Master of Enchantment

by Subversa

Winner in Round Six of the Multifaceted Awards in the category Aphrodisia It begins the summer after Seventh Year, when the war is raging on, with an unexpected moment of tenderness. What is this inexplicable feeling Hermione experiences? And how can she get Snape to discuss it with her, when all he wants to do is avoid her? Rating is for final chapter.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 7

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All characters belong to JKR.

Prologue

It was the summer after seventh year, and the war was at its peak. Hermione was taking her turn in the rotation and manning headquarters, along with Minerva McGonagall. Just past midnight, there was frantic knocking at the door, and Hermione rushed to admit Severus Snape and Remus Lupin with an unconscious Nymphadora Tonks supported between them.

Minerva hurried to assist them as they carried Tonks up to a first floor bedroom and placed her carefully on the bed. With a magisterial calm, Minerva examined Tonks and said, "She has been Stunned, and she hit her head when she fell. I'll sit with her until she wakes up."

Lupin reached out and touched Hermione on the shoulder. "Severus and I need to speak to you, Hermione."

Lupin led her back down to the kitchen where all of the Order members seemed to congregate at headquarters. He sat beside her and spoke to Snape, saying, "Put on the kettle, please, Severus. We could all do with a cup of tea."

Snape acquiesced without a word, reaching for the teakettle. Hermione noticed a cut on his hand and saw that both he and Lupin were the worse for wear, battered and dusty.

"What happened?" she asked.

"We had information--" Lupin glanced involuntarily at Snape, "that your family was targeted by the Death Eaters, but we didn't know when they planned to attack. Tonks and Mundungus Fletcher were keeping your parents' house under guard. Tonight, we found out the Death Eaters were on the move. Severus and I went as quickly as we could, Hermione; we got word to Moody and Shacklebolt, and they were coming too. When Severus and I got to the house, it was empty. Tonks was on the ground in the back garden, unconscious. Dung is dead."

Hermione heaved a terrific sob, and Lupin grasped her hand. Impatiently, Snape turned his back on the teakettle and pulled a bottle of brandy from a cupboard. He poured a measure of brandy into the waiting teacup and pressed the cup into her other hand.

"Drink this, Miss Granger. Slowly." His voice was quiet but commanding. Hermione turned her tear-streaked face up to look at him; after seven years as his student, she was used to obeying his will. Snape's face was impassive, but his eyes were fierce. With a trembling hand, she raised the cup to her lips and sipped the fiery liquid. Immediately, she felt the warmth slide down her throat, beginning to warm and calm her. He nodded his approval, as Lupin spoke again.

"We searched the house, Hermione. There was a fight, that much we know for certain. Your parents weren't there. Now, we don't know that anything bad has happened to them. We sent an alarm, and most of the Order are looking for them now. You mustn't despair. Someone will contact us as soon as they know."

The kettle began to sing, and Remus stood to pour the boiling water into the teapot. Snape moved to take his seat, wordlessly motioning for Hermione to take another sip of the brandy.

Speaking in his customarily dispassionate tone, Snape continued the story. "We waited for Dumbledore to arrive; he is taking Fletcher's body to his sister. The others went on to search for your parents, and we brought Tonks here. St. Mungo's is being watched by the Dark Lord."

Lupin placed three mugs on the table and poured strong, hot tea for each of them. He topped off each mug with a measure of brandy and pushed one over to Hermione.

"Drink it, Hermione. It will help, I promise you." Hermione thankfully took the second teacup between her trembling hands, grateful for the warmth. Snape watched her until she began to sip the hot liquid. He then quickly drank his own tea, muttered something about a shower, and left the room.

Lupin began to speak to Hermione in a kindly, distracting way, asking about her plans to go to University in Bulgaria at the end of the month and about Ron and Harry beginning their Auror training the next January. He told a story or two about his own days at University until Snape came back into the kitchen, dressed in black slacks and a black suede shirt, his black hair still damp from the shower. Lupin looked at him in surprise.

"Having trouble sleeping, Severus?" he asked.

"Minerva asked me to have you step upstairs, Lupin."

Lupin stood to pour another mug of tea. "I'll go up, then," he said, also slipping the brandy bottle into the pocket of his robes. "Hermione, you should try to sleep. Severus, we're leaving in the morning at 7:00?" At Snape's silent nod, Lupin left the kitchen.

"If you have finished your tea, Miss Granger, you may try to sleep now. I will not be sleeping and will cover your shift." Snape's tone was matter-of-fact. His manner implied that he was not offering kindness or assistance, simply stating reality.

Hermione stood up, feeling dazed and frightened, as well as a little drunk. She swayed on her feet, and Snape stepped closer to place a steadying hand on her elbow. She could smell the shampoo he had used to wash his hair and his shaving lotion. He was a full head taller than she, and for the first time, she was aware of the breadth of this man's chest and the wiry strength in his arms. An unfamiliar energy seemed to pour out of him; she felt the power surround her, enter her very being, and her heart began to race. She noted the angle of his jaw, with a surprising fascination, and knew the urge to press her lips to the pulse beating in his throat. When he touched her, she felt her tummy turn over.

Fearlessly, she placed one hand on his chest and looked up into his inscrutable black eyes.

"Please don't send me away, sir," she whispered, gazing up at him imploringly.

For what seemed an eternity, they stood that way in the cozy kitchen at number 12, Grimmauld Place. The palm of her hand, resting beneath his heart, registered the steady, if quickened, cadence. She felt the pressure of his fingers on the bare skin of her arm, almost a caress. Breathless, she watched the normally tight-lipped mouth relax - did she only imagine the softening in his obsidian gaze? What was this force in the air between them, that seemed so viscous, and felt both warm and treacherous? With her free hand, she reached around him, ignoring his instinctive stiffening, not caring that her movement dislodged his hand from her arm, and slowly gathered a great handful of the back of his shirt. She needed this contact, required it, hungered for it. Closing her eyes, she tucked her curly head beneath his chin and pressed her soft body against the angular length of his.

Snape stood, rigid in her embrace. Hermione was oblivious to his discomfort; she felt safe, and comforted, and some other emotion for which she had no name. Clinging to him with her eyes closed, she could see neither the expression of agony on his face nor the clenched fists held deliberately by his sides.

Much too soon, the doorbell chimed, and he put her away from him, striding out of the room without a backward glance. She followed him, hearing excited voices in the hall, and walked right into Ron and Harry, who were sprinting past the other Order members.

"Hermione!" Ron was gasping, out of breath. "We have your parents safe at the Burrow!"

Harry looked at her closely and wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of his hand. "Moody and Shacklebolt were able to get them out of there while Dung and Tonks held the Death Eaters off. Are you okay?"

Ron grabbed her hand and began to pull her toward the door. "We'll take you to them, come on..."

Hermione was only minimally aware of the smiles and arm pats bestowed upon her by the other Order members grouped in the hall, who were removing their cloaks and discussing an impromptu supper of whatever was in the cupboard. Snape stood motionless, the crowd separating them, as Ron tugged on her hand, and Harry herded her from behind. Her, "Thank you, Professor," was lost in the clamor, and he merely inclined his head to her as she was swept away.

She did not see him again.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2 of 7

We?re all grown up now -- but how to get close to the Man-Who-Fled?

These characters are the property of JKR

Chapter 1

Hermione smiled and shook hands with her well-wishers, appearing to be every inch the proud graduate but only she knew how hopeless she felt and how empty the days ahead of her loomed.

Her parents were so pleased when she agreed to the party they had planned for her homecoming from the University of Bulgaria. Now here she was, surrounded by all of her old school friends and many of her old professors, and all she could notice was the one person who was not present.

She stood and pressed Professor McGonagall's hand before moving on to speak with Professor Dumbledore. Professor Flitwick, deep in conversation with Arthur Weasley and Alastor Moody, waved to her from his perch on one of her parents' bar stools. Harry and Ginny were at the table, laughing with Fred and Angelina over a game of cards. George and Charlie were deep in a Quidditch debate with Seamus and Oliver Wood. Katie Bell sat with Parvati and Lavender, shaking their heads over the sports talk. Ron had a possessive hand on Luna Lovegood, who was earnestly speaking to Remus Lupin. Remus caught Hermione's eye and gave her an imperceptible smile. She smiled back, remembering his one-time avowal that she was the cleverest witch of her age. How would her cleverness help her now?

"A Sickle for your thoughts..."

His whimsical tone always touched her heart. Hermione looked up into the twinkling eyes of Albus Dumbledore.

"I imagine a Knut would be more on mark," she demurred.

"It appears that everyone is having a lovely time except for the guest of honor," Dumbledore mused, his eyes narrowing as he cast a sidelong look at her.

"Oh, Headmaster, I am so happy to see you all!" Hermione protested.

"As we are happy to see you, my dear. An advanced degree in Charms, as well as Potions, from the University of Bulgaria? Graduation with the highest honors? These are accomplishments of which you may be justifiably proud. Why, then, do I sense melancholy?"

"Just ... indecision, sir. I don't know what I want to do now."

"Your next step yes, let us discuss that, shall we? What are your options?" Dumbledore tilted his teacup to his lips and quirked an inquisitive eyebrow as he took a sip.

Hermione found herself nervously pleating her robe with her fingers. "Durmstrang offered me an assistant teaching position in Potions. Beauxbatons offered me the Charms mistress position for years one through three, and the Ministry of Magic wants to interview me...."

"...and these choices are not satisfactory?" Dumbledore posed his question in a soft, musing voice.

"All of them are wonderful. I never expected to receive so much recognition." She met his gaze then, momentarily amazed at her own good fortune. "Everyone has been so complimentary. I'm certainly not the only person to ever complete a course of study in two subjects!"

The doorbell rang, and they were momentarily distracted, as Neville Longbottom and his very pregnant wife, the former Hannah Abbott, came into the room. Harry jumped up to clap Neville on the shoulder while Ginny and Alicia ran to embrace Hannah and to ask after the baby. Hermione waved to them, hoping her face did not show the sharp disappointment she felt.

"But you have not been congratulated by everyone, have you, Hermione?"

Feeling momentarily naked to his penetrating gaze, she looked up into his eyes and saw nothing but complete understanding. Abruptly, she decided not to lie.

"No, Headmaster, not by everyone." Horrified, she felt tears fill her eyes.

Surreptitiously, Dumbledore slipped her a snowy handkerchief from the pocket of his midnight blue robes.

"He is a difficult man, my dear. Are you certain there is not another future you would rather pursue?"

Hermione used the handkerchief to blot the damnable tears, careful not to smear her make-up. "I'm not certain that I have any choice in the matter, sir. He doesn't respond to my owls, and he's not here. He has no interest in my future. Obviously."

Dumbledore regarded her for a moment, then said, "Desirable results are worthy of careful planning and hard work; haven't you always found that to be true?"

Hermione bit her lip and looked away. They stood together in silence for a moment, both lost in their own thoughts. Hermione ached as she watched Harry pull Ginny into his lap and place his hands on her belly where their baby grew. Ron led Luna over to the card table, and Hannah Longbottom smiled as she looked at Luna's engagement ring. Hermione knew that Ron had spent his entire first month's paycheck after Auror training on the moonstone ring on Luna's finger. Their wedding was set for Christmas. She was happy, so very happy, for all of the ones she loved.

But she felt so left out, so outside of their happiness.

Dumbledore touched her shoulder, and she looked up at him, only to find his gaze on Minerva McGonagall, who was now looking at baby pictures with Molly Weasley.

Minerva said, "Molly, the baby looks just like Fleur, only with Bill's hair!" And both of the ladies laughed, watching the red-haired baby girl in the moving photo wave her fists.

Hermione heard Dumbledore say softly, "Do not walk away from love, my dear. It is a rare bird and does not wait forever to be captured and adored. If you walk away from love, it may not be there when you return for it."

At that very moment, Minerva looked up at them and nodded a silent agreement. Molly, distracted from the pictures of her granddaughter, smiled at Hermione. "How is that nice Viktor Krum, dear?"

Hermione wished her final guests farewell, hugging and kissing Ron and Harry last of all. She knew they were puzzled at her reticence, but she didn't know how to explain her feelings to them. Thankfully, her parents had already gone to bed. Now she would have some blessed peace and silence. Slipping her shoes off, she curled up on the sofa, where she was soon joined by Crookshanks, and the minutes ticked by as she stroked his ginger fur and considered Dumbledore's offer. It was time to plot her next move. She had served through one war, for the good of all wizard-kind. Now she would wage her own war, for her heart's desire.

Hermione was nothing if not determined.

Hermione Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts and took a moment to get her bearings. The castle rose before her in the early summer dusk, and the beauty of it brought a lump to her throat. So much of her life, the best part of her life, had taken place behind those ancient walls. With her suitcase in one hand and Crookshanks' carrier in the other, she began to walk up the long drive. She heard a loud popping noise behind her, followed by a clatter and some muted cursing. Hermione pivoted and laughed with delight when she saw her old friend, Nymphadora Tonks, sprawled over a bright pink knapsack.

"I am such a klutz!" Tonks fumed, scrambling to her feet.

"You are perfectly Tonks-like!" Hermione said, and she put her luggage on the ground to hug her smaller friend. "I'm so glad to see you! When did you get back from Greenland?"

Tonks gaped at her. "Greenland? Who told you I was in.... no, let me guess..."

And together, the girls said, "Mad-Eye Moody!"

When Tonks finished laughing her hearty laugh, she said, "I was in Wales! For an investigation! Mad-Eye thinks there are plots everywhere. If anyone ever needed a nice Draught of Peace, he's the one."

Seeing Hermione's slight wince at the mention of a potion, Tonks picked up her rucksack and grabbed Crookshanks' carrier in her other hand.

"How are you? I'm sorry I missed the big welcome home party. Was everyone there? Did Ron make a big prat of himself?"

Relieved at the turn of conversation, Hermione picked up her suitcase and began to stroll up to the castle with Tonks.

"Ron is engaged to Luna Lovegood."

Tonks cocked her head to one side. "How do you feel about that?"

Hermione smiled. "Luna is the best person in the world for Ron. They never, ever fight, and she can calm him down and shut him up with one look. It's amazing."

"I didn't think he would ever get over you and Viktor. He was demented on the subject, the last time I saw him." Tonks shook her head in amazement. "What a mouth!"

Hermione grinned at her. "He's almost serene, now, Tonks. He and Luna are deeply in love. Ron never loved me; he just thought he owned me. I was the only female in his orbit that he wasn't related to." With a shrug, she added, "If it hadn't been for Luna, Ron would never have made it through Auror training. Harry and Ginny really believed he was going to bomb out of training, until they dragged him off to a party at Neville and Hannah Longbottom's house. Luna was at the party; she and Ron have been inseparable since that night. Luna always fancied Ron, in her own way. I really hope they'll be happy."

"Well, everybody knows I have the devil's own luck with the blokes," Tonks said mournfully. "I thought that Minerva had asked me to visit because she had some new professor to fix me up with." Tonks' brave little smile was painful to see. "But since you're here, maybe she's just having a pajama party!"

Hermione shook her head as she and Tonks gave the Whomping Willow a wide berth. "I'm here to help organize the Education Symposium. So maybe there is a mystery bloke." She giggled at Tonks' comical face. "You must be imagining things, Tonks. You are little and cute and funny lots of men fancy you." She thought to herself, *I know one who does, for certain!*

Tonks stopped for a moment and lay a hand on Hermione's arm. "What happened with Viktor, Hermione? We all thought...."

Hermione smiled softly. "Viktor asked me to stay, Tonks. He wants to marry me. I just couldn't do it. I don't love Viktor that way."

Tonks shook her head. "You don't love Viktor, you don't love Ron all of these perfectly cool men want you, and you won't have them. What's up with that?"

Hermione shrugged and began to walk again.

Tonks stubbornly stood her ground. "Hermione, I'm remembering a conversation we had when you were just sixteen years old..."

Hermione doggedly continued toward the castle. "I don't know what you're talking about, Tonks," she said over her shoulder.

"...when you and Ginny were telling me your deep, dark love secrets..."

"I'm sure I don't remember a thing about it," she said, not looking back, walking faster.

"...and you said you had a crush on..."

"TONKS!"

Hermione whirled around, her face flushed a bright pink, to see Tonks laughing so hard she had to put down the cat carrier and her knapsack and lean over to catch her breath. Crookshanks, fed up with the slow progress to the castle, put a knowing paw through the bars and released the catch on the carrier so he could scamper off and stretch his legs.

Hermione stormed back to where Tonks was laughing and said in a lowered voice, "Please do NOT embarrass me, Tonks. That was silly school girl stuff. We're all grown up, now."

She had a moment of impatience, waiting for Tonks to promise to behave. Then Tonks's eyes grew wide in comical alarm, and Hermione felt the thrill run down her spine as a soft, sinister voice said, "I can't tell you how relieved I am to hear it."

Turning quickly, Hermione found Severus Snape standing right behind her. His trademark sneer was firmly in place, and his black, heavily lidded eyes bore an expression of benign boredom. Her hungry gaze consumed the inky black hair, now threaded with silver, his pale skin, the hawkish nose, and his unrelieved black attire.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, she said, "G-good evening, Professor Snape."

Snape inclined his head slightly, his eyes never leaving her face, and he said, "Miss Granger."

"Wotcher, Severus?" Tonks said, giving Snape a lopsided grin.

Still watching Hermione's face, Snape said, "Hello, Tonks."

Hermione found herself speechless and immobilized by the strength of his steady regard. She heard Tonks babbling on about how Crookshanks had escaped his carrier and asking after Snape's plans for the summer holiday, and still his black eyes bored into her own soft brown ones. She was unable to think, unable to speak, unable to move, so mesmerized was she by him.

Tonks was winding down to an embarrassed silence and Hermione was trying desperately to break her gaze away from Snape, when a very cheerful, "So, you found them, Severus! Welcome, ladies!" startled her into looking away from him, up the path, to Remus Lupin.

"Remus!" Tonks cried and ran to hug him. "You look smashing!"

"Nymphadora, my dear, you are looking quite wonderful yourself," Lupin replied in a perfectly serious tone. Giving her shoulder a final squeeze, he put her to one side and walked over to take Hermione's hand.

"Welcome, Hermione," he said, smiling down at her. Hermione found herself inspecting him more closely than she had at her parents' home the week before and was pleased to see that she agreed with Tonks' estimation of his condition. His color was good, his eyes were clear, and his robes were new and well-made. Save for the graying of his sandy hair and a few old scars, he looked better and younger than she had ever seen him.

Before she could answer Lupin, Snape spoke again, so close to her ear that she could feel her hair stir with his breath as he said, "Did you hear what he called her? And she didn't scream, protest, or hex him."

Tonks laughed out loud, as did Lupin. Hermione turned a fraction of an inch toward the velvet voice and found Snape's intent stare still focused on her face but with -- could it be? -- the ghost of a smile on his lips.

She felt herself flush to the roots of her hair and was very thankful for Lupin's gentle grip, which helped her remember where she was. She squeezed his hand and said, "You *are* looking remarkably well, Remus. I'm so glad."

A youthful grin broke across Lupin's face. "You girls need to stop with the compliments; I think I'm going to blush."

He bent over and retrieved the cat carrier and Hermione's suitcase and began to lead the way to the castle. "Minerva sent Severus out to find you two before dark; we're dining in her quarters this evening, and she told me we are not to be late!"

Tonks linked her arm through Lupin's and began to chat with him about their mutual friends in the Order as they headed for the castle entrance. Before Hermione could take a step in that direction, Snape moved into her path, standing very close to her.

She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling the power of his presence, then, with a determined lift of her proud chin, said, "We mustn't keep Minerva waiting."

In a voice full of soft menace, he replied, "But, Miss Granger -- anticipation is a dangerous elixir, is it not?"

Steeling herself to look straight into his eyes, she said, "Only if the anticipated event materializes, Professor Snape. Otherwise, pointless waiting is a tease, and a bore."

As she moved around him, hoping for a majestic sweep to the castle doors, she heard his amused, "Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger," and she knew she was woefully out of her league.

Chapter 2

Chapter 3 of 7

Severus reflects upon his current situation and his past influences and comes to a decision.

These characters belong to JKR, bless her

Master of Enchantment

Chapter 2

Severus Snape sat motionless in the leather wingchair before the fireplace in the staff lounge. The windows were open to the soft breezes of the summer night; in deference to the season, his goblet held a dry Riesling, rather than the brandy he favored in cooler weather.

Dinner in Minerva's quarters had been tedious. Her cooking was passable, at best. The Headmaster joined them, and Severus was aware that Dumbledore was at his interfering best. Dumbledore and Minerva were shamelessly attempting to make a match between Nymphadora Tonks and Remus Lupin. In Snape's opinion, not even a loud-mouthed, clumsy Metamorphmagus with all the feminine charm of a Bowtruckle would want to marry a werewolf even a werewolf with a new steady job as the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. As for the werewolf, he would be lucky to get *any* woman to marry his defective arse.

Severus glowered as he thought about Lupin. For the second time, Lupin had been selected, over his own application for the job, to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. In the glow of cooperation and tolerance following the war, even a werewolf could become a respectable professional. The improvements to the Wolfsbane Potion meant that he need only spend the nights of the full moon cycle as a werewolf; his days could be spent in the classroom.

It was not as if Severus wished any ill for Lupin. He had never been a friend during their school years, but neither had he been one of Severus' chief tormentors, as James Potter and Sirius Black were. In their time serving in the Order during the war, Severus and Lupin had developed an easy working relationship. Not a friendship never a friendship; Severus neither had, nor desired, friends.

Severus sat forward and poured another goblet of wine, then drained half of it. He did not enjoy reminiscing. There were very few fond memories from his past that he would voluntarily recall. However, a crisis was upon him now, and he was brooding.

Hermione Granger. The insufferable, buck-toothed, bushy-haired, know-it-all little pain-in-the-arse of a Gryffindor student with that preposterous name had become an alluring, educated, enticing woman with a head of soft brown curls, perfectly proportioned teeth hell, perfectly proportioned everything, as far as one could discern in those

damn robes and eyes the color of amber in firelight. She was a threat and he was giving her hell for it, but he needed a plan.

It wasn't until this morning at breakfast that Albus and Minerva had dropped on him the bombshell that the 157th Annual Wizarding Education Symposium would be held at Hogwarts on August 22, and that Severus had the happy chore of organizing the event. To assist him with the added burden of this onerous task, they were hiring an assistant to whom he could delegate much of the work.

Never at his best before ingesting a judicious quantity of caffeine, it did not occur to Severus until after his fourth cup, in his study, while idly perusing an alchemy journal, that Dumbledore had been entirely too blasé about the whole assistant question. Undoubtedly, he was to be saddled with some nitwit who would drive him insane with ineptitude.

Immediately, he stood and threw Floo powder into the fireplace.

"Headmaster Albus Dumbledore."

Dumbledore's head appeared as if suspended in air above the grate.

"Yes, Severus?"

Severus sat on the low stool by the hearth and asked, "May I inquire as to the identity of the assistant I am to have?"

"Certainly. A former student, who has completed the University coursework and has not yet accepted a position, is currently free and has agreed to help out for the summer."

Severus found himself with a curiously tight grip on the container of Floo powder, but did not react when it shattered in his grasp and dusted his clothing with glittering flecks. She had outfoxed him. Ignoring her owls and party invitations was not enough of a snub. He would be saddled with Hermione Granger, working daily, in close approximation, for the longest summer of his life.

"You mean, Headmaster, Hermione Granger."

"Well, yes, Severus. How ever did you guess?"

After lunch, Severus requested a meeting with Dumbledore, who graciously agreed to see him at two o'clock.

At the appointed time, Severus approached the gargoyles guarding the Headmaster's office and said, "Pepper Imp," gaining entrance to the revolving staircase. In the office, Dumbledore greeted him and sat regarding Severus gravely.

"Headmaster, when I was injured in the battle at the Riddle estate, I was unconscious for three days. You told me you used Legilimency to ascertain what I had discovered of the Death Eaters' plans and their whereabouts."

Severus stopped, at an uncharacteristic loss for words. Of all the people in the world, only in the presence of this man could he let down his guard. It did not, however, make it any easier for him to expose the least particle of vulnerability.

Dumbledore spoke into the silence. "You wonder if perhaps I became aware of information that did not pertain to the Dark Lord's movements."

Severus nodded and made eye contact with Dumbledore, who stated, "There were many thoughts very close to the surface, no doubt due to your belief that you were about to die, Severus. Images of your parents, of your childhood, moments with Lord Voldemort, and with other Order members, were at the forefront of your mind when you were injured."

There was a certain desperation in Severus's expression as he opened his mouth to speak but was forestalled by Dumbledore, who held up his hand in a halting gesture.

"Yes, Severus, I witnessed your moment with Hermione Granger when she was in fear of her parents' lives. No, she has not been invited to Hogwarts to assist with the Education Symposium as a matchmaking attempt. I am fully aware of your sentiments on the subject, in spite of the let us say, Special Circumstances that exist between you. I do not, however, see why Miss Granger should be penalized when she wishes to accept the temporary position of Assistant Symposium Coordinator."

Severus sat for a moment, staring at his hands in his lap. Special Circumstances? Dumbledore was right on top of the game, per usual. Abruptly, Severus stood, his eyes still averted, and said, "Thank you, Headmaster. I appreciate your frankness. I will not take any more of your time."

Severus left as quickly as possible, unaware of Dumbledore's indulgent smile or of the carefully crossed fingers hidden beneath the Headmaster's desk.

Severus moved to the window in the staff lounge; the air was turning cool, and it was time to close it. The sight of Hermione, strolling the grounds in the starlight, caused him to close his eyes and press his forehead to the cool windowpane.

How he despised weakness! His father was so weak, such a drunkard, and a bully, dealing with his wife and son with his fists and with cruel hexes and curses. His mother was so weak, cowering before his father, submitting to his tyranny, making such feeble attempts to shield her only child from the brutality of Sedgwick Snape. Severus burned with anger as he recalled how his father had destroyed her wand and forced her to do her own housework without magic, like a Muggle. He raged inside as he recalled the penury of their home, the hand-me-down, shabby clothes he was forced to wear, relics of the Snape cousins he was seldom allowed to see. And all the while, his bastard of a father wore fine clothes, had expensive liquor, expensive tobacco, and expensive women, all of which he was not above flaunting in the faces of his long-suffering wife and his furious son.

Severus' only solace was the dusty boxes of magic books in the cellar. His mother once told him that the books had been his grandfather Snape's library. From the time he began to read, at the age of five, he would sit, poring over the books. He was convinced that somewhere in these manuals was the answer to his father's violence. If he learned the proper spell, his father wouldn't be so angry all of the time and would love Severus and his mother. He began with the illustrated texts, demonstrating how to use one's wand, transfiguration exercises, and elementary potion-making. As his comprehension grew, he delved into the volumes with no pictures, books full of ever-darker magic. As he read his way through his grandfather's collection, his eager brain stored the tantalizing information. When he opened the last box and saw the aged spell books, some written in English so old he could barely decipher it, he felt a thrill of power.

He had just turned eleven and would be starting at Hogwarts in the fall. He had not found the magic to make his father love him, but he could acquire the capacity to make his father cower and quail before him.

The ancient tomes were the first things he packed in his Hogwarts trunk, and he proudly displayed them in his Slytherin dormitory. Among his peers, the Dark Arts texts were equally attracting and repelling. His knowledge made him a useful ally; it also made him a dangerous enemy.

Severus forced himself to walk away from the window, from which he could see Hermione. Taking the bottle of wine, he upended it, pouring the remaining liquid into his goblet and tossed off the lot. He placed the goblet back on the table and squared his shoulders. Fortitude came from recognizing and capitalizing on your assets. He had identified his strengths early in his school career. He was a sneaky little bastard, as Lucius Malfoy, who was a seventh year when Severus began at Hogwarts, so aptly phrased it. Severus was loyal to his House, Slytherin, and had no scruples about screwing over anyone outside of it. He caught on quickly and was an ambitious student who excelled in all of his classes, except for flying lessons. He mortified himself the first day of flying class by falling from his broom like a Muggle child on a bicycle, while the girl next to him laughed at him and the boys hooted and jeered. Severus did not suffer humiliation well. It scalded him like acid and reminded him of being in the presence of his father.

Sedgwick Snape did not fancy the notion of his clever, tyrannized, and incensed son with a wand in his hand. For that reason, Severus spent his holidays and his summers at Hogwarts from age eleven on. His mother was permitted to communicate with him by owl, and his father would grudgingly supply the minimum amount of gold necessary to buy robes and books each year second-hand, of course but other than that, Severus was like a foundling without a home.

He spent those summers at Hogwarts, enjoying an autonomy he had never known before. He studied the subjects that appealed to him (the Dark Arts), practiced his wand work (hexes, the better to attack Potter and Black), and experimented with potions, for which he had an unusual flair. For relaxation, he took one of the school brooms to the Quidditch pitch and taught himself to fly through trial and error, without the mocking eyes of his classmates to scorn him to shame. His activities were casually directed by the teachers who were in and out, involved in their own summer pursuits. It was not surprising that he got excellent marks in each subject he attempted in his O.W.L. year, nor that he did the same on his N.E.W.T.s.

Sedgwick Snape was wise to eschew the company of the son who abhorred him, for Severus grew into a powerful wizard, an authority to be reckoned with, whose calling was potion-making, but whose passion was the Dark Arts.

Oddly enough, by the time Severus left Hogwarts, he no longer cared to revenge himself upon his father or to rescue his mother from her chosen slavery. He went on to University, and in his first year there, his parents died in a house fire, no doubt caused by his father's pathetic habit of smoking in his bed. In attending to their obsequies, Severus discovered that years before, his mother had inherited a small family estate with a house and grounds, including a monthly stipend of gold. It had been his father's practice to take all of the gold each month and spend it on himself. The estate had been neglected; Severus knew that Sedgwick Snape would never have permitted his wife to move to a place where she would have any natural allies against his brutality. They had died in the shabby house where Severus had lived his childhood years. Now, at the age of 19, Severus was finally free of his parents. At last, he had gold and property of his own, with no more family ties, however tenuous. It was an independence he had never known before.

But by then, he had already come to the attention of Lord Voldemort, whose many interesting projects for Severus constituted slavery of a different sort.

His unfortunate manner and personal habits continued with him until he returned to Hogwarts as a teacher. In spite of his dalliance with the Dark Lord, Albus Dumbledore believed him, trusted him, and accepted him. Dumbledore also began to quietly instruct Severus in matters of personal hygiene as well as demeanor. Severus accepted this subtle tutoring with a gratitude he was incapable of expressing. He would never win Witch Weekly's Congeniality Award, but he learned how to conduct himself in polite company, how to groom himself appropriately, and even, at the behest of Minerva McGonagall, the niceties of ballroom dancing.

For the last ten years, Dumbledore and McGonagall had been encouraging him to marry. Privately, he could not imagine the woman he could endure for longer than a good weekend of shagging.

Severus had a well-ordered, controlled life. He had meaningful employment, facilities for his personal research, contact with other professional people among the Hogwarts staff, and time for his infrequent recreational pursuits. When he wanted a woman, he bought one. He had never had an ongoing sexual relationship, much less a romance, with a female. He had no use for love. He had seen love first-hand. His mother's "love" for him, her "love" for his father love made him ill.

But these people, the staff at Hogwarts, were his family. His unspoken devotion to Dumbledore was the closest approach to affection that he permitted himself. His cold demeanor might not provide much in the way of reciprocation for the other teachers' inclusion of him in their lives at Hogwarts, but he served them in other ways, such as brewing potions, and undertaking administrative tasks. This place was his home. He was respected and accepted here. For all the healing, learning, and growing he had experienced in his adult life, Severus still could not abide vulnerability on any front. He would never, ever voluntarily place himself in a position, which could result in ridicule. His rigid control over every aspect of his life was his security.

There, then, was the answer to the riddle of what to do about Miss Hermione Granger. Nothing. He would continue to repel her personally, in every way, at every opportunity, while maintaining a civil (by his standards) working relationship. Above all, he must have no physical contact with her, Special Circumstances be damned. It was only one summer, after all.

Some forms of comfort were forever beyond him, so he had to take his pleasures where he found them usually cowering in his Potions classes.

Before he knew it, there would be a whole new class of first year Gryffindors for him to torment.

Chapter 3

Chapter 4 of 7

A mini-break at the seashore, wizards in Margaritaville, and a midnight swim.

These characters belong to JKR.

Master of Enchantment

Chapter 3

Hermione twisted her hair up into a knot and stuck a pencil through it, fanning the back of her sweaty neck with a piece of parchment. July was turning the castle into a steam bath, it seemed. Her crumpled robes were in a heap on the table; even her sleeveless white scoop neck top and navy blue shorts were too many clothes to be wearing today. Leaning her cheek upon her hand, she closed her eyes and imagined a dip in the lake; soon, she began to doze.

"Comfortable, Miss Granger?"

With a start, she opened her eyes and jerked her head up, dislodging the pencil in her hair and sending it flying across the staffroom. Professor Snape stood inside the doorway, impeccable as ever in his black coat and his robes. He immobilized the flying pencil with a flick of his wand and sent it floating back to the table. For a moment, Hermione was confused and felt like a student interrupted in wrong-doing.

"I was just resting my eyes," she said crossly, rubbing these offending orbs to clear the sleep from them.

Snape raised his eyebrows, curled his lip, and glanced at her wrinkled robes, piled haphazardly on the table.

"If you say so, Miss Granger." He closed the staffroom door and walked around behind her, glancing at the schedule she had been working on. "Still not finished with the symposium itinerary? What a pity. I was about to tell you to take the rest of the afternoon off."

Hermione shifted in her seat, feeling quite nearly undressed and oddly wrong-footed. She said waspishly, "I don't need *your* permission to take the afternoon off." A trickle of perspiration began to course down the back of her neck. She whirled around to glare at He-Who-Does-Not-Perspire, only to find him was he looking down her top?

Snape immediately went on the offensive. "If you wish to work as my assistant on this project, you will follow my directions. Otherwise, Miss Granger, you can," his eyes flicked contemptuously over her disheveled state, "take yourself off to the seashore, or wherever that costume would be acceptable."

Gods but he was obnoxious! Hermione pushed herself up to stand and stepped into Snape's personal space, noting with narrow-eyed satisfaction his involuntary step back. She followed him, ignoring the frisson of excitement from his proximity. "In case you haven't noticed, Professor Snape," she snapped acerbically, "it's broiling inside. Broiling! So I am going to dress comfortably. If you find that unacceptable, you can..."

Their delightful heart-to-heart was cut short as the staffroom door thudded open and Tonks erupted into the room, her hair its own light brown color, for once. She was wearing jeans, a tie-dyed tee-shirt and leather sandals; her toenails were painted bubble gum pink.

"Wotcher, Hermione!" she said gleefully, tossing her rucksack on top of Hermione's robes. "All right, Severus?" she added, not wishing to leave anyone out.

Hermione jumped back from Snape, and his nostrils flared in self-satisfaction at her retreat. He nodded a greeting to Tonks, keeping a weather eye on Hermione. "Back for the weekend, Tonks?" he inquired.

Tonks grinned at him. "No, I've come to kidnap you lot for the weekend."

Hermione goggled at her. "Leave Hogwarts? For the whole weekend? Will there be shade, Tonks? And breezes and iced lemon?"

Tonks flopped down on a chair, and Hermione followed suit, her hopeful eyes fixed on Tonks's face, Snape all but forgotten in the lure of cooler pastures.

It had been a tense two weeks. Each morning she reported to Snape's office for her work assignments; each afternoon she delivered her completed work to him. He handed her the daily task without looking up from his own ledgers and received the completed papers back with a muttered thanks and no eye contact. The man was infuriating! After a damn-near flirtatious greeting upon her arrival, he had retired into himself again as if nothing had ever happened between them. The only time he would look at her was at meals, when he could occasionally be drawn out to speak to her. She was pleased to find out that they shared certain literary interests, and could talk quite naturally on subjects ranging from Chaucer to Dickens to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Snape tended to disappear as soon as he finished eating his meals and he was seldom seen in the staffroom. She was virtually never alone with him and was finding it bloody impossible to further her plan at all.

Tonks pulled two ordinary-looking door keys from her jeans pocket and showed them to Hermione. "One of my mates at work took a couple of rooms at an inn, right near the shore. He can't go this weekend, so he offered the place to me, and naturally, I thought of you lot." Tonks looked from Hermione to Snape with suppressed excitement. "Go on, you know you want to! We can just laze around, drink lots of fancy drinks with pink umbrellas, and tell stories about everyone we know. It'll be brilliant."

Snape's lips thinned derisively. "I think not."

Hermione grabbed a key out of Tonks's hand. "Paradise, Tonks. It sounds divine."

Remus Lupin strode into the room, a knapsack in his hand. He wore a light blue polo shirt, neatly tucked into his jeans and deck shoes with no socks. He dropped the knapsack onto the tabletop, and crossed his arms over his broad chest. "Come on, you two, time's a-wasting. If we hurry, we can be there in time for the sunset over the sea and at least one pitcher of some Muggle frozen drink concoction." He mused for a moment. "Maybe two."

Snape made a move as if to leave the room. "I thank you, but no."

Lupin barred the staffroom door. "Come on, Severus, I won't make you drink crass Muggle cocktails. For you, only the driest gin." Lupin winked at the girls and smiled engagingly.

Tonks entered into the group wheedle. "Look, Severus two rooms one for the girls and one for the boys. I know Remus snores like a troll " a snort from Lupin at that "but it will do you good to get away from Hogwarts. And, I know you have swim trunks, because Minerva told us you went on holiday to St. Tropez one summer." Tonks waggled her eyebrows at him. "Girls in bathing suits, Severus, and cooking not done by house-elves."

Lupin looked reflective. "Be a sport, old man. If they drag me out to dance clubs every night, I'll go spare trying to keep up with both of them. Show some solidarity, colleague to colleague."

Hermione sat quietly in her chair, clutching the key so tightly that it bit into her palm and trying not to breathe. "Say yes, say yes, say yes," she chanted in her mind, while she watched Snape's face for his reaction to the cajoling. His expression darkened when Lupin mentioned dancing with both girls, but he bore the air of a man politely rebuffing an invitation of dubious sincerity. As she observed him, she realized that he did not believe Tonks and Lupin really wanted him to come. Suddenly, all of her animosity towards him fell away; she walked over to him and put her hands on his sleeve.

Tonks was taking the mickey out of Lupin for being too old to dance the night away; Lupin was loudly and playfully defending himself. In the confusion, Snape looked down at Hermione's hands on his sleeve and then let his eyes travel from her hands to her face. He quickly calculated the benefits versus the risks of this proposed outing; it was dangerous to leave his comfort zone, but going on holiday could mean the advent of Holiday Severus, who operated outside the constraints placed on Professor Snape. Recklessly, before Hermione could speak, he said, "I will come with you, if only to see you in the environment actually appropriate to your clothing." Gently shaking her off, he said over his shoulder, as he walked away, "Better get cracking, Miss Granger. No doubt we will all be waiting while you pack."

Hermione felt weak with relief and a bit giddy at Snape's sudden acquiescence. "I'll bet you the price of the first round of drinks that I will be packed and at the gates before you will, Professor," she said to the back of his head.

"You're on," he replied, as he swirled out of the room in his long black robes.

Hermione hung her clothes in the wardrobe while Tonks checked out the bathroom. The inn was small but the rooms were nice and the view was breathtaking. Each room contained two double beds, a wardrobe, and a dresser holding a television set and a video recorder. There was also a sitting area, consisting of two chairs arranged before the glass doors. The girls threw the draperies wide and opened the French doors out onto the terrace, which held a white wrought iron table with a large blue umbrella and four wrought iron chairs with blue cushions. The sun was setting in a fabulous blaze of glory over the ocean. As the sun went down the temperature followed; soon, Hermione was glad of the light hooded jacket she had brought.

She heard her name and looked over to see Lupin, followed by Snape, swinging their long legs over the railing which separated one terrace from the other. "Where is Tonks?" Lupin asked, crossing to the French doors. "Not watching that infernal telly, is she? Come out, Nymphadora Tonks, hungry men await your presence so they can have their dinners!"

Tonks wrinkled her nose at Lupin from across the room, where she was primping at the mirror. "Look, I can have my violet hair, Remus," she said in a somewhat pleading tone. Lupin muttered a mild oath and entered the room.

Hermione found herself distracted by Snape's movement as he folded his long form into one of the chairs. She had been having a hard time keeping her eyes off of him, ever since he had met her in the castle entrance hall, with his light bag in his hand. "I guess we tied," he had said, taking her own bag from her hand. "That means Lupin has to buy the first round."

He had smirked at her and led the way down the path to the gates. He wore what looked like a black silk shirt, unbuttoned at the throat with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. The shirt was tucked into a pair of tight black jeans and he was wearing black trainers. Hermione had never seen so much of his skin or so much of his body, and she had

certainly never seen him in Muggle clothing of the type she and her friends wore. Her mouth had been dry and her palms sweaty, just looking at him. In fact, they still were. She shoved her hands into the back pockets of her jeans to dry them.

"Are you hungry?" Snape's silky voice inquired now, recalling her from her reverie. She stared at him very hard, looking for signs of an intended double meaning, but his expression was no more or less sarcastic than usual.

"Yes, I am hungry. I'll go see if I can hurry Tonks along." Hermione moved through the French doors, away from him.

Severus watched her retreating form, taking in all the details. Her hair had been smoothed and was twisted up on her head. Curly tendrils framed her face and the back of her delectable neck. Her hip hugging jeans reminded him vividly of the Muggle fashions of his youth, but the tiny tee-shirt, which showed a small expanse of skin above the jeans, was strictly a current fad among the young. He knew that his mouth was watering for the woman, rather than the promised dinner. Deliberately, he looked away to where the last magenta and gold streaks were disappearing in the evening sky; surreptitiously, he wiped his palms on the black jeans.

Severus had been fairly certain Hermione was behind him, staring at his arse, as they walked away from the castle earlier. It served her right, for wearing those shorts and that skimpy top in the staffroom, showing her legs and her barely-covered breasts to him. Two could play at that game. He was not quite certain how he was going to withstand the sight of her in a swim suit, but he was determined to be brave.

Severus was on holiday, and his motto had ever been: What Happens On Holiday, Stays On Holiday.

Just how he was going to communicate these perfectly rational rules to Hermione had not yet occurred to him.

In the room, Lupin and Tonks were in a rather impassioned discussion.

"Your own hair is lovely."

"Remus, I don't go *out* like this be a mate, let me change it..." her voice trailed off as she screwed up her face to make her hair turn violet.

"No. We agreed: no morphing."

Tonks turned on him with a sudden ferocity. "Don't you listen? I never go out looking like this, like myself it's daft!"

Lupin stood up from the end of bed where he had patiently waited for her to finish her outburst and towered over her. "You will go out with me exactly as you are." His tone was final and brooked no argument.

"I can be cuter. Really." She looked almost as if she would cry.

Lupin took her small hand and brought it to his lips. "You accept me, 'Dora, exactly as I am. I accept you the same way. Morph your appearance for work, if you must, or for yourself, if you like, but when you're with me, I want you entirely as you are."

Tonks blushed crimson and turned away from him to apply lipstick to her mouth. Lupin stepped up behind her and looked into the reflection of her eyes in the mirror. "You are a right dish just the way you are, silly girl. Now, come to dinner I'm starving."

In the mirror, he spied Hermione, hovering uncertainly in the background. "You're hungry, right, Hermione? I know Severus is hungry, and if we don't hurry he may start gnawing on passers-by."

Lupin began herding Tonks toward the door, grabbing her jacket from one of the double beds, and shooed Hermione out onto the terrace as well. "Severus, getting a witch out the door when you're hungry is the work of ten wizards. Why did we decide to start hanging around with this lot?"

Snape rolled his eyes as he pushed himself out of the chair and followed the others down the terrace steps to the walk. "Because one of them provided accommodations for this little outing, perhaps?" he suggested snidely.

Lupin nodded sagely. "Too right she did! Good move on our part." Tonks slugged him on the arm, but he only smiled at her.

"Where is this pub, exactly?" Snape asked, sounding resigned to his fate of inane company.

"Down the corner," Tonks told him, linking arms with him. Snape looked a bit surprised, but courteously accepted his role as escort down the street.

Hermione put her hands in her jacket pocket and smiled up at Lupin as they began to follow their companions. "That was absolutely brilliant, what you said to Tonks back there, Remus."

"Nonsense. It was truth, plain and simple. I wish I knew who drummed it into her head that there's anything wrong with the way she looks. A good hex would sort them out straight away, I imagine." Both of them checked their sleeves for their wands, and grinned at each other. "Why do I feel so unarmed every time I go into a Muggle establishment?" Lupin lamented.

"Buck up, Remus, you'll feel better after the first pitcher," Hermione said as they followed Tonks and Snape into the darkened pub.

They found a large circular banquette in a darkened corner, away from many of the Muggle holiday-makers, who had already imbibed quite a bit. "Ladies first," Lupin said, motioning for Tonks and Hermione to scoot across the padded seat. He and Snape stepped up to the bar and placed their orders.

Tonks poked Hermione. "Quit gawping. Even Severus is going to notice that kind of pathetic drooling."

Hermione tore her eyes away from him and slapped at Tonks' poking finger. "Oh, mind your own business. I can't help myself." Then, rather pitifully, she said, "Am I really pathetic?"

"Hopeless. There's only one cure." Tonks leaned close to her ear. "You have to shag him into next week."

Hermione turned a speculative eye on her friend. "Tonks, are you and Remus..."

"No!" Tonks stared at her in comical dismay. "Are you daft? He's gorgeous; he could have anyone he wants."

"Tonks, he just kissed your hand and called you a dish, and "

Tonks became engrossed in the contents of her coin purse. "It's habit with him. We had some assignments together during the war, and we got to be good friends." There was a rather rueful look on her heart-shaped face. "He thinks I have something he calls 'poor self-esteem.' He's just being a mate, getting me to buck up and think more of myself, you know."

Hermione tried again. "Tonks, listen. I really believe that Remus is attracted to you."

Tonks shook her head stubbornly. "I've had boyfriends, Hermione; I know how a bloke acts when he fancies me. Remus has never put one toe over the line." She looked across the room at the two men leaning on the bar, one laughing, the other sneering, and gave an audible sigh. "He thinks of me like a friend or a sister, maybe."

Lupin and Snape walked back to the table with the drinks. Lupin carried a pitcher of margaritas and three cocktail glasses, the stems threaded through the fingers of one hand. Snape carried a highball glass of clear liquid over ice. Lupin slid in next to Tonks, and Snape took the place next to Hermione.

"Four fish-and-chips coming up," Lupin informed them, pouring the margarita concoction into the three cocktail glasses and handing them out to the girls.

"Remind me again why we're eating at this *drinking* establishment?" Snape queried dryly, leaning back and swallowing a portion of his own drink.

"Because we wanted a bit of food to keep us from getting sick on the drink, mate," Tonks told him, raising her glass. "To mini-breaks at the beach!"

Lupin and Hermione raised their frivolous drinks and waited until Snape grumbled and touched his glass to theirs.

They were on the third pitcher when the truth-telling began.

After the first pitcher, Snape gave in and allowed Hermione to pour a margarita for him. They ate the fish-and-chips, watched the Muggles throwing pointy instruments at an oddly segmented board ("I'm telling you, the game is called DARTS," Hermione insisted), observed some of the Muggles dancing, and they talked, and they laughed. Well, Snape didn't laugh, but he did snort a time or two.

They reminisced about their school days at Hogwarts, when they were each students. Thankfully, Lupin and Snape kept their memories to general topics and did not fall into any nastiness about the Marauders or the ill-fated prank. They each told their most and least favorite classes and teachers. When Tonks, and then Hermione, said that Snape had been their least favorite teacher, his lips quirked up on one side, and he sketched a bow from his seat. "We aim to please," he assured them obnoxiously.

Lupin and Tonks, who had both been in close quarters with Snape at one time or another during their work for the Order, exchanged a look. They had never seen him so loose and talkative and human. It was gratifying, but also alarming, because there was no precedent for where this behavior would take him.

Neither of them had ever met Holiday Severus before.

They imbibed more tequila-laced margaritas and Tonks followed up with the topic of her first shared fumble at school. She was quite droll, telling the story of meeting a fellow student on the Astronomy Tower one night. "Old Charlie got the surprise of his life when he found out I wasn't wearing any knickers..."

Lupin reminisced about his first time, in sixth year, in an empty dungeon classroom "No, a gentleman doesn't kiss and tell," he answered Snape's snide query.

Snape made a "Phhht," sound, and said, ticking each point off on his long fingers, "If you were in the dungeons, it was a Slytherin, because there wasn't a Hufflepuff girl in our year you'd have looked at twice. It had to be a prefect, because you wouldn't risk a non-prefect endangering your position. It was either Belinda Flint or Mary Nott." He watched Lupin's astonishment with a self-congratulatory smirk, and offered his empty glass for a refill.

"Well, Severus, you were the observant one, apparently. I have no clue with whom *you* took a tumble." Lupin gave Snape a feral grin and took a sip of his drink.

"Well, you wouldn't know the lady, Lupin. She wasn't at Hogwarts." Snape's manner was almost a dare.

"Met a stranger on holiday, did you?" Tonks inquired a bit drunkenly.

"No," Snape said, drawing his words out sardonically. "When we left school, all the seventh-year boys in Slytherin were given a gift by a Slytherin alumnus Lucius Malfoy, actually." He paused for effect. "Twenty-four hours in an expensive brothel. In Paris."

Lupin's mouth sagged open. "Twenty-four hours? At the age of eighteen?" He shook his head sadly. "Now I wish I'd been a Slytherin," he mourned to Tonks, who punched his shoulder.

"Hush your mouth, Mr. Squiffy. It's Hermione's turn."

Hermione was a bit squiffy herself. She was loving the way Snape was loosening up, loving the occasional bumps of his hand or knee under the banquette table, loving her dear friends, Tonks and Remus, having the loveliest time and then she heard the topic of conversation.

Merlin's beard, she did NOT want to answer this question. She should make something up, but her brain was blank; she couldn't think of a single lie to tell. She *could* throw Viktor under the bus, poor thing, but he wasn't here to defend himself and that would be really low. She *could* refuse to answer, but it would be so childish. Oh, how utterly humiliating, twenty-one years old and never been...

They were all looking at her now, Lupin and Tonks with drunken sincerity, and Snape with unholy amusement was that git looking smug? Did he dare?

"Hermione?" Tonks prompted again.

Too late, the drunken Lupin discerned Hermione's predicament, and said, "Oh, Merlin, look at the time, they're going to close the place with us still in it..."

It was a brave attempt, but Hermione paid him no mind; she was staring at Snape's face. He was now very attentive and focused on her. "I didn't take a tumble at Hogwarts. I haven't. Ever. Yet."

Hermione did not stop to analyze Snape's startled reaction to her revelation. Speaking with the exaggerated enunciation of drunks everywhere, she said, "Would you let me out, please, Professor Snape? I need to visit the Ladies'."

Snape moved across the banquette with alacrity, allowing her to escape the suddenly close confines of the booth. She took three steps and turned back to the table, drilling all three of them with slightly out-of-focus glares. "Not for lack of offers, mind you." Then she continued her weaving trek to the loo.

Severus watched her go off to the Ladies', his expression carefully schooled to indifference.

Merlin's beard! A virgin a twenty-one-year-old virgin, of all the freakish bad luck. All that time living in Potter's and Weasley's pockets, two years of war, three bloody years with that Krum fellow in Bulgaria, and she couldn't manage to rid herself of her virginity. Well, that was a sobering thought, if ever he had one. Damn, damn, damn.

Stalking to the bar, he paid their tab and waited for Hermione to return from the bathroom. Sodding Lupin and Tonks could damn well stay the night if they wanted. Apparently they did not want, as they joined him at the door. Hermione came back from the loo and pushed out the exit door with an air of studied nonchalance.

Of one accord, the four began the short walk back. As they approached the front of the inn, Tonks turned with a look of absolute mischief on her face.

"There's an indoor pool." Her voice was excited but hushed. "Fancy a dip?"

Lupin cocked his head to one side and surveyed the detached structure at which Tonks was pointing. "Nothing like a swim after a night of drinking," he mused.

Hermione was looking from one to the other of them in horror. Were they mental? "The pool has been closed since ten o'clock," she hissed, indicating the posted hours. "We'll get thrown out if we wake anyone!"

Tonks pointed her wand at the door and muttered, "*Alohomora*."

Lupin pushed the pool room door open and entered, casting a Silencing Spell.

Hermione stood rooted to the spot. "But our swim suits!"

Snape was leaning a shoulder against the side of the building, regarding her with an almost predatory gleam. "By all means, Miss Granger, go retrieve your suit. You are a *singular* person, after all." He glanced through the door into the pool area. "Providentially, Tonks remembered her knickers tonight; she's swimming in her undergarments."

Hermione brushed right past him into the pool enclosure, where she saw Tonks and Lupin splashing about in their under things. Singular, was she? Because she was a virgin? Was he going to taunt her about that now on a daily basis ?

Hermione threw her jacket onto a chaise and tugged her tee-shirt over her head, tossing it onto the pile. Unfastening her wide leather belt, she kicked off her sandals and then wriggled out of her jeans. Without looking left or right, she dove into the water and came up sputtering. "It's cold!"

She swam to the side, prepared to pull herself out of the pool and retrieve her wand from the chaise. Snape's voice, directly above her, halted her.

"I'll cast the Warming Spell. Stay in the water."

"Thanks," she answered. She didn't move away from the side, but treaded waterwhile observing Snape's technique as he warmed the pool water. With a smirk, he looked directly into her eyes. "Satisfactory, Professor Granger?" he inquired with mock concern.

Hermione shrugged. "Nice wand work. It got the water warm." With a sudden surge of inspiration, she splashed his jeans-clad legs. "See? Warm water." Then she turned and swam deeply into the middle of the pool.

Snape placed his wand carefully on the poolside, and toed off his black trainers. Next he shed the black silk shirt, quickly followed by the tight black jeans.

Hermione, who was watching from the safety of the opposite side of the pool, observed the purposeful stripping hungrily. His skin was like alabaster, as if it had never seen the sun. There was a smattering of black hair on his chest and a mind-boggling line of the same hair down his flat belly. She wondered what activities he was involved in that kept his frame so lean and his wiry muscles so taut. Silently urging him on, she watched him peel out of the jeans, and saw, to her deep satisfaction, tight black briefs. Her glimpse was brief indeed, because he was in the water swiftly, and oh gods, she was in trouble now, because he was heading straight for her, with a determined glower on his face.

Hermione squeaked and swam for the shallows, where Tonks and Lupin were lounging, conducting a lazy conversation. Snape changed his course in the water and continued his pursuit. Hermione reached the others and slipped between them, then behind them.

"Where are you going, Hermione?" Lupin asked, while Tonks laughed.

"Away from *him*!" she said, pointing at the advancing Snape with increasing alarm.

Snape was in the shallows now and stood, walking toward her. "You splashed me, Miss Granger," he commented.

Hermione grabbed Tonks's arm. "Help me!" she whispered frantically.

Tonks stepped away from her and gave her a little push toward Snape. "Bad form, Hermione. If you're gonna splash, you're gonna be splashed." Tonks considered the nasty sneer on Snape's face. "Or something worse, maybe. But you're definitely gonna pay, if you rough house." Tonks looked pious. "It's important to be fair, in work or play," she intoned.

"Oh, Merlin!" Hermione squealed. She moved to pull herself out of the water.

"Miss Granger, if I have to put myself to the trouble of fetching you, it's just going to be worse," Snape promised her.

Ignoring his advice, Hermione scrambled out of the pool, standing in the cool air in her wet knickers and bra. She was completely unaware of the picture she made, her dark thatch showing clearly through the fabric of her pants and her crinkled nipples pushing against the sodden lace of her bra.

Snape seemed to be having some trouble breathing, and there was unquestionably a bulge in the briefs as he hoisted himself over the side of the pool and advanced on Hermione, while she backed away from him. Gods, he was a sight to behold; that rapacious gleam in his eye nearly stopped her heart. She wanted this man, wanted him in the worst way, in every way, and he wouldn't even call her by her name.

Snape scooped her up into his arms and stalked toward the deep end of the pool.

Tonks and Lupin were calling encouragement to Snape and commiseration to Hermione, but she could barely hear them over the pounding of the blood in her body. She was throbbing in places she had never noticed before as she willed herself to memorize the feel of his nearly naked body against hers.

Snape was looking straight ahead as he carried her across the enclosure.

"Sir?" she tried, tentatively.

"Do *not* speak," he snarled.

"Well, sir, I thought..."

"Don't TALK, Miss Granger." Snape emphasized his words by tightening his grip on her.

"I just thought that, since we've seen each other in our underwear, we could use each other's first names now," Hermione said in a small voice.

He glared down at her. "Would that make you behave yourself, Hermione?"

"Yes, Severus," she breathed.

"Fine." He dropped her like a lead weight into the deep water, then followed her in, to splash and dunk her repeatedly.

Hermione was breathless from repeated dunking, and from her own pealing laughter, when Snape ceased the water barrage.

"Now, will you have the courtesy to let a man swim?"

Hermione conjured the enormous, thick bath towels, while Tonks supplied the pillowed floor covering, and Lupin rustled up an entire tea service. They then slipped into the white terry-cloth robes in the changing rooms and settled down for a nice cup of tea. Snape was the last one out of the pool, after swimming lap after lap, almost as if he were trying to exhaust himself. Lupin tossed him one of the towels and pushed a cup of unsweetened tea at him when he collapsed on the floor beside them.

Hermione watched Snape with some concern as he savored his tea. It was almost as if some rigid mold had fallen from him, and he was branching out and moving in directions she had never expected of him.

Tonks heaved a huge yawn and stretched. "I am going to have a lovely lie-in this morning," she declared.

Lupin nudged her leg with his foot. "You'd lie in every morning if you could," he said.

Tonks suddenly sat forward and placed her teacup in its matching saucer. "I have a question for you," she said in a contemplative tone.

"Spring it on us, 'Dora," Lupin invited.

"Have you heard of the Enchantment?"

Hermione looked at her as if she were bent, but Snape gave a short nod, and Lupin said, "THE Enchantment, you mean? Sure."

Tonks wrapped her arms around her terry-cloth clad knees and propped her chin on them. "Do you believe it's true? That it exists?"

Lupin sighed. "I have always hoped it's true," he admitted. "But I've never felt it, sadly enough."

Hermione was looking back and forth between them. Snape observed her confusion with a slight movement of his lips, a shadow of a smile. Finally, a topic Hermione had never found in a book.

"What is it?" she demanded. "The Enchantment? I've never read about it, or heard of it. Is it folk lore, or a fairy tale something they don't teach in school?"

Lupin, ever the teacher, took pity on her. "Muggles call it Love at First Sight, Hermione, though a more accurate description would be love at first touch. For wizard kind, the Enchantment has an actual, physical presentation. It's really very rare; I've only known two couples who experienced it." Lupin unconsciously rubbed the scar on his chin. "It's not a requirement for love, or marriage, or happiness, even. But it is a fabulous gift between two people. It is also potent, ancient magic."

Tonks was watching Lupin closely, while Hermione looked as if she wanted nothing so much as a quill and parchment, to take notes. Snape was staring down at his empty teacup, every line of his formerly relaxed body now rigid and tense.

"Who, Remus?" Tonks asked softly. "Who did you know, the ones who were touched?"

"James and Lily Potter are the only ones among my contemporaries. In my family, my father's parents were blessed that way."

Tonks nodded respectfully, a far-away look in her eyes.

Lupin smiled at Snape. "Severus, I'm surprised you haven't said one biting thing during this entire discussion. Why?"

Snape shrugged and pushed his empty teacup away from him. He appeared uncomfortable with the topic of conversation, but he answered, "The Enchantment is a historically verifiable phenomenon. It sounds like a load of Thestral crap, but it does exist."

Hermione looked from face to face. "What is the physical sign? How do two people know if they have the Enchantment between them?"

Lupin said, "Between them, within them, surrounding them it's like an all-encompassing magical aura..."

Tonks said, "I've heard the first time hits you so suddenly, it makes you weak in the knees..."

With one of his sudden, panther-like moves, Snape was in Hermione's face; his words were so soft that she stopped breathing to hear him. His voice was like liquid dark chocolate as he said, "It's an energy field, initially generated by the proximity of the couple." Snape's ebony eyes claimed hers and bore into her as he spoke. "It thrums through their veins like the thickest molasses, enveloping them in the power and binding their souls." With each word, the image in Hermione's mind became clearer and Snape's voice became hoarser. "Inside their universe of two, they are overcome by feelings of safety and security, of blinding passion, and of the inviolable rightness of their coupling. It is elemental magic in its purest form."

Hermione was transported back; back to the kitchen of number twelve Grimmauld Place, to the night she had held his body in her arms and experienced a spiritual completion right down to her very core and a stirring of rapture beyond her eighteen-year-old understanding.

Snape stood abruptly, breaking eye contact with her, and the vision in her mind dimmed. Transfiguring his clothes into a clutch of pebbles, Snape dropped them into the pocket of his robe, along with his wand. Hermione stared at him as he turned his back on her and strode to the door.

"Good night," he said shortly and left the building.

Hermione sat as if she had been hit with a Stunning Spell. Inviolable rightness. INVIOLABLE. And yet he let her go away to Bulgaria for three years, ignored her owls, denied something hallowed, something sacrosanct. Hermione's entire body was trembling with an excess of emotion; she was quite suddenly so exhausted that she wasn't sure she could walk back to the room.

Lupin and Tonks were moving about, chatting in a desultory way as they tidied up the pool enclosure to leave it as they had found it. Lupin leaned over to take Hermione by the elbow, helping her to stand and guiding her toward the door.

"And you know what else about the Enchantment?" Tonks said wistfully, following along with her arms full of jumbled clothing.

Lupin glanced back, a gentle smile on his face. "No, what else?"

"I've heard the shagging is amazing....."

Chapter 4

Chapter 5 of 7

Hermione has a hangover, Snape faces the truth, Lupin is on the receiving end of a talking-to, and a Slytherin is slapped.

These characters belong to JKR

Master of Enchantment

Chapter 4

Hermione knew before she opened her eyes that she had a monumental hangover. One does not live a generally liquor-free life, then engage in a night of unfettered drinking, without paying a price.

Her first clue was the dull pounding of her head and the generally queasy feeling in her stomach, but she really knew she was in for a rough morning when the bed suddenly shifted beneath her body. If the bed was going to roil about like a ship at sea, she might as well move to the floor. Preferably, the floor by the toilet, just in case.

Bravely, she opened one eye, to see how her head was going to react to daylight. What light she could see was too bloody bright, but there was something blocking it. Squinting her one open eye, she managed to focus on the object between her eye and the morning light. When her vision finally conveyed its message to her brain, that Severus Snape was looming over her in her bed, she had been giving him a one-eyed stare for several seconds. Somewhat belatedly, her body jumped involuntarily, and her hands scrabbled for the bedclothes, trying vainly to pull them up to her chin. The sudden movement was a bad idea; she closed her eyes against the increased pain behind them and said, "Good morning, Professor Snape."

"I hate to disillusion you, Miss Granger, but morning was quite a while ago."

She could hear the sneer, even if she couldn't see it. "Would it be rude to ask why you're in my bed?" she asked, putting a hand to her aching brow.

"Technically, I am *on* your bed, not *in* your bed. I would be happy to make the adjustment, however, if it is necessary to your well-being."

Hermione clenched her teeth and dared to open both eyes in a painful squint. She was dimly surprised to see him wearing a short-sleeved dark green shirt, unbuttoned over his bare chest, and dark green swimming trunks, with a tiny pattern of silver snakes on the fabric. As her eyes traveled up to his face, she found that he was staring at the thin straps and low neckline of her white silk chemise.

"Do you MIND?" she demanded, trying again to tug the sheet higher on her body, only to find her attempts foiled by his body weight on the bedclothes.

"Come, Miss Granger, I'm sure you learned at Hogwarts that turnabout is fair play," he drawled, letting his eyes travel insolently from her breasts to her face. "Or were you not staring at my chest a moment ago?"

Her answer to that comment was an exclamation of frustration and another fruitless tug at the sheet. In defeat, she scooted farther down the bed, covering herself more completely, and then put her hands to her aching head.

"What do you call that garment?" he inquired idly.

"Entirely insufficient, apparently," she muttered, rolling to her left and giving him her back. "Go away, I feel sick."

"Am I to understand that you have no use for this hangover antidote?"

Hermione rolled back to face him, quickly enough to make her head swim sickeningly for a moment. Going in and out of focus, she could see the stoppered bottle, held in his long fingers. Mutely, she held out her hand.

Snape held the bottle just out of her reach, an inquiring lift to his brow.

"Please." She really hated to whine.

"Please what?"

Smug bastard. "Please give me the damn bottle before I throw up on you."

The bottle fell onto the bed and rolled toward her. Hermione popped the stopper and upended the bottle over her mouth, going so far as to lick the residue from the stopper. Immediately, she began to feel better.

Having watched this performance with amusement, Snape took the bottle and stopper back from her and rose from the edge of the bed. "I feel quite certain now that you will not expire from your hangover, Miss Granger. If you decide to venture out-of-doors today, I have left a sunscreen potion on the terrace table for you."

Hermione pushed herself up on her elbows, amazed at how quickly the potion worked to relieve her symptoms. "It's Hermione, Severus," she said softly, looking up at him with a shy smile.

The corner of his mouth quirked, like an involuntary twitch. "Get out of bed, girl, it's time for lunch," he said, going out the French doors, down the steps, and heading toward the water.

Hermione swung her legs over the side of the bed. Tonks' bed was empty and there was no sign of her. The terry cloth robes they had commandeered from the pool changing rooms lay in a wadded heap on the dresser. With abrupt clarity, the events and discussion of the night before came back to her now-sober mind.

With narrowed eyes, she stared out the open French doors at the beach, now crowded with blankets peopled by Muggle holiday-makers. It was a good thing Snape had left the room before she remembered just how furious she was with him.

Seething with anger, Hermione shut the French doors and snapped the drapes closed with a jerk of her wrist. Then she headed for the shower. Snape was going to hear everything she thought about his insufferable behavior over the last three years. She didn't care if they never spoke to one another again afterwards, as long as she was able to tell him exactly what she thought about him first.

The pelting spray of the shower washed the angry tears from her cheeks, as it cleansed her body of the chlorine from the swimming pool. She wished she could as easily rinse him out from under her skin and down the drain.

Severus settled himself on the beach chair, under the umbrella Lupin had set up for their use. The darkened spectacles Tonks had provided softened the glare of light on the water significantly, and he was able to sit quietly and ignore the Muggle children paddling about in the shallows, while keeping an eye on the doors to Hermione's room.

Where had he ever gotten the impression that he was in control of this situation? What brain fever had led him to believe that he could begin to control Hermione Granger? He couldn't even control *himself*.

A less restrained man would pull at his hair in frustration, but Severus' manner gave no indication of his inner turmoil. He felt divided. His most familiar self was within him, the rigidly curbed, emotionally stunted, calculating Professor Snape, sneering and contemptuous but it was as if the volume had been turned down on him. Gaining dominance now was the Holiday Severus, who lived outside the context of Professor Snape's world. Holiday Severus was permitted to express emotions other than disgust and disdain. Holiday Severus could relate to other people in a non-defensive manner, because Holiday Severus would never see those people again. Holiday Severus was

allowed to attempt new leisure activities, because it didn't matter what strangers thought about him. Holiday Severus was a jolly chap, comparatively speaking, but there was a serious problem with the emergence of Holiday Severus on this get-away: Holiday Severus had never met anyone who knew Professor Snape, and Severus had always meant to keep it that way.

After all, What Happened on Holiday, Stayed on Holiday.

And why did Tonks have to bring up the Enchantment last night? If Albus Dumbledore wasn't behind that little conversational gambit, then Severus' espionage instincts were failing him.

Severus had known, upon reflection, what had happened with Hermione in the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, on that night three years before Dumbledore could use the epithet "Special Circumstances," but Severus knew it was the Enchantment. In the intervening time, Severus had tried to convince himself that it was something else, something less decisive, that he had felt with her when she'd embraced him. Each passing day since she returned to Hogwarts belied this self-evasion. Every time she drew too near, he could feel the kinetic energy produced by her proximity. In the continuity of his everyday life, he had been able to evade the truth, but outside the context of his familiar world, he could see it clearly: Here, in the person of Hermione Granger, was his incontrovertible destiny. He had believed he could live to the end of his life without allowing another person inside his protective shell. Now he was being proved wrong by a chit of a girl. Not just the girl surely he could have walked away from the *girl* but the *magic* was beyond question.

The worst part of it all was that now Hermione *knew* about it. She was sharp; more intelligent than any other person Severus had ever known, with the possible exception of himself. With the information she had been given last night, she would be able to nail his arse to the proverbial wall.

And he might even deserve it.

His resolve to repel Hermione, to hold her at arm's length, was crumbling. Holiday Severus could have a divine affair with the delectable Miss Granger over the next two days but Miss Granger was going back to Hogwarts with Professor Snape, who did not relax his personal guard for anyone, not ever. Either Holiday Severus was going to have to take a damper, or Professor Snape was going to have to take a personal, emotional risk.

This was not a simple matter of choosing between a holiday fling and something more serious. He was lying to himself if he believed that he had a choice in the matter.

Severus became agitated and a pained grimace crossed his face as the truth crashed in on him. He could either submit to the imperative of the magic or try to walk away from it. The hell of the dilemma was that any decision he made would affect not only himself, but would also affect Hermione. If he chose to continue his life alone, then he was condemning her to the same fate. She had felt the power between them it was undoubtedly the reason why she returned from Bulgaria without having married that Quidditch player, Krum. Neither he nor Hermione would ever be able to touch another lover without comparing the experience to the impact of the Enchantment.

Severus' rash decision to make this trip was looking more and more like his undoing. He had lived nearly twenty years of his life in a dance with the Dark Lord, but *this* was the hazard to which he would lose his life-as-he-knew-it.

It would fall to him, then, to make the best decision he could make for *both* of them, and may the gods have mercy on their souls.

Severus was distracted from his cogitations when Hermione stepped out onto the terrace. Her hair was twisted up on her head again; she was wearing a basic one piece swimsuit, in Gryffindor crimson, with a matching sarong tied around her waist and knotted at the hip. The sarong left one lovely leg bare. She had been more naked the night before in her underwear, but this was the sight he had come to the shore to see sod the ocean. He watched as she picked up the sunscreen potion and swallowed it. He saw her turn, as Lupin came out of the other room onto the adjoining terrace. Hermione greeted Lupin, who was dressed as Severus was, in swim trunks and an open shirt. Lupin was also wearing the darkened glasses Tonks had provided for them, and he handed Hermione her pair, which she promptly put on. Severus could see that they were laughing together, and he felt a stab of jealousy. Oh, Merlin, he was well and truly screwed if the sight of her laughing with the werewolf could make him feel this way. With a snarled oath, he stood and strode off down the beach, away from the inns dotting the shore, his expression at once forbidding and forlorn.

Hermione looked down at the beachfront and saw Snape heading away from the holiday-makers inhabiting the blankets spread on the sand around their big beach umbrella. For a moment, she allowed her gaze to linger on his retreating figure, and then she looked away from him.

"Remus?" she said.

Lupin was in the act of swinging his long legs over the terrace rail to join her. "Yes?"

"Where is Tonks?"

Lupin pushed his sunglasses up on top of his head and rolled his eyes. "Have you ever heard of a Muggle activity called parasailing?"

Hermione's eyes grew wide in alarm as she copied his move and pushed her sunglasses up as well. "Is she insane?"

"I refused to accompany her, so she called me an old stick-in-the-mud and flounced off without me. You should have seen Severus' face when she invited him to go with her. That was almost worth the price of admission."

Laughing with him, Hermione sat down at the umbrella-shaded table and patted the seat beside her. "Sit down with me, Remus; I want to talk to you."

Lupin accepted her invitation and smiled at her with his usual warmth. "Yes, I think he likes you."

Without responding to this sally, Hermione said, "That's not what I want to talk to you about."

Lupin slumped a bit in his seat and his expression became wary. "What is it, then?"

Hermione decided to just take the plunge. "I think Tonks fancies you, and I know you fancy her, and neither one of you is doing anything about it."

Lupin looked away from her, gazing out across the sand to the horizon. "Hermione, I know that you are fond of me and fond of 'Dora. I am asking you, as a friend, not to interfere between us."

Hermione pursed her lips and regarded his profile, as he continued to look out to sea. "Why should I keep quiet about it, Remus? I know for a fact that *you* were the one who pointed Harry in the right direction with Ginny. And, that you made sure Luna Lovegood turned up at the Longbottom's party when Ron was having such a tough time." Hermione slapped the table top with one hand. "You have meddled on behalf of your friends more than once; it's about time somebody did the same for you."

Lupin turned his head and faced her. She saw such sadness in his eyes that she reached out and took his hand. With some difficulty, he said, "Hermione, I love her. Love her in the let's-get-married-and-have-lots-of-sex-and-babies kind of way."

"Then what's the problem..."

"No, listen to me. I am a *werewolf*. Yes, I've got the potion, but it doesn't change what I am. How could I ever ask a woman to make that part of her life? How could I? Especially if I love her?" His voice was down to a whisper and his head was now bowed.

Hermione resisted the urge to thump his hard head and said impatiently, "Don't you think that the woman in question is capable of making that decision for herself? Don't you think you could treat her like an adult and quit making decisions that affect BOTH of you without consulting her?" She wished very much that Severus Snape was

present to hear this part of the conversation.

Lupin looked up in surprise at her exasperated tone. "What makes you think she would even want me? I don't think "

Hermione interrupted him. "Remus, she told me last night that you are gorgeous and that you could have anyone you want. She believes you don't fancy her because you are such a gentleman to her." Trying to choose her words carefully, she continued, "We've all seen the way you act with the women you date. Give Tonks a taste of that, Remus."

Lupin began to look somewhat alarmed. "But I didn't love those women, Hermione. It's easy to be charming and to chat a girl up, when it really doesn't matter..."

"What's the worst thing that could happen, Remus?" she asked, as patiently as she could.

"She could laugh at me. No, I could stand that but what if she never wanted to see me again?" He looked up solemnly. "The way things are now, I can see her as often as I like, whenever she's free. We hang out, we drink, we dance, we talk about things it's perfect."

In exasperation, Hermione changed tactics. "What would you do if she took up with another man?"

Lupin stared at her in horror. "Has she?"

Hermione allowed herself a little smile of satisfaction at his change of demeanor. With a shrug, she said, "What if she has? You don't intend to do anything about it, and a girl has needs..."

Lupin stood so suddenly that his heavy wrought iron chair fell over with a loud crash. "Who is it? Tell me, Hermione. So help me "

Hermione watched him as he reflexively reached for his wand, glowering at her in a challenging way, his eyes blazing. All of the pathetic whinging was over, and he was a wizard with a wand and a witch to watch over. She stood too and gave him a dazzling smile.

"Excellent! That was brilliant, Remus. Now, take that attitude off and go find your witch. I believe she is attempting flight without a broomstick." She waved in the vague direction of the other hotels, down the crowded side of the beach.

"Did you say that just to make me mad?" Lupin demanded, somewhere between asperity and amusement.

"I *said* it to make a point. Hell's bells, Remus, how are you ever going to get to the sex and babies part if you never even kiss her?"

She watched the expressions flit across Lupin's face as he considered her words. Normally, she was kinder and more patient with her friends, but right now, she was viewing Lupin as just another man who would not commit to a definite course of action; she was quite fed up with it.

"She said I was gorgeous?" he asked, apparently repeating the one piece of information that made no sense to him.

"Gorgeous," Hermione confirmed with finality.

With a sudden, exuberant smile, Remus grabbed Hermione in a quick hug, and swung her in a circle before putting her down. Without another word, he tucked his Disillusioned wand in his swim trunks at the small of his back and headed off to find Tonks.

Severus was walking back toward the inn when the terrace came into view. Lupin and Hermione were sitting with their heads together, holding hands. Severus increased his pace, keeping them in sight. Wouldn't it be ironic, if after all of his agonizing, she chose the werewolf over him? His lip lifted in an ugly snarl as he considered the possibility. Remus Lupin had been a handsome boy with popular friends, when Severus had been a scrawny, unappealing boy with no friends at all. Lupin had grown into a prematurely grey, battle-scarred man, who had still maintained some of his youthful good looks; Severus, on the other hand, had grown into a tall, angular, ill-favored man, who had only marginally improved from his unprepossessing youth.

As he bore down upon them, Severus saw Lupin shoot to his feet in a menacing way. If Severus had been within striking distance, he would have jinxed the bastard from behind for such threatening behavior. Almost immediately, though, Hermione was on her feet; Severus knew a moment of gratification as he waited for Hermione to turn her wand on Lupin. She did not attack him, but waved him off, it seemed, in a dismissive way. Not as satisfying as a good curse, but it would do, Severus thought. It pleased him to see her send Lupin about his business.

When Lupin caught Hermione up into his arms and twirled her around, Severus felt his jaw drop in consternation. The fury that filled him literally made him see red. Completely disregarding the dangers of being seen by a Muggle, he Disapparated.

Hermione was watching Lupin striding off when Snape Apparated right in front of her, startling a scream from her. The ferocity in his face made her take a step back, even as she was glancing quickly around to see if a Muggle had witnessed his appearance.

"What are you playing at?" she hissed at him. "You could have been seen!"

Snape controlled himself with a visible effort and ground out, "I would like to speak with you in private, if you please."

Incensed, Hermione flung back at him, "I wouldn't go into a room alone with you if you paid me!"

"You didn't even WAIT for a room alone with Lupin before you threw yourself at him! What's the matter, Miss Granger? Do we mere mortal men lack the bestial appeal of that savage wolf?"

Hermione stepped up to his hateful, insulting face and slapped him as hard as she could. Without waiting for his reaction, she ran into her room and closed the French doors with a pane-rattling slam.

Snape stood immobile on the terrace with the imprint of her hand on his cheek, feeling like an utter fool. He saw Hermione grasp the draperies in her hand and close them against him. With a grim determination, he righted the wrought iron chair Lupin had upset and seated himself facing the closed French doors, his back to the beach front.

Perhaps an hour of his surveillance had passed when he heard an approach from behind him the strangest noises, really. He turned his head and saw Lupin and Tonks making slow progress toward the room Snape and Lupin were sharing. Slow because they were snogging and groping one another in a remarkably revolting public display. He wondered briefly if they would give up the fight and just shag right there in the sand, but he was relieved to see them make it up the terrace steps to the doors of the other room. As they fumbled their way indoors, Snape was confounded when Tonks looked directly at him, jerked her head toward Hermione's closed door, and then disappeared as Lupin kicked the door shut behind him.

Severus was conscious of a sensation as if the entire situation was spiraling out of his control with ever-accelerating speed. No longer was he agonizing over the choice he had to make; it was painfully clear to him that the choice had been made. His frenzy of possessiveness, ignited by the sight of Lupin giving Hermione a brotherly hug, told its own tale. If he were honest with himself a distasteful exercise which he avoided whenever possible he had to admit that the possessive feelings had been with him for three years, now. He had managed those feelings with an ironclad discipline until Hermione had arrived at Hogwarts and been in and out of his presence every day. How appalling that his self-control, which had stood him in such good stead for so long, was insignificant in the face of the dominion of the Enchantment.

He had not survived two wars with the greatest Dark Wizard of all time without learning some lessons about bowing to a superior force. He would have her, but he was still

Slytherin enough to want it to be on his own terms. Would he have to brave the wounded Gryffindor lioness in her lair, or would circumstances enable him to achieve a more covert rapprochement? Resolutely, he began to gather the tatters of his pride and settled in to wait her out.

Patience was not an issue for him; some potions simply took longer to brew than others did.

A/N: The line, "get married and have lots of sex and babies," is shamelessly lifted from the divine mouth of Alan Rickman is the delightful film, *Love Actually*.

Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 7

On Hermione?s side of the door, dinner with a stranger, a dance, and The Relationship Talk

These characters belong to JKR

Master of Enchantment

Chapter 5

Hermione sat on her bed, the one farthest from the door, hugging herself with her arms and rocking. The tears had passed again; she was tired of crying, tired of scheming and planning, and tired of trying to manipulate the man into her life and her arms and her bed. The irresistible force had finally met the immovable object and the irresistible force was ready to admit defeat. Perhaps it would be best to cut short her time at Hogwarts and send owls to Beauxbatons and Durmstrang to find out if the proffered positions had been filled. Britain held no appeal for her now.

Feeling quite tired again, she stretched out on her bed and drifted to sleep.

The sound of the door opening jerked her back to consciousness. She was on her feet, with her wand in her hand, before Tonks had the door closed.

"Chill, Hermione!" the Auror said, locking the French door behind her and falling onto the nearest bed with a beatific expression on her face.

Hermione stepped over to the other bed and looked down at Tonks, whose hair was even more mussed than usual, whose lips were all puffy and bruised looking and whose swimsuit appeared to be wrong-side-out.

Breaking into a tender smile, Hermione sat on the edge of the bed. "Remus found you, I see," she commented.

"Oh, yeah." Tonks looked at her. "He said you told him I said he was gorgeous. I should hex you."

Hermione snorted. "If you weren't too addled to hold your own wand, I would be scared now."

Tonks sighed happily. "I tried to deny I ever said it, but he got all..." Tonks' voice trailed off dreamily.

Hermione prompted her, "He got all...what?"

Tonks closed her big eyes and smiled a secret smile. Hermione patted her cheek softly. "I love seeing you like this, Tonks. I'm so happy for you."

Tonks sat up suddenly. "We're supposed to be getting ready to go out to for dinner and dancing!"

Hermione moved back over to her own bed. "Well, you had best pop into the shower, then. What are you going to wear?"

Tonks hopped up and headed for the bathroom. "Remus says we're going to dress up tonight, so I thought I'd wear the little black dress. How about you?"

"I am not going anywhere, silly," Hermione said.

"If you think I'm going to go out on my first date with my new boyfriend and watch Severus Snape sulk all night long, you are wrong, missy," Tonks said airily. "Pick out something sexy and get changed."

Hermione glared at her. "Leave him here, then. You and Remus deserve a nice romantic date on your own."

"Last night you're drooling on him and today you won't eat dinner with him?" Tonks said, obviously confused.

"Things have changed since last night, Tonks."

"Like what?" Tonks went into the bathroom and began to run the water in the shower, leaving the bathroom door open to speak with Hermione.

"Like I slapped him hard enough to give him a black eye and slammed the door in his face. He'll never speak to me again. Slytherins aren't too keen on humiliation."

Hermione was shocked when Tonks' infectious laugh floated out of the bathroom.

"Hermione, didn't you see him sitting on the terrace and staring at the door all afternoon?"

"WHAT?"

"He sat there like a roosting bat or something and never took his eyes off the door all afternoon. Remus and I occasionally looked out the window and saw him doing it." Tonks giggled.

"Oh, between bouts you had time to look out the window?" Hermione asked, then squealed when the wet face flannel sailed over the shower rod and smacked her on the shoulder. For some reason, the news of Snape's vigil lifted her heart.

"Hurry UP, Hermione! Oh, I forgot! Severus said I should tell you to wear the green dress and to wear your hair down."

"Oh, he did?"

Tonks smothered her laughter as she rinsed herself and turned off the water. She knew very well that nothing would serve to get Hermione dressed more quickly than for her to be told what Snape's instructions were.

Thirty minutes later, Tonks was putting the finishing touches on her makeup when the French doors rattled. Hermione slipped her shoes on and walked over to throw the doors open. Lupin grabbed her up and whirled her around in a burst of exuberance.

Hermione laughed out loud. "Put me down, you nutter!"

Lupin grinned at her. "Can't help it if I feel like hugging everyone I see, Hermione."

A drawling voice spoke from the bottom of terrace steps. "It's true. He tried to hug me, and I had to curse him."

Lupin moved past Hermione into the room, and she was able to see Snape, who was watching her from the bottom of the terrace steps with an unreadable expression. He was wearing a beautifully cut charcoal grey double-breasted silk suit with a blindingly white shirt and a forest green silk tie. His ravens-wing hair, threaded with silver, was swept straight back from his forehead. Standing there gazing at him, Hermione thought he looked like some aristocratic lord.

Snape snickered to himself when he saw how she was dressed. Hermione stood in the doorway, wearing a short red dress with a demure, high neck and high-heeled red pumps; her hair was smoothed and styled in an elegant chignon. So much for the green dress with her hair down. When Lupin whirled her around, Snape saw that the back of the dress was cut nearly to the small of her back; he also saw the lacy black knickers she was wearing beneath the short skirt.

With calm deliberation, Snape began to climb the steps up to the terrace; Hermione turned and fled back into the room, where Lupin appeared to be snogging off all the makeup Tonks had applied. Hermione stopped uncertainly, half-way across the room; she wasn't quite comfortable with interrupting the couple, who were oblivious to her. As she stood considering what to do, she was alerted to Snape's presence behind her by the sudden crackling electricity in the air. He placed a hand on her elbow and turned her toward the French doors, saying sotto voce, "We may never make it to the restaurant if we wait for those two."

With some vehemence, Hermione jerked away from Snape and moved onto the terrace. "Keep your hands off me, please," she said.

Snape smirked and stopped to pick up a flimsy red scarf from the back of the chair.

"Is this your wrap?" he inquired, following Hermione out into the summer evening and closing the door quietly behind him.

"Yes, thank you," she spat, snatching the scarf from him. How had she gone from a steady refusal to make up one of a party of four, including Snape, to being alone with him on a dinner date?

Snape waited patiently for her to precede him down the terrace steps onto the walk, being careful not to follow closely enough to touch her. "Lupin made reservations at the restaurant in the next hotel," he explained conversationally, gesturing for her to walk with him.

Hermione walked as quickly as she could in her high heels, trying to remember why in the world she had chosen to dress herself like such a tart. Wear the green dress indeed! She would bloody well wear whatever she wanted. She was so *angry* with him!

She was a bit startled to hear Snape, who was effortlessly keeping up with her pace, say in his silkiest voice, "Say it, Hermione."

She whirled on him, her fists clenched on her sheer red wrap. "I'm FURIOUS with you!"

He stopped when she did and turned to face her, his expression open and unguarded. A tendril of her hair had flown across her face when she turned so abruptly; with infinite tenderness, Snape used his fingertips to move the tendril out of her face. "I know you are."

In frustration, she stomped one foot. "Don't you DARE be nice to me, Severus Snape! Just don't you DARE." She glared up into his face.

"I apologize for what I said about Lupin," Snape said, suggesting with a gesture of his hand that they continue walking to the hotel restaurant.

"Oh, well, THAT makes up for everything," Hermione said sarcastically, beginning to walk again.

"It was out of line," he continued.

"I can't imagine why you would *say* such a thing to me," she raged at him, walking faster.

"I saw Lupin pick you up and whirl you around I was jealous."

She threw him a scathing look. "Oh, please. He just did it again, for Merlin's sake."

"Yes, but I had already cursed him for trying to hug me, so I didn't like to curse him again so soon," he explained apologetically. "I'll do it the next time I see him, though, if you like."

Hermione stopped again. "You're making fun of me! I can't believe you're LAUGHING at me when I'm so ANGRY."

Snape stepped in front of her so that he could make full eye contact with her. "I'm not making fun, Hermione. You have quite a lot to be angry with me about. I just thought I'd address the slapping-offense first, so that we can move on to the things you're REALLY angry with me about."

To her amazement, she could clearly see that he was serious. He was not sneering or smirking or snarling; he was speaking to her with complete sincerity.

How totally unnerving.

"First of all," she snapped, walking around him to continue towards the hotel restaurant, *you* have no right to be jealous of me. Second of all, it's obvious to a FLOBBERWORM that Remus is totally gone on Tonks."

"Lupin is indeed quite taken with Tonks," Snape agreed, ignoring her first statement.

Hermione, in all good conscience, had to admit to herself that he had given her a comprehensive apology for the 'bestial appeal' remark. "I accept your apology," she stated stiffly, as they arrived at the hotel entrance.

Snape placed the tips of his fingers on her elbow for a fleeting moment, only to direct her steps, as a liveried doorman swept the door open for them and they walked across the lobby to the formal restaurant. Snape gave Lupin's name to the maitre d' and they were seated at a table for four, elegantly laid with crystal, silver, and china. Snape took a moment to shoot forbidding glances at the two strangers who had watched Hermione's progress across the room with far too much interest; he had the satisfaction of seeing both men avert their eyes from his dangerous glare.

Hermione was oblivious to this exchange; her own eyes were sweeping the stately decor of the room. She was very impressed with her surroundings, as well as a bit intimidated. "This place looks quite expensive," she said hesitantly.

A waiter approached them with menus; Snape forestalled the young man by saying, "Would you object if I ordered our meal, Hermione?"

Hermione was completely out of her element, and for the first time in a while, she felt the twenty-year difference in their ages. "No, not at all," she said politely, looking down to spread the linen napkin across her lap. She bit her lip and wondered who this polished gentleman was and what he had done with Severus Snape?

To cover her confusion, she lifted the crystal water goblet and brought it to her lips. On his side of the table, Snape had quickly perused the menu and placed the order for their dinner, including a bottle of wine, in fluent French. In amazement, Hermione forgot what she was doing and accidentally swallowed an ice cube.

Snape watched her sputtering across the table with wicked delight, reflecting that it had been a wise decision for him to study the restaurant menu in the room before using the strange telephone to call and place the reservations for four in Lupin's name. If he could continue to keep her off-balance this well, things might go more easily for him when it came time to discuss her remaining complaints against him.

Hermione used the cloth napkin to dab at the water she had dribbled on her chin. She had no idea how he had done it. An hour ago she had been enraged with the greasy, infuriating, and uncouth Potions master; now she was confronted with the immaculate, debonair, and refined stranger across the table, who was watching her with an alarming new mien. How could she be angry with someone she didn't even recognize?

The efficient waiter returned to their table with the wine bottle, swathed in a pristine white cloth. Hermione watched in fascination as the young man presented the bottle to Snape, who looked at the label and nodded his approval. The waiter then used a corkscrew to open the wine, which he poured into a wine glass and offered to Snape. Snape took the glass and swirled the wine, sampling the bouquet with his over-sized nose; then, he took a sip. The waiter seemed on edge until Snape nodded to him curtly, which caused the anxious young man to break out in a relieved smile. Snape indicated that the waiter should leave the iced bucket on its stand by his chair and waved him off, leaning to pour the pale liquid into Hermione's wine glass.

"I think you'll like this vintage," Snape said graciously, "it is very light, and will complement the fish quite nicely."

Hermione hoped she wasn't looking as disoriented as she felt. Grasping for some remnant of her reason, she sat up straighter in her seat, and said, "Professor Snape..."

He lifted his brows enquiringly. "I thought we agreed on first names, Hermione," he chided.

She plowed on, ignoring the interruption, "Please don't try to change the subject. The discussion last night in the pool enclosure "

"Yes, quite right. We must consider those issues very thoroughly. But not during our meal, perhaps? Shall we agree to cover that topic when we have left the table?"

Was she committing a faux pas by wishing to hash this out at the dining table? Hermione felt her face flush in embarrassment, which she attempted to cover by drinking from her wine glass.

Snape gave himself mental congratulations for how well he was handling her, thus far. Look at that face the little Gryffindor was actually feeling wrong-footed for wanting to give him the total telling-off he so richly deserved! It wasn't really a fair fight; she was half his age and did not have nearly the weapons in her arsenal that he possessed. However, he was a Slytherin, so the lack of fairness did not prevent him from enjoying her discomfiture at his hands.

As smoothly as glass, Snape initiated a conversation regarding French poetry, which sparked Hermione's interest, and they whiled away the wait for their food by comparing Baudelaire and Rimbaud. He knew she spoke French and thought it might impress her to find out that he spoke it also. How else did the silly girl think he stayed abreast of the Potions studies in other countries?

Hermione sipped at her wine, marveling at how well the flavor blended with the fish she was eating. This man was full of contradictions and depths she had never suspected. She had developed a crush on him in her sixth year, which she successfully recovered from when she and Ron attempted a romance in seventh year. Then came the night her parents were targeted by the Death Eaters, when she got squiffy in the kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and clung to him like a limpet. In the years since then, she had fantasized many things about Severus Snape, but imagining him as some urbane man with worldly savoir faire had never entered her mind.

Hermione heard the unmistakable sound of shattering glass and looked toward the sound, not at all surprised to see Tonks apologizing to a harassed waiter while Lupin quietly urged her on toward their table. Hermione thought that Tonks was looking very pretty, even without any makeup, in her smart black dress and shoes. Lupin was wearing a nice Muggle suit of a muted taupe, which blended with his hair well, his hair could have used another swipe with a comb, perhaps, but at least none of their clothes were on inside-out, which Hermione counted as a victory. She smiled at them in welcome.

Snape watched the Metamorphmagus and the werewolf arriving late for dinner and congratulated himself again on his impeccable timing. He stood as they approached, placing his folded napkin on the table.

"Sorry to be late," Lupin said with a small smile, holding the chair for Tonks as she sat down. "We were unavoidably detained."

Tonks stifled a giggle at that, then cast a shrewd look between Snape and Hermione. Before she could speak, Snape walked around the table and stopped beside Hermione's chair. "As you can see, we did not wait for you," he said. "We can, however, recommend the fish wouldn't you agree, Hermione?"

Hermione looked up at Snape with some confusion. He was clearly waiting for her to stand up perhaps they were going to be tactful and leave the new couple alone? She saw Snape's small nod, and she stood, a tremor running through her as he draped her scarf across her shoulders, his hands lingering for a moment too long on her bare flesh.

"Yes, the fish was lovely," she said.

"You're not going?" Lupin asked in surprise.

"Only into the lounge," Snape replied coolly, inclining his head toward a doorway leading into a darkened area; Hermione looked that way and saw a dark bar, the movement of couples dancing, and for the first time, she heard the music.

The lounge was at the back of the hotel, with the glassed-in walls giving a view of the beach. Double doors at the far end of the room led out onto a wooden pier that jutted out over the water. At the opposite end of the room, a DJ worked at a large stereo system. The polished dance floor stretched from the far side of the bar to the double doors, which were open to the soft breezes of the summer night; between songs, it was possible to hear the surf washing up onto the shore.

Snape chose a table along the glass wall and waited for Hermione to sit before he took his seat across from her. He signaled to the waitress and ordered a gin with lime, while Hermione asked for lemonade; the waitress returned quickly with their drinks, then left them alone.

Hermione looked around the pleasant bar, noted the sun setting spectacularly over the ocean, and then glanced across the table at Snape, who was studying her intently. Her earlier righteous indignation had fizzled out somewhere between the ostentatious wine-tasting and the discussion of French symbolist poetry. She was young, but she was not *stupid*; she fully realized that he had manipulated her expertly from the time he showed up at her door dressed like a hawkish James Bond imitator, right down to this moment is this extremely civilized lounge perhaps he was banking on her reluctance to cause a scene in public?

"Swearing off the margaritas?" he inquired warily, noting the expressions flitting across her face. She gave him a scornful look and lifted that determined chin; Severus' eyes darted quickly from side to side to see how many strangers were about to become familiar with the intimate details of his personal life.

"Would you please just stop with the courtesy and civility?" she snapped. "You're freaking me out."

The lounge was fairly empty for a Saturday night, Severus reflected. No doubt more people would come as the night wore on. He supposed it had been enough of a victory

to put off her tantrum for as long as he had. He swallowed a judicious amount of gin and leaned forward slightly, making eye contact with her and holding her gaze fearlessly.

"You can ask me anything you would like to know," he stated calmly. "I will answer any question you have without evasion or prevarication."

Hermione, who was gathering her wrath for a tirade, was taken aback. Nonplussed, she opened her mouth to speak, when he held up one hand to stop her.

"But first, dance with me."

She glared at him with narrowed eyes. "I do NOT want to dance with you. I want answers."

Snape stood and waited imperiously for her to rise. "I thought Gryffindors were renowned for their courage. Are you *afraid* to dance with me?" He let just enough venom leak into his tone to goad her. He wanted to hold her again, hold her before they quarreled. When she heard everything he had to tell her, she might choose to walk away from him, regardless of the Enchantment.

Hermione's lips tightened, and her glare intensified. "You *know* what will happen if we touch."

Snape allowed himself a sneer as he leaned over her, placing his palms flat on the table. "You *are* afraid, then," he whispered provocatively.

Hermione knew she was being baited, but there was a traitorous part of her that wanted to give in to his request, that wanted to feel his arms around her that wanted to feel the power surging between them. Quickly, she stood and walked onto the dance floor, just as a slow number began to play.

Severus followed her onto the dance floor, taking her small hand in his and placing his other hand lightly at her waist on the silken fabric of the red dress. They stood for a moment without moving, wide brown eyes locking with intense ebony eyes, as the energy joined and thrummed through their veins. With what little presence of mind he could muster, Severus led her into the dance. As they moved together, their eyes remained bound until, with a shiver, Hermione closed the distance between their torsos and tucked her head beneath his chin as she had done on that long-ago night. She let go of his hand and both of her arms snaked around his narrow waist; Severus felt the increased contact with a swooping sensation in his belly, and he placed his free hand on the bare skin between her shoulder blades, pressing her to him, closer still.

Dimly, beyond their microcosm, the words of the song filtered into their minds.

Lying beside you, here in the dark

Feeling your heart beat with mine

Softly you whisper, you're so sincere

How could our love be so blind

We sailed on together, and drifted apart

And here you are by my side

So now I come to you with open arms

Nothing to hide, believe what I say

So here I am with open arms

Hoping you'll see what your love means to me

Open arms

Living without you, living alone

This empty house is so cold

Wanting to hold you, wanting you near

How much I've wanted you home

But now that you've come back

Turned night into day

I need you to stay

So now I come to you with open arms

Nothing to hide, believe what I say

So here I am with open arms

Hoping you'll see what your love means to me

Open arms

As the song came to an end, Severus rallied his strength and stepped back from her. The look on her face was delicious. Her eyes were glazed and unfocused; he wanted nothing so much as to catch her up into his arms and kiss her.

Abruptly, he said, "Thank you. Shall we go?"

Hermione struggled to clear her mind, conscious only of the acute feeling of loss when he released her. She walked back to the table to retrieve her scarf as Snape stepped up to the bar and paid their tab. He walked back to her at the table and indicated they should exit through the double doors onto the pier.

"What about Remus and Tonks?" she asked him.

"They'll find their way back. Come." Snape led the way down the wooden stairs to the sandy beach. Hermione slipped off her high heels, then they set off across the sand back to their inn.

When they reached her door, she looked at him uncertainly. Snape opened the French doors and nodded for her to enter. Hermione did so, putting space between them quickly, tossing her scarf onto the bed and picking up her wand from the bedside table.

Snape followed her in and closed the doors behind him, placing his wand on the bed closest to him. "I only want to speak to you, Hermione." He stood there, his hands held out, empty, before him.

Her brow wrinkled at she studied him. His face still looked so different. He was not sneering, snarling, or frowning. The nakedness of his expression was interesting, she thought. Then she noticed he was approaching her.

"No." She pointed her wand at his undefended chest. "Don't come any closer. I I can't think if you get too close."

Snape froze, keeping an eye on the wand, and raised his hands again where she could clearly see them. "Hermione, I'm unarmed. I can't hurt you."

Her laugh was not pleasant. "You have never yet hurt me with your WAND, Severus Snape."

"I deserve that." He looked into her eyes, his own expression completely open and unguarded. "I'll sit in the chair by the door. I'll leave my wand on the bed. You sit where you want, keep your wand just please let me explain to you. I'll answer any question you have. I'll tell the truth."

Hermione looked skeptical, but even in her hurt and anger, she could see what this attitude and these words, were costing him. As she watched him, he backed, step by step, to the chairs by the doors; reaching one, he sat down.

"May I remove my jacket?" he asked her. Hermione shrugged at him indifferently, wishing that she were wearing something other than this skimpy red dress. Snape draped the suit coat over the empty chair beside him and quickly removed the forest green necktie, unbuttoning the top buttons of the shirt.

Hermione sat down on the edge of her bed, with Tonks' bed between them. "Okay, go ahead and get it over with. Say what you came to say." She stared at him stonily.

Snape took a deep, somewhat shaky breath. "That night, on Grimmauld Place..." his voice faded, almost as if he hoped she would pick up the narrative and begin speaking. Instead, she continued to stare at him with an unchanged expression.

"You were my student!" He knew it was a cowardly defense, but couldn't help the urge to dodge her unwavering regard.

"Former student."

"You were a child!"

"I was of age."

"You were on your way to Bulgaria! To Krum!"

She stood so quickly that he actually cowered back in his chair before he caught himself. "I was on my way to UNIVERSITY. Viktor just happened to BE there. And you KNEW I would never... After feeling that ... and you LET ME GO ANYWAY!"

He let the words hang between them for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was steady and unruffled. "I let you go. Yes."

"You didn't want me." It was presented as a statement, but he heard the hurt, the uncertainty.

"Whether I wanted you or not was immaterial."

She stared at him. "Immaterial to whom, exactly?"

She had the satisfaction of seeing his lips tighten, and some vestige of his usual scorn. "Oh, use your brain, girl! What thirty-eight year old heterosexual male with a PULSE would not want a beautiful eighteen year old female?"

Her look became contemplative, and in the manner inimical to all the members of her sex, she chose the one extraneous word in his entire question to pursue. "Beautiful?" she asked.

The annoyance left his face, his mouth relaxed, and his lips parted slightly, his eyes warming to a searing gaze as he slowly looked his fill at her wondering eyes, her trembling lips, her proud breasts in the crimson dress, down to her embraceable waist, her mesmerizing hips, all the way down her shapely legs to her pretty feet. Then he took his time, letting his eyes make the return trip up her body, letting her see every emotion and desire upon his face as it crossed his mind, until he was looking into her eyes, unmasked and unreserved.

"Beautiful," he reiterated, his voice hoarse.

He could barely breathe as he watched her crawl across the bed, and then he had an armful, and a lapful, of crying, laughing, caressing, kissing Hermione. Severus put a hand to the back of her head and returned her kiss very thoroughly, slipping his tongue through her parted lips, teasing and tasting her mouth, caressing her tongue with his own, showing her how it felt to be wanted by him how it felt to be so beautiful. The shared pulse was pounding in them, her sweetly timid tongue was in his mouth, her hands in his hair, her delicious little bum resting on the hardest erection of his entire life; when he gently sucked her tongue, she moaned audibly into his mouth, and it took all of his self-control to tenderly end the kiss. He embraced her trembling body for another moment, then he stood and sat her down on the edge of the bed.

Her voice made a small sound of protest as he broke the contact between them, pressing a final, wrenching kiss on the palm of her hand, and stepping back away from her.

Her impassioned gaze questioned him without words. "We haven't said all the things we need to say," he said softly, letting her hear his own longing, not trying to hide from her the evidence of his arousal. "If I'm touching you, I won't be able to speak to you coherently."

Her wanton scrutiny left little doubt of her immediate opinion of talking versus snogging.

Taking a deep breath, Severus spoke again. "Hermione, after Grimmauld Place, I spent two years studying everything I could find about the Enchantment. I couldn't find an example of a couple who rejected the imperative."

Studying a subject? Research? Hermione forced herself to focus for a moment, dragging her gaze away from his erection and back to his face. "Who would want to reject it?"

Severus, who had moved behind the chair, gripped the back of it. "You may wish to."

She looked at him in confusion, and actually shook her head, as if to clear it. "Severus I had maybe five minutes of an unreciprocated hug three years ago. Since that time, I have been unable to force myself to think of another man, and you may be assured that I tried." Hermione bit her lip and looked rueful. "For about six months, I must have sent you a minimum of one owl a week." Snape nodded his agreement with her assessment at this point; he vividly remembered the letters he had never answered the letters he saved, and reread in drunken moments of maudlin self-pity. Hermione was continuing, "I refused to even *see* Viktor until after Christmas of that first year. By that time, I was so angry with you, and so angry with myself, that I spent the next two years trying very hard to make myself want Viktor. He's intelligent, he's accomplished, he's sought after "

Severus made a derisive sound and she turned questioning eyes on him. "Enough of Krum's attributes, perhaps?" he suggested dangerously.

"I'm trying to make a point! Viktor wasn't some pathetic loser " another disdainful snort "he was everything a girl could want, and I didn't. He loved me, he wanted to marry me, and I tried very hard to love him back. I even tried to sleep with him and "

"YES, yes, I think I get your point," he ground out. She had those wide, inquisitive eyes fixed on his face again, and he mustered his patience for her. "I beg your pardon, Hermione. It is difficult for me to hear you speak about Krum." He struggled with himself for a moment. "I am very possessive, and I am a jealous man. If we come to some kind of agreement, I'm sure I will, in time, be less sensitive to the subject of other men." Considering the murderous feelings he harbored toward the Bulgarian Seeker at this moment, he sincerely hoped his words were more than a vain promise.

"All I'm trying to say is that I don't think of other men, and I don't*want* to think of other men. This Enchantment between us is precious to me, Severus. Every girl dreams of this kind of magic with the man she chooses." Hermione stood, and moved to the chair between them, kneeling on the seat and looking up at him; he stood gripping the back of the chair harder than ever to keep his hands from her body. "What kind of agreement will we come to?" she queried, reaching out and tracing a line across his white knuckles with the tip of her finger.

"We can discuss that. Before we do, I think it's important for you to know to know about me." He walked away from her, walking along the pathway between the foot of the two beds and the dresser. Hermione turned, and sat in the chair, watching him with some confusion.

"What do you want me to know, Severus?"

He reached the vanity, now as far away from her as the small room would allow. He turned his back to the mirror and looked across the room at her. His senses were clearing, his erection diminishing, and his brain was almost functioning. In some removed part of his mind, he was amazed to find that he was more afraid now than he had ever been when kneeling at the feet of the Dark Lord. What was the worst Voldemort could do to him? Torture him with Cruciatus, or kill him. What was the worst Hermione could do to him? She could remove his very soul, and leave him breathing, forced to endure year after year without her light. Damnation, how had it *come* to this? And the hell of it was, even with the full knowledge that he was flying in the face of forty years of careful living, he was not able to step back from this precipice.

"I have done despicable things, Hermione. I was not a nice person when I was in school at Hogwarts, and after school, I became a Death Eater." He stood, ramrod straight, across the room from her and awaited her judgment.

"And then you went to Dumbledore and you became a spy for the Order. You asked for, and received a second chance." Hermione shrugged. "I don't know what you're on about, Severus."

"I am not a nice person now. I am not fun-loving and I am not pleasant. I am hell to get along with. Passion is marvelous, and sex can be transcendent, but one must also live a day-to-day existence." He began to slowly approach her, holding her gaze. "I can if you permit me show you."

Hermione considered him speculatively. "Show me how?" she asked.

Severus now sat down on the edge of the bed across from her chair, their knees separated by mere inches. "With Legilimency. I can open my mind to you, and you can see. I I won't hold anything back."

"By turn, then, my mind will also be open to you?"

He nodded.

Hermione leaned toward him. "If I do this look into your mind and let you look into mine will you believe me without reservation if I tell you that I accept all of you, including your past?"

A snarky Snape-smile curled his lip. This little Gryffindor was shrewdly backing him into an untenable corner. She was a worthy partner, indeed; perhaps the Fates weaving their Enchantment paid attention to such detail.

"Yes," he answered her. "If, after you have seen my past, you say you accept me, I will believe you without reservation."

Hermione sat up straighter. "Then do it. Cast the spell."

A/N: Lyrics to Open Arms written by Jonathan Cain/Steve Perry, performed by Journey (and many other artists since then).

Severus' comment about "The Fates weaving their Enchantment" is inspired by a line from a poem by a Forgotten Poet, which properly reads, "How many fates have kept over us, weaving us together"

Chapter 6

Chapter 7 of 7

Severus casts Legilimens, nature takes its course and takes its course again; decisions are made, then it?s farewell to the seashore

These characters belong to JKR

Master of Enchantment

Chapter 6

Severus reached behind him on the bed and found his wand by touch.

"The spell will work more quickly and more easily if we maintain eye contact," he explained to her.

Hermione sat in the chair across from his place on the edge of Tonks' bed; there were mere inches between their knees as they faced one another. She responded, her voice low and husky with emotion, "Show me, Severus. See me. Feel me. Know me."

She saw the shudder ripple through him at her words. He held his wand between them, pointed it at her, and said in a powerful voice, "*Legilimens*!"

Hermione immediately felt him there, in the forefront of her mind; she greeted him joyfully, and he took her hand with a sad smile and led her forward. She knew, in some distant way, that both of them were still seated across from one another in the room of the inn, yet, at the same time, she had the distinct feeling of being led into the corridors of his being.

The sensation was of a sudden immersion into his emotions, accompanied by a succession of images, all filtered through his feelings. Hermione found it to be disconcerting at first, but Severus reached into her mind and steadied her; sensing his strength surrounding her, she was able to concentrate on the panorama of his life.

His earliest memories were of deprivation of touch. As a baby, a toddler, a small child, he was left alone, crying, reaching, needing; a baby who was not held and rocked enough, a toddler who was not cuddled and reassured, a small child left to his own devices. She saw his mother and his father, saw the war between them and the effect on their only prisoner of that war, their own son. She saw the dilemma that forged his early childhood: the love for one parent who overtly abused him and the love for the other parent who failed to protect him from the abuse. She felt the comfort he found in the boxed books and she saw the lure of the Dark Magic, as a very young wizard began down a path of need, driven first by the hope that he would learn the spell to change his parents, and then by hate and the desire for vengeance. He led her on, into his years at Hogwarts, the rituals of Slytherin House and the scorn of the girls and the ridicule of the boys with whom he was forced to pass his days. She saw his peers acquire a grudging admiration of his skills and abilities, which brought him a place among them, in spite of his caustic personality and his neglected physical appearance. She glimpsed the torment he suffered at the hands of James Potter and Sirius Black, the sight of the werewolf, the humiliation and frustration he felt when the other boys were not punished for his brush with death. She went on with him, saw his sexual initiation, somehow, in his mind, interposed on his Death Eater initiation. She saw the curses he hurled, the people who recovered, and those who did not. Deeper, deeper, ever darker, into an ugly place within him, a place of hate and despair, with the only positive voice being that of the one whom he called "Master." She felt her own revulsion at the horrible memories of the abasement he suffered at the hands of the Dark Lord, the death-dealing potions he brewed, and the people who recovered, and those who did not.

At this point, Hermione felt Severus attempting to disengage his hand from hers, but she held fast, urging him to show her more, ever more, of himself and how he evolved. Resolutely, Severus led her on, to memories of the faceless women, coins exchanging hands, acts of sexual abandon for which he paid dearly, in gold and in spirit. Now, here, the moment when he could no longer endure the senseless nature of the deeds he was asked to perform, the days of agonizing, the decision to go to Dumbledore; she saw Dumbledore's role in this man's life, the unblinking attendance to the recitation of his acts of damnation, the inexorable probing as he lay himself open for Dumbledore to do as she was doing now; the acceptance he received and the absolution he felt, even if he could not name it.

Hermione was awed as she viewed Severus's subsequent acts of heroism when he turned spy for the Order of the Phoenix and used his skill at Occlumency to go among the Death Eaters and learn of their plans and schemes. She recognized his innate sense of honor, the honor which had forced him to return to the side of the Light; she saw his tremendous courage in his unswerving conviction and dauntless resolve to do the right thing, regardless of his own personal safety.

Even as she thought these things, Hermione felt Severus push her admiration away from him. Insistently, he showed her his attempts to advance at Hogwarts, the other teachers he out-maneuvered to become Head of Slytherin House, and his machinations behind the scenes to gain the Defense Against the Dark Arts post, over and over again. She watched as he began to perceive Hogwarts and its staff as his home and his family, allowing himself a sense of security behind those ancient walls. She saw his holidays away from school, how he allowed himself to ease into the persona he thought of as Holiday Severus; she saw his plan for her to meet Holiday Severus on this trip. In his holiday memories, she saw a more relaxed Severus relating with strangers from whom he felt no threat and for whom he had no need to maintain his unbending facade.

Then she saw the advent of her beloved Harry and felt Severus' antipathy and aversion for this carbon copy of his old school foe; she saw herself as a bushy-headed, buck-toothed child and felt his impatience with her personality, as well as his grudging respect for her intellect. Interspersed with his fury of impatience over Harry's many escapades at school, she felt his rising awareness of the inevitability of another, final confrontation with the Dark Lord and his minions. She was witness to his dogged resolution to reclaim his place among the Death Eaters upon Voldemort's return; she saw a glimpse of the physical tortures to which he was subjected to prove his loyalty as a Death Eater. She was aware of Severus' attempt to dissuade her from seeing the memories cataloging his persecution among Voldemort's followers; stubbornly, she continued on through his physical suffering. At the end of it all, she felt his savage joy at the fall of Voldemort and his bone-deep relief that the struggle was finally through.

She saw then, with a blow like a Bludger to the stomach, their night at Grimmauld Place and its impact on him; she saw his agony, felt his longing as well as his determination to protect himself from this, what was happening right now - an invasion of his most private, secret self. In a blur, she saw his efforts to hold himself aloof from her, his final acceptance of their bond and his decision to pursue her.

Hesitantly, Severus led her to a memory that he, himself, now only visited in half-remembered dreams. He allowed her to see his one moment before the Mirror of Erised, many years before, in Hermione's first year at Hogwarts, when the Mirror had been used to protect the Philosopher's Stone. In the Mirror, Severus stood, relaxed and smiling, arm-in-arm with a faceless woman, while a small black-haired boy with warm brown eyes and a Snape-hooked nose played at his feet. As Hermione viewed this memory of the reflection of the deepest wish of his heart, the faceless woman took on Hermione's face; she and Severus recognized at the same moment that his mirror-child had, even then, her eyes.

They both paused for a long moment, studying this memory. Hermione felt Severus's internal struggle: his terrific need to control his life and protect himself at last surrendered in the face of his grim decision to follow through on his promise to show her everything and to hold nothing back. At the end of this journey into his very soul, Hermione watched as Severus acknowledged his deepest, most private wish - to share the Enchantment with his one true kindred spirit.

Hermione could feel Severus' emotional depletion at the end of this journey, but she was determined to finish what they had begun. She took both of his hands and pulled him back, through the corridors of his being, into hers. She was only half his age and a much more forthright person; the journey was much shorter and easier to navigate.

Hermione willed herself to be open to him; she was aware of his tentative hesitation to invade her being in this way. Severus reached for a memory, pausing as if for permission, and she gestured to him, see it all. As he viewed her thoughts and memories, she saw them, too. Her earliest recollections were of security and safety in her mother's arms, with her smiling and proud father in attendance. Next, a blur of successive childhood memories; her pet dog, her grief when her grandmother died, her joy in learning at her primary school, her ambitions to be the best and the smartest among her peers, her excitement when the letter from Hogwarts arrived so unexpectedly.

Severus looked carefully at her time as his student, at the many times she had doubted him and suspected him of wrong-doing. He saw her growing respect for his intellect and knowledge and her quiet admiration when his role as a spy was revealed to her. He saw her repeated, tireless defense of him to her cohorts, Potter and Weasley, who frequently suggested he was leaking Order plans to the Dark Lord. He saw her schoolgirl fascination with his hands, with his voice, with his body beneath his robes, and felt an odd gratification. He slowed as he looked through her thoughts about Potter, Weasley, and Krum very carefully, looking for signs of romantic feelings that may have been thwarted by the advent of the Enchantment.

He saw that she loved Potter as a friend and a brother. He saw her impatience and her persistent physical distaste as she attempted teenage romances with Weasley and Krum. He saw her wild excitement as she held Severus in her arms at Grimmauld Place, her confusion over where the sudden feelings had come from, and her despairing attempts to seek comfort and advice from him with her unanswered owls. He witnessed her few failed attempts to give herself sexually to Krum, and he found it within himself to feel a flash of pity for the confused young Bulgarian.

Hermione felt a moment of impatience with his uncharacteristic sympathy for Viktor; she tugged him on, urging him to see all that he wished to know. She felt him examining her thoughts about her career, her attitudes toward marriage and children, and, at last, her feelings about him, right now...

He was pulling her out of the chair and into his lap; their minds were still entwined, saturated each with the other's thoughts and memories, and now he was reclining on the bed, pulling her down beside him, so that they were eye to eye. She knew, without his words, that she had answered his question, and that he had answered hers - now, how did she wish to proceed, because he was entirely at her disposal?

Hermione leaned into him, searching for his mouth, and she found it. Oh, yes, *this* was a kiss, this scorching conflagration launched by his lips claiming hers, as his body rolled toward her, and his torso rose to loom over her. Cleverly, his tongue laved the inside of her mouth, teasing, caressing her tongue with his; her hands tangled in his hair and she gasped out loud as he released her lips and trailed burning kisses down her throat to the juncture of her shoulder. She could feel their hearts, synchronized

and beating as one, and she knew the passion burning its way through her body was creating the exact same havoc for him. Her hands found their way from his hair to his back, and quickly she pulled his shirt loose from his trousers, running her hands up and down his back, feeling his spine, his shoulder blades, the muscles in his back as he shifted his position to look down into her face, completely suffused with the power of the emotions and sensations throbbing through both their veins.

Her eyes took in the cherished face, with its planes and angles, the thin, cruel lips, the hooked nose, and she could feel his wonder and amazement, to know, from inside her mind, that she viewed his face with desire and approval. This knowledge seemed to hit him fiercely, like a brutal blow - always, he had been told he was ugly, greasy, loathed, unwanted, undesired - she pushed her way into his mind with more determination now, showing him how she saw him, and with a groan, she opened up those fantasies of him that had sustained her for so long. Not only did she want him, she wanted him this way, and this way, and this way - he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against hers; for the first time in an eternity, she heard his actual voice -

"Hermione - do you want - once we start, I don't know if either of us will be able to stop it ..."

"...why would we want to stop... YES, I want... please..."

She struggled to a sitting position and pulled the red dress over her head, letting it drop to the floor. Severus swooped and claimed her lips again, allowing his hands to grasp her waist and then begin a slow trip up her ribcage, gently cupping her breasts. When he brushed the pads of his thumbs simultaneously across her nipples, he was pleased to hear a moan that told him his lover was going to be a vocal partner. Quickly, he turned from her to retrieve his fallen wand, and he cast a Silencing Charm before letting the wand fall again to the floor with a moan of his own - Hermione had nipped his nipple with her teeth and simultaneously run an unsure hand up the front of his trousers, grasping his length through the fabric. With a whimper of frustration, she reached for his belt. Severus pushed himself off the bed, his black eyes locked on her face, and he undressed himself quickly down to his own black briefs.

At last he stood before her, whipcord thin and lightly muscled. Hermione grasped the top his briefs, and carefully, she pushed them down his hips to his thighs. The sight of his engorged penis elicited a little gasp of hunger from her as she cupped his scrotum, then traced her way up the arc of him to the glistening drops on the head of his erection. One touch there told him that he had best occupy her, or he would be spraying in her hand like a teenaged boy.

Severus stepped out of his briefs and stilled her questing hands, pausing to kiss each palm as he stretched out beside her. He kissed each breast in turn, opening his warm mouth to suckle one breast while he rubbed the alternate nipple between his thumb and finger. He moved his mouth from side to side, and soon she was angling her hips to rub up against him. Obligingly, he moved down her body, grasped the top of her knickers in both hands, and successfully stripped them from her body, letting them drop from his nerveless fingers as he gazed at her nakedness. He pushed gently into her mind to show her how she looked to him and to let her feel how the sight of her impacted him. She was gasping from sharing that emotion when he covered her body with his, catching her lips in a bruising kiss, taking a full breast in the palm of each hand. He kneaded her as she bit at his lips, and he gently nudged her thighs apart to let her brush her damp curls against his bent knee.

Hermione surprised herself with the way she bucked her hips and humped against his knee with such abandon; she had never suspected herself of having this passionate nature after her experience of such distaste for Viktor's caresses. Severus kissed his way down to her breasts, moving one hand to her mouth and letting her nibble on his thumb, while the other hand gently parted her glistening folds and stroked down her cleft as she jerked against him and cried out. Gently, he stroked her with his fingers as he sucked her nipples, and when she was writhing mindlessly beneath him, he kissed his way down her belly to more closely inspect her. Using both hands, he parted her lips and used his tongue to lick her from her opening up to the little bud, which he nuzzled before settling down to lick her nectar. Now she was truly moving her hips, pressing herself eagerly, ever more eagerly into his warm, wonderful mouth. Severus slipped one finger easily into her vagina, then followed with a second finger, slowly and gently moving his fingers in and out. He slipped in a third finger now, and pressed his long tongue through her folds, licking deeply, again and again, fingers in and out, tongue up and down, as Hermione moaned louder, and moved more frantically.

Feeling for her with his mind, he judged when, and took her little clitoris in his mouth and gently sucked, then flattened his tongue against it as she bucked and began to come, loudly, wildly. When her movements slowed, he slid up her body and took her into his arms, kissing her deeply with her own essence on his lips and tongue.

Hermione clung to her lover in the aftermath of the cataclysm that had been her first orgasm with him, joined to him in body by contact, in soul by the Enchantment, and in mind by Legilimency, and she wanted to feel the torrent move like a tide through his body, too. She reached for his erection, and he caught her hand, gently pressing it upward until her arm was extended over her head, with his hand imprisoning it just above her elbow; he sucked a nipple into his mouth, and caught her other hand in the same way as it headed south. He covered her now, with her arms pinned to the bed, and his penis throbbing against her belly. As he looked down at her, he saw her looking at the head of his penis, glistening with pre-come, and he shuddered at the sight of her licking her lips.

"No," he whispered to her hoarsely.

Hermione shifted beneath him, a gentle rolling motion with her hips, back and forth. "No to my hands... no to my mouth... what does a girl have to do around here to get a yes from you?"

Once again, she felt Severus reach for her mind and pull her to him. His fingers were now entwined with hers as he positioned himself between her thighs and kissed her mouth.

"Spread your legs for me," he whispered to her.

The pulsing tide was increasing; they were breathing now as one. Hermione spread her legs, and she felt one hand leave hers as he reached down to probe her with his fingers, then he slipped the head of his cock inside of her, and they moaned together. With an iron will, Severus kept himself from moving, allowing her to become accustomed to him. Then she shocked them both by moving her hips up, impaling herself more fully on him. He could see her discomfort, as well as her determination, as he moved past the membrane of her maidenhead. Her triumphant "YES" drove him to kiss her mouth; he moved his hips the slightest bit, pulling almost out, and slid back in. Hungrily, she moved her hips again, thrusting up, taking more of him; when she heard his groaned, "Oh yes, oh, fuck," she pushed again and wrapped her legs around him, this time taking all of him.

Severus looked into her brown eyes, brimming in tears, and because he was saturated with her thoughts, he knew that the tears were transcendence, not pain. He put his lips by her ear, and he said, "Many, many times, for the rest of our lives, I will be buried inside of you just like this, and many, many times, it will be more pleasurable." Slowly and rhythmically, he began to move back and forth, in and out, creating that unutterable friction that drives the human race. "No matter how many times I fuck you -" she shuddered as he said it, beginning to move with him, increasing the tempo, "I will remember this time, because it will also be the first time -" he slipped a hand between them and touched her clitoris and she cried out, "that I ever said," and his fingers moved in that age-old circular motion, bringing her right back to the edge with him, "I love you, Hermione," and she screamed his name with her orgasm, moving against him without inhibition, meeting his hip movements thrust for thrust, until he shot his come deeply inside of her, and he kept moving until the last tremor of his climax, repeating over and again into her ear, "I. Love. You. I. Love. You."

He had shifted enough to the side that he was no longer on top of her, and they were tangled together in a heap of legs and arms, sticky and satiated, drifting in sleep. Then there was a thumping sound, which became thudding, coming from the next room, just on the other side of the wall; it was the sound of a piece of furniture repeatedly bumping into the wall. Hermione roused from slumber, cocked her head to one side as she considered the possibilities, and realization slowly dawned. She looked over at Severus, who was already watching her with a small, crooked smile.

"The sodding fool forgot the Silencing Charm," he commented.

Almost immediately, inaudible voices, one a low growl, the other a higher chant, began. Severus rolled over to retrieve his wand with a small groan. "But *we* cast a Silencing Charm," Hermione protested as he pulled away from her.

"That keeps noises we make from being heard; it doesn't keep us from hearing other people's noise." Gathering his wits about him, Severus sat up and warded the room with a Soundproofing Charm. "Can't do a thing for the people in the room on the other side of them," he said.

Hermione sat up too, pressing herself against his back. "The Legilimency spell is gone," she mourned and pressed her lips to his shoulder.

Severus turned in her arms, surveying her dishevelment with pleasure. "The Enchantment isn't gone," he observed, capturing one of her hands and pressing it, palm to palm. They gazed into each other's eyes, feeling the coursing power flowing between them.

Hermione felt light-headed with her desire for him. "Is it always going to be this strong?" she wondered out loud, trailing her free hand down his throat, to his chest, to his belly, to his stirring cock.

"I hope so," he growled, beginning to pull the pins that held her hair, tossing them carelessly onto the floor before pressing her back onto the pillows with one hand tangled in her long curls, and rabidly devouring her mouth.

The next time she woke, it was near dawn. She felt the soreness in her lower regions with a certain satisfaction and reached for him with her arms. He was gone, the pillow where his head had lain indented but empty. Feeling abandoned, she sat up and switched on the lamp; she could hear the shower running in the bathroom. She went into the bathroom quietly and was pleased to hear him singing softly to himself in a pleasant baritone.

"Severus, I'm coming into the shower," she said and slipped past the plastic curtain.

He was standing with his back to the showerhead, rinsing her shampoo from his hair. Swiftly, he pulled her into his arms, kissing her mouth. "How did you know to warn me before you entered?" he asked as he ended the kiss.

Hermione chuckled, sliding her arms around his soap-slick body and letting her hands slip down to his delicious arse. "I saw Sirius Black come up behind you in the hallway at Grimmauld Place one time," she told him. "The clock was chiming the hour, so you didn't hear him. When the chime stopped, he continued walking, and you slammed him against the wall with your wand at his throat so fast it made my head spin. He shouted something really foul at you, and Mrs. Black's portrait woke up and the drapes flew open and she started screeching about blood traitors..." Hermione squeezed his arse cheeks and licked a nipple. "I warned you because I want to live to shag again..."

Severus picked up the soap and began to lather her body. "You do realize I'm forty years old?" he inquired conversationally.

Hermione released his bum to grasp his stirring cock and bring him to a full erection with three judicious strokes of her increasingly knowledgeable hand. "Yes, love, but how old is that in dog years?"

The sun was rising now over the deserted beach. Hermione and Severus walked the sand in their bare feet, allowing the morning tide to wash over their toes, her arm about his waist, and his arm about her shoulders.

"I never knew the world was this beautiful," Hermione said quietly, looking at the rosy dawn sky.

"The world hasn't changed, Pet," Severus replied.

Hermione stopped walking, and pressed herself against him, holding him tightly, clinging as she had in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. "Call me that again," she said into the white of his dress shirt.

Severus grasped the nape of her neck, under the heavy hair still damp from their earlier shower, and used his other hand to tip her chin, so that he was looking into her eyes. "Pet. My precious, beautiful Pet." He watched the beloved brown eyes tear up and moved the hand from her chin to her cheek, where he swiped a tear with his thumb, then brought the thumb to his lips to taste the saltiness. She shivered against him, then reached her arms up to pull his head down to hers for a sweet, searing kiss.

"I love you, Severus," she said against his lips.

"...and about time you said it, too," he answered, scooping her up and heading back to the privacy of the room.

They slept until noon and woke up ravenous.

Grudgingly, they pulled clothes on to brave the outside world. As Hermione was struggling to get a brush through her tangled curls, the French doors rattled, and Tonks' and Lupin's voices came through.

"You *have* to eat!"

Severus opened the door, eyeing the duo sardonically. "Can I be of assistance?" he asked.

Lupin held up bags. "Two words, mate. Chinese food."

Severus stepped back and made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "By all means, enter."

They spread the cardboard boxes across the dresser and filled their plates greedily. Tonks delved into the sack she was carrying and brought out iced bottles of beer. She and Lupin settled on one bed, while Hermione and Severus took up residence on the bed they had shared. There were several minutes of uninterrupted chewing and swallowing. Finally, Lupin pulled out another bottle of beer and twisted the top off, giving Severus and Hermione a bland look.

"Sleep well?" he inquired.

Severus glared at him. "Two words, Lupin."

"Yes, Severus? And those two words are..."

"Silencing Charm."

Hermione began to laugh, and Tonks inhaled part of a dumpling and began to cough. Lupin patted her helpfully on the back and looked chagrined as he said, "Did I forget..."

"How you expect anyone to sleep through that ruckus is beyond me." Severus gave Lupin a sneer and went back to his food.

Lupin capitulated and changed the subject. "What are our plans for the rest of the day?"

Severus raised a brow at him. "I don't know what your plans are, Lupin. Hermione and I are planning to have a swim, a nap, and dinner."

"Another nap?" Tonks mouthed at Hermione, who giggled.

"Shall we finish up our mini-break at the pub where we started?" Lupin suggested.

Hermione spoke up. "Yes, let's. It's a lovely pub."

Severus's lips quirked into a half-smile as he looked at her. "As you wish. Dinner at the pub." He turned a scowl on Lupin. "Provided we all make it out of our rooms, of course."

Lupin rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "Hey, I'm forty years old."

Tonks leaned over to Hermione. "Forty looks good on some people, whaddaya say?"

"Fabulous," Hermione breathed, looking at Severus, who was asking Lupin, "But how old is that in wolf years?"

Lupin and Hermione cleared away the remnants of their meal while Severus and Tonks moved their belongings to one another's rooms. Then they all changed into their swimsuits, swallowed sunscreen potions, and met outdoors. Severus and Hermione settled side by side in the wrought iron terrace chairs, while Lupin and Tonks walked down the beach and splashed out into the water.

Hermione was smiling upon the spectacle of her happy friends when she was reminded of her own happiness by Severus pulling her over onto his chest. "Do you think they suspect?" he asked glibly.

Hermione giggled at him, then leaned into a relatively chaste kiss. Pulling back from him, a thought came to her, and she said, "Severus, what are we going to do?"

He stroked one finger down her cheek. "I was wondering when you were going to think of that."

She sat up, looking at him seriously. "We've still got a symposium to plan, and I can't think straight when I'm sitting next to you. When I'm in the next room from you, all I can think about is being back with you. How can I work like this?"

Severus gently stroked her arm. "It's like the beginning of any love affair, Pet. In the beginning, all you think about is being with the other person. The difference with us is that the Enchantment drives us. Even for Enchanted couples, though, the initial furor calms down to a dull roar, so that they can get on with their lives." He studied her face for a moment, then said diffidently, "What do you *want* to do?"

Hermione took his hand and brought it to her cheek, turning her face to kiss his palm. "In a perfect world, I would want to go away with you and shag you senseless until I could be in the same room with you without wetting myself and could leave a room without your company and not die inside because of it."

"I don't see why we can't do that," he said evenly, rubbing her full lower lip with the pad of his thumb and watching her beautiful eyes darken with desire.

"But the symposium," she said, nibbling on the thumb at her lips and trying to keep her mind on the conversation.

"...can easily be planned by Albus and Minerva. Trust me, Pet, when I say that they foresaw this event and have planned for it." He smiled sourly. "Albus carefully orchestrates his little schemes. He deliberately brought you to Hogwarts to put you in my path, didn't he?"

Hermione nodded her head, now sucking on his thumb and insinuating a hand beneath his shirt to flick a finger across his nipple.

Severus captured the hand beneath his open shirt and removed his thumb from her mouth, pinching her on the chin. "I refuse to put on a public display for these Muggles, Miss Granger," he warned her sternly, his lips twitching.

Hermione shifted in her seat, saying peevishly, "I wish you would stop*calling* me that."

"That can be arranged, no doubt." He leaned toward her, his lips next to her ear. "What would you *rather* I call you, Hermione?"

Something in his tone caused her to turn her face so that they were eye to eye. She searched his face questioningly, her heart suddenly racing.

His lazy smile caused a wild swooping sensation in her tummy. "Perhaps you would prefer me to call you mine? My wife? Mrs. Snape?"

Severus cursed the damn French doors at least once before he had Hermione safely inside the room, where she could forcibly undress him in privacy, while she explained the reasons why she thought he had the most marvelous ideas.

That evening in the pub was markedly different from their first time, two nights before. There was a melancholy, end-of-holiday air, offset by a luminous, beginning-of-romance aura. Both couples were largely lost in each other and mostly oblivious to the Muggles at surrounding tables. There was a good deal of eye-gazing and hand-holding. Lupin and Tonks were utterly agog to see Severus smiling and laughing with Hermione. Albus had told them what he hoped for, but they had not believed it would actually happen.

At one point, when Hermione went to the Ladies', and Severus dropped a tender kiss on her lips as he stood to let her past him, Tonks leaned forward and said,*Is* it the Enchantment, Severus?"

Severus curled his lip at her. "*Was* it a 'mate from work' who gave you the keys to the inn, 'Dora?"

Lupin reached a hand across the table. "Congratulations, Severus. I hope that you will be very happy."

Severus took Lupin's hand, with a rare smile. "Thank you, Remus. I hope you'll be happy, too."

Tonks goggled at him. "It has to be the Enchantment - it's bloody well changed your entire personality."

Severus stood to admit Hermione, who had returned from the loo. "'Dora says the Enchantment has changed my personality, Pet," he commented to her as she slid into her seat.

Hermione blushed charmingly. "Oh, did you tell them?"

Severus quirked an eyebrow at her. "I didn't have to tell them. Albus did."

Hermione turned to the conspirators with a shocked face. "Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded.

Tonks held up her hands defensively. "I swore to Albus I wouldn't say a word about it. Our only job was to get you away from Hogwarts and to bring up the Enchantment in conversation."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "I should wring that scrawny, ancient neck."

Lupin grinned at him wolfishly. "I imagine that scrawny, ancient duffer could still kick your arse, mate."

Severus replied with a sneer and a rude gesture that had both girls in gales of laughter.

Lupin pulled a handful of Muggle coins from his pocket. "Let's go spend these in the jukebox, 'Dora. I want to dance with you." He stood and held his hand out to Tonks, who flushed prettily and allowed herself to be led away.

Hermione leaned into Severus's arm and pressed a kiss on the pulse beneath his ear. "If you strangle Professor Dumbledore, who's going to perform our ceremony, hmm?"

Severus looked down into the warm brown eyes and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "We don't have to rush into anything, Pet. If you want a real wedding, we can take the time to plan it. A girl only gets married once - I want you to have what you want."

Hermione turned on him fiercely. "What I WANT is my honeymoon, thank you very much. I have never had some wedding fantasy -"

Severus interposed wickedly, "Well, tell me about the fantasies you *do* have, Pet..."

"...and I want to be married as quickly as we can. *Why* can't we elope? All we need is a magistrate!"

Severus glowered at her and spoke sternly. "I will *not* run off with you without so much as your parents' blessing. NO. We will follow our plan, speak to Albus, speak to your parents, send the owls to your friends, and we will plan a formal reception when we return from our honeymoon. No one is going to say that I swooped down on you and tricked you into anything untoward. This marriage will take place strictly on honorable terms, or it will not take place at all. Do I make myself plain?"

Hermione watched him with a wicked gleam. "Why does it make me so hot when you do that?" she whispered.

"Behave yourself, young lady, or there will be no pudding for you." He gave her a wicked gleam of his own and she sighed happily.

"Yes, sir," she replied meekly.

He stood and held out a hand to her. "Come dance with me."

A lovely melody was beginning as they joined Lupin and Tonks on the dance floor. Tonks had her arms wrapped around Lupin's waist, her cheek pressed to his chest, her expression one of dreamy contentment. Lupin's head was bowed, his cheek pressed to the top of her head, holding her as if she were a china doll, while they danced.

Severus pulled Hermione into his arms and they began to dance together, as they had the night - no, the lifetime - before. He knew it was dangerous, rushing into the future as they were, but the Enchantment made its own rules and he was never surer of anything in his life than he was of the rightness of their union.

The hour was growing late, and the Muggles had all gone home. Lupin poured the last of the pitcher of beer into their glasses and held his own aloft. "Here's to mini-breaks at the beach," he said, echoing the toast from their first night. Four glasses touched and each of them drank.

Severus replaced his glass on the table, looking at the other couple with a speculative eye. "What are you two doing next Friday night?" he asked.

Tonks grinned at him. "Want to make another weekend of it?"

Hermione said, "Severus and I have discussed it, and we would very much like to have you both stand up with us for our wedding, as best man and maid of honor."

A good deal of laughing, crying, hugging, and backslapping followed this statement, but it was agreed that Tonks and Lupin were indeed available on Friday next to attend the nuptials. Soon afterward, they left the pub and began their slow way back to the inn, speaking desultorily of meeting for breakfast early in the morning before Apparating back to their workaday Monday morning lives.

Severus led Hermione down to the beach, where they stood looking at the starlight on the water. "It is very sudden, Pet, this change we are making in our lives."

Hermione looked up into his face, his habitual arrogant sneer replaced by a look of warm concern. "Severus, I have wanted this ever since that night on Grimmauld Place. I had no idea why I wanted it, other than suspecting I had developed an incurable yen to devour you whole, body and soul. Now I know we've been given this incredible gift in the Enchantment. I don't want to waste another moment of my life away from you - and I know that every moment I have spent away from you since we first touched has felt like wasted time."

"You are a woman who is driven by ambition, Hermione. How will you realize your career goals buried in the wilds of Scotland, married to a Potions master?"

Hermione stamped her foot, her hands on hips and a martial light in her eye. "Do I question you about how you're going to accomplish your career goals married to me? No, I do not. I accept that you are fully capable of determining what you want to do and how you're going to do it *while* married to me. I don't *know* what I'm going to do with my career right now, Severus, and I don't HAVE to know right now. I'm going to get married, have my honeymoon, get settled in my married life, and then I will look about me and decide how I wish to proceed with my career. That is my plan. Now, do we have to cast *Legilimens* again for me to make my point?"

The Potions master stood in the starlight beside this incomparable woman, with whose love and everlasting passion the Fates had blessed him, and accepted yet again that he could not explain the workings of destiny. He placed his large, elegantly made hands on either side of her face, gazing into her eyes as they felt the ineffable magic of the Enchantment wash through them, synchronizing their very heartbeats, one to the other. "No, Hermione. That will not be necessary."

And she did not protest when he swept her up into his arms and carried her through the soft, summer night, to love her yet again.

A/N -- BelfryBat has done a piece of art to accompany a scene near the end of the story, which can be found here: http://www.deviantart.com/deviation/20562006/