

Caramel

by corianderpie

Is there such a thing as a harmless crush? Over the course of a year, two people experience the perils of wanting what they just can't have.

The Way These Things Begin

Chapter 1 of 36

Is there such a thing as a harmless crush? Over the course of a year, two people experience the perils of wanting what they just can't have.

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It was his hands she noticed first.

About thirty minutes into Double Potions, she looked up while her Blood-Replenishing Potion was brewing. She had two minutes of waiting before she would add the first of three grains of crystallised dragon lymph. Professor Snape was standing several yards away, demonstrating to a tableful of Slytherins how to add the tansy extract.

He lifted the heavy cool glass of the tansy bottle and laid the pad of his stained index finger along the length of the tiny pipette before releasing the tansy in slow anticlockwise swirls. With his other hand he pushed the stirrer clockwise through the cauldron's depths.

His fine-boned hands moved smoothly among the implements and ingredients, dancing a slow, measured step they had danced many times before, and always with the same controlled flow. They were... so graceful. More than graceful... beautiful.

As Hermione watched, a buzzing feeling flashed across her skin. Her stomach...or something in her abdomen...lurched, and heat shot down through her legs and up into her head. She clutched the table's edge to steady herself. *Hot, so uncomfortably hot down here today*, she thought distractedly, eyes still fixed on the scene at the Slytherins' table.

'Erm, Hermione...' A worried voice cut in. Neville's. 'Aren't we supposed to do the dragon bit yet? Is it two minutes?'

Shocked, Hermione looked down at her cauldron, which was half full of yellow, curdled liquid with little snot-coloured strands forming along the edges. A scorched-tyre smell emanated from her ruined potion...and from Neville, Ron, and Harry's too. The three of them gaped at her. She shot out her wrist and looked at her watch...almost three minutes! Wand out in an instant, she screeched: '*Aguamenti!*' then, 'Bugger!' as water from her wand tip drenched the fires beneath all four cauldrons and pooled on the table.

'Miss Granger.' Professor Snape had materialised soundlessly at her elbow. 'I doubt that you learned that particular, ah, variant on a Conjuring Spell in Professor Flitwick's class. But then,' he continued, eyes travelling over the four cauldrons with their putrid and rapidly solidifying contents, 'the evidence does not seem strong that any of you have learned anything of note whatsoever. For example, Miss Granger, it is widely known among First Years and other puling infants that one uses a quenching charm to

put out fires, not a drenching charm.'

Draco Malfoy barked out a laugh.

'I am not particularly shocked to find you copying the work of a fellow student, Mr Weasley, Mr Longbottom, Mr Potter.' Snape's cold eyes settled on Harry. 'A pity,' he drawled, 'that your trust seems to have been misplaced. Ten points each from Gryffindor. For cheating.'

He smirked at Hermione. 'I would have felt obliged to make the penalty greater if you had wasted any of the dragon lymph. Fortunately for you, you didn't even get that far. Now try again. You have time to brew an incomplete version and avoid losing all marks for today's lesson. Whether anyone at this table has the skill to do so is, of course, an open question.' He glided off, robes swirling, amid a surge of ill-suppressed snickering from every Slytherin in the room.

Red-faced with humiliation, Hermione rapidly Vanished the potions from all four cauldrons, spelled the water off the sodden table (*Why Aguamenti, Hermione, why?*), and hastened to the supply cupboard to begin again.

Back at the table, she snapped at the others, 'This time, pay attention to what you're doing. I can't always be carrying you lot.'

'But, Hermione,' began Ron.

'No time,' she said shortly. 'You're on your own.'

She was sweaty, flustered, off balance, and already feeling uncomfortable about carping at her friends (*they were not the only ones not paying attention*). But she was determined to focus her mind for the rest of the class. Though not a horribly difficult potion, it did require some care, and she was appalled at how badly she'd muffed it...truly a Neville-esque performance.

Keeping her eyes firmly within the bounds of her working area, she began methodically to chop, pour, measure, and weigh her ingredients anew.

Nearly an hour later, Professor Snape announced the end of class. Hermione sighed and pushed back a great hank of hair that had escaped her ponytail. She was at a good stopping point but not done. If only she had twenty more minutes.

Harry, Ron, and Neville were scooping up measures of their potions from their cauldrons to take to Professor Snape for marking. Harry's was brown and sludgy, Ron's grey and sludgy, and Neville's a thin, smelly brew with little shreds of wilted lovage floating on the surface. Hers was smooth, light-bodied, and purplish; just right, according to *Intermediate Potions. Perhaps...*

Leaving her potion untouched, she queued with the others as they trooped up to deposit potion samples with their teacher. Snape received most of the bottles with either silence or a puncturing remark. He touched each with his wand to inscribe it with its maker's name before placing it upright in a dark wooden box. Four students were sent back to their desks to retrieve their successful potions, which Snape would later decant and send up to Madam Pomfrey.

When she reached Snape's desk, Hermione stopped and plunged her hands into the pockets of her robes, eyes flickering somewhere between his hooked nose and the fall of lank hair that framed his face. *Raven's wing hair, fine black silk* a voice breathed across her brain, tying her tongue and sending blood shooting to her face.

When she didn't speak, he did. 'Where is your potion, Miss Granger? Did you fail at your *second* attempt as well?' The questions were not neutral; his sneering inflection was intended, as usual, to hurt and intimidate.

She swallowed hard. 'Sir, I got the potion to a good stage just as it was time to stop. The base is there, I know; I just have to temper it with albumin and add the final reactive elements. May I... I wonder if I could Suspend it now, then return after dinner to finish. I, it wouldn't take long.'

'Your attempts to improve your mark are both transparent and futile, Miss Granger. You had plenty of time during the lesson to complete the assignment, and you will be marked on the contents of your cauldron at this moment. I do not intend to reopen the classroom after hours and babysit you as you finish your assignment. Give me a vial of your... results... now, clean up your work area, and leave.' He managed to sound both bored with her and impatient to have her gone.

Hermione's face, which had been red, went blotchy as anger swamped her synapses. Her head snapped up and she glared into her teacher's cold, flat eyes. 'I want to finish my work to finish my work, sir. So it won't be wasted, and so that I will know...*really know*...how to make Blood-Replenishing Potion. Of course I wouldn't expect my marks to be any different.'

She spun on her heel and marched back to her worktable, her jumbled emotions finally making her eyes water up *Sneering, bullying, exacting git. You would think HE would understand the urge to finish, to learn, to get it right.*

'Miss Granger.' His voice was silk threaded with mockery.

She stopped, but did not turn to face him, staring instead at a crack in the stone floor.

'What an affecting display of righteousness. As it happens, Mr Thomas will be serving detention here tonight. Bring me a vial of your base to be marked, Suspend the contents of your cauldron, and return at eight o'clock to complete the potion.' He paused. 'Please be aware that if you don't return tonight after you have so touchingly pledged your commitment to your... work' (*making it sound like bloody child's play, the bastard*) '... I will deduct a further fifty points from Gryffindor.'

Hermione let out a shuddering breath. 'Thank you, sir,' she murmured, and continued to her worktable. *Sipho*, she hissed, and a little of the potion arced into the open glass vial she held, then '*Suspendio*' as she waved her wand at her cauldron, locking the potion into quiescence until she was ready to start work on it again.

Books put away, table cleared, she palmed the stoppered vial in one hand and lifted the cauldron in the other, then retraced her steps to the front of the room. She looked straight up at Snape as she held out first the glass vial, then the cauldron, the defiant effect of her rigid posture and tightly clenched lips somewhat lessened by the shine of unshed tears in her eyes.

He returned her gaze down the length of his nose, saying nothing as he turned to nestle her potion down among the others and set her cauldron on a bench behind his desk. Again, though (*damn it!*), the sight of his hands' smooth sureness on the tools of his craft sent a cascade of tingles over her skin. Up close, the hands still appeared beautifully formed, and so graceful, but they were also scarred and stained from many years of handling combustible, poisonous, prickly, and maleficent potion ingredients.

There are a lot of stories in those hands she thought suddenly, *many of them probably quite Dark* She shivered, and a single tear finally trailed down her cheek.

'Miss Granger,' he growled, his tired voice tinged with what sounded like disgust. 'If you wish to stand about weeping and staring, please do it elsewhere. Perhaps in the toilets. This lesson is over.'

Hermione stalked towards the back of the classroom, grabbing and slinging her book bag over her shoulder as she went. At the door, she turned and looked back toward Professor Snape. He was standing at his tall desk, fingers curled around the edges, looking into the middle distance with an expression of such weariness and... desolation... around his eyes and mouth. His gaze caught on hers, and as bleak black eyes met warm brown ones, hers widened with shock...and his froze over.

He gave her the benefit of his most frigid stare for a moment before he dropped his eyes down to the wooden potions box before him. He snicked the box shut and growled, 'Eight o'clock, Miss Granger,' then turned and disappeared through the door into his office.

Hermione sagged against the door frame and moaned quietly.

She found Harry and Ron out in the corridor, waiting for her.

'Are you okay, Hermione?' asked Harry rather nervously, not sure if she was going to snap at him again. 'You seemed a little, um, rattled in there. Not that Snape wasn't a right bastard today, but you just look kind of, erm...' He trailed off.

'Of course she's rattled, mate!' Ron positively goggled at her. 'Merlin, Hermione, you just *assigned yourself* to detention with Snape. Have you gone completely mad?'

Hermione snorted rather wetly and swiped her handkerchief across her face. 'I sort of did, didn't I? I must be mental. *And you don't even know the half of it*' she thought feverishly as they made their way up the many flights of stairs toward Gryffindor Tower. WHAT was all THAT? she demanded of her labouring brain.

But the answer came singing like a feather-stroke up her spine: *Professor Snape, bat of the dungeons, sallow-faced, greasy-haired, malevolent Slytherin bastard, is sexy. And now I know it*



Illustration by QalaChaki.

A/N: Love, honour, and thanks go to my incredibly kind, generous, and sharp-eyed readers: greenstuff (beta) and lifeasanamazon (Brit-picker).

And that incredibly cool illustration? That's by QalaChaki (Deviantart). The full size version (which has great texture) can be seen at http://fc09.deviantart.com/fs46/f/2009/188/7/9/Blood_replenishing_potion_HJG_by_QalaChaki.jpg

Pastoral

Chapter 2 of 36

Hermione grapples with her surprising discovery.

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Later that afternoon

'I wish I could get away with doing my Arithmancy homework in Defence Against the Dark Arts,' muttered Hermione, stuffing *Defensive Magical Theory* roughly into her bag. Spending an hour and a half reading Slinkhard's useless book under Dolores Umbridge's eye left her feeling mutinous.

'Yeah, that didn't work out too well the one time you tried it, did it?' said Ron in an undertone as they entered the corridor. 'But at least she didn't make you split your own hand open in detention.'

'True,' admitted Hermione, glancing over at Harry. 'She just made me write *ordinary* lines with an *ordinary* quill.' She puffed out an angry breath and began to walk faster. 'It still made me want to stuff her stupid hair bow down her throat and crack one of those bloody kitten plates over her fat, evil head.'

She swept savagely down the stairs, Ron and Harry in her wake. They exchanged a significant glance behind her head.

'So Hermione, were you going for a run now? We could bring you a sandwich if you, you know, want to get outside,' said Harry offhandedly.

'Sandwiches, pumpkin juice, whatever you want,' seconded Ron. 'Give you strength to face Round Two of Potions tonight.'

She stopped abruptly at the foot of the stairs, causing Ron to crash into her. 'Right. Of course. I should. I will. A sandwich would be good. Thanks. See you after dinner.' And, looking rather distracted, she turned right around and headed towards Gryffindor Tower.

'Good call, mate,' said Ron as he and Harry made their way into the Great Hall. 'Bit fierce today, isn't she? I thought the top of her head was going to start smoking.'

'Yyyep,' agreed Harry. 'Crabby as a skrewt.'

'O.W.L.s,' said Ron sagely as they swung onto the dark wood benches at the Gryffindor table. 'She's feeling the pressure.'

'Yep.' Harry reached glumly for an apple from the bowl that had just appeared in front of him. 'Feeling it.'

Hermione emerged from the eastern sally door fifteen minutes later in t-shirt and tracksuit bottoms, her hair bound up in a ponytail. She stretched a bit and began moving down the hill towards the lakeshore.

As she went, she tapped two tiny silver cuffs with her wand and slipped them over the outer rims of her ears before tucking the wand in her waistband. The discreetly named M-Clip was a product from Fred and George Weasley's new line of Muggle-tech novelties: charmed ear cuffs that looked like ordinary jewellery but could hold about 5,000 minutes of Muggle music. Hermione had helped the twins test and refine the gadget earlier in the term, so they had given her the prototype free.

Hermione Granger had two ways of coping with stress and uncertainty: going to the library or going for a run. After the sort of day she'd had, she wanted...needed--to move and breathe. It was the only way she could hope to get her equilibrium back. She'd been holding certain thoughts at bay all day and the strain had made her very irritable.

When she reached the relatively level ground of the lake edge path, she lengthened her stride into a run and let her mind loose on the newly fascinating subject of Professor Severus Snape. Something had shifted in her perception of him today, and she intended to get a grip on it.

She approached the issue in her usual way, by marshalling the facts at her disposal and trying to examine her own assumptions. Snape was brilliant~~(fact)~~. Cold (*a widely if not universally held opinion*). Rather nasty and vindictive (*ditto*). Biased against her best friend, her House, and herself (*the evidence would seem to bear this out*). Prone to explosive fits of temper (*demonstrably true*). A consummate Potions master (*fact*), which meant he had to have an underlying love of order (*reasonable assumption*). A former Death Eater (*fact*), which meant--what? That he had once been drawn to violence, hatred, and destruction? What made him change his mind? Was he full of regret? (*Speculation, faulty inference, and idiotic question, respectively. Get it back on track, Hermione*)

She returned to her mental catalogue. A member of the Order of the Phoenix (*fact*), though pretty comprehensively loathed by the other members (*observable*). An Occlumens (*fact*). A double agent, but loyal, she was sure, to Dumbledore (*act, and again with the inferences*). Tall (*yes*). Dark (*mmm*). Austere (*yes, that works*). Not handsome in the least (*but somehow beautiful, like a great black bird of prey or a cat. Something wild but contained.*).

Hermione made a face. *Okay, attempt at rational analysis has failed.*

She rounded the far side of the lakeshore loop and began running back towards the castle. The early evening sunlight was gleaming on the usually dark surface of the lake, making it look like a warm sheet of ruffled silver. Springtime was full and ripe in the vicinity of Hogwarts, with about a hundred shades of green carpeting the forest and hills. The mountains rose up purple and blue and brown, dappled with the shadows of clouds and dotted with pockets of old snow.

Her spirits rose with every stride.

So she was starting to have a little thing for Hogwarts' least popular teacher. Unexpected, but why not? No one need know anything, and it might be... fun... to have a bit of forbidden lust fizzing through her veins. Better fun than the low-level frustration and uncertainty that was her longstanding, waxing and waning, going-nowhere crush on Ron.

The cool damp mountain air filled her lungs and the blood pumped through her limbs, heating her skin. Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* poured out of the magical cuffs into her ears. The M-Clip was marvellous; it felt like the music was right inside her skull. This music was just what she needed: it was warm and bright and full of the promise of beautiful things. It always made her feel like something magnificent was within her grasp. She grinned and broke into a flat-out run.

Lungs bursting, she squeezed out a final burst of speed and finished the sprint with a flying leap in sync with a sudden fortissimo in the Beethoven. As she slowed her pace back to an easy jog, she thought of her mother, as she often did when she ran.

When she was eight, Hermione had finished second in a school science competition, and in her desolation she'd reduced a bookcase to kindling just by looking at it. Her magic had begun showing itself strongly in emotional moments, though as a Muggle-born she had no idea what it was, and it scared her.

When Dr Jane Granger had found her tear-soaked and terrified daughter moments later, it had looked to her as though Hermione had physically attacked the furniture. 'You need fresh air, exercise, and a break from the books, love,' she'd pronounced. 'Go and change into your trainers and meet me downstairs.'

So began their ritual of running together nearly every day. Hermione soon discovered that the exercise settled her emotions and actually seemed to help her brain work better, and she was hooked.

At Hogwarts, the habit took on another layer of meaning--it connected her to her Muggle life. It was something she had before she knew she was a witch--back when she was just an odd, bookish, intense little girl. *Now an odd, bookish, intense big girl* she thought, her pace easing into a walk as the path sloped upward. *Not so different, even though I live in a different world now.*

She smiled lovingly up at the castle looming ahead of her, its grey stones half awash in yellowing sunlight, half lapped in shadow, its southern windows glittering red. *Lucky me.*

Severus closed the sally door behind him and looked at the sky. He judged he had ten minutes before he could move to the cold frames outside the southernmost greenhouse and start harvesting. For maximum potency, spurge needed to be cut within two hours of sunset, which would come a bit after nine this evening.

The shadows along the castle's eastern walls were deep, and on impulse he stepped out towards the promontory, onto a bright patch of turf that still lay in full sunlight.

He could see someone moving along the lakeshore path; a student, a girl. As he watched she began to sprint, bounding down into a hollow of the path and out of sight for a minute or two before emerging at full speed, arms pumping and ponytail flying. She gave an exuberant leap before slowing back down to an easier run, and he saw who it was: Hermione Granger, in a dark red t-shirt and grey tracksuit. She was close enough now that he could see her flushed and shining face. Her expression was abstracted and she was smiling slightly. She looked as though she were thinking of something very pleasant.

If she looked up now, she would see him standing there. Somehow, suddenly, he didn't want that--didn't want to see her unselfconscious joy dimmed by his presence. He moved back a few steps into the shadow behind a buttress, his eyes still fixed on the glowing girl, whose pace had now slowed to a walk.

Sure enough, she lifted her gaze to the building--seeming to look right at him, though he was only a dark shape cloaked in shadow--and just... beamed at it.

Her smile was so keen and bright and open that he almost gasped. *To be looked at like that* It felt like his heart had been struck.

Fool. His face went rigid with disdain for his own reaction. *She's smiling at something in her own mind. If she could see you, her face would sink like a stone. As it should.*

Severus wore his sour, forbidding aspect like armour. Armour he worked, ate, and slept in. Armour he had made himself, which fitted him like a second skin. He cultivated a near-universal fear and dislike among his students, and kept his distance from his peers. It was the only way he had found to keep existing in a life shaped by duty, remorse, and mortal danger.

No. A smile like that would not be for him.

He turned, silent as always, and made his way through the gathering shadows towards the greenhouses.

'Oh, you blessed boys, you sweet, sweet men,' Hermione sighed as she sank down into a chair in the common room and reached for the roast beef sandwich Harry and Ron had brought from the Great Hall. 'Thank you!'

She beamed at them and took a massive, horseradish-y bite.

'How was your run?' asked Harry, grinning.

'Brilliant. I really, really needed that,' she answered through her mouthful. Deliciously tired from her run, warm from the shower, and dressed in fresh clothes and robes, Hermione radiated contentment and exuded a sweet, clean herbal scent.

'You look, erm, much better, Mione,' said Ron, a bit flustered. 'Smell nice, too,' he muttered.

'Thank you, Ron, I will take that as a compliment. Though I don't think my minty fresh breath is going to survive this sandwich,' she remarked, taking another bite.

"S'only Snape you're going to see, and I doubt he ever brushes, so he'd be a hypocrite to mind," Ron declared. 'Wouldn't put it past him, though.' Ron pulled the corners of his mouth down in an exaggerated scowl and growled out between clenched teeth, "'Ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger. For reeking.'"

Harry shouted with laughter.

Hermione flushed pink and twisted her mouth in an effort not to smile. 'Ron, what did you just do?'

'It's called a joke, Hermione. It's a thing we do for fun.'

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'I mean the points, Ron. You're a prefect, and you just docked ten points from Gryffindor. The hourglass doesn't have a sense of humour.'

Now it was Ron's turn to redden. 'Oh. Right. Well. Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger. For, ah, smelling *good* this time.'

'Prat.' Hermione rose to her feet. 'I'll be back,' she said, stuffing the last big bite of the sandwich into her mouth as she headed for the girls' bathroom. She would ~~not~~ go down to the dungeons with dragon breath.

Returning to the common room, she walked over to Dean, who was playing Exploding Snap with Seamus. 'Once more unto the breach, Dean,' she said. 'Are you ready for your servitude?'

Dean grimaced. 'I have to be, innit?' He got up and dragged his rucksack onto his shoulder.

Hermione grabbed her bag and waved her fingers at Ron and Harry. 'This shouldn't take that long,' she said. 'I'll see you in a bit.'

'And then can we work on the Charms essay together?' asked Ron.

'Ron, I've finished mine. I'm revising Arithmancy for O.W.L.s tonight.' She sighed at his stricken look. 'But of course I'll take a look at your work. Just... try to get an outline going while I'm away, okay?'

And she and Dean stepped out through the portrait hole.

A/N: Love and thanks to my kind, generous, and sharp-eyed readers: ariadne and greenstuff (betas) and lifeasanamazon (Brit-picker).

To view/listen to Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, go here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZGb-Kjy0S0>

Detention in the Dungeon

Chapter 3 of 36

Hermione returns to the Potions classroom to finish her assignment...

Disclaimer: Is any of this mine, really? Well... no.

That evening...

Severus set the basket of spurge cuttings on a worktable at the back of the classroom and moved to the supply cabinet to gather gloves, goggles, a nasal filter, a metal bowl, a silver knife, and a large glass beaker. He had just set the equipment down next to the spurge when a knock sounded on the door.

He felt the first tendrils of a headache curling behind his eyes.

'Enter,' he growled, and the door swung open to admit Dean Thomas and Hermione Granger. Severus's lip curled in a reflexive little sneer.

'Mr Thomas, you will be working over here.' He spread his hand out to indicate the table with the spurge. 'Don't touch anything before I have given you your instructions.' He turned his gaze to the girl. 'Miss Granger, your cauldron is on the bench and the supply cabinet is unlocked. I suggest you choose a workspace as far from Mr Thomas as possible. His immediate vicinity will soon be... unpleasant.'

Severus returned his attention to Thomas. 'Tonight you will be milking this spurge. I believe Professor Sprout covered spurge with you several years ago?'

Thomas screwed up his eyes and said rather noncommittally, 'Erm, yes...'

Granger was still standing nearby. Out of the corner of his eye, Severus saw her actually start to lift her hand for permission to speak...no doubt the relevant passage from *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* was burning a hole in her tongue. *Incredible. She's like a barely trained Labrador puppy.* He ignored her.

'Let me refresh your memory on the salient points, Mr Thomas. Spurge sap is caustic. It sticks like burning tar to whatever it touches. It's a violent purgative. This particular spurge is at the height of its potency. Do I have your attention?'

The boy nodded gloomily.

'Very well. Tonight you will squeeze the sap from the stems in this basket into this beaker. Watch me.' Severus drew on the goggles, nasal filter, and gloves, picked up the knife, and plucked a fat stem from the basket.

'Make a series of little slits in the stem and roll it between your fingers, like this, to press out the sap.' Drops of a pungent, sticky white substance oozed out of the punctured plant. 'When you are sure a stem is wrung dry of sap, put it in this metal bowl.' Severus dropped the spent stem in the bowl and pulled off the safety gear.

'If you don't want to end the evening in the infirmary with weeping skin ulcers, pay attention to what you're doing. Don't get the sap on your skin or clothing; if you do, spell it off immediately. Don't drip it on the table. Keep your mouth closed so you don't breathe it in. Don't touch your eyes or mouth or nose with anything that has touched the sap. When you are done, Scourgify your hair and clothing. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir,' said Thomas tonelessly, and reached for the nasal filter.

'Good. Since the fresh sap is volatile, I am going to set a ventilation charm and a vapour barrier around your workspace.' Severus flicked his wand and the air around Dean's table shimmered briefly and began to hum slightly.

He turned and paced up the aisle. At the front of the classroom, Granger was just setting her bag down next to a worktable. *Merlin, are those wands sticking out of her hair?* The girl's long brown hair was pulled back and twisted into a messy knot, which seemed to be held in place on the back of her head by two wooden sticks. The effect was oddly pleasing. He had to ask.

'Miss Granger.'

She jumped as though stung and spun around to face him. 'Sir?'

The alarm in her eyes just... bothered him. It shouldn't. But the contrast between the unguarded expression he'd seen in her earlier and this look of watchfulness made him feel hollowed out. *I'm like a Dementor. Sucking a bit of joy out of any room* But almost before the thought formed in his head, he had performed the usual mental alchemy, transforming his painful reaction into cold disdain.

'What are those... objects... in your hair?' He injected a note of distaste into his voice and flared his nostrils as though he smelled something off. *She smells of lemon verbena.* He added a slight grimace.

'Oh.' Her hand flew up to touch one. 'Hair sticks. Well, chopsticks really. But they work just as well, and I, um, my mum wears her hair this way and...' She stopped mid-babble. *Mercifully.*

'Quite.' He infused the word with contempt.

Severus moved on around his desk. The sight that met him there was not cheering: forty each of Second-Year and Third-Year essays. He closed his eyes, acknowledging the spreading dull ache between his temples.

For a while, the quiet of the dungeon was broken only by the scratching of quill and the rustling of parchment; the quiet chopping and clinking sounds from Hermione Granger's table; and, once, a sharp yowl followed by a muttered spell when Dean Thomas came in contact with a bit of spurge sap.

After twenty minutes or so, Severus looked up at Granger.

She was absorbed in her work...focused and relaxed. He breathed in; she must have just added the shaved bolete. It smelled exactly right...loamy, with an acrid note. *Clever girl.*

As he watched, the thought hit him that it was a rare thing for him to work alongside someone else...someone working competently and quietly on her own project. It felt collegial and... cosy.

Cosy. His sneer was for himself this time. *What a soft-headed notion.*

Some fifty minutes after she entered it, Hermione closed the classroom door behind her. She sank onto the stone bench in the corridor, absently clutching a wooden box on her lap. The best thing would be to collect her thoughts before she went back to the common room. She was aware she was a bit undone.

Closing her eyes, she slumped against the wall and reviewed the past hour...

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As she and Dean descended from Gryffindor Tower, Hermione reckoned she was half curious and half apprehensive about the prospect of seeing Professor Snape.

Was she going to act like an idiot? Mess up her potion? Give him an excuse to sneer at her? Or would she find that her reaction to him this morning had been a fluke, and that he was just her unpleasant Potions teacher after all?

By the time they reached the dungeons, she had begun to tense up, the centring effects of her run leaching away into anxiety.

When Dean opened the door, Professor Snape was standing right at the back of the classroom...closer than she had anticipated...and her pulse leapt alarmingly.

But Snape almost immediately turned his attention to Dean, whose task would apparently involve spurge.

She lingered, mercifully ignored, near Dean's worktable.

At first she was half afraid Professor Snape was just going to leave Dean to sort out the spurge himself...and she was pretty sure Dean wouldn't remember the details of a Herbology reading from their second year.

But Snape actually spent five minutes explaining the task and its dangers, and even demonstrating the proper technique. He wasn't the least bit warm or encouraging, but his instructions were clear and complete.

He can be a good teacher when he wants to be she thought.

And in the few moments she stood there unobserved, watching her teacher interact with her fellow student, she fell through the looking glass completely.

This morning she had noticed how beautiful his hands were. Tonight, nothing about him seemed the same as before. His mouth. The way he moved. The cut of his clothes. His eyes. Eyebrows. Cheekbones. The way he held himself.

And his voice, *gods*. Muggle actors were paid well to use their voices like that. It was resonant, cultured, precise. Every sound came out as though it had been chosen and placed exactly where he wanted it. The minute movements of his mouth as he formed each word were... hypnotic. And the tone, low, rich, and velvety smooth, seemed to issue from some place deep inside him. It was a glorious, dark, seductive voice; how had she never realised it?

She caught herself staring at his mouth and forced her eyes away before she was discovered.

She managed to move to the front of the classroom before he was finished with Dean, only to be electrified moments later when he said her name.

'Miss Granger.'

She turned to face him, trying to school her features into some sort of neutral expression.

'Sir?'

'What are those... objects... in your hair?'

She felt her eyes pinned helplessly to his mouth. She wasn't entirely sure what she said then...some nonsense. Apparently all he had to do was say a half-dozen words to her and she'd lose her mind. *Bad, this is bad and stupid...*

'Quite.' He bit out the word and sailed on to his desk.

She breathed in and out slowly. Twice.

Well. So she *had* just acted a bit of an idiot, and he had sneered at her a little, but it had passed.

She risked a glance at him. He did not seem to be in the mood to bait or insult her...or to talk to her at all. Indeed, he just looked tired as he surveyed the piles of parchment covering his desk.

Okay, good, fine. I can do this

Once she had collected her cauldron and ingredients, she was able to lose herself in her work...even with Snape working a few steps away.

The quiet of the classroom was soothing. At one point it occurred to her how pleasant it was to be able to concentrate on her own work without interruption.

Hermione's potion was a success, she knew. But she wasn't sure exactly what to do with it once it was finished.

'Professor,' she ventured.

He raised his eyes and lifted one eyebrow. 'Yes, Miss Granger?'

'I'm finished, and I think it is, erm, correctly done. Shall I... do you want to give it to Madam Pomfrey if it's, you know, okay?' Her voice ~~wasn't~~ obeying her, but was coming out all squeaky and shaky.

'Bring it here.'

She lifted the steaming cauldron and carried it to him, carefully setting it on a brass trivet on the desk's corner.

He rose and, seizing a long-handled silver spoon, dipped it into the potion. (*Lord, the way he moves...*) First he dribbled a bit of the potion back into the cauldron, checking its colour and consistency. Then he lifted another spoonful to his nose and breathed in the vapour. Finally, he dipped the tip of his little finger into the potion in the spoon, and (*omygods*) brought it to his lips for a taste.

The slight pursing of his lips as he tasted his own finger sent a jolt of heat through her. *I want that to bemy finger. Or, let me taste yours.* Her teeth caught a bit of her upper lip into her mouth, and as she released it, the tiniest whimper escaped her throat.

He narrowed his eyes and stiffened at the sound, seeming to radiate a sharp displeasure.

'This will do,' he said icily. 'Kindly wait while I decant this. I will ask you to take the completed bottles of Blood-Replenishing Potion up to Madam Pomfrey on your way back to your dormitory.'

He picked up her cauldron and stalked through the door to his office.

His robes move like that because they're gathered at the shoulder Hermione babbled inwardly as she stared at the door. *And because he moves quickly. Or really, because he'll be quite still, then he'll move, then he'll be quite still again. He wastes no movement whatsoever.* She wondered how she could ever have thought he was anything at all like a chittering, swooping bat. Shaking her head to clear it, she moved to clean up her work space.

As she fastened the buckle on her bag, Professor Snape reemerged with a wooden box full of clinking glass bottles.

He set it on the corner of her table, said, 'Goodbye, Miss Granger,' and turned back to his desk.

'Good evening, Professor,' she murmured.

Dean, face half obscured by his safety gear, mumbled a wistful sounding 'G'bye' as she passed him.

She gave him a sympathetic but wobbly smile in return. She really couldn't trust herself with more.

This morning she had been shocked to discover that Professor Snape was attractive, even sexy. Tonight she knew better. *He's not just sexy. He's bloody well made of sex.*

Maybe after all this wasn't going to be *fun*, strictly speaking.

* * * * *

A/N: Love and thanks to my beta greenstuff and Brit-picker lifeasanamazon, and to everyone who posted a review for the first two chapters! Meeting you all makes this even more fun.

Riches Strange and New

Chapter 4 of 36

Hermione finds a way to make her crush on Severus work for her.

Disclaimer: Everything you recognise belongs to JKR, who generously lets us play with her things. Or at least graciously looks the other way when we do.

* * *

September 1996

Hermione's seventeenth birthday dawned mild and clear.

The sun found her in the Quidditch stands, flat on her back on a bench, panting. She had run a couple of dozen laps around the pitch and finished by running the stairs three times. It was a lot of stairs, and now her heart was threatening to pound right out of her body.

When she was able to, she stood slowly and moved dazedly down to the pitch to stretch, then made her way into the girls' changing room. Lavender and Parvati might be up by the time she got back to the dormitory, and she didn't fancy competing for shower time.

Hermione emerged into the games building's main corridor twenty minutes later, fingers twisting an elastic band around the end of her French plait. As she drew level with the door to the duelling chamber, it opened, and out stepped Minerva McGonagall, flushed-faced and bright-eyed. She wore loose trousers and an open-necked shirt, and her robes were draped over one arm; her wand hung loose in her grip. A burnt, sulphurous smell billowed out after Professor McGonagall, as did her duelling partner: Professor Snape, in a similar state of dishabille, two spots of colour burning high on his pale cheeks.

Hermione stopped short, gaped, and blushed.

'Ah, good morning, Miss Granger. I see you have been taking your exercise early, as have we.' The Transfiguration teacher smiled warmly at Hermione.

Professor Snape, after narrowing his eyes at Hermione in a sour glare, ignored her. Thrusting his arms into the sleeves of his robes, he addressed his colleague. 'Thank you for the practise, Minerva. Good morning.'

With that, he turned and strode rapidly along the corridor and out of the door.

'Shall we walk back together, Miss Granger?' asked Professor McGonagall.

'Unh, yes. Yes, Professor.' Hermione had recovered her ability to speak, which had deserted her just for a tiny moment there.

As they traversed the slope towards the main entrance of the castle, she gathered her courage to ask, 'Do you and... and Professor Snape often duel?'

'Yes, several times a week. Most of the teachers do practice fairly often these days. As you might expect.' Professor McGonagall's face took on a rather grim expression.

'Oh.' *Of course.* The staff were preparing for war. Hermione's eyes tracked the black figure on the path ahead of them...he had almost reached the door. She shivered.

* * *

'For the next lesson, please read pages forty-two through to fifty-eight in your books and give me fourteen inches on Transfiguration in the culinary arts. Class is dismissed.'

'Miss Granger, can I see you for a moment in my office?' Professor McGonagall smiled at Hermione as the girl tucked her Transfiguration book into her bag. 'I have some Muggle post for you that Mr Filch has just brought up from Hogsmeade.'

Hermione turned to her friends and exclaimed, 'Ooooo, prezzies! Will you be in the common room later? For a little birthday cheer?'

Harry shot her an amused look. 'Of course we'll be there. As will a gigantic pink cake...it was pink, wasn't it, Ron?'

'Oh yeah, big and pink. I got a sugar rush from looking at it. Dobby will Apparate up with it after dinner; we just need to give him the signal.'

* * *

The ruins of Hermione's birthday cake presided over a common room table littered with cups and plates, cards, bits of wrapping paper, and assorted loot: a book and chocolates from Harry and Ron, respectively, in true Hermione's-birthday tradition; mittens from Mrs Weasley (in Gryffindor colours); and an ingenious handmade card from Ginny, featuring a miniscule bushy haired witch whose wand shot out rainbow coloured sparks whenever the card was opened.

There were Muggle cheques from both sets of grandparents, which Hermione would have to countersign and send back to her parents to put in the bank for her. Her mother had sent a glorious deep red cashmere jumper, which Hermione was holding in her lap and stroking as though it were a particularly silky and docile cat. Her aunt in America had sent a new translation of the *Odyssey*. And a card from her father had two pieces of paper tucked inside: a photocopy of three round-trip tickets for the Grangers to travel to Istanbul the day after Christmas, and a picture postcard of Cappadocia.

Hermione reached for the last wrapped package, which had come bundled in the parcel from her parents.

'It's from Jill,' Hermione said as she opened the card, a smile gathering in her eyes.

'Jill your Muggle friend?' asked Ron, reaching for another hunk of cake.

'Yes, my "Muggle friend." You make her sound like a pet. She's been my friend about twice as long as you, you know.'

And oh, how I needed a Muggle friend this summer Returning home in July, after her extended convalescence at the Burrow, had been utterly surreal. Hermione avoided

telling her parents half of what had happened at Hogwarts during her fifth year, and she didn't even mention the events at the Ministry. How could she burden them with that?

She had been nearly desperate to feel normal, and to have fun like any other teenage girl home for the summer holidays. Not like someone who had fought a horrific battle against grown-up witches and wizards, seen a friend die, and been gravely injured. Not like someone who would have to endure all this and more again, and soon.

Jill Fletcher knew how to have fun better than anyone Hermione knew. She was clever and unbelievably funny and knew everything about art and music and films. And for a few weeks in July and August, before Hermione returned to the Burrow and the wizarding world, she had been happy to be Jill's sidekick. Sneaking into nightclubs to see bands was so much nicer...so much more *normal*...than sneaking into the Department of Mysteries on a doomed rescue mission.

Hermione sighed. She put the card down and began to open the little package.

Harry picked up the card. It was small and square, made of heavy rag paper with rough edges, with a brilliant green apple printed on the front. Inside, it read 'Dear H Here is a new one I think you'll like: 60 A / 40 R. Track 3 especially makes me think of your dilemma. Happy 17th, and keep me posted. Love J.'

'What's 60 A / 40 R?' asked Harry.

'Oh, it's Jill's grand unified theory of pop. She thinks all pop music that's worth anything can be divided into two categories: Songs that Rock and Songs that Ache. 60 A / 40 R means this CD is 60 per cent Ache and 40 per cent Rock.' Hermione was studying the CD case, which had a picture of a red-haired woman holding a big green apple up in front of her face.

'What does she mean by your dilemma, Mione?' asked Ron, who had taken the card from Harry.

'Mmmm, not really sure,' said Hermione vaguely. 'We talked about a lot of things this past summer. I'll have to listen and see if I can work it out.'

She had a pretty good idea what Jill meant. Jill knew Hermione had a crush on one of her teachers. The CD was called 'Nine Objects of Desire'*Not rocket science*.

She glanced at Harry and Ron, but they seemed to have lost interest in the subject. Ron was shovelling more cake into his mouth, and Harry had reached for the pumpkin juice.

'More PJ for the birthday girl?'

'That's birthday *woman* to you, laddie,' Hermione quipped. 'I am now of age, so show some respect.'*Thank the gods my best friends are boys, and that Ginny skived off after the cake*, she thought, regarding the two of them with affection. *Girls wouldn't let me off so easily*.

* * *

Later, in her room, Hermione spelled the music on the CD into her M-Clip and slipped the cuffs over her ears. "Three," she murmured.

The song was dark, intimate, and sultry, with bass and jazz guitar lines weaving a sinuous rhythm, and clarinet and accordion echoing one another above them. The lyrics spoke against indulging a hidden desire, but the music told a different story. The music was entranced and all too willing to fall. *Naughty Jill*, Hermione thought as she drifted into sleep.

* * *

Fortunately for Hermione, there wasn't a question of her *falling* into anything. The attraction she continued to feel for Professor Snape would never be reciprocated...and she truly didn't want it to be. The rest of her life...friends, family, school, the fight against He Who Must Not Be Named...was too precious to her to risk wrecking it. Which a liaison with her teacher would surely do.

Plus the object of her obsession did. Not. Like. Her. That fact could not be more evident.

But there was no mistaking her body's reaction to him, and the way it strove to drag her brain along with it into a hot, thrumming little cavern of lust.

In public, she handled herself pretty well. Her equilibrium was sometimes threatened, but never overturned. True, she flushed hot in places visible and invisible whenever she unexpectedly caught sight of Professor Snape. But if she knew she was going to see him...at meals, say, or in class...she could control her reactions quite well. In the Great Hall, she kept her back to him as much as possible, which helped.

In the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, where Snape now presided, her strategy lay in narrowing her focus to the task at hand...reading, listening, analysing, and practising. The satisfactions of hard work were as rich as ever, no matter the hormonal joyride she seemed to be on.

At night, though, she let her body and brain conspire.

With all the curiosity, perseverance, and ingenuity she was capable of, Hermione built a secret fantasy life in the curtained privacy of her four-poster bed. It was a kind of refuge from the gnawing worry about just when and where the war with You Know Who would break out again. And it was delicious.

She quickly grew to be glad she'd had some experience with Viktor. It turned out, she discovered, that fantasy needs different kinds of fuel. Severus Snape's voice, eyes, and lips were the melody playing in her mind as her hands sought her own skin, but her body's memories of times alone with Viktor Krum formed the rhythm section.

She remembered the feel of hot breath on her ear, trailing enticements and promises and endearments, teeth biting the lobe; lips and tongue on her neck and shoulder; broom-callused hands moving down her belly and plucking at her waistband.

She remembered also the feel of a man's skin, rougher and hairier than her own, but with areas of silky softness in unexpected places...cool here where the chilly air touched it, hot there where the pulse hammered just below the skin.

Teenagers in a castle without their own private rooms, she and Viktor had snatched at each other when they could, ducking into supply cupboards, grinding their bodies together in alcoves in deserted corridors, groping each other under the library table where they both sat at work.

This was not the way these things played out in the steamy Muggle paperback novels she devoured during the summer. There the lovers were grownups with beds, fires, candles, wine, time, and privacy. They could leisurely undress each other, seduce one another, kiss, banter, and tease.

Not so for randy students: they rarely had much time and they were usually on the verge of discovery, hastily cast Silencing and Cloaking charms notwithstanding.

The excitement and urgency of these remembered rendezvous infused Hermione's Snape fantasies. Where would a Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher and a know-it-all sixth-year go to have each other, when what they were doing was so far out of bounds?

Well, she loved it when Fantasy Snape pulled her behind a tapestry and fell on his knees to yank down her trousers and ravage her with his mouth while students streamed by mere yards away and she gasped out his name, protected by his perfectly cast Muffliato charm.

Also most excellent were the library stacks, where she sometimes knelt down to return the favour. His beautiful hands tangled in her hair, cradling her head gently as she licked and sucked, then ducked to take one of his balls into her mouth, swirling it with her tongue as her fist stroked him, slick with her spit.

And detention... ah, detention.

Here she had to revise present circumstances a bit and put him back in his position as Potions teacher, just for the sake of location. The broad worktables, magically swept clear of detritus and scourged of any old potion spills, were marvellous places to be splayed out under Snape's hands and tongue.

The teacher's chair was made of wood, with a tilting back and no arms. Perfect for straddling a firmly bound erstwhile Potions master while her hands dove into his shirt, caressing all the flesh of his torso then pinching his nipples hard as she flirted the tips of her own breasts into his open mouth.

It was a very good thing that she had to face Professor Slughorn, not Professor Snape, in a classroom that had become her mind's naughtiest playground.

All in all, she built up quite a repertoire of Having Snape tableaux over the autumn term. If some pieces of her fantasy pictures were still vague or missing, so be it. There were plenty of things she imagined doing that she had only read about. She didn't actually know what it felt like to have a man's cock inside her. She and Viktor had never got that far...there was so much else good to do with each other's bodies and so little opportunity to do it. And she had known, in her fourth year, that she wasn't ready for that particular step.

She also couldn't know what Severus Snape really smelled or tasted like, or how he would look or sound in the throes of passion. Her fantasy Snape was shadowy, a mosaic of her own experiences with Viktor, her diligent summer reading in Muggle-Smut Studies, and everything she saw, knew, or imagined about the man himself.

Her private Snape's eyes consumed hers, his hands gripped and stroked her, his mouth explored her everywhere, and his cock filled her night after night. But her pride and common sense warned her not to turn him into some misty teen dream, and she lectured herself sternly when she caught herself straying into the vicinity of tender smiles and hand-holding with Snape. *Work with the facts, Hermione. He's your teacher, and a bastard, and he hates you, and you don't really even like him. Don't decide you're in love with him just because you think he's shaggable. Take what you can use and forget the rest.*

So it was that Fantasy Snape came to her in her bed and did what she wanted him to do, and when she was done with him...when she lay sweating under her duvet, with her breath growing slower and deeper after her orgasm...she dismissed him.

Real Snape's presence had a reliably unsettling effect on her...even when he was being hateful. There wasn't a flick of his eyebrows that didn't ignite little whirls of fire under her skin, not a sneer she didn't want to crush from his mouth with her own.

But Fantasy Snape gave her a safe place to channel her unruly reactions to. *Later*, she would promise herself. *Later. He can look like that for you tonight*

Her relationship with Fantasy Snape was hot; it was thrilling; and it was safely her own secret.

It was almost enough.

* * *

A/N: As usual, big smoochies and bear hugs go to my beta, greenstuff, and Brit-picker, lifeasanamazon. I is luv u. And 1 million thanks go to those of you who took the time to review the first 3 chapters. It is a thrill to hear from you. I'll do my best to answer each of you promptly.

The song referred to in this chapter is 'Caramel' by Suzanne Vega from her 1996 album *Nine Objects of Desire*. When I started writing this story, I remembered this song about illicit desire, and dug it out. It became a touchstone for the story and gave me the title; some chapter titles (like this one) are also drawn from lyrics on that album. If you loathe songfic, never fear, I've kept the influence very light...the story stands completely on its own without the song, which has chiefly served as a private inspiration for me. It's torchy! Listen to / watch a live version here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-1mIOBbKi0>

Caramel lyrics:

It won't do / to dream of caramel / to think of cinnamon / and long for you. / It won't do / to stir a deep desire / to fan a hidden fire / that can never burn true. / I know your name; / I know your skin; / I know the way / these things begin; / But I don't know / how would live with myself / what I'd forgive of myself / if you don't go. / So goodbye / sweet appetite. / No single bite / could satisfy. / I know your name; / I know your skin; / I know the way / these things begin; / But I don't know / how would live with myself / what I would give of myself / if you don't go. / It won't do... etc.

Ships in the Night

Chapter 5 of 36

Severus has encounters with both his masters—and a moment alone with his memories.

Disclaimer: Mine? Nope. JKR's? Yep.

* * * * *

December, 1996

'It's not uncommon, Severus, as you well know. Filius relies on young Mr MacMillan to rehearse the beginning madrigal singers. Pomona has always had one or two young helpers. And since Minerva has been Deputy Headmistress, she has used a teaching assistant to mark papers for her First and Second Years...strictly supervised, of course, but it does give her some relief. Surely one of your sixth or seventh year students could be trusted that far.'

Albus let the suggestion trail off into silence. He sighed at the irate expression on his young colleague's face, and turned to the sideboard. 'More tea, my boy?'

Severus grunted his assent and went back to grinding his molars viciously. His long body was sprawled in a fat leather armchair before the Headmaster's hearth, but he was anything but relaxed.

Interference. Meddling. Bloody Albus. As if the Headmaster had no notion of the level of control it took for him to stay in this game. As if suggesting that he couldn't handle the pressure was at all helpful. *He'd damn well better pray I can handle the pressure, the manipulative bastard*

Albus smiled almost tenderly as he handed Severus a fresh cup of hot black tea. 'I won't insist, Severus. I know your privacy is essential to you. I also know how difficult it can be to delegate when your own standards are so high. But I do urge you to consider it seriously. Perhaps Mr Malfoy would be an apt choice.'

Severus almost spat out his tea. But his scowl softened into a sneer. 'Really, Albus. You're losing your touch,' he observed, settling more comfortably into his chair. 'If you want me to take Draco Malfoy on as my lackey so that I can spend more time protecting his *soul*, just say so. Don't pretend a concern for my welfare that is both misdirected and unwelcome. You know perfectly well that nothing would drive me round the bend faster than having a *young helper* underfoot.'

Albus chuckled but said nothing further on the subject. He took a long look at the wizarding chessboard laid out on the table between them. 'Ah,' he announced. 'Queen to F2. That's checkmate.'

The queen raised her tiny sword in both hands and, howling like a berserker, rushed upon the fleeing black king. Severus snatched up his king before the enemy queen overtook him, depositing him in the vinewood box. The little king leaned over the top of the open box and made a series of very rude gestures at the queen with his hands and tongue. She slashed at the air with her sword, shook her fist, and generally pantomimed 'You are SO DEAD!' to her saucy foe.

Severus smiled grimly. 'Thank you, at least, for not letting me win. There's only so much jolly along I can endure.' He began to put the rest of his pieces back in the box.

'Really, Severus?' The headmaster looked at him over the tops of his half-moon spectacles, eyes twinkling. 'I shouldn't have thought you could endure any jolly whatsoever. I'm glad to hear you might not mind a very little bit of it.'

The younger man unfolded himself from his chair with fluid grace. 'Quite. Thank you for the game, Albus. I'll just go along to my rooms now. I have a number of papers to mark tonight.'

He glided to the door and, as it closed, Albus heard the clunk of the staircase beginning to move.

The old wizard put the white chess pieces in the box and closed the lid, blocking out the sound of the melee that instantly broke out between the losing and winning sides. He watched the fire in silence for a few minutes, and in due course it flared green and Minerva McGonagall stepped through it onto the hearthrug.

Minerva looked keenly around the room, and when she had satisfied herself that they were alone, she lowered herself into the chair Severus had vacated.

'How did it go?' she asked.

Albus smiled and reached out for her hand, clasping it in his on top of the chessboard. 'Oh, perfectly well, I trust. I planted the seed, then proceeded to dig it up. He thinks it was a clumsy scheme to get him to keep a closer eye on Draco Malfoy. Now that he believes he's spotted the manipulation, perhaps he will actually take in the suggestion and get some help.'

Minerva pursed her lips. 'I hope so. He is spread so very, very thin. Surely it would not kill him to accept assistance from a student? He doesn't hate them all. Perhaps Mr Nott? He's quite intelligent, and he's in Severus's House.'

The Headmaster shook his head. 'I agree that Theodore Nott would be a fine choice. But if Severus is to ask for help, it will have to be on his own terms, Minerva. I've done what I can.' He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, smiling into her eyes with affection.

'Tea, my dear?'

* * *

As the stone staircase deposited him at the door behind the gargoyle's back, Severus pulled his watch from his pocket and illuminated its face with his wand. As always, he found it a bit absurd that he should have to check the time after having just left a room full of clocks. But each of the headmaster's clocks displayed a different time. Albus's collection was more in the nature of an art installation...no doubt the older wizard intended it as a reminder of the arbitrariness of clock time, the fleeting nature of human life, the primacy of the Now, or some such rubbish.

Curfew had already fallen, and the corridors were quiet and dim. Severus had long liked this time of day best. It was still early enough for him to feel wide awake, but late enough that all the brats were below the hatches, taking their noise and their puerile dramas with them. Between ten and midnight, Hogwarts felt most welcoming to him.

He eased open a heavy oak door at the end of the corridor and started down the staircase he found there. Two flights down, he stopped on a broad landing. A pair of mullioned windows were set in the wall here, sharing a single deep ledge.

Severus sat, swinging his legs up onto the ledge and setting his shoulders against the cold stone. The windows to his left looked out over the main courtyard, but iced-over condensation made the panes opaque. He swept his wand down from his lips to his chest and murmured '*Expedia*.' He reached into his pocket for a packet of cigarettes and shook one out; lit it; took a deep drag; leaned his head back; closed his eyes; blew out the smoke.

How many times had he and Lily sat here during their fifth year, leaning against opposite sides of the embrasure, bent knees intermingled at the centre of the ledge, books propped in laps? Often they passed a cigarette back and forth in the filtered sunlight. It was the closest he ever came to kissing her...closing his lips around the cigarette that had just left her mouth. Fifteen-year-old Severus had been quite proud of the spell he'd invented that allowed them to smoke without dulling their senses of taste and smell.

This had been his corner of heaven, for a time. And it was one spot in the castle that still contained only good memories for him *Mostly because I never came across her snogging Potter here, thank fuck*. Which was more than he could say about several dozen other places around the castle and grounds. Those two were always at it, seventh year.

The sound of a door opening echoed in the stairwell, and in a moment he could hear voices floating down from the floor above *Ah, yes, a patrol*. Not all the children were snuggled away. He cast cloaking and air-purifying spells around his little nook, and took another drag on his cigarette. He'd be damned if he'd let a pair of prefects chase him out before he'd finished his smoke.

'It's stronger in the stairwell, Ernie...can you smell it now?' said a girl's voice. 'Someone's been smoking in here.'

The two sixth years, lit wands held aloft, traipsed down the stairs onto the landing. Ernie MacMillan and Susan Bones. *Holding bloody hands*.

'You're right,' said the boy. 'But whoever it was is gone now.' He drew the girl towards him, arms wrapping around her waist. 'It's just us.'

She melted, smiling into his mouth as he bent to kiss her.

Merlin's short and curls, SPARE me. Severus moved his wand in a tight, spiky pattern, and a veil of frigid air drifted over the oblivious Hufflepuff pups.

Bones broke away, shuddering. 'Gah! Did the castle just turn inside out? It's freezing!'

'That is quite a draft,' MacMillan declared. 'Let's get back into the corridors and see if we can't find that smoker.' He tucked his girl's arm under his own and the two of them clattered down the stairs and out into the third floor corridor.

Severus cast a warming spell around himself and tapped his ash negligently onto the floor. He rubbed his thumb against a rimed windowpane and peered through it at the dark greys and blacks of the winter night.

* * *

By the time the last moronic essay was marked, Severus's eyes had the gritty itch of over-tiredness. He looked at his watch; quarter past three. He scraped back his chair and rose, stretching. As he reached out to extinguish the lamp, pins and needles pricked along his left forearm before exploding into the urgent pain of a summons. *Perfect timing, as ever*, he thought dryly, even as he clutched at his burning flesh.

Jaws clenched, Severus stepped over to a shallow, ceiling-high cabinet. He extracted two vials of Pepperup Potion and downed them quickly, hating the necessity. Thus fortified, he unlocked a drawer and, reaching into it, began to fill a narrow wooden box with bottles, pots, and sachets.

Among his many uses, Severus Snape was the Dark Lord's personal apothecary. He had developed any number of potions, powders, and unguents to help maintain Voldemort's physical strength. The Dark magic coursing through Tom Riddle's distorted body was very damaging to soft tissues, and the Dark Lord's kidneys, liver, and skin especially needed constant upkeep. He would be in need of some refills.

Severus's winter cloak flapped about him as he strode down to the Apparition point outside the school gates...though with the adrenaline rocketing through his system, he hardly felt the cold. He turned on the spot, fixing his mind on Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrage's house.

There had been a Death Eater meeting tonight at the Lestranges', where the Dark Lord was currently residing. Voldemort had excused Severus from attending, on account of his prior engagement with Albus Dumbledore. 'We can't let your other master grow jealous of your time, can we, Severus? Lucius can tell you later if there's anything you need to know.'

This was part of the Dark Lord's game...singling him out for favour and distancing him at the same time. When he made a showy point of excusing him so he could dance attendance on his other master, he underlined their mutual awareness that Severus was a double agent and that his loyalty would always be in question. When he told Severus dismissively that Lucius would fill him in, the subtext was that Lucius was poised to be his right-hand man, and that Severus was losing status and access.

This was absolute shite, of course, and they both knew it. Unless and until his betrayal was detected, Severus' position as Voldemort's inside man at Hogwarts was unassailable. No other Death Eater could ever get as close to Dumbledore, or to Potter...whatever the Dark Lord might lead the Malfoys to hope.

Voldemort managed all his followers with this kind of pushing and pulling, and in most cases it was exceedingly effective. He constantly kept each of them feeling on the edge of utter disgrace and destruction on one hand and ultimate power and pleasure on the other. Pitting the Death Eaters against one another, playing their weaknesses, granting and denying them favours and mercies...these manipulations came as easily to the Dark Lord as breathing. Easier actually, given the current state of his lungs.

The Lestranges' Apparition chamber was dark and deserted. Now that Severus had answered its call, the pain of the Dark Mark on his forearm had subsided considerably. He made his way towards the library. The whole house was quiet. Severus deduced that whatever scenes of ecstasy and cruelty had unfolded during and after the meeting were mostly played out. He knew bedrooms and dungeons would contain the spent bodies of Death Eaters and their victims or accomplices.

The Dark Lord used these meetings both to demonstrate his own power over his Death Eaters...someone was always punished for something...and to give them a taste of what the world would be for them when they were victorious. It would be a world where they could indulge whatever intoxicating desires they wished, whenever and wherever they wished.

Severus knew now his own attendance at the meeting had only been deferred. He would soon discover whether Voldemort planned pleasure or suffering for him tonight.

Fireglow lit the planes of the Dark Lord's skeletal face. He was at ease in a high backed chair before the hearth, Bellatrix crouched beside him on the floor like a favourite hound. Voldemort's left hand was entwined in her wild black hair, and her expression looked drugged, her mad eyes heavy-lidded and a slack smile curving her beautiful mouth. *Clearly Bella has been a good girl*, thought Severus acidly. He laid the box of potions on a table and fell to his knees.

'Severus, my boy. So good of you to join us,' hissed the Dark Lord. 'I trust your evening was not too demoralising. We missed you.'

'My lord,' murmured Severus, kissing the hem of Voldemort's robes. 'You know I would have been here had you desired it. Tea and chess with the Headmaster was, if not demoralising, certainly tedious.' He tilted his face to let his master gaze into his eyes, offering up scenes from his recent conversation with Dumbledore.

'How touching,' smiled the Dark Lord. 'And would you not like a little friend to play with, to ease your troubles, Severus?'

Voldemort lifted his hand from Bellatrix's head and grasped Severus's left arm, pushing the sleeves of robes and shirt up to reveal the Dark Mark. He touched the tip of his wand to Severus's skin, and green light pulsed around the outlines of the skull and snake.

Severus sagged down to the floor. So it was to be pleasure for him, tonight.

Surges of heat engulfed his body. His brain fired with the most delectable images and sensations. Soft, pale skin flushed at his touch, lush lips parted to him, urgent hands buried themselves in his robes, begging him, needing him... 'Fuck me now, Severus. I want you,' she moaned. It felt, tasted, sounded so real... his heart's desire...

Mine, he triumphed inwardly, panting as his climax neared. *Mine, she's mine at last*.

* * *

A/N: Love and gratitude to greenstuff and lifeasanamazon for all your excellent advice and encouragement.

'Expedio' is Latin for 'clarify'...it's Severus's spell for smoking.

Girl Talk

Chapter 6 of 36

Lavender gets too close for Hermione's comfort.

Disclaimer: Who does it all belong to? JKR and her associates, heirs, and assigns.

* * * * *

December 1996

The door was ajar, which was unusual. Hermione pushed it open and paused upon the threshold. 'Professor?' She called and stepped forward.

A hand grabbed her upper arm and yanked her into the room, then forced her back against the wall as the door slammed shut inches from her ear. Spells for closing, locking, and silence hissed from her captor, whose hands now held both her wrists up against the wall and whose dark eyes glinted in the dimness as his mouth descended upon hers.

His mouth was hard, but hot and open, tongue thrusting in to meet hers until she was kissing him as hungrily as he was kissing her. Then he withdrew suddenly, pulling back just out of her mouth's reach while still pinning her hands. He grinned wolfishly as she arched towards him, trying for more contact. 'Diffindo,' he growled, and her robes flew open to expose the t-shirt and short skirt she was wearing underneath. 'Good,' he said as his eyes flicked down her body. 'I see you came prepared for detention this time.'

His hands swooped to her hips and he lifted her off her feet while thrusting one leg between hers and pinning her against the wall again with the length of his body. His hands moved down under her arse...bare under her skirt.

She could feel his cock hard against her thigh, though it was still hidden beneath layers of cloth. Her face was now slightly above his and her hands were free, so she clutched his hair with one hand and wrenched his head over to give her access to his ear, which she began to lick and bite. Her other hand snaked down the front of his body and tried to twist into his trousers. 'The same cannot be said for you, though,' she growled. 'I don't have my wand...help me here.'

'Diffindo,' he muttered again, and his fly sprung open.

She plunged her hand in to liberate his silky, hot, straining cock, running her fingers up and down it twice before reaching down to cup his balls. 'Fuck me now, Severus,' she whispered, then swirled her tongue around his ear before biting it again. 'I want you.' She grasped his cock and guided it towards her aching core.

He paused for just an instant at her entrance, then he brought her down onto his cock, filling her with one hard stroke.

'Oohhhhh!' she moaned, eyes closed and head thrown back.

He shut his eyes tight and held perfectly still for a moment or two, fighting to keep control. 'You're so tight, so sweet.' Back from the edge, he pulled out slowly and thrust back in as deeply as before. And again. And again. And again. Then he stayed there, filling her up so amazingly. He worked his thumb into the space where their bodies joined and stroked it over her clitoris.

She gasped and circled her hips, grinding into his thumb and rocking her pussy around his cock.

He slipped his hand up under her shirt and pushed aside her bra. His mouth went to her nipple while he raised his thumb from her clit up to her mouth.

She closed her lips around it, sucking and licking it fervently. He pulled the thumb out and returned it to her clit, circling and stroking and pressing as he began to thrust into her again. She strained against him jerkily, breath loud and ragged, keening 'yes, yes, yes!' Then she shattered, her spasms rolling through her, pulling him along with her into an explosive climax...

Gods, I am a perv, Hermione thought as she gasped sharply into her pillows, hands now quiet on her crotch, Fantasy Snape and his glorious cock gone! am a really talented, hard-working, persistent, perverted perv. If Gryffindor could earn points for this, we'd be a cert for the House Cup this year.

'That sounded like a good one, Hermione,' came an arch voice near her head. Lavender.

Damn and blast, she had forgotten the Muffliato. Thank all the gods she had not actually said Snape's name aloud this time.

'Are you decent?' Lavender continued after a moment, with a rather forced-sounding giggle, and Hermione saw her roommate's fingers curl around the edge of the closed bed curtain in preparation to drawing it open.

Hermione sat up and yanked the duvet over her rumpled and gaping pyjama top, baring her feet. 'Erm, Lavender, what do you want? I'm, uh...' Hermione trailed off.

'Busy? Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were, you know, finished.' And Lavender, curse her, had pushed the curtain open and was peering in at Hermione. She was backlit by her bedside lamp, and her expression was impossible to read.

Hermione blinked in the sudden light, speechless with embarrassment as Lavender sat down on the edge of her bed. Though really, she thought, why should I be embarrassed? I'm not the one bathing Ron's neck in my spit every night right in the middle of the common room. At least I am...was...trying for some privacy.

'Lavender,' she said a bit sharply, 'I'm sort of, not in the mood for girl chat right now. I'd like to get some sleep if it's all the same to you.'

Lavender ignored her. Her china blue eyes had a very annoying sort of coy laughing look about them, Hermione saw. And there was something else in Lavender's face that Hermione couldn't quite place. Worry? Anger? Determination?

'Sooo, Hermione,' purred Lavender. 'Are you, um, seeing anyone special these days?' She flicked her eyes down to Hermione's lap and up to her face, smirking a bit. 'If you are, you are a sly one. I couldn't imagine who you might be finding time to work into your... busy... schedule. Is it long-distance, say, a certain boy from Durmstrang? Or someone closer to home?'

Irritating cow, thought Hermione, swallowing hard. She was sure Lavender could see the telltale flush of blood flooding up through her neck and face.

At the same time, she had a nearly overwhelming, absolutely mad desire to confide a little something to someone about her obsession with Severus Snape. It was very hard keeping it all bottled up, when every day some part of her brain and body were wrapped up in Fantasy Snape's hot, dark embrace. Ron and Harry, her best friends, would be a hundred kinds of sick if they had any inkling.

But boy-crazy Lavender...at least she could have some sympathy for the way Hermione was feeling. Even if there was no way in Hades she could be trusted with anything like the truth.

Hermione stared down at her bare toes, which her private Snape loved to suck on. 'Closer to home,' she sighed. 'But thoroughly unrequited. You know how it is.' She looked up. 'Or not,' she said hastily. 'I mean, you and Ron, it looks pretty, um, requited from where I'm sitting.'

Lavender was watching her quite keenly, without any of the smirk left on her face. 'Does it?' she asked a little stiffly. 'Well, it is bloody well required.' She paused. 'On my side anyway.' And again her eyes glinted with something that was not like laughter at all.

Oh, mother of Merlin, she thinks that I want to, that I might. Hermione drew a breath and said carefully, 'Lavender, it is really... nice to see Ron really... getting along well with, erm, with someone who appreciates him so much.' Nice? She was stretching the truth pretty hard there. 'He deserves love.' That part was true, at least.

'I'm glad you are there for him.' Also not completely untrue. It did give her a pang to watch Ron and Lavender coiling around each other like mating flobberworms, but if she, Hermione, couldn't find it in her heart (or really, in her loins) to be with Ron that way, then she'd be a rotten friend if she begrudged him getting a little touch. Or, actually,

quite a lot of touch.

She hesitated. *Better be a little clearer in case she's not getting my drift. Not the sparkiest wand in the shop*'So I want to let you know that a few minutes ago, when you heard me being, er, busy, Ron Weasley was the furthest person from my mind.'

Instantly the hard look (*jealousy, of course*) left Lavender's eyes and her expression became open and avid. 'Ohhh, Hermione, whooo then? Is it a Gryffindor? A seventh-year? You can tell me, I won't breathe a word.'

Ha! Hermione bit her cheek to keep from laughing in Lavender's face. 'Lavender, truly. All I can tell you is that it is Not Ron. Thoroughly unrequited, and Not Ron. And I'm really... content... with both parts of that. You know me...I don't have time or energy for a boyfriend these days. I'm just so busy...' she stopped talking, aware that she would never, ever again be able to say the word 'busy' with a straight face in Lavender's hearing.

She shook her head. 'Anyway, I really need some sleep now.'

Lavender looked at her for a moment and seemed about to say something, but then just flashed out with a grin. 'Well, Hermione, if you ever want to talk...you know, girlfriend to girlfriend...if you ever need any advice, I'm right here for you.' She bounced off Hermione's bed (*at last!*) and put her hands up to the curtains. 'Shall I close these, then?'

'Please. Thanks.' In her shadowed bed, Hermione lay back and smiled mirthlessly to herself. A seventh-year Gryffindor? Clearly Lavender's idea of perfect boyfriend material...Ron was nearly there. *No, try a twenty-seventh-year Slytherin.*

Lavender did have something right, though. *In a lot of ways I would be much better off pursuing something with Won-Won. I may lust after Severus Snape every single day, but even I know he is not, and never will be, Boyfriend Material.*

Hermione grimaced and turned on her side, willing sleep to come.

* * *

A/N Love eternal to greenstuff and lifeasanamazon, my globalized beta team.

Magic for Modern Lovers

Chapter 7 of 36

Lavender is surprisingly resourceful, generous, and sane. Hermione thirsts for new knowledge.

Disclaimer: Q: Who owns this stuff? A: JKR!

* * *

The next morning when Hermione left the breakfast table for the library, Lavender unwound her arm from Ron's waist and followed her out of the Great Hall.

'Hermione, thanks for talking to me last night. It's just kind of hard to know where I am with Ron. I want us to be somewhere good, but then there's you. You make me feel really insecure. You're brilliant and pretty and a prefect and Ron's best friend. He loves you, I know. I just want him to love me, too, and, well, not as a friend. He clams up when I try to talk to him about it, so I thought I'd try a different approach. Sorry if I was a little rude and nosy.' Lavender's blue eyes smiled into Hermione's brown ones.

Hermione gaped at Lavender. That was the most honest, no-nonsense speech she'd ever heard from Lavender Brown. 'N-no problem, Lavender. Yes, awkward. But glad I could help.'

'Anyway,' said Lavender. 'I got to thinking last night that maybe you'd like to borrow this.' She held out a chunky, oversized book covered in squashy pink leather with white letters tooled onto the front:

Magic for Modern Lovers

Dr Alixter Joy

A book of sex spells.

Hermione gaped again and glanced quickly around for teachers. 'Lavender, where did you get this book? Love spells are forbidden! That part of the library is so highly restricted that I think only Dumbledore can get in there. Seriously, not even Madam Pince.'

Lavender rolled her eyes, 'Oh Hermione, it's not from the Hogwarts library. It belongs to a friend; I'm borrowing it from her for a couple of weeks. You know, since Ron and I are so new, I thought we'd start things off with a bang.'

Hermione threw up her hands in the universal sign for 'Stop Now.'

Lavender giggled. 'Sorry! Anyway, do you know Romilda? Her mum is a charm breaker specializing in love spells, and Romilda says she has an amaaaazing library.'

Lavender got a faraway, hungry look as she said it, and Hermione had to struggle for a moment to keep from laughing at the spectacle of Lavender Brown coveting books.

'Mostly locked up, of course, but Romilda found this one in the garret. Apparently it was very popular in the seventies...everyone's parents have a copy stashed around somewhere. It's everyday stuff, really, nothing at all dangerous or Dark,' she said breezily. 'Just enhancements. And consensual things. Both people have to cast the spell together for most of these to work. And, thank the gods, Dr Joy has modernized the language so it's not all 'Whenne a wytche and a wyzzard do planne to mete abedde,' you know? Look.'

Lavender opened the book randomly. 'Pulso Corium: A Suite of Spells for Spanking,' the type proclaimed above a line drawing of a witch holding what looked like a handful of limp spaghetti noodles over the bare bottom of a wizard (*or was he a werewolf? so hairy!*) spread-eagled on a rumpled bed. As Lavender and Hermione watched, the

witch brought her hand down so that the noodles smacked into her wizard friend's backside. The tiny wizard made a grunting sound and squeaked, 'Again, mistress.'

Hermione stared, open-mouthed, as the little couple repeated the flogging vignette.

Lavender giggled again. 'Some of it is pretty kinky. But there's plenty that's sweet and romantic, or plain vanilla. Lots of stuff you can do all on your own. Something for everyone,' she said cheerily. 'Why don't you borrow it overnight, Hermione? See if there's anything in here that will be good for, ah, business.' She closed the fat pink book and placed it in Hermione's nerveless hands before sauntering back towards the Gryffindor table and Ron.

Hermione stuffed the book into her bag and strode off towards the library.

When the hell had Lavender Brown become Hogwarts' resident sex therapist? *Sometime during the years Harry and Ron and I have been trying to stay a half-step ahead of torture, chaos, and violent death*, she answered herself wearily, feeling rather old.

The library was not the place to get acquainted with Dr Joy, nor was there an opportunity during the rest of the day, though she carried the book around to lessons and meals. Whenever she opened her book bag, Hermione heard *Magic for Modern Lovers* give off a little exhalation of warm air, like a contented sigh, and caught a whiff of something... was that patchouli? She would probably have to spell her bag to get rid of that smell.

After an hour or two in the common room that evening, Hermione wished Ron and Harry good night. 'I'm going to go work upstairs. It looks like all the roommates are down here, and I'd like to take the chance of some time for myself.'

To bed with you, Alixter Joy, thought Hermione as she crawled onto her four-poster with her wand and the pink book, which was now noticeably warm and was making a low humming sound. She closed the curtains, murmured 'Lumos,' and opened *Magic for Modern Lovers*.

The book had no logical organizational scheme that she could discover. Dr. Joy's brief introduction assured her that this was deliberate: 'Variety is the spice of life for today's groovy witches and wizards. This book is bursting with sweet nibbles and salty snacks as well as full-course feasts for solos, duos, and groups of really good friends. Just take your wand in hand and dip in!'

Seriously? thought Hermione irritably. *That is naff. No wonder this thing was sitting in the Vanes' attic gathering dust* She began flipping through the pages, lingering occasionally over one of the line drawings, most of which starred the same rather elegant witch and hairy wizard, though occasionally a blond witch and wizard showed up in supporting roles.

She began to see some themes running through the collection of spells. For example, the book was scattered with 'mood setting' spells, many of which Hermione recognized from other contexts...candle magic, the fountain of wine.

She wondered how many everyday, seemingly innocent spells could be used in a sexual context. *Oh great*, she groaned inwardly. *That's just what I need, to start thinking of EVERYTHING in terms of sex.*

There were dozens of erotically tinged Engorgio spells, of course, with accompanying countercharms to use when the fun of having, say, enormous breasts, wore off and the backache part was setting in. Convenio spells, all illustrated, seemed to cover every possible mode of physical coupling and some that Hermione could have sworn would be impossible.

After about twenty minutes, Hermione grew tired of browsing aimlessly through Dr Joy's cheery, dated dicta. *Does this thing even have an index?* She flipped to the back. *Nope. Not groovy enough, I guess* she thought as she tapped the book with her wand and murmured *Revelio Indexium!* A piece of parchment appeared on the bed next to her, printed minutely in the same font as *Magic for Modern Lovers*.

Where to start, though? *What do I actually want to find?*

She pondered for a long minute, staring unseeing into the upper corner of the bed canopy, where a small spider was poised perfectly still in the middle of its web.

I want to know more. More about Snape...about Severus. I just, I want more of him

That seemed a hopelessly vague notion...and also an impossible boon to ask of the universe itself, much less of Dr Alixter Joy and his great pervy book. Knowing Severus Snape more would have to involve his participation, and he was, to her knowledge, locked up tighter than Azkaban. *Also my teacher and a complete bastard*, she reminded herself.

So the search would probably yield nothing usable. *No problem. The search for knowledge is never in vain* she thought wryly.

Perhaps... *Disco*. Spells of Discovery. She found the heading and ran her finger down the list of spells, flipping to a few of the pages. Tantric spells, mostly, very hippie-ish.

One or two Disco spells seemed like they would be better off in a book called *Magic for Jealous Lovers*...the magical equivalent of going through your husband's pockets. She tsked quietly. If she were this book's editor, spells like this would be right out. *Serious downer. Not groovy.*

Percipio, then. Spells of Knowledge and Perception. Again she traced down the list and stopped at Percipio Corium. To know the skin? No Annuo in the title to indicate the spell was for consenting couples, no Solus to indicate it was a spell to be performed on oneself. A typo?

She riffled to page 438 in *Magic for Modern Lovers* and found it. Percipio Corium, full stop. No typo, apparently. A spell to know the beloved's skin, involving both a potion and an incantation.

She read through the description of the spell's casting and effects, ears buzzing and heart thumping. This was it. A way for her to have more of what she craved. It did seem to nudge past an ethical line, though, a bit. Shouldn't this sort of thing be consensual?

Dead easy though, if she was reading it correctly, except for one of the potion ingredients. But if she could steal Boomslang skin from Snape's locked stores as a second year, cadging this ingredient would be a piece of cake.

She hesitated just a moment, then Summoned a Copying Quill and a fresh sheet of parchment. She touched the quill to the words Percipio Corium on page 438 of the book and then to the parchment, muttering the incantation.

When Percipio Corium was copied out neatly, Hermione rolled the parchment up with a slightly trembling hand and sealed it with a touch of her wand. She was pretty sure she would never dare use this. A sex spell might not be Dark or even dangerous in an ordinary sense of the word, but she had read enough to know that even the most seemingly innocuous ones could have serious and unintended consequences.

She tucked the rolled parchment in the very bottom of her trunk and began to get ready for bed.

* * *

'Thanks for the loan, Lavender. It was, erm, seriously instructive.' Hermione placed the book on Lavender's table just as the other girl walked in from the bathroom, toweling her hair. Hermione was already dressed and ready to head down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

'Isn't it though?' Lavender enthused. 'Isn't it great? Ron won't try any of the Convenios with me yet, but I'll tell you he sure loves it when I do Engorgio...'

'Oi, Lavender!' Hermione yelled. 'Too, too, too much information.'

She tried to close her mind to any scenario that involved Ron, Lavender, and Dr. Alixter Joy, but felt a rush of amused pity for Ron. He hadn't a prayer. She felt a little wistful envy, too. At least he had a shot at trying out some of the Annuos in *Magic for Modern Lovers*.

'Sorry! Did you find anything useful?' Lavender waggled her eyebrows up and down in a stagy leer.

'Maybe,' Hermione smiled briefly. 'It's a little hard to know what the most useful thing would be in my situation. But it was fun to read.'

'You should know I'm giving it back to Romilda in a few days. If you want to look at it again, I'm sure she'll lend it to you. I'll let her know that you can be trusted with this kind of thing and won't rat on her.'

'Oh,' said Hermione hastily. 'Please don't. You don't have to tell her I read it, do you? I'd like to keep all this private if possible.' She flashed what she hoped was a warm and confidential smile at Lavender.

Please, please, don't let Lavender decide to start blabbing that little Miss Perfect Prefect has a pathetic crush on someone she can't have, likes to read cheesy sex manuals, and has a nightly date with her own hand.

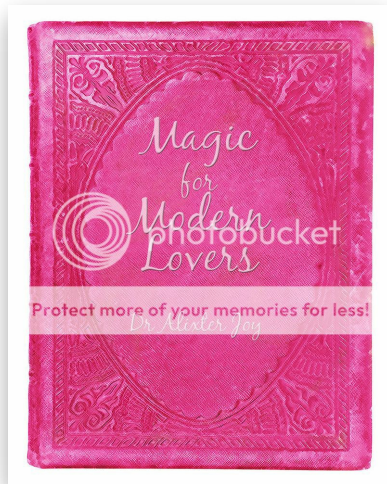


Illustration by QalaChaki.

* * *

A/N: Q: Do I love and appreciate greenstuff and lifeasanamazon for their steadfast help and support?

A: I do.

This chapter and the preceding one were originally published as a one-shot on AFF and OWL entitled 'Magic for Modern Lovers.'

To see a larger version of the fabulous illustration by QalaChaki, check out her DA page at: <http://qalachaki.deviantart.com/gallery/#/d2b1mhe>.

Iecur Fortis

Chapter 8 of 36

Severus gets hurt and Hermione gets upset.

Disclaimer: She wrote it (yay!). She owns it (super!). I play with it for fun and no-profit (neat!).

* * * * *

December 1996

He was trapped in lightless, biting cold. *So cold*. And there was something else...*pain*. The pain rippled outwards from a deep place; a place that shouldn't feel anything at all, but should be going about its metabolic business in darkness and quiet. For a while...minutes? hours?...the cold and the pain were all he knew, twin agonies that begged all other sensations and obliterated thought.

He passed out.

When consciousness returned the pain was still there. And it was joined by a different pain, this one on the surface, a sharp stinging slanting from his temple across his cheek and over his mouth, which tasted of bile and blood. A sort of dull heaviness weighed down his limbs and his head. Was this cold? *No, numbness*. It was worse in his legs, or where his legs should be. He couldn't feel them, really, at all. His hands and arms were like blocks of waterlogged, frozen wood. One hand wrapped around something slender. His wand?

He opened his eyes. Grey light...blinding for a moment until his eyes adjusted. Low clouds; dark trees. Hills. LakeHogwarts. *Home*. He passed out again.

And awoke.

Now the pain was muted. And the cold... or was he warm now? Hard to tell...his body didn't seem to have any shape to it*'m losing my body. Maybe this will not be such a bad way to die...* With that thought his eyelids flew open, as a racking surge of adrenaline knit him back together all at once*No. Hell, no. Not like this, you FUCKING bastard.* He fixed his mind on the necessary memory, flung his wand hand up, and opened his lips to roar, brokenly,*Expecto Patronum!*

The silver doe burst from his wand tip and sped away, melting through the school gates not thirty yards from where Severus lay on the lake shore, legs in the frigid water, head pillowed on a patch of frozen mud.

He passed out.

* * *

'What news, Poppy?' Albus asked, closing the door quietly behind him and casting a privacy spell over the room. It was a standard precaution...there were no other patients in the hospital wing.

The healer stood up from her seat at Severus's bedside and circled around it to stand beside the Headmaster. 'He hasn't surfaced yet, but he is resting now and I believe he's out of immediate danger,' she said quietly.

'I have treated the frostbite and the bruising, neither of which had a magical cause. They're healing well. The cut on his face is from a hex, but it's superficial and was not complicated to treat. I cast an overall analgesic charm, of course. But the broken leg will have to wait until he's stronger and until we can determine the extent and nature of the internal spell damage...I don't want any adverse effects from the Skele-gro.'

Poppy swept her glance over her patient before she continued. 'The spell damage appears to be mostly around the liver. I'm monitoring it constantly, and the force of the curse doesn't appear to be either growing or diminishing. If it were growing, I'd have to advise an immediate transfer to St Mungo's, risky as that would be. As it is, I'd like to wait a while for him to wake up and tell us what he knows about the type of spell and how it was cast.'

'Thank you, Poppy,' said Albus gravely. 'Your approach is a sound one, I believe.' He stepped closer to the bed and gazed down at the still form of his colleague. Severus was dressed in loose hospital robes and tucked under several blankets...his torn, filthy clothing was nowhere to be seen.

A livid gash extended from his left temple right across his mouth and down to his jaw...it already looked much better than it had when Hagrid had borne him, limp and bloodied, into the castle an hour before. His skin had a distinctly yellowish cast...the sign of a blighted liver. His closed eyelids were purple and looked bruised, and his lips were very pale.

Yet for all Severus's battered appearance, Albus reflected, he had never seen the younger man look so peaceful. Perhaps no one had, at least not since Severus was a boy. The Headmaster sighed heavily. Severus was a strong-willed man and a powerful wizard. He would never willingly let anyone glimpse his human vulnerability. That made it easy to forget that he *was* vulnerable, and entirely human. *Do I let myself forget it too often?* wondered Albus. *I think perhaps I do*

A quick double knock sounded on the closed door, and a high, panicked voice gasped, 'Madam Pomfrey? Are you there?'

Poppy turned and opened the door a little, standing in the opening to block it. 'Yes, Miss Granger? Are you ill or injured?'

'No, I... I'm not. I'm sorry, is Professor Snape here? Professor Hagrid told me and I came as fast as I could...' Hermione gulped, only dimly aware of how absurd the words might sound. She had sprinted from Hagrid's hut to the castle and up to the hospital wing, leaving an astonished Ron and Harry still standing at the door of the hut.

Hagrid's distraught expression was burned on her retinas, and his words kept echoing in her ears: 'Ha' dead at least, poor bloke. Beat up summat terrible. Dunno how he managed a Patronus in that state, soaked and bleedin' and froze nearly solid...'

She tried again. 'Please, is he okay? What happened?' She was awash in dread.

The Headmaster appeared behind Madam Pomfrey. 'Miss Granger. Professor Snape is in here. You may come in for a moment, but do keep your voice down. He has been injured, and he is sleeping.'

Poppy looked up at the Headmaster with astonishment. 'Professor Dumbledore, I'm not sure...'

'... that it's wise?' He finished her sentence. 'I think Miss Granger can be trusted to look in on the patient without disturbing him.' Albus opened the door wider and beckoned Hermione to pass through. 'Would you give us a few moments, please, Poppy?'

Madam Pomfrey's eyebrows drew together in disapproval. 'I need to get a few things from the dispensary. I'll be back shortly.' She swept past Hermione, leaving the door ajar.

Hermione stepped into the dim room and halted a yard or so from the bed, her eyes fixed on Snape's waxen face*He looks so ill.* 'Please, Professor Dumbledore,' she murmured, turning to the Headmaster. 'What happened?'

'We don't know just yet, Miss Granger. As Professor Hagrid may have told you, he found Professor Snape outside the school gates about an hour and a half ago. Professor Snape had sent a Patronus to Hagrid's hut, but he was unconscious by the time Hagrid reached him. Madam Pomfrey has stabilised him, and is confident that he will wake up soon and be able to advise us about the nature and origin of his internal injuries.'

It took a moment for Hermione to realise what the Headmaster was implying. 'Spell damage?' she breathed, horrified. 'Who... how... why?' Her mind was racing, and she gasped. 'Was it...He Who Must Not Be Named? Or a Death Eater?' It was hard for her to imagine that anyone but a very powerful wizard or witch could have reduced Professor Snape to this state.

'As I said, Miss Granger, we don't yet know. But I believe that's likely. Severus had some... business... with Tom this afternoon.'

Hermione blinked at the Headmaster's use of Professor Snape and Lord Voldemort's first names. She had at least a dozen questions. She bit back all but one.

'Has he been discovered?' she whispered.

Albus stepped close to the head of the bed. He gazed down at Severus in silence for a moment, then said, 'I think not. If Voldemort had divined his true loyalties at last, he would not be lying here in hospital. He would never have been returned to us alive.'

Hermione blanched, and her stomach knotted. No one had ever spoken to her so plainly about the extreme danger of Professor Snape's position. And she had never before been confronted with the evidence of that danger. Contemplating his drawn profile and listening to the papery rasp of his breathing, her vision began to blur with unshed tears.

'How can he go on doing it?' she wondered aloud.

Dumbledore turned his head and caught her gaze. 'Professor Snape is an extraordinarily brave and skilful wizard, Miss Granger. We are fortunate to have him on our side.'

'And he is... on our side... isn't he?' she faltered, needing the Headmaster to confirm it.

Dumbledore's eyes held hers in silence for a moment or two. Then he sighed. 'Dark days are coming, Miss Granger*This...*' he gestured towards the bed, 'is only a taste of what Lord Voldemort is capable of. Shocking as it is to us, he would do this, and worse, to one he regards as his own, and he would do it with little or no provocation.'

He paused. 'Most of us will see, and some of us will do, things that will horrify us and break our hearts. But come what may, you must never doubt Severus Snape's loyalty. I never shall.' He turned his gaze back to Severus, and reached out a hand to caress the crown of his head.

The grimness of the Headmaster's words...or perhaps the tenderness of his gesture...made Hermione swallow hard to keep her tears back. It was no use; they spilled out.

Severus stirred and groaned faintly under Albus's touch, and the Headmaster pulled back his hand. 'Ah,' he murmured, staring intently at Severus. He turned to Hermione. 'Miss Granger, would you be so kind as to fetch Madam Pomfrey? I believe our sleeper awakens.'

'Yes, sir, of course.' Hermione spun on her heel and hurried from the room.

Poppy was in the dispensary, and with her were Harry and Ron. Hardly sparing a glance for her friends, Hermione spoke to the healer, her words tumbling out. 'Madam Pomfrey, Professor Snape is waking up. Professor Dumbledore asked me to fetch you.'

'Thank you, Miss Granger.' Poppy said, seizing a narrow wooden box from the counter. 'Mr Potter and Mr Weasley just arrived. If you wish, you may stay in the hospital wing and wait for news, but no more visits to the patient for the time being.' She stepped into the corridor and was gone.

Hermione turned her tear-streaked face to her friends, who were looking at her in confusion. She wailed and threw herself into Harry's arms, burying her face in his shoulder. Shocked and embarrassed, he put his arms around her and stroked her back rather awkwardly, staring wide-eyed at Ron over her head.

'Mione, *what* is going on?' demanded Ron.

Hermione only sobbed and burrowed her face deeper into the front of Harry's robes.

After a moment, Ron shrugged and reached into his pocket. 'Well then at least take this,' he mumbled, pressing a handkerchief into her hand. He patted her on the shoulder and sat down to wait out the storm.

* * *

Swimming up out of nothingness, Severus heard quiet voices. It was red behind his eyelids. The pain was there...a small dark star, swaddled somehow and secreted deep in his body. He smelled hospital smells...bitter disinfectant herbs and starched linen. And something sweet and clean. *Lemon verbena*.

A large warm... hand?... was touching his head. He shifted, and the movement sent muted pain messages along nerves in his leg and under his ribcage. He groaned. The hand disappeared, the voices sounded again, and a door opened and closed.

He opened his eyes a little, just enough to confirm... he was in the hospital wing. He was safe.

He closed his eyes again and allowed the memories to come.

Voldemort's summons came towards the end of his fifth-year morning lesson. He dismissed the class early, then hurried to pack his kit of restorative potions and arrange for Dumbledore to take his afternoon lessons, the pain roaring like wildfire in his arm all the while.

Apparating to the Lestranges', he had known right away something was off. He could almost smell it: the rankness of concentrated fear spiked with the tang of Dark magic.

The drawing room was in near darkness, with just a bit of greyish light spilling in around the drawn curtains. Several Death Eaters...Bella, Rodolphus, Macnair, Pettigrew...hovered near the cold hearth. He thought he could discern a pair of feet protruding from behind a sofa.

Lord Voldemort's breathing, rough and shallow, was the only sound in the room.

The first spell hit Severus as he knelt beside the Dark Lord's chair. It was like an invisible knife slicing from his jaw line to his opposite temple, missing his eye by a trifle. Blood sheeted down his face.

'Not... good... enough... Severus,' rasped Voldemort, his wand still sparking. 'It did not... last... any longer... than before... and now... it feels... like thisPrometheo!' The second spell arrowed into Severus's torso and blossomed into a web of nauseating pain.

Severus curled into a ball on the floor, sweating and retching. He fought to control and deepen his breathing...he needed oxygen in order to think and speak and survive this. With a Herculean effort, he raised his head and grated out, 'My deepest... apologies my lord. I had... hoped it would... work. I have brought phials of the original potion and the new one, it's... they're... in the box.' He gestured towards the table where he had left his kit.

'Wormtail,' croaked Voldemort. 'Bring it.'

Pettigrew scurried to retrieve the box. His face was glistening with sweat and tears, panic seeming to rise from him in waves as he scrabbled among the bottles, finally withdrawing a small beaker half full of brick-red liquid. He held it up.

Severus nodded, then closed his eyes against a pulse of nausea.

Voldemort leaned his head back and Pettigrew tipped the potion down his throat. Almost immediately his breathing slowed and quieted. The lecur Fortis potion acted quickly; unfortunately its effects didn't last long...a limitation Severus had tried to overcome in the last batch, apparently with no success.

'Your apology is... noted.' The Dark Lord's voice had regained its lazy, sibilant tone. 'Bellatrix. Severus is leaving. Would you escort him? And Bella. No spells.'

She didn't use spells, but steel-toed boots vigorously applied can do real damage, too.

So it was that Bellatrix Lestrange appeared outside the Hogwarts gates on a December afternoon, clutching the arm of a bleeding Severus Snape. 'Rot here,' she snarled, and jammed his wand into his hand. Loosening her grip on him, she aimed a last vicious kick at his shin. Something cracked. He collapsed and rolled down the embankment, managing to stop himself only when he was half submerged in lake water. He passed out.

* * *

A/N: lecur Fortis means 'strong liver.' It is my made-up potion. I'm guessing it tastes nasty. :)

So, I know the last couple of chapters were pretty light and fluffy, and this one's pretty dark. And I think I've been saying this in answers to reviews, but it seems like a good time to say it here: this is an angsty fic. There will be more UST as we go along, and also plenty of heartache (and a few laughs, sure), because I'm trying to be canon compliant for HBP, wherein some really horrible stuff happens. Nor are HG and SS going to jump each other anytime soon, for a lot of reasons. (Sorry!) I plan to get them

somewhere good, but it's going to take a while to get it right. So... keep reading if it stays fun for you!

Thanks and love to lifeasanamazon and greenstuff, who are like those neighbours who bring over the extra cookies they baked...i.e., a dream to have around.

Realisation

Chapter 9 of 36

Hermione comes to a new understanding. Harry is uneasy. Ron is Ron.

Disclaimer: She wrote it, she owns it, amen.

* * * * *

'A Prometheus curse? Are you sure?' Poppy looked from her patient to the Headmaster, brow furrowed. 'I've never dealt with one before. Perhaps St Mungo's...'

'No,' Severus interjected. His voice sounded like it was being scraped over jagged rocks. 'Not necessary. The potion I have been making for...' He stopped and closed his eyes. 'I have a quantity of... lecur Fortis potion... in my quarters.' He breathed in shallowly. 'It will prevent further injury to the liver and will... repair the damage that's already been done.' He grimaced. 'In time.'

Albus rose. 'Private stores, Severus?'

Severus nodded.

'I'll fetch it myself then. Is there anything you would like to tell me about your wards before I venture upon them?'

Severus smiled slightly. He looked ghastly...his drawn-tight skin had the appearance of old, used, and rather damp parchment, and his eyes were shadowed and sunken.

'You won't have... any difficulties, Albus.' The Headmaster...being the Headmaster...could of course Floo directly to Severus's private quarters. There were a couple of areas in his rooms Severus had warded thoroughly against even Dumbledore, but his private laboratory and stores were not among them.

'I'll return in a few minutes,' said the Headmaster, his hand on the doorknob. He gazed searchingly at Severus for a moment before he left. A plan had already formed in his head. *He's not going to like it a bit*, he thought. *Too bad.*

* * *

It was not yet dinnertime, but darkness had fallen, and the diamond-paned windows of the dispensary were opaque with reflected light.

Harry sat in a wooden chair that he'd scraped next to Hermione's, and she sagged sideways against his shoulder, sniffing and clutching Ron's sodden handkerchief. Ron had pulled his chair up in front of Hermione's, and he sat hunched over, crossed arms resting on his knees, peering up at her through his fringe.

Harry and Ron were silent. Three times they had tried to get Hermione to tell them what was going on, and each time she'd responded with renewed sobs. They had given up; she would talk when she would talk.

Hermione was grateful for the space they were giving her to compose herself. She felt a mess: scared (on so many levels) and worried and emotionally exhausted and, now that she seemed to have cried herself out, a little bit embarrassed.

Finally, she pushed herself away from Harry's loose embrace and sat upright, wrapping her arms tightly around her own body. She looked at her friends, smiled wanly, and took a deep, shuddering breath.

'Thanks, you two. Sorry. I think... I really got a shock, is the thing.'

'What happened, Mione?' asked Harry gently.

She sat up straighter and dropped her hands to her lap, where they lay mangling Ron's handkerchief. She lifted her chin in her characteristic, unconscious gesture of fortitude.

'Professor Snape was... tortured. His face is cut up and his leg is broken and there's... there's spell damage. Internally. Professor Dumbledore... he said...or, well, he appears to think...it was probably He Who Must Not Be Named who did it.' *There*. She'd managed to tell them the relevant parts.

'But why?' Harry asked quickly. 'Did he...did Voldemort find out Snape is really working for Dumbledore?'

Ron cringed and mouthed a protest, but kept silent.

'That was the first thing I asked Professor Dumbledore,' said Hermione. 'He said...' *Here come the tears again, damn it* 'he said he thought not. That if that were the case, You Know Who would never, would never, um, never have sent Professor Snape back alive.' She swiped at her wet cheeks.

"Wow," said Ron quietly.

No one spoke for a minute or two.

'What do you reckon, Harry?' said Ron. 'Why would, erm, You Know Who want to torture Snape?'

'Right, because I'm the expert on Voldemort's motives, what with all the time I've spent in his brain,' said Harry in a flat voice.

Hermione broke in hastily. 'Oh, Harry! Ron didn't mean that, I'm sure!'

'S'okay, I'm not actually all that offended,' said Harry with a tiny and unconvincing smile. '*I have* spent some time sort of connected to him when he was doing awful stuff. And I can say that he, just, he *likes* to do awful stuff. To hurt people and frighten them, sometimes for no real reason you could name. He's evil, you know. And crazy.'

'Professor Dumbledore said something like that,' said Hermione. 'He was looking d-down at Professor Snape, and he said that...You Know Who...would do this sort of thing to one of his own, without provocation. He also said, oh...' Hermione's lip began to tremble. 'He said Professor Snape was brave and, and skilled, and that we are lucky to have him on our side, and that he trusts him completely and always will, no matter... no matter what happens.'

This time the tears came with a few quiet sobs, and Harry wrapped an arm around Hermione and pulled her in to his side again.

After a minute or so, Ron said slowly, "But Hermione. Why are you so, um, upset? He's fine, yeah? Safe now. And it's not like he's, I dunno..."

'If you say something nasty about Professor Snape right now, I will kill you, Ronald Weasley,' Hermione all but screeched, jolting upright. 'Do you hear me? You will be *dead by my hand*.' As soon as the words were out, she clapped her hand over her mouth and stared at Ron, horrified. 'Sorry! Oh, sorry, Ron!' Then she burst into tears yet again.

Ron's face had gone quite red. 'I wasn't going to say anything nasty, I swear,' he protested. 'It's just...Snape, he's got to know what he's in for, doing what he does. Working for an evil lunatic and everything...pretending! I mean *pretending* to work for an evil lunatic,' he amended quickly as Hermione's expression hardened through her tears.

She was really on an emotional rollercoaster, caroming between anger and tears every few seconds, it seemed. And underneath it all was an oceanic feeling she was reluctant to give a name to.

'Maybe,' she said finally and sighed. 'But you didn't see him, Ron. He looks so... broken. If that's what he signed up for, I just, I can't wrap my mind around it. It is sick, and horrible.' She fell silent, remembering something else the Headmaster had said, about dark times, and heartbreak, and the horrifying necessities of war.

Hermione closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She was *really* ready to stop crying...she was doing no one any good by carrying on like this. Exhaling and opening her eyes, she looked in turn at Harry and Ron and smiled her good, resolute Hermione Granger smile.

'It's getting late, isn't it? Let's go to dinner,' she said firmly, rising from her chair and holding her hand out to Ron.

'Oh, thank Merlin,' groaned Ron, seizing her hand and leaping up. 'I am one hundred per cent in favour of that. Starving!'

Harry, too, got out of his chair and trailed after his friends. He hadn't heard anything too surprising in Hermione's account of Snape's condition and Dumbledore's remarks, but the incident weighed on him. He had, as usual, a lot of questions he wasn't sure Dumbledore would answer, even in his new, more confiding persona. Still, he'd have to ask them the next time he saw the Headmaster.

As the three of them passed the door to Snape's room, Dumbledore opened it and stepped out.

'Miss Granger, Mr Weasley, Mr Potter. I'm so glad I caught you all.' Dumbledore smiled fleetingly. He looked very tired. 'I trust you are on your way to the Great Hall? Excellent. I shall walk with you for a moment. Harry, Ron, when you reach the Great Hall, would you do me the favour of asking Professors McGonagall and Slughorn to come up here as soon after dinner as convenient?'

Harry nodded. 'Yes, Professor Dumbledore,' said Ron.

'Thank you both. And Miss Granger, if you would be so kind as to join me in my office this evening at eight? I'd be most grateful.'

'Oh. Of... of course, sir.'

Dumbledore had stopped in front of the hospital wing's fireplace. 'Very good. I shall see you then. I hope you are partial to humbugs.'

He looked at each of them in turn as he spoke his next words. 'It is important that none of you speak to anyone else about what you've seen and heard here today. The situation is very sensitive. Do you understand?'

Their mumbled *yessirs* and solemn nods seemed to satisfy him. He grabbed some Floo powder in his good hand, flung it into the fire, and disappeared among the green flames.

'What do you guess he wants you for?' wondered Harry.

'I have no idea,' Hermione said simply. 'But do you know, I think I had really better go for a run rather than go to dinner. Could you save me something? I'll drop in to the common room before I go to Dumbledore's.'

'I don't know how you can do it in the dark and the cold. Doesn't your sweat freeze in your clothes?' Ron picked at a loose thread on the sleeve of Hermione's jumper.

Hermione rolled her eyes and pushed his hand away. 'Ugh, Ron, thanks for taking the conversation to that level. It's certainly not as cold as Quidditch in the snow, which you play *all the time*. And I'm not going to talk to you about my sweat.' But she felt a little better. Ron being Ron was something she could handle.

She turned at the next landing and disappeared up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower.

'That girl? Is moody,' remarked Ron.

'Yeah, she really is. I haven't seen her that upset in...I don't know how long. I mean, she cries sometimes, but she gets over it. That was just...'

'An epic snot-fest,' Ron supplied. 'Your robes got slimed, my friend.' He pointed.

Harry grinned and shook his head as he Scourgified the front and sleeves of his robes, which were indeed starting to crust over in places. 'And again, raising the conversational tone, Ron.'

'S'my job, mate. I do it well,' said Ron serenely as they entered the Great Hall.

The ghost of a grin lingered on Harry's face, but his thoughts were troubled. Something was going on with Hermione. Something she wasn't sharing. Something big.

* * *

The run helped. At least now Hermione didn't feel like she was going to break down into tears if someone looked at her oddly.

Food couldn't hurt. She didn't feel hungry, but she ate. The boys had brought her roast chicken and potatoes. Abstractedly, mechanically, she chewed and swallowed her way through half of the food on her plate, then pushed it away.

She couldn't stay in the common room. Her fellow Gryffindors were irritating her by their mere presence. By seven-thirty she was en route to Dumbledore's office. There was a little-used staircase in that part of the castle, one of whose landings had a deep-set double window overlooking the central courtyard. She sometimes sat on the window ledge when she wanted to read without interruption; with any luck it would be unoccupied tonight, and she could have a few minutes to herself.

It was. Hermione hoisted herself up on the wide stone ledge, noting with distaste that someone had left a little pile of cigarette ash on the floor under the window *Filthy habit*.

Her mind was in a terrible tangle.

She had taught herself, over the years, to parse emotional states...her own and others'. She noticed things about other people; she was sympathetic, compassionate, loyal: she knew these attributes helped make her a good friend. And she tried to pay attention to and understand her own feelings. But this was just too much...too many strong feelings all at once and, worse, nowhere for them to go.

Hermione remembered something Ron had said last year when she had tried to explain to him and Harry what was going through Cho Chang's mind...he'd said that a person couldn't possibly have so many feelings at one time without exploding. She had teased him at the time, but it didn't seem very funny now.

Maybe if she could identify her feelings she could start to sort through them. She circled two fingers over the icy condensation on one of the windowpanes and stared unseeing at the darkness outside.

She had been seized with terror and dread as she raced from Hagrid's hut to the hospital wing. Just remembering it made her pulse jump and her stomach clench. When she saw Professor Snape was still alive, she had felt almost sick with relief.

Then things started to get complicated. In his infirmary room she had felt horror and anger at what had been done to him...and appalled disbelief that this was apparently his lot in the struggle against He Who Must Not Be Named. He was to do... whatever it was that spies had to do: learn secrets without giving any away, she supposed... while enacting absolute loyalty to a *maniac* who liked to half-murder him.

And then, when Professor Dumbledore had laid his hand on Snape's head and affirmed his trust in him, she'd been nearly undone by another wave of emotion. There was tenderness and fierce protectiveness and a yearning to hold Snape in her arms and somehow mend his hurts. A desire to defend and champion him, telling the world how brave he was and how clever.

But there was the rub: the world could not know what he was. Subterfuge was his shield and weapon...layers and layers of subterfuge.

And no one could know how she felt about him, either: not her friends and not him. *certainly* not him. She knew now, though. The knowledge was terrifying.

It was no wonder she felt insane and no wonder she had unleashed a tsunami of tears on Harry and Ron in the dispensary. They had caught her just a few moments after she'd realised...that she was in love with Snape. All her rationalising, all the distance she had tried to put between her heart and her libido...it was useless. She loved him. And she could say and do nothing about it.

Hermione screwed her eyes tight shut and banged the back of her head against the stone wall behind her. *Damnation and bloody hell...just... ugh. Hell* This couldn't end well... could it?

* * *

A/N: Huge thanks to ladyinthecloak for betaing this chapter for me, to lifeasanamazon for Brit picking and support, and to greenstuff for cheering me on. Glomps, ladies: big squashy hugs.

Rationalisations

Chapter 10 of 36

Dumbledore and Hermione both give matters some thought; both come up with good reasons to do what they were going to do anyway.

Disclaimer: All is JKR's. In case you were wondering.

* * * * *

At eight o'clock on the dot, Hermione stood at the entrance to the Headmaster's office. She was actually apprehensive about meeting with Dumbledore...an unfamiliar feeling. She felt exposed and unsettled, like a wrongdoer being brought to account.

She worried at a fingernail with her teeth and looked up into the gargoyle's bulging, stony eye. What did Dumbledore want with her? Surely the Headmaster didn't have it in mind to question her about... well, about anything. But it must have something to do with Professor Snape. What, though? Her brain, reeling from the emotional onslaught of the day, couldn't come up with any sort of sensible answer.

Best to go up and actually, sort of, *find out* what Professor Dumbledore wanted. *It's absurd to stand here having a staring contest with a gargoyle* But she didn't move.

There was a little divot where the creature's pupil would be if it were living, and she reached up and put her finger on it. Her fingertip just fit into the perfectly rounded hole. She wondered if the stone had been carved by magical or nonmagical means and allowed herself to imagine a Muggle craftsman laboriously smoothing away imperfections in this tiny concave surface. What tool would he use?

Hermione sighed in exasperation. *I'm stalling, and it's not helping.* 'Humbugs,' she said to the statue and whisked herself behind it as it moved aside.

She paused for a moment at the top of the stairs, calming and collecting herself. The door to Professor Dumbledore's office was ajar, and she could hear voices from within.

'Severus won't like accepting the help...and from a student, too.' That was Professor Slughorn.

'Pish! I don't think he has a choice in the matter,' Professor McGonagall said tartly.

'Precisely so, Minerva. I am not aiming to give him what he likes, Horace. I am more concerned that he gets what he needs,' Dumbledore replied.

Hermione didn't fancy eavesdropping. She knocked stoutly and stepped around the door into the Headmaster's warmly lit office. 'Hello, Professor Dumbledore. I'm here.' *Well obviously, Hermione.* She scrubbed her clammy hands down the sides of her skirt.

'Miss Granger, do come in.' Professor Dumbledore rose from his chair in welcome. 'We are in need of your help, you see.'

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Horace Slughorn and Hermione Granger emerged into the corridor and the gargoyle slid back into place behind them.

'Well, Miss Granger, this is an unfortunate state of affairs,' puffed Horace as he walked by her side towards the main stair. 'Quite a burden, really.'

'Yes,' said the girl in a low voice. 'I don't know how he bears it. I'm glad, really, to have a chance to help.'

Horace was rather nonplussed for a moment before he worked out her meaning. 'Oh yes, yes, quite,' he averred. He had, of course, been thinking of the additional burden *he* would be taking on over the next weeks, covering six of Snape's lessons.

The girl walking beside him, on the other hand, seemed quite eager to shoulder her part in this onerous scheme...a scheme that would involve secrecy and subterfuge in addition to the huge piles of extra work.

When they reached the fourth floor, she wished him goodnight and walked briskly towards the library where he had no doubt she would be until curfew, making notes on the voluminous pile of parchments Dumbledore had given her before she'd left his office.

Youth, thought Horace to himself, with a shake of the head that set his jowls quivering. For himself, he wanted nothing more than the comfort of his quarters, a large glass of smooth old Cognac, and a night of dreamless sleep...courtesy of the Cognac.

The day's events had been quite alarming. This castle was supposed to be his citadel of safety. Just now, Voldemort's reach seemed far too long for Horace's comfort. *Far* too long.

* * *

Albus stirred the coals in the grate. The sparkle and flare of burning Floo powder had dissipated in the wake of Minerva's departure, and the fire itself was on the ebb. *Like so many things*, Albus thought and then smiled at himself. It was an old man's thought, as natural a response to the waning of the year and of life as it was a foolish one.

Actually, one of the gifts of age was the knowledge that, at all times, as many things are in flower as are fading. It made one's own end seem less cataclysmic if it wasn't accompanied by a general sense of apocalypse. After he was gone, Dark and Light would still keep their appointments with one another, eternally.

Albus noticed his sleeve had got caught up around his blackened forearm, and he shook the cloth down to cover his dead hand. The world would somehow go on without him, true. But he would play his cards ruthlessly to the last moment...and he would do his best to direct the game even after he'd gone.

He hoped the cards would favour Harry Potter and Severus Snape in the long run. Both deserved the chance of long lives in the sunlight of peace, lives full of good work, honour, wholeness, joy, love. None of which they'd find if Voldemort prevailed.

So he needed both of them fit and fighting to the last breath to defeat Tom Riddle, if that's what it took. Every resource must be funnelled to Tom's defeat, every chance taken.

Hermione Granger was an essential support for Harry in his fight. She was peerlessly brilliant, admirably brave; she also had a deep gift for friendship.

Now it appeared that Severus might also be a beneficiary of that gift. The girl clearly felt sympathy, admiration, and protectiveness for her teacher...all had been on display earlier in the hospital wing and this evening in his office when she had readily fallen in with Albus's plans to help Severus recover.

Perhaps she feels something more, as well.. This thought had surfaced several times since the afternoon, so he'd have to keep it under consideration. But it made little sense to him. Physically, Severus Snape was no Gilderoy Lockhart, and surely his foul-tempered, sneering persona would do nothing to make up for what he lacked in looks.

Furthermore, Hermione Granger had long carried a torch for Ron Weasley. If Weasley was her ideal, the odds of her having a crush on the likes of Severus Snape seemed long.

No, it was most likely that what Miss Granger felt for Severus was some version of her overdeveloped sense of justice and her dedication to the underdog, coupled with admiration for his intellect.

The point was that Severus needed a friend now; soon, he would need a friend even more.

If all went to plan, Harry...and many others...would very shortly have more reason to hate Severus than ever. That could not be helped...not at all. But if Albus could provide Severus with one real friend in Harry's inner circle, Severus might...just perhaps...have a better chance at the honour and thanks that would be his due when all was over.

Yes indeed. The potential short- and long-term benefits of this plan far outweighed any possible risks.

Albus sighed deeply and rubbed his eyes. He was very tired, and the night's work was far from done. He moved away from the fire, now down to dusky coals.

* * *

In the library, Hermione was gaining a new appreciation for her teachers' forbearance. It was actually a kind of torture to have to read forty third-year essays, one after another.

She had started in on the pile with the same sort of constructive attitude she always took when helping Harry and Ron with their homework...trying to get them to develop the best parts of their arguments and support them with sound if basic research.

But by the time she had got through about ten parchments, her lengthy marginal comments had become terse and even scathing: 'See page 67 of Trimble. Read it this time'; 'Use a dictionary'; or, simply, 'No.'

At least I'm getting into the Snapeish spirit of the thing she decided, smiling wryly to herself as she stood and stretched. Her role in helping cover Professor Snape's workload while he recovered was to keep up with marking papers and exams. It would hardly be fair if he fought his way back to health only to face an avalanche of... *this... rubbish.*

'Hi Hermione. What are you working on? Merlin, that's a lot of red ink!' Lavender Bloody Brown was suddenly standing right there, reaching out for the nearest parchment, an effort by one Pasiphae Sneed entitled 'Hinkypunks: Mischievous or Misunderstood?'

Hermione snatched the parchment away and rolled it. 'Oh, it's nothing, just... erm, there are a few third-years I'm tutoring. I'm commenting on their drafts for Defence Against the Dark Arts. Erm, yes.' And she began whisking parchment rolls into her bag.

'A few! It looks like you're tutoring half the third year.'

'Well, haha, of course I'm not! These others are... my own... ah, notes. A personal project.' Hermione went beetroot red as the lies shot out of her mouth, one after another. Was Lavender put on this earth to torment her? She had to wonder.

'Oh.' Lavender's expression was, worryingly, shrewd. Hermione hated that. Oblivious Lavender, Bored Lavender, even Teasing Lavender...these were preferable to Noticing, Speculating Lavender. Not a thing to be done now, though. She needed to leave before she lied herself into a corner.

'Must dash. I hadn't realised it was so late. It's,' she glanced at her watch, 'oooh, it's nearly ten. Bye!'

Once in the corridor, Hermione took refuge in a broom cupboard to regroup.

Had that... scene... with Lavender been really necessary? Would it have been acceptable to tell her truthfully what she was doing? No, she decided. She'd done the right thing, if clumsily.

No one was to know yet about Professor Snape's sudden 'holiday'. McGonagall and Slughorn would of course tell the students in tomorrow's DADA lessons, and the news would be generally known by the time Dumbledore stood up at dinner to make the announcement to the whole school.

But the official story would be undermined if it were known that Hermione Granger was sitting in Hogwarts' library marking DADA papers the night before Professor Snape was believed to have left the school.

Her mistake had been in taking the work into a public place and putting herself into a position where she might be forced to lie. She was no good at it. She must avoid unnecessary risks in future, and that would require a functioning brain. Right, so she should really try to sleep tonight, or she'd be a useless zombie tomorrow. A weepy, snappish, useless zombie.

As she hurried along the familiar route from library to dormitory, she took stock.

In the last six hours, she had seen Professor Snape laid out gravely injured in the hospital wing, learned some horrible things, wept for what felt like days, battled to regain her equilibrium, been admitted to the Headmaster's confidence and given an important job, started on that job, and been caught out (again) by Lavender Brown.

And I am in love

Sometime in the last two hours, the knowledge had lost its dreadfulness. In fact, she felt great. Like she'd moved into the most wonderful house, spacious and full of light. *Severus, Severus, Severus, brave lovely Severus* sang her heart.

Stupid, hopeless, one-sided, a disaster, whimpered the unhappy, outmanoeuvred sliver of her brain that was still trying to warn against exactly this.

Yes, she coaxed her rational side. *This is hopeless and one-sided. That doesn't mean it has to be a disaster. It's still my secret, and it's not hurting anyone. Only... isn't it better that I face the fact I care about him and that I start behaving like his friend, rather than just using him as some kind of imaginary toy...some non-person...the way I have been?*

Her beleaguered brain might have whispered that perhaps she protested too much, but Hermione wasn't listening. She was making a short to-do list: tonight she would revel in the sweetness of these new feelings. Then she'd get a good night's sleep and wake ready to give him any practical help she could.

'Bamboozle,' she said to the fat lady and stepped through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room.

* * *

'So you're marking DADA essays and exams while Snape recovers?' said Harry.

It was breakfast time. The three of them were huddled a little apart at the end of the Gryffindor table.

'Yes...well, through to fifth-years, anyway; Dumbledore's taking the rest...and Slughorn and McGonagall will be dividing his lessons between them, at least until the holidays,' Hermione said in an undertone. 'And please, please remember. What I told you goes no further. Officially, he has been called away on family business.'

'Oh right. Because no one saw him being carried into the castle yesterday, looking like Death's ugly aunt,' scoffed Ron.

Only her flared nostrils...and the laserlike focus she suddenly brought to creasing the fold in her napkin...betrayed just how little Hermione liked Ron's choice of words. She was determined, however, not to repeat yesterday's histrionics, and she let it pass.

She took a measured breath. 'Actually, only two students did see it...it happened while lessons were still in session. And Dumbledore had already dealt with them by the time the three of us got the news from Hagrid yesterday afternoon.'

'What? You mean he *Obliviated* them?' Ron was agog.

'No, Ron, *of course* not. If you had ever bothered to open your copy of *Hogwarts: A History*, you would know that it's been illegal for teachers to Oblivate students since 1693. Plus completely unethical and crude.' Hermione reached for another *pain au chocolat*. Her appetite was back this morning.

'What I mean is, Dumbledore talked to them and made them promise not to breathe a word. Administering Wand-Oaths *isn't* illegal.'

She ripped off a strip of pastry and popped it into her mouth. Personally, she didn't find teachers coercing students into unbreakable oaths any less crude than tampering with their memories, but at the moment she was not much inclined to take the conversation in that direction.

'Do you know who the students were?' asked Harry.

'No.' Hermione frowned, then shrugged. 'It doesn't matter, does it? They won't say anything. We won't say anything. Professor Snape is visiting his mother, who is ill, full stop.'

'I suppose Dumbledore is concerned about how parents would react if they knew one of Hogwarts' teachers had been tortured and dumped in front of the school gates,' said Harry consideringly.

Hermione nodded. 'Parents, yes. The Ministry. The *Daily Prophet*.' She lowered her voice still further and leaned in towards Ron and Harry. 'The last thing Professor Dumbledore and the Order need is a whole lot of attention on Professor Snape. I don't think Dumbledore is working with Ministry approval as regards most of Professor Snape's work. And it's not like that lot trust him as Dumbledore does.'

'Hey,' said Ron. 'I happen to have several close relatives among "that lot".'

'Ron, don't be obtuse,' she scoffed. 'Your father is a member of the Order, and Percy is a tosser. Anyway, you're not actually taking sides with the Ministry, are you?'

'Just saying,' he mumbled. He didn't know *what* he was saying, actually. He just felt alienated and irritable. Wasn't Hermione taking this whole Snape thing far too seriously? Why did she even have to be involved? He tried to catch Harry's eye, but Harry was looking at Hermione and saying something.

'We'll have no problem feigning ignorance. Right, Ron?' Harry turned to him and grinned.

Ron blinked, then shrugged. 'Right. Never do, do we, Harry?' He smiled resignedly.

* * *

A/N: Love and thanks to ladyinthecloak for betaing, and to lifeasanamazon for Brit-picking. *squishes L&L*

And thanks go everyone who's left me a review or 2 or 9; even if it's really brief, I love knowing you're out there, reading. *squishes readers*

Thanks to itsybitsybossy for cluing me in to the property law concept of the Dead Hand, and to Wikipedia for telling me it was also the name of a mid-80s Soviet nuclear strategy of mutual assured destruction. Nice.

Mischief Managed

Chapter 11 of 36

Hermione seizes more than one opportunity.

Disclaimer: JKR wrote it and owns it and makes it brush its teeth at night.

* * * * *

For several days Severus mostly drifted in a drugged sleep.

On his fifth morning in the hospital wing, he lay with his eyes closed. He was horribly thirsty, but was trying to feign sleep until Poppy finished bustling and left the room. Finally, groaning, he reached out for the glass on his bedside table and drained it, then sank back into his pillows.

'Oh, Severus, there you are. How are you feeling this morning?' Poppy knew better than to simper at him much, but the question still annoyed him.

'Yes. Here I am,' he rasped. 'And I feel like a man whose liver is half functioning and who has been sedated as though he were a mad elephant. For days.' He closed his eyes. 'How many days?'

'Five and a half,' she said, and held up her hand to forestall his reply. 'You need real rest as much as you need medicine,' she proclaimed. 'Allowing the body to heal itself is nearly always our best practice. Potions and spells can easily be miscalibrated, and even the most subtle, skilfully applied ones are crude approximations at best of the nuance and power of our own capacity to heal ourselves.'

Sententious biddy, he thought. She rounded the foot of the bed and approached his side.

He lifted his hand to gesture at one of two bottles in her hand. 'If that's what I think it is, keep it away from me. Let me sleep when sleep comes.'

She set the bottles down beside his water glass and pulled out her wand. 'I'll be the judge of that, Severus. You are not qualified to diagnose and treat yourself...no, no, hush!' She shook her finger at him. 'Save your breath and let me work.'

She folded down the sheet before scanning his body with hand and wand, murmuring low, questing incantations over his leg, solar plexus, heart, neck, and face.

At last she stood back and smiled. 'A vast improvement since yesterday. Your liver function is much stronger. You must be able to feel it.'

He could. He was far from well, but he no longer felt vitally stricken. The pain in his abdomen had eased, changing from a constant nauseating agony to a diffused dull ache, with occasional spikes of real pain.

However, this meant that the sting and itch of the cut on his face and the grinding ache of his mended tibia were more noticeable, as were the complaints of a body that had been immobile for too long. *Have to get out of this bed, no more of that sedative..* he was drifting off again, damn it. *Of course; she was putting it in his water* 'No more!' he protested once again, fighting to stay awake.

She knew what he meant, and told him what he wanted to hear before sleep took him again: 'Yes, Severus. No more sedative. Next time you wake up, you can stay awake.'

She collected the glass from his table and pocketed the bottle of sedative. Before she left the room, she pulled back the thick curtain over the small window to let some wintry light in.

Hermione Granger was sitting in her office waiting for her.

'Good morning, Miss Granger,' said Poppy. 'Come with a delivery?'

The girl nodded and indicated a bottle on the desk beside her, which was nearly full of a viscous brick-red liquid. 'It's been cooling overnight and is ready to use.'

'Excellent.' Poppy nodded with satisfaction. Once she had used all the lecur Fortis potion in Severus's stores, Horace had started brewing more. Slughorn's version wasn't as refined as Snape's and didn't last as long, but it was doing the job.

The girl...who, as Poppy understood it, Professor Dumbledore had roped in to help carry Snape's workload...had come to the hospital wing once a day to deliver the day's potions from Professor Slughorn, who loathed walking up more stairs than he positively had to. She never stayed long, and she never asked to see the patient, though she usually inquired how he was doing...she did so now.

'Professor Snape is awake, or will be in a few hours. Then I expect the battle will begin to keep him mostly to his bed while he recovers a bit further.' Poppy had known Severus long enough to predict the sort of patient he would be when conscious...prickly and, if compliant, only begrudgingly so.

'How long before he recovers?' asked Hermione.

Poppy shook her head as she took a seat behind her desk. 'That's one of the wickedest things about the Prometheus Curse. The worst of the original damage can be mended, but as you might expect from the name of the curse, its effects renew themselves daily and need to be managed. It can only be eradicated by the wizard who cast

the original spell. Professor Snape will be dependent upon this potion,' she gestured at the bottle, 'until... well, until You-Know-Who decides otherwise.'

Hermione had known all this for days, being quite capable of research. She rephrased her question. 'But how long until he feels well again, even if he still depends upon the potion?'

'Oh, perhaps two weeks or so. If he rests. He will need to guard his health and strength.' Poppy reached for the dark red potion and absently passed the bottle back and forth between her hands. 'He should be fit to teach by the beginning of next term,' she said, half-forgetting who she was talking to, 'if he can be persuaded not to pretend he's superhuman.'

'I do get the sense from Professor Dumbledore that that'll be an issue,' Hermione said earnestly. 'That Professor Snape would much prefer to do everything himself, to his own standards.' She made a wry face. 'I can understand the feeling. But,' she added, 'Professor Dumbledore says Professor Snape will simply have to change his ways, at least for a little while.'

Poppy looked sharply at the girl. *I'll just say it*, she decided. 'Miss Granger, I must tell you I was concerned and...well, let's just say *concerned*...when Professor Dumbledore made you privy to details of Professor Snape's condition, and enlisted your help to such a substantial degree. He has heard my thoughts on the matter; so has Professor McGonagall as your Head of House. Now I want to tell you something I don't believe you are hearing elsewhere: you *can* say no to the Headmaster.'

Hermione opened her mouth, but Poppy cut her off. 'No, no, my dear. Hear me out.

'I think I understand your desire to please Professor Dumbledore with your competence, but he is asking you to take on the sorts of responsibilities that are more suited to an adult witch or wizard. You have your own schoolwork and friends and so forth.' She waved her hands about to indicate Hermione's full life. 'The wellbeing of the staff is Professor Dumbledore's responsibility, and mine. It is not yours, my dear. You needn't take it on.'

Hermione, whose complexion had changed shade more than once during Madam Pomfrey's speech, bowed her head and considered her hands, which were folded in her lap.

'Madam Pomfrey,' she said at last, 'this is something that's easy for me to do. I am always helping my friends with their... work.' She suppressed a smile at the thought of the larcenous, trespassing, rule-breaking forms her friends' 'work' sometimes took.

'Professor Sn... I mean, my teachers, are not my friends,' Hermione continued, red-faced now. 'But we are on the same side. Sometimes'...she searched for words...'bad things happen and even students have to fight back. I want to help Professor Snape. It's important. I don't want You Know Who to win.'

Poppy looked at Hermione a little sadly. 'Of course you don't, dear girl. None of us does, I'm sure. But it pains me to see the burdens you children are under in these times. I just wanted you to hear that there is no dishonour in simply being a young person with a young person's concerns and without the weight of the world upon you.'

There was a longish moment of silence, broken at last by the girl. 'Thank you, Madam Pomfrey. You are really... very kind.'

She rose from her chair, then paused for a moment in thought. 'It's just occurred to me that I have something that may help Professor Snape over the next couple of weeks. I'll bring it up at lunchtime, if I may.'

'Certainly, my dear.' Poppy had resumed her usual crisp demeanour. 'I will see you then.'

But when Hermione returned to the hospital wing during the lunch hour, Madam Pomfrey was nowhere to be found.

After waiting in the healer's office for five minutes, Hermione succumbed to temptation. She couldn't leave something so valuable lying out in the open. Safer just to... deliver it to his bedside and let him discover it next time he woke up. Yes. That would be best.

It was the flimsiest of excuses. But she had been so good. So circumspect. She had absolutely longed to see him for days. She had scarcely gone five minutes at a stretch without wondering how he was. She treasured up the few morsels of news Madam Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore passed along to her each day, as she feigned a much milder interest in the subject than she felt.

Befriending Severus Snape (which she was quite determined to do, ideally without his really noticing) was rather tricky. One could not take a direct approach.

She had of course thrown herself into marking DADA papers (she now worked in Professor McGonagall's office, or in Professor Slughorn's, for privacy) and was up to date with those.

In the last two days she had also helped Professor Slughorn brew and bottle the lecur Fortis potion. It was fascinating. The brewing itself was not so complicated, but the purifying process was incredibly difficult, picky work. Hermione could turn out a passable version of the potion, but with practice, she knew she could learn to extend its effectiveness for hours, even days.



Caption: Hermione's notes (in blue) on a copy of Severus's lecur Fortis potion recipe. Illustration by Hechicera.

And she now held in her hand the instrument of her latest scheme to help Snape. She was a little afraid she'd come across as overeager with this particular plan, but it was too good an idea to ignore.

She had spent the last half an hour in her dormitory adjusting the contents of her M-Clip to suit him...no, to *delight him*. And heal him. That was what she wanted to do.

She stripped out the pop, rock, and folk music that she just couldn't see him enduring, and filled the M-Clip's memory up with Mozart and more Mozart, all the Beethoven she had, Bach, Telemann, Handel, Mahler, Brahms, Liszt and Chopin. *Rigoletto*. Strauss songs, so pretty. Some early music...Machaut and Josquin and Dowland. The little scraps of Thelonious Monk and Duke Ellington could stay, she decided. Her mother liked jazz; Severus might too...who knew?

She had written out instructions for using the device and spelled the play list onto a sheet of parchment, which she then Transfigured into a small square book with a black leather cover.

Now she was standing outside his door clutching both book and M-Clip box. Before her courage deserted her, she knocked softly. No sound came from within. She turned the knob and stepped in, then carefully, soundlessly, closed the door.

The window curtains were pulled back and a meagre amount of greyish light filtered in. Severus's eyes were closed, his head turned away from the window. One long hand lay by his side; the other rested his chest, which rose and fell smoothly and steadily.

His colour was much better, and the horrid gash across his face was well on its way to disappearing. She marvelled at the speed and efficacy of magical healing methods. In the Muggle world, that cut would have made a permanent, disfiguring scar.

Hermione set her offering on the bedside table, then just stood by the bed gazing at him. She drank in the quiet lines of his mouth, the strong dark shapes of his brows, the fine-grained skin of his eyelids, and the curve of his thick black lashes. *Lovely. Lovely.* A stray lock of hair lay across his cheek, its tips just touching the edge of his upper lip. Entranced, she reached out to lift it gently away from his face.

She didn't even see his hand move, but suddenly it was wrapped around her wrist, imprisoning her own in midair. Severus's black eyes snapped open and locked with hers.

'Wh... what are you doing?' he whispered hoarsely.

* * *

There was that scent again. Like a sunlit herb garden studded with... citrus trees He could sense Poppy...not humming and bustling but still and quiet for once...standing beside his bed. Had she brought an aromatherapeutic tonic with her?

Then fingers were touching his cheek, lifting his hair. Quicker than thought, his hand shot up and captured a thin wrist. He opened his eyes to see, not Poppy, but... Hermione Granger?

'Wh... what are you doing,' he choked out in a whisper. He felt disorientated. And so thirsty.

He dropped her wrist and flicked his eyes over to the bedside table, where there was a spoon but no water glass. 'Thirsty,' he croaked. 'Need water.'

It took the shocked girl more than a second to react. 'Of course,' she said, drawing her wand. She Transfigured the spoon into a tumbler with a crooked straw in it, then she pointed her wand into the glass, muttering, '*Agumenti Satis.*' It filled and she held it out to him as he hauled himself, grimacing, into a half-seated position.

He poked at the straw. 'What is this?'

'Oh! Bendy straw,' she said, demonstrating its bendiness with a flick of her finger and thumb. 'Here.' She guided the tip of the straw to his mouth. 'Sip through it, and you don't have to sit up quite so much.'

He drained the glass and murmured, 'More. Please.' She refilled it and stood watching him, smiling brightly. As though she were the proud mother of a toddler learning to drink from a cup.

He set the glass down, settled back on his pillows, and fixed a sour, narrow-eyed glare on her.

What was this person...this *smiling, sweet-smelling* person...doing in his room, touching his face?

Her presence was bewildering, and, as such, it irritated him. Therefore, he would irritate her back, and she would leave *QED*.

Speaking slowly and with as cold an inflection as he could manage, he said, 'Miss Granger. *What*, pray tell, are you doing here? Aside from sharing with me the wonders of that Muggle marvel, the *bendy straw*?'

The girl was unperturbed. In fact, she was clearly trying to temper her widening smile.

'Professor Snape. I am very happy to see you on the mend,' she said, eyes beaming into his. 'I have something for you I was going to leave with Madam Pomfrey, but I couldn't find her and it's a valuable object, so I popped in here with it. You happened to wake just... at that moment.' Her smile faltered in earnest now, and she cast her eyes down.

His scowl deepened. 'And what is this... *valuable*... object?'

'This,' she said, turning to the table and picking up a tiny metal box. She opened it and shook two smooth, semicircular pieces of metal into her palm. 'I don't know if you've heard of this, it's only recently in production. It's called an M-Clip.

'These cuffs are, well, they're platinum, which is part of where the "valuable" comes in. But they're spelled to hold and play back music. You activate them with your wand, and put them on the outer rim of your ear, like this.' She tapped the cuffs with her wand, said '*Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*,' and, pulling her hair back with one hand, slipped a cuff over her right ear.

She held up the other. 'May I?' Before he could answer, she leaned forward, brushed his hair away from his ear, and hooked the cuff on.

His eyebrows shot up.

'Mozart. Wonderful, isn't it?' Again her brown eyes were shining into his.

He nodded. He couldn't actually speak. The music was rippling and cascading through his head and his body like a sparkling stream. It was electrifying.

She picked up a little book from the table. 'This,' she said, 'tells you how to work it. You can key it to your wand, and add and remove any music you happen to have on vinyl record or compact disc. Only Muggle music, though. They haven't worked out how to add wizarding music yet.'

The girl smiled mischievously (*another flavour in her wide repertoire of smiles, it seemed*). "They" being the Weasley twins of course. But don't worry. I've been using these for months and they haven't blown my head off.

'Here,' she unhooked the cuff from her ear and handed it to him. 'It's even better with both. So.' She picked up her book bag from the floor beside her feet. 'Keep it until after the holidays. I have... well, I have the Muggle equivalent that I can use while I'm away. Feel free to add any music you like; I can reprogram it when I get it back.

'I hope to see you back in the classroom soon, sir. Goodbye.' And she was gone.

Once he was alone, he let his face show some of his discomfiture. *What WAS that?* He didn't have a way of understanding what had just happened. *Was it a dream?* But the music pouring into and through him was very real. He opened his hand and picked up the second cuff between thumb and forefinger. He slid it over the rim of his ear.

She was right. It was even better with two.

* * *

Hermione walked quickly through the hospital wing on her way to the stairs and her afternoon Arithmancy lesson. She was nearly panting with exhilaration at her own daring. She had talked to him quite easily, just as though they were friendly. She'd given him her music. She had *touched* him. *Twice*.

And now she had this. From one pocket she pulled a glass tumbler and a crumpled bendy straw; from the other she drew her wand *Finite Incantatem*, she murmured, and the glass and straw were replaced by a spoon. *His* spoon, touched by his lips and tongue. The one elusive item that, according to *Magic for Modern Lovers*, would allow her to successfully cast Percipio Corium. If she were ever inclined to do so. Which she wasn't.

She crammed wand and spoon back into her pockets and strode on.

* * *

A/N: Aguamenti Satis: 'fill [this] with [enough] water'

To see a full size version of Hechicera's brilliant illustration for this chapter, go to QalaChaki.deviantart.com/art/lecur-Fortis-potion-129372483. She took the basics I provided about this potion and then ran with it, researching liver tonics and alchemical notation and writing the potion. The detail is splendid. The wonderful sketch of SS was made by RosesAndThorns.

My thanks as always to lifeasanamazon and greenstuff. They are the superbest. And if they'd had the chance to read this A/N in advance, they would have said, 'Grammar? Do you mean "super-best" or "most superb"?' To which I would have responded, 'Yes!'

Recuperation

Chapter 12 of 36

Severus is not an ideal patient.

Disclaimer: JKR owns all. I am a squatter.

* * * * *

Severus's sitting room was 20 feet 7 inches long, measured from the door of his laboratory on the south side to the door of his bedroom on the north side. It was 17 feet 8 inches wide when measured from the entrance door to the hearth directly opposite.

It was approximately the size of the sitting rooms of the other Heads of House at Hogwarts, but it was...perhaps...more cluttered.

This was because the other Heads had their desks and many of their books in the third rooms of their suites...they used these as studies. His was his private laboratory. So his desk and most of his books were crammed into his sitting room (though he'd had shelves built in his bedroom too, where books also towered in tidy stacks on his bedside tables), along with the sofas and chairs he required as Head of House.

It was, in short, a room ill suited to pacing.

And today, nine days after his near-fatal rendezvous with Voldemort and three days into his sequestration in his own rooms, he was inclined to pace.

Really, he was *inclined* to get the hell out of his rooms and breathe some air he'd not already inhaled uncountable times.

If only he could walk more than three steps without needing to stop and support himself using a chair back, doorframe, or stretch of wall...whatever came to hand.

Yesterday was the first day he had been able to get out of bed, wash, shave, and dress. It had taken him two hours to do all those things, but he had done them. Then he had immediately lain back on his bed...booted, buttoned, and frock-coated...and slept like the dead until mid-afternoon. He'd spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening reading and drowsing in front of the fire.

Today was a nearly normal day, except that every little thing exhausted him...and he was still a virtual prisoner.

Three nights ago Filius and Minerva had Levitated him from the hospital wing down to his rooms. They had made the move in the dead of night to avoid students (and it was sheer luck they'd not encountered Peeves).

Since then, house-elves had Apparated in with food and drink. Mostly he just wanted water, but he made himself drain the bowls of broth and chew and swallow the toast they brought him.

Poppy Flooded in twice daily to supervise his potions dosage and make assessments of his progress. He found it infantilising to have a great pinafored mother hen swooping and clucking about his rooms. And none of his growled abuse seemed to find its mark with her...she tartly deflected it and went ahead with her pillow-fluffing, pulse-taking, brow-wiping officiousness.

He was also fed to the teeth with the intrusions of his colleagues. Horace had appeared twice with batches of lecur Fortis potion, which Severus needed quite a bit of. On the second occasion, Severus had cut off Horace's nattering bonhomie with a weakly cast but quite sincere Furnunculus hex. Horace had begun sending the potions via Poppy.

Minerva made a point of Flooding in around teatime each day. He was irritated with her on principle, but at least she didn't make sympathetic sickroom noises at him. She simply talked of the day's DADA lessons and of her plans for the next day.

Perhaps the classes she had taken on would not be sinkholes of anarchy when he returned. He shuddered to think of the wilderness his Slughorn-tended classes would have become by the time Horace handed them back to him.

He was not pleased to discover that, in order to cover his fifth- and sixth-year DADA lessons, Minerva had given the reins of her first- and second-year Transfiguration

lessons to her teaching assistant, Plato Cowell, a seventh-year Ravenclaw.

'Oh, Cowell's perfectly capable of handling a couple of weeks' worth of lower level teaching,' she said, waving her hand dismissively at Severus, who was silently radiating disapproval.

'In fact, I'm grateful for the chance to give him something a little more challenging. He has been marking papers for me since the beginning of last year, and I think the poor boy is on the verge of deciding he doesn't want to be a teacher after all. I am hoping a little time in the classroom will reinvigorate his ambition. He'd be a good one.'

Severus snorted, bringing on a coughing fit that in turn reduced him to panting, stomach-clutching pain for nearly five minutes. Minerva tsked and handed him a glass of water but generally stayed out of his way while he recovered from this little attack.

Breathing hard, he gazed up at the window in his ceiling, which was twenty feet below the surface of the lake. The dying daylight illuminated a long rope of weed undulating gently across the outside of the glass.

At least the woman has some vestiges of tact and self-restraint, he thought as he watched her refill their teacups.

He revised this assessment almost immediately.

'You should consider keeping Miss Granger on as your assistant even after you've returned to the classroom.' Minerva pulled a flask out of her sleeve and tipped a little amber liquid into her tea. 'I cannot tell you what a relief it is to have a reliable second to whom I can hand over some of my more routine work.' She settled more comfortably in her chair.

'What are you talking about, Minerva?' he demanded coldly.

'Severus, you did know, surely, that she has been marking papers for your first through fifth years?' She looked at him quizzically. 'Horace and I quite depend upon her already. If we had to mark all those papers as well as take your lessons we'd be buried. Albus had the foresight to recruit her for the task the very night you were hurt. I am surprised he didn't choose to tell you she was part of the plan, as I can tell from your expression he did not.'

'Where are they?' he rasped.

'Of whom do you speak, Severus?' She cocked an eyebrow at him.

Damnable woman. 'Not *whom*, *what*. The papers, Minerva. The scribbled-on, amateurishly marked, know-it-all-tainted PAPERS. Hand them over.'

'Well, of course most of them have gone back to the students already,' she said blandly. 'I do have a batch in my satchel; we traded marked for unmarked right before I came here.' She began to rummage in her bag, pulling out handfuls of rolled parchments. 'Miss Granger sends her good wishes, by the way. She's been quite concerned about you, you know.'

Severus's face was flushed a dull yellowish red. He was boiling with rage and frustration at being *handled* and *disrupted* and having his lesson plans and papers *touched* and his classroom *overrun* by bloody well *anyone* bloody Albus chose.

'*Wingardium Leviosa Totus*,' he hissed with a curt wave of his wand. The parchments Minerva had heaped on his coffee table floated up and moved over to his desk, where he released them into neat piles.

'Miss Granger's good wishes and expressions of concern are none of *my* concern,' he sneered. 'I shall have my work cut out for me cleaning up her efforts there...' he pointed at the parchments '...and discovering how badly she has queered my students' marks in the last nine days.

'I'll thank you to retrieve the papers you deposited with her today and bring them here to me so that I may mark them properly.'

'I'll do no such thing,' said Minerva with asperity. 'You are behaving like a spoilt child, Severus. You may look at those parchments tonight to assure yourself that Miss Granger is doing a more than acceptable job with them. I promise you she is.

'No!' she snapped when he drew breath to speak. 'Not a peep from you until I finish. I will remind you that I have been teaching at this school for longer than you have been alive, and that my standards have not slipped a jot since you scraped your Divination NEWT.

'Hermione Granger will continue to mark Defence Against the Dark Arts papers as instructed by the Headmaster until he deems you fit to resume your duties. And if you have a shred of sense that is not prisoner to your tender self-regard, you'll let her continue to mark them as long as you can manage to keep her.

'I'll be by to pick those parchments up after breakfast tomorrow. The third-years will be needing them back before the holiday. Do not waste your strength redoing work that has been done and done well, Severus. It's absurd.'

Minerva stepped to the fireplace and Flooed to her own rooms without another word.

Checking his first impulse to throw his teacup into the fireplace after his colleague, Severus hauled himself to his feet and hobbled over to his desk. Reaching for a quill with one hand, he yanked the first parchment towards himself with the other.

Karin Morgenstern had written 15 inches on the benefits and risks of using personal concealment charms in defensive situations...apparently Horace was at least keeping to the assignments laid out in Severus's own lesson plans for the month.

Hermione Granger's neat handwriting filled the right-hand margin of the essay. Her comments were surprisingly terse and to the point, if a little overhelpful. Severus, for example, would not have appended a list of references for further reading. He doubted the Hufflepuff girl...a very mediocre student...would care to go deeper into the subject than she had to. But the mark was fair enough.

He unrolled the next parchment. Dennis Creevey, a Gryffindor, had done a slapdash job. As usual. Granger's notes were sharp but not harsh, and again the (very low) mark was fair.

Slytherin Vestal Pryce was a lamentably bad writer. Granger had heavily marked up the first paragraph of her essay, then left a note at the bottom requesting that Vestal come and see her so they could go over the paper's many grammatical and spelling problems. 'You must improve your writing skills if you are to succeed in this or any other class at Hogwarts,' she warned, and Severus smirked. He could picture the know-it-all saying these words aloud to Pryce, and the mutinous, mulish look she would receive in reply. Pryce would not take kindly to being lectured to by a Gryffindor student.

The lake water pressing against the windows of his rooms was black by the time he had finished reviewing all the parchments.

Granger had done an acceptable job. Severus could quibble but he couldn't find fault.

He sipped from the bowl of broth the house-elf had just delivered. Dumbledore had managed everything so that Severus did not have to lift a finger during his recovery.

But if he had no work... Well, he needed to do something or he'd fairly quickly run mad.

Perhaps he could review his notes for the project he had been working on two years ago, before the Dark Lord had returned and recalled his Death Eaters and Severus's

time had entirely stopped being his own. He pulled out his wand.

'*Accio* journal. *Accio* Fortescue, Pelham, Hemon, Garcia, and Tomikawa.' The books flew to his desk and stacked themselves neatly.

He reached into his pocket for the silvery ear cuffs, tapped them with his wand, and slipped them on. The rich sounds of a Bach suite for cello flowed into him as he opened his old journal and began to read.

* * *

Albus stepped out onto the hearthrug. A low fire gave the room a dim golden glow. The desk lamp was on, flooding the book-choked desktop with light. Severus sat absorbed, scratching away with his quill in a leather-bound journal set amid the piles. He didn't seem to have heard Albus come in.

'Good evening, Severus,' said the Headmaster, and Snape jerked his head up, simultaneously pulling something off his right ear.

'Albus. Minerva told me you were away from Hogwarts.'

It wasn't the most gracious greeting, but he'd been taken by surprise.

'I've just returned, and I wanted to see how you were faring. Better than the last time I saw you, it seems.' Albus smiled and glanced down at a stack of parchments covered with complex formulas written in Severus's narrow, spiky hand.

He looked up in surprise. 'The old Sublimation project? I didn't know you'd taken it up again. How marvellous; it was such an audacious hypothesis, such a well designed series of experiments. When did you start working on it?'

'I'm not working on it,' said Severus truculently, closing the journal and pulling the other cuff off his left ear. 'I had time on my hands and a modicum of energy so I just... took a look.' He turned off the desk lamp and removed an envelope from a drawer before making his way slowly to the nearest armchair, into which he lowered himself stiffly.

'Albus, since I am immured here, would you send an owl for me?'

'Of course, Severus.' Albus reached out for the envelope and read the inscription. 'Narcissa Malfoy?' He looked over the tops of his glasses at his pale, spent young colleague. 'Are you sure you want to send this by owl?'

'I don't see an alternative. Merlin knows why the Dark Lord hasn't summoned me these last few days, but the dispensation cannot last. Narcissa will know what to do when she receives this.'

'I will send it straightaway if you wish, Severus, but I should tell you I called on Narcissa Malfoy the day after you were hurt. I think you'll find Voldemort has taken steps to make shift without you.'

Knowing how incapable Riddle was of thinking of anyone's needs but his own, Albus had contrived to remind him that the spell he'd cast on Severus would have the Potions master in hospital for weeks.

Albus recalled the mood of his visit to Narcissa Malfoy...how their conversation was a careful dance of half-truths, double meanings, and subtext. He did not ask her to carry a message to Voldemort that Snape was badly broken and couldn't work at present, and she did not promise to do so. And yet he did ask, and she did promise.

'In fact,' Albus mused, as though it had just occurred to him, 'I recollect that Narcissa is rather a dab hand with potions. I wouldn't be surprised if she has stepped in to supply the lack herself.'

'Regardless, why don't you take the opportunity to rest, Severus? While you stay in your rooms you can have a little span of peace, and some relief from all your usual duties at Hogwarts and... elsewhere. Mmm?' Dumbledore held up the envelope.

Leaning forward, Severus plucked it out of his hand and winged it into the embers, where it flamed up and burnt down to ashes.

'Good, good,' sighed Albus, suddenly looking as tired as Severus felt. 'I shall be at Hogwarts until the holiday begins, dear boy. I'll look in tomorrow.'

He stepped into the fire and was gone.

Severus sat quite still in the warm, dim room, letting his exhaustion fill his whole body.

A few days of autonomy, even if he had to take them cooped up in his rooms were... well, a few days of autonomy. Unheard of, unlooked for, but his. He looked over at his desk, with its piles of books and parchment.

He knew he had to try one more time to reach Draco before the boy went home for the holiday. But he would leave it for just a bit...

It was very late when Ka the house-elf found Professor Snape fast asleep on his sitting room sofa. She Levitated him gently to his bed, pulled off his boots, undid the buttons at his neck and wrists, and set a fresh pitcher of cool water on his bedside table.

He barely stirred when she Apparated away, and if any dreams came to him that night, he'd forgotten them by morning.

A/N: Furnunculus hex: a spell that causes boils to break out all over the victim.

Thanks to greenstuff for the beta and lifeasanamazon for the Brit-pick, as always!

Triangulation

Chapter 13 of 36

Angsty, hormonal teenagers talk about some things and worry about some other things.

Disclaimer: On the seventh day, JKR (who owns the Potterverse) rested. And the rest of us started playing with her stuff.

* * *

December 1996

'I know about Professor Snape,' said Lavender. She had paused in her hair brushing to direct a pointed glance at her roommate.

Hermione, who was standing on one foot while she pulled on a long grey sock, overbalanced and stumbled against her bed. Blood rushed out of her head and she felt like she was about to be sick.

'What?' she said weakly, her sock dangling from her hand. 'What do you mean?'

'I know he's hurt. I know you've been helping McGonagall and Slughorn do his work. I know Dumbledore's lying about his visiting his mother. I'm guessing he's still in the hospital wing.' Lavender smiled slyly.

Was it possible to be both thoroughly relieved and utterly panicked at the same time? *She doesn't know that. But still!*

'How do you know all that?' Hermione squawked. 'Who else knows? It's supposed to be a secret, Lavender, it's important!'

'I *know* it's a secret! Dumbledore made me take an unbreakable oath not to tell anyone about it who doesn't already know.' Lavender pouted. 'It's been awful! I hate not being able to talk about things! But then I noticed you with the DADA papers that night in the library, and you got all flustered about it. I've also seen you going into Slughorn's office twice, and two other times I saw you coming from the hospital wing. I can add two and two to make four, Hermione.'

'Oh,' breathed Hermione, sinking onto her bed. 'Oh.' So Ron had *not* told Lavender. Rather, Lavender had been one of the two students to whom Dumbledore had administered a Wand Oath on the day Severus was attacked.

'But wait. If you can talk to people who know about it, why not talk to the other student who saw Professor Snape being carried in? Or to... um, yes. Why don't you, um, talk to that person?' In her panic she'd almost given Ron up.

Lavender made a disgusted face. 'Draco Malfoy? No thanks. I'd rather take tea with Peeves than try to have a conversation with that one. He feels the same about me, I'm sure.'

Malfoy. Hermione didn't know what to make of that bit of news. She'd have to think about what this meant, and consider what to tell Harry and Ron.

However, Lavender was the immediate problem.

'Well, I... I'm sorry, Lavender. I don't feel comfortable gossiping about it. I mean, you're right. Professor Snape is still in the hospital wing, and I am helping some while he recovers. I can't tell you much more than that.' Hermione finally pulled on her sock, then felt under her bed for her shoes.

'Ooohh, did Dumbledore make you take a Wand Oath, too? But you could talk to me, couldn't you, since I know the truth? Did you see Hagrid carrying him in? I thought it was just me and Malfoy. Do you know what happened to him? He looked soooooo bad!'

Now Hermione felt very awkward. 'No, I didn't see him. I found out... a little later. Lavender, I just feel very odd talking about this. Do you mind if we change the subject? What are you doing over the holiday?'

Lavender was so frustrated she actually punched her pillow. 'I should have known you'd be like this. Oh, it makes me crazy! I need ~~to~~ talk about things to, to, to *process* them, and no one will talk to me! McGonagall is like a stone wall, and Dumbledore is... well, he's *Dumbledore*, and Hagrid shakes his head at me, and Pomfrey just says "Never you mind, my dear," and shoos me away, and Draco Malfoy's my other option? Ugh! Stupid, stupid Wand Oath!' she wailed.

Hermione was silent for a moment after this outburst. Gods, Lavender could be such a baby. Finally she said, more gently than she wanted to, 'I'm... well, I'm going down to breakfast now. Would you like to come?'

'Yes,' sniffed Lavender, flouncing off of her bed and heading towards the door.

Hermione stifled a sigh and followed.

* * *

'... Parvati said Padma's going to Oliver Wood's parents' for Christmas dinner. She's fancied him for sooooo long, and this last summer they finally got together. Parvati's at loose ends about it...she says it's weird when your twin is all focussed on someone else.'

Lavender was prattling about her favourite subject...everyone's love life or lack thereof. As she talked, she drew little shapes on Ron's chest with her finger. She was draped across his lap in a wide chair in a secluded corner of the common room... 'the Nook,' she called it.

Ron was half-listening, or less. It was amazing to have a girl in his lap, ready and willing to kiss him anytime he fancied a snog. She might not be exactly the right girl, but she was a pretty good one. Nice legs and all. Good kisser, he guessed, not that he had much basis for comparison. Though she talked a lot. Really, really, really a lot.

His eyes were on his friends. Hermione had just come into the common room, and her face had lit up when she'd seen Harry sitting by the fire. She'd made directly for him, claiming a seat next to his.

Lavender was still talking. '... know for a *fact* that she fancies *someone* a lot. She won't tell me who it is, but she *did* say it wasn't you. I think it's McLaggen, though Parvati thinks *not*. She's not telling, of course, but then she never talks about *anything*. It's like sharing a dormitory with a, a, a *teacher* or something. I know she's your friend, but she makes me so *cross* sometimes.'

'What? Who are you talking about?' Lavender had suddenly claimed much more of his attention, and not just because she was nibbling on his earlobe.

'Hermione, silly. Haven't you heard a word I've been saying? Widdle Wonnikins.' She was starting to work her lips over his neck while running one hand up to clutch in the hair of his nape. The other hand was... oh.

Ron shifted to deposit Lavender beside him and caught her wandering hand in his. Somehow he didn't want her *touching* him quite so much at the moment.

He glowered at his girlfriend. Could he trust what she had just said or was she having him on? He knew she was sensitive about his friendship with Hermione.

But Hermione had been acting strangely lately. Really emotional. This whole Snape thing, for example. It was like the greasy git had become her favourite person all of a sudden, just because he got beaten up by You-Know-Who.

And now Lavender was saying Hermione *really* fancied someone a lot? WHO? Why didn't he know this? It could *not* be that git McLaggen. Could it? Did Harry know? Oh

bugger, WAS IT HARRY? He stared at his friends, who were leaning in towards each other, talking intently. He felt... he felt queasy.

'Ron? Hello Ron?' Lavender was waving her hand in front of his eyes, breaking into his spiralling thoughts.

'Sorry, Lav. Um, I just remembered something I have to talk to Harry about. Er, team thing. Catch you later, yes?' He disentangled himself from her and loped over to plop himself down on the sofa next to Harry.

'Hi Harry. Hi Mione. What's up?'

* * *

'Hi Harry.' Hermione smiled happily as she dropped into the chair beside him in the common room.'

'Hi Mione. You're looking cheerful. Did McGonagall nominate you for Head Girl?' Harry teased, smiling back at her.

'Don't be silly.' She pushed lightly at his shoulder with two fingers and smiled even wider. 'No, I'm just glad that I finally got a date for the Slug Club party tonight.' She looked down at her lap and smoothed her skirt over her knees.

Harry stopped smiling.

'Why are you going with McLaggen? He's a git, you said it yourself.' When she'd announced at dinner who her date was, he felt like she'd dropped a Dungbomb on him. McLaggen was just... *foul*.

'Harry, I never called Cormac a *git*. I said he had a nasty temper and that he's rather full of himself,' said Hermione calmly. 'Really, though, he's not all bad.'

Harry snorted. 'Yeah, *Cormac's* a real prince.' *Ugh, wrong word*, he thought as Hermione started to get that disgusted, irritable, why-are-you-trusting-that-awful-book look. Hastily he blurted, 'Are you going with him to make Ron jealous?'

'Am I... what? No! Why would I want to do that?' She glanced over at a fat armchair in an alcove of the common room. Ron and Lavender were entwined there. 'Ron is... Well, he's... Oh, Harry. That ship has sailed.'

Harry went red. *Great*. He'd just put his foot in it completely. Well, she was definitely distracted from another rant about the Half-Blood Prince, anyway. Might as well keep going.

'I thought, you know, a month or so ago when you were fighting so much...' he muttered. 'It seemed to me like you and he...'

'You thought because Ron has such an exceptional ability to get under my skin that I fancy him? Harry, you and Ron are like brothers to me. He is the more *irritating* brother, that's all. I... I am *very fond* of you both. If I ever felt any differently about Ron, it doesn't matter anymore.' She looked a little embarrassed, but not nearly as embarrassed as he felt. He hated talking about this stuff.

'Oh, okay then,' he said. 'Sorry.'

'It's okay, Harry. And in answer to your *first* question, I'm only going with Cormac so I'll have someone to go with. He's a Slug Club member so it's convenient; you're going with Luna; Ron's otherwise occupied; and...'

There was another reason, but Hermione wasn't going to name it. 'And anyway, it doesn't mean anything, my going with Cormac. I may as well ask why you're going with Luna. Are you trying to make someone jealous?'

'No,' said Harry gloomily. 'Not likely.' He forced himself not to look over at Ginny, who was sitting on one of the common room's squashier sofas with Dean's head in her lap. She had reacted with a distinct lack of jealousy when she found out Harry had asked Luna to the party. Ginny probably thought of him as a *less irritating* brother, too.

At that moment, Ron appeared and collapsed on the sofa next to Harry.

'Hi Harry. Hi Mione. What's up?'

'We're just talking about Hermione's *date* for the Slug Club party,' said Harry grimly, before Hermione had a chance to say anything.

Ron frowned. 'What is the story with that, anyway, Hermione? McLaggen's the biggest berk outside Slytherin House. I thought you... I didn't think you... You don't *fancy* him, do you?'

Hermione rolled her eyes skyward and sighed heavily. 'Thanks for your support and subtle understanding. Both of you.' She spoke slowly and with great emphasis: 'This is a *party*. *One* party. To which we were both already going. We are *not engaged*.'

She cast her eyes down as she continued into the part of her speech that was almost entirely disingenuous. 'Besides, what if *did* fancy him? He's... he's fanciable. He's well connected. He's good-looking. He's a, a *great* Quidditch player.' She couldn't think of any more positives. *Best to leave now*, she thought.

'I have to go get ready. Harry, I'll see you there. Ron... I'll see you later. Really, you two; don't be so idiotic about this,' she said starchy. 'It's not a big deal.'

Ron and Harry watched her disappear up the stairs to the girls' dormitory. Their minds were reeling. Hermione had just called *McLaggen*, of all people, *fanciable*. True, she'd also said it wasn't a big deal, but her flushed cheeks seemed to give the lie to her words.

Harry felt like he'd rather poke his own eyes out than talk about this with Ron. But he couldn't say nothing. 'Well, *it's* just one party,' he muttered. 'I don't think she *really* fancies him. Probably.' He thought that came out pretty lame, so he tried a joke. 'It could be worse, though, yeah? She *could* be calling Malfoy fanciable.'

Ron made an abrupt barking sound, as if he'd been hit hard in the chest. Which, in a way, he had.

McLaggen? Fanciable? REALLY? He recalled the things she'd said about the great hulking git. *Well connected. Good-looking. A great Quidditch player* None of these things were what Ron was, in his own estimation.

Rage and despair washed over him as he sat still, gazing at his own big freckled hands, which were resting on knees clothed in trousers that had covered three sets of Weasley knees before his.

He forced himself to look at Harry and give him a tight smile. 'Yeah, Malfoy would be worse, wouldn't he?'

Ron slumped back into the sofa and shut his eyes. Well, at least it wasn't Harry she fancied. *That* would be worst of all. He guessed.

* * *

Hermione stood before the mirror in the girls' bathroom, working Sleek-Eazy potion into her hair to tame the usual frizzy explosion into glossy, docile locks. She wound it up into a twist and secured it with pins.

She studied her face in the glass. It was rare that she did more than glance at her reflection in passing to make sure she was presentable. Now she scrutinized her features, which were accentuated more than usual by her upswept hair.

Her skin was maybe the best thing about her face: pale and creamy with some peachy colour in her cheeks and just a sprinkling of tiny freckles. Her mouth was a little wide, but nice in her face, which was sort of heart-shaped, she supposed. Straight, smallish nose. She turned a little to the left, then a little to the right to judge her profile, which was... fine. Nothing alarming there.

She smiled experimentally at herself, first with closed lips and then showing her teeth. The reducing spell she'd needed in fourth year had left her with even, white teeth. Good teeth. She gazed into her own eyes, seeing rich brown irises, clear whites, long thick lashes. They were set pretty well in relation to the bridge of her nose...neither too close nor too far...and the clean arches of her eyebrows seemed to make her eyes look bigger and more open.

She looked away from the mirror, then turned back to take in the whole effect of her face*Huh*. Not bad at all. She looked older than she remembered looking, and she liked it. She was no Fleur Delacour, but really, she was rather... pretty.

I'm pretty. She wasn't surprised exactly; she'd felt fairly good about her looks for a couple of years now...ever since Viktor...whenever she actually thought about them.

But she was suddenly quite deliriously happy. Tonight, she was going to be ~~a~~pretty girl at a party. Boys would look at her differently.

If only Severus... No. *Nononono. Stop that right there.*

She lifted her chin. Something deep in her rebelled against the notion of Severus Snape...the real one, her irascible teacher, her hero*noticing she was pretty*, as if he were just *some boy*.

It felt dirty to drag her fantasies of him to the level of flirting with him at a Christmas party...oddly, dirtier than her most extreme erotic fantasies. Thinking of him as a real romantic possibility for herself was just... icky. And fatuous. And she was not going to entertain it. Certainly not while she was still at school...

Sighing, she reined her mind in before it could manufacture any scenes from the day after graduation day. A year and a half from now. During which time he and she and everyone they knew might be... *Don't go there either*, she scolded herself.*Party. Think Christmas party.*

Besides, she told herself, getting one last point in,*he's still sick, still confined to his rooms. He won't be at any Christmas party tonight*

But Cormac McLaggen...who was a brute and a bore...would, alas.

She had asked McLaggen to be her date to the Slug Club party for one reason: Lavender Brown needed to be thrown off the scent.

This morning's conversation had unnerved Hermione. Lavender, for all her indifference to schoolwork, apparently*could* notice things quietly, and *could* put two and two together to make four. Just because the correct answer was six in this case didn't mean Nosy Brown wouldn't find the missing integer and put it in the sum where it belonged.

Perhaps if Hermione flaunted a seventh-year Gryffindor boy on her arm Lavender would fall short of putting the pieces properly in place.

She sort of wished she'd asked someone else, but actually Cormac was the seventh year she knew best.

And he was good looking, objectively speaking.

She wrinkled her nose as she headed towards her dormitory to put on her dress robes*Just really not my type*.

A/N: Jeez, it's hard to come up with chapter titles sometimes.

Love and thanks to the fabulous greenstuff and the wonderful lifeasanamazon.

Dark Corners

Chapter 14 of 36

A minor comedy of errors at the Slug Club Christmas party.

Disclaimer: This will come as news to no one, but JKR owns all recognisable Potterverse characters, plot points, story arcs, situations, inventions, locations, and mojo.

Late December 1996

The Severus Snape who billowed into Horace Slughorn's crowded sitting room was, to Horace's eye, thinner, paler, and more sour looking than ever.

Horace was not altogether pleased to see his colleague...he'd been frankly afraid of Snape's temper since the Furnunculus incident...but he did his best to welcome him warmly.

'Ah, Severus! Delighted you could make it, delighted, delighted,' he boomed, touching Snape's elbow and then leaning in and adding*otto voce*, 'You're looking very... erm... fit. Marvellous. So pleased...'

Severus gazed down coldly at Horace's hand on his sleeve. Horace whipped it away and stepped back. He plastered a smile on his face and continued in a louder voice,

'It's wonderful to have you back at Hogwarts. I trust your family business went as you'd wish? Good, good.

'Well.' He turned and gestured at the room, which was clotted with students and teachers and awash in fairy light. 'Happy Christmas, Severus. The drinks table is in the corner, just there.

'Oh ho, Mr McLaggen; Miss Granger!' He beamed at the couple who had just entered the room. 'Smashing! You see we have Professor Snape here; we are only lacking your friend Mr Potter, Miss Granger, to make our little soiree complete, eh? Smashing, smashing.'

Slughorn sidled off in the direction of the drinks table, leaving an irritable Snape, a pale and trembling Hermione, and an oblivious, smirking McLaggen clustered together to the right of the door.

To faint or not to faint? It was touch and go for a moment for Hermione.

When she'd stepped through the door, McLaggen's hand on her shoulder, the very first thing she'd seen was an expanse of midnight black wool that she instantly associated with Snape. It took her brain a beat or two to catch up and realise that it was really *him*, standing like a great storm crow just inside the room.

Somehow her knees got the message that they should buckle. She clutched at McLaggen for support. Her mind, too, was in a whiteout, incapable of the most basic functioning. The only part of her body that seemed to be working was her heart, which was pounding very hard indeed.

She hadn't seen Snape since the day she'd lent him the M-Clip in the hospital wing, and she'd certainly never expected to see him here tonight.

Shocked as she was, she couldn't not stare, gorging herself on the sight of the real thing at last.

He looked thin, pale, and annoyed. He stood straight and still, a spare, dark column of contained mental, physical, magical power... Oh gods, he looked lik**himself**.

In three silent seconds that seemed like hours, she watched his eyes narrow and his lip curl as he surveyed her and McLaggen. Her heart sank under the realisation that, however thrilling it was for her to see him, he was unlikely to be half so pleased to see her.

'Happy Christmas, Professor Snape,' drawled McLaggen. 'Nice to see you back, sir.

'Ow, Hermione, love! No need to wrinkle up the old dress robes, hmmm? Let's put that arm right here, shall we?' McLaggen detached Hermione's fingers from his arm and wrapped her arm around his waist, where he held it fast with his own hand.

Ugh, the, the... *git* was positively leering down at her. She wrenched her arm away and stepped to the side. 'Thank you, Cormac,' she said, flustered. 'I'm fine over here.

'Sir,' she said determinedly. 'It really is wonderful to have you back at, at Hogwarts. You have been missed.'

'Mmmm. Quite,' was the icy reply. 'Excuse me.' And Snape stalked off towards the other side of the room.

'Pouring it on a bit thick, weren't you,' chortled McLaggen, recapturing her hand and beginning to tow her in the direction of the drinks table. 'Hard to think of exactly who would miss *him*. In fact, he should go away more often...boost his popularity no end. Hallo, Zabini! Looking sharp as always, my man.'

McLaggen handed her a glass of elf-made wine, which she gulped like water. She looked around and couldn't see Professor Snape anywhere. She also couldn't see Harry and Luna, so she allowed herself to be pulled into the conversational circle around McLaggen and Zabini.

Fairly soon she felt almost calm.

* * *

Where the hell was Draco? He needed to talk to the boy.

An hour ago, Severus had left his rooms for the first time in over a week. He'd hoped to catch Draco in the depopulated Slytherin common room, but when he got there, a fourth year had told him he thought Draco had gone to 'the party.' Horace's party. The idiotically named *Slug Club* party.

Bloody marvellous.

He'd climbed the stairs to Slughorn's quarters, unwilling to retreat to his own rooms without gaining his object. He'd waited as long as possible to emerge and seek Draco out, but today had been the last day of instruction; Draco would be back at Malfoy Manor within twenty-four hours.

Horace's huge sitting room was decked out like a Veela-run bordello (not that Severus would know about that...). Great sheets of thin, glimmering silk in gold, pink, and pale green covered the walls and formed a series of tentlike canopies below the room's high stone ceiling. Fairy lights clustered and drifted around the room, and garlands of holly and...Merlin's balls, was that mistletoe?...punctuated the draperies.

The cretin was actually encouraging children to snog one another in his sitting room.*Right*. Severus would find Draco as quickly as possible and take him outside for a private talk.

But here was HMS Slughorn bearing down on him. 'Ah, Severus! Delighted you could make it, delighted, delighted.' Horace grasped at his sleeve and murmured some inanities. Severus looked down pointedly at the man's sausage-like, age-spotted paw, and it promptly departed his person.

Severus was just about to cut into Horace's babble to enquire about Malfoy when the door opened behind him and a pair of students walked in.

It was odd; he recognised Hermione Granger's scent before he realised who she was. But in a second or two the swirl of bronze silk and creamy skin resolved into the form of his so-called *teaching assistant*.

She was tucked under the arm of a tall, ruddy boy...Cormac McLaggen. Severus hadn't taught him since his fifth year, but he remembered him well and without fondness as a preening, braying lackwit.

So that was Hermione Granger's type. Why did these oafs always end up with girls they could never appreciate or deserve?

Horace was prattling merrily, but suddenly he heaved himself off in the direction of the drinks table.*Wonderful*, thought Severus. *I shall have to find Draco on my own*

'Happy Christmas, Professor Snape. Nice to see you back, sir,' McLaggen said.

And that's a threadbare piece of insincerity, you little prat

Granger was staring at him wide-eyed, a transparent mixture of confusion and delight suffusing her face.

She was making him uncomfortable.

'Ow, Hermione, love! No need to wrinkle up the old dress robes, hmmm? Let's put that arm right here, shall we?' McLaggen pulled Granger in to his side and looked down

at her indulgently...possessively.

Great hulking git.

The girl broke free from her escort and addressed him. 'Sir, it really is wonderful to have you back at, at Hogwarts.' She smiled tentatively. 'You have been missed.'

More false sincerity. Gods, how he loathed small talk. 'Mmm. Quite,' Severus murmured, then moved out into the room, scanning for a white-blond head among the crowd.

Fifteen minutes later, having made the circuit of the room several times without success, Severus stopped by Horace, who was hovering next to the drinks table.

'I cannot seem to find Malfoy, Horace. Has he not arrived yet?'

'Who?' Horace looked blank for a moment. 'Oh, young Mr Malfoy. Draco, isn't it? Well, now, he's not a *Slug Club member*, don't you know. It's rather an exclusive gathering, what?' Slughorn surveyed the room contentedly. 'The best and the brightest and all that.'

Severus took note of a couple of students locked in a sloppy looking clinch under one of the mistletoe garlands. The girl was nearly engulfed in the boy's robes, and he looked like he was feeding wetly on her face.

'Quite,' he growled for the second time that evening.

Horace followed his gaze. 'Oh ho,' he chuckled, shaking his head. 'Teenagers. Swooning. Pining. Mauling one another in dark corners. Jolly good thing those days are past, eh, Severus?'

Severus was about to remark that this particular mauling was happening in the middle of a well-lit room when the girl pushed the boy away and Severus could see who she was: Hermione Granger, looking much less composed than she had when she walked into the room.

She held McLaggen at bay with both arms and spoke to him with great emphasis while he laughed and attempted to reenvelop her. She hurried off through the knots of people.

It seemed she was not entirely comfortable snogging in the middle of a crowded room.

Perhaps she's more of a dark-corner girl

Severus shook his head to clear it. He must be more tired than he thought; after so long in quiet and solitude his strength was easily sapped by all this... humanity.

'Mead?' Horace was thrusting a glass into his hand. 'Marvellous tippie, this...mind you, I have a bottle of *thereally* good stuff, but I'm saving that for... well, for later, anyway.' The bloody man *winked* at him, then turned aside and began conversing with someone Severus couldn't see.

He sipped gloomily at his mead, wishing it were firewhisky, and tried to think where he might go next to look for Draco. Did he have a girlfriend in another house? Unlikely. Library? Not a chance.

Suddenly he had Horace Slughorn's cloth-of-gold covered arm wrapped round his shoulders and was pulled around to face...*Potter*. And Trelawney. And Lovegood. *Lovely. Just fucking perfect.*

He'd waited too long to make good his exit, and now he was trapped listening to a half-drunk Horace hold forth about Potter's prowess in Potions.

Apparently the boy wanted to be an Auror. *Typical*. He probably thought it would be glamorous: chasing down Dark wizards; fighting eternally on the side of the Light. Wait until he got a good taste of the paperwork and of Ministry politics... Severus sneered ever so slightly.

He was turning to leave when a disturbance rippled through the crowd around them. It was Filch, holding an angry looking Draco Malfoy by the ear and making a beeline for Slughorn.

Severus schooled his features, though his heart skipped a beat when he heard where Draco'd been caught: an upstairs corridor. And Draco was lying about his intention to gatecrash the party. He was positively radiating guilt, defiance, and frustration.

He needed to talk some sense into the damned foolish boy. Now.

* * *

It was just not in Hermione's power to stay at the party trying to act normal. And there was no way she'd consent to being groped again by that slimy, hulking ~~git~~ McLaggen.

Ugh.

She had to get out.

Unwilling to brave the Gryffindor common room...where she'd probably be stopped by Ron or Lavender or both, asking questions she didn't want to either answer or evade...she slipped out of Slughorn's rooms and made her way to one of her favourite solitary thinking spots.

* * *

Well, that all went well.

Draco was clearly eating his own guts out with fear, and he'd die rather than admit it.

He'll probably die anyway.

Dumbledore had received Severus's report of the evening's events in his typical fashion...quietly imperious. His parting words: "You must keep trying, Severus... He needs you... Stay close."

Oh, really? Now there's something I'd not thought of

The end game was not far off. Severus needed to be prepared for myriad possible scenarios. He needed information.

He *bloody* well needed to find out what the bloody boy thought he was planning next. The attempt with the necklace had been dangerous and stupid. If another such clumsy effort were in the offing... then that would introduce unwanted variables. To say the least.

An owl was now winging its way to Malfoy Manor. Severus had invited himself to Christmas dinner with the Malfoys. He'd cadged an invite for the goddamned miserable New Year's party, too. Draco would not be allowed to disappear from his sight over the holiday; Narcissa would see to that.

I'd much rather be locked back up in my rooms.

Severus really wanted to kick something, but he was surrounded by the hard bones of the castle: stone, iron, and wood. Torches guttered in the brackets lining the seventh floor corridor along which he walked.

He allowed himself one moment of longing for the warm fug of his rooms...for the burrow filled with the intellectual and bodily comforts he'd allowed himself in the last few days.

That interlude was over now. The moment he had closed the door behind him earlier this evening, he had returned to the game. Tomikawa, et al., were back on his shelves, and there they would stay until... Well. There they'd stay.

And ever since he'd emerged, his old companion headache had begun lazily to wind its tentacles around the contents of his skull.

He eased open the heavy door at the head of the back stairway and began his noiseless descent in darkness.

As he passed the fourth floor, where a spill of moonlight illuminated the landing, he smelt it. Lemon verbena, volatilised, no doubt, by her personal warming spell.

His alcove was occupied.

'Miss Granger. Curfew is long past. Might I suggest you go someplace you're permitted to be?'

She turned her head to face him, mouth agape, eyes wide as saucers. Her right hand reached out and touched his shoulder; she jerked it back instantly and flinched away from him.

'S-s-sir!' she stammered. 'It's... you. You're, you're, you're real.'

He regarded her narrowly for a moment. She wasn't crying, but perhaps she had been. She looked drawn and downcast, huddled in the corner of the window ledge...a far cry from the flushed and touselled version of herself he'd last seen pushing her way through the crowd at Horace's party.

'Quite real, Miss Granger.' He reached up to massage the bridge of his nose. 'And in no mood to counsel the lovelorn,' he added...rather adroitly, he thought. Surely he shouldn't have to resort to threats to dislodge her.

Her blush was noticeable even in the flat silver light. 'The love...uhhhh...I, er,*what?* I'm not I-*lovelorn*. I, just, I... no, sir, not... uh...'

He scowled. 'Well argued, Miss Granger. You'll forgive me if I don't award you any house points for that remarkable piece of rhetoric. Go. Now.'

But instead of hopping off the ledge and scurrying away, she did something surprising. She laughed. Not a loud or a merry laugh, but a sort of huffing sound accompanied by a wry smile that she quickly covered with her fingers. She cut her gaze up to his and... *wrinkled her nose*, as though she were complicit in his critique of her.

'Sorry, sir. I'll just be off to my dormitory now.' She slid down from her seat and paused to smooth her skirts and wrap her robes more snugly around herself before walking to the landing door.

'Miss Granger.'

She turned in the doorway and looked back at him. Torchlight from the corridor beyond flared around her, illuminating half her face and making the bronze of her robes gleam dully.

He cleared his throat. 'Miss Granger. Thank you for all your... help. It was...I... thank you,' he finished lamely*Now who's winning the rhetorical prize?*

'Professor Snape. It was a privilege to help you in whatever ways I could. If I may say it, I'd be honoured to continue the work as long as you find it useful.'

She smiled then: not a great, sunny beaming smile like he remembered seeing once, but a small, brief, warm smile. She closed the door behind her, leaving him in the cold, pale moonlight.

He hoisted himself up onto the ledge and leaned his head against the stone wall, as he'd done a hundred times before.

So this was Hermione Granger's secret spot, too. He found the idea did not irritate him at all.

At least not until he turned his gaze to the window and saw that she had drawn little hearts in the rime on the glass. There were about a dozen of them, each now marred by tiny rivulets of meltwater.

He twisted his mouth into a grimace.*Not lovelorn. Oh, no, clearly not*

A/N: XO to greenstuff and lifeasanamazon.

Conversations among Friends

Chapter 15 of 36

The new term starts at Hogwarts.

Disclaimer: Jo wrote it and owns it, and no one profits from it without her say-so.

January 1997

'Severus, your style is sadly wanting today. Again.' Minerva said crisply as she silently shouted *Furnunculus!*

Repello incantatem! countered her adversary soundlessly. 'That was a pathetic attempt, Minerva.' Severus, looking as bored as a sweating, panting wizard could, readied his next spell: *Labefio!*

Mobiliarmum! A suit of armour hurtled out from beside the wall and caught the curse, instantly collapsing onto the floor as its legs went soft. 'Oh, poorly done!' Minerva grinned. 'I could see that Jelly-Legs Jinx coming before you cast it. And you have not been able to disarm me all week.' *Rictusempra!*

Diffindo aulaeum! A tapestry hanging from the ceiling billowed down between the duellers and immediately began twisting and rippling as though in torment from Minerva's Tickling Hex. 'You're trying to goad me into recklessness to mask your own deficiencies,' snarled Severus. 'You underestimate me.' *Depulso magistrix!*

An instant after he cast the Banishing Charm, Minerva's Backfiring Jinx hit him in the forehead and he flew backward into a dim and rather spidery corner of the chamber.

Expelliarmus! Minerva disarmed him and caught his wand neatly as she advanced. She stood over his sprawled form and held the wand out to him. 'Severus, I never underestimate you. And a bit of recklessness can come in handy from time to time, wouldn't you say?'

'No, I would not. That's a tiresome Gryffindor notion,' grumbled Severus as he got to his feet, wincing at the ache in his abdomen. It was nearly always bearable these days, but being flung across the room did make it worse.

'Shall we end?' she asked, wiping her brow with a large tartan handkerchief.

'Yes. Lesson preparation awaits,' he said, pulling out his own plain white handkerchief.

'Ah, indeed.' Minerva pursed her lips.

This afternoon students would begin Flooing in to Hogwarts; the older ones who were licensed to do so would Apparate at the gates (at the Ministry's insistence there would be no train).

Tomorrow morning, instruction would resume, with Severus back in his classroom for the first time in nearly a month.

'Two points I'd like to clarify with you, Severus, if I may.' Minerva held the door open for him to pass through. 'First, I've become rather attached to our daily duelling arrangement. Shall we try to keep it up?'

'Certainly.' His tone was indifferent, but inwardly he was pleased she'd asked. Though he'd never tell her so, his morning matches with Minerva had become important to him. His mind and his magic felt settled...integrated...after the exercise, making it an excellent way to start the day.

'Good. Before breakfast, as usual, then?' He nodded. She continued. 'Second, I want to ascertain whether you will be keeping Miss Granger on as your assistant in the new term.'

'I...'

'The reason I ask is this: if you are not, I'd like to take her on myself.' She looked away from him, scanning the whitening edges of the low-hanging eastern clouds. It wouldn't do to crowd him on this delicate issue.

'Cowell will be graduating in June, and I need to start training a new assistant for next year. I've been impressed with the work she's done for you...no surprise, I suppose...and if you can spare her...'

'I was going to say, Minerva, that I will be keeping her on. Her work has been... perfectly acceptable...'

She snorted.

'...*perfectly acceptable*, and I find I can... let go... of that particular task if it is being adequately performed.'

They had reached the entrance hall. 'Very well,' Minerva sighed. 'Perhaps then I will enquire if Mr Nott is interested in the job. There would be a certain symmetry in that, don't you think? A Gryffindor assistant for the Head of Slytherin House, and a Slytherin assistant for the Head of Gryffindor? Rather nice, actually.'

He had no opinion he cared to share on *theniceness* of these arrangements. Fortunately, she didn't seem to expect one.

'Spectacular, as always,' sighed Ron as the remains of the various puddings disappeared from the Gryffindor table.

'Mmmm, Wonnie-bunny is sweeter than pudding,' crooned the Appendage-to-Ron known as Lavender, running her thumb across his chocolate-daubed bottom lip and then popping the thumb into her mouth.

Hermione regarded the pair with open disgust; Harry and Neville, with embarrassed fascination. The Ronvender (as Seamus had dubbed them) were sitting with every part of their bodies touching that could touch and still permit them both to eat.

As far as their friends could tell, they hadn't broken physical contact with one another since their reunion that afternoon in the Gryffindor common room.

'I guess it's true that absence makes the heart grow fonder,' offered Neville with a sickly grin.

'Or the tart grow fondler,' muttered Hermione, who, though not usually given to wordplay, couldn't resist.

Harry snorted, and Neville glanced nervously at Ron to see if he'd overheard. But Ron was whispering something into Lavender's ear that was making her neck flush pink, and the two of them got up from the table, waved vaguely at their friends, and left the Great Hall.

'What d'you think?' Seamus scooted down the bench towards Hermione and Harry, and grinned across the table at Neville. 'Third floor corridor alcove, Room of Requirement, or greenhouse?'

Neville looked away, flustered, and grew pale.

'Stop it, that's just...' Hermione tried for some righteous indignation but she couldn't keep her lips from quirkling a little. 'I vote third floor alcove. It's closest.'

Neville made a distressed noise, his gaze fixed on a spot behind Harry's head.

Harry looked smug. 'I have inside information. Ron's been practising Warming Spells and Cushioning Charms for the past week. My money's on Greenhouse Number One.'

'What about Greenhouse Number One, Mr Potter?' came a cold, lazy drawl from behind Harry, Hermione, and Seamus. Neville, whey-faced, stared transfixed at Professor Snape as though he were a giant cobra.

Seamus's tongue untied first. 'First Herbology lesson of the term, Professor. Potter's just guessing that Spr...that Professor Sprout's going to start us off in Greenhouse Number One tomorrow. Ease us back into it, like.'

'My, my. What a very wholesome conversation.' Snape's voice dripped with sarcasm. 'I'm sorry to make you miss any part of this... edifying exchange, Miss Granger, but I need to talk to you. My office. Ten minutes. Bring your diary.'

Hermione's teacup cracked neatly in two, spilling her tea all over the table.

'Oh no! Erm, I mean, yes sir. I'll be there.'

He left in an eddy of black.

Hermione contemplated her teacup in dismay. The sudden buzzing spike in her magic that had broken it made her momentarily afraid to try to repair it. 'Erm. Harry... could you...? Oh, never mind, I have it.' She took a deep breath and pointed her wand at the mess. '*Reparo. Tergeo.*' The teacup mended itself and the tea vanished.

What a relief.

Harry was incredulous. 'You're not still working for him this term, are you, Mione? Not now that he's bet...that he's back?'

'I suppose I'll see in'...she looked at her watch...'nine minutes if that's what he wants. I'd be happy to do it, of course.'

Neville's complexion had turned greenish, and he stared at Hermione as though she were singing on her way to the guillotine. 'Why...?'

Hermione was blushing furiously, but also looking quite pleased. 'Well, it's an honour to be asked to be a teaching assistant at Hogwarts. I mean, think about Ernie with his 'Professor Flitwick says this' and 'Professor Flitwick told me that.' And besides, I don't know that that's what Professor Snape wants. It may be something else altogether, though I can't think what.'

'Well, if you start rabbiting on about how Professor Snape says such and such, you'll have to go sit at the Slytherin table, where they actually care what the git has to say,' declared Seamus.

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'Seamus, don't be such a, *aberk*. Anyway, I'll just be marking papers, not sitting at his feet soaking up the Sarcastic Sayings of Severus Snape.' She got to her feet and shouldered her bag. 'I will see you lot later.' She looked at Harry with just a hint of pleading in her eyes.

He nodded and shot her a little smile, affirming their tacit agreement to disagree peaceably when it came to Snape.

Seamus stared after her. 'She called me a berk. And she was funny. When did Hermione get funny? Did she go on holiday and come back funny? Because I don't remember her being funny at all. I think I might love her if she's funny now.'

Harry shoved Seamus lightly and grinned. 'I dunno. She was pretty funny, wasn't she? Maybe people change as they get older? Relax a little?'

'Maybe she's still in a good mood from her holiday. It sounded amazing.' Neville's eyes shone. 'I mean, Professor Sprout set her up with a letter of introduction to Magister Ekrem Teimourian. She got to meet him *at his house*. She spent the *whole afternoon* with him.'

Seamus blinked at Neville. 'Who?'

'Ekrem Teimourian. He's really old, older than Dumbledore, and he's one of the most famous Herbologists in the world. His collection is kind of legendary, and it's not just plants, either. I've heard Professor Sprout talking about the time she went specimen collecting with him in the Balkans. She said it was a high point in her career.'

'Oh.' Seamus could clearly not care less about some wrinkly Herbologist, or about Professor Sprout's career highlights. 'Harry, d'you have the time?'

'Just gone seven-thirty. You lost your watch again?'

'Yeah. Need to keep it quiet for a few months though. Me da'll blow his top if I tell him I need another one already.'

Laughing, the three Gryffindor boys trooped out of the Great Hall towards their dormitory.

* * *

Calm.

Whatever he says to you, remember you are his friend. Be his friend. He needs a friend. Be calm. Friendly. Nottoo friendly. Mildly friendly. And calm.

She knocked.

'Come,' he called out brusquely. His wards shimmered and the door opened just wide enough to admit her. She hesitated.

He pointed to the green-cushioned chair between his desk and the hearth. 'Sit.'

Hermione sat, settling her bag beside her on the floor and looking up at him. Quite calmly.

Snape pushed a small metal box across the desk towards her. 'Thank you for the loan of this item, Miss Granger. I... had forgotten how much I miss certain pieces of music.'

He did not mention that he had become so accustomed to using the M-Clip...so nearly addicted to it...that he had sold several volumes from his library so he could buy one for himself.

'You're welcome, sir,' she murmured, reaching for the box and slipping it into her bag.

Snape rose from his desk chair and strode to the fireplace. He cleared his throat.

'*Hhhrrehmm*. My health is... much improved, as you see. But the nature of my injury limits my strength and energy. I have come to concur with the Headmaster's stated preference that I take on a teaching assistant on a permanent basis.

'Will you assist me, Miss Granger?' He glared at her, as if daring her to refuse.

'Yes, sir. I'd be honoured to.' *Short. Simple. Babble-free. Well-played, me*

'*Hhhrrehm*. Good. Ah, hmm, yes, good.' He turned and walked a few steps away from the hearth, then paced back.

'You will continue to mark all papers and exams for my first- through fifth-years. You will summarise for me each student's performance on every assignment*Briefly*, Miss

Granger. I don't want essays.

'We will also meet weekly to discuss upcoming assignments so you understand what I am looking for. If this would be acceptable to you, I'd like to draw up a schedule of your hours.'

I'm calm. Friendly. Friendly and calm. And succinct.

'Of course, Professor Snape.' She bent to take her diary and a quill out of her bag, and in doing so she felt the outline of a stone jar tucked in an interior pocket.

She had forgotten all about it. Her heart leapt.

Unable to stop herself, she yelped, then clapped her hand over her mouth. 'Oh, god, sorry, sir, sorry! I, er...*Aaghh, so much for calm!*

'Does your diary *bite*, Miss Granger?'

'Does my di...? No, oh no, sir.' She could tell her smile was a little manic*Breathe, Hermione.*

'It's just that when I put my hand in my bag, I touched*this*, and remembered that I had it.' She pulled out the jar and cradled it in her lap.

'Over the holiday, my parents and I went to Turkey. Professor Sprout was kind enough to give me an introduction to Magister Ekrem Teimourian, who lives in Ankara, as you probably know. We had a lovely afternoon in his gardens and when I left he gave me this. May I?'

He cocked an eyebrow as if to say, 'You are clearly going to do what you are going to do.'

She placed the jar carefully on his desk and turned a rapt expression on him. 'It's*Amphora proteus*, sir. Black Sea diatoms.'

He moved towards the jar, a blank look on his face. 'I know what*Amphora proteus* are, Miss Granger.'

She blushed. 'I know you do, sir. And I know that diatoms, specifically Black Sea diatoms, and especially those of the *Amphora* genus, are one of the preferred purifying agents for Iecur Fortis potion.' She burrowed in her bag and came up with a piece of battered parchment, which she unrolled.

'This also is not news to me,' he said testily. 'Is that...is that my handwriting, Miss Granger? My formula for Iecur Fortis potion?' He snatched the parchment from her hand.

'Erm, yes, it is. I helped Professor Slughorn brew the potion while you were ill, and I made my own copy using a Copying Quill. It, um, it makes an exact copy, down to the ink blots. As you see. All the blue ink is my notes.'

'I was, um, curious, so I did some research on the potion, especially the purification components. I found an article by Magister Teimourian in*Findings in Herbology* that went into great detail about the different species of diatoms, the importance of their origins to their relative efficacy, and the history of diatom culturing and preparation in Turkey and the Crimea.'

'So since Magister Teimourian lives in Turkey, and I *wasgoing* to Turkey on holiday, I asked Professor Sprout for an introduction. He was, well, he was amazing. So brilliant and kind. We talked about diatoms for over an hour, and he gave me that.' She gestured towards the bottle. 'As a gift. And now I am giving it to you, and to Hogwarts. You and, and the other teachers will have much better uses for it than I would as a student.'

She smiled nervously. *So much for brevity.*

He leaned against the desk and rested his hand carefully on top of the jar's lid. 'That is very... thoughtful of you, Miss Granger. I'll put this jar in my stores; I'm sure the *Amphora* will come in handy.'

He didn't mention that he already had a supply of absurdly expensive*Amphora proteus* in his private stores, immaculately cultured and dried by the Tblisi firm of Artemis and Hidisyan and purchased by the Malfoys for Severus to use in the Dark Lord's restorative potions.

'Oh, but sir, you can't just put this jar in your stores. They're not dried diatoms. It's a culture. They're live*Amphora proteus* in an agar medium. They'll want to live in a larger vessel in a greenhouse.' She looked at him expectantly.

He gently broke the seal on the stone jar and lifted the lid. Inside a gelatinous mass glowed with dim green light. He stared at the precious goo, his heart beating fast. 'This is a valuable gift indeed,' he said slowly. *Live Amphora proteus in a culture from the best collection in the world. A lifetime's steady supply, if properly tended. It couldn't possibly be...*

'I wonder,' he said softly, 'whether Magister Teimourian told you when and where these were collected?'

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. 'That strain was collected in Laspi Bay. In 1991. Before the great Black Sea die-off. Magister Teimourian says his mother culture may be the only source of its kind in the world.'

Severus stared at her, rendered temporarily speechless.

'Miss Granger,' he finally managed. 'Let me understand you. You independently researched the Iecur Fortis potion and discovered that freshly killed and cured*Amphora proteus* from the north shore of the Black Sea are far and away the best purifying agent for the potion.'

She nodded.

'You then procured an introduction to a reclusive Herbologist who is the world expert on*A. proteus* and other benthic diatoms, and came away from your meeting with the gift of a live culture.'

She inclined her head.

'And not just any culture, but one containing organisms collected before the die-off that extinguished the most magically potent strains of*Amphora proteus*.'

'Yes.' Her smile grew wider.

'Which you then brought back to Hogwarts in your school bag and presented to me.' His voice was nearly a whisper.

His eyes bored into hers for an instant before she dipped her head and began to study her own clasped hands.

'Did you happen to deduce that with this'...he touched the stone jar lightly...'I can make a batch of the potion that will essentially negate the Prometheus Curse and restore my health to a substantial degree?'

She lifted her head and beamed at him then, a huge, ecstatic smile. 'Oh, sir. I *was*hoping that was the case. I mean, I wasn't sure it would be as helpful as *althat*. But the

literature was suggestive, and when I spoke with Magister Teimourian...only in the most general, theoretical terms, you understand, I didn't mention you or, or, or He Who Must Not Be Named...I *really* began to hope. And I *did* suppose that it certainly would not be *abad* thing to improve the quality of your ingredients...

Hermione caught herself babbling and shifted her gaze down to her hands again.*Mildly friendly, mildly friendly, mildly friendly... Calm... Succinct...*

She heard him walk to the other end of the room and back again, turn, and do it again. And again. He was pacing.

After an eternal couple of minutes, he stopped in front of her chair.

'Why?'

She looked up then, confused. 'I beg your pardon, sir?'

His expression darkened with irritation. *'Why, Miss Granger. Why did you go to such... lengths?'*

She lifted her chin. 'A dozen reasons. Because I was curious about the potion. Because I love to research and solve problems. Because I had a good idea and wanted to follow through on it. Because I was glad of the excuse to meet an eminent wizard like Magister Teimourian. And because you did not deserve what happened to you, and it horrified me and made me angry. We are on the same side in this fight, sir, and I do what I can to help my friends.'

Friends.

There, she'd said the word. She wondered if he felt its weight in the air between them as she did.

Friends.

What was the foolish girl talking about? She was his student...a tiresome, managing, Gryffindor-to-the-core, Potter-loving, know-it-all, obviously sentimental, one-among-hundreds student.

So why did the word warm him so? He stiffened against the feeling.

'Miss Granger, much as I am... grateful... to you for this,' he gestured towards the jar, 'and suitably impressed by your intrepidity, we are *not* friends. I don't make *friends* of my students.'

The instant he said it, he wished it unsaid.

She turned beetroot red, but sat up even straighter than before. 'Well, sir, I also do what I can to help my *allies*.'

Then, as if it were her instinct to save him even from his own churlishness, she opened her diary and said, 'Why don't we discuss my duties as your assistant, Professor? What day were you thinking of for our weekly meeting?'

Dazedly, he retreated to his desk chair and opened his own diary, thinking, *Theoretically, I won't need her help; the improved potion will have me fit soon.*

Fuck that. I WANT her help And he did, quite ferociously. Hermione Granger's help was patently a good, good thing.

'How are your Tuesdays?'

* * *

A/N: Geeky section of a/n: All the spells used in MM/SS duel in this chapter are canon spells or are have canon elements:

Furnunculus: skin boil hex (doesn't have an English translation in canon)

Repello incantatem: 'repel spell' (does not appear in canon, but the two words are used in other canon spells)

Labefio: Jelly-Legs Jinx (no incantation given in canon; this Latin means 'to loosen or make unsteady')

Mobiliarmum: 'move armour' (canon prefix 'mobili' plus 'armum' for 'armour')

Rictusempra: Tickling Charm (straight-up canon)

Diffindo aulaeum: 'cleave tapestry' ('diffindo' is canon Severing Charm, plus Latin for 'tapestry')

Depulso magistrix: 'banish teacher' ('depulso' is canon Banishing Charm, plus Latin for 'teacher')

(Again, I am no Latin scholar. So when I say 'X is Latin for Y,' I mean 'Internet Latin.')

Also, *Amphora proteus* is indeed a species of benthic diatom (with a fabulous name) that can be found in the Black Sea. There was a major biological die-off in the Black Sea in the early 1990s.

Glomp section of a/n: Love and thanks to hehicera, greenstuff, and lifeasanamazon for alpha reading, beta reading, Britpicking, and encouragement. Readers are love, reviewers are love: I squish you all.

Many Meetings

Chapter 16 of 36

Just some cosiness. And also some Voldemort.

Disclaimer: There was a great author named Jo / Who wrote seven books in a row / And now every day / For love and no pay / We post things she'd rather not know (of).

Week One

As it happened, the very next day was Tuesday.

Hermione was nervous and elated all day. She was also slightly loopy from lack of sleep, having been up until all hours working on her first report for Snape.

But above all she was determined, in all her interactions with him, to live by her new mantra *Be calm, succinct, and mildly friendly, no matter what he says*

When she entered the room, he gestured towards a chair near his desk. 'Sit.

'Your report?' He held out his hand.

She sat silently, nibbling unconsciously on a cuticle, while he scanned the scroll.

'What exactly is this?' he demanded.

Hermione had modelled the document on Muggle 'spreadsheets,' and its design involved a considerable amount of Charms work.

'It's a sort of grid that you...or rather that I...can keep adding to throughout the term. See,' she said, leaning forward and pointing, 'each of the two hundred students in your first- to fifth-year DADA classes has his or her own row, down the side, here.

'Across the top are column headings for each examination or written assignment. Run your finger across the headings like this to expand the columns, and like this to shrink them. The same when you run your finger down or up each column. It packs a lot of information into a normal-sized piece of parchment.'

He ran his fingertip across the grid a few times, then asked, 'What is this red column to the left of the names?'

'That's a bit of an experiment,' she said eagerly. 'That column contains an Arithmantic formula that identifies patterns in the student's work and attempts to predict an outcome for the term.

'It's for me, really...I don't know most of these students and the red column will sort of tell me the story of where each one is academically. You see them all in class, so I'm sure you have a sense of each student's strengths and weaknesses without having to use such a tool. It just occurred to me that it might be interesting to see if I could create a workable formula...' She stopped talking and squirmed a bit under his chilly gaze.

'Three quarters of what you've just said was surplus to requirements, Miss Granger. Let us be clear from the outset that I expect brevity and exactitude in both your verbal and your written reports to me. If you cannot manage that, this arrangement will be short lived. I will not be chattered at. Is that clear?'

'Yes, sir,' she said and closed her lips. *Is that brief and exact enough for you, you impossibly irritable man? You may limit my speech, but I'll think what I want.*

'...laughable results,' he was saying.

'I beg your pardon, sir; I missed the first part of what you said.' She coloured.

He glared at her. 'Would it be too much to ask of you to pay attention?'

'No, sir; I do apologise.'

'As I was saying, your experimental formula seems to produce some absurd predictions. For example, Mr Creevey the younger.' He touched his finger to Dennis Creevey's name and read aloud, "'Error-prone and unpredictable. Shaky foundation in Dark Arts defence principles, frequently misuses basic to intermediate concepts, hopelessly at sea with advanced material." So far so right, I would say. Now here's the oddity: "Likely to be dead, married, or in hospital by April. Query: Left-handed?"'

He drummed his fingers on the parchment. 'Did Professor Trelawney help you develop this formula, by any chance?'

She smiled, choosing to find the humour in his barb.

She shrugged slightly. 'No, I haven't had time to show it to anyone but you yet. I'll take it up to Professor Vector this week. At a guess, I'd say it's making strange predictions because it doesn't have enough data to work with yet. Sir.'

'Fine. While you were crafting this... overelaborate object'...he gestured at the grid...'did you make note of any particular issues requiring my attention? By this I mean students not completing the assignment, misconstruing it entirely, copying verbatim from the textbook...that sort of thing?'

'I did,' she said promptly. 'Run your finger down the list of names, and the ones I think you should review will turn green.'

He did, and perhaps twenty names turned green. The usual suspects, mostly. *That*, he thought, *is rather a nice touch*

Week Four

By early February, their Tuesday evening meetings had an established pattern.

At 7:30 exactly, she'd knock on his door.

'Come,' he'd call, or, 'Enter.'

She'd find him behind his desk, and she'd sit in the chair opposite him. The fire was always lit, adding its glow to the lamplight.

She would sit in the chair with the green leather seat and hand him the updated parchment. He would skim through it, occasionally asking her a question.

Then he would put the kettle on.

Then he would hand her a parchment containing the week's lesson plans and begin to describe the week's assignments and what his expectations were for each. For example, first-years were expected to show they had read and understood certain points of the assigned text; second-years would receive higher marks if they used an additional source or two or drew on earlier lessons to enrich their arguments, and so forth.

When the water boiled, he would disappear into the laboratory for a moment and emerge with a large wooden tea tray, which he'd set on the desk before dropping back into his own chair, all the while continuing to talk as she scribbled notes on her copy of the lesson plan.

When the tea was ready, she would pour and they would drink it while continuing to work. He took his black; she used milk and a little sugar.

At the conclusion of their meeting, usually 8:30 or so, she would transfer marked papers from her bag to his desk and scoop up the unmarked ones; on the other days of the week she stopped by the DADA classroom after his last lesson and made the exchange there. She would wish him good night and go to the library to mark papers and do her own work until curfew (she could mark his papers in public now that everyone knew she was his TA).

Hermione reflected on this soothing regularity as she raised her hand to knock on his door. Her self-consciousness was fading with the growing ease of their interactions.

Routine: an antidote to crazy love feelings, she thought wryly as the wards lifted to admit her.

But tonight was a little different. When it was time for her to go, he said offhandedly, 'If you'd prefer, Miss Granger, you can stay here and mark these'...gesturing at the stack of unmarked parchments. 'I'll be in the next room brewing; you can let yourself out when you're done.'

The calmness of her reply belied her pounding heart. 'Thank you, sir; that would actually be very convenient.' He disappeared into his laboratory without another word. She pulled her chair up to his desk and reached for the first paper.

If he had any idea what these small gestures meant to her, he'd probably never let her into his rooms again.

Soon, however, she was absorbed in her work and was in reality as calm and comfortable as she appeared to be. The scratching of her quill made a duet with the clinkings and scrapings audible through the open door to Snape's laboratory.

* * *

Week Five

The summons finally came on a Tuesday afternoon in the second week of February, ten minutes before the end of his second-year lesson. The lesson, naturally, ended early that day.

After a quick stop in his rooms, Severus Apparated to the Lestranges, feeling oddly empty handed without his customary Potions kit. Sounds of laughter and talk were coming from the drawing room; he found Voldemort alone with Nagini in the library. A private audience could be propitious or... not.

He placed a parchment scroll on the table beside Voldemort and dropped to his knees.

'I heard you've been unwell, Severus. Such a pity. How is your... health?'

Severus took a split second to ready himself before meeting the Dark Lord's gaze. He hardly felt the ripple of nausea as Voldemort's cold, brutal intelligence invaded his mind...he was too intent upon his Occlumency. The fabric of thought and memory he let Riddle see had to appear full and complete, its pockets of treasonous reality perfectly concealed behind partial truths and misdirections.

It was, as always, an exhausting performance, even for such an unequalled Occlumens as Severus Snape.

'Dear, dear, how uncomfortable for you,' hissed Voldemort mockingly once he had withdrawn the tentacles of his mind. 'And saddled with a Mudblood slavey, how dreadful. But... a friend of Potter's, is she?'

'Yes, my lord. Though so far she has spoken of him little enough in my presence.'

'Fresh little thing, isn't she? I remember Lucius saying as much.'

'Perhaps she meets Lucius's standard, my lord. I wouldn't take her served on a platter with *beurre blanc*. I would characterise her as an undergrown, shrill, jumped-up swot whose usefulness is limited to the lower forms of ink-stained drudgery. Her work...menial as it is...is... serviceable.' Severus flared his nostrils to signal disgust.

Behind one of the curtains of his mind, he vowed to find an occasion to punch Lucius in the mouth *Fucking paedophile*.

'Mmmmm,' mused Voldemort, stroking his bloodless chin. 'I don't suppose you could try to not frighten the little Mudblood too much, Severus? One never knows when the connection to Potter might bear fruit.'

'In any event, you'll be resuming your potion-making duties for me immediately. Narcissa, it turns out, is hopeless at making the things taste at all well.'

'I'd be very deeply honoured, of course, my lord,' said Severus, who'd expected this.

Voldemort smiled his horrid death's head grin and pointed his wand at Severus's midsection. *Finite incantatem!* he said grandly. 'There now. Let that be a sign of my favour to one who shows loyalty to me.'

'Yes, m...my lord. Th...thank you,' Severus gasped, staggered by a feeling of almost overpowering good health as the Prometheus Curse was lifted...a solid month after its power was nullified by the improved lecur Fortis potion.

Which was simply one more of Severus Snape's secrets that he hoped the Dark Lord would never know.

'Of course you'll stay to dinner, Severus. Bella will be so... delighted... to see you.'

Of course he would stay. He'd dine with the Lestranges and, since there was not to be an official Death Eater meeting afterward, he could perhaps get away before the guests turned to whatever tediously depraved amusements Bellatrix had laid on for them.

'Bellatrix has acquired a set of Muggle acrobats since the last time you were here. They are a bit dungeon-worn by now but still diverting in their way.'

Oh brilliant, a Muggle-baiting show. How original

'Come to me after dinner, and we'll discuss this.' Voldemort tapped his finger on the parchment scroll...a record of Dumbledore's movements, and of Harry Potter's. 'Then we can go in and watch the show together.'

Severus felt a heaviness descend upon him, damping down his robust feeling of wellness. He was for it now. A heavy meal, stomach-turning postprandial entertainment, and Amycus Carrow's hand, at some point, on his thigh. The stupid blighter never stopped trying.

And no Tuesday evening meeting with Miss Granger Odd how that seemed to matter.

* * *

Hermione had missed him at dinner.

She knocked and received no reply, but the door swung open. The wards had been adjusted to admit her without his command.

She hesitated on the threshold. 'Professor Snape?'

A parchment materialised on the floor at her feet. On it was written in his spiky, cramped hand:

11 February, 5 PM

Miss Granger

I am called away on business. Today's assignments are on my desk. See me tomorrow to reschedule our weekly meeting.

S. Snape

Business. Her stomach clenched as she heard Dumbledore's voice say, 'Severus had some... business... with Tom this afternoon.'

Was he somewhere right now being hexed and abused? Or playing the Death Eater? What would that entail? Her imagination balked.

She walked over to his desk and swept the pile of essays into her bag. Then she hesitated.

She looked at the note again. He hadn't said she couldn't stay. Maybe if she stayed to mark the papers here, she'd still see him, however briefly, when he returned.

His wards had let her in. He was trusting her to do the right thing.

I'll just... sit over here and work at this little table she thought, and practically tiptoed to one of the sofas. She wouldn't get up and look at his books, or try to determine what was floating in each of the jars on the mantel, or poke her nose into his laboratory or his... other room.

And she didn't. The minutes ticked past into hours. She finished marking just after nine-thirty.

Curfew was in half an hour, and she had no excuse to stay any longer*But perhaps... tea. Why not?*

Of course he could call down to the kitchens for some when he got back, or make his own, but the house-elves were mediocre tea makers at best, and she had to admit he was not much better. Surprising, that.

She crept into the laboratory. The kettle was on the work table nearest the door; she filled it and set it on a burner.

Finding the tea things was a little trickier. Would they be in the laboratory or the sitting room?

Rather than risk any nasty wards he might...no, that he certainly*would*...have attached to the cupboards that held his private stores, she opted to try a Summoning Charm. Mercifully, it worked...the tray with its big brown pot, spoons, cups, tea canister, sugar bowl, milk jug, and tea strainers burst out of a low cabinet in the sitting room and flew at her. She barely caught it in time, and the sugar bowl jolted off the tray onto the floor.

While she waited for the water to boil and then for the tea to brew, she did a little bit of Charms work among the tea things. The enhanced Stasis Spell she cast on the perfectly brewed tea was designed to lift as soon as the pot was touched.

She set the tray on his desk next to the pile of marked parchments and let herself out.

* * *

The air was frigid under clear skies spiked with stars. Severus's wand hand felt gnawed by cold in the few moments it took him to take down the wards sealing the school gates, pass through, and reset the protections.

He'd be inside by his fire soon enough. Meanwhile he almost relished the sharpness of the air as it scraped into his airways, barely warmed, it seemed, before it reached his chest.

Unreadably jovial as Voldemort had been, sordid and numbing as the captive-Muggle parade had proved to be, he still felt surprisingly splendid. Alive. This would be a good night to spend in the laboratory catching up on his cataloguing.

The moment he closed his door behind him, a piece of parchment materialised at his feet.

11 February, 9:45 PM

Dear Professor

The marked papers are on your desk. I'm sorry you couldn't join me for tea this evening, but I've left you some.

I'll come to your classroom tomorrow after morning lessons to reschedule.

Yours

H. Granger

And there was the tea tray on his desk, a plume of steam Suspended above the spout of the pot. The moment he touched the handle, the steam began to curl upward. He picked up his cup. Warm. Tea poured, he sipped. *Perfect.*

Perhaps it was the small comfort of having a pot of excellent tea awaiting him, but a rogue hedonistic impulse seized him.*To hell with the lab. I'm having a bath*

* * * * *

A/N: To answer the question that may be leaping to your mind just now: no, the next chapter does not open with Severus in the bath. I know! I am so mean. Just, you know, take a moment now to conjure your favourite Severus-in-the-bath scene. Ahhh... nice.

I get a little shiny-eyed sometimes about the supreme excellence of many of the people I've met in fandom. Three people who steadily support and encourage me are greenstuff, hechicera, and lifeasanamazon. Thanks, ladies; I value your help immensely. And all of you who have left me one review or twelve? You're awesome. Thank you. And all of you who may not feel all reviewy but are following the story? Thank you, too. I'm glad you're there.

Stormy Weather

Chapter 17 of 36

It's not always sunshine and puppies down in the dungeons.

Disclaimer: Hers, all hers.

May 1997

Gusting wind and torrential rain fretted the lake into choppy waves. Swirls of foam, feebly lit by the few rays that leaked through the storm clouds as the day died, showed greyish pale against the dark water.

Below the churning surface the lake water moved more slowly. Weeds...great ropy ones and delicate feathery ones, growing vigorously now that longer springtime days were here...swayed over a dozen or so illuminated underwater windows.

Fire glow and lamplight filled a cluttered chamber twenty feet down, where two people sat on opposite sides of a great desk littered with parchments and tea things.

Severus Snape lounged in his chair, perusing a longish piece of parchment filled with Hermione Granger's neat, even handwriting.

The girl leant forward, eager to make her point. 'I don't agree, sir. I feel his work has shown considerable improvement in the past few months.

'This...' Hermione brandished a piece of parchment...'isn't very original, but it's well researched and written. His December exam on level three hexes was nothing like this. It was as though he'd read half the assigned pages, digested them only partway, then vomited bits of them willy-nilly over the parchment. It was horrible.' She shuddered.

In the next room, the kettle whistled. Severus flicked his wand and the kettle floated in from the laboratory, settling in front of Hermione.

Hermione scooped tea into a big brown teapot and filled it with boiling water. Since February, she'd been in charge of tea at their Tuesday meetings.

'Miss Granger, you perceive a variation in Mr Giles's performance, not an improvement. I have been teaching him for nearly five years, and I can assure you that his work is better or worse depending upon what young witch he is able to prevail upon to "help" him in his studies,' Severus said acidly.

'When he was eleven and twelve he was at the bottom of his class in every subject except flying. His third year, however, he was chosen for the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. Aphra Vesey and Sarah Michaelson have been, shall we say, taking turns to tutor him since then. During examinations he is on his own, and he performs accordingly.

'Compare that...' he gestured at James Giles's essay...'with Miss Vesey's paper and you'll see it. These sorts of... arrangements... are always glaringly evident.'

He regarded her shrewdly, his lips curved in a smirk.

'Oh.' Hermione lifted the lid on the teapot and poked a spoon into it, just to have something to do with her hands. The tea still wanted at least three minutes' brewing time.

A month or so ago, she would probably have let the subject lie. Tonight, however, she felt brave, comfortable, or curious enough...she wasn't sure which...to address the obvious parallel.

She flashed a wry half-smile.

'You know, in the very beginning, I was simply eager for Harry and Ron to like me. They didn't at first...no one did when I got here; I was so, um...'

'Shrill,' he supplied, despite himself.

She coloured. 'I was going to say "nervous," but I suppose the effect was shrill, yes.' She was silent for a moment, then she shrugged. 'In any event, I've made a habit of helping them academically ever since, as I'm sure you and all our other teachers know quite well. They're annoyingly helpless sometimes, but they're so dear to me, the best friends I could hope to find...' She trailed off at the sight of his expression.

Snape's smirk had turned into a nasty sneer.

'Miss Granger, I've seen these sorts of arrangements play out more times than I can count...usually it is a brighter girl helping a boy, though sometimes it's the reverse. You won't get what you seek from either of them. They'll take what you have to give and turn on you in the end.'

'What I *seek*?' Her cheeks and neck were on fire now. She was utterly incredulous. 'I don't want or need*anything* more from Harry or Ron than I already have. And they'll never turn on me, nor I on them. We've been through too much together. I've seen the best and the worst of them both. They're good, brave people. They're my dearest friends.'

Snape glared at her balefully.

'A touching speech, Miss Granger,' he said coldly. 'I'd be more moved if you were not pledging your loyalty to two such hardened delinquents. Let's drop this subject, which has no relevance to our work here. We've finished discussing the parasitic Mr Giles, I believe. Who is next on your list?'

After a moment, she said, shortly, 'Consuelo Guthrie.'

She was angry with him. Why did he have to be so horrid when it came to Harry and Ron? She'd seen enough of his ways...especially in the last few months...to know how low his opinion of students was in general. But surely he had a particular animus towards Harry. *Why?*

More to the point, why had she pursued this topic with him,*knowing* he hated her friends?

It was because she'd felt that some warmth and a sense of mutual respect had grown between them over the last months.

It seemed now she'd been mistaken.

'Well, Miss Granger? I'm waiting. What have you to say on the subject of Miss Guthrie's progress or lack thereof?' His lips were pressed tight together as he helped himself to tea, leaving her to pour her own.

Since February, Hermione Granger had habitually stayed after their meetings to mark papers in his sitting room while he worked at his desk or in his laboratory.

Not tonight.

The moment they'd finished their business, Granger gathered her things and left with a mumbled, 'Good night, sir.'

Severus stood up, grabbed the tea tray from his desk, and slammed it down on a side table. The house-elves could deal with it later. He dropped into an armchair and stared furiously at the fire.

He'd not expected to end the evening in a horrible mood, his skull the crèche of a howling headache, his mouth tasting of ashes.

Usually, Tuesday evening was the high point of his week. After nearly five months of spending two or more hours each week in the company of Hermione Granger, he could not deny certain truths.

She was a brilliant girl...a voracious and curious reader with a surprisingly agile mind. More than once she had drawn him out on a topic that interested her and they'd ended the evening with a great pile of open books between them on his desk. Twice their conversations had driven him to all-night research binges.

She was helpful. By the beginning of March, he'd begun to marvel that he had ever done without a teaching assistant, and that he'd resisted the idea so bitterly.

She was pleasant company. When he had taken her on, he'd been resigned to the idea that she would babble and he'd have to repress her. But her speech was usually rational and to the point. He rarely had to shoot her a quelling glare.

When she left his rooms at quarter to ten on Tuesday nights, he was nearly always clear-headed and calm. He knew what this meant: his mind and his magic were in harmony. He recollected feeling this way once last year when she'd returned to his classroom to finish a batch of Blood-Replenishing Potion. He'd been... comfortable... that night, a feeling he'd rejected at the time as idiotic. Now he'd grown accustomed to experiencing it on a weekly basis.

He didn't want to examine the situation too much. Surely...surely it was harmless, his having this little oasis once a week.

No one need know...certainly *she* need never know...that he thought of her as a friend. That he... liked her. That she was a good in his life, a good in which he was half-guiltily indulging...

Tonight, though, he'd lost his temper and she'd left feeling angry and hurt.

He was still angry himself, still bruised, though nothing he felt at the moment could touch the hot rage that had swamped him when she'd started talking about her ~~h~~*dear friends* Harry Potter and Ron Weasley.

Two of the most mediocre, heedless, glory-seeking, entitled Gryffindor brats he'd encountered since his own school days.

Now that he knew Hermione Granger better, he could well imagine the role she must have played in keeping Potter alive for nearly six years as Voldemort's power slowly grew. Surely she'd thrown herself...brain, body, heart, and soul...into harm's way for him...and for Weasley.

To Severus's knowledge, she'd nearly been killed twice. She was brilliant and gallant...and they used her to write their fucking Charms papers for them.

He knew it was no concern of his if she played the fool for love or friendship.

But tonight, when she'd spoken so glowingly of them...'so dear to me, the best friends I could hope to find'...it was as though a sudden storm blew through him. For a few moments, he'd wanted nothing so much as to rip their images from her heart. He'd wanted to shake her, smack her, whatever it took to make her see that *they were not worthy*. But instead of his hands, of course, he'd used hurtful words.

And now she was gone, he was out of harmony, and he had no idea how to mend matters. Apologise? He rebelled against the idea. He'd advised her, on the basis of his own experience, that trusting the wrong people was a certain route to irremediable pain. What was there to apologise for in that?

Severus raked his fingers back through his hair and dug them hard into his scalp. He felt as though there were an axe lodged in each hemisphere of his brain. It was a familiar feeling.

He surveyed his sitting room, full of a decade and a half's accumulation of objects. It felt empty. Dismal. Displeasing. The last of his anger had leached away, leaving behind something much grimmer.

Though he was in some ways the ultimate inside man...ensconced deep in the interior of Hogwarts Castle, deep within a life he had chosen, deep inside the counsels of two mortal enemies...he felt another familiar feeling...an old, hungry, desolate feeling...of being outside a lighted window, looking in.

Always.

A hole somewhere in the centre of his being had had its lid torn off this evening.

When this happened, he knew what to do. Sleep dulled the despair. Music sweetened it. Work pushed it aside. Soul-searching simply made it worse.

So he did not question himself too closely about why he cared *at all* that Hermione Granger's bright-eyed loyalty and fierce love belonged to people who were not him.

Instead he reached into his desk drawer and took out a tiny metal box. Within two minutes he was in his laboratory pulling ingredients from the supply cupboard while the precise, intricate, melancholy strains of John Dowland's *Lachrimae* dropped jewel-like into his ears.

* * *

Silencing spells had many uses in a Hogwarts dormitory. For example, they were good for masking the sound of a person crying herself to sleep. Or trying to.

Sleep: the antidote to heartache.

If only she could get there.

Hermione gazed up into the darkness of her bed canopy. Her eyes were dry now, though red and puffy, and her tears were just salty stripes on her skin and a lingering dampness on her pillow.

Tuesday evenings were usually a high point of her week...a kind of oasis, almost.

By the end of January, she and Severus had fallen into such an easy, comfortable mode of being together. She loved seeing how his mind worked as he explained the lesson plans for the coming week, and she loved watching how the curriculum for each class unfolded as the term progressed, building logically on what came before. (So unlike her own uneven formal education in Defence Against the Dark Arts.)

When he was absorbed in explaining his plans or...especially...when some aspect of the week's lessons set them off on a conversational tangent, he seemed to forget to be prickly and forbidding. Sometimes they talked for hours, until they ran out of time. Three times they had lost track of time and overshot the curfew hour; he'd sent her back up to Gryffindor Tower under a concealing glamour.

But tonight had been a nightmare. She'd ventured on more personal subjects, and he had slapped her down. Hard. She was painfully reminded that he could be spiteful and unpleasant and that he hated her friends and essentially thought she herself was a foolish girl.

Why did she have to be so devoted to this person? Why couldn't she want someone even a little bit suitable? Someone who might love her back?

In the beginning, wanting him had felt exhilarating...like a liberation from the silly, little-girl crushes of her past.

Now here she was, apparently stuck in the biggest, worst, most ill-conceived and ill-omened little-girl crush of all time.

Because what else was this? She still knew precious little about Severus. She *did* like him now, very much...or at least she liked the way his mind worked, and the way it sometimes meshed so well with her own. She adored his flashes of humour, mordant and bone-dry, and as quick to come and go as a bright bird flitting through dark foliage.

But she wasn't even sure he liked her in return, *at all*.

No. Not true. She knew he did, at least sometimes. She could not be mistaken about the feeling of comfort and ease that often filled a room when the two of them were alone in it together, whether speaking or silent. She felt like a cat in a sunbeam then, and she was sure...*sure*...that he took pleasure in her company, too.

Oh, she was so tired of running over this in her mind. She must sleep. Reaching through a gap in her bed curtains, she took a little metal box off her bedside table.

I'll get up early and tackle the stairs at the Quidditch pitch she promised herself. Letting the stately and sad passages of Dowland's *Lachrimae* unfold in the darkness behind her eyes, she finally drifted into sleep.

And then into a dream.

A/N: John Dowland was an English Renaissance composer who wrote exquisitely melancholy songs with names like 'Flow My Tears,' 'In Darkness Let Me Dwell,' and 'Can She Forgive My Wrongs.' Nuff said. I'm giving you two links: the first for a recording using the instruments of the period, lute and viol; the other a lovely modern guitar rendering (my fave).

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCfhqh0u20c> (lute & viol)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oTfzpb01Sk> (guitar)

Thanks and love to greenstuff, hechicera, itsybitsybossy, and lifeasanamazon for all their good help and encouragement. And also? To you, dear reader. *glomps readers*

Visitations

Chapter 18 of 36

Some things are easier to see in the darkness.

Disclaimer: JKR wrote and owns the Potterverse, has great hair, and is a hell of a good sport. Long may she prosper.

The corridor was long, stony, dim, and cold, but she knew what she sought was at the far end. It took forever and not very long to get there. A door, familiar but strange.

She looked down at her feet. They were bare. The floor was icy. Why were her feet glowing? Her hands too, when she held them out in front of her. A dim, pulsing light surrounded them, and a faint buzzing filled her ears. Her mouth was dry.

Something dangerous was coming.

Behind the door was what she needed. What, though? A fire? Some water? A weapon? It felt like it might be any of those things, or all of them.

She laid her palms flat on the door. It was warm and smooth. As soon as she touched it, her feet felt warm. The light shining from her hands and feet grew steady and took on a pinkish cast. The buzzing in her ears resolved into the sound of a single lute being beautifully played. The feeling of danger retreated a little.

Come, he said from behind the door, and the wards shimmered apart for her.

He's here. He's letting me in. She felt a huge wave of relief wash over her.

The door opened and she found herself in a short, empty corridor, with another door at the end. She started walking towards the door, but there was some sort of barrier. She could go no further.

Danger was somewhere nearby.

I am dreaming this, she thought. If it were real, I would be inside his rooms now, not in this... place. My dream... I can change it... I will...

Severus, she called soundlessly. Come. I'm here.

The second door opened and he swept in, then stopped in front of his door. His feet were bare, she saw, and glowing brightly. So were his long, beautiful hands and his thin, beaky face. Her heart nearly burst at the sight of him.

Come, she said. I'm here. Come here.

He came, and with each step he took towards her, her light, warmth, and music grew fuller.

What is it? she asked. Why do I feel like this?

Magic, he said. It wants what it needs.

Danger growled behind her, then was silent.

Whose magic? she asked.

Ours, he said, reaching out and taking her hand in his.

What does it want? she whispered.

This. He brought her hand up and rubbed it against his cheek. This. He kissed it. This. He pulled it around behind his neck and left it there. This. He cupped her face in both his hands. This. He met her lips with his.

She forgot her thirst. She drank and so did he. The barrier in the centre of the corridor weakened and music flowed from one end of the space to the other, layered and rich, his and hers.

She began to tear at the buttons at his throat, hungry for more of his skin beneath her lips and tongue.

He moaned and thrust a hand down the back of her skirt to pull her tight against his body.

Danger roared and scratched iron claws down his door.

She felt it in her spine, that staticky nightmare feeling. The dream was spinning out of her control.

He withdrew behind the barrier. All his light disappeared into him...she knew it was hiding behind his black eyes, but they had grown flat and cold. A buzzing sound crashed against the walls and rebounded painfully in her ears.

Go, he said. Be safe. Go now.

Danger was rending his door. He turned and walked towards it.

Your boots, she called in despair. You'll need them.

He looked down at his cold, bare feet. Yes. Thank you. I'll remember.

** * **

Hermione woke, and her face was wet with tears. Her left ear cuff was pinching her ear; she pulled both of them off and dropped them into their box. *So thirsty.* She reached for the water glass on her bedside table and drank deep, then fell back on her damp pillow.

The dream slipped away moment by moment, leaving behind little tremors of desolation. She was left with disconnected impressions: calling Severus; kissing him; losing him; music and discord; a bone-scraping fear.

She sat up, picked up her wand, and murmured 'Accio book. Lumos.' A small, mouldy book entitled *Soule Darkenesse: Being a Studye of Divers Evildoers & Theyr Workes* flew from her bag into her hand.

Perhaps she could get some insight into the Horcrux problem. It was worth a try. Because if this was the relief she could expect from sleep, she'd jolly well do without it, thank you.

Parvati's gentle snoring made a soft, almost pleasant buzzing sound in Hermione's ears as she began to read her way through the rest of this awful night.

** * **

It was nearly dawn when Severus allowed himself to give in to exhaustion. He pulled off his boots and lay down fully clothed on top of his bed. Within moments he was asleep and dreaming.

The house was familiar and strange. He was where he always was, in his meagre hiding place. Bare boards under and over him, rough and splintery, streaked with old dirt. Knees up to his chin, body tucked in small.

Roaring and pounding came from the next room, and screaming, and sobbing. The pounding left bruises on the walls. Little pools collected on the floorboards where the blood from inside the walls leaked out.

There was that jangling nightmare feeling running up his spine, telling him to run and hide and also that it was hopeless to run and hide.

I'm dreaming this dream again, he thought.

Severus had been six years old when he discovered he could identify a nightmare while it was happening and, even though he could not change what happened in the dream, he could blunt its power by an act of will.

If he was chased by a monster, it would be because he had chosen to be chased by a monster. If the monster caught him and opened its jaws to devour him, he had chosen this fate. When he did this, the nightmarish nerve-scraping sensation disappeared and he was left in a dream that was still full of horrors but stripped of terror.

He emerged from his hiding place and watched the door shake as it was struck. Danger was near, on the other side of the wall, just beyond the door. He stood straight and defiant, choosing it.

Come, he said. I'm here. Come here.

And his ancient dream of horror and danger began to change.

The pounding changed to scratching...first a clawing, then a gentler scraping, as of horn or hoof on wood.

Come, he said.

A bright light burst through the closed door, and a silver doe stepped into the room. She walked up to him and gazed into his face with the liquid brown eyes of a real deer.

The screaming and crying had stopped. Or maybe it had changed into the faint strains of music he now heard from the next room.

The doe walked past him, brushing lightly against his hand. She felt warm and real. He looked at his hand; it was glowing faintly. His bare feet were glowing.

He walked after her as she began to pick a path into the woods. The floor...the ground...was rough and cold. Tough weedy plants curled up between his toes. No doors or walls, only trees in the nighttime forest. And somewhere, music. A bass viol, or a cello.

This is new, he thought.

The doe flitted through the trees ahead of him, always in sight, never in reach. He broke through a wall of bushes into a clearing.

The silver doe was gone, and the silver moon shone down on a pool edged with soft grass. Music hung in the air here, layered and vivid, washing through and around him.

And the girl was here, standing beside the pool, slender and smiling.

This is not my dream, he said, looking down at his cut-up feet.

Isn't it? she asked and smiled more deeply than before. Maybe it's mine, then. But I am glad you came; you are welcome here.

This is not my house, he said, trying to make her understand.

Isn't it? She walked towards him, her face and hands and feet aglow in the moonlight. She stopped when they were nearly toe to toe and her dark eyes shone up into his. My gille dubh, my darling, she said. I think this is your home.

Away off in the forest, danger rustled, then hissed, then was silent.

Not... he began, and stopped. Warmth enfolded him, and light, and music.

Her hands reached up to cup his face. Lovely, she said, so lovely. You will always be my dark-haired lad, my sorcerer.

Her lips were lush and sweet, as he had known they would be. Kissing her was like drinking sunlight and dappled shade. Oh, he had been so thirsty, and hadn't known it until now. He drank and she drank.

He slipped a hand down to where her skirt met her bare leg. She gasped and, with hands and mouth, pulled him deeper into the kiss.

His other hand found bare flesh at her waist. The music was like honey wine, dizzily sweet.

I am drunk with you, he whispered into the cloud of her hair. And I am hungry.

Yes, she breathed. Yes, I am hungry too. I could feast on you forever and never stop. She devoured his mouth with fierce kisses. Never stop.

Danger hissed somewhere nearby in the surrounding darkness, which began to writhe into the clearing, trailing like greasy smoke through the grass. Shreds of it drifted across the moon.

He tore himself away from her kisses and grasped her upper arms tightly. What have I done, he whispered. I brought that here.

The music was falling in ruins around them, the musicians sobbing and trying to play with broken fingers.

No. She shook her head. Her eyes were frightened and sad, but when he looked into them the music began to heal itself a little. No. You didn't. There is no safe place.

Bitter cold nipped at him and he felt his flesh harden against it. I will keep this place safe, he thought. There WILL be a safe place.

I need to go, he said. He dropped his hands from her arms and turned to face the hissing darkness. He was very cold, but cold like steel or like the moon, not like an animal bleeding out its warmth onto the ground, or like a child cowering in a dark room.

He looked back. She was by the pond again, beyond his reach. Yes, she said, I know. Tears poured down her face, soaking the collar of her shirt.

Be safe, he said.

She reached into the water and pulled out a long sword. Remember your boots, she called. She pointed the dripping blade at the spot on the grass where she had been standing. His dragon-hide boots were there. You will need them.

Thank you, he said. I had forgotten.

Severus woke with a painfully hard erection straining against his trousers. His pillow was damp with sweat. Gasping, he fumbled open his flies and stroked his cock mercilessly fast and hard. Lightning exploded in his brain and electrified every inch of his skin, and he shouted as he came all over his trousers, his waistcoat, his bedclothes.

When the last tremor had passed, he lay panting and still on the bedspread.

The dream was whole in his mind for a few moments before its edges began to soften and fray, its centre to blister and blur. But shining through the drifting pieces of image and emotion was the memory of the girl. The nymph. Nimue. The Lady. Artemis...no, Aphrodite. She was no pale, distant huntress but a sweet and luscious girl, hot and hungry in his arms.

His spent cock twitched with interest. He regarded it incredulously.

Fuck a motherfucking duck.

Hermione Granger had invaded his oldest dream. She'd also, apparently, taken possession of his cock.

This is not good.

He scourged his clothes and bed covers, then rose and stripped bare. The clothing he left in a pile on the floor for the house-elves.

In the bathroom, he glared into the mirror at his thin, pale body and his bloody witless cock, which was bobbing hopefully about as if it had not just enjoyed the orgasm of

the fucking year.

Get it the fuck together, Severus. Don't start with this kind of pathetic crap now, of all times.

His brief but punishingly cold shower did what cold showers are supposed to do: woke most of his body up while chastening part of it.

Back in his bedroom, he extracted fresh clothing from his wardrobe and put it on layer by layer: white pants, white shirt, black trousers, black waistcoat, socks, boots, black frock coat, black robes.

Most mornings, he did up his dozens of buttons in an instant, using magic. Today he fastened them all by hand...even though he would be undoing a number of them in twenty minutes when he met Minerva in the duelling chamber, and even though he would shower again after their match.

This morning's toilette was about control, nothing less.

By the time he was dressed, he was able to tell himself that it had only been a dream, albeit a powerful one. It was no wonder he'd had a strong physical reaction to it. These things could sometimes affect a person's mind, body, and emotions in unexpected ways.

He had nothing to fear about his connection with Hermione Granger. It was a perfectly routine, workable arrangement. In fact, the sooner they smoothed over last night's regrettable emotionalism and normalised their association, the better.

He would speak to her at his earliest opportunity today.

Holstering his wand, he set off for his appointment with Minerva.

* * *

'Well-fought, Severus,' said Minerva as he handed her back her wand with one hand and helped her off the floor with the other.

She was silent for a moment. It seemed so unlikely, but she had to ask: 'Severus, did you... did you build a Cushioning Charm into that last hex?'

'No,' he said indifferently. 'Not built in. Cast immediately afterward. I saw no reason to break your bones in addition to defeating you again.'

She snorted. 'In other words, I'm getting old. Well, thank you anyway, Severus. My coccyx does need a bit of a rest. But don't get too smug. I'm nearly done letting you win.'

They passed through the door and into the bright morning air. She felt him stiffen slightly, and followed his gaze across the Quidditch pitch to where Hermione Granger was standing on one leg to stretch after her morning run.

'Go on ahead, Minerva,' he said. 'I need to have a quick word with Miss Granger.' And he strode, robes flapping around his legs, across the rain-washed grass towards the girl.

A/N: A gille dubh, or 'dark-haired lad,' is a sort of Scottish tree faerie, benevolent but shy.

Gosh, I enjoyed writing that chapter. :D

Thanks to greenstuff, hehicera, and lifeasanamazon. Your ponies, princess costumes, and five pound boxes of chocolates are in the post (no, really, they are). And thanks to you, readers, for sticking with my story.

Reconciliation

Chapter 19 of 36

And some things are clearer in the light of day.

Disclaimer: JKR wrote and owns the Potterverse. I claim no ownership and make no money from this work of fan fiction.

7 May 1997

As Hermione finished her last cool-down lap, the Ravenclaw Quidditch team began landing, shouldering their brooms, and making their way into the changing rooms. She exchanged tired smiles with Cho Chang as the older girl walked past carrying the chest containing Ravenclaw's practice set of Quidditch balls.

The last match of the season, Ravenclaw versus Gryffindor, was in four days' time and both teams were cramming in all the practice they could. Though it was just past seven, the sun had been up for nearly two hours, and the Gryffindor team had now arrived to take possession of the pitch for the next hour and a half.

They all looked nearly as bedraggled and forlorn as Hermione felt after her sleepless night. She waved dispiritedly at her friends as they kicked off the ground for a strategy meeting high in the air, up out of earshot.

The Quidditch pitch was still soggy from last night's storm, but the clouds were almost all dispersed and the unobscured sun glinted off countless tiny puddles and rivulets and droplets of water.

Hermione shut her eyes against the dazzle as she began her stretching routine. She bent her left knee up behind her and caught her ankle in her left hand while her right arm lifted up to help her balance. The idea was to pretend she was a tree, rooted and strong, reaching up towards the sky as she stretched the large muscles in the front of her leg...

'Miss Granger.'

'Gah!' she screeched. Staggering forwards out of the stretch, she stumbled right into Professor Snape, who caught her by her upper arms.

He held her steady for a moment before releasing her. She immediately crossed her arms over her chest, gripping her biceps where he had grabbed her.

'Oh... *god*, sorry, sir, you completely startled me,' she gabbled. 'Sorry!'

He didn't answer her immediately, instead regarding her with an unreadable expression in his black eyes. If she hadn't known better, she might have taken it for a spark of humour. Whatever it was, it wasn't the swift irritation she might have expected.

When he spoke, it was in his most measured and silken tones. 'Not at all, Miss Granger. Rather, I should apologise for surprising you like that.'

'In fact, I came over here to apologise for my behaviour last night. I made *hrhmmm*, I made unwarranted remarks of a personal nature, and it was inappropriate. I... didn't mean to cause you any pain. I would be... sorry... if this contretemps got in the way of our working relationship.'

By the end of what was, for him, an outlandishly gracious speech, he was looking up and away from her, as though something really quite interesting were happening up in the Hufflepuff section of the stands.

Hermione shut her mouth as soon as she realised it was gaping open and, cheeks aflame, stared down at the toes of her trainers.

'Thank you, sir. I thought afterwards that I shouldn't have begun that topic, knowing that you... er, that is, I was inappropriate as well and I would like to apologise for that.'

They each shifted their eyes towards the other at the same moment. Meeting his gaze, Hermione broke into a smile that lit her whole face.

He offered his hand for her to shake. 'Friends, Miss Granger?' he asked, one brow raised.

'Friends, sir' she said, reaching out her hand and giving him the kind of firm shake her father had taught her to use.

'Very well. I'll see you this afternoon.'

He strode off towards the castle.

Hermione didn't watch him leave, but instead walked rather slowly up into the lowest tier of the stands. Stretching routine forgotten, she sat quietly smiling and cradling her own right hand to her chest as though it were a baby or a precious pet.

After a few minutes, she rose and made her way to the girls' changing room.

High above the pitch, the Gryffindor team had begun to train, but down in the stands a lone, unheeded spectator had seen something that riveted her attention even more than the manoeuvring of Gryffindor's red-haired Keeper.

Lavender couldn't quite believe she'd seen what she thought she'd seen. It could have been completely innocent. The body language had been subtle and ambiguous, but she couldn't shake the feeling she'd just witnessed a meeting between lovers.

It was almost unimaginable. But she didn't believe she'd imagined it...

A handful of puzzle pieces suddenly clicked into place.

Unrequited, my arse, she thought, gazing speculatively at the door that had just closed behind Hermione. *I've got my eye on you, you superior cow*

* * *

'You didn't sleep much last night, did you?' Lavender's tone was deeply sympathetic. 'I mean, it must have been three when I got up to go to the loo, and I could hear you turning a page in your bed. Are you okay? Did you have a row with someone... or something?'

Hermione stared at Lavender for a moment. *Unbelievably nosy. WHAT is she on about now?* Lavender had been in a sulk for two solid weeks, ever since Ron had broken it off with her. This show of concern was just... odd.

'Erm, thank you, Lavender, I'm okay. No rows, just bog standard insomnia. You know I have that problem sometimes when my brain is running on something.'

After sharing rooms for nearly six years, the Gryffindor girls did indeed know quite a bit about each other. They knew, for example, that Parvati snored; that Hermione often closed her curtains and read in bed, sometimes deep into the night; and that Lavender usually had to get up for the loo at least twice each night. It was all routine.

'Mmmmmm,' said Lavender, still looking at Hermione with a little smile that did not reach her eyes. 'Well I'm glad. It's no fun to suffer.' She took a bite of toast and a sip of tea. 'I wouldn't want that for you.'

'Well, um, thanks. That's... sweet. But I'm fine, really, quite fine.' She smiled briefly at Lavender and stood to go, sweeping her gaze casually around the room before shouldering her bag.

Her heart somersaulted. He was there at the staff table, bending down a bit so he could catch what Professor Flitwick was saying. His hair was tucked behind his ear, giving her a full if fleeting view of his profile.

He'd used the word. *Friends*. And he'd actually apologised for hurting her, said he would *besorry if this contretemps got in the way of our working relationship*

And the handshake. *Gods*. She'd had to sit in the stands for a few minutes trying to fix in her mind the sensation of his long cool hand in hers.

She still didn't understand why he had snapped at her last night, but now, with their friendship confirmed with a handshake, she thought maybe he really had been trying to protect her, or give her good advice. It was misguided and hurtful, but seen in this light? So very sweet. She felt she could forgive him anything this morning.

Beaming, she practically floated out of the Great Hall, Lavender and her weird attentiveness quite forgotten.

* * *

Wednesday afternoon DADA classes were Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw fifth-years. Five minutes after the lesson ended, a few students were still queuing to place their work in the box on the corner of Professor Snape's desk.

In the doorway, Hermione brushed past a sharp-featured girl whose thick black hair was bound in a long plait.

'Excuse me,' Hermione said, smiling at the girl, whom she recognised as Aphra Vesey, a fifth-year Ravenclaw.

'What? Oh. Erm, yes. No problem,' muttered Aphra distractedly, shifting a few inches to the side. Her eyes were fixed at the front of the classroom, where a fair-haired boy and a tall girl lingered a few steps from the desk. The boy was whispering something in the girl's ear, making her blush. But the colour drained from her cheeks when her professor, momentarily forgotten, spoke.

'Mr Giles. Miss Michaelson. I want you gone from my classroom. Your papers. In the box. Now.'

Hermione recognised the blend of boredom and impatience in his voice, and had to fight to swallow a huge smile. She glanced sideways at Aphra to see if the other girl had noticed her reaction.

But Aphra could only see her classmates walking towards the door, James Giles grinning rakishly at her while Sara Michaelson shadowed him, her right hand just inches from the most perfect arse in all of Hufflepuff...

Hermione stood aside to let the three fifth-years through the doorway, then walked up the aisle to Snape's desk.

She looked up at him quizzically and shook her head. 'He really is playing with fire, isn't he? What a little rotter.'

Severus returned her gaze with the same unreadable look she'd seen there this morning. 'Indeed. As I mentioned last night, he's not the sharpest tool in the box.'

She smiled. 'Professor Snape, that's a Muggle saying! I haven't heard a witch or wizard say that since I've been at Hogwarts.'

He shrugged very slightly. 'It's a favourite saying of my aunt, who is a Muggle. Usually used in connection with her husband.'

She laughed. 'Then your aunt and my grandmother have that in common. Though really my grandfather is neither as stupid nor as deaf as he pretends to be. He simply has a very difficult wife.'

'My aunt is rather more justified in her use of the epithet, then. Her husband is thick as two short planks, as they say. Now,' he said, pointing at the box. 'Here are the day's takings. Enjoy.'

He smiled. It was just the merest quirk of his closed lips and the ghost of a twinkle in his eye, but it was, unmistakably, a smile.

Oh. My. God. Muggle aunts. Personal exchanges about difficult family members. Humour.*Smiles.* Was he trying to kill her?

She ducked her head, which felt like it was on fire. 'Thanks,' she mumbled, and began shoving parchment rolls into her bag.

'My pleasure, Miss Granger.' He turned away to place his own books in his bag. Snapping it shut, he said, 'Shall we?' and gestured towards the door.

Which he held open for her.

'Until tomorrow then, Miss Granger.'

'Y-yes, sir. Until tomorrow.'

Definitely dying now, she thought as she watched him billow towards the Staff Room.*Dying happy, though.* And she walked off in a daze in the opposite direction.

* * *

No one else was in the Staff Room yet, which was just how Severus liked it.

'Coffee,' he barked at the air, and in two seconds a house-elf Apparated in with a steaming pot and several cups.

'I is bringing plenty for tired teachers,' squeaked the creature, setting the tray down on a table.

'Hmmp,' grunted Severus, reaching for the pot. The house-elf bowed and Disapparated with a crack.

He settled into a chair by one of the tall windows. The afternoon sunlight, still strong at this hour, slanted in obliquely across his feet.

That went well, he thought, smiling slightly into his cup. Apparently, sometimes apologies do what one hopes they will.

His idyll was shattered by a piercing wail that sounded like it started several floors below and was rising fast. 'Aaauggghhhh, he's killed him! Help! Murder! Murder in the bathroom! Heeeelllllp!'

Severus leapt to his feet as the author of the screaming erupted through the floor. It was Myrtle, the ghost of the second floor girls' bathroom. As soon as she saw him, she began to fly in loops around his head screeching, 'Murder! Murder! Blood! He's kiiiiillled him, oooooooooohhhhhhhh!'

'In your bathroom, Myrtle?' he demanded, already sprinting down the corridor.

'Yes, oh yes, it's terrible, professor, come quick!' howled the ghost and dived back down through the floor to the scene of blood and destruction Severus would find moments later.

* * *

Severus wasn't given to bedside vigils: he found them maudlin and useless. Yet here he was in the darkened Hospital Wing, gazing abstractedly at the peaked face of the boy he was sworn to help. He'd stopped by in the course of his nightly rounds of the castle...he hadn't seen Draco since he'd carried the boy's bloodied form up to Madam Pomfrey earlier that evening.

Draco's wounds were knit and treated with Dittany; the second dose of Blood-Replenishing Potion was doing its work; and he was in a deep, drugged sleep. There would be no permanent damage from the Sectumsempra curse Potter had cast. *Thank Merlin.*

The hot rage in which Severus had spent most of the evening had burnt down to cold exhaustion laced with a sense of the absurdity of his position. He was bound by codes of honour, love, and magic to protect two arrogant, disrespectful boys intent upon getting themselves killed...possibly by one another.

He was sure Potter had his thieving little hands on his own old Potions book. He was equally sure Dumbledore would do nothing about retrieving it or punishing his favourite miscreant. It was beyond galling, but Severus would have to settle for the satisfaction of ruining the rest of the boy's Saturdays this term.

Draco, though... He focussed his gaze on the sleeping boy. How wretched he looked...thin, greyish, and pinched, even in sleep.

Draco hadn't the bottom for what he was ordered to do. There was a softness about him...his father called it weakness...that was nearly invisible beneath the carapace of spite and haughtiness he'd inherited from Lucius.

But Severus could see Draco's vulnerability. He knew what it was to be an angry boy with an implacable, punishing father. He knew what it was to be in thrall to Voldemort's Death Eaters, and to take the Dark Mark before he was really a man.

He himself had stopped trying to please his own vicious Muggle father before he was ten years old, and had been shot of him completely before he was seventeen. Draco was less fortunate; he would never measure up to Lucius's expectations and perhaps he would never stop trying.

Perhaps he would, though. There was a chance that Draco could become his own man in time...if he lived long enough, which was really quite unlikely. But he might. And Severus could perhaps save the child from doing something so horrific that he'd spend the rest of his life either running from it or repenting it. Or, worse, repeating it.

Such a supreme effort to protect a single rather unremarkable soul

A vivid image of Hermione Granger flashed across his mind. She was standing on the Quidditch pitch, one arm reaching up gracefully to the sky. *Now there is a soul worth protecting*, he thought.

Abruptly he stood up, body tense as a bowstring, lip curled. *Sentimental tripe. And it's not actually her soul you're interested in, is it?*

Draco shifted and moaned, and Severus turned to leave. There would be time enough when the boy awoke to get his account of what had happened in that bathroom today, and to find whether it had something to do with Draco's great task. Severus wanted to discern if Potter knew or suspected anything.

Knowledge was everything in his position. He needed to have his hands on as many strands of the web as possible.

Severus paused in the doorway leading out to the third-floor corridor. *You could ask her. Potter's probably told her all about it. She'd tell you, her professor, if you asked her.*

He passed his hand over his eyes. *Can you make up your sodding mind?* he demanded of himself. *Do you want to pump her for information, protect her, or shag her senseless?*

Yes. Yes. And... yes. Bugger it.

A lit wand appeared at the far end of the corridor, its circle of light revealing Dumbledore's long grey robes. The Headmaster had returned to Hogwarts.

Albus's progress up the corridor was slow, and when he drew closer, Severus could see how haggard...how sick...the old wizard looked. Much worse than a few days ago. Severus's stomach lurched. *It won't be long now.*

'Good evening, Severus. Minerva just told me what happened. How is Draco?'

'Alive. Sleeping. On the mend. Poppy can tell you more.'

'Do you know what spell Harry used on him?'

Severus sneered. 'An old one of mine, actually. *Sectumsempra*. I believe that Potter has somehow got his hands on my old copy of *Advanced Potion Making* and that he found it there.'

Albus drew himself up and looked at Severus sharply. 'Are you sure of that? Did he tell you so?'

'Well, not aloud, but it was swimming in the very front of his mind. When I questioned him, he lied repeatedly. Of course.'

Albus sighed. 'I'll speak to him about it.' He paused. 'I understand it was an emergency, Severus, but you know how I feel about your using Legilimency on students without their consent.'

Severus felt a portion of his earlier rage returning. 'Potter had just used a lethal...*alethal*...spell on Malfoy. Given that simple fact...never mind the identities of the two students in question and their *singular* positions...I might expect you to trust my judgement. Headmaster.'

Albus held up his good hand in assent, then laid it on his colleague's arm. 'Of course, Severus. Forgive me; I misspoke. I trust your judgement completely. I'll just go and look in on Draco and speak to Poppy. We'll continue this conversation tomorrow.'

He passed through the double doors to the Hospital Wing, leaving Severus in the darkened passageway.

Albus's apology didn't make Severus feel any better. He wasn't sure what was worse...a patronising Dumbledore or a weakened one losing his grip on his own judgement and self-control.

Desolation surged through Severus. Very soon he would be lonelier and in greater danger than ever...in a living nightmare from which he would probably never wake.

He stood up straighter. He wouldn't think in those terms. He had the power, the brains, and the nerve to enter the darkness. Whether he'd come out the other side...well, that couldn't be part of the calculation. He need only try to ensure that there was another side for anyone at all to come out to.

Striding down the corridor, he dismissed the notion of his own loneliness. It was completely beside the point. Completely.

A/N: The HP Lexicon posits that the Sectumsempra incident happened on 6 May, a Tuesday, but the day/date is uncertain. So I made it that Wednesday (7 May) to suit myself. Ron and Lavender had broken up 21 April, according to ze Lexicon (I know! Can you believe they lasted that long?).

Hidden Fire

Chapter 20 of 36

Severus makes great strides in self-knowledge

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just here to besmirch it.

Early Thursday morning...

The fact that he'd got almost none the night before meant Severus was longing for sleep by the time he finished his rounds at midnight.

In his own bed at last, he spread his naked limbs out like a starfish. His bed was supremely, almost indulgently comfortable, with expensive sheets worn to a downy softness by years of washing.

Sleep came quickly, but tonight there was no folderol about silver does and forest clearings. Tonight's dream was linear and very explicit.

He was seated at his desk, working, when Hermione knocked at the door. Enter, he called.

That's your job, sir, she said.

Oh, naughty girl.

Dream. It's only a dream.

Well, then, he thought. Let's get on with it.

She stopped a foot or so in front of him, tilted her head back and reached both hands up to his shoulders. She pulled. Come down here, Severus, she said, smiling her glorious smile. I need you.

He let himself fall back into his chair, and her hands moved to the sides of his neck, her fingers splayed, thumbs gently tugging at his lower lip to open him. Yes, she breathed as she bent to cover his mouth with hers. Good.

Her kiss was hard and hungry from the start; she kissed him as though she'd been starved for him. He grabbed her waist, pulling her between his legs. She clambered into his lap and wrapped her legs around him, breaking their kiss to growl into his mouth, Fuck me, Severus. I want you.

And, because it was a dream...a fucking great dream...his trousers and her blouse were already open and she was naked beneath her skirt. She rose up so that her breasts were right in front of his face, and he took the tip of one into his mouth, pressing the nipple between his tongue and teeth and sucking hard.

He could feel her, wet and hot, rubbing against him tantalisingly for a moment before she lifted her hips to position herself and drive... down... deep. Oh FUCK it's good. His hands now gripping her bare hips and arse, he pulled her down further until he felt his cock strike deep within her. She gasped thickly, her head rolling forward so her wide eyes, shocked and dark with need, met his.

Mine now. Eyes locked on hers, he lifted her slowly off his cock then drove in again, fast and deep. And again. She moaned his name, and he thought he would explode then and there. He wanted her on his desk, and she was on his desk, spread and panting. His hands on her hip and thigh, steadying her against his thrusts, his thumb on her clit, his cock buried in her again and again. Tight, wet, mine, so sweet, gods, oh, oh, oh, OH FUCK!

He shouted himself awake as he began to come, white fire ricocheting around his skull, his lightening-struck bones melting into one another.

It was a long minute or two before his rational brain roared into action.

Right.

Once might be anomalous. Twice could plausibly be a coincidence. Three times, and you're establishing a pattern.

This was twice...his second sexual dream in twenty-four hours featuring Hermione Granger. And, really, coincidence wasn't in it. He'd made a choice, jumping into the dream as though it were cool, clean water on a stifling day.

Instead, it was a pool of quicksand. A monumental lapse in judgement; a dangerous delusion; a truly fucking bad idea.

Was he really going to become one of those weak-minded fools who pant after their students? The thought was intolerable.

But part of him...the purring part that was feeling very fine indeed...bloody well wanted to establish a pattern, meeting her in his dreams a third and a fourth and a ninety-eighth time.

*Who can it hurt?*this part coaxed. *You? If you give no outward sign, if you never act on it, what's the harm in it?*

Besides... in days, or weeks at the most, you won't see her again in friendship until everything's ended well and your role is known. Which means, realistically speaking, never.

The bitterness of this last reflection decided him. No, he wouldn't act on his urges, nor would he pretend he ever could or would act on them.

But if he were about to lose her smiles in reality, he'd keep them in his dreams. He'd fucking bask in them. And she'd love him in a way she never would in real life...this girl who'd overwhelmed his defences without even trying to.

* * *

Later Thursday morning...

Severus steadied himself mentally before entering the Great Hall. Breakfast would be the first time he'd see Hermione since he'd become conscious of how much he desired her.

But she wasn't there. The test would have to wait until this morning's Defence Against the Dark Arts class.

At ten-thirty, he looked up from his desk as the sixth-years entered the classroom.

She came in on a tide of Gryffindor boys...Weasley and Potter, as usual, but also Thomas, Finnegan, and Longbottom. Finnegan had just said something that made her laugh, and Severus caught his breath.

She was lovely when she laughed. Finnegan seemed to think so too. He had that look on his face: the transparent dazzlement Severus had seen...and sneered at...a hundred times.

How many callow idiots were after her? Whose attentions did she favour? He had no idea, and it was none of his concern so he bloody well didn't care.

Okay. *Merlin*. He did care, and this brought with it an unforeseen humiliation: he was reduced to regarding his male students...infantile oafs, every one...as potential rivals.

He rose from his chair and scowled at the assembled students. 'Silence. Your assigned reading has taken you through page 567 of *Facing the Faceless*. Now turn to page 568 and read through to 572. We'll begin the discussion in ten minutes.'

He began to pace up and down the aisles...a very effective method both for keeping order in the classroom and for calming unruly emotions.

As he walked up the aisle where she sat, he saw that she was wearing hair sticks and that the skin at her nape was bare.

What if he were to stop beside her chair and reach out to remove the sticks? What if she turned towards the aisle in surprise, her hair cascading down, heavy and warm? What if he then knelt beside her and buried one hand in that hair, cradling the back of her head in his palm, and kissed her smiling mouth?

He breathed in as he passed her, closing his eyes as he did so.

Enough. All hell is going to break loose if you can't control yourself around her. So do it

'Mr Finnegan,' he growled. 'Your feet do not belong on that chair. Try to sit like a human being.'

Nothing like a little casual spite to ground one. He smirked.

When ten minutes had elapsed, Severus rounded on the class, his most minatory glare on his face.

'Now. Who can name and describe the three chief varieties of Numbing Hexes and the appropriate counter-spells for each? Mr Nott.'

Self-control was Severus's speciality. He shoved his turbulent feelings into their compartment and proceeded to teach his class without giving another thought to touching Hermione Granger.

* * *

Thursday afternoon...

Ten minutes after the last lesson of the day had ended, Severus looked up from his desk. The last of the second years had left the room, and in the doorway stood his TA, smiling at him.

His demeanour stayed totally calm even as his heart did a somersault. What a rich pleasure it was to be smiled at by Hermione Granger.

*You've been besotted with her for months, haven't you?*an internal voice sneered. *Taken you long enough to see it, you dim-witted old pervert*

But he didn't feel old, and he didn't feel dim, and he didn't feel like a pervert. He felt *happy*. And strong. Not with his usual wary, tensile strength, but with an upwelling of life and hope.

Maybe one day... probably not, but maybe.. That thought couldn't go any farther, but he let it stand. *Maybe one day.*

Meanwhile, he was perfectly capable of fooling the entire world into believing his feelings for Hermione were barely half a degree warmer than total indifference. Even if he could no longer fool himself.

'Good afternoon, Miss Granger.' He pointed to the box on the corner of his desk. 'Have at it.'

'Thank you, sir,' she said, and unrolled one of the parchments. "'Practices for Controlling Cornish and Welsh Pixies,'" she read aloud. 'Oh, what delights lie in store for me. And for you, a great pile of scribbling on the topic of "The Hadean Oracle: Friend or Foe?" The fourth-year consensus lies with "foe," in case you were wondering.'

'Mmmm, clever little creatures. Though I suppose they had a fifty per cent chance of choosing the right answer,' he mused, smiling his nearly undetectable smile.

'It was not the wickedest topic you've ever devised,' she allowed as she exchanged the marked for the unmarked papers in her bag.

Then she paused for several moments, clearly undecided about something.

'Are you,' she ventured, 'are you going downstairs? Sir? If you are, I'll walk you as far as the entrance hall. I wanted to talk to you a bit more about vampire rights...we had to stop too soon last week.'

He regarded her silently. Couldn't speak quite yet.

'Or another time,' she said hurriedly. 'I just...I wondered if you'd read Farthingale, and what you thought of the part where he postulates...'

'As it happens, I am going downstairs and would be happy to continue that particular conversation,' he broke in. 'I'll be with you in... just a moment.'

He moved to a tall bookshelf in the corner and took down several volumes, all the while breathing deep and calming breaths. His skin was prickling, every hair standing up as if in sympathy with... *Fuck. What am I, sixteen?* Just before he turned back to his waiting TA, he cast a concealing glamour over the front of his trousers.

He handed one of the books to Hermione. 'Read this. She quite effectively exposes the flaw in Farthingale's main thesis, and everything falls apart from there. Farthingale is vogueish, and he's a nimble writer, but there's really nothing there in the end.'

So on the first day of his new awareness Severus managed to keep his bargain with himself. He walked (rather carefully) downstairs with Hermione and talked (with all due reserve) about an intellectual topic and generally gave no outward sign that he was on his way to his rooms to refresh himself with a nice, private, earth-shattering wank.

* * *

Phantom Hermione returned to his rooms the next night and the next, taking him in his bed, in his bath, on the sofa in the sitting room, on top of his desk, under his desk, on his potions workbenches, up against the thick-paned underwater window, and in the cramped, odorous darkness of his supply cupboard. She knelt before him on the carpet in front of the fire, and he returned the favour. She could do astonishing things with her tongue and lips, and the way she cried out his name when she came drove him over the edge.

He didn't always wake between dreams. When he did, he cleaned himself quickly and sought sleep again, not allowing his consciousness to solidify enough to judge what he was doing.

He only wanted to get back to Phantom Hermione and whisper her name into her ear like the sweetest endearment, and hear her whisper his to him. Then to feel her slide her hand inside his trousers while she murmured something altogether more bracing into the skin of his neck.

Such as, 'Strip and find a place to kneel.' Or, 'It's time to make me scream.'

* * *

Saturday...

Quidditch wasn't really Hermione's cup of tea. She wondered sometimes whether she would even go to the games if her best friends weren't such fanatics...and now both on the team.

She had actually skipped the occasional game when Gryffindor wasn't playing...always arousing the incredulity of Harry and Ron, who would miss a game only if they were in hospital.

Or in detention, like Harry was today, of all days.

His face as he'd left the breakfast table in the Great Hall had been utterly woebegone, but Hermione could muster almost no sympathy for him. He had let down his team, his House, and himself when he recklessly used that horrible spell.

She could not understand how anyone could use a spell whose origins and effects were a mystery.

She took her place in the stands with Neville and Seamus and looked around the pitch.

It was the loveliest of days. Early May in Scotland could be ravishing, and this afternoon was mild and fragrant. Hermione remembered a similar day last year, when she had discovered she was developing a bit of a crush on her professor...

Seamus, beside her, broke in on her thoughts. 'Chocolate Frog, Mione?' He grinned goofily. 'D'ye think we can win it without Harry? Bad day for him to be in detention. Snape's a right bastard.'

Hermione took the Frog but frowned. 'Seamus, Harry almost committed murder. He was lucky Professor Snape came along when he did, or he wouldn't be in detention, he'd be sitting in front of the Wizengamot.'

Seamus shrugged, his smile fading. 'Yeah, I s'pose. Though I'd think he'd get a medal for wiping out Malfoy. Would do the whole world a favour, that would.'

Hermione glanced over at the Slytherin stands, where Draco Malfoy sat with his friends, fully healed. He looked thin and drawn, but, she realised, no worse than he had before Harry'd sliced him up.

Harry's got to be right. Something is amiss with Malfoy she thought. *But what?*

She swept her gaze around the stands at her fellow students and experienced a feeling of unreality *How many secrets are we all keeping?* she wondered. *What will become of us? Surely it won't be long now before we are at war, and maybe Harry really will have to kill Draco.*

Each day of relative peace was a gift. *Best to enjoy it all while I can*

A moment later Madam Hooch released the Quaffle and the crowd roared. Soon even Hermione was wrapped up in the drama of the game.

Gryffindor and Ravenclaw were both playing brilliantly. All three Gryffindor Chasers worked seamlessly together whenever they had the Quaffle. But Ravenclaw's Gemma Stubbs, Fabienne Brandt, and Julian Deeble were even better, seeming to read one another's minds as they wove around the pitch.

Ravenclaw had adopted a particularly brutal offensive strategy, and Ron often had to choose between fending off a well-coordinated double Bludger attack or getting badly pummelled whilst he tried to stop the Quaffle. As soon as his teammates realised what was going on, Gryffindor's Beaters both began covering Ron very closely whenever Ravenclaw had the Quaffle.

'They're like dancers,' Hermione breathed, then flinched as both Ravenclaw Beaters smacked the Bludgers towards Ron again. 'Really violent, homicidal dancers,' she muttered.

She looked around for the Seekers. Ginny was nearby, Cho halfway down the pitch. Both were hovering like great hummingbirds as they relentlessly scanned the air for the Snitch.

The sun shone on Ginny's bright hair where it fanned out over her shoulders and...suddenly...its rays flashed on something else just twenty feet below her. The Snitch...Hermione could see it! Ginny saw it, too, and dived straight at it. It was all over in an instant...Cho, too far away, never had a chance.

The stands erupted in cheers and howls, and the whole team converged, screaming, on Ginny. Hermione threw her arms around Neville and Seamus and the three of them began to shout 'Weasley is our Queen' over and over until the chant was taken up by everyone in Gryffindor House.

The crowd of students who'd waited for the team to emerge from the changing rooms started the chant again as they walked in riotous triumph back to the castle, arm in arm with their champions.

Hermione didn't think she'd ever felt such pure joy in the wake of a Quidditch match...she was so proud of Ginny, so happy for her.

And when Harry came through the portrait hole door and Ginny ran into his arms and claimed him at last... words couldn't describe how fine that was. The looks on their faces as they pulled apart took Hermione's breath away...Ginny jubilant, Harry awed.

She watched Harry and Ginny go out together through the portrait hole, holding hands as if life depended on it. Just like that, they were the couple they were meant to be.

But it wasn't 'just like that.' Ginny had been in love with Harry for years. She'd been patient and tenacious...even though she'd also chosen to date other boys and explore her options, Hermione knew he had never stopped being Ginny's lodestar.

Hermione retreated into a corner of the common room and sat unseeing as she worked out a thought that had just occurred to her.

Surely she could take a page from Ginny's book and find a way to hold onto hope without counting on anything. Would it be so terrible if she stopped thinking of her feelings for Severus as a silly crush she'd inevitably outgrow and started thinking of them as a part of her life that might never go away? And that could fortify her in the dark days ahead? And that might actually bear fruit one day in the unimaginable future?

She had never let herself think for more than a moonstruck minute that there was a real future for her and Severus. All the impediments she'd catalogued last year were still in place (except for the part where they didn't like one another...that seemed to have been sorted quite beautifully). More importantly, though, war felt daily more imminent. The whole teacher-student thing aside, both of them would be right in the thick of a fight they might not win.

But here were Harry and Ginny, choosing love and one another even though they might not survive into their twenties.

Maybe one day, she thought. *I won't count on it but... maybe. And meanwhile, I'll treat myself to as much of him as I can manage*

'Butterbeer, Mione?' Seamus was smiling toothily at her, his gold- and red-painted face a streaky mess.

She rose quickly and said, 'Oh no, Seamus, not before dinner...I know it's weak stuff, but without food it always goes straight to my head. Should be a good party tonight though, and I plan to be here for it. Shall we have a drink together then?'

'It's a date,' said Seamus happily.

'Ta,' she murmured, smiling distractedly, and headed for the stairs.

There was something in her room she needed to look at before dinner.

* * * * *

A/N: Er... so Severus was getting a little impatient with this whole 'slow build' thing, and required some smut from his POV before he would participate in this chapter. In fact, he's interrogating my whole plan for this story, and really getting kind of stropky. Apparently he's had enough of both angst and quasi-monastic living for several (long, wizarding) lifetimes and would really prefer to get to the good stuff and stay there...as if he hasn't already starred in more PWP than Jenna Jameson and been married off more times than a Ken doll. (Which is all good and right, of course.)

'Strip and find a place to kneel' is a lyric from 'Birth-Day,' a song on the Suzanne Vega album *Nine Objects of Desire*. Apologies to SV...the line was just too good not to use! This album is of course where the song 'Caramel' may be found. (See A/N to chapter 4 for lyrics and link.)

Thanks to greenstuff, hechicera, and lifeasanamazon...three very busy women who still find the time to help me out...for their suggestions, corrections, and unflagging support. Group hug!! And thanks to all of you who are sticking with the story. I love hearing from you.

Percipio Corium

Chapter 21 of 36

A misunderstanding, a drunken party, frustrated lust, and a poorly researched love spell. What could go wrong?

Disclaimer: When you create such a fine, rich 'verse as the Potterverse, as Dame Jo did, everyone wants to play in it. Which is all I'm doing here, playing. (Yes, I know she's not a Dame yet. Could someone British please ring the Queen and ask her to work on that? Kthx.)

* * * * *

Saturday, 10 May 1997

Late afternoon...

'Oh, Ron,' Hermione sighed. 'This is a good thing. A *good* thing. You know Ginny's been in love with Harry forever, and he's finally noticed her this year. Frankly, this would have happened ages ago if you weren't such an ogre. I'm sure Harry's been really worried about what you'd think.'

Ron gaped. 'What d'you mean? Ginny's been dating other blokes. She hasn't fancied Harry since she was twelve. And I'm not an ogre. I just don't like seeing my little sister snogging people like, like, like a...' he spluttered.

'Like a *teenager*?' Hermione rolled her eyes. 'You're going to have to get used to it, and I'd advise you not to behave badly and spoil their moment.'

They emerged from the cloister into the courtyard, and just then Harry himself walked in through a nearby door looking dazed and blissful.

Hermione squealed and ran to him, throwing her arms around him and kissing him soundly on the cheek. 'You!' she exclaimed, beaming into his eyes. 'That was the best thing I've ever seen!'

Laughing, he lifted her up and swung her round, and when he set her down he grabbed both of her hands and smiled radiantly at her. 'Was the best thing I ever felt, Mione.'

She looked over his shoulder towards the door he'd come through. 'Where's Ginny? She won't like you holding my hands,' she teased.

He kept hold of them, swinging them back and forth and grinning like a fool. 'Girls' loo. She's meeting me in the Great Hall for dinner. Thought I'd come out here and get a little air.' His eyes went to Ron, and the grin faded a bit.

Seeing that Ron seemed at a bit of a loss, Hermione dropped one of Harry's hands and held her own hand out to Ron. 'Come on, Ron, let's walk with Harry.' And linking her arms with them both, Hermione pulled her two best friends into the cloister, determined to do a little fence-mending before they went down to dinner.

As soon as he lost sight of Hermione under the overhang of the cloister, Severus turned from his vantage point at a second-floor window and stormed down the corridor and the stairs, scattering students before him. When he got to the entrance hall, he just kept going down, down to the dungeons. *Fuck dinner*. He would not sit there and watch Potter...*Potter* of all people...paw at the girl he wanted. He needed to be alone.

* * *

'Seamus! No! I...I'm sorry, I just don't feel like that about you.' Hermione braced her hand against his chest, pushing him away.

'Aw, Mione, couldn't you try? I think you're the cleverest, prettiest girl in the whole school,' he pleaded, reaching out to grasp one of the curls that lay on her shoulder. If he could just touch that hair a little more; it drove him mad thinking about burying his hands in it...

She shoved at him again, hard. 'Have you been drinking?'

Well, that's a stupid question; we've all been drinking Merlin knew her own judgement was impaired, or she wouldn't be sitting in this corner with a soulful Seamus Finnegan, who, she now realised, had planned this.

Hermione stood up. 'I have to go. This is... I have to go.' And she pushed her way through the crush of celebrating students and out the portrait hole.

Boys! Merlin!

She stalked off down the corridor. Directionless at first, she soon bent her steps to her favourite window ledge, in the back stairway to the Headmaster's office.

Once there, she leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. The truth was, if Seamus had not made that ridiculous crack about her being the prettiest girl in the school, she might have snogged him. She could have closed her eyes and thought about Severus, imagining it was him telling her sweet, foolish things and kissing her...

Damn it, damn it, damn it She was just *aching* for him...had been since he'd apologised to her on Wednesday morning. And her newest realisation...that she harboured a hope for a future with him...didn't seem to be cooling her present ardour. At all.

Oh, *god*, she needed to be touched! Maybe she should go back to the party and corner Seamus.

Yes, but then there's tomorrow. Do you want to wake up tthose consequences? She shuddered.

To hell with it, she decided, jumping down from the window ledge and beginning to run down the stairs *I'm going to do it*.

* * *

'No, *olivewood*, Winky. And it has to be flat, not cupped like this one.' Hermione handed the wooden dish back to the house-elf, trying to keep the impatience out of her voice. She was a bundle of nerves, despite the lingering effects of three bottles of butterbeer.

Winky pointed at a spot on a high shelf and a flat wooden plate floated down into her tiny wrinkled hands. 'Like this, Miss Hermione?' she squeaked.

'Yes, perfect.' Hermione tucked the plate into her bag and sighed in relief. That was it, the last item she needed to cast the spell.

'Thanks so much for your help, Winky; I'll bring the plate back tomorrow.'

'Oh, no hurry, Miss! We is having lots of extras.' Winky gestured around the cavernous storeroom, which was filled with row upon row of floor-to-ceiling shelves stacked with every imaginable kind of serving dish and cooking utensil.

'Okay, thank you,' Hermione called, already making her way out through the main kitchen.

She'd decided it would be safe to use the second-floor girls' bathroom, having overheard Daphne Greengrass sharing a choice bit of gossip with Tracey Davis. Apparently Moaning Myrtle had abandoned her usual U-bend and was now residing in the Slytherin boys' loo, to the chagrin of every boy in the dungeons. It seemed Myrtle was very concerned for Draco Malfoy's wellbeing and wanted to be near him.

So Hermione could be fairly certain of being undisturbed during the forty minutes or so it would take her to brew her potion.

In the second-floor corridor, she ducked behind a tapestry and picked up the cauldron she'd hidden there earlier. The spoon she'd stolen from Severus's bedside, wrapped in one of her handkerchiefs, was tucked into the cauldron, as was a collapsible spirit stove.

Sitting cross-legged on the patch of floor just beyond the bathroom cubicles, she smoothed out the parchment and carefully reread the spell.

With smooth, deliberate motions that belied her inner tumult, she began to arrange her ingredients and equipment in a half circle in front of her.



Hermione's copy of Percipio Corium, rendered by the marvellous QalaChaki. For the high-res version, where you can enjoy the (animated!) details of the art and read the text of the spell, see link to her DeviantArt page below, in the Author's Note.

* * *

In the course of the day Severus had come to realise that weekends had a certain disadvantage. Since there were no lessons, he could only count on seeing Hermione at meals, and that only from a distance. Today, since he'd had Potter in detention through lunchtime, he'd only seen her at breakfast.

So when he unexpectedly spotted her walking in the courtyard with Weasley, he felt a jolt of pleasure.

Then, the very next moment, Potter appeared, and she was running into his arms and kissing him, her face alight.

And Potter, whose usual suite of expressions ranged from truculent to vacuous to smug, was gazing at her with complete, luminous happiness.

And it was as though Severus were seventeen again, watching Lily Evans run to James Toe-rag Potter. And all the light and air had just been sucked out of the world and despair and futility flooded his body and mind and he wanted to smash everything everywhere to bits.

Instead, he went to his lab. He would work. Work would save him.

Five hours later, when he reached a good stopping point, his headache was like the tide on shingle...relentless waves crashing and rasping against the insides of his skull...and he was truly exhausted. He Suspended the two potions he was working on and stumbled off towards his bedroom.

It was a rare thing for him to take a sleeping draught, but tonight he needed oblivion in the form of heavy, blank, dreamless sleep. With no visits from brown-eyed succubi.

* * *

It's a piece of caramel, Hermione thought as she gazed at the little honey-brown shard in her hand. *Enchanted caramel*. She giggled at the absurdity of it...this exotic Russian love potion was essentially a recipe for burnt sugar.

So many Muggle pantry staples were magically significant, and so many Muggle recipes were really nonpotent versions of wizarding potions. She often thought that some of her more parochial wizarding friends would be aghast if they knew how closely the worlds mirrored one another...

She shook her head to clear it of distracting, digressive thoughts.

For this was the moment of decision. Right now, this confection was just that...a sweet. Once she focussed her intention on it and cast the final incantation, it would potentiate...it would become capable of giving her, in Alixter Joy's words, an experience unlike any she'd had before.

She looked up at her bed curtains. For months now they had sheltered her while she rode out a hundred fantasies, her hands travelling their familiar paths over her own skin, her mind spinning scenario after delicious scenario.

It just... wasn't enough anymore. Not even close. She needed *something* more, and if not this, then it was probably going to be Seamus. Or Cormac *Ewww!* She screwed up her face in disgust. *Definitely Seamus before Cormac.*

But she didn't want Seamus, and toying with him to take the edge off her physical needs was surely more reprehensible than what she was about to do. At least with Percipio Corium, no one would be the wiser, so no one would get hurt.

And she would get something she really, really craved: the knowledge of Severus's skin. Having the memory of him on her fingertips and in her palms...well, that would make every fantasy just... *so much more real.* Thinking about it made her clench her thighs together in anticipation.

Well, then, she thought. *Let's get on with it*

She took a moment to focus her intention before touching the tip of her wand to the bit of caramel on her palm and murmuring the incantation.

She slipped the sweet into her mouth and closed her eyes as it began to melt on her tongue. The flavours of sea salt and tart rose hips sparkled around the rich, sweet notes of the browned sugar. She lifted her tongue up to the roof of her mouth and sucked on the caramel so that the dark, tangy sweetness flowed to her throat. She swallowed, then lay back against her pillows, rolling the caramel around inside her mouth, smoothing its edges and drinking it down as it dissolved.

When it was all gone, she whispered, *Nox,* and laid her wand beside her in the absolute darkness of her curtained bed.

Now what? Joy had really been quite vague about how one actually... sort of... *did it.*

Hermione remembered something Professor Flitwick had said first year: 'Magic is nearly all in the wizard's intention. The words of the spell direct the intention, and the wand helps focus it, but the power originates within.'

Inhaling slowly, she lifted her right hand from the bed and stretched it out in front of her. She breathed out: 'Severus.'

Her hand touched warm flesh. 'Oh!' she yelped, and snatched the hand back.

A breath or two later, she tried again, heart hammering. She laid her right palm flat against an expanse of skin. There were hairs, and bone below the skin...a rib? She moved her fingers, and the pad of her middle finger brushed against... *oh gods...* a *nipple.* Which began to harden under her touch. She could feel a heartbeat, slow and regular.

Jesus Christ and all the saints. She was touching Severus Snape's bare chest.

She lifted her left hand, letting the intention flow into it, and set it beside the right hand. She splayed her fingers out so that her two hands were nearly spanning the width of his torso.

Though really, according to Alixter Joy, it was an astral projection of his torso. She had never worked with astral bodies before and was unprepared for how realistic it felt. It was... amazing. She could feel gradations in temperature in his skin, and his chest hairs rubbed against the pads of her fingers. And his... nipple... Her fingers retreated from that area. Too much to handle just at the moment.

So what happened when she shifted her intention slightly... downward... without moving her hands at all? *Oh, my.* It felt as if her hands were sliding across his skin, down past the crest of his rib cage and to the muscles of his abdomen.

Her thumb grazed an area of raised skin, and she concentrated on that, tracing its outlines with her forefinger. A mole, she guessed, or a small birthmark. Or a scar? Then, his navel and, below it, a line of hair trailing down... What would happen if she kept going? His nipple had been so responsive; did that mean that she could...

Flushing hot, she pulled her mind back and her hands lost the feel of him.

How can this be ethical? squawked an internal voice. *It seems so invasive!*

Old news, Hermione, she chided herself. *You knew this crossed the line. Don't lose your nerve now.*

In trying to convince herself to use the spell over the last several days, Hermione had vowed that if she cast it once, she would never cast it again. It was to be a one-time exercise, to be revisited only in memory.

Right. So. I am just... gathering memories

Focussing her mind again, she began deliberately to move her hands over his face. His eyes were closed, as though Astral Severus were asleep. She traced the tender skin of his eyelids and allowed his eyebrows to tickle her index fingers as she moved them to the high, bony bridge of his nose. Brushing downward she limned its length and then explored the way his flesh stretched over his cheekbones before softening into the planes of his cheeks.

Hmmm. He needs a shave.

She was becoming more used to how this spell worked. She didn't need to reach her hands out. By moving her intention, she could 'move' her hands anywhere she wanted.

Just now, she wanted to touch... his mouth. She skimmed her finger across his upper lip. It twitched, and a puff of air escaped his astral nose. Again, she pulled back. This was just *disturbingly* corporeal.

She tried again, this time applying a firmer touch, so that her thumb dragged his mouth open a little and she could feel the soft wetness of his inner lip.

She moaned. *This is the best spell ever invented.*

Once more her hands began ranging eagerly across his skin, learning him inch by inch. She traced the whorls of his ears and her fingers slipped through his fine hair and down to his neck, warm and throbbing with the steady pulse of his blood.

She put one thumb into the little dip where his throat met his clavicle, then stroked both hands out along the bone to his shoulders and then down the cool skin of his upper arms. She lingered a moment to follow the definition of his biceps before trailing her thumbs to the crooks of his elbows and caressing the soft skin there. Then down his forearms, firm with muscle, the hair chafing her palms deliciously. And down to his fine-boned, strong wrists and, at last, his hands.

She took one of them between her own two hands for a moment before lacing her fingers through his and clasping his palm to her own. Wanting to feel more of the rough and smooth of his hand, she unthinkingly pulled it up to her face, and gasped.

His long, callused fingers and cool palm lay against her burning cheek. Which meant... if she wanted to, she could ~~feel him with other parts of her body~~ Not just her hands.

'Oh, god,' she whimpered as a wave of pure desire swept through her. She moved his forefinger over to her mouth and pulled it across her bottom lip very slowly before taking it between her lips and resting its tip on her tongue. She sucked it ever so gently and released it with a soft kiss.

But what was she doing kissing his finger when his lips were to be had? And with that mental shift, her hands were cupping his jaw as she brushed her lips against his.

'Severus,' she whispered as she nuzzled his mouth, which had fallen open slightly. She planted light, slow kisses across the pillow of his bottom lip and in the corners of his mouth. 'Severus,' she crooned.

But he didn't answer, and his lips didn't respond to hers, and she felt suddenly sick. *What am I doing? This is all wrong.* This was so close to what she wanted, but also horribly off. She wanted to kiss and be kissed, not *grope* a simulacrum of the man she loved.

Just then, his lips moved under hers, forming a word. 'Hermione,' he whispered soundlessly, and again, 'Hermione.'

She winced and withdrew her touch. *And now I'm imagining my Severus doll is saying my name. I am insane, and perverted, and pathetic*

Hermione lay supine, her hands quite still at her sides, as tears began sliding down into her hair.

She was totally unprepared for what happened next.

A hand rasped against her cheek, its long questing fingers splayed from her temple to her mouth. Another tangled in her hair, wrapping around the back of her skull and pulling her head up off the pillow.

Hermione snatched up her wand from the bed beside her. *Finite Incantatem,* she hissed, panic-stricken.

The phantom hands were gone. Her head dropped to the pillow and she stared wild-eyed into the darkness.

Oh, Merlin! Wrong! Something just went very wrong!

* * * * *

A/N: So, yeah. She did it. And it went awry. And left us with an ebil cliffie. *cackles ebilly*

Some time ago, hechicera (aka Qalachaki) gifted me with the first illustration for this fic; this is her third one and the best yet, I think. I really love her work and enjoy collaborating with her. Go see the high-res version at <http://qalachaki.deviantart.com/gallery/#/d2bz0m9> and give her some props if you feel so inclined.

I am not a great student of the astral plane, but I decided that's how the spell must work: the incantation 'Somes Lucis' ('bright body'...see illustration) invokes an astral body associated with the beloved. I'll reveal more about just what happened when she cast the spell in future chapters.

Reciprocation

Chapter 22 of 36

Things go boom.

Disclaimer haiku:

It is hers to profit from...

Never mine, my dears.

* * * * *

The dream was unlike any Severus had ever experienced.

He could see nothing but a pattern of clear red and pink light swirling behind his eyelids. No images resolved themselves; no story unfolded. There were just these gentle, slow caresses and the cascades of sensation they sent through his skin.

The touching felt *remarkably* real.

The first sensation that drew him out of the depths of Dreamless Sleep was a tickle on his lip that made him huff out a breath. In his dream, it manifested itself as the brush of a bird's wing. A skylark, he decided with dream-certainty, swooping past him and away.

The next touch couldn't be anything but a hand gently cradling his chin and pressing at his bottom lip to open his mouth. Fingers moved to his ears and threaded through his hair, stroked his neck and shoulders, swept down his arms.

He relaxed, luxuriating in the feeling of being caressed. *Different sort of dream... but... nice.*

Then his right hand was clasped between two other hands and placed on what felt like a cheek, soft and firm and warm to the touch.

And his finger was being sucked; he could feel the wetness on his flesh, and the suction. *Never felt that in a dream before... Wait... why am I dreaming? Didn't I take... potion...?*

And hands were on his face again, drawing him into a kiss. Many kisses, actually...slow kisses across the width of his lower lip. And the mouth kissing him seemed to be whispering his name right into his own mouth.

She's here, he thought, and was wholly glad...and instantly impatient. *Kiss me like you mean it, girl*, he demanded.

The dream kisses continued as before...gentle and maddeningly chaste. Again she whispered his name.

Hermione, he said sharply. *Hermione!*

Her touch was gone in an instant. He called her again, peremptorily. There was nothing now but the shimmering red and pink, with deep blue beginning to swirl out from the centre of his vision.

This dream was all wrong...alien, blind, disobedient to his will.

Not a dream...

He began fighting his way out of sleep. If this was a spell...if someone had somehow penetrated his very sophisticated wards, he was in considerable danger.

With a supreme effort, Severus broke free of the grip of the potion he'd taken and his eyes snapped open.

'*Vestigium!*' he panted and thrust out both hands. They brushed against a soft cheek, tangled in thick curly hair, wrapped around the back of a head. He swept his thumb in a wide arc that touched the corner of a mouth, and then he was grasping at formless air. He caught a faint scent of burnt sugar and lemon verbena.

He leapt from the bed and, seizing his wand, strode into his sitting room. It was empty; so were his laboratory and bathroom. When he had ascertained that his wards had not been breached, he stood, naked and furious, in the centre of his darkened sitting room.

Aside from the house-elves, there were only two creatures in the castle...in the world, actually...whom his wards would automatically allow into his rooms. Albus Dumbledore, his Headmaster, was one. Hermione Granger, his teaching assistant, was the other.

That was not Albus he had touched as he awoke. And he doubted the Headmaster had set an actual succubus upon him.

Which meant that Hermione Granger had abused his trust and invaded his privacy with a shockingly ill-considered and mean-spirited prank *Not her style*, he thought.

No. It has Potter written all over it.

Severus squeezed his eyes shut, but couldn't block out the image of Potter and Hermione embracing deliriously in the courtyard not eight hours earlier.

He saw he had been telling himself a story about Hermione...that she respected him, enjoyed his company, even liked him. But clearly, any respect she had for him was nothing compared to her loyal subservience to her 'dearest friends.'

How could he have been such an utter, fawning fool?

His rage, coiled up in a dense little ball inside his chest, exploded outward. It was a good thing he was holding his wand and could direct the shockwave into a single, floor-cracking blast. Otherwise his whole sitting room would have been destroyed.

'*Reparo*,' he hissed, pointing his wand at the smoking chasm at his feet. He reset his wards to exclude her and stalked back to his bedchamber.

For several pitiless hours, he worked to set himself to rights. He analysed every interaction he'd had with Hermione Granger over the months since his injury. In every case he was able to find an explanation for her words and deeds that had nothing to do with connection, friendship, liking, or respect. Instead, on examination he discovered blind ambition, duplicity, bootlicking, and emotional instability.

Whenever a protest arose in his own breast, he smothered it with vicious efficiency.

By morning, he vowed, he would be untouchable again.

* * *

Meanwhile...

Oh god, oh god, oh god, what was that? What have I done?

Hermione lay rigid with terror in her bed. Those hands...someone or something else had been awakened by her spell. Her mind raced through the possibilities.

Were they Severus's astral hands? If so, what did it mean that they reached out to her? Was it a hallucination, or some unexplained side effect of the spell? Or had she perhaps invoked an incubus?

She began weeping in anger and fear. How could she have done this? Just yesterday she had been judging Harry harshly for casting an unknown spell he'd found scrawled in the margin of a book page.

Mine was actually printed in a book...that should make it reliable, shouldn't it? Even as she thought this, though, she remembered her first impression of *Magic for Modern Lovers*: sloppy, ill organised, poorly edited. And *this* was her authority. She'd done no research to confirm the details of the spell...she'd never seriously thought she'd use it. It was just an idea, a prop for her fantasy life. Until last night.

I am never, ever, ever drinking alcohol again, ever. Ever.

It was all she could do to not leap from her bed, sneak into the boys' dormitory, steal Harry's cloak, and break into the library.

I can't. I can't take more risks and break more rules. Not tonight.

Instead, she made a list of subject areas to search in the morning, when she could legitimately use the library, writing down book and journal titles when she could remember them.

Astral plane studies was a branch of metaphysics that overlapped with some fields of divination, especially chaomancy and astrology. Hermione had always had about as much respect for the field as she had for divination as a whole. She'd thought of it as a soft subject, a debased form of which was popular among *Witch Weekly* readers.

In the morning, however, she proposed to make herself into an expert...too late, but still. She had to find out what on earth she'd just done.

* * *

Sunday morning, 9 o'clock

Irma Pince found Hermione Granger slumped on the floor beside the library door, waiting for Irma to open it. The girl looked exhausted, even a little ill.

'Good morning, Miss Granger,' said Irma, pursing her lips. 'You're here very early, are you not?' Shesha disliked it when the students came into her library and handled her books, and Hermione Granger was one of the very worst. The girl had touched the great majority of books in Hogwarts' collection, some of them repeatedly and for extended periods of time. She was trouble, that one.

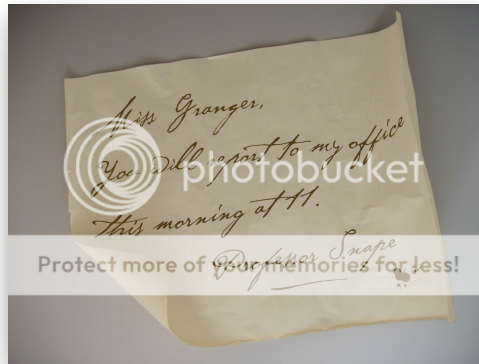
'Good morning, Madam Pince.' The girl scrambled to her feet and smiled wanly. 'I have a big, um, big project I'm having difficulty with, and I, er, thought of a new approach last night that I'm eager to research.'

Irma pushed open the heavy oak door and ushered Granger in. 'Mmmff. Very well,' she replied. 'You know where to find me if you need help with anything.' She turned and walked into her windowless office.

Hermione trawled the journals section of the library, finding relevant back issues of *International Metaphysics Review*, *Theoretical Transdimensional Studies Quarterly*, and *Journal of Practical Celestial Magick*. She was heading into the book stacks when the owl arrived.

It was a school owl, and it held out its leg with a very bored expression as she untied the parchment scroll, hands trembling.

Her stomach clenched when she saw the familiar handwriting:



Hermione had to sit on the floor to avoid falling.

Of all the possible scenarios she'd come up with the night before, this augured worst: that Severus knew, somehow, what she'd done. Why else would he demand her presence on a Sunday morning?

She checked her watch: it was 9:25. Desperate as she was to find some answers to her questions before she had to face him, there would not be time for that now.

The next hour or so would be better spent settling her mind so that she was not in a complete panic when she reported to his office.

She tapped the stacks of journals she'd gathered, and they flew back to their shelves. Already on the move, she Transfigured her jeans, jumper, and shoes into track suit and trainers.

She would run part of the lakeside path. That would calm her if anything could.

Sunday morning, 11 o'clock

She knocked.

'Enter,' he called, and she felt the wards go down. Which meant he had reset them against her.

With an effort, she kept her spine straight and shoulders square as she walked into his office.

Snape was standing behind his desk, arms crossed. His expression could not have been colder.

Hermione walked forward to stand opposite him. 'Good morning, sir,' she said weakly. *Shoulders UP, Hermione.*

He didn't deign to reply. He just held out his hand, palm up.

'Give me your wand.'

'My wha... my w-wand?'

'Your. Wand. Now.'

She handed it over, grip first, as though she were surrendering a sword. He would be casting Prior Incantato. Of course. She was caught.

He touched her wand's tip with his own, and out flowed a ghostly image of hands sweeping through the air. The image disappeared almost instantly.

'Let's try the penultimate one, shall we?' he murmured. The hands reappeared again, and around the hands, pink and red lights flickered over expanses of skin.

'*Deletrius*,' Snape muttered, and the images disappeared. He laid both wands, side by side, on his desktop. He bowed his head and was silent for a moment. When he looked up at her, his eyes were hot with anger.

'Miss Granger,' he growled. 'What possessed you to use an illegal reciprocating charm on a teacher in this school? A fourth-year student would have no difficulty tracing that spell. Are you going to tell me that you cast it by mistake, or are you actually insane?'

Reciprocating. Traceable. Hermione closed her eyes. Her ears were roaring, and she felt she might vomit, or faint, or both. She had used a reciprocating love spell on Professor Snape. Everything she had done with her hands and mouth last night, he had felt on his own body.

He's going to kill me now. I'm going to be expelled. He'll kill me and the Headmaster will expel me and then I'll kill myself.

For a minute or two it took everything she had to keep from bolting, but slowly she breathed her racing heart into a slower rhythm. Running away would solve nothing.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. 'I think... now that you mention it... I might not be altogether sane, actually.' She stifled a hysterical giggle. 'But it was deliberate,

what I did. You were the... I wanted... I didn't make a mistake.'

His scowl deepened, and two spots of colour appeared high on his cheeks. 'Is that what you think? Shall I begin to list the mistakes that have brought you here this morning?'

Hermione shook her head. 'That's not what I meant. Of course... my judgement... I mean, I've been stupid, reckless, thoughtless...'

She paused to try to collect herself. 'I wanted to know how it felt to, to... touch you. I had no idea the spell was reciprocating. I would never have dreamt of invading your privacy and your, your...' she trailed off miserably.

"Body" is, I believe, the word you are looking for,' he hissed with hot fury. 'My body, Miss Granger*mine*. One of the few things I am not obliged to share or compromise in this asylum for adolescents. I am not a prop for your games, and I do not relish being the butt of this sort of... *joke*.'

She was aghast. He thought she had been trying to make a fool of him, or torment him, or worse*Of course that's what he would think...that last night was some sort of crude, baiting joke*. This was a nightmare.

'Oh, Professor S-snape, no. Please...' she turned a horrified look on him. 'I have...' *How to say this?* 'I have, have *fancied* you for months. Since the end of my fifth year.'

She babbled on in anguish. 'I know it's a crush, and nothing but... but fantasy and imagination. When I let it begin it seemed harmless; but it's become so strong and now...' Again she ran out of words.

His eyes were narrowed and his jaws clenched. 'Really, Miss Granger,' he ground out. 'You*fancy* me? Your prevaricative skills are truly impressive, but my patience has run out. You will accompany me to Gryffindor Tower, where you can answer to Professor McGonagall in the Headmaster's absence.'

'Oh, no, please!' *How could this possibly be getting even worse?* 'If you don't believe what I say, I'll, I'll take Veritaserum. Or...or look at my thoughts. Use Legilimency. I... I give you my permission,' she faltered.

'Your permission,' he sneered. 'Such niceties, Miss Granger. I need hardly point out the irony. *Legilimens!*'

And he was inside her head. She stared into his angry black eyes as he pushed around impatiently, finding conversations she'd had with Harry about him...Harry usually hostile, she often defending Snape on principle.

He brushed past memories from her fourth year, when she, Ron, and Harry had learned of Snape's Dark past, and Ron had become convinced he was still a Death Eater. He flicked across memories of the many arguments the three of them had had ever since about why Dumbledore still trusted him.

Then... she felt his mind slow down when he reached the memory of that particular day in fifth year when she'd first noticed the loveliness of his hands. She gulped and braced herself for what he would see next, trying to keep her gaze as steady as possible.

He seemed to linger over each vivid fantasy, as though he were slowly pulling petals off a flower and rubbing them between his fingers before he let them fall.

In scene after scene, Fantasy Snape kissed, licked, sucked, touched her, entering her with fingers, tongue, and cock, stroking his beautiful scarred hands over her flesh and tangling them in her hair.

He saw Lavender lending her the great pink book; he saw her reading it and copying out Percipio Corium. He moved through her anguish when he was hurt; her terror and joy when she realised how she felt about him; her pride in helping him with the lecur Fortis potion and her pleasure in his company; her constant yearning.

Snape broke the connection and wheeled away from his desk, breathing audibly but saying nothing.

Hermione dropped her eyes to the desk, and she clutched at its edge. She was nearly stunned with shame*How could this be any better than being dragged up to McGonagall's office?*

She was also, unbelievably, almost overwhelmingly aroused. The collective force of her fantasies had hit her like a Bludger. Blood pounded between her legs, feverish shivers rippled over her skin, the tiny hairs all along her spine stood up. Her underwear was soaked.

Oh, really, Hermione!

Tears flooded her eyes (*again*) and she squeezed them shut and wept in earnest, shoulders shaking, knuckles white as she gripped the edge of his desk. After a while...she didn't know how long...her sobs abated. She shuddered out a breath and opened her eyes to stare wretchedly down at the desk.

'I'm so sorry, sir. You must think very b-badly of me, but I never meant to hurt you.' She sniffled. 'I have worked s-*schard* to keep my th-thoughts to myself, to make sure n-no one suspected. I know my feelings are my own, and don't involve you. I thought, I thought, that stupid spell would be private. I thought it was safe.' She dug into her pocket for her handkerchief and used it to swipe at her dripping chin before balling it up in her fist.

Then his arms were curled around her.

He had come up behind her quite soundlessly. One forearm pressed her, from breast to collarbone, back into his body. Long cool fingers cupped her jaw, grazing her mouth, which had fallen open on a sharp shallow intake of breath. The pad of his thumb stroked the wetness from the corner of her left eye. The other arm wrapped around her belly and hips. He pulled her back another inch or two, crushing her into the front of his body, and *oh sweet Merlin* she could feel, through at least five layers of cloth, that he was hard.

She let her head fall back against him, and the skin of her temple grazed his neck, where a pulse pounded. He breathed in deeply, burying his nose and mouth in the top of her head, and with that breath he tightened his grip on her.

His mouth moved down so that his lips were brushing the outer curve of her ear. He growled very softly, 'Does this feel*safe* to you?'

Reaching up, he moved aside her hair and mouthed her neck, lips closing delicately on her flesh, whispering, 'Or this?'

'N-no,' she finally managed.

He nestled an inch further down her neck and this time she felt the touch of teeth and tongue.

Elation flamed out along every nerve in her body, blossoming darkly in her belly and shooting white fire through her brain.

He wanted her. He was kissing her neck and holding her body against his racing heart and hard cock.

She slumped against him, limbs momentarily undone by a wave of obliterating lust. Her damp handkerchief fell, forgotten, from her hand to the floor.

'Shall I stop now? I should stop. But shall I?' He bit the spot where her pulse beat strongest.

Gasping, she froze for a moment, stupefied by another surge of desire.

Then she wrenched herself around in his embrace and seized the front of his robes, pouring into his black eyes a look of dazed appetite. 'Yes, you stop,' she croaked. 'My turn.'

A/N: Spells used in this chapter include Vestigium, a spell to trace the origins of another spell (noncanon spell; i.e., I made it up); and Deletrius, which dispels the images evoked by Prior Incantato (both canon spells).

Note illustration by QalaChaki; larger size can be seen at her DA page at <http://qalachaki.deviantart.com/gallery/#/d2e7c11>.

What? Oh, was that an evil cliffie? Hmmm, yes, I suppose it was. *cackles and runs about in an ecstasy of evilness*

Temptation

Chapter 23 of 36

A kiss, and then another...

Disclaimer: Severus and Hermione and the whole entire Potterverse belong to JKR. I solemnly swear that I am up to no good with them, and that I make no money from this work of fanfiction.

Sunday morning, 8:30

Neither Granger nor Potter was at breakfast, which was a pity. Severus had been rather hoping to watch her squirm under his gaze. Even if she thought she'd got away with her prank, he was sure her guilt would be in evidence. She was terrible at hiding her emotions.

Weasley was there, however, looking hung over (like most of the older Gryffindors who'd managed to make it to breakfast) but not particularly nervous. Perhaps he wasn't in on the joke. Severus sneered as he stabbed at his fried egg. *Weasley the third wheel.*

When the post came, Severus beckoned to one of the departing school owls. 'Pick up in the Staff Room at quarter past nine,' he told it. It hooted sulkily and flew off to the Owlery.

He had decided it would be best to get it over with this morning. Albus would be back this afternoon, and Severus had no doubt that Granger and Potter would suffer more if McGonagall were the one meting out their punishment rather than the Headmaster.

He entertained himself for a few minutes imagining the two of them trying to explain to their housemates just why Gryffindor had lost enough points to be out of the running for the House Cup to the end of the century.

Severus didn't give a damn what the gossip said about him. He'd be gone or dead soon enough. *She*, however, would have to stay, and he thought it would be exquisitely fitting if it were whispered that she had cast an erotic spell on a murderer and traitor. It would be worse than losing House Points, worse than anything short of expulsion.

Eleven o'clock would do, he decided, rising from his chair. And he'd deal with her first, to make sure his hypothesis was correct. Potter could wait.

Hermione slunk into his office at eleven exactly, wearing a grey jumper, a bedraggled ponytail, and a guilty expression. She looked as though she'd slept about as much as he had.

Good. And a sleepless night is only the beginning of her worries. By this time tomorrow, she'll wish she'd never met Harry Fuckwit Potter.

'Give me your wand,' he said, holding out his hand across the breadth of his desk.

'My wha... my w-wand?' she squeaked.

'Your. Wand. Now.' He snapped his fingers.

Whey-faced, she handed it over.

Prior Incantato, he said silently, and images of hands and skin and light flowed out of her wand like coloured smoke. *Aura flashes*, he thought, slightly taken aback by the colours...the clear, bright red and pink of passion and desire, rather than the muddled hues of cruelty and vengefulness.

Severus Banished the images and stared down at his desk.

It appeared she had cast an astral spell. Percipio Corpus, or Corium, or something like that...legal in most countries only if used consensually, though it was easy to conceal its nonconsensual use. You simply had to add some gold dust to the potion to keep it from reciprocating. Granger must have left out the gold, whether through malice or carelessness.

He didn't even try to keep the anger out of his face when he looked at her. 'Miss Granger,' he growled. 'What possessed you to use an illegal reciprocating charm on a teacher in this school? A fourth-year pupil would have no difficulty tracing that spell. Are you going to tell me that you cast it by mistake, or are you actually insane?'

The exchange that followed, increasingly whinging and desperate on her side, only enraged him further. She was caught red-handed, damn it! Yet she appeared to still want to take advantage of the intimacy he'd permitted to grow between them.

She FANCIES me? He'd never heard a more absurd, repellent lie. What the *fuck* was she playing at?

But then...

Veritaserum? Legilimency? Now we're getting somewhere.

Severus didn't hesitate. If she thought she could bluff her way out of this, she didn't know whom she was dealing with.

Like any Legilimens, Severus had experienced the ways each mind was different from any other...not just in what it contained, but in its entirety...its ineffable savour, its bent. Even without focussing on any specific thought or memory, a skilled Legilimens could quickly gather a broad sense of what might be called the person's character.

Harry Potter's mind, for example, tasted of deep loneliness and submerged anger, of stubbornness and independence and loyalty and recklessness and courage. There was also a fair-mindedness that reminded Severus, most unhappily, of Lily.

Hermione's mind was lovely: a tirelessly churning intelligence sweetened by generosity, empathy, bravery, and loyalty; tempered by a tendency to rush to judgement and to worry; and veined with passion.

Severus felt himself in a warm and capacious place filled with elegant structures organising vast amounts of knowledge, memory, association, and... feeling.

For there it was. Respect. Trust. Admiration. Loyalty. Attraction. *Lust*, for fuck's sake. Liking. Adoration. Tenderness. Worry. Hurt. Guilt. Pride. Hope. Despair. All for him.

He could hardly recognise the version of himself that filled her mind.

Fucking hell, she does fancy me.

The earlier memories where she defended him to her friends were disorientating enough, but he felt himself becoming unhinged when he arrived at a huge and varied cache of sexual fantasies starring him.

It was like experiencing his own dreams of her, but with the roles reversed and, really, rather filthier. Something like awe flooded him as he examined each one. How did a girl like this come up with such... inventive... scenarios?

His pulse quickened and he began to tremble. Nearly everything in him screamed at him to seize her and never ever let go for even a minute. *Mine, she's mine!*

No, no, NO! He broke their mental connection and reeled away, fighting hard to remember the truth: she was a child...a *child*. He was going to kill and die. He could not have her. She could not have him.

Why not? his body howled. *Take her! Take her and work it out later!*

Because... danger... Voldemort... Dumbledore... Draco... But his rational brain was crippled. The blood it needed to function properly had been commandeered by his cock, which was in no doubt about what to do.

While he struggled, Hermione had been weeping wetly and clinging to his desk. At last, she began to talk again, apologising to him. She knew, she said, that her feelings had nothing to do with him. She'd thought, she said, that what she'd done would be safe.

His anger spiked. She'd carelessly upended his world and she wanted his *forgiveness*? He'd show the damned girl how *indifferent* he was to her, and how fuckingsafe she was.

Four strides took him to her, and he wrapped one arm around her chest and shoulder, the other around her belly and hips. He jerked her back, making sure she could feel his *indifference* rubbing against her arse.

Her head fell back on his shoulder, exposing her neck, and her sharp little gasp pierced him... and... *gods*... she was pushing against his body, trying for even more contact. His cock went from hard to harder.

His chastisement, when he managed to form the words, sounded far feeble than he'd planned: 'Does this feel safe to you?' How could he scold when he was coming undone from the smell and feel of her pressed into his body?

She shivered at his words, or perhaps at the touch of his lips on her ear, and yes her smooth white neck was just... there... As he bent to mouth her skin, desire overwhelmed the last traces of his anger.

'Or this?' he whispered, talking to himself as much as to her. *No, not safe, no...*

'N-no,' she stammered.

Right, he should stop, send her away with a warning, with a curse, rather than just... *tasting*... her neck, soft as white rose petals... her pulse fluttering right there...

One moment she was limp and shuddering in his grasp; the next she was facing him, grabbing his robes, hauling his face down to hers, and staring into his eyes hungrily.

'Yes, you stop,' she said hoarsely. 'My turn.'

Her hands snaked up his neck to his face and into his hair. Then she was kissing him full on the mouth, urging his lips apart with her own, groaning when he opened to her.

She covered his mouth with fierce, open-mouthed kisses, grazing his lips with her teeth but keeping her tongue back. She was like a ravenous little animal, whimpering faintly as she left one last devouring kiss on his lips and began to make her way down to his throat.

* * *

I am kissing him and oh GOD.. Hermione groaned. She'd wanted this for *so long*. And he was *letting* her kiss him, not stopping her... In fact his hands were on her arse and her back, pulling her in to his body. His open mouth was warm and firm and wet and *real*; her hands were in his hair and on his skin, dragging his face down to hers. *I want to eat him up, I want him, god, want him...*

Tears were pouring down her cheeks again, but she hardly noticed. She was struck by a memory of that place at the base of his throat where his collarbone dipped, and she began to kiss her way down to it, greedily mapping the smooth contours of his freshly shaven skin, the sharpness of the bone beneath the flesh of his jaw.

Her hands released his head and he let it fall back, baring his throat to her... *owell, god damn it* the top third of his throat. Growling at his collar, she began to fumble at his buttons...

And then his hands were like clamps on her upper arms as he pushed her away and held her at arm's length.

'Wha...?' she gasped. 'No! Please...' She struggled in his grasp.

'Stop it,' he rasped. 'Stop before, before I can't stop...' He looked wild, his hair hanging down in front of his face, his thin lips twisted into a grimace. They were red and wet from her kisses, and so was a spot on his neck right below his jaw.

He shoved her away and she stumbled back against his desk. He turned and strode to the other end of the room, putting as much space between them as he could. For several long moments, they stared at each other, panting, like adversaries in a prize fight.

'Please... I don't understand,' she said at last. 'I thought...'

'No, you didn't,' he cut in harshly. 'You didn't*think*, and you aren't *thinking*.' He shut his eyes.

'I just wanted to touch you,' she whispered.

'I have apprehended that much, Miss Granger,' he snarled, scowling at her and thrusting one hand through his hair. 'However, I am not interested in playing naughty schoolgirl and nasty master with you.'

He cut his gaze down and away. 'You have fostered a delusion concerning me, and you must cure yourself of it. There is no happy ending possible here. No connection. No love affair. No *love*.' He flung the word out as though it were the vilest curse, and looked back up at her, his face clouded with pain and anger. 'Do you understand *now*?' he spat.

That last line, as it happened, was a tactical mistake.

Hermione set her mouth in a line and glared at him. 'Don't patronise me. You're going to have to do better than laying down the law and trying to cow me. Because I'm not afraid of you, and I'm not delusional. You *felt* something. You *wanted* me.'

Severus threw back his head and shouted at the ceiling. 'Ha!' He strode back towards her, stopping when they were toe to toe and he was towering over her.

'Men...of whom I am one, as you've so cleverly discerned...are visually oriented people when it comes to sexual matters. And I've just been treated to the spectacle of you *fucking* me seven ways to Sunday.'

He glowered down at her, and his voice was low and rough. 'I've seen you bracing yourself against a chair while I take you from behind. And I've seen you rubbing your various... charms... over me as I strain against the cords tying me to the bedposts. Wasn't there some feather work in there somewhere, and quite a bit of sneaking around and seizing our pleasure in unorthodox and inappropriate places?'

His mouth twisted into an expression of disdain. 'I'll admit it was all rather crudely arousing. But altogether I must say those were execrable efforts for a sixth-year of your intellect. Based, I suppose, on some trashy reading and the witless gropings of other... pubescents.'

'Stop,' she whispered. 'Stop saying those things. Stop treating me like a child.'

'You *ARE* a child, or barely more than one,' he shouted into her face, 'and you are my student, not my peer. I *AM* your professor and no child. That is all and everything we need to know about one another.'

He turned and walked to the fireplace, where he stood, trembling, with his back turned to her.

Go, go, go away, go away he pleaded with her silently. 'Go,' he rasped. 'Go now. Let's forget... everything. You did not cast that spell and this morning we discussed... *what*? '...we discussed the fact that I no longer require your services as a teaching assistant, effective immediately. *Gods, just go.*

She didn't go, not quite yet. Instead she walked up and stood a few feet behind him. He could feel her there, pulling at him without touching him. He burned for her to come closer, to come all the way to him.

'Of course, that would be best,' she said quietly. 'And I'll go. You could have sent me away without insulting or belittling me.' She paused, then hurried on, pushing out the words. 'I know what you saw. I know it wasn't just... sexual fantasy. You saw how I feel about you, how I admire and value you, how I worry about you, how proud I am of you, how I... care for you.'

She gulped, obviously on the verge of tears again. 'I am... sorry... that it's all so repellent to you. I suppose...I suppose I don't really know you at all, do I? I let myself forget how harsh you are. Cruel when you don't have to be.'

She walked to the door and put her hand on the handle, then turned back to him, puzzled. 'Sorry, what was that?'

He half turned towards her and closed his eyes against the spinning of the room. 'I do,' he said again, a little louder this time. 'I do have to.'

Hermione stared at him as he stood there, pale and swaying slightly. He looked ill. 'Sir...?' she said. Then, 'Oh.' She dropped her hand from the door handle. 'Oh.' And she walked back to him, stopping, again, a few feet away.

There was only one thing she could think of to say, for all the good it would do. 'Severus Snape. I am your friend. I... I love you. That's all.' She reached out a hand but stopped short of touching him. 'Darling Severus,' she whispered. 'Darling man.'

Stunned and sick, he watched her walking away again. *Don't don't don't go, don't leave me alone, I want you...* 'Hermione,' he groaned. 'Please.'

And he was across the room, grabbing her by the arms. 'Stay. I can't... If you leave... Just...*damn* it to bloody, *fucking* hell!'

Hermione just stood there for a minute, looking down. When she raised her reddened eyes to his, she wore a sort of half smile. 'Congratulations, Professor. You've won the day's rhetorical prize. Well argued.'

With a growl he pulled her into his arms, smashing her cheek against his scratchy, buttony chest, crushing the breath out of her.

She didn't get the chance to catch it properly for some time, either. He loosened his grip on her just enough to grab her chin and turn her face up so that he could fall upon her mouth.

Like hers, his kisses were hungry...starving, even; ferocious where hers had been merely fierce. Both of his hands wrapped around her skull, holding her head where he needed it to be while he took what was his, pushing her lips apart even as he suckled and nipped at them.

She didn't try to kiss him back. It felt like a battle she would quickly lose. She just clung to him, trying to stay upright as he pushed deeper and deeper into her mouth until he'd claimed it completely.

When he began to move from her mouth to her throat, his hands moved too, capturing the hinges of her jaw between his two thumbs, his other fingers fanned out and pressing into the back of her neck, the base of her skull.

Her throat was like roses and plums, like rain, like the deep desert pool that was no mirage*At last*. He would taste every molecule of that creamy flesh, get as close as he could to the heat of her blood pounding under his lips and tongue. He wanted to *bathe* in the sounds she was making...gasps, moans...and in the feel of her submission.

She grasped the back of his neck with one hand, hanging on him, pulling him in to her; the other clutched his robes at the shoulder, her arm bent tight between his own stronger arm and her body.

There were the finest wires, tight and quivering, between the places he was kissing her and her brain, spine, skin, breasts, belly, and sex. Each kiss, each lick, each half-bite sent surges of heat through the wires; each instant of lessened pressure as he moved his open mouth over her skin left her dizzy and desperate for him to renew his attack. She was being owned, and not one iota of her body or brain had any objection.

He reached the collar of her jumper and pulled back. Locking eyes with her, he pinched a bit of the wool between his fingers and growled, 'This goes.'

It wasn't a request, but the two words...or perhaps it was the absence of his mouth on her skin...somehow restored her ability to think and speak and act.

'I'll do it,' she said. 'You do these.' She pulled at one of his buttons and frowned. 'Fair's fair.'

She saw his objection forming on his face, and before he could say a word, she pulled him down into a kiss.

This time she teased at the seam of his lips with her tongue, then tugged at his chin with her thumb to open his teeth. Once inside, she caressed his tongue with hers, then flicked it lightly and withdrew.

He took the invitation for what it was, kissing her hotly and thoroughly, then receding and letting her take the lead again.

Finally she broke the kiss. 'Both of us,' she panted into his mouth, giving him five or six more little kisses before stepping back and putting her hands on the hem of her jumper preparatory to pulling it up over her head.

Then she paused, and blushed. 'You first,' she said, and raised an eyebrow as a scowl overspread his flushed face. 'I did notice that you haven't agreed yet, and this won't work if it's just me.'

This was too much talk for Severus's liking. 'Fine,' he rasped. *Diffindo*. The silent, wandless spell sent all sixty-four of the buttons from the front of his frock coat, waistcoat, and shirt clattering to the floor. 'Satisfactory?'

She gulped. 'It's... it's brilliant, thank you, sir.' A strip of pale skin strewn with black hair appeared between the plackets of his open shirt and above the line of a thin white singlet. She could see that little dip at the bottom of his throat where his sternum began. *I can't believe... is this happening?*

'Call me Severus,' he said. *I want my name in your mouth*

'Severus,' said Hermione, very quietly. She delicately pushed apart the edges of his shirt collar and, stretching up a little, pressed her lips against the top of his sternum. Her fingers slid along his collarbone underneath his shirt.

With a snarl, he picked her up and carried her to the sofa. He sat with her across his lap, still bundled up in his arms, and began to kiss her mouth, face, and neck. One of his hands cupped her face, the other burrowed into the warm space between her jumper and her shirt; hers were grasping his head, tugging it to where she wanted it most...her ear, apparently, and the skin just behind and below it.

Hermione's head lolled back. *Oh... sweet... Jesus how can kissing feel so good..* She felt his hand splayed out along her back under her jumper, and she wanted it on her skin. She pulled his head away from her neck and looked deep into his eyes before yanking the whole assemblage of jumper and shirt up over her head and flinging it aside.

The sudden chill of the dungeon air on her skin woke her up to her surroundings.

For a second or two she just gaped at him. Then, gasping, she wrapped her arms around herself.

Merlin's ghost she was sitting on Professor Snape's LAP and his SHIRT was OPEN and HER SHIRT WAS OFF! He was looking at her like THAT and he was ~~was~~ *wanting!* Her hand darted up to the spot under her ear he had just been kissing...KISSING!

I'M SEDUCING MY TEACHER! I'm a, a, a SEDUCTRESS!

Severus could read the expressions that moved across her face. *Oh hell*, he thought, *going too fast*. He acted quickly. Before she could scramble off his lap, he had Transfigured her jumper into a blanket, which he wrapped around her. He folded her back into his arms, tucking her head under his chin.

'Shhh, shhh,' he hissed through gritted teeth. He carefully kept his embrace loose and tried to will the tension out of his body. He was outrageously, painfully aroused and he wanted nothing more than to *take her right now on the bloody sofa* It just about killed him to cover her up with the blanket and to keep his mouth and hands away from her skin. But she'd taken fright, so for the moment he would settle for keeping her in his arms.

The brazen woman of fantasy was really an awkward girl after all. She needed gentleness, reassurance.

'Hermione,' he said, assuming his smokiest, most velvety-silken voice and stroking her back through the damned blanket. 'Don't be afraid, and please don't go. This is... astonishing... for both of us. Let's just sit a moment and then... then we can talk.' *And then, Merlin willing, I can get back to tasting you.*

She let out a long, shuddering breath and nestled in to him. Which was what he wanted her to do, of course, though it didn't make his immediate situation any easier.

'It's just...' she began in a small voice. 'It's just that... I'm in love with you.' And she curled up a little tighter into herself, as if for protection.

He rested his chin lightly on the top of her head and squeezed his eyes tightly shut, his mouth and brow creasing into a grimace. He breathed in the scent of her hair and let out a sigh of his own. 'I know,' he said a little jaggedly. 'I know that now.'

A/N: Whew! I don't know what else to say about this chapter. It was the hardest one yet to write, but I have to admit I like how it turned out. ☺

Thanks to greenstuff, hechicera, and lifeasanamazon for putting up with my multiple drafts, wibbling, and general neediness. *kisses each of you and places flowers in your hair*

Understanding

Chapter 24 of 36

Sometimes the sun shines in the dungeons.

Disclaimer: One of the many things that distinguish me from JKR: she owns this stuff.

Sunday, 11 May 1997

Around much of its circumference, the shores of the lake fell away quickly into deep water. The water always looked dark, but it was a different quality of darkness depending on the season. In cloudy weather...which was frequent at Hogwarts...it could look as black as obsidian, with just the faintest translucency at the surface quickly giving way to total obscurity.

Today, the noon sun sent shafts of greenish light down into the water, the top few inches of which were almost warm.

Ginny Weasley trailed her hand along the boat's side and smiled lazily at her brand-new boyfriend. Harry was rowing the boat up under the sheer cliffs directly below the school so they could have a little privacy on this beautiful day. *The second best day ever*, thought Ginny, yesterday having been the pinnacle.

'Just here, I think,' she said, and Harry backed oars and stilled the boat. She lifted the small anchor from the bows and dropped it over the side, watching as it plummeted down through the green water and out of sight, twenty feet and more.

'We're right over Slytherin, aren't we?' remarked Harry.

'I suppose we are.' Ginny grinned. 'Troglydites.' She pulled two wrapped sandwiches and a bottle of pumpkin juice out of the bag at her feet. 'Mind if I join you?'

Grinning back, Harry scooted over on his thwart to make room for her beside him.

It felt so good to have his arm around her, to smell the spicy sweetness of her hair, to know he could kiss her right now.

He looked down into her smiling eyes. 'Ginny,' he said. 'Ginny...'

'Yes,' she said. 'I know.' And she kissed him.

Twenty or so feet down, the boat anchor bumped gently along the foot-thick glass of the round window in the ceiling of the Slytherin Head of House's sitting room. In the centre of the window, seen from below, the sun was a small white disk swimming in the green glow of lake water.

Severus stood unheeding before his hearth, half in the circle of filtered sunlight.

There was a girl just over there, in his bathroom. *The* girl. The girl he wanted, and who against all expectation wanted him back. The girl who had, until a few minutes ago, been curled up on his lap on his sitting room sofa as they each learned how to breathe again.

What was taking her so bloody long?

He walked over to stand outside the bathroom door. Water was running inside, into the sink. 'Hermione,' he called. 'Are you all right in there?'

'Oh, yes, yes, I am.' Her voice was a little muffled. 'I'll be out soon.'

Soon. Whatever that meant. Stifling his impatience, he replied, 'Right, I'll just put the kettle on.'

From the sublime to the utterly banal in mere minutes, he groused to himself as he stalked towards the laboratory. *The fucking KETTLE.*

He stood before his workbench and closed his eyes. *Yes. But she's still here. She's really here*

At the crucial moment, he hadn't been able to send her away, and for that he was now unspeakably, savagely glad. He felt alive, exultant. Defiant.

When she'd gone off to the bathroom, a measure of his reason had returned. With it came the certainty that he meant to keep her as long as he could manage it. The timing was disastrous, the risks immense, the circumstances... distasteful..., but he would find a way. He'd be damned if he'd give her up now that he knew what he knew.

He lit the flame under the kettle and began to focus his intellect on a familiar set of issues: secrecy, intelligence gathering, disinformation, and damage control.

He didn't sit next to her on the sofa when she returned from the bathroom.

This did not seem like an encouraging sign, and Hermione was much in need of encouraging signs. She felt herself in unmapped territory and she was more than a little afraid she was there on her own.

The expression on his face wasn't encouraging, either...no soft or loving looks there. Not even any lascivious looks.

No: he sprawled, scowling, in an armchair on the other side of the cluttered coffee table.

She'd spent as long as she dared in the bathroom, trying to make sense of the developments of the past hour. But she still hadn't a clue how to start talking to him. So for the moment she kept silent, tucking herself more tightly into the corner of the sofa and hiding behind a cup of his wretched tea.

It was so unfair. He knew everything about her feelings for him...seriously *everything*. And she knew nothing about what he felt. The longer the silence between them persisted, the more his cruelest words...'crudely arousing'; 'execrable efforts'; 'you have fostered a delusion'...echoed in her head, chipping away at her courage.

Did he really mean all that? What is he thinking NOW? She was beginning to feel a little desperate.

Severus was thinking, *Well, this won't fucking do.*

Hermione was over there on the sofa, huddled in a corner and clutching her cup. He was over here on this chair, a chair he never sat in and now realised he hated. It was a damned ugly, uncomfortable chair.

A coffee table lay between them. As did this silence, which was growing more bloody unbearable by the second.

She'd taken a good twenty minutes in the bathroom...an eternity...emerging finally with her shirt and jumper on, her hair up, and her face scrubbed. Her eyes and nose were still pink from all the crying she'd done, but to him she looked good enough to eat.

By then he'd identified several possible courses of action.

He'd also spelled his buttons back on, judiciously closing his shirt while leaving his waistcoat open and shedding his frock coat.

He'd thought to procure some sandwiches from the kitchens, since it was clear to him that neither of them would be appearing in the Great Hall for any part of the lunch hour.

'Sir must be hungry,' piped the house-elf who had taken the order.

'Very,' he'd growled, glaring at the creature. It squeaked in fright and cracked out, then back, then out again without another word.

He'd had time to lay out the tea things and sandwiches on the coffee table and fuss them around rather a lot.

'Oh,' she'd said when she saw them. 'Tea.' And she had gone to sit on the sofa, leaving plenty of space for him.

At that moment, it had struck him as prudent to sit *overhere*. This had been an idiotic impulse. Now he'd have to work his way over there.

He shifted in the stupid bloody chair.

And fucking *tea*. What a joke: *An Italian, a Russian, and an Englishman are each alone in a room with the girl they want to shag. What does each one do to seal the deal?*

Oh, fuck it. Just say something.

'That book is rubbish, of course.'

She looked up, startled. 'What book is that, sir...I mean, um, Severus?' Her face flooded with colour *so damned lovely*.

'*Magic for Modern Lovers*.' He smirked. 'You're too young to remember...as are your accomplices, Miss Brown and Miss Vane...but the first edition of that... volume... occasioned quite a scandal. It sold brilliantly until the courts and the hospitals started to register the consequences of incomplete research, haphazard fact-checking, nonexistent testing, and piss-poor editing.'

Severus grinned at her discomfiture. 'The original publisher was bankrupted, the author fled to Portugal, and every copy of that edition was recalled and destroyed. Or... nearly every copy, I suppose.' He sipped his tea. 'The new edition sold even better than the first, though everyone agreed it had... lost a certain *edge* in the stricter editorial process.'

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head slowly from side to side, and then her shoulders began to shake, and then she was laughing out loud. After a minute or two, she smiled at him ruefully and said, 'Sorry, I just had a rather ghastly private joke.'

'Yes?'

'It's just...on Wednesday I was so angry with Harry for casting a spell whose origins and effects he didn't know...that awful slicing spell he used on Malfoy. And here am I, not five days later, doing precisely the same thing. I could have found that out...what you just told me...in five minutes in the library. I just...,' she looked at him searchingly, 'I just never thought I'd ever, *ever* use that spell. I seem to have fooled myself. Quite spectacularly, really.'

She leaned forward. 'I'm very sorry, sir. That must have been a horrible shock. I wonder... I was in the library when your owl came, about to try to find out what went wrong with the spell... I still don't know. Can you tell me?'

Ah, the eager student returns. Christ, she's adorable.

He put his cup down and looked her steadily in the eye. 'I can tell you several things. Four things, in fact. First, yes, it was a shock, but a far from horrible one in the end.'

He stood up and pushed aside the coffee table with his foot. 'Second, I really would prefer it if you called me "Severus" rather than "sir," at least while we're alone.'

He plucked her teacup from her hand and set it on the table. 'Third, I can tell you exactly what went awry last night, and I will do so. Later.'

In one liquid series of movements, he dropped to his knees in front of her, pushed her knees apart enough to fit his body between them, and ran his palms up the sides of her thighs to her hips. His face was now on a level with hers, and inches away.

'Because, fourth, I'm going to kiss you now,' he said, and he raised his hands to her face.

'Oh, thank god...' was all she had time to say.

This time he kissed her more softly, deliberately, his parted lips pressing against hers, slowly drawing her into the kiss, building its intensity until everything else in the world fell away.

He discovered he loved kissing Hermione Granger. Loved it. Could do it for weeks at a stretch. The taste and feel of her, her forthright appetite for his kisses, her passionate little sounds. *I am kissing Hermione Granger*, he announced to himself, and for once no cynical or self-disgusted internal voices answered him. He could feel his magic pooling like quicksilver in his lips and hands where they touched her.

That's different

He was also very aware of his cock straining into the sofa cushion between her knees, inches away from its goal.

Hermione broke the kiss and leaned her forehead against his for a moment before pulling back to look at him. Her eyes were dark, her wide mouth red and swollen with kissing. His cock leapt at the sight.

'Talk,' she said with an obvious effort. 'You said we would talk. We should...'

'Right.' *Damn it.*

Frowning, he got to his feet and sat down beside her on the sofa, putting nearly a foot of space between them.

Hermione stared down at her lap and fidgeted with the hem of her jumper for a long minute, then made a sound that was half-sigh, half-laugh. 'I can't believe I'm saying this, but it's so much easier to... kiss you... than talk to you. I mean, at the moment. Usually the talking is not so hard.'

To hell with it. He'd talk, but he wasn't going to *not* touch her while he was doing it. He took her hand and laid it with his on the cushion between them.

'Hmmm,' he said, avidly studying her profile, the slight pout of her bottom lip, the way her eyelashes veiled her downcast eyes. 'I agree. The kissing has gone remarkably well.'

He leaned in and skimmed the tip of his nose over the outer edge of her ear and murmured, 'Hermione. I enjoy kissing you. I want to kiss you more. I want to do more than kiss you.'

'You do?' She jerked around and stared at him, red to the roots of her marvellous hair.

'I mean, I want, um, want that too. It's just that you said, um, you said, love's not, not possible. You said what you, er, um, what you saw was crude and, and, and execrable and you didn't want to, ah, "play naughty schoolgirl and nasty master" with me.'

'If that's true, if you don't...' She stopped talking for a moment. Her lower lip had begun to tremble. 'Then I'm just confused...' She trailed off and averted her eyes.

Oh. He sat back and sighed. 'When I said all that, I was trying to get you to leave. I would have thought that was obvious.'

She frowned, still not meeting his eyes. *Is that how she gets the courage to speak, by not looking at me?*

'It was obvious. What isn't obvious...to me, anyway...is why you want me to stay. I mean, all those things you said about me and, and you are true *am* young. You *are* my teacher. Nobody we know would think that us k-kissing each other is a good idea. Not to mention... you know.'

Severus experienced the strangest dual reaction to this speech. First, irritation: *Is she trying to make me declare myself to her?* Then, something akin to wonder: 'You know,' she said, and with those two words, a thick, hot haze of animal desire and questing magic filled his chest *Ah, fuck, what she does to me..*

He narrowed his eyes a fraction, reckoning how many cards he would need to lay on the table to secure her.

'Yes,' he finally said. 'Those things are true. And if someone had asked me two months ago whether any circumstances would permit... an intimate relationship between a teacher and a student, I'd have scoffed at the idea. I did scoff at myself when I began to realise I had strong feelings for you. Feelings of attraction.' He ran one forefinger lightly from the back of her hand up to her wrist, and she shivered. 'Feelings of desire.'

She was staring now at their hands, entwined on the sofa between them. Her colour was still high, and he could hear her breathing.

He modulated his voice. He'd had some experience of the effect it could have on women, and he used it now to coax his girl, his little wild bird, in from the windowsill where she was poised.

'I tried so hard to make you go because I wanted you to stay so badly. And in the end I couldn't let you leave, though I should have. It was a moment of weakness, but just now I cannot be sorry for it.'

He reached his free hand over to tip her chin up so she faced him, and he pitched his voice just a little lower, a little softer. 'Hermione. I find you utterly lovely. Your feelings for me are a revelation. Your... fantasies... are wonderful. You intoxicate me.'

Some perfect instinct...Circe knew where it came from...prevented him from bending down to kiss her. She would need to have her say, and she would need to give him an indication that the next kiss was welcome. He couldn't just take it.

She regarded him worriedly for a moment or two. Then she closed her eyes and sighed deeply. When she opened her eyes again, they were full of a familiar warmth.

That's how she looks at me when we're alone. And I've never let myself see what it means

'Hermione...' he said.

'I'm intoxicated, too,' she whispered.

And when he lifted her hand and pressed his lips into her palm, she looked it...flushed, heavy-lidded. Ripe *Mine*. He bent to claim the next kiss.

* * *

The disk of the sun had disappeared from the circular window, and the water showed a deep dappled green.

Hermione, rumped and dazed, sat quietly in her corner of the sofa.

Severus was in the bathroom. She squirmed a little whenever her mind wandered to what he was probably doing in there.

She tried to focus instead on what had been happening out here until just a few minutes ago.

There had been quite a lot of kissing. And touching.

Her hands under his shirt, stroking the skin she'd first touched last night in her bed. How different it had felt now...no longer quiescent but rippling with living muscle under her touch.

His hands inside her shirt, gripping her waist, gliding up her sides to cup her breasts over her bra. His fingers dipping inside, their rough pads drawing a gasp from her as they grazed her nipple, circled, pressed, gently pinched it. She remembered moaning and arching into his hand.

He'd kissed her mouth and neck and ears, seeming to learn what she liked from changes in her breathing and the sounds she made. When she had kissed, nuzzled, nipped, and caressed him in return, he'd found the wherewithal to use a few words...along the lines of 'gods' and 'shit' and 'fuck yes'...to direct her.

He swears a lot, she'd thought at first, but soon the words only made her burn hotter. Some fragment of her brain that was still noticing and commenting on things had noted that *this* was something Percipio Corium could never give her.

Also, the taste and smell of him His mouth, tea and tobacco; his skin musky, salty, faintly sour, with a trace of spice from whatever he used to shave.

In time his waistcoat had come off and his shirt was unbuttoned...this time by her hands. Though her own shirt was still on, it was partly unbuttoned, and her bra was unhooked. Her jumper was under the coffee table.

His mouth on one breast, his hand on the other...she'd thought she might die from the sensations. Or perhaps she would die if she couldn't touch him more *moremoremore*. She'd slid her hand down...there. She could feel the heat of his cock through his trousers, and it lurched when she placed her hand over it.

'Ah, *fuck*,' he had groaned harshly. 'Ah, Jesus, yes. Hermione.'

Panting, he'd pulled back from her and fixed her with a fathomless black gaze. And asked her a question.

He had obviously been surprised...even taken aback...by the answer.

Then he'd asked her another question. Her answer, given even more diffidently than the first, didn't seem to improve the situation.

In fact, he'd said, 'Ah, *fuck*.' And not in a heated, you're-killing-me-keep-going sort of voice. It had been more of a choked, why-the-hell-do-I-have-to-die-like-this sort of voice.

'*Never?*' he'd croaked.

'No, never. I mean, Viktor and I, um, touched each other a lot, but it was always... we were always mostly *clothed*. And he's the only one I've ever, sort of, done anything, um, like this with.'

'McLaggen?'

'*What?* No! Oh, god, disgusting, no! He dragged me under some mistletoe at Professor Slughorn's party and, and, slobbered on me, but that was just the once and... ugh, awful.'

He'd shifted away from her, wincing. 'Then how... All those fantasies were so...*full*.'

She'd felt like her neck and face were on fire. *He thought I'd actually DONE those things? Oh GOD, this is HORRIBLE*

Mortified, she'd simply said, 'I *doread* quite a bit.'

And he... had laughed. Out loud. 'Remarkable.' And pulled her into a hug, and kissed the top of her head, and laughed again.

He'd tipped up her chin and looked in her eyes. 'You're beautiful, Hermione. I want you. Badly. But this will have to go a little differently than I'd... imagined. Which means that just at the moment I need to go into my bathroom and... collect my thoughts.'

'Don't move.' And he'd risen and walked, rather stiffly, through the door leading to his bedroom and bathroom.

That had been at least twenty minutes ago. *What was taking him so long? I thought men went faster than that.*

Hermione was startled out of her reverie by a muffled thumping, scraping sound from overhead. She glanced up at the ceiling window in time to see a small boat anchor begin its ascent to the surface.

Squinting, she could see the faint outline of a small boat high above the window. She wondered distractedly how long it had been there. Not that anyone could see into the room at this depth. *Except merpeople. Grindylows. The squid.* She began to giggle, imagining the denizens of the lake swimming past and getting an eyeful of her and Professor Snape...*Severus*...grappling on the sofa.

'Something funny?' Severus was standing just inside the room. He was buttoned back up in shirt and a new waistcoat (the one he'd been wearing was still draped over the teapot), and had tied his hair back in a queue.

'Oh, I just saw the shadow of one of the school dinghies pass overhead. It worried me for a second before I realised no one can see in here from the surface of the lake. Then I started imagining an audience of grindylows and squid. It made me laugh.'

'Indeed.' He made his way to the sofa, sat beside her, and threaded his fingers through hers. 'Which brings us to a most pertinent topic. Does anyone...anyone at all...know of your... feelings... for me?'

She shook her head. 'No. Who would I tell? My two best friends would... they'd have trouble understanding, to put it mildly. There's no one I could...oh, well, I did tell a Muggle friend of mine, Jill Fletcher, that I fancied one of my teachers. But that was months ago and she's a Muggle...she doesn't know anyone else from the wizarding world. Doesn't even know there is such a thing.'

He looked at her gravely. 'Hermione. Perhaps I don't need to tell you this, but it's absolutely crucial, so I will say it. For the moment...for the foreseeable future, really...no one must know what we started here today. You are aware of some of the... issues... and possible bad sequelae.'

He brushed a lock of her hair away from her cheek. 'I am glad, beyond words, that you are here now. But the risks are even more serious than you may imagine. We'll talk about this more later. Meanwhile, we must both be silent and very, very circumspect. Do you understand?'

She nodded, all the laughter gone from her face.

'Good.' He raised her hand to his lips, brushed a kiss across it, and placed it back in her lap. 'Now, unfortunately, I have a bit of business to attend to.'

He rose and reached for his frock coat. 'Stay for a while. Eat something.' He gestured at the plate of sandwiches on the coffee table. 'Prepare yourself to meet your friends.'

'If anyone asks you where you have been, it's best to tell them the truth...you were here. Working on a big new project. Let's say... an improved system for tracking and predicting student progress and identifying deficits? That should discourage most people from probing further.' The ghost of a smile glinted in his eyes.

'We may not have a chance to talk again until tomorrow afternoon. Alone, that is. If you need to reach me before then, send an owl. I'll find you. I'll think of a better system of communication by then.'

He was buttoned up now, standing before her, looking thoroughly Snapeish...saturnine, aloof. Rather sour. There was nothing of the lover about him anymore, and Hermione's heart gave a painful heave. Rising from the sofa, she flung her arms around him and craned up to kiss him. His embrace lifted her from her feet and his kiss was fierce and possessive. A reassuringly lover-like kiss.

'That's my girl,' he murmured into her hair when they finally stopped kissing and stood holding one another. And then he was gone.

She drifted towards the door that had closed behind him and laid a cheek and both hands on it. His wards rippled gently around her, affirming her right to be there.

After a minute or two, she walked back to the coffee table, seized a sandwich, and, lost in thought, began to devour it.

* * *

A/N: Hi, beloved readers. *pets you and coos soothingly* I know. I feel your pain. BELIEVE me, I do. Next time I write a smutty SS/HG story, she's NOT going to be 17, or a virgin. But at this point in this story she is, and we all have to deal with it, as does Severus. As does she, for that matter. Talk about jumping into the deep end. Always one for a challenge, the dear girl. *loves HG*

Also, in the next chapter we will finally move on from the Declaration of Feelings part of the story, which has only taken about, um, *counts* three chapters to unfold. Maybe next time I also won't explore both points of view quite so thoroughly. Or maybe I'll stretch it to five chapters next time. Buwahahaha!

Thanks to greenstuff, hecicera, and lifeasanamazon for your unflagging support and discerning eyes. I give you X and O!

Research

Chapter 25 of 36

Hermione becomes a student of secrets and lies, while Severus transitions from double agent to triple agent—working for himself in addition to those other two fellows.

Disclaimer: Playing in the Potterverse is like trying on wedding dresses at Harrods: not mine, never will be, but oh what fun I'm having.

* * * * *

Closing the door behind him, Severus silently reset his wards to permit Hermione's access to his rooms.

Smirking ever so faintly, he billowed down the empty corridor and came to a stop in front of the mirror that concealed the entrance to the Slytherin common room.

Rather than sweep right into the common room as he usually did, he flicked his eyes up and down his own reflection. Sure enough, his final clinch with Hermione had disordered his appearance a bit. Scowling, he twitched at his robes and pulled the tie off his hair, letting it fall down in its customary curtains on either side of his face.

'Oh, Professor, I liked your hair the other way,' purred the mirror. 'You should wear it back more often; it's so becoming.'

'Syllabub,' snarled Severus, resisting the urge to kick the mirror in.

'Oh, *fine*, rush right through, *don't* stop to chat,' wailed the glass as it began to shade into transparency. 'Gods, I'm *sobored* today; where *is* everybody?' The last words of the mirror's complaint were almost inaudible; its surface had gone from reflective glass to shimmering air, and Severus stepped through it.

He strode to the centre of the room...to where the green light from two of the great underwater windows met on the thickly carpeted stone floor...and surveyed the cavernous space. Of course he knew that Draco was unlikely to be inside on a fine Sunday afternoon, but Severus intended to start running him to ground here.

The room was nearly deserted. But near the hearth, a clutch of third-years were huddled over a table, staring at an open book and sniggering wildly as only a pack of fourteen-year-old boys can.

'Mr Urquhart!' barked Severus. 'Come here.'

All three boys jumped at the sound of their Head of House's voice...they'd been too engrossed in their book to notice his entrance. Pitt...a pallid little waster who was typically the ringleader in whatever nonsense this lot got up to...pushed the book off the table and surreptitiously kicked it under a sofa.

Eye-rolling was not in Severus's expressive repertoire, so, stone-faced, he waved his wand and said *Accio* book.' It flew to his hand and he glanced at the print on the jacket. '*101 Ways to Drive a Witch Wild* by the editors of *WQ Magazine*,' he pronounced, each syllable dripping with contempt.

He looked at Pitt. 'More contraband, Mr Pitt? This is getting very old. Ten points from Slytherin, and all of you will report to Mr Filch's office for detention on Wednesday at eight o'clock. Now go outside.'

As the three of them shuffled past him, Severus growled, 'Not so fast, Mr Urquhart. I need a word with you.' Urquhart, a hulking, spotty child who played Chaser on the Slytherin Quidditch team, halted and stood, hunched over and staring at the floor.

'Find Draco Malfoy and tell him to come to me in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom straight away,' said Snape. 'Understand?'

'Yes,' mumbled Urquhart. 'Malfoy, in your office, straight away.'

'No: Malfoy, in my *classroom*, straight away,' hissed Severus. 'The classroom is distinct from the office; they are in fact several floors apart. I trust this message is not too complex for you to convey, Mr Urquhart.'

'Ah, n-no, no, sir. I have it. I'll find him straight away. I'll just g-go now.' And the boy hurried after his classmates.

'Stand up straight,' said the mirror irritably as Urquhart approached it. 'You'll grow a hump on your back and no one will ever love you.' Then it shimmered clear and let him pass.

Severus looked around the now-deserted common room, then down at the book in his hand. Smirking much more broadly now, he shrank it down to the size of a matchbox and tucked it in his waistcoat pocket before following his charges out of the room.

'I hate warm Sundays,' sighed the mirror once all of its people had departed. *So boring.*

* * *

Sandwiches duly demolished, Hermione had taken her usual chair in front of Severus's desk. She had her running to-do list out and had added several items under a

freshly drawn line:

1. Note to S
2. Find blush glamour...or potion?
3. Cover story details
4. Write to Jill!!
5. Galleons
6. R section research...get pass from Burbage (?)
7. M map...ask Lupin?
8. Bath (do first?)

Looking over it, she acknowledged to herself that people who knew how to sneak around did not make lists to help them remember how to sneak around.

She inserted a caret between items number 3 and 4 and added another item to the list:

> 3a. Create code

There. Now to start in on it.

Item number 1: note to S. Her stomach swooped.*Severus*. She had been calling him that in her mind for many months. Now she could say it to his face. He had asked her to.

What else could she now call him to herself? *My beloved*? Too twee. *My boyfriend*? She wrinkled her nose. So wrong. *My man*? Well, yes, if she were an R&B singer.

My lover.

The word sent a shiver through her. *He's not, yet, really*. But he wanted to be...that was very clear. *I want it, too*. She wanted it so much she could hardly breathe when she thought about it. She was going to have sex with Severus. Hopefully a lot of it. And the sooner the better.

She hoped it could be as soon as Tuesday night. Hence item number 6 on the list. Reading smut was one thing. She needed to fill out her research in the Human Sexuality section of the library. Professor Burbage would give her a pass...the Muggle Studies teacher had a soft spot for Muggle-borns.

Part of her was glad she and Severus had stopped this afternoon. It would have been too much to handle, surely, if they had gone from teacher and student to lovers in the space of two hours.

Part of her was chagrined, though. He'd proceeded on the assumption that she was much more experienced than she was, only to discover she was a virgin who'd only ever been kissed by two boys. *One of them a slimy git*.

She had until Tuesday night to work out what she was doing in the realm of seduction. If she could help it, she ~~was~~*not* going to endure any more frustration or uncertainty in his arms...or watch him go off to the bathroom to tend to himself again.

Her vision blurred and she licked her lips.

Agh! Every line of thought landed her in the same state.

She had it so *bad*.

Hence item number 2 on the list. She knew she was no good at concealing strong emotions. That needed seeing to, or half the school would be suspicious by nightfall.

Sighing, she pulled a piece of parchment towards her from the pile at the side of the desk and sat for a moment, quill poised, before beginning her note.

Dear Professor Snape, she wrote.

I have thought of a solution to the communication issue we spoke of earlier. If you would care to talk about it before tomorrow, I will be in the library after dinner until curfew.

Yours

H. Granger

She read it over with satisfaction. It was perfectly neutral on the surface but, as with the only other note she had ever left him, earlier in the term, the words "dear" and "yours" gave her a thrill to write. And this time when he read those words, he would know what she meant by them.

Hermione pushed the parchment over to his side of the desk and crossed out item number 1 on her list. She scanned the other items and sighed. Items number 2 and 3 were absolutely crucial, and altogether, she would be spending most of her spare time in the library for the next few days.

But really, a bath would need to be next on her list. The prefects' bathroom, with the big, luxurious bath and all those taps and jets *Mmmm*. Just the thing.

After a final trip to Severus's bathroom to check her appearance, she let herself out of his rooms and began making her way upstairs...dearly hoping that the fine weather would mean deserted corridors all along her way.



Hermione's list, by QalaChaki.

The view from the DADA classroom windows was southward, out over the lake, so that now, in late afternoon, sunlight poured over the rows of dark wooden desks and the air sparkled with dust motes.

When Draco pushed open the doors, the bright light made him squint. He had in fact spent the entire day indoors, both in the Room of Requirement and in the library.

Lately, his efforts to fix the Vanishing Cabinet had become all-consuming. When he wasn't tinkering with it and testing it, he was researching new approaches. Or revisiting failed approaches. Once or twice he had stood in the stacks in the Dark Charms aisle of the Restricted Section, closed his eyes, reached out his hands, and pulled out whichever volumes he happened to touch.

He knew he looked a mess. He'd become so thin his bespoke trousers bagged around his flanks. The Slytherin mirror had run out of flattering things to say to him, and merely sighed heavily whenever he stood before it.

Sleep eluded him, and when it came, it was full of terrors he tried not to remember when he awoke. His emotional life had devolved into a tight little spiral of fear, desperation, and resentment. He kept his social alliances going by dint of will...he got no pleasure out of talking to his so-called friends, not one of whom knew what he was working on, what he needed to do to save himself and his parents.

Now here was that oily glory-hound Snape pulling him out of the library to have yet another go at him.

But the teacher's desk was vacant, and nothing stirred in the room but swirls of glittering dust particles *What, he's not even fucking here to keep his appointment?*

'Professor Snape, are you here?' called Draco, not bothering to conceal his peevishness. 'It's me, Draco.'

Snape took a single step out of the deeply shadowed area between two of the windows. He pointed at the floor in front of him. 'Come over here, if you please.'

Draco didn't please. He walked halfway to where his professor stood, then stopped and folded his arms. 'What is it? I'm rather busy at the moment, and if this is going to be the same lecture I've heard twenty times from you, I'd just as soon...' "

His tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth and his limbs were paralysed. He felt himself lifted an inch or two off the floor and pulled forward to dangle within two feet of Professor Snape. The sun shone directly into his eyes...his eyelids were frozen open.

'No, Draco,' Snape said. 'The time for lecturing has passed. You have been thoroughly obtuse, and I have been sufficiently patient *Legilimens!*'

Draco suffered the mental invasion in silence...he didn't have a choice...but his rage flared so hot he hoped Snape would burn himself on it *How dare he... double-crossing git... Aunt Bella was right... he'll be sorry, sorry, sorry...*

But as he felt Snape getting closer to the heart of his plan, Draco began to panic. What if the safeguard didn't work? Snape's mind was so strong, so insistent... Draco felt helpless, his own defenses shredding like dry leaves.

Then he felt it, like a body blow. And he could tell Snape felt it too, because his paralysis disappeared for a fraction of a second, resuming before he collapsed onto the floor. He could feel renewed attack, renewed repulse, retreat. With each approach, Draco's gut churned. He longed to puke, but he couldn't. The sunlight flowing into his dazzled eyes felt like it was boring through his retinas and eating away at his optic nerves.

Snape was like water, like air, like fire, seeking to flow around the barrier. But it held. Draco wished it would just break and end his misery.

At last Snape withdrew from his mind, and Draco crashed to the floor, rolled over on his side, and vomited.

Severus staggered back against the classroom wall and pulled out a handkerchief to stanch the flow of blood from his own nose.

When he could speak, he rasped, 'Who gave you that?'

The boy at his feet just heaved and gasped, and Severus crouched down beside him. He ran his hand over Draco's solar plexus, muttering an anti-nausea spell, and Transfigured a nearby chair into the items he needed...a basin of water, a cloth, a drinking glass.

When the boy could sit upright, Severus spelled away both vomit and blood, then asked again, quietly. 'Who, Draco? That was dangerous.'

Draco squawked. 'No shit it was. I will *end* you for that. I am going to *tell*...' He gulped and began coughing, then fell silent, leaving open the question of just whom he was going to 'tell.'

Severus sighed. *Idiotic little shit.* 'Draco. You couldn't end a dying cat in your condition. And we both know that anyone you might tell either doesn't care or can't touch me.'

He sat down beside the boy on the stone floor. 'Just tell me, Draco. Time is growing short. Let me help you.'

Draco choked out a slightly hysterical laugh. 'Back to the lecture, Professor? I've told you before I don't want your help, and now I'm going to tell you where to ~~stick~~ it...'

'Careful, Mr Malfoy,' Severus murmured. 'The Headmaster is likely in his office as we speak, and there's nothing to prevent my taking you up to visit him right now. *You will* keep a respectful tongue in your head.'

Draco flung his head back, rapping it hard against the stone wall behind him. *Fuck!* He rubbed at the back of his skull. 'Aunt Bella was right about you. Completely, totally right. And when my father hears what you did, he will disembowel you. You do not *fuck* with the Malfoys.'

'Is that who put that barrier in your mind? Bellatrix? Did she tell you it could kill you? No? Well. Not really the font of sober good sense, our Bella.' Severus rose to his feet. 'Get her to remove it. Most wizards who decide to use Legilimency on you won't scruple to stop before the block breaks, and you with it. Occlumency is much safer; I could teach you...

'Merlin's huge, hairy bollocks, *I don't want your fucking help*! For the twenty-first time, back off, Snape! This is *my* job, and *I will get it done*.' Draco started to pull himself off the floor, but quickly subsided, white-lipped and groaning.

Severus looked down at Draco with an impassive expression. 'Best that you rest here for at least fifteen minutes, I'd say. Then get yourself up to the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey will be able to take care of the nausea quite easily, I expect.'

He started towards the door. When he got there, he turned around. 'I will be checking with Madam Pomfrey, and if you don't report to her promptly, I'll convey you there myself. Let's avoid that little scene, shall we?'

He paused. 'And Draco. Regardless of what your Aunt Bellatrix has told you, or of what you feel about what happened here today, I am your ally. *You will* need my help, and I *will* render it. Think better of your stubbornness. We will all come through this in far better condition if we work together.'

With that, Severus swept out of the classroom, closing the door behind him.

Once he was in the corridor, he shut his eyes tight and dug the heel of his hand into the bridge of his nose. Bella's blocking spell had left him with a hellish headache and an irritatingly high level of uncertainty.

He had been able to come close to the kernel of Draco's plan. He'd seen that there was only the one plan on the horizon...just one more throw of the dice before the school year ended and Draco's access to Dumbledore disappeared.

Severus had also seen that Draco was flailing about, trying to fix something broken...something that the boy was certain would allow him to carry through with his plan. Draco's mind was suffused with fear and desperation, and with something else that Severus found very interesting and illuminating...resistance.

He really doesn't want to do it Draco's mind was working against itself even as he strove to fulfil his task. He couldn't afford to admit it to himself, but it seemed that he was using the very elaborateness of his own plan as a means to delay...and thus somehow avoid...becoming a murderer and a fugitive.

He'll keep himself in a helpless lather until the last minute, and then.. then Draco would act. Whether by somehow pulling together this mysterious plan or by trying the more desperate direct approach, the boy *would* make his final attempt before the end of term.

In sum, Severus and Draco would both play their parts as ordained by Voldemort and Dumbledore, and as sealed by Severus's Wand Oath to Narcissa.

Of course they would. That had never been in question.

Severus descended the stairs, scowling.

So he had three weeks, or perhaps four, before the catastrophe.

He'd better get to it, then. He tapped his fingers against the outside of his waistcoat pocket, where the silly little sex book lay like a talisman.

* * *

An adequate glamour spell had been easy enough to find. Hermione would have preferred the surer effects a potion could give, but in the brief time she'd had to research before dinner, she couldn't find one that did the job. Perhaps Severus could help with that, later.

Once it was in place, the glamour would show anyone looking at Hermione only what they expected to see. And since no one she knew expected to see a flushed, love-struck Hermione, no one would. Theoretically. She would still have to be very careful about what she did and said and where she let her eyes linger, but the glamour should help conceal the sudden, uncontrollable blushing to which she was prone.

Hermione looked at her watch. Fifteen minutes until dinner began.

She looked at her list, and put lines through numbers 8, 2, 3, and 3a.*I'm not half bad at this*, she thought, then sighed. She knew perfectly well that the difficult part hadn't even begun yet.

She gathered her things into her bag and reshelved the books she'd used. Just before she left the library, she cast the glamour. It was show time.

* * *

She came into the Great Hall in a knot of other Gryffindors, twelve minutes past the start of the dinner hour.

She was arm in arm with Ginny Weasley, laughing and talking. Potter and Ronald Weasley trailed behind them, both looking a bit awkward.

Under cover of his habitual bored stare, he drank her in. Just before she sat, she paused and swept her gaze around the room, pausing for a half second when her eyes met his. *That blush*. It was charming, and it did marvellous things to his insides, but he'd have to find her a potion to conceal it.

She chose to sit with her back to him.*Good girl*. The boy Weasley plopped down next to her, and Potter and the Weasley girl sat opposite, and quite close to one another. Draped over one another, to be more precise. *Ah. They're... together now. How tedious, and how splendid*

Severus had rarely felt so fit, or enjoyed a meal more thoroughly. Potter was decisively eliminated as a rival, the curried vegetable marrow soup was excellent, and he had Hermione's handkerchief in his pocket...he'd retrieved it from the floor near his desk. It was another talisman: his lady's favour, embroidered with tiny pink flowers and stiff with dried tears and snot.

He had her note in another pocket. She had some solution to their communication issue, she wrote. And he would be able to see and speak to her again this evening without having to come up with some pretext of his own. He rubbed the parchment between his thumb and forefinger.

'Sybill,' he purred to his neighbour, who jumped in alarm. 'Would you kindly pass the Stilton? Thank you.' He smiled, showing his teeth.

Professor Trelawney, trembling, fumbled her flask out of her sleeve and emptied it into her goblet. Snape was being civil to her. What disaster could this portend? She drained her goblet, shut her eyes, and prayed to the Powers for strength in whatever trial was to come.

When she opened her eyes, she noticed something she'd overlooked, and touched Snape's sleeve. 'Excuse me, Severus. Is that flagon over there empty? It's not? Oh, thank you, just a little bit, just to wet my lips. A little more. Maybe a splash more. Well, might as well finish it off, eh? Cheers!'

Ever mindful of favours bestowed, Sybill sent up her thanks to the Powers for gifting her with just a bit more liquid courage. Perhaps all would be well after all.

A/N: It has sssuch interesting things in its pocketses, Preciousss!

Those of you familiar with the Polyjuice episode from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* may be confused that a mirror has appeared at the entrance to the Slytherin common room. It was a gift to the House from Narcissa Malfoy at the end of Draco's third year at Hogwarts, when his preferred hairstyle was so horrifyingly ugly and unflattering that his mother assumed that he was simply never looking in the mirror. This gift ensured that he had to see his reflection (and hear about it) at least twice a day.

True story.

Again with this chapter my love and thanks are due to greenstuff, hechicera, and lifeasanamazon...three women with extremely busy lives who make time every week or so to help me with this story. * brushes away a tear of gratitude *

If you would like to see a larger version of the illustration by QalaChaki, go to her DA page: <http://qalachaki.deviantart.com/art/Caramel-Hermione-s-to-do-list-146048735?q=sort%3Atime+gallery%3Aqalachaki&qo=3>.

Exploration

Chapter 26 of 36

In which Hermione accidentally damages some books. And other things happen.

Disclaimer: She owns it.

The library was clotted with fifth-years and seventh-years cramming for OWLs and NEWTs, respectively. *Of course.*

Severus glared at the twitchy little blighters as he passed among them, looking for Hermione.

There she was, at one of the small tables against the outer wall, her books spread out over the entire surface, her bag occupying the chair next to her.

Everything in him surged towards her. It was extremely trying to have to stop a yard away from her table. Rather than, say, pulling her out of her chair and pressing her against the wall...

Future assignations would *not* be taking place in the damned library in front of an audience of dozens.

'Miss Granger,' he said, and she looked up. Her features were set in a neutral expression, but her eyes were molten and her cheeks flushed.

'Oh, hello, Professor Snape,' she said crisply. 'I made a list for you.' And she pulled a parchment from her bag and handed it to him. On it she had written:

I have spelled two Galleons that will allow us to communicate with each other any time without detection. Yours is under that copy of Advanced Principles of Arithmancy.

He raised an eyebrow. 'This is a good start, but I can think of two or three more sources you should check. May I?' He gestured at the chair.

'Certainly,' she said, and moved her bag to the floor. 'Here.' She handed him a quill.

He sat down and wrote:

I need to see you alone, now. Meet me upstairs in the Dark Charms aisle in ten minutes. I'll arrange the pass with Pince.

He pushed the parchment back over to her and, while she read it, he slid the Galleon from under her Arithmancy book.

She rolled the parchment and stuck it in the pocket of her robes, then pulled a Galleon out of the same pocket. Under cover of a stack of books, she touched her wand to her coin.

He felt the coin in his hand flash hot, and he looked at it.

Yes was inscribed around the edge of the coin, circling the rampant Hippogriff on its reverse.

I'm mad about you, he thought.

'May I have that list again?' he asked. 'I've thought of one more source. A crucial one.'

She handed it back to him and he wrote:

Destroy this.

Her face was crimson now. 'Thank you, sir,' she said. 'I will, um, look into that one right away.' She began to gather her things and shove them into her bag. The parchment had gone back into her pocket.

'Fine. That should be enough for you to be going on with.' He rose and nodded curtly to her, then stalked over to the door of Madam Pince's office.

'Irma. My TA, Miss Granger, needs access to the Restricted Section this evening. Dark Charms. Will you please set the wards to let her in?'

'Very well, Professor,' said Irma tightly. 'You're fortunate to have caught me, I'm just on my way to my rooms.'

'Really? And who will be locking up for you tonight?'

'Argus will. He sometimes does. I thought you knew that.' She sniffed. 'I can't be here *all* the time, you know. *I do* have a life of my own to live.'

'Yes, of course,' Severus said absently, letting the notion of Irma Pince's private life go unexamined. 'Good night.'

This is going to be easier than I'd imagined he thought as he waited in the corridor, concealed by a tapestry, for Irma to leave the library.

Back inside, he took the narrow stairs to the Restricted Section two at a time. At the top, he paused. These stacks were a warren. It would be nearly impossible to secure the entire section...and really, too risky to try. He would have to settle for securing the Dark Charms aisle. It was at the very back of the stacks, and had only one opening.

He walked towards it, readying the spells he'd need.

She was already there, halfway down the row, studying the tattered dragonhide spine of Krakauer's *The Uses of Pestilence in Warfare: Spells and Stratagems* by wand light.

Muffliato. Repello Sulum Alio. Confundo Quislibet. He cast the spells at the entrance to the aisle and strode towards her. She turned at his approach and stepped forward to meet him.

He grabbed her shoulders, pulled her roughly in to his body, and covered her mouth with his. She moaned and opened to his kiss. Her hands swooped up his back underneath his robes, fingers digging into the muscles of his shoulders. Her wand clattered to the floor.

Gods, the RELIEF! Severus had found much of the time since he'd left her in his rooms quite tolerable, even pleasant, as it was passing. But nothing *nothing*...could compare to the warming, dizzying spill of sensation that flowed through him at her touch.

She was up against the bookshelves, one of his legs wedged between hers. He bent his knee to lift her up a little, bringing her face closer to his.

He grunted, surprised, when he felt her grinding herself against his leg. He brought his hands down to hold her hips and cup her jeans-clad arse and shifted to press his leg more firmly into her groin. He broke the kiss and pulled back to look at her face, rapt and flushed with desire in the white glow of wand light.

Ah, god. Here, now, in the library stacks? Really? He bent to kiss her again.

One of her hands fluttered down against the shelves, and it started a small cascade of brittle leather fragments from the bindings of the rare and precious books she was leaning against.

'Oh, the books!' she squeaked, stopping all forms of kissing, clutching, and trouser-riding she'd been engaged in.

Hardly missing a beat, he seized her hand and pulled her to the very back of the aisle, where it ended in a blank stone wall. He whirled her around so her back was against the wall, and dropped her hand. 'Here, then,' he growled.

Wordlessly, he Summoned her lit wand and inserted it between two books to his right, just above his head. He lit his own wand and placed it to his left. The effect was of two glowing torches bathing them both in pale light.

For a moment, they just looked at each other.

Then he reached out a hand, slipped it between her legs, and gently squeezed.

'Aaaahhh,' she whimpered and stared at him wide-eyed. She stood, frozen, for several long seconds; then, keeping her eyes on his, she pressed herself into his hand. She was tentative at first. But soon she'd braced her own hands against the wall and begun pulsing her hips out to meet him as he rhythmically pressed his fingers and palm into the seam of her jeans just... there.

Severus had been with a number of women over the past two decades, some of them skilled and uninhibited lovers. Never had he experienced anything so stirring as the look, sound, and feel of the virginal and fully clothed Hermione Granger riding his hand.

He was overwhelmingly aroused, his cock aching to bury itself in her. But she needed something more than a quick fuck in the stacks for her first time. *Deserves it*, he thought, his gaze fixed on her luminous eyes.

Still, he could give her something they were both hungry for.

'Hermione,' he growled, giving her a squeeze that made her moan, then pulling his hand away. 'Do you trust me?'

* * *

'Do you trust me?'

Not if you take your hand away NOW. She moaned again, this time in protest.

'Do you?'

'Yes,' she breathed. 'Yes, of course.'

She made to close the gap between them and Severus stopped her with two fingers on her shoulder. 'No. Stay there. Keep still.'

He stepped up so he was just inches away from her, and put one hand lightly on her thigh. He tipped her chin up with the other hand and began kissing her softly. Her eyes fluttered closed, then jolted open when she felt her jeans Transfigure into a skirt.

Severus trailed languorous kisses to her ear while his hands began to move...one down from her chin to cradle her neck, the other sliding under her skirt up and up her bare thigh, caressing her skin with the lightest strokes of his long, rough fingers.

Dizzy now, heart pounding, she had to put her hands on his shoulders for support. Hanging on him a little, she widened her stance.

Then his hand was back where it had been, but this time only a little bit of thin cotton separated his fingers from her... *from there*. And then he moved the cotton aside, and two fingers dragged through the wetness between her legs, from the hot centre up to *oh GODGODGOD*.

'Is this how you are when you sit in my classroom?' he whispered in her ear. 'When you pass me in the corridor?' He stroked and pressed. 'Is it?'

'Aaaahh... yes,' she managed. 'Yes.'

'That's good, Hermione. I want you this way. I want you to think of you wet... and aching... When I look at you I want to remember... how you smell...' He breathed in. Pulling back to look in her eyes, he brought his fingers up to his lips. 'And how you taste.' He put them in his mouth and pulled them out again, then brought them back down to stroke and press more, to tease at the opening of her sex. His eyes never left hers. 'How you feel.' And a finger was *ohgod inside* her. She gasped and pushed against him, wanting *deeper wanting more*. 'How you sound,' he murmured in her ear. And now *uuuuuhh* was that... another finger and... doing something with his *thumb*...

'Do you want this, Hermione?' *His voice is SO...* she didn't have the word for it. He interspersed his words with tiny kisses, his breath hot on her skin, his hand doing *godohgod things* to her.

'Mmmhahh, yes, god, please. Severus.' *Yes, I want this, want you, want you to, to, ttake me...* Even unvoiced, the thought made her insides churn with fear and desire. *Is this really going to happen now, in the library?*

But suddenly, he dropped to his knees before her and his hands slid up the outsides of her thighs, rucking her skirt up to her hips *Diffindo*, he hissed. One hand yanked at her knickers and they came away. She felt utterly exposed. Shocked, she stared down at the top of his head.

'Beautiful,' he said. He kissed the tops of her thighs, one after the other. 'So beautiful.' And then his mouth was on her, his tongue tracing and retracing the path his fingers had forged.

Oh... God...

Now he was, *um, mouth there... so warm and soft and rough and OHYESTHAT, oh gods fingers again* one and... two inside.

She was full of him, covered by him but *more, more, there has to be more I need it now*

Her hands went to his head, steering him *stop there yes that yes yes* 'Oh god yes, just, oh, *there*, ahmmmm, ohhhhh *GOD...*'

When she came, it felt like her whole body was being swept out to sea between her own legs; like she was drowning, wrapped in a shroud made of silk and honey.

Severus kept his mouth on her, drinking in her ecstasy the whole time she shuddered and bucked and pulled at his head...

When she was still at last, her hands making gentle, random little strokes on his head and shoulders, he kissed her thighs again, twice each. She trembled. In four silent seconds, he cleaned her and restored her clothing to its original state, rose to his feet, and folded her into his arms. She gave a wild little sob and nestled in to him.

Severus stiffened a bit. *Was that a happy noise or an unhappy one?*

He circled one hand over her back and murmured, 'You are entirely lovely, do you know it?'

He tightened his arms around her briefly, then bent to kiss her on forehead, nose, mouth. She responded hesitantly at first, then clutched at his waistcoat and kissed him fervently.

When her hands started sliding down his body, he captured them in his and pulled away from her with a groan. 'Ah, Hermione. We need to stop or we will still be here when Mr Filch comes to lock up.'

He kissed the backs of her hands, one at a time, then kissed the insides of her wrists, then dropped her hands.

'You go first, I think,' he said. 'I will follow after a few minutes. Here.' He plucked both their wands from among the books and used his to spell smooth her hair and clothes. 'Better. Tomorrow I'll get you a potion to conceal, shall we say, signs of emotion? Your blush when you looked at me in the Great Hall this evening was very becoming, but perhaps a little suspicious.'

She blushed again. 'You saw that? Well, I suppose you would. I, um, I was wearing a glamour that will conceal... that sort of thing... from anyone who doesn't know how I feel about you.' She smiled at him a little shakily. 'So that would mean...everyone but you.'

He looked at her appraisingly. 'That's good. I suppose the glamour will do for now. And the parchment from earlier?'

'I Incendio'd it in the toilet before I came up here,' she said, looking rather satisfied at her own aptitude for secret doings.

'Well then,' he murmured. 'I think we have no other business to discuss here.' He cupped her cheek and jaw in one hand; she leaned into it.

'Good night, Miss Granger. Until tomorrow.'

'Good night, Professor Snape.'

He narrowed his eyes and smiled his phantom smile as she walked down the row of bookshelves, turned the corner, and was gone.

* * *

Dazed.

That's what she was. At the head of the stairs leading down to the main library rooms, Hermione stopped and held out her hand in front of her. It was trembling, just like the rest of her body.

Where was she going now? Where *could* she go? The public parts of the library were unthinkable; so was the common room, even if she was just passing through on her way to bed. There was no way she could act normally around anyone at all just yet. She wanted to still be with *him*. Not out here trying to decide how to hide from the world.

Suddenly she knew where to go. She looked at her watch. Thirty-eight minutes until curfew. Not much time, but it would have to do.

* * *

Hermione hoisted herself up onto the ledge and leaned back.

At least here she could be alone and also, in a way, close to him.

The double windows showed a sky still aglow above the castle battlements; sunset had been a bare quarter of an hour ago. The days were growing very long, this far north.

Hermione gave a little snort. A long day indeed.

Twenty-four hours ago, she had been on her way to the kitchens on a tide of butterbeer and frustrated lust. Twenty-four*minutes* ago, she had been half-naked in the Restricted Section with her teacher's face between her legs. Doing... *god*... delicious, *amazing* things.

She'd never been able to make herself come like that. It had been deeper but somehow softer than the usual sharp, bright lightening*Voluptuous*, was what it had been.

And that had been a scene straight out of her own fantasy life...the secrecy, the stolenness, the*inappropriateness* of it. And the heat of it. Though the real thing was approximately one million times more intense than the fantasy. That was really *him* doing those things. Real Snape...Real Severus. That was her taste in his mouth when they kissed...tangy, briny. His voice telling her she was lovely...no, *entirely lovely*.

And that was just... we didn't even... HOW was she going to live through what they would do next...whatever it would be? How would she survive*until* then, buttoned down and pretending everything was just normal?

Another thought occurred to her. Had he planned tonight to be an enactment of her fantasies? She tried to imagine asking him that, but couldn't. She could share.*that* ... with him but she shied away from talking about it. Just eleven hours ago she would never have dreamed...

... *And again, it's been a long, strange, life-changing day* she thought, a little impatient with the way she kept circling back to the same thought, as though her brain had short-circuited. *And I wish I had time and space to get used to all this. And I wish I were within somewhere, alone together, instead of sitting here hiding from everyone, alone by myself. But that is not how it is. It's ten minutes to curfew and I have to go be normal now.*

She hopped down from the ledge and ran up the stairs to the fourth floor door.

Halfway down the corridor that led to the main staircase, she stopped and smacked her forehead. She'd forgotten to show him how the Galleons were used. Her whole pretext for asking him to meet her in the library in the first place, and she'd muffed it.

She ducked into an empty classroom and pulled out her Galleon. Gathering her intention, she touched her wand to the coin*Professor*, she inscribed on it. Then, *This uses a Protean Charm. Incantation* Reor est ut inscribe.

In seconds her Galleon flashed hot and she read,*Full marks, Miss Granger*. That message faded, then *I can still taste you* flared around the Hippogriff.

Hermione sagged into a chair in the darkened room, the Galleon clutched in her lap. She could not think of a single thing to say in reply to that. She had to say*something*. She settled for *Good night, Severus*.

With two minutes to spare before curfew, she stood before the Fat Lady and took a deep, calming breath, then another. 'Springtime,' she said.

'Isn't it, though, my dear?' sighed the Fat Lady, casting her eyes coyly up at the Merry Monk on the adjoining wall.

The Monk winked and raised his glass to the Lady, who blushed and giggled as she swung open to admit that nice Granger girl to the Gryffindor common room. 'Sleep well, love.'

A/N: Spells and incantations in this chapter are all essentially canon spells, but I made them specific to my needs:

Repello Sulum Alio: repel everyone

Confundo Quislibet: confuse anyone

Reor est ut inscribe: to think is to inscribe

(Again with the Internet Latin. Not a Latin scholar. *g*)

There is a wonderful illustration connected with this chapter, but it's a gif and I can't embed it here. It's an illustration of the Galleon coin with Severus's message to Hermione, it's by the phenomenal QalaChaki, and it's at <http://qalachaki.deviantart.com/gallery/#/d2el8sr>.

Did I ever mention how great my beta and Brit-picking team is? Once or twice? Well, I'll say it again. They are the bestest.

Satisfaction

Chapter 27 of 36

Severus learns that Hermione is not easily intimidated.

Disclaimer: Mine, all mine!**Not**.

Clouds had rolled in overnight and lay low and heavy over the castle and the lake. A thin but steady rain was falling now as Hermione let herself out of the sally door.

The first, predawn cloudbursts had drenched the school grounds, and Hermione's chosen path, which ran along the edge of the Forbidden Forest and down towards Hogsmeade, was already slippery with mud when she reached it.

Grudgingly, she cast spells to shield her trainers from the wet and mud and give them extra traction. But she left her tracksuit unspelled and her head unprotected.

Somehow she couldn't bear to run in a bubble this morning. She wanted to feel the damp air and drizzle on her skin. She wanted to smell wet earth and plants and hear the rustle and murmur of the rain.

But she didn't want to see Severus. Well, yes, *shedid* want to see him. And she would, later: in the Great Hall at mealtimes; in class; after the end of lessons when she went to his classroom to pick up papers to mark...

What she did *not* want was to accidentally-on-purpose run into him before or after his morning bout with Professor McGonagall*That* would just be so obvious. And risky. Glamour or no, McGonagall would not be easily fooled.

No. Today was going to be challenging enough as it was. Right now, Hermione just wanted to run, and breathe, and think. So when her path took her close to the games building, she picked up her pace and kept her eyes averted.

* * *

There she was, not twenty yards away, on the path that edged the forest before merging with the lane to the village. She was wet with rain and running quickly.

Severus flicked his gaze up to the castle. Had she come out through the sally door or the main door? Where would she go back in? Could he intercept her on her way?

No. Too risky. He would see her at the expected times, and in public places...in the Great Hall and in his classroom. Last night in the Restricted Section had been bloody amazing but one couldn't make a habit of such meetings.

The door behind him opened and Minerva emerged and collided with his back. 'Oh, Severus, pardon me. I thought you'd have gone on already.'

'Hmmm,' he replied.

Could one, though? Make a habit?

'... don't you think? Severus?' Minerva looked at him sharply. 'Severus, I have a suspicion I am talking to myself.'

'Quite so.' He repressed a smirk. 'I'll see you at breakfast.' And he strode off in the direction of the greenhouses, encased in rain-repelling charms.

* * *

There was a minuscule parchment-wrapped parcel wedged into the sally door's latch.

That had not been there when she left, three quarters of an hour ago. It was dry.

Hermione picked it up. There was no writing on it. She opened it and plucked out the contents: a single sprig of some sort of herb. She broke one of the flat green leaves and inhaled the clean, citrus scent.

Lemon verbena. The scent of her own shampoo.

Oh.

* * *

Dear Jill

This is just a quick note...I only have a few minutes before the post goes out. But I have to tell someone.

I'm sure you remember what we talked about last summer...my crush.

Well.

Yesterday he and I started something. I'll give you more details later, but Jill...I am so happy, and scared, and excited, and nervous, I can hardly put one foot in front of the other.

Wish me luck. I need it!

Love

Hermione

* * *

'Wha's that?' asked Ron, spraying toast crumbs.

Hermione glared at him and wiped the envelope with her serviette. 'Muggle post, Ronald, surely that's obvious.'

'Wha' d'y' do wif Muggle posht?' He'd reloaded his mouth.

She bit back a deeply sarcastic reply. 'An owl will take it to the post office in Hogsmeade and it goes on from there.'

'Huh. What's that little picture on the corner for?' He tried to take the envelope for a closer look but she snatched it back.

'Stop it, Ron. Honestly!' She signalled to one of the school owls that had just made a delivery at the Ravenclaw table.

Ron's face closed down, the way it did when his feelings had been hurt. 'Honestly, yourself, Mione. I was just curious. No need to bite my head off.'

She sighed. 'Sorry.' Hermione fed the owl a scrap of bacon, and while it was gulping the treat, she held up the envelope and pointed at the stamp. 'It's called a postage stamp. It means I've paid in advance to have the letter delivered.' She stuck the letter in the owl's beak and said, 'Hogsmeade post office.'

'Jill Fletcher. Ah, your Muggle girlfriend. Not a bloke, then.' Ron's hurt expression had turned smug.

Hermione felt her mouth fall open and blood shoot to the surface of her skin. 'Well spotted, Ron. Jill is not *a*bloke. What, is that why you wanted to look at my letter? You thought I was owling some, uh, some *boy*?'

'Nah, I didn't really think you were, but I promised Seamus I'd find out if you were, ah, if you had any, er, if there was someone, uhm...'

Wisely if belatedly, Ron stopped saying words. His hand fumbled for another piece of toast to stuff in his mouth.

'You. Can go. To hell. Ron,' Hermione leaned across the table to hiss. 'Friends don't spy on one another. If you have something to ask me, ask it. Well? Do you?'

He gulped down his toast. 'Ahhhh, no. No, Mione,' he muttered. 'Sorry... um, sorry.'

'Fine.' Hermione rose from her seat and stared down at him, looking, Ron thought, quite a lot like McGonagall did when you said something daft in her class. 'Apology accepted.'

She made the words sound more like, 'You have a reprieve from your blood-soaked death. For now.' Not really the tone to make a man feel at ease.

Before she was halfway to the door, Seamus swung into the seat beside Ron. 'Well? Did you find out anything? Is she seeing someone?'

Ron puffed out his cheeks. 'No joy, Seamus, and I'm not going to try again. She'll murder me. She's in a mood this morning. Completely scary.'

'Ah, damn.' Seamus frowned. 'So no clue if she fancies someone? Lavender says she does, but you know Lavender. She probably thinks the Whomping Willow has a thing for Professor Sprout, or whatever. She's mental.'

'Yeah, I know Lavender,' Ron muttered, wishing he didn't. 'But like I told you, if Hermione was seeing someone at Hogwarts...or Durmstrang, or wherever...I would know. She's my best friend, and she'd tell me. Or Harry. She absolutely would. No question.'

* * *

Hermione spent her nine o'clock Arithmancy lesson disregarding Professor Vector's lecture. She was composing a letter, and it took her a while to hit the right tone.

12 May 1997

Dear Professor Lupin

I hope this finds you very well.

I have been meaning for some time to ask you about this, but recently have become more eager to broach the subject.

It's about the Map. If you wouldn't mind, I'd very much like to learn more about the magical basis for it. I'm primarily concerned with how it was created and where it draws from, and following on from that, whether you think there's any way its magic could become corrupted or damaged or otherwise give incomplete or incorrect information.

Please don't be alarmed...I have no reason to think the Map is corrupted or damaged in any way or that it has become dangerous to use. However, as you may know, it is now being used for more serious purposes than the usual mischief. I know that events three years ago demonstrated its accuracy. But now we are using it almost every day, I want to feel reassured it can be relied upon.

I hope you can find the time to talk to me sooner rather than later. If you'd rather not reply by owl, I will be in the GCR between midnight and one o'clock tonight.

Please give my warmest regards to all.

Sincerely

Hermione Granger

There. Not a single outright lie in the whole sneaky, disingenuous letter. Thank Merlin for the passive voice, and for her own impeccable, above-suspicion reputation.

If she judged Lupin right, he would take her request kindly, seriously, and at face value. *Please*, she prayed as she tucked the final draft into her bag. *Jet him reply by owl, and soon. I do not want to have to lie to his face.*

The bell rang for the end of the lesson. *Right*. Not yet ten-thirty and she had already engaged in emotional bullying, academic malfeasance, and three kinds of deceit, just trying to keep this new... *thing* with Severus private.

Hermione put her head down briefly on her desk. *I wish I found this part of it fun. This is sooooo not fun*

She raised her head. Not fun, but necessary. She didn't care...or thought she wouldn't care...what gossip might say about her. She was not ashamed of loving Severus, and she'd defend him to the end to Ron and Harry, if need be. But Severus could possibly lose his position over what had already happened between them...never mind what they were planning.

She hugged herself tightly for a moment. Then she stood up and marched out of Professor Vector's classroom. She was due at her Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson.

* * *

The man had *not* been making it easy for her to survive the day.

And the more she thought about it, the more it brassed her off.

DADA had been excruciating. It was bad enough when he stood up there at the front of the room, acting as bored and disagreeable as ever, and looking as cool as you please while she blushed and fidgeted in her second-row seat.

Worse was when he moved around the room, pacing the aisles while the class read a few pages on the uses of contagious disease in warfare and wrote a short essay. It was very distracting.

Worst of all was when he stopped and stood in the aisle one row behind her for a full minute and a half. He was *right there*. Was he looking at her? Was he thinking about... *that*? She could *feel* him there...the skin of her neck and scalp was buzzing with heat and magic. The sound of his boot leather creaking as he shifted his weight electrified her. Helplessly, she thought of how he tasted when she kissed him.

Then, when he finally brushed past her desk on his way to the front of the room, he managed to drop something into the crook of her right arm. She palmed it and peeked at it in her lap. Another sprig of verbena.

She looked up. He was looking right at her, a tiny smirk playing around his lips.

What the...? Is he...? He's TRYING to wreck me

She glared at him and frowned, all her hazy, hypnotised, lustful feelings gone. Grinding her teeth, she bent over her essay. She would have to have a talk with him about this sort of behaviour.

Soon the essay topic took hold of her, allowing her to get through the rest of the hour tolerably well. At the lesson's end, she turned to her neighbour. 'Neville, will you take my essay up to Professor Snape with yours? I need to dash.'

Her final, defiant glance at Severus fell flat...he wasn't even looking at her. She swept out of the room, bound for the Owlery.

* * *

Even with its southern exposure, the late afternoon light in the DADA classroom was the subdued grey of a rainy day, barely warmed by the feeble light of the wall sconces. The last student left just as Hermione arrived. Severus was sitting at his desk, sorting papers. He looked up.

'Hello.'

She swung her bag off her shoulder and set it on his desk.

'Hello, sir.' She pulled out a sheaf of parchments. 'Where shall I put these?'

'Just there will do.' He pointed. 'Here are yours.'

'Thank you.' She piled them into her bag.

She glanced back over her shoulder at the classroom's open door.

'I need to talk to you. In private.'

'Of course. Shall we adjourn upstairs?' He gestured towards the staircase behind him, which led up to the mezzanine room that some of his predecessors had used as an office.

'Certainly.' Stiff-backed, she marched up the stairs ahead of him.

Fairly crackling with irritation, she was.

Good. He trailed his fingers lightly along the bannister, eyes fixed on her swaying arse.

* * *

'... and that display in the Great Hall was outrageous. Why did you *do* that?'

'I agree. It was quite a show. You looked as though you'd been dipped in some sort of dye.'

Indeed, she looked rather like that now, standing rigid and red-faced in the soft light.

'Really? So would you, too, if you were sitting at a table full of people, trying to eat a normal lunch like a normal person, and you got a secret message asking if you were wearing any *knickers* under your *skirt*, and then the person who sent it *licked his finger*.'

He looked down at his forefinger and rubbed it slowly with his thumb. He wondered how soon he'd be able to kiss her.

'I'm trying,' he said, 'to imagine myself in the scenario you describe...wearing a skirt in public and imputing lascivious motives to my male acquaintance. I rather think I'd be inured to embarrassment.'

'But *I'm not* and you *know* I'm not. Stop joking about it.'

'You didn't have to read the Galleon then and there.' He shrugged. 'As for me, I had a little mayonnaise on my finger. From the pommes frites. Excellent mayonnaise.'

She actually stamped her foot. *Adorable.*

'But I've been angry with you since this morning! Is that really how you want it? Because I don't. Your antics...no, let me finish...you *antics* are confusing and annoying and distracting. You're being really... unkind. I don't like it.'

'Obviously. But answer one question. What, exactly, were you being distracted *from*?'

'From my schoolwork! From my attempts to act normally! This does not come easily to me. I mean, yes, I managed to keep my feelings about you to myself for a long time, but *that* secret and *this* secret just don't compare. I can hardly think straight when I'm around you.'

He was delighted to hear it.

'I find...don't you?...that in many of its forms anger focuses the mind beautifully.' He dropped his voice and rolled the words out deliberately. 'Irritation, annoyance, exasperation, displeasure. They're like a good, strong wind. Everything else just falls away, hm?'

She stared at him.

'I saw you floundering in my classroom. I thought you could do with a jolt of pique. And in the Great Hall, I decided we might test that glamour of yours. It appeared to work quite well...none of your friends seemed to notice your distress. Of course, that may be attributable to their negligible powers of perception, but...' He dismissed her friends with a gesture.

'Furthermore, I wanted to know if you were wearing knickers under your skirt, and I had the means to ask you. The answer was inconclusive...perhaps you could clear up the matter for me now?'

'There!' she burst out. 'You said it. *You* decided to test the glamour. *You* thought making me angry would be a good idea.'

With each 'you,' she stepped closer to him until they were toe to toe and she was squinting up into his face. 'You're making light of my objections and *again*, belittling my friends, which you *know* upsets me.' Now her forefinger was jabbing at his chest.

'You made those decisions without consulting me. Yesterday, you said you did not want to play nasty master and naughty schoolgirl with me. Well, I don't want that either. That's not how I think of myself, and it's not what I want from you.'

He couldn't help it: 'What *do* you want from me?'

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'You know what I want. You saw it all. But right now? And in general? I want... parity,' she said. 'I want you to act like my I-lover, not ~~my~~ master.'

My lover. The hairs on his nape stood on end.

He took hold of her finger-jabbing hand and pressed it against his waistcoat. 'Yes. Parity. Quite.'

'However, let us be clear. In public I am a teacher who can barely tolerate you, and you are a student who would never dream of doing this.' He brought their hands down and placed hers against the front of his trousers.

She gasped.

'This is what happens to me when I see you, hear your voice, or think about you,' he murmured. 'I am simply more skilled than you at hiding my feelings. Today, I used my... expertise... to help you show the world only what it expects to see: student.' He put one hand on her chest. 'And teacher.' He pressed her hand firmly against his cock. 'Indifferent to each other.'

His mouth was now hovering beside her ear. 'I was also wooing you, a little.' He rubbed his hand over her breast in a slow circle. She moaned, pressed in to him, began tentatively to move her own hand on the cloth that covered his cock. 'Did it work? Shall I kiss you now?'

For answer he got an armful of girl, two hands on his face, and an open, eager mouth on his.

For a while, they didn't waste any breath on words but kissed each other with all the day's pent-up hunger, hands in each other's hair, eyes half-shut, mouths venturing out to explore ears and throats before returning to feed deliriously on *those* lips.

Finally she pulled away to look at him, sliding her arms down to encircle his waist. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes had never looked blacker. Her heart thudded. 'Yes,' she said.

'What?'

'Yes, it worked. The wooing.' She was silent for a moment, thinking of the tiny parchment package, the Galleon flashing its shocking messages.

'But I wish you'd told me what you were doing. I know!' She put a finger on his lips to silence him. 'It wouldn't have worked if you'd told me. I know. But I still. *Still what?* What was she trying to say? She wanted to pay him back for his high-handedness. She wanted to be the one pulling the strings.

She lifted her chin and gave him what she hoped was a cool stare. 'It was a very trying day, and I, I require satisfaction.'

He replied with one eyebrow.

She looked down, pinning her gaze on his top waistcoat button. 'Yes. Satisfaction. You've had things your way today.' Her fingers were on the button. 'Now I'll have them my way. Will you ward this room, please?'

'Already done.'

Her fingers, on the fourth button, barely faltered. 'Good. And you are, um, free... for a, a little while now?'

'I have no other engagements before dinner.' His voice was low and rough.

The waistcoat was open. She started on the shirt buttons. When he made to shrug out of his robes and frock coat, she stopped him. 'No.'

'Hermione. What are you doing?'

'Hush,' she muttered, pulling his shirttail out of his waistband. 'I'm opening your shirt. Beyond that, well, you'll see.'

She actually wasn't sure what she was doing. She just knew she wanted to touch him. And she felt that, after last night and today, he owed her his co-operation.

She laid her hands on his bared stomach and slid them up over his ribcage. *So pale*. This was where she had been on Saturday night. She skimmed her fingers over the mysterious little knot she'd felt then. 'A scar,' she murmured. And it wasn't the only one. Shiny white lines crossed one another over his chest and a patch of puckered skin the size and colour of a plum lay under his left armpit.

Old wounds. She shuddered, looked up. His expression was guarded, his mouth a flat line. She craned up to press a soft, open kiss against his compressed lips, then another. When his lips parted, she smiled into his mouth and deepened her kisses.

Again, he buried one hand in her hair; with the other he pulled her hip into his thigh.

Her hands were on his back, in the warm space under his clothing. She ran them over his vertebrae and traced his sharp shoulder blades. *So thin*. More scars revealed themselves to her touch, and suddenly she blazed with anger at whoever had made them.

She was seized with a savage desire to *make it better*, and that desire mingled with the hunger she'd been staving off all day. She could have snarled out loud. Instead, she whispered fiercely in his ear: 'Beautiful.'

* * *

'Beautiful.' She dragged his earlobe into her mouth and bit it, sending a jolt to his cock and burning away his last scrap of shame.

The hands that had been wandering around his back swept up to his chest, palms skimming then circling his nipples.

Where her hands went, her mouth soon followed. Her tongue, flat and wide, then hard and pointed, then forming a hot, wet circle with her lips, sucked one nipple into her mouth while her hand played with the other one. There was a small, bright explosion at the top of his spine.

Now her fingernails were skating down his torso and every square inch of his skin felt alive *where the fuck did you learn that oh don't touch that yes touch it FUCK I'm going to come in my fucking trousers*.

Groaning, he put his hand over the top of hers where it lay along the length of his cock. Then her hands got busy with his belt buckle.

Oh Christ. 'Hermione. You don't have to do this.'

'Do what?' Wide-eyed. She had his flies open.

'Whatever... what you're doing.' He dragged the words out of himself.

'Of course I don't have to. I'm pleasing myself just now, remember? And getting a little of my own back?' Her hair was a glorious tumble. 'Don't think you're the only one who wants to hear and feel and, and smell and taste.'

'You look rakish.' She grinned at him, obviously enjoying herself.

'Now I should tell you that I have the theory of this but lack practice. You'll help me if I go off the rails?' She pushed ineffectually at her hair.

'Yes.'

She slowly sank to her knees in front of him, kissing her way down.

It was and it wasn't among the best he'd ever had. Or so he decided when it was over and he had collected the pieces of his mind and reassembled them.

She clearly did have a handle on the basic principles and even some advanced techniques, which she employed with varying degrees of success. Taking him into her throat did not work so well...she had to retreat from that. But the perineal stimulation was very effective. Just... very.

More than technique, though, her genius was in the way she seemed to...*like* it. The first few minutes were tentative exploration, during which she would occasionally look up at him with a serious face, asking 'This?' before doing something magnificent.

If she only knew, it was all magnificent, but the more she lost herself in it, the closer he came to losing control. He wanted to seize her and fuck her into oblivion. *Another time*, he chanted to himself. This time, her hot mouth and hand were wrapped around his cock, her other hand was cradling his balls, and it was sheer fucking heaven.

Oh fuck, here it comes 'I'm coming,' he gasped, pushing at her head a little. She responded with a swirl, a suck, a squeeze, and he was gone, his orgasm blowing through him in a blast of dark heat.

When he was still and spent, he looked down and touched her face, wincing as she slid her mouth from his cock. She looked up at him and swiped a trembling hand across her mouth and streaming eyes.

He pulled her up into his arms to kiss her hair and face and mouth. Surely he'd never before seen anything so beautiful.

* * *

'... so beautiful,' said Filius, shaking his head appreciatively.

'Hm,' grunted Severus. 'What?'

'It's a beautiful piece. Do you know it?'

Severus stared at his colleague with cold incomprehension. But before Filius had got halfway through some business about the Brahms motet his choristers had mastered, or not mastered, or were on the verge of mastering, or whatever, he'd lost his audience again.

Severus felt his Galleon flash hot in his pocket. He pulled it out and, placing it in his serviette, he brought it up to his face under cover of wiping his lips.

Watch appeared at the coin's margin.

He looked down at the Gryffindor table, where pudding had appeared. Hermione was helping herself to the trifle. It was, perhaps, a little messy. She popped the fingers of her right hand into her mouth, one by one, to clean them, then leaned in to hear something Ginevra Weasley was saying. She laughed along with the Weasley girl, her face alight. She never once looked his way.

* * * * *

A/N: Thanks and love to all of you, and especially to those who voted for me in the SS/HG Moste Potente Passions awards, wherein I placed in the Best New Author category. How cool is that? *dances *preens Eternal love is due to greenstuff, hechicera, and lifeasanamazon, who are steadfast and supportive even in the face of much wibbling and the occasional diva fit.

Preparations

Chapter 28 of 36

Hermione's plans are shaky. Severus's plans are sound.

Disclaimer: I own many things. These characters and settings are not among them.

* * * * *

Hermione woke up when the common room clock chimed one. She was curled up on the sofa that faced the hearth, and she was cold.

A few dull orange embers glowed in the ashy grate. Had she missed him? No, she was sure she'd just nodded off a few minutes ago. Professor Lupin had not made an appearance.

Hermione wasn't sure whether she was more relieved or disappointed.

On one hand, the idea of lying to Lupin made her feel queasy.

On the other hand, the Marauders' Map was a problem. Harry, obsessed with Draco Malfoy's doings, looked at the Map every day. It made any rendezvous with Severus that much riskier.

She huddled into herself and thought, for the twentieth time, of their meeting yesterday.

He'd pulled her up into his arms and kissed her hair, her face, and her mouth, taking his own taste into his mouth...

She'd rested her forehead against his and breathed into the humid space between them: 'Please.'

Then, thank all the gods, he had put his hand up under her skirt, fingers hooking into her knickers.

'Knickers,' he'd observed, his eyes glittering.

'Yes of course, knickers, I always weaaaahhhh!'

She remembered holding his gaze, leaning forward shamelessly into his hand...

The clock chimed the quarter hour and the embers in the grate suddenly blazed up. Professor Lupin's face flickered into view.

'Hallo, Hermione' he said. 'Sorry I'm late. I was detained but thought I'd pop in and see if I'd missed you. I'm glad you're still there.'

Hermione swallowed her surprise and smiled at him. 'Thank you for coming, Professor,' she said, sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace so they could talk quietly.

'Happy to help,' he said. 'You're sure everything is okay? Harry's fine? You're all okay?'

She blushed. 'Yes, we're all perfectly fine.'*Just sitting here thinking filthy thoughts, Professor, nothing out of the ordinary*

'Good, good. So...the Map.' Floo-Lupin grinned. 'One of my favourite pieces of Charms work, I must say.'

'You made it yourself?' Hermione asked, impressed.

'I did. Fifth year. I got the idea in History of Magic when Binns, er, when Professor Binns set an essay on the Third Goblin War. I chose the Siege of Dunsbury to write about, and while I was researching I found it.'

'Found what, exactly, sir?'

'Aha, well! Didn't Hooke's account of how the assassin finally got through to the inner court and actually *found* Queen Mab strike you as rather *thin*?'

'Well, treason... and, luck, really, wasn't it?'

'Yes, treason got the assassin into the castle and gave him the tool he needed, but luck had little to do with the rest. That place was a labyrinth, and the queen kept her animal form nearly all the time after the first two assassination attempts. No, the assassin had a map that was keyed to the castle and its occupants. Made it really easy for him to find her spider's web, bide his time until she was alone, and then just...pfft.'

'That's...I've never heard any of that before.' Hermione frowned, thinking of her HoM O.W.L. She'd got full marks on her account of the Siege of Dunsbury and the assassination of the goblin Queen Mab IV. 'Where did you read about that?'

'Right in the Hogwarts library. Look for Lawrence Larrabee's *Whose Treasure?* Its subtitle is *Revisiting, Revising, and Revisioning the History of Britain's Goblins and Faerie Folk* or something horrible like that. Most British historians think it's boll...um, rubbish, because Larrabee's a goblin sympathiser and also an American. But he was right about the map.'

At any other time, Hermione would have loved to hear more. Just now she wanted Lupin to come to the point.

'So how does it work?'

'It's actually a goblin version of a Protean Charm...more complex, obviously, but the principle's the same. Then a Fidelius Charm to hide the Map's true markings...and a few other little charms for fun.' Lupin chuckled fondly to himself.

'But how could the anchoring object be a whole *castle* and everyone in it?' This was far beyond the scope of any Protean Charm Hermione had ever heard of.

'As I said, it's goblin magic. An unjustly neglected field of study, as it happens. You know Hogwarts was built by goblins, yes? The Map is anchored on the castle's cornerstone, which is just *thick* with goblin magic. It's quite a story, how we located the cornerstone. You see, James...'

'I'd love to hear it sometime,' Hermione cut in. 'I'm sure it was very, um, very exciting.'

'Yes, well, to cut a long one short, then,' Lupin said, 'I'm quite confident the Map is safe. You can double-check the spell...Larrabee has a translation in one of his appendices...but I think the only way it could be broken or corrupted would be if the castle's cornerstone were somehow compromised. And if that were the case...well, we'd know because Hogwarts would be uninhabitable.'

'How so?'

'Flooded by lake water, for one thing. Visible to Muggles, for another. Merlin knows what else.'

'Well,' said Hermione. 'That's a relief, then. The Map's safe. Good. Okay.'*Damn it.*

'Hermione, really, are you all right? You seem, I don't know... rather down.'

She summoned a smile. 'Just tired, I think. It's late. Thank you so much for putting my mind at ease about the Map. I'll check Larrabee, of course, if you don't mind.'

'Why would I mind, my dear girl? It eases *my* mind to know you are being so forward-looking about Harry's safety. He's lucky to have you on his side...as are we all. Good night.' And Lupin was gone.

'Good night,' Hermione said dully to the grate. Plan A...somehow altering the Marauder's Map to conceal her whereabouts as needed...seemed rather hopeless. Plan B, a handful of stopgap measures, hardly merited the name. And she'd had to endure Lupin's affectionate praise, when she was being a self-serving sneak. *Just lovely.*

Stumbling with exhaustion and leaking guilty tears, she left the common room for the sanctuary of her own bed.

* * *

Tuesday morning, Severus noticed that he had begun avoiding mirrors. This made him wonder what he thought he was playing at.

Was it easier for him to justify his actions if he didn't look at himself? Or...ridiculously...if he confirmed with his own eyes just how unlovely he was, would *he* somehow realise it too?

So he forced himself to take a good long look after he shaved.

Apparently, this is love's young dream, he thought sardonically. Not sinister, repulsive, and old, but...*Graceful? Beautiful?*

He snorted. *Right, well. I don't have to subscribe to her opinion of me*

As to whether or not his actions were justified, well, of course they weren't. And of course they *were*. *Take your pick*. Regardless, for a moment she would be his, and when that moment had passed he had plans A and B to protect her from the damage to come.

Speaking of protection, he turned with a grimace to the shelf behind him.

The potion was as foul as he remembered, thick and goopy and tasting of rusted metal and rotten vegetation. And there was a nasty burning in his testicles as it took effect.

Contraceptive potions for women, though, tasted even worse...he knew: he'd tried one once out of curiosity. There was an ancient joke (doubtless with a kernel of truth) that the potions were so effective not because they prevented fertilisation but because they made women too nauseated and resentful to want sex after all.

This was not, at present, a result Severus was willing to risk.

* * *

Tuesday morning, Hermione's guilt receded in the face of necessity.

'I just don't understand why you feel like you need to check on it, Hermione. It's always been completely reliable.'

Hermione sighed. 'I know, Harry. It's probably *not* necessary, especially after what Lupin told me about it. But I'm curious. And it can't hurt to be sure it's still working the way it should. I promise I'll look at it whenever I can and let you know if I see Crabbe and Goyle lurking outside the Room of Requirement. Wouldn't you rather have the day off of Malfoy-watch, anyway? To concentrate on Ginny?'

Low, Hermione, so low.

'But it's Tuesday. You'll be closeted with the gr...with Snape tonight, won't you? What if he sees it?'

She rolled her eyes. '*Of course* I won't let him see it, Harry. He probably won't even be in his sitting room for most of the evening. I don't expect we'll be lounging around the fire chatting.'

Three true statements. Two of them also utterly deceitful. I am going straight to hell

'All right, Mione. I'll get it to you before lunch.' Harry smiled at her. 'Thanks.'

She smiled back out of sheer relief. 'Don't thank me, Harry. Please. I just want all of us to be safe. *To hell. On the fast train*

'And I'm really very curious about this spell. How is it we don't have a single practical lesson on goblin magic at Hogwarts? Dumbledore's curriculum choices are so baffling sometimes.'

Harry opened the classroom door and followed her in, mumbling something noncommittal. Each lost in private thoughts, they settled into seats across the aisle from each other and waited for McGonagall to start the lesson.

* * *

He'd had the bed made freshly. He'd had a wank and a wash. He'd Obscured the windows in his rooms. He'd brushed his teeth and given himself a long, sour stare in his shaving mirror.

What the fuck was there to do now but wait, and try not to think too much?

The last thing Severus had ever wanted was to bed one of the young girls who flowed through his classroom over the years. He'd always found it easy (and prudent) to resist their charms...especially in the earlier years when his grief over Lily, and his guilt, had darkened everything.

Yet here he was, rattling about his own rooms, waiting for the teenage virgin he was in thrall to. He'd seen her four times today...at meals and once in the fourth-floor corridor between lessons. Each time a dizzying gut-punch, even when he was expecting to see her.

This was nearly intolerable.

He sat down and reached for a book.

There was, as it happened, no section on 'deflowering a virgin' in *101 Ways to Drive a Witch Wild* by the editors of *WQ Magazine*. Indeed, five minutes' paging through the 'Seductions' chapter prompted Severus to throw the book into the fireplace and jab it with a poker into the hottest part of the fire.

Apparently he was supposed to give special attention to his clothing. Plan some smooth compliment he'd pay her once she entered the room. Think about lighting and scents and wine and all sorts of clichéd fucking nonsense.

He was irritated at himself for looking at the idiotic book. But nearly all of his sexual experience had been with older women, married women, divorced women, prostitutes...people for whom fucking was a matter of course. Even his own first time had had nothing to do with love or tenderness. (How could it?)

He fled into his laboratory, tied his long apron, pulled on his protective gloves, and began weighing and measuring ingredients from a new delivery.

The clock struck the half hour. She wasn't there yet. She was never late. Why was she late?

He pulled out a knife and split open a sack of dried *Amorphophallus titanum* spadices on the middle workbench. The flowers' faint reek filled his nostrils, and he began to pick the tangle of wizened spadices apart into piles according to their size and condition.

He was crouching in front of a low cabinet feeling around in the back for a box of pint jars (he could have sworn the fucking jars were there) when he felt her come in. Didn't hear her, see her, or smell her...he *felt* her: that strange surge of magic he'd begun to experience in her presence, but much stronger this time. Like a chord scored for the full orchestra.

He rose to find her standing in the doorway of his laboratory. In the time it took him to get to her, he pulled off and flung aside his gloves and apron.

'You're late,' he growled, glaring down at her.

'Six minutes, only,' she protested, a little breathless. She reached a hand up to his cheek.

'Don't be late,' he said. *I needed you six minutes ago*

Up came her other hand, pulling his face down to hers. 'Here now,' she murmured, then put her mouth on his. She kissed him, pulling his lower lip into her mouth, sucking and gently biting it.

Fuck it, I needed you hours ago He bracketed her head with his hands and began kissing her with long, hard, demanding kisses, crushing, sucking, biting, his tongue thrusting into her mouth.

Kissing ravenously along her jaw to her ear, he muttered, 'Never... be... late.'

'No,' she gasped, hands fisted in his hair, pulling him in to that one spot on her throat.

Some minutes later, she was leaning in to him, face against his frock coat. They hadn't yet moved from the doorway, but had finally paused to breathe.

Holding her, Severus was aware of the sense of vivid well-being she brought with her. He could feel his own heartbeat, strong and even.

He spoke into her hair. 'Now we've re-established the value of punctuality, come with me. Please.' And he led her by the hand to the sitting room sofa.

Nestled into the crook of his arm, legs tucked up beside her, she glanced over at his desk, at her usual chair. 'Are we going to go over the lesson plans, um, tonight?'

He looked down at her through narrowed eyes. 'No. We are not. We will not have time for that. I mean to have you properly tonight. Do you understand?'

She sagged against him a little, then pulled herself up and twisted round to look him in the face. 'Yes,' she said. 'That, um... yes. That was my plan, too. I'm glad you agree. I just didn't want to take anything, you know, for granted.' She blushed.

Heat washed through him, melting his last doubts.

'No, it wouldn't do to take anything for granted.' He picked up her hand and raised it to his mouth, curling her fingers into her palm and kissing the inside of her wrist. He cast a silent spell. 'Better to be explicit.'

He opened her fingers, revealing a spray of tiny white flowers in the hollow of her hand. As she watched, he pinched them up, crushing them between thumb and forefinger and bringing the bruised little blossoms to his nose, then to hers.

He pushed his fingers into her hair, leaving the broken flowers tangled there. She made a little strangled noise.

Pulling away from her enough that they were no longer touching at all, he looked straight into her wide, dark eyes.

'Let me be explicit about my own plans,' he said. 'We can then decide if we're in agreement on the important points.'

He pitched his voice low, lapping her with the sound of it.

'In a moment I'm going to lead you into my bedroom. There, I will take off your clothes as though I were unwrapping a sweet. Slowly, I think, this time. I'll lay you on my bed, with your hair spread out on my pillow.' Her hand drifted up to her hair, dislodging a single verbena blossom, which fell to her lap.

'Then I'll look at you. And I'll touch you, everywhere, with my hands and my mouth. I'll learn what you like and where you like it, and I'll give it to you.'

'When you tell me to fuck you because you can't stand the aching for another second I'll work my cock into your cunt.'

Hermione blushed furiously at the word.

'Yes, your cunt. It'll hurt...a little or a lot. I'll wait, and soon it'll stop hurting and start aching again and you'll beg me to get on with it and I will. Maybe I'll make love to you slowly. Maybe I'll fuck you hard and fast. Or maybe my mouth won't ever leave your cunt and we'll leave the fucking for another time. We'll see how we go.' By now her eyes were glazed and her mouth was hanging open between quick, noisy breaths.

He moved in to breathe a few more words into her ear. 'But. *I will* have you in my bed and afterwards I'll spend the night surrounded by the smell of you, plotting how and when I can have you again.'

He brushed his lips across her hairline. 'Would you like to tell me your plans, or do mine seem workable?'

She closed her eyes and gulped. 'G-good plans. Seems, seems, uhn, good. Let's go with, um, with yours.' She opened her eyes but seemed unable to meet his at the moment.

He loved being able to befuddle her like this, without laying a finger on her.

'Oh!' she said, and stood suddenly. 'My plan; it had these in it.' She walked over to the doorway of the laboratory and bent down to rummage in her bag, forgotten there since he'd knocked it off her shoulder while kissing her.

She pulled out a handful of wrapped condoms. 'I thought, um, *I planned* that we'd need these at some point.'

'Ah. I'm glad you raised the subject. We can use those if you like, but I have also taken a contraceptive potion.'

She stood, considering, for a moment before tucking the condoms back in her bag. 'That should be better, shouldn't it? It all seems quite a lot to think about, and I was worrying how it would all work and just really, feeling very glad that at least *one* of us has done this before.' She stopped mid-babble and her cheeks flamed. 'I mean, I mean... you, you *have*...'

Severus wondered if he could ever tire of watching the play of emotions across her face. *He enjoyed* it so much. Just now, though, he'd prefer to see desire there, rather than embarrassment.

He rose and strode to her. 'I have.' He held out his hand. 'I've done it often enough to know when it's time to stop talking and start doing. That's now.'

She slipped her hand into his and said something he didn't quite catch.

'What was that?'

'Just... I *like* it when you talk to me. Will you? Talk like you were talking before?'

He stroked her cheek with his forefinger and filled his voice with smoke and velvet. 'Leave that to me.'

And he led her into his bedroom.

* * * * *

A/N: Thanks and love to G, H, and L for they know what and they know why.

Amorphophallus titanum is a species of flowering plant that looks kind of like a huge purply-greeny calla lily and smells like a rotting corpse. It has a great big sort-of-phallus-shaped structure, called a spadix, rising from the centre of the plant. (Thanks, Wikipedia!)

But you don't actually care about botany right now, do you? Go on, click over to the next chapter. :D

Becoming

Chapter 29 of 36

Alone at last.

Disclaimer: Some things I do for money; this fic is not one of them.

Hermione glanced at the bathroom door as they passed it. *There's the bathroom.*

She remembered vividly the first time she'd used his bathroom. How terrifyingly intimate that had felt. How she'd averted her eyes, trying not to take too much in, wanting to get her business done with her composure intact. Because she still had to go back out to his sitting room and pretend she wasn't even a little bit desperately in love with him.

The pretending was over now. They were standing in his bedroom, side by side. Her mind was sliding all over the place, unable to find a purchase. Everything that had been, wasn't, and could no longer guide her. Everything that was going to be, wasn't yet, and she couldn't conjure what it would feel like, what *she* would feel like.

Can't I just turn my brain off? Just turn it off? Please?

Severus stood a foot or two away from her, their joined hands forming a bridge between them. She understood he was letting her look at the room, letting her take time. She felt a rush of relief and gratitude, and just a glimmer of calm.

He would be her link between before and after. He had a plan. He'd help carry her through.

Joy fizzed through her and suddenly she wasn't afraid...and not because she was feeling brave: in this moment, she just wasn't afraid *at all*.

She turned to him...could he feel the glow coming off of her?...and said, 'Start doing, please.'

He raised her knuckles to his lips, then released her hand and pulled off his frock coat, sleeve by sleeve, and dropped it on a chair before applying himself to his waistcoat.

I will not fidget, she thought, and darted a glance at the bed...wide, high, and uncanopied. The bedclothes were turned back, and her heart lurched.

The waistcoat slithered down from the chair to the floor; he loosened his shirt at collar and cuffs.

'Pirate,' she said, smiling shyly.

'Not a pirate,' he said, taking off one boot, then the other.

She took in his white shirt and black trousers. 'Poet, then.'

'Not a poet, either,' he said, arms held still at his sides, fingers twitching slightly.

'And me?' she murmured.

He closed the space between them and wrapped a hand around the side of her neck. 'Not a wench, surely.' He kissed the corner of her mouth. 'Muse?'

'No, I meant my clothes. You said...'

But his mouth was on hers and a quick pull had her shirt out of her waistband, his hand snaking inside to grip her bare waist, cool on her warm skin.

Kissing him, kissing him... slow, shallow, rhythmic kisses, marking time while his other hand found her tie, got it off, and flicked open the top few buttons of her shirt. His hand moved down from her neck to spread along her shoulder underneath her shirt and it was utterly thrilling to feel that hand resting lightly against her collarbone while he kissed, kissed, kissed her... then drifting down her breastbone to ease the last three buttons from their holes. Now both hands moved together to push shirt and cardigan off her shoulders and arms and down with a soft whoosh to the floor.

He stepped back and wordlessly pulled his shirt up and over his head, then tossed it over to the chair. There it was, on his left arm...the great big ugly Dark Mark. She averted her gaze *don't think about that now*. He made quick work of his belt, whipping it out of the loops. His trousers rode low on his hips, sharply tented in front.

'I remember,' he said, moving around so that he was standing behind her, 'Sunday morning.' He pulled her back against his body, one arm wrapped around her waist, and moved her hair away from her ear. 'I held you like this.' He kissed her ear and, delicately, her neck. 'I felt half-mad.'

His cock was pushing into the small of her back and she wondered, would it be a good thing if she pushed back and swivelled her hips like *this*? His breath caught and he bit her neck with a little growl, then started kissing it much more forcefully. *Ohgodyes a good thing...*

'I, um, me too,' she said, trying to hold up her end of the conversation. 'When I f-felt that you wanted me, it made me lose, uhn... ohhh, lose m-my mind a little.'

His hands were trailing shivery electricity across her skin, very lightly stroking her bare breasts (*where did my bra go?*), circling around and brushing past her nipples. *Too lightly*. She put her hands over his, showing him the rough touches that sent shockwaves through her.

She was now positively rubbing her arse against him. This was apparently no longer a good thing, as he grunted and stilled her hips with his hands. 'I'll need that later,' he gasped.

It took her a second to realise what he meant: she'd been close to bringing him off in his trousers. The thought simultaneously embarrassed her and made her want to

tackle him to the bed and tear his trousers off and free his poor imprisoned cock.

But she knew, from a time or two alone with Viktor, how these things went. *Okay. He needs maybe a tiny break to, um, do some Arithmancy problems in his head*

She looked down. She was still wearing her shoes! What a good time to take them off! And the socks. Surely she should take the opportunity to get rid of her skirt too. She'd had, she decided, stamping the skirt down off her ankles, enough of the slow unwrapping, and felt the looking and touching should proceed, simultaneously and speedily.

He seemed to have decided the same thing, judging from the fact that he stepped forward, picked her up, and nearly threw her on the bed.

She squeaked and blinked up at him as he stood over her, devouring her with his eyes.

Oh yum, the sheets were soft. She wriggled her shoulders into them. Severus kept standing there, looking down at her, the angle of his trousers as acute as before. *Or is it obtuse?* She stifled a giggle, but knew the smile was all over her face. She felt giddy and lightheaded.

This must be the part where he looks at me

She wriggled again, more deliberately this time, and stared right into his face. His eyes, shadowed by his hair, were unreadable, but she could see that his lips were wet and open just a little.

Well, someone needs to do something she couldn't quite say.

Her hair was not yet spread over his pillow...which had seemed like a very sexy part of the plan as originally outlined. So she scooted up towards the head of the bed, and, lifting her hair in handfuls, she laid it out all around her head like a great halo.

Her right hand snagged in the spray of verberna blooms he'd left in her hair, and, inspired, she placed it on her belly right between her navel and the top of her knickers. Now she did giggle...whether at her own daring or at her joke, she wasn't sure. *Nervous giggle, either way.*

Quicker than thought, Severus undid his trousers and let them fall. *No underpants*, was her first shocked thought, then, there he is. There were the two sharp little knobs on his collar bones; the scars on his white, white skin; his narrow waist and hips with their trail of black hair; and his dusky cock.

One minute ago, she was feeling rather bold. Now she felt a little scared, and she shivered. *Oh, god, we're actually doing this*

Graceful as a cat, he folded himself into the bed beside her and twitched sheet and duvet up over both of them. And he was kissing her again, one hand cupping her cheek. Gratefully, she flung her arms around him and kissed him back with her eyes closed, trying to find that place where nothing existed for her but his mouth on hers.

Warmed by the bedclothes and the deep hot kissing, Hermione began to be aware that the rest of her body wanted some attention. *More...* She gave a hopeful little squirm and was rewarded with his hand on her hip, thumb stroking the skin of her belly. She wriggled again, chafing her nipples against the hair of his chest.

He raised himself up on one elbow and looked down at her. 'Beautiful girl,' he said, thrillingly. *She felt beautiful.*

'Beautiful man,' she returned, blushing but holding his gaze. 'Kiss me again.'

And he did. Her ears, throat, shoulders. Her breasts, endlessly, with lips, tongue, and teeth, his hands pinning her wrists to the bed, until she writhed and moaned, clutching helplessly at the air.

He released her hands and she brought them down to his head, riding it lightly as his mouth moved down her belly, his hair brushing her skin. *Oh yes, yes, yes, go down there, I want you there*, and she arched her hips up in anticipation.

He kissed her twice through her knickers then looked up at her from between her legs, one eyebrow raised, and kept moving down, the horrible man, kissing the insides of her thighs and then down one leg, leisurely, lifting it up until he was licking the soft skin behind her knee. *Now that's good.* She must have made some sound of approval; she could feel his mouth curve into a smile as he kept going down, down, until he was cradling her foot and his tongue was *oh!*

Her hands drifted around her belly and breasts and she closed her eyes, relishing the dirty, lovely feeling of her toes in his mouth.

Then his mouth was back on her knickers, his tongue pressing and teeth scraping against the cotton. Her eyes flew open. *Andamn him!* he began to kiss his way down her *other* leg but *ahhhh!* now his hands had hooked around her knickers and he was dragging them down her legs in the wake of his mouth. So when he'd finished doing that delicious swirling, sucking thing on her other foot, she was as naked as he was. *Finally.*

He heaved up so that he was stretched over her, propped on his elbows, his face inches from hers, his erection hard on her thigh.

'And now?' he asked, smirking. *Actually smirking, god! He must know what I want*

'Kiss me,' she said, undulating her hips a little, hoping he'd take the hint.

He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her lightly. 'Like that?' Then deeper. 'Or that?' smiling against her lips.

'No-o-o-o,' she groaned, her face positively on fire. 'Kiss *methere*.' She couldn't say the word, so she grabbed one of his hands and pulled it down between her legs. '*Here*.'

'Ah,' he replied with an air of faint surprise. 'Yes. You do like that, I recall.'

Bad man, joking when I need...OHGOD that 'Aaaagghhh,' she wailed...he'd gone right to her most sensitive part and it was an instant of almost unbearable pleasure. He dragged his tongue down to the centre of her. 'Ohhhhaahmmmm.' Voluptuous, yes, silky, hot, and wet. She was split open with ripeness and he was eating her whole; she wanted to be completely in his mouth so she pushed forward into his face. He growled. He swirled and sucked in rhythm with her rocking and THEN one long finger slid in and she had that greedy feeling again...that the more she *got* the more she *wanted*...and WHAT was he *doing with that finger inside her MORE PLEASE oh GOD there it is again and another one spread me wide fill me up I AM YOUR QUEEN and MOVE your tongue up there OH...JESUS...YES...RIGHT THERE.*

His fingers felt so good and so right and not enough but the bones of her pelvis were melting together and her heart was going to burst and the dark tidal wave was building in her belly and suddenly *NO!* his mouth and hand were gone and she opened her eyes to see him rearing above her and there was the feeling of his cock at the entrance and with a great *push* he was inside her.

'Ohhh,' she whimpered. It was so much. There'd been a fleeting sharp pain, then this stretched, almost too much, really very uncomfortable feeling of being filled up.

Severus loomed above her, his face flushed. He leaned down and kissed her. 'All right?' he gasped, his eyes burning into hers from inches away. 'Just... relax. Breathe.' He kissed her again, gently, though she could feel that his body was tight and quivering.

So she tried, and in a little while the fullness became its own kind of pleasure, and she felt the ache kindling again. 'Severus,' she said, in wonder and need, staring up into his face. 'Severus. I... ' *love you*. She stroked her hands down his back to his arse, and filled her hands with it. 'I want you. Please.'

And he moved, slowly withdrawing his cock and then *ohhh my, oh YES*, filling her up and seeming to strike into the very centre of her, a delicious shivery stroke of almost pain but actually really almost-enough pleasure. He moved in her, out... and in... and *he is inside me and oh GOD..* Her hands gripped him, her legs wrapped around him and she thrust her hips up to meet him as he filled her; if she could just *be touching more of him now please* she could have what she needed. *NEED IT.*

'Please, please, please,' she chanted, hardly aware of what she said. 'Please!' The pressure building up, her pulse thundering between her legs when he reached down his hand and began flicking and touching her there and she shouted something as the great obliterating wave finally crashed over her, pounding through her and finally washing her, boneless, out to sea. As if from a distance, she felt him still working in her for another stroke or two and then he stiffened, shuddered, yelled 'Fuck!' and collapsed onto her.

* * *

They lay side by side and face to face, arms wrapped around each other, his left leg layered between hers. He wondered idly how long he'd be able to stay like this without needing to have another go at her.

It had been a supreme, prolonged effort to last as long as he had...all the way through to her climax. For the moment he was content with that, and with the feeling of her lying in his arms. More than content.

They were staring at each other across six inches of pillow. Hermione's face was flushed, her eyes shining. Severus could feel a sentimental declaration gathering in the air between them, so he narrowed his eyes and twisted his mouth into a half smile.

'So. You are my queen?'

Her eyes flew open wide and she squeaked, 'What? Oh god, did I actually say that out loud?'

'You did. You said quite a few things. Some things about spreading and melting, but mostly questions about what I was doing and then commands. Then something that sounded remarkably like begging.'

Hermione rolled out of his arms, grabbed a pillow, and put it over her face, moaning something he couldn't understand. She lowered the pillow so that she was clutching it to her chest, and glared at him.

'That expression on your face is what is termed *asmirk*. It's smug, supercilious, and antisocial and, and horrible. You are wrong to use it on me, and I just have to say that one day *you* will beg *me* for something, and then you'll see how it feels to be *smirked* at.'

Oh, how he enjoyed rousing her fighting spirit.

He deepened and refined the smirk. 'You may try all you wish to make me beg, but you never will. I am far too supercilious and antisocial. And horrible.'

'Well, that's a challenge, then,' she said primly, pulling the sheet up around her waist and giving her pillow a squeeze.

'I also suspect I would find your smirk adorable, as I do everything else about you. *Well, bugger it.* The sentimental declaration had erupted after all.

The melting expression returned to her eyes. 'Oh.' She rolled back to him, smiling, and laced her fingers in his, pulling his hand up to her mouth to kiss. It was his left hand, and he could feel the shock go through her as she saw the Mark.

He tensed, too, and withdrew his hand from hers. *That's right, little girl, it's real. I'm a real Death Eater with a truly evil past*

The wrongness of her being here with him stirred in his belly and a chill began to creep over him.

But she grasped his hand again and kissed it repeatedly, then ducked her head forward to shower his face and mouth with kisses. 'Forgive me for reacting like that,' she murmured at last into his throat. 'I knew that was there, and it doesn't and hasn't and never could make any difference to me. It's not who you are.'

You know so very little about me, he thought as she covered his mouth with hers and kissed him passionately. Then, with the skill born of much practice, he exiled that thought to another time.

Severus wrapped his arms around his girl and resolved to hear her begging once more before he let her go for the night.

* * * * *

A/N: *draws curtain over lovers*

tiptoes away

whispers: Well, that seemed to go pretty well.

glomps betas

smiles at readers: Thanks for your patience.

Caramel

Chapter 30 of 36

You can't always get what you want, but if you try, sometimes...

Disclaimer: Hers.

The ashy end of a log fell with a soft thud into the grate, its skeletal embers glowing briefly, a few slow sparks drifting up and fading out.

The sitting room clock chimed the half-hour.

In the next room the two lovers lay still, each curled around or tucked into the other, drowsing in the warmth their bodies made beneath the bedclothes.

Severus stirred and brought his hand up from its resting place on Hermione's thigh to push back her hair. He kissed the skin behind her ear.

She turned to face him.

'It's time, isn't it?'

'Yes.' He reached out his hand and her clothes...skirt, shirt, cardigan, socks, underwear...flew to the bed, folding themselves in midair and landing in a pile beside her.

She turned away and put her hand on top of the pile. 'Thank you.' Her voice was small.

Summoning his trousers, he slipped from the bed and into them. 'I should be out of the bathroom in five minutes.' He collected the rest of his clothes and left the room.

Dressing himself, he stared into the mirror. Pulling at his mind and body was an unanswerable longing to keep her in his bed all night. To wake up beside her in the middle of the night, and in the morning.

Greedy sod.

This, apparently, was the danger in getting what you wanted: it only fed the wanting.

He pulled his coat sleeves straight and stepped into his sitting room.

After he left the room, she rolled onto her back and gazed up at the ceiling. Shouldn't she be feeling ~~happy~~ now instead of increasingly distraught?

But it was nearly curfew...time to bottle up everything she'd just experienced and shove it onto a shelf *Horrible*.

She heard him leave the bathroom and so she picked up her clothes and slipped in there.

Dressed, she looked at herself in the mirror. *I wish I could stay.*

When would she ever be able to stay?

Never.

Unless...

She turned and ran out to the sitting room.

The Gryffindor common room was always at its fullest just after curfew. Usually, Hermione would have been grateful that Ron had staked out one of the best tables near the fire and was saving a chair for her.

'Ron, I can't. I've got loads to do. I need the quiet upstairs to concentrate.'

Ron glanced over at the alcove containing the chair containing Harry and Ginny and their two books. He flushed and, turning, glared into the fire.

Hermione sighed. 'I know it's hard, and lonely, and, and *odd*. Just let them be for a little while, can't you?'

'I *am* letting them be!' he growled. 'Do you see me bothering them?'

'No,' she said quietly. 'I don't. Listen, Ron. I have a couple of things that I simply must do upstairs. Then I'll come back down and work here, okay? Give me half...no, three quarters of an hour.'

'Okay. Thanks, Mione.' He smiled his sweet little-boy smile, looking up at her from under his fringe.

Dear Ron. She smiled back.

The bath in the girls' bathroom was not particularly large, but it was deep. Hermione held herself suspended, balancing on her heels and the tips of her fingers, her chin half-sunk in steaming, fragrant water.

Eyes closed, stupefied by the heat, she swung her hips from side to side, starting currents and eddies sliding across her skin and sloshing up the sides of the bath.

The stinging ache between her legs...which had spiked on contact with the hot bathwater...began to subside. She rested her hand on the tender flesh.

Lover. Lover. Lover.

She held on to the word, using it to push away the worrying and analysing and judging thoughts swarming the edges of her mind. Severus was right, she knew he was: worry would take her nowhere she hadn't already been, and nowhere she wanted to be.

Worrying is not the same thing as planning, he'd said. *Try not to worry too much* Did he really know her that well, or was it written all over her face? Probably the latter, as he'd given her a Dissembling Draught before she left. To ease her reentry into reality.

The problem (*was it a problem?*) was that she wasn't certain, at the moment, which was more real: Gryffindor Tower, Hogwarts Castle, the world in general, and the last seventeen point seven years of her life; or two point four hours in one high, wide, uncanopied bed in the Slytherin dungeons.

She must have had a shower or a bath. Her hair was up, but damp bits curled around the edges of her face. And on her neck. Which was a nice neck, actually, when it was

naked

bare like this. He could never figure why girls liked bathing so much; they'd do it at the drop of a hat. Lavender; Ginny; even his mum. A girl thing. Maybe that's why they always smelled so good. She smelled

delicious

fantastic right now. He leaned towards her, reaching for a quill. She looked up from her book. Was she startled he was so close? He smiled his little-boy smile and retreated, quill in hand, eyes still on her.

The fire was making shadows on her face; maybe that's why her mouth looked sort of

ripe

pretty. Red. Different. He licked his lips...dry. Must be thirsty.

'Mione, fancy a butterbeer? I'm just going to get one for myself.'

'Ronald! It's eleven o'clock on a school night!' Now her mouth looked more like it usually did. Sort of thin and frowning.

'Well, I'm thirsty.' Even before she rolled her eyes, he realised his voice had come out on a whine...the sort of tone his mum always scolded him for.

But then... 'I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't mean to snap at you.' She was smiling at him, and her hand was on his. He suddenly wanted to twine his fingers in with hers so their hands were palm to palm...

She picked up her quill again. 'Just some water for me, as long as you're getting up. Thank you.'

He got up, a little dazed, and headed for the cupboard where older pupils were allowed to keep food and drink.

Lavender (how long had she been sitting there?) chose the moment he was passing her chair, laden with a bottle, a full water glass, and a bag of crisps, to stretch her legs out.

He nearly tripped. 'Careful, Lav!' he squawked.

Her look was pure scorn. 'REALLY, Ronald. It's eLEVen o'clock on a SCHOOL night. Have you no DEcency?'

'Um, guess not,' he muttered, stepping over her legs.

'Fool.' She said it quietly, but he heard it, all right.

He let it go. What was her problem? He dropped heavily into his chair, clattering bottle and glass on the table, spilling some water.

Hermione picked up her wand and murmured, 'Thanks, Ron. *Tergeo*.' And she sank back into her book, as quickly as that, as though he himself wasn't even there.

Ron ripped open the bag of crisps and shoved a handful in his mouth.*Bloody Harry*. His best mate should be here backing him up. But no.*Harry thinks girls are just GRAND*.

He studiously avoided looking at the Harry-and-Ginny chair. *Hereally* did not want to see what he might see. What *hewould* see. *Traitor*.

Good crisps, though. He sighed and twisted the top off of his butterbeer.

* * *

The calm, vibrant, confident feeling had leached away before she'd been gone half an hour. Like coming down off a drug: a smooth but inexorable collapse of his spirits.

He rather hoped he'd find a rule-breaker or two tonight. He craved that sharp, sour satisfaction...the sort of familiar pleasure that might distract him, stop him obsessing on what couldn't be helped.

But no joy. He swept through the dim corridors, a luckless predator alone with his thoughts.

One particular thought struck him halfway down the sixth-floor picture gallery.

Eight minutes later he was unlocking a cabinet in the Restricted Section and extracting a crumbling folio volume in Old Ukrainian. Forty-four minutes later, he sat there still, in a pool of wandlight on the floor, occupied with the beginnings of a new train of thought. One that made his heart speed up.

The school clock struck midnight and he rose and reshelved the book. It was time he was back in his rooms.

* * *

The bright chimes of the common room clock lagged behind those of the school clock by just half a beat...BONG bing! BONG bing! The clocks' syncopation had bothered Hermione at first, but for years now she'd rather loved it. It was a homely sound.

Tonight she didn't notice it at all. When the big clock began to strike the hour, her eyes flew to the smaller one on the mantelpiece.*Midnight*. She'd actually been able to lose herself in her HoM reading, and the hour had flown.

She nearly leapt from her chair. But. Even with her glamour and the Disassembling Draught both operating, she needed to be circumspect. So she rubbed her neck and smiled at Ron. 'Bed for me. Goodnight, Ron.' She closed books, rolled parchment, wiped quills, fitted everything into her bag, and set herself the task of getting across the room and up the stairs in a natural, casual, everyday sort of way.

It's like training for a life on the stage she thought as she nodded to Parvati, standing at the sink beside her with a mouth full of toothpaste foam.

Or a career in espionage she thought as she slipped the little tin from her desk drawer into her dressing gown pocket in full view of Lavender, who was brushing her hair.

Heart racing, she closed her bed curtains and cast silencing and deflecting spells in a dense web around the bed.*Or a future as a succubus*. That one made her snort with nervous laughter.

She was about to send a message when her own Galleon flared:

I'm ready

She picked a sliver of caramel out of the tin and, focusing her intention, cast the spell and put the sweet on her tongue.

Touching wand to Galleon, she thought

here I come

* * *

The first touch was just her hand in his, fingers laced, palms touching. He raised his hand to his lips and kissed the space where her hand was...invisible but warm, solid, soft, and real to the touch.

And then she pulled his hand to her mouth; he watched the hand move a few inches and hover, felt her parted lips on his knuckle, the wet inside of her mouth. He raised his other hand to touch the skin where she'd kissed him...dry. *Fascinating.*

Risking a larger movement, he reached out both arms to enfold her, and *ow fucking ow!* Something hard collided with his nose. Her head. She must have been moving in for a kiss.

Well, this is going to take some work He rubbed his nose.

She grasped his hand in both of hers and peppered it with little contrite kisses.

Right. He held her palm to his lips again and spoke against the flesh, slowly and emphatically: 'Don't. Move.'

When he embraced her, it was as though she lay atop him. His hands, which appeared to be suspended in midair, were splayed over her back, buried in the hair at the back of her head.

He let his attention flicker around their bodies: to one of her calves pressed against the outer surface of his own; to a lock of her hair curling under his upper arm. She was there, complete in every detail of texture, temperature, shape, weight. Only no sight. No sound.

Experimentally, he moved his mind but not his body so that he was sitting upright with her in his lap. The sensations were utterly different. He could only feel what his mind concentrated on: when he thought of her arse on his thigh, he felt a patch of contact there but nowhere else...her hair, arms, legs, torso were all gone.

He tried to expand his consciousness outward from the area of contact, but the sensations began to flicker and weaken as he worked to hold more of her in his mind.

Working theory number one: allowing the physical body fully to align with its astral projection obviates the need to hold parts of the astral bodies in contact using the conscious mind.

Corollary: this is a good thing, since the conscious mind is apparently able to grasp approximately bugger-all at any given moment.

In other words: act as though she's there and she is.

So he closed his eyes, rolled her over on her back, and began to kiss her in earnest, snaking one hand down along the curve of her soft, warm belly and the ridge of her hip to explore her state of arousal.

Ah, god, so ready. His cock, which had been at least half-hard since before she'd touched his hand, jumped against her hip. He raised his finger to his mouth and nose...no taste, no smell, and of course the finger was dry the moment it left her.

Odd, very odd. But workable.

Something else was odd... she was being unusually passive.*Oh. Right.*

He grasped her hand and placed it on his hip, and whispered against her throat, 'Move with me.'

She surged into life, wrapping her legs around his, kissing his mouth feverishly, biting his neck *will that leave a mark I wonder OH JESUS FUCKING CHRIST*, grasping his cock, and mouthing *want you* against his throat.

And if he happened to look like a fool, plunging and panting above an invisible girl on his bed, no one was there to see it. If he, perhaps, moaned and shouted her name, and, holding her afterwards, strung together a sort of psalm of possessive and tender whisperings, she wasn't there to hear it.

Best of all, if he chose to sleep naked and entwined with Hermione Granger every bloody night for as long as she would have him, no one need be the wiser.

* * *

In the small hours, she half-woke from a dream, full of longing.

Not a dream. His arm was wrapped around her, his lips on her neck, his knee pushing between her legs.

She moaned and pulled his hand down around her hip, pushing into his body, reaching clumsily between her legs to coax him forward.

So good, so good, soooo good. She ached from use, but to refuse him was unthinkable. She wanted him all around her, inside her, all the time, it seemed.

'Any time,' she whispered, though he couldn't hear. 'Anywhere, anytime, all the time, always yours.'

She fell asleep in his arms, and when she awoke again later, still in darkness, she felt around for him with hand and mind but he was gone. The potion must have worn off.

She drifted, wondering disjointedly how one could calibrate the dosage...*Will need... experiments...* She smiled and slept.

* * *

There was a clattering and banging at the window across the room. After a moment, Lavender pushed aside her curtain...her bed was nearest...and lunged at the window latch. The owl hopped inside and dropped the square envelope at Lavender's feet.

'It's for you, Hermione. Muggle post at the crack of dawn, if you please,' Lavender said, dropping the envelope on the floor before bundling back into her bed and jerking the curtains closed.

Hermione leapt out of bed and hurried to gather up the letter. It was from Jill, postmarked the day before.

13 May 1997

Hermione

I got your letter. I need to know more! Call me! There MUST be a telephone in that medieval school of yours. Find it; use it; kill if you must.

I am dying of suspense. Literally.

With love and awe

Jill

Hermione chewed on a fingertip and looked up at the waiting barn owl. 'Oh,' she said to it, 'I'm so sorry. I don't have a treat for you here...it's the dormitory. But come back to me at breakfast in the Great Hall; I'll have a letter for you then, and a good treat. I promise.'

The owl hooted dolefully and flew away. Hermione walked to her desk and sank into her chair. She dug out a box of Muggle stationery, a biro, and a postage stamp.

14 May 1997

Dear Jill

You have no idea how much I wish I could call you. However, the only phone in the school is in the Headmaster's office. Amazing, I know. 'Medieval' is an apt name for this place, in so many ways.

It's been so long since we talked about all this, I hardly know where to begin. I wish we'd seen each other over the Christmas holidays...then at least you'd have part of the story.

But before I do begin, I must ask you to tell no one. In fact, when you're done reading this, please destroy it and the last one and any other letter I send you about this subject. This may seem extreme, but disasters would rain down if the wrong people found out.

Promise?

Love

Hermione

She read it over. Nonspecific enough, surely. And putting Jill off for another day or so would allow her to figure out how much she could safely tell.

The Galleon in her pocket flared:

Bring copy of P Corium to DADA after lessons

Nice, she thought, hurt. Terribly romantic of you, Professor. 'Good morning' too much to ask for, I suppose, or even 'please would you'..

The Galleon grew hot with another message: all the runes encircling the hippogriff on the coin's reverse turned into tiny, perfectly wrought, full-blown roses, each glowing red as it appeared, then fading to gold.

Oh. GOD. How to contain this feeling? *Must run now.* She Summoned her trainers. Collected herself. Sent one message:

certainly

and another: each rune spinning on its axis in a giddy dance.

A/N: Of course you knew we weren't done with Percipio Corium quite yet. :D

Thanks to hechicera and lifeasanamazon for the beta/Brit-pick.

Concealment

Chapter 31 of 36

Some secrets are mostly kept; some are partially revealed.

Disclaimer: *luvs JKR *luvs using JKR stuffs *promises to put JKR stuffs back when done *backs out of throne room bowing

'Lick it. Please.'

She grinned and took the spoon from him.

'To think, young as I am, that I would live to hear those three words from your mouth. And not for the last time, I'll wager.'

'A vestige of your accustomed deference would not be amiss, Miss Granger. The merest scrap, really. I'd rather this conversation not descend into lewd innuendo.'

'Innuendo is off limits, then, sir? You prefer your lewdness to be more explicit?' She wriggled a bit in his lap, reaching her spoonless hand down to his belt buckle.

'As you know.' He lifted her hand away. 'The spoon, Hermione. Put it in your mouth.'

She leaned forward and whispered, 'Unfair. Why won't you let me have the double meaning?' Pulling back, she looked him in the eye and stuck the spoon in her mouth, dragging it slowly out over her tongue. 'Here.'

He snatched it away and thrust it in his pocket, then, as quick as a snake, caught both her wrists in his hands and held them up and away from his body.

'Now then. Say it.'

""It.""

'Are you drunk?'

'Yes. I'm drunk on your, um, your charms. And your blandishments.' She was smiling. 'I've missed you all day long. I can't be serious now.'

The afternoon sun slanting in to the mezzanine office washed across their thighs...his encased in black, hers draped in grey. He let go of her hands and pushed her skirt halfway up her legs so that the sunlight fell on her bare skin. Her breath caught.

Five days into their affair he was learning that his sternness brought out her playfulness. Which was fine...even rather delightful...within limits. He kept his expression flat. 'We don't have much time.' He made circles with his thumbs on the fine skin of her inner thighs, and she shivered. 'Tell me what you want.'

She cast her eyes up to the ceiling and spoke as if she were ticking items off a checklist. 'I want your hands on me. That's taken care of, so that's, mmm, that's good. I want you to, uh, to kiss me.'

Ravaging the base of her throat, he thought, *I'm storing up your taste for tonight* He breathed her in.

She reached again for his belt buckle and worked at it as she spoke: 'I want...you...to be wearing one...less...pair...of trousers.'

He stood, lifting her with him, and the trousers dropped. Her face and neck were aflame. 'I want you to put me on that desk,' gesturing towards it, 'and, and make, um, make love to me. On the desk.' *Repeating the important part.* A staple of her fantasies, he knew.

He deposited her on the warm wood.

* * *

15 May 1997

H

I AM LIKE THE TOMB! I HAVE ALREADY BURNED THE LAST TWO! SPILL!

Yr obedient servant

J

* * *

There was a gallery around the main reading room of the Hogwarts library. Three sides were threaded with narrow rows of bookcases; the fourth side held two rows of small tables.

The tables, bright with sunlight from the tall windows, were entirely empty on this Saturday morning. Hermione chose a table against the gallery railing and heaved her book bag onto one of the chairs. She stood for a moment, rubbing her neck and shoulder where the strap had dug into the flesh.

Today would be a serious work day. For most of the week, she had been coasting on the reading she had already done. Her work in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes was lacklustre. She'd weaseled out of as much prefect work as she could. She needed to pull her socks up, academically speaking.

However, this morning, research on the Marauders' Map was first on her agenda, and she walked over to the History of Magical Creatures section in search of Lawrence Larrabee's *Whose Treasure?*

An hour later, she pushed the book away and looked down at her notes, and at the copy she'd made of Larrabee's translation of the goblin spell that had been used to map the Castle of Dunsany. It was no help. What she needed was something that could fool or distort a Protean Charm. Where should she start looking?

The Galleon in her pocket went hot, and she pulled it out.

Are you alone?

Heart pounding, she transmitted *yes* and closed her hand around the coin.

The scrape of a chair across the polished stone floor made her jump.

Without asking if he could join her, Seamus swung the chair around beside her table and sat astride it, arms crossed over the chair back.

Hermione shoved the Galleon in her pocket, feeling it flare anew as she did so. *Oh BOTHER!*

'Morning, Mione. Thought I might find you here.' Seamus smiled, a complicated sort of smile that didn't reach his eyes.

'Seamus, hello; I, um...'

'I know. You're busy; been busy all week.' He gestured at her book and parchment. 'Please just let me say something I've been wanting and trying to say to you.'

'Um, couldn't we...' *Seamus, LEAVE so I can read my message!*

'Please.'

He wasn't going to leave until she let him speak. 'Okay,' she said, trying not to sound ungracious.

An invisible hand with a callused palm and long, rough-textured fingers slid into hers, and she quickly pulled her hand from the tabletop into her lap.

Which was not the best place for it just now: she felt Severus's thumb begin to stroke the top of her thigh. She squeezed his phantom hand, yanked it away from her leg, and pinned it back on the tabletop.

'...so sorry about that. I wanted to tell you how I felt about you and I think I was scared, so I drank too much and acted like an eejit. I wanted... I want... I'd like to start again. Hermione?'

'Ye...um, yes?' Severus's hand had gone, thank god. He must have got the extremely unsubtle hint.

'Would you, erm, would you have tea with me at Madam Puddifoot's next Saturday? I'd like to just, you know, talk. Get to know one another better.'

Was that...? Yes it was a very soft kiss on her temple. Two. Three. *Madman!* She began quarreling with him in her head.

Seamus was waiting for an answer.

'S-Saturday? I wasn't planning to go into Hogsmeade,' she said distractedly and gestured at her overflowing book bag. 'I'm so, um, *sstretched*.' She raked her hands into her hair as if to demonstrate her level of stress and anxiety, but really to dislodge Severus.

'Just for an hour.' Seamus leaned forward, lines of earnest pleading etching his forehead. 'One hour, two friends having tea. That's all.'

And the damnable man was shifting her hair so he could kiss the side of her neck. Seamus cocked his head and squinted. 'Hermione, what just happened to your hair?'

She stood up, knocking over her own chair in her haste. 'Seamus! This is not a good time, can't we talk another, oh! another time?'

He set his jaw. 'Yes, we can. Next Saturday at Madam Puddifoot's. I won't leave until you say yes.'

'Yes, then, yes, fine. Okay. Now I *really* need to get a book from over there.' She pointed to the other side of the gallery. 'Next Saturday,' she said over her shoulder as she hurried away towards the sheltering stacks.

We need some new ground rules, clearly. What was he thinking, using it during the day?

* * *

Severus was thinking, *If you only knew, Potter. While you sit in detention and pine for your redheaded girlfriend, I am in the next room kissing my girl. Who is not your girl, but quite entirely mine.*

True, the kissing was not going so well. Hermione's responses were less than welcoming.

His Galleon flared.

Stop! Not alone! Seamus came...bad timing. Tonight?

Finnegan. *He fancies her.* Severus curled his lip. *Too late, Mr Finnegan. Play the mooncalf all you want; she's taken.*

Still, Finnegan was with her right now and he was not. Severus swept out of his private laboratory and into his sitting room, where Potter sat sullenly shuffling through manky old scraps of parchment. Severus's mood had gone sour. Now it was just him and Potter, and the air was thick with their mutual resentment.

Severus stalked over to Potter's side and flicked his eyes over the boy's work. 'When you're done with those,' he gestured, 'start on these.' And he kicked a big box on the floor. Dust puffed out of it, and two silverfish scuttled away.

Potter scowled. 'Yes. Sir.'

Severus threw himself into his desk chair. He'd have to take his satisfaction in the usual way...by spreading the loathing around. He reached for his marking quill and his pot of blood-red ink.

After a time he found he had raised his eyes from his work and was staring at the top of Potter the Younger's dark, unruly head.

He put down his quill and leaned back in his chair as cascades of thought followed memory followed association, leading him along paths he'd been avoiding...and ending, finally, in resolve.

* * *

17 May 1997

Dear J

You can always make me laugh...how is that? I love you for it.

You will probably laugh and shake your head at me when I tell you I first drafted this letter the same day I sent the last one off...I have so much to tell and so much to conceal (at least until I can talk to you in person) that I wanted to sort it out in advance.

So. You remember how we speculated I'd get back to school in September and decide I had been out of my mind to think he was all that wonderful? Because he is NOT conventionally handsome, or charming, or kind. Odd-looking, prickly, and terrifying, more like.

Well, I did not snap out of it. I fell into it more and more...I let myself. He became a huge fantasy object for me. Completely in secret, of course. He never suspected; no one did.

Then, in December, a couple of weeks before the holidays, he was very badly hurt. He almost died, really. It was then I realised I was actually in love with him, which was a bad shock, because truly I thought I was just having a rather epic lust-crush. It's FUN to feel that way, all swoony. You know what I mean (two words: David Buchan).

He took a while to recover fully, and while he did, I was assigned to be his teaching assistant. (I can just imagine the look on your face, Jill. I truly didn't angle for the position.) And in January, after he recovered, he asked if I would continue to help him.

So we began meeting every Tuesday evening, getting friendlier all the time. And by 'friendlier' I mean I might have seen him half-smile at me once or twice, and he did (faintly, backhandedly) praise my work. But he stopped, more or less, scowling at me. And we TALKED about just everything. His main subject is chemistry, but he's brilliant on politics and physics and history too. It was wonderful to have someone who could really meet me intellectually. And it was horrible because now of course I was completely, utterly mad for him, and hopeless about it.

Then, last Saturday (just last Saturday...it's hard to believe), I let slip to him how I felt about him. I mean, really let it slip. I'll just say that alcohol was involved (on my part), and that I didn't intend for him to find out. But he did. And, as it happened, he had been fighting feelings for me, too. We both resisted a bit longer...as much as we could, really...then we stopped resisting. We kissed, and we did more than kiss. That's when I wrote you the first letter.

Tuesday night we slept together. I have no words to tell you how wonderful it was. If you were here and could see my face, you would know. It was better, by orders of magnitude, than anything I could have imagined...and for my first time, which I was sure I would have to more or less endure. He was unbelievably attentive and careful with me. I think it did hurt for a minute there, but just... well, words truly do fail me. Even on a second draft of this letter. It was pure murder to have to leave him when curfew came.

We've managed to find ways to be together since then. It's never enough, of course.

And yes, I'm aware it may be a doomed affair. I hope not, and I avoid thinking about it day to day. But there is so much conspiring against us...

You've known me for so long, Jill. You know how I crave what's rational and ethical, and how I love to plan my life down to the smallest detail. This thing goes against all those impulses. Yet it feels as important and right as everything I've felt was important and right before. I can't adequately explain the excellence of his character...of his whole being. He is flawed, I can see that...he can be high-handed, impatient, bad-tempered, vindictive. But beneath the surface I see someone stronger and braver than anyone I've ever met.

I became aware while writing this letter that there's no way I will not come off sounding like a delusional schoolgirl...even to you, a sympathetic friend. And maybe I am. But I am in this now and I will not willingly let it go.

Thank you for listening to me, and try not to worry. It is, above all, an Adventure. And I am, above all, happy.

Love

H

Dinnertime was long past, but the evening sun still lit the southern faces of the hills and brought out the warm amber colours in the gallery tables.

Students dotted the chairs and tables in the library...mostly fifth-years and seventh-years cramming for OWLs and NEWTs. The great school clock began to strike the hour. Nine. Bleary eyed and stiff from sitting too long, Hermione rose and began slowly to place her books and writing materials in her bag, leaving until last the Muggle-stamped envelope addressed to Jill, which she tucked into the bag's front pocket.

She would run up to the Owlery to send it, then go and work in the common room until bedtime. Severus would use Percipio Corium to join her around eleven. She was so tired, she didn't know how late she'd be able to stay awake with him.

They were getting better at the incorporeal having-sex part of the spell, though *that* was always so much better when they were in the same room with each other and could hear and see and taste and smell as well as touch. But she did love being able to fall asleep in his arms each night, or to feel him drift off in her embrace. How wonderful it would be to watch him sleep...

Oh, well.

The day had been very productive: she was caught up with DADA marking, had drafted her Charms essay due Tuesday and created a bibliography for her HoM paper due in two weeks; done all her assigned reading in three classes for the week; and, best of all, had an idea that might help her solve the Map problem. She'd look into it tomorrow, around the four tutoring sessions she had scheduled and the rest of her assigned reading.

She could see that weekends would have to be like this. If there were to be two days in a row during which she wouldn't be alone with Severus...couldn't have the satisfaction of looking her fill and talking to him unreservedly...those days would need to be filled with work and more work. Work would save her.

She felt the heat of her Galleon through her jeans pocket.

I am in the stairway alcove. Are you free?

Oh, thank god, she thought fervently. *Yes. On my way now from library.* She would send the letter in the morning.

His wards rippled around her as she opened the fourth-floor door into the stairwell. She walked down to the landing and deposited her bag on the floor beneath the window embrasure.

Severus was sitting on the ledge, arms resting on his knees, long hands dangling. He held one hand out to help her climb onto the ledge, then wordlessly pulled her to him so she was sitting between his tented legs, her back to his chest. Sighing, she let her head fall back against his shoulder and rested her forearm along the top of his arm, which encircled her waist.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, looking out of the window as daylight left the sky. The courtyard had long been in shadow, but they could see the tops of the south-facing wall of Gryffindor Tower and its adjoining battlement glowing in the pinkish light of the declining sun.

'This has been a place of mine since my second year at Hogwarts,' he said finally, his voice harsh and halting. 'That is now... twenty-five years.'

Hermione said nothing, waiting for him to speak.

He cleared his throat and swallowed. 'My best friend and I would meet here and talk and read and smoke cigarettes. She was a Muggleborn, like you.' He buried his nose in her hair and breathed in and out, and fell silent for a minute or so.

'I never thought I'd know such a person again. Someone clever and kind and, and lovely who would look at me and see...someone worth caring for.' He made a little sound somewhere between a grunt and a sigh. 'She and I...we didn't end well. And I came to believe that friendship and... trust... and... affection... were beyond me.' He seemed to be pulling the stubborn words out, like rusty nails stuck in a board.

Still she said nothing, though her heart was racing.

'Then you came.' A short, mirthless laugh. 'Now, of all times, at the very edge of disaster.' His arm tightened almost painfully about her midsection and his voice grew low and fierce. 'This desirable, brilliant, brave, generous, resourceful, strong, *good* girl, offering herself to me as my friend and my lover.'

She stifled a gasp and tears began to well up in her eyes, but she was silent yet.

'Do you remember,' he said, 'the first time we met here? It was in December.'

'The night of Professor Slughorn's party,' she murmured.

'Yes. I was weak and sick from my injuries. And it had been a grim day for me, though certainly no grimmer than many. I came in search of a moment of quiet, and here you were, in my quiet place. I was not best pleased about it.'

'I remember that.' She smiled slightly into the twilight. 'You looked very tired. I was so surprised to see you, because I'd just been thinking about you.'

'The hearts?'

'Yes.'

He squeezed her. 'Well, *you* looked lovely. And I was short with you, and you gave me a radiant smile.'

He wrapped his other arm around her and leaned forward to rest his chin on her shoulder. 'I have spent much of the day thinking about the last few months, including that night, when I believe the weakening of my reserve began.'

'Hermione.' His voice was just above a whisper. 'I should not be holding you now. I should never have begun... holding you. My actions of the last week have been almost criminally foolish, selfish, and dangerous.'

She began to speak, trying to turn to face him. 'Shhh,' he said, tightening his arms again. 'Wait. I mean, please wait.'

'Just tell me,' she pleaded, twisting to look at him, her tears flowing freely now. 'Are you, are you breaking it off with me?'

'I... am not.' She sagged back against him in relief. 'That's too simple a solution.' She stiffened.

'I am not breaking it off with you,' he repeated. 'What I am doing is ending the pretense that we can go on blithely shagging one another as if our... desires... and our actions don't exist within a larger context.'

'We don't pretend that,' she protested, wiping at her tearstained cheeks. 'We take extraordinary precautions! I know the stakes are high. You could lose your position. It would be dreadful if we were found out.'

His spoke very softly. 'That's not what I'm talking about. There are far worse risks we run.'

'You, you mean war things? Things to do with your, um, your other job? With V-Voldemort?'

'Don't!' he growled. 'Don't say his name.'

Now she did turn around to face him, backing up so that she was sitting on her heels on the expanse of stone ledge opposite him. 'Why not? That's superstition, surely.'

'Names have power, Hermione. There are whole disciplines and traditions of Naming magic that we barely touch on at Hogwarts...they would be more or less in Sybill Trelawney's bailiwick, Merlin help us. That doesn't mean these magics are either insignificant or innocuous. Avoiding speaking the Dark Lord's name is prudent practice.'

'Oh.' Hermione suddenly felt small and scared. There had been a time when the mention of some unexplored magic would have thrilled her and propelled her towards the library on a mission of discovery.

A Hogwarts education was supposed to ready her to take her place in the wizarding world. She also needed it to be preparing her to fight in an apocalyptic war for the future of that world. But she was finishing her sixth year at Hogwarts, and her professor was telling her there were powerful magics that were utterly beyond her knowledge. This was not thrilling; it was terrifying.

'Hermione,' said Severus. The harsh lines of his face were softened in the dying light, his dark eyes glinting in the shadows. 'The last week with you has been a kind of heaven for me. You can have no idea. But this heaven is coexistent with a sort of hell. I can no longer cling to the one and ignore the other. And that means you and I have to make some decisions soon.'

He'd said 'you and I.' Not just 'I.' She took heart from it. 'What decisions? And when?'

Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but she thought a faint smile crossed his face. 'We have a great deal to discuss, and we'll need time and privacy. Tuesday evening will work.'

Tuesday! 'That's a long time from now,' she said sharply. 'It's rather unfair of you to scare me like this, then say we'll take it up again in three days.'

'Perhaps it is unfair. But Tuesday is within the realm of possibility. Just now, curfew is approaching,' he said, reaching out a hand to take hers. 'Come here and kiss me before you have to leave.'

She crawled forward over the stone and crouched between his legs, reaching out to touch his cheek. 'I've wanted to kiss you all day.' She sniffled.

'I typically start wanting to kiss you the moment I leave off kissing you,' he murmured, and kissed her.

* * *

20 May 1997

Dearest darlingest H

Huzzah for Adventure and Happiness!

But of course I am worried. I don't want to see you hurt, and I'm afraid you will be. I hope he is as deserving as you think he is... 'odd-looking, bad-tempered, and vindictive' as he may be!

I eagerly yet patiently await further news, and when I see you in June will of course kidnap you and tie you to a chair until you spill ALL the glorious details. There will be none of this 'words fail me' business. Fair warning.

Love

J

PS: Your last? Torched, and the ashes ground to a fine powder and binned. Jxx

* * * * *

A/N: Gratefulest thanks to the epically generous hechicera and lifeasanamazon for betaing and Brit-picking this chapter (three days earlier than requested!) and everything else I send their way. They are Just. So. Awesome.

Scarred

Chapter 32 of 36

Severus encounters two birds, two masters, two magical familiars, and two lovers. It's almost too much.

Disclaimer: Hers.

As Monday night became Tuesday morning, Hermione drifted to sleep in Gryffindor Tower, nestled into the crook of her lover's arm.

Deep in the dungeons, Severus had nearly followed suit when the nerve-stripping pain of a summons sent him stumbling out of bed, hands outstretched for the trousers draped over his bedroom chair and then, in a very few minutes, out into the springtime darkness towards the Apparition point.

He paused outside the school gates, working to get his mind right. Tonight it was... difficult... to shake off the soft languor of the lover and muster the hard alertness of the spy.

Through the rune-encrusted door of the Lestranges' Apparition chamber he walked, along the passage to the stairs, up one flight and out into the torchlit hall. His eyes slid over the by-now-familiar paintings as he walked towards the library. Rodolphus's grandparents had been collectors of Chinese art, and the walls of the first floor corridors were lined with the serene-faced portraits of someone else's ancestors, splendid in their brocaded silks.

A serpent-thin jade dragon writhed on its pedestal to the right of the library door, eyes bulging and teeth bared.

Just as Severus reached for the door handle, Nagini undulated into sight farther down the corridor, herself headed for the library, it seemed. Severus held the door open for the huge snake, but instead of passing through immediately, she reared up, and up some more, until she was looking down at him.

This close, Nagini smelt faintly of putrid flesh and almost-fresh blood, of mouldy stone and something like scorched metal. The snake's body was not resurrected from blood and bone and malice, but her scent was still the Dark, charnel-house reek of her master. She was entirely his creature in a way no human servant could be...not even Bellatrix.

Nagini held herself over Severus, her pale tongue flicking, for a long, intimidating moment before oozing leisurely down to the carpet and through the door. Pushing her head up over the back of the chair before the fire, she hissed and clacked in her master's ear.

'Severus. I hope I have not taken you away too soon from a more enjoyable activity?' Tom Riddle's smile was the usual ghastly rictus. 'Nagini tells me you smell *afex*. Please tell me it's a story worth hearing. Did you manage to smuggle a whore into Hogwarts? Or have you breached Minerva McGonagall's plaid knickers?'

Severus knelt and kissed the desiccated hand. 'Neither, my lord. I'd just had a bit of a wank when the summons came.' He shrugged. 'One does, you know, from time to time.'

Bellatrix, who had been lounging at one side of the mantel pushing the point of a poker into her own palm, erupted with sudden laughter. 'Ikkle Sevvikins and his left hand! Call the *Prophet*...our Snapey's not a pathetic, dried-up wanker after all,' she crowed, singsong. 'He's a pathetic, *mmmmoooooiiissstt* wanker.'

'Tell me, Sevvie.' Bella's plush mouth curled into a moue. 'Do you have to get yourself a little...*whiskeyish* before you find the nerve to *do it*?' She darted her tongue out and flicked it back in. 'Because that's how I remember it. But once you got going... well.' She walked up to him and drew a fingernail down his cheek. He held himself still, loose-limbed and radiating boredom.

'The blood showed soooo nicely on your white young skin.' She leaned in still closer, stage-whispering in his ear now: 'Do you still have the scar? I have *vine*. Call me sentimental.' She licked his closed lips, then turned and sashayed back to the fireplace, dragging the sooty poker behind her across the carpet.

'Sentimental' was the last epithet Severus could ever assign to the mad girl who had relieved him of his virginity when he was seventeen, at a sort of infant Death Eater revel organised by Charles Mulciber.

That was back when taking the Mark had felt like being reborn into a life of possibility and power...the life that he deserved.

Children and their illusions.

He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his mouth. 'I'm touched,' he said in a tone that meant otherwise. Then he turned to Riddle. 'My lord, shall we get to business?' He extracted a roll of parchment from his pocket.

One good thing about Bella's theatrics: they had deflected Riddle's attention from the fact that Severus's 'wank' had been anything but.

He filed away the problem of Nagini and her olfactory gifts. Just another obstacle to overcome, and overcome it he would.

Bellatrix was waiting in the corridor when Severus left the library. The Dark Lord had dismissed her from the room when he and Severus began to speak of Dumbledore's comings and goings. Partly, Riddle knew Bella hated Severus and it amused him to exclude her from the conversation. But mostly, he liked to keep pieces of his operation from all his lieutenants, so that he alone saw the whole picture as it came together.

And it was coming together. Severus could sense it in Voldemort's mood, which was smooth and magnanimous. Riddle showed none of the peevish cruelty or paranoia he evinced when Things weren't Going His Way. The strings he had attached...to the Ministry, to Hogwarts, to Azkaban, to key commercial interests, to certain foreign governments, to the *Daily Prophet*, and to assorted nonhuman magical communities...were in his hands.

It was almost time. Which meant Severus's work for the night was far from over. He'd need to glean what he could from whomever was knocking around the Lestranges' tonight.

But first, here was Bella sprawled cross-legged on a low settee, the blackened poker across her lap leaving smudges on her red velvet evening robes. She scowled up at him from under a gleaming curl that dangled before her eyes. Then she rose and held out her hand to him.

'We missed you at dinner, Severus. Again. I shall begin to think you don't enjoy our company,' she simpered.

He bent over her hand and brushed the knuckles with his lips. Bella's mood changed constantly, but one thing stayed the same: her testing for weakness. Following her

lead meant ceding power in this game, but at the moment he needed to remain in her house. So he played along, for now.

'Bellatrix, the food and the company in your house are without parallel. Sadly, so little of my time is my own, especially during the week. But,' he offered her his arm, 'I am eager to make up for it now. Is anyone at billiards, or...?'

She looked at him archly, still in her hostess role. 'Well, I think Alecko Carrow and Yaxley may be upstairs*fucking*, or whatever they do, but most of us are still down here. The Dark Lord is seeing people individually tonight so we're all keeping each other company. Billiards and brandy, very wholesome.' She held two fingers up to her mouth to stifle a fake yawn.

'Yes, the Dark Lord asked me to send in Yaxley,' Severus said.

'Oh, the Ministry report. This is apparently an evening of foreshortened pleasures.' She sighed theatrically and snapped her fingers. A surly looking house-elf Apparated in and bowed. 'Tosh. Find Mr Yaxley and tell him to take his tiny cock out of Miss Carrow's fat arse; he's needed in the library.' Tosh blanched, bowed again, and cracked away.

They were nearly at the door to the billiards room when Bellatrix stopped and dug her fingers into Severus's arm. He looked down at her, and didn't like what he saw.

'Se-ve-rus,' she whisper-sang. 'You know I hate you. You are and always have been a greasy, sneaky, lying, worthless little shit.' Her tone was caressing. She began scratching bloody little lines into the back of his hand with her fingernails. 'Let's have a fuck, shall we? For old times' sake? All this talk has me *itchy*.' She licked the blood from his hand and, dropping her poker, reached both of her arms up to pull his mouth down to hers. 'I could still make you *scream*, you know.' For the second time that evening she dragged her tongue across his lips, then thrust it between them and into his mouth. For the second time, he kept himself loose and unresponsive.

After an interminable second or two, she drew back and slapped him, hard, twice. 'You are a dried-up wanker,' she yowled, and let herself go into gales of laughter, doubling over and yodeling, 'Sevvie is a wan-ker, Sevvie is a wan-ker!' She'd reverted to some shrill playground version of herself.

He looked down at her flatly, then strode past her to open the door to the billiards room. He was done with this game.

The room and the adjoining drawing room were full of people, including...*gods, is that...?* two members of the Wizengamot Severus had never seen under the Lestranges' roof before. *Truly, it's almost time.*

Rodolphus was chalking his cue. Severus let him take his shot before announcing, in a carrying voice, 'Lestranger, your wife is in need of some attention.' He indicated the door he'd just entered by, through which hooting and screeching sounds filtered. 'You might take your cue with you. She's armed.'

As he swept over to join the group around one of the Wizengamot members, he felt a phantom hand on his cheek. Without breaking stride, he mentally closed his finger and thumb over Hermione's earlobe...their signal for *not safe*. Her touch left him, and he held out his hand for Dolores Umbridge to shake.

* * *

The road just outside the school gates was shaded on one side by tall, old trees; the other side was edged by a meadow that sloped down to the edge of the lake, which was close in here. In late spring, the early morning sun raised a low mist over lake, meadow, road, and wood before its growing strength at midmorning melted the vapours away.

Severus paused at the gate after Apparating. Luminous mists swirled around his knees, but his upper body and face were in clear light as he looked out over the lake. Wavelets lapped the spot on the grassy shore where he'd lain cold and broken in December; where, for a moment, he'd almost given up.

Choosing life then had been almost purely an act of rage. He hadn't been willing to freeze in the mud like an animal, like... some miserable Muggle without the power or the sense to save himself.

He slipped in through the gates and, plunging into dimness as trees closed ranks on both sides of the road, began to make his way up towards the castle. He was spent...mentally, spiritually, physically exhausted. His watch told him he'd missed his appointment with Minerva; he'd apologise at breakfast...if he made it to breakfast. First he would need to get up to Dumbledore's office and make his report. *So little time.*

A little brown songbird...a skylark...skimmed out of the trees in front of him and flew trilling into the open sky overhead. It was a male looking for his mate. Severus's heart began to beat faster, and he felt his magic welling up in him and singing along his skin.

And sure enough, here she came around a bend in the road, pink and panting, with her hair scraped back into a high ponytail. He stopped short...his heart might really be about to burst.

'Severus!' Her greeting was pure joy and surprise, and she pelted into his arms. 'What are you doing out here at this hour and...' she drew back, wrinkling her nose and her brow 'in yesterday's clothes? Oh, you look done in! Oh!' Her horror was written across her face. 'Last night, you... You've been *out*! To, to, *there*! To THEM!'

She stepped away the better to look at him, frantically running her gaze over him. 'Are you hurt?' She seized his hand, where Bella's scratches had crusted over with dried blood. 'Your poor hand.' She cradled it in both hers, gently kissing the hurts, and he felt a tear fall on his skin.

That broke him. Growling, he seized her hand and pulled her roughly up the embankment and into the wood. As soon as they were out of sight of the road, he slammed her back against a tall elm and, imprisoning her between his arms and the tree, began to kiss her brutally.

Tense and stunned for a minute, she pushed at him and tried to twist her face away from his onslaught. He held her still and plunged his tongue into her mouth over and over, scraped his teeth over her lips, mashed his mouth into hers until she could, surely, hardly catch breath.

Finally, he let her push him back a fraction. He caught her head between his hands and thrust his face into hers. 'Kissing it...better...doesn't...make it...better,' he ground out.

As soon as he said it he knew it was a lie. And he wanted to howl in despair at the look on her face. Hurt. Betrayal. Fear.

Then she flushed with anger. She pushed him far enough away that she could begin pounding on his chest.

'Never! Do that! Again! Never! Never! Never! Do that to me! Ever!' She shoved him and he fell back a step. She shoved him again, then wrapped her arms around herself and began to sob.

What... am I doing? What have I done? Severus stood and watched Hermione cry. He wanted to bolt. *Fucked it all up now, you have. You're done.* He wanted to fall on his knees and beg her forgiveness, swear he'd never do it again. *Need her; I can't lose her now.* He wanted the last ten minutes not to have happened; he wanted to have met her tenderness with something that was not *insanity*. He wanted to *understand* what had just happened. How could he swear he wouldn't do that again if he didn't even know why he did it once?

Tell her the truth. It was the softest of voices in his mind.

The truth. 'Hermione. I am so sorry. I... don't understand why I did that. It's true I've been with,' he swallowed, 'with my colleagues all night. I'm tired and *frightened*

'worried. And I... when I go there, I make myself hard and cold. When I come back, I have to... readjust to a slightly more civilised style.

'This is...' he shifted his weight and ran a hand through his lank hair, 'this is no excuse. There's no excuse for that kind of behaviour. Especially. Ahm. Especially aimed at you, from me. I think, I think I don't yet know how to square *you with that*.' He waved his hand back towards the gates. 'You are its antithesis. The way you make me feel is the antithesis of how I am when I am... out there.'

Some light was starting to fall on the problem as he talked. And she had raised her head and was looking at him searchingly, her face raddled with crying and spent anger.

'That can't happen again,' she said, and snuffled.

'No,' he said, and waited.

She stepped closer to him and, once again, took his hand in both hers. She raised it to her lips and kissed the broken skin, then looked up at him with a frown. 'Kissing DOES make it better,' she admonished him. 'This.' She kissed the back of his hand again, gently, then turned it over and kissed his palm. 'Not whatever you were doing over there.' She gestured towards the tree. Then she folded his hand up to his chest and left it there, resting over his heart.

'I'm, I'm going to go now,' she said. 'I'll see you this evening, and we'll talk more.'

'Yes,' he said.

She walked a few steps, then stopped and turned. 'You should know... my, *myheart* is with you. Remember that.' She turned again and ran off through the trees to the road, her ponytail swinging.

His wounded hand clutched convulsively at his waistcoat as he watched her go.

* * *

'Dolores Umbridge and Cathal Symmes. I see.' Albus looked grim and tired, but unsurprised at the news. 'The end of our days, Severus. I need... if I can hold on for another few weeks, I'm almost...' He trailed off, sighed.

Severus stood up and walked around the desk to kneel beside Albus's chair. 'Let me see it.' He carefully lifted the old wizard's dead hand and pushed the sleeve up. 'Best to take this off, please.' Albus stood and shrugged out of his heavy robes, letting them fall on his chair. He rolled up his shirtsleeve and sat down again.

The curse had blackened the arm up past the elbow, and tendrils of darkness were beginning to snake up into the still-living flesh of Albus's upper arm and shoulder. Severus took out his wand and, gathering his intention, sang a verse or two of the healing charm from between parched lips. 'It holds. Mostly. As I'm sure you know. I'll bring you more potion in the morning; it's nearly ready.'

He rocked back on his heels, and Albus laid a finger on the back of his left hand. 'What's this?'

Severus almost laughed. 'As you can see, those are a few superficial scratches. Not important how I got them, and they'll be gone in two days.'

Albus raised a bushy white eyebrow. 'I see. I can see you're thirsty, too.' He rose and plucked a crystal glass from a shelf behind his desk. He filled it and, as Severus drank, he walked over to Fawkes's perch and exchanged a bit of song with the phoenix.

Severus set the empty glass on Albus's desk and raised his eyes to see Fawkes picking his way over parchments and books to stand before him and fix him with his golden eye.

The phoenix trilled low in its throat, a single throbbing cellolike note, and snaked its head closer and still closer to Severus's face. A tear dropped from the bird's beak and splashed on the back of Severus's hand, sending warmth radiating up into his arm and the rest of his body.

'Thank you, Fawkes,' Severus said, his mouth gone suddenly dry again. He looked down at his hand, coarsened with old scars and smooth with the new skin wrought by the phoenix's tear. It was absurd that this most inconsequential of wounds should receive so much care. And yet. He felt profoundly grateful that it should be so.

* * * * *

A/N: Hi beloved readers. Well, that put some of the 'angst' back in 'angsty romance.' Makes me want to cry, *Why* does everything have to be so *hard* for them? Why can't they just be *happy*?, and I'm *writing* this thing. And yet, I love the angst. Obviously. ☺

Thanks to hechicera and lifeasanamazon, stalwarts and dear friends, who once again turned this chapter around on a dime.

Sweet Appetite

Chapter 33 of 36

Hermione takes charge.

Disclaimer: Canon got you down? Me too. That's why I am writing this piece of anonymous, nonremunerative fan fiction whose characters I do not own or claim.

* * * * *

She wanted to sit down in the middle of the road and cry. But instead she ran back towards the school.

She was scared. She wanted to be with him.

Can't, he needs time, I need space, it's not okay what he did, but think where he's been, horrible, and he's worried, and his hand is bloody, and he says he's in hell and we need to talk, oh GOD why can't I just be holding him now, how can it be right to not be holding him, but that was SO AWFUL...

And round in circles she went in her mind. Finally, running up the stairs to the castle door, she thought, *I'll see him at breakfast, see how he looks.*

He wasn't at breakfast. She sat there for half an hour, pretending to read and picking at a piece of toast, and he never came.

And he wasn't at lunch. She was there for the entire hour, her stomach in knots. This was unbearable.

There were twenty minutes before afternoon lessons started. Hermione ducked through a small door off the entrance hall. She pulled out her Galleon.

I am in entrance hall cloakroom. Worried about you. Come if you are near.

* * *

Three minutes and forty-five seconds was what it took to get from the staff room to the entrance hall if one was in a hurry. Not running flat out...that wouldn't be wise...but *moving fast*.

Through the door, close it, survey the room *there she is!*, lock and ward it. *Breathe*. Turn around and...she was in his arms, squeezing him hard and spilling a torrent of words into his waistcoat.

'Oh thank you, thank you for coming. I kept thinking I'd see you in the Great Hall but you never came, and I felt like I couldn't wait until tonight to be sure you're okay and to tell you *I'm* okay and I'm not angry and I wish I could be with you every minute today. And also this.'

She pulled his face down to hers and kissed him once and twice with soft, closed-mouth kisses, then pressed her lips to his, urging his apart with gentle persistence. He responded gingerly at first, but he soon forgot his self-consciousness and kissed her hungrily.

'Gods, this is better,' she whispered as he angled his head to get access to her throat. 'Severus.'

'Hermione. I'm sorry. So sorry.'

'Shhhh. I know.' She pulled his face into her neck. 'Shhhh, my darling.'

He crushed her to him and stared out over her head. 'I don't deserve you.'

She laughed a little and smiled up at him. 'Maybe not. Or maybe I don't deserve *you*. Doesn't mean I don't want you. Right now, though, we're going to be late for class.' She reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a little tin. She opened it and showed him that it was half-full of little shards of hard caramel. 'May I hold your hand?'

* * *

The potion wore off an hour before dinner, but Hermione felt it had done its work. Severus had hardly let go of her hand all afternoon.

He was back at his place at the staff table for dinner. She gave herself permission to sit facing him and to very occasionally glance up at him. He looked tired and sour.

After about half an hour he pushed back from the table and stalked out of the room. She sat a few minutes more, hating the circumstances that wouldn't let her follow him.

When she couldn't wait any longer, she pulled out her Galleon and wand under cover of the tablecloth. *Can I come now?* she sent.

A minute, then yes.

When she opened the door to his rooms, he was sitting at his desk marking papers, face closed and shoulders hunched. He pointed his quill at her usual chair. She hesitated, then walked over and sat down. So they were back at this level of formality. *Why?* This was chilling.

Impulsively, she leaned forward and reached her hand across the desk to him. He hesitated, then took it in one of his and caressed it with the other, staring intently at it as he did so. Then he put it down and sat back in his chair.

And began to talk.

* * *

After her first torrent of tears and disbelief...*impossible; Dumbledore can't die, we can't lose him now*...she piled into his lap and tried to talk him out of it. *He can't make you do it; it's against every law and every right thing; it's insane; it's sick; it's horrible; it's suicidal; there must be another way; why you; how can he ask it of you, it's like throwing you away*; and, his favourite, *we'll just have to get you away from England, somewhere safe; you've done enough*

He finally stopped this vein of talk by telling her he had taken an Unbreakable Vow to do this thing. He didn't tell her about Draco and Narcissa's involvement, but a Wand Oath was a Wand Oath and she could neither dismiss it nor find a way to reason him out of it.

She cried again for a while, head burrowed into his chest like a child.

She cries so easily.

'Hermione. Hush. This is the way it has to be. Even without the Wand Oath. I am the only person who can do this. And it will, in a way, keep me safer for a while. Soon Dumbledore won't be here to protect me. If I refused, the Death Eaters would make it their first order of business to hunt me down.'

She wailed, 'Instead, the Order of the Phoenix will make it *their* business to hunt you down!' and started sobbing anew.

He pulled back from her. 'Hermione. Please go and sit in your chair now. I can't say the next part with you in my lap.'

She didn't like it, but she went. He stood and walked over to the fireplace. He ran a finger along the mantelpiece and fixed his gaze on one of the jars lined up there while he spoke.

'Now you know that I'm about to become... a murderer and, if I'm lucky, a fugitive. And you won't be able to defend me, because my success...and my life...will depend on no one knowing what side I'm really on. You must bear the secret with me, and you must continue to hide our, ah, relationship. Or...'

He turned to face her. 'Or I can Oblivate you. Wait, please; let me finish.'

She subsided into her chair.

'I am capable of, hrhmmm, of a very refined, subtle Oblivate. I would use Legilimency to pinpoint both the memories to be elided and the memories that need to be kept...that would be any memory that you know or could infer is shared by someone else; for example, that you are my TA and spend Tuesday evenings here. These memories are sequenced into a potion along with the Oblivate spell, so that when the potion is drunk, Obliviation commences. The side effects are minimal compared to a standard spell-based Oblivate, and the overall, um, *mental fabric* retains a much higher degree of integrity.'

He turned back to the fireplace. 'And,' he murmured, 'if one is careful, it is fully reversible. If... provided we, um, we both survive.'

'Oh!' A pause. 'Oh.' Then silence. She was thinking. He picked up a poker and scraped at the grate. He refused to look at her or give her any sign.

'So,' she said after a while. 'The questions are: can I be trusted to keep your secret; can both of us be trusted to keep our relationship secret; what is our contingency plan if we are found out. What else?'

He closed his eyes. *Beautiful, brilliant girl.*

'Contingency plan if you are captured,' he said quietly.

'Oh.' She turned pale.

'With the Oblivate, all those questions would be moot.'

She snorted wetly. 'Doubtless. But I will agree to the Oblivate only if we cannot *answer* those questions to our satisfaction. The idea of abandoning you or forgetting that I *love* you and starting to *hate* you because you're a *murderer* makes me want to kill someone myself. Starting with your stupid *Dark Lord*. And I might want to hex Professor Dumbledore a lot. If he wasn't,' she gave a little sob, 'if he wasn't already so sick and d-dying.'

She sagged into her chair and began to cry again. He stood where he was, watching her.

'God,' she finally muttered. 'I cry *too much*. We need to sort this out.'

'But first,' she said, rising and walking to him, 'I need to tell you I won't leave you unless I have to. I didn't want to before today, and *certainly* don't want to now.' She put her hands on his shoulders and glared up at him. 'If you and I can't work out together what to do, no one can.'

Surely this was his cue to kiss her. So he did.

* * *

Severus's clock struck nine, and far above the dungeons the school clock did the same.

'We have an hour until curfew,' he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. 'Let's go over it again.'

She referred to the parchment in front of her.

'One. Can I be trusted to keep the secret? This is related to, well, to all of the other questions. I have the glamour and two potions to help maintain my façade. We agreed that I will Oblivate Jill using a standard, spell-based Oblivate, which you will teach me, and that I will make sure those letters have really been destroyed. You will begin training me in Occlumency and Legilimency, though we won't be able to depend on my skills very far. Beyond that, it is a matter of pure trust.' She looked at him. 'I feel I'm up to the task. Do you think I am?'

He looked at her levelly. 'I trust you.'

'Thank you.'

'Two. Can we be trusted to keep our relationship secret?' She sighed. 'We will need to be more careful. No more impromptu meetings. No more s-sex in the DADA classroom.' She blushed. 'Only use Galleons or caramels when we are sure we're alone.'

'Let's see. Oh, yes. You will teach me the full suite of concealing, deflecting, and locking spells you use. You will lend me this book,' she put her hand on it where it lay before her, 'and you won't ask why I need to manipulate a goblin Protean Charm; you will simply trust that I need to do so.'

He scowled. 'That is correct.'

'And overall I will do my best to act as though I don't like you very much.'

'Without overdoing it.'

'Right. A kind of tepid distaste, like you have for me.'

Let's get through this blasted list so I can get you into bed for five minutes, for gods' sake.

'Moving on. Number three. What shall we do if we are caught? This will depend upon circumstances. Each of us must be prepared to make a quick assessment of the risk. Each of us will consult with the other before taking action, unless we judge the risk to be too high. In the case of someone confronting us, we will employ distraction, denial, Confunding, and Obliviation, in that order, as needed.'

How coolly she talked about Confunding and Obliviation. 'Yes. Quite. Next.' He shifted in his chair and tried not to dwell on the many contingencies this plan left open.

'Four.' She swallowed. 'What shall I do if I am captured by Death Eaters?' She raised her eyes from the parchment and stared at him steadily. 'You will make the Oblivate potion for me, pelletize it, and place it in a poisoner's ring that I'll wear on my finger. If I am captured I will t-take it and wipe out my memories of our, our relationship and my feelings for you and my knowledge of your true affiliation.'

And she began to argue again. 'I still don't see why I can't just destroy the part about your loyalties and keep my feelings and memories...'

'We've discussed this, Hermione. For one thing, it leaves too many holes; your feelings of, of affection and your sudden "discovery" that I was a murderer would be so incompatible that you might actually suffer a psychotic break.'

'But if I were captured by Death Eaters, how much would it matter if I went insane? They'd just torture and kill me anyway.'

And I can imagine being forced to do it, to prove myself loyal! Stop talking nonsense; you know very well that it matters,' he said impatiently. 'Our aim is to survive the war, together if we can and separately if we must. If you lose your wits you're likelier to lose your life. And if you Oblivate, I can *bring you back* later. But I cannot cure you if you are mad.'

She looked like she was about to start crying again.

'What else is on the list?'

'Um, number five. My parents are at risk already because of my friendship with Harry, and might be even more if you and I were discovered. They ought to be, to be,' she savagely wiped away a tear, 'relocated. Hidden. Oblivated. Soon. You will help me with this; if we can't organise it safely or in time, I will ask someone else in the Order to help me. You think maybe L-Lupin could do it.'

'Anything else?' he asked, getting ready to rise from his chair. He knew that was all that was on the list.

'No,' she said quietly, staring down at the parchment. 'No. Except... well, except for one thing...'

'What's that?' *It's nine-twenty.* He could feel the minutes slipping away and it was making him angry.

'Why,' she started and fell silent again. Something was percolating in that bushy head.

'Hermione. Speak.'

'Well. Why do we care so much if we're found out? What does it actually matter, in the larger context?' She waved her hand around to indicate the larger context. 'Up till now, I've gone on the assumption that we needed to be very careful because you could lose your position if we were caught. But, god! What exactly will Dumbledore *do* to you if he finds out you've been sleeping with a student? He can't *fire* you; he needs you to *murder* him first. Ha! We are operating in a whole different moral arena, aren't we? Do the normal rules even apply? I'm not sure they do.'

She was up and pacing. 'For that matter, what will He-Who-Is-a-Pile-of-Dragon-Dung do? If you can hide your actual feelings for me, and your *true loyalties* for heaven's sake...if you can hide *those* things, what will it matter if even *he* finds out you've been sleeping with me? Couldn't you make up some horrible little story that would please him, like...I don't know...that you seduced me for a bet, or something like that?'

She stood still in the middle of the carpet, a blazing look on her face. 'All I can see that really matters is that he not know you and Dumbledore were working together...that you pass this insane *loyalty test*. I'm right, aren't I? The rest is secondary. We can wear ourselves out trying to sneak around and planning to club people over the head if we are found out, or we can concentrate on *being together* while we still have the chance.'

He finally found his tongue. 'It would be best if we were not caught.'

She flapped her hand at him dismissively. 'Of course it would. I don't propose to start snogging you in the corridors. We'll be secret, we'll be careful, but we'll keep our focus on what matters: being together as much as we can, and keeping you as safe as possible through this *horrible nightmare* of a *sham murder* that makes me *so angry*.'

She began walking around the room again, ticking points off on her fingers as she spoke. 'I'll keep using the glamour and the potions. I'll still work on the, um, the Protean Charm...and I *wish* I could tell you why; it's just not my secret to tell.

'I'll carry the Obliviate potion because my doing so will protect you if everything goes completely pear-shaped. I think... it's a good idea to Obliviate Jill and my, my parents. Two separate issues, but, um, both important.' Her lip trembled. 'But if I can only *be with* you once a week, and only for another week or two? That is Not. On. No. No. No.'

'Aren't you forgetting something?'

She stopped short and looked at him eagerly. 'Am I? Oh, tell me!'

He curled his lip. 'There are other consequences of discovery. Do you really want everyone at Hogwarts to know you are sleeping with me? And after? How will it be when everyone looks at you with pity and disgust because you had an affair with a murderer and a traitor?' *And a greasy git.*

That seemed to subdue her. 'That would not be very much fun,' she finally said. 'And it will be hard, especially, to know what I know and endure everyone hating you so and not be able to defend you. It will be lonely. But.' She lifted her chin. 'If you can do it, I can do it. I'm not afraid.'

He persisted. 'Your *best friends* would never approve if they knew, even leaving out my *shocking betrayal*. They already loathe me. Surely they'd think I am... *beneath you*.' He let the curtains of his hair fall forward and peered out at her intently, like an animal from its cave.

She was no fool. She could read between the lines. Her mouth fell open in astonishment. 'You think I'd be *ashamed* of you? You think I could *ever* be anything but *proud* that you chose me? I'm, I'm young and, and shrill and *swotty* and a know-it-all and hardly even pretty and just, well, *young*. And I don't exactly have boys lining up at the door for me...well, one maybe, but that's neither here nor there.

'No.' She came over to his chair and curled herself into his lap. 'I know you're not to everyone's taste, and that's fine with me...I'm completely mad about you. Besides, be *damned* to what Harry and Ron might think; what *do they* know? God, Ron spent five months lip-locked with Lavender Brown!' She grimaced.

Hermione threaded the tips of her fingers into his hair, stroking it back behind his ears. 'I sometimes... I don't know how much you've thought about it, or if you think about it at all, but I sometimes think about us after Hogwarts. Just little daydreams of our having dinner together in a nice restaurant, then making our entrance at Grimmauld Place, where we sit next to one another holding hands under the table and sleep in the same bed and Mrs Weasley can't say a thing about it because we're adults and colleagues in the Order and it's none of her business.'

She smiled at him. 'Silly. And now I know *that* probably will never happen. But my point is, you are a prize. My prize.'

She kissed him all over his face...brows, temples, eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth...

I love your silly daydreams, he thought. *I could lose myself in them.*

This is not wise; I'll need to remember what's wise. In a little while I'll remember.

She spoke against his lips, the words tumbling out between kisses: 'It's nearly curfew. But I don't want to leave yet. I want to make love to you now, in your bed. You can walk me home, late. Just this once. Tomorrow we'll be prudent again.'

No wisdom tonight. No prudence. He stood up with her in his arms and carried her into his bedroom.

'Do you know what I want to do?' she asked, slipping down out of his arms onto the bed.

'No.' He yanked at his coat sleeves and shrugged the thing off.

She knelt before him on the bed. Her hands were on his waistcoat. 'I want to unwrap you and kiss you all over. No, I'll lick you all over. Then I want *to ride* you.' The waistcoat was off and she whispered in his ear as she unbuttoned his shirt. 'I want to get on top of you and fuck you into the bed.'

His cock jumped for joy. 'Where did you learn to talk like that?' She never used that word.

'Here and there,' she said offhandedly, smirking at him. 'I love to read. Have an excellent memory. You've taught me a thing or two. Haven't we discussed all this before?'

She pushed his shirt off his shoulders and stared greedily at his chest. She swept her hands, fingers spread wide, from his sternum to his waist and settled them there while she dipped forward to lick and suck one of his nipples. *Jesus FUCK.*

'Mine,' she murmured, and trailed her tongue across to the other nipple. 'Mmmmmine.' She hummed it into his skin. He held her head, buried to the wrists in her wild hair. She kissed and licked her way across his chest and stomach, making him shiver.

'I love this whole part here,' she said, tracing two fingers along his clavicle and out to his left shoulder. And now she sowed kisses all the way down his inner arm, sucking lightly on the skin inside his elbow and continuing along his forearm...treating the Marked flesh as though it were just another expanse of skin...and his wrist, palm, and

finally fingers, which she pulled into the soft cavern of her mouth to suck and kiss.

When she was done with his fingers, she brought her silky wet mouth up to his and kissed him so thoroughly that his lips buzzed with blood.

Meanwhile she undid his trousers. They fell to the floor, and she rested her hands on his hips while she kissed him. She moved one hand to his cock, cupping his balls briefly before skimming her palm up the shaft.

'And I love this,' she whispered, mouth against his ear. 'I love everything about this.'

Now both her hands were on him, stroking him, and she kept talking. 'You know I want to fuck you *everywhere*. Here. In the next room. On the *floor*. Against the *wall*. On the *sofa*. In the *bath*.' Those words in her mouth and her hands on his cock and balls drove him nearly mad, but he kept still, letting her take the lead.

'Imagine this. You are sitting at your desk. I get underneath it and *do this*.' She slipped off the bed and knelt to take his cock in her mouth, slicking the shaft with spit so she could work it with her hand while her tongue and lips swirled around the tip. She hummed and grunted with appetite. He'd never felt more self-satisfied. Though he was getting just a little impatient to get to the *riding* part.

As if sensing this, she looked up at him and said, 'Get on the bed now, please.' There was a little bit of business as she helped him out of his boots and the trousers still pooled around his ankles, and then he was completely naked and sitting on the edge of the bed.

Hermione pointed to herself. 'Clothes on or off? Your choice.'

'Off.' *Ridiculous question.*

'Right.' She smiled and blushed, a delectable combination of brazen and shy. She pushed off her shoes with her toes. 'Now. I'll do the tops, you do the bottoms.' She began unbuttoning her shirt.

Growling, he shoved his hand up under her skirt to pull down her knickers. With the other hand, he unzipped the skirt; it fell to her ankles with the knickers. Her shirt was off and she was unhooking her bra; he reached out to touch her cunt, sliding his fingers through the wet curls at her centre and up between the soft fat lips to her entrance.

She dropped her bra. He looked into her flushed face and pushed a finger into her, crooking it and dragging it back out over the sweet spot inside her. He moved his thumb over her clitoris, then drove two fingers into her.

'Ah, godmmm, that's so good,' she moaned, bracing herself against his shoulders and leaning into him. After a few more strokes, she pushed him onto his back. She skimmed her hand over his cock, which leapt in her palm as though magnetised to her flesh.

'Lie down there.' She pointed. He moved, and she climbed onto the bed, swinging one leg over him to straddle his waist. For a moment she looked down at him, running her hands over his torso. He could feel the wetness of her on his belly, and her sweet, ripe arse pressing against his cock.

She lifted up then and, with a little maneuvering and one false start, positioned herself atop his cock and slowly pushed down onto him. He breathed, worked, to keep himself in check.

Her eyes closed and her mouth fell open as she filled herself. When she opened her eyes they were dark and wild. Bracing herself with her hands, she rose up and drove down again, a smoother stroke this time. A smile crossed her face...triumphant and a little smug...and she bent over to kiss his mouth before concentrating on the task of fucking him into the bed.

He thrust up to meet her, filling his hands with her arse and his eyes with everything else as she rode him. She was... exquisite. Every inch of her was flushed and alive to the feel of him inside her, fucking him, hungry for him. *She loves me, said she loves me*

He reached one hand to finger her clitoris, and with the other he cupped a breast, flicking and pinching at the nipple in rhythm with her strokes. She needed to come soon, because he could not last much longer. She growled and gazed down at him, eyes unfocused, mouth open and panting, her strokes growing more urgent as she reached for her orgasm, and there it was *oh Jesus Christ* squeezing him as she wailed and shook, and he put his hands on her hips and took over driving, driving as she came apart above him and he was getting there and *Oh. FUCK.*

He shouted her name. He burst free of time and space. He was fire and liquid magic and she was the ocean and the earth and the sky and everything he needed to live. He was so fucking *alive*.

She collapsed onto him and they held each other, slick and panting, as the candles on the bedside table guttered and smoked in the hot wax.

* * * * *

A/N: *looks fondly at S&H* I love them together.

Thanks again to my dear greenstuff, hehicera, and lifeasanamazon for beta/Britpick.

Thanks for reading.

Discontent

Chapter 34 of 36

In which pretty much everyone is either angry or upset—often with good reason.

Disclaimer: Still hers!

* * * * *

'How was your *date*?' He sneered down at his worktable, not pausing in his chopping.

She dropped her bag and perched on a stool across from him.

'Lovely! Marvellous!' she said. 'Seamus and I are planning an August wedding.'

Thwock! Thwock! went his knife. He felt his shoulders creep up towards his ears. *Not. Amusing.*

'Oh, Severus, how do you think it was? It was horribly uncomfortable. You were right: I shouldn't have kept the appointment. I ended up being cruel when I'd hoped to be gentle.'

Good, he thought.

The iris corm on his table was now mangled and unusable. He scraped it into a bowl and laid down his knife and finally looked at her.

'No surprise then.'

She looked away.

He cleared his throat and changed the subject. 'Did you find a ring?'

'I did. At Porphyry and Smythe. I'd never been in there before.' She reached into her pocket and produced a silver ring with a large hinged bezel set with a moonstone. 'Will this do?'

He took it from her and flicked open the bezel to reveal the tiny chamber beneath. 'Yes. Silver and moonstone are good. A very... preservative combination. Very neutral.' He scanned it with his wand. 'It's clean.'

'I know,' she said softly.

He reached for her right hand and slid the ring over her third finger.

'Come into the sitting room,' he said. 'Let's get started.'

* * *

Between Hogsmeade and the school gates, the road crossed a meadow full of yellow-flowering broom studded with purple thistle. The air throbbed with birdsong and the buzzing of bees.

Lavender glimpsed a flash of bright hair around a bend in the road and her heart leapt. She sped up a little. When the road straightened out, though, she *saw*'s just Ginny. She felt angry at herself, and she felt like crying.

When will this stop hurting so much?

She slowed, letting Parvati, Padma, Seamus, and Neville catch her up.

Seamus was glum. 'I don't know why she came to Madam Puddifoot's at all. She wouldn't even stay the hour.'

'Well, she came because you asked her, didn't she?' Neville said.

'But if she's so busy she can't even think about dating anyone, she could have just told me so at the castle and spared herself the trip.'

'Ha!' She couldn't help it. How blind could everyone be?

""Ha," what?" Seamus asked.

'You're not her type.'

'Oh, right, Lavender,' he said. 'Hermione's *already dating* someone and *nobody knows it but you*. In fact, she probably doesn't even know it herself.'

'It's McLaggen,' Padma chimed in. 'She just doesn't have the heart to tell anyone because he's so horrible.'

Seamus said, 'But that's not the worst of it. You see, she's *sdating* McLaggen but she's actually *in love* with Blaise Zabini.'

Padma pounced. 'Oh, no, no, it's worse than that. She's pining for Zabini *and* Malfoy. But sadly they only have eyes for each other.'

Neville said something very quietly, his face reddening.

But Padma heard, and she screamed with laughter. 'He said "Pansy Parkinson"! Neville, you dirty-minded little boy.'

Seamus whistled, eyes wide. 'Now *that*... that I could respect. I'd gladly stand aside for that. If they'd let me watch sometimes, you know.'

'Fine,' said Lavender. 'Laugh. You *wouldn't* laugh if you knew what I do.'

Parvati, silent until now, raised an eyebrow. 'Well, so tell us. I can't understand why you won't just tell us.'

Lavender felt her face grow hot. Gods, how she longed to knock that prissy cow off the pedestal that Seamus had her on. ~~That~~ *he* had her on.

But she couldn't bring herself to blurt it out. She was terrified of Professor Snape. There was no telling what he'd do to her if she crossed him like that.

'I know what I know,' she said airily. 'Watch her and draw your own conclusions.'

* * *

They sat facing each other, knee to knee.

'Comfortable?'

She nodded.

'Good. This will take a while. It will be best if we do it in one go, but if you need to stop, close your eyes and we'll take a short rest.'

'Okay.'

He rested his forehead against hers while he spoke the incantation. Then he breathed to ready himself, and plunged in.

But it was he who had to stop, not long after they'd started. He'd not made his walls strong enough, and the flood of her feelings...passion and devotion, but also the painful loneliness of a secret life...wrecked his concentration. He closed his eyes.

Locking down was... difficult. As though his feelings no longer fitted into their proper place.*This is getting harder to do... a problem... for later... FOCUS* He felt himself lift up into the cold light of intellect, free of the dark muddle of emotion.

He opened his eyes and ranged again through her mind with the dispassionate precision of a surgeon, sifting, sorting, taking up some pathways and leaving others. There were a few surprises...*a map... ah, that's how they do it..*and these he filed away neatly.

A shadow clung to some of her thoughts and memories of him, subtly distorting them. He knew that shadow and, when he had gleaned everything else, he moved towards it, seeking out her dreams.

Now she stopped him, closing her eyes and whispering, 'Not there, please, do you have to go there?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Dreams are part of the whole, and sometimes the most important part.'

She shuddered. 'They are awful dreams.'

'I'll go quickly,' he growled, impatient, strained with the effort it took to hold in his head what he had already collected.

Still she averted her eyes. 'There's... I just... oh, bother.' She looked at him pleadingly. 'I don't want you to think I'm weak and cowardly. They're just dreams, and if I seem weak in them, well... they're just dreams,' she finished lamely.

'Yes. May I?'

She settled back and gazed into his eyes.

The dreams started as searching dreams and ended in terror. Little licks of dread would build as she tried to find him. Sometimes she was in the castle, lost in a maze of corridors. And sometimes she was in the woods, embayed in a tiny clearing, the surrounding trees webbed with menace. Sometimes she was struggling on the surface of a dark lake, dragged down by her clothes and... other things.

She called for him. She searched and searched and could never find him in time, never save him.

Malignant shadows crossed the sky and leaked from doorways. Harry was dying, Ron was screaming in pain, Severus was covered with blood, her parents were dead, Dumbledore was dead. She was alone, exposed, seconds and inches from the horror that was always coming...

Enough. He broke the contact. He didn't have to see every single one. He just needed to locate the pathways so that the potion could reach and deaden them root, stem, and leaf.

Touching his wand to his own head, he drew out a twisting rope of silver mist and dropped it in a bottle. He stoppered the bottle, then moved to the sofa to collect her where she lay slumped sideways and weeping.

Heart still shuttered, he knew rather than felt that he should hold her. It would take him a little while to return from the cold place.

She sat in silence for some time after her sobs subsided, her head on his shoulder. Fat tears still dropped off the end of her nose and chin and splashed onto his waistcoat and their joined hands.

'That was overwhelming,' she finally said.

'Yes.'

'You saw the map.'

'I did.'

'It's... I can explain...'

'Later,' he growled. 'Not now.'

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'Did you... was that enough?'

'It was.' He glanced at the stoppered bottle, which lay on the coffee table. 'The potion should be ready by tomorrow. The base is already started.' He nodded towards the door of his laboratory. 'In fact,' and he made rather a show of looking at his watch, 'I shall need to get back to it in about ten minutes. Do you need some tea?'

She shrank into herself. 'No, thank you. No tea. I'll just, if I could... um... stay here until I've collected myself?'

He hesitated. Really, she needed to leave, both peaceably and soon. On one hand, he couldn't eject her if she was going to wander distraught through the corridors. On the other, if she was still here when his feelings returned from exile, he might not be able to answer for the outcome. They would not be *gentle* feelings. Not after what he'd seen.

He forced himself to kiss her forehead. 'Hermione. I am a bit undone by that effort. It will be some time before I am... myself. Time alone in my laboratory is what I need now, rather urgently. May I say I will meet you at midnight, in the usual way?'

It worked. 'Oh, Severus, of course. Are you... will you be all right?' She caressed his cheek, wide-eyed with concern for him.

'Yes, quite all right,' he ground out. *Go.* And he kissed her hand. 'Midnight, then?'

'Midnight,' she said, chin up.

And off she went, to lie to her friends and eat her heart away with loneliness and fear. The door had barely clicked shut behind her before he began to work out his feelings quite vigorously against the sitting room furniture.

* * *

Even before his door shut behind her, Hermione had decided she'd go for a long run.

By the time she returned to the castle, she had mastered her upset at being ejected from Severus's rooms. If he needed time and space, she could certainly let him have it. And for her own part, it was probably better to be out in the sunshine and fresh air than huddling up on his sofa while he worked in the other room.

Worrying is not planning, he'd told her. This afternoon's tour of her dreams showed she'd been worrying more than she'd thought she had. Worrying about what would happen after Severus did... that thing he had to do. Where would he go? How could she see him, and where, and when? They had not really spoken about these things in detail, and clearly, she needed to. *Maybe tomorrow...*

She spent a bit more time than usual on her hair after she showered, trying to bolster her spirits. Just before dinner, she sent him a message *Better now. You?* He returned, *Quite well*, and then after one or two seconds, *Thank you*.

'Ready to go down to dinner?' she asked her roommates, brightly.

'I am,' said Parvati, pushing back from her desk. 'Lav?'

Lavender looked up from the parchment she was writing on. 'In a minute. Go ahead, I'll follow you.'

'So, Hermione,' said Parvati as they descended the stairs towards the common room. 'Lavender has this idea that you are secretly seeing someone, but she won't tell us who it is. Are you?'

Thank Merlin Parvati was a little in front of her, because there was no way Hermione could completely hide her shock.

'Huh,' she said, hoping she sounded normal. 'Lavender has some odd ideas sometimes...especially about people's love lives. I mean, remember how she was so sure Susan Bones was gay, just because Susan touched her hair once?'

Parvati snorted. 'That was classic Lavender. But you didn't answer my question.' She turned at the foot of the stairs and looked up at Hermione. 'Are you secretly going out with someone or aren't you?'

'Well... *no*. Of course I'm not.' She paused, praying her heart would stop racing so fast. 'I think, um, well... I know Lavender's your good friend, Parvati, and I don't want to speak ill of her. But... I think she doesn't like me and saying, um, things like that is her way of showing it. I don't really understand it, but I can't think of any other explanation.'

'I think you're right about that. Though if you claim not to understand why she doesn't like you...' Parvati shrugged. 'You know she's completely shattered about Ron, don't you?'

'I, um, yes, I know. But what's that to do with me? I didn't make Ron break up with her.'

Parvati stared. 'You're kidding, aren't you? You don't think it hurts her to see Ron mooning over you while you toy with Seamus?'

'While I *what*? Nobody's *moon*ing! Nobody's *toy*ing! Ron is my friend! *Seamus* is my friend, and, and, and if he wanted more, well, we sorted that out this afternoon. I told him...that is, we agreed we'd just be friends, and *Ron* and I have never been more than, than friends...' She stopped talking, dismayed by the scornful, knowing look on Parvati's face.

'Hermione, don't think we're all fools just because we aren't as clever as you.' Then Parvati gasped, as if a thought had just hit her. 'Oh my gods! It's *Ron*, isn't it? You and Ron got together and you're keeping it secret! But *why*?'

'No! Parvati, I...'

'Shhh, she's coming!' Parvati looked up the stairs. The sound of a slammed door was reverberating. *She's going to find out!* Just stop pretending,' she hissed.

Lavender came round the bend in the tower stairs and stopped, looking sullenly down at her two roommates. 'Still here? Well, let's go, then.' And she pushed between them and into the common room passageway. Parvati followed and Hermione took up the rear, scarlet-faced and upset.

Could things possibly get any more complicated and miserable? Then she couldn't believe she'd asked herself the question. *Of course they could*. This business with Lavender and her grudges was nothing in comparison to what was to come. A living nightmare.

Hermione stood straighter and pinned a small smile on her face as she entered the Great Hall. She'd show him that she really was just fine, that the afternoon's distress had passed. There he was, at the staff table, talking to Professor Vector; she couldn't tell if he'd seen her little show. She took a seat at the Gryffindor table. Straight spine, small smile. Just fine.

'You okay, Mione?' asked Ron quietly, leaning in to her a little.

She started, then turned the little smile on him. 'Oh yes. Just fine.' But the concern in his eyes made her heart throb almost painfully in her chest. *Gods. Lying to Ron. I hate this*. 'Well, no. I'm... I'm having rather a rough day, all things considered.'

'Oh.' He swallowed. 'Anything I can do?'

'No. But thank you for asking.' *My heart is just breaking, that's all* 'Ron.' It came out sounding choked. She tried again. 'Ron. You will always be my friend, won't you? No matter what happens?' And she seized his hand under the table. 'No matter what?' *I cannot, cannot lose my friends. I couldn't bear it*

Now he looked really worried. 'Of course, Hermione. What...?' He stopped. 'Of course I will.' And he transferred her hand to his other hand so he could put his arm around her shoulders and pull her close. 'We're going to be all right, Hermione,' he whispered into her hair. 'We can do this together, you and me and Harry. And the Order. And Dumbledore. We're going to win.'

She nearly gave out entirely at the Headmaster's name...nearly started wailing right there at the crowded Gryffindor table. She squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed her despair, and let herself clutch his hand and curl for a moment into his side, so strong and warm. *Dear Ron*. How she loved him and Harry. *It will be all right. It will; we'll make it through together. Somehow*.

She pulled away from him and smiled up into his face...still a small smile, but a real one this time. 'Thanks, Ron. I needed that. What would I do without you?'

He blushed and muttered, 'I dunno.' And then, almost unintelligibly, 'Don't find out.' He ducked his head and started shoveling food into his mouth.

Buoyed, Hermione picked up her own fork. But within minutes she felt the tendrils of despair snaking back in to her mind. Nothing was solved. In fact, the problem felt even more starkly defined. She could not do without her friends, and would never abandon them. She could not do without Severus, either, and would never abandon him. They might learn of her relationship with him, but could never be told the whole truth. She'd always be in some lonely, uncomfortable place in the middle.

She dropped her fork.

Unless...

'Well, Hermione? Do you?'

Lavender was leaning across the table, pink-faced and insistent.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I said, do you know what "chemistry" is? It's a Muggle thing, isn't it?'

What the... ? She blinked. 'Um, well, yes. It's the Muggle science of understanding how the elements of the physical world interact. It's kind of, mm, I guess alchemy is the closest magical equivalent. Or potions would be like applied chemistry.'

Lavender smiled. 'I thought so. Thanks!' And she settled back into her place and lifted some salad onto her plate.

'Um, sure,' said Hermione, unheeding, already back in her own thoughts. It was a long shot, and probably just a bad idea all around. And Severus might not...probably would not...agree to it. But she'd ask. She had to ask.

* * *

'No, you're wrong. It's never *Ron*!' Seamus felt lightheaded. *It couldn't be.*

'Why are you so sure?' Parvati asked. 'It fits, doesn't it? She and Ron and Harry have always had this weird triangle-shaped relationship, but now Harry's with Ginny, I think Hermione and Ron have *started something*. I mean, if you'd seen her face when I asked her about it... And then tonight they were practically cuddling at the dinner table. I thought Lavender was going to climb across the table and stab them with her butter knife.'

'What? I didn't see anything.' Now he felt as if he'd been punched in the gut.

'You were sitting too far away. It was quite a display. Maybe Hermione decided to take my advice and just come out in public with it. I mean, that's the part I can't understand...why keep it secret? But maybe it's just been too new. You know how that is...in the very beginning you want to keep it to yourself.'

Seamus *didn't* know how 'that' was. He wanted to, but tonight he felt farther from 'that' than ever before. Every feeling he was feeling was a bad one. Except the anger. The anger didn't feel bad...just strong.

* * *

'Aughhhh! Whadt... *gah*, Seamus! Why'd you do dadt?' Blood trickled out between the fingers Ron was holding to his nose.

'That was for being a sneaky, lying git and for laughing at me behind me back.'

'Seamus...'

Seamus punched him again, this time in the gut.

Ron staggered back, one hand still on his nose, one clutching his stomach.

'That was for being a right shit to Lavender. She loves you and she don't deserve it.'

'*Lavedder?* Whadt are you *dalking* about?' Ron wheezed.

'You can stop pretending. Parvati told me. Secret's out.' Seamus looked at his roommate in disgust. 'You're bleedin' all over the place. You'll want to have your *girlfriend* take a look at that.' And he turned on his heel and stalked off.

* * *

'I am *not* seeing Hermione! You're all barking mad!'

Parvati shrugged. 'I'm sorry if I misunderstood the situation, but you were certainly cosy at dinner, and the way Lavender was talking...'

'What did that...what did she say? She said I'm with Hermione now? Well, she's mental, is all. Hermione is my friend, and Lavender's never been able to deal with that, and now she's got Seamus running around punching me in the face.' Ron gestured at his swollen nose. 'You tell that lunatic featherheaded *bint*...no, never mind; I'll tell her myself. Where is she?'

Parvati looked at him warily. 'Um. Library, I think? Or... yeah, library, she said.'

'Thanks,' he muttered.

She waited until he was through the portrait hole before bolting up the stairs to the dormitory.

Lavender was lying on her bed reading *Witch Weekly*. Hermione was, thankfully, actually in the library.

'Um. Lavender,' Parvati began. 'Ugh. Don't hate me, please. But... I told Seamus that Ron and Hermione are together, and then Seamus went and punched Ron, and now he's looking for you and he's really angry.'

Lavender sat up. 'Seamus is looking for me?'

'No, no, *Ron* is. He said... well, he said some really mean things about you and charged off to find you, just now...I sent him to the library because I wanted to tell you what had happened.'

'Wait. Did you say you told Seamus that Hermione's with *Ron*? Why'd you do that? And...*what things did he say about me?*' Lavender was on her feet.

'I told Seamus because I thought he should know. They're treating him really shabbily. *god*, she went through the whole charade of going to Puddifoot's with Seamus and a few hours later she's practically sitting in Ron's lap at the dinner table. Horrible, really, and *why?* Why would they? It's not like he wasn't going to find out.'

'Parvati! She's not with *Ron*! She's with...oh damn it, never mind. She's *not* with Ron, he's just,' Lavender gulped, 'he's *just in love with her* and hanging around and thinking she'll be his girlfriend, and she's *using him* and *stringing him along* or maybe she really doesn't know how he feels about her but *it hurts* me to see him wanting her when if he *only knew*... But what did he say about me?'

'It's *not* Ron? Who, then, Lavender? *Who?* Just tell me, for Merlin's sake!'

'PARVATI WHAT DID HE SAY ABOUT ME?'

Parvati tried to put her off. 'Lavender, he was angry...Seamus had just punched him. I'm sure he didn't mean it.'

'Doesn't matter. What? Tell me. I'll know if you're lying. I'll know, so don't.'

'Well, he said...' Parvati looked away. 'He said you were, um, mental.'

'What else?'

Parvati shook her head.

'I know that's not all,' Lavender said.

Parvati sighed. 'Lav. You're too good for him.'

Lavender reached for her wand.

'Okay! God! He said you were a lunatic featherheaded bint. Happy now? Did you really need to hear that?'

Lavender's knuckles whitened on her wand.

'Maybe I did,' she said after a minute. 'But we'll see who's the featherhead. And who's the bloody *bint*.'

* * *

He was waiting for her at the head of the stairs.

'I've been looking for you.'

'I heard.'

He took two steps towards her. 'I waited for you here because I knew that Parvati was lying when she said you were in the library.'

He opened a small door and gestured her inside the broom cupboard. It was a broom cupboard they used to use when they needed to go farther than they could go in the common room. Her heart hammered.

But he was not interested in *that*, of course. His beautiful blue eyes were cold in the wandlight, and he was extra careful not to touch her. She felt she could choke on the grief that filled her chest. She made her own expression hard.

'Why are you spreading stories about me and Hermione?'

'I'm not. Nothing could be farther from the truth.'

'So how do you explain *this*?' He pointed to his nose. 'Seamus has a hair up his arse about how I'm going out with Hermione, and apparently it's your fault.'

'My fault,' she sniffed. 'You bring me *here* to tell me how things are *my fault*? Parvati misunderstood something I said, and gossiped about it; Seamus blew a fuse and punched your fat face; all because of *her* dishonesty and *your* stupidity, not anything to do with me.'

He was looking at her so hatefully. *This is not fair, not fair, not fair!* Why wasn't that bitch Hermione suffering even a tenth as much as she was? Whoring around with that...ugh!

'You think she's so wonderful and smart and perfect and that she's your best friend but she's *not*! She's using your love and she's, she's *fucking* someone else and she doesn't even care enough about you to tell you. She's not your *friend*. She's a *freak*, a sneaking *freak*.'

Ron's face was no longer red...it was white with anger. 'Glanced in a mirror lately, Lav? You might want to, to learn what a freak looks like.'

'You ask her,' she screeched. 'You just *ask her* who she's having sex with whenever she can manage it!'

'I won't,' he said grimly. 'I'm not going to say anything to her. *You* are mental, and you don't have anything to say that's worth hearing, much less spreading around. You need help. And you need to get over... *us*, Lavender. You and me...it was a mistake. Just a really bad mistake.'

The door slammed behind him, and she was alone in the dark. Alone in the cupboard where she'd made him moan; where he'd shouted her name and covered her face and her breasts and thighs with hungry kisses, and grateful kisses. All, apparently, a mistake.

Well, she wasn't just going to sit here and cry and *take it* anymore. It was time for someone else to feel some pain for a change.

* * *

'Miss Brown,' said the Headmaster, lifting his brows in surprise. 'To what do I owe the pleasure at' he glanced at a clock whose hands insisted it was four-twenty 'nine-thirty on a Saturday night? I hope...' He peered at her rather sharply, and arose from his chair. 'Do sit down, my dear. Tell me what is wrong.'

Lavender couldn't believe she was actually here. It was as though she'd woken up from a trance and found herself in Dumbledore's office. And now he was sitting beside her, gazing at her keenly and waiting for her to talk.

This... this must be the right thing to do. It's wrong what those two are doing; it needs to stop; Dumbledore needs to know; what if Snape does this sort of thing all the time? The idea...a new one...gave her courage. She gulped and said, very low, 'I'm afraid, sir. I'm afraid of what will happen if I tell you. Will you... will you protect me?'

The old man seemed to be listening with his very hair, so intent was he. 'Of course, Miss Brown. I will protect you to the limits of my ability. Tell me. What is it?'

* * * * *

A/N: O.o

Oblivion

Chapter 35 of 36

Dumbledore goes too far. Hermione struggles with her emotions. Severus seems awfully upset.

Disclaimer: Whose? Hers.

* * * * *

Moments before the big school clock struck ten, the fire flared in the Hospital Wing, and Professor Dumbledore called out, 'Madam Pomfrey!' from amongst the flames.

Poppy emerged from her office and hurried over to the hearth. 'Professor Dumbledore! Is anything wrong?'

'Ah. Well. Rather. Could I trouble you to come to my office now?'

'Certainly,' she said, reaching for the Floo powder.

'And could you please bring some Revenit potion with you? I have a student here who is... rather poorly that way.'

She stiffened. *Oh.* 'I'll be there in two minutes.'

'Excellent. Thank you, Poppy.'

Alone again, she moved towards her main supplies cupboard.

Poppy was not usually the sort to let her mind run ahead of the facts. But at the moment she couldn't help it *Why is there an Obliviated student in the Headmaster's office?*

When she arrived, she found Lavender Brown stretched out on a sofa. Her eyes were open and her face, along with her whole body, was relaxed. She gazed dully up at Poppy as the healer examined her, and she murmured, 'Who are you?'

'I am Madam Pomfrey, my dear. I am the healer here at Hogwarts. You've had a bit of a turn, and Professor Dumbledore here has asked me to make sure you are... fit.'

Doubtless Albus had good reason for asking her to help conceal the signs of Obliviation: the severe if short-lived memory loss; the pronounced muscle relaxation; the characteristic glassy, stupid stare...unmistakable to anyone who had ever encountered it.

'Any other injury, Headmaster?' she asked him in a low voice.

'No. Miss Brown arrived in my office whole and healthy half an hour ago, and she has been here with me ever since.' He met Poppy's gaze with a grave look. He was telling her that he himself had done it...that he had broken the law...worse, violated his responsibility...and Obliviated a student.

'I see.' She paused. 'Am I to know any more?'

'Not just at present, I'm afraid. I trust... all will come clear in time, but at the moment I cannot be explicit. I fear I must rely upon your utmost discretion.'

'Of course,' she said, thin-lipped, and reached into her pocket for the phial she'd brought with her. Turning her attention back to Miss Brown, she murmured, 'Ah, my dear, let's get you sitting up, shall we? I have a little medicine here that will help you, though it won't feel that way at first.'

A spasm racked the girl's body the moment she'd swallowed the potion, and Poppy supported her while she vomited copiously onto the carpet. When she'd emptied herself out, Poppy lowered her gently into a reclining position, where she lay trembling, with tears leaking from her closed eyes.

'*Tergeo,*' said Dumbledore. He bent and stroked Miss Brown's forehead gently. 'It seems this young lady has been in a state of misery for some time. I hope she may soon rally and rediscover her joy in life.' Straightening, he said, 'I am much obliged to you, Poppy. I will return her to her dormitory once she's feeling a bit better.'

It was a dismissal, though a gentle one. Poppy returned the empty phial to her pocket. 'Perhaps a little biscuit in fifteen minutes or so. And I would like to see her tomorrow.'

'By all means. Goodnight, Poppy.'

'Goodnight, Professor Dumbledore.' She stepped through the fire into the shadow-filled ward, and walked past the rows of empty beds to her warmly lit office.

With two fingers of firewhisky in her tumbler, she sat, trying to recover her equanimity.

No doubt he had his reasons; he would not do such a thing without very pressing need. But... she was left with a sour feeling.

That girl...who knew what he had just taken from her, never to be restored? 'I hope she may soon rediscover joy in life,' he'd said. The remark seemed grossly out of place in the circumstances.

She set the almost empty glass on her desk and sighed. She was being unjust to him, she knew. Of course he cared deeply for Miss Brown's wellbeing and happiness. It was just that there were some things he valued more than anyone's wellbeing and happiness.

She picked up her glass, raised it...*to a day when children may be simply children and not pawns in a fight they never caused.*...and drained it.

* * *

'Now tell me, Miss Brown.' The Headmaster was looking at her rather sharply. 'To what do I owe the pleasure at,' he glanced at one of his clocks, 'ten-forty on a Saturday night. You are out past curfew; is anything amiss?'

Lavender could only stare...at him, and around her, at his office. Why was she here? How did she *get* here? She didn't remember coming in. Her head hurt, and her

stomach hurt, too. The one felt full of mortar, yet curiously light, as though it would drift away if it weren't attached; the other felt grindingly empty, as though she hadn't eaten all day. Had she? Her mouth tasted horrible.

'I... I don't know, sir,' she finally said. 'I don't know why I'm here.'

She looked at the Headmaster, and felt a surge of fear. *I'm frightened of Dumbledore?* That couldn't be right.

'Well.' He smiled. 'I certainly do appreciate the visit. In my position it's not often I have guests who don't want anything in particular. It's rather a refreshing change. But you look a little unwell...shall I call Madam Pomfrey for you?'

'No!' Lavender blurted out. 'Um, no.' The idea of Pomfrey made her feel oddly apprehensive. All she knew at the moment was that she was frightened of... something... and that she was *exhausted* and that she wanted to be in her dormitory, in her bed, safe and alone. 'Thank you,' she added. 'I'm so sorry to intrude like this. I'll go now.'

He rose, too. 'As it's past curfew, I'll walk you back to Gryffindor tower. I shall be glad to stretch my legs a little.'

Thankfully Dumbledore didn't try to make small talk with her, just paced beside her in silence. And Lavender found she felt a bit better with every step. Though still so very tired.

When they reached the portrait door, the Headmaster stood by expectantly.

What's the password? Oh yes... It flowed into her mind easily. 'Pandora,' she said, and the Fat Lady yawned and opened.

Lavender turned to Dumbledore. 'Good night, sir. Thank you.'

He smiled slightly. 'Not at all, Miss Brown. Not at all. Sleep well.'

Inside the common room, she heard her name through the haze of exhaustion...Parvati? She didn't know, didn't care. Didn't want to talk. Held up her hand, walked on. Just wanted... stairs. Toothbrush. Pyjamas. Bed, and curtains. Oblivion.

* * *

Midnight came and went, and so did five past twelve, and ten past. Hermione could hear, through her wards, Parvati's gentle snoring. Lavender mumble-whined something in her sleep.

She'd got in the habit of letting Severus come to her, for any number of reasons. It took her until nearly twenty past twelve to decide she'd go to him.

She slipped the caramel onto her tongue and reached out for his hand and, for the second time since they'd begun using Percipio Corium to meet, she felt his fingers close over her earlobe. *Not now. Not safe.*

The last time he'd used the signal, he'd been with Voldemort.

She lay staring up into the darkness, trying to breathe away her panic.

This worry and dread she felt when she could not reach him: she had to master it. She could not let it control her like this.

As a practical matter, she hadn't the energy to spend feeling horrible about things she couldn't change. And surely *he* had enough to do without having to dry her tears every other time they met.

And... her eyes widened and her hands curled into fists. *We'll never make it if we can't trust what we have* Her indulging her own terror was, she suddenly realised, a betrayal of trust.

So. The togetherness they'd shared over the last thirteen days could end at any moment. Perhaps it was already over. And she would have to go on without it.

She lay there, thinking, growing more determined.

Today she'd felt so desperate...as though she would never be able to do this. She'd actually thought of asking Severus if she could tell Harry and Ron...if she could self-Oblivate, why couldn't they?...just because she couldn't stand the loneliness. An insane idea. She was so glad she hadn't had a chance to ask it of him.

Because now... now she felt a spreading calm, as though she'd tapped a new reservoir of strength. She *could* do this. She had to do it, and she could, and she would.

She'd be the good thing he could depend upon, even after they had to part.

Tomorrow, she'd tell him all this.

Calming by degrees, she finally slept...a deep, dreamless sleep. Somewhere in the night she half-woke to feel him curling his long body against hers. Or perhaps that was the dream; in the morning he was gone, if he had indeed been there at all.

* * *

Potion will be finished at two. Come to office at four

Then, after a brief pause:

Good morning.

Ah, *Severus Snape*, thought Hermione. *Business first, niceties later, if ever.* She answered *Good morning Severus!* Yes to four o'clock then tucked the Galleon in her pocket and turned away from the window where she'd been standing.

'Lavender,' said Parvati, pulling aside their roommate's bed curtain. 'Breakfast time.' She shook Lavender's shoulder. 'Wow. She's really out for the count. Good thing it's Sunday.'

'Mmmm,' said Hermione. 'I think she was already asleep when I got up here last night. And, you know, I never heard her get up in the night. She must have, though; she always does.'

Parvati pulled back her hair into a ponytail. 'She was in quite a state yesterday. I'm starting to worry about her, a bit, with this pointless obsession with your love life.'

The little hairs on Hermione's neck stood up, but she kept her expression as neutral as she could. 'Yeah it's, it's starting to get a bit weird. I wish there were some way to convince her I'm not in love with Ron.'

'Oh, she knows you're not. I learned that much yesterday. It just drives her mad that Ron is in love with you.'

Now Hermione stared, and spluttered. 'But, but... are you *serious*? Ron doesn't even think I'm a *girl*. He's um, he's *so* not interested in me. I'm not his *type*.'

Parvati snorted. 'Ha. According to Lavender, *he's* not *your* type. And I think you might want to start noticing how he feels about you. Trust me when I say he knows you're a girl.'

Hermione had nothing to say to that, and she let Parvati go down to breakfast ahead of her. Her heart was in her mouth. *Lavender suspects something? She can't KNOW, can she? She can't have told anyone, because there's no way it wouldn't have got back to me somehow. Is there? Oh god, is this it?*

This might be the end of being able to hide in plain sight. Maybe the time for bald-faced lies and denials had come. Or maybe it was too late even for that?

The water was just getting deeper and deeper.

And... could it be true what Parvati and Lavender thought about Ron? That would be so horribly ironic, if he had begun to have those sorts of feelings *now*, when it was too late. It would be just plain horrible, actually.

She would watch him and try to judge. It had taken her too long to notice that Seamus was thinking of her ~~that~~ *that* way; maybe Ron, too...

Ugh. Please, no. Please, please, no.

* * *

'Morning Harry, morning Ginny. Hi, Ron,' said Hermione, sliding onto the bench across the table from him.

'Morning,' Ron muttered. His eyes were shadowed. *He didn't sleep well, either.*

Hermione looked down the table. Parvati was down there, far out of earshot. She looked up to the front of the room. Severus was there, safe and sound and reaching for the coffee.

As she casually moved her gaze along the staff table, Dumbledore's piercing blue eyes caught and held hers. Her heart pounded, and she felt dizzy. *Murder. God, how soon?* She tore her gaze from his as soon as she noticed she'd been staring right at him, but too late: she was flooded with all the horror she'd been keeping at bay.

Breathe, breathe, calm, calm, she chanted to herself, tucking her chin down and staring fixedly at her empty plate, which dimmed and blurred. *It's all for the good, for the good, the good. Breathe...*

And soon, she was through it...her vision clear of dark swarming dots, her stomach feeling more or less normal. With trembling hands, she slid a piece of toast onto her plate and reached for the jam.

Every time she thought she was getting better at handling this burden of knowledge, she found that she just... wasn't. Wasn't mastering it. Wasn't able to keep it in a box on a shelf in the corner of her mind. Couldn't really accept it. Could hardly bear it.

What to do?

It came to her. She needed to talk to someone about all this and, apart from Severus, there was only one person she *should* talk to.

She looked back up at the staff table. Dumbledore was on his feet. Now he was stopping beside Severus and talking to him. Now he was stepping down from the dais and walking along the length of the hall.

Oh, to follow him, and talk to him! Surely he could offer her some wisdom. Or, at least, talking about it would be some relief. But she needed to discuss any such move with Severus first.

Ron and Harry got up from the table, and Hermione was just in time to see Harry giving Ginny a meaningful look before the two boys shouldered their brooms and headed for the door.

Ginny was in Quidditch gear, too, and had her broom with her, but she lingered. She slid a little closer to Hermione on the bench.

'Hermione,' she said, in a low voice. 'Did Ron... did you and Ron have, um, a quarrel or a scene or something last night?'

Hermione blanched. 'No. No...not at all. Why, Ginny?'

Ginny raised an eyebrow. 'Well. He came into the common room around nine or nine-thirty, and he looked, just *really* angry. And he wouldn't say a word, not even to Harry. And *then*, when *you* walked in a few minutes later, he turned beetroot red and buried his nose in a book. Which he was holding upside down.'

'I... I didn't notice,' faltered Hermione.

Ginny nodded. 'I know. You went right upstairs. And you didn't look upset, particularly. But Ron really seemed to react in a weird way to you.' She sighed. 'It must be Lavender, then.'

'Wh... um, Lavender? What must be Lavender?' *Breathe, breathe, calm, calm...*

'Well, when *she* walked in...quite a while after curfew, I think...he turned sort of *purple*. The colour my mother turns sometimes when she's *really* angry. And he was still pretending to read, but this time he ripped one of the pages right out of the book when he was turning it. And then he stood up and said something about Spellotape and went upstairs to his dormitory and didn't come back. So then Harry and I thought *they'd* had some kind of argument...he and Lavender. But Ron won't say.'

Ginny looked up and down the table. 'Where is she, by the way?'

Glad of a simple question, Hermione said, 'Still asleep when Parvati and I left.'

Ginny was silent for a moment. 'Hermione,' she said, slowly. 'Just... if it comes to it, try not to hurt him too badly, okay?'

'Ginny! I'm not going to hurt him! I never would! I mean...' She paused, and tried to swallow down the sick feeling overtaking her. 'You don't think Ron really *fancies* me, do you?' She nearly choked on the words.

To her relief, Ginny shook her head slightly. 'Well, not exactly. Or, no more than he ever has, anyway. He's sort of a puzzle to me, that way. I think he might be a puzzle to himself. But however he feels, I *can* tell that you have, shall we say, moved on? You just don't ever look at him that way anymore. If he ever realises *he* does fancy you, he'll be in for a disappointment.'

Mustering her shaky poise, Hermione said, 'It is true I'm not waiting around for Ron to notice me these days. So I really hope that he isn't... that he doesn't... you know.'

Ginny looked at her levelly. 'Me too.' And she got up from the table and hefted her broom. 'See you later, Hermione.' She smiled briefly, and was gone.

If emotional blows kept coming at this rate, Hermione thought, she'd have to go for approximately eight runs per day to maintain her cool. That, or start dosing herself with Numbing Potion.

Talk to Dumbledore, she told herself. It has to help, somehow.

* * *

Lavender hadn't moved when Hermione returned to the dormitory before lunch. Startled, Hermione drew close to her roommate's bed. Lavender was breathing easily, and her skin was warm, and her pulse was even. She wasn't ill, just fast asleep.

Hermione felt vaguely worried and also rather relieved. A sleeping Lavender was a silent Lavender, which could only be a good thing at this point. If she was still asleep at dinnertime, Hermione decided, that would be time enough to worry, and to seek help.

The stairs from Gryffindor Tower shifted when Hermione reached the fourth floor landing, swinging around towards a secondary corridor. Exasperated, she decided to seek an alternative route rather than wait with the other students for the main stairs to move back and let them continue down to the Great Hall.

The corridor was nearly empty, and she was alone when she opened the door onto the back stairs.

But when she reached the landing, she was no longer alone.

Severus got down from the ledge as she approached. She gasped. His face looked wild and grim...forehead furrowed, mouth pinched, eyes all but shooting fire. She felt his usual wards snap into place around them.

Wordlessly, he put his hands on her waist and lifted her up to the ledge, then pushed between her knees, seized her head in both hands, and kissed her...if it could be called a kiss. It was something between being devoured by a great snake and being branded with a hot iron.

It was not a pleasant kiss, but neither was it punishing and cruel, like his unwanted kisses when she'd happened upon him in the Hog'smeade road upon his return from Voldemort. Instead it was hungry. So very hungry. So she let him kiss her like this, and reached out to hold him as he did so.

When he was done, he pulled back a little and just... looked at her. And his gaze was devouring, too, somehow, seeming to take her face in bit by bit, from forehead to chin. He lifted some of her hair and let it lie on his palm for a moment as he stared at it, as though his hand were a scale and the hair some rare potions ingredient. Finally, he moved his thumb across her brow, down her nose, sweeping out along her cheek and down her jaw while he pinned his eyes on her mouth, which he bent to kiss again. If it could be called a kiss.

The touch of his mouth on hers was as light as it had been heavy minutes earlier. His lips were slightly parted, and he brushed them against hers and let them rest, breathing in harshly as she breathed out, for one breath, and two.

When he stepped back, his eyes were glowing black in a white, white face. He clamped his mouth together and twisted it. He looked absolutely livid.

'Severus,' she said, her pulse pounding in her ears. 'What is it?'

But he just said, 'Four o'clock. We'll talk then.' He turned on his heel and swept down the stairs, his wards bursting apart when he reached them, the shockwave shattering two of the mullioned panes in the window behind her.

It took Hermione a good twenty minutes to work her way into and out of a state of extreme worry...of near-panic*Don't ask for trouble, wait until four, talk to him then* she repeated over and over again, slowly subduing her anxiety...or, actually, managing to detach from it somewhat.

She was getting better at this...at taking the overwhelming feelings and containing them and putting them away in a corner of her mind. She really was getting better at it. She really was.

* * * * *

A/N: o.O

Reckoning

Chapter 36 of 36

People play the cards they're dealt.

Disclaimer: Not only did JKR create a dazzling, heartbreaking, unforgettable world, she lets us go there and stay as long as we want. She's the friendliest goddess ever.

* * * * *

Albus scarcely broke stride as he passed behind Severus's chair.

'Come to my office at eleven, Severus, if you please.'

He spoke in a quiet, neutral tone, and it put Severus's hackles right up. Whatever the headmaster wanted, it wouldn't be pleasant.

Perhaps Albus knew or guessed something about his affair with Hermione. If so, he had an unpleasant hour ahead of him. But Hermione was right...what was Albus going to do about it? Sack him? He couldn't.

Severus watched Albus as he made his way down the Great Hall, his slow but steady progress communicating dignity and a civilised refusal to rush. Or that would be what the uninformed eye would see. Severus saw in it Dumbledore's steely determination to hide his waning strength.

Of more moment than whether or not Albus knew was*how* he knew. And the question of who else knew.

Severus looked down at the Gryffindor table. Hermione was sitting with her usual pack of Potter-and-Weasleys. All her companions were dressed for Quidditch even though the season was over. Finnegan was far from her, and the boy Weasley...whose apelike arm had been wrapped around her last night at dinner...was silent and glum and sitting across from her rather than beside her.

Good. It was good to see nothing that would inflame his own very active jealousy. He had no time for the jealousy, and he had no cause for it...he knew he hadn't...but it *would* keep flaring up and deadening his reason. All too often, by the time the fit had passed, he would have lost one more chance to hold his girl.

Last night, for example. Still angry with her for dallying with Finnegan, embracing Weasley, he'd turned her away when she'd come to him after midnight. He had finally gone to her at nearly two o'clock, curling around her for an hour or two as she slept, leaving before she woke. He could not stay away, it seemed. And why should he stay away out of pique? It would be stupid; criminal and stupid.

Severus looked at his watch. He had a potion to attend to. He pushed back his chair and rose from the table, and it was habit that made him extend his arms slightly as he began to walk, allowing air to flow into and along his robes so they began to billow and flap behind him.

* * *

Albus wasn't sitting companionably in his fireside chair. He wasn't at his desk. He wasn't up in his gallery poking about among his books.

Rather, he was standing square in front of the fire facing the door, and he was wearing his outer robes and his tall hat.

He got right to the point.

'Severus. How is it that Hermione Granger knows you're going to kill me?'

Oh. Worse than he'd feared.

He chose an evasive tack to start with. 'What makes you believe she knows that?'

Albus turned and took off his hat and placed it on a bust of Paracelsus. He unclasped his outer robes and draped them over a suit of armour that stood beside his desk.

Back nearly turned now, he said, quietly, 'Severus. Reconsider your reply.'

Ah. *He knows.*

'May I ask, then, *how* you know that?'

Dumbledore peered at him. 'It is, as you might say, right in the front of her mind. Or it was, three hours ago at breakfast.'

Legitimacy. Anger flooded Severus. *Hypocritical old bastard.* But at least she hadn't told him voluntarily. And at least it went no further than Dumbledore. Probably.

'How does she know this, Severus?'

'I told her,' he said coldly.

'And what did you tell her, exactly?'

'Only what's pertinent. That you're dying and that I'm going to kill you to make it look like I've turned.'

'I see. And, Severus, why is that pertinent for Hermione Granger to know? Have you told others? Does Harry know?' The headmaster's voice was very quiet, very even.

'Potter doesn't know,' sneered Severus. 'And I've told no one else. Nor has she.' He would have to answer the first question, doubtless, but the thought of talking about Hermione with Dumbledore made him almost sick with anger and disgust.

'I am truly glad to hear it's gone no farther than your teenage lover. And, of course, one of her most intimate Muggle friends. Yes,' said Dumbledore. 'I know that part, too. The friend is dealt with and, for the rest, we needn't discuss it at length. However, I do want to know, right now, if there are any more surprises like this waiting for me. Are there?'

'Surprises of what nature, exactly?'

'Well, I shall spell it out. Surprises in the nature of gross personal misconduct. Insubordination. Recklessness. Violations of trust. Any other little explosive devices you may have lying about that may tend to promote Voldemort's cause.'

Severus's hand was resting on the back of one of Albus's armchairs, and at this he tightened his grip so hard that one of his fingernails pierced the fabric. How dare Albus. How dare he.

When he could speak, he said, biting out the words, 'My actions have been in no way intended to promote the Dark Lord's cause. My dedication to his defeat is complete.'

Albus's tone grew sharp. 'Then *why* did you do this, Severus? Seducing a student...and *this* girl, of all people...then telling her the one secret upon which so much depends? *Why?*'

'It's not... I didn't *seduce*...'

He stopped. He knew how the words would sound. No one in his position would ever admit that it *was like that*. What could he say that wouldn't sound deluded? What words could touch what she was?

I need her.

Absurd. Of course he could *survive* without her...yes, he bloody well could. 'Need' was self-indulgent and weak.

I love her.

No, damn it. A cheap word to fling about, 'love.' He pictured himself saying it and was repelled.

She is mine.

It was the word that came closest. And he knew it was selfish. Not allowable. Cowardly. Wrong.

'Can you tell me nothing, Severus...nothing to help me understand? Nothing to help me help you?'

A battle raging inside him, Severus dug his fingers into the back of the chair.

Albus looked down at the hearthrug and said, 'If you care for her at all, Severus, don't expose her like this.' He looked up. 'And even if you don't care for her, you must still protect her. Either way, this cannot stand. The risk is unacceptable.'

Albus's words were like poison pouring into his ears, coursing towards his heart.

If you care for her at all

Silence stretched for...how long? He struggled to find something...a word, a gesture...that could turn the tide. At last, he bowed his head and, fixing his gaze on the rug at Albus's feet, he whispered, 'Please.'

'I beg your pardon?'

Severus looked him full in the eyes and said, harshly, 'Please, Albus. I said, please.'

Albus studied his face for a moment and turned abruptly towards the fire.

'No, Severus,' he said quietly, then, louder, 'No.'

He turned back around and drew himself up tall.

'Fix it, Severus. If you won't, I will. You have twenty-four hours, and that's generous.'

He walked around his desk and sat. 'I will be out of the castle most of the afternoon. We shall talk again by this time tomorrow.'

Severus didn't move.

The headmaster reached for a quill. 'Goodbye, Severus. That is all.'

'Yes. Sir.'

Severus left.

* * *

When the door closed behind Severus and the staircase rumbled into motion, Albus laid down his quill and slumped back in his chair.

He waved his wand, allowing the portraits in his office to move, talk, and hear again.

Dilys Derwent sniffed. 'So good of you to let us out of the cave occasionally, Albus.'

He looked up at her. 'My apologies, Headmistress. If it's any consolation, I'll soon be equally subject to the whims of the living.'

'Well, that sounds like nothing but self-pity,' clucked Dilys, and went back to her tatting.

Albus supposed it did, and for a brief moment he wished he might be indulged in some self-pity.

The moment passed. Albus Summoned his teapot.

It was, perhaps, no surprise that Severus would seek out carnal comfort while he was under such tremendous pressure. Understandable, if undesirable. But he had chosen his partner most cruelly and recklessly.

Albus poured his tea. It didn't much signify now...he was eliminating the affair...but he did wonder: how had this happened?

He'd known Miss Granger cared for Severus...respected him, liked him. Miss Brown had not been able to recall the exact wording of the letter she'd intercepted, but she seemed to think the girl fancied herself in love. Jill Fletcher, the Muggle girl he'd visited this morning, had thought so, too, before he Obliviated her.

Perhaps she did love him; or perhaps respect and liking had been enough to precipitate the affair. These things could take on a life of their own once begun.

Albus stroked his beard. The decision to tell her the secret, though... why had Severus made such a baffling, foolish choice?

Possibly Severus imagined it was a hedge against ruin. Perhaps he needed *someone* to bear witness to his loyalty and his sacrifice...even though telling the secret undercut his loyalty and might nullify the sacrifice. So irrational...so unlike Severus.

He has lost his way. By how much?

He put four sugars in his second cup of tea, stirred, drank it down.

The situation was dangerous, but Albus hoped...no, he believed...that it would come right. He was fairly certain Severus had begun to fall back in line.

He won't snap. He HAS lost his way, a little, but he'll do his duty. He simply needed to be reminded of it

And this... crisis... might just make it easier, in the end, for Severus to kill.

It's better, perhaps, that his anger is fresh

* * *

Stairs, stairs, so many *fucking* stairs to get down.

'Goodbye, Severus. That is all.'

Back to the dungeons and out of the light, creature.

He stopped on the landing, too sick with fury to keep moving. Bracing his hands on the ledge, he stared out of the window. Across the courtyard and over ten yards or so were the library windows, shadowed and opaque.

She was probably there now. Was she?

He got up onto the ledge and, reaching into an inner pocket in his robes, he pulled out a blank piece of grubby, dog-eared parchment, soft with use. He unfolded it and smoothed the creases, touched it with his wand, and muttered under his breath. 'I solemnly swear I am up to no good.'

Yes. His idiot heart leapt. His magic surged and kindled at the sight of her tiny dot. Bloody fucking ludicrous.

According to the Marauders' Map, H. Granger was at a table in the library gallery, alone. Working on Merlin knew what.

Three days ago, proud and a little abashed, she'd told him about this one successful piece of work.

'And then you tap it with your wand, like this, and say, "mischief managed."'

'So this is the original?' he'd asked.

'Yes,' Hermione'd said. 'I made the swap yesterday. The copy Harry has now looks almost exactly the same. I used a Protean charm based upon the original map, with one small corruption: the copy doesn't show my dot.'

'You don't think Potter will notice you're not there?'

'Not as readily as he'd notice if yours went missing. Typically, he wouldn't be searching for me on the map.*You*, however...' She'd shrugged, pink-faced. 'It's not the perfect solution, but it's what I could manage. It does ease my mind, a little.'

What pains she'd gone to, copying the map. What trust she'd shown, giving him the original. ('You'll need it more than I would, I think,' she'd said.) How utterly fucking futile it all was.

He watched her dot start moving. Down the stairs to the main floor of the library and out of the door, then to the main staircase and up, up to Gryffindor tower. He wanted to reach into the map and seize her, *gods if she were only here* He spread his hands out on the ledge, pressing his fingertips into the joints of the stone, and closed his eyes against this witless longing.

When he opened them again, he saw her dot moving out of the Gryffindor common room and into the corridor, then onto the stairs. Which shifted, depositing her on the fourth floor.

Come, he thought. *Come here*. And, by Merlin, she was coming. Down the passage, two turns, down the other side of the quadrangle and into the stairwell, and now he heard her, and now he saw her.

He slid down from the ledge and warded the landing. Without a word, he lifted her up onto the ledge and pushed between her legs *She came to me, she's mine. Fuck you, Albus*.

He kissed her with hard, angry kisses, and she didn't push him away. First she froze, and then she reached out her arms to wrap around him beneath his robes, and held him as he mauled her.

Ah, gods. He pulled back to look at her face. He looked, and looked *Mine. Won't she always be mine*

He dipped his face to hers again and breathed with her once, and twice.

'Severus,' she said shakily. 'What is it?'

'Four o'clock,' he said. 'We'll talk then.' He swept through his own crackling wards and down.

Done. Time to start breathing without her.

* * *

Four o'clock at last. Oh, they had so much to talk about! Plans, worries, her desire to confide in Dumbledore and recruit his support.

Every day seemed to bring new difficulties and dangers. But they always found new ways to think through their problems, separately and together *We are a good team*, she thought. *I am so glad we have each other*

Hermione pushed open the door. Severus was not in his sitting room, so she put down her bag and walked towards the lab, calling out, 'I'm here. Are you in the lab?'

He was. He was funnelling a thin clear potion into a bottle. He stoppered it, and put it in a box with some others. 'I'm almost finished here,' he said, gesturing at a cauldron on the worktable behind him. 'I made tea; have some while you wait, then we can go to the sitting room and talk.'

'Okay,' she said, getting up onto a stool set near the table that held the tea things. 'Thank you. Would you like some?'

'Not just yet.' He reached up to a shelf for a pair of empty bottles, and pulled on his protective gloves.

She sipped her tea and made a face. 'Severus, I am sorry to say it, but this is the worst tea I've ever had. A new low, even for you.' She smiled at him to show she was teasing.

He had stopped moving and was looking at her oddly. 'Is it?'

'Oh, dear. That wasn't funny at all, was it? Just stupid of me; forget I said it.' She hopped down from her stool and walked over to him. 'No cruel words between us, even in jest, yes?'

She stretched up to kiss him. He turned his head away.

'Sever...' She stopped. Had she been about to call him 'Severus'? How embarrassing! Why would she... But, wait, of course she would call him that, she had been calling him that for weeks, ever since...

Ever since when? She couldn't think of when she had started using his given name. Trying to remember felt like trying to see to the bottom of the lake...it was there, the bottom, but she couldn't find it, not at all.

A staticky feeling plucked at her spine, and her skin felt clammy. *Oh, god, what..*

'You should sit down. This won't take long, but it will be disorientating.' He took her by the elbow and walked her back to her stool.

'What won't take long? What are you... Severus!' she gasped. 'What was in that tea?'

He moved to the other side of the table, so that it lay between them. 'You know what was in it,' he said softly. 'You'll know for another minute or so, and then you won't know or care. This is best. We could not have done it, Hermione. It wasn't going to work.'

She was on her feet. 'No, no, no, oh *god*, no! How could you... Take it back! Make it stop!' She ran around the table and pulled on his sleeve. 'Quick, quick!'

He didn't move; she couldn't move him; why was he just *standing there*? 'Severus!' she screamed, pounding on his chest. 'Stop this! Where is the antidote? This is not funny!'

He pulled her arms away from him and held them at her sides. 'Do you see me laughing?' His voice was sharp and venomous. 'There's no answer for us but this. This is wartime. We cannot be together, not at all. I was a fool. A disgusting fool. This is best,' he repeated, in a hissing whisper now.

'But I had some new ideas,' she sobbed. 'I had so much to talk to you about, to ask your opinion about, and now I c-can't re-remember *any* of it. Oh, please, please. Please. Please don't.'

He put his arms around her.

'Hermione. I'm s...' He coughed. 'I'm sorry. But you need to fight your war, and I need to fight mine, and I can't risk... We should never have... But we did.' He squeezed her to his chest. 'I'll never forget it. Never. I might be a coward and a villain but I'll always be yours. I'll come for you. After, I'll come.'

He released her and stepped away, again putting the table between them.

Confusion. Parts of her mind felt like they were filling with sticky mud, a slow flood drowning anything she tried to hold onto. She stopped trying, and that was better. Speed and sharpness returned. Clarity. So much better. Leave that other stuff alone; it's impossibly murky, and somehow really horrid, and what does it matter anyway?

Relieved, she lifted her hand to her cheek. Tears. Why? She was crying? Snotty and tear-soaked, and Professor Snape was right there! Looking unbelievably sour, too...what must he think? *God!* She turned away and fumbled in her pocket for a handkerchief. It was hard to get her hand to do what she wanted it to.

His cold voice cut through her muddle. 'If you are quite done snivelling, you had better drink some tea.' He was beside her, holding the tea up to her lips with one hand and steering her onto a stool with the other. She tried to take the tea from him...so *awkward* to have him so close!...but her hand...her whole body...felt floppy and boneless.

She drank from the cup...oh! The worst tea conceivable!...and horror of horrors, she vomited. All over his sleeve, all over the floor.

'*Tergeo*,' he said, and...goodness! He swept her up in his arms and took her into the next room, where he placed her on a sofa with a pillow under her head.

It was utterly shocking...her mind went immediately to Harry and Ron, who would probably suffer twin strokes when she told them that Professor Snape had ~~h~~*picked her up*.

He glared down at her. She swallowed hard, and cowered. 'I am brewing, Miss Granger. I do not require bile or the remains of your lunch as ingredients. Stay here until you feel able to leave.'

When he got to the door of the laboratory, he turned. 'I have been revolving the question in my mind for some weeks, but the scene you just created in there has decided me. I no longer require your services as an assistant, effective immediately. Thank you for your help. It has been... interesting.' He vanished into the next room.

Mortified and exhausted, Hermione lay on his sofa for a minute or two...just long enough to gather her strength to leave. She'd try not to think too much about being sacked by Snape. There was a tide of misery in her that she must stem; sleep would help.

Bright side, Hermione; look at the bright side she thought as she shouldered her stupidly heavy bag and dragged herself out into the corridor *Less work means more time to rest. This is a good thing.*

Right now, she only wanted to get to her bed...why did it have to be so far away? She felt she could sleep for a week.

* * *

The antidote filled four phials. He took them out of their box and lined them up on the worktable with shaking hands.

One would remain here. One would be at Spinner's End. One he would hide on her parents' property. The last quantity he would desiccate and put in the poisoner's ring she'd brought him. This he would Transfigure into something he could wear around his neck.

The door in the next room clicked shut.

He was alone again.

~fin~



Banner by ariadne1

A/N: O.o

o.O

I have no idea how to start this author's note. Actually, I have too many ideas. Maybe a list? I'll try that.

1. This is the end of the story.
2. I plan to write a sequel.
3. No, really. I've actually always planned to write a sequel.

4. What was that? Oh. Why don't I just keep writing *this* story instead of doing this cheesy 'sequel' thing?

5. Well, it's not meant to be cheesy. I've thought about it a lot (like, A LOT), and it makes sense to me. And this is actually a good place to end this story.

6. *ducks*

7. Ow! I didn't mean 'good' in THAT way. I don't think it's good that he's alone and she's forgotten him. I think it's horrible. It makes my heart hurt.

8. Also, if you hunt me down and AK me, there WON'T be a sequel.

ETA: 8a. If you have not listened to the SONG Caramel, which was a huge inspiration for this story, now is the time. Check it out:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-1mIOBbKi0>

/defensive part of A/N

9. There's no way I can express what writing this story has meant to me. It's the first story I've ever even tried to write...like, ever...and now I've finished it, one year and eight months after I started. The thought makes my head explode a little bit.

10. You read it! You're out there in the world and you read my story, and...if you got this far...you probably liked it. I hope you did. I'm so glad you're there. Thank you.

11. Fandom, OMG! It is like a party that never ends, and where a large number of the guests are brilliant and amusing and generous people who *know how to play*. The world could take a lesson from the fen. Not to sound like a National Public Radio advertising spot, but while I've been writing this story I have received GENEROUS SUPPORT...real generosity, tremendous support...from dozens of new friends, but I must name especially greenstuff, lifeasanamazon, and hechicera, my betas (and my illustrator, ye gods!); and ariadne1, machshefa, and annie talbot of OWL; lady karelia of The Petulant Poetess; and the mods at Sycophant Hex. I throw flowers at your feet, each of you. I'm so grateful.

/amazed part of A/N

Bye now. I'll see you around.