

Limited Exposure

by sunny33

Hermione needs to find a holiday job to pay her Hogwarts' expenses when she returns after the war. She finds a unique position with an unexpected employer.

Chapter One: Job Hunting

Chapter 1 of 41

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Chapter One: Job Hunting

The sun hung low in the summer sky, painting dappled pictures of light and shadow on the wall opposite the bedroom window. Sprawled upon the bed, Hermione Granger watched the ever-changing patterns as she contemplated the disaster she called her life.

What the hell did I expect? My best friends and I would contribute to the despatch of Tom Riddle, everyone would heap praise upon our shoulders, and the wizarding world would finally accept Muggleborns as equals? Then we'd all get on with our lives and even go back and finish school like normal teenagers?

I hate this. Endless rounds of interviews, photographs, and handshaking. Dinners, parties, speeches. I really, really hate it. How many times can a girl smile for the cameras without getting cramp in her cheek muscles? The boys love all the attention not to mention the squealing young women and some not so young mobbing them at all those Ministry functions, but I'd rather scrub toilets for Argus Filch than attempt a conversation with any of the men who fancy themselves as the next boyfriend of Hermione Granger, Order of Merlin, First Class. Half of them want to use my name to get a leg up in their careers, and the other half just want to get their leg over. As if I'd shag any of those halfwits. I have standards.

Okay, so my standards are pretty picky, but one day I'll find someone who qualifies. He has to have a brain, and knowing how to use it would be a bonus. Loyalty, compassion, courage, integrity, common sense, a wicked sense of humour, sensitivity, and he must be able to cook. That last one is essential; I'm hopeless in the kitchen. Good looks, toned muscles, and a good working knowledge of a woman's erogenous zones wouldn't hurt either.

The girl on the bed snorted and rolled onto her back, staring at the slowly rotating mobile of the solar system her father had helped her build when she was seven.

Who am I kidding? Someone who can string two sentences together on parchment without asking for help and can find a book in the library by himself would be a good start. Who cares if he's as ugly as sin and doesn't know where my G-spot is? I don't know where the bloody thing is either. I'm sure there are books for that, and I can always close my eyes. I just want someone who wants me, Hermione Granger, not me, one third of the fucking Golden Trio.

And I want a job. Being a heroine is all very well, but unless I start selling my name to advertise the latest designer robes (yeuch) or cosmetic potions (double yeuch), I'll not have enough in my Gringott's account to cover my school expenses. Pity Mum and Dad managed to spend all their savings getting started in Australia. I suppose that was my own fault for not leaving their knowledge of their profession intact. It must have been pretty hard to make a decent living with no qualifications. I was in a bit of a hurry at

the time. At least they're back home now, although it was a bit touch and go with the memory reversal for a while there. Mum still looks at me a little vacantly at times.

Sighing, Hermione sat up and stretched. Long denim-clad legs swung over the side of the bed as she reached for the wizarding newspaper lying on the nearby chair.

Right. Get yourself together, girl. What's on offer in the Prophet? Surely there's a nice holiday job at Flourish and Blott's or Scrivenshaft's or...

Nothing. Bloody nothing. Don't wizarding teens need holiday jobs? Everything in here needs qualifications or experience. For Merlin's sake! I spent the last year fighting fucking Death Eaters; isn't that experience enough?

Oops. My language is bloody awful. Better not let Mum hear me.

Hermione, you silly mare, she's no mind reader. No one can hear your thoughts.

Except Legilimens. But they're all dead. Or disappeared. I heard Harry say Snape went and discharged himself from St Mungo's against medical advice and cleared off. Typical. Everyone is lauding him as the greatest spy who ever lived, and the sneaky bastard just slips away into hiding.

I admit it; I'm just jealous. Wish I could too.

The *Prophet* tossed to one side, Hermione fossicked under a pile of clothes until she felt the distinct rustle of crisp, Muggle newsprint.

I'd better check the Muggle papers. If nothing else, I could waitress or serve behind a counter in a shop somewhere until school starts back.

Or not.

Dammit! Go off and save both wizarding and Muggle worlds from the forces of the dark side (now I'm starting to sound like Yoda), and all the bloody holiday jobs get snapped up by ungrateful Muggles. Almost starting to feel a slight twinge of sympathy for the Malfoy prat.

No, it's okay. It was just a crick in my neck.

Pausing to rub at the offending spot, she almost had the page turned when a small advertisement caught her eye.

MODEL WANTED

Artist requires female model aged 18-30. Excellent remuneration and regular hours for eight weeks from June 29th. Must be prepared to pose nude. Artist's references available.

The timing's right. But can I do it? Strip naked in front of a complete stranger and stay in one position for goodness knows how long. Wonder if I'd be allowed to talk?

More importantly, would I be allowed to pee?

Don't be silly, Hermione, of course you'd be allowed to pee.

Sounds like a pretty easy job. Sit around naked all day and get paid for it. Perhaps I could take a book and read while he's painting my lower half. No funny business allowed, though. Would have to check his references. Although, it might be a female artist. Same applies, check her references too.

Being naked didn't really bother Hermione. Her parents had been products of the hippie generation and had cultivated a no-nonsense attitude towards nudity that had stood their daughter in good stead in the shared bathrooms at Hogwarts. The occasional guest of the Granger household found it a little disconcerting to find no locks on the bathroom doors, but they soon adjusted.

I'd have to be careful and use a Glamour though. Mum and Dad probably wouldn't mind, but if Molly Weasley ever saw me naked in a shop window, she'd have a conniption.

Eww. Ron or Harry might see me naked!

Malfoy might see me naked! Definitely a Glamour then.

I'll see what Mum thinks.

With her nose still screwed up by the thought of Draco Malfoy seeing any part of her body unclothed, Hermione slid off her bed and padded downstairs in her bare feet.

"Mum! Where are you?" she called, although the delicious aroma wafting from the kitchen hinted at the older woman's whereabouts.

"In the kitchen, dear. Just taking some of those ginger biscuits you love out of the oven. They'll be ready to eat in a few minutes."

"Mmm. Did I ever tell you you're the best cook in England?" Hermione's hand reached for the oven tray only to be rapped lightly over the knuckles by her mother's wooden spoon.

"Only when you wanted to eat all my baking, dear."

"Are you trying to tell me I lack subtlety?"

"If the cap fits..."

"Very funny. Anyway, what do you think of this for a holiday job?" Hermione passed over the paper, trying to sneak a biscuit beneath its pages.

"Hmm. Managing a five star restaurant? I don't really think your cooking skills are up to it, darling." Jean Granger moved faster, removing the tray to the bench behind her and rolling her eyes at her daughter's frustration.

"No, not that one. The one below."

"The artist's model?"

"Yes. What do you think?"

"Why not? Are you worried about the naked part or the keeping still part?"

"The naked part. Would you be upset if I applied and got the job?"

Jean chuckled. "Don't be silly. You know we've always taught you to be proud of your body. There's nothing wrong with nudity; it's perfectly natural and harmless as long as one's intent is innocent. I suggest you take a close look at the artist's previous work and references first. I know you can defend yourself against most things, Hermione, but it doesn't hurt to be cautious."

"That's what I thought. All the same, I think if I go for an interview I'll use a Glamour. I'd hate for some people I know to recognise me in a nude painting somewhere. I'll go and ring the number now. Thanks, Mum." She wrapped her arms around her mother, snagged a biscuit, and skipped to the door with a grin.

Hermione dialled the number and sucked her burned fingers as she waited for a reply. Just as she was about to hang up, a man's voice answered. Remembering to breathe, she replied, "Hello. I'm ringing about the position as an artist's model advertised in tonight's paper. Is it still available?"

"Yes. Do you wish to apply?"

"I do. I'm looking for a job over the same period as you require a model."

"Very well. Would tomorrow at two pm suit you for an interview?"

Hermione's brow furrowed. The man on the other end of the line appeared disinclined to volunteer his name or even ask for hers. Nevertheless, she took the details of the address and agreed to meet at the studio. She planned to arrive early and discreetly check out the area, wand at the ready. She'd had quite enough unwelcome surprises in the past twelve months already.

Brandishing the half-eaten biscuit in triumph, she turned back to her mother, who had followed her into the room.

"Well, it looks like you have a job interview. Was it a man or a woman?"

"A man. And the funny thing was, his voice sounded vaguely familiar. Kind of scratchy, but there was something about it. Can't be anyone I know, though. I don't know any artists. He sounded quite serious, not at all arty."

"That could be a good thing, dear. You want him to behave professionally, after all. Now, are you ready for another delicious, cooler ginger biscuit?" Jean glanced at her daughter's reddened fingers with an indulgent smile. Every time.

"I'm always ready for some of those, Mum. I'll put the kettle on, then call Dad while you put them on a plate."

I suppose I'd better get ready for the interview. Wonder what one wears to a job interview to be a nude model. Will he want to examine the goods? I'd better check I don't have any embarrassing pimples anywhere I need to take care of.

After a quick shower, Hermione unwrapped her towel and studied her reflection in her full length mirror. Turning around slowly, she tried to assess herself as a artist would.

Right. Face looks good, skin clear. Arms smooth, no bitten fingernails. Legs depilated love that charm Lavender taught me. Back when I was still talking to her in fifth year. What colour shall I paint my toenails? Red's a bit tacky. I think a nice deep purple will do.

Bum looks good, even if I do say so myself. Nice and firm, but not too boyish. Shall I Glamour the tattoo? No, no one has ever seen it except Mum, so it won't matter. Adds interest. Waist is reasonable, better stay away from those ginger biscuits if I want it to stay that way. Pity about the top half. At least they're firm and perky, even if they're a bit on the modest side. Still, I'm not enhancing those with a Glamour. If he's only after a busty blonde, I'm not the model for him. Fancy carrying that around all day. No, thank you.

Hermione aimed her wand at her head, and with a few murmured words and a little judicious wand-waving, her hair had smoothed and lengthened, darkening from its usual light brown to a rich, deep chocolate colour. Screwing up her nose and crossing her fingers, she pointed her wand once again towards her face.

"Oculus caeruleus."

Turning towards the mirror, she gasped. Intense blue eyes stared at her from a face framed with glossy, dark waves. She barely recognised herself. A touch of lip gloss and mascara later and she was ready. Time to test the disguise on her mother.

"Hello, dear, are you one of Hermione's friends?" Jean looked puzzled, glancing up the stairs from where the unfamiliar girl had descended.

"Mum! Are you serious? It's me!"

"Oh, so it is." Jean sighed. "You know how I get sometimes, dear. I must say, straightening your hair and darkening it those few shades has made an enormous difference. It looks so much longer now. And your eyes are amazing. I always wanted blue eyes..."

"No, Mum. Dad would kill me. You know he always says he adores you just the way you are. So, do you think anyone would recognise me?"

"You certainly look different. You're you, but you're not you; do you know what I mean?" Jean replied after a moment's thought.

"Hopefully, I'm different enough to avoid notice if any of this man's paintings are ever seen in wizarding society. Or by Great Aunt Emily."

"She's not so bad, Hermione. You just haven't ever spent enough time with her to understand her sense of humour."

"She has a sense of humour? Can't say I've ever noticed it," Hermione grumbled.

"It's dry. Very dry. But it's there under all the disapproving looks and sniffs."

"I'll believe you, Mum. Merlin, I'd better get going! I'm due there in ten minutes. Just as well there's an Apparation point near his studio. See you soon!"

"Bye, love. Good luck! And don't forget to check those references carefully."

"I will."

This must be it. Third door on the left, down the alley between Boots and the Indian restaurant. At least it's in a reasonably respectable area of town, and the front entrance looks clean and tidy.

He said just to walk in, and a bell would let him know I'm here. Well, here goes.

That's odd. I'd have thought he'd be out straight away. He was expecting me. Courtesy is obviously not one of his strong suits.

Hermione wandered about the small entrance hall. There did not appear to be any paintings for sale, but several were stacked up against the wall to one side, and two or three were displayed on easels. She listened again and, not hearing any sounds from beyond the door leading off the hall, decided to risk a quick peek at the canvases on the floor.

Hmm. Not bad. Obviously obsessed with the naked female form, but he doesn't seem particular about age, shape, or looks. That's a good start. All quite tastefully done, too.

Maybe this won't be so bad. The man's probably old and eccentric and harmless. Or young and completely gay. Or...

Bloody fucking hell! What in Merlin's name is he doing here with a paintbrush in his hand?

A/N: This story was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Hope you enjoy it, shall!

Thanks and hugs go to sempra for her alpha and beta expertise.

Chapter Two: Define Femininity

Chapter 2 of 41

Hermione discusses art with an expert and says far too much.

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Chapter Two: Define Femininity

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuckity fuck!

I thought he'd gone off to hole up in Manchester somewhere until school re-started. Since when has he painted?

Nudes.

Professor Snape paints nudes!

Get a grip, Hermione. He's giving you that look. The one where he suspects you of breaking rules. Play it cool. You're supposed to be a Muggle who's never heard of Hogwarts, let alone the foul-tempered, points-taking, detention-loving Severus Snape. With any luck, he won't even suspect I'm a witch, let alone using a Glamour.

Concentrate! He's speaking to you.

"...Reilly. And your name?"

"Her... Henman. Grace Henman. I'm sorry; I didn't catch your first name, Mr Reilly."

"Sidney. Now, Miss Henman, I believe you have come in response to the advertisement we discussed last night on the phone. Have you done this sort of work before?"

"No, I haven't. Is experience necessary?"

"Not really, but I need to know whether you are fully aware of the nature of the job."

"I know you require a model to pose nude. I have no problem with that. What else is needed?"

"Obviously, you have never undertaken such a task before, Miss Henman. Posing for an artist is more difficult than you, and most people, think. A model needs to have the ability to maintain the same position for long periods, sometimes hours, without moving or speaking. A small shift in any part of the body will alter the way light falls on the skin. Even a seated or recumbent pose will become irritating after some time, although I will endeavour to provide a comfortable surface to rest upon."

"What about... er... toilet breaks?" Hermione's cheeks reddened.

"You have no problem with posing nude, yet you blush when referring to perfectly natural bodily functions? Rest assured, meals and toilet breaks will be scheduled regularly."

"That's a relief. May I ask what the painting is for, sir?"

"Paintings. I'm working towards an exhibition later this year. The theme will be men's fascination with the female body. As you can see, I already have several works completed, but the focus of the exhibition will be a series of paintings featuring one particular model, ranging from full body poses to detailed works highlighting specific areas of the woman's form."

"Which specific areas, exactly?"

"I haven't decided yet. Probably hands, neck, hips, breasts. Those areas which define a woman."

"Not... other areas?"

"If you mean genitalia, no. I consider pornography to be distasteful, not artistic."

"But surely the genitalia are the most important feature distinguishing a female from a male."

"Miss Henman, do you want that part of your body displayed in a public gallery for all to view?"

"Well, I wasn't necessarily referring to myself, just the general principle. Surely, avoiding the area that is the very centre of a woman's femininity defeats the entire purpose of the theme. Should women be ashamed of those parts of their bodies? Did Michelangelo emasculate David? Was da Vinci's Vitruvian Man not fully equipped? Male nudes in art are in most cases anatomically correct. Would you like to be painted with *your* genitals omitted?"

"By highlighting other areas in detail yet representing the female genitalia as a mere shadow between a woman's thighs, are you not suggesting that they are somewhat offensive? As a woman, I find that *attitude* distasteful. And dated."

"Can that part of the female body not be depicted in an accurate, yet tasteful manner for once, as opposed to the gratuitously sexual displays in men's magazines? Does the idea make you uncomfortable, Mr Reilly?"

"Not at all. I find I agree with your fundamental philosophy, but remain unconvinced of the practicality of such a suggestion. An honest representation on canvas of a woman's pudendal area without inviting a sexual interpretation could be a significant asset to the collection's theme, but not all models are as liberal-minded as you, Miss Henman."

Hermione blushed. Years of feminist teaching from her mother and several weeks of men treating her like a prize to be won had overridden her usual respect of the man before her. "I'm sorry, Mr Reilly. I didn't mean to rant. Sometimes my tongue gets away on me before I have a chance to engage my brain. I haven't even got the job yet, and I'm trying to tell you what to do. It's a bad habit I've picked up over the years."

"I have no problem with you expressing your opinion, but be warned, I will expect silence while I am working. Any questions or comments will have to wait until your breaks."

"You mean I've got the job?"

"I believe I will offer you the position. I have a contract here which details the hours I expect you to be available and the remuneration, among other things. I suggest you take this home and read it thoroughly. I will need to know within forty-eight hours whether you wish to take up my offer."

"Sounds fair enough. Well, I'll be off then. Thank you for your time, Mr Reilly."

"Good day, Miss Henman."

Once more lying on her bed watching the play of light on her walls, Hermione groaned.

What the hell have I got myself into? I fully intended to fake an interest, then disappear and hope he never found out it was me. Why did I get carried away blathering on about the right of women's genitalia to be painted? Now he thinks I'm some bloody feminist exhibitionist. I even mentioned his bits. What was I thinking?

The stunned expression on his face was almost worth the embarrassment though. Wish I'd had a camera.

How can I pose naked for Severus Snape, of all people? How can I have even thought for one moment I'd let him get close enough to paint my...

I still can't believe it was him. And judging by the paintings he's already done, he's damned good. Who'd have thought?

Might as well look at his contract.

Flipping through the paperwork, Hermione groaned once more.

Oh, fuck. How can I turn him down? I can just avoid mentioning the whole genital thing and hope he carries on with his original plan. I'd never get this hourly rate anywhere else, and that's providing I can even find another job.

I'd be crazy not to do it.

And, if I was really honest, it would be a bit of a thrill knowing Snape had painted me naked without realising one of the banes of his existence was his model. He would be mortified. Mind you, so would I if he ever found out, but that'll never happen.

Shall I?

Sitting in the tiny sitting room at the back of the studio, Snape summoned a glass.

Unbelievable. The first promising candidate for the job, and she's a bloody women's liberationist. I should have sought a model from the wizarding community.

And risk my colleagues and detractors discovering one more thing to hold against me. Not bloody likely. Who would pose nude for Severus Snape anyway?

She really is what I'm looking for. Striking colouring, attractive face without looking like some of the painted tarts I interviewed yesterday, and youthful, unenhanced curves. A natural woman. And she doesn't seem the least concerned about posing nude. No idiotic giggling like that blonde this morning.

As long as she keeps her mouth shut while I'm working, I'm sure I can tolerate her. I've put up with much worse in my Potions and Defence classes for years. One opinionated female won't get the better of me.

She does have a point though. How can I depict the nature of a woman by ignoring her essential femininity?

Fuck, I hate know-it-alls. At least I'll only have to deal with her for eight weeks. Then back to the Potions classroom. The know-it-all there will be dressed; thank Merlin for small mercies. Pity I couldn't convince Kingsley to grant those three pains in the arse honorary N.E.W.Ts. And he thought I was pushing the idea because I was proud of the little prats. Not bloody likely. The sooner they leave Hogwarts, the better. Potter is bound to be even more arrogant now he's despatched my maniacal ex-master, although I must admit he demonstrated far more courage than his puerile father ever did. Must have taken balls to face the Dark Lord, knowing he had to die to save us all. Still a bloody Potter though. Weasley will bumble his way through his classes as always, relying on the Granger girl to prop him up while he wastes his time chasing other young women and playing Quidditch. She'll pine over him and say nothing, except in my class when she'll be waving her hand and driving me insane. And then she'll take over the best table in the library with untidy piles of books and parchments covered with her chicken-scratchings.

Snape grimaced as the winding track of his thoughts lead to the inevitable.

Oh, fuck.

Longbottom's returning. Some utter nonsense about his last year being a waste of time. Should have shut up and studied more instead of running around with those hoydens of girls causing trouble. And bloody Horace allowed him back into Potions. Had to do N.E.W.T Potions for the Herbology apprenticeship he's planning with Pomona. He was managing perfectly well without Potions in his sixth year. Just because he did a remedial course over summer and didn't blow up any cauldrons last year doesn't mean he should be inflicted on me.

I wonder if I can make enough money just painting for Muggles and brewing potions privately?

Not for a year or two. They know I was working for the right side, but they still remember Snape the Death Eater, Snape the greasy Potions professor, and Snape the evil headmaster. Might take a while before anything I brew outside Hogwarts finds a market. And I don't fancy the poor artist starving in a garret routine. At least I get good food and comfortable living quarters at Hogwarts, even if they're accompanied by assorted batty colleagues and hormone-ridden adolescents who think brewing instructions are only guidelines.

One day, Severus, one day.

Snape sighed and reached for his firewhisky.

Fate had shone upon him the day a sudden rain shower had forced William Standish to take cover in his doorway. The eccentric art gallery owner had seen untapped potential in the few works displayed in the window and decided Sidney Reilly was to be his next protégé before he had crossed the threshold.

Snape still had no idea why he had allowed Standish into the studio that afternoon three years previously. The man's Muggle enthusiasm had nourished the starved ground of the artist's ego, and a profitable and mutually satisfying relationship had blossomed. Despite long periods of absence, Standish had asked no questions and simply accepted Snape's equally eccentric behaviour as befitting an artist.

Nudes had not been Snape's preferred subject; his rare experience of naked women having been coloured by fear and desperation. And blood, so much blood. The paintings discovered by Standish the previous summer had been his first foray into the depiction of the female form. A surprisingly successful foray, given his lack of first hand knowledge. Finding a model who was prepared to suffer through his acid tongue and surly attitude for more than one painting had proven more challenging.

And now he had agreed to paint a series of nudes of the same model for an exhibition in a mere four months. The wizard who could resist all but Tom Riddle's *Imperio* had been powerless in the face of William Standish's single-minded persistence.

"Good afternoon, Miss Henman."

"Good afternoon, Mr Reilly."

"May I assume your presence here indicates you wish to accept my offer?"

"You may. I have one or two questions, however, if you don't mind." The piece of paper with her list was already in her hand.

"Of course. What is it you need to know?"

"Firstly, I see you indicate you expect my presence from the hours of eight in the morning until six in the evening. Am I expected to provide my own meals or purchase them from a nearby café?"

"I will provide you with any sustenance you require while you are here. It would hardly be efficient for you to completely dress and leave the studio every time you needed food or drink."

"But won't that incur costs for you?" She frowned; his offer was generous and unexpected.

"Indeed it will, but in return I will expect you to maintain a degree of patience. We will not always be able to stop working for lunch the moment the clock chimes twelve. Is that a satisfactory arrangement?"

"Of course. I realise I'll need to be flexible so as not to disrupt your work."

"Good. And...?"

"Do you require me to use any particular hairstyle or make-up?"

"I would prefer you to wear your hair down and little, if any, make-up. Your current appearance is quite satisfactory. I intensely dislike painted faces and gravity defying hair."

At that, she smiled. "Then we agree on something. My last question is, can you be certain the work will be complete by the end of August?" The thought of finding excuses to leave Hogwarts to run off to pose nude for the Potions professor was a little titillating, but in the end, impractical. "I have other commitments beyond that time."

"As do I. Any painting not finished by then will remain so."

"So, we'd better get started then. I was thinking, maybe you would like to do some preliminary sketches while I'm here today?" She stilled the tremor in her fingers.

His eyes narrowed. "So eager, Miss Henman?"

"A little nervous, actually. I just thought if I got the first time out of the way, I could relax better."

Snape nodded. "I see. I can't fault your logic, and I have no plans for the rest of the day. Come this way; I work in the back room." He guided her by the elbow towards the rear of the building into a large and light-filled space populated by two easels and numerous canvases, paint tubes, and brushes. Assorted chairs and a chaise-longue were stored in one corner. Two doors opened off the hall leading to the studio. Pointing at each, he murmured, "The bathroom where you can change and leave your clothes. The other is a small kitchen and dining area."

Hermione spun around, taking in the dozen or so half-finished paintings stacked against the walls and apparently random piles of artist's paraphernalia scattered throughout the room. *Not such a perfectionist away from school, then.* She allowed a brief smirk, then composed her expression as she turned back to Snape. Another door led from the rear of the studio.

He noted the direction of her gaze. "My private rooms. I don't always wish to go home overnight. Now, if you are ready to proceed?" He gestured towards the bathroom.

"Oh... okay. Back in a minute." Now was the moment. Her final chance to change her mind before exposing herself to her teacher.

The moment passed.

Grabbing her bag, Hermione entered the bathroom. Stripping off her clothes before she had a chance to think too hard, Hermione eventually stood nude before the full-

length mirror. The Glamour remained unyielding, offering no hint of bookish student Hermione Granger to the unsuspecting eye.

Or so she hoped.

Wrapping herself in a purple satin robe, the colour chosen specifically to avoid any subliminal connections, she left the bathroom. Snape had moved the chaise out to the centre of the room and was waiting with sketchbook and pencil in hand.

"Where do you want me?" She could not suppress the blush at her unfortunate phrasing.

Seemingly oblivious, Snape waved towards the chaise. "Just make yourself comfortable over there. Your pose isn't important at this stage; I just want to familiarise myself with your proportions and general colouring."

Reassured by his disaffected tone, Hermione moved to the chaise and slipped off her robe, gasping softly as the slightly chillier air of the studio had the expected effect on her nipples.

"Relax, Miss Henman. It's a perfectly natural response. Now, sit down." He circled her slowly, examining her body from all angles. "Not too bad. You have pleasing proportions and elegant limbs. Please, place your hair behind your shoulders. That's better. Your breasts should not be hidden; they are perfectly formed."

Hermione relaxed as he continued muttering to himself, pencil flying over the paper. At times, he stopped, moving closer to study her hands, feet, and on one occasion, her breasts. Even then, with his nose twelve inches from her left nipple, he was the consummate professional.

She was almost disappointed.

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Thanks and hugs go to sempra for her alpha and beta expertise.

Chapter Three: Posing as a Muggle

Chapter 3 of 41

Hermione gets to know the real man behind the professor.

Disclaimer: They still belong to JKR no matter what strange situations I put them in.

Chapter Three: Posing as a Muggle

Well, she's certainly not shy about her body, is she? All that talk about being nervous, and there she is, posing like she's done it for years. She did have a moment there when she first took off her robe. That reminds me, I must turn down the air conditioning in here next time she comes. Wouldn't want her to think I keep the place cool deliberately. Although those nipples did crinkle rather delightfully. I could use that for one of my focus pieces perhaps a composition where she's facing a mirror with flushed cheeks and breasts and peaked nipples in the reflection contrasting with her normal appearance in reality. I wonder how broadminded she really is.

She's surprisingly comfortable to work with. No flinching or giggling when I move in close to capture a few details. And she knows the value of silence. Hallelujah! This may just work out satisfactorily.

Snape finally stood and closed his sketchbook. Tucking his pencil behind his ear, he glanced at the clock on the far wall. "I think that's enough for today, Miss Henman."

Hermione looked up and smiled as she stretched, unaware of the infinitesimal widening of Snape's eyes as he watched her breasts rise in response to her movement.

He turned away as she gathered her robe and, not bothering to put it on, padded off to the bathroom to dress. "I'm sure you're in need of refreshment. I'll put the kettle on," he managed.

"Great. I'm parched," she replied as she opened the door. "I'll only be a minute or two."

What the hell was all that about? I spend three hours sketching every part of her body and only saw her as a subject to be portrayed on canvas, then she stretches and ... Merlin! Snape glanced down at the front of his trousers and was reassured to find all was in order. *At least one part of me is still a gentleman.* He poured the tea and, assembling the pot and cups on a tray with sugar and milk, carried the lot back to the studio where he set it on a side table as his model appeared, once more fully dressed.

"Did you get what you needed, Mr Reilly?" Hermione asked once she had nearly emptied her cup.

"Yes, thank you. The sketches will be a good start. I'll look over them tonight and develop some ideas for compositions. Can you be here at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, Miss Henman?"

"Of course. And it's Grace. You've seen more of me today than most people have ever done, so I really think we can dispense with formality, Mr Reilly."

He inclined his head. "Indeed. However, you must do likewise."

Hermione put down her cup and stood. "Sidney it is, then. Well, I'd better be on my way. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Snape showed her to the door and watched her walk down the street and around the corner. As he locked the door, a sharp crack somewhere nearby set his senses to full alert, relaxing only when the old Mini belonging to the man who lived on the next corner sputtered into view.

Hermione let herself into the house, wondering briefly why everything was so quiet before remembering it was her parents' cinema night. She chuckled as she saw the paper open on the bench at the entertainment page. Circled in red was *The Horse Whisperer*.

Poor Dad. He's been resisting that one for weeks. Mum just wants to go and drool over Robert Redford for a couple of hours. No... nearly three hours. I bet Dad goes to sleep. And she won't even notice; she's had a crush on him since she was sixteen and saw him in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. I suppose he was quite cute back then, but a bit blond and pretty for my liking. Reminds me of a nice version of Draco Malfoy.

Did I just use 'nice' and 'Draco Malfoy' in the same sentence? All that nudity this afternoon must have affected my brain. And what about Snape? He almost caught me staring when he took off his jacket and bent over to pick up that pencil he dropped. Those jeans were really snug.

Stop it! You're not going there. Professor Snape does not have a nice bum. He doesn't. You need to get out more. There must be loads of younger, less snarky bottoms available. Although he was surprisingly polite and pleasant today. I suppose not having a room full of idiots trying to blow him up or throwing nasty hexes around helps. Or Dark Lords with hungry snakes. Or twinkling old geezers setting him awful tasks. Or Harry.

Or Neville.

Hermione giggled, trying to imagine Neville Longbottom's face if he ever found out she'd posed nude for Snape. Giving up after a minute or so of images of Neville in a dead faint, she flicked the switch on the kettle and threw a tea bag into a cup just as a knock sounded on the front door.

Opening the door to find two grinning young men, Hermione threw open her arms.

"Harry! Ron! What are you doing here?"

Harry handed over a parcel of fish and chips. "We decided we'd better check on you. We've hardly seen you in the last two weeks."

"That's because you two were so busy working your way through all your groupies," she said as she found some plates and salt and vinegar.

Ron blushed. "Hey! Give us some credit. We haven't spent *all* our time with girls. We went and bought our supplies for Hogwarts today."

It was Hermione's turn to redden. "Oh, bloody hell. I was supposed to meet you two at Diagon Alley. I completely forgot. I'm so sorry!"

"S'okay. We popped over here, and your mum told us you'd found a holiday job. She said to come back later, so here we are," said Harry through a mouthful of chips.

"Harry! You're getting as bad as Ron. Don't talk with your mouth full."

Ron carefully swallowed. "So, what's this new job?"

"Er... I'm helping an artist in his studio. Sort of assisting with composition, working through gender biases and stereotypes, setting up a comparative analysis of femininity versus feminism..."

"Yeah. Sounds great. Where's the tomato sauce?" Harry interrupted.

Hermione smirked. They're so easy. Use a few long words and they're put off the scent. Just as well. Wouldn't want those two prying into my new occupation. I'd never hear the end of it.

Bringing out a few bottles of butterbeer she'd stashed in the pantry was the final blow to the boys' curiosity. By the time the Grangers arrived home, the boys had left with full stomachs and merry hearts, off to find another conquest or three.

Hermione let herself into the studio with the key Snape had given her and tossed her bag onto the chair in the kitchen. Finding no evidence of the artist in residence, she knocked on the door to his private rooms. "Hello! Sidney! Are you there?" Hearing no reply, she turned to go back to the kitchen, nudging the door with her shoulder as she moved.

That's weird. The door's unlocked. I've been coming here a week, and he's never even opened the door while I've been around. I hope he's all right.

Hesitating at the threshold, she gently pushed the door fully open. "Sidney? Are you in there?" Stepping into the room, Hermione found no sign of the occupant but stopped in her tracks as she noticed the paintings lining the walls of the small sitting room. Large paintings, small paintings, and simple pencil sketches covered every available inch of wall. Many of the paintings were dark, angry, pieces with barely recognisable features but a unifying theme of evil. A chill settled on the back of Hermione's neck at the almost palpable depiction of the artist's torment over the years. Interspersed with these were the sketches, all depicting the same smiling, pretty girl in various poses. Not until she spotted a full size portrait of the same girl in oil did Hermione realise who she was. Red hair, green eyes, and a Gryffindor scarf.

Lily Evans. Harry's mum.

Hermione had heard the story of Snape's devotion to Lily, but the evidence before her tore at her heartstrings. Here was a man tortured by his past, his only comfort lying in the two-dimensional images of a girl who had never understood his feelings, whose rejection had sent him on a path of loneliness, despair, and eventual guilt. Tears welled as she stared at the wall before her, tears of compassion and guilt at her own harsh judgement of the man in the past.

"Seen enough, Miss Henman?" The ice in his tone was only surpassed by that in his eyes.

Turning, she bowed her head. "I'm sorry, you didn't answer, and I was worried something had happened to you. I didn't mean to pry, truly."

He frowned and relaxed a little. "Why on earth would you think something had happened? I just stepped out for some milk."

Realising her over-reaction to his absence was out of character for a supposedly ordinary Muggle, Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. I was just spooked by the silence, I suppose. Really. I'm sorry if I've intruded. I'll just go and change."

After she had closed the bathroom door, Snape leaned against the wall and sighed. The last thing he needed was to have his model asking all sorts of awkward questions about the paintings in his sitting room. *Perhaps I'll just put it down to my angst phase. I'm sure all the best artists have them. She was very upset though, which is odd. It's not like she'd understand what lay behind those paintings. Don't know why I've kept them really, except to remind me of how lucky I am to still be alive. And Lily. Dear, sweet, unforgiving Lily.*

She's my reminder never to trust a woman with my heart.

As Hermione emerged, Snape studied her face. All traces of tears had disappeared. As if by magic. Relieved, he guided her to the chair he had placed in the centre of the room earlier and resumed work as if nothing had happened.

"Sidney?" Hermione looked up from her plate of salad.

"Hmm?"

"What made you start painting?" she asked, spearing a tomato wedge with her fork. "That's if you don't mind me asking."

"I really can't say. It just happened," he replied, then looked away, but not before she caught a hint of something in his expression that stilled any further questions.

Snape's thoughts drifted to primary school when he would forget the taunts of his supposed playmates and immerse himself in the slip slop of thick paint on paper and the colours over which he had complete control. His father's disparaging comments aside, *'What's that bloody boy doing playing with his paintbox like a little pansy? He should be out kicking a ball around,'* Snape had continued to paint. As he had grown older and discovered his much anticipated escape to Hogwarts was no escape at all, he had sublimated the hurt and pain onto oils and canvas. The years serving Voldemort had generated the works of darkness and self-hatred in the other room hitherto only ever seen by the artist himself.

Painting had been his deepest secret and his only salvation and, now he had weathered the storm of the last twenty years, was set to yield opportunities never before imagined. Maintaining the small studio in a nondescript Muggle shopping area had scraped at his purse-strings but allowed him somewhere away from prying eyes on both sides of the conflict. His work was striking: bold colour and brush strokes juxtaposed with areas of meticulous detail, the whole a composition of unique form. The less threatening pieces had been sold sporadically over the years, providing a *raison d'être* for the studio as well as covering some of the costs of rent, electricity, and art supplies.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, Snape noticed the young woman watching him curiously. He gathered the dishes and piled them into the sink to be dealt with later once he was alone and free to use magic. "Right, back to work. I'd like to get this one finished today."

Hermione responded by discarding her robe over the kitchen chair and walking naked over to assume her pose. Following her gently swaying form across the room, Snape once again noticed the tattoo on her right hip. The stylised letter M with an extra loop looked vaguely familiar, but he could not place where he had seen it before.

"Okay. I'm ready." Hermione faced the chair, using the back to rest her hands upon, stretching her head and allowing her hair to flow down her back. With one leg slightly bent at the knee and the other extended, her body created a smooth line, accentuating the curve of her neck and the length of her legs.

Snape muttered something inaudible and stood behind his easel, gradually transferring the feminine form from flesh to oils.

After four weeks of posing nude for Snape, Hermione had succeeded in banishing the dour Potions professor she had known to a separate compartment in the back of her mind. She knew she'd have to let him out again in another month, but for now she was happy to imagine the serious but always polite and reasonable artist was the real Sidney Reilly. Although he rarely indulged in conversation while he was painting, except to issue instructions while placing her limbs where he wished, Hermione had found the man to be a rich sounding board for discussion on art, Muggle politics, science, and human nature during meal times and had found herself leaving for home ever later in the evening as they stretched one cup of tea to several while they debated the latest topic.

Relaxing in his paint splattered jeans and t-shirt at the end of the day, hair tied back off his face, Sidney Reilly was even wont to laugh occasionally. The first time took her by surprise, the second was enlightening, and by the third Hermione finally understood. Severus Snape was not just a teacher and fearless spy; he was a real person with feelings, ideas, and a rapier wit often directed at his model after she had spoken without first thinking through her idea.

After the first few sessions, she had lost any remaining nervousness about exposing herself to her teacher, secure in the knowledge he had not penetrated her disguise. His strictly professional conduct while she was naked was impeccable, but the way his eyes lingered at times on her breasts and hips eased any feelings of inadequacy.

For his part, Snape found he was enjoying Grace's company and intelligent, seeking mind. He had never spent any real time conversing with a woman before, regular debates on Quidditch matches with Minerva McGonagall notwithstanding. Her precise method of chopping and slicing salad ingredients for lunch, a task she had volunteered for after a few days of stodgy fare, pleased his eye, and her tea brewing was perfect.

If she wasn't so young and so Muggle, she'd be the perfect woman, he mused after she had left one evening. She has a sharp intellect and pleasing personality, but something about her voice and the way she uses her hands reminds me of someone I know. Although I've taught so many young women of her age over the years, I suspect, like them, she's simply a product of her generation. Muggle girls and witches aren't so different after all.

A/N: This was written for the TPP Every Flavour Auction for shalimar_1981. Many thanks go to sempra, who cast her expert eye over it.

Chapter Four: Obsessions and Confessions

Chapter 4 of 41

Severus and his model get to know each other better, and the paintings are shaping up nicely.

Disclaimer: JKR owns them. I'm just borrowing them for practice purposes.

Chapter Four: Obsessions and Confessions

"Well, I think we're nearly there," Hermione said as she studied the canvasses lined up against the wall. "How many did you say you needed?"

"Two dozen or so," Snape replied as he joined her, absently wiping his hands on his jeans. "Those three charcoal sketches I did the other day will work well for the introductory panel in the entrance of the gallery."

Hermione nodded, appreciating the economy of line and stark contrast of the black and white drawings. "I see. So, start the viewers off with simplicity, and as they move into the exhibition, the works become more complex." She pointed to three paintings done in muted tones. "That's why you've done these with only a minimal palette of colours, but the later ones are more vibrant and detailed. It makes perfect sense now."

"Exactly. Too much too soon jades the eye. Each set of paintings needs to offer something more. More colour, more detail, or a new perspective," he explained.

"And the climax?" she asked as she mentally arranged the completed paintings into groups.

"Climax?" Despite himself, a faint tinge of red coloured his cheeks.

"The climax. The grande finale. I assume all this lead up has to finish with something spectacular. What are you planning?"

"That will depend on my model," he said, turning to rearrange some brushes on the shelf behind him. "I've had some thoughts on the matter."

Watching the subtle interplay of expression on Snape's face, Hermione suddenly thought back to their first conversation. *Oh. That's what he wants to do.*

Indicating the canvasses he had completed over the previous week, Snape continued. "As initially planned, we have sketches and complete nudes in various poses and degrees of detailing. I've done the works focussing on your neck, hands, and breasts..."

She took pity on him. "And now we need to finish what we started. You know, I've been reading up on art history over the last few weeks. It's not like it hasn't been done before. Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* was certainly controversial in its day, but surely if done tastefully, something similar would not be beyond this exhibition's scope?"

Snape was silent for several long moments before replying. "Courbet's work is still considered controversial in some countries. Nevertheless, would you really be prepared to pose for such a painting?"

"Why not? I've spent the last six weeks naked for most of the time I've been here." Hermione smiled inwardly as she realised any previous inhibitions had become secondary to the success of the exhibition. "I know that sort of pose would be rather more exposed than anything we've done before, but I'm sure I can deal with it. Can you?"

Snape grimaced and muttered something under his breath.

"Pardon? I didn't catch that."

"I said, I'm not sure, dammit!"

"Why?" *He hasn't had any problems before. Why is he all flustered now?*

Snape began pacing across the room. "I know it's ridiculous, and it should never have happened. I didn't intend it, I swear, but I can't help myself..."

"Sidney!"

"What?"

"What are you on about?" Hermione folded her arms and waited. "Well?"

Snape visibly straightened and faced her. "I don't know whether I can handle painting you in such intimate detail, Grace. Or even if I should. Over the last few weeks, I've found myself increasingly attracted to you. No, don't say it; I know I'm far too old for you, and I would never expect you to feel the same way about me. But I have to be honest with you. I can't promise I'd be able to retain my professional distance should we proceed with such a plan. As it is, I had another idea I've been reluctant to explore for the same reason."

Oh, hell. He fancies me.

Severus Snape fancies me.

No, Sidney Reilly fancies me. The Severus Snape I know would run a mile from a Muggle teenager.

How do I get myself into these situations? It was bad enough turning Ron down once the dust from the final battle had settled, but this intriguing, talented, sexy man Sexy? Where the hell did that come from? is going to be standing in front of my Potions class in a couple of weeks with a scowl on his face, deducting points left, right and centre. Although I'd quite like to get to know him better, I just can't risk it.

I'll have to be gentle with him, but I don't want to ruin all our good work by failing to follow through completely.

"Sidney, you're obviously a man of great personal integrity. You've always treated me with utmost respect." *Potions class not included.* "And while I've enjoyed your company and conversation, I have to leave for school at the end of the month."

"School? You're still at school?" His words were a strangled gasp as his face reddened.

Bugger! Why did I mention that? Now he'll go all daft and gentlemanly on me, and I really want to see this exhibition done properly. "Er... yes. I... er... skipped a year, and now I'm returning to finish up and take my final exams. Sort of an adult student, really." *There. That should work, and it's almost true. Time for a distraction.* "Now, what was that other idea you had?"

Relief flickered in his eyes as he accepted the change of subject with alacrity. "Other idea? Oh, yes. I thought it would be a powerful composition to depict you standing in front of a mirror, studying your reflection. Before the mirror is an innocent girl, but the reflection shows a woman." He hesitated, reluctant to explain further.

"So, how does the observer know the difference?" Hermione asked, then nodded to herself as she understood the implication. "Her breasts. In the reflection, her nipples are puckered, and the skin is flushed, maybe a little damp with sweat, as if..."

"Yes." He didn't allow her to complete the sentence. "Of course, I would adjust the reflection image as I painted it. There's no need for you to..."

"No, it would simply be a matter of turning down the air conditioning. Cold air works just as well, you know. The flush and sweat I could create by running around the studio a few times before I undressed," Hermione said. "Shall we do that one today while the idea is fresh in our minds?" She had to restrain a chuckle at the baffled expression on Snape's face.

After several moments of staring at her as if she'd grown an extra head, he shook himself. "Very well. I'll start with the original image, then you can do whatever you need to do for the reflection. I have a cheval mirror in my room we can use."

Hermione breathed out her relief as his mind engaged with the technicalities of the pose, allowing his pride to retreat to lick its bruises. While he was fetching the mirror, she changed into her robe in the bathroom and ran her hands through her long, brown locks to tousle them a little. A slick of lip-gloss and she was ready.

"Where do you want me to stand?" she asked, dropping her robe over a chair.

Snape fussed over the position of the mirror for a moment before replying, unaware his reflection in the glass revealed his warring emotions. Expression calmed and firmly professional, he moved behind Hermione, placing his hands on her shoulders to guide her into position. She pretended not to notice the faint tremble as he turned her body a little away from the mirror and lifted her arms into the position he wanted.

"Now, turn your head toward the mirror and lift your hair from the nape of your neck as if you need to cool down."

"Like this?" Hermione lowered her eyelids and feathered her fingers through her hair as directed, the movement of her arms lengthening her torso and accentuating her

curves.

"Perfect. A little too perfect," Snape said, reaching for a seldom-used artist's smock and slipping it over his head. "How long can you hold that position?"

What is he doing? He's never bothered bef...Oh. "For a while. I'll probably need to rest my arms every so often though." *He looks quite uncomfortable. Why is he staring like that?*

Oh, fuck. That wasn't supposed to happen until he turned the cold air on. That's so unfair; I don't get to cover up with a smock.

Snape's expression was almost painful as his eyes lifted from Hermione's nipples to her flushed cheeks. "I thought we were starting with the original? Have you turned the temperature down already?"

"It's all your fault, Sidney Reilly. If you hadn't made a point of putting on that smock, I might not have noticed that bulge in your trousers." Any sensitivity to Snape's delicate male ego had fled in the face of Hermione's own embarrassment.

"I apologise..."

Hermione brushed his words aside. "It's flattering, really, and I can't help it if it has the desired effect. Just paint, dammit!"

Three excruciating hours later, during which Hermione was certain Snape's little problem had not flagged in the slightest, he finally called for a rest.

"Enough." Snape dragged his hand over his face and put down his brush. "I can finish this after you've gone home."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Please, just go and put some clothes on." Gathering up his palette and brushes, Snape turned away as Hermione shrugged on the robe and made for the bathroom.

Standing before the mirror in the bathroom, Hermione studied her reflection. *Merlin! No wonder the poor man can barely walk. I look like some wanton creature who's just had a good ravishing. I never knew my skin glowed like that when I was turned on. And those damned nipples. Traitors! Still, he started it.*

Must have taken a lot of courage to admit he's attracted to me. Especially when he thinks I'm a Muggle. He must really have it bad. I suppose I should feel guilty. I could have easily developed feelings for him, if I didn't know who he really was. He's so different, yet not. Still sarcastic, no patience for fools, and his little outburst of temper the other day when he knocked over the turpentine was pure Snape, but I suppose I'm seeing him from a different angle now. I can see the dry wit behind the sarcastic remarks, and really, that delivery boy last week was as thick as two short planks.

Maybe in another time, another place, we could have at least been friends, but once I return to school, it'll all be over.

Although, there will be the exhibition.

Sighing, she slowly dressed and joined Snape for their customary pot of tea.

"Once again, I apologise. My reaction to you was uncalled for and inappropriate," he said as he poured, spine stiff with misplaced mortification.

"To be quite honest, Sidney, it made me feel more comfortable, knowing you were aroused." *There, I said it. Aroused. Erect. Stiff. Maybe if I say it enough, the thrill will wear off. Hang on, what thrill? Gods, Hermione, you're obsessed.*

"How on earth do you explain that? I would have thought it would have upset you."

"Why should I be upset? It's not like you called into your trousers for your penis to come to attention just for fun." *That's right, mention the P word. Really embarrass him.*

Snape grimaced. "Do you mind? I'd rather not discuss the details." Despite his words, Hermione could not miss the slight glint of amusement in his eyes.

Hermione grinned. Her father was right. Humour always worked to defuse awkward situations. "Let's not make a big issue out of it, or you'll never get that last painting done."

"You mean you still... after today's debacle?"

"What else is likely to happen? I doubt you'd throw me on the floor and have your wicked way with me."

"How can you be so sure? You don't know anything about me really, Grace."

"I know enough." *More than enough, Professor. You spent years protecting us even though you didn't like us. You risked everything for the benefit of those who reviled and doubted you. You're hardly going to allow a few hormones to overcome you now.* "Really, what's the worst that can happen?" *What am I doing? I can't seem to help myself. It's like I want him to give in to his baser urges.*

"I could embarrass myself like an overeager schoolboy. Would you feel so blasé then, miss?"

Hermione smiled and patted his hand. "Sidney, if that's what it takes to make this exhibition spectacular, then I suppose you'll have extra laundry to do. We've come this far; surely you don't want to give in now?"

"Unbelievable." He shook his head. "I've never met anyone like you before, Grace."

"Don't be so sure of that. I'm not that unique." *Just tell him who you are, why don't you? I'd better go before I say something else I'll really regret.* "Just consider it, okay? I'll be back tomorrow, and we only have another week left to finish everything." She let herself out while he remained seated, staring at the easel where his afternoon's frustration sat waiting to be completed.

You've really done it now, haven't you? Snape looked down at his trousers and the unapologetic evidence of his lack of restraint. Thirty-eight years of celibacy, twenty years as a Death Eater, avoiding the advances of those who thought to educate me properly, eighteen years as a teacher and not once tempted by a student; nearly four months as a bloody hero with witches propositioning me from all quarters and I have to succumb to the charms of a teenage Muggle. She'd probably run a mile if I so much as mentioned magic.

At least there's only a week left to humiliate myself completely. Will put me in the right frame of mind to deal with another year of catastrophe-brewing imbeciles, if nothing else. And they thought Death Eater Snape was someone to be feared. He was a kindly soul compared with the frustrated old bastard they'll get this term.

Bitter thoughts tumbling through his mind, Snape continued to work on the juxtaposition of desire and innocence before him. With oils and brushes he painted his unquenched desire onto the barren canvas of his life.

Exhausted, the artist collapsed on his bed in the early hours of the morning, his unwanted and ignored erection having finally flagged with fatigue. He slept, fleeting images of cerulean eyes and dewy skin tattooed with odd symbols tormenting his dreams.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Many thanks go to Sempra, whose helpful advice is always welcome, and special thanks also to Liski, who told me about *L'Origine du Monde* in her review.

Chapter Five: Close Encounters

Chapter 5 of 41

The final painting is done, but not without some embarrassing moments for both artist and model.

Disclaimer: The characters belong to JKR. I'm just using them for a bit of practice.

Chapter Five: Close Encounters

Hermione paced back and forth across her bedroom as she dissected the day's revelations one by one. Never one to be disorganised, she finally sat at her desk and took out paper and pen to make notes.

FACTS

1. *Sidney fancies me, or me-as-Grace at least.*
2. *Snape thinks I'm a pain in the arse.*
3. *I go back to school next week.*
4. *Snape will be teaching me.*
5. *Sidney will exhibit his paintings in November.*
6. *Snape is dour, unfair, and foul-tempered. In his favour, he's had a damned good reason for it, but I doubt he'll change. His appearance, at best, is unpleasant.*
7. *Sidney is talented, witty, has a sharp tongue and knows how to use it, but also has a wicked sense of humour. He's sexy.*

Hermione stopped writing. There it was in black and white, non-erasable (to a Muggle) ink. *It's one thing to think it, but now I've written it down it must be true. I really think he's sexy. He's not remotely good-looking, even as Sidney, with that lank hair and oversized nose. Not to mention the teeth. What's wrong with me?*

Giving up the analysis of her appalling taste, Hermione added a new sub-heading.

PROBABILITIES

1. *Sidney will assume I'm not interested and act like a gentleman.*
2. *Snape will be his usual self. Worse, probably.*
3. *His classes will be hell. (Note: What's he teaching this year?)*

If we go ahead with the last painting, how will I ever look him in the eye again, knowing he's seen every part of me? Up close and personal. How do I stop blushing in class? I can just see it. "Miss Granger, ten points from Gryffindor for inappropriate facial colouring in class."

She sighed and wrote her final list.

QUESTIONS

1. *Will he invite me to the exhibition?*
2. *Do I want to see myself displayed naked?*
3. *Should I write to him after school starts?*

She dropped her head onto her arms and groaned. After several minutes of slow-breathing exercises and relaxation techniques, Hermione took up her pen once more.

4. *Why do I want to?*

Carefully folding the paper into quarters, she tucked it into her pocket and made her way downstairs to find out what was for dinner.

"Hermione! There's a phone call for you!" Jean Granger called up the stairs the next morning.

"What? At this hour?" Hermione dragged herself out of bed, grabbed her dressing gown, and grumbled down the stairs. Picking up the phone, she said, "Yes?" in her less-than-accommodating voice.

"Not a morning person then?" asked Snape.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't expect it to be you on the phone."

"No matter. Something has come up that needs my urgent attention. I won't be able to paint this morning. Consider it a paid half day off. That is, if you were planning on coming at all."

She could not miss the hint of uncertainty in his question, even over the telephone. "Of course I was planning on *turning up* today. And you don't need to pay me. As it happens, I have some errands to run as well. I have no other plans this evening, so I could stay later if necessary. When do you want me?" *Oops. Bad choice of words.* She definitely heard a sharp intake of breath at the other end of the line. *Very bad choice.*

"Two will be fine. I'll see you then." He hung up without any further ado.

Hermione wandered into the kitchen to check the time. *Bloody six o'clock! What was he thinking? Although, if he recognised the area code on my phone number, he would assume I'd have to be up this early to get to his place on time. Still, an hour or so more sleep wouldn't go amiss.*

Blowing a kiss at her mother as she headed back up to her bed, Hermione decided she would use her unexpected free time for a trip to Diagon Alley for school supplies. Thanks to Snape's generous wages and prompt payment in cash every Friday afternoon, she had more than enough saved for the necessary supplies.

Three hours later, Hermione passed through the Leaky Cauldron with an efficient schedule organised to cover exchanging her money at Gringott's and visits to Flourish and Blott's for the required textbooks and Madam Malkin's for new school robes. Much as she disliked spending hard-earned Galleons on robes only needed for one year, her sixth year set was decidedly tatty and a little tight in certain places. Transfiguration would never last the entire school year, so new robes it would have to be. Her last stop would be Slug and Jiggers for the necessary ingredients to stock up her depleted Potions kit.

After a slight altercation with the security goblins at the bank, who were determined not to let one of her ilk back through their hallowed doors, Hermione jostled her way through the crowd to the bookshop, not noticing the man clad entirely in black who had entered the shop just before her arrival.

Snape swore as the incompetent assistant led him towards the back of the shop. The urgent Floo from the Headmistress that morning to advise him of the flooding in the dungeons from Peeves's latest chicanery had added to the headache pounding since the early hours. Unrequited desire thrummed through his body, leaving him tense, irritable, and not the least enthralled with a last minute dash to Diagon Alley to replace essential texts and ingredients for the first week's classes.

A flash of bright blue sleeve caught his eye as he collected the needed items from the shelves. Turning, he spotted a delicate, pale hand reaching for a book in the next aisle. Something about the hand seemed very familiar: the smooth skin, the angle of the thumb, the shape of the nails, but before he could consider it any longer the stammering young wizard from the shop interrupted. By the time he had finished explaining that, no, he did not want the latest Gilderoy Lockhart, *Clashing With Centaurs*, the hand and its owner had disappeared.

Paying for his purchases, Snape strode along the alley, managing to avoid the stares of the gormless and inadequate, and those of his students as well, by keeping his head down and his eyes straight ahead. An unfortunate half an hour taking tea with Narcissa and Draco Malfoy, "But we insist, Severus, dear," delayed his plans, but he reached his final stop with plenty of time to spare.

The apothecary was almost deserted, most customers having departed for food establishments. While he was awaiting his order, Snape perused the shelves for any new or rare ingredients. Once again, a glimpse of blue attracted his attention, and there was that hand again. Rounding the corner of the shelves, Snape stopped short as the bushy, brown hair and book-laden bag revealed the owner of the appendage. Hermione Granger. No wonder the hand was familiar; he'd seen it waving in his face for six endless years. There she was, Potter's know-it-all handmaiden, guaranteed to set his teeth on edge as soon as she opened her mouth. *Fucking brilliant. Just what I need to really complete my morning.*

But before he had so much as a chance to snarl, the girl nodded acknowledgement and disappeared without uttering a word. *Odd.* Sneering at the doxy wings instead, Snape collected his purchases and made his way home without any further contemplation of Granger or her hands.

Bugger, bugger, bollocks... shite! Why didn't it occur to me his urgent task might involve appearing in Diagon Alley? Lucky I escaped without speaking, or he'd have put two and two together. Luckier I'm not wearing anything he's seen before today. Reminds me. Better change before I Apparate to the studio. Mind you, seeing him there answered one question. By the look of the glare on his face, he's not planning to be any more pleasant to us this year than he has ever been. Still, I'll have Sidney to imagine whenever he's stalking around the classroom like an overgrown crow. I know his little secret; he's actually a decent human being under all those scowls, with emotions, desires, and a conscience. Wouldn't mind finding out what else is under those robes, but I suppose that is a little inappropriate.

Hermione stashed her purchases in her school trunk, showered, and quickly changed into a different set of clothes. Grabbing a sandwich on the way past the kitchen, she applied her usual Glamour and left a note for her parents not to expect her home for dinner.

Snape was finishing his own lunch when she arrived at the studio quarter of an hour early. Flicking the switch on the kettle, she lifted a mug in question, receiving a brief smile and a nod in return.

"Everything okay?" she asked, once she had eaten half her sandwich.

He looked up. "Nothing to be concerned about. I just had a small problem with supplies. It's all sorted out now."

"Did you finish yesterday's painting?"

"Almost. A few finishing touches and it will be done." He waved to a covered easel in the corner.

Lifting the cloth, Hermione studied the canvas. "That's amazing. You've really captured the difference between innocence and desire, and yet each nuance is so subtle. This is the best so far. All you need now is the final painting." She watched his face, noting the almost surgical precision in the way he had schooled his features. *Come on, Snape, don't go all spy on me now. I want to know what you're thinking.* "I'll just go and change, shall I?"

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but simply nodded.

While Hermione was in the bathroom, Snape moved the large bed he had shifted into the back room to the centre of the floor and smoothed the blue silk coverlet, carefully chosen to match his model's eyes. Once he was satisfied with the position of the bed and the placement of the pillows, he set up his easel and paints.

Hermione dropped her robe over a nearby chair and crawled onto the bed until she was lying in the centre. "What position would you like me in?" *Not again. Terminal foot-in-mouth disease, Granger.*

Snape winced. "I would prefer you to position yourself in whichever way you feel appropriate, Grace. I'd rather not..." He averted his eyes as she placed a pillow beneath her head and shoulders, raised her left knee and allowed it to fall sideways, and bent her right knee a little. The slight elevation of her body kept the curve of her breasts natural, with the rosy peaks crinkled in anticipation. Snape's breathing quickened as he finally looked up and beheld the centre of a woman's femininity: lush, moist, and waiting. With trembling hands, he chose a brush.

At least he left the smock off today. Maybe he should have used it. That must be really uncomfortable. Still, he seems to be concentrating on the canvas now he's over the initial shock. I should be grateful I can't see what he can. It's bad enough knowing how much he can see. If only I didn't feel so damned moist...

Hermione let her eyes drift over her professor's intent expression. Despite his obvious arousal, he seemed to have immersed himself in the process of transferring what he saw onto the canvas before him. Lost in contemplation of his agile hands at work, she startled when he spoke.

"You're not making this easy, Grace."

With a shake of her head, Hermione focussed on his face. Dilated pupils and flushed cheeks met her perusal. "Pardon?"

"You've changed your position. I doubt you really want me to paint you quite so..." He groaned and turned away.

She glanced down. As she had allowed her wayward imagination to come up with a variety of more interesting activities for his hands, her knees had drifted apart, revealing far more of her inner secrets than the merest hint of intimate flesh she had anticipated. Matching his face flame for flame she drew her knees back into the original position. "Sorry, my mind drifted off."

Snape took a few deep breaths while he adjusted his trousers, then resumed painting. "Don't apologise. It is my self-control that is lacking."

You wouldn't say that if you knew what I had been thinking, Professor. Just as well you think I'm a Muggle. A little Legilimency there and I would have been in big trouble.

"No thanks to my lack of concentration. I promise I'll pay attention," she replied. "Just paint fast, will you, Sidney."

A few hours, several adjustments of his trousers, and a few self-directed imprecations later, he laid his brush down for the last time. "That's going to have to suffice. I can't... Excuse me." He strode stiffly out of the room without further explanation.

Hermione watched him walk through to the bathroom and close the door firmly behind him. A stifled groan followed by absolute silence left her puzzled for only a moment or two.

Oh, Merlin, a Silencing Charm. Is he doing what I think he's doing? Have I reduced Severus Snape to this?

And why do I have this crazy urge to watch?

Get a hold of yourself, Granger. Put your robe on and make a pot of tea. He'll need it after the afternoon you've put him through.

After only a few short minutes, Snape joined her in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry. I had to use the facilities," he said, failing to make eye contact.

Is that what they call it nowadays? "No problem. I'll just get dressed while you pour."

Allowing Snape to believe she knew nothing of his activities in the bathroom, she rapidly dressed and stowed her robe in her bag.

"So, do I get to see the painting so far?" she asked as she picked up her cup.

"No. I'd rather you didn't at this stage," he replied. Shifting from foot to foot, he hesitated. "Grace, I'm sorry, but I've made a decision."

Sitting down, she watched his face as he continued. As usual, he revealed nothing.

"This will be our last session. I have enough to finish the paintings for the exhibition, and I believe it would be in both our interests to terminate our agreement today. Of course, I will pay you for the rest of next week as originally agreed."

"I see." *No I don't.*

"No, you don't."

What is he, some kind of mind reader?

Fuck, he didn't just use Legilimency on me, did he? No, I'm sure I'd have noticed. And been thrown out by now... or hexed... or...

"Grace, please, look at me."

Not on your life. I'm not that foolish.

"I can't go on like this. You know the effect you have on me. It's unprofessional and inappropriate. It must stop."

"So, you'll just finish the paintings by memory alone?" She lifted her head and dared to meet his eyes.

"I doubt I will forget any details, Grace." It was his turn to avoid eye contact.

It's for the best. A few days apart might be enough to prevent him recognising me back at Hogwarts, although I'd better keep my head down in the classroom. "Will you let me know when the exhibition is on?"

"Of course. Leave me your address. I presume that was your mother I spoke to this morning? Does she even know what you have been doing all summer?"

"She does. And she approves." Hermione lifted her chin. "Our family has no hang-ups about nudity."

"I suppose she's the one who imbued you with your convictions on feminism."

Hermione nodded. "She'll pass on any messages or letters when I'm back at school."

He winced. "I didn't need to be reminded of that, Grace."

"Sorry. I'd better go. It's been an enlightening experience working with you, Sidney. I look forward to seeing the end result of all our work." She reached up and brushed his expressionless cheek with her lips. "Thank you."

Hermione did not see his face crumple as she left or hear the shatter of the teacup as it hit the wall.

A/N: This was written for the TPP Every Flavour Auction for shalimar1981. Thanks to karelia, who betaed this chapter.

Sorry about the delay in posting. It couldn't be helped.

Chapter Six: Reality Bites

Chapter 6 of 41

At last, they are all back at Hogwarts.

Chapter Six: Reality Bites

Disclaimer: Unfortunately, they're not mine.

"Stop! Someone's coming! They'll see!" Hermione pushed him away from her, pulling her robes on. Reaching for his hand, she pulled him around the corner and into a darkened classroom. He reached for her immediately as his mouth sought hers. Skin heated and robes parted once more, allowing deft fingers to tease and excite, pushing her headlong towards the brink...

A loud bang forced them apart as the door crashed against the wall. Hiding behind the couch, Hermione placed a fingertip on Sidney's lips to silence his cry of outrage. "Hush, it's Snape. He'll give us detention if he finds us here."

Watching the black-robed man glance around the room looking for miscreants, she tensed as lips nibbled at the side of her neck. Finally, Snape left in a swirl of robes, and she turned to her lover to find him lying naked in a bathtub, sweet-scented bubbles covering the areas so long denied. As she reached over to sweep the foam aside, Harry and Ron's voices called from the Quidditch pitch.

"Hermione! Come and watch us practise! You promised!"

"I did promise," she said to Snape as he wrote the instructions on the blackboard. "I have to go."

Sidney rolled over in bed, propping himself up on one elbow as he slowly drew down the sheet to expose her naked and flushed body. Trailing his fingers down the curve of her breasts, stopping to circle the tight peaks he found there, then continuing down, his black eyes never left hers. Closer and closer his hand drew as she lifted her hips to encourage and hasten. Closer, closer, but never quite reaching, she burned and cried out as Snape loomed over her and snarled, "Thirty points from Gryffindor for inappropriate facial colouring, Miss Granger!"

"DAMMIT!" Hermione sat up in bed, wrestling with the sweat-soaked sheets as her heart pounded and her body ached for completion. Dragging down the flimsy cotton nightshirt bunched up above her hips, she crossed the room to the open window. The cool touch of night soothed the fever of frustration from her blood as she pressed her forehead against the glass and sighed.

"So, Hermione, where were you all summer?" Ron asked through a mouthful of chocolate frog as the Hogwarts Express chuffed its way north.

"Working."

"Doing what?"

"Just a job I picked up in the Muggle paper." She lifted her book, hoping the boys would get the hint.

"What sort of job?" It was Harry's turn. "Come on, 'Mione, we told you all our news."

"Helping an artist. I told you before."

"What, did you clean up his paints, run errands, that sort of thing?"

"Something like that."

"I don't know why you're being so secretive about it." Ron had perfected the art of whining. Nothing was worse than a redheaded, freckled, six-foot whiner.

She put down her book and let out a huff of annoyance. "If you must know, I spent all summer getting naked in front of a hot, older man. Happy?" She stared at the pair opposite.

Both young men's eyes widened and jaws dropped. Then they turned to each other and burst into laughter. Tears flowed as they slapped each other's backs and rolled in their seats.

"Good one, 'Mione. You almost had us there!"

"Yeah." Harry held out the sweet bag to Ron. "Never mind, mate. If she doesn't want to tell us, we'll just have to make it up. I think she spent all holiday reading the textbooks for this year and has done half the assignments already."

"That was just the first month. Then she drew up colour-coded charts for all of us to plan our homework by. I can just see it..."

Hermione stood and picked up her bag. "I can see you idiots need some time alone. I'll be in the next empty carriage, reading in *peace!*" Leaving the two boys grinning at each other's increasingly preposterous ideas for 'How Hermione spent her summer,' she wandered down the train to find a quiet corner.

Thank Merlin my bluff worked. I thought for a minute they'd believed me. Still, might have been nice if they had. They could at least have entertained the possibility that I might be interested in the opposite sex. Although, I suppose all the invitations to dinner and dances I've turned down might have lead them to believe the opposite. Hermione Granger: bookworm, swot, and homework organiser that's me.

I suppose I'd better figure out how to handle Snape. Hmm. I'd quite like to handle him, I think, just not in any way that wouldn't be frowned upon by... just about everybody.

Including him.

Stop that, Hermione! It doesn't help!

Okay. Okay. No imagining Sidney naked because that would be imagining Professor Snape naked, and that's just wrong.

Right, if I don't put my hand up in class and keep quiet (sorry, Neville), he might not notice me.

Bollocks!

Of course he'll notice. It's completely different behaviour from usual. He may well be blind from using the facilities by now, but he's not stupid.

I suppose if I answer questions in my 'organising Harry and Ron' voice, it might put him off. Perhaps I should wave my hand around like I used to back in first year. He'd be so busy being aggravated, he may not even notice it's the same hand he painted in great detail a few weeks ago.

And Neville will suddenly become a Potions genius. It's hopeless. If I stay quiet, he'll notice something's wrong, and if I don't...

Suddenly, Hermione's worried frown eased into a triumphant smirk.

I'll just have to be as Gryffindor as possible. Harry always said Snape could never see past the Gryffindor robes. Must remember not to wear Muggle clothes around too much at weekends. That could be a huge mistake. And stick with Harry and Ron. With those two around to annoy him, he won't pay any attention to me.

Pity, I'd quite like him to pay attention to me. Preferably one on one.

Plan decided, Hermione returned to her book. It wouldn't do to get too far behind in her study plan, after all.

"Severus! Welcome back. I trust you have spent the last few months resting and recovering." Minerva McGonagall had visited Snape in St Mungo's before he had left to find her profuse apologies for misjudging him brushed aside as unnecessary. Expiation for her sins unforthcoming, the new headmistress afforded her colleague and erstwhile student as much care and concern as he would allow, excusing him from involvement with the castle's repairs after the final battle and insisting Poppy Pomfrey obtained her supplies from St Mungo's. Snape had only to ensure he had adequate ingredients and equipment for the forthcoming year's classes which, Peeves's interference aside, had been dealt with earlier in the summer.

Snape barely looked up from his meal. He had arrived late, slinking into his seat as the new first years were Sorted. He nodded to the woman beside him, spearing another potato with his fork. His gaze slid around the Great Hall, examining the faces at the student tables: some fresh and excited, many wary and unsure after a year of his own tenure as headmaster, and others, more than he had imagined, with fractured lives and battle memories haunting their eyes. His Slytherins, diminished in numbers, each absent face a testament to his failure. Draco Malfoy was a surprise; his mother had been released from custody, and the boy himself forgiven publicly by Potter himself. Lucius had not escaped a twenty-year sentence in Azkaban, but without Dementors and a more humane warden, the prison merely curtailed his freedom and excesses of vanity. Snape had assumed the Malfoy scion would take over his father's business interests in his absence. He made a mental note to talk to the young man later.

The Misses Parkinson, Greengrass, and Bulstrode and Blaise Zabini were the only four other returning seventh years, and a full half of the new seventh years were missing. Snape's lips thinned as he turned his attention to the other tables. Hufflepuff house had distinguished itself by its naïve avoidance of politics, harbouring few junior Death Eaters or Dumbledore's army members. Its ranks were largely intact, but from the previous year only Hannah Abbott had returned for her N.E.W.T.s.

Ravenclaw's intellectuals almost spilled out of the benches allocated. No self-respecting Ravenclaw would leave Hogwarts without sitting their final exams, and many had returned for the opportunity to make up for an 'unfulfilling academic year.' He shook his head slightly at the serious faces above the blue and bronze ties.

The noise from the Gryffindor table next drew his unwilling eye. Amidst an untidy melee of red and gold, he identified some of his least favourite students. Much back-slapping and hand-shaking was contributing to the racket from their side of the room, and in amongst it all were Potter (of course), Weasley, and Granger. *No, not Granger, she's sitting off to one side reading. How predictable. It's Longbottom the Snake-Slayer who's enjoying the attention. Potter and Weasley are lapping it up, as expected. Nothing ever changes.*

His food turning to sawdust in his mouth, Snape laid down his knife and fork. Muttering an excuse about work to be done, he slipped out of the Hall as silently as he had entered, not noticing a set of brown eyes studying him as he left.

He looks the same, but different. Resigned. Depressed. So different from Sidney. Even when he was making that bloody noble speech about our 'best interests' he was at least showing some emotion. Now he's bottled it all up behind the Snape façade: cold, unfeeling, disdainful of all who surround him. But that's not who he is. He's a man, with ideas and talents and feelings and desires. It's so unfair.

Hermione pushed the cooling food around her plate with little interest. Merriment surrounded her; the welcome familiarity of the start-of-term banquet a balm to the battered spirits of those in the Great Hall. It was a fresh, new start. Now the open wound of their losses had stopped bleeding and healing had started, it was a chance to be young and carefree for a short time with no threat of evil or burden of prophecy to torment their dreams. She could see it in Harry's grin, hear it in Ron's awful jokes, and feel it in the very walls around her. No one would forget, but they would learn to live and laugh again.

She was more concerned with facing the man who had painted her most intimate places. The man who had reacted with such passion and had demonstrated such control. The man who would be teaching her in... She glanced at the timetable she had just been passed.

Double Potions tomorrow morning. I'm not ready for this. What if he realises...?

Dropping her head into her hands, she muttered, "Fuck!"

"Hermione! Did you just say what I thought you did?" Ron had even stopped eating.

"Yes, Ronald. What of it?"

"But you don't. Well, hardly ever. And never at the sight of your timetable."

"But look at what we have first thing tomorrow, Ron. It's no wonder she's swearing." Harry thrust the parchment in front of his friend.

"Bloody hell!"

"I know. You'd think they could have eased us into it, wouldn't you? But, no, Potions on Monday mornings. With Snape. It's going to be a nightmare. Why couldn't he have taught Defence again?" Harry studied the back of Hermione's head and suddenly frowned. "But, 'Mione, you like Potions."

"I don't want to talk about it." Muffled though it was, the message was clear enough.

"All right, all right. Keep your hair on." Shaking their heads at the vagaries of women, the boys resumed the important discussion on their plans for the next few weeks, none of which involved academic pursuits.

You can do this. You have to do this. Just keep your head down, and whatever you do, don't look him in the eye. Keep it together; here he comes.

Hermione shuffled her books and ingredients once more, delaying the inevitable as long as possible. Harry's warning nudge went unnoticed as she repositioned her knife for the twentieth time.

Cardamom, patchouli, and a very subtle hint of turpentine flared her nostrils almost before she felt his presence in front of her desk.

"When you're ready, Miss Granger, perhaps we can start this lesson?"

Don't look him in the eye. Don't look him in the eye. Hermione kept her gaze lowered to find herself staring between the parted edges of his robes to the very area she wanted least to associate with Potions and professors. *Oh, gods, don't look there either!* Settling for his chest, she attempted a weak smile. "Sorry, sir. I was just checking I had everything."

"Ten points from Gryffindor for lack of organisation. You're back in the classroom now, Miss Granger. I suggest you remember that." He turned on his heel and strode to the front of the room. Surveying the faces before him, he stood before his desk as the silence reigned again.

"Well, what have we here? Four Ravensclaws, one Hufflepuff, three Slytherins, and four Gryffindors. I suppose I should be grateful the headmistress didn't combine you lot with the new seventh years. Longbottom!"

Neville nearly fell off his stool as Snape pointed one long finger at his desk. "Y-y-yes, sir?"

"Move over to the other side of the room. Miss Granger will *not* waste her time whispering to you this year."

Gathering up his possessions, Neville did as he was told. His face paled as he realised with whom he had been partnered. "Malfoy? You want me to work with..." Snape's glare silenced him. Draco's was little better.

Hermione watched as Snape tore apart all the comfortable partnerships in the room, moving Harry and Ron to work with Terry Boot and Mandy Brocklehurst, Hannah Abbott with Michael Corner, and Daphne Greengrass with Anthony Goldstein. Without further instruction, she joined Blaise Zabini at his desk.

"You all should know by now I expect nothing less than your full attention in this classroom. This year you will be brewing complex potions, some of which can be dangerous." Glaring at Neville, Snape continued. "Some of you *will* fail unless you follow my instructions to the letter. Is that understood?"

Hermione chewed the end of her quill as she listened to the annual tirade. The details were insignificant; the general message was the same every year. *Either he really is an evil-tempered, misanthropic loner and I have terrible taste or it's all an act he's so used to he doesn't know how else to teach. Which is it, Sidney? Where's the relaxed, talented artist? Where's the man whose passion nearly brought him to his knees? Why can't I bloody concentrate?*

Forcing herself to focus on her ingredients and cauldron, Hermione diced and chopped and ground herself into the oblivion of brewing until she forgot both the Slytherin with whom she shared a workspace and his Head of house prowling the room. With a final stir, the liquid within her cauldron gave a resounding belch and turned deep green. Gregory's Unctuous Uncction was ready to be bottled. Beside her, Blaise Zabini had rendered his potion with equal accuracy and had fetched two vials from the store cupboard. Handing one to his partner, Blaise did not waste words as he prepared his sample.

"Thanks."

"No problem. I was over there getting mine anyway."

She nodded, then stood back as Snape appeared at their desk.

"I see we have two passable attempts here. Do I have a volunteer to try Miss Granger's potion?" He looked around the room, finding eyes suddenly diverted and hands occupied. "Longbottom!"

Neville sighed. "I knew it," he whispered to no one in particular.

Draco Malfoy's satisfied smirk dissolved as Snape handed him a beaker with some of Hermione's Unction within. "Mr Malfoy, I'll let you do the honour. Give this to Mr Longbottom to test."

The younger Slytherin complied, handing the potion to Neville, confusion furrowing his usually smooth brow. "Here. Drink this."

Neville placed the empty beaker on the desk thirty seconds later and turned to Draco. "That was great! You should try some too, mate." He clapped Draco on the shoulder and grinned. "So, how did your summer go, Malfoy? You should tell me all about it over a drink or two next weekend."

"I think that qualifies as a success," Blaise said under his breath as he cleaned up his half of the workspace. "Any idea how long this stuff works?"

"Forty-eight hours. Neville's going to kill me."

"Only if Malfoy doesn't get to you first. I don't think I've ever seen him squirm like that." Blaise chuckled. "Even Snape looks amused."

Hermione turned her attention to the Potions master. *He's right. Snape has that little quirk of the corner of his lip that lifts when he's about to laugh. I wonder how many times that's happened before, and no one has noticed. I'd never have recognised it if I hadn't spent so much time with him as Sidney.*

Snape turned on his heel. "You have seven minutes to bottle a sample of your work and leave it on my desk for grading. Anyone remaining in this classroom after that time will lose their house five points." He stalked over to his desk and sat, glaring at the flustered students. "Move!"

There we go, back to the old Snape we know and love.

Love...

Don't be ridiculous. Like is one thing, lust is another, but love is just...

Unthinkable.

A/N: This was written for the TPP Every Flavour Auction for shalimar1981. Many thanks to karelia, who beat up the extraneous commas for me. She's my hero!

Chapter Seven: Correspondence

Chapter 7 of 41

Things become a little heated after Hermione gets a letter.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. I just made up the rest.

Chapter Seven: Correspondence

... and the ginger root should be grated before it is added to the cauldron...

"Utter tripe, Leadbetter!" Red ink slashed across the page in a flurry of criticism.

... Next, add the anteater armidillo anteater echidna bile and stir twenty-three times in a clockwise...

"Do they pay *any* attention to the fucking instructions?" More red ink and acid comments decorated the page. Snape sighed as he picked up the next fourth year's essay.

They'll need more than Wit-Sharpener Potion to pass their O.W.L.s next year if they don't improve. Pity Grace isn't a witch. With her quick mind and ability to concentrate, she'd show these idiots a thing or two. His mind followed the thought to a delightful place where every student had long, dark hair and cerulean eyes. Of course, they were also all naked and beckoning to him with one slender hand. A very familiar hand.

His eyes drifted to the essay before him. "Dammit!" Taking his wand, he siphoned off the red ink adorning the side of the essay with a sketch of Grace Henman's face, doodled while he was daydreaming. Snape shoved the essay back onto the stack and stood, painfully aware of the effect his fantasising had had in his trousers.

Why can't I get her out of my mind? She's a teenager, for fuck's sake. I shouldn't even be thinking of her in that way, let alone getting a hard-on every time I do.

His fly was unbuttoned before his conscience caught up with his hands. Strong fingers encircled his wayward arousal and stroked several times before he dragged them away with a self-recriminatory groan.

No! I can't. I won't.

Trembling with unsated need, Snape reached for the Firewhisky and slumped in well-worn armchair. Two glasses later, his hands had steadied and his trousers had loosened enough to resume his marking.

It was a long evening.

After the waxing gibbous moon had set, leaving all of Hogwarts cloaked by darkness, Snape chased Grace through his dreams, never quite catching her, following her enigmatic smile through fragmented pathways, hearing her laugh, always around the next corner, and ever drawn by the beckoning finger of the hand he knew. Dawn sneaked into his room to find a restless wizard lying naked and sweat-kissed amidst a tangle of sheets, turgid cock in his hand, gasping out his shame in spurts of creamy seed.

"How are your parents, 'Mione?" Ron pointed to the Muggle envelope wedged between the platter of bacon and eggs and the jug of pumpkin juice.

"I haven't opened it yet. I'll read it later in my free time." Hermione glanced at her watch. "Right now, I have to get a move on. I want to check out some references in the library before Potions." Leaving the last of her egg, Hermione drained her glass and threw the letter into her bag before standing. "I'll see you boys in the dungeons. Try not to be late!"

Fifteen minutes later, she closed the last book and tidied her notes. *That was easier than I'd thought. I still have enough time before Potions to read Mum's letter.*

Hermione pulled the envelope out of her bag, frowning when she found not a letter, but another envelope inside the first. *What's this? Oh, hell, just as well I didn't open it in front of the boys. His handwriting is fairly distinctive. I wonder what he wants?* Glancing around to ensure she remained unnoticed, she opened the second envelope.

Dear Miss Henman,

I am writing to inform you the paintings for the exhibition are all completed. I trust you are well.

Yours sincerely,

Sidney Reilly

She re-read the letter and shook her head. *He wrote just to say that? He didn't even tell me how they turned out.*

Taking a quill and piece of parchment, Hermione started writing a reply, then stopped and stared at her hands. *Fuck! Stupid, stupid, stupid! You're supposed to be a Muggle!* Digging deeper into her bag, she found a biro and some of the Muggle notepaper she usually used to write to her parents.

Dear Sidney,

I'm pleased to hear the paintings are finished, but you didn't tell me how they turned out. Do you think they'll work together as well as we thought?

Things here are busy, but that's no different than usual.

Hermione sucked her pen for a moment as she dithered over her sign off. *'Yours sincerely.'* *The man has painted every part of me naked, and all I get is, 'Yours sincerely?'* *He really is taking this gentleman thing too far.* A wicked smile crept over her face as she reached a decision. Using her wand to erase the last sentence, she picked up her pen again.

Things have cooled down somewhat since I last saw you, but the weather here has been great.

Take care of yourself,

Grace

Her chuckle died as she noticed the time. *Merlin, I'd better run, or I'll be late for class. Snape will kill me. Or at least give me detention, and I don't think I can stand that much individual attention.*

Arriving just as her fellow students filed into the classroom, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief and shook her head at the questioning looks from her friends. As she slipped into her seat, she looked up to find Blaise Zabini smiling a greeting.

"Hi." She smiled back as she set out her Potions kit.

His dark eyes glinted as he leaned back in his chair, supremely comfortable in his own skin. Hermione studied him surreptitiously as she half-listened to Snape berating Hannah Abbott for knocking over her inkbottle. Blaise had always been somewhat of an enigma. During the war, he had seemed to hold Muggleborns and Death Eaters alike in disdain, remaining aloof and dissociated from either group. He'd appeared to tolerate Draco Malfoy and his friends, but with barely concealed contempt. She had heard his family was even wealthier than the Malfoys, and his mother had not allied herself with either Voldemort or his opponents. Tall, attractive, and dark-skinned, he exuded confidence and an innate composure Malfoy could only aspire to.

I bet he'd know what a G-spot was. And where to find it. Hermione turned her head towards the blackboard to hide the blush her errant thoughts had created. *You really must be frustrated, girl, to be thinking about a Slytherin in that way.* Her eyes fell upon her teacher, now standing before his desk, watching the class collect their ingredients. *And he's the most Slytherin of them all. Forget frustrated, I must be out of my mind.* With a sigh, she copied down the instructions for the day's potion.

"Here, I've got yours as well." Blaise put her share of the ingredients from the store cupboard on her side of the worktable.

"Er... thanks. You didn't need to do that."

"It was nothing." He shrugged. "Your turn next time."

Hermione nodded. "Okay. It's a deal."

She chopped and sliced, eyes firmly on her knife. Turning her thoughts away from the two Slytherins who had commandeered them was proving difficult until a third Slytherin was heard hissing behind her.

"No, Longbottom, you idiot, slice the knotgrass lengthwise, not across. And move the armadillo bile away from your elbow!"

She met Blaise's amused gaze and giggled. It seemed even Draco Malfoy had realised he had a vested interest in keeping Neville on track.

"He's only worried about his hair," Blaise said under his breath.

"His hair?"

"Imagine how much damage an exploding cauldron could do."

Her snort was unfortunately loud enough to draw attention.

"Do you have a problem, Miss Granger?" Snape appeared from nowhere, far too close for comfort.

"N-no, Professor. No problems." *Only you.* She closed her eyes and counted to ten as his body heat and scent drifted away.

"Are you all right? You look a little flushed."

"Fine. Just fine." She waved away Blaise's concern and returned to her chopping board and the familiar rhythm of brewing.

Sample handed in and workspace clean, Hermione left the dungeons as soon as the class was dismissed, not stopping to wait for Ron or Harry. She had just enough time for a side trip to the Owlery to send the reply to Sidney, via her mother, before heading for her Arithmancy lesson.

As the owl winged away, Hermione stopped suddenly in her headlong dash down the Owlery stairs. "Bloody fucking hell!" *He knows my parents' address! He only has to look up the students' register here and he'll know who I am. What am I, completely daft? How could I have done such a stupid thing?* She leaned her forehead against the cool stone of the wall, struggling to control her breathing. *It's all right. He has no reason to look up my address. I'm sure he's not the least bit interested in where any students live, let alone a Gryffindor. Just calm down.*

Anxiety attack aborted, Hermione once again started jogging to reach her next class. *At this rate I'll get fitter, if nothing else.*

Dear Miss He Grace

The paintings have indeed fulfilled all of our expectations. Standish was most impressed and expressed a wish to meet you some time. I explained you were unavailable at the moment.

As far as 'taking care of myself' goes, what exactly do you mean? Did I not appear to eat well enough over the summer? I suspect I am somewhat better equipped to look after myself than a mere schoolgirl. Nevertheless, I shall take your sentiment in the manner in which it was offered and thank you for your concern.

Kind regards

Sidney Reilly

Sidney

I was not referring to food.

Grace

Grace

If not food, then what? I admit to being somewhat baffled.

Sidney

Hermione's eyes widened as she noticed what Snape was reading after assigning the class an essay on the properties of Re'em blood and other rare ingredients. The Muggle envelope was as out of place on his desk as a copy of *Witch Weekly*. Embarrassment succumbed to curiosity as she watched him through a curtain of hair while scribbling nonsense on her parchment.

The subtle softening in the lines of his face would have been invisible to anyone not expecting it as he slit the envelope and extracted the letter. Hermione found she was holding her breath as he began reading.

Sidney

Do I need to spell it out to you? You knew at the time I was aware of your difficulties as you painted that final canvas. I may be still at school, but I'm not entirely naïve. Your hurried trip to the bathroom was not exactly subtle. Oh, don't get all flustered and repentant about it; I was tempted to do the same.

She watched as his face first flushed, then his mouth dropped open. Averting her eyes as he glanced around the room, Hermione resumed her observation when he continued reading.

That shocked you, didn't it? After all your studies of the female form, I suspect you still fail to recognise we have exactly the same desires and needs as you men. Did you really think I could spend so much time staring at your erect penis bulging against your jeans and not respond? Yes, I used the word. Penis.

It's just a word, after all. We debated the significance of a woman's genitalia as the seat of her femininity. Likewise, should the male penis not receive its due share of attention? For you are definitely a man you left me in no doubt of that and your penis proudly declared your masculinity. Somewhat impressively, I might add. Is it so surprising then that I found my own body responding in kind?

Hermione was sure she heard a sharp hiss as Snape shifted, restless in his chair but clearly reluctant to leave the shelter of his desk. *Stop reading, you idiot. Stop now before you embarrass both of us.* Her grip on the quill tightened as she saw him turn the page. *Oh, Merlin, why did I get so carried away? I only meant to suggest to him the possibility I was interested. Okay, so I wrote it in flaming letters six bloody feet high, but he wasn't fucking supposed to read it in class.* Her faint whimper drew a puzzled glance from Blaise, but an eyeroll and a shrug served to send his attention back to his work. Returning her focus to the front of the room, Hermione was as transfixed as her professor was on the page before him.

I understood at the time why you felt the need to step back a little and regain control. Believe me, so did I. But now I regret not knocking on that bathroom door and offering to take care of you.

In every way.

Would that have really been so terrible?

Yours

Grace

This time, his groan drew the attention of some of her classmates. They stared at their teacher, wondering who had caused the latest infraction.

Silence reigned as, for the first time in all their years at Hogwarts, Professor Severus Snape stood without a single word and left the classroom. If his gait was somewhat stiff, only one student noticed. And on his return some five minutes later, only one student blushed and squirmed as her imagination took her to places previously unexplored.

Grace

You're going to be the death of me, woman. I was foolish enough to read your last letter while not alone. You have no idea how close I came to completely humiliating myself.

Still, you gave me food for thought.

The exhibition will be showing from the 7th to the 14th November. If you wish to attend, the weekend dates would suit me better to accompany you. I suggest we meet at the studio and travel from there if that suits you.

I hope you are taking good care of yourself. As I am.

Often.

Sidney.

Hermione ensured her door was firmly warded against sound and unwanted visitors before unfolding the letter once again. One hand skimmed over heated skin as she read his brief but revealing words.

Often. Gods... often.

The parchment fell unheeded to the sheets as her fingers and imagination took care of her own desperate need.

A/N: This was written for the TPP Every Flavour Auction for shalimar1981. Many thanks to my beta, karelia.

I apologise for the wait for this chapter. I had to set this to one side for a few weeks while I completed my SSHG Exchange assignment. Thank you for your patience, dear readers. The rest of the story should be posted regularly, short of feast, fire, famine, or flood!

sunny33

Chapter Eight: Accepting the Inevitable

Chapter 8 of 41

Hermione and Snape begin to come to terms with their desires.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. I just torment them for fun.

Chapter Eight: Accepting the Inevitable

Consciousness returned with a vengeance, an unceremonious dumping of reality banishing Sidney's naked desire from Hermione's dreams and tipping her awake into the cool morning air.

"Bollocks!" She scrubbed at her face and looked around for her missing nightgown. Giving up on a lost cause, Hermione dragged her sticky and nude body into the bathroom, silently thanking whoever had decreed returning seventh years were entitled to their own facilities.

Oh, Merlin. I look like I've spent the night having sex, not just dreaming about it. How did my hair get into such a rat's nest? It's all Sidney's fault. Often. I'll give him often.

But it's not Sidney. It's Snape.

Professor Snape.

She smiled at her sleep-creased face in the mirror and nodded as her muddled, swirling thoughts gradually distilled into a single, crystal-clear conclusion.

It's Professor Severus Snape, and I don't give a toss. He wants me. Well, maybe not me exactly, but, dammit, Grace is me. I only changed my hair and eyes. Grace is me, and I'm Grace. Grace wants him so badly. I want him so badly.

I just need to decide what to do about it.

Problem unresolved, Hermione showered and dressed before joining her fellow Gryffindors in the Great Hall for breakfast. She watched Snape with fleeting glances between mouthfuls of sausage and egg.

He looks relaxed enough this morning. I wonder whether... No, I mustn't think about it. Concentrate on what Ron is saying.

"... and that's why we need your help with the Transfiguration essay. Please, 'Mione."

"Didn't I tell you I wasn't going to do your work for you this year?"

"But we just don't understand it. We've really tried. Ron even read the relevant chapter in the textbook. Twice." Harry flashed the cute, self-deprecating smile that usually melted Hermione's resolve in seconds.

"You two are hopeless. I've already explained the theory three times since the last lesson." Hermione resisted, but their combined pitiful expressions were too pathetic to ignore. "Oh, all right. I'll go over it one more time after dinner, but I'm *not* writing a single word of your essays. Understood?"

"Yes, miss," they replied as one, grinning at each other.

"Now, leave me alone until then. I have a letter to write." Excusing herself, Hermione took one last look at the man of her desires and left. Snape never so much as looked up from his plate.

Dear Mum

I'm writing to ask a huge favour. Sidney Reilly's exhibition is showing in the second week of November. I really want to go and see the paintings on display, but I don't want Professor McGonagall to know I was posing nude over the holidays. You know how old-fashioned wizarding folk are.

I wonder if you would mind terribly pretending there's a special family get together you want me to attend, so I can come home and go to the exhibition from there.

I know I'm asking you to be deceitful, and normally I would never do such a thing, but this is very important to me.

If you agree, would you send back a letter asking the headmistress for leave for me to come home for the weekend of the 7th and 8th of November. If not, I understand, really I do.

Love

Hermione

Hermione hurried to the owlery before she changed her mind. It was the only way. She had first considered asking for leave to attend the exhibition, using the same half-truth she had told the boys, but quickly discarded that course of action. Minerva McGonagall would be sure to ask the name of the artist she had assisted, and if even if she was not aware of Snape's method of stress relief, one mention of Hermione's request to attend an art exhibition that weekend in Snape's presence could have disastrous consequences. She hoped her mother would understand.

Snape felt his early good humour rapidly fade as his oldest students filed into the classroom. Taking care of himself had reached a whole new level since the last letters he had exchanged with Grace, and he had performed the task with breathless compliance both the night before and as soon as he had woken. *She should have received my letter by now. I wonder if she'll come. Damn. Shouldn't have used that expression, brings far too many interesting images to mind...*

Distraction. I need a distraction.

He folded his arms so his robes concealed the front of his trousers and paced back and forth before the class, watching the students settle themselves at their workbenches while willing his recalcitrant body into submission.

Everyone is quiet and well-behaved. Inconsiderate of them. A few points deducted here and there would have helped. Interesting, Mr Zabini appears to have charmed Miss Granger. She's smiling at him. Never thought I'd see the day when the Gryffindor bookworm would show an interest in any Slytherin. Zabini certainly has a gift. Lets them think he's totally disinterested, then with one smile has them eating out of his palm.

Lucky bastard.

"Today you will be brewing the base for Strengthening Solution. However, in the second stage next week, you will divide your Potions into half and use the standard salamander blood in one and Re'em blood in the other. I trust you have all remembered the properties of Re'em blood you discussed in your essays earlier this week. You have a question, Miss Granger?"

"Yes. Isn't Re'em blood almost impossible to procure?"

"Indeed. However, the Ministry in their wisdom grants a small allocation for this particular class. It is a *small* allocation, so I expect you all to use it correctly. Is that understood, Mr Longbottom?"

"Yes, sir." Neville shot an anxious glance towards Hermione, whose only reply was a reassuring nod.

"Once the two potions have been completed, you will be testing them on each other to determine the difference in potency." He looked around the room and indicated the blackboard. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

As she gathered hers and Blaise's ingredients, Hermione found herself standing beside Draco Malfoy. Drawing his attention by dint of a light touch on his arm, she spoke before he could react. "Keep an eye on him please, Draco." She tipped her head in Neville's direction.

The blond managed to refrain from showing any surprise at Hermione's request. "Er... sure, Gra... Hermione." He was rewarded with another pat on his arm and a wide smile.

"Thanks."

Hermione shrugged at Blaise's raised eyebrow when she returned to their desk. "What?"

"You'd better watch out. Your little friends don't seem too happy about you chatting with Draco."

She looked across the room to find Harry and Ron glaring at Draco. "Oh, they'll get over it. I just asked him to watch Neville. Nothing to write home about. Besides, I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

"That's different. You have to work with me. That makes it tolerable."

"Don't be daft, Blaise. Now, if I started snogging you in the middle of class, *then* they'd have something to worry about." She began measuring and chopping her ingredients.

"Would you?"

"Would I what?" she replied, concentrating on her work.

"Snog me?"

"Dammit, Zabini! I almost cut my finger. Do you have to say things like that when I'm using a bloody sharp knife?" She looked up to find his eyes laughing while his mouth pretended to pout.

"And there I was thinking you'd started fancying Slytherins."

"You don't know the half of it," she muttered, flicking a glance to the Slytherin who dominated her thoughts and dreams.

"Women, so fickle." Blaise's eyes widened a fraction as he followed the direction of her gaze. With a frown, he shook his head and started his own preparation.

Snape sat at his desk, idly watching Hermione and Blaise brew. Like a moth to a flame, his eyes were drawn to her delicate hands quickly and efficiently chopping and stirring as she followed the instructions on the board. Despite his constant awareness of everything occurring in the classroom, his thoughts once again began to stray to Grace.

Why am I so obsessed with a Muggle? What is it about her? Why can't I find a witch like Grace?

Don't be a fool, man, no witch would be interested. They know too much about my past, and most of the younger ones have suffered through my classes. It's no wonder they avoid me.

Hermione chose that moment to look up at her professor to find his gaze fixed on her hands. Flushing and looking away immediately, she went back to her brewing, hoping he did not recognise the hands he had painted in so much detail only weeks earlier.

Snape's expression hardened. *Typical. Even the so-called brightest witch of her age can't stomach the sight of me. None of them ever meet my eyes. Afraid I'll use Legilimency on them, I imagine. As if I'd be remotely interested in their puerile lives. Even my colleagues avoid eye contact.*

Except Poppy. She's healed me often enough when I've been ill or injured not to be afraid of my temper. And Nymphadora. She was never afraid of me once she left school. Bloody soft-hearted Hufflepuffs. I could have taken an interest in her if she hadn't taken up with that bloody werewolf. And then she was foolish enough to get herself killed. Still, I always assumed I'd be dead myself by the end of the war, so it was a moot point.

Maybe a Muggle is my only option. But Grace is still only a girl, too young for the likes of me.

Although she was all woman when she responded so readily to my arousal during that last painting. I thought I'd imagined how moist she'd become, but those letters...

Fuck! I'll have to buy looser trousers if my bloody body doesn't stop behaving as if I'm a hormone-crazed adolescent.

"Hermione, Professor McGonagall wants to see you in her office after dinner. Something about a letter from your mum. She said not to worry; it's nothing bad." Ginny threw her bag onto the couch in front of the fireplace in the common room and sprawled out beside it.

"Thanks, Gin. When did you see her?"

"Just now, on my way in from Herbology. What do you think your mum wants?"

"I don't know. I'll tell you after I've seen her." *I hate lying to her, but I can't tell her the truth. 'Hey, Gin, Mum's wangling me a weekend away to spend with Professor Snape looking at some nude paintings he did of me over summer. Oh, by the way, I'm seriously considering shagging him in the not-too-distant future...' That's if he doesn't find out who I am and hex me into next week first.*

"Come on then. Let's go down early. The sooner we eat, the sooner you can find out what your mum wants, and the sooner you can share." Ginny grinned as she caught Hermione's arm and pulled her up off the couch.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming. You do realise I'll still have to wait for Professor McGonagall to finish her own dinner."

Ginny screwed up her nose. "I suppose so. And she always seems to talk for *ages*. Still, it wouldn't hurt to get there before Ron. I hear there's roast pork tonight, and you know how he always *hogs* the crackling."

Hermione rolled her eyes and giggled. "He makes such a *pig* of himself, doesn't he?"

"A right boor." Ginny nudged Hermione as Ron and Harry wandered down the stairs from their dorm. "Holy sow, here they come now!"

"What?" Ron gaped at his sister and friend, who by then were incoherent. "What's so funny? Harry, what's wrong with them?"

Harry shrugged. "They're girls. Trust me – don't ask. Whatever it is, you don't want to know."

Hermione wiped her eyes as they all headed out the door. *Very true, Harry.*

"Well?" Ginny stretched herself out on Hermione's bed as she awaited an answer.

"Mum wants me to go home in November to meet some relatives who are coming over from Canada. We haven't seen them since I was a baby, and they'll only be in the country a week." It was close enough to the truth. She did have an aunt and uncle living in Calgary, and she hadn't seen them for years. The visit was her mother's invention, however.

"What did Professor McGonagall say? It's usually hard to get permission to go home during the term."

"She was great. Said as I had my Apparation licence it was not a big problem, but I wasn't to tell anyone except you and the boys. She doesn't want everybody thinking they can come and go as they please, but she told me she sees the few of us who have returned to complete our final year more as adult students than children and believes we're old enough to take responsibility for ourselves." *Made me feel even more guilty as well.*

"Brilliant! So, are you going to tell them?"

"I suppose I should, but I think I'll just say it was a one-off thing. I can imagine what Ron and Harry would want to do if they thought they could take off for weekends whenever they liked." *Probably just go to Quidditch games, not nude art exhibitions. I'm such a hypocrite! It's only once though. It's not like I'm planning to sneak off every weekend.*

As it turned out, Ron and Harry were not the least bit interested in leaving Hogwarts at weekends.

"But 'Mione, you'll miss the match between us and Ravenclaw! It's only a boring old family thing; can't you get out of it?"

"No, Ron. It's something I really want to do."

"Besides, you know she'd only have her nose in a book all through the match anyway. Half the time she cheers when the opposition has scored a goal just because she hears everyone else doing it." Ginny grinned at Hermione's blush. "Admit it, Hermione. Quidditch is about as interesting to you as extra History of Magic homework is to these two idiots. And stop whining, brother dearest, I'm sure there'll be plenty of squealing girls eager to watch your exploits."

Ron's face lightened as he considered the possibilities of his first appearance on the Quidditch pitch since the war had ended. Leaving the two young men arguing tactics with Ginny, Hermione slipped off to write a note to Sidney.

Sidney

Sorry for not replying sooner. I'd love to see the exhibition with you. I'm available on the 7th. What time shall I meet you at the studio?

She paused and sucked the end of her pen while she decided how far to push him.

I found your last letter intriguing. I think of you at night, you know, imagining what you might be doing.

Often.

Grace.

"Mum, how do I look?" Hermione twirled in the kitchen, allowing her mother to appraise her appearance. After an hour of panic over what to wear, she had raided her mother's wardrobe and found the perfect dress. With a halter neck, the front of the bodice formed a low but not scandalous sweetheart neckline, nipping into her waist, then flaring out to a skirt which skimmed her curves and swirled around her knees as she walked. The back was virtually non-existent down to below her waist, exposing the sweep of her spine to the appreciative eye. A quick flick of her wand had changed the colour from a dated peach to a rich blue slightly darker than her eyes. With her mother's silver choker and earrings, her hair swept up into a loose knot, and high-heeled sandals, she had managed to dispel any notion of the girl she was.

"Oh, my. You look very glamorous. I didn't know that old dress could look so good. I don't suppose you'd consider leaving it that colour, dear?"

Hermione grinned. "No problem. It would suit you as well. You'd have to let Dad take you out somewhere special to wear it though."

Jean smiled. "Your father won't need much encouragement if I wear that. As long as I still fit into it, of course. It's been a few years since I last wore it. Otherwise, you'll just have to keep it."

"I'm sure it'll fit you, Mum. I happen to know you steal my spare jeans when I'm at school."

"Your father has a big mouth. It was only that one time when we went hiking." She walked around her daughter, examining the dress from all sides. "So, are you coming home tonight?"

"Mother!" Hermione's cheeks flared scarlet.

"I was young once, dear, and a girl doesn't go out on a date in that outfit planning to come home early."

"It's not a date."

"You forget I've been forwarding all those letters you two have been exchanging since you went back to school. I know you spent far more time with Sidney than you needed to for the job. And you never stopped talking about him. He's not just your boss, is he, love?"

Hermione's head bowed as she pulled out a chair and sat down. "I don't know, Mum. I hope not."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Meeting her mother's eyes, so similar to her own, Hermione knew she had to tell her the truth. "The thing is, it's complicated. Sidney Reilly is not just an ordinary artist..."

A/N: This was written for the TPP Every Flavour Auction for shalimar1981. Many thanks to karelia for the beta work.

Chapter Nine: Woman: Unveiled

Chapter 9 of 41

The exhibition and its effects.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. I just torment them for fun.

Chapter Nine: Woman: Unveiled

The truth was oddly liberating. Hermione told her mother almost everything, skimming over some of the more personal details.

"This professor, isn't he the unpleasant one you always used to complain about?"

"He was... he is... but that's the problem. I can't see him like that anymore. Not now I've got to know him. He's... different."

"You've found the man behind the mask, dear. Teachers are human too; it's just we rarely have a chance to find that out while we're still their students. Didn't you tell me he'd played a huge part in ending that dreadful war?"

"He did. He was amazing. The sacrifices he made to ensure our safety... and all the while we denigrated him and cried unfair. We were awful really."

"You didn't know at the time. I hope you're all treating him with more respect now."

"I've always treated him with respect, Mum, but I still feel guilty about how much I disliked him. That's why I was so confused at first. I was mixing up all the old feelings of fear and dislike and suspicion and couldn't let go of the past. I also knew I had to go back to school and sit in his class, knowing he was Sidney, knowing I had posed *naked* for him, *knowing* he had allowed me to see him at his most vulnerable."

Jean watched the emotions play across her daughter's face. "If you felt that way, why did you keep writing to him?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. His first letter was so very formal. After all the things he had said, I just wanted to find out if he still felt the same way, or if it was just the situation at the time."

"You said the letters became more suggestive and flirty. He didn't do anything inappropriate while you were modelling for him?"

"No, Mum. Like I said, he became aroused during the last two paintings but felt really embarrassed by it, and that was why he ended the sessions early and finished them alone. He didn't want to act on his feelings. He's twenty years older and believed I was a Muggle."

"Does his age bother you, love?" Jean's voice was gentle, non-judgemental.

Hermione looked up from her study of the carpet. "I should be asking you that question, Mum."

Her mother smiled and took her hand. "I understand better than you might think. I've never told you the story of my first relationship, have I?"

"Before you met Dad, you mean?"

"Years before. I was a second-year student at university. My pharmacology lecturer was in his mid-thirties, a brilliant but unpopular man with a reputation for reducing female students to tears and avoiding faculty social events." Her face softened as her memories travelled back down the years. "One day I approached him after the lecture to ask a question. At first, he was monosyllabic, but I persisted, and eventually he relented and allowed me, a second-year, to converse with him. After that, I spoke with him at the end of each lecture, and soon it was coffees at a discreet café."

Hermione giggled as she realised where her mother was heading. "You didn't?"

"I did. I fell head over heels for Paul. He was my first, and only, *grand passion*. It took months, but eventually he succumbed to my charms and took me home to his flat." She sighed. "It was wonderful. We spent all our spare time in bed making love and talking about our hopes and dreams for the future. I cherished the fact that, of all my friends, I alone knew the real man inside."

"So, what happened?"

"The end of the year happened. I went home to my parents' home for the summer, and while I was away Paul was offered a professorship at a prestigious university in the United States."

"And he just left you?"

"No, he wrote, asking me to go with him, but I was away in France with my parents and didn't get the letter until it was too late. He had gone."

"Mum! You should have followed him."

"I seriously considered it, but I was afraid. Afraid our feelings weren't real. Afraid I would upend my entire life and go to him to find it was only about sex. You see, we had never talked about love. I had no idea what he felt for me. So I never replied to his letter. To this day, I still wonder what happened to him."

Hermione felt a tear slip from her eye. "Did you ever look him up? And what about Dad?"

Jean smiled. "No. I decided a long time ago the past should stay in the past. And your father was the best thing to happen to me. I met him some years later, and his kindness and sense of humour and gentle nature wound its way into my heart before I knew. He was, and still is, the right man for me, and I've not regretted for one minute becoming his wife, but I don't regret the time I spent with Paul either."

Hugging her mother, Hermione sighed. "Oh, Mum. What shall I do?"

"I can't answer that, love. You need to decide if and when you tell him who you really are, and if anything happens tonight, know I understand. I allowed Paul to slip out of my life because of fear. You and Sidney... Severus... have been through so much over the last few years. Don't allow your fight for freedom to go to waste. Even if it doesn't work out, the journey will be worth it."

Hermione stood outside the door to the studio, twisting her hands together as she tried to calm her nerves. The last time she had seen Sidney Reilly, he had sent her away. Had he really changed his mind?

Opening the door, she let herself in. "Hello! Sidney!"

A soft gasp behind her alerted her to his presence. She turned to find him standing just inside the door, rigid and silent. "Oh, there you are."

Snape closed his eyes briefly, then re-opened them, meeting her blue gaze. "Grace," he whispered.

"Sidney, what's wrong?" Hermione took the few steps that separated them and grasped his arms. "Are you all right?" *Oh, Merlin, he's regretting those letters already.*

He shook his head, then nodded and met her eyes again, pupils dilated with arousal. "It's... I'm... You look..."

"Sidney?"

"Dammit, woman. How can you do this to me?" He glanced down at himself. "Even when you're fully dressed. Although I have to ask whether you're actually wearing anything under that."

Hermione's smile bathed Snape in its warmth. *He's definitely still interested. Very much so, judging by the state of his trousers. I wonder if I dare...*

Reaching up, she pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, retreating before he could react. "Hi. It's good to see you, too. And a lady never tells."

His answering groan sent a shiver down her spine. *I can do this. He's the man I want.*

"I think we should go before I do something I might regret. Our ride is waiting outside."

Taking her arm, Snape escorted her to the taxi, then returned to lock up the studio. The trip to the exhibition was surprisingly short; only two or three miles separated the shopping centre where the studio was situated from the sophisticated art gallery in the midst of the city nightlife. During the ride he had remained silent, simply watching her as they sat in the back of the taxi, thighs tingling where they nearly touched.

"I don't know if I can do this." Another attack of nerves assailed Hermione as she stepped out of the car and saw the number of people milling around outside and within the gallery.

"Do what?"

"Go inside. I've just realised all those people in there will know what I look like naked."

Snape smirked. "But I'm the only one who has been lucky enough to see the real thing. Or unlucky, perhaps." He looked down at his straining trousers with a rueful grin. "Stand in front of me, will you? I need a moment."

You need a moment? I take one look at the effect I have on you, and I feel all weak at the knees, Severus Snape! Laughing, Hermione stepped aside, leaving him to his battle with self-control.

"Heartless woman. I'll remember that." He caught up with her at the door and swept it open with a bow. "Allow me."

The foyer of the gallery was classic in its simplicity. Plain white walls and a black granite floor were strategically lit to highlight the three charcoal-on-canvas sketches propped unframed on easels just inside the entrance. A large poster on the wall behind simply announced: **Woman, Unveiled. A Collection of Works by Sidney Reilly.**

In the gallery proper, Snape's paintings had been arranged as planned with a variety of presentations. There were more sketches, several Hermione had never seen before, some paintings mounted on block and others framed.

"When did you do these?" she asked as she studied a simple sketch of her face in repose.

Snape flushed a little. "After you had left, from memory."

"They're amazing. You've captured me so well, even the stupid way I bite my lip when I'm thinking." *That is definitely a habit I need to break.*

Before they had a chance to see any more, a tall, good-looking man of around forty approached them.

"Well, well, this must be your lovely model, Sidney." He took Hermione's hand in his and brushed his lips across her knuckles. "Delighted to meet you at last, my dear. My name is Standish, William Standish. We must get together and chat soon. Don't allow Sidney here to monopolise you all night. He's had you all to himself for far too long." Seeing another familiar face in the crowd, Standish made his excuses and moved on, leaving a thin-lipped Snape and a bemused girl behind him.

Hermione reached out and squeezed Snape's hand as Standish left, seeing the tension drain visibly from his shoulders. "You'd think he was the one who had seen me stripped naked from the expression on your face, Sidney."

"He's rich, successful, and charming."

"So. He's also not my type." She looked up at him and smiled.

"You have a type?"

"Yes. Brooding, artistic, and passionate." She pulled on his arm. "Come on; I want to see the rest of the paintings."

Walking around the gallery, Hermione was once again entranced by Snape's talent with his brush and pencil. Each work breathed life, as if he had poured his heart and soul into its creation. The paintings and sketches of her hands were exquisite in their detailing of the tiny creases around her knuckles, and his brutally honest depiction of her less than generous breasts warmed her heart when she realised it was another he had painted from memory.

"These are brilliant," Hermione told him, reaching for his hand again. Feeling the warmth and rightness of Snape's fingers entwined with hers distracted her as they wove through the crowd amassed before the final two paintings. Glancing back at him, trailing just behind, she noticed a trace of anxiety in his eyes as he stared above her head to the canvas before her. Only then did she realise the people beside her stood silently, watching the two newcomers.

Her brow furrowed a little as she looked at the painting they had gathered to view.

It was magnificent.

Snape had managed to imbue the canvas and oils with a quality of richness and vibrancy which reached out and caught the viewer in its spell. For a moment, Hermione wondered whether he had used his magic. There she was, Hermione Granger, or Grace Henman at least, dewy-eyed and innocent, with skin like creamy silk and sweet curves of promise, and at the same time lush and enticing, every man's temptation, every man's downfall.

"Did I really look like that?" she asked Snape, convinced he had taken liberties with his brushes.

"To me you did. You do," he replied, his syllables caressing her self-esteem.

Further conversation was forestalled by the rush of congratulatory handshakes and comments directed at the artist himself. With an apologetic twist of his lips, he turned to accept the praise and toasting from Muggles he had rarely allowed from the lips of his fellow wizards. Nodding her understanding, Hermione moved away to examine the painting which had left Severus Snape's iron control in shards of self-recrimination.

Oh, Merlin, I never realised just how intimate that pose was. No wonder he was suffering so much. And he's managed to convey how damned moist I was. Every bloody person here can tell I was turned on while he painted that. Bastard!

Still, it really is a beautiful work and completes the collection perfectly. Just let the gods ensure no-one I know ever sees it. Even if they didn't know it was me, I'd know.

I wonder if it's normal to feel so turned on by the sight of my own naked body. Or maybe it's the knowledge that Sidney, no, Snape, dammit, was so aroused while he was creating it.

And now, judging by the way he's holding that program in front of his groin. That'll teach you to look at that painting in public, my dear Severus. Shall I go and rescue him or leave him to suffer for a little longer?

"Grace, please!"

"Problem, Sidney?" She slid in front of him, deliberately nestling her bottom into the hardness he could not control.

"Must you? It's hard enough to hide as it is."

"Mmm. I can tell." She wriggled slightly, drawing a smothered groan from the man behind her.

"You're an evil woman. I don't know what I ever saw in you." Snape refrained from moving away, despite his protests.

"Oh, I think everyone here has a fairly good idea."

Snape leaned forward, allowing his lips to brush her earlobe, setting off a delicious heat which coursed through her body. Voice low and throaty, he said, "We need to talk. In private."

Hermione spun around and met black eyes glittering with desire and hope and so much more. "I thought you'd never ask. The studio?"

He closed his eyes and let out a sigh of relief. "Now... please."

A/N: This was written for the TPP Every Flavour Auction for shalimar1981. Many thanks to karelia for the beta work.

Chapter Ten: The Road to Hell is Paved With Good Intentions

Chapter 10 of 41

Severus and Hermione return to the studio to...

Disclaimer: They all belong to JKR. I'll give them back... eventually.

Chapter Ten: The Road to Hell is Paved With Good Intentions

Oh, gods, what am I doing? We'll be there in a few minutes. Look at him, so hot and flustered and... vulnerable. How can I tell him?

How can I not tell him? Fuck, fuck, fuck.

...

Merlin, this damned Muggle vehicle is too slow. She'll change her mind. I'll change my mind. How could I have imagined she'd want me? She's regretting it already. I can tell by the expression on her face.

...

No, don't give up on me, Sidney. See, if you pull away, I'll just move closer to you. Yes, that's right; my hand is dangerously close to that bulge in your trousers. What will you do if I just...?

...

Oh, fuck. She's touching me. She hasn't changed her mind then. Gods, woman, don't do that! Don't... Don't stop doing that! Oh, shite, the taxi-driver's smirking in the mirror. He knows!

...

He definitely likes that. Stop fighting it, Sidney. Just a few more strokes and he'll... Damned, nosy taxi-driver. I had him right where I wanted him. Still, I shouldn't have lost control like that. I still have to tell him.

He'll kill me.

...

Finally. Pay the man, Severus, and get into the studio away from prying eyes. I need to talk to her before she drives me insane. Just open the door, let her in, and don't look at her breasts or mouth or bum or...

...

Eww. Thank heavens we got rid of that creep. He was really starting to get to me. Time to find out what's under those layers, Sidney Reilly.

Where's he gone?

Tea? He made tea?

"Tea, Grace?" Setting a tray on the table in the kitchen, Snape looked as uncomfortable as he felt.

"Tea?" Hermione stared at the long fingers holding the teapot, imagining them employed in a far more interesting task. Shaking her head to dispel the enticing images, she walked slowly around him until she reached the chair beside his.

"Yes, tea. As I said, we need to talk."

"Oh, I thought that was just an excuse to come back here." She moved closer, left thigh pressing against his right.

A brief smile flitted across his face. "That too. But first, let's adjourn to my sitting room. It's more comfortable in there."

She nodded and followed. *Time to face the music.*

Hermione took his sitting at one end of the old sofa instead of the chair as an invitation, curling up right beside him rather than at the other end. She reached for her teacup and drank slowly, savouring the warmth and delicate flavour of his favourite brew. "So, Sidney, what did you want to talk about?"

He turned a little to watch her face. "Did you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"Your letters. You think about me at night?"

Hermione met his gaze and found his insecurities exposed within. She lifted a hand to his face and smoothed the furrow on his brow. "Every night. I can't stop thinking about you, wondering what you're doing, wishing I was there... helping."

Dropping his head back on the sofa, Snape closed his eyes and let some of the tension out in a soft sigh. "But, Grace..."

"I know." Her voice gentle, she continued. "You're too old, too jaded, too unsuitable."

He nodded. If he had opened his eyes, he would have realised her words were rimmed with tears.

"Sidney, look at me!"

He flinched at the familiarity of words uttered in a previous life. A life before Grace.

But he looked, all the same, to find warmth and affection and acceptance.

"Sidney, I don't give a toss about all that. I rather fancy you just the way you are. Warts and all." She giggled at his expression. "Well, you might have warts. I haven't seen enough skin yet to make an informed comment."

"But... I... there's something I..."

She placed a finger to his lips. "Hush." Tracing the soft flesh of his lower lip, Hermione continued. "I have to t..."

Her words bruised on her lips as he suddenly leaned forward and possessed them, teacups falling unheeded to the floor in a shatter of porcelain.

Oh, my, his mouth tastes so sweet and spicy. And is that a tongue? Where did this man learn to kiss? He's a wizard!

Fuck.

He is a wizard. That's what he was about to tell me when our libidos mounted a coup against our higher functions. How could I forget that tiny detail?

...

Just as I imagined. The taste of her on my tongue is divine. I can only dream of how she'd taste elsewhere.

You're living in a fool's paradise, man. Any minute now she's going to...

...start attacking my buttons!

Run. Run while you still can!

I'm not a fucking coward!

...

Bugger the details. Talking's overrated.

I can't believe how many buttons the man can have on a Muggle shirt. Did he have the damned thing made especially to frustrate me?

Arggghhhh!

...

She just ripped my shirt open. The bloody woman just tore my shirt off. Merlin, I almost exploded on the spot! Her hands... so soft... so sensual... oh... oh!

...

Yess! Found his weak spot. Who would ever have thought Severus Snape would melt from a simple touch.

Of his navel.

What is it with this man and his navel? Most men seem to think they're only good for storing lint. You'd think I have my finger in a much more intimate place the way he's squirming. Perhaps I should lick my other finger and...

Oh, yes.

Very useful to know.

...

Oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god! I can't take it anymore. She's going to make me...

...

Oops. Too much of a good thing. Didn't even get his pants off so I could watch the show. But on the positive side, they're all damp now. He really should take them off to avoid catching a chill. Wonder if he'll let me help.

...

Great. Best orgasm I've had for weeks and it was in my pants like a randy teenager. What must she think of me now?

More importantly, what the hell is she doing now?

Where have I seen that curious expression before? It's like she wants to know everything.

...

One more button, then I'll see what he's hiding in these trousers.

Merlin! He's half-deflated and still impressive. No wonder I could tell so easily when he was aroused.

I wonder how long it will take to find out the full extent of his... assets.

I know just the incentive he needs.

...

She's studying it like a laboratory specimen. She'll be getting out a ruler next and taking measurements. Oh, looks like she's lost interest.

Or maybe not. I knew she wasn't wearing much under that dress, but that flimsy excuse for an undergarment is... fantastic.

Stepping out of the pool of lustrous blue, Hermione stood in only a tiny thong, relishing the naked hunger in Sidney's gaze.

That did the trick. Back to full attention. And very attentive he is, too. I think I need to get down and examine this more closely.

Mmm. Velvety, yet so hard. And so sensitive. It almost throbs when I grip it.

Tastes a little musky for my liking, but I'm sure I'll get used to it. Especially if he keeps groaning so deliciously when I lick... there... and suck... mmm... just here.

...

Fuck, what is she doing? Feels so dirty and depraved and so... so... oh, gods forgive me, I can't stop... have to stop... so close... I can't, not in her hot, wet, divine mouth. No. No!

"Stop!" Snape retreated to the other end of the sofa, panting and attempting to refasten his trousers. "I have no damned control!"

"You think mine's any better?" she asked, licking her lips and eyeing his gaping fly. "I need to touch you. Please."

Snape stood and dropped his trousers and still-sticky boxers to the floor. "Happy now?"

"Definitely." She pouted as he turned and walked towards the door at the back of the room. Forcing her mouth to make comprehensible sounds in the face of his glorious nudity, she asked, "Where are you going?"

"I thought a bed...?" He raised an eyebrow. *Breathe. In. Out.*

Hermione's eyes followed the eyebrow. *Fuck, that's so... Snape. And he's naked, erect, and... she scrambled to slip off her thong and follow him,...waiting for me.*

Despite the lack of candles and a four-poster bed Muggle bedrooms were definitely not as sensual the room was opulent and inviting, with dimmed lighting and the bed covered with a sumptuous eiderdown. Snape beckoned to Hermione to join him as he slipped under the covers.

"Coming?"

Any minute now. Just let me get my hands back on you. With a growl, Hermione threw the bedding back to reveal her prize: moist, eager, and *gods, so hard.*

"Patience, temptress. It's my turn." He gently pried her hands away and rolled onto his side. Snape's lips met hers again in a fiery conflagration: tasting, licking, vying for dominance. As his tongue explored hers, his hands discovered the wonder of her breasts. *Soft, so soft. Why have I never noticed before? I could die happy, just knowing the sensation of a pebbled nipple under my fingertips. Time to expand my repertoire. I wonder how she will react if I just... ah, sensitive, are we, Miss Henman?*

Suckling on the delicate, rosy flesh, Snape grazed her with his teeth and found her delightfully responsive, bucking against his mouth with a gasp. *Interesting.*

He did it again.

Is she ready for more? Hermione opened to him as his hands slid lower, teasing the curls he found there. *I'll take that as a yes.*

Merlin, she's so wet and hot and... where is the damned thing?

...

Oh, Sidney, this is so much better than my dreams. Ragged breaths and soft moans, cool air peaking saliva-moistened nipples, and, *yes*, fingers exploring wetness and heat and *just a little more to the left, up a bit, no, back where you were; do you need a bloody map?* Then at last, *yes, yes, gods, please, yes*, and his tongue, flicking and teasing and *oh my god, don't stop* and something forming deep inside, heat spreading, *pressure, more, more, more*, and then he was thrusting, thrusting, *gods, he's really inside me*, until no further coherent thought was possible, and everything was heat and friction and white, white perfection and his pulsing release.

Much later, Hermione stirred and remembered, smiling in her almost sleep at the sensation of bare, warm skin against her entire body, the scent of man and woman and ecstasy, and the puffs of exhalation making the dark hair on the back of her neck dance to the rhythm of his breathing. Carefully raising herself on one elbow, she studied the sleeping man beside her. Years had disappeared as he slept; the stark lines of his features gentled; his lips, thin but soft; his magnificent eyes covered in repose. Reaching up to run a finger across his brow and along his jawline, she smiled as his lids opened and his black gaze met hers.

"Hi."

"You stayed." He looked genuinely perplexed.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I just thought..."

"I'd wake up and run away, horrified by what I'd done?" A smothered giggle brought a frown. "Don't be daft, Sidney. Not only did I thoroughly enjoy what we did but I'm rather hoping a repeat performance might be on offer."

His relief was tangible. "It was satisfactory, then?"

"More than satisfactory. You need to ask?"

Snape blushed. "I haven't... well, not very often... and not with someone I..."

A single finger stilled his confession. "Hush. You were brilliant. But, of course, if you feel you need more practice..." She reached between them. "Mmm. I'm sure I can work with this. What do you think?"

He growled and rolled her onto her back, covering her from neck to toe with lean, aroused male. "I think you talk far too much, Grace Henman." With that, he proceeded to ensure her lips were fully occupied while his hands explored her curves with new confidence.

Skimming his fingers over her hip, he traced the outline of her tattoo. "I've been meaning to ask you about this. What is the significance of the design? I've seen it somewhere, but I can't remember the details." He nearly missed the subtle alteration in muscle tone as she shifted a little.

"It's a commonly used symbol. I'm sure if you thought about it you could divine the meaning."

Snape snorted softly. "Divination has never been my forte."

At last, an opening. "Divination?"

Swiftly closed. "Divination. Fortune-telling. Tarot cards. That sort of rubbish."

"Well, perhaps it will remain a mystery then. Now, I believe you were about to show me how much you've learned."

His hands returned to their self-appointed task of cataloguing every inch of her skin as his lips claimed her mouth with hot, impatient desire.

Slowly, as the fires continued to build within, Snape eased between her parted thighs and rediscovered nirvana. This time, they moved in a rhythm of peace and harmony, allowing the sensations to envelop their every nerve ending until with a gasp, Grace Henman called out in exultation.

"Oh, yes! Severusss!"

A/N: This was written for Shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Thanks go to karelia, who looked this over and gave me some great tips, and to quaffswinegaily, who made me put more Snapey thoughts in.

Jinxie, you earned one hundred points for your house for guessing the end of this chapter in your last review!

Chapter Eleven: No Longer a Secret

Chapter 11 of 41

Who is the mysterious witch who has enchanted Snape? He'd really like to know!

Disclaimer: The characters and settings all belong to JKR. I promise I'll clean them up and wash out their mouths with soap and water before I return them.

Chapter Eleven: No Longer a Secret

Drifting down from the giddy heights of bliss, the analytical part of Snape's brain functioned no more effectively than that of any other post-orgasmic male.

"Uhhh... ahhh... mmmph." He stretched and sighed, residual currents of pleasure still coursing through his body, leaving his skin hypersensitive and limbs weak. The absence of a naked, delectable woman beside him finally permeated his endorphin-infused haze.

Where's she gone? Bathroom, I suppose. Gods, she was incredible. So enthusiastic, so tender, so... vocal.

Hearing my name, my name, on a woman's lips as she came... Merlin, it was...

"Fuck!"

A muffled crack from the next room answered his unspoken question. Miss Grace Henman was no more Muggle than he was.

"FUCK!"

Snape leaped off the bed and ran into the sitting room. Careless of his nudity, he glanced around the room. As expected, there was little trace of his erstwhile model. She'd managed to collect her dress, purse, and shoes and disappeared.

Bloody lying bitch! All along she knew and said nothing. She let me humiliate myself in front of her while all the time she was laughing behind my back. How could she do it? And tonight... everything she said and did.

Everything she did...

She must have... She wouldn't... It wasn't... faked?

No!

No. No-one could fake that. Her passion, at least, was real. Her passion for me.

Snape paused in his restless circuit of the room, mouth curling into a smirk. Turning to the battered desk in the corner, he picked up the scrap of paper on which Grace had written her address so many weeks earlier.

Bloody hell. She had time for that?

The letters on the paper blinked and shimmered as they constantly changed shapes. The address was indecipherable.

I don't need that. I can remember. It was 36... no 46... or was it 48? Suffolk Lane. No, Sheffield Lane. Or Sheridan. Dammit, she's embedded some sort of Confundus Charm.

"Finite Incantatem!"

Might have known that wouldn't work. She's not only a witch, she's a bloody skilled one as well.

As if that should be a surprise. Grace, or whoever she is, isn't a fool.

"Fuck, bugger, shite!"

Think, Severus, think.

She can't be a current student. No. Way.

They all despise me. Not that I blame them. I'd despise me too if I was a student.

So, that leaves a recent ex-student or an older woman with a superb touch in Glamour Charms. Or a home-schooled witch who knows of me. No, scrap that. She was too comfortable as a Muggle to have ever been a pure-blood. She has to be Muggle-born.

Even so, it'll be like searching for a needle in a haystack.

And why do I want to find her so desperately?

Snape cast a disconsolate glance down to his groin, where the sticky residue of his recent activity remained. "And you can keep quiet. It's your fault we're in this bloody mess."

Tossing the useless piece of paper onto the desk, Snape headed off for a much-needed shower, never noticing the single word scrawled on the back of Grace's note.

Sorry.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck! Stupid stupid stupid!

Hermione tossed her dress and shoes into the corner of her bedroom and flopped onto the bed. Having concealed her wand in the bottom of her purse, she had found the slip of paper she'd seen earlier and used a clever spell she had found in an old Charms book to disguise her address, then Apparated directly to her bedroom.

Oh, Merlin, I hope the confounding part of the charm works to stop him remembering the address. Shite! What if he wrote it down at Hogwarts? How can I find out and destroy it?

Got it!

But how do I tell him now? From behind the strongest Shield Charm I know would be a good start. Will he even be prepared to listen?

"Severus." Gods, just saying his name out loud makes me tingle all over. "Severus Snape." I can't help it. I'm wet just thinking about him. The way he used his tongue... and his mouth... My professor had his tongue there! I licked him! That's so...

...kinky!

Stop thinking about it. I have to concentrate on damage control.

I need a list.

But first, I need a shower. And a...

FUCK!

Hermione jumped up and rushed to her desk in the corner of the room. Flipping the calendar to the current month, she swore again and dug out a large Mediwizardry text she had acquired the year before from her old beaded bag.

Confundus Charm... Conjunctivitis Curse... Conceptus Charm... Here it is, Contraceptus Charm.

The Contraceptus Charm is one hundred percent effective at preventing pregnancy only if used before coitus takes place. If used after sexual contact, the Charm's efficacy will decay at the rate of ten percent per hour, thus rendering it less useful.

Shite. The first time was six hours ago, and I'm fertile right now. That's all I need.

Right, Hermione, don't panic. Muggles do this all the time. I just need to go to a chemist.

One quick shower later, Hermione settled onto her bed with her pen and notebook.

1. Morning After Pill

2. Warn Mum not to talk to tall, dark, oddly-dressed men about me.

3. Stop imagining Severus naked. It doesn't help.

4. Go back to Hogwarts.

5. Meet with Severus in dungeons and explain rationally and quietly why it all happened.

5. Seduce Severus before he has a chance to work out who I am.

"I'm going to die."

Snape towelled himself dry and returned to the bedroom to dress. Casting around for his clothes and wand, he remembered how, and why, he had discarded both in the sitting room. Groaning at the renewed interest in his nether regions, he sat on the edge of the bed and forced the memory of Grace on her knees before him into the deepest compartment in his mind.

Gods, the thought of her sweet mouth makes me hard again despite her deception. I need to concentrate. Who is she?

Muggle-born witches. Intelligent Muggle-born witches. Intelligent Muggle-born witches with divine curves, slender hands, hot, wet...

Snape dragged his hand off his penis and stalked through to the sitting room, gathering his clothes from the floor and dressing while muttering to himself.

"Fucking lust-crazed fool. Get a hold of yourself. Who the fuck is she?"

I need to get back to Hogwarts. She can't get into my quarters to interfere with my records there.

Morning after pill obtained from an early-opening chemist, Hermione joined her mother in the kitchen for a cup of tea.

"You're back." Jean handed Hermione a steaming cup.

"Yes. Shouldn't I be?"

"I thought you'd still be with Sidney. How was the exhibition?"

"Brilliant, but a bit embarrassing. I'm not sure whether I really want you and Dad to go and see me *that* naked, but his paintings are so beautiful."

"I'm not sure your father's ready to see them anyway. I think we'll just take your word for it, dear. So, how was Sidney, or should I say Severus? Did you tell him?"

Hermione sighed. "No... and yes. I meant to, but things got intense and..."

Jean drew the correct conclusion from her daughter's flushed cheeks. "You ended up in bed with him before you could tell him who you were, didn't you?"

"I really did intend to tell him, but he was... and I... and it just happened. It was amazing, really incredible. He was so different, but not an expert, you know, just a little unsure, as if he'd never really done it before. I can't believe he hasn't ever... maybe never with someone he cares about... cared about. Oh, Mum, what have I done?" She scrubbed her hands over suddenly tear-filled eyes.

Taking Hermione into her arms, Jean rubbed her back as she sobbed out her regrets. "What exactly happened, love?"

"It was fine last night. We went to sleep after the first time, but later we talked a little, and one thing led to another."

"Do you regret sleeping with him?"

"No, not that, never that. But, Mum, I called out his name at the end."

Jean chuckled. "Is that all? Lovers do that all the time. Why would that upset you so much?"

"His *real* name. I called out 'Severus!' Mum, you have to be careful. I've managed to delay him finding this address for the moment, but he may have it written down elsewhere. Please try and delay him if he turns up here. Tell him your name is Wilkins and you've never heard of Grace Henman. Just until I have a chance to talk to him."

"Hermione, darling, you can't hide from him forever. You'll have to tell him, and the sooner the better."

"I will. I promise. I need to find the right moment. Please, Mum."

At Jean's nod, Hermione added, "And whatever you do, don't make eye contact. I'm pretty sure he wouldn't stoop so low as to use Legilimency on you without permission, but don't risk it."

After a few more instructions and another tearful hug, Hermione popped her head into the study to farewell her father and Apparated back to the gates of Hogwarts.

Right. Compose yourself. You've just been to a family gathering. Everyone was happy and well, and you spent all day Saturday catching up with your cousins. Last night was a family dinner, and they're all heading home today.

You did not spend last night in bed with your Potions professor. You will not imagine his naked body or the smell or taste of him. And you especially won't obsess over the expression on his face as he came.

Oh, Circe. It was exquisite. He was so vulnerable... so open...

Great. There are the boys. They're sure to have some inane tales of Quidditch glory to share. That'll take my mind off Severus.

Severus.

Fuck, have to stop thinking of him as that.

"Hi Ron, Harry! How was the match yesterday?" Hermione forced a smile into place as the two young men enveloped her in a hug.

"Bloody brilliant, 'Mione! You should have seen us!" Ron proceeded to give a blow by blow re-enactment of the match, using his hands to demonstrate the 'wicked' manoeuvres undertaken by the Gryffindor Keeper, namely himself. "And so we won by ninety points. Impressive, huh?"

"Excellent. How did the party afterwards go without me to keep the noise under control?"

"Professor McGonagall only had to warn us three times," Harry replied with a grin.

"And the fourth time?"

"She sent us all to our dorms, threatening detention to anyone who was still in the common room after five minutes."

"Idiots." Hermione laughed. "You're lucky you didn't lose all the house points you'd earned by winning the match."

Ron had the grace to blush. "Well... er..."

"What did you do, Ronald?"

"I... er... got caught snogging Lavender or was it Parvati in the broom cupboard."

Harry translated. "McGonagall caught him with a girl in the broom cupboard. The prat lost us thirty points. I told him to use a Silencing Charm, but he just couldn't control himself long enough to use his brain."

Know the feeling. Still, at least they had a good time. They're less likely to ask awkward questions about my weekend.

"Anyway, we're on our way to see Hagrid for morning tea. Do you want to come?"

"No, I have a few things to catch up on. Give my love to Hagrid though. I'll see you two later."

Now, to find a willing house-elf.

Snape noticed the huddle of Gryffindors outside the main doors of the castle as he took the short-cut to the dungeons. A sneer at their raucous behaviour accompanied him down the narrow path. *Looks like they won again, the way Weasley is gloating. Can't see what the Granger girl sees in him. Although he might be facing some competition from Zabini soon. He's been rather more forthcoming with her than usual in class.*

He entered the castle through a rarely-used side door and made his way down several flights of stairs to his quarters. As he opened the door to his private entrance, Snape startled a house-elf straightening some papers on his desk.

"What are you doing, elf? You know my desk is to be left undisturbed!"

"Begging your pardon, master. This elf was just tidying this pile of parchment. It was looking untidy."

The smell of stale butterbeer wrinkled his nose as he waved his hand in dismissal. "Well, don't do it again. Now, leave!"

"Very well, master." With an odd smile and a pop, the elf disappeared, leaving Snape with an uneasy feeling in his stomach.

He tossed his cloak over a chair, and poured himself a generous shot of Firewhisky. *Ten in the morning and I'm already drinking. Bloody women. I must find that address.*

Where is the damned thing? I'm sure it was here on my desk.

Fuck.

Snape gave up looking for the address he'd used for his correspondence with Grace and began pulling out his old student marking books.

Where to begin? Let's start with the last five years of seventh years. Who have the best marks and are Muggle-born?

Hmm. Penelope Clearwater. Possible. She was bright enough. But very straight-laced. I can't imagine her posing nude for anyone.

Heather Finch-Fletchley. She was a little more outgoing. But she was short and stocky. A Glamour wouldn't affect how she felt in my arms, and Grace was definitely not that shape.

Sarah Turpin. She was a clever thing, slim and polite. The perfect Ravenclaw prefect. But she had short, broad fingers. Never matched her body shape. No idea why I remembered that.

After two hours, Snape had exhausted his lists of students without finding any witch he believed could be Grace. Hearing a loud growl from his stomach, he realised morning had already passed into afternoon. Leaving the sound of his door slamming in his wake, he headed off to find some much-needed sustenance.

Hermione's pretence at reading a book while she was eating lunch was thin at best. Even Harry noticed she had not turned a single page during the entire meal, but at that point his sudden flash of perspicacity abandoned him. Her frequent sidelong glances to the staff table went unnoticed by all but a dark-skinned wizard seated amongst the Slytherins on the opposite side of the Great Hall.

He looks to be in a foul mood. Not surprising really. He's not even tasting his food. I'll bet he's sitting up there trying to work out how to find me and what to do when he does. I'm not sure I'd like to be around to find out what he decides.

Snape glared around the hall, ignoring Pomona Sprout's attempt to share a choice piece of gossip she had just heard and Rolanda Hooch's latest dirty joke.

Mr Zabini seems obsessed with the Granger girl. He watches her constantly. I might have to have a word with him about his intentions. He's too taken with his own sophistication to realise he may have overreached himself with that witch.

Suddenly weary of the clatter of cutlery and intrusive hum of voices disrupting his train of thought, Snape pushed his chair back and stood. Leaving the Great Hall by the staff door, he took three steps towards the dungeons before pulling up short and turning about face. With a smirk, he walked up the corridor towards the staff records room.

The student register. Why didn't I think of it before? All I need to do is check the addresses of past Muggle-borns. I'm sure I'll remember Grace's parents' address once I see it.

Here it is. Just as well all of the inquisitive witches I work with are still eating; they'd only ask impertinent questions. No need for them to know anything.

Now, let me see. I'll start with students who were in first year in 1990 and work my way backwards.

Frustration curdled Snape's mood further as he searched fruitlessly for the next thirty minutes. No addresses were familiar, and no names stood out as possibilities for the witch whose body and intellect had enchanted his own.

Replacing the register on its shelf as the first sounds of movement in the corridor outside became evident, Snape retreated to his dungeon of discontent to brood in peace.

As he passed through his sitting room, Snape picked up the plain cloak which served as a Muggle garment when he was using his studio. He frowned as he noted something out of place caught on the sleeve. Carefully pulling it from the heavy wool, he moved into better light to examine his finding.

It was a single hair. Long, brown, and curly.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. And karelia is the best. You all know that, don't you?

Thanks to my readers for all the wonderful reviews. They are really appreciated! xx

Chapter Twelve: Discovery

Chapter 12 of 41

Some Slytherins are better than others at seeing the obvious.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. When I'm finished playing with them, I promise to dust them off and hand them over.

Chapter Twelve: Discovery

Hermione's pacing threatened to wear a path in the floor of her room. Pleading Arithmancy essays to write, she had escaped the boys before they came down from their Quidditch high and remembered to ask her about her weekend.

Okay. Winky found my address just in time. Initial crisis averted. But it's only a matter of time before he realises I'm Grace. I need to explain before he figures it out.

Gods, how do I explain why I stayed that first day? Why I went back and allowed him to paint me nude? How do I explain why I want him so much? I barely understand it myself.

I just don't want to lose him.

Startled by the intensity of her feelings for the dour professor, Hermione froze halfway between the desk and the bed. Knife-edge clarity struck with the precision of a silver blade. Dragging a quill and blank piece of parchment out of her bag, Hermione began writing.

Dear Severus

Please don't burn this letter as soon as you see who it's from. I'm sure you're furious with me, but I can explain.

If you're still reading, thank you.

Yes, I knew who you were as soon as I laid eyes on you. I've known you for some years now, and I'm well aware of the part you played in the war.

Thank you, by the way. I don't think you hear that often enough.

When I first saw you, I didn't know what to do. I'd used a Glamour as I wanted to avoid any chance of my wizarding friends recognising me if they ever saw a painting I had posed for nude. I had no idea you were Sidney Reilly. Truly. I just needed a temporary job. But your passion for art and your ideas captivated me from that very first day. The rest, as they say, is history. The more I discovered the man under the Potions professor mask, the more I liked him, but the day you responded physically to me was the first time I'd seen you as a man.

I tried to tell you the truth last night, but things were moving so fast. However, not telling you I was a witch is the only thing I regret. You were everything I had imagined. And I had imagined a lot.

Please forgive me.

Yours

Grace

Satisfied, Hermione sealed the letter and left her bedroom for the owlery.

Snape replaced the empty container back on the shelf and consulted the calendar for the date of the next full moon. After checking the cauldron he'd left to simmer, he sat in his armchair, glass in one hand, and stared at the hair he held between two long fingers, mind busy with possibilities.

Grace! Or could it be someone who brushed past at the exhibition? Or a staff member? No. I don't wear this cloak here.

I need my Pensieve.

Unwarding the cabinet in his study, Snape took out the enchanted stone bowl and placed it on his desk. Silvery threads of memory swirled on the surface of the Pensieve as he paused, then added a final strand. Taking a breath, Snape lowered his head into his memories of the previous evening.

He followed his memory self and Grace into the exhibition, carefully observing who he came into contact with. A groan escaped him once again as he watched his own arousal become evident as the memory progressed. Realising no woman – or man – at the gallery had possessed long, curly hair of any colour, he turned to study Grace, who had reached the final painting.

Merlin, look at her; she's no less turned on than I was. No wonder she was so eager to leave. Who are you, Grace? How could you have allowed me to want you...

... to need you...

... to love you?

Why?

His musings ceased as the memory sharply changed to the last thread he had put in as an afterthought. He watched as he and Grace came apart in each other's arms for the final time, studying the body and face he'd thought he'd known so well. At her final cry of completion, he found himself unceremoniously dumped onto the cold, stone floor of his office.

Definitely not faked. Her desire, at least, was genuine, even though her taste is somewhat questionable. Dammit, I don't give a pixie's tit who she is or where she comes from. I want her.

I want Grace.

Picking himself up off the floor, Snape retrieved his memories from the Pensieve and put it back on its shelf. As he locked the cabinet, a distinct tapping sound alerted him to the small, brown owl demanding entrance.

Pesky owls. No respect for privacy. Throwing the owl a scrap of bread left over from supper a few nights ago, Snape broke the seal on the envelope.

Forgive her? How can I, when I have no idea who she is? Still, she hasn't run screaming from her actions. Must be a good sign.

She can wait for a reply. No need to appear too eager.

Decision made, Snape put aside his quest for Grace's identity to face the teetering pile of third-year essays on his desk. Time enough for that when he had done some work.

He was still thinking about Grace Henman three hours later. Only one essay had been graded.

Double Potions this morning. Shite! What if he knows?

No, don't be daft. If he knew already you'd be dead.

Perhaps I am dead and my mind just won't admit it?

No. That banging on the door would have gone away by now.

"All right, all right! I'm coming!" she called through the door as she grabbed her book bag and robes.

"About time. We're starving." Ron rubbed his never-full belly.

"You're always starving, Ronald. Perhaps you'd better ask Madam Pomfrey to check you for a tapeworm."

Ron screwed up his nose. "A tapeworm? Is that some disgusting Muggle disease?"

"No, Ron. It's an expression. Well, actually, it is a disgusting Muggle disease, but not in this context. Muggles get them from contact with infected faeces..."

"Do you mind? We're about to eat breakfast." Harry herded his friends towards the Great Hall.

"Sorry, Harry, but he did ask." Hermione grinned as they walked, only to find her amusement chilled at the sight of Snape sitting at the High Table, watching everyone as they wandered in.

"What?" Ron followed the direction of her gaze. "Snape. You've been weird about him ever since we started back." He laughed and began filling his plate. "About time you saw sense."

Pumpkin juice splattered as an envelope dropped from a post owl into Hermione's glass. Vanishing the mess, she slipped the letter into her bag and continued her breakfast without comment.

"You're not going to tell us, are you?" Harry pointed at her bag with his fork.

"No. Curious?"

"Not at all. It's probably some girl stuff from your mother, or another book catalogue, or..."

"Close enough, Harry."

As soon as decently possible, Hermione made her excuses and found the closest empty classroom. Warding the door, she slit open the envelope with her wand.

Dear "Grace"

Furious is not exactly the word I would use.

Shocked. Dismayed. Disappointed. Frustrated.

Very frustrated.

You deceived me. You had opportunity enough to reveal your identity during the summer, but you chose to perpetuate your lie.

Why?

S.S.

Hermione sat in silence, staring at the parchment before her, the final question nipping at her conscience with sharp, relentless jabs. *I could have told him many times over, but I was too bloody scared. Scared of losing my job. Scared of losing my friend, Sidney. Scared of losing his desire. Stupid... selfish... pigheaded...*

I don't deserve him.

Taking out her quill, Hermione scratched out a reply etched in tears and guilt.

Double Potions was a nightmare. Keeping her head down to avoid Snape's notice, Hermione brewed with one eye on the professor, watching him as he glided around the room, commenting on the contents of the students' cauldrons at each workbench. While she watched Snape, Blaise Zabini studied her, finally nodding to himself and allowing his lips to curl in smug satisfaction.

"Miss Granger! Focus! You need to add your nettle seeds immediately. Surely you of all people can follow a simple set of instructions?"

"Yes, sir." Her reply fell unheeded as laughter erupted from behind her. Blaise's elbow in her ribs directed her to the source of the amusement.

Neville Longbottom and Draco Malfoy were leaning against each other helplessly as they watched Neville's potion transform from the delicate shade of blue it was supposed to be to a vivid chartreuse.

"I told you, Longbottom. It was nettle seeds, not fennel seeds. Don't you ever listen?"

"I was too busy looking at your hair, Malfoy. It's sooo pretty."

"Oh, shut up about my bloody hair, will you. Just because yours is unremarkable."

"Both of you cease and desist! This is a Potions classroom, not a pub. Ten points from both your houses yes, I said both, Mr Malfoy and you're to stay after class and scrub out that mess you've concocted." Snape turned on his heel and stalked across the room to investigate the contents of Ron Weasley's cauldron.

"What's up with those two?" Blaise murmured as he stirred, nodding towards Neville and Draco, who were still grinning.

"No idea. But it's nice to see them getting along." Hermione continued stirring her own potion clockwise one last time. Setting her glass stirring rod to one side, she examined her brew closely. "Do you think this is the correct blue?"

Blaise nodded. "Perfect cyan. Not cobalt, not cerulean. Well done."

Hermione frowned at his description. "Er... thanks. Yours looks good too."

"I know." False modesty had never been one of Blaise Zabini's shortcomings. "Come on; let's get these samples delivered to Snape, and maybe he'll let us out early."

"Funny, aren't you? Se—Snape never allows anyone to leave early."

Blaise raised an eyebrow as she flushed. "You've never been on our side of the room before, Granger. Just watch."

Taking both labelled vials to Snape's desk, Blaise caught his Head of House's eye. With a curt nod, Snape indicated the door.

Blaise smirked as he gathered his Potions kit and banished the contents of both cauldrons. "Coming?"

As she followed him out of the classroom, Hermione shrugged away Ron and Harry's curious stares.

"What's the hurry," she asked as they left the dungeons behind.

Blaise tried the door of an unused storeroom and ushered her in. Locking the door with a flick of his wand, he said, "You, Miss Granger, have some explaining to do."

"I beg your pardon?"

He leaned against the door and shook his head. "Ever the innocent. But I know better. What in Merlin's name are you up to with my Head of House?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about it." Hermione tried to push past him, but the young wizard was taller and stronger.

"Let me see. The last few weeks you've been eyeing Snape up as if you want him for breakfast. Neither of you were around from Friday afternoon to Sunday morning."

"But—"

"And today, you're as jumpy as a unicorn around Pansy Parkinson. I'm not your Quidditch-blinded friends, Granger. If I'm not very much mistaken, you've been getting your sweet, little hands into our Potions professor's trousers. The only thing I don't understand is his lack of reaction to you. I know he's a superb Occlumens, but..."

"You know nothing, Blaise Zabini. Nothing! Now leave me alone!" Hermione had her wand tip at Blaise's throat before he knew she had moved.

"Settle, you little hell raiser. Did I say anything about telling anyone? I want to help you, though Merlin knows why."

"You... what? Why?" Wand drooping, Hermione stepped back with a puzzled frown.

"And she just confirmed it. You seem a good sort, Granger. The professor could do with someone to care for him. He's been decent to me over the years, so I thought I could pay back the favour." Blaise shrugged, then grinned. "Of course, if you still want to deny any interest in Snape, do you fancy accompanying me to Hogsmeade next weekend?"

"I don't... it isn't what... he doesn't... Dammit, Blaise, you can't say a word. I mean it. Not a word!" Her wand was back at his throat – hard, unwavering.

"Whoa. Back off, Granger. I get it." He ran a slightly tremulous finger across his mouth. "My lips are sealed."

"Swear it. On your wand." The sparks were almost visible in her eyes.

Blaise shrugged again. "I'll swear a Wand Oath." His smirk returned as he saw her shoulders relax. "But only after you tell me what the hell is going on to get you this uptight."

He seems genuine. But can I trust a Slytherin?

I trusted Snape. I still trust him, even though he's going to kill me.

Dammit, we have no more time now.

Hermione glanced at her watch. "We have Transfiguration in a few minutes. Do I have your word you'll not mention this to anyone before this evening?"

Blaise nodded.

"Meet me here after dinner. I'll explain everything you need to know."

"Everything." One word demanded all.

"If you insist. Everything." *Well, nearly everything. I'm not feeding your fantasies. Still, it might be useful to have someone on my side when the inevitable happens.*

As Snape circuited the classroom for the final time, his ears caught a muffled giggle from the back of the classroom. His steps were silent as he appeared behind the desk where Mandy Brocklehurst and Hannah Abbott had moved their chairs together to study a page in what appeared to be a Muggle women's magazine while they waited for the class to be dismissed.

"Five points each from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff for bringing inappropriate material to class." He held out his hand for the offending publication, which Hannah handed over with reluctance.

"We were only looking at our horoscopes." Her nervous explanation met steely indifference.

"I don't care one whit whether you were looking at horoscopes or studying the lost tribes of the Amazon. If it is not a Potions textbook, it does not belong in my classroom. Now, get out of my sight, the pair of you." He waved the rest of the class out of the room without looking up from the page in the magazine open in his hand.

I knew I'd seen it somewhere before.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Betas are wonderful, especially my Karelia!

PS. Don't worry, quaffie, nekkid Snape *will* return. ;)

Chapter Thirteen: Expectations and Confrontations

Another letter for Severus, and Blaise and Hermione have a little chat.

Disclaimer: Characters and settings you recognise belong to JKR. Any naughty thoughts the characters have are mine, because she doesn't do naughty.

Chapter Thirteen: Explanations and Confrontations

"Take this to Professor Severus Snape, but fly around a bit first in case anyone spots you coming straight from here. Okay?" Hermione stroked the back of the little brown owl's head, hoping the intelligence she saw in the magical creature's black eyes was not a product of her imagination. After watching the bird swoop off in a wide arc over the Forbidden Forest, she made her way back down the stairs in search of dinner.

"Where have you been, 'Mione? We tried to find you after Potions this morning, but you'd disappeared, and you didn't turn up for lunch either." Ron waved his laden fork at her as he spoke.

"Put the fork down, Ron; you'll drop food everywhere. Do I have to explain my every move to you boys?" At their joint nod, she sighed, looking past their heads to the amused expression of her Potions partner. Rolling her eyes and smiling, she turned her attention back to her friends. "All right, if it'll keep you happy. Blaise and I finished early, and Snape let us leave. After that, we had Transfiguration, which you know perfectly well. You were there in body, if not in mind. Really, was today's task so very difficult?"

"But, 'Mione—"

"Hush. I'm not finished. After Transfiguration, I had some references to look up, so I grabbed some sandwiches before you showed up for lunch and ate them on the way to the library. This afternoon I had Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. Happy?" She served herself some roast potatoes and passed the platter to Ginny, who winked.

"We will be when you stop smirking at Zabini. What's got into you lately?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps she's realised there's more to life than schoolwork?" Ginny asked as she serenely passed the potatoes on.

Hermione's mouthful of pumpkin juice almost choked her as she met the redhead's eyes. *You have no idea what's got into me, Harry, and I guarantee you don't want to know.*

"But, 'Mione, Zabini's a Slytherin." Ron's plea was not particularly effective through half-masticated potato.

"What's wrong with that?" Neville joined the conversation from beside Ginny. "Didn't Headmistress McGonagall advise us all to put aside our house prejudices and look for the person underneath?"

"Is that what you've been doing? Exploring Draco Malfoy's hidden secrets?" Ron stole a glance across the room to where the blond in question was surrounded by several Slytherin senior girls. "Looks like you've got competition."

"Don't be daft, Ron. Draco's not so bad when he forgets to be snooty and all." Neville shook his head and turned back to his dinner.

Hermione glanced up at the High Table as Snape slid into his seat well after everyone had started eating. He looked annoyed, frustrated, and tired, and she felt her hands itching to sweep his hair from his face to reveal his expression.

Snape's scowl successfully cut short any questions from his colleagues about his tardiness. Having spent the time since his last class once again engrossed in his past student registers, he had arrived hungry and frustrated. The only ex-student witch he had taught in the previous ten years who fitted the criteria of curly, brown hair, intelligence, and the correct birth date was Penelope Clearwater. *No. It's not Miss Clearwater. Grace is too comfortable with her own body and mine. Miss Clearwater was a prude, just like the Weasley prat she doted upon.*

Brooding over his stodgy meat and vegetables, Snape startled when a small brown owl swooped past and dropped an envelope on his plate, then perched on the edge of the table with a slight wobble. *Damned owls, why they can't deliver letters onto the table is beyond me.* Taking a small piece of beef, Snape offered it to the owl, noting the bird was missing one talon from its left foot as it launched itself back into the air. He slit open the envelope with his wand and extracted the letter as he chewed on his own food.

Dear Severus

I never wanted to disappoint you. Your good opinion of me has always mattered, even before this summer. When we thought you'd... well, I found it hard to believe. Still, I'd rather you were angry than disappointed.

What developed between us was unexpected. Before I knew it, I was in over my head, and the moment was never quite right to explain who I was. I feared, and still fear, you will reject me out of hand when you find out who I am.

Please bear with me, Severus, and my need to hide behind Grace for the moment. I promise I will reveal who I am soon.

I do so miss spending time with you. I can't stop myself imagining you alone, taking care of yourself while you think of me. Do you still do that, Severus?

Do you remember Saturday night and smile as I do?

I lo want you so much it hurts.

Grace

Expelling his breath with a hiss, Snape shifted in his chair and glanced around at his colleagues, relieved to find no untoward interest in his mail. He tucked the envelope into his pocket with care, a tiny smile softening his expression as he began eating food now tasting far more enticing.

Down at the Gryffindor table, Hermione had tensed as she watched her Potions master open and read the letter. *Gods. That was me. He smiled for me.*

"Oi, wonder what old Snape's up to?" Ron asked, nudging Harry.

"No idea, but he seems happy. It's not bloody natural. Can't be anything good."

Hermione snapped as the tension accumulated over the previous days finally reached boiling point. "Don't be so fucking awful! Professor Snape is as entitled to be happy as anyone else here. I can't believe you two!"

Ron stared, mouth open and eyes wide. "Harry. 'Mione swore at us again."

Harry grinned. "You know, I think we're finally having a positive influence on Miss Goody-Two-Shoes here." He ignored Hermione's huff of exasperation and held up his glass for a mock toast.

Shaking her head, Hermione glanced up to see Blaise looking from Snape to her with a knowing smirk.

At the High Table, Snape's eyes narrowed as he noted the exchange between the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables. *What are those two plotting? Merlin help us if the Gryffindor know-it-all and my most devious Slytherin start combining their talents. I think I might retire.*

Blaise warded the door and added a Silencing Charm for good measure. Turning to the nervous girl pacing the floor, he drawled, "Well?"

Hermione sighed. "Are you sure you want to get involved?"

"I'm already involved, Granger, so you might as well spill."

"It started when I applied for a holiday job posing for a supposedly Muggle artist..."

In fits and starts, Hermione related the general gist of the events of the summer to an increasingly amused Blaise, feeling the weight of deception lifting from her shoulders as she spoke.

"Let me see if I've understood this correctly. You turned up for the interview using a Glamour, found Snape was the artist, yet still went ahead and took the job?"

Hermione nodded, eyes on the floor.

"Then, when he was obviously attracted to you, you didn't run for the hills?"

Another nod.

"Well, you've got guts, Granger, I'll say that for you. No wonder you were Sorted into Gryffindor." Blaise stretched his long legs in front of him as he leaned against the teaching desk. Tapping a finger to his lips, he frowned. "But why didn't you enlighten him then?"

"I know. I should have. But by then I was too invested in the exhibition. You should see his work..." She paused when she saw the glimmer in Blaise's eye. "Or maybe not. But he's so talented. It would have been a crime not to finish the collection, and if he'd found out who I was..."

"He'd have run a mile."

"Exactly. And by the time we'd done the last paintings, the intimate ones, I was so confused by my feelings towards him, I couldn't. I knew I was incredibly drawn to him and physically, well, let's say I was just as interested as he was, but he was my Potions professor, and I hadn't come to terms with that by then."

"So, he sent you away in a fit of noble self-flagellation, and you returned to school as if nothing had changed."

"Oh, believe me, Blaise, *everything* had changed. Every time I looked at him, I kept seeing images of Sidney and remembering his..."

"Don't remind me." Blaise's lips twisted as he turned to gaze out of the window.

"I suppose you're appalled, just like Ron and Harry would be if they knew. How can I fancy the greasy git of the dungeons?" Hermione was surprised at how disappointed she felt. She had believed Blaise Zabini, at least, would understand.

"No." His reply was soft, barely audible. "I don't fault your taste; Snape isn't as bad as some choose to believe."

"What, then?"

He remained facing the window. "It's of no consequence now." Turning, he lifted his shoulders and smiled. "What happened next?"

Hermione puzzled at Blaise's odd behaviour for a moment, then continued. "You were there, Blaise. He treated me no differently to the last time I was in his classroom. He saw Hermione Granger, annoying Gryffindor, pain in his posterior. He had no reason to believe otherwise. To him, Grace was a Muggle."

"That must have been a relief."

"It was, but in some ways it hurt, too. I know it was irrational, but I couldn't help wanting him to see *me*, to recognise *me*. Of course, I'd have run a mile if he had." Her laugh was tinged with bitterness. "We exchanged some letters. He had my parents' address, and they'd send the letters on and likewise forward my replies to his studio. The letters became a little... suggestive."

Blaise was silent as he considered her words, then he suddenly looked up. "That day, when he left the classroom in a hurry. He was reading one of your letters, wasn't he?"

"I never expected him to read it in class! It was so embarrassing!" She flushed again as she recalled Snape's reaction to her words. "Anyway, after that, I decided I didn't care he was my professor. He'd invited me to see the exhibition, so I arranged for Mum to get permission from Professor McGonagall."

"That's where you both were at the weekend. Where was the exhibition?"

"London. At a gallery in Bankside. Why?"

"Just curious. How was it?"

"The exhibition? Stunning. The way the paintings were presented exceeded anything I'd imagined. They were intimate, but somehow tasteful. It was a little embarrassing knowing everyone there was looking at them, but I was somewhat distracted by the time I reached the final painting." She smiled, remembering exactly why she had been distracted. "After that, we went back to the studio, and... you know..."

Blaise groaned softly. "Oh, Merlin, girl. I don't need details. He still has no idea you're a witch then?"

Hermione shook her head. "That's the problem. At one point, I... er... inadvertently used his real name."

A bark of laughter escaped her companion as he immediately came to the correct conclusion. "You didn't? You fucking did! Bloody hell, Granger, surely he's not that good? No, don't tell me. It's too depressing. My head of house is getting more action than I do. I obviously left my move too late."

Looking up to meet the resigned acceptance in his deep brown eyes, Hermione reached out and laid her hand on his arm. "Are you serious, Blaise? I thought you were just teasing."

He flashed a rueful smile. "I'd hoped. But I soon realised your attention was elsewhere. Why do you think I was watching you so closely? Still... I'd like to be your friend, at least."

Hermione squeezed his arm and reached up to brush his cheek with her fingertips. "I'd like that."

"Just don't tell anyone. I don't want my housemates to think I've gone soft in the head, fancying a Gryffindor."

"Looks like we both have a secret." Hermione smiled, her attempt to lighten the mood succeeding as Blaise responded with a quirk of the lips.

"When do you plan to tell him?"

She shrugged. "No idea. I've written to try and explain, but I'm sure he'll figure it out soon. I'm right in front of him, after all."

"Don't underestimate the power of assumption, Hermione. He never suspected you were a witch, and he seems to be ignoring the possibility you're a student of his, or he'd have worked it out by now. Still, you must tell him. Soon."

Hermione's eyes suddenly widened. "Oh, Merlin!"

"What?"

"I told him over summer I was returning to school this year. I implied I was an adult student, but... surely he'd remember?"

"Depends on the context and how distracted he was at the time."

"Very, if I remember correctly." She noted Blaise's raised eyebrow. "Okay, okay, I'll tell him as soon as I get the right opportunity. And, Blaise?"

"Hmm?"

"Thanks for being so understanding. In any other circumstances..." She smiled weakly.

"I know. Still, there's plenty of other witches who will appreciate the patented Zabini charm. You'll just have to be the one who got away."

She thumped him on the arm. Hard.

As they walked together down the corridor, each was lost in their own thoughts until a sudden ruckus nearby jolted them into awareness. Just ahead, around a corner, voices could be heard rising in anger. Hermione touched Blaise's arm and indicated they should stop and listen before proceeding, not wanting to become involved in another student's argument unnecessarily.

Pansy Parkinson's shrill was easily identified. "It's no wonder you kept turning me down! All this time I've been hanging around, waiting for you to notice me, and then I find out you're not man enough for a woman! You disgust me, Draco Malfoy!"

Hermione frowned. "We can't let her get away with this. It's not Draco's fault he doesn't want her."

"With that screech, I'm surprised anyone would want her." Blaise chuckled.

With a grin, she nudged him. "Play along with me..." Rounding the corner, the pair heard Pansy continue her rant. Millicent Bulstrode and Daphne Greengrass watched on, sniggering.

"Just wait until my father hears about this. You'll be a laughing stock! I can't wait..." She squeaked to a halt as Blaise and Hermione drew up to flank the pale-faced blond.

"Ah, Draco, love, that's where you are. I thought we'd arranged to meet nearer the main entrance." She leaned towards the startled young man, wrapped one arm around his waist, and planted a prolonged, surprisingly enjoyable kiss on his lips. "Mmm, you taste divine. I can't wait until we go to Hogsmeade next weekend. It'll be a chance to get away by ourselves for a change."

Blaise grinned as Draco blinked, frowned, then relaxed and drew her into a longer, more passionate kiss. "I can't wait either. But we still need to go over that Ancient Runes essay we're working on. I presume that's why you dragged Zabini up here."

"Yeah, I'm the brains; you're the beauty. Shall we go?" Blaise continued up the corridor towards the library without looking back.

Hermione turned to Pansy and her cronies. "Was there anything else you needed, Pansy? No? Good." As the Slytherin girls slunk back to the dungeons, she hooked her arm through Draco's and gently tugged him to follow Blaise.

Checking the corridor was empty, the lone figure observing the confrontation slipped out from a darkened alcove and scowled as he walked away.

A/N: This was written for Shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Beta kudos go to Karelia and plot-bouncing appreciation to quaffswinegaily.

Blaise sort of took over this chapter. Poor lad thought he wasn't getting enough attention. I promise more Snape in the next chapter.

Chapter Fourteen: Everyone Knows... Something

Chapter 14 of 41

Snape is naked, Draco is confused, Blaise is breathless, Harry and Ron are oblivious, and Ginny is outraged.

Disclaimer: They're still JKR's, although she might not want to admit to it with the way they've been behaving lately.

Chapter Fourteen: Everyone Knows... Something

"Are you planning to tell me what that was all about, Granger?" Draco dropped her arm once they were well clear of his fellow Slytherins and attempted a feeble glare at his supposed girlfriend.

Hermione knew his pride wouldn't allow any saviour. "I couldn't stand her screeching any longer, so I had to do something. Would you rather I'd let her continue?"

He avoided meeting her eyes, taking time to smooth his perfectly coiffed hair before he spoke. "No, I suppose not. But did you have to be so bloody Gryffindor about it?"

Blaise grinned. "I don't think she knows any other way, old boy. Still, they're convinced you two are an item now, so that gets you off the hook and safely back in the closet."

Draco's horrified expression set his companions to rolling their eyes.

"For goodness' sake, Draco, we're not blind, stupid, or naive." Hermione patted him on the arm. "For all that, you're a damned good kisser."

Cheeks heating in a most unMalfoylike manner, the blond stared at her. "You... you... I..."

"Close your mouth, Malfoy. You'll catch flies." Blaise chuckled as they entered the corridor to the library. "Consider yourself lucky. She seems to enjoy kissing Slytherins. Present company excepted, of course." He winked at Hermione with a mournful downturn of his lips.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Slytherins, plural? Who...?"

Blaise's smirk vanished as Hermione swore under her breath and shoved him up against the stone wall. Locking her lips to his, she forestalled any further reply by rendering her would-be suitor mute for several long seconds. As she pulled away, she whispered in his ear, "A single word more, Blaise, and no-one will benefit from the patented Zabini charm." She shifted her weight so the wand in her pocket pressed against the hardness she had felt in his trousers.

"It was worth it," he murmured as, with a subtle tilt, his pelvis thrust against the supposed threat. He sighed and straightened his robes. "Besides, you'd never do it, Granger. You're too decent. That's one of the things I like about you."

With a twitch of her lips, Hermione acknowledged the truth of his words. "I should have insisted on the damned Wand Oath." Turning to include Draco in the conversation, she changed the subject. "Come on, you two, we're allegedly studying, remember?" Stalking off ahead, she left the two Slytherins to follow one bemused and the other still breathless.

Severus Snape replaced the lid of his inkpot and set his quill on its stand. Neatly stacking the essays he had finished marking, he abandoned his office for the privacy of his rooms. After discarding his robes and loosening his collar, he poured a glass of wine and settled himself into his well-worn but comfortable armchair. Letting his head rest back on the padded leather, his mind drifted back to the first lesson for the day as he closed his eyes and relaxed.

Longbottom and Malfoy. That was unexpected. I wonder when they'll recognise it themselves. It's not as if everyone else hasn't noticed. Lucius will have a seizure when he finds out his beloved heir is that way inclined. Can't say I blame the lad; I'd be tempted to the other side too, if Miss Parkinson was the alternative.

Still, I have an alternative, if I can only find out who she is.

Grace, Grace... Grace... who are you?

I know you have brown, curly hair. Your body has delicious curves, and your breasts... oh, Merlin, your breasts, please let them be your own. I need to taste them again.

Snape's fingers twitched as he slowly unfastened the buttons of his shirt. Slipping his hand under the fine linen, he slid his fingertips over the heated skin of his chest and tweaked the nipple he discovered. Allowing his imagination to picture Grace standing before him slowly discarding her clothing, item by item, he rolled and pinched his flesh into a peak of desire.

With his other hand, Snape withdrew his last letter from his pocket. Unfolding it, he began reading as he shucked off his shirt and unbuttoned his trousers. By the time he had reached the last few lines, his trousers and boxers were pooled at his feet, leaving the cool evening air caressing his aching arousal.

I do so miss spending time with you.

His fingers drifted down his chest, brushed the sensitive skin around his navel for long seconds, then followed the trail of dark hair down to where it thickened into his only curls.

I can't stop myself imagining you alone, taking care of yourself while you think of me.

Imaginary Grace's hand avoided his heat and instead reached down to cup the softness below, forcing a gasp from his lips as the sensation shot straight to his cock. A bead of fluid glistened in the candlelight as he lost himself into his fantasy.

Do you still do that, Severus?

Gripping and stroking and twisting and pulling, she smiled as she tormented him with pleasure. Panting now, he dropped the letter as he reached out in a futile caress, seeking the warmth of his lover.

Do you remember Saturday night and smile as I do?

The strokes quickened... harder... faster... gods, I remember... I remember... faster... yes... yes...

I lo want you so much it hurts.

"Yesss!"

As his pounding heart found some semblance of a normal rhythm and his breathing slowed, Snape released his sticky, softened penis and smiled. *I love you, Grace.*

He didn't hear the soft gasp from the corner of the room.

Having found a suitable table in the library, Hermione pulled parchment, quills, and her Ancient Runes text from her bag. Blaise and Draco pulled out chairs and sat, watching her as she settled herself with her essay.

"Are you two going to do some work, or are you planning to waste your time watching me?"

Draco shook his head. "I don't believe you, Granger. You snog the daylights out of two blokes, one after the other, then you calmly sit down to write an essay as if nothing had happened. Has someone slipped something into your pumpkin juice?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Draco. You know perfectly well why I kissed you, and Blaise, well, he knows why as well. I've heard rumours you've snogged most of the girls in seventh year, which, considering your likely sexual orientation, is pretty bizarre."

"But, I..."

"You were trying to fool yourself and everyone else into thinking you're straight. Well, I have news for you, Draco Malfoy it's not working. It's time you woke up and saw what was under your pretty, aristocratic nose."

Blaise's eyebrows nearly reached his hairline as he watched Hermione lecture Draco. "Steady on, Hermione. Give the poor fellow a break. He's probably still lightheaded from that kiss. I know I am."

"Bollocks. He's a fantastic kisser, but he's also a bloody good actor. Draco was no more turned on than I was." She pointedly ignored his last statement.

Draco pouted. "No-one else has ever complained."

"They were probably Slytherin girls. They were turned on by the thought of the Malfoy fortune. Now, if you're not going to study, perhaps we'd better arrange where we'll be meeting on Saturday."

"Saturday?"

"Saturday. Our *date*, remember, when you're going to get me alone and ravish me senseless."

"Oh, great. *That date*."

Hermione chuckled. "Don't worry, darling, your honour is safe with me. If you play along nicely, there might be a nice surprise in it for you. Now, if you're not going to study, bugger off back to your common room and let me talk to Blaise in private."

Much to her surprise, Draco did, muttering something as he left which sounded suspiciously like, "Bloody Gryffindors."

After Draco had left, Hermione glanced around the library and reinforced the Muffliato charm she had applied when they had first arrived. Turning her attention back to Blaise, she caught a glimpse of pain in his eyes before he reapplied his usual serene facade.

Reaching out to take his hand, Hermione squeezed gently. "I'm sorry, Blaise. I didn't intend to tease you like that, knowing how you felt. It was all I could think of to distract Draco after what you said. Please, forgive me. Today's been somewhat... difficult."

Blaise turned his hand under hers and gently stroked her knuckles with his thumb. "It's okay. I was out of line. I was trying to make light of the situation and said too much." He met her eyes, his own dark with want. "I only wish... No, never mind." He shook his head and pulled his hand away, standing abruptly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Oh, Blaise." Moisture pricked the corners of her eyes as Hermione watched him walk away.

Fuck! Why couldn't I have fallen for him? He's my age, gorgeous, witty, sweet...

But he's not Severus. And kissing him was just not the same. Why does Severus's mere touch make my blood boil when Draco and Blaise's kisses leave me unmoved?

What the hell was I doing, kissing them both? Have I completely lost my senses? One minute I'm Hermione, the asexual bookworm, and the next I'm kissing every Slytherin I talk to. I suppose I should be grateful Goyle didn't return this year. Ewwwww!

Okay. I have standards. That's good to know.

I must find Luna tomorrow and see whether she'll agree to ask Neville to take her to Hogsmeade. If we time it right...

On that thought, Hermione packed up her bag and made her way back to Gryffindor tower. Arriving at the entrance portrait, she smiled as the Fat Lady pirouetted to her own private melody. "You're in a good mood tonight," she said instead of the password.

"Oh, it's been a wonderful day! A lovely gentleman has asked to visit tomorrow, and I've just heard the most delicious gossip!" She twirled again, almost losing her balance as she came to a halt. "Do you want to know what it was?"

Thinking she would be regaled with tales of another portrait's mischief, Hermione decided to play along. "Oh, do tell."

The Fat Lady beckoned her closer. "Well, my friend Violet heard from her cousin Damara Dodderidge, the cow who snubbed me last winter in the Grand Staircase, that *she'd* heard Elizabeth Burke from down in the dungeons tell Giffard Abbott... Oh, it's so delightful... and surprising... You'll never believe it!"

"What? What is it?" Hermione rather wished she hadn't asked; curfew was drawing ever closer.

"Apparently, and don't say I told you this, the Potions professor is in love! The snarky old git has finally fallen head over crabby heels with some poor woman."

Fuck! What else do they know? Who else have they told? "Who? And how did Elizabeth find out?"

"That's the exciting part. No-one knows who she is, only that her name is Grace. He calls it out when he... you know..." The Fat Lady blushed crimson and hid her face with her hands.

"How on earth...?"

Peeking through her fingers, the Fat Lady replied, "Elizabeth has a habit of sneaking around in the paintings in his quarters. If you ask me, the daft tart has an unhealthy obsession with him, always watching and peeping. Well, she got more than she bargained for tonight, I dare say!" She fanned herself. "Oh, I think I need a lie down, dear. Give us the password, and I'll let you get off to bed."

Hermione frowned, shaking her head. "I don't think you portraits should be spreading those rumours. If Professor Snape finds out, it'll be turpentine for the lot of you."

"Eeeeeee! Don't you tell him, missy! Just get inside, I must go and see Violet!" The door opened without the password, and Hermione stepped through to the common room, temper flaring.

Bloody Elizabeth Burke. Spying on Severus while he... I'll turpentine her myself if I find out she's done it again. He's mine!

"Whoa, 'Mione. Who are you about to hex? I didn't do anything, I swear!" Ron held up his hands and backed away as she stormed into the room.

"What?"

"You look like you're about to cast an Unforgiveable. What's up?" Harry asked.

"Nothing. Forget it." She forced a smile. "Have either of you two seen Neville this evening?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah. It was weird though. He came in here a while ago looking a bit like you just did, stomped around a bit, then went up to the dormitory. Haven't seen him back down here since. Not like good ol' Nev at all. You two didn't have an argument, did you?"

"No. I haven't seen him since lunchtime. He seemed okay then. Still, it's his business." She shrugged. Neville could wait until he calmed down from whatever had upset him. She had enough problems of her own to deal with.

The group of first-year Hufflepuffs scuttled away around the nearest corner in fright as Severus Snape swooped past on his way to the owlery early the next morning.

"Did you see that?"

"What do you think it means?"

"I dunno, but let's get out of here. He might come back!"

Snape was oblivious to the fear his particularly good mood had generated. Claspng the letter he had written after a long and satisfying shower, he beckoned to an owl watching from above. "Come on, then, I don't have all day." The owl fluttered down, landing unsteadily on the perch provided for the attachment of letters. "Don't fall down now, there's a good chap. Now, I want you to take this to the witch who calls herself Grace Henman. If you can't find her, bring it back to me and no-one else. Do you understand?" The owl studied him, a solemn look on its small feathered face, and appeared to give a slight nod before launching off and out of the window.

That owl looked familiar. Perhaps I've used him before. I hope the creature has the wit to follow my instructions and return the letter if its magic isn't sufficient to find Grace by her assumed name alone.

His attention turned inwards, Snape failed to notice the small owl swooping around the owlery tower and directly into the Great Hall, where it landed on the Gryffindor table and limped over to a surprised witch, who opened it without thinking.

Ginny watched her friend's face as she read the letter. "Hermione?"

The other girl seemed to be staring at the High Table, where Professor Snape had just sat down. "Hermione?"

"Hermione!"

"What!"

"Are you okay? You look sort of flushed... and why are you crying?" Ginny's concern was almost Hermione's undoing.

"It's... it's..." The letter fell unheeded to the table, landing face up in front of the redhead.

My dearest Grace,

Indeed I do.

Take care of myself, that is.

*In fact, I did so sitting in my armchair yesterday evening. While remembering **your** hand stroking me, **your** lips, **your** tight, moist, heat surrounding me.*

And yes, I smiled.

I want you too, Grace.

I no longer care who you are. Come to me before I perish from the love you are withholding.

Yours

S.

"Hermione? Who's Grace. And who's this pervert, S? He... or at least I assume it's a he, shouldn't be sending such disgusting letters to anyone, let alone the wrong person! You should report it. I'm sure that was a school owl." Ginny's initial whisper was increasing in volume.

Hermione glanced down the Great Hall to Harry and Ron, who had just arrived and were making their way to the two empty seats across the table. She shook her head and snatched the letter back. "No, Ginny! Leave it. You don't understand."

"But, Hermione, the beast made you cry." All of Molly Weasley's overprotectiveness coalesced in her daughter in that moment. "How dare he?"

Hermione caught Ginny by the sleeve. "Hush! I'll explain later. Please, Gin, let it be. Just eat your breakfast."

"You have fifteen minutes, Hermione Granger, and it had better be good."

"You have no idea, Gin."

Less than twelve minutes later, Hermione and Ginny left the Great Hall in search of an empty bathroom.

"Spill. Who is he? And what does he want with this Grace person?"

"Gin, it's not that simple. Grace is... well... me."

"You?"

"Me. It's a name I used. You don't need to know why, and, no, you don't need to know who he is either."

"So why are you crying?"

"Read it again, Gin." She passed the now-crumpled letter.

As Ginny read the letter more slowly and carefully, her eyes widened.

"Bloody hell, Hermione, you've... you... with this guy... really?"

Hermione nodded.

"And he wrote this *this* without even knowing who you really are?"

Another nod.

Ginny closed her eyes for a moment and thought. Tapping her finger on her lower lip, she added, "That owl was from the Hogwarts owlery. I recognised the limp. It's someone *here!*"

"Stop! I told you, you *don't* need to know. Ginny, please! I'll tell you when I'm ready."

The younger girl pouted, then nodded. "All right. But may I ask one question? Why didn't he recognise you? Everyone knows Hermione Granger."

"I used a Glamour. And that's all I'm saying. I need to talk to him first before I tell anyone else." Hermione could not hide the slight tremble of her hands as she refolded the letter and tucked it into her bag. "I'll see you later, Gin. We'll be late for class if we don't go now."

As the door closed behind her friend, Ginny Weasley frowned suddenly. "Anyone *else?*"

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Huge thanks to my beta, karelia, for all her advice and encouragement.

Chapter Fifteen: Patience Has Its Own Rewards

Chapter 15 of 41

Severus sorts out his little portrait problem and has a discussion with Hermione.

Disclaimer: These characters belong to JKR, but if she doesn't want them back after I've corrupted them, I'll be happy to take them off her hands.

Chapter Fifteen: Patience Has Its Own Rewards

Hermione's diligent habit of studying weeks ahead proved invaluable for the remainder of the day. Her apparent distraction in class was overlooked by her teachers as due to the pressure of work, and Minerva McGonagall was even heard to wax poetical in the staff room later in the day about the degree of detail in the brocade chair Miss Granger had conjured in Transfiguration. Hermione herself, however, was merely going through the motions of her day, the letter from Snape burning awareness in her pocket.

I can't believe he wrote that. In such detail. And the last line... from Severus Snape?

'Come to me before I perish from the love you are withholding.'

He's a closet romantic. There's no other explanation. And he'll be mortified when he knows who he revealed it to. Although the rest of the letter would be rather embarrassing as well.

And what the hell am I going to do about Ginny? She can't find out who 'S' is. She just can't. I'll have to let her think he's another student. I suppose if word gets out I've been kissing Blaise and Draco, she'll assume he's one of those two. Or think I'm sleeping with half of Slytherin house.

Great. Either I'm a dried-up, sexless swot or I'm the scarlet woman of Gryffindor. I can't bloody win.

Still, Severus loves me. Well, I assume that's what he's trying to tell me.

I'll have to reply, but I can't reveal myself to him yet. I can't afford to earn myself detention for the rest of the year until after Saturday.

Avoiding Ginny was easier than she had thought. With different timetables and Quidditch practice, Hermione managed to escape further questions from the younger girl, retreating to her room soon after dinner with the excuse of Arithmancy homework to complete.

Sucking on the end of her quill, Hermione gathered her courage, then began writing.

Severus

I can't begin to describe how your last letter affected me. I've spent today in a daze, not concentrating on my work at all. The image of you naked, stroking yourself while thinking of me, is so clear in my head I can barely think straight.

Are you doing it now as I write? Should I come to you and assist? Would you turn me away?

But I can't. Not yet. I have something I need to do first.

One thing I can promise. I'm not withholding anything.

I love you, Severus Snape. Believe that if nothing else. I want nothing more than to tell you in person.

Yours, always,

Grace

P.S. Check the portraits in your quarters.

Transfiguring the plain envelope into metallic silver, Hermione tucked the letter into her bag to await an early morning trip to the owlery. Thoughts turning back to her letter,

she bathed and, ignoring her nightgown, slipped under her sheets naked.

Hermione smiled at her plate of bacon and eggs when the owl flew over Snape's head and dropped its cargo without stopping. She watched from the corner of her eye as he opened the silver envelope and perused the missive within.

Snape managed to maintain an expression of bored disinterest as he read, but could not stop the blood pooling in his groin at Grace's words. Shifting in his seat to relieve the sudden tightness, he cursed his impatience in opening the letter at the breakfast table.

"All right there, Severus?" Rolanda Hooch asked. "Not bad news, I hope."

She shrugged and returned to her sausages when he remained silent.

Fucking nosy woman. Go back to your breakfast and let me read this in peace.

So, she needs a little more time. I hope it's not too long; even masturbation becomes less appealing after a while. What would Hooch and her cronies think if they knew I was sitting here with a bloody erection just because some mystery woman has me wanking over her? That would throw all their little preconceptions awry. No, Rolanda, Severus Snape is not a celibate bat; he has needs like the rest of you.

Oh, gods, she loves me?

She loves me!

Stop smiling, Severus; you'll upset the first years.

I can't. She loves me.

Portraits?

If Hermione's smile was a little wider than Ron's joke deserved, no-one noticed. If her step was somewhat light for someone carrying the number of books she did, no-one commented. Seeing Snape unable to conceal his happiness at her words did something indescribable to her heart. It felt enormous, as if it wanted to burst out of her chest and dance through the corridors announcing to all and sundry, "I'm in love with Severus Snape!"

Such was her state of bliss, Hermione was paying little attention as she rushed down the corridor towards her Charms lesson. When a wall of black suddenly stalled her progress mid-stride, she spent valuable seconds frowning at the row of buttons before her eyes and trying to remember their significance before her olfactory memory caught up and registered the familiar scent of cardamom and patchouli under her nose. Dragging her eyes upwards, Hermione found herself on the receiving end of an unusually tolerant smirk.

"I believe, Miss Granger, you have better things to be doing than counting my buttons."

Did he just make a joke?

Snape stepped sideways and continued towards the dungeons without so much as a point deducted.

Oh, fuck. I've done it now. He's in a good mood.

I've gone and ruined Severus Snape.

I'll go down in history as The Woman Who Desnarked the Snape. Slytherins will despair; Hufflepuffs will cry; Gryffindors will rejoice; and Ravenclaws probably won't even notice.

Ruminating on the end of life as she knew it, Hermione reached the Charms classroom and slipped into her seat just in time to catch Ron passing a note to Harry. She managed a suitably unimpressed expression and took out her quill, settling to work with an enigmatic smile and a soft sigh.

Snape walked the perimeter of his quarters, checking each painting for evidence of tampering. Preferring scenic works to portraits, he was rarely bothered by uninvited oil-based opinions or suggestions, having terrorised the first few unfortunate visitors who had wandered into his rooms when he had first moved in.

A flicker of movement caught the corner of his eye as he turned towards the fireplace. His wand was in his hand before reason caught up, the *Petrificus Totalis* surprisingly effective against the familiar young woman caught in the process of sneaking into a rather pleasant woodland scene.

"Elizabeth? What are you doing in here?" He released the spell, but did not allow her the relief of an easy escape.

She quivered. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't, but..."

"But what?"

She shook her head, keeping her painted mouth firmly closed.

Snape's eyes widened as he made a few unwelcome connections in his mind. "Were you in here yesterday evening?"

Elizabeth remained mute, but the fierce scarlet of her cheeks betrayed her.

Oh, fuck. That's all I need. Portraits in every hallway gossiping about my masturbatory techniques. Minerva will have a seizure. She'd have a seizure just realising I have a cock, let alone that I'd use it in such a manner. Bloody sure she still thinks of me as a skinny first year most of the time. Could be quite satisfying to see her reaction.

Or maybe not. If she knew, no doubt all the other biddies would as well. That doesn't bear thinking about. I really don't want Trelawney getting any more ideas.

And Merlin forbid any of the students find out.

"No-one is to know. Is that understood? I can find a wall in the deepest, darkest dungeon to hang your portrait, with wards to keep you there if necessary. Or turpentine."

"That's what she said." Elizabeth sulked in the corner of the frame.

His eyebrows nearly reached his hairline. "She? Who?"

"The Fat Lady. She said you'd turpentine us if anyone said anything."

"Just how many of 'us' are there, Elizabeth?"

"Only me and the Fat Lady and Violet and Damara. And of course there was Giffard and..."

Snape groaned and covered his face with his hands. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Tell me none of you have told anyone alive."

Elizabeth covered her ears. "You shouldn't use such language, Professor! It is most unseemly in front of a lady." Her lips curled into a coy smile. "Not half as unseemly as what you were doing last night, *Severus*."

"Stop batting your eyelids at me and answer the question, witch! Does anyone alive know?"

"Only..." she cringed, "... one."

"WHO?"

"That crazy girl with the awful hair who spends all her time in the library. She's the one who threatened us with turpentine."

Hermione bloody Granger. Fucking marvellous. I'm surprised the self-righteous twit hasn't been down here to lecture me on the error of my ways.

She did threaten the portraits into silence, though. Odd.

Perhaps she didn't want any sensitive Hufflepuffs to be traumatised.

Should make tomorrow's Potions lesson somewhat interesting. Still, I don't want a repeat. I'll have to speak to her.

Reaching for his wand, Snape ordered Elizabeth back to her portrait in the corridor. A short incantation later and the paintings in his room had become impervious to infiltration by Elizabeth or any other portrait inhabitant.

As he left his quarters for his next teaching session, Snape rapped on Elizabeth's frame with his wand. "If I hear anyone... *anyone*... mention my personal activities again, you'll be in that room so fast your varnish will crack. And that applies to the Fat Lady and Violet and all the rest of your gossip-mongering friends." Without waiting for her reply, Snape stalked off down the corridor, leaving Elizabeth to sob tears of guilt, embarrassment, and not a little frustration into her lacy handkerchief.

Grace

The portraits have been dealt with. I don't suppose you would care to reveal just how you knew there was a problem in that area?

Never mind. I know. Soon.

My ability to concentrate hangs on a thread; my wrist is aching; and my dreams are inhabited by your sweet smile. I hope you're satisfied.

S.

Severus

Without you? Never.

G.

Grace

And whose fault is that?

S.

Hermione glanced around the dungeon corridor, hoping Snape was still happily eating breakfast as the owl flew off. Watching his smile as he read her brief reply over breakfast had been heart-warming until the moment when he had scribbled on the back of the parchment and set about re-attaching it to the owl's leg.

Bloody hell! If I'm still here when that owl leaves, I'm history. "Gotta go. Library." She had grabbed a piece of toast and scurried out of the Great Hall just as the owl had launched itself from the High Table. Not looking back, Hermione had headed towards the dungeons where the owl had finally caught up with an indignant squeak.

Pocketing the note, she leaned against the wall outside the Potions classroom, assuming an innocence she was far from feeling. By the time the rest of the class arrived, Hermione's heart had slowed to a more reasonable rate, only to quicken again as Snape billowed around the corner. A gentle squeeze on her shoulder was Blaise's only contribution as they filed into the room and prepared their equipment for the lesson.

"*Discretion*," Snape's eyes focussed everywhere but on Hermione, "is much to be desired in many circumstances. However, at times we need the truth. Veritaserum is a complex potion, taking several weeks to mature, but the Ministry in all their bureaucratic wisdom decree you shall be imbued with the knowledge to complete the process. Do not assume this implies any relaxation of the strict guidelines for its legal use.

"You will be brewing this potion over the next few weeks in your Thursday sessions. Your first task is to read the relevant chapter on Veritaserum today and attempt to assimilate the information. I expect two feet on the properties of the main ingredients of this potion on my desk before you all leave today. Begin!"

Retiring behind a pile of essays, Snape watched the class from behind his hair. Granger gave no indication she was privy to any disturbing information regarding her Potions master. Relief and suspicion fought a battle for dominance as he studied the young witch.

"He's staring at you, Granger."

"Hush. Don't draw attention to us. You're supposed to be reading, not giving a running commentary on Severus's actions."

"Severus now, is it?"

"Of course it bloody is. I'm not so kinky as to think of him as Professor Snape while he's... oh, never mind." Her cheeks flamed.

Blaise grinned. "Do tell. If nothing else, I can live vicariously through him, although it wounds me deeply to consider the place he holds so deep in your heart."

"Have you ever considered a career as an actor? I'm sure you'd win an Oscar."

"An Oscar? Why would I want a man? My name's not Malfoy."

"Idiot. Look it up some time. And stop pretending you don't care anymore; it just makes me feel even more guilty."

"My quest here is done then. I shall read in silence, doomed forever to the purgatory of your indifference."

"Zabini! Granger! The definition of reading does not include any mention of conversation. Keep it that way!"

Heads down, the pair complied for the remainder of the lesson. As their fellow students filed out, Snape looked up from his desk.

"Miss Granger, a moment... please." His expression revealed nothing.

Once Blaise had left the room, concern marring his handsome features as Hermione waved him away, the Potions master began pacing back and forth.

Hermione studied the stone floor as she waited, his every step heralding the death-knell of their relationship. *Oh, bugger. This is it. He's finally worked it out. Merlin, I'm not ready for...*

"It has come to my attention that you have... certain information about my... private activities." Even Snape couldn't prevent the flush rising in his cheeks. He turned suddenly and retreated behind his desk. "The portraits..."

What? Is that all he's worried about? That I'll tattle to all and sundry about his supposedly lewd behaviour. If only he knew he'd bragged about it to me himself only two days ago, then he'd have something to be concerned about. This I can handle. She awarded him a reassuring smile and her best bossy voice. "Don't worry, sir. It's perfectly natural. Men and women do it all the time. In fact, it could be considered abnormal if a single man didn't. Why, Alfred Kinsey reported as far back as the 1950s that it was..."

"Yes, yes, Miss Granger, I don't need a lecture on the subject. What I need is your discretion." *Gently now, don't upset her. Let her think she's doing you a favour.*

"Sir, that goes without saying. The portraits' gossip will go no further. Do you require a Wand Oath to that effect?"

"That will not be necessary. I will take your word as a Gryffindor." *That'll work far better; enlist her sense of honour in her house.*

Snape watched his student leave, a feeling of unease creeping down his spine despite her repeated affirmations of secrecy. *Something's wrong here. Why wasn't she more embarrassed? Granger is hardly likely to be highly experienced, yet she took the knowledge of her professor masturbating without so much as a blush. She even quoted the bloody Kinsey Report at me. And why hasn't she broadcast it amongst her housemates?*

Gryffindors and women. I'll never understand them.

"What the hell was that all about? Does he know?" Blaise accosted her as she rounded the corner just past the Potions classroom. He looked her up and down. "No, you're still in one piece."

"It was nothing to do with that, Blaise. Something else entirely." Hermione grinned and walked off.

"And you're not going to tell me, are you?" he called after her retreating back, shaking his head as she waved and blew him a kiss. "Tease!"

Relief bubbled up into giggles as Hermione headed to the Great Hall for dinner. Once again, she had escaped Snape's awareness. *I really should be offended he hasn't recognised me yet. What is he, blind or suffering from a massive case of denial?*

Passing a side corridor, Hermione stopped in her tracks as a cold yet familiar voice hissed from a darkened doorway.

"I want to speak to you, Hermione Granger. Alone."

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Many thanks to karelia, who is the best beta in the world and quaffswinegaily, who puts up with me tossing ideas around at morning tea.

Sorry about the delay in this chapter, but I spent last weekend helping my nine-year-old practise for her school Masterchef competition. She cooked poached whole pears with vanilla egg custard and raspberry coulis and won the final!

Chapter Sixteen: Kisses

Chapter 16 of 41

It's Hogsmeade weekend, and plans are afoot.

Disclaimer: Still not mine. Still getting grubby...

Chapter Sixteen: Kisses

"It was only a kiss!"

"What do you mean 'It was *only* a kiss'? It was a *kiss*, for Merlin's sake! It looked pretty damned serious to me. And what was all that about Hogsmeade? Are you two really together? I thought... I thought..."

"No. We're not. It's just for appearances, all right. Keep your hair on; anyone would think you were jealous."

"Of course I'm bloody jealous! Oh, fuck... I didn't mean to say that. Forget it." Face flaming, Neville rushed down the corridor, stumbling a little on the hem of his robes as he rounded the corner.

"Jealous? Of whom?" Draco Malfoy frowned as he watched his Potions partner flee. "Of whom, Neville?"

Hermione kept her hand on her wand as she turned towards the shadows.

"Now, Hermione Granger!" The voice was definitely familiar, yet oddly sinister.

"Luna?" A muffled giggle was the only reply. Peering into the dark, Hermione withdrew her wand. "*Lumos!* What on earth are you up to? And what's with the spooky hissing? You really had me going there for a moment."

Luna Lovegood grinned and twirled the butterbeer corks on her necklace. "I was practising."

"Practising what? You're not thinking of starting a secret society and taking over the world, are you, Luna? Because if you are, I don't want to know. My life is quite complicated enough as it is." Hermione dumped her bag on the floor and leaned against the cool, stone wall.

"No, nothing *that* exciting. I was trying out my scary voice. Dad said we're going to Portugal to hunt Wibbling Pimples at Christmas."

"Wibbling Pimples? Sounds revolting. I'd look in the fourth-year dorms; there's bound to be plenty there." Hermione managed to keep a perfectly straight face as her friend frowned and shook her head.

"No, Hermione, Wibbling Pimples. Apparently, if you show any fear or anxiety, they vanish. I thought *if* sounded scary, I might be more likely to catch one."

Hermione nodded, feeling guilty about her flippant comment in the face of Luna's earnest explanation. "I see. Well, you certainly had me worried, so I think you're on the right track. What did you want me for anyway?"

"No, silly, you wanted me. Mandy told me you were looking for me earlier."

"Oh, of course. I just wondered whether you'd help me with something on Saturday..."

Snape chewed slowly, smothering his anxiety in a thick layer of disdain.

"Hungry today, Severus? Been using up too much energy at night, then?"

Hooch's wink made him feel slightly queasy, nothing to do, of course, with the six sausages and three helpings of eggs he had eaten while lingering at the breakfast table. "Exercise?"

What does she know? Have those portraits been gossiping after all? And where's that bloody owl?

"All those patrols you insist on doing. Can't be healthy to be traipsing the corridors at night like you do. I'm sure the students won't destroy the school if you had a night off."

Snape's internal alert level dropped a few notches as he sneered at the Flying instructor. "Some of us actually care about the welfare of the students and the school, Rolanda." With a curt nod, he pushed his chair back and stood, abandoning hope of a letter from Grace. As gracefully as he could, considering his rather overfull stomach, he stalked from the Great Hall.

Two days and no reply. She's never taken that long since I discovered she was a witch.

I'm a fool. Waiting around for a bloody letter from a woman who won't even reveal her name. For all I know, she's tired of the game she is playing and has moved on to taunt someone new.

Hermione watched the slump of his shoulders as he left the room, a wrinkle worrying her brow, the letter carefully hidden in her bag burning a hole in her conscience. *Damn! I'll have to send it this morning and put him out of his misery. So much for increasing his anticipation, the daft bugger has turned all negative on me.*

"Hey, Mione, are you coming?" Ron called.

"No. I believe she's waiting for her *boyfriend*." The scowl on Neville's face looked as out of place as a house-elf at Buckingham Palace.

Ginny Weasley's eyes narrowed as she scented victory. Despite all her promises of discretion, Hermione had refused to reveal the name of her lover. "And who would that be, Neville?"

Neville nodded towards the handsome blond walking over to the Gryffindor table.

"*Malfoy*? He's Hermione's boyfriend? I don't believe it."

"See for yourself." Neville startled as another blonde appeared beside him. "Oh, hi, Luna. What's up?"

Luna's dreamy expression faded as she took his arm. "I thought you could take me to Hogsmeade today, Neville. We haven't had a good chat for ages."

Neville's eyes widened to match Luna's as she steered him away from his despair. "But..."

"It'll be fine, Neville. Just wait and see. Now, where do you want to go first? I heard Honeydukes has made a special batch of sugar quills encrusted with wrackspurt saliva. Gives you a lovely buzz while you eat them."

Puzzled at the odd pairings she had witnessed, Ginny resolved to watch closely for developments. Something was up, and Molly's daughter was determined to discover what it was.

"You don't have to hang around me all day, Granger, you know. I can take care of myself."

"Stop your grumbling, Draco. You're supposed to be finding a quiet spot to ravish me senseless. At least look as if you're enjoying my company." Hermione checked her watch. *Just bear with me another twenty minutes, Draco, and you'll find it was all worth while. Oh, fuck, there's that Parkinson bitch. Time to activate Subplan A.*

"Granger... why are you looking at me like that? You're not going to...mmpf..."

"Dammit, I wish you'd warn me before you did that!" Draco pulled away from Hermione's embrace just in time to spot the departing backs of his Slytherin housemates. "Oh... thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Isn't there any other way to distract them?" Even his whine was cute.

"Not convincingly. Unless you wanted them to catch me with my hand on your..."

Draco winced. "No, no need for that. Kissing is fine. Just don't look you're enjoying yourself quite so much, will you?"

Hermione smirked. "But, Draco, honey, you know how my blood is on fire for you... how you melt my defences and send my body into raptures with your very presence."

"I think she's been sniffing too much of your cologne, Malfoy. It's addled her brains." Blaise chuckled as he walked past. "I'd make yourselves scarce; Millie's coming back this way. I think she's trying to catch you two out, but she never was particularly subtle."

"Where are you off to?" Draco asked.

"Just a little errand. You can have Hermione all to yourself for a while." He winked at the pair and disappeared around a corner. A distinct pop heralded his departure from Hogsmeade.

"Come on, Draco." Hermione tugged at his arm.

"Where are you taking me, woman? I warn you, if you think for one moment I'm going into a private room with you just for appearances..."

Oh, for Merlin's sake. He really does think he's irresistible. Cute maybe, but not irresistible. "Just trust me for once, dammit! Hurry, or bloody Millicent Bulstrode will follow us."

"Isn't that the general idea?"

"Don't be any denser than you have to be, Malfoy, or I'm leaving you to the vultures. Now. Come. On!"

"All right. All right." He held his hands up in surrender. "You're in charge."

"About time you saw things my way." Hermione led him back down the path towards Hogwarts, checking her watch again as they walked.

"Make up your mind. I thought we were supposed to be seen together to protect my reputation."

"We've been seen together by at least a dozen people, including Pansy and her cronies. That's enough for now. Ah, there they are."

Ahead, on the path to the Shrieking Shack, Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom were involved in a heated discussion.

"I see yours is as cantankerous as mine, Luna." Hermione's cheerful greeting had both young men staring at her, looking for her second head.

"Not the most co-operative date I've had," Luna replied. "Still, at least he's here."

"What's going on?" Neville looked from witch to witch, then blushed as he met Draco's equally confused eyes.

"You two are what's going on. You need time to talk away from the gossips at the school. We've given you both alibis; now we're going to make ourselves scarce for a couple of hours or so. What you two do with that time is completely up to you." Hermione smiled at the two wizards and linked arms with Luna. "Shall we go for a stroll around the lake? No-one will notice us there."

"Yes, let's. Maybe we can spot some Nargles in the mistletoe at the edge of the forest."

Waving goodbye to Draco and Neville, the two young women headed for a peaceful, if a little chilly, walk around the lake.

Blaise returned from his unauthorised trip to London two hours later uncomfortable in body and spirit. While the idea of a trip to the gallery where Snape's paintings were showing had been exciting and a little wicked, the reality of the exhibition had played havoc with his heart.

*He stood before the doors to the exhibition, the words, **Woman: Unveiled**, already drawing a response from his groin. Guilt warred with desire, and the baser emotion won as he entered the gallery. The blue eyes and dark hair of the woman in the paintings was both a relief and a torment as he slowly circled the room, drinking in images of her breasts and naked skin until he reached the final two paintings.*

"Oh, Merlin, what have I done?" he whispered as he felt the passion radiate from the canvas, his intrusion into the intimacy between artist and model all the more profane for their ignorance of his presence. "It's true. They love each other."

Shoulders slumped, weary of his own foolishness, Blaise Zabini finally snuffed out the small spark of hope he had clung to.

Each step heavy with despondency, Blaise made his way back to Hogwarts. He didn't see the two girls until the voice he least wanted to hear spoke.

"Hey, Blaise. Wait for us!" Hermione's breath was visible in little puffs as she hurried to catch up.

He closed his eyes and hoped his blush would be assumed due to the cold air and exertion. "Hi. What have you done with Draco?"

"Left him with Neville at the Shrieking Shack." Hermione waved vaguely back in the direction they had come. "We're staying out of sight for a while.

"By the way, this is Luna Lovegood. Luna, Blaise Zabini, my Potions partner and friend. I don't know whether you know each other."

Blaise summoned the remnants of his self-esteem and bowed over Luna's hand with a smile. "How have I not been introduced to such a fair lady before?"

"Oh, it's probably just because my hair colour is very rare. Only the Lovegoods and Malfoys seem to produce such blonde hair, although theirs tends more to silvery. Do you like it?" Luna smiled at the handsome Slytherin and tilted her head as she awaited a reply.

Her matter-of-fact reply demanded only one response. "It is exquisite."

"Thanks." Luna turned to Hermione. "Do you think we've given the boys long enough yet? I really have to go and work on my scary voice some more."

"Go ahead. They should be fine now. I think we can assume they'll use their discretion on their return to school. Thanks for your help."

"No problem. Nice to meet you, Blaise. I'll see you around."

He nodded. "No doubt. Goodbye, Luna." He watched her skipping up the path to Hogwarts and smiled.

"She's a lovely person, Blaise."

"I'm sure she is, Hermione."

"Would you consider...?" She met his eyes and flinched at the pain she saw within.

"Not yet, Hermione. I need some time." He shrugged and looked away.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"It's okay. It's really not your problem." Stiffening his shoulders, he continued. "Talking about problems, have you told Snape yet?" Her gasp warned him a split second before a voice snarled behind him.

"Told me what, Mr Zabini?" Snape's eyes however, pinned Hermione to the spot.

"Er... nothing... just a Potions question... It'll keep..." Without stopping to see if her answer had been sufficient, Hermione fled.

Blaise watched the woman of both their desires leave and turned to Snape, who stared after her with a frown.

"Mr Zabini, if you know anything I should know, now is the time to share."

"I could never betray a lady's confidence, sir. However, I suggest it might be in your best interest to pay a little more attention to Miss Granger."

Snape remained silent, staring after the young witch long after Blaise had left.

"Oh, look who it is, girls. Mr Macho and his studly friend. They appear to have lost their girlfriends somewhere. Dumped Granger for Longbottom, have you, Malfoy? Knew a common tart like that wouldn't hold your interest long." Pansy stood with her hands on her hips, sneering with her two friends. "Perhaps it's time you tried a real woman?"

"Now, look here..." Neville bristled.

"Allow me, Neville." Draco stepped forward, lifting his nose even higher than Pansy's. "For your information, Hermione Granger has more brains in her little finger, more sensitivity in her left toenail, and more class in the hair on her head than you three have combined. And furthermore, I doubt any of you have an inkling of how a real woman would behave, given you act like the bunch of catty schoolgirls you are." He turned and offered an elbow to an astounded Neville. "Come along, Neville. We have better things to do than waste valuable time here."

"Go on, then. Find some place to snog, you poofs!"

A glint appeared in Draco's eye as he remembered the lesson learned from a very Gryffindor witch. Spinning Neville into his arms, he placed one hand on each of the other wizard's shoulders and closed the distance between their lips. Neville's grunt of surprise opened his mouth a little, much to Draco's advantage as he plundered the sweetness of another young man's lips. After a few seconds, the Gryffindor in Neville took charge, and his tongue replied, twisting and dancing with Draco's as they ground their hips against each other despite their horrified witnesses.

"Ewwwww!" Pansy stared, feet rooted to the spot until Millicent's greater bulk managed to drag her away from the scene.

Draco prolonged the kiss long after the girls had left, finally pulling away, reluctant and panting, to stare at a grinning Neville. He smirked and nodded towards the direction their tormentors had taken. "Think that did the trick?"

"I don't know. We'd better carry on in case they come back," Neville replied as he took a handful of Draco's robes and pushed him up against the wall of the corridor they had been accosted in.

"Mmm. A sound plan. Where were we?" Draco reached down between their bodies. "There?"

Bloody hell. Even Longbottom is getting more than I am. Ten points to Slytherin for making a Gryffindor squeal, Malfoy! Ignoring the oblivious couple, Snape continued to his quarters, thoughts only on the letter he had received from a disgruntled owl while chaperoning at Hogsmeade. Fear and anticipation had stayed his hand from opening it until he reached the privacy of his own rooms.

Finally, the door closed on the bustle and clamour of students returning from a day of imbibing sugary treats and butterbeer. Snape stilled and listened for a few moments to the glorious sound of silence, then scowled at the faint tremor of his fingers as he slit the seal on the envelope.

Dearest Severus,

My fault entirely.

And yet, as I sit here at my desk writing to you, I wonder anew at this connection, this relationship we share. Is it purely sexual? Did the fertile soil of bare skin and intimate exposure yield a crop of passion and desire alone?

I hope not.

Passion without love is a rose with no scent. All show and colour, but no depth.

I like to think our many and varied discourses on subjects dear to our hearts bore the sweet fruit of love and affection and friendship to balance the heat which ignites when we touch.

While I admit I dream of your naked skin beside me, under me, inside me... inside me, I also imagine sitting entwined together on a couch reading, sharing ideas, debating philosophy, and dare I say, even politics and religion. The simple joy of sharing a meal.

I miss that.

I miss you.

Love,

G

"Hermione?"

"Yes?" She looked up to find Blaise standing beside her chair, anxiety clouding his usually serene brow.

"May I have a word?"

"Of course." Pushing a pile of books and parchment to one side, Hermione pulled out the seat beside her.

"No. Somewhere else." Blaise looked around the library, quiet on a post-Hogsmeade Sunday morning.

"All right. Let's go for a walk outside. It's not so cold today."

"Actually, I was thinking of our usual spot in the old Charms classroom, but outside will work."

"Blaise, you're worrying me. What's wrong?" Hermione left her belongings spread over the table and followed him from the room.

"Nothing... and everything." He shook his head and offered no further explanation until they were well away from prying ears. Leading her to a quiet courtyard, Blaise indicated a stone bench and sat down.

"Well?" Hermione sat beside him, taking his hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. "What is it?"

"Promise you won't hate me?" All of Blaise's self-confidence had evaporated.

"Of course I won't hate you. I'm your friend. Please, tell me."

He bowed his head and flashed a thin smile. "I know I shouldn't have done it, but I couldn't resist. The opportunity was too... there."

Hermione patted his hand. "You've lost me, Blaise. What opportunity?"

"I Apparated to London yesterday and went to the gallery."

"The gall..."

"That's where you both were at the weekend. Where was the exhibition?"

"London. At a gallery in Bankside."

"You went to Snape's exhibition?" She paled. "You saw the paintings?"

He nodded.

"All of them? Even..."

"Every single one." His cheeks were scarlet, but he pressed on. "They were magnificent. *You* were... are magnificent." He reached up with his free hand and brushed her cheek. "Gods, you're beautiful."

"Blaise... I... Severus..."

He pressed a finger to her lips. "Hush. I know. I could see it in the paintings. The expression on your face, the loving detail with which he formed each brush stroke. Dammit, Hermione, I could bloody well feel the love between you. It was only paint and canvas, but I could *feel* it."

Moisture gathered in the corner of her eye, drawn by the intensity of emotion in the dark-skinned wizard's face. She watched him swallow and sigh.

"Don't cry; you're too beautiful to cry over my bruised feelings. I dug this hole, and I'll have to Transfigure myself some earth to fill it."

Despite herself, Hermione giggled. "Why do you always have to make light of everything?"

He curved his lips, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "I have to laugh or I'd cry, and tears don't suit my elegant Zabini persona."

"Oh, Blaise, you're one in a million. Some witch is going to be very lucky to have you one day."

"That's what my mother always says. Come on, let's get inside before we freeze."

The owl alighting on Hermione Granger's plate looked disturbingly familiar to Snape as he poured his third coffee for the morning. Shaking the ridiculous notion from his brain most owls looked the same, after all he continued his breakfast without allowing any further contemplation of the Gryffindor know-it-all to impinge on his cheerful mood.

Pocketing the letter with a minimum of fuss, Hermione ignored Ginny's eager glances. It was a simple matter of mentioning the Quidditch Cup standings, and she was free to leave unnoticed.

Grace,

I'm writing this while reclining on my lonely bed, once again naked and aching for you. How did you bring me to this? I used to have such control over my baser urges until you appeared in my studio and destroyed all my adolescent notions of love and desire and passion.

I used to see love as an angry emotion: possessive, jealous, bitter... I had no time for it, having been struck down by its duplicity once before.

It was you, Grace, who taught me about love. The simple act of brewing a cup of tea made to please the palate of the one you care about most. And, yes, a shared meal, conversation, even arguments, knowing a disagreement in philosophy does not alter one's emotions.

Waking up to find you still beside me last weekend, I discovered a joy so sublime I cannot describe it in mere ink and parchment.

Never doubt my desire for your touch your body is only a physical metaphor for the need my mind, heart, and soul has for you.

Make it soon,

I beg you,

S.

Snape sat at his desk once the class had commenced brewing and no obvious mishaps were in the making. Nodding at Draco Malfoy, who had his partner well in hand, in more ways than one, he cast his gaze over the rest of the students. Potter and Weasley appeared to be working doggedly over their cauldrons. Three months of no assistance from Miss Granger was beginning to pay off.

Granger herself appeared inordinately content. Not so young Zabini beside her, whose frequent pained glances left him in danger of losing his usual position as the unchallenged sophisticate of Slytherin.

Snape found his thoughts turning back, inevitably, to Grace. He imagined her expression upon receiving the letter he had penned the evening before and, without conscious thought, began sketching her face in red ink on the unfortunate student's essay before him.

Damn! What was I thinking? Just as he reached for his wand to siphon off the extra ink, Snape paused. *It's her face. What if I...?*

With swift and sure strokes, Snape added Grace's hair to the sketch. But instead of the long, straight, dark locks he was accustomed to drawing, his quill created a mass of curls reaching below her shoulders. A whispered spell, and her eyes were changed to an indeterminate hazel and the hair to brown.

Snape stared at the sketch, comprehension dawning slowly but undeniably. He looked up to find two rich, brown eyes staring at him from beneath a mass of bushy curls.

Fuck!

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. I have Karelia for a beta. Aren't I lucky?

Chapter Seventeen: Confrontation

Chapter 17 of 41

Severus and Hermione finally talk... sort of.

Disclaimer: They're still JKR's underneath it all.

Chapter Seventeen: Confrontation

As she set the heat under her cauldron to a low simmer, Hermione glanced up toward the front of the class. *What's he doing? Looks like he's doodling on someone's essay. That's hardly appropriate, Professor. And now he's staring at it as if it might bite him. That's odd behaviour, even for Severus.*

Oh... Merlin.

He knows.

Snape held Hermione transfixed in the depths of his black, incredulous gaze. Memories tumbled into his mind unbidden as he stared at the Gryffindor student before him.

Grace Henman Granger, Hermione.

"I have one or two questions, however, if you don't mind."

"Can you be certain the work will be complete by the end of August? I have other commitments beyond that time."

"I have to leave for school at the end of the month. Er... yes. I... er... skipped a year, and now I'm returning to finish up and take my final exams. Sort of an adult student, really."

"You've captured me so well, even the stupid way I bite my lip when I'm thinking."

"That crazy girl with the awful hair who spends all her time in the library. She's the one who threatened us with turpentine."

Fuck!

How could I have missed it? I was so certain Grace wasn't a current student.

Her know-it-all attitude. Her hands. Her Virgo tattoo. Even the precise way she chopped salad ingredients.

I should have realised it was Granger from the moment I picked up that brown, curly hair. I already bloody knew she was an intelligent, powerful, Muggleborn witch by then.

Snape suddenly dropped his eyes, fists balled on top of the parchment on his desk.

A nudge from Blaise drew Hermione's attention back to her cauldron.

"Doxy wings. Now!"

"Damn!" For the next few minutes, Hermione's mind was fixed on her brewing. Only after the simmering stage had been reached did she have time to acknowledge Blaise's warning.

"Thanks. That was just in time."

"What the hell were you thinking, Hermione? You're usually more focussed than that."

"He knows."

"Who knows? What?"

"Severus. He *looked* at me."

Blaise rolled his eyes. "You're almost as paranoid as he is. He looks at you all the time. Probably to make sure you're paying *attention*."

"No. He suddenly looked up and stared at me as if..." A light kick under the table stilled her tongue as Snape raised his head to reveal distinctly red-stained cheeks.

Snape found himself once again staring at Hermione Granger in horror as his mind regurgitated unwelcome and embarrassing tidbits.

"Why should I be upset? It's not like you called into your trousers for your penis to come to attention just for fun."

I wrote to her and told her I was masturbating over her. More than once. A student, for Merlin's sake! Minerva will kill me if she finds out. No, she wouldn't be so forgiving. She'd rip my balls out, string them up in the Great Hall, and make me watch as the first years practised spells on them.

She knew. She bloody knew exactly why I had to leave the classroom that day. Oh, gods... I came in my pants like a randy teenager, and she knows!

His gaze never wavering, Snape relived the feeling of Grace's lips on his cock and the taste of her arousal under his tongue. His trousers strained as he remembered her tightness around him when she came and cried out his name.

As Grace's naked form threatened to overwhelm his consciousness, he lifted his head, and the sight of Hermione Granger fully dressed in her student robes poured guilt into the brew of emotions churning within.

A student. I fucked a student. I fucked Hermione Granger!

Someone Avada me now before Minerva does.

"Miss Granger. See me after class."

"Do you want me to hang around?"

The reassuring weight of Blaise's concern fortified her. "No. Not this time. I have to do this alone. I *need* to do this alone. If you play the knight in shining armour, he'll never respect me as a woman. Thanks, anyway." She patted his arm as he packed up his Potions kit. "You could run interference on those two though."

Behind them, Draco and Neville's furtive glances between their professor and Hermione broadcasted the topic of their whispered conversation. Blaise rolled his eyes. "I'm onto it. Don't worry about them; just concern yourself with getting out of this room in one piece."

Her weak smile was little comfort as he joined the pair behind and nearly dragged them from the room.

Ron and Harry merely waved as they left, deep in a discussion about what was likely to be on the menu for lunch.

Hermione placed everything into her bag precisely, finally looking up to the front of the classroom when the last reassuring sounds of her fellow students had faded. Snape was sitting behind the desk, leaning back in his chair with arms folded. A peculiar expression rested uneasily upon his face, as if, for once, he had lost control of the situation.

Taking the bull, or at least the snake, by the horns, Hermione stood and faced her lover.

"You've worked it out."

"Indeed."

"And? You have nothing to say?"

"I have a considerable amount to say on the matter, Miss Granger. However, I shall refrain from commenting until I hear your explanation." *Control, Severus, control. You don't want her rushing off to Minerva accusing you of Merlin knows what perversion.*

"Miss Granger? *Miss Granger?* I believe we have moved past the formalities, *Severus.*" *I won't let him deny our relationship. He might kill me, but he will not pretend this never happened.*

"What did you expect? Grace? Hermione? Whispered endearments and stolen kisses? Shall I get down on my bended knee and propose right now?" His sneer was almost effective, betrayed only by the heartbreak in his eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous." She moved around his desk, acknowledging his wince as she drew closer. "Tell me it's impossible. I'm a student, and you're my teacher. You're twice my age and a hundred times as bitter. Tell me I'm crazy to have fallen for you. Tell me something I don't already know." She shrugged and turned to the window.

"Why?" It was almost a whisper.

"I told you why. I needed the money. I thought I could do the job and walk away, pretend it had never happened. But you... you were... different. I found the real Severus Snape there in the studio. Witty and sarcastic and intelligent. Brooding, artistic, and passionate. Just my type. How could I let you go?"

"You should have. Dammit, woman..." He bowed his head, frowning as he noticed the unaccustomed trembling of his fingers. "Grace... Granger, why didn't you tell me?"

"When would have been a good time? During class? After dinner? 'Oh, by the way, Professor Snape, you're a great shag, and I think I'm in love with you?' I was terrified you'd find out and even more afraid to lose you by telling you myself."

Snape met her eyes, almost moved by her tears until he remembered. *"I suggest it might be in your best interest to pay a little more attention to Miss Granger."*

"Zabini knows. Dammit, who else have you told? Potter? Weasley?"

Stung by his accusation, she stepped back half a pace. "No! How can you say that? The only person I told was my mum, and for your information, she gave me her blessing. Blaise figured it out for himself. Although Ginny knows there's someone, but not who."

"Miss Weasley? How?"

"She saw one of your letters. By mistake!"

"Fuck! Which one?"

"Put it this way, she was about to run to the headmistress and complain about the pervert writing me letters. If I hadn't told her I knew the sender of the letter, she would have created merry hell."

Shite, that one! How long before she works it out? I have to stop this now.

He stood just as she stepped back to him and stumbled. Catching her arms with his hands, Snape rested his chin in wonderfully bushy, untamed hair and inhaled the scent of his downfall. "Oh, gods..."

Hermione lifted her face to find his inches away. Close enough. Brushing her lips across his, she coaxed them open to drown in his desperation.

Ignition.

Lips, tongues, teeth clashing... hands reaching to unbutton, pushing away cloth hindering access to bare skin... breathing ragged and desire subsuming rational thought until...

"No!" Snape dragged his unwilling mouth away, staggering back to the support of his desk as he rebuttoned his robes. "I can't. I mustn't."

"Why not? What's the worst that could happen?" Hermione stood, arms akimbo, heedless of the half-uncovered breasts her unfastened clothing revealed.

Snape averted his eyes from the temptation before them. "Are you naïve or merely foolish? This is wrong! You could face expulsion, not to mention the disdain of your peers for your choice of consort. I could lose my job, my income. Do you really think the headmistress would forgive one of her staff for despoiling her precious lion cub?"

"I don't give a damn what people think. I love you, Severus Snape, and the rest of them can go to hell. Whatever happened to *Come to me before I perish from the love you are withholding?* I'm not withholding anything." She advanced towards him, pressing her body to his as the desk stalled his retreat. "Don't deny it. I can feel it there between us, hard and insistent. *Never doubt my desire for your touch your body is only a physical metaphor for the need my mind, heart, and soul has for you* Should I doubt it?" She ground her pelvis against his arousal, eliciting a groan from the man before her.

"Yes... No... Dammit, Grace, don't do that. I can't think."

"I don't want you to think. I want you to *feel!*" She lifted a hand and placed it over his heart.

"What part of wrong did you not understand; you're my student! I can't kiss you... I can't touch you god knows I want to... I *mustn't* love you. Leave, please, for the sake of my sanity. Just leave!"

Hermione lowered her hand and backed away. Her lowered head and soft words quieted him faster than any hex. "I'm sorry, Severus. I can't switch off my feelings as easily as that. I love you."

She closed the door quietly as she left.

Oh, Grace.

Hermione paced the floor of her room, muttering to herself. "Bloody noble fool, too scared to take a chance. What do I have to do, quit school? Damn him!"

"Go easy on the man, Hermione. He does have a point. You could both get in Merlin knows how much trouble if the headmistress found out about your relationship." Blaise leaned back against her headboard, legs sprawled over her quilt as he made himself comfortable.

"But, Blaise, he just sent me away. He won't even talk about it. And for the last few weeks, he's avoided me as if I was bloody Voldemort reincarnated. He disappears as soon as Potions is finished, rarely appears at meals, and never seems to patrol any more. How can I have a conversation with the man if he isn't present? It's so frustrating!" She flopped down on the bed beside him and sniffed. "He's shut me out as if nothing ever happened. Walks around looking like death warmed up and won't even try to resolve the situation."

His arm around her trembling shoulders, Blaise rolled her into the warm comfort of his embrace and brushed her tears away with a gentle caress. "It'll work out, love, I promise. He'll realise what he's missing and come running soon enough."

Hermione looked up into deep brown eyes full of compassion and tenderness and sighed. "Why do you put up with me, Blaise? Here I am, drivelling on like a lovesick fool about Severus, and you hold me and tell me everything will be all right. Look at us, together on my bed. I feel so guilty, knowing how you feel. Don't you...?" She glanced down at the conspicuous gap between the lower parts of their bodies.

He grimaced. "I do; of course I do. But don't worry about it. I'd rather spend a few minutes in discomfort than leave you without a shoulder to cry on. Who knows what you'd do if I left you to your own devices? I can always take care of myself later."

Hermione found herself giggling at the familiar expression, certain she had never revealed that particular detail to Blaise. Sobering, she dared ask, "Do you, Blaise?" She looked down again and raised an eyebrow.

His blush was evident even through his dark skin. "Hermione! I... you... You can't ask a guy that!" Seeing her grin, he shook his head. "Bloody Gryffindors! Yes. Yes, yes, and yes. I'm a normal, red-blooded male. So go on, hex me and get it over and done with, or do you have any more personal questions you want to get off your chest?"

Still lying beside him, Hermione smirked. "There is something I've always wondered. Do you happen to know where the G-spot is?"

"That, my dear, is something *you're* never going to find out. Serves you right." He rolled onto his back, making no attempt to hide the significant tent in his trousers the topic of conversation and close contact had created.

Amidst gales of laughter, neither of them noticed the stifled gasp as the door opened and just as swiftly closed again.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. A bouquet to karelia for being my beta, even though she tells me I'm evil.

Chapter Eighteen: Don't Believe Everything You Hear

Chapter 18 of 41

Rumours circulate Hogwarts about Hermione's new lover, but Ginny is not convinced.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. I promise to wash their minds out with bleach before I send them back.

Chapter Eighteen: Don't Believe Everything You Hear

Ron Weasley closed the door with as much stealth as his scattered wits were able to muster. Sprinting back down the short corridor to the returned students' shared common room, he flopped onto the couch beside Harry.

"Bloody hell, do you know what's going on in there? No wonder she's always too busy to help us with our homework!"

"What's she doing? Buried in obscure textbooks? Knitting more elf hats?" Harry shuddered. "Don't tell me she's drawing up revision schedules already; it's not even Christmas!"

"Worse, she's shagging bloody Slytherins!" Ron sighed and slumped into a chair. "Now she'll never have time to look at our essays."

"Ron, did you say Slytherins? As in plural?" Harry's cheeks were pink with the thought.

Ron shook his head. "Don't go down that track, mate. It was only a figure of speech. She's holed up in there on her bed with Zabini, and things were looking mighty cosy."

"Cosy?"

"Let's just say he was up for the challenge, shall we? Never knew 'Mione had it in her. We should be proud of her. First, she complains about Potions class, then she swears at us, and now she's shagging Mr Cool." Ron grinned and puffed out his chest. "We must have had some influence after all."

"Mr Cool?" Ginny asked as she joined them. "Who's that? I've been dying to find out who Hermione's boyfriend was."

"Oi! You knew she was shagging someone and didn't tell us?" Ron tossed a cushion in his sister's direction.

"Don't have to tell you boys everything. So, spill... who is it?"

"Oh, I don't know. What do you think, Harry? Does she deserve to know?" Ron tapped a long finger against his lips and ducked the returning cushion.

Harry raised his hands. "Don't bring me into your argument. You're the one telling the story, Ron."

Ginny moved closer to Harry and placed her hand on his knee. "Brother, darling..." Her hand drifted up Harry's thigh slowly as he squirmed beneath her touch, cheeks flaring crimson. "Do you really want to see this?" Her fingertips brushed the rapidly growing bulge in her boyfriend's trousers.

"Ron... tell her, please! Or... maybe... don't tell her." Harry leaned his head back and closed his eyes as his hips thrust of their own accord into the warm hand now grasping his arousal through layers of fabric.

"All right, all right!" Ron covered his face with his hands. "I really *don't* need to see you doing that, little sister. What would Mum say?"

Ginny grinned as she gave Harry's lap a farewell pat. "She'd pretend to be horrified, but behind your back she'd be proud of my ability to extract information. Now, you were saying...?"

"Bloody women! It's Zabini. He's in there with her now."

"Blaise? I thought they were just friends." Ginny frowned. Hermione had spent a lot of time with Blaise Zabini over the previous few weeks, but she had seen no suggestion they were anything other than good friends. "So why is she being so secretive about it?"

"No idea. I suppose we did tease her about him a while back. Although after Neville and Malfoy becoming an item, I wouldn't have thought her fancying Zabini would rate a mention."

Ginny nodded, vowing to find out more from Hermione next time she could catch her alone. No-one paid any attention to the pair of Ravenclaws across the room, whose books had been abandoned as they stared, mouths agape, at the three Gryffindors.

With a curse and a sweep of his arm, Snape cleared his desk of its burden of parchment and quills. As the upturned inkpot dripping red fury onto the stone floor, he watched the last of the pile of essays float towards the ever-enlarging puddle. The name at the top of the sheet taunted him.

H. Granger.

Dammit! Why can't I stop obsessing over the girl? Every time I close my eyes, I see her face, her hands, her lips, her skin... I shouldn't even be thinking of her skin. I'm her bloody teacher. I'd never have allowed her to pose nude if I'd known.

Oh, gods, the exhibition! How can I allow it to continue? My student... naked... It's unforgiveable.

Why doesn't she understand?

Why does her voice, crying my name in ecstasy, haunt my dreams? Why can't I wake without my shame coating my belly?

Why does my heart tighten in my chest whenever I see her in the classroom?

I must be strong.

I must be strong enough for both of us.

It's for her own good.

"Severus? Severus!"

Minerva's voice broke into his reverie as the Floo flared green. He turned to see the headmistress's head floating in the flames, frowning at the clutter of parchment and ink on the floor.

"Whatever is going on, Severus? Is there a problem?"

"No, Minerva." He sighed. "Just an accident. Nothing to concern yourself about."

"Very well then. I came to tell you I expect to see you at dinner tonight. You have been neglecting your duties at mealtimes lately, and I feel the need to remind you your presence at the staff table is important for discipline. Your Slytherins have become quite unsettled."

Snape's terse nod of acquiescence was not lost on the astute witch. Her tone softened a little as she continued. "If there's anything you need to discuss, Severus, my door is always open. You've seemed a little... tense... lately."

A little tense? You'd be more than a little tense if you knew about the fantasies running through my mind involving your pet Gryffindor student, Minerva! No more tense than always, Minerva. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a little work to do before dinner."

Attempts at avoiding the vision of his downfall at the Gryffindor table failed miserably as the sound of her laughter carried across the hall to invade his mind and torment his senses. Finally, he succumbed to the pull of her gaze: liquid, brown, and afire with emotion. How could he have ever thought cerulean was superior?

The Great Hall ceased to exist for Snape and Hermione, the clamour of conversation and the clatter of cutlery washing around them as if they were immovable rocks in a sea of humanity. For one brief moment time stood still, held hostage by love and desire and shame and cold, hard reality.

Snape dropped his eyes.

"Did you hear the latest?" Rolanda's elbow was as sharp as her tongue.

His grunted response was no deterrent.

"Potter's sidekick Granger has taken up with one of *your* Slytherins. Apparently, they were caught at it in her room. Seems no-one is safe from her clutches. Always thought she was unnatural, that one. Couldn't stand flying."

His lip curled as he struggled to maintain disinterest. "Indeed. And which of my little snakes has been so honoured?"

"Zabini. Look at the way he's staring at her now. I'd have thought you'd have trained them better than to wear their hearts on their sleeves like that, Severus."

Snape watched as Hermione lifted a hand and waved to Zabini, her eyes crinkled with mirth. She turned to the Weasley witch and nodded, ducking back into the conversation as if the moment before had never occurred.

Appetite withered on his plate, Snape pushed his chair back and stood, leaving the hall without explanation or apology. Brown eyes followed him as he left the room, smile fading into dismay as she caught the surprised hurt and anger in his final glance at Blaise Zabini.

"Fuck!" *How could he know how Blaise feels? I'm sure he hasn't told anyone.*

Ron nudged Harry. "She's doing it again."

"You know, Ron, I think 'Mione shagging Zabini is a good thing. She needed to loosen up."

Hermione rounded on the pair. "I'm right here! And what makes you think for one moment Blaise and I are shagging?"

"But, 'Mione..."

"He's my *friend*, Ron! You and Harry are my friends, but I'm not shagging you two, am I?"

"Oi, it's not like I didn't offer." Ron grinned.

"I hardly think, 'Hey, what about it? I'm free tonight,' is the sort of offer most girls would be interested in, Ronald."

"I don't know; it's worked a few times." Ron waggled his eyebrows. "Besides, I saw you two at it in your room yesterday."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "At what, exactly?"

"Er... you know, cuddling on the bed and..." Suddenly, Ron found his fork fascinating.

"And?"

"And... Well, you can't tell me a bloke gets a hard-on for no reason!"

Hermione refused to let Ron off the hook, despite her reddened cheeks. "So, you entered my room without knocking, made immediate *invalid* assumptions, then bugged off and spread gossip about me. Does that pretty much sum it up?"

"He did only tell me and Gin, 'Mione. It's not like he put a notice up in the main corridor." Harry found his voice after a nudge from Ginny.

She rounded on the pair sitting across the table. "And who else was in the room at the time?"

"No-one. I think," Ron replied, the effort of remembering the details wrinkling his forehead.

"No. Mandy and Terry were working at the corner table, remember," Ginny said.

"Mandy? Mandy Brocklehurst? The biggest gossip in Ravenclaw house!" Hermione almost shrieked. "What were you thinking?" She pushed her plate and glass away and picked up her bag. "Stupid question. There was no bloody thinking involved!"

As she stormed off, Ron shrugged. "Don't know why she's so titchy. Everyone thinks she's hot stuff now they think she's snared Zabini. I did her a favour."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "You really have *no* idea how women's minds work, have you, brother?"

Ron spread his hands in a gesture of defeat. "No, none at all. How about you enlighten me?"

"Yes, please do," Harry added. "We need all the help we can get."

"Firstly, if she isn't in a relationship with Zabini, just how embarrassing do you think it will be next time she has to work with him in Potions, knowing everyone thinks they are shagging? And secondly, what will her real boyfriend think?"

"Another boyfriend? Just how many are there?" Harry looked confused.

"Oh, for goodness' sake. Hermione is definitely sleeping with someone. Don't ask me how I know, but I do. If it's not Blaise, then he's not going to be happy, is he?"

"But *who* is he?" Ron whined.

"I have absolutely no idea. But he's very romantic and sexy." Ginny remembered the letter she had read. *And his initial is S, so it can't be Zabini!* Ignoring the boys, she followed Hermione from the Great Hall and headed for the library.

S. Who do we know whose name starts with S? Ginny dug out a scrap of parchment and a quill from her bag and started making a list.

Seamus Finnigan? Parvati would kill him. Unlikely.

Stewart Ackerley? No, too young.

Stan Shunpike? She has a thing for the underdog, but that's just ridiculous.

What if the S stands for his last name?

Zacharias Smith? That creep? Surely she has some standards.

Who else?

What if he's not a student?

Slughorn?

The other students nearby looked up as Ginny let out a loud snort and giggled. Holding her hand over her mouth, she waved away their interest. But as she stared at the parchment list, she suddenly stilled, wide-eyed with mouth open.

Surely not? He's dark, and I'll admit he has a certain sex-appeal, but he's old enough to be her bloody father! Oh, Hermione, what have you done?

"I knew you'd be up here." Blaise joined Hermione at the outer wall of the Astronomy tower, draping his cloak over her shivering shoulders. "Beautiful view, isn't it?"

The rising moon was painting the landscape before them with a silvery glow, the frost-limned grass almost luminescent in the light.

"Yes. It's so peaceful; I could stand here for hours." She sighed.

"You'd get frostbite and hypothermia for your trouble. Whatever possessed you to come up here without a cloak? You could have at least used a Warming Charm." He followed his own advice, creating a thick blanket of warm air to fight off the chill.

"Mmm. Thanks. I should have thought of that myself. I was... distracted."

"By all the daft gossip about us? Does it bother you?" His voice was steady, calming.

"It should bother you, Blaise." Turning to face him, Hermione met his eyes. "Doesn't it?"

He shrugged. "I know it's not true, much as I would like it to be. What other people think is of no consequence."

"But what if..."

He pressed a finger to her lips. "If he thinks you have another interest, he might decide to do something about it."

She shook her head. "No, he's as likely to give up completely. He doesn't think he should be with me as it is. He'll see this as confirmation. And either way, he's likely to take it out on you. I might be in love with him, but I'm not blind to his faults. You don't deserve that, Blaise."

"Don't worry about me. Snape will hardly hex one of his own house members. And I'm not about to turn into Longbottom if he turns the cutting edge of his tongue onto me." He grinned and drew her into a hug. "What you need to do is write to him again. He can avoid you in the hallways and disappear after class, but he can't dodge a letter dropped in his bacon, can he?"

Hermione rested her head on Blaise's strong, safe shoulder. "You're right. It's worth a try."

"Twenty points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger!" Snape's voice was colder than the air surrounding them and just as bitter. "And thirty from Slytherin for inappropriate behaviour. Get back to your common room, both of you." He spun on his heel and left the tower without waiting for their reply.

A single tear trickled down Hermione's cheek as the door slammed behind the man she loved.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Hugs to quaffswinegaily and LivingTheDream, my long-suffering sounding boards. Kisses to Karelia, my comma queen.

Sorry about the delay on this one, chickadees. I had an evil tooth of doom that has been causing problems for the last two weeks. Tends to put the muse off a bit!

Chapter Nineteen: Tempt Me

Chapter 19 of 41

Letters are exchanged, and Ginny confronts Hermione with her deductions.

Disclaimer: It appears I've borrowed these characters from the esteemed Ms Rowling. I promise they'll be sent back all shiny and new.

Chapter Nineteen: Tempt Me

Hermione ignored the curious glances sent her way as she passed through the common room, reining in the turmoil of emotions through sheer willpower until her door was closed and warded behind her. Flopping onto the bed, she ground the heels of her hands into her eyes in a futile attempt to stem the flow of tears.

Why did he have to choose that moment to patrol the Astronomy tower? Miles of hallways and stairs he could have chosen, and he chose that one. What is he, some sort of psychic? Although if he was, he'd have known there was nothing going on between Blaise and me.

I can see why he was upset. All those rumours, thanks to my idiot friends. And then poor Blaise suggesting how I can get closer to his biggest rival. If only Severus knew the truth.

The truth.

He has to be told.

Sitting up, Hermione scrubbed at her face one last time and reached for her bag. Taking a quill and parchment, she began writing.

Dear Severus

"Stubborn bloody man probably won't even open the letter..."

Taking her wand, Hermione performed a few complex manoeuvres.

"See what you think about that little bit of foolish wand-waving."

Beginning again, she put quill to parchment to explain her actions.

Snape woke the next morning with a groan, the throbbing in his head competing with the familiar ache in his groin. Staggering to his bathroom, he groped blindly in the potions cabinet.

Why can't you learn? Women prefer youth and good looks every time.

Gods, that headache potion tastes foul. Why haven't I looked into that before?

His jaw unclenched as the revolting brew worked its magic and reminded him why he'd never altered the recipe. The relief was short lived as he glanced down to see the jaunty angle of his undaunted morning erection.

I forgot about you. I don't suppose you'd just go away and leave me in peace. I'm really not in the mood for another cold shower.

Libido uncooperative, Snape despatched his unwanted tumescence with a rapid series of strokes and a harsh cry of completion. Physically sated, he dressed and left his quarters, wearing his emotional frustration hidden beneath a scowl as he slid into his seat in the Great Hall several minutes later.

"Morning, Severus! Got out of the wrong side of bed again, I see." Rolanda grinned. "Perhaps you should try a quick toss in the shower. Might improve your disposition, old boy."

His glare was interrupted by an owl dropping a roll of parchment in his lap.

Fucking nosy harridan. I should tell her I've already tossed off, and this is as good as I get. Maybe then she'll keep her crass comments to herself.

What's this? Looks like her writing. Well, if she thinks I'll be reading anything she writes other than her assigned homework, she's...

Snape unrolled the parchment and began to read.

Dear Severus

By now you will have realised I have enspelled this parchment with a mild compulsion charm. Please don't be angry with me. I knew you'd probably throw this letter away without even opening it otherwise.

You've probably heard the rumours going around about me and B, and after seeing us together last night you no doubt believe them.

It's not true, Severus. B and I are only good friends. Truly.

To be fair, he would like more, but he knows how I feel about you and is being a perfect gentleman. I was upset, and he was comforting me, nothing else.

You have to believe me, Severus. I love you and only you.

Please talk to me. Just talk. I can't stand the distance between us even when we are mere feet apart.

Remember how you felt about Grace. She and Sidney are just as real as you and I. They are parts of us, perhaps the best parts.

Don't give up on me, Severus.

Don't give up on us.

All my love,

H

Snape felt her eyes on him as he gazed down at the sheet in his hands. Forcing himself to confront the truth in her eyes, he looked up to drown in the unshielded emotion he found there.

Hermione wondered whether she had imagined the fractional nod Snape finally allowed before turning his attention to his plate, but she noted the way he carefully folded her letter and placed it in the pocket closest to his heart with a hint of a smile.

Suddenly, the day seemed brighter.

"Hey, Mione, what do you think we're brewing today?" Ron asked as they neared the dungeon classroom.

"You know, Ron, I have no idea."

"But you always know. Half the time you've memorised the bloody instructions and researched the brewing technique before we even get into the room." Ron shook his head and turned to Harry. "It's all the sex; it's ruining her."

"Don't talk such nonsense. Just because I haven't looked up today's potion doesn't mean I can't brew it." She grinned and winked at Blaise, who was rolling his eyes behind the boys' backs. "After all, according to you two I'm shagging my partner, who happens to be an accomplished brewer. How can I go wrong?"

Harry sighed. "I thought you and Blaise weren't... You said... Dammit, Hermione, who are you shagging?"

Watching their professor as he swept past, Hermione's lips twitched. "No-one at the moment... unfortunately."

"I can vouch for that... also unfortunately," Blaise added.

Snape turned at the door and waited until the students had all filed into the room. As Blaise passed, he heard a harsh murmur.

"I suggest you keep it that way, Mr Zabini."

Blaise's barely perceptible nod seemed to satisfy Snape, who allowed the door to close without his usual dramatics before moving to the front of the classroom.

"What was that all about?" Hermione whispered once Snape was occupied with another pair of students.

"Just a little territory marking on the part of your beloved," Blaise replied. "Consider it progress."

"I can think of better... What on earth are Neville and Draco doing?"

"That smoke is an interesting colour. Would you call it violet or magenta?"

"I'm inclined towards fuchsia. I think they should have been paying more attention to the instructions and less to Draco's hair, silky as it might be."

"Snape seems to agree, if his expression is anything to go by." Blaise carefully added their next ingredient, stirring precisely twenty-three times clockwise before Hermione slipped in her contribution. "There. No purple smoke for us. That should keep him happy. I'm a little concerned about your appreciation of Draco's hair though. Don't you think mine is silky?"

Hermione swatted his arm. "No. It's wonderfully thick and curly, but silky it is not. Stop fishing for compliments!"

"Worth a try. You're a hard woman to please."

"Some things are better hard." Hermione's gaze flicked to the professor stalking around the room as she ground her beetle eyes.

"Granger! I do *not* want to imagine my Head of house in that state."

"Oh, but I do." She smiled dreamily.

"More's the pity." Blaise's grumble was half-hearted. Teasing Hermione about Snape had become his therapy in a sad, upside-down way. Acknowledging both his own desires and hers defused any tension and helped him accept his role as a friend and confidante.

"You'll find it hard when brewing the final stages if you don't keep your mouths shut and your minds on the cauldron." Snape's snarl as he passed left both students shaking with mirth.

"I wish," Hermione murmured.

Grace

I have decided to address you as Grace to maintain the illusion in my mind that my feelings for you have any degree of propriety.

I have come to realise over the past few weeks I care not the reality of your name, for Grace you shall always be in my mind and my heart. Seeing you each day before me in your true guise is sweet torment, and every smile bestowed upon another is a bitter potion of truth.

That said, I henceforth absolve you of any duty towards me. B would prove a fine partner for a woman of your intelligence, character, and beauty. He is fair of face and not lacking in wit, unlike some I could mention.

How I hate him.

I sit here alone in my bed, a pathetic sight to behold, and scratch away at this parchment in the hope of somehow resolving the gulf between my heart and body's desire and society's mores.

Our relative status allows no kind loophole, no sympathy for our predicament. I must remain distant from the warmth of your regard and deny that which every cell in my body yearns for.

My conscience stands firm.

But my cock stands here in my lap belying all the priggish words I have written thus far. It stands hard and aching and desperate for your touch.

I know not the solution for our dilemma, but I know I must abstain from temptation.

Please tempt me.

I remain yours, even as I remain silent.

S

Hermione read the letter once more as she lay on her own bed, smoothing the creases where it had been folded into her pocket. True to his word, Snape had remained silent, his behaviour exemplary, but the hot flame of desire was never far from his eyes when they met hers across the classroom. But for Blaise's gentle distraction she would have been consumed in their depths.

The Christmas holiday was looming, and Hermione was expected home for the break. Knowing she would not see Snape for two weeks brought both relief and despair.

A sharp knock returned her thoughts to her immediate surroundings.

"Come in!"

Ginny Weasley's grin almost preceded her into the room. "Hi."

"Hi. What's up?"

The redhead flopped down on the bed beside Hermione and turned to face her, head propped on one elbow. Studying her friend's face, Ginny said, "I know."

"You know what?"

"I know who he is."

"Who *who* is?"

"Your boyfriend. Although I suppose that sounds really weird considering who it is."

Hermione's heart sank. *How? She can't know. Nothing's happened. I haven't even spoken to him for ages.*

Ginny continued, ignoring Hermione's horrified expression. "I can see the attraction. He's smart, powerful, and definitely has a kind of dark, sexy look."

"You can? He does?"

"I can see other people would be worried about the age difference. I imagine that's why you've been so cagey. What I don't understand is how you got to know him; he's so busy now."

Hermione shook her head. *How couldn't I know him? We've lived in the same bloody castle for years. What is she on about?* "Ginny... I don't know what to say. He's just not what I expected." She sat up and grabbed Ginny's sleeve. "You mustn't say anything. He could lose his job."

"Don't be daft, Hermione. He's the Minister of Magic. No-one can tell him what to do."

"The Minister of... Ginny! You think I've been seeing *Kingsley Shacklebolt*?" Relief flooded Hermione's overwrought mind. Collapsing onto the bed in a fit of giggles, she shook her head. "How did you ever come to that conclusion?"

"Oh, come on, don't deny it. That letter was signed 'S', and I can't think of anyone here with that initial you'd be that interested in. He fits all the criteria. Intelligent, powerful, single, sexy. The owl came from the owlery here, so it had to be someone who had free access. Who better than the tall, dark, and handsome Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt himself?"

Oh, Merlin! I'm not sure whether I should be horrified or relieved. How can she think... Kingsley? That's just wrong. Besides, I'm sure he plays on the other side of the Quidditch pitch. What straight wizard calls himself 'Royal'?

"Hermione? Hermione! Come back down to earth."

"What? Sorry. I was distracted for a moment."

"So, what's he like?"

"Brilliant, talented, artistic... beautiful. Damaged. Passionate..."

"Damaged? Kingsley? I never knew."

"No, not Kingsley. Never mind, Ginny, we need to get packed for the holidays. Do you and Harry have anything special planned?" Mentioning Harry was a sure-fire distraction where Ginny was concerned.

"No, more's the pity. We'll be under Mum's thumb the whole holiday. I'm sure she's already shifted my bedroom to the attic out of spite."

Hermione giggled. "As if Harry would be crazy enough to try anything under Molly's nose. You'll be lucky to get a peck on the cheek under the mistletoe."

Ginny sighed. "That's so true. My love life might as well be non-existent. At least you've experienced your lover's touch in all the right places. I've had to be content with a bit of snogging in quiet hallways."

"You haven't?"

"Not a thing. I keep seeing Mum in my head wagging her finger at me, and Harry, bless him, hasn't pushed it. Still, I know he wants to, and that's enough for now. I'd better go and pack." Pushing herself reluctantly to her feet, Ginny waved from the door and disappeared.

Later that night, Hermione found herself wandering aimlessly through the corridors. Her trunk was packed and her gifts sorted out and left in a pile for the house elves to work their magic on Christmas Eve. Resting her forehead against the cold glass of a window, she watched the snow outside swirling around in the air currents rising off the

stones.

We've reached a stalemate. I know he cares about me. He knows I care about him. But he won't allow us to do anything about it. I suppose I can see his point, but does he have to be so damned mature about it all?

Stupid, Hermione. He's thirty-eight. Of course he's the mature one.

Thank goodness I have Blaise to lean on. He's such a brick. I hope he likes his Christmas present.

Hermione's train of thought came to a screeching halt when a strong hand grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. The familiar smell of turpentine bathed her olfactory senses as she relaxed into a pair of wool-enclosed arms.

"Severus!"

"Indeed." His eyes pinned her to the spot as she drank in his face.

"You've been painting." A tiny smudge of brown decorated his left cheek.

He shrugged. "It's a distraction."

"Does it help?"

"No." Paintings lined the small room he used at Hogwarts. Brown curls, dark waves, eyes of chocolate and cerulean. Intimate details drawn from memories of perfect moments committed to canvas only to mock and shame. "Not any more." He looked away from the reality of her face.

"I've missed you. Gods, I've missed you." Her hand crept up of its own accord and caressed the paint smudge away. "I've missed touching you, talking to you, laughing with you."

"Grace." The name was a breath of a whisper.

"Please..." No more words were necessary as she lifted her mouth to meet his lips and found home. The taste of his favourite tea seasoned with anticipation filled her senses as his arms stole around her shoulders holding her as if never to let go. Temperatures rising, Snape turned her to set her bottom against the window ledge and insinuated his hands beneath her robes and shirt to rest on the tingling skin above her waistband.

Forever it seemed they stood there, tongues dancing and hands renewing their acquaintance with each other's bodies. Hermione's fingers inched down between them to find the hardness pressing against her belly and stroked.

Once.

Twice.

With a strangled gasp, Snape pulled away and leaned against the opposite wall, breathing ragged and hair hiding his face. After a few moments, he looked up and shook his head.

"We can't."

Hermione met his eyes; hurt and disappointment warring with frustration in her own. "Why?"

"You know why. I apologise. I shouldn't have... I must go. Please forgive me."

As she watched his retreating back, tears flowing unchecked, Hermione whispered, "I love you," to the empty stone walls and headed back to her lonely bed.

A/N: This story was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. And Karelia rocks my world. Just thought you should know that.

Chapter Twenty: Christmas is Coming

Chapter 20 of 41

Hermione takes her frustration home for Christmas, Blaise is supportive, and Severus gets a letter.

Disclaimer: The characters belong to You Know Who. Not *him*, you wallies, JKR!

Chapter Twenty: Christmas is coming

She watches in silence as he enters the bedroom and stands before the bed unfastening his robes. Button by button his fingers work, each button undone allowing the edges of the fabric to part a little more. His black eyes hold hers in thrall for long moments until she drops her gaze to discover the pale skin exposed by the action of his fingers. Her breath held, she follows his hands down his body to his penis, erect and demanding, thrusting through the gap in the fabric. His mouth quirks at her gasp of surprise, and a raised eyebrow confirms her suspicion.

He has been naked under his robes the entire day. At breakfast, while chatting with the Headmistress, walking the halls, woollen folds brushing his arousal as he passed oblivious students, and in the classroom, hanging heavy and unfettered between his legs.

Oh, Merlin... in the classroom.

She squirms, heat and moisture building between her legs.

Relentless.

Delicious.

His robes discarded, he stands proud and nude, waiting.

"Yes," she whispers, lifting the slip of a nightdress over her head and sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Yes," he groans at the glory of her bare skin.

"Now... please." Her legs part as she caresses her breasts, plucking at the rosy nipples.

He reaches for his groin, grasping his erection with practised fingers. Moving closer, his hand works back and forth as he watches her fingers trail down her belly into the dark curls below.

"Show me." His voice is rough with need.

She smiles, one finger dipping into moistness, then circling her swollen clitoris. Around and around, knees parting further to invite his participation.

Stepping between her thighs, he uses his own wetness to draw tantalising circles on her heated skin, drawing ever closer to her busy fingers. Meeting her eyes once again, he breathes a single word.

"Hermione."

"Severus."

His eyes close as he acknowledges the truth in their words and seeks confirmation with his flesh.

"Please." Once more she begs, time coalescing into that one moment as he stands poised, the tip of his ardour brushing the silkiness of hers.

"Please... oh please!"

Tears flowed anew as Hermione awoke alone, sweaty and sticky, frustration throbbing through her body, release denied despite her best efforts. Flopping back onto her pillow, she dried her eyes with the back of her hand and retrieved her discarded nightgown from the floor beside the bed.

Snape was nowhere to be seen the next morning at breakfast, and all too soon it was time to head down to Hogsmeade and board the Hogwarts Express for London. If Hermione was somewhat silent on the ride to the village in the carriages, few noticed. The excitement of a two-week break from lessons and Christmas was enough to distract even her most devoted friends.

All but one.

Blaise Zabini chose the small compartment at the back of the train usually avoided by the groups of chattering students. As Hermione walked past, some distance behind her fellow Gryffindors, he caught her wrist and pulled her into the compartment. Locking the door and pulling down the blind, he sat her on the seat beside him.

"Okay. What's happened? You look like shite." Blaise sat back and folded his arms, awaiting a response.

Hermione glanced at the concern on his face. "That bad?"

"Dreadful."

"Thanks."

"What's he done now?"

"Nothing." She shrugged. "Well, not nothing exactly."

"What then?"

"He caught me wandering the halls last night."

"And deducted points?"

"No."

"Don't make me extract it out of you syllable by syllable, Granger. This trip only takes a few hours."

"We kissed, all right? He kissed me and then changed his mind and ran away. He's driving me crazy! Blaise, how can he do that? How can he kiss me with such need and passion, then switch it off as if nothing had happened?"

Blaise shook his head. "Believe me, Granger, there's no way he'd be able to turn off his feelings that easily. Hide them, maybe." Reaching out with his arm, he scooted Hermione closer and pulled her to his side. "Come on; it's time for some of that special Zabini magic."

Gradually, the gentle rock of the Express as it chuffed its way to King's Cross and the warmth of Blaise's embrace lulled Hermione into a deep, much-needed sleep. Unwitnessed, Blaise watched over her slumber, guarding her from unwanted interruptions as he caressed the frown from her brow with tender fingers.

"Oi, Harry, have you seen 'Mione?" Ron surfaced from the latest Quidditch gazette and peered around the compartment. I thought she was going to sit with us."

"Dunno. Maybe she had a better offer. Gin's around somewhere, and Zabini's likely to be with her."

Ron snorted as a thought occurred to him. "Perhaps she's done a Neville and braved a Slytherin compartment. She could be having a deep and meaningful conversation with Pansy Parkinson."

"Or trading hair-care tips."

"No, that'd be with Malfoy!" Grinning at his own wit, Ron returned to his perusal of the Chudley Cannons' statistics. "Bloody hell, they need to get cracking!"

Harry frowned. "Malfoy and Hermione?"

"No, you berk, the Cannons. They're at the bottom of the points table!"

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Look."

Hermione's whereabouts forgotten, the two young men studied the points charts and debated the chances of their favourite team reaching the final.

As the train slowed towards the end of the journey, the door to the compartment slid open to admit Hermione and Blaise.

"There you are. We were beginning to think you'd sneaked off at Hogsmeade and Apparated home," Harry teased as Hermione blushed.

"No, just fell asleep in another compartment. Didn't sleep very well last night." Her yawn added emphasis.

"Studying all night again? You're crazy, 'Mione. It's Christmas! Talking about Christmas, you are coming over to the Burrow on Christmas Day, aren't you?"

"Of course. I'll bring my parents as well. Dad loves seeing all the magical decorations and lights. He's as bad as your father, just the other way around!"

Ron looked up at Blaise. "If you're interested you can join us, Zabini. Mum's always keen to feed as many people as she can."

Blaise shook his head. "That's decent of you, Weasley, but I'll be expected to spend the day with Mother. I hope you lot have fun." He glanced out of the window as the train slowed to a halt. "I'd better go; she hates waiting."

Hermione followed Blaise out of the compartment. "Blaise?"

"Yes?"

"If you want to come and visit over the holiday... well... you know you're welcome, don't you?"

He nodded. "You never know, I might just take you up on that offer. I'll owl you."

Hermione's gaze followed him as he stepped off the train and into the embrace of a tall, elegant witch with dark skin and a magazine smile. They exchanged pecks on the cheek and disappeared into the milling crowd without a backward glance.

"Darling, can I come in?" Jean's voice was accompanied by the aroma of freshly-baked ginger biscuits and hot chocolate.

Hermione threw off the quilt she'd wrapped over her shoulders and found a smile. "Sure, Mum. I was about to come downstairs anyway. Mmm, did you just bake these?"

"I had to rescue them from your father. He would have eaten the lot, given half a chance."

"You know Dad loves them. Especially at Christmas. Nobody would think he was a dentist if they ever saw him with a plate of ginger biscuits."

"Just as well I don't let him take them to work then." Jean handed Hermione a steaming mug of her favourite winter drink. "Now, young lady, it's time you told me what's wrong. You've been moping around ever since you came home. You haven't even put your decorations on the tree yet."

Every year since Hermione was born, her parents had bought a new ornament for the Christmas tree. From the age of three she had helped select a special bauble or figurine to add to the collection. The ritual of hanging Hermione's decorations was always the final step in preparing the house for Christmas, missed the previous year while she was camping out in the cold, hungry and miserable, and her parents were barbecuing with new-found friends in Australia. She knew her parents had been looking forward to re-establishing normality.

"Oh, Mum. I'm sorry I've been a grump. It's just..."

"Sidney? Or Severus? Or whatever you call him."

"How did you..."

"Call it womanly intuition. After all, when I saw you last month he'd just discovered you were a witch. I've been waiting to hear what happened when you returned to school."

Hermione had the grace to blush. "Gods, I never owed you to tell you what happened!"

Jean smiled and scooted closer to her daughter in the bed. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, she squeezed gently. "Don't worry about that now. Just tell me what happened."

Slowly, with several pauses to gather her scattered emotions, Hermione related her tale of woe.

Frowning, Jean handed Hermione a clean hanky and waited for her to wipe her eyes and blow her nose. "I'm not sure why you're so upset, sweetheart. It sounds like Severus feels the same way as you do. You can't blame him for acting responsibly and considering your reputation and education."

"I know, Mum, that's part of the problem. I know in my *head* he's right, but my heart and body don't seem to have caught on. It's just so damned *frustrating!* And not only that, I'm sure he believes I'll take up with some younger wizard and forget him now the exhibition is over."

"You'll just have to let him know with letters and actions that he is mistaken. And I don't mean accosting him in every corner of the castle and snogging the daylight out of him. You have plenty of studying to keep your mind off him between now and graduation, and I'm sure he won't run away between now and then."

Hermione sighed. "You're right, of course. It's just so hard seeing him every day and knowing I can't be with him, can't tell everyone he's mine. Blaise is the only one who knows."

"Blaise?"

"My Potions' partner. And that's a problem as well."

"He's bothering you?"

"Far from it. Blaise is a wonderful person, who is smart and kind and funny and even handsome. He's been a really good friend to me since he figured out what was going on."

"I don't understand, dear. If he's so supportive, why is he a problem?"

"He's in love with me. Oh, nothing creepy, Mum, he's been quite open about it and knows I don't feel that way about him. That's why he is so wonderful. Despite how he feels, he listens to me whine about Severus and never complains. I feel so guilty, but he's the only person I can talk to."

"He sounds like a special person. Try not to hurt him, won't you? Good friends like that are hard to come by."

"Talking about good friends, how are Ron and Harry and the others?"

Hermione smiled wistfully. "Fine. Totally oblivious, but that's probably for the best. Ginny is convinced I'm pining over Kingsley Shacklebolt for some reason, and the boys think Blaise is my boyfriend, but otherwise things are as usual."

"Shacklebolt? Isn't he your Prime Minister?"

"Minister of Magic. And a really great wizard. He was in the Order, and I know him quite well, but..."

"Not fanciable?"

"Very fanciable, if you're a wizard. At least, that's what I suspect."

"Hermione! You can't say that about your Minister. It's not respectful!"

Hermione giggled and shook her head. "Oh, Mum. You can always cheer me up."

"That's what mums are for."

"That and ginger biscuits," Hermione replied, swiping the last biscuit.

Minerva McGonagall's tight lips should have warned Snape to moderate his temper, but his state of constant frustration rendered him oblivious to such signs. As the terrified first year scuttled off down the corridor, her agitated brogue penetrated his black mood.

"My office, Professor. Now!"

Snape scowled as he followed his headmistress's tartan cloak up the spiral stairs.

Only a dozen or so of the little brats here over the holidays, yet they can't stay out from under my feet. Why can't I sulk in peace? Fucking season to be jolly.

I hate bloody Christmas.

"Severus... Severus!"

"What!"

"Once again I am forced to ask. Is there anything wrong?" Minerva's concern leaked through her stern expression despite her best efforts.

"No. Nothing."

"Then why were you berating young Fothergill for simply walking back to his common room after dinner? You're well aware the poor lad is already distressed at his parents gallivanting off to Switzerland and leaving him here for Christmas. I plan to have some strong words with them on their return, and I don't need you making the boy even more miserable."

"His parents' irresponsibility is not my concern." Snape's lip curled. "His behaviour is. Using magic in the corridors is still against the school rules, I presume?"

"He used a simple *Lumos* in that patch of corridor where the lamps are faulty. We all do. I hardly think it was a transgression worthy of twenty points." She held up her hand as Snape began to protest. "No. I don't want to hear it. Henceforth, I will expect either more temperate behaviour or an explanation. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly, Headmistress." Snape offered a perfunctory nod and turned to leave.

"One more thing, Severus."

"Yes, Minerva." His sigh was barely audible.

"Try to have a happy Christmas. It won't kill you."

Maybe not, but long, empty days without seeing her smile might. Endless cold showers at this time of year are definitely bad for the health.

Snape spent the next few days in his quarters, the black miasma of depression cloaking him more heavily each day. Even Firewhisky was of little use, leaving him with a splitting headache and a coated tongue but little resolution to his problem. While his head knew the socially appropriate course of action, his heart roundly disputed it at length while his penis took every opportunity to disrupt his concentration.

He took the small package from his desk drawer and turned it over and over in his hands.

She'll get the wrong idea. Or maybe the right one. I should never have bought it. I'm a fool. An old, pathetic fool. I can't send it.

But his feet had betrayed him and taken him to the owlery while he ruminated. Calling down a large tawny owl, he affixed the package to its leg before his conscience caught up with his actions. "Go. Take it to her before I change my mind."

The owl looked at him with a steady eye, then blinked. With a hoot, it swooped off the perch and out of the window, almost colliding with a small, brown owl arriving with a letter.

Snape fended off the enthusiastic newcomer for several moments before realising it carried a message for him. Taking the envelope, he slit it open with a deft flick of his wand and perused the contents.

Face ashen, he took the stairs two at a time and, reaching the bridge between the owlery and the castle, leaped off.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction.

Smooches and cuddles go to Karelia for evicting the comma I left in a compound predicate. Yes, quaffie, I am currently beating myself with a limp lettuce leaf for penance.

Oh, the *shame!*

Chapter Twenty-One: Money, Money, Money

Chapter 21 of 41

Hermione finds out more about Blaise, and Snape has a problem.

Chapter Twenty-one: Money, Money, Money

Christmas Eve found Hermione sitting at her bedroom window with her nose pressed to the glass, envying the antics of the young people in the park across the street. Several teenagers around her age were making snowmen, every so often stopping to toss a hastily-made snowball at a chosen victim. Their cold-blushed cheeks and carefree smiles were pointed reminders of the youth she had forfeit in her fight for freedom. Freedom taken for granted by the couple kissing and caressing each other on the park bench without a thought to anything other than the next few minutes.

Hermione huffed, fogging the glass in front of her face. *Stop being such a wet blanket, Granger. They have every right to be happy. Just because the man you'd like to snog in the park... or the garden... or anywhere with a bed is tied up in knots over society's expectations to...*

Hmm, tied up in knots. Wonder if he'd...

Stop it. It's hard enough to...

Well, it was hard the other night. Only managed a quick stroke or two before he ran off. Wonder what he's doing in that dungeon all by himself.

Alone.

Hard.

Fuck! Why can't I think of something else?

"Hermione, you have a visitor." Jean poked her head around the bedroom door.

Thank Merlin. A distraction. Just what I need. "Who is it?"

"A very charming young man. Says he's your friend. Tall, dark-skinned, lovely dress sense."

"That'd be Blaise. I wonder what he's doing here." Hermione grinned and headed for the door. "I don't suppose there are any ginger biscuits left?"

"No, but I was just making another batch. They'll be ready in twenty minutes. You take your friend into the sitting room, and I'll bring them through when they're ready."

"Thanks, Mum; you're a gem."

"I can see he's already put colour into your cheeks and a smile on your face, and you haven't even talked to him yet. That's worth a plate of biscuits. Now, shoo! He's waiting."

Blaise leaned against the wall of the hallway, studying the assorted photos of Hermione and her parents displayed along the walls. "Quite the gallery you have here."

Blushing, Hermione took his arm and led him away from the array of cheesy childhood grins and unfortunate hairstyles. "Let's just go and sit down, shall we?"

"Don't tell me you're embarrassed by a few old photos, Granger. After the pictures I've seen?"

"You're supposed to be still guilt-ridden and apologetic about going to see those paintings, Blaise Zabini, not teasing me about it!" She punctuated her words with a few pokes to his undeniably well-muscled chest.

He caught her finger with one hand and brought it to his lips. Brushing a kiss across the tip, he smiled. "The thing is, Granger, I've thought about that a lot, and I've decided I'm not the least sorry about seeing Snape's exhibition. He's very talented, and his use of colour and form exquisite. It was well worth seeing for that alone."

"Really?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I'll admit seeing a certain witch of my acquaintance in glorious dishabille was my nefarious intention. For that, I humbly apologise. Still, I don't regret it. You, my sweet, are perfection." Before she had a chance to protest, he continued, "Alas, I know your heart lies beyond my reach, but a man needs some standard, some hopeless ideal to aim for... and a little visualising in those lonely nights doesn't do any harm." He winked as he stretched out on the soft leather of the sofa: lean, handsome, and shamelessly grinning.

Hermione couldn't contain her amusement at his theatrical confession. "Hopeless. You and Severus both. Absolutely hopeless! You'll both go blind at this rate. That'll teach you to keep your minds on your work. I really need to find you some other girl to exert the Zabini charm over."

"You don't have a sister hidden away upstairs, by any chance?" Blaise looked up as Jean entered the room, preceded by the delicious aroma of freshly-baked biscuits. He stood and took the plate from Jean, capturing her hand with his and bringing it to his lips. "Or perhaps an angel such as this, sent to release me from the despair of your rejection."

Jean's cheeks coloured as she heard her daughter giggle. "Is he always like this, dear?"

Hermione nodded. "Don't take him too seriously, Mum. He's just practising his charm."

"Well, in that case, practise away, young man. I don't get charmed anywhere near often enough nowadays."

"Mother! Don't encourage him!"

After Jean had left, Hermione took possession of the plate, swiping a few biscuits before Blaise had demolished the lot. "So, does your mum cook anything special at Christmas?"

Blaise shook his head. "No. She never goes into the kitchen. We have a cook." He shrugged.

"No house-elves?"

"Plenty. But Mrs Trimble directs them. Mother is usually far too busy to be involved with such mundane matters as cooking."

"Where does she work?"

Puzzlement briefly creased Blaise's brow as he considered her reply. "Work? Why would she work? All her money has come from her first seven husbands. As far as I know, the only vocation she has at the moment is securing number eight." The easy smile had melted from his eyes, leaving them bleak and empty for a few unguarded seconds. With an effort, Blaise reconstructed his carefree mask. "Still, it keeps me in decent clothes, so who am I to complain?"

"Seven? She's been married seven times?"

"Goes through husbands like most women go through dress robes. Sometimes, I wonder if she even remembers which one my father was." Bitterness tinged his words as he studied the biscuit he held.

Reaching out to take his hand, Hermione squeezed gently. "I'm sure she does, Blaise. Do you ever see him?"

"He died before I was born. Mother has a great talent for widowhood, it appears. She always says black is her best colour."

"They all died?" She frowned.

"Don't even think it, Granger. I try not to myself. If I did, I'd never sleep." Suddenly, he was enveloped in a mass of hair and arms. Leaning into her hug for a brief, blissful moment, Blaise closed his eyes and sighed.

Long after Blaise had left, the stark revelations of his home life gnawed at Hermione's conscience. His singular ability to maintain the veneer of the sophisticated, wealthy young wizard without a care in the world beyond the effort of bestowing his charm upon whomever he selected was permanently shattered as she remembered the brief glimpse of vulnerability he had allowed before reverting to his usual smooth and easy manner.

Gazing out at the darkening street outside, Hermione's mind painted pictures of elegant dinners with few words spoken beyond the need to pass the salt and evenings reading alone in magnificent rooms rendered cold by lack of simple human connection.

And despite it all, he's still turned into a decent, caring person. He deserves so much better than I can give him.

A tapping on her window startled Hermione as she sat deep in thought. Opening it to allow the tawny owl entrance, she reached for a treat for the chilled bird before gently unfastening the package from its leg. The familiar handwriting on the attached tag sent all thoughts of Blaise's troubled home life from her head as she read.

Miss Grace Henman

Not to be opened before Christmas Day.

Grinning, she opened her trunk and retrieved the silver-wrapped package she had been dithering about sending. Attaching it to the owl's leg, she opened the window and sent it on its way, watching until the creature disappeared out of sight.

A sudden decision made, Hermione changed into warmer clothes and found her winter coat. As she passed the living room, she popped her head in to let her parents know she would be out for an hour or so.

"Don't be late, dear, dinner will be ready at six. You don't want to miss out on all those vegetables you prepared, do you?"

"I won't. You know I'd never miss your Christmas Eve roast," Hermione replied as she opened the front door.

Ducking around to the side of the house, she turned on the spot and with a soft crack appeared outside the gallery where Snape's exhibition was in its last few hours. Surprised at the number of people still milling around viewing the paintings, she pushed through the entrance doors and was once again immersed in the talent of her lover. This time, however, she was not recognised as the model posing nude for the art works on display and was left to study the canvasses in peace.

Snape felt the cold of the wind reaching under his robes and biting into his skin as he landed just inside the gates of Hogwarts. Slipping through the iron guardians, he focussed his scattered thoughts long enough to Apparate to his destination. Letter clutched in his hand, he entered the gallery, eyes fixed on the man locked in a serious discussion with a well-dressed woman.

"Excuse me, may I borrow this gentleman for a moment." Snape nodded politely as the woman spent a few moments waxing effusive over his work, then turned to Standish.

"Evening, Sidney. Didn't think you could make it tonight. Splendid turn out for the last day, don't you think?"

"Who, William?" Snape ground out, staring at the sold stickers on the two feature paintings.

"Who? Who what?" A frown creased Standish's brow as he tried to decipher Snape's question.

"Who bought the paintings?"

"Oh, that. No idea. Sent an intermediary. All hush-hush it was. Wouldn't reveal names, just came with a nice, fat cheque like I said in the letter. You'll do very nicely out of this exhibition, my boy. We should start planning the next. I can see you becoming the next big thing on the art scene if we play our cards right." Standish rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

"I don't give a flying fuck about the money. Those paintings are not for sale. You need to cancel the deal." Nearby conversations ceased as Snape's voice grew louder.

Standish's cheerful smile dissolved as he guided Snape into a quiet corner of the gallery. "That's not so easily done. The money has changed hands, and the client is expecting delivery tonight, as soon as the exhibition closes. He's arranged a car to pick them up."

"Then phone him and tell him you will refund the money."

"I can't do that; he left no contact number." Standish let out a sigh. "Sidney, we discussed this several times. You knew the paintings were to be sold; that was the whole point of the exhibition. You can't pick and choose what sells and what doesn't. These people," his hand swept around the room, "are not here just to look at your paintings and offer empty praise. They are aficionados of fine art from all over Britain... and France, in her case." He pointed to an elderly woman dressed in Chanel from head to

exquisitely painted toes. "They come to these exhibitions to make investments in artists they believe have a bright future.

"If you want to have those paintings for your own home, you'll have to get your model to sit again so you can repaint them. I'm sure she won't mind, judging by the way she was hanging on your every word last time you were here."

Snape forced a brief smile. "It's not that easy... We... I... Hell, William, I just... It's complicated."

Standish stared at his companion. Slowly, his lips curled into a smile as realisation blossomed. "Dammit, man, you went and fell for her, didn't you?" Shaking his head, he continued. "You can't stand the thought of another man sharing her, even vicariously through oil and canvas. Well, you wouldn't be the first, I suppose.

"Still, it doesn't change anything. The paintings are sold, and there's nothing I can do about it. Business is business, Sidney. As a matter of fact, there are only a few sketches left unaccounted for. Your understanding of the nature of womanhood has intrigued the patrons, and the passion showing through in some of the works has shown them a glimpse of something they rarely experience. Denying them now would be like allowing a room full of women to taste a new type of chocolate, then burning the recipe."

Snape opened his mouth to press his point further, then snapped it closed as he stared into the crowd gathered before the central pair of canvasses.

"Fuck!"

Sold? SOLD! He sold them and didn't bother telling me? Even inside her head, Hermione could hear her voice rise an octave. How could he?

Taking a few deep breaths, she tried to calm down. Don't be stupid. The paintings were intended to be sold. He wouldn't have painted them otherwise.

But he didn't tell me.

How could he forget something so important? Or did he forget?

Is he trying to get rid of any reminders of me and the summer?

Brushing moisture from her eyes, Hermione stumbled, half-blinded with tears of frustration and anger and disappointment, out of the gallery to the soothing cold air of the street outside.

She didn't hear the familiar voice calling after her as she Apparated away.

A/N: This story was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour auction.

Kudos to karelia for the beta.

Merry Christmas to all of you out there. Have a lovely day! xx

Chapter Twenty-Two: Merry Christmas

Chapter 22 of 41

Christmas gift giving, and look who's come to the The New Year's Eve party.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. I promise I'll send them back all clean and shiny when I'm done.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Merry Christmas

Turning the tiny square package over and over in her fingers, Hermione examined the silver wrapping which gave no clue to the contents.

I knew the paintings were to be sold. We both knew. Why do I feel so...

Let down?

As if he had any control anyway. Standish was dealing with the business side of the exhibition.

Does he even know?

He'd hate it. I know he would.

I hope he would.

Would he?

Thoughts twisted into knots, Hermione sighed and succumbed to her curiosity. Carefully removing the paper, she found a small, flat box covered with black velvet. Inside was a chain of finest silver links bearing three charms.

Runes.

Runes? Oh, Merlin. I learned these back in fifth year. He must know that.

Dagaz: Breakthrough, awakening, hope, happiness, growth.

Laguz: The healing power of renewal, dreams, fantasies.

Berkano: Renewal again, liberation, new beginnings, desire, love, birth.

Dare I believe this is a message and not just a pretty trinket?

Bringing the silver charms to her lips, Hermione bestowed a kiss on each before lifting the chain to her neck. Its length was sufficient for the charms to lie discreetly between her breasts, avoiding uncomfortable questions. With a smile, she headed down the stairs to join her parents for their ritual present opening around the Christmas tree.

"Hermione! About time you got here!" The loud clattering on the stairs of the Burrow heralded the onslaught of warm hugs and excited greetings. "We've waited all day to open your presents!"

"Oh, Ron, you didn't have to wait until I arrived. You could have opened them this morning."

Ron grinned. "Mum wouldn't let us, but we had a good feel and shake." Holding up a somewhat battered parcel, he dragged her through to the sitting room where a tree bravely holding up an assortment of Muggle and wizarding ornaments stood beside the hearth. "Come on, I can't wait 'til you see what I found for you."

"Are you eighteen or three, Ron Weasley?" Hermione shook her head at her redheaded best friend.

"Two, I think, 'Mione. He's been up since six this morning." Harry followed them into the room and flopped onto the sofa.

"Six? That's late for my big brother." Ginny smirked as she curled into Harry's side.

"Oi! You three have to be nice to me. It's Christmas." Ron handed his friends gifts wrapped in Chudley Cannons orange. "C'mon, open."

Harry met Hermione's eyes and grinned. "Together... go!"

Paper flew everywhere as they tore open their gifts. As one, the pair held up bright orange, Snitch-patterned nightwear. Hermione could not contain herself at the sight of Harry holding the shiny boxer shorts to his lap. "Oh, gods, Harry. You'll look so hot all the girls will be after you. You'd better lock him up, Gin."

"He might like that." Ginny smiled at Harry's blush as her finger trailed over the front placket of the boxers.

"Stop that, woman! Your mother's in the next room." Harry stuffed the offending garment into his pocket and turned to Hermione. "Let's have another look at yours."

She held up the flimsy, satin night shift.

"Very sexy. I'm sure your mystery man will appreciate the... um... coverage."

"I'm not sure it will cover anything; it's so short." Hermione pictured herself appearing in front of the Potions master in the skimpy orange creation she now possessed and giggled. "He'll love it."

"'Mione! I didn't buy that as a sex aid! I thought it would be cool in the summer."

"It's okay, Ron. I'm pretty sure she won't be wearing anything much over summer, will you?" Ginny winked.

"That's it, I'm opening mine now. You lot are obsessed with sex." Ron picked up his present from Hermione and shook it once more. "I'm pretty sure... Yes! The Keeper's gloves I wanted. You're brilliant, 'Mione!" Wrapping his long arms around her, he squeezed tight, then leaned back, eyes caught on the silver chain around her neck. "That's new."

Hermione's fingers fluttered over the chain. "One of my Christmas presents. It's a lovely, fine chain."

Ron's interest had already drifted to Harry, who was opening his own present.

"Wow, thanks, 'Mione!" Harry examined the sleek design of the wand holster he had unwrapped. "Just what I needed. It's very stylish."

"Well, I would have bought you a cane, but that's been a little overdone, don't you think?" It took a few moments to compose themselves enough to watch Ginny opening her gift of a quirky lacquered jewellery box, complete with twirling ballerina and tinkling melody.

Setting the box aside with a fond caress, Ginny handed over her parcel to Hermione. "It's not much, but I think you'll like it."

The set of handkerchiefs painstakingly embroidered with her initials brought moisture to Hermione's eyes. "They're beautiful. Thanks." The girls hugged as Harry fished in his pocket for his contribution to the party.

"Here's mine." His lips twisted as he shrugged. "Hope it's useful."

Hermione's gaze flicked up to catch the amusement in Harry's eyes as she opened the paper to find an elegant, gold-plated Muggle fountain pen set, complete with cartridges of ink in several colours.

"You've always got ink on your fingers. Sometimes, Muggles do it better." He grinned. "Besides, it'll save you forever searching in your bag for a quill you haven't worn out."

Molly's call for dinner saved Harry from the cushion about to be launched in his direction.

Just as Molly was serving the first course, a loud knock silenced the hum of conversation around the table.

"I'll get it," called Ginny as she ran to the door.

Hermione's heart sank as she saw the tall, dark wizard sweeping in the door.

"Am I too late for dinner?" Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice boomed as he grabbed Molly in an all-encompassing hug.

"Of course not, but if you don't put me down, no-one will get fed." Molly's squeak finally penetrated Kingsley's good cheer, and he set her gently down to resume serving.

Finding a space between Hermione and Arthur, Kingsley beamed as he pulled out the chair. "And how's my favourite bookworm?" he asked, wrapping an arm around Hermione's shoulder and kissing her cheek.

Across the table, triumph glowed in Ginny's eyes as she winked at a furiously blushing Hermione. Managing a smile, Hermione patted the hand on her shoulder. "So,

what's put you in such a good mood, Minister Shackbolt?"

He shook his head. "I'm not Minister Anything in this house, young lady. And surely a day or two's escape from the demands of politics, Molly's fine food, and the company of one's dearest friends is enough for anyone to be happy?"

"Well said, Kingsley. Shall we have a toast? To good friends, present and absent!" Arthur lifted his glass and stood, followed by the rest of the table. A moment's silence allowed everyone to spare a thought for those who would never share the bounty of Molly's cooking again, and if a few tears found their way into the glasses, no-one passed any comment.

Three soul-warming courses later, Kingsley patted his mouth clean with a napkin and sighed. "Magnificent, as always, Molly. Arthur's a lucky, lucky man. Which reminds me, Hermione, may I speak to you for a moment in the library sometime this evening?"

Ginny's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets as Hermione nodded agreement.

"So, what do you think he wants?" Ginny whispered as soon as she could get Hermione alone.

"I have no idea."

"You don't think he's going to... propose?"

Hermione cut off her friend's squeal with a quick *Muffliato*. "Ginny! You don't have any idea what you're talking about, so stop making assumptions! Kingsley Shackbolt, the *Minister of Magic* is not my... my... anything!"

Clearly unconvinced, Ginny smirked. "Sure. If you say so."

"I do." *If I wasn't so bloody principled, I'd let her think she was correct to take the heat off Severus. Damn my pride. Still, I'd better go and find out what he wants.*

Hermione waited patiently for Kingsley to finish his conversation with Arthur Weasley before touching his arm to indicate she was ready for him. Following him into the library, she closed the door behind them both and turned to him with a puzzled frown. "What was it you needed me for, Kingsley?"

He smiled and gestured to the armchairs before the fire. "No need to look so worried, my dear. I merely wanted to enquire as to your plans for next summer."

Hermione shrugged. "I hadn't really thought about it. I was going to look into my options after school starts back next term." She lowered her eyes. "There are some things I need to sort out before I make any final decisions, anyway."

"Well, I'd like you to consider coming to work as my assistant, at least for a year or two, Hermione. I've seen and heard about your considerable organisational and research skills, and you're just the person I need to get this bloody office of mine sorted out. The previous incumbents were less than scrupulous in their record-keeping, if you know what I mean. After everything is straightened out, if you didn't want to stay on, you could move on to whatever field you choose with an excellent reference for your trouble."

Kingsley could see the shadow of doubt in Hermione's wide, brown eyes. "I know you think you're too young for such a responsibility, but I'm sure it is well within your capacity, and to be quite honest, I really need someone I can trust absolutely to do the job with no hidden agendas. I know you, Hermione Granger, and I know you are just such a person."

Hermione nodded, too overwhelmed with the wizard's faith in her integrity to speak.

"Just think about it, all right? I'll box on for the next six months and keep my fingers crossed."

Finding her voice, Hermione replied. "Wow. I'm... just... wow. I'm honoured you want me for the job, and I'll certainly keep it in mind. Thank you, Kingsley."

"You're welcome. Let me know later on when you've decided. Now, I must go and talk to young Harry. Merry Christmas!"

Hermione leaned back in her chair once she was alone and pondered Kingsley's offer.

Wow. That's amazing. I could learn so much about how wizarding government works and maybe have a chance to influence things. And I don't even have to commit to a long-term position if I don't want to. I could move on to anything else I wanted with that on my resume.

Wow.

But what about Severus?

What if...?

Don't be daft. Even if everything works out with him... Gods, I hope it does... I can Floo to the Ministry from anywhere. It won't make any difference.

I'll definitely think about it.

Snappe slammed the door to his private quarters shut with a satisfying crash of wood on stone. So satisfying, he opened it and repeated the process. Removing his robes and hanging them on the coat rack, he reached for the wine he had abandoned earlier and slumped into his fireside armchair.

Idiots, the lot of them, with their foolish presents and garish decorations and overrich food. Are they all trying to eat themselves into an early grave? Four types of roast poultry, ham cooked in two ways, roast beef and pork, and grease-slathered vegetables. And none of them green, except the boiled-to-death brussels sprouts. Followed by plum pudding, brandy butter, mince pies and Christmas cake.

Gods, I feel sick.

If I never hear Silent Bloody Night again, I'll be a happy man. If they had taken their own advice and ceased their infernal blathering at the dinner table...

Draining the glass, he set it back on the side table and contemplated the pile of items he had left that morning.

Old Ogden's from Minerva. Unoriginal, but acceptable. Strawberry-filled chocolates from Pomona. Does she really think I have such a sweet tooth? More parchment from Filius. Useful, I suppose.

What is this thing from Rolanda? Looks suspiciously like some sort of sex aide. Well, I'm not fucking asking her what it's for.

Damn, I suppose I'd better see what she gave me. I've put it off all day. I'm surprised she sent anything after the way she reacted last night. Probably had sent it already.

I imagine she regrets it now.

Still, I might as well know what she thought of me before she found out I'd sold her to the highest bidder.

Mmm, these are top quality brushes. Hog and sable, excellent balance, fine hardwood handle, and a complete set of sizes. Outstanding, Miss Granger. What is this they're wrapped in?

Silk sleep pants.

Black.

No top.

Fuck.

Snape groaned and adjusted his trousers, his body once again reminding him of the unforgettable night of passion he had shared with his student.

An hour later, having tried reading Potions journals, the latest Board of Governors' meeting minutes, and even a Muggle novel, Snape stood and awkwardly made his way to his bedroom. Stripping naked, he glared down at his unrepentant erection and stomped into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Once.

"Severus, I insist."

"What part of 'No, I'd rather run barefoot through the snow dressed as Cupid, singing Christmas carols' do you not understand, Minerva?"

"Nevertheless, you will accompany me to the Burrow on New Year's Eve, you will behave with civility, and you *will* try to enjoy yourself. And you will *not* suddenly find an excuse to leave before midnight. Is *that* understood, Professor?" Minerva's expression brooked no argument. "You've done nothing but stalk around the corridors for the last twelve days, frightening the wee ones and upsetting your colleagues. I warned you, Severus, and I'll not be taking no for an answer."

Snape's shoulders slumped. A shrill Minerva McGonagall was a force to be reckoned with. Not to mention her hints earlier in the day that the Hogsmeade roster for the year had not yet been finalised.

"Very well, Minerva, as you cannot seem to manage without me, I shall endure the inanity of a Weasley New Year's Eve party. Just don't blame me if my presence creates disharmony."

"Oh, grow up, Severus. Everyone will be too busy enjoying themselves to bother with your surly attitude." She lifted her hand and patted his cheek. "Besides, you'll be a good lad and smile occasionally, won't you?"

Snape's glare followed her long after she had disappeared from his office.

Another knock sent Ginny scurrying to the front door to let in the latest arrivals. Already, the Burrow was buzzing with a heady cocktail of seasonal bonhomie and increasingly loud voices lubricated by a good serving of punch made to the Weasley twins' special recipe. Fred would have been proud.

Opening the door, the youngest Weasley was met with the somewhat unexpected sight of Blaise Zabini casually clad in a pair of jeans, a jumper, and what looked like a Muggle cashmere scarf.

A turquoise scarf.

"Well, are you going to let me in, or are you planning to let me freeze out here while you decide?" Blaise's eyes twinkled as Ginny blushed.

"Er... sorry. I just didn't..."

"Think I'd come?" The twinkle began to threaten Dumbledore's reputation.

"Idiot! I knew you were coming. Hermione said so. It's just... the scarf... it's so..."

"Loud?"

"I would have said... vivid." She smiled weakly. "Where on earth did you get it?"

"It was Hermione's Christmas present. I *think* she still likes me..."

"Oh, there you are, Blaise. I was beginning to think you weren't coming. And you wore the scarf!" Hermione threw her arms around him and grinned. "It looks fabulous. The lovely man in the shop told me turquoise was just the thing this season for men of your skin and hair colouring... What? Ginny? Why are you laughing? It looks great on him."

Ginny, calming herself after discovering the sharp point of Blaise's elbow, patted her friend's hand. "Hermione, my love, Exactly where did you buy that scarf?"

"At a shop in Covent Garden. *His & Hers* I think it was called. Why?"

Blatantly eavesdropping, Draco held back a snort. "You'd better get your eyes checked, Granger. It's called *His & His*. I shop there all the time. Wizarding fashion is so passé." His eyes swept over Blaise's garment and nodded. "Not my colour, but it does have a certain *je ne sais quoi*. You should keep it, Zabini. Never know, you might get lucky." He winked and turned back to deliver another glass of punch to Neville.

The contents of Luna's glass were in danger as she waved the hand holding it in a flourish. "Well, I think it's wonderful, Blaise. You'll never get infested with Wrackspurts wearing that colour."

"There. With two such ringing endorsements, obviously this scarf is perfect. Shall we?" Blaise offered an arm each to Luna and Hermione and joined the festivities.

Blaise was at Hermione's side when the front door opened again to admit Minerva McGonagall and a scowling Severus Snape.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in. Better put your game face on, Granger. You'll need it."

"What?" She turned, unable to suppress her reaction as her eyes met Snape's over the crowded room. *Dammit, I'm supposed to be angry with him. I shouldn't be smiling like a simpering twit. He's in my bad books. Besides, if I look too pleased to see him, certain people will get entirely the wrong idea.*

Or the right one.

Luckily, Ginny was otherwise engaged, regaling Neville and Draco with tales of Ron's odd taste in Christmas gifts.

"Fuck. Since when has he attended parties at the Burrow?"

"No idea, my lovely, but he's heading this way. I suggest you try not to undress him with your eyes in front of a room full of people. They might suspect you are having inappropriate fantasies about your professor."

Hermione managed not to spit her mouthful of drink on the new scarf. But not by much. "Blaise! If anyone is thinking about my fantasies involving a certain professor, it'll be..."

"Me, I hope." Snape's murmur in her ear as he brushed past en route to the unoccupied chair in the corner of the room was barely audible.

"Oh, stop smirking, you prat!" Hermione swatted Blaise's chest as she turned to watch the black-robed body she craved appear to blend itself into the background.

Hermione glanced around a few hours later when a voice called out, "Ten... nine... eight..." To her dismay, everyone had already paired up in anticipation of the arrival of 1999. Ginny and Harry were snuggled up in one armchair by the fire, Molly and Arthur were holding hands in the kitchen, Minerva McGonagall had a blushing George Weasley in tow, and Ron had found a long-legged blonde she had never seen before. Even Blaise, the traitor, had sheepishly ducked off to join Luna as she counted down with the rest. The only solitary person besides herself was the wizard in the corner, watching the clock with a scowl.

Dare I? In front of everyone? Oh, who am I fooling; they're not interested in a quick New Year's kiss. Everyone will be doing it.

"Six... five..."

"Looks like it's you and me, *Professor*."

"I don't think..."

"Three... two..."

"One. Happy New Year, Severus." Hermione kept her voice low as her lips met his under the cover of cheers and whistles. She had intended to keep the kiss light and brief.

Intentions were fine things.

With a groan, Snape lifted his hands to entangle them in her hair and flicked his tongue across the crease of her lips. Without a thought to the possible audience, Hermione whimpered and opened to him, allowing his tongue entrance and his body to press ever closer to hers. Waves of desire surged through her body as the heat of his arousal ground against her aching centre in a brief moment of madness. Suddenly, he pulled away, spun on his heel, and had disappeared before the front door had swung closed.

Hermione opened her eyes to find the entire room in stunned silence, staring at her. The seconds ticked by and still no-one had spoken. She glanced around at the faces of her friends and loved ones and answered the questions in their eyes with one of her own.

"What?"

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction and betaed by the incomparable Karelia.

The runes used are from the Elder Futhark alphabet. I used this website for the meanings: <http://www.sunnyway.com/runes/meanings.html>

Dagaz (D: Day or dawn.) Breakthrough, awakening, awareness. Daylight clarity as opposed to night-time uncertainty. A time to plan or embark upon an enterprise. The power of change directed by your own will, transformation. Hope/happiness, the ideal. Security and certainty. Growth and release. Balance point, the place where opposites meet.

Laguz (L: Water, or a leak.) Flow, water, sea, a fertility source, the healing power of renewal. Life energy and organic growth. Imagination and psychic matters. Dreams, fantasies, mysteries, the unknown, the hidden, the deep, the underworld. Success in travel or acquisition, but with the possibility of loss.

Berkano (B: Berchta, the birch-goddess.) Birth, general fertility, both mental and physical and personal growth, liberation. Regenerative power and light of spring, renewal, promise of new beginnings, new growth. Arousal of desire. A love affair or new birth. The prospering of an enterprise or venture.

Chapter Twenty-three: The Best Lies are Based on the Truth

Chapter 23 of 41

Hermione tells the truth... almost.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings in this story belong to JKR. I'm just teasing them a little.

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Best Lies are Based on the Truth

Fuck! Bugger! Damnation! What have I done?

What was I thinking?

What was she thinking?

Merlin's bollocks! There was no thinking involved. Only hot, full lips, hands everywhere, all those curves squirming against my...

Shite!

They didn't see that.

Tell me they didn't see that!

And I left her there to face them.

Alone.

Fuck.

"What?" *That's right, glare them into silence while you think up something to explain why you were snogging and groping the bloody Potions professor.*

Shite, never did work on the boys.

"Hermione, you were snogging Professor Snape." Harry's expression could only be described as bewildered.

"Yeah, 'Mione, what was that all about? He had his hands all over you, the creep."

Attack is the best form of defence. Didn't someone say that once? "Oh, for Merlin's sake. Considering you lot all paired up and abandoned me, what did you expect? I wasn't about to sit around like some leftover."

"But, 'Mione..."

Hermione raised her chin and glared at Ron. "It's New Year, Ronald. I can kiss whomever I choose. Besides, he may be a greasy git," she laid her hand to her forehead in a mock swoon and fluttered her eyelashes, "but he's one hell of a kisser. The man has a gift. Who knew?" With that, she flounced off upstairs, hoping the subject was closed.

As everyone left in search of another drink or more food, Ginny's brain tossed around all she had seen and heard in the previous few minutes. Snape had not moved fast enough for her to have missed the decided bulge in his trousers or the proximity of her friend's hand to said bulge just before he had done his disappearing act, and Blaise had looked far too smug as Hermione had left the room. Two and two, which had previously added up to a dubious four, now appeared unerringly bound for an impossible seven. Eyes widening, her lips slowly formed a perfect O as she remembered exactly what Hermione's secret paramour had written in the letter she had read. *Nimue's knickers!*

"Ginny? Are you okay?" Harry twisted in the chair to face her. "You look ill."

Ginny swallowed. "No, I just realised...er... we were all a bit mean leaving Hermione alone like that, weren't we?"

"She'll be fine. Can't have been too traumatic. Didn't look like she was going to let him go for a minute there. I was sure I'd seen her hand..." He shuddered. "Ew. The dungeon bat can kiss. Where did he get the practice?"

Ginny gave him a half-hearted slap on the arm. "Just forget it, Harry. You'll have nightmares if you think about Snape's previous snogging history for too much longer."

"But, Gin. What will her boyfriend say? She shouldn't be snogging other blokes when she already has a man."

Ginny shook her head. "If he was here, wouldn't she have been with him? Exactly. So he won't know, and as no-one knows who he is, no-one can tell him."

"But someone might mention it in passing and..."

"Harry."

"...it could be..."

"Harry!"

"What?"

"Shut up and kiss me again before my mother remembers to check up on us."

Harry had completely forgotten his concerns about Hermione by the time Molly and Arthur had returned to the room some time later.

A soft tapping on the window woke Hermione just as she had finally drifted off to sleep after several hours of tossing and turning. Letting the owl into the room, she retrieved the letter it carried and allowed it to perch on her headboard while it demolished an owl treat.

H

I have not had the headmistress pounding on my door seeking to castrate me yet, so I assume you managed to offer a suitable explanation for my appalling behaviour.

Not that I regret the kiss for one moment. Just the audience.

And leaving you to face the inquisition.

For that, I beg your forgiveness.

S

Hermione quickly scribbled a note and gave it to the patient owl, tumbling back into bed and into sleep as soon as she had closed the window against the chill night air.

S

I blamed them for leaving me with only you to choose for a New Year's kiss. I may have given them the impression you were a fantastic kisser, so if you get any funny looks, you'll know why.

If we stick with the same story, I think it'll blow over.

Besides, Professor McGonagall had George in a clinch at the time. No idea what that was all about, but she'll hardly have any reason to question our behaviour.

I look forward to seeing you in a few days back at school.

We need to talk.

Properly.

H.

Snape threw the parchment into the fire, watching it burn as he loosened his robes and shrugged them off shoulders still knotted with tension. Lying down on his bed still dressed, he relived the kiss many times over before he too drifted into slumber.

"Hey, Curly!" George slapped Hermione on the back as she sat beside him at breakfast the next morning. "Looks like we both survived smooching with the professors. Although I think you deserve more points for yours." He chuckled as he helped himself to scrambled eggs.

"Er... thanks. I think." Hermione managed a weak smile, then frowned. "What were you up to with Professor McGonagall, anyway?"

"That's the good news. She was asking me to fill in as Flying Instructor while Hooch is away on leave next term. I'd just agreed when it struck midnight, and, well, I had to be the gentleman. If I'd have known you were stuck with Snape, I'd have pointed her in his direction and snaffled you myself." He grinned. "Don't suppose you want to make up for it now?" His lips puckered, and he closed his eyes.

Hermione giggled. Putting a finger to her lips to hush the others, she lifted a warm breakfast sausage and placed it lengthwise against George's mouth.

"Mmm, Curly, always knew you'd be tasty." With that, George bit the end off the sausage and winked. "Oh, well, better luck next year."

"George! Stop harassing the poor girl. I'm sure kissing Severus last night was quite difficult enough without you tormenting her about it." Molly shook her head and patted Hermione's shoulder as she passed by with the bacon.

A fierce need to defend the man she loved bypassed all Hermione's self-preservation instincts. "I told you. The man can kiss like a... anyway, I enjoyed it. Maybe I'll make sure I find him next New Year!" Even her ears were red as she fixed her eyes on her plate and finished her breakfast without any further mention of New Year or kissing.

After the dishes had been set to washing themselves, Hermione attempted to hide out in the library away from the curious glances of her friends. Her parents were due for lunch in a few hours, so there was no excuse to go home until later that afternoon. Finding an interesting looking book on Ancient Runes, she settled in for a good read.

"I knew I'd find you here."

"Oh, Gin. Hi. I thought you were off with Harry somewhere."

"Fat chance with Mum watching our every move. Besides, I wanted to talk to you." Flicking her wand at the door, Ginny locked and silenced the room.

Hermione felt the moisture evaporate from her mouth. "What about?"

"You and Snape."

"I told you. He was the only person left unattached."

"Bollocks. That doesn't explain the length of time you kissed, or the fact he was obviously aroused, or your hand on his bum. And I happen to know you have a mysterious boyfriend whose name starts with S and who can access the Hogwarts' owls. Explain that, Miss Innocent."

"I... I... Dammit, Ginny!" Hermione had her wand out before Ginny had noticed her hand moving.

"Hey, there's no need to..."

"Don't be daft, Gin. I'm not going to hex you. Wand Oath. Now. You will not repeat anything I am about to tell you. To anyone. *Especially* Harry."

"All right, if you're that worried. I wasn't about to tell him anyway. I already covered for you last night when he asked too many questions." Ginny raised her wand and swore the Oath. "There. Happy? Now, spill!"

Hermione sighed. "Do you remember that job I had over summer? Well..." Editing out a lot of the details, especially those concerning exactly what Snape was painting, she told Ginny how she had fallen in love with the dour Potions professor.

The redhead's eyes widened further and further with each revelation. "I can't believe Blaise knew all along and never said anything."

"He's been amazing, Gin. So supportive. Despite how he feels about me. I just hope he can find someone else."

"Oh, I think things are looking up in that department. He spent a long time talking with Luna last night after you went to bed. Mum just about had to throw them out to get them to go home."

"Really?"

"Yes. He seemed quite taken with her."

Hermione grinned. "Brilliant. He deserves someone special like Luna."

"She's definitely unique." Ginny giggled and then fell silent.

Hermione watched her friend's forehead wrinkle as she opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, shaking her head. "What?"

"Nothing."

"As you said before, bollocks. What were you going to say?"

Ginny lowered her eyes, studying her fidgeting hands. "It's... How do you know he's not just using you?"

"Severus?"

"Yes. I mean, he's never been nice to any of us in the past."

"Besides saving our lives numerous times and risking his own in the process?" Hermione raised an eyebrow.

Ginny had the grace to blush and hold her hands up in defeat. "I know, I know. I didn't say he wasn't a good man, just that he's never been a nice man. I'm worried he'll hurt you... no, not physically, I think he's too honourable for that. I meant emotionally. He seems so cold and withdrawn."

"I know he's always appeared that way, Gin, but he's just very reserved and doesn't trust easily. Underneath it all he's quite insecure and vulnerable. I was lucky enough to see the real Severus Snape while he thought of me as a Muggle. He didn't see me as a threat, you see. That only happened when he found out who I was. Since then, he's bloody blown hot and cold, one minute stealing my breath away with kisses, and the next avoiding me like the plague."

"I would have thought he'd be all too pleased to have a willing witch in his arms. It's not like he gets that many offers."

Hermione sighed. "He's worried about my reputation and education and losing his job. He's right, of course. It's just so hard. The end of the year is ages away, and I'm terrified he'll convince himself our relationship is a bad idea before then."

Ginny wrapped her arms around her friend. "I know it's difficult, but you'll really need to stay away from him for a while at least after that kiss last night. If you're seen with him anywhere other than the classroom... well, people aren't daft."

Sniffing, Hermione nodded. "I need to talk to him about something when we get back, then I'll do my best. I don't want him to lose his job over me."

"Besides, I'm sure you'll find something else to do... a little study perhaps?"

"I know what I'd rather study."

"Hermione!"

"Hey, Hermione!"

"Yes, Dennis?"

"Did you really..."

"Yes, Dennis. I kissed Professor Snape at New Year."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Didn't he try to bite you?"

"No, Demelza. He didn't try to bite me, hex me, or take off points. He's not a vampire, as anyone who has seen him supervising Hogsmeade weekends could deduce, and he wasn't angry. Anything else you need to know before I'm allowed to eat my dinner?"

"No. I'm good."

"Hermione?"

Oh, for fuck's sake! Can't they leave me alone? "I told you, Lavender, we were the only two left, and he's not *that* bad."

"No. It's not that. It's just... he's staring at you."

"What?"

"He's staring right at you. It's kind of creepy."

Hermione looked up to find the Potions professor's eyes fixed on her face. *And that's not helping the rumours, you pillock. I'll fix you.* "Oh, don't worry, Lav, he's probably trying to work out whether to give me detention or try to get me alone for a quick shag on his desk." *Hopefully, the latter.*

Ron's mouthful managed to reach the front of Neville's shirt across the table. "'Mione! Do you mind? We're eating here!"

"What's the matter, Ron? You've been quite happy to speculate on my sex life recently. Why can't I make equally ridiculous suggestions about Professor Snape?"

"It's just not right, is all."

"Typical. You boys and your double standards." Hermione suppressed a smirk as she swivelled in her seat, lifted her hand to her mouth, and blew a kiss at the still-glaring professor. As he flushed deep red and dropped his gaze, a snort from further down the table drew everyone's attention.

"Look at that. I think you're onto something, Hermione. Maybe you could control him in the classroom by blowing kisses at him whenever he starts looming." Harry grinned as she threw half a bread roll at him.

"You're all a bunch of idiots. For the last time. It was New Year. I kissed Professor Snape. End of story."

"You forgot the bit about him being one hell of a kisser," Ron pointed out in an effort to be helpful.

"Really?" This time from Lavender.

"Gods, yes." In the ensuing silence, Hermione managed to eat her dinner, ignoring both her housemates and the staff table for the rest of the meal.

"Miss Granger, a word after class, please."

A few titters drew his gaze as he continued his progress around the room, silenced by the glare sent the perpetrators's way.

Blaise's comforting hand on Hermione's shoulder was stilled with a hissed, "Alone, Mr Zabini," as Snape passed behind their bench.

"Looks like you're on your own, Granger."

"I'm not afraid of him," she replied.

Blaise chuckled as he sliced his fluxweed. "I think he's the one who should be wary. You're likely to pin him to the desk and have your wicked way with the poor bloke as soon as the room is empty."

"In your dreams, Zabini... or perhaps mine."

"His probably, the way he's walking."

"Blaise!" Liquid heat shot to her centre as she watched Snape's stiff gait. "I'm trying to concentrate here!"

"Better add the fluxweed now then."

"Shite!" Dragging her eyes back to her cauldron, Hermione managed to shut out all her libidinous fantasies long enough to complete her potion.

As the class filed out, Snape sought refuge behind his desk. It wouldn't do for any of his students to notice the significant tent in his robes he had been painfully aware of since the moment Hermione Granger had entered the room.

"You wanted me, Professor?"

In every way you can imagine. And several you can't. "I believe you wanted to speak with me." He leaned back in his chair and watched her fidget with her robes.

"I do. I'd just hoped it would be in the privacy of your quarters." *Or your bedroom... or bath... or anywhere we can both be naked would do.*

He flicked his wand, locking and casting a Silencing Charm on the door. "This will suffice." *To stop me taking you right here and now, hopefully.* He smirked at her pout while imagining those full lips employed elsewhere. "Now, you had something to say?"

Hermione took a moment to run her eyes down his all-too-familiar frame, oblivious to the effect her pink tongue moistening her lips was having on his self-control. Suddenly overheated, she shucked her robes off onto the desk behind her. "We need to talk, Severus." Her use of his first name deliberate, she moved closer to the barrier between them. "We... I... can't continue like this. The other night..."

"We nearly gave ourselves away. It was only your quick thinking that prevented a major uproar." The corner of his mouth lifted in a tiny smile as a glint appeared in his eyes. "One hell of a kisser?"

"I know. A bit over the top, but it stopped any further questions. Besides, you are."

"I am what?"

"One hell of a kisser."

This time, the smile lit up his face from within.

"So, what now?" *Apart from mind-blowing sex on this desk?*

Snape shifted in his chair, a pained expression appearing on his face. "Hermione, I can practically hear what you're thinking. It's not helping."

"If you're that clever, why aren't you naked and ready for me?" Hermione's nipples pebbled into tight peaks against the thin fabric of her school blouse. She felt, rather than saw, his heated gaze lower to fix on her breasts.

With a groan, Snape stood and swept his robes aside. "See what you do to me, witch. How can you expect me to concentrate on teaching when I can barely walk?" Deliberately running his hand over the aching erection barely confined in his trousers, Snape moved around the desk.

Hermione's eyes could not leave his groin as his hand continued to slide up and down of its own accord. "Why deny us then? Do you realise how wet I am right now, just from watching you do that?" She stepped forward and closed her hand over his.

And as mouths moved close enough for breath to mingle, hardened nipples brushed against layers of wool, and a rigid cock pressed against a welcome captor, the dam of their restraint finally burst.

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Chapter Twenty-four: So Much for Self-control.

Chapter 24 of 41

Temptation gets the better of Hermione and Severus... briefly.

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Chapter Twenty-four: So Much for Self-control

Somewhere, deep in Snape's mind and almost buried in a miasma of passion and desire, a little something nagged at his conscience. Something important he really should remember.

Not as important as the hand stroking him through his trousers, however.

Lifting her onto the nearest desk allowed him to blaze a trail of heat up the outside of her thighs, skimming around the crest of her hipbones to continue back down to the

delicate skin behind her knees. Opening to him, she tilted her pelvis to try and encourage his fingers closer... closer...

A cry of frustration as his hands left her skin mewled into a pleased whimper as, even through wool and cotton, exquisite friction began a relentless spiral of sensation, Obliviating any remaining conscious thought.

Snape's tongue finally tasted the honey of her mouth, lapping up her murmuring pleasure as the rhythm of his movements increased its pace.

Bottom firmly braced against the hard wood beneath her, hands clutching at the uncompromising layers of fabric hindering her goal of bare skin to bare skin, Hermione heard herself groan as Snape's trapped hardness slid along the damp cotton of the underwear exposed by his equally desperate efforts. The sound of the stoic Potions professor's gasp at the intimate contact served only to encourage Hermione's attempts until she managed to part the offending robes and push them to the floor. Finding his upper body clad only in a fine white shirt, which had already become partially untucked, she slipped her hands beneath the fabric to find delicious, heated skin.

Snape had likewise succeeded in dispensing with the buttons of her blouse and the flimsy front closure of her bra, baring her to his gaze. He smiled as he found the silver chain and charms nestled between her breasts. As he lowered his mouth to taste victory in the form of a peaked, rosy nipple, his thrusts intensified further.

"Wait, I need to..." Hermione fumbled with his belt. *Dammit, Severus, why can't you use a normal buckle instead of this archaic contraption?*

"No... can't stop." Breathing ragged, he batted away her hands and slipped a finger under the edge of her knickers to find the swollen, slick flesh beneath.

"Oh, gods, Severus. Yess!" Her lips found his again, and her tongue mimicked the action of their lower bodies as his skilled fingers worked in tandem with his relentless thrusting, encouraged by hands which had infiltrated under his waistband to cup lean buttocks.

"Come for me, Grace! I'm... I can't..."

Hermione closed her eyes as her body, denied his touch for so long, exploded into a vortex of sensation centred on the juncture of her thighs where the warmth and moistness of his throbbing release was echoed in his breathless cry of completion.

Several oxygen-restoring minutes later, Hermione reluctantly extracted her hands from his trousers. "So much for talking."

"Talk is overrated." Snape quirked a smile as he reached for his wand to remove the sticky mess in his underwear.

"No. Don't." Hermione stilled his hand. "I rather like the idea of you walking around the rest of the day like that. It'll stop you denying this ever happened."

"Merlin, Granger, you're a kinky wench. Just as well these survived your ministrations." He retrieved his robes from the floor and proceeded to cover the evidence. "You realise this is going to be damp and uncomfortable."

She grinned. "Serves you right. I tried to unbutton you." Her smile faded as she heard the dull murmur of children's voices on the other side of the door. "Fuck! I thought you used a Silencing Charm."

Snape groaned and met her eyes. "One-way Charm. My own refinement. Means I can still hear what's going on. That'll be the first year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws."

"I have to get to Arithmancy, but this conversation is *not* over, Severus Snape!" Hermione straightened her robes and headed across the room. "You ready?" At his nod, she unlocked and opened the door.

"... and in future, Miss Granger, you will refrain from such vulgar public displays and remember your place as a senior student at this school. Your detention is at seven o'clock this evening. With Mr Filch."

Bastard. "Yes, sir." Hermione lowered her head as she passed the goggle-eyed first years. Only after she had passed out of their view did she succumb to the giggles she had been straining to silence. *Vulgar public displays? Who's he to talk?*

Hermione tugged at her robes for the final time and cast a quick Cooling Charm on her face before opening the door to the Arithmancy classroom. Surprised at Professor Vector's simple nod as she entered, she slid into her seat beside Blaise and quietly pulled out her textbook, parchment, and quill. As she settled into reading the numbers shimmering on the blackboard and deciding the calculations needed to resolve the equation, the professor stopped at her desk.

"Are you all right, Miss Granger? You look a little flushed." The older woman's concern creased her brow.

"I'm fine, thank you, Professor."

"I know Professor Snape can be a little... difficult at times. You mustn't take it personally, dear."

Hermione nodded. "I know. But it was my own fault. I should have shown more decorum. Thanks for your support though."

"Very well. Carry on then." Vector continued her rounds of the classroom, stopping every so often to answer a question or ask one of her own.

Hermione glanced at Blaise. "Thanks for covering for me."

"I knew you'd be late. Didn't realise your little chat would take quite so long. Just what were you two doing down there?"

"You don't want to know, Blaise. Trust me." Hermione grinned. "But the ungrateful bastard gave me detention with Mr Filch tonight. Bloody prat."

"Ungrateful?"

"Not telling." She reached over and pointed to his parchment. "That should be a three back there, by the way."

"Oh, bollocks. I'll have to start again." Blaise grimaced at his calculations. "It was the thought of you and Snape naked. Put me off."

Hermione giggled. "Idiot. You have a filthy mind. No-one was naked." *Slightly exposed, maybe, but he doesn't need to know that.*

"You're no fun, Granger. How will I cope if you won't provide me with fantasy material? A man's got to have some joy in life, you know."

Restraining a snort at the perfectly straight face Blaise had managed to maintain, Hermione shook her head and turned back to her own work.

Half an hour later, she remembered Ginny's comment on New Year's Day. "I heard you and Luna were getting on well at the Burrow. Do you have something to tell me?"

Blaise turned and smiled. "Jealous, I hope?"

She slapped his arm. "Extremely. I thought I had your undying devotion."

"You rejected me, Granger, remember? In my deepest despair I had to take my shattered feelings and seek solace in another's arms." His grin widened. "She's a smart

one, Luna. Knows far more than anyone realises. You do realise she saw straight through the performance you gave after Snape left."

Hermione stiffened. "What?"

"Don't panic. She said she'd worked it out ages ago. Something to do with Wibbling Pimples. I must say, I didn't quite get that bit, but I presume you'll know what she meant. She said to tell you not to worry; she won't say a word. Said he's the perfect man for you, just needs a few Wrackspurts cleared from his brain before he figures it out too. She's really quite something."

"Ginny knows too." Sighing, Hermione finished packing her bag. "At this rate, the whole school will know what's going on before we've had a chance to figure it out for ourselves."

Blaise wrapped his arm around her shoulder and hugged her to his side as they left the classroom. "Never mind, perhaps you could ask Filch tonight for his advice."

"Pillock."

"Nutter."

"Tosser."

"Muppet."

Ron and Harry rushed into the Great Hall, flushed with fresh air and Quidditch fervour.

"Hey, 'Mione!" called Ron. "You survived!"

"Survived what?" Hermione looked up from her textbook.

"Your little chat with Snape." Harry grinned.

"Apart from a detention with Mr Filch, yes."

"Ouch. No more kiss-blowing then?"

"Not in public, anyway." Ginny couldn't resist.

"Ginny! That's *not* funny!" Ron's face had turned an interesting shade of pink.

The laws governing Derivative Polyarithmancy became suddenly fascinating as Hermione hid her own blush in her book, thankful when the conversation rapidly turned to George's 'amazing' coaching session.

"And then he just tossed out *all* the spare Bludgers and let them have at us! It was brilliant! Pity about old Jimmy though. Still, Madam Pomfrey said he'd be as right as rain tomorrow." Ron snaffled the last piece of chocolate cake from Hermione's plate. "You don't want that, do you, 'Mione?"

"Ronald! I was saving that to take back to my room. I thought some chocolate might be handy after detention. Heaven knows what I'll end up doing."

Ron shuddered and offered the remaining, slightly squashed, third of the cake. "Rather you than me. Here, take it."

Shaking her head, Hermione put her book away and stood. "No, thanks. I think I've gone off chocolate."

Making her way down to Argus Filch's office, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. *Why do I suspect Filch's company might be preferable to that lot sometimes? They have no clue at all. Fancy George letting the Bludgers loose. Somebody could have been seriously hurt. Bloody irresponsible, that's what it was...*

"Well, well, what have we here? A miscreant. Excellent." The wiry caretaker beckoned to Hermione and pointed to a chair standing before his desk. "Sit."

Perched on the edge of the seat to avoid the accumulation of cat fur attached to the upholstery, Hermione glanced around the room. *Surprising. Not what I expected from Harry's description. Everything seems very neat and clean, and he even has quite pleasant furnishings.*

"Seen enough, girl?" Filch growled from behind her.

"Sorry. I was just admiring your desk. Mahogany, is it?"

Filch bared his teeth in what passed for a smile. "Yes. Nice piece that. Restored it myself."

"You did a wonderful job. The finish is very smooth." Turning towards Filch, Hermione offered a smile of her own. "Do you enjoy furniture restoration?"

"That I do, missy. Nothing like taking a poor, mistreated piece and bringing it back to the way it should be. Too many people take furniture for granted. It should be respected and cared for if they want it to serve 'em well." Filch's expression had softened, and his hand caressed the surface of the desk as he spoke.

"I see you have kept Miss Granger out of trouble, Argus." Snape's expression was impossible to read as he entered the office. Reaching into his robes, he withdrew a small flask. "Here's your rheumatism remedy. Remember, no more than five drops a day."

"Much obliged, Professor. Do you need me to find something for the young lady to do?"

Hermione's eyes widened as the elderly caretaker appeared to smile at her again.

"No, thank you, Argus. I'll take over her detention now." Snape glared Hermione into standing, then turned for the door. "Follow me, Miss Granger."

What in Merlin's name is he up to now? And why was Mr Filch so friendly?

Oh, come on, Severus, I don't have great long legs like yours. Slow down!

"Oof!" *I didn't mean stop in the middle of the corridor, you prat.*

"I can hear you thinking, Hermione."

"Well, stop listening to my thoughts and slow down, will you? I'm getting out of breath trying to keep up."

"Fitness, Miss Granger. You obviously need more exercise."

I'll give you exercise."I'm sure I can think of plenty of *physical* activities I can do. Running..." *after certain Potions professors, "jumping..." your bones, "pulling... stroking..."*
She smirked at his glare, "... licking, sucking..."

"Hermione!"

Her smile was all innocence. "Swallowing uses a few muscles, doesn't it?"

"Gods!"

"Oh, Professor, is there a problem? You seem to have slowed down." Hermione increased her pace, leaving Snape muttering dire imprecations as he followed.

Ignoring the doors to his classroom and office, Hermione continued on to his quarters and leaned against the wall of the corridor beside a startled Elizabeth Burke, who had just returned from a lovely gossip session with Violet.

"You! What are you doing down here?"

Hermione glanced down the corridor in both directions. Snape had disappeared into his office, and the corridor appeared empty. Finally realising she had been addressed by the woman in the portrait beside her, she forced a smile.

"Oh, hello. You must be Elizabeth." *The peeping cow the Fat Lady told me about.*

"I am. I guard the Professor's door. No-one is allowed entrance unless he has given permission." The portrait crossed her arms and looked down her nose at Hermione.

"Really? We'll see about that." As Hermione raised her hand to knock, the door opened, and with a scowl at Elizabeth, Snape pulled her through into his living room.

"You didn't say anything to the interfering busybody out there, did you?"

Noting his slightly damp face, discarded robes, and loosened collar, Hermione shook her head. "Of course not." Walking over to the sofa, she made herself comfortable without awaiting an invitation.

Snape challenged her with an eyebrow, then conceded defeat. "Talk. If we must." He stood at the fireplace, spine stiff, trying to ignore the ever-increasing demands from his groin.

"We must." Hermione gestured to the armchair across from the sofa. "Please, Severus, sit down. You're making me uncomfortable, looming over there."

"You make me uncomfortable just being in the same room, woman." He made no attempt to disguise the obvious bulge in his trousers, glancing down as he moved to the chair.

Looks fairly uncomfortable too. Still, if he's good and can keep his brain engaged long enough for us to have a conversation, perhaps I'll help him with that. "Nevertheless, we can't ignore the situation. We have to decide what to do." *Dammit, I thought he was supposed to be the mature one in this relationship.*

Is that what we have? A relationship?

Snape slumped back in the armchair, shaking his head. "I can't think straight half the time, let alone make decisions. I swore I'd restrain myself until after you had graduated, but this afternoon... I... bloody hell, see what you do to me!"

Hermione watched as the professor's composure crumbled and the man she knew and loved looked back at her, vulnerable and unsure. Steeling herself not to simply move into his arms and burn away the uncertainty with her kisses, she remained seated.

"I know. I feel the same watching you swoop down the corridors. I want to be the third year you berate, just to have your voice caressing me. I want to be your robes and embrace you as they do. I want to be with you and feel the warmth of your body beside me and around me and inside me. But I know you're right. There's too much at stake.

"But I need to know one thing, Severus. What do you want from this? From us? What do you want when I'm no longer your student?"

"Everything. And nothing. You deserve so much more." His eyes glistened with unaccustomed honesty and openness.

"More than what? A good man? I've found one.

"An honourable man? A man of wit and humour and grace? He's right here.

"A man whose touch makes my body sing and whose body leaves me breathless? I already have him.

"A man I love?"

Hermione moved over to Snape's chair and kneeled at his feet, placing her head in his lap. As his fingers gently wove through her hair, she whispered, "You're everything I want and need, Severus Snape."

For long moments the two remained silent, each wrestling with the conflict of need and desire with expectations and duty.

Hermione lifted her head some time later to realise Snape's hand had stilled. His head rested on the back of the armchair, and his thick, black lashes brushed his cheek as he let out a soft puff of a snore. She smiled to see how much younger he looked with the stress ironed out from his face in the relaxation of sleep. Easing gently from his arms, she retrieved a soft blanket from the back of the sofa and draped it across his body.

Before she left, Hermione found a blank piece of parchment on his desk and penned a brief note.

I left before we could get carried away again, much as I would have liked to.

I will try to behave with more decorum now, but my thoughts will be anything but decorous. In my fantasies, we will be naked and joined together in every way possible. I can see you in your chair, stroking yourself until you let out the cry of ecstasy I know so well as you imagine me doing the same.

I shall have conversations with you in my head about Potions and books and politics and art and every other topic possible until we can be together.

Love always,

H.

P.S. I forgot to thank you for the beautiful chain and charms. They are exquisite.

As she replaced the quill, Hermione noticed the Calendar Charm hovering over the corner of the desk. *January 4th, 1999. Clever bit of magic there. Must ask him about the*

spell used.

Closing the door quietly, she made her way back to Gryffindor Tower, her mind once again on the man sleeping peacefully down in the dungeons.

"Got a problem, dearie?" The Fat Lady asked as she gave the password.

"Pardon?"

"You look like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. Reminds me of the headmistress back when she was a seventh year. Mind you, between you and me, she had a lot to worry about back then, what with her carrying on with Professor Dumbledore and all." The giggling portrait suddenly covered her mouth and looked behind her. "Ooh, but don't tell anyone I told you!"

"Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore? While she was a student?" Hermione gaped at the portrait. "Are you sure?"

"Saw it with me own eyes, lovey. They thought I was asleep. Very irresponsible he was, keeping her out so late."

"But what happened? Didn't they get into trouble?"

"Oh, nothing much came of it. Turned out he was... well, you know, not destined to be a ladies' man, if you know what I mean." The Fat Lady gave a lewd wink. "Found out he preferred the laddies to the lassies."

Hermione brushed off the revelations about Dumbledore's sexuality. Everyone knew he had been gay once his early relationship with Grindelwald had been uncovered. "But what happened before then? Did anyone find out?"

"Oh, it was all around the school. Nice juicy bit of gossip it was, too."

"But he didn't lose his job, and then he became headmaster later."

The portrait shrugged. "Some loophole in the School Charter I heard. Shocking, really, the things people can get away with."

"Terrible." Hermione nodded, eager to get away from the garrulous portrait. "Well, I must go to bed. Goodnight."

Despite her supposed detention with Argus Filch, Hermione could not help the grin stretching across her face as she entered the common room.

She had a plan.

A/N: This story was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. My thanks go to karelia for her brilliant beta skills.

Sorry about the wait. I took a while to get this chapter written, then my poor beta was without internet until a couple of days ago. Kudos for her for looking at this so quickly amongst everything else she had to catch up with. xx

Chapter Twenty-five: Research

Chapter 25 of 41

More letters are exchanged, and Luna comes up with some useful information.

Chapter Twenty-five: Research

Snape drifted back to consciousness, the smile which softened his angular features fading with his dreams as he woke alone. Pushing aside the warmth of the blanket, he stood and stretched out the kinks in his spine as he glanced around the room for his erstwhile companion.

"Hermione?"

With no witch in evidence, Snape extinguished the candles with a huff of disappointment and made his way to his bed to seek solace with his fist and his dreams. The note lying on his desk remained unnoticed.

It must be somewhere. What school has a charter and doesn't have it filed in the bloody library? I've looked in all the relevant sections, and I daren't ask Madam Pince. The nosy biddy would want to know why I was interested in school regulations.

At least Blaise is having fun. I'm sure he and Luna have done less than five minutes work the entire time they've been here. Just as well I taught him Muffliato a few weeks ago.

Looks like they're finished for the day.

Hermione pasted a smile on her face as Blaise and Luna walked over to her table. "Hi, you two. All up to date with that Potions essay, Blaise?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I did it last night while you were in *detention*. You never did say how that went." Blaise grinned.

"No, I didn't. And I wasn't planning to. You'll have to use your deviant imagination to fill in the gaps, Zabini. Did you know he has a filthy mind, Luna?"

Luna's dreamy expression did not alter as she replied, "Yes. That's one of the many things I like about him."

"See, Granger. Someone appreciates me. So, what has had you prowling around the shelves with that fearsome expression on your face? You could scare the little kids to death with one glance."

"You shouldn't frown, you know, Hermione. Wrackspurts love frown lines. That's how they get in. Is there anything we can help you find?" Luna waved vaguely at the shelves.

"Not unless you have a copy of the Hogwarts' Charter stuffed up your jumper." Hermione sighed and rested her chin on her hands.

"The one that's kept in the headmistress's office?"

Hermione closed her eyes and counted to ten. "The headmistress's office! Why didn't I think of that? How do you know that, Luna?"

"Oh, I saw it there tons of times last year. Neville and Ginny and I seemed to spend a lot of time up there. Of course, now I know Professor Snape was just protecting us from the Carrows by summoning us to see him, but it seemed pretty scary at the time. He seemed to wander off and leave us alone in there quite often. That's when I noticed the lovely old book up on the shelf behind his desk. I managed a peek one night while he was out of the room. Poor Neville nearly had a conniption."

"Why is it kept there?"

"I asked Dad about that. Apparently, it is the original and only copy written at the founding of Hogwarts. As it is so old and valuable, it never leaves the head's office. Some of the laws in it are quite archaic, but still stand today. You should have a look some time. I'm sure Professor McGonagall wouldn't mind showing it to you."

"What are you plotting, Granger?" Blaise knew her well enough to be suspicious.

"I imagine she's looking for a loophole in the laws so she can be with Professor Snape." Luna sighed. "It's so romantic. Both of you pining over each other, trying to find a way to be together."

Hermione blushed. Unwilling to repeat the gossip she had heard about the headmistress, she mumbled an explanation. "I just thought it would be worth checking the actual rules."

"Isn't that like shutting the Quidditch crate after the Snitch has flown?" Blaise whispered as they turned to leave.

"This Snitch isn't flying anywhere unless I can get a look at that bloody book. Any ideas?"

"I'll work on it." Blaise heard the shuffle of careworn feet. "We'd better get going. I can hear old Filch prowling about, and it's nearly curfew."

"He's not so bad." Hermione smiled as they turned the corner and met the Squib in question. "Good evening, Mr Filch."

Filch nodded. "Evenin', miss."

Grinning at the others' stunned expressions, Hermione waved to Luna and Blaise as she ascended the stairs towards Gryffindor tower. After dropping her bag on her bed, she followed the corridor extending beyond the individual rooms of the returned Gryffindor seventh years to the tapestry of Wilmot Fordyce the Third and whispered the password which allowed her into the impossible common room linking all four houses.

An entity comprising eight limbs, two heads, and an inordinate amount of exposed skin greeted her as she left the short tunnel beyond the tapestry.

"Oh, Hermione. I thought you'd gone to bed." Neville's face matched the stripe on the tie wrapped around his forehead. Grabbing the nearest item of clothing, Draco's shirt, he bunched it over his strained trousers as the blond surfaced from an avid exploration of his right nipple.

"Granger, your timing is appalling." Draco grinned as he licked his lips.

"So is your sense of decorum, Malfoy. Don't you think your room would be a more appropriate venue for that sort of activity? And what's with the Rambo impersonation?"

"Rambo?" Both purebloods shared identical puzzled frowns.

"Never mind. It's a Muggle thing. Just put some clothes on, both of you."

"What's the problem, Granger? Don't you appreciate the vision of male beauty before you?" Blaise smirked as his fellow wizards rapidly dressed.

"The view is just fine; I'm just not sure I'm ready to play the voyeur yet." She winked at Blaise. "Although Neville's chest has certainly filled out nicely since I last saw it in first year."

"Hermione!" Neville finished buttoning his shirt as fast as possible.

"I'm almost offended you preferred his chest to mine, but I have to commend your taste." Draco smiled as he pulled Neville towards his room. "You'll have to excuse us; we have... business to attend to."

"I think I've created a monster. A pair of them." Hermione slumped onto the recently vacated sofa.

"I'm more concerned with why you saw Longbottom's naked chest in first year. Just what do you Gryffindors get up behind that common room door?"

She shook her head. "Like I said, a filthy mind. Neville and the other boys of our year were playing some strange game known only to eleven-year-old boys, which involved taking their shirts off and chasing each other around the common room. Percy Weasley soon put a stop to it." Raising her arms up and behind her, she yawned. "So, any thoughts? That is, when you've quite finished."

Blaise tore his eyes off the breasts straining against her blouse as she stretched and had the grace to flush. "Sorry. Old habits, you know. Thoughts? About what, apart from the obvious?" His gaze drifted back down to her chest.

"I'll tell Luna you were ogling if you're not careful."

"Wouldn't bother her, I expect. She knows of my unrequited lusting after your body. Told me to look all I liked, but keep my hands off or Snape would castrate me. Quite a convincing argument, that one. She also told me I'd grow out of it eventually, and she was happy to be patient."

Hermione let out an unladylike snort at the Ravenclaw's logic and wiped a few tears of mirth from her eyes. "I knew she'd be good for you, Blaise. And I meant thoughts on how to get a look at the Hogwarts Charter."

Blaise's expression sobered as he contemplated the problem. "The way I see it is you need to make the most of your strengths. The headmistress is a Gryffindor. Just go and see her and ask to look at it."

"But what reason do I give?"

"Obvious, isn't it? You read about it in *Hogwarts: A History* and wanted to see the real thing. She'll be so chuffed at your interest she won't even consider any ulterior motive."

"What if it isn't mentioned in *Hogwarts: A History*?"

"Then find another book that refers to it. You're always reading esoteric books on all sorts of things for no sane reason."

"And you're the picture of sanity?"

"I make no claims to sanity, Granger. However, I will admit I'm knackered. Time we went to bed."

She raised an eyebrow. "You might like to rephrase that."

"Nope. Offer stands." He grinned as he stood to leave. "By the way, do you know Snape's birthday is on the ninth?"

Hermione made a quick calculation in her head as Blaise left the room. *Shite, that's this Saturday!*

A tapping on the window found Hermione bleary-eyed and sluggish early the next morning. *Bloody hell. Who sends owls this early?* Her expression softened as she took the missive and recognised the handwriting.

H

I woke alone, much to my regret and frustration. My hand serves as a poor substitute for the heat of your body, yet I agree, we must practise restraint and avoid situations where we might be tempted to succumb to our baser desires.

I found your note this morning after once more relieving my aching body with an embarrassingly few sordid strokes in the loneliness of my bed. I'm pleased my gift gave you pleasure, and I am wearing yours, wishing your skin was the silken touch against mine.

Remain certain, my witch, that despite appearances to the contrary before others, my heart, soul, and body rest in your hands.

S

"Oh, gods." Hermione closed her eyes, unable to remove the image of her lover from her mind. Tossing her nightgown aside, much to the bewilderment of the waiting owl, she snatched up a piece of parchment and, nude, began writing.

I am also wearing your gift as I write.

Only your gift.

I love you.

H

Attaching the note to the owl's leg, Hermione opened the window and let it fly before returning to her bed to allow her mind and her fingers free reign.

"Hey, 'Mione! What's in the catalogue?"

"It's only books, Ron. Would you like a look?" She smiled sweetly as Ron shook his head and reached for more toast. Checking the charm on the cover, she resumed her perusal of *Madame Solange's Special Gifts for Saucy Witches and Wicked Wizards* price list.

Hmm, that's a possibility. I'm sure he'll find it very... oh, my... Definitely.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm, yes, Gin?"

"That's not a book catalogue, is it?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, I know you love books, but I've never seen you look quite so flushed while reading before. C'mon, let me see."

Hermione glanced at Ron and Harry across the table, happily arguing over who was entitled to the last piece of bacon, and slid the article in question over to her friend.

"Holy Hufflepuffs! Is this even allowed in the school? Where did you get it? *Why* did you get it? You're not going to order something from here, are you? You will show me, won't you?" Ginny gaped as she turned page after page, occasionally holding the catalogue sideways and frowning. "What exactly *is* that?"

"No idea. I might ask Blaise later."

"You can't show that to him! He might get... you know... ideas."

"He's always getting ideas, Gin." Hermione laughed at Ginny's puzzled expression. "Never mind. Let's put that away before those two want to know what books are so intriguing."

Ginny sighed. "I wish I could order something from it. I'm sure Harry would approve... eventually."

"Why not? You're of age now. The shop doesn't have any restrictions other than that."

"I still haven't been allowed my own account at Gringotts though. I'm sure Mum would have a fit if a bill came for naughty underwear or some of those toys in there."

Hermione glanced up at the staff table where her wizard was engrossed in conversation with the headmistress. "I know someone else who might have a fit when he sees what I'm going to order for him."

"You wouldn't!"

"Want to bet?" Hermione stuffed the catalogue into her bag and stood. "I'm off to my room for a decent look at this without the boys around. Coming?"

"Try to stop me."

Locking her door with a flick of her wand, Hermione sprawled on the bed beside Ginny as they examined the seductive underwear and intriguing toys and other sex-oriented paraphernalia on offer.

"So, what are you ordering?" Ginny asked with a wink.

Hermione showed her the items she'd selected. "What do you think?"

"I'm not sure I want to think about those things and Severus Snape in one package. But other than that, brilliant! He'll kill you for sure, but brilliant!"

Hermione smacked her friend's arm. "Thanks for the support. I'll tell him you said that."

"Don't you dare, Hermione Granger. If Professor Snape found out I knew about this, he'd kill me first. And slowly."

Laughing as Ginny left, Hermione filled in the order form with her Gringotts account number and delivery details and set off for the owlery.

"Miss Granger, will you please enlighten the class as to the most advantageous stirring techniques for today's potion." He didn't smile, but the mere fact of his asking her to advise the class was extraordinary enough to raise a few eyebrows.

"Um... of course, Professor." As she described the correct pattern of clockwise and anticlockwise stirs used in the brew, her eyes followed the professor's progress around the room. "And finally, complete the potion with three rapid figure-of-eight stirs in the centre of the cauldron, take out the stirring rod, and reduce the flame."

"Thank you, Miss Granger. Any questions? No? Then why are you all standing around staring? Get on with it!"

The restoration of Snape's proper demeanour broke the spell chaining the students to their desks. With a scurry of feet and rattle of vials, the brewing commenced.

"He'd better be careful, Granger. That sort of courtesy will breed suspicion." Blaise passed her the stirring rod and began chopping myrtle leaves.

"Poor Harry and Ron are still looking stunned. I think the sky in their world will fall in if they hear Severus being polite again." Hermione poured in eight ounces of pure rainwater and set the cauldron to heat.

"Have you decided when to beard the kitty in her den?"

Hermione snorted as she added a pinch of ground garnet to the boiling water. "I assume you mean the headmistress?"

"My favourite feline." Blaise grinned and handed over the finely shredded myrtle.

Shaking her head, Hermione continued adding the ingredients Blaise had prepared until the potion reached a period of simmering.

"I think I'll try on Sunday afternoon. She's always quite mellow at that stage of the weekend."

"Nothing to do with the fifty-year-old malt she keeps stashed in her office, I suppose?"

"Blaise! How can you say that?"

"Easily. Malfoy said once his aunt broke into her study when she was a student and nicked the current bottle for a dare. Apparently, she was not a happy kitty for a whole week. The Slytherins of the time had a party to remember, however."

"And there I was starting to think Slytherins could be decent. Oh, well, it was a nice thought while it lasted." She gave a dramatic sigh as her eyes found the Slytherin now leaning against his desk and watching her from the cover of his hair.

Luckily, Madame Solange believed in discretion, and the heavy package brought to her table on Friday morning by a large horned owl was wrapped in plain brown paper. Ignoring the boys' curious glances, Hermione stowed the package in her bag and continued eating as if strange parcels were delivered to her every day.

"Is that it?" Ginny mouthed silently from across the table.

Hermione nodded. "Later, when the nosy ones are otherwise occupied."

As she walked to her first class, Hermione paid little heed to the boys' conversation.

How shall I deliver his present? By owl?

No, too impersonal, especially for this gift.

By house elf? Not bloody likely, they gossip more than Lavender's cronies.

In person, naked, on my knees in front of his delectable... Stop it!

Right. Composed again now. Harry is giving me funny looks. Must stop thinking of Severus's co... Shite, there I go again!

"Are you okay? You look a bit flushed. You aren't running a fever, are you? Madam Pomfrey did say there was a little wizard flu about, and you know how contagious that is." Harry moved away a little as he spoke.

"I'm fine, Harry. Look." She grabbed his hand and held it to her forehead. "Not a trace of a fever."

"That's good, 'cause we were going to ask if you'd help us start our Charms essays." Ron's relief was not well concealed. "Just start, mind you. I know we're supposed to do our own work."

Mollified a little, Hermione nodded. "All right. I'll give you some pointers to get you started. But you do all the research yourselves and write your essays independently. Got it?"

"Yes, miss," they replied in unison as they entered the Transfiguration classroom and found their seats.

"You're really going to give these to him?" Ginny stared at the items on Hermione's desk in awe.

"With instructions on how and when to use them."

"I don't want to know. I *really* don't want to know!" Ginny covered her ears and retreated from the room, face blazing.

Hermione pulled out a few pieces of parchment from her desk drawer and with a complex wave of her wand decorated them with bright red and gold stripes/ *could do*

green and silver, but that wouldn't aggravate him half as much. Will make the surprise so much more effective.

Another complicated wand movement and she had cast an Undetectable Extension Charm on a medium-sized envelope. Slipping in the parcel, she followed it with a page of instructions, then sealed the envelope. After writing Snape's name on the front, she slipped the innocuous looking letter into her bag and smiled once again.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Many thanks to quaffswinegaily for her input and karelia for the beta. You girls rock!

Sorry about the delay, real life and holidays intervened! Thanks for your patience.

Chapter Twenty-six: Conversations with the Headmistress

Chapter 26 of 41

Hermione gives Severus his birthday present, and they both have a chat with Minerva.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to J K Rowling. I make no money from playing with them.

Chapter Twenty-six: Conversations with the Headmistress

The chilly halls of Hogwarts were dark and silent early on Saturday morning as the castle and its occupants slept. All but two, one under a Disillusionment spell, creeping towards the dungeons with her breathing too loud in her ears, and the other gasping her name as he spent once again on cold, lonely sheets.

A Silencing Charm ensured Elizabeth Burke would not raise any alarm should she notice the envelope being slipped under the door she guarded. Having delivered the gift, complete with detailed instructions, Hermione returned to the warmth of her bed, confident she would be seeing the recipient before the end of the day.

Snape noticed the envelope as soon as he walked into his sitting room. There it lay, seemingly innocuous, inviting him to investigate. Ever cautious, Snape used several charms to check for foul play before bending to pick up the envelope. Turning it over in his hand, he recognised the handwriting on the front and smiled.

Happy Birthday!

All my love, H.

Expecting to find only a card, Snape's eyebrows lifted in surprise when he reached into the envelope and discovered a sheet of parchment and a gaily striped parcel.

Clever witch. I don't suppose she learned that trick from Filius's classes.

The wrapping parted to reveal two medium-sized bottles with purple and gold labels and a scrap of gold silk with a drawstring and two long ties.

The bag seems very feminine. What was the girl thinking? He opened the lids of the bottles and put his experienced nose to use.

At least they're useful. Now the parchment. Hopefully this will explain the reason for the bag.

She can't be serious. It's a what?

Oh, fuck. She'll be the death of me yet. I'll never last the day.

Returning to his bedroom to comply with the instructions he had been given, Snape placed the two bottles beside his bed. "I'll be needing you later."

Hermione paid little attention to the conversation at the Gryffindor table as Snape's chair at the top table remained resolutely empty. Huffing her disappointment, she had turned to talk to Ginny when the redhead hissed a warning.

"He's here. And he's walking oddly. Do you think...?"

Turning her head slowly, Hermione watched a slightly flushed Severus Snape ease himself into his seat with a grimace. "Looks like it." She smiled and raised her glass to the now poker-faced professor. His slight nod would have been imperceptible to anyone watching.

Up at the staff table, Snape reached for the bacon, all too aware of every movement; the flimsy silk caressing his rigid cock and cupping his balls in an exquisite embrace. The added sensation of cold air drifting up to buttocks bare under his robes only served to enhance the experience, and the hungry gaze of the witch at the Gryffindor table increased it tenfold.

Nothing under my robes but the pouch, she said. Does she want me to come all over it before breakfast is finished? I must get her alone soon, or I'll...

"Everything all right, Severus? You look a little restless." Rolanda Hooch nudged him when she reached for the teapot.

A glare sufficed to quell her curiosity as Snape once again shifted in his seat, feeling the silk already dampening from the weight of the robes dragging over his sensitive flesh.

Forcing a few mouthfuls into his stomach, Snape groaned silently with every tiny movement, finally pushing back his seat, sweeping his robes across the front of his body, and stalking out of the staff door behind the table.

A mumbled apology and an excuse involving Arithmancy equations sufficed to allow Hermione leave from her fellow students as she followed Snape's example and left the Great Hall. Glancing up and down the corridor, she could see no sign of the Potions professor and with a sigh headed for her room.

"Not so fast, young lady." His growl tingled down her spine, and a hand encircled her waist, drawing her into a dark side corridor. "See what you've done to me, witch."

One hand was pinned to the wall above her head, then the other was pulled under his robes to be placed over a straining erection confined only by moist, thin silk. Hermione inhaled his heat and desperation as he ground his arousal into her palm with a shudder. Before he had an opportunity to protest, she slipped from his grasp and spun him so their positions were reversed. Wrapping her fingers around his length, she stroked up and down, dragging a gasp of pleasure from Snape.

"I take it you're enjoying your present."

"It's torture." He closed his eyes and let his head fell back against the wall. "Pure torture."

Hermione watched his face as she cupped his sac and squeezed gently.

"Oh, fuck!"

"Such language, Professor. You should be ashamed of yourself."

He managed to open one eye and scowl at her grin. "Ten points from..."

Moving her hand faster, she captured his lips with her own and swallowed his cries of release when he came undone in her palm.

"Better?"

Not giving him time to recover his ability to speak, Hermione kissed him once more. "Happy birthday, Severus. I love you."

With a swirl of her robes worthy of the boneless wizard slumped against the wall, Hermione disappeared around the corner.

"Severus?"

The familiar tones of the headmistress's voice broke into Snape's sex-addled stupor.

"Severus? Do you have a problem? Should I call Poppy?"

He shook himself into full consciousness and levered his frame off the stone wall. The sensation of the sodden silk sheath clinging to his genitals and dripping onto his thigh stained his cheeks as he sought an adequate explanation.

"No. I'm fine. Just a migraine. I need to get to my rooms to find a headache potion."

"You'll do no such thing. I have the necessary potion in my office, which is much closer. Come along."

Wet, sticky, and still all but naked under his robes, Snape reluctantly followed.

"Sit yourself down, boy; you look done in. I'll fetch the potion from my bathroom." Minerva McGonagall fussed him into an armchair by the fire, then left the room.

As soon as she had gone, Snape used a Cleansing Charm to remove the evidence of his indiscretion, groaning anew when the dry silk whispered once again across sensitised skin.

"There. It's one of your own brews I obtained from Poppy. Drink it all. Good. I'll see to making the tea while you explain what is upsetting you enough to bring on a migraine."

Snape avoided her knowing gaze, standing and walking over to the window. Taking care to keep his robes draped over his once-again swelling penis, he sighed.

"I admit I have been struggling with something for some time now, Minerva. It's personal. Very personal."

The concern of her hand on his shoulder was his undoing.

"You know you can tell me anything, Severus. What's distressing you so?"

Like floodwaters released after the storm, the words poured from his mouth with only a sliver of self-preservation preventing disaster.

"I tried so hard not to fall for her. I told her at the end of the summer it was over. But she wrote... and it was... and that night... oh, gods... It's wrong. It's inappropriate. But I need..." Resting his forehead against the coolness of the window, Snape drew in a ragged breath. "What do I do?"

Minerva frowned, trying to piece together the snippets of information he had revealed. "She's someone you met over summer?"

He nodded, unwilling to trust his traitorous mouth.

"And for some reason you can't be with her?"

Another nod.

"I see." Her lips pursed as she fought her disapproval. "Pursuing a relationship with a married woman is inevitably a mistake, Severus. Perhaps you would be better to follow your original plan and cease contact."

Shoulders drooping in relief at her misperception, Snape bowed his head and gathered his control. "Yes, Minerva. I agree. I shall not trouble you again with the matter." Gathering his robes around him, he turned without a further word and swept from the room.

For a long time, the elderly witch stared at the door, pondering her Potion master's confession. His uncharacteristic willingness to discuss such a personal matter only served to increase the concern she had felt since the Christmas holidays. A ghost of a smile crossed her face when she remembered her star pupil's remark about her professor's kissing abilities. At least it was clear now where he had been practising. Tired eyes suddenly widened as a thought drifted into her mind.

"Oh, my, he hasn't been foolish enough to fall for a Muggle?" Minerva asked the room in general. Muggle-wizard relationships were difficult enough at the best of times, but for Severus Snape it would be a recipe for disaster. The man was far too Victorian in his attitude to cope with a modern Muggle woman. Shaking her head, Minerva sent the teacups back to the kitchen with a flick of her wand and began tackling the pile of parchment on her desk.

"Well?" Ginny closed the door after her and flopped down on Hermione's bed.

"Well, what?"

"Was he wearing his present?"

"Who told you I know that?" The triumphant grin on her face defied her attempt at nonchalance.

"That wicked smile told me." Ginny closed her eyes and rolled onto her back, hands tucked behind her head. "Tell me I should be more disturbed by the thought of Professor Snape in a tiny gold pouch. Did you make him dress in traditional style under the robes like you were going to?"

Hermione's blush answered the question.

"Oh, shite. Imagining that should *really* not be turning me on, Hermione. It's bad enough it turns you on. You're contagious, that's what you are."

Giggling and unable to speak for several moments, Hermione collapsed on the bed beside Ginny. "Now you know how I feel. But just remember, you can imagine all you like, but he's mine, and I'm not sharing."

"Not even a little bit? Just a quick peek?"

This time the gales of laughter drew attention from outside the room. With a perfunctory knock, Blaise walked in. "What's going on in here? Come on, share the joke, you two."

"Nothing you need to know, Zabini. We wouldn't want to sully your pure mind."

"You completely ruined my mind months ago, Granger." Blaise wandered over to the desk, having spied the brightly coloured catalogue lying on top of a pile of books. "What's this?" Picking it up, he leafed through a few pages. "Is there something you're not telling me, Hermione?"

Hermione snatched the catalogue back before Blaise reached the pages with the items circled in ink. "I just wanted to see what they sold, that's all."

Ginny nudged her with an elbow. "Show him that thing. You know, the one we couldn't work out a use for. It's on page twenty-two."

"You remembered the page number?"

"Hey, it was... er... fascinating. Show him."

"Yes, show me." Blaise sat down beside the girls and reached for the catalogue.

"Not so fast, Zabini. Let me find the page. There." Hermione pointed to an odd object at the top of the page. "It says it comes in black, blue, red, and pink, but it doesn't actually say what it's for."

"No idea. Looks weird." Blaise shook his head. "Perhaps you should order one. They might come with instructions. I'm sure you could find a willing test subject." He leaned back and grinned until he was smacked on the arms from both sides. "Hey, there's no need to get stropky, girls. There's plenty of Zabini to go around."

"Oh, go back and tell Luna that. I'm sure she could find a use for you." Hermione patted Blaise's bottom as she directed him to the door.

"Do you really think he didn't know?" Ginny asked.

"Of course he knew, and it must be fairly outrageous because I've never seen him blush so deeply. And there's nothing on the page which gives it away, or we would have figured it out ourselves."

The door to the headmistress's office opened of its own accord when Hermione reached the top of the spiral stairs. Knocking appeared to be superfluous as Minerva McGonagall appeared from a door at the other side of the room and beckoned her in.

"Come along now, girl. Don't be shy." She guided Hermione to the chair beside the fire and pointed her wand at the grate to boost the smouldering fire within to a hearty blaze. "To what do I owe the pleasure today? It's not often I have students voluntarily coming up here, Miss Granger."

Hermione managed a tight smile. The distinct whiff of whiskey lingered in the air between them. *Blaise was right. She does like a tippie or three. What is it with the female professors in this school?* "I wanted to ask you a small favour, Headmistress."

Minerva had perfected the expressionless face long before Severus Snape had been born. Hermione continued, confidence seeping away as the silence yawned. "I mean, if you don't mind. You might say no. That's okay. I only..." She shrugged.

The headmistress relented. It was amusing playing the stern elderly witch with the younger students, but she respected the young woman before her far too much to trifle with her emotions. "It might help if you explained what the favour is, my dear, before you convince yourself I will not assist you."

"Oh. Well, I heard from Luna Lovegood that you had the original Charter of Hogwarts here in your office, and I wondered if you would mind if I looked at it. I know it's a valuable tome, and I would really be very careful with it. But I..."

Smiling, Minerva reached forward and patted Hermione's knee. "I'm surprised you haven't come and asked to see it long before now. I'm well aware of your love for old books, especially those pertaining to the history of Hogwarts. You were never seen without a copy of *Hogwarts: A History* for the first three years of your time here. I can only assume you had memorised every word by then and didn't need to carry it around with you."

Hermione blushed. "Something like that." She would still be carrying the beloved book with her if it hadn't been for the boys' teasing in fourth year.

"I have some people to see around the castle over the next hour or so, but if you wish, you may sit here at my desk and look at the Charter. It is not to be removed from the desk, mind you." Minerva spoke a brief incantation and pointed her wand at the glass cabinet on the wall behind her desk. Lifting the ancient book from its stand, she placed it with reverence on her desk.

Touching the still supple leather binding the book with the tips of her fingers, Hermione sighed. "It's magnificent. Look at the illuminations and the penmanship. I've never seen anything like it."

"Don't use any magic on the book. It is heavily enchanted to maintain its integrity so nothing can be tampered with, and any extraneous magic could interact with the charms already in place. I suggest you allow me to place a temporary Reverse Impervious Charm on your hands so you leave no traces of oil or sweat on the parchment."

Hermione held out her hands for the spell to be applied, then sat behind the desk as the headmistress left the office. The wonder of the book before her had driven all thoughts of her original purpose from her head, and for an hour she simply browsed through the pages, devouring the information within and delighting in the beauty of the workmanship.

The old-fashioned clock chiming the hour on the mantelpiece jolted Hermione from her study of the list of subjects originally taught at Hogwarts. Looking up at the door, she swore under her breath and as quickly as she dared, flipped the pages until she found Section 247b: *Obligations, Duties, and Conduct of Staff*.

Running her finger down the long list of rules pertaining to professors' daily lives at the school, including a detailed description of the dress code, Hermione finally found what she was looking for. Digging into her bag, she found parchment and a quill and copied word for word the relevant passages. Just as she finished, the door opened, admitting a flustered headmistress.

"Are you all right, Professor?" Hermione gently closed the book and gave it a final, longing pat.

Minerva patted down a few stray strands of hair and huffed a sigh of aggravation. "Peeves! That poltergeist is asking to be Banished. If it wasn't for Professor Sprout's tender spot for him, he'd have been gone years ago.

"But don't you worry about that. Did you find whatever it was you were looking for?"

Unable to stop the red staining her cheeks, Hermione dipped her head and avoided eye contact. "Nothing specific, Professor. I just wanted to look at it. I did have a question though; do the dress codes for staff still apply? Everyone seems to dress so formally. I've often wondered whether it was by choice or because you had to."

"Mostly by choice, my dear. We professors are an old-fashioned breed. I imagine if anyone really wanted to dress more simply, the Board of Governors would turn a blind eye. As long as they didn't wear anything too outrageous. Gilderoy Lockhart certainly pushed the boundaries at times with his frills and velvets... But I should not be discussing that with you."

Hermione smiled, remembering Lockhart and his fripperies. "Well, thank you again, Professor. I feel very honoured to have been allowed to look at the Charter."

After seeing her student to the door, Minerva returned to her desk with a speculative glint in her eye. She had not missed Hermione's blush or been taken in by her swift change of subject. Neither had she missed the sheets of parchment the girl had hurriedly stuffed into her bag.

A simple wave of her wand opened the Charter to the last page Hermione had been studying. Another flick and the built-in protection charms in the book activated. The passages recently read glowed a little.

"Now, what was so interesting that Miss Granger needed to make notes?" Scanning the page, Minerva frowned. "Staff duties. Dress code, as she mentioned. Nothing out of the ordinary there." Reading further to the last few paragraphs, her eyes widened.

Slumping back in her chair, the lines on Minerva's forehead deepened. The various threads of information had woven together into an alarming tapestry.

"Dilly!"

An ancient house-elf appeared. "You is calling Dilly, Headmistress?"

"I is... am. Please inform Professor Snape he is required urgently in my office. And accept no excuses. That boy has some explaining to do."

With a crack, Dilly disappeared to follow her beloved headmistress's order.

A/N: This was written for the TPP Every Flavour Auction for shalimar1981. Bucketloads of thanks go to quaffswinegaily for the alpha read and karelia for the beta.

Chapter Twenty-seven: Facing the Music

Chapter 27 of 41

Hermione and Severus are called to the headmistress's office.

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Chapter Twenty-seven: Facing the Music

"Well? Did you get a look at it?" Ginny pounced as soon as Hermione had returned to her room.

"Have you been waiting here all this time?"

"No... not really... oh, all right, yes. I saw Blaise just after you had left for Professor McGonagall's office, and he told me where you were. He and Luna aren't far away. Do you want me to go and get them?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and laughed. "You might as well. None of you lot will leave me in peace until you know as much as I do anyway."

"Glad you've finally figured that out for yourself," Ginny replied with a grin as she left the room.

Five minutes later the entire 'Granger-Snape Alliance,' as Blaise had named their little group, had assembled in Hermione's room.

"Time to enlighten us all, Granger. What did you find out?" Blaise lounged against the desk, twirling Hermione's best goose quill between his long fingers.

"Lots. Did you know the female staff may 'entertain' guests of either gender in their quarters until the hour of ten pm, after which only other females are permitted to remain? The men, however, are allowed to have guests of either gender at any time. That's so... archaic." Hermione huffed and shook her head. "I don't know why the female professors haven't insisted that clause be revoked."

"I'm sure Professors Vector and Sinistra wouldn't mind that at all." Luna smiled at her friends' disbelief.

"Luna? Really? Vector and Sinistra? How do you know that?" Ginny asked.

"Doesn't everyone?"

"No."

"Hey, you two. As interesting as that little snippet is, it's not relevant." Blaise turned to Hermione. "Granger, focus. Did you find out anything useful?"

"Possibly." She pulled her parchment stack out of her bag and spread it over the desk, after nudging Blaise aside. "I made a few notes."

"A few? What did you do, copy the entire Charter?"

"No, Gin, just the relevant paragraphs. What do you think of that?" She pointed out two passages she had written out in full and circled.

"Do you think he'd agree?" Blaise frowned.

"Depends on his Wrackspurts. They might still be clouding his judgement." Luna's radishes swung as she twirled on the spot in a fit of excitement.

"He'll need to sort out more than his Wrackspurts if he finds out about this. His attitude, for one thing. Imagine it, Professor Snape..."

"Mione! Are you in there?" Ron's voice bellowed from the hall outside Hermione's door. "Harry and I are going down to dinner. Are you coming?"

Hermione opened the door, admitting a startled Ron.

"Oi, what are you lot up to? And why weren't we invited?"

Blaise had swiftly gathered up the pile of parchment and was shuffling it into a neat stack. "Planning our study sessions for the N.E.W.T.s. Would you like to join us? I'm sure Hermione can make you up a schedule for revision."

"Er... no, thanks." Ron couldn't quite control the shudder. "We've been scheduled by Hermione before. We'll be fine."

Ginny giggled. "Watch out, brother. You wouldn't want your little sister to beat you in your exams, would you?"

Ron swallowed the distraction ploy whole as he flopped into the chair beside the desk. "I'm sure Mum would tell me it's unwisely to try and beat a girl. I'd hate to disappoint her." He looked down at the sudden growl from his stomach. "See... dinnertime. I hear it's treacle tart tonight for dessert. My favourite."

"Any dessert is your favourite, Ron. Are you coming or not?" Harry poked his head around the door. "Oh, hi, Gin. I wondered where you were."

Ginny winked at Hermione. Moving to the door without answering Harry, she wrapped an arm around his waist and reached up to kiss his cheek. "I was just here talking to Hermione."

Cheeks flaming, Harry said no more as they joined Ron and the others on the way to dinner.

Stacking the pile of marked essays onto one side of his desk, Snape rose from his chair and let out a weary sigh. Half expecting Hermione to appear at his door during the evening, he had endured the constant reminder of her desire stretching across his sensitised flesh all day, only removing the pouch when it became clear she was not coming. Sleep had denied him its temporary relief when he had refused to succumb once again to the temptation of his own hand. He had spent hours releasing his frustration onto canvas, painting not Grace, but Hermione, nude and waiting.

In his bedroom, Snape removed the cover from the canvas and studied the painting. Without conscious thought, his hand strayed to his groin, stroking the growing reaction there. Breath catching as pleasure rippled through his body and his imagination brought life to the painted image before him, Snape unfastened his trousers and reached for the bottle at his bedside. Ylang ylang and vanilla drifted to flare his nostrils as his hand spread the scented oil over heated skin. His eyes widened when the fluid warmed, sending an exquisite tingle along an increasingly swollen shaft. Stroking up and down rhythmically, the intense pleasure found him lying on the bed, trousers kicked across the room and shirt rucked up so his other hand could use the oil on his nipples. A low moan escaped him as his balls tightened and lifted, and a drop of fluid appeared at his tip. Lowering his hand to cup his sac, he began moving his hand faster.

With a crack, a house elf bearing the headmistress's sigil on her tea-towel appeared. Clapping a hand over her eyes, she turned to face the door. "Master Professor Snape, the headmistress is requesting your presence in her office."

Snatching a blanket to cover himself, Snape managed to snarl a reply without ceasing his activity. "I'll be there... as soon as... possible."

"You is not understanding. The headmistress said it was urgent. You is to come now."

Stopping the Hogwarts Express would have been easier. With a strangled cry, Snape exploded over his stomach despite his unwilling audience. "Damn it! Not a word, elf!"

He could have sworn the elf smirked. Summoning his trousers, Snape performed a perfunctory Cleansing Charm, then dressed and followed Dilly to the headmistress's tower.

"You summoned me?" A scowl set firmly on his brow.

Minerva's lips thinned as she looked up from the large book on her desk. "Indeed. Severus..." Her nose wrinkled. "What is that smell? Have you started wearing cologne?"

Snape sniffed, and a trace of pink suffused his cheeks. "No. I do not wear cologne."

"Well, something smells rather pleasant. I suppose it's a change from potions' fumes. That is not the reason I requested your presence, however."

"Requested? Your house-elf was most insistent."

"I am attempting to maintain a level of courtesy, Severus. Courtesy that you seemed to have overlooked yesterday."

"I beg your pardon? I fail to understand what I have done to offend you, Minerva."

The headmistress stood and moved around her desk to stand before the bristling professor. "I am referring to your personal problem. The personal problem I suspect involves not a Muggle as you allowed me to believe, but a student at this very school."

Fuck! "A student?" His tone was just the right side of irritated.

"Not just any student, Severus Snape. Hermione Granger."

Double fuck! Occlumency shields firmly in place and expression neutral, Snape lifted his head to meet her eyes. "Do you believe for one moment your precious Gryffindor would find *me* appealing?"

"I admit I find it hard to believe." McGonagall's conscience prickled at his subtle wince. "I have no doubt some women find you attractive, Severus, but Hermione is a young, innocent girl with her entire life before her. How could you?"

Tell me something I don't know, woman. Sooner or later she'll wake up and realise she's in bed with a man twice her age who can only offer her cauldron full of guilt and past regrets. His shoulders slumped as reality struck with the force of a well-placed Stunner. *She will, and she'll hate me.*

He looked up to meet the penetrating gaze of the witch who had once been his own teacher. She'd always had the gift of making him feel twelve again when necessary.

"Damn it, Minerva, it wasn't supposed to happen. It's my fault entirely; I should have stopped it before it went too far, but I... I was weak."

Returning to the chair behind her desk, Minerva sat, spine rigid, visibly struggling for control. "I am very disappointed in you, Severus. Of all the professors I have had the privilege to work with, you're the last I would have expected to have this conversation with."

"Because my appearance and demeanour render me safe?" Bitterness rendered his voice hoarse.

"Because you have always conducted yourself with honour and propriety, Severus." A rising chill separated them. "Until now. This is inexcusable. I cannot condone your conduct. By all rights I should report this to the Board of Governors immediately."

"What are you waiting for?" Snape sneered and walked over to the fireplace, staring into the flames for several long moments.

The silenced crackled between them. Not since the despair of the days of his own tenure in the head's office had there been such tension between the two.

Finally, Minerva spoke. "I need to hear Miss Granger's side of the story." She glanced at the tome on her desk. "Dilly!"

With a pop, the house-elf reappeared. "Yes, Headmistress?"

"Fetch Hermione Granger. She'll probably be in the Great Hall for dinner by now."

Dilly nodded and disappeared.

A few minutes later, the grinding of the circular stairs announced the younger witch's arrival. With a smile, she entered the office. "You wanted me, Professor?" The scent still lingering in the air drew her eyes to the fireplace where Snape's watchful gaze met hers with a warning.

The fractional widening of Hermione's smile and quirk of her eyebrow as her nostrils flared was not lost on the headmistress. "I believe you know Professor Snape, Miss Granger?"

Hermione frowned. "Of course I do, Professor McGonagall. I'm in his Potions class."

"A fact I am hoping you have not forgotten. You are his student."

"Yes." *Is this leading where I think it's leading? If it is, we're in big trouble.*

"The problem I have, Miss Granger, is that I believe you know Professor Snape rather better than one would expect, given your current status as teacher and student. Would that be true?"

Hermione swallowed hard. "Er... yes. Of course. I've seen him at Grimmauld Place over the years and at Order meetings, so I suppose I do know him better than some other students."

"Miss Granger! Do not prevaricate!" McGonagall slapped her hand down on her desk. "You and Severus Snape are involved in an inappropriate relationship. True or false?"

Snape's almost imperceptible nod told Hermione he had already answered that question.

Straightening her shoulders, Hermione walked over to where her professor stood and deliberately took his hand. With a brief squeeze, she turned back to the headmistress. "I do not consider it inappropriate. We are both consenting *adults*, after all."

"You are his student! He should never have approached you. It is wrong, Miss Granger."

Hermione shook her head. "But that's the whole point, Professor. He had no idea who I was until after... well, after it was too late."

"What do you mean? How could he not know you?"

"Hermione, there's no need..."

"Hush, Severus. Let me explain. Professor McGonagall, I met up with Severus over the summer when I applied for a job."

"What job?"

Snape's resigned nod spurred her on.

"Severus paints. Brilliantly. But he does it in a Muggle studio, using another name."

"You paint?" Confused, Minerva looked at Snape for confirmation.

"Like I said, brilliantly. He advertised for a model, and I went for an interview without realising who he was." Carefully editing out references to the exact nature of Sidney Reilly's paintings, Hermione explained why she had disguised herself and how the relationship had developed over many hours of posing and the tea and discussions after.

"And you did not consider it appropriate to reveal your true self to Severus?"

"I couldn't. At first, I was desperate for a job, then as time went on, I didn't want to risk him sending me away. I'd thought he would never need to know it was me."

Minerva's eyes narrowed as she remembered one detail. "The weekend home for your family reunion?"

Hermione blushed. "My fault again. I persuaded Mum to tell you that so I could go to Severus's exhibition. I couldn't risk anyone asking too many questions about Sidney Reilly."

"Give me one good reason why I should not expel you right now!" The headmistress was furious. Not only had her prize student lied to her, she had done so to arrange an illicit meeting with her teacher.

"I have none, Professor. However, Severus had no involvement in it. As far as he knew at that time, I was a Muggle. It was only after... well, later that night, he realised I was a witch."

"Which is when he should have come to me."

"But he still didn't know who I was. I ran off before he could find out. I spent the next few weeks terrified he would recognise me."

Minerva sighed. "I don't know what to believe. Exactly *when* did he realise who you were, Miss Granger?"

"Just before Christmas. He wasn't happy." Hermione offered a little smile to Snape.

"Not happy? I was bloody furious."

Remembering the kiss at New Year, Minerva's ire rose again. "You must have known who she was at New Year, Severus."

"And why do you think I didn't want to accompany you that night, Minerva?"

"Nevertheless, you have obviously continued an intimate relationship since then."

Hermione crossed her fingers behind her back. "Professor McGonagall, I can honestly say we have not had sexual intercourse since Severus determined my true identity. I will take Veritaserum if needed."

"You did before?" Minerva quelled her embarrassment to ask the question.

"Once. Or twice." Hermione smiled up at Snape, who blushed as deeply as his employer.

"I still must report the matter."

Playing her last card, Hermione released Snape's hand and approached the headmistress's desk. In a low voice, she asked. "Despite your own experience in the same situation?"

Minerva's eyes widened. "What do you know of that?"

"I have my sources."

Studying the determined expression of the girl before her, Minerva knew she had been outplayed.

"Very well. If you insist on taking that stance, Miss Granger, I must refer you to the section in the Charter you were so assiduously studying."

Snape had joined them at the desk. "What Charter?"

"The Charter of Hogwarts. Your resourceful *young* witch has discovered a loophole in the regulations pertaining to staff/student relationships."

"Which is?"

"Section 247b: Clause 22. *A staff member and a student must not become involved in a relationship which transgresses the student teacher boundary. The exception to this rule applies only when the student in question is of age and has given full consent. In this case, the couple must immediately marry to provide the Board of Governors proof of the legitimacy of the relationship. The student must be removed from any classes taught by the staff member, or if this would impair the student's learning, he or she is to have their work marked by an independent and qualified person.* That's your choice, Severus. You stay completely away from her until she graduates or you marry her."

Snape stood stock still, all colour draining from his face as he read the page indicated. His fists clenched on the desk as his hair swung forward, covering his face. Shaking his head slowly from side to side, he turned and faced the two women.

Hermione's smile had returned, and her eyes shone until she looked up and met the confusion and self-recrimination in Snape's. "Severus?"

"No. That is not appropriate. Do what you will, Minerva, but keep Hermione out of it." Snape turned on his heel and left before either witch had the opportunity to reply.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. As always, my thanks go to quaffswinegaily for her input and karelia for her comma wisdom.

Chapter Twenty-eight: Men Are From Mars; Women Are From Venus

Chapter 28 of 41

Severus's refusal creates all sorts of misunderstandings.

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Chapter Twenty-eight: Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus

Hermione groaned and forced tear-swollen lids apart the next morning as her alarm clock squealed its disapproval of her tardiness. A splash of cold water drove the last of her hard-won sleep from her mind, and a quick shower served to restore her appearance to somewhere near normal.

Sitting before her mirror, brushing her hair, she remembered the stunned silence in the headmistress's office after Snape's hasty departure.

It had been several seconds before Minerva McGonagall had closed the *Charter of Hogwarts* with a snap and harrumphed her disapproval.

"I see. You would do well, Miss Granger, to take heed of *Professor* Snape's wishes. Attend your classes and work hard for your N.E.W.T.s. If anything is to become of this *relationship* of yours, it will have to wait until you finish your schooling."

Hermione had reined in her hurt and pasted a cold smile on her face. "With all due respect, Professor McGonagall, I do not believe you are in a position to advise me in such matters. If I may excuse myself?"

Ignoring the shocked older witch, Hermione had managed to maintain her composure until she was well away from the spiral staircase. Even then, she had only allowed a few tears to trickle down her cheeks as she returned to her room through mealtime-empty corridors.

Locking and Silencing her door, Hermione had finally unwrapped the tight seal on her emotions, allowing her face to crumple and tears to flow in earnest.

"Dammit!" Tossing the brush aside after it caught on yet another tangle, Hermione stood and walked over to her window. As if nothing momentous had occurred, the predawn winter landscape glistened with frost and crisp night air. Lights twinkled in the dark from various windows around the castle, indicating the gradual stirring of its inhabitants. Leaning against the cold glass, Hermione took several slow, cleansing breaths.

I will not let them win.

Them?

Who? McGonagall? Severus?

Why did he walk away? It was the perfect loophole. Surely he wasn't only interested in an easy shag.

Was he?

No. I know he loves me. I do. He must know I'd accept him. What in Merlin's name is he afraid of?

Or is he one of those stubborn bloody men who refuse to be told what to do? Would he throw away our chance to be together for the sake of his pride?

Probably.

Well, if that's the way he wants to play it.

Resolving not to reveal any weakness before the headmistress, her friends, or her would-be lover, Hermione steeled her expression and left her room, head held high.

"Oh, there you are, Granger. We wondered where you'd disappeared to at dinner last night. If Luna hadn't seen the headmistress's house elf come to fetch you, we'd have sent out a search party by now." Blaise linked arms with Hermione as she passed through the common room, his teasing words partly belied by the worried frown creasing his brow.

Hermione shrugged. "I came back to my room before you lot had finished eating. I had study to do."

"And that doesn't explain why you didn't answer the door when we knocked." He turned her to face him and tipped her chin up with one finger. "Or those puffy eyes. What happened, Hermione?"

She shook his hand away. "Nothing I want to talk about at the moment." Meeting the concern in his dark eyes, she sighed. "Please, Blaise."

Always sensitive to her moods, Blaise nodded and reached for her hand. With a gentle squeeze, he asked, "Want me to keep the others off your back for a while?"

"Could you?"

"No worries. Now, let's go and eat. I'm starving."

At that, Hermione had to smile. "You're starting to sound like Ron."

Avoiding Snape's gaze at breakfast was easier than she had expected. He was nowhere to be seen. Blaise's raised eyebrow as he followed her gaze to the empty seat at the staff table met with no response.

Shrugging, the Slytherin loaded a plate with food and placed it in front of Hermione. "Eat, Granger. We have Potions this morning. You'll need all the fortification you can get, I suspect."

Hermione managed a grim smile despite the sudden pallor of her face. Picking up her fork, she attacked the bacon with a vengeance. "Perhaps I will at that."

Deep in the dungeons, Snape's plate was less fortunate. Shattered into tiny pieces beside the hearth with bacon and eggs strewn across the floor, it spoke volumes for the mental state of the room's occupant, currently pacing the room and muttering to himself.

"Damned Minerva. Damned Charter. Damned rules! Married? At her age? Bloody ridiculous!"

Turning on his heel, Snape felt the crunch of broken china and squelch of pulped food under his foot. Grimacing at the mess, he Vanished the lot and continued his rant in silence.

I've spent my fucking life following orders. Does Minerva really expect me to marry solely because a fucking thousand-year-old book decrees it? This one thing, one bloody thing, I'd finally expected to decide for myself. At the right time.

Not while she's at school.

She can't want that. Not to be forced to marry.

I want to do it properly. Bended knee and a ring and without interfering old harridans and sniggering house-elves as witness.

Damn them all.

Snape's relentless motion came to a sudden halt as his brain caught up with his meandering thoughts.

Shite. I really do want to marry her.

Where did that come from?

Snape entered the classroom from his office and stood in front of his desk in silence, his grim expression daring any foolish student to speak out of turn.

"Today you will complete the Contraceptive Draughts you left in stasis last week. The instructions are on the blackboard. As most of you are likely to benefit from the use of this potion at some stage in the near future, I trust you have all endeavoured to research the next stage in the brewing process over the weekend and will not have any mishaps. Is that correct, Mr Longbottom?"

Neville met Snape's eye and nodded calmly. "Yes, sir." Four months of working with Draco Malfoy had finally succeeded where five years of Hermione's well-intentioned enthusiasm hadn't. Neville had realised he was quite a capable brewer, given the right incentive. And the blond's skilled hands and confidence in his ability had been exactly the incentive he had needed.

"Then begin. I expect a satisfactory sample from each work station by the end of the class." Without a glance in Hermione's direction, Snape sat behind his desk and reached for the inevitable pile of essays there.

She's ignoring me. Why can't she see I'm only thinking of her? Protecting her. If we married now, her reputation would be ruined and her integrity in question. Her N.E.W.T. results would prove she gained no favour from me, but the stain would linger. It always does.

I must talk to her.

"I can see why he was such a good spy." Blaise tilted his head toward the apparently unperturbed Potions professor twenty minutes into the lesson. "Whatever's going on between you two hasn't seemed to interrupt his classroom demeanour."

Hermione shrugged and kept her head down as she shredded and chopped. "Maybe he doesn't care."

"Bollocks." Blaise smirked. "I said 'seemed'. He keeps glancing over here through his hair. And he hasn't written so much as a word on that essay in the last fifteen minutes. For what it's worth, I'd say he's just as upset as you are, Granger."

Shoulders relaxing just a little, she chanced a peek in Snape's direction to catch his dark gaze fixed on her face, the unmasked longing she found there striking deep into her heart. Looking away before she could betray herself, Hermione resolutely focussed on her brewing, thankful her potion had reached a critical stage allowing no distraction. By the time she set her stirring rod aside and turned the heat down to a gentle simmer, Snape had left his desk and was stalking around the opposite side of the classroom.

Once her potion was complete, Hermione hurried to the front of the class to deposit her sample on Snape's desk while he was otherwise occupied. As she placed the vial in the waiting rack, familiar fingers closed over hers, and a warm, lean body pressed against her back. A surge of desire so intense, so primitive, had her biting her lip to stifle the soft moan threatening to draw the attention of her classmates.

"We need to talk, Hermione."

The very fact he had used her given name in class, albeit in a low murmur which caressed her ear, almost melted her resolve.

Almost.

Pulling her hand from beneath his and stepping away from his plea took all her strength.

"You had your chance to talk yesterday. You chose not to."

Glancing over his right shoulder at the class still busy bottling and labelling their samples, Snape shook his head. "I know. I merely... Dammit, Weasley, can't you watch where you're going!"

Ron, having approached Snape from his left, watched in horror as his sample oozed in long, viscous strands from the back of his professor's robes down to the floor, forming an impressive puce puddle by his boots.

Not waiting to find out what manner of punishment Snape meted out to the horrified redhead, Hermione gathered her books and bag and left the classroom, uncomfortably aware of the large part of her sighing in relief at the seemingly innocuous nature of Ron's brew, despite its variance from the pure magenta a correctly brewed Contraceptive Draught should display. Anger at the man's pig-headedness did not equate to wishing him harm.

"Damn, damn, fuck, damn and... and... damn!" Snape slammed the door of his office closed and threw his potion-sticky robes in the general direction of the bathroom. "Bloody Weasley!"

Slumping into his armchair, he allowed himself a good ten minutes to brood, then summoned enough motivation to find a new set of robes for his next class.

First years. Oh, joy. Why do I do this job again? That's it. For the satisfaction of nurturing eager young minds into capable adults.

What a load of shite.

Several mind-numbingly tedious hours later, Snape returned to his quarters to eat alone once more. Despite avoiding *her* eyes and Minerva's smug smile, he pushed his food around his plate and tasted little of what actually reached his mouth. Leaving the dishes to the house-elves, Snape tossed back the rest of the glass of wine he had in his hand and headed for temporary oblivion amongst his paints and brushes.

He didn't show for any meals again today. I hope he's all right. Hermione rested her chin on her left hand as she picked at her meal. I know I'm supposed to be angry with him, but I can't stop worrying. Perhaps I should go and see him.

"I know that look, Granger. You're about to give in. Don't you think it's time you let him make the first move?" Blaise leaned back in his seat and cocked an eyebrow at the anxious witch beside him.

Hermione sighed and pushed her plate away. "He did. Or he tried to in class on Monday. But Ron... interrupted."

"So you ran away? That's not like you." Blaise's tone gentled as he laid his hand on hers. "I know you said you didn't want to talk about it, but maybe I can help."

Hermione turned her palm to Blaise's and offered a small smile. "Let's go back to my room. It's time I told you what happened."

Stepping back from the easel, Snape wiped a bead of sweat from his brow with a paint-stained finger. Hermione's eyes mocked him from the canvas as he sagged into the chair in the corner of the room, resting his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

What am I doing? I have no right to paint her like that. Not after what I said.

What is wrong with me? I can't eat. I can't sleep. I can't concentrate. It's been weeks, and all I've succeeded in doing is avoiding the issue. She looks at me with that expression of disappointment, but I just can't face another rejection.

She doesn't understand why I can't marry her yet.

He studied his latest work with a critical eye. Despite feeling his life was spiralling out of control, it was his best painting yet. He had caught Hermione's essential nature in bare strokes of pigmented oils: inquisitive, determined, passionate, loving.

Passion for *him*. Loving *him*.

His brushes hit the floor with a clatter as an unwelcome conclusion suddenly prevailed in the morass of emotions swamping Snape's brain.

Fuck! She believes I don't want to marry her at all! She must think I only wanted her for her body. No wonder she's furious.

I have to find her and make her listen to me.

The corridors of Hogwarts loomed dark and lonely as Snape prowled, watching and waiting for his opportunity to no avail. Hermione had been nowhere to be seen all evening, not even in the library.

Fists clenched at his sides, Snape stopped to lean against the cool of the stone wall for a few moments. Decision made, he headed for the senior students' common room.

"Have you talked to him yet?" Blaise asked as he claimed Hermione's chair and put his feet up on her desk.

On the bed, Hermione rolled onto her side and put the book she had been reading aside. "I've barely seen him. You know he disappears into his office as soon as Potions is finished, and he's hardly been to any meals for weeks. How can I talk to him if he's nowhere to be found?"

"You could always go down to the dungeons and see him there."

"I know. It's just..." Hermione sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "... I don't know whether I'd be welcome."

"Don't be daft, Granger. He did say he wanted to talk to you." Blaise walked over to the bed and sat beside Hermione, wrapping one arm around her shoulders. "And since when has my favourite Gryffindor let a little thing like a grumpy Potions master stop her?"

Leaning into Blaise's comfort, Hermione sighed. "I'm not afraid of him. I suppose it's more fear he will tell me it's all over; he doesn't want me any more."

Blaise shook his head. "You've really overthought this, Hermione. You *know* he loves you. You *know* he wants you. Merlin only knows what's going on inside his bloody head, but I guarantee he hasn't suddenly decided he'd be better off without Hermione Granger in his life."

She smiled, then kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Blaise. You always know exactly what to say."

"You're not the only know-it-all at this school, you know."

A peremptory knock at the door startled them both.

"Who's that? I thought Luna and Ginny had gone back to their dorms."

"No idea." Another knock disturbed the silence of the late evening. "Shouldn't you answer that before whoever it is wakes everyone else in the dorm?"

Hermione swung the door open to find an impatient Severus Snape standing outside her room with a pale-faced Ron alongside.

"Sorry, Hermione. He insisted I show him which room was yours," Ron whispered as he slunk away.

Snape waited until Ron had disappeared back into the common room before meeting her eyes. "Well, are you going to invite me in?"

Stepping back into the room, Hermione gestured for him to enter. His lips had almost curved into a smile, then he spotted Blaise Zabini lounging on one elbow on Hermione's bed.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Thanks as always to quaffswinegaily for her input and karelia for her beta skills. Love you both!

Chapter Twenty-nine: Carried Away

Chapter 29 of 41

Severus and Hermione finally talk.

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Chapter Twenty-nine: Carried Away

Snape's eyes settled on the young wizard lounging on Hermione's bed. "I suppose I should have expected to see you here."

Blaise met his head of house's glare with a shrug. "Someone has to be here for Hermione."

"Take care with your tone, Mr Zabini. Your housemates would not suffer the loss of house points lightly."

"Do you really think that is appropriate, *sir*? If I'm not mistaken, you've come to discuss your relationship with my friend here. House points are hardly relevant." Blaise continued to look at ease on the bed despite Snape's dominant position.

"What I have come for is no business of yours, Zabini. Leave now, or suffer the consequences."

"No."

"No?" Snape's back stiffened in disbelief. "You dare defy me?"

Blaise finally levered himself off the bed. "Yes, I believe I do."

"Blaise, perhaps you'd better go." Hermione's attempt to defuse the testosterone-laden tension fell on deaf ears.

"I'm not leaving, love, until I force some sense into this man's skull. I see you pushing your food around your plate every meal and studying until you can hardly keep your eyes open. You try to hide it, but this problem you have with Professor Snape is tearing you apart." He turned to Snape, who had subsided into stunned silence. "And you're just as bad, avoiding meals and stalking around the hallways looking for anyone you can offload your foul mood onto. Don't you think it's time you grew a pair and explained yourself to the woman you profess to love?"

"Zabini..."

"I'm leaving. Take off as many points as you like. You should know by now I don't give a toss about the House Cup or my housemates' opinions. Give me as many detentions as you like, but stay here and talk to Hermione. Please... sir." Enclosing Hermione in a tight hug and ignoring the Potions master's venomous gaze, he whispered, "Don't take any nonsense from him, Granger."

"Thanks, Blaise." His Gryffindorish display brought a smile to her lips as she closed the door behind him and turned back to Snape.

"You have quite the champion there." Snape's sneer broke the uncomfortable silence settling over the room.

"Blaise is a good friend. He's just trying to help."

"I'd rather he didn't try to help in your bedroom at this hour."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You don't think for one minute he..."

"I might have done before Christmas, but I can see now he's moved on. Rumour has it he and the Lovegood girl are something of an item."

"Rumour would be correct. It's early days, but there's definitely a spark there."

"Good. Perhaps she'll take his mind off our business." Snape pulled out the chair from the desk and sat down. "But once again we're avoiding the subject. I came here for a reason."

"I assumed you did." Hermione sat on the edge of the bed. "I only hope Ron hasn't collapsed in the common room in terror at the thought of you cornering me in my..." Her voice faltered when she noticed the slight tremor of Snape's hand as he wiped his brow.

"Why are you here, Severus?" She searched his face for some indication of his intentions. Finding none, she closed her eyes and waited.

"Look at me, Hermione." His words were simple, but somehow intimate in the confines of her bedroom. "What do you see?"

She frowned and met his gaze. Studying his beloved face, she noted the creases on his brow, deepened over the last few weeks. She saw the way his hair fell over his face, lank and uncared for. Noting the paint stains discolouring his fingertips, she smiled a little.

"You've been painting."

He nodded. "It helps."

Looking at his face again, Hermione discovered his eyes, for once unguarded, need and desire bathing her in their warmth.

"I see you, Severus. I see creativity and passion and brilliance. I see loyalty and courage. But do you know what I see most of all? I see love."

He abandoned his chair to kneel before her, reaching up to cup her cheek. "You're a remarkable young woman, Hermione Granger. Know that I do love you, will always love you, but do not ask me to consider this ill-founded notion of marriage."

She pulled away from the joy of his touch. "But why? Surely the circumstances don't matter. We want to be together. This is our solution."

"I want more than anything on this earth to bind you to myself and never let you go, but this is not the time. You have your whole life ahead of you. It's not right to commit yourself to someone so much older and more damaged while you're still at school. Imagine what it would do to your reputation."

"And if I tell you I don't give a shit about my reputation, and I'd rather spend my time looking forward to a life at your side. Would that make a difference?"

"Hermione, you're only nineteen. You have years ahead of you to grow and mature. And change your mind."

"And you're only thirty-nine. A young man in wizarding years. Don't tell me you're too old. Don't tell me you're too damaged. We were all damaged by Voldemort one way or another. I saw far too many people die. I hunted Horcruxes. I wiped my parents' memories and sent them to Australia with no guarantee I could retrieve them, for Merlin's sake. I'm no naïve young girl!"

With her brown eyes sparking temper and her hair escaping its tie in unruly curls, Severus's head lost the battle with his heart and body. He reached up and claimed her mouth with his, igniting the ever-smouldering bonfire of need in both their bodies. Groaning, he tasted her sweetness with lips and tongue while his hands sought the silk of the skin under her shirt.

Her instant response sensitised every nerve in his body, and the caress of her fingers down his bare chest overwhelmed any errant sliver of conscience. Flat male nipples pebbled as a tongue swept them into arousal, and his reciprocating gesture drew a gasp from his wick.

Clothing, suddenly superfluous, magically disappeared until Snape lay on the bed in only his skin and a passion-dazed expression beside an equally bare Hermione. Finding her wet and wanting when his hand and mouth drifted down from their exploration of the delicate skin of her belly almost had him exploding before she performed her own voyage of rediscovery.

As her mouth claimed his rampant desire, the last lingering vestige of honour and duty decided to raise its unwelcome head and shout for attention. Louder and louder it clamoured between ragged breaths and mind-addling pleasure until the pressure became too much, and he ejaculated his seed and shouts of denial simultaneously with her release.

"No. No. NO!"

Lifting her head a few minutes later, Hermione stared at his face with a bemused expression and a droplet of semen on her lower lip. "No?"

"No. I mean yes. Oh, shite." He flopped back onto the bed and covered his face with his arm.

"What's the matter?" A mischievous finger trailed down his belly to linger in wonder at his softened penis, mapping its length and teasing the still sensitive tip.

"I didn't..." He captured her hand in his. "Don't. I can't think when you do that."

Pouting, she pulled his hand to her body and held him close against her breast. "Thinking is overrated. Just feel."

He indulged her with a tweak of her nipple, then reclaimed his hand. "Hermione, I didn't come here for sex." He raised his hand as she opened her mouth to speak. "I know. I started it. I take full responsibility. But we have to stop giving in to our libidos every time we get within arm's reach. Minerva may be a hypocrite, but the rules are clear. Either we marry, or we stay away from each other."

"Then we marry."

"It's not that simple."

"Severus, it *is* that simple. I love you. You love me. We want to be together. Yes, people will talk and disapprove and probably cause trouble. But together we can face it. Together we are strong."

"You're young. Too young to be committed to marriage with anyone."

Hermione shook her head at his persistence. Suddenly, a shred of memory fell into place, producing a triumphant smile. "A hand-fasting then? I think I've read about those types of ritual where a couple is joined for a year and a day and after that decide whether they will formally wed. Neither of us would be tied to a lifelong commitment that way."

Severus nodded slowly. "That may be sufficient to appease Minerva and my conscience."

"I'll start researching it tomorrow. Meanwhile..." She shifted closer, pressing the warmth of her body against his cooling skin.

Turning and gathering her into his embrace, Severus pressed his lips to her forehead, a somewhat chaste gesture considering where his erection was nestling. As her knee bent and her leg lifted over his hip, he found her tight heat enclosing him for the first time in months and surrendered to the inevitable.

Waking in an unfamiliar room with a naked witch draped across his chest and hips startled Snape into an attempt to sit upright and reach for his wand.

"Wassamatter?"

Hermione's sleep-muddled voice reminded him where he was. A slow smile crept across his face as he relaxed back onto the pillow and stroked the tousled hair strewn across his chest.

Allowing her a few more minutes rest, his mind recaptured the moments of passion the night before as they had made love into the early hours of the morning, urgency and heat melding with exquisite tenderness until they had fallen asleep entwined in each other's embrace.

Nudging her shoulder, Snape watched her eyes reluctantly open. "Wake up; it's nearly dawn."

"S'not morning yet."

"Do you really think I should wait until your friends are up and about before I leave?"

This time, Hermione sat bolt upright. "Shite! We fell asleep!"

Amusement softened his expression as he propped himself up beside her and dropped his gaze to her exposed nipples peaking in the cool air. "It seems we did, not that we should be surprised after all that physical activity."

Noting his concentration on her chest and the tent appearing in the sheet where it barely covered his groin, Hermione grinned. "I thought you considered yourself old. Looks like one part of you doesn't know when it's had enough."

Snape looked down and with a smirk slowly pushed the sheet aside, allowing his erection to spring up unencumbered. Her sharp intake of breath and restless shifting beside him encouraged a long finger to circle a nipple and then delve under the flimsy cotton still covering her to find her equally ready.

"Tempting though it may be," he murmured, fingers sliding in and out of her heat, and his own desire bobbing in encouragement, "I must use your bathroom and remove myself from this room."

"Not until you finish what you started, you prat." Hermione countered with a swirling fingertip and a firm stroke or two.

"Bloody hell, woman. Keep that up and I'll not last."

"Neither will I, so..." In a matter of seconds she had straddled his hips and proceeded to reduce him to a state of blissful incoherence.

He refused her entry into the bathroom afterwards on the grounds he would never manage a quick shower with her assistance. Once dressed again in immutable black, Snape drew Hermione to him for one last prolonged kiss.

"Severus?" Hermione looked up at him as she stepped back.

"Yes?"

"You don't regret last night, do you?" Her voice was steady, but anxiety clouded her eyes.

"How could I? Yes, we shouldn't have done it, but I'd never regret a single moment spent with you in my arms." He glanced out of the window at the lightening sky. "But I really must go."

He let himself out of the room after checking all was quiet in the corridor beyond. A noise behind him stalled his feet just as he closed the door. Turning, he swore under his breath as Neville Longbottom made an equally cautious exit from the room opposite Hermione's.

Neville pulled up short as he came face to face with his Potions professor. Taking in the man's creased clothing and shower-damp hair, Neville smiled. "Oh, good morning, Professor," he whispered, then walked toward the common room.

Snape followed the young man, toying with the idea of a quick *Obliviate* briefly until he noticed him stop and turn with a finger to his lips.

"Stay put." Neville walked out into the common room and in a much louder voice began speaking. "Ron? What are you doing out here? Isn't it a bit early for you?"

The redhead unfolded himself from the armchair he'd been sleeping in and rose to his feet. "Was jus' waiting for Snape to leave. He was in *Hermione's* room! No idea why. Thought I'd better check she was okay, but must have fallen asleep."

Neville had circled his friend slowly until Ron had his back to both the corridor where Snape was waiting and the entrance to the common room. Placing an arm around

Ron's shoulders, he waved Snape to the door as he encouraged the younger wizard back to his room. "You must have dropped off pretty quickly, Ron. I saw Snape leave not long after he'd arrived. He probably wanted to talk to Hermione about her Potions project."

"What Potions project?"

"No idea, but she's bound to be doing one, isn't she?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah. That's probably it. Thanks, mate." Without looking back, Ron shuffled off to his room to catch another hour or two of sleep.

Snape slumped against the wall of the main corridor for a moment as he pulled his scattered thoughts together.

Longbottom? Now I owe Longbottom again? Although, if I'm not much mistaken, that was Malfoy's room he was leaving. I suppose I should have seen that coming, the way they've been behaving in class.

Still, Longbottom?

Perhaps we have a mutual understanding then.

The shuffle of Argus Filch's footsteps motivated him into moving in the opposite direction without further contemplation of Neville Longbottom's or his own sex life.

"Late night, was it?" Blaise winked as he grabbed some bacon before Ron emptied the plate.

Caught mid-yawn, Hermione could only nod. "Something like that."

"I don't remember seeing him leave last night." Blaise dropped his voice to a low murmur and raised both eyebrows as she blushed. "You do realise if he's in a filthy mood today, you'll only have yourself to blame for keeping him up all night. And stop looking so smug, Granger, you know I didn't mean it that way. He'll have a hard time teaching if... Oh, fuck, I give up. You're impossible this morning." Shaking his head at the giggling witch beside him, Blaise turned to speak to Luna.

Hermione's hands shook with mirth as she tried to pour herself some pumpkin juice. Sipping a little in her plate, she managed a few swallows before she glanced up at the staff table to see Snape leaning back in his chair looking relaxed for a change. Her smile dissolved as she caught the headmistress's expression.

Bloody hell. He's sitting up there looking for all the world as if he's been shagged senseless. Which he has. Whatever happened to Mr Poker Face the bloody spy? Professor McGonagall is already looking suspicious. Come on, Severus, say something horrid, for both our sakes.

As if receiving her thoughts, Snape suddenly straightened up in his chair and scowled. Turning to Pomona Sprout, seated beside him chatting to Hagrid, he snarled a request. "Do I need to *Accio* the teapot, or could you cease prattling for one moment in order to pass it this way?"

"No need to be rude, Severus. Did you get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?" Pomona passed the pot with a huff.

Without replying, Snape poured his tea and lifted the cup to his lips, eyes roaming down to the Gryffindor table to find Hermione watching him with an anxious frown. His eyelid drifted down in the barest of winks before he set down his cup and tackled his breakfast with rather more appetite than usual.

Thank Merlin. He finally started using the brain in his head. What is it with men? One decent shag and they lose all ability to think.

Still, I'm almost as bad. As soon as that man touches me, I lose all my resolve. I must get to the library today to look up handfasting. At least that way we could live together without offending too many people and learn what it's really like to be a couple. I'm sure he has some weird habits I need to know about.

I know I have.

He'll probably hate living with a girl my age. I'm sure I would if I was a thirty-nine year old professor. I'll have to make a real effort to keep my things in order and think before I act.

Oh, shite. Sooner or later he will have to at least try and make peace with Ron and Harry.

I think my job's easier.

A/N: This was written for the TPP Every Flavour Auction for shalimar1981. Thanks to my alpha and beta, quaffswinegaily and karelia. I don't have a gamma...

Chapter Thirty: The Sorting Hat Always Knows Best

Chapter 30 of 41

Hermione discovers she is more Gryffindor than she thought.

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Chapter Thirty: The Sorting Hat Always Knows Best

Snape leaned back in his chair and watched his students chop and shred and stir. All eyes were on their cauldrons as they waited for just the right moment to add their ingredients in the complex Blood-Replenishing Potion. Hermione and Blaise Zabini were, as expected, well ahead in the brewing process. Potter and Weasley, having been ditched by their frustrated Ravenclaw partners weeks earlier, had already made two errors as far as he could tell; their potion was boiling rather than simmering and about to turn into an unpleasant smelling brown sludge.

Four... three... two... and there it is. Another fail for Potter and his sidekick. Look at them, completely bewildered by their result. Reading the instructions properly would have helped.

Longbottom and Malfoy seem to have managed a half-decent brew so far. But why is Malfoy allowing his partner to add the ingredients? That's asking for disaster. I'd better get over there before the inevitable happens.

Snape left his desk and glided over to where Draco was stirring while watching Neville slice echinacea roots.

"Careful, Nev, keep them even."

"There, I think they'll do."

"Now, add them slowly a few at a time while I continue stirring."

Neville did as instructed, concentration wrinkling his brow as he dropped three or four pieces of root into the cauldron at steady intervals, stopping at the precise moment the brew changed from a dull brown to rich russet.

"Well done, Mr Longbottom." Snape nodded and continued past their bench to that of their still-puzzled housemates.

"Did he just...?" Neville stared after his professor, mouth agape.

"He did." Draco grinned. "I have no idea what you've done to change his opinion of you lately, but whatever it is, keep it up, will you?"

Neville nodded, words still out of his grasp, then turned back to his ingredients.

Snape advanced on the next workstation, aware his lover was watching his progress. Tempting as it was to knock the witless wonders' heads together, he stayed his hand.

"I see you two have managed to create yet another new potion. What shall we call this one, Potter?"

"Pot o' Shite?" Ron's murmur would have escaped all but the keen hearing of the Potions master.

"Indeed, Weasley. An apt name. Now, clear it up, and then you can spend the rest of the lesson on an essay detailing exactly what you did wrong."

Turning on his heel, Snape continued along the line of benches, making an occasional comment as he passed.

"Is he sick?" Ron's expression mirrored that of Neville's a few minutes earlier.

"Dunno. But at least we didn't lose points or get detention." Harry Vanished the contents of their cauldron and lugged it over to the cleaning sinks.

Still shaking his head, Ron gathered up the leftover ingredients, muttering to himself. "He must be ill. It's the only explanation."

When Snape finally reached Hermione and Blaise, they were in the final, delicate stages of their brewing. Standing a few feet away, Snape allowed himself a moment to study Hermione's hands. The same hands he had painted so many months earlier in such detail, along with various other more intimate parts of her body. The pressure in his trousers alerted him too late to the folly of such a train of thought. Snape was painfully aroused in a classroom full of students, any of whom could notice his condition with a glance in the wrong direction. Approaching Hermione from behind as she made the final stir and turned down the heat under the cauldron, he threw caution aside as his body's clamour for attention overrode his native caution. Leaning over her shoulder, he inspected the potion while ensuring she felt every rock-hard inch of his desire against her soft curves.

"Very good, Miss Granger, Mr Zabini."

Her subtle pressure back against his groin rendered him unable to speak. With a curt nod, Snape found the sanctuary of his desk, parting his legs a little to relieve the pressure on his heavy, unsatisfied erection and aching balls. Teaching Hermione's class had become both heaven and hell.

As the class prepared to leave, Snape noticed Hermione frantically scribbling on a piece of parchment. Without so much as a glance in his direction, she stood, heaved her bag onto her shoulder, and followed the last of her classmates from the room. Curious, he walked over to the desk to pick up the parchment so vital a moment earlier yet discarded as she left.

It's been two weeks. I know how you are feeling. Frustrated. Restless. Hard as hell.

Go to your office after your last class.

He read the sentence again. Why did he need to go to his office at the end of the day? Trying to read on, he found the words blurred and unreadable.

Clever girl. No clues until I comply. Very well, I shall be patient.

Checking the classroom a final time for any spills or remaining ingredients after his final class had left, he locked the supply cupboard and entered his office. It was empty. A niggler of something forgotten dissolved as he read the suddenly legible next sentence on the parchment he withdrew from his pocket.

Remove your trousers and pants but leave your robes on. Sit down.

With a smirk, Snape complied, his hand finding his groin as soon as he had made himself comfortable.

I didn't say you were allowed to touch! Put your hands on your desk.

"Bossy wench." Still, he complied.

That's better. Now, start some marking.

"Marking? What in Merlin's name..." Snape checked the parchment again and turned it over. Nothing more was written. *She's up to something, but what? Very well, if I must.* Ignoring the cool draught around his lower half, Snape picked up his quill and an essay. Suddenly, the draught became warm. His hand stilled, and his thighs parted as gentle hands pushed at his knees. Shifting forward in his chair, Snape's lips curled into a rare smile as he began reading the essay before him. Beneath the desk, he felt his balls cupped and caressed, then warm heat enveloped his arousal.

"Fuck, that had better be you or I'm..." A firm squeeze silenced his protest. "Marking it is then."

Snape managed to grade only one essay before his concentration surrendered to the activities of tongue, lips, and fingers under his desk. Leaning back into his chair, he looked down at the unruly curls bobbing under his desk. "Gods, woman, you'll be the death of me!" Closing his eyes, he gripped the edge of his desk as she increased her tempo.

His balls tightening and lifting at his impending climax, Snape's eyes flew open as a peremptory knock preceded Minerva McGonagall's voice.

"Severus! Are you in there?"

"Shite! Stop, Hermione!" he hissed. Sitting up in his chair and picking up his quill, he managed a strangled, "Yes, Minerva." A muffled giggle arose from between his knees as his cock was reclaimed and gently caressed by a hot tongue.

The headmistress appeared not to notice her Potion master's flushed cheeks and unsteady breathing as she dropped a large number of files onto his desk.

"What exactly are those?" If his usual bite was absent, it went unremarked.

"Files, Severus. Next year's new students. As you did not appear for the meeting we had arranged to discuss them, I decided to bring them to you."

Fuck. I knew there was something I had to do. "My apologies, Minerva. I became caught up in a little marking, as you can see." He shifted forward once more in his seat at the insistent pressure on his thighs. "... ah..." A wet finger had wormed its way behind his sac to find hitherto unexplored areas. *Oh, gods.*

"Are you all right?" Minerva frowned.

"Yes. Quite." He forced his lips to remain closed in a tight smile. "Shall we?" Opening the top file, he flipped over the pages of parchment detailing the child's family background, previous education, and magical potential.

Years as a double agent at risk of death with the slightest slip of the tongue or mind had not prepared Snape for the next thirty minutes of exquisite torture as he and Minerva checked each file for any indicators the child had any specific needs or strengths. Brought to the brink of release several times by Hermione's enthusiastic mouth and probing finger, each time checked by a firm squeeze of his shaft *where did she learn that?* he was only capable of nodding and murmuring assent where appropriate.

"You're unusually agreeable today." Minerva studied his face. "And you look peaky. I think that's enough for one session. We can continue this tomorrow." Rising, she gathered the files, taking care to mark the last one they had seen. "Perhaps an early night might not go amiss. But don't forget dinner. It wouldn't do to go to bed on an empty stomach, Severus." She turned to leave. "By the way, I trust you have the problem with Miss Granger well in hand. There's a Board of Governors meeting tomorrow." The implicit threat hung in the air between them.

"Yes, Minerva. I believe we will reach a satisfactory conclusion soon." *A lot sooner if you'd bloody leave.*

"Make sure of it. I do not want to lose my Potions master after all we've gone through in the last few years."

As she opened the door, the slow, seductive rhythm of Hermione's attentions rapidly escalated, accompanied by the finger finally slipping into him and finding just the right spot. Clutching at the edge of the desk as the door closed behind Minerva in slow motion, Snape felt his long-delayed orgasm pulsing out of control through his entire body, bringing bright spots to his eyes and tearing a cry of inarticulate joy from his lips. Long moments passed before his breathing slowed enough to allow speech.

"Holy mother of Merlin, you are insane, woman!"

Crawling out from beneath the desk and planting herself on his naked and sticky lap, Hermione grinned. "Good?"

"Outstanding, Miss Granger. But still insane. Do you know how close we were to discovery?" He paled as he noticed the parchment she had written still sitting on the desk only half covered by the essays he had been attempting to mark.

"Well, I hadn't planned on Professor McGonagall arriving, but I improvised."

"Improvisation? Is that what you call it? Torture would be more appropriate."

"Semantics, Severus. I suppose I'd better leave now. It will be dinner time soon." She dropped a kiss on his forehead and stood, straightening her skirt.

"I can't allow you to leave yet, Hermione. There is the small matter of your pleasure to attend to." Severus raised an eyebrow and reached for her waist.

She skipped out of reach. "Trust me, there's no need."

"But..."

"I have two hands, Severus." She slipped a finger into his mouth.

Tasting the evidence of her words, Snape shook his head. "Insane and multitalented."

"About time you realised that."

"And what of your research on handfasting?"

"Nearly done. I've found out a lot."

"Such as?"

"Patience, my dear Professor. I need to sort it all out before I tell you."

"Patience isn't my strong suit."

"But it can be taught." She smirked, reaching down to cup his still exposed genitals. "You're a fast learner."

"Indeed. Now, off with you before I fail my lesson."

Snape gathered his trousers and pants from under the desk, thankful Hermione had pulled them out of sight when Minerva had arrived. It took a little effort to apply his usual scowl, but soon he was presentable enough to face dinner.

Blaise moved over to make room for Hermione when she arrived for dinner. "Sit here, Granger. Luna and I were just talking about Valentine's Day."

Hermione's broad smile faltered. "Valentine's Day?"

"Yes, you know the one. Cupids and pink hearts and soppy cards. You hate it from all accounts. It's on Sunday. We're all going to Hogsmeade, but what are your plans?" He jerked his head at the staff table where Snape had just arrived, then frowned. "What *have* you been up to? He looks like the cat that got the cream."

Hermione tried to look innocent and failed miserably. "Let's just say *I* was the cat."

Ginny's fork clattered onto the table, drawing the attention of her brother, sitting a few places further down.

"Hey, Gin, stop throwing the cutlery around. You're making Harry nervous." Grinning at his own wit, Ron clapped Harry on the shoulder and winked. "She was probably overcome by the sight of your broad, manly chest, Harry. You really should buy yourself some bigger shirts."

Thankful for the distraction, Hermione focussed on her plate until Blaise's elbow found her ribs.

"Really, Granger?" He had finally caught on.

"Slow, Zabini. You're losing your touch."

Watching the Potions master actually smile as he passed the salt to Pomona Sprout, Blaise shook his head. "Lucky, lucky chap."

Hermione smirked. "You're just jealous."

"Too right I am. If it can make Snape smile, imagine what it could do for a charming fellow like me. I don't suppose..."

He deserved the thump on his arm. "Ask Luna. She might oblige."

Blaise blushed, an event not often seen, and glanced at Luna on his other side, happily chatting with Neville. "She... I... we're not..."

"Yet?"

"Yet." He recovered his equanimity. "So, I'll just have to live vicariously through you for a while. I take it things are better between you two?"

Hermione couldn't hide her smile. "Oh, gods, yes. I'm doing some research at the moment into something which may solve a few problems. No, don't ask. I'll tell you when I have something definite."

"Fair enough." Blaise nodded towards Ginny across the table. "Do you think you can put the redhead out of her misery before she expires from curiosity?"

Grinning, Hermione beckoned to Ginny and leaned over the table towards her. "Whatever you are thinking, it's probably true," she whispered. Leaving Ginny to her own lurid imaginings, Hermione tackled her meal with a better appetite than she'd had for weeks.

The topic of Valentine's Day had been completely forgotten.

An hour later, bereft of the rush of adrenaline her earlier activities had created, Hermione lay on her bed hugging her pillow.

What was I thinking? No, there was no thinking involved. It was hormones. Must have been. Since when have I done something so colossally stupid? Boring, bookish Hermione Granger kneeling under her professor's desk performing fellatio was bad enough, but to keep teasing him while Professor McGonagall was there was madness! Insane, he called me. With good reason. Then I went and boasted about it to Blaise and Ginny. What must they think of me?

Where's that maturity I'm supposed to be cultivating to prove to Severus I'm capable of making a commitment to him? I'm a bloody hormone-driven teenager, just like the rest of them, and I thought Ron was bad, bragging about his conquests to all and sundry. I'm far worse. I'm risking his job and reputation, all for a few minutes of physical satisfaction.

He always said Gryffindors are foolish, reckless, and impulsive. I just proved it. I've never done that sort of thing...

Well, there was the setting fire to his robes incident in first year. And Polyjuicing myself into a cat in second year. And stunning him in third year. And smacking Draco. And the Department of Mysteries and camping and that bloody snake and Apparating midair and the bank and, oh, hell, I am a Gryffindor.

I'm just a Gryffindor whose focus is on a man not a monster.

And what am I going to do about bloody Valentine's Day?

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Many thanks to quaffswinegaily and LivingTheDream for their input and Karelia for her beta skills.

I'm away on holiday in ten days, nearly four weeks in USA, so the next chapter may be delayed, depending on how much time I get for writing while travelling around. Hugs to all you lovely readers and reviewers! :)

Chapter Thirty-one: Plots Abound

Chapter 31 of 41

Hermione decides she needs to act more maturely.

Disclaimer: I still don't own them. I wish I did.

Chapter 31: Plots Abound

Armed with the determination to shed her hormone-driven, sex-addled immaturity in favour of her previous levelheaded intelligence, Hermione rose early to complete her homework essays and re-organise her school bag and desk. Satisfied she had restored order to at least a small section of her life, she left her room before her friends had arisen to spend an hour in the library before breakfast.

Even Madam Pince's frown at her softly exclaimed "Yes!" failed to suppress Hermione's grin. Gathering a dozen pages of carefully summarised notes and plans, she stowed them in her bag and headed to the Great Hall for a well-earned breakfast.

"Details. I want details." Ginny hauled Hermione onto the seat beside her.

Hermione smiled but shook her head. "No. You'll have to make do with what you know already. I realised last night I have to be more mature about this, or Severus will never accept me as an equal."

Ginny sighed and turned her head to the staff table. After watching Snape in silence for a moment, she nodded. "I suppose you're right." Then she winked. "Won't stop me trying though."

"Fair enough." Hermione glanced at Snape, firmly suppressing the surge of longing threatening to melt her resolve. *Now all I have to do is control my urge to shag him senseless at every opportunity.*

Ginny watched her friend's expressive face and giggled. "Not going to be easy, is it?"

"Gods, no. And I need to talk to him today."

"Talk?"

"Yes, talk. As in have a serious conversation. Without distractions."

"Good luck." Ginny smirked behind her glass of pumpkin juice.

The end of the school day found Hermione waiting outside the Potions classroom for Snape's fourth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins to leave. Avoiding eye contact with the departing students, Hermione peeked around the door to check Snape was the sole occupant. After closing the door, she walked up to his desk, finding her equanimity difficult to maintain when she saw his frown morph into surprised pleasure as he realised she was not one of his fourth years returned to plague him.

Snape ensured their privacy with a swiftly applied Locking Charm. "Do you think this is wise?" He shifted in his seat, a little colour staining his cheeks.

Hermione realised immediately the direction his thoughts had taken. Shaking her head, mostly to clear her own lascivious imagination, she offered a rueful smile. "I'm not here for a repeat of yesterday, Severus." Noting the subtle shuttering of his expression, she added, "Not that I wouldn't want to, but I know you need to meet Professor McGonagall again today, and I wanted to talk to you first."

"Fuck, I'd almost forgotten that again!" His face relaxed into a rare smile. "What is wrong with my memory lately?"

"Muggles call it selective memory loss, Severus. You just don't want to think about another group of first years."

"Bollocks, woman. I blame you. I can't concentrate in your presence."

Hermione managed to transform her giggle into a snort. "It's not my responsibility if none of your blood is reaching your brain. Now, get your mind out of your pants and concentrate. We don't have long before the headmistress expects you in her office."

"Merlin! One day she's under my desk driving me insane, and the next she's appointed herself as my personal secretary. No wonder I'm losing my edge."

Hermione reached into her bag and extracted a sheaf of parchment. "Your state of mind can wait. I promised I'd tell you about my research into handfasting."

As Snape studied her notes, Hermione outlined the information she had discovered about handfasting and the plan she had made. Within minutes, his usually severe expression had softened with hope and anticipation.

"Do you really wish to proceed with this?" He examined her face, a shadow of doubt still creasing his brow.

"More than I've wanted anything in my life." Her eyes met his, affirming her simple words with the warmth of affection and the molten heat of desire.

"I'll discuss it with Minerva then. May I?" He indicated her notes.

"Of course." She hesitated as she gathered courage for her next question. "I'll need to talk to..."

He scowled. "I suppose you must. Wait until I confirm this with Minerva though. I wouldn't want the witless wonders causing trouble before we gain her consent."

This time the giggle escaped. "Witless wonders? Is that your name for them?"

He had the grace to look a little ashamed. "Er... yes."

"Brilliant! I might steal that some time. No doubt I'll have occasion to use it."

"Hermione! You should be berating me for insulting your friends!"

"Oh, don't sound so disappointed. It's hardly an insult if it's true." She wagged a finger at him. "Not all the time, of course. There are just some moments..."

"Indeed."

Having escaped Snape's classroom with her intentions unsullied, mainly due to his impending appointment with the headmistress, Hermione retired to her bedroom to contemplate exactly how she was going to explain to her two supposed best friends her relationship with their Potions master.

At least I'll have Blaise and the others as back up.

Oh, shite.

How do I explain why they're the last to know?

The knock on her door rescued her from self-recriminations.

Blaise's smile soothed the worry lines from her forehead as he helped himself to his usual spot on her bed.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"You've been spotted in the library scratching away at parchments clearly unrelated to any homework assignments we've been given. I saw you heading down to the dungeons not long ago, and here you are, with not a hint of wickedness about you. What are you up to, Granger?"

Hermione could only laugh at Blaise's process of deduction. "So, if I'd been dishevelled and breathless, you would have brushed it all off as a lurid assignation in the

Potions classroom and not been the least bit concerned? You only worry if I look normal? Zabini, you really should get out more."

"Am I mistaken?"

"No, of course not, you prat. If you must know, I've been researching handfasting."

"Handfasting? That's like an alternative to marriage, where a couple pledges to be together for a year and a day initially and after that decide whether they wish to make a permanent commitment, isn't it?" He ducked the pillow aimed at his head. "What?"

"Why have I spent the last few weeks researching this when you knew all about it?"

"Pureblood, remember? We learn these things as children."

"Smug bastard."

"Well, you could have asked instead of turning all secretive on us."

"It didn't occur to me." Hermione shrugged. "Never mind that now. I've found out the relevant information, and Severus is discussing it with Professor McGonagall tonight. I just have to work out how to tell Ron and Harry if we go ahead with it."

Blaise shook his head. "Do you really worry that much about their opinions? If they're true friends, they'll be happy for you."

"I know, and if they can't grow up enough to accept my choice of wizard, they'll simply have to get over themselves. But it's the initial reaction I'm more worried about. I don't want them going off half-cocked and doing something idiotic."

"They'd do that?"

"Unfortunately, it's a possibility."

"We need a plan then."

After Blaise had bid her good night, Hermione set her mind to her other problem. Valentine's Day. With no opportunity to visit Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley before the weekend and not enough time to arrange for an owl order gift, she resorted to the back-up plan of all sensible young women.

She wrote to her mother.

"Come in, Severus." Minerva closed her office door behind the Potions professor and waved vaguely towards the armchairs by the fire. "Tea? Or something stronger?"

Snape smirked. "Some of that fifty-year-old malt I know you have hidden in the secret drawer perhaps?"

The headmistress frowned. "How did you know about that?"

"It's where I stashed my supply of Old Ogdens' while I occupied that desk, Minerva. And everyone on the staff knows your penchant for a fine dram or three."

"Everyone?" She blanched.

"Well, I suspect Hagrid still believes you're a teetotal paragon of virtue. Even I am loath to disabuse him of the notion."

Minerva conceded defeat, activating the magically hidden drawer in the grand oak desk and relieving it of its contents. Summoning two glasses, she poured a generous tot into each and brought them over to the fireside where the stack of student files awaited.

"Well, shall we?"

"If we must." He sighed and drained his glass in one swallow. "Gods, that's a grand drop."

Fifty minutes later, the last file had been discussed and annotated. Minerva gathered the folders and deposited them onto her desk as she glanced at the clock beside the door.

"Just in time for dinner. I hear it's roast chicken tonight, my favourite."

Snape lifted his hand to halt her progress towards the door. "One moment, Minerva. I have something else we need to discuss."

With a soft sigh, she resettled herself into her chair. "Very well. Dinner will still be there in a few minutes. What do you wish to talk about?"

"Miss Granger."

"Oh. I thought you'd made your position clear on that issue last time."

Snape focussed on his hands as he replied. "So did I, but perhaps I was a little hasty. I had thought to protect her from an impulsive decision she might live to regret."

"You gave the impression you did not care to marry the girl." Minerva's tone was laced with reproof.

"I did, much to my regret. At the time it didn't occur to me to consider how she could have misinterpreted my response. I..." The memory of the hurt he had caused the woman he loved reflected briefly in his expression.

Softening, Minerva reached forward to take his hands in hers. "I take it you've since talked to Hermione?"

"Yes. I... we agreed marriage was not the answer. At least, not yet."

"And you believe you can stay apart until the end of the year?" Minerva raised a disbelieving brow.

Snape huffed defeat. "No, dammit." He raised his eyes to meet Minerva's. "I tried, Minerva. I behaved like a total arse, avoiding her at all costs. But eventually..."

She smiled and shook her head. "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would never have believed it. Severus Snape in love, truly in love. Oh, don't glare at me, boy, I remember that glorious feeling. The need to be with one special person, to hear his voice, feel his touch. You'd do anything, risk everything to be together." Her eyes clouded as she drifted into her past for a few moments. "I'm not heartless, Severus. However, I do have the reputation of the school to consider."

"I'm well aware of that." He reached into his robes and withdrew the sheaf of parchment Hermione had given him earlier. "True to form, Hermione has been doing some research."

"Into what?"

"Handfasting. She believes it would be a reasonable compromise to appease the Board of Governors without subjecting either of us to an irreversible commitment."

"It certainly sounds possible. However, you have not said whether you agree with the proposition."

"How can I refuse? For some inexplicable reason, the woman wants me. *Me*, Minerva. Can you believe it? She's adamant she is not going to change her mind after the year and a day, but at least now understands my reluctance for her to enter a wizarding marriage at her age."

"One last question, Severus. If she had been a little older and not at school, would you have had any doubts about marrying her?"

"I would have claimed her as my wife already. Do not doubt it." Snape stood to leave.

Minerva nodded. "I'll see what I can do. Leave this with me to consider after dinner. And, Severus?"

"Yes?" He turned at the door.

"As headmistress, I have to take the school into consideration. As a friend and colleague who has known you since you were eleven years old, I'm delighted you've found someone who understands the hidden depths of your character. You hide it well, but you're one of the most steadfast, honorable, yet sensitive men I know. You deserve to be happy, lad."

Snape could only nod his thanks, struck dumb by the welling emotions her words had stirred. He had to take the long way to the Great Hall to allow his eyes to dry.

Watching the small brown owl swooping off south with her letter the next morning, Hermione leaned against the low window ledge and hoped her mother still took Wednesday afternoons off. With any luck, she would have managed to find and send the requested items before the end of the day.

Her next stop was Argus Filch's office. Knocking at the door, she waited until she heard the familiar shuffle of the caretaker's feet.

"Good morning to yer, missy." The faded old man almost managed a smile. Clutched in his hand was a rag smelling strongly of furniture wax.

"Good morning, Mr Filch. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Jus' finishing off something. Do yer want to come in?"

"Yes, thank you. I have a favour to ask of you." As she entered the room, Hermione caught sight of the intricately carved chair Filch had clearly been polishing. "Oh, that's gorgeous! Have you just finished it?"

Argus Filch stood straighter than he had for years. "Yes. Been working on that one for a year or two now. Ain't she a beauty?"

Hermione caressed the satiny wood and bent to examine the details of the design. "Thanks to you, she certainly is."

Flushed with pleasure, Filch shuffled from one foot to the other. "You had a favour, missy?"

"Call me Hermione, please." Hermione straightened and explained her request.

"That shouldn't be a problem, miss... Hermione. I'll keep my eyes open for it and make sure it gets to the right room." He screwed up one eye in a wink. "And I'll make sure no-one is any the wiser."

"You're a wonder, Mr Filch." She grinned as he blushed anew and opened the door for her.

"I reckon you can call me Argus now, seeing that you're all but finished your time here."

"I'd like that. Thanks, Argus." On impulse, Hermione reached up and planted a quick kiss on the bemused caretaker's cheek. "See you on Sunday!"

"So, the problem is you don't want Ron going off half-cocked and doing something daft when he finds out about you and Professor Snape." Ginny summarised Hermione's concerns.

"Not just Ron. Harry too."

Ginny shook her head. "No, if anything, Harry would just go into a sulk and brood for a while. My brother's the one who'll make a song and dance about it and be a right prat. He's the one we need to manipulate."

Blaise snorted. "I thought I was the Slytherin here."

"*You* haven't grown up with six older brothers. I have years of experience at dealing with Weasley males. As for Harry, I'll just snog him until he comes around. Won't take long."

"Can't we just tell them Hermione is happy with Professor Snape?" Luna asked.

Hermione sighed. "If only it was that simple. They both still have issues with him, although I admit Harry hasn't been so bad since he saw all those memories about Severus and his mum."

After discarding several ideas, including tying the boys up while they were told and keeping them that way until they had agreed to behave reasonably, Ginny's lips curled into a devious smile.

"I've got it. This is what we're going to do."

A/N: Sorry about the long wait, chaps! Our four week holiday in the USA was a whirlwind tour with lots of driving and activities and little time for writing. All is back to normal now, however!

Thanks always to karelia for her beta skills and encouragement.

Chapter Thirty-two: Patchouli and Floo Powder

Chapter 32 of 41

Ron has been thinking, and Hermione and Snape make plans.

Disclaimer: JKR owns everything except the plot.

Chapter Thirty-two: Patchouli and Floo Powder

"Miss Granger, see me after class." Snape's tone did not bode well for Hermione's evening plans.

"Yes, sir."

"What have you done this time, Granger? Botched your potion?" Blaise lifted their perfect sample to the light and swirled the silvery liquid. "Insufficient research in your latest essay? Or did you simply not hand it in on time? The man's going to run out of excuses to keep you after class soon."

Hermione grinned and glanced over at Harry, who was staring at the Potions professor in a most unforgiving manner. Ron Weasley, however, seemed lost in thought. "Harry has taken the bait. Ron seems a little preoccupied today."

"Perhaps he's actually paying attention to his potion?"

Looking over at the thick, greyish brew Ron was stirring, they both laughed.

"Perhaps not. Probably planning his next conquest. Now *that* he takes seriously."

"A man has to do what a man has to do, Hermione." Blaise handed over the vial. "Be a good girl and take that to your beloved, and I'll clean up this mess. Maybe you could fit in a quick snog while the rest of us toil at our benches."

"Blaise Zabini, sometimes you're a right prat."

"Yes, and you love me, don't you?"

"I adore you even more when you scrub cauldrons. It's so sexy seeing a man clean." Hermione patted Blaise's cheek as she walked away.

"Pity you didn't tell me that a few months ago."

Sample safely delivered, without any snogging, Hermione sat at the bench and waited until the rest of the class had left, including a smirking Blaise.

Snape closed the door behind the last stragglers, locking and Silencing it behind them. Spinning to face Hermione, he released the smile he had been suppressing all day.

"Minerva has approved. We may handfast in two weeks."

"Really?"

"Really."

"That's... that's..."

"A very short time to get it organised. However, Minerva insisted it should be done sooner rather than later so as not to interfere with exams. I don't suppose you'd like me to arrange a detention tonight so we can discuss what is needed, amongst other things?"

"No need to impugn my academic reputation with your love of detentions. I'll just tell anyone who asks I'm going to see you for help on an extra homework project I'm doing. As soon as I mention the H word, they'll run a mile."

"Spoilsport."

Detention or not, by the time Hermione left Severus's rooms that evening, she was exhausted in the best possible way, leaving him sprawled on the bed naked and satisfied.

Smiling as she walked along the corridor to the common room entrance, Hermione's thoughts drifted back to Snape's quarters.

He greeted her soft knock on his office door with a suitable scowl for the benefit of any passing Slytherins. As soon as the door closed, Snape guided her to the opposite wall.

"Come through to my sitting room. It'll be more comfortable in there."

Hermione nodded and followed. Dropping her bag beside the sofa and shrugging off her robes, she made herself comfortable and patted the seat beside her. "Sit down. You're making the place look untidy."

"I don't think so; I'll never be able to concentrate." Snape perched himself on the edge of his armchair and summoned a quill and parchment. "Business before pleasure, young lady."

"Yes, sir!" Hermione sat bolt upright and favoured him with a brisk salute. Suddenly, she felt a tingling sensation as her bra disappeared from under her blouse, reappearing draped across the candelabra. So much for maturity. He's as bad as I am.

Snape flicked his wand again. Her three top blouse buttons popped open, affording him a good view of creamy flesh and, as she leaned forward to fetch her own parchment, a glimpse of rosy nipples.

"No need to be uncomfortable, of course. Now, where shall we start?" His smirk faded as his own trousers and underwear appeared folded over the back of the chair and a chill breeze whispered around his already stirring groin.

"Tit for tat, Severus." Hermione grinned, staring with interest at the obvious tent in his robes.

"Later, witch. Do you have any specific desires... for the handfasting?"

"I've been thinking..."

After they had made as many decisions as their arousal-scrambled brains could manage, Snape tossed the parchment aside and stood, allowing his robes to drop to the floor, leaving him clad in a fine white shirt which did little to conceal his fully erect state.

Button by button, he removed his only garment, finally standing proud and nude before his witch.

"Shall we move to..."

As Hermione kneeled before him and took him into her mouth, Snape gulped and nodded. "Or not, of course." His eyes widened as she performed a particularly acrobatic act with her tongue. "Merlin, woman! Where did you learn that?"

It was somewhat later by the time they managed to find their way into the bedroom, leaving clothes scattered throughout the sitting room and an upended Floo powder pot. Hermione, backing into the room while still firmly attached to Snape's lips, stumbled to a halt as he pulled away, blushing.

"What is it, Severus?" She turned to follow the direction of his gaze.

Perched upon an easel beside his bed was a painting. One she had never seen. One in which she was, for once, fully dressed.

In the most beautiful wedding gown she had ever seen.

Tears threatened as she moved closer and brushed the tips of her fingers over the surface of the canvas, drinking in all the details, from the simple, flower-adorned twist of hair atop her head to the runes at her throat.

"When?"

"The night I came to your room. This," he indicated the painting, "was not planned. It was something of a revelation."

"And yet you came to me to explain all the reasons we should not be together."

"I thought I was doing the honourable thing."

Hermione reached for Snape's hand, pulling him to the bed. Guiding him onto his back in the middle of the soft quilt, she straddled his hips, rocking slowly against his hardness. As he closed his eyes and surrendered to her ministrations, she reminded him once again of her position on the matter, whispering words of reassurance and using lips and tongue and fingertips and searing heat to remove all doubt.

Ron waved Hermione over to his armchair when she entered the common room on her way to her bedroom. "Hey, 'Mione. How did it go?"

"Fine. I'm all organised. He was quite helpful." She brushed at her robes with one hand as she spoke.

"Snape was helpful? Can we get that in writing?"

"Professor Snape, Ron. I wish you'd show him some respect. You know as well as I do what he did in the war."

"Yeah, yeah. Professor Snape. My hero." Ron's nostrils flared a little as he glanced around. "Can you smell...?"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Sorry, 'Mione. I must get on with my own homework. Can't spend all night talking."

Staring at him, looking for the sudden extra head, Hermione frowned. "Are you all right, Ron?"

"Yeah, of course. I'll see you in the morning." With that, Ron gathered up his books and disappeared into his room.

"Uh, oh. I think you have a letter, Hermione." Ginny batted away the cheeky little owl dive-bombing her head. "Why does he always do that to me?"

"Well, if you hadn't let him sit on your shoulder and play with your hair when I first bought him for Mum and Dad, he wouldn't be so fascinated with it." Hermione waved a piece of bacon at the irrepressible bird, who desisted from his attempt to gather some of Ginny's hair for his nest and dropped his missive into her plate instead.

"Don't you know you're supposed to deliver the letter to the person whose name is on the envelope, you little twit?" Ginny giggled as she stroked the owl's head with a finger. "Why you named such a daft owl Hercules is beyond me."

"He was so small when I found him at Eeylops, I thought he deserved a grand name." Hermione grinned as she read her mother's reply to her request. Feeding Hercules another treat, she sent him to the owlery for a rest before returning home.

"So, anyway," Ginny lowered her voice and glanced towards the two boys seated a few places down the table, "are we all set to go tomorrow?"

"Yes. You lot can corner Ron and Harry after breakfast. They usually lounge around in the common room for a while on Saturday mornings playing chess. I'll stay well away until after lunch. That should give you enough time. I'm sure I can find something to do."

"Or someone..." Ginny winked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I was referring to *homework*. You know, that activity involving textbooks and essay writing?"

"Of course. What else?" The redhead rested her chin on her hand and studied Snape up at the staff table. "He's not that bad, really, when he's not breathing down your neck. Pity about the nose, but I can see how his eyes could suck you right in. And he does have lovely hands. Oh, stop looking so smug, Hermione, Harry's pretty good with his hands too."

"What is Potter good at, and why are you staring at my Head of house like that, Ginevra Weasley? You do realise Granger is dangerous when provoked?"

"Trust me; you really don't want to know what's going on inside that head. And she knows she's only allowed to look. We have an understanding, don't we, Gin?"

Ginny nodded. "Don't worry. I like my head too much to risk crossing either you or Professor Snape. You're both bloody scary."

Easing himself onto the bench between the two girls, Blaise helped himself to Hermione's last piece of bacon.

"Hey, I wasn't finished! You've been spending far too much time around Ron lately, Zabini!"

"Oi! I heard that!" Ron grinned and raised his fork, a juicy piece of bacon dripping grease all over the tablecloth.

"I think he just made your point admirably." Blaise gave Ron the thumbs-up, then turned to the girls. "Everything ready?"

"We'll have them eating out of our hands by tomorrow lunchtime. I'm sure a good snogging will be all Harry'll need to see the light."

"You can snog him after lunch all you like." Hermione pushed her plate and glass away and stood. "Right now, though, it's time for Transfiguration. Coming, Mr Bacon-Snatcher?"

"Yes, M'am! I'll go and drag Luna away from the Ravenclaw table. We'll catch up in a minute."

Ginny and Luna slipped into Hermione's room on Saturday morning soon after breakfast.

"Are you ready to disappear?"

"Yes. Who's left in the common room?"

Luna checked off her fingers. "Ron and Harry are playing chess as usual. Draco and Neville are snogging on the couch. We agreed they would be told too, didn't we? Blaise has checked the library, and all my housemates are nose deep in their books. Hannah and Lavender have gone for their usual walk down by the lake, and you know Draco is the only Slytherin who uses your common room. I think that accounts for everyone."

"All right. I'll be back at twelve. Good luck!" Hermione took a moment to hug her friends before heading off via the Gryffindor common room to the library.

"I think it's time we demonstrated the power of feminine persuasion... or coercion." Ginny flicked her hair back and slicked on a little lip gloss for good measure.

"I didn't know feminine power comes from lip gloss." Luna sounded serious.

"It doesn't. But strawberry is Harry's favourite flavour. It doesn't hurt to be prepared. Come on, let's go get 'em."

The two girls walked into the senior common room, apparently engrossed in conversation.

"He must be bloody good in bed to have her looking so smug," Ginny said as she moved behind Harry and rested her hands on his shoulders.

"It's not always all about sex, Ginny. Maybe he's brilliant. She would never put up with someone who is dim." Luna's eyes shone with the effort of deception foreign to her nature.

Harry looked up and patted Ginny's hand. "Who's good in bed?"

"Hermione's boyfriend. Luna and I can't agree on whether he is fantastic in the sack or scarily brilliant like she is. What do you think?"

"No idea. I'm just confused about it all. When does she get to see him? I haven't seen her spending time with any of the blokes here, and I can't imagine she'd be interested in a younger boy." Harry frowned for a moment, then moved his knight.

"I think it's someone else." Ginny pretended to ponder. "I know. She's shagging Stan Shunpike. She always had a soft spot for the underdog."

Ron looked up and rolled his eyes as he checkmated Harry for the third game in succession. "That's just wrong, that is. Leave poor Stan out of this."

"I know." Luna's dreamy smile and sigh enhanced her performance. "It's Kingsley Shacklebolt. He's powerful, intelligent, and ever so handsome."

"And the Minister of Magic, Luna. He has a reputation to uphold, and I imagine a schoolgirl in his bed would be a touch hard to explain." Harry gathered up the chess pieces and sent them to their box.

"Mundungus Fletcher. He's under a spell and is really charming and good-looking. Hermione has discovered his secret, and he's shagging her to keep her quiet." Blaise grinned at the horrified expressions on Ron and Harry's faces.

Draco managed to tear himself away from Neville long enough to add his unscripted contribution. "No, she has grander plans. She's sneaking off to Azkaban to keep my father entertained. Mother hates the place and refuses to visit except on shower days."

Ron shuddered. "I'm not sure what's more disgusting, the thought of Mundungus Fletcher naked or you suggesting your own father as her lover, Malfoy."

"It always pays to know your family's weaknesses, Weasley. Leaves one less vulnerable in the long run."

No-one noticed Neville had not said a word.

"I still suspect you, Zabini. You spend enough time in her bedroom." Harry grinned.

"Chance would be a fine thing. She has about as much interest in shagging me as she does you two. No, I'm putting my money on someone who left school a few years ago. Perhaps Weasley's brother Percy. He's smart enough for her."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, are you all blind as well as thick?" Ron threw his hands up in disgust. "Isn't it bloody obvious?"

Ginny, Luna, and Blaise shared puzzled glances. Things were not going quite as planned.

"Obvious?" Ginny ventured to respond.

"Who does she see every day? Who do you know who is as brilliant as she is? 'Mione values courage over appearance and integrity over muscles. Who did she kiss at New Year and bloody enjoyed it?"

"Snape?" Harry looked bemused.

"Snape. Haven't any of you noticed how she stares at him in class nowadays? Like she wants to eat him alive. She's always insisted we should be grateful for him and treat him with respect, but I overheard them arguing in class one day. You don't argue like that with Snape without getting detention, but he let it pass. Then there was the night he came looking for her in the bedroom. Neville said he'd left soon after, but I'm sure I didn't see him go.

"She's shagging Snape, she is."

"Snape?" Harry was beginning to sound like a broken record.

Ginny was the first to string a coherent sentence together. "Ron, how can you say that?"

"I may be a bit slow sometimes, but I can put two and two together. He keeps wanting to see her after class, and last night she came back from supposedly talking to him about her homework with Floo powder all over her robes."

"Floo powder? What does that have to do with it?" Harry was finally thinking again.

"Harry, have you seen a fireplace in Snape's office or his classroom? The only place she could have been in contact with Floo powder last night was his private quarters. And when she came in last night, her hair was all over the place, her shirt was untucked at the back, and her skirt was back to front. And I caught a definite whiff of patchouli."

"Patchouli?" Harry was at it again.

Ron shrugged. "Snape always wears a patchouli-based aftershave."

"Ron?"

"Yes, Gin?"

"How do you know what Snape smells like? Have you been... sniffing him?"

"Snape? You sniffed Snape?"

"Don't you start, Malfoy." Ron stood and faced his friends. "Bill uses something similar. I was with him when he bought it one day. Tried to persuade me to buy some. I knew there was something putting me off it, but it wasn't until our next Potions class I realised what it was."

"Anyway, as far as I'm concerned, long may it last. Snape's been a lot more pleasant lately, well, less unpleasant, anyway. And 'Mione isn't chasing us with colour-coded study charts. It's a win-win situation. I just can't believe none of you saw this coming."

"Why didn't you say something?" Harry was trying to work out whether he was more disturbed by the thought of his best friend shagging the Potions professor or his other best friend condoning such an activity.

"Because, Harry, I didn't want to get my head bitten off. By you or 'Mione. I told you I'm not stupid."

Ginny turned and shrugged at Blaise as Ron left the room. "My brother's a genius. Unbelievable!"

"Our job is done here. Now, you work on your boyfriend. He's losing the glazed look," Blaise muttered.

"I'm on it." Ginny smiled and perched herself in Harry's lap. "Enough talk about Hermione. What are you getting me for Valentine's Day?"

Harry blushed. "I can't tell you that. Then it wouldn't be a surprise."

"Well, perhaps you'd better take me for a stroll around the lake, and we can make plans for tomorrow. Or maybe get in a little practice." Ginny raised an eyebrow and stood, tugging Harry by the hand to follow her.

"If that soppy grin was anything to go by, Potter's forgotten all about Hermione's choice in wizard." Blaise offered his hand to Luna. "Everyone else is out enjoying the fresh air. Well, everyone except those two." He jerked his head towards Neville and Draco, who had lost interest in the conversation and retired to their favourite sofa. "Shall we go for a walk and find Hermione?"

"It would be a pleasure, Blaise Zabini."

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Thanks as always to my alpha team of LivingTheDream and quaffswinegaily, and the best beta in the world, karelia.

Dearest readers: Once again, I apologise for the wait. Between the last chapter and this one I had to finish my SSHG Exchange fic and get it sent in. Thank you all for sticking with this story so far and your fantastic reviews. Love, sunny xx

Chapter Thirty-three: Valentine's Day

Chapter 33 of 41

Hermione does a little shopping in Hogsmeade, then prepares for Snape's Valentine's surprise.

Disclaimer: None of the characters or settings are mine. The inimitable JKR created them all.

Chapter Thirty-three: Valentine's Day

Hermione woke on Sunday, a smile lighting her face as she anticipated the day ahead. After a quick shower, she pulled on her jeans and her favourite cherry-red jumper and headed off for breakfast, stopping briefly at the owlery first.

For once, the Cupid-infested, heart-and-flower-bedecked Great Hall did not bother her. Hermione Granger finally understood Valentine's Day. And judging by the lack of a scowl on Severus Snape's face, so did he.

The flurry of owls bearing roses and cards arrived to a round of cheers started by the Hufflepuff table. Their envelopes were almost all shades of pink, in contrast to the Slytherins' restrained green and silver. Ravenclaws receiving Valentine's cards seemed to enjoy a variety of colours, especially Luna Lovegood, whose blush matched the delicate pink rose accompanying her sage green envelope. Hermione's housemates revelled in red and gold envelopes, ribbons, foil-wrapped chocolates, and roses.

She watched as her favourite gimpy school owl swooped down and deposited a plain white envelope on Snape's plate. Despite the headmistress's obvious curiosity, he barely glanced at the missive before stowing it into his robes unopened. The wicked smirk he flashed Hermione's way, however, confirmed he knew exactly who had sent the letter.

Hermione had no further time to exchange furtive peeks at her lover. A lurid purple envelope decorated with lime green pulsating hearts plopped onto her plate from a great height, dropped with disdain by the owl hovering above. Not even deigning to stop for a treat, it swooped away towards the nearest window as if to escape the cacophony of love-struck teenagers and hooting birds.

"Who's that from?" Ginny pointed to the atrocity calling itself correspondence.

"No idea. I'm not even sure it's safe to pick up." Hermione took out her wand and poked at the offending item. Trying a few dark detection spells she had picked up from Bill Weasley over summer and checking for any more benign but embarrassing enchantments did not reveal anything untoward. "It seems safe enough."

"Perhaps you just have an admirer with really, really bad taste." Ginny turned away to kiss a scarlet-cheeked Harry, who had opened her card at the table without thinking. The wizarding version of singing telegrams was far more embarrassing. Even a muttered *Silencio* failed to spare his blushes.

Hermione turned the envelope over and chanced a sideways glance at Snape. He was openly smiling now, watching her table with interest. *Or perhaps I just have an incredibly devious admirer who knows the advantages of hiding in plain sight.* Slipping the parchment from its violet cocoon, Hermione felt her face heating as she read the message within.

I'm wearing my birthday present for you.

Flipping the parchment, Hermione discovered a pencil sketch of her own face on the reverse: lips swollen, cheeks flushed, and with pupils dilated in passion.

Oh... gods.

"So, who was it from?" Ginny prodded her friend's arm, then hissed in her ear, "Hermione! Stop staring at him like that. Do you want the entire school to know you're shagging the Potions professor?" She reached for the parchment.

"Oh, no you don't, Ginevra Weasley." Hermione's cheeks flared red as she tucked away the note. "Just use your imagination. You seem to be pretty good at that."

With a good-natured shrug, Ginny chuckled. "Devious bastard, isn't he? No-one would suspect him of sending you that... that..."

"Monstrosity?"

"Something like that. Am I allowed to ask what you have planned for him?"

"No." Hermione grinned at Ginny's pout. "But I'll tell you about it later, if you're good. Now, go and take Harry off to some quiet place before he wonders if you'd rather spend the day with me. Wouldn't be good for his ego, thinking he was thrown over for a girl."

Ginny snorted. "It would almost be worth worrying Harry for a few minutes to see the look on Ron's face if we started snogging in front of them." She glanced up at the staff table. "On second thoughts, I'd rather not risk it."

Hermione had just finished her breakfast when Harry whispered something in Ginny's ear and stood, moving around the redhead to stand and shuffle awkwardly in front of her.

"Er... 'Mione, can I have a private word before we head off to Hogsmeade?"

She glanced at Ginny, who shrugged. "Of course. Would now be okay?"

He nodded and led the way from the hall. Finding a quiet corridor was easy with most of the school still at breakfast. He hunkered down against the wall and beckoned to Hermione to sit beside him.

"What's up, Harry?"

The Boy Who Saved the World looked nervous. "Um. We... that is, Ron... well, he said... he said..."

"He said what?"

"HesaidyouwereshaggingSnape." Harry couldn't meet his friend's eyes.

Hermione frowned. "Pardon?"

Harry took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and tried again. "Ron said you were shagging Snape. There. I said it."

"Did he?" Hermione knew perfectly well what Ron had said, as Ginny had given her the blow-by-blow account, but she was waiting for Harry to give some indication of his opinion on the matter.

"I was watching you at breakfast. You were ogling him, 'Mione!" Whining was not a flattering look for Harry Potter.

"So? What if I was?"

"But a person usually only ogles someone they fancy."

"Yes." She wasn't going to make it easy.

Harry thought about her answer for a bit. "You fancy Snape? You're not just shagging him to make him go easy on us?"

"Yes. And no, why on earth would I do that?"

Harry screwed up his face and thought a little more.

"You *like* shagging Snape. You like *him*."

"Yes, Harry, I do. I love him."

Shaking his head in an effort to clear out the unwanted images breeding inside his skull, Harry resorted to babbling. "Why... how... Hermione! Does he love you? Is he using you? Has he..."

Hermione patted his shoulder. "It's okay. The feeling is mutual. Of that I'm certain. And I understand if you're confused. I was a little confused at first myself."

"At first? How long has this been going on?"

Hermione took a deep breath and began. "Well, do you remember the artist I was working for over summer? It was Severus."

"Severus?" Harry's mouth tripped a little over his Potion master's given name.

"Yes, Severus. One usually refers to the person one is intimate with by their first name, Harry."

Harry gulped and shook his head again. "Carry on."

Hermione proceeded to give Harry the edited version of the development of her relationship with the ex-spy everyone loved to hate.

"So, this has been going on for months. You've been shagging him on the sly for *months!*"

"Not months, Harry, only recently."

"But you've been doing all this under everyone's noses. Merlin, that's so *sneaky!*" He almost looked proud. "You must have a bit of Slytherin in you!"

She couldn't help herself. "As often as possible, Harry. As often as possible."

"Ugh. I didn't need to know that, 'Mione."

Hermione smiled and took his hand. "Are you going to disown me as a friend now?"

Harry snorted. "Not bloody likely. As long as I don't have to shag Sn... Professor Snape, you can do what and who you like. But, please, *no details!*"

"Trust me, Harry, I don't share. The only person getting their hands on that man's body is me." She grinned. "One more thing. We're having a handfasting in two weeks. I'd like you and Ron to be there."

"What's a handfasting?"

Hermione explained the traditional ceremony as they walked back to the Great Hall to meet Ginny and the others. She allowed her friends to head off out of the front door ahead of her, hanging back as she noticed Snape leaving the hall by the rear door.

Positioning herself on the staircase leading down to the dungeons, she waited for him to pass.

"And what was that little tête-a-tête with Potter all about?" His breath warmed the back of her neck, and his hands circled her waist, drawing her back against thick wool and silk clad steel as she squeaked in surprise.

"Must you do that?" She turned in his arms when he drew away. "I meant creep up on people, not... *that.*" Pressing her lower body against his, Hermione reinforced her point. "I see you're enjoying your birthday present today."

"I'm not entirely sure walking around as hard as hell and aching for a certain woman's touch could be considered enjoyable." He groaned as her hand unerringly found the gap in his robes and cupped his arousal.

Hermione's heavy-lidded gaze and dilated pupils served only to inflame him further. However, after a few divine caresses, she reluctantly withdrew her hand and shook her head. "Not yet. You'll have to save that for later. I have some things to do in Hogsmeade." She glanced around and, seeing no-one, reached up to meet his lips with hers before waving him a cheery farewell.

Snape slumped against the wall, his groin afire and his hands clenched in the effort not to reach into his robes and relieve the throbbing tension beneath right there in the corridor.

Neither of them had seen the wide-eyed blonde on the floor above.

"I think they make a lovely couple." Luna's smile was dreamy as she walked beside Blaise down the main street of Hogsmeade.

"Who, Hermione and Snape?"

"No, silly, Draco and Neville." She pointed at the two wizards entering Honeydukes, no longer concerned at being seen together. "They've finally figured out everyone else in the school knows they're a couple."

"Took them long enough. You'd think after all the snogging in the common room they'd realise someone would have noticed." Blaise chuckled, then added. "I wonder if our fellow students will accept Hermione's choice of partner as easily."

"I wouldn't say they've all accepted Draco and Neville." Blaise followed the direction of Luna's gaze to find Pansy Parkinson scowling at the sweet shop.

"No. She's still disappointed at losing the golden goose." He grinned at Luna's confused frown. "She had aspirations to be the future Mrs Malfoy. Being rejected for a wizard wasn't exactly in her ten-year plan."

"Oh, poor thing. She must be devastated."

"And that's why I like you, Luna. Only you would find room in your heart to sympathise with Pansy Parkinson." Blaise leaned over and brushed his lips across Luna's cheek.

The intensity of her smile left him feeling a little breathless. They stood, eyes locked together and bodies close enough to feel one another's warmth for a long moment, only to be interrupted by the cheerful hail of Ginny Weasley.

"Hey, you two, want to join us at The Three Broomsticks for a drink?"

Blaise flashed Luna a rueful smile and waved at Ginny and Harry. "We'll be right over." He turned and took Luna's hand. "We need to talk, but not here. Later."

Luna just squeezed his hand and smiled once again as they headed across the street.

"What have you done with Hermione?" Blaise asked as they sat opposite Harry and Ginny.

Harry shrugged. "I haven't seen her since we left."

"She said she had some shopping to do and would catch up with us later," Ginny said. "I suppose she has things to organise for the handfasting, but she wouldn't tell."

"You three knew about that?" Harry glanced from one grinning face to the other and groaned. "Why am I always the last to find out?"

Ginny took his hand. "You've been busy, love."

"But even Ron worked it out! I knew she was shagging someone, but I... I... I didn't notice. I wasn't paying attention. We're supposed to be best friends."

Blaise shrugged. "Happens, mate. Women: they're complicated creatures." He ignored Ginny's slap and Luna's giggle. "Just be grateful she's happy."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. You're right. Complicated." He grinned at his girlfriend. "Very."

"And don't you forget it," Ginny ordered as she patted his cheek.

Hermione had made a few essential purchases at Scrivenshaft's before turning her steps towards Gladrags Wizardwear. Peering through the window, she saw no other students and entered the shop.

"Good morning, can I help you?" The elderly witch behind the counter seemed to be taking her measurements with her eyes even as she stood there in the doorway.

Hermione smiled and reached into her bag for a sketch she had done from memory.

"I was wondering if you could make this for me." Handing over the parchment, she watched anxiously as the seamstress studied the drawing. "I need it by the 27th," she added.

"Hmm, shouldn't be too much of a problem. The design seems relatively straightforward." Gimlet eyes suddenly met Hermione's. "A handfasting is a special occasion. You'll need to come through to the back to choose your fabric."

"How did you know?" Hermione frowned in confusion.

"I've been in this business for many years, lassie. You have that look in your eyes." With no further explanation, she beckoned Hermione to follow her into a room full of bolts of exquisite fabric. Half an hour later, Hermione left the shop, smiling and thanking the woman for all her help.

As she began to walk away, Hermione felt a tug on her sleeve. Pulling up short, she turned to find Lavender Brown hanging off her arm.

"Hello, Lavender. I didn't see you there." She smiled at the blonde.

"I noticed. You didn't notice me earlier either." Lavender's smirk was disconcerting.

Hermione felt her heart rate climbing as she tried to maintain her composure. "Oh, where was that?"

"On the staircase. When you were, shall we say, *talking* with Professor Snape."

Fuck! What did she see? Gods, what did she hear?

"Don't panic, Hermione. I didn't hear your conversation with Snape, but I did see everything. Do you have something you'd like to share?"

Well, I suppose everyone has to find out sooner or later, and I'd rather she didn't spread the wrong rumours. Merlin knows what she'd come up with. Making a decision, Hermione dragged Lavender over to a quiet alley.

"Don't you dare..." Lavender began.

Hermione stared at her erstwhile roommate. "Dare what?"

"*Oblivate* me. I wrote it all down just in case, you know."

Shaking her head, Hermione lifted her empty hands. "Don't be daft, Lavender. I wouldn't do that."

"Really?"

"Really. You'd have found out soon anyway. Severus and I are getting handfasted in two weeks. The whole school will know then."

"You and *Professor Snape*?" Lavender's eyes widened in shock. "I thought you were just, you know, shagging. But handfasting. That's serious!"

Only Lavender Brown could be more shocked at a handfasting than a sexual relationship between her professor and a fellow student.

"Yes, Lavender, it's serious. And before you ask, the headmistress has given us her approval, due to my age and status as an 'adult' student, amongst other things."

The other girl was clearly torn between her desire to pass her newfound information onto anyone who would listen and the possibility she could glean more gossip-worthy material off her housemate.

"Wow. You and Professor Snape who'd have thought?" Lavender's brows knitted together as she processed another idea. "Oh, Merlin, you've seen him *naked*!" Curiosity won a short battle over disgust. "Is he... well... is what they say about noses true?" The last came out in a rush.

Hermione blushed but declined to answer. Lavender chose to take her silence as confirmation and left to find an interested ear.

After a quick drink at the Three Broomsticks with her friends, Hermione made her excuses and returned to Hogwarts, planning the rest of her afternoon as she walked up to the main entrance.

Right, a quick bath, then some of that special perfume Mum gave me at Christmas, do something with my hair, then clothes. No, scratch that, not too many clothes, wouldn't want to waste time. Once I'm ready, I'll go and find Mr Filch... no, Argus... and collect the hamper Mum sent.

Merlin, I hope someone else hasn't decided to use the Room of Requirement today...

"Oof!" She hadn't noticed Argus Filch standing behind the door. His delighted hug left her speechless. And breathless.

"Congratulations to yer, Miss Hermione. He needs a nice young woman to care for him, does the professor." Filch's grin would have been scary to any other student, but Hermione could see the goodwill behind the leathery face, quivering jowls, and thinning, grey hair. "He's always been good to me, brewing potions for me old bones. And for my Mrs Norris when she was sick. Now, you look after him, girly, an' I'll look after you. I happen to know where all the best spare furniture is stored in this castle. If you need anything for your quarters, jus' let old Argus find it for you."

Lavender certainly works fast. Hermione smiled and patted the hand still on her shoulder. "Thanks, Argus. I appreciate that."

"He'll be right chuffed with that delivery of yours, he will. Do yer want me to bring it up now?"

"Not quite. I have to get ready first. I'll meet you on the seventh floor in about an hour. But please, don't tell him, Argus. It's a surprise."

"Wink's as good as a nod to a blind horse." Filch nodded and shuffled off as more students arrived back from Hogsmeade, stopping and staring at Hermione as if she had

grown a set of antlers atop her head.

Ignoring them, she headed off to her room to prepare for her valentine.

Sixty-three minutes later, Hermione gathered her robes about her and climbed the staircase to the seventh floor. Only she knew the robes concealed a thin voile sundress and little else.

Relieving a still-beaming Filch of the large package he had brought for her, she entered the Room of Requirement with her own specific needs firmly in mind. True to form, the Room, having repaired itself after the massive fire started by the unfortunate Vincent Crabbe, took on the appearance she had desired.

Soft grass had appeared instead of carpet. Impossible trees and shrubs formed a backdrop to clumps of spring bulbs, and overhead the ceiling appeared as a clear blue sky. A brightly coloured blanket lay spread upon the grass, and onto this Hermione placed the picnic hamper she had taken from the insulated box.

Hermione grinned and mentally hugged her mother as she unpacked the basket.

Plates, knives, forks, and wineglasses for two.

Champagne... and a good one, too.

Smoked salmon pâté, cheese, oh, goodie, my favourite Blue Castello, salami, sundried tomatoes, crackers. They'll be perfect to start.

Two wedges of Mum's famous bacon and egg pie and some of her chocolate cake.

And fresh strawberries for afters. Where on earth did she get these at this time of year? And I thought I had magic. I have nothing on Mum.

Hugging herself with glee, Hermione set the food out on platters she had Transfigured from the wrappings and used a Stasis Charm to keep everything fresh while she awaited Snape's arrival.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction.

I'm using film Neville's appearance for this story.

Thanks as always to karelia for her superb beta skills.

Chapter Thirty-four: Strawberries, Chocolate, and Promises

Chapter 34 of 41

Severus and Hermione celebrate Valentine's Day, and the Room of Requirement is very resourceful.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognise belongs to JKR.

Chapter Thirty-four: Strawberries, Chocolate, and Promises

Eight resigned tones chimed into the silence of the Room of Requirement. Hermione glanced up at the clock she had asked the Room to provide some two hours earlier and rose from the cushions piled beside the spread awaiting Snape's arrival.

Where the hell is he? I told him six o'clock, dammit! I feel like a right berk sitting around here by myself with no knickers on and all that food staring at me. Serves him right if I eat the best stuff without him. I'm starving!

She reached for her wand to remove the Stasis Charm just as the door opened, admitting a flushed and out of breath Snape.

"Severus! Where have you been?"

"In the bloody library." Snape gaped around him, then stopped and ran his hands over the grass at his feet. "Is that real?"

"Of course it's real. The Room created it." Hermione was still miffed at his late arrival. "Why exactly were you in the library when you were supposed to be here at six?"

"Trying to find out discreetly how to find and get into this damned room. It didn't occur to you to provide directions?"

Hermione's irritation fled as she realised her error. "But... you were headmaster. Didn't you..."

"If I remember correctly, the Room was protecting your friends... from me. For some peculiar reason, they never thought to share the secret of its location or access." Sarcasm dripped like acid from his tongue.

"Oh. But after..."

"Never needed to know. Until tonight. Do you know how difficult it is to find information from the library without Irma Pince showing up like the Spanish Inquisition?"

Hermione had to giggle at the scowl on Snape's face. "I think I have a fair idea. Why didn't you just ask Professor McGonagall, or even Neville?"

She was almost tempted to call up a mirror to check for a second head with the way he stared at her.

"Have you any idea of the rumours that gossip-mongering blonde bimbo has been spreading around the castle about us? Asking for the directions to this room would have been tantamount to standing on the staff table announcing to all and sundry I was planning to spend the night rendering their favourite Gryffindor speechless with the

wondrous talent of my lips, fingers, and cock and would someone please show me the way?"

Hermione felt an indecent warmth spread under the flimsy garment she wore beneath her robes. "I think I like the sound of that, Severus. Say it again, please." Her fingers worked at the buttons on her robe as she moved closer.

"Which part? The bit about rendering you speechless or the talented cock?" His face relaxed as the sight of her removing an item of clothing distracted him from his rant.

Hermione dropped her robes and drew his head down for a lingering kiss before answering, "Neither. Both. Never mind. You're here now, and I'm hungry." She gently pushed him towards the cushions. "Sit here, and I'll bring you some food."

Snape tried to make himself comfortable as Hermione turned away to reach for a plate. The unfettered movement of her breasts and glimpses of dusky areolae through the thin white fabric of her dress did nothing to help as he hardened and swelled inside the silk at his groin. The brush of her hand through his robes when she handed him a glass of champagne would have been his undoing if not for the delicious smell assaulting his nostrils.

"It's Mum's special bacon and egg pie. You'll get some soon." Hermione passed him a selection of cheeses, paté, and crackers and smiled. "Hungry?"

"Starving."

And they both knew he wasn't referring to the food.

Eyes fixed on Hermione's every movement, Snape endured the torment of his arousal with every tidbit she offered. His groan as her dress rode up her thighs while reaching across the blanket for more tempting offerings was rewarded with a flip of the skirt to reveal her lack of undergarments and a firm stroke or two from one hand as she fed him with the other.

Once the pie, chocolate cake, and champagne had been consumed, between increasingly lingering kisses and mutual caresses, Hermione set the strawberries aside, banished the leftover food into the hamper, and transfigured the blanket onto a thicker, softer version.

"I like the way you think." Snape's lips curled up into a lazy smile as he reclined back onto the cushions and beckoned to his witch.

The wicked gleam in Hermione's eye should have been warning enough. "Not so fast, Professor. I think you're overdressed." With a flick of her wand, Snape's robes disappeared, leaving only a thin layer of slightly damp gold silk ineffectively concealing his need.

"Hermione..."

"Hush. Close your eyes."

Snape laid back and allowed her hands and lips to explore his increasingly sensitised skin. Fingers trailed up his arms, down his flanks, and across his lower abdomen to lift and resume their journey at his thighs. Every inch of his skin was subjected to her attention. Every inch, that is, except the desperately hard inches contained in his pouch.

"Hermione... please..."

"Patience, my love." She stood, and, with a quick tug on the shoulder straps, her dress pooled around her ankles. Lowering herself to her knees, Hermione straddled his lower legs.

"I don't think so." Hermione removed Snape's hand from his groin and pinned both above his head with a spell before he had realised her intention. "Just watch."

At first, she just kneeled there astride him, watching the bulging silk twitch as his cock tried to make contact with skin. After a few minutes her hands lifted to caress her own breasts in gentle circular motions, pulling and tweaking at the nipples every so often with a groan to match that of the man lying beneath her, watching her every move.

"Do you like that, Severus? Seeing me do this?" His incoherent nod encouraged her to draw her hand lower, first over her silken belly, then down further to the dampened curls below. "What shall I do now?"

He swallowed with difficulty, mouth suddenly dry. "T-touch yourself."

"Like this?" She parted her moist flesh and slipped a finger inside.

"Gods, yes." His hips bucked as she then touched her finger to his lips. Licking the dew from her skin, he smiled. "Delicious."

"I thought you'd like that." She rewarded him with a kiss.

Resuming her position, Hermione reached down yet again and, without breaking eye contact, began swirling her fingertips rhythmically around her swollen clitoris, every so often plunging them deep inside as her climax drew closer and closer.

Snape's breathing increased pace with hers as he thrust against the silk barrier in time with her movements.

"I'm so close, Severus." Her fingers quickened. "So close."

She watched his face, flushed with the sheen of sweat as he strained for release. His expression, so often guarded and untrusting, wide open, his passion and vulnerability there for her eyes only.

Dragging her hand away, Hermione leaned over and, with her teeth, untied the gold silk, allowing his erection to spring forth, magnificent in its demand for attention.

In a single movement, she released his hands and took him into her body, unsure of whose cry of ecstasy was loudest as the intimate contact triggered both into powerful waves of release, impossible to stem and seemingly endless.

Ragged breathing and pounding hearts were the orchestra of their recovery as they collapsed onto the blanket, still joined as one.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Severus."

"Holy fuck, Granger. You're going to be the death of me."

"What a way to go though." Hermione sighed as she rolled over onto her back, disengaging from Snape with a moist plop.

"I could die right now a satisfied man."

"I'd smack you for that if I had any energy left, you prat. Don't joke about such things."

"Do I look like I have a sense of humour?" Snape lifted himself up on one elbow and offered the glare usually guaranteed to have first years cowering behind their desks and even fourth-year Hufflepuffs sniffing into their pumpkin juice.

"No, you look like a constipated bat. You really need to work on your repertoire; we've seen it all before."

"Maybe you lot have, but the first years, now, they're a different kettle of fish." Snape's grin really was terrifying.

Hermione giggled and rolled over, scooping up the bowl of strawberries and warming the chocolate dipping sauce she had put aside. "I think it's time for 'afters', don't you?" Coating a fat strawberry with chocolate, she used it to paint a large heart on Snape's bare chest. "See, you do have a heart, after all."

At least he did until she licked it all off, then offered him the strawberry.

"I see the sort of 'afters' you're angling for, miss." Snape found his own strawberry and proceeded to decorate her nipples with artistically drawn flowers.

He studied his handiwork. "Hmm. Not bad, but I'm sure I can do better. Let me just erase this attempt." His tongue, always willing for such a chore, rapidly dispensed with the floral theme to have it replaced with a geometrically precise line of fruit, each berry cemented with chocolate to increasingly squirming skin in a line marching from Hermione's cleavage down to the sensitised bud below... and beyond.

"I like it. You should dress like that more often."

Arousal heightened by the warring sensations of cold fruit and warm chocolate in her most intimate places, as well as her lover's newfound playfulness, Hermione could only beg. "Please, Severus."

His own arousal clearly evident, Snape slowly and deliberately lifted each berry from her skin with his lips, then offered it to her mouth from his. As she chewed, he ensured the chocolate was cleaned off thoroughly before proceeding to the next stop on his leisurely trail down her body.

"I think I've had enough chocolate for now." Snape's eyes glinted with mirth as his fingers ghosted over the skin alongside the two remaining strawberries.

"Stop now and I'll ask Lavender for help with our hand fasting vows." Her growl was breathless as she moved her hips, unsuccessfully attempting to gain firmer contact where she needed it the most.

Snape shuddered. "Of course, one can never have enough of strawberries and chocolate." Leaning over, his tongue flicked out and scooped up the penultimate berry, which he savoured himself before turning his attention to the very last fruit nestled snugly in a swollen, moist embrace. Sucking the strawberry from its resting place, Snape crushed it a little between his teeth, allowing the sweet juice to mingle with the chocolate before lapping up both with long, languorous strokes of his tongue, returning from time to time to tease at the bundle of nerves above.

"Still delicious." He smiled against her skin, then lifted his head. Finding her lips with his, both sticky with strawberry juice and chocolate, he pressed the length of his body against hers until his heat found an answering flame, and speech and thought fled in the wake of their convergence.

Some time later, Snape awoke alone to the scratch of a quill and rustle of parchment coming from nearby. He rolled over to find his witch, still happily nude, concentrating on the pile of notes before her.

"What are you doing?"

She looked up and smiled. "Trying to plan our hand fasting ceremony while you snooze, lazybones."

"I can't help it if you wore me out, woman." Snape grumbled as he rose to his feet. "What is there to plan? Isn't there some sort of standardised rite?"

Passing over one pile of parchment, Hermione sighed. "There is, but it's awfully complicated. Apparently, the formal rite involves the presider drawing a circle of sand and identifying the four cardinal directions. Then four witnesses representing the elements, earth, air, fire, and water, have to stand at each pole and chant invocations to their elements for protection. Then the god and goddess are called upon to bless the match. The whole ceremony is very ritualistic. And long. We have to wear fine white garments with nothing underneath and bare feet, in order to commune with the earth and..."

"Are you serious?" Snape shook his head.

"Look. It's all in the notes. That's the way a wizarding hand fasting is usually done."

"We have to stand there, nearly nude, in front of Minerva and your friends and Merlin knows who else?"

"Well, yes. But..."

"Hermione, what do you think will happen if I'm beside you, naked under a flimsy robe, seeing you, also naked?" He looked down to find his point admirably demonstrated.

She giggled. "So, you get an erection, and everyone can see how lucky I am. I'm sure Ginny will be impressed. She's always asking whether it's true about noses."

"There must be another way."

"Well, there's this one." Hermione managed to keep a completely straight face. "Everyone at the ceremony is completely naked, and the consummation is witnessed by all attending. Apparently, it was quite popular back in the fourteenth century. I'm sure you could perform admirably."

His growl declared otherwise.

"Hmm. Didn't think so. Might have been fun, but the thought of Professors McGonagall and Flitwick baring all is a little disturbing."

"Not to mention Potter and Weasley."

"Oh, they'd be fine. They have pretty good bodies. I doubt anyone would be offended." Hermione smirked.

"That's what concerns me." Snape glanced down at his wilting erection. "Exactly when did you find this out, witch?"

"Camping for months, remember. Not much privacy in a tent." Hermione ran her eyes up and down Snape's bare body. "Besides, I prefer lean and graceful to muscles any day."

Slightly mollified, he reached for the rest of her notes. "Putting tradition aside for a moment, exactly what is *required* for the hand fasting to be completed?"

"Not a lot, just an exchange of promises. And some ribbons to bind the pledge. All the rest is garnish, really. Like all magic, it's the intent that matters."

Moving to stand before her, Snape let the parchment drop and reached for her hands. "So, all I have to do is say, I, Severus Tobias Snape, pledge to you, Hermione Jane Granger, to love you, protect you from harm, and keep my body unto yours for a period of one year and one day, and the deed is done?"

She nodded. "And I say, I, Hermione Jane Granger, pledge to you, Severus Tobias Snape, to love you, protect you from harm, and keep my body unto yours for a period of one year and one day. And one of those completion phrases."

"Like 'So mote it be'?"

"Yes, so mote it be. That's about it, aside from the ribbons." As she spoke, the room around them began to shimmer. Iridescent spirals of silver and gold and crimson formed out of thin air and swirled around and around their wrists in a figure of eight, the light gradually increasing in intensity until both were blinded by its intensity. Clinging on to one another, Snape and Hermione blinked as the brightness slowly faded into a dull sheen surrounding their hands.

"What the fuck was that?" Snape attempted to release his hands but found them stuck fast.

"No idea. But why can't we let go of each other?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Unless..." He drew her toward him and touched his lips to hers. With a soft hiss, the last of the shimmer seemed to absorb into their skin, leaving their hands freed. Encircling each of their wrists was what appeared to be a tattoo of crimson, gold, and silver intertwined into an elaborate design about an inch wide. Snape lifted his hands, turning them before his eyes to inspect the pattern. "Shite!"

"What?" Hermione reached up and took his hands once again. "What is it?"

Summoning his wand silently, Snape Banished the heaps of parchment scattered across the floor.

"I presume you have a reason for destroying hours of research, Severus?"

"We don't need it anymore." He shrugged. "It appears the job is done."

"What, we did it ourselves?"

"Look around you, love. We are naked, grass beneath our feet. We spoke our promises and used the sealing words. It appears the Room of Requirement has provided the rest."

"So, when you kissed me, it finalised the ritual. But don't we need witnesses?"

"The castle itself is sentient. Perhaps that was sufficient."

Thinking for a moment, Hermione once again studied her wrists. "These bindings. All my sources stated they would not appear until the ritual is complete. They stay visible until the year and a day are over, only disappearing if the pledges are not renewed then."

"Bloody hell. You mean I have to wear Gryffindor colours for the rest of my life for all to see?"

Hermione laughed at his outrage. "The colours represent what we feel towards each other. You, my dear curmudgeon, conjured those colours up yourself."

"Bugger. What do they signify then?"

"I'd be able to tell you if you hadn't destroyed my notes, wouldn't I?"

Snape scowled at his wrists again until a book appeared in his hand. The Room provided all, it seemed. "Red: passion, strength, lust, fertility." He raised his eyebrows at the dominance of red in their designs. "Let's just broadcast it to the world, shall we?"

Hermione chuckled and peered over his shoulder. "Gold: Energy, wealth, intelligence, longevity. I don't know about the wealth, unless there's something you're not telling me, but the rest applies."

"Wealthy I am not, unfortunately. I suspect it is the intelligence which brought us gold."

"You think I'm intelligent?"

"Stop fishing. What does it say for silver?"

"Treasure, values, creativity, and inspiration."

"You were certainly inspiring and creative not so long ago." Severus pressed closer and tossed the book aside in favour of inspiring more creativity.

"Shouldn't we inform the headmistress?"

"Bugger the headmistress. We have a hand fasting to consummate."

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Many thanks to karelia for her superb beta skills and LivingTheDream, my sounding box. The hand fasting rituals described were my own compilation of various descriptions I found online, and the colour meanings came from <http://www.myspiritualwedding.com/colors-handfasting>.

Chapter Thirty-five: Owing Up

Chapter 35 of 41

Severus and Hermione confess their little indiscretion to their friends.

Disclaimer: They all belong to JKR. I'm just playing with them.

Chapter Thirty-five: Owing Up

"You did WHAT?"

Snape tugged his sleeves up a little to show his irate headmistress the evidence.

Minerva peered at the tattoo encircling his slender wrists. Tracing the design with her fingers, she shook her head. "Unbelievable. You say the Room fulfilled the conditions?"

"It appeared to know what it was doing."

Her brow wrinkled as she recalled some of the requirements for a Handfasting. Lips pursed, she glared at her Potions professor. "Exactly *why* were you and Miss Granger together, barely dressed, in the Room of Requirement last night?"

Snape raised a lazy eyebrow. "Barely dressed would be an overstatement, and as far as our activities are concerned, I suspect you'd rather not know."

"I take it the union has been consummated?" Noting Snape's satisfied smirk, she didn't wait for a reply. "I'll need to notify the Board of Governors before the Ministry does. No doubt your deed has appeared in the Register of Betrothals, Handfastings, and Marriages by now. Luckily, it is Monday, and I recall Arthur Weasley once mentioning nothing ever gets done before eleven on a Monday morning. Interdepartmental meetings, apparently. With a little luck, no-one will check the Registry before this afternoon."

"Miss Gr... Madam Snape will be wanting to relocate her possessions to your rooms; however, I would ask you to delay that until after dinner tonight when an announcement of her new status can be made."

"She has decided to remain Miss Granger until the school year is complete. She seemed to be of the opinion that taking my name while sitting in a class with her peers might create a little... tension."

It was Minerva's turn to raise an eyebrow. "She always was perceptive. Do you have any problem with her plan?"

He shook his head. "No. The last thing I wish for her is estrangement from her classmates. She will face enough speculation as it is. In regard to that, I would ask you to arrange alternative marking for her Potions samples and essays until the end of the year."

"Do you believe you cannot remain impartial, Severus?"

"Not at all. If anything, she would probably complain I have marked her more severely over the last few months, but others may not see it that way. For her own peace of mind, I need to have no part in her grades beyond overseeing her in the classroom."

"Very well, I shall contact the authorities tomorrow. And one more thing."

"Yes, Minerva?"

"As disappointed as I am not to have conducted the ceremony for you, I wish you both every happiness. You deserve it." Before Snape could move out of reach, Minerva gathered him into an embrace and kissed his cheek. "Look after that exceptional young lady, Severus. She'll be the making of you."

"She already is." Snape startled the older witch by returning her kiss with one of his own. "Now, may I be excused?"

"Don't twinkle at me, young man. And make sure you two are seen at breakfast. I do not want tongues wagging unnecessarily."

As she reached for a quill and parchment, Minerva debated with herself as to whether Snape really had winked as he had turned for the door.

"Oh, hi, Hermione. We were just wondering where you'd disappeared to last night. You missed quite a party in your honour." Ginny and Blaise were waiting for her as she left her room after returning for a quick shower before breakfast.

Hermione frowned. "What party?"

"The party to celebrate your betrothal to Professor Snape. Everyone came, even the Slytherins. But not you." Ginny grinned and winked.

"We assumed you were participating in a private celebration of your own. Especially as no-one had seen Snape stalking the halls as he usually would on Valentine's Day. I hear the Astronomy Tower was quite busy for most of the evening," Blaise added.

"I... er... Well, yes." Her blush confirmed her friends' suspicions nicely.

"Well?"

"Well, what, Gin?"

"Did you have any time between *other* activities to make arrangements for the Handfasting?"

Fidgeting with her cuffs, Hermione took a deep breath and waited for the explosion. "There's something I need to tell you about that. It's not..."

"Dammit, Hermione, has that man upset you again? I've a good mind to..."

"No, Blaise. Calm down. It's not like that. The thing is... Well..."

"What?" Ginny's impatience had her dancing around on the spot.

"We didn't mean to, really, but there's no need for a Handfasting." Without further explanation, Hermione showed the two purebloods her wrists.

"Hermione! How did you manage that?" Ginny almost managed to control the excited squeal.

"Granger, you devious cow!" Blaise stared at her in admiration for a moment, then nodded to himself as he understood. "Room of Requirement, right?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Everything, Ginny. Severus and I were discussing the Handfasting ritual and happened to repeat some of the vows made..."

"Fucking hell, Hermione! You two idiots were standing there naked, holding hands, and just happened to say the binding words. In the bloody Room of Requirement. Are you both completely daft?"

"Naked? Who said they were naked? Nobody said they were naked!" Ginny looked from one friend to the other, eyes wide.

"Trust me. For that ritual to have been completed with no-one else present I assume you weren't involved in any kinky threesome or orgy, Granger, because I'd be awfully offended you hadn't invited me they needed to be naked. The Room provided the ribbons?"

Hermione nodded. Once again, Blaise had proven how well he knew wizarding customs.

"And *you're* supposed to be the know-it-all. Unbelievable." Blaise shrugged. "Oh, well, it's done now. And we'd better get to breakfast. Handfasted or not, you're still due in

class in less than an hour, Madam Snape."

"It's Granger. For now. It'll be easier."

"He agreed?"

"He's not entirely insensitive, you know." Hermione huffed as she turned for the door.

Hermione pulled her sleeves down to cover her wrists as she filled Ginny in on how the Handfasting had occurred on the way to the Great Hall. The sudden silence as she entered the hall spoke volumes as all eyes watched her walk down the room to her usual spot at the Gryffindor table. When it became apparent she had not grown two heads or was about to burst into joyful song, the babble of conversation resumed, but not without watchful eyes directed both at her and the head table where Severus Snape had yet to put in an appearance.

"Where is he?" whispered Ginny.

"Presumably still with Professor McGonagall. He went to inform her of what happened."

Ginny sighed. "Such a gentleman, taking the responsibility by himself. If only more men were like him."

Hermione grinned. "What, short-tempered, sarcastic bastards?"

"You can't say that about the man you've just shagged." Ginny produced her best Molly expression. "I presume you shagged him thoroughly after the Handfasting was complete."

"Yes, I can, and yes, I did. He's not perfect, and I doubt he'll change into a sweet, charming soft touch like Remus was, but then again, I'm no saint either. Just ask Umbridge."

Ginny shook her head. "No way. I wouldn't go near that hag voluntarily for all the Galleons in Gringotts."

A giggle announced the arrival of Lavender and Parvati, who settled themselves on the bench either side of Hermione.

"Lavender told me about you and Professor Snape," began Parvati. "Is it true? You and him? Together?"

"Yes. It's true."

"But... why?" Parvati looked genuinely perplexed.

"For the usual reasons, of course."

"But he's..."

"Don't even go there, Parvati," Ginny interrupted. "Trust me."

Parvati nudged Lavender. "Go on, ask her again."

"No, you do it."

"Ask me what?" Hermione noticed Snape had appeared at the staff table and was watching the proceedings at the Gryffindor table with interest.

Leaning forward with her back to the top of the room, Parvati whispered, "How big is it?"

Hermione just managed to refrain from rolling her eyes. "What is it with you two? You're obsessed!"

The two girls either side of her had the grace to blush but moved closer anyway.

Incensed, Hermione continued. "You really want to know about your Potions professor's penis?" *I'll teach them to be careful what they ask for.*

Lavender and Parvati squirmed in their seats.

"Would that be when it's flaccid, like when he was teaching you lot? Or maybe when I undress in front of him and yes, I do, Parvati and it's erect? Or perhaps when it's rock hard and ready to burst after I've been pleasuring him..." She lowered her voice, forcing her two housemates to lean closer. "...With my lips and tongue?" Hermione licked her lips and glanced up at her husband.

"Ew, Hermione! There's no need to be crude!" Lavender screwed up her face.

Yes! Got her! Now she'll leave me in peace.

But Lavender had no intention of leaving. "You do *that*? To *him*?"

Bloody hell! They're still here.

"Yes, Lavender. I do." Hermione's set expression would have been warning enough to her closest friends. "Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

After a quick whispered conference with Parvati, Lavender turned back to Hermione. "Well, actually... Does he like it? I can just imagine the expression on his face as he loses control, groaning in ecstasy. Does he close his eyes and shout out your name when he comes? We've always wondered what Professor Snape would look like then, haven't we, Parv? They say the most repressed men are the most passionate when they finally let go. Is it true? Does he..."

Merlin, she's like a Niffler that's found its way into Malfoy Manor! Hermione closed her eyes and allowed Lavender's voice to babble on, almost soothing in its endless flow, until she noticed Ginny's pale face and wide eyes staring at something behind her.

"... Truth to tell, we sort of fancy him a bit ourselves now he's not teaching us anymore. He's got that sort of bad boy thing going with all the black robes and sneers. And that voice... it could melt anyone's knickers. You're so lucky, getting to know the *real* Severus Snape. I wonder what he's like to live with?"

"Intolerant, demanding, ill-tempered, and tedious. But she can't say I didn't warn her." Snape himself stood behind Hermione, resting his hands on her shoulders. "And twenty points from Gryffindor for excessive nosiness, Miss Brown. If you have any further questions about my sex life, you are welcome to come for a detention and ask. Of course, you are unlikely to get any satisfaction."

For once in her life, Lavender Brown could not muster so much as a giggle. Blushing furiously, she dragged Parvati to her feet, and the pair almost ran from the Great Hall.

Hermione leaned back against Snape's lean body and sighed. "I wouldn't encourage them if I were you, Severus. They're likely to turn up for detention just to spend time with your knicker-melting voice and bad-boy robes."

"They'd only do it once. I'm sure a few hours spent disembowelling horned toads would prove an effective deterrent."

"Stop looking so pleased at the prospect. I'm sure you could think of better things to do than supervise those two."

"I'm sure I can." His thumbs promised everything as he brushed the sensitive skin exposed at her neck, and he dropped his voice for her ears alone. "Minerva suggested we delay your move to the dungeons until after she has announced our Handfasting at dinner. She wishes to notify the Board of Governors before the news spreads any further." With a final discreet caress, Snape swept off, leaving Hermione to her friends' curiosity.

"Where did Lav and Parvati go in such a hurry? They haven't eaten yet," Ron called from several places down the table.

"Let's just say they'll think twice about asking Hermione personal questions in the future." Ginny grinned at Hermione. "Consider yourself lucky it wasn't Terry and Mandy. You wouldn't have distracted them. They'd have wanted to know measurements in all three scenarios to the nearest quarter of an inch. Bloody pedantic Ravenclaws."

Blaise had lost his usual serene expression. "I can't believe you were discussing Snape's... er... personal measurements with those two. Shall I arrange the obituary now?"

"Settle down, Zabini." Ginny patted his hand. "No numbers were exchanged, remember."

"Do they know you've already Handfasted?"

"No. They can find out when everyone else does. Professor McGonagall will make an announcement at dinner; then I'll move my things to Severus's quarters. Or, rather, our quarters."

This time, Ginny let out a little squeal. "You're moving in. Oh, Merlin!"

"Of course I'm moving in. What's the point of being Handfasted if we don't live together?"

"Of course. I just hadn't thought it through that far. I wonder what he'll be like to live with."

Hermione groaned. "Not you too!"

"What have we missed? I hear the news about you and Snape is out." Harry squeezed in between Ginny and Blaise while Ron took the space vacated by Lavender.

"That's old news, Harry." Ginny patted his cheek. "You boys missed a lot while you were sleeping in this morning."

"Who slept in? We were here in time for breakfast, and that's the main thing." Ron was still chewing on his last bite of toast. "And what's this I hear about a Handfasting? Do we get to participate in the ceremony? I've always wanted to do Air. Flying, and all, you know."

Hermione glanced around the table, ensuring no-one else was within earshot. "You know I would have asked you, Ron, but it's too late. Severus and I... well, we sort of did it ourselves last night in the Room of Requirement. It wasn't intentional..."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "How did you fulfil the necessary conditions?"

"Never mind about that, mate." Blaise came to the rescue. "They've gone and deprived us of a party, that's what they've done. What shall we do about it?"

"Nothing until after it's officially announced." Hermione put her finger to her lips. "And you're the only people who know apart from Professor McGonagall. And I'll tell Luna. No-one else is to know until dinner."

"So, no party until after dinner, then?" Ron beamed.

"No party, Ronald."

"But how did you Handfast yourselves? What happens in a Handfasting anyway?" Harry was having trouble keeping up. By the time he had been enlightened, it was almost time for their first class.

Potions.

Oh, fuck. Terry and Mandy will be there. What fun. Hermione collected her school bag from under the table and set off with Blaise, Harry, and Ron to face the reaction of her other classmates.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. My sublime beta is karelia, and let's all wish her a Happy Birthday!

Chapter Thirty-six: Feeding the Rumours

Chapter 36 of 41

Minerva makes the announcement at dinner, but not before more rumours spread through the castle.

Disclaimer: I don't own the characters or the castle. A castle would be cool though. Especially if it had a moat.

Chapter Thirty-six: Feeding the Rumours

Snape greeted his senior class with an expression betraying none of the sensual pleasure he had enjoyed the night before. His trademark sneer firmly in place, he gestured towards the blackboard and began. "Can anyone identify the potion you are brewing today?"

"As if she wouldn't know. She's shagging him, after all." Terry rolled his eyes as Hermione reeled off the essential characteristics and use for a Truth-Saying Potion, used as a cheaper and less restricted alternative to the Veritaserum they had brewed earlier in the year.

"Don't be so mean, Terry. She would know anyway. Besides, we only have Lavender Brown's word for it. It could just be a nasty rumour. Look at him; he's treating her no

differently from usual."

"You were too busy talking to Padma this morning, Mandy. You missed seeing him standing behind her at the Gryffs' table."

"He was probably giving some poor sod detention."

"With his hands on Hermione's shoulders and her leaning back against him with a very satisfied smile? I doubt it."

Mandy's squeal drew the unwelcome attention of the subject of their whispering.

"You have something you wish to share with the class, Miss Brocklehurst?"

"Er... no. Sorry, sir."

"Five points from Ravenclaw for disrupting the class. Any more ridiculous noises and it will be ten. Now, if there are no further questions, begin."

For the next thirty minutes the potion required absolute concentration. Hermione and Blaise diced, shredded, measured, and stirred precisely as the well-oiled team they had become, only relaxing once the potion had reached the simmering stage. Their eyes met over the cauldron as they set down their knives for a moment.

"Well, he's keeping it close to his chest." Blaise nodded towards the man peering into Ron and Harry's cauldron with a scowl.

Hermione muffled her laugh with her hand. "What did you expect, a full-on snogging session in front of the class?"

"No, but I thought he'd at least acknowledge you."

"I didn't. I expected him to behave just as he is."

"Surly and impatient?"

"You know him then?"

Blaise grinned. "All right, you win. Even after being shagged senseless, which I assume you attempted, the Potions master shall remain unmoved."

"Don't believe everything you see, Mr Zabini." Snape's low murmur startled the two students. With an approving nod towards their cauldron, he glided off to the next workstation.

"That's damn near an admission of overwhelming, bone-melting sexual satisfaction, I suspect." Blaise winked at his partner, then turned his attention to scattering ground black beetle eyes over the surface of the shimmering brew in the prescribed fashion.

Across the room, Draco and Neville smirked at each other as they watched Snape circulate the room.

"He's hiding it well."

"Not to me he isn't, Nev. Mind you, I've known him since I was a baby. Look at his hands."

"What about them?"

"See how he's rubbing his thumb against the side of his index finger? That's his tell."

"How do you know that?"

"He always did it at dinner parties at the Manor when he had *toperform*."

"Perform?"

"Act as if he was a pureblood. You know he comes from a pretty rundown industrial area. Took my parents years to coach him to speak and behave properly in company. Of course, he absolutely detested it."

"Sounds like living with my gran. Poor bastard."

"Now I've heard it all, Neville Longbottom sympathising with his nemesis." Draco snorted. "What brought about that turnaround?"

"Oh, shut it, you gorgeous prat. You know we've had an *understanding* since I caught him sneaking out of Hermione's room that night."

"Next thing I know you'll be taking tea with him and Granger and discussing the latest potions advances."

Neville shuddered. "Not bloody likely. That's your job."

The indulgent expression on Draco's face softened a lot of the sharp angles. "For you, love, I'll sacrifice myself. Now, have you finished chopping the hellebore root?"

By the end of the double lesson, all speculation as to the relationship between the curly-haired bookworm and the professor had succumbed to the need for concentration and application of techniques learned over the previous six years. After all the samples had been deposited on his desk, Snape watched the students file out of the door.

"A word, Miss Granger, if I may?"

Heads turned and eyes sparked with interest as Hermione packed her bag and walked up to Snape's desk. With a flick of his wand, the door slammed on inquisitive eyes.

"Isn't that a little obvious?" Hermione quirked an eyebrow at her husband.

"Obvious be damned. I've spent two hours waiting for this." With that, he drew her into his arms and captured her lips with his. Several minutes of passionate exploration later, he released her with a sigh. Looking down, he frowned at the jaunty response making itself known in his trousers. "I suppose *that* will have to wait."

Giving him a gentle squeeze through the layers of cloth, Hermione grinned. "I'm sure you'll manage. At least you only have firsties to terrorise. I have to put up with the stares of whoever is still waiting outside."

With an evil smirk, Snape reached up and ran his hands through her hair. When it was tousled to his satisfaction, he took her mouth in one last kiss, nipping her bottom lip before releasing her. "Now you look suitably ravished."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione chuckled as she hoisted her bag onto her shoulder and headed for the door. "I'll see you later. But for now, my public awaits."

"If one more Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw asks me whether Severus really shagged me over his desk in the bloody Potions classroom, I'm damned well going to go down there and demand he do exactly that just to shut the little buggers up!" Hermione dropped her bag and flopped onto the bench at the Gryffindor table. She glared up at the staff table where Snape conversed with Pomona Sprout without so much as a hint of concern.

"Well, if you must leave his classroom looking like you did this morning, you can hardly blame them." Ron managed to keep a stern expression on his face until he met Blaise's eye across the table and grinned. "After all, you did give Mandy and Terry quite a show on your way out. And Hannah was there as well."

Hermione laughed as well as she remembered the perfect 'O's' her fellow students' mouths had formed as she met them in the corridor outside the Potions classroom in all her dishevelled glory. "True. I suppose I asked for it. But the looks on their faces!"

"Hey, what's this I hear about you and Snape and lewd activities in the classroom?" Ginny asked as she sat down.

As Blaise and Ron enlightened Ginny, Hermione glanced again at her husband, who now seemed to be on the receiving end of the headmistress's displeasure.

Good. That'll teach him. One minute he's the paragon of self-control, and the next he's playing the lothario. Still, by tonight everyone will know we are Handfasted, and the novelty will wear off soon.

After a quick lunch, Hermione had some time to spare for her next important task. Making her way to a quiet corner of the library, she took out a fresh piece of parchment and a quill.

Dear Mum

I hope you're sitting down as you read this. If not, sit down now.

First of all, thanks heaps for the wonderful picnic hamper. The food was terrific, and the champagne, well, let's just say it was very appreciated.

The thing is, after the picnic, we started talking about Handfasting.

I know I'd promised you and Daddy would be present at the ceremony. The only problem is...

After several attempts at explaining how she and Snape had accidentally Handfasted themselves, Hermione finally blotted the parchment and rolled it up to attach to the leg of a sturdy brown owl waiting on a perch in the owlery. Offering the bird a piece of sausage she had saved from lunch, Hermione watched it fly off. A soft hoot drew her attention to the dejected little owl looking at her.

"Oh, hello, Gimpy. Don't be sad; it's too far for you to fly in this weather. I haven't forgotten about you. Here, there's a little sausage left for you too."

After sharing the treat with the little owl who had delivered so many messages to Snape for her, Hermione stroked his feathers for a minute or two before leaving for her next class.

"Well, this is it. She'll make the announcement any minute now." Ginny reached under the table and squeezed Hermione's hand. "Did you get a chance to tell Neville and Draco?"

"Yes. After Transfiguration."

"How did they take it?"

Hermione glanced down the table at the two young men in question and shook her head with a smile. "As expected. They took great delight in the fact neither of us realised what we were doing. Draco did manage to splutter out his congratulations between girly giggles though, so I suppose that means he's okay with it. Neville just looked smug. Do you think he knew something already?"

"No idea. You have to watch the quiet ones though. They notice more than you think." Ginny looked up as a sharp rapping sounded from the staff table. "Looks like your moment of fame is here."

Shrinking down in her seat and covering her face with her hands, Hermione groaned. "Is it too late to disappear? You could always say I was held up in the library."

"Like hell. You, my dear friend, have to face up to your sins. And so will he."

Severus Snape was sitting bolt upright in his seat, face inscrutable.

"Oh, Merlin, I wish I could do that." Hermione whispered through her fingers.

"What, look like you have a broomstick up your..."

"Ginny!" Despite herself, Hermione grinned.

"Relax. It'll all be over in a few minutes."

Minerva McGonagall cleared her throat as she stood, catching the attention of the students and staff alike. "Good evening, everyone. Before we begin our meal tonight, I need your attention for a few moments." Her steady gaze travelled around the room silencing the last whispered conversations in its wake. "That's better. Now, it has come to my attention there has been rumour and gossip spread amongst you about a certain member of my staff and one of your fellow students.

"Whilst I heartily disapprove of such ill-mannered behaviour," her steely eyes met Lavender Brown's long enough to set the girl's lip quivering, "it is time to clarify the situation."

All eyes were on the headmistress as she beckoned to Hermione to approach the head table. Meeting the younger woman at the end of the table, Minerva led her to stand beside the Potions professor, who rose to his feet and, with elegant finesse never before suspected by those watching, lifted his wife's hand and brought it to his lips.

Minerva raised her hand as the gasps from the student tables threatened to erupt into a more verbal reaction. "Silence! It is with great pleasure I wish to announce Professor Severus Snape and Miss Hermione Granger were Handfasted last night. With my blessing."

She turned to rest her eyes on her professors. "Miss Granger will remain in *all* her classes as usual, however, alternative marking arrangements will be made for her Potions work. Now, I believe dinner is about to be served." With an imperious clap, the food appeared on the tables, distracting both teachers and students alike.

"How does she do that?" Ginny stared at the headmistress.

"Do what?" asked Blaise.

"With a few short words, she put Lavender in her place, told everyone she approved of their relationship, and put paid to any suggestion of favouritism. Then had dinner arrive as if nothing unusual had happened."

"That's why she's the headmistress and not you, Ginny."

Ginny shrugged. "I think I'd rather be a mere student and not up there." She tilted her head to the staff table where Snape had pulled out a chair for a very uncomfortable looking young woman.

"I'll drink to that."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as she closed the door of her bedroom on the ruckus behind it. The makings of yet another celebration had developed with her friends and the rest of the eight-year students breaking open Butterbeer bottles as soon as they had returned after dinner. No-one had seemed to mind Hermione excusing herself to pack after only one drink. Hoots of laughter had followed her down the short corridor to her room along with increasingly ribald suggestions on just how she could ensure their professor's good mood in class.

With an efficiency gained from years of practice, Hermione's wand flicked and swooped her clothes, books, and other personal possessions into her trunk. Once the room was bare, she leaned on the windowsill and peered out into the winter night. The glow of lights from various windows in the castle and the dark velvet waters of the lake below soothed the anxious flutter in her chest as she readied herself to take her place as the Potions master's wife. No matter what upheavals took place in the lives of its inhabitants, the castle itself remained a constant, enduring for centuries as witches and wizards learned and grew, laughed and cried, fought and loved within its walls.

A sudden pop startled her out of her reverie. "Is Mistress Snape ready for removing to the dungeons?"

Hermione smiled at Winky as the little house-elf reached for the trunk. "Yes, thank you, Winky. Are you sure you can manage that? It's awfully heavy."

"No problem for Winky, Mistress." And with another pop, Hermione's possessions had disappeared.

"Well, I suppose it's time." Hermione spoke to the empty room and smiled to herself.

Several hugs, well wishes, and even a few tears later, she found herself standing before the door to her new quarters. As she raised her hand to knock, the door swung open to reveal the smirking face of her husband.

"You do realise you don't need to knock now?"

"I... well... the wards..."

"Already changed to allow you to pass freely. The password is *Woman: Unveiled*." His smirk morphed into the special smile only she knew.

Hermione snorted. "I hope you don't let passing first years hear that. They might get the wrong idea about you, Professor."

"Or entirely the right one. Come here, wench." He pulled her into his arms, kicking the door closed behind her as he greeted her with urgent lips and questing tongue. Pausing for breath a few minutes later, he shook his head. "What is it about the taste of you? I can't get enough of it."

Hermione reached up and patted his cheek with a smirk of her own. "Addicted, are you? I'm sure there are potions for that."

"If it's an addiction, then an addict I shall be." Snape sighed and released her from his embrace. "I suppose I should allow you to unpack before I drag you to our bed."

"Our bed. I rather like the sound of that."

"You can like the sound of it in due course. You have unpacking and homework to do, and I have marking to finish." Snape scowled suddenly and groaned. "Tell me I didn't just tell my wife to do bloody homework!"

"You did, and you're right. You'll... we'll have to get used to it. I have N.E.W.T.s in a few months, and I have to study. At least we can be together as we work, although no doubt I'll need to spend time in the library as well."

"I wouldn't have you any other..." A loud tapping on the window drew Snape's attention mid-sentence. Opening the window to allow the owl inside, Snape retrieved the missive and settled the bird on the mantle with a treat.

"Mail? At this time of night?"

"Mmm. Not unusual, especially from this source." He handed over the letter for her perusal, an odd expression on his face.

Dear Sidney

I have deposited your final cheque today for the last of the paintings. Jolly good show with the exhibition. I knew you were made of the right stuff.

We need to meet soon to discuss our next project. I was thinking of a counterpoint to our last exhibition. Perhaps you could explore the nature of woman in her role as a mother, from the first kiss before conception to the moment the child leaves as an adult.

I'm aware your Miss Henman is unlikely to be in a situation to provide a real life model, but I believe she would be the ideal subject, with a little embellishment on your part in certain paintings.

Do think it over, old chap. This one's a winner for certain.

Regards

William Standish

Boneless fingers allowed the paper to flutter to the ground as Hermione's face lost all colour. "What the hell is he thinking? That's the most ridiculous idea I've ever heard!"

Behind her, Snape's emerging smile withered into a careful study of neutrality.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Oodles of hugs to karelia for her awesome beta skills.

Chapter Thirty-seven: Living Together

Chapter 37 of 41

Severus and Hermione make a few adjustments.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. I'm just borrowing them to play with.

Chapter Thirty-seven: Living Together

Hermione closed the door of the wardrobe and shrunk her empty trunk to stow away. Thanks to Argus Filch, Snape's modest armoire had been switched for a roomy wardrobe, and a second set of drawers tucked into an unused corner of the bedroom had completed her storage needs for clothes. However, another foray into the castle's storerooms would be in order if any of her already substantial collection of books was to find a home.

She wandered around the silent rooms, adjusting a bottle or two in the bathroom and finally unloading parchment, quills, and reference texts onto the second desk in the living room ready to start her homework.

Where is he? I thought he was only going to do a quick round of the castle. He was in such an odd mood when he left, as if something had upset him. Before that letter came he was...

Shite.

He was fine before the letter came. He does think it's ridiculous. Surely?

Picking up the letter from where it had been left on the floor, Hermione read it once more. A frown creased her forehead when she found no clue to her husband's change of demeanour.

The weight in Snape's chest had not eased despite several encounters with wayward students, including one somewhat unnervingly brash group of Gryffindors who cheered him as he stalked past rather than disappearing into the nearest dark corridor. Thoughts turned inward, he ignored the opportunity to deduct points and left them to their own devices.

Why did I assume she wanted children? My children. I always thought I hated children, but the idea of my seed growing within her... Dammit, I thought we'd at least talk about it!

She was still up when he crept through the door after midnight. Still in the living room, at least, sprawled out on the sofa clad only in a flimsy nightgown, her mouth pouting slightly open and snuffling softly in her sleep. A soft murmur escaped her lips as she stirred at his entrance. Spirits lifting at the sight of her, he banished his anxieties to await later discussion and scooped her up into his arms.

"Hi." Serious brown eyes met black as he laid her onto the bed.

"Hi, yourself, sleepyhead."

"Where have you been all this time? I missed you."

"Walking. And thinking." Discarding his robes and outer clothes, he began unbuttoning his shirt.

"About the letter?" Her eyes followed the hands now unfastening his trousers.

"Yes." Snape stepped out of his remaining garment and stood beside the bed, his appreciation of the sight before him clearly evident.

All thoughts of Standish set aside with her nightgown, Hermione lay naked on the coverlet, her skin molten honey in the firelight, fingers lightly brushing the pebbled peaks of her arousal.

"Come to bed."

He shook his head, eyes fixed on the hand moving down her body as his own mirrored her actions.

"No. Your turn to watch."

Hermione groaned and hid her head under the pillow. *I love him. I love him. I love him.* Try as she might, the affirmation did not help. Snape, long used to his own company in the mornings, banged and thudded in and out of the bedroom and bathroom as he prepared himself for the day ahead at what Hermione had decided was an obscenely early hour.

Especially after the activities of the evening before. And twice during the night. And maybe an hour or so earlier, although she couldn't be sure she hadn't imagined it in her sleep-muddled haze.

"Why are you hiding under the pillow, woman?"

"Mmmmpghrrrrmm."

"Indeed."

"Grrmmssleeping."

"I see that. You don't want a cup of tea then?" Snape rested his hand on an enticing curve outlined by the quilt.

Sitting up with a start, Hermione scowled and rubbed her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Five-thirty."

"Five-thirty!"

"Of course. That's the time I always rise."

Slumping back down into the nest of warmth under the covers, Hermione muttered to herself. "I've married a bloody lunatic. Who gets up at five-thirty at this time of year?"

Smirking, Snape tucked the quilt around her shoulders and kissed her cheek. "I do. However, as you are clearly not possessed of the ability to carry out an intelligent conversation at this hour, I shall go and drink my tea and leave you in peace."

"Don't forget to close the door after you." *And a Silencing Charm wouldn't bloody hurt.*

Finally blissful, delicious quiet. Clearly, a few ground rules had to be set. An early morning shag was one thing, but the subsequent racket was totally unacceptable. Hermione dozed back off while constructing a mental list of *Rules Regarding Early Morning Noise Control*.

"Feeling better?" Snape glanced up from his desk as Hermione entered the sitting room, freshly showered and fully alert.

"Mmm. Thanks." Stealing a kiss as she passed, Hermione found a freshly brewed pot of tea on the side table and poured. "Gods, this is divine. What blend do you use?"

"Can't tell you all of my secrets." He smirked as he watched her drain her cup and refill it for a leisurely second.

Hermione shrugged. "I suppose you'll have to make the tea in the mornings then. Preferably after *quietly* dressing and showering."

"I believe we've already established you're not a morning person."

She nodded. "That's why I've always studied late at night. More time in bed in the morning." Catching the predatory gleam in his eye, she added, "For sleeping, Severus. You know, the *other* thing people do in beds?" Placing her empty cup on the table, Hermione sidled over to perch on his lap. With a finger, she traced the outline of his lips. "Not that I'm averse to more physical activities in the mornings, given the right incentive..."

It was a creditable attempt at his usual sneer, but Hermione could detect the amusement in his eyes. "So, everything has its price. As long as I sneak around my own bedroom in the morning while I get dressed, I'm permitted to ravish you whenever I so desire."

"*Our* bedroom. And you don't have to sneak, just don't bang the wardrobe and bathroom doors so much. There are no firsties to terrify in here, and you hardly need the practice."

"But I can ravish you whenever I wish?" Snape raised an eyebrow and allowed his hand to slide inside her robes to find the swell of her breast.

"Absolutely."

It was some time later before they were presentable enough for breakfast.

William Standish's letter lay unanswered on Snape's desk nearly hidden by a pile of third-year essays. Hermione glanced at it and scowled as she picked up the *Daily Prophet* discarded by Snape that morning.

"Anything in the *Prophet* today worth reading?"

"Not a lot, unless you think Madame Malkin's expanding to another shop is exciting. Personally, I don't care what I wear, as long as it's black." Snape gestured to his ever-faithful black robes.

Hermione chuckled. "Not that anyone would notice. Maybe if it was Flourish and Blott's I'd be interested." Flicking through the pages, Hermione suddenly fell silent and stared at the parchment in front of her. "Fuck! Kingsley Shacklebolt!"

Snape glanced up. "I hope you don't mean that, Hermione. I really don't think he's my type."

"You have a type? In men?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. I prefer the ones who stay well away from my witch. What about Shacklebolt?"

Hermione folded the paper carefully and placed it to one side. "I forgot all about it, what with you... and me... and everything. He offered me a job at Christmas."

"If you think I'll allow you to leave Hogwarts before you have completed your education..."

"Severus Snape, if *you* think for one minute you can dictate what I do... Never mind. The job was for after I have graduated. Sorting out the mess his office records were left in by the previous incumbents. He seems to think for some reason I'd be good at it. It would just be temporary, and he promised he'd give me a good reference if I didn't want to stay when I was finished."

Snape bowed his head. "I apologise. I over-reacted. You have the right to decide what you do and when you do it." He extracted the letter from Standish from the pile on his desk. "I'd rather hoped you would wish to model again this summer."

This time Hermione saw the disappointment wash over Snape's face before he schooled his features. "Oh, Severus, you know I'd love to pose for you again. Last summer was... incredible. Getting to know you was a bonus, but being part of creating something so wonderful was one of the best experiences of my life. But I told you how I felt about his idea."

His back was stiff as he turned away. "You told me it was ridiculous. Is the thought of motherhood so ridiculous?" Snape wheeled around to face her, his expression naked and vulnerable. He spoke so softly she had to lean forward to catch the words. "Is the thought of carrying my child so ridiculous?"

Hermione gasped as his interpretation of her words the previous evening struck with the chill of a winter's night. "No, no, you don't understand." Reaching for his hand, she tugged him closer. "Severus, more than anything else in the world, I'd love to bear your child one day. Or children. It was the idea that motherhood is the epitome of a woman's existence I objected to. That all a woman is can be represented by her ability to carry a child."

"You don't believe becoming a mother is fulfilling?"

"I believe carrying the child of the man I love would be immensely fulfilling. But a woman is not just a mother. She is a daughter, a wife, a sister, a friend. She's a lover, a writer, an artist, a teacher. She's a scientist, a gardener, a thinker. She's everything and so much more. You can't define a woman by motherhood alone. Just as we explored every facet of a woman's body in your last exhibition, in the next we should showcase a woman's full potential."

Relief softened his features as a smile crept into his eyes. "We?"

"Of course. You don't think I'm going to allow any other woman to spend that much time alone with you. Especially if there is nudity involved."

"Nudity. Who said anything about nudity?"

"Trust me, Severus, if we spend any amount of time in your studio, there *will* be nudity."

"And what about Shacklebolt's offer?"

"I'm sure we could come to some arrangement for me to start in September once school resumes. It would be easy enough to set up a direct Floo connection to the Ministry, I imagine. After all, I have the Minister of Magic on my side."

"Indeed."

Much later, after marking and homework had been completed, Hermione curled up against Snape's side on the sofa, tracing an intricate design on his thigh through the wool of his trousers. As her finger wandered closer and closer, then boldly trailed up and down his burgeoning length, Snape captured her hand and drew it up to his lips. "Cease and desist, woman, or I'll embarrass myself like an overeager schoolboy again."

Smiling, Hermione simply continued her activity with her other hand. "Tell me, Severus, did you have any secret schoolboy fantasies when you were at Hogwarts?"

His blush answered the question quite succinctly.

"Tell me."

"Oh, sweet Circe in a Citroën, Severus, don't stop!"

"Not... planning... to," Snape panted. Lifting her bottom higher, he began thrusting harder and faster as he felt his impending orgasm swelling within him, focussing all his senses on the point of contact between their bodies. With a final cry, he pushed them both over the edge into gasping, shuddering ecstasy.

"Holy fuck! That was incredible." Hermione flipped over onto her back and sat in the seat she had been kneeling upon. "A bit hard on the knees though. Could have done with a Cushioning Charm."

"I thought I was supposed to be the old and decrepit one in this relationship." Snape stretched and leaned back, admiring the vastness of the night sky above.

"Old and decrepit you may not be, but your imagination is sadly lacking. Taking me from behind in the teacher's Quidditch stand. Isn't that a bit trite?" She grinned.

"I was *fifteen*; forgive me if my sexual fantasies did not involve anything more exotic than actually getting an orgasm that didn't involve my trusty friend here." He held out his right hand, still trembling a little from his climax.

"Your friend has served you well, from memory, but it's time for him to retire. Unless I can watch."

"You, wicked woman, are far too fond of watching me masturbate." Snape watched her pupils dilate as he ran his hand over the skin of his belly, through the coarse curls at his groin, and down to cup his still soft penis. Her soft groans as he slowly stroked the velvety skin encouraged a rapid thickening and hardening despite the chilly air permeating the fading Warming Charm.

Suddenly, he stopped and turned to his wife.

"Sweet Circe in a Citroën? Where did that come from?"

Hermione strangled her cry of frustration and replied, "Long story. Camping involved long periods of inactivity between bursts of panic. We made up swears to distract ourselves. Now, will you *please* carry on with what you were doing?"

Further encouragement was unnecessary as Snape proceeded with the job in hand.

Brilliant idea, old chap! I must say young Grace has had a positively enlightening influence on you. By all means rummage up a few sketches and ideas and send them to me. I think we're onto another winner!

William

Hermione passed the letter back to Snape with a grin. "Looks like we've got work to do, *Sidney*."

"I have work to do. You have exams to study for. I'm quite capable of creating a few sketches without supervision."

"But won't you need a model?"

Snape caught her around the waist and drew her body along the length of his. "I think I have a fairly in-depth knowledge of my model. I can do the drawings from memory alone in the initial stages. I'll need your assistance once I start painting over summer."

Hermione sighed. "I suppose it will be back to the dark hair and blue eyes if we don't want to shock William. Or I could just tell him I'd had a change of hairdo and contacts."

"You'll do no such thing, young lady. My peace of mind relies on the fact that our first paintings were of Grace Henman and not of Hermione Granger."

"I still wish I knew who bought those two paintings, Severus."

He scowled in the general direction of Standish's letter. "I'm not entirely sure I want to know who has your intimate anatomy displayed on his wall."

Resting her head on his shoulder, Hermione nodded. "I suppose that would be awkward, wouldn't it? Better not to know."

At that moment, not so far away, the thought of the paintings of Hermione Granger brought a smile to their owner's lips.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. Many thanks as always to karelia for her beta eyes.

Chapter Thirty-eight: Graduation

Chapter 38 of 41

Hermione and Severus reach the end of the year with a little help from a special potion.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings in this story belong to JKR. I promise to polish them up, wash their minds out, and put them back unharmed when I'm finished playing with them.

Chapter Thirty-eight: Graduation

"Isn't it nice to see them looking so happy?" Luna rested her chin in her hands and sighed her approval.

"Happy?" Blaise studied the Potions master, at that moment scowling at the antics of some third-year Gryffindors. Hermione, meanwhile, was busy berating Ron and Harry for not completing their Transfiguration homework to her satisfaction. "I'm not sure what you mean, Luna. Snape may have been a little less harsh in the classroom lately, but neither of them appears any different really."

"You men are all the same. So unobservant. Haven't you noticed the way they're always aware where the other is, even though they decided to continue eating most of their meals at their usual tables? The way they brush against each other when they walk. Have you ever seen *anyone* brush against Professor Snape and escape without losing points?"

"Well, she is his wife..."

"And they've scared enough Hufflepuffs down by the kitchens, appearing from that back corridor all flushed and dishevelled. I think that must be their favourite spot."

"Luna!" Blaise shook his head and covered his ears. "I really don't want to know!"

She patted his arm. "It's all right, Blaise. I know you still have a bit of a thing for Hermione."

"No! Merlin, don't think that, Luna. You're right, I did have a *thing* for Hermione last year, but I always knew her interests lay elsewhere. I'm over it, truly. She will always be one of my best friends, but there's someone else now who has caught my eye." He reached over and squeezed her hand.

She gifted him with the smile he knew was his alone, and suddenly he knew. Luna hadn't just caught his eye; she was the woman he wanted. She was kind and serene and intelligent and her uncanny ability to see the real person under the veneer, to see his wants and needs and still accept him, was remarkable. Meeting her beautiful grey eyes with his own, Blaise lifted her hand to his lips. "Luna Lovegood, it's official. I only have eyes for you. Will you do me the honour of spending some of the holidays with me?"

The rest of the Great Hall faded into inconsequence as she returned his solemn gaze. "Blaise Zabini, I would be delighted."

He nodded. "Excellent. There's just one thing. About my mother..."

Snape had the Astronomy Tower to himself, having sent the subdued Ravenclaw couple on their way twenty points lighter and with a stern lecture on concentrating on their exams rather than each other. Leaning against the cool stone of the parapet, he stared out into the clear spring night, feeling every weary bone in his body.

Shite, I can talk. I should be taking my own advice. Even after six weeks of living with her I can't be in the same room without wanting her naked and writhing under me. I've never had so many inconvenient erections in my life, dammit! I should be grateful. Fantastic sex two or three times every night, not to mention the occasional quick shag in that quiet corridor no-one knows about, and Merlin knows how many times she's waylaid me in odd corners for a few minutes snogging. We should be well past that stage of our relationship by now. Surely?

Fuck! Has someone...?

Whipping out his wand, Snape cast several spells designed to reveal any lust-inducing curses or hexes on his person.

Clean. It's not me. I'd better check Hermione when I get back. We need to do something soon, or neither of us will be in a fit state for exams. I've seen her yawning in class, and it's all my fault.

Trudging slowly back to the dungeons, he yawned himself. Even reducing his rounds to those for which he was rostered had not helped. Five hours of sleep a night coupled with a constant state of sexual arousal was simply too much for a man of his age.

Finding his wife fast asleep at her desk with her nose precariously close to the inkpot confirmed his suspicions. She was exhausted as well. Ignoring the all-too-predictable tightness in his trousers at the sight of her mane of hair spread over her parchments and rosy lips parted in sleep, he quickly performed the same spells while she slept. Nothing.

They had to talk.

Snape laid Hermione gently on the bed, clad in her least sexy pyjamas, then removed his own garments and lay gingerly beside her, acutely aware his arousal had not subsided.

Albus Dumbledore in his underwear... Sybill Trelawney singing love songs... Dolores Umbridge naked. Ahh, that'll do it... Eventually, he slept.

The woman curled in his arms murmured softly and pressed her warm bum into his morning erection. "Mmm, Severus. Did you put me to bed last night, love?"

"You had fallen asleep at your desk... again. Hermione, we need to talk."

"Now?" She squirmed against him and pulled his hands to her breasts. "Are you sure?"

In the face of inevitability, Snape conceded. "Later. Over breakfast."

An hour later they were facing each other over tea and toast, one hunger temporarily sated.

"What was it you wanted to talk about, Severus?"

Snape covered his unaccustomed fluster by pouring another cup of tea. "I... er, we, that is, have a problem."

"We do?"

"Have you not noticed how tired we've become lately? You're falling asleep instead of studying, and I'm barely managing to keep up with my marking."

Hermione frowned. "Yes, that's true, but surely, the time of year... exams..."

Snape shook his head. "No. We have to face up to facts, my dear. As difficult as it may be, we have to spend more time in bed... asleep. I believe you told me a bed did have two functions."

"But I can't help it. Every time I see you, I want to..."

"I know. Merlin, I *know!*" He groaned and pointed to the tent in his trousers. "Just talking about it has me wanting you again. And we can't keep this up."

Hermione looked down and giggled. "Well, obviously *you* can."

"Very amusing. Now eat your toast and stop looking at me like that, woman!"

That evening Snape once again found Hermione slumped over her desk. As he sighed and lifted her away from her work, he noticed she had been furiously scribbling notes on a potion she had found in one of his lesser-used texts.

"You brilliant, wonderful girl!" After tucking her into bed, Snape headed for his private potions lab, parchment and book clutched in one hand.

"Oh, gods... Merlin... Circe... Sweet Indra! Don't ever stop... oh, my! Heavens! Now, Severus, now, dammit!"

After disentangling his limbs from hers and slumping back onto his own pillow, Snape propped his head up with his hand and studied his wife. "Indra?"

The pink in her cheeks was most becoming. "Er. Indian god I read about once. Liked sex. A lot."

"I see. Obviously, my education has been sadly lacking."

Hermione grinned. "Something you don't know? That's a first."

"There are many things I don't need to know about. A sex-obsessed Indian god is but one of them."

Leaping out of bed, Hermione suddenly started pulling her clothes on. "I just remembered. I found something last night!"

Snape reached for the two vials of opalescent lilac potion he had placed on his bedside table the night before. "This, perhaps?"

Her eyes widened. "You brewed it already? I didn't think you'd have the mermaid's tears." She picked up a vial and swirled it around carefully. "It's very pretty. Seems a shame to drink it."

"I had just enough in my rare ingredients safe. It appears we need to take a dose daily to alleviate the effects of *Rare and Importunate Passion and Luste.*"

"It won't stop us wanting sex altogether, will it?" Hermione's lower lip trembled.

"I studied the information you found thoroughly. It appears to reduce the exigency, not the desire itself. We should be able to control our physical reaction to each other and moderate our activities while taking the potion."

Hermione took a vial from Snape's hand. "Oh, well, at least each dose only works for twenty-four hours. Bottoms up!" She drained the vial. "How much did you manage to brew?"

Snape emptied his vial and tossed it aside. "Enough to last us until you graduate. Now, come back here before the blasted stuff takes effect."

"Madam Hermione Snape!"

Noticing her name no longer caused any reaction from her fellow students, Hermione made her way up to the podium where the headmistress stood, a rare smile taking years off the older woman's features as she continued.

"Madam Snape has the distinction of achieving the highest marks for her year every year since she started at Hogwarts. All of her teachers are very proud to have been involved in this hard-working and talented young witch's education. We eagerly await her examination results, which I am sure will reflect her years of dedication to study despite conditions of extreme duress at times." McGonagall handed Hermione her beribboned scroll and turned her to face the crowd of graduating and younger students, parents, and friends. "I present to you: Hermione Snape!"

Blushing furiously at the shouts and cheers from the Gryffindor table, which drowned out the enthusiastic applause from the Hufflepuffs, the polite appreciation of the Ravenclaws, and the surprisingly warm reaction of the Slytherins, Hermione smiled and waved at her parents and friends in the front row, then turned and shook hands with each of the professors lined up beside the headmistress. Except the last one. In front of the entire school, she reached up and kissed Professor Severus Snape most thoroughly before returning to her seat.

By the time all the students had received their scrolls and been presented to the audience, Hermione had eyes only for Snape. Sitting between her parents, she smiled as she clasped a hand of each. Her father, after initial disappointment at their sudden Handfasting, had grown used to his daughter's taciturn husband and had decided he was a decent chap after all, especially after he had been introduced to Firewhiskey over the Easter holidays. Jean was still sighing over the romance of it all and determined to have a hand in their completion ceremony the following year.

"Who's that rather snooty looking blond man over there, sweetheart?" Jean asked once the formalities were over. "He looks like he has swallowed something unpleasant."

Hermione grinned. "That's Lucius Malfoy. He's just discovered his only son is unlikely to be perpetuating the family line as expected."

"How could he possibly know that? The lad must only be your age."

Nodding towards Draco, sitting indecorously close to Neville Longbottom and clearly caressing his thigh, she giggled. "Oh, I think it's pretty obvious. Poor Mr Malfoy must be beside himself. Still," she noticed Narcissa Malfoy's expression matched Jean's, "his mother is on his side. That will help. Everyone knows Lucius is devoted to his wife. And besides, Neville *is* a pureblood. That will please him."

"Isn't that the lovely young man who came to visit at Christmas? Blair, wasn't it? How did he cope with your Handfasting with Severus?"

"Blaise, Mum. And he was fine. He's still one of my best friends, and he and Luna have been together for the last few months. She's really good for him, gives him all the love and attention he deserves but keeps him grounded at the same time."

Hermione chatted with her parents for a few minutes longer, then turned them over into Molly and Arthur Weasley's capable hands.

"Go and find him, dear," Molly whispered while the men were exchanging congratulatory slaps on the back. "I saw him slinking out of the staff door only moments ago."

With a grateful hug, Hermione headed for the most likely place Snape would be lurking, given his promise to Minerva McGonagall not to be as antisocial a prat as usual and stay out of the dungeons for the duration of the festivities.

However, the back corridor by the kitchens was silent and empty.

Shite. I was sure he'd be here. Where did the grumpy git bugger off to? If he's gone down to the dungeons, I'll bloody well tell Professor McGonagall.

"Ow! Fuck!" Kicking the stone wall had not been one of her best ideas. Hermione hopped a moment or two and regaled the empty corridor with her best expletives.

"Such language, Madam Snape. It is hardly fitting for a graduate of this institute of learning." Snape's murmur sent a tingle over the ear lobe he was addressing and a thrill to more interesting areas. The warmth of the body folding her into an embrace from behind and the firm press of male intent into her curves banished any thoughts of her abused toe.

"Where were you?"

"Waiting. Wanting..."

"I can feel that. Did you...?" She reached into the folds of his robes and discovered that, yes, indeed he had. Stroking Snape slowly through the gold silk, she turned to face him and smiled her approval. "I didn't take the potion today."

His smirk broadened into a feral grin. "Neither did I."

"I suppose we'd better make sure it is out of our systems then."

"Research is always important, don't you think, Madam Snape?"

"Absolutely, Professor." Unbuttoning his robes, she discovered her hypothesis that he had followed his birthday instructions to the letter was completely valid.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Severus!" Kissing the top of his head as she joined him for their early morning tea, Hermione smiled at his resigned expression.

"Did you have to remind me? They're going to be bloody awful today." Snape sighed and added a spoonful of sugar to his tea.

"Since when have you had sugar?"

"Consider it fortification. I'll need it."

"Better have two. I have plans for you later." Hermione planted herself in his lap, artfully arranging the silk robe she wore to display her lack of any other garments. "Of course, if you need a little encouragement to start the day..." The rapid response beneath her provided the answer.

"You know we don't have time for this," Snape groaned as he pushed the edges of her robe apart to explore the bounty offered.

"Severus, it's only seven-fifty." She shrugged the robe off her shoulders and tossed it on the floor. "Your class doesn't start until nine." Unbuttoning his shirt, she swept her tongue over one nipple, smirking as she felt his erection twitch. "Kingsley isn't expecting me until nine-thirty."

"You planned this?" Another twitch.

"Have you ever known me to do anything without planning it first?"

Snape hovered between relief and disappointment when his wife moved off his lap, only to swallow hard as she knelt before him and began unbuckling his belt. "Oh, fuck, Hermione."

"Not exactly what I had in mind, but I'll take it under consideration for later. Now, shut it, Professor, I'm busy."

It was an unusually relaxed Severus Snape who strode into the Potions classroom an hour later, ignoring the profusion of pink chocolate hearts and roses being shoved into bags all over the room.

After several uneventful hours, Snape found himself back in his quarters to find a reprise of the previous year's picnic laid out in his sitting room.

"Like it?" Hermione had thoughtfully repeated all the details, including her mode of dress.

"Mmm. Love it. Just give me five minutes." Slipping onto the bedroom, Snape managed to replicate his apparel in half the time.

"Are you going to fall asleep this time?"

"Mmmhmm?"

"Severus!"

"Don't poke, woman, I'm awake."

"Just as well. We have to go over tomorrow's ceremony."

"Again?"

"Planning, remember? We don't want a repeat of last time. Everyone would kill us."

"Leave me in a room with Minerva, Molly, and your mother again, and I'll kill myself," Snape muttered as he propped himself up in bed. "Very well, I'm awake." He glanced sideways at his still-naked wife, sitting cross-legged beside him, studying her lists. "Might I suggest you put some clothes on, my dear, if you want my full attention."

Hermione cast a pointed look at the tent in the sheet over his groin and reached for her robe. "I thought forty-year-old men were supposed to need a little recovery time."

"Most forty-year-old men don't spend their time with witches half their age. Now, what do we need to discuss?"

"Only a few details. Now, you did say both Lucius and Draco are standing for you?"

"Yes. You know they sorted out their differences some months ago. Longbottom has behaved remarkably well around Lucius, and Narcissa finds him charming. I still haven't decided whether Draco has given her a potion or hexed her..."

"Don't be a prat. Neville can be a perfect gentleman when he wants to. I'm sure he and Narcissa get along just fine. Now, as you know, I have Blaise and Ginny standing for me as they were the first to know about us. Ron and Harry will man the door as planned and ensure everyone is in their places, and Luna will bring my parents to the ceremony through the Floo." Hermione consulted her list. "You have the rings in a safe place? And Professor Mc... Minerva is organised?"

"Everything is ready, love. I'm sure it will all go according to plan and by tomorrow we will be officially and permanently married." His heart skipped a beat when he noticed the moistness in her eyes. After a moment, he regained his voice. "That is what you wish, isn't it? It's not too late to change your mind." Shoulders stiff, Snape avoided her gaze.

"Change my mind? Change my mind! Have you been sniffing too many toxic fumes today, Severus Snape? Did the three orgasms you've had so far today addle your brain?"

"Why are you crying then?"

"Have you never heard of tears of happiness? Now's not the time for insecurities, you bloody idiot!" Tossing aside her precious lists, Hermione pulled back the sheet and straddled Snape's naked lap. After a prolonged, heated confirmation of her words expressed lips to lips, she said, "I love you, and I'm marrying you tomorrow. Got it?"

His smile lit up the room. "Got it. Now, what were you saying about 'so far'?"

A/N: This was written for shalimar81 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. My thanks to karelia for her eagle eyes and everyone who has taken the time to comment on this story so far. xx

Chapter Thirty-nine: Unexpected Gifts

Chapter 39 of 41

Hermione and Severus have a couple of visitors bearing gifts before the wedding.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings are the property of J.K. Rowling. I made up what they got up to.

Chapter Thirty-nine: Unexpected Gifts

"Severus! Someone's knocking at the door! Can you get it? I'm not decent!" Hermione poked her head through the door to Snape's office and scampered off to the bedroom as he rose to see who was disturbing their early morning routine.

"I hope this is an emergency, Zabini." Snape waved Blaise through into the sitting room with a less-than-welcoming scowl.

"Not exactly an emergency, but I knew you'd both be busy for the rest of the day and didn't really want to give you these in the Great Hall later." He ducked back out of the door to retrieve two large, flat, rectangular parcels wrapped in brown paper. "Congratulations, both of you." He smiled at Hermione, who had dressed and joined them.

Snape frowned as he studied the gifts. The printed label on the corner of each was unmistakable.

Standish Gallery, Bankside, London

"You! It was you!"

"What was, Severus?" Hermione caught Snape's hand before it reached his wand. "Whatever is the problem?"

"Zabini here is the problem. But nothing I can't cure with well-placed hex or two." Snape's snarl successfully wiped the smile from Blaise's face.

"You will *not* hex my friend, Severus. Well, at least not without explaining yourself first." Letting go of Snape's hand, she inserted herself squarely between the two wizards.

"The paintings. Those are the two paintings. *He* bought them! He's had them for over a bloody year. Merlin knows what he's been doing with them."

Eyebrow raised, Hermione pointed to the unbroken gallery seal on each parcel. "Nothing, apparently. They haven't even been opened." Turning to Blaise, she flashed him a reassuring smile. "Why did you buy them, Blaise?"

He shrugged. "It didn't seem right to leave them there for just anyone to buy. They were too... intimate." His blush was evident even through his dark skin.

"You went to the exhibition? And saw everything?" Snape reached for his wand again.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, are you going to hex every man who attended the bloody exhibition, Severus? So, Blaise has seen me naked. What of it? It's you I'm marrying, and I have it on good authority that *he* prefers blondes now. What I want to know is *why* he waited until now to reveal he was the purchaser."

"I was going to give them to you the Christmas after the exhibition, but things between you two were tense, and I didn't want to cause any more problems. By the time you had sorted yourselves out, you were Handfasted, so I decided to keep them for a wedding gift. I give you my word; they have remained wrapped and sealed since I took delivery of them, Hermione."

He turned to Snape. "Sir, it's true I once harboured feelings for Hermione. But when I saw those paintings, it was clear her heart belonged elsewhere. I still consider her a very dear friend, and seeing her so happy in your arms is all I could ever ask. You're a very lucky man to have the love of such a woman, and she is blessed to be loved by a brilliant, honourable, and courageous man. I wish you both every joy in the future." With that, he dipped his head in a brief, formal bow and turned to leave the room.

"Oh, no you don't!" Hermione spun and grabbed Blaise's sleeve. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Blaise, for being such a good friend. You were always there when I needed a shoulder to cry on." She slanted a mock glare at Snape, who had the grace to look uncomfortable.

"Well, if he causes you any more grief, you know where to come." Blaise quirked a smile at Snape. "But I'm sure you can handle him all by yourself now."

"I'm sure he wouldn't be averse to a little *handling* now and then." Her evil grin set both men's cheeks aflame.

"No, no, I did *not* need to know that! Too much information, Hermione!" Blaise retreated out of the door, shaking his head as if to rid himself of the images he had acquired.

"What shall we do with..." Hermione gasped as her lips were claimed, heat and passion driving all thought from her mind.

Releasing her several minutes later, Snape quirked a brow. "What was it you were saying about *handling* me?" As he pressed his hips closer to hers, expressing his interest in being handled in no uncertain terms, another knock broke the silence. "Fuck! Isn't anyone still asleep in this bloody castle?"

Opening the door, he found Argus Filch standing in the dungeon corridor. "Argus, what brings you down here at this hour?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Professor, but I have something for you. It's a little something I've been working on for a while now. I thought it would be right nice for a wedding gift, you see." He offered a rare smile as Hermione moved into view from behind Snape. "G'morning, Herm... er... Madam Snape."

"Hermione. And how are you today, Argus? Did the children all settle down last night after their Valentine's excesses?"

"Nothing me and my cat couldn't deal with. Still, that's not what I'm here for. I've brought you..."

Hermione's squeal of delight startled both men. "Argus! Is that the chair you spent so long working on? It's gorgeous!" She ran her fingertips over the gleaming wood, tracing the intricate carvings over the back of the chair. "But you can't give it away. Not after all that work."

The elderly man caressed the wood he had nurtured back into life. "It looks out of place in my rooms amongst the mops and dusters and other mess. I'd be grateful if you would give it a home. I know you'll both appreciate it far more than most."

"We would be honoured to look after such a fine piece of furniture, wouldn't we, Severus?"

Snape nodded his agreement, and once his witch had made the old squib blush with a tight hug and a kiss, shook his hand and saw him to the door.

"Now, where were we?" Snape turned back to find Hermione had disappeared. "Woman, where are you? I had plans for you!" He followed the sound of her steps into the bedroom.

"They'll have to wait. We're running late now, and there's so much to do before the ceremony this afternoon." Reaching up for a fleeting kiss as she passed, Hermione patted his shoulder. "Don't pout, dear; I'll make it up to you tonight."

"That dress is gorgeous! Who designed it?" Ginny fingered the delicate folds of organza floating in layers from the lightly-beaded bodice. With every movement, the shimmering pale bronze fabric captured light and came alive.

Hermione couldn't help herself. Twirling to demonstrate the full effect of the multiple layers, she smiled. "Severus, really. It was in a painting he did last year. I stole his design, but he has no idea. I'd ordered it for our Handfasting originally."

"He painted you in a wedding dress? Before your Handfasting?" Ginny's mental calculations were obvious in her expression. "When exactly?"

"In January."

"That would have been *before* you sorted yourselves out?"

"I think it was somewhat of a revelation to him when he painted it. I saw it a little later, of course. I hope he likes it." Hermione studied her reflection in the mirror and adjusted one of the flowers scattered through her simple twist of tumbled curls.

"He should love it." Ginny shook her head, puzzled. "I don't know how, but despite all the layers, it looks like you're wearing barely anything at all."

"It's not too low-cut, is it?"

"No, don't be daft. I can barely see the tops of your breasts; they're only hinted at. It's just such sheer fabric. I can't see anything through it, but it feels like any minute I'll catch a glimpse of skin. Are you wearing *anything* underneath?"

Hermione blushed, answering her friend's question immediately.

Ginny's eyes widened, then she grinned. "Mmm. Very seductive; I'm almost jealous of your husband. But why bronze?"

Hermione managed to answer between giggles. "The original was white, but I thought that wasn't particularly appropriate considering we'd been living together for a year. I took it back to Gladrags, and the seamstress who made it suggested this would suit me. It was only the work of a few minutes for her to charm it to this colour."

"It does look fantastic on you." Ginny glanced at the clock. "Bloody hell, it's time you got yourself to the Room of Requirement before your husband thinks you've abandoned him."

Snape stood before podium provided for the occasion by the Room of Requirement. Despite the hustle and bustle of excited arrivals surrounding him, he remained enveloped in his own contemplation. Memories of the previous summer's project served to occupy his mind while he awaited his bride.

"Severus?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I've been thinking."

Snape put down his book and turned to face his wife. "And that is news? When is Hermione Snape ever not thinking?"

"No, you prat. I've been thinking about the exhibition."

"What about it? We'll start planning the poses this week, now your exams are over."

"Well, that's it. I know William has approved our idea, but I think we're on the wrong track. As symbolic as it would be for you to paint me in all those different roles, the fact remains that you're creating art to sell, and pictures of a woman doing everyday, or even not-so-everyday occupations are not that likely to sell well."

Snape nodded. "You have a valid point. But it's a little late to change now. We have no other ideas."

Hermione sat up with a grin. "On the contrary, I think I have the perfect theme."

Snape noticed the wicked twinkle in her eyes. "Now would be a good time to share this brilliance of yours, my dear."

She twisted her body around to look him in the eye. "Last year, you did 'Woman: Unveiled'. Why don't you complement that with 'Man: Unmasked'?"

"You want me to paint the male form. Nude?"

Her smile widened. "Mmm, I could observe, offer ideas, make the tea, help select the model..."

"Hermione, I don't think..."

"Relax, Severus. I've solved the problem of the model as well. We'll just use Polyjuice. I know how you work, and I'm sure I can pose as a man."

"And who exactly would provide the special ingredient for the Polyjuice? Zabini? Potter? Some other well-built young man of your acquaintance?" Snape's sneer was worthy of old times.

"I didn't realise you'd paid any attention to my friends' physiques, love. Is there something you aren't telling me?" Her gentle teasing defused his temper. When he allowed a tiny smile, she continued. "No, I thought you would provide the essential ingredient."

"I hardly think my appearance would be conducive to sales, woman."

She waved aside his doubts. "There's nothing wrong with your body, Severus, and of course we'd Glamour your face once the Polyjuice takes effect. It would be difficult to explain to William how you'd painted yourself otherwise. I'll do the same as I did for 'Grace'. Different hair and eye colour, and I'll modify your magnificent nose a little; it is rather distinctive, after all. No-one will have any idea it's you except us. You can use the same structure as before. Complete nudes and more detailed paintings of specific features such as hands, jaw, and buttocks."

Snape smirked. "And don't forget the all-important masculine areas. Just as you insisted yourself. Although I'm not certain I would enjoy painting a picture of my own genitals." A sudden intake in breath revealed he had reached the obvious conclusion. "I am NOT painting my own erection! No bloody way!"

"I think that would be a little obvious, Severus. And probably at risk of being labelled pornographic, as much as I enjoy the sight myself. A little tumescence, or suggestion thereof, might be acceptable. Mind you, I suspect maintaining control might require the use of the potion, if you're any example."

The sensual nature of his thoughts would have been evident to anyone who cared to look at his face as Snape dwelled on the hours spent creating his last exhibition. True to her word, Hermione had taken Polyjuice every day and Glamoured herself into a disturbingly familiar yet striking man. He had been surprised how arousing it had been to see his own body displayed in such a manner, and even more surprised at his wife's suggestion on how to fill in time while the last dose of Polyjuice for the day wore off.

"You want to WHAT?"

"You heard. I want to find out what it's like to use this equipment of yours. I've discovered it's very sensitive, you know." Hermione reached down and ran a finger along the penis she currently possessed.

"I know it's bloody sensitive. I've lived with the damned thing for forty odd years!" He screwed up his eyes. "Would you please stop touching it?"

"You don't say that when it's yours I'm touching." Hermione deliberately stroked herself, watching with fascination as the flesh swelled under her fingers. "Merlin, that feels good!"

He couldn't help himself. Reaching out, he tentatively touched the heated skin. It felt the same as his own, but different. "Fuck, this isn't right. I don't fancy men."

"Think of it as Advanced Masturbation. A bit like Advanced Potions. Using the same knowledge but taking it a few steps further. Wait a minute." Hermione lifted her wand and removed the Glamour. "There. Now I'm completely you. Come on, play with yourself. You know you want to."

It had taken several more doses of Polyjuice before Hermione had been satisfied she had experienced all the male body had to offer. And it hadn't been until the third evening of experimentation that Snape had discovered the true wonder of his prostate and all the pleasure it could offer, returning the favour to Hermione once his body had recovered.

"Fuck. That was amazing!" Back in her own skin, Hermione slumped across the bed, unable to move so much as her little finger.

"Incredible. I'd consider switching to the other side, but I think I'd miss these." Severus palmed his wife's breasts, circling a fingertip over each nipple. Her sigh of bliss confirmed her agreement.

"Severus. Severus!"

"What?" He startled from his reverie at Minerva's nudge in time to see perfection approaching him from across the room.

The expression on Snape's face as Hermione walked towards him left her in no doubt as to his approval of her choice. Her parents had escorted her into the Room of Requirement where Blaise and Ginny had taken over. Walking between her two dear friends, Hermione looked around the room. Harry and Ron had managed to spruce up for the occasion and looked dapper standing either side of the door. Luna, wearing her latest earrings crafted from rosehips, waved from the left. Neville and Draco stood to her right, hand-in-hand, but her eyes returned to the man watching her every step.

Snape stood with Lucius Malfoy and Filius Flitwick, wearing robes she had never seen before. Black, as expected, but the cut and lustre of the fabric could only have been selected by the elder Malfoy. Hermione was well aware of her husband's taste in clothing, and the exquisite garment in which he was attired was not his usual fare.

Joining Snape at the centre of the room, Hermione brushed her finger down his sleeve.

"Mmm, exquisite. I see Lucius dressed you today."

"I take it you approve?"

"Definitely. I'll have to have a word with him later about the rest of your wardrobe."

His protest was aborted by Minerva clearing her throat to begin the proceedings.

As Snape's lips closed over hers to complete their bond, Hermione felt the moisture on his cheek matching her own tears of joy. They had kept the ceremony simple; after Minerva welcomed their friends and family, the couple had exchanged simple vows declaring their love and commitment to each other. She smiled to herself as she remembered Snape's amusement as she had made her vows. Minerva's old-fashioned suggestion that she, "love, honour, and obey," her husband had been countered with a promise to love, honour, and cherish him instead. Muffled giggles from beside her had proved Ginny had been paying attention.

"What's so funny?" he asked when he finally relinquished her mouth.

"Minerva's expression when I changed the vow. I think she might have been a little offended."

"She should have expected one of her cubs to refuse to obey. I suspect she secretly trained you all to attempt to break as many rules as possible."

"I'll have you know I did not..."

"Polyjuice? Burning robes? Need I say more?" He snorted as he turned to greet their well-wishers.

"Extenuating circumstances and you know it. Bloody elephant."

"Why are you calling your husband an elephant?" Blaise murmured into her ear as he hugged his congratulations.

"Because he never bloody forgets anything, the git."

"You have a husband who will never forget your birthday or anniversary, and you're complaining?"

Hermione grinned. "When you put it like that, I suppose it's an advantage. Oh, look, hasn't Luna surpassed herself today!"

Blaise studied Luna's colourful outfit and nodded. "That's what I love about her. Her creativity and ability to be herself."

"How are things between you two now she's back?" Xenophilius Lovegood's announcement at their graduation the year before of his intention to take his daughter away for a six-month exploration of the magical wildlife of South America had put Luna and Blaise's fledgling relationship on hold until her return. After a scant few weeks staying at Blaise's home, she had set off for the other side of the world with tears in her eyes and a promise to return by the end of the year.

"It's good, Hermione. Really good. I even think the time apart has strengthened our relationship. We know now our future lies together."

Hermione glanced at Luna, then Blaise and narrowed her eyes. "Have you... you know... yet?"

"*You know?* Isn't that a bit missish for a woman who had to take a potion to control her unladylike urges?"

"You knew about that?"

"Hermione, *everyone* knew about that. And we were bloody relieved when you two stopped pouncing on each other at every opportunity."

"But... how? Never mind. You didn't answer my question. Have you or have you not been having sexual intercourse with that woman? Is that direct enough for you, Zabini?"

"Ouch. Very direct. And I suppose, as you told me about you and Severus, no, we haven't... yet. But I think tonight will be the night. Wish me luck."

All he received was a slap on the arm. "You don't need luck. You need to be gentle and take your time and remember she hasn't had any experience. Well, the last time I saw her she said she hadn't." Hermione's eyes twinkled. "Maybe she found a strapping, tanned Brazilian while she was away, but he was torn between his duty to his family and the arranged marriage they had planned and had to allow her to leave his arms and his bed."

"Oh, shut it, Snape. I'm already bloody nervous enough about it. No need to make it worse."

"You, nervous? Anyone would think you hadn't... Blaise, really?"

He shrugged. "Never wanted to before. Well, I did want to once with a pretty special girl, but she was never interested. Probably just as well, I hear she's nearly worn out one poor bloke already."

The other arm suffered this time. "Go and chat up your girlfriend, Zabini. I have a husband to find."

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. My thanks to KingPhilipsWench, who culled the smirks, and karelia, beta extraordinaire.

Chapter Forty: A Year and a day and Forever More

Chapter 40 of 41

It's all over bar the wedding night...

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. Severus's paintings are mine!

Chapter Forty: A Year and a day and Forever More

"Enjoying yourself?" Hermione crept up behind her husband and looped her arm around his waist.

"Mmm, surprisingly, yes."

"I told you it wouldn't be as bad as you expected. They *are* all our friends, after all." Her eyes widened as her hand drifted a little lower. "Er, Severus, what exactly are you

wearing under those robes?" His wicked smile and a discreet grope through the folds of his robes confirmed her suspicions. "Not even the gold pouch?"

"Not a stitch." He nodded to Molly Weasley as she passed, bearing a tray of drinks. "Feels rather liberating."

"*Liberating?*" The high-pitched squeak was somewhat embarrassing. With an effort, Hermione returned to a low murmur. "You're naked under there. Naked. Gods, Severus, are you aware of the effect that has on me?"

"I have a general idea." He ran his hand down the back of her dress, from her neck to her hips. "I've been thanking Lucius's taste for fuller robes all evening, watching you in that excuse for a dress." Grasping her hand, he found the opening in his robes and guided her to the proof of his words.

"You know, I had a dream about you walking around the castle like that once. Very frustrating it was, given you were being all noble at the time." Giving him a quick squeeze, she reluctantly released him as Kingsley Shacklebolt strode up to their quiet corner.

"Hermione, Severus, congratulations to you both!" The Minister of Magic shook Snape's hand and kissed Hermione's cheek. "I must say, you both look splendid in your finery tonight. And what a delightful ceremony."

"Thank you, Kingsley. We're pleased you could find the time to come."

"No problem at all, now my office and work load are so well organised. Which brings me to something I've been meaning to talk to you about, Hermione."

"I knew it would happen sometime. You don't need to handle me with kid gloves, Kingsley. Everything is running smoothly now, and I realise you don't need me anymore."

A loud guffaw startled the rest of the room into staring at the Minister. "On the contrary, my dear, I need you more than ever. No-one else could possibly run my office, and me, the way you do. Even my wife is envious of the way you have me under your thumb. No, I was planning on humbly appealing to your generosity and pleading with you to remain as my personal assistant indefinitely." He turned to Snape. "Or should I state my case to you, Severus, to allow me to retain your wife's services."

Snape shook his head. "Don't look at me, Kingsley. I'm under the thumb as well. I wouldn't dare presume to comment on my wife's career aspirations."

Hermione's eyes sparkled with mirth as she patted Snape's arm. "And that's why I married him. Kingsley, I'd be honoured to stay on as your assistant. I very much enjoy the challenge of the job, and I hope we can work together for some time to come." She grinned. "As long as you do as you're told, of course."

"I wouldn't dare do otherwise, Madam Snape."

As the Minister wandered off to circulate the room, Snape turned disbelieving eyes to his wife. "I thought I was the only man you ordered around nowadays. I feel cheated."

"Don't worry, love, I only boss him around in the office. Only you get the privilege of my talent for direction in the bedroom... and the bathroom... and the sitting room..."

"On the subject of bedrooms, is there any chance we can slip away in the not too distant future? Things are becoming rather... uncomfortable." Snape drew his robes tighter against his body, revealing the decided tent at his groin.

"That definitely looks like it needs taking in hand." Hermione grinned as Snape groaned. "However, we'd better go and say our goodbyes to my parents and a few others first. Just make sure your robes hang loose."

"I'll endeavour not to embarrass anyone, madam." He flicked his robes across his body, carefully hiding his arousal in folds of fabric.

"I don't give a toss whether they're embarrassed. I just don't want anyone getting any ideas. It's mine. All mine." She drew his face down for a deep kiss full of unspoken promises whilst once again reaching under the cover of both their robes and stroking him quickly until he gasped for mercy.

"Parents. Now!"

After hugging her parents and promising to visit during their next free weekend, Hermione leaned against a stone pillar and planned her wedding night as Snape shook her father's hand and chatted with her mother, a bead of sweat on his temple the only evidence of the strict self-control he was exerting.

"What have you done to him now? He looks a little tense." Blaise's murmur startled Hermione out of her increasingly wicked daydream.

"How can you tell?"

"Let's just say I watched him walking across the room. Not exactly as graceful as usual. And he has rather a lot of his robes gathered at the front."

Hermione giggled. "Don't you dare say anything. He'd be mortified if he thought anyone knew."

"Given that he walked around in that state half the time before and after you'd Handfasted, it's hardly out of character."

"Blaise! Have you been studying the state of my husband's penis? I'll start thinking you fancy him. I could get jealous, you know."

Blaise's cheeks burned red as he wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. "I haven't been studying the state of your husband's... anything! And don't mention that word in context with him again. He was my teacher not that long ago, woman!"

"You started it." Hermione smirked as he lifted his hands in defeat.

"I concede. You win."

"Never mind, you have better things to do than speculate on Severus's bits. Go and find Luna and take her home, Blaise. Have fun." She reached up to kiss his cheek and whispered in his ear, "And don't forget the Contraceptive Charm, or you'll have me to answer to!"

"Hermione, why has Blaise gone red?" Ron asked.

"I just gave him a little advice. Nothing you shouldn't already know, Ron."

"Oh, good. I'd hate to miss out on some valuable Granger gem of wisdom. Ouch! No need to punch me like that! I meant Snape; you know I did. It's just hard to remember."

"Snape. S.N.A.P.E. Rhymes with grape and shape and..."

"Yeah. Got it."

"Are you picking on poor wee Wonnieskins again, 'Mione?" Harry laughed as he joined them.

"Someone has to keep him in line, Harry. Are you two having fun?"

"It's a great party. Everyone seems happy for you."

Hermione smiled and looked around to find the proof of Harry's words in the joy and good cheer filling the room. "And you two? Are you okay?"

Ron grinned and wrapped her in his long arms, ruffling her hair with one hand. "Of course. We may have been a bit shocked at first, but we got over that a long time ago. You two are obviously made for each other. Doesn't hurt that you get most of your bossiness out of your system with your husband though. Leaves less for us to endure."

"Oh, I'm sure I can dig deep and find some for you if you need it, Ronald." Hermione hugged the redhead back. "And Ginny will deal with Harry, won't you, Gin?"

"Absolutely. But I reserve the right to come to you for tips if I need them." Ginny opened her arms for her hug.

"Any time, Gin, any time."

Ron grinned at Harry. "Like I said, she's bloody scary, and now she has an apprentice!"

"Who's scary?" Snape had appeared beside Hermione.

"Your wife. And she's infected my sister."

Snape's roar of laughter sent both young men scuttling back a few paces as they stared at their former Potions master. The sight of the usually dour man laughing, together with the excess of information revealed when he had allowed his robes to drop against his body was something they would not forget easily.

"Severus Snape, stop that! You're upsetting my brother and boyfriend!" Ginny smacked Snape on the arm, then continued in a whisper, "And it looks like it's time you took your wife back to your quarters, if that promising bulge in your robes is anything to go by."

"Fuck!" Snape gathered his robes around himself and grabbed Hermione's hand "Wife! Time to go. I have *plans* for you." He stalked off with her in tow.

Waving, Hermione called back to her friends, "Have fun! Thanks for all your help!"

Just before leaving the room, Snape swirled around and pulled Hermione into his arms. "This will give them something to think about." Lowering his head, his lips met hers in a fiery combustion of barely leashed passion. After several heated minutes, he drew back with a lascivious smirk. "Coming?"

"Just a few seconds more..."

They swept out of the room to a loud cheer.

"Finally!" Snape slammed the door behind them and warded it against intrusions magical or otherwise. A flick of his wand closed the Floo and lit a fire for warmth as he slumped onto the sofa. "Come here, woman, and let me have my wicked way with you."

"Would that be with the dress or without?" Hermione tried to maintain an innocent expression as she twirled before her husband, giving him glimpses of bare flesh between the flimsy layers of her sole garment.

"Leave it on for now. I'll have great pleasure removing it myself." Snape had unbuttoned the lower half of his robes, which began to part as he made himself more comfortable.

Hermione poured two glasses of wine and handed one to Snape as she settled herself beside him, toying with the remainder of his buttons as she sipped.

"This is lovely. Where did you get it from?"

"Lucius. Remember, he sent an entire case as a wedding gift. Elf-made. Only the best for the Malfoys. We opened it earlier for a pre-ceremony toast."

"He's not so bad when you get to know him, really. Quite sweet once he drops the snooty airs."

Snape chuckled. "I wouldn't let him catch you calling him sweet. He'd be horrified. Takes a lot of effort to be a Malfoy, you know." He glanced down, feeling a cool draught. "What exactly are you doing?"

"Just examining my property. Nothing you should concern yourself about, dear."

"Uhhh. Mmm, very good. Carry on..." Snape's head fell back onto the sofa and his eyes drifted closed as Hermione continued to investigate. The sensation of cool liquid splashing onto his flesh interrupted a discreet yawn. "Do you really think Lucius would appreciate you wasting his precious wine like that?"

"Oh, I wouldn't call it a waste." She proceeded to lick up each droplet most thoroughly. "Would you?"

"Gods, no. By all means, carry on. Ahhh... Fuck! Do you want a wedding night or not, woman?"

Hermione licked her lips and smiled. "Whatever do you mean? Don't tell me the implacable Severus Snape is having trouble controlling himself?" She resumed her self-imposed cleaning task, spilling a little more wine just to ensure she didn't miss any spots. "Mmm, I'm sure the wine tastes better this way." Lifting her head just before her husband gave up all hope of restraint, she found his lips and shared the sweet saltiness of her lips with him.

Turning her around to sit facing away from him between his thighs, Snape lifted her curls from her neck and released the back fastening on her dress with a triumphant smirk. Slowly easing the straps down, he caressed the soft skin of her shoulders with his lips, then filled his hands with the sweet curves below, thumbing the rosy peaks as they stiffened in the cool air. Pushing aside the fabric, he slid his palm down lower and then dipped one finger into her sweet centre to find her wet and wanting. Her moans of pleasure sent shards of fire to his groin as he flicked and stroked, relentless in his desire to feast on her ecstasy. All too soon, her breathless, uninhibited climax had him thrusting against the cleft of her buttocks in time with her movements against his hand. Aware of his own release spiralling out of control, he knew it was too late to consider the upholstery on the sofa as sensibility yielded to sensation.

"Oh, bloody hell, I didn't intend that to happen!" Snape looked down at the creamy mess coating his groin and Hermione's bottom. "I think it's time we adjourned to the bedroom, Madam Snape."

She mewled her discontent as his fingers slid from within their slick sheath, leaving her bereft.

Snape helped her to stand, allowing the dress to slide unhindered to the floor, joining the robes he had discarded in the same movement.

"Merlin, you're fucking beautiful." Hermione stood motionless, studying the lean contours and still rigid, but sticky flesh which had become so familiar.

"Just as well beauty is in the eye of the beholder then." Snape shook his head and waved his wife ahead of him into the bedroom, all the better to watch her fine bottom as she passed. "Mmm, definitely one of my favourite views to behold."

Swinging her hips in invitation, Hermione looked back at Snape. "Why don't you make yourself comfortable while I use the bathroom for a moment?"

Closing the door behind her some things were not meant to be shared. Hermione used the toilet, then tarried briefly for a quick wash and tooth brushing. After removing the pins from her hair and applying a spritz of Snape's favourite scent, she was ready.

Whew. Shouldn't have left the fire going in the hearth all evening. It's awfully hot and stuffy in here now. I wonder why Severus didn't dampen down the fire.

Oh.

Blissfully unaware of his perfumed, naked, and, to be honest, only slightly disappointed wife, Snape lay sprawled out nude on the bed, his previously impressive erection drooping to one side as he snored lightly. A lock of hair had drifted over his face and fluttered lightly with every exhalation.

Hermione damped the fire with a flick of her wand and climbed onto the bed, giving her husband's now limp penis a gentle pat. Not even so much as a flicker of interest. With a chuckle, she pulled the covers up over them both, kissing his cheek as she snuggled under the covers into his warmth.

We did start rather early this morning. Poor man was knackered. So am I, for that matter.

Without any further contemplation on the subject, Hermione Snape closed her eyes and went to sleep.

After all, they had the rest of their lives to spend making up for their wedding night.

Which, of course, they did.

A/N: This was written for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. My heartfelt thanks go to my beta, karelia, whose eagle eyes I wouldn't be without.

Epilogue: Loose Ends

Chapter 41 of 41

The last bit where everyone else gets a little attention.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. I'm about to *Obliviate* them and put them back where they belong.

Epilogue: Loose Ends

"That went well. Professor Snape was surprisingly pleasant to everyone."

"Nev, of course he was. There were no students there, remember." It was close, but Draco managed to refrain from rolling his eyes as he tossed his cloak onto the bed.

"Mmm. I suppose you're right. He's been quite civil since we graduated. Mind you, covering for him when I caught him outside Hermione's room that time helped. He really wasn't too bad after that even in class."

"I told you he wouldn't be so bad if you'd stop trembling in your boots every time he came past."

"I did not tremble."

"Yes, you did. Like a jellyfish." Draco pulled Neville into his arms. "A rather sexy, vulnerable jellyfish, I might add."

"And you say Harry has a saviour complex. He has nothing on you, Ferret Boy."

Humming in pleasure, Draco nipped the tender skin at the base of Neville's neck. "Say that again."

"Ferret Boy? I thought you hated that name."

"Mmm, sometimes. Makes me horny when *you* say it."

Neville's eyes gleamed as he whispered softly in his lover's ear, "Ferret Boy, I want you to take all your clothes off and show me just how horny you feel."

Then Draco Malfoy, the usually cool, calm, and collected scion of the Malfoy line, rid himself of his encumbering garments, reached into the drawer beside his bed, and handed Neville the bottle he found there with a very unMalfoy-like whimper. "Please?"

Dear Ginny

If you're reading this, the wedding is over, and Severus and I have retired to the dungeons. I wanted to say thanks for all your help over the last few days and especially for your support last year.

I hope this little gift helps. Use it well.

Love

Hermione.

"What's in the envelope, Gin?" Harry called as he was pouring the tea.

Ginny stopped at the kitchen door on her way up to the bedroom. "Oh, just a thank you present from Hermione. I'll show you later. I'm sure you'll like it."

Upstairs, she tucked the flimsy red silk pouch under her pillow with a secret smile. "I know will."

"Do you trust me, Luna?" Blaise asked as he untied the silk scarf from around his neck.

"Absolutely. Why?" Her large silvery eyes held a smile just for him.

"I have a surprise for you."

"Oh, wonderful! I love surprises!"

"Well, close your eyes and... just for good measure..." Blaise tied the scarf over Luna's eyes.

"You haven't suddenly turned kinky, have you, Blaise?"

Blushing, he shook his head, then realised she couldn't see him. "Nothing like that, love."

"Pity. I quite like trying new things." Luna's lips curved into an invitation.

Carefully avoiding contact below the waist, Blaise brushed her ear with his lips. "I'll keep that in mind for future reference. Now, hold on tight."

With a soft crack, they appeared behind an elegant building in a sought-after street in London. Leading Luna by the hand, Blaise guided her through the front door and up two flights of stairs.

"Mmm. I smell old wood and furniture polish and velvet. Where are we, Blaise, some exclusive club of your mother's?"

"Not bloody likely. Hold onto my arm for a moment longer." Blaise unlocked the door of his newly purchased flat and led Luna into the sitting room.

Releasing the knot, he whisked off the blindfold with a flourish of his hand. "Welcome to my humble abode, Miss Lovegood. You are my very first visitor."

"Yours? This is your flat?" Luna spun around, taking in the wood panelling, lush woollen carpets, and silk drapes on the full-length windows overlooking the Thames. The furniture was a clever blend of antique oak and modern cream leather with splashes of rich colour in the cushions and rugs.

"All mine. Bought with the inheritance I received after my father died. I've only recently had access to the account." A frown creased his brow as he recalled the bitter clashes with his mother over the money and his right to spend it to attain his independence.

She wandered around the room, stopping every so often to admire the many pieces of art he had collected over the previous two years. Stopping before a set of paintings above the fireplace, she studied them in silence for a moment. "They're very good. Such intimate detail."

"They're an investment. An up-and-coming artist, whom I suspect will gain in value as he sells more work."

Luna nodded and moved on. "This is beautiful. Egyptian, isn't it?" She gently caressed the thin neck of a vase displayed on a side table, seemingly oblivious to the effect her hand was having on her companion's trousers as she stroked up and down the column of earthenware.

"Er... Luna. Come and look at the view." Voice a little strained, Blaise gestured to the windows where the lights of the city sparkled and shone, casting myriads of twinkling reflections on the surface of the river below. Above all the buildings, the moon bathed the scene in a silvery shimmer as it headed down towards the west.

Wandering over to stand beside him, Luna's eyes widened at the splendour of the sight before her. "It's lovely. But just the sort of night to watch out for Drigiwinkles."

"Dirigi... wrinkles?"

"No, silly. Drigiwinkles, tiny faerie-like creatures that love dancing in the moonlight and creating mischief. But don't worry, Blaise. There's a very simple deterrent to stop them invading your home."

"And that would be...?" He moved behind the slender blonde and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her into his warmth.

Luna smiled to herself and spun in his embrace. Reaching up, she trailed kisses from his jaw to his ear. "Sex," she whispered. "They hate the sight and smell of sex."

"Oh."

"Just as well that's what you were planning, isn't it?" Luna giggled at Blaise's expression. "What, you think I didn't know?"

"I... er... well. I'd hoped. But if you're not ready..." He shrugged.

"Don't be daft, Blaise Zabini. I've been ready for weeks. I thought we were waiting for you."

With that, Luna's mouth met his. For several long moments their tongues explored and tasted, and their hands sought and found bare skin. Suddenly, Luna pulled herself free, dropped her cloak onto the armchair, and pushed open the door to the bedroom, leaving her dress in a silken heap on the floor behind her.

"Holy Mother of Merlin." Blaise's brain had resumed its function by the time he had locked the front door and followed Luna into the bedroom. It had a slight relapse at the sight of the expanse of luminous skin, bare from cornsilk hair to delicately painted toes, awaiting him on the bed.

"Are you ready now, Blaise?"

Luna's smile was all the encouragement he needed. Turning his back on the bed, Blaise removed his garments one by one. A glance over his shoulder revealed the silver gaze charting the shape of his body.

"Turn around. I want to see you." The desire in her voice spurred him into action. As he turned to meet her scrutiny, her eyes dropped to the proud, jutting evidence of his arousal. "Oh, good, I see you *are* ready." Luna reached out with one hand. "May I touch?"

He nodded, speech having deserted him along with his clothes. Closing his eyes as he moved to join her on the bed, Blaise hissed in pleasure while Luna stroked and cupped and fondled until he could withstand no more.

"Please... stop. Let me..." Lying her gently back against the silk coverlet, Blaise took his time to explore the woman he loved, supping on her sweetness and worshipping her curves until she writhed beneath his clever fingers and persistent tongue and begged him, "Now, now... please." So he answered his witch's pleas, joining together with her, dark skin melded to fair, in a wild dance of passion spinning out of control throughout the long, enchanted night.

And in that same night expressions of love and commitment were shared in many places. The flat overlooking the river Thames, an old house in Grimmauld Place, and an opulent suite in a mansion in Wiltshire. And, of course, deep in the dungeons at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The next morning, Luna Lovegood stood in front of the fire in Blaise's living room and again studied the paintings there. "Funny how the artist was so obsessed with her hands. Must have been a few Wrackspurts in the studio." Then she turned to Blaise and winked.

The End

A/N: This was started back in March 2011 for shalimar1981 for the TPP Every Flavour Auction. It's taken a while between two SSHG Exchanges, three LDWS challenges, trips to Australia and USA, preparing and putting the house on the market, and the three-year subdivision process. Not to mention ferrying the youngest child around,

starting the next eldest at Uni, sending another off to the UK, work, dancing, learning to play the guitar...

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Lastly, a million hugs to all the readers and reviewers out there in the ether. You made the whole thing loads of fun! xx sunny33