

Phantom of Hogwarts

by Good_Witch

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1- And So It Begins...

Chapter 1 of 84

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Disclaimer: I own nothing you recognize, as usual here...

Author's Note: This is my first attempt at any fan fiction, so I hope it's not too awful. I love the Phantom of the Opera, and I hope you can see where I'm coming from for this. Please review if you enjoy it and definitely let me know if you find any errors. Thanks in advance!

p.s. this will eventually be NC-17, but it will take a bit to get there...

And, SnivellusSnape has been helping me with this, so credit where credit is due!

Phantom of Hogwarts

Chapter 1- And So It Begins...

"Severus!"

I hear Dumbledore calling my name down the corridor and stop. *Hell's bells, what does the old man want now? I hate it when he does this...* Slowly, reluctantly, I turn on my heel to face him.

"Headmaster." I incline my head slightly and see the huge grin plastered across his face. This can only mean trouble.

"Severus, you know that tonight is the Halloween Feast, and I have a very important announcement to make. So, I must insist that all of the staff attend. I know how much you love to spend the festivities in your own rooms, but I cannot allow you to be absent this time." He shakes his head at me and wags his finger as if I were a student being reprimanded.

Bloody old goat! I am NOT a child to be chided. The old fool clearly has trouble remembering that I was a gods-damned Death Eater! I scowl in response, and he mocks me with his own caricature of a scowl. His eyes still twinkle and I know he's making fun of me. I can't help but grimace as I close my eyes and spit out a response, feeling like I have acid on my tongue.

"As you wish, Headmaster. I shall attend the Feast with the rest of the staff for the required duration. Until then, good day to you."

I turn again on my heel and start off, hearing him chuckle behind me. As I continue down the corridor toward the dungeons, I encounter a pair of third year Hufflepuffs. Apparently my irate expression is even more severe than usual, as the girl swoons faintly in terror when I pass. Her companion has trouble holding her up, and I whip around, wand in hand, to mutter a reviving charm, but the stupid boy blocks her with his body.

"You idiot! Move out of the way!" He shudders and his eyes goggle, and he can't seem to form words with his trembling lips. In the meantime, the girl has slumped against the wall, sliding down it. I snap my wand back into my robes and glare at the boy, utterly exasperated.

"Very well. I shall leave you to determine if *you* can correctly cast *Ennervate*. As you seem reluctant to allow me to help." I spin on my heel, but quickly look back again. "Ten points from Hufflepuff for incompetence." The boy gulps nervously, looking stricken and relieved at the same time. Disgustedly, I step away from them and thunder down the corridor again. *Damned fool children. For Merlin's sake, what did the dunderhead think I was going to do?*

I fume inwardly, wishing that these flaming imbeciles would realize that I am not one of Voldemort's minions!

He's gone anyway! When the Final Battle happened at the end of the summer, it became clear that I was a double agent, clearly on the side of the Light. I helped bloody Potter and his damned friends finish Voldemort, with Order members on all sides helping to protect them and me. They rightly assumed that the shock of my traitorous defection would distract Voldemort enough to allow Potter, augmented by the rest of the Golden Trio, to cast the Killing Curse. It was only with the quick action of many Aurors that the *Avada Kedavra* Voldemort sent hurtling toward me was deflected, spinning back at him as well as Potter's. With the trebled strength of Potter's and the furious intent of his own spell flung back on him, Voldemort had no chance to escape probably the most intense Killing Curse ever cast.

When it was all over, nobody moved for a while. The smoking remains of Voldemort hissed and sizzled. We were all watching it, half-expecting him to rise like a phoenix from the ashes. After several minutes, when nothing happened but the breeze blowing the ashes about, we all came back to earth with the realization that it was all over. Order members and other wizards and witches alike began celebrating. The Golden Trio was mobbed by thankful well-wishers. Even the Order members were flying about hugging each other, laughing and crying in release of the awful deadly tension.

I remember watching everyone congratulating and thanking Potter and his friends. As always, I was alone to one side, apart from everyone. I sighed deeply, realizing that all I had done for so many years had finally paid off. I was free. I looked down at my forearm and saw the Dark Mark slowly fading. Even as it faded, though, it left a ghost-like afterimage. That was when I knew that I was to be left scarred in more ways than I ever imagined. I looked back up to the jubilant group, and I noticed only one person looking at me. Hermione Granger was smiling and crying, and when she caught my eye, she nodded slowly and mouthed "thank you."

I was taken aback. My position had always been a thankless one. Dumbledore was the only one who seemed to appreciate what I did. She noticed my sleeve pushed up and me holding my arm. Her brow furrowed and she nodded pointedly at it. I looked down at my arm, with the Dark Mark completely faded into a pale scar, and looked back to her. She had turned to face me, concerned. I simply held my arm out, and she could see that the mark was gone. Her eyes widened in shock, which quickly turned to excitement. She looked back up at me, amazed, and smiled.

I was numb, not sure what to do with or even how to feel about my new-won freedom. I felt like I was turned loose of my moorings, drifting. I had no purpose any longer. Something of my blankness must have been visible, for she hurried up to me with a puzzled look on her face.

"Professor Snape, are you all right? Were you hurt by the spell? Did the Aurors miss anything? Is your Dark Mark really gone? How can that have happened? Does that mean Voldemort is really gone forever? That he can't come back this time? Isn't it exciting? Won't you come celebrate with us? Um, sir? Are you really okay? Should I fetch Dumbledore or Madam Pomfrey?"

Her incessant questions went spinning in my mind. I hardly knew the answers to even the simplest of them. But her questioning voice awakened something from my numb psyche. Hermione Granger, Insufferable Know-It-All, badgering me with questions. It's a wonder her hand wasn't waving in the air to boot. I felt the familiar irritation resurfacing, rejoicing that I was feeling something at all. My gaze focused on her anxious face, worried brown eyes darting from my arm to my face and back to the group.

I felt my lip curl in my familiar sneer and irritably drawled, "Miss Granger, even in the wake of the Final Battle to defeat the Dark Lord, you manage to babble with questions! Do cease your prattling. I am fine, of course. You have no cause to bother me any longer. Please, don't let your pathetic concerns over my well-being keep you from enjoying your charmed life with the rest of the Golden Trio."

I dismissively inclined my head toward the group cheering and tossing Potter and Weasley onto their shoulders, rolling my sleeve back down and straightening my clothes. I saw the pain in her eyes before the familiar dislike returned. She tossed her wild hair and lifted her chin, angry at my words.

"Do forgive me for bothering you, Professor. Indeed, forgive me for even *daring* to care whether or not you were harmed. I happen to care about everyone who helped defeat Voldemort, including you, whether you believe it or not!" Here she stamped her foot, her hands on her hips. "But now I see that I was in error. No matter, I shall not burden you any longer with protestations of *thanks* for your invaluable contributions to this victory."

With that, her eyes blazing, she whirled and ran back to the group, easily disappearing within the crowd.

"*Invaluable contributions to this victory?*" "*Care about everyone... including you?*" Still reeling a little, I prepared to Apparate to Hogsmeade, ready to return to my dungeons, desperately needing some comforting familiarity.

Before I could Disapparate, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I stiffened instinctively, reaching for my wand. Then I heard the soft chuckle. I turned to see Dumbledore, smiling, tears shining in his eyes, beaming at me.

"My dear, dear boy. You were about to leave, weren't you?"

"Well, yes, Headmaster. I am not one for celebrations, as you know, and I think my presence here is no longer necessary, nor desired."

Dumbledore shook his head slightly and gripped my shoulders in both hands. "Severus, I was hoping that, now that you are free of the Dark Lord's grasp, you would begin a new life with the rest of us. There is no need for you to hold yourself apart from the world. You are no longer in a precarious position, where one misstep could mean your destruction. Think of it, Severus. You won!"

"You mean, we won. The Order won. The side of the Light won. Not I."

Smiling ruefully, Dumbledore sighed. "No, Severus. *You* won. You accomplished what you set out to do. You conquered your dark side. You defeated that which has kept you cut off from the rest of us for years. Your strength and discipline and nobility of character have helped you win the battle against evil in our world. Consider what you have won. A chance to start anew! Don't retreat into your dark, solitary dungeons. Come, join us; give yourself the chance to have the life you've missed out on during all these years of war."

I could feel his hands gripping me tightly. His force of will was almost palpable. Some might say his ability to get others to do what he wants is nearly magical. I felt the numb centre of my being start to thaw, painfully. I weighed his words carefully and turned to look at the crowd again. Could I just march up to them and insinuate myself into the folds? Perhaps it is time for a new beginning...

Just then, a woman stumbled back out of the throng a bit, and she turned to see us. It was Hermione Granger, and she lit up with a smile when she saw Dumbledore. Then she caught my eye again and her face changed. She glared at me coldly, scorn and disdain plainly written on her face before merely nodding and turning away.

"*I happen to care about everyone who helped defeat Voldemort, including you, whether you believe it or not!*" Well, after that look, I do *not* believe it. Silly girl, you know what you're supposed to say due to manners, but I doubt you truly meant it. Don't go out of your way to lie to people Miss Granger; the less you say, the less there is in which to catch you out!

I felt the humiliated hatred spread, filling all the spaces that had just been numb and empty. I would *not* go and force myself on those people, like a lap dog seeking affection! They would never accept me as one of their own. They made that clear from the start, even before I went to the Dark side. Why else would I have even considered it, if they had been even remotely welcoming? No, I will not weakly crumble and just beg them for their regard. I haven't needed it before, and I don't need it now. I straightened to my full height, spine rigid and formal and looked back at Dumbledore.

"Thank you, Headmaster, but I am not foolish enough to go where I am not wanted. If, as you seem to believe, these people wanted me as part of their group, they would have come to include me. As you can see, I am not their hero; Potter is. Is that not what you have wished for all along? I have merely done my duty to help the Order. You know the Prophecy. We would still be under Voldemort's reign of terror if it weren't for the boy. Now, as the crisis is over, and I no longer have need to force myself into their lives, I wish to return to my quarters. Alone, as I prefer. Of course, feel free to forward my congratulations on to the Boy Wonder and his cohorts. I'm certain that they would rather hear from you than me. Now, I will leave you to your celebration. I have things to attend to, now that my time is more available to me, for the start of the new year. Good day to you, Headmaster."

"Severus, don't be like this! You have carefully cultivated fear and hatred for you amongst these people for years. Do you honestly believe anyone would have the guts to approach you, of all people, about joining them in a social revel?"

Unbidden, Hermione Granger flashed across the screen of my mind. She had approached me, asking if I would join them. She was even concerned about my welfare. I remember the worry in her eyes, and then the return to the normal icy hatred after I insulted her. Dumbledore is right. It is my own doing. But I refuse to cave in to the sweetness and light he espouses. It sickens me. And, I privately admit in the deepest recesses of my being, I don't want anyone to see just how much I really *do* want to be carefree like them, to know just how much it hurts me to be so reviled.

"Be that as it may, sir, I do recall being a member of the Order, and yet I have not even been treated like a part of the group, even under that pretence. It is clear to me that my company would be repugnant to many and disconcerting in the least to others. No, I am much more comfortable retiring to my own quarters. And I'm sure they will be much more comfortable if I do so as well. Do not concern yourself. I am quite fine. Enjoy your celebration."

With that, I Disapparated before Dumbledore could say another word.

My ruminations occupy me until I find myself slamming open the door to the Potions room. I sweep to my desk and sit, glaring at the stack of essays waiting to be graded. *This* is what I should be doing tonight, not being forced to sit through yet another interminable feast with all of the sloppy, noisy, incompetent dunderheads. I snatch the top parchment and my quill. Sweeping my eyes across the page, I sigh gustily and stab my quill into the red ink pot. Pitiful. Utterly pathetic. I scratch the failing grade across the top of the page and toss it into a pile of similar awful attempts. My work drags on, until I realize that it is almost time for the feast. I don't dare arrive late, or Dumbledore may make me even more miserable. Irritably throwing the quill down, I stalk out of my room and make my way up to the Great Hall.

As usual, it is lavishly decorated. The room is buzzing with excitement, students milling about, talking and laughing. All of the other faculty members are already seated, except for Dumbledore. I roll my eyes. He does like to make an entrance.

I take my seat, avoiding looking at anyone, keeping my eyes on the doors, silently urging Dumbledore to hurry up so we can get this over with. More students are pouring in, including the ever-present Golden Trio.

Ever since the Final Battle, the students have been in even higher spirits. They no longer have to worry and fear that Voldemort will destroy them or their families. The wizarding world in general has been very eager to return to a more carefree existence, undertaking projects that had been put on the back burner while everyone had to focus on ridding the world of Voldemort and his legion. There have been rumours of advances in Muggle relations, and the students of Muggle families have been gaining a new popularity.

I shift in my seat, aggravated with the delay. All of the student tables are full, and many students are craning their necks, looking at the High Table, speculating about where Dumbledore must be. Finally, he enters, to a sudden susurrus of excitement. Eyes goggle from all sides, as it becomes obvious he is not entering empty handed.

I narrow my eyes, not quite sure I believe what I see. Dumbledore is carrying the four-legged stool and the hat used at the start-of-term sorting! What in blazes can this mean? A murmur of astonishment ripples across the High Table. Dumbledore has an extremely self-satisfied smirk, and his eyes are twinkling at twice their normal rate. You'd think the man would be positively *skipping* with delight at whatever his surprise is.

Dumbledore places the stool in front of the High Table and lays the Sorting Hat on it. When he straightens up, the Hall falls silent, the hush heavy with expectation. Beaming at everyone, he spreads his hands.

"Welcome to the Halloween Feast. As you all know, I have a very important and exciting announcement to make tonight. I'm sure you're all wondering why I have brought the Sorting Hat out as well." Here, he pauses, chuckling. "With the defeat of the Dark Lord, our very own Ministry of Magic has finally had time to devote to other pursuits. One of the main topics that has gained more focus in the months since the war has ended is that of Magic/Muggle relations. Many of you from Muggle families may have experienced the upsurge of interest in your lives outside of the wizarding world." At this point, students turn to each other and look at those among them from Muggle families. Some of them are smiling and nodding, looking pleased and proud.

I look at the Golden Trio, and both Potter and Granger are grinning conspiratorially at each other. Weasley, like the oaf he is, is muttering to them, back and forth, clearly confused.

"The Ministry's Department of International Magic Relations has also realized that all over the globe, wizarding communities have been falling behind their Muggle counterparts in a particular area of development." All across the Great Hall, indignant murmurs rumble, resenting his implications. Dumbledore pauses for a moment, allowing the outburst to run its course. His smile becomes even more smug, and he lets a pregnant pause grow before he continues.

"Magic is both a science and an art, but for some time the wizarding world has been lagging behind the Muggles in development of the arts. And by this I mean the Fine Arts. Music, singing, painting, poetry, sculpting, dancing... These are the things that have fallen by the wayside in our world, as too many of us simply use magic to accomplish our goals, rendering a final product that requires no labour of love to create. The Ministry has decided that it is time to begin encouraging the pursuit of the arts, beginning with those who may adapt most easily, the young. Therefore, it is with great pleasure that I relate to you the newest form of inter-school competition. Much like the Tri-Wizard Competition three years ago, we will be competing against Beauxbatons and Durmstrang this year. However, we will allow all of the faculty and staff the chance to participate with the students in this endeavour."

Bloody hell... I feel a tightness in my chest as I realize what this may mean. Somehow, I feel the foreboding sense that Dumbledore will entangle me in whatever is going to happen. I try to breathe deeply and remain calm, glaring at him. He looks at all of us at the staff table, one eyebrow raised in amusement at the variety of reactions there. Some actually look pleased, which makes me question their intelligence anew. Others range from polite surprise to unsure speculation. His eyes lock with mine for a moment, and I try my best to use Legilimency to impart to him just *how much* I am *not* interested in his new project. He tilts his head toward me, drawing his eyebrows together in a mock scowl, while still smiling, then quirks an eyebrow at me again and turns away.

The students have broken out in multiple conversations about the inclusion of the staff with the students, but they quiet quickly when Dumbledore turns back to them.

"The new competition is performing musical theatre!"

Some of the students have cheered at this, and their tablemates are besieging them with questions. I see Hermione Granger bouncing in her seat, excitedly explaining to Potter and Weasley and the other Gryffindors near her.

"Beauxbatons has been given the rather appropriate musical 'Les Miserables,' Durmstrang has been assigned the musical 'The Sound of Music,' and Hogwarts has received the assignment of the musical 'The Phantom of the Opera.' We will be casting the show tonight, rehearsals will take place regularly, including throughout the holidays, and we will perform during the Easter holiday. Therefore, you must accept that if you are cast, you will be required to stay at Hogwarts over both the Christmas

and Easter holidays. The Ministry has decided that the casting will be open to students in years four and up for 'The Phantom of the Opera.'"

Some of the younger students moan in protest at this, but they are quickly shushed by their tablemates.

"Now, I'm sure you are all still wondering why the Sorting Hat is here." There is vigorous nodding all around. "In an effort to obtain the best persons for each role...and considering that I have never been in the position of a director before, I surely don't feel qualified to choose..." Laughter bubbles up at his frank admission. "...I have bewitched the Sorting Hat to do that job for me. When the feast begins, you will all be called up to take your turn in the hat, and it will determine the best choices for the cast. I have already provided it with a complete cast list, including character descriptions, to help it along. And, for those of you who think you are out of the running because you, as they say, can't carry a tune in a bucket, we have a spell just for you, which will guarantee you a most pleasant singing voice with which to perform." He casts a stern but jovial eye over the Hall, once again being met with laughter, albeit some of it with a slightly hysterical tinge.

My guts twist. Dread settles over me like a blanket. This is preposterous. This is a school of witchcraft and wizardry, not singing and dancing! Bleakly, I wish I had the gift of Divination, so I could have seen this coming and drowned myself first. I gaze out over the students and see many of them looking pleased and excited. Of course, most of them are show-offs and braggarts anyway, so I'm not entirely surprised. That, and they're all slackers and layabouts, always looking for something else to do, instead of their work! Some of the younger students are sulking. Snivelling babies! I can't bear to see them pouting, knowing how it will affect their behaviour in my classes. I can already tell that there will be a rash of House point losing, as I know this will set the student body off in an uproar. Damn Albus! All this will do is cause more commotion, and students are too inattentive as it is! I glower blackly at everyone, seething at this newest hindrance to what I had hoped might be a smooth school year.

"Now, I must remind you that Hogwarts has a tradition of putting forth only the best efforts in any endeavour, and I very much would like for this school to be the first to win the new Tri-Wizard Musical Competition! The grand prize is a wondrous trophy which will nicely fit with the numerous others in our Trophy Room, and the school will also receive 5000 galleons for the creation of a new Fine Arts department and curriculum, which will be part of the requirements for finishing school in wizarding schools across the globe starting next year. If we do not win the money, Hogwarts will be forced to increase its tuition to pay for the creation of the new department, and we all know your families would much rather you win the grand prize than empty their pockets even more." With this, Dumbledore crosses his arms and looks gravely over his spectacles at the students. Many of them exchange dismayed glances, especially the younger ones, who have more years to look forward to, and no way of affecting the outcome of this year's competition.

"Of course, I have the utmost confidence in your ability to succeed. I am eagerly anticipating planning a delightful feast this Easter, celebrating our victory in the competition." He chuckles lightly, uncrossing his arms and clasping his hands.

"Now, I believe I have gone on long enough, and it is time to let the feast begin. When it is your turn, students, simply come to the stool and place the Sorting Hat on your head. The staff will have their turn after all of the eligible students have gone. The cast list will not be announced until Saturday morning, where it will be posted at the entrance to the Great Hall. As our food arrives, I would like to wish you all good luck...no, wait...I believe the correct phrase is: *break a leg*."

The food appears along the tables, tempting and delicious, but I can't even move to fill my plate. Dumbledore shuffles to his seat, humming happily to himself. He scoops up a platter of lemon tarts and offers them to me. I glare at him reproachfully.

"Headmaster, I cannot believe you are actually going to go along with this... this ridiculous affair!" I hiss at him, keeping my voice down so as not to invite attention.

"Now, now, Severus, it's good fun for a good reason. Surely you agree that wizard art pales in comparison to Muggle art. You yourself admit that our kind has not turned out anything even remotely equivalent to that playwright you so admire, what was his name? Shake stick?"

"Shakespeare," I interrupt savagely.

"Yes, yes, Shakespeare. Interesting names these Muggles have. And how long ago was he around? Centuries past. No, think on it, Severus; our world is stagnating, and now that we no longer have to fear the Dark Lord, we can work to better ourselves. We wizards have done the same things in the same ways for eons, while the Muggles around us have thrived and improved themselves and the world they live in. Just look at their advances in medicine and, what is the word? Teck-long-ah... Hmmm, teck-lawn-og..." He purses his lips, frowning, then waves his hand about airily. "Oh, you know, those devices they create that do things for them since they don't have magic."

"But, Albus," I plead, "what was the absurd title of the work we have been assigned? 'The Phantom of the Opera?' Surely you can hear the melodrama inherent in such a title. This is laughable. A travesty! And certainly not worthy of being associated with the stellar name of Hogwarts." I am in earnest now, trying to make him see the folly of the venture, but he turns a cool stare on me and I falter.

"Severus, do not attempt to deter me from complying with the Ministry. I am in complete agreement with them this time, and I expect full cooperation from *everyone* here at Hogwarts to make this step into our future a success."

I hear the emphasis in his speech and know I am in a bind. His stare is hard and uncompromising, and I feel that I have no choice but to bow to his will. Railing inwardly at this, I merely set my lips in a thin line, incline my head, and say, "Of course, Headmaster. You shall have my cooperation in this as in all else."

He nods slowly at me, and I break eye contact with him and turn away. Miserably, my gaze sweeps the room. All of the eligible students from Hufflepuff have taken their turns with the Sorting Hat, and a handful of Ravenclaws have finished their turns. Resentfully, I choose some of the food remaining on the platters and force myself to eat. I watch everyone gorging themselves, nattering on in loud, irritating voices about this newest development.

After a while, I have eaten all I can stand, and I am sullenly waiting to leave, knowing full well that I will not be allowed until all of the students have had their chance with the Sorting Hat, and the rest of the staff and I take our turns. I look balefully out across the Great Hall. Draco Malfoy is talking to his cronies, a smug, self-important expression on his face. I imagine he is expecting to get cast, and is probably boasting of how Narcissa would make Dumbledore give him whatever is the best role, if the Sorting Hat doesn't. I snort grimly at his presumption. That family is always full of themselves.

My gaze wanders over the Gryffindor table. Hermione Granger is animatedly talking to her tablemates, while Potter and Weasley listen intently. Her eyes sparkle with excitement, and Potter has a small smile playing across his lips. There's one whom I would expect to want to be in this fiasco. He's always been one to want the spotlight. I feel my expression darken in remembered annoyance with Potter and his followers. Suddenly, Hermione pauses, shooting a glance up at me, as if she felt me looking at them. Her face freezes for a moment in uncertainty, all of the sparkle gone as her smile fades. Composing herself, she stops talking. Brashly, she looks me in the eyes, her gaze cold and unflinching. Potter and Weasley notice and shoot hostile glares my way. Somewhat taken aback by the steel in her unwavering gaze, my eyes narrow dangerously. We're locked in a silent battle of wills, neither of us willing to look away first, when she is tapped on the shoulder by another student.

It is her turn with the Sorting Hat. She flicks a quick acknowledging glance at the interrupting student, stands haughtily, and walks down the aisle between the tables. As she gets closer, she once again locks eyes with me. I can sense her determination to not back down from me, and I feel slightly amused. That silly little bookworm hasn't the backbone required to stand up to Severus Snape. She mounts the dais, still looking at me, until she has to turn away to sit on the stool. She sits and puts the hat on, back straight and dignified. I'm still watching her, and my eyes have travelled down her back to the tight expanse of her robe across her rear. She stands gracefully, casting a disdainful glance over her shoulder at me, and walks back to her table, pointedly not looking at me any longer. I watch her figure sway slightly as she moves, and then see her overtly look at Potter and Weasley, a look of triumph on her face.

Bloody Potter is scowling at me, standing and walking down the aisle for his turn. I return his scowl with an even more menacing one, and he angrily flops onto the stool, slamming the hat on his head. When he is done, he throws another scornful glare at me, meeting my malevolent sneer, then stomps off to the table in a huff. He mutters to Hermione, glaring at me, but she primly refuses to look my direction again. Weasley jumps up for his turn, and catches my eye. He tries to frown, but blanches instead, and his eyes nervously dart everywhere about the room. I content myself with an evil smirk and lean back in my chair, arms crossed, watching him bumble to the stool.

Finally, after a few more students take their turns, it's time for the staff to wear the Sorting Hat. I feel my anger growing at the inanity of the whole situation, and I sit, stonily, while the other staff members move forward. The students are watching with gleeful anticipation, giggling and whispering. I cannot believe Dumbledore is allowing the students to see the teachers in such an undignified position.

McGonagall takes the initiative to go first, setting the example like the good little Gryffindor lapdog that she is, subservient to Dumbledore. Flitwick goes next, needing a lift to the stool, and garnering twitters of amusement from the students. I will not tolerate such a lack of respect! No one had better even *think* of laughing at me, or they will regret it all their days!

Eventually all of the other teachers have gone, and I know I'm the only one left. Fuming, I refuse to move. An expectant hush falls over the room. Dumbledore turns to me slowly, a significant expression on his face. He nods toward the stool. I rage at him, feeling my hands itch with the desire to throttle him and all of the fools at the Ministry. His eyes darken with irritation, but he politely coughs and gestures to the stool again.

The damned students are all waiting with bated breath to see me in that ridiculous hat! Stiffly, I rise from my chair. I hear a rustle of anticipation and whispers, and I sweep my gaze across the room, threateningly. A very loud silence descends. My eyes fall on Hermione Granger again. She is watching me intently, her face composed, but her eyes hold a sparkle of superiority. She? *Superior*? Hardly! I straighten to my full height, sweep my cloak out of the way, and stride around to the stool. I keep my eyes locked on hers, daring her to think she is better than I. I see the challenge in her expression and I sink down onto the stool as if it were a throne, regally placing the Sorting Hat on my head as if it were a crown. I am still watching her, boring my eyes into hers, when I hear the disconcerting voice of the hat. My vision blurs as I am drawn into the confines of the Sorting Hat, cursing my inability to maintain the contest of wills with Granger.

"Ah, Severus Snape! It's been a long time... Never did I think to be having such reunions with former students such as yourself."

"This is not my choice! Finish this business and stop blathering!"

"Oho, you haven't changed much, Severus. You always had the Dark side in you. You were a consummate Slytherin, you know. But, knowing all you have done in the past decades, I wonder if perhaps you might have done well as a Gryffindor instead..."

"Blast it! How dare you insult me? I would never deign to be a bloody Gryffindor! This whole debacle is rubbish... Hurry up and finish your 'sorting.'"

"Yes, the casting for the musical... Let me think a moment..."

I hear a soft humming from the hat, still confined in the darkness of its grip. I know that the time it takes while in the hat does not necessarily match that which is observed by others, but I can't help feeling the sweat trickle down the back of my neck, railing at how long it's taking. The hat makes some slight noises, sounding suspiciously like chuckles and snorts, and I hear my own heartbeat even louder in the solitude.

"Whatever could possibly be taking you so long? Surely it is plain to see that I am not interested in nor suited to being in a musical! You are wasting my time. Release me this instant!"

"Ah ah ah, Severus. Let's not be hasty. I have the character descriptions within me, and it is my duty to see if you are suited to any of them. Now, answer these questions: What do you do here at Hogwarts?"

"You know very well that I am the Potions Master! What does any of this have to do with..."

"Patience!" The hat cuts me off mid-tirade. *"And where do you teach your classes?"*

Fuming, I bite out, *"In the dungeons, as always."*

"Do you have a mate, Severus?"

"I do not have time for silly affairs such as that."

"So, where do you live?"

"In Salazar Slytherin's original quarters, near the dungeons."

"What is this I see in you? You bear the mark of the Dark Lord?"

"What?" I sputter, completely taken aback. *"How can you tell that?"*

"Ah, Severus, there is much I can see within you. Much that was only a seed when you came to me so many years ago. You have lived as a creature of the Dark side, of the night. And yet, you cleave unto the Light now; you secretly crave it. How reassuring. I can see you in your Dark Revels, in your Death Eater cloak and mask. You truly are a formidable wizard, Severus. You have lived up to so much of the potential I saw in you as a boy, but you have done so in such a lonely, dark way. You have a remarkable gift. You know that your skill in potions and in Dark magic rivals that of an artist in his medium. You are the artist. And like many artists, you live a tragic existence. Your life is a sad one, but you have not extinguished all hope of improving it."

I am speechless. I can't believe that the hat can read so much of my soul. I marvel at the depth of the enchantment that Dumbledore has placed on the hat. I don't know what to say or even think. My breathing increases in shock.

"I see how deep the hurt goes, Severus. I know how much you yearn for what everyone else seems to have. I can tell how lonely you are, how you are truly a man apart. You are marked for life... scarred inside and out."

The hat pauses, and continues in a low, thoughtful tone, *"You may truly be the only person here who can fill the role believably..."*

I find my voice, outraged and shaken. *"You must be joking! This is a farce. I am no fool to pretend to be someone else..."*

The hat cuts in smoothly, *"But you are, Severus. You have been pretending to be someone else for most of your adult life. Now that the war is over, you no longer have to pretend. But you are a gifted actor, after all those years of spying."*

I reel again in shock. My palms are sweating, and my knuckles are straining against my skin as I clench my fists tightly. I resist with all my might, but a small inner voice acknowledges the truth in that statement. I don't want this. I want no part in this at all. I feel my stomach roiling as I realize that I will have no choice. The hat will undoubtedly choose me for something, based on what it has said. Trembling, I gasp, *"Don't... please."* It's the first time I have begged against something. Somehow, this frightens me more than Voldemort ever did. I can't explain it. I am a private man. Performing like this would bare me too much to the scrutiny of others. Trying to portray a character could lead me places in my soul that I don't want to go. It's dangerous. All I know is that it scares me, and the foreboding grows stronger.

The hat sighs and responds, *"I have my duty, Severus. As do you. The cast list will be posted Saturday morning. Relax. You have cheated danger so many times, how can a 'silly affair' such as this be so frightening? Really, Severus, you are blowing this all out of proportion."*

"What do you know? You're just a ridiculous hat!" I retort furiously.

"True, but I'm the hat with the insight into your mind, and I can see the fear plain as day. You are a rather undemonstrative man, but you have the passion within you to be

great. You will find out Saturday what your role is. Rest assured, it will be an important one... you could garner nothing less."

Before I can respond, I feel the whirling sensation again, and lights explode before my eyes. I am released from the hat, and I breathe deeply, steeling myself, regaining control before I lift my hands to remove it. It would not do for the students to see how shaken I am. I pull the hat off my head and open my eyes. Blinking rapidly in the light, I see a sea of faces avidly watching me. I glare heatedly at them, again coming to rest on the Golden Trio. Potter and Weasley are scowling at me, but Granger is gazing at me with a speculative look. I narrow my eyes at them and sneer. Straightening to my feet like a shot, I smack the hat onto the stool and turn to Dumbledore. He is smiling again, satisfied. I curb my sneer and nod to him, quickly stalking out of the Great Hall to a rumble of students' remarks.

2- Can You Hear the Caged Gryffindor Sing?

Chapter 2 of 84

The Golden Trio reacts to the new competition. Insights are gained to each of them and their respective relationships.
Now, how will they be affected when the cast list comes out?

Disclaimer: Neither the characters nor the settings nor the play they're all working on are mine. Just having a little fun... so please don't sue.

Author's Note: I hope you all continue to enjoy the story!

Chapter 2- Can You Hear the Caged Gryffindor Sing?

"I can't wait till tomorrow morning!" Hermione Granger was beside herself with excitement. Harry and Ron smiled indulgently at each other over her head as she bounced down the hall toward Gryffindor Tower. "I love Phantom of the Opera! I saw it in London with my folks over Christmas holiday several years back. It's so romantic and dramatic. And it was so beautiful! I hope I get cast. I so want to be in it."

Ron cast a sly look at Harry and winked. "But 'Mione, if you get cast, it'll take time away from your studying. Aren't you worried about your N.E.W.T.s?" He looked at her with a worried expression and clasped her arm gravely. Hermione's rapt expression faltered, and she looked at Ron in horror. Ron couldn't hold it in any longer and his face crumpled into snorts of laughter. Hermione whipped around to look at Harry as well and saw him grinning. She scowled at them both and swatted Ron's hand from her arm.

"Honestly! You are such a prat, Ron! You just did that to scare me! Hmph. Well, you do have a point..." She stared off into space, obviously thinking hard. Harry knew what she was thinking, so he gripped her arm.

"Hermione, stop it. He was only joking. You know you really want to be a part of this. You don't need to worry about your N.E.W.T.s. You've been more than ready for them for years now! Don't let them stop you." Harry shot an irritated glare at Ron, who was still sputtering with chuckles. Ron manfully managed to compose himself. "Besides, I think it sounds fun, and who knows when we might get a chance to do something like this after we leave Hogwarts? And... well... I really want to get a part too... and I was hoping we could do this together." Harry looked at the floor, releasing Hermione's arm, stammering.

Hermione looked curiously at Harry. Was he blushing? No, he couldn't be. She smiled uncertainly at Harry, then turned to glare at Ron again. He backed away, holding his hands in front of him, as if to ward her off.

"I'm sorry, 'Mione. I just couldn't resist. You're so bloody predictable! Harry's right, though. Think of it as our last Hogwarts adventure. Now that the war is over, we won't have any more of the scary kind, so how about a fun one? I've never seen or heard of musical theatre before, but from what you told us at dinner, it sounds fun. And it'd keep us from getting too bogged down in N.E.W.T.s. I was just joking, really." Ron managed a dutifully contrite expression and Hermione forgave him. She rolled her eyes at Ron, then smiled a little, letting him know he was off the hook.

Harry stepped between them. "Good, now let's get back to the common room. I want to know more about this play. And, say, did the Sorting Hat talk a lot to you lot, too?" Harry used this as an excuse to fling his arms around his best friends' shoulders, walking in step toward the Tower. Ron looked surreptitiously at Harry, noting the slight flush on his cheeks. He smirked to himself. Knowing Harry so long, he could tell that Harry fancied Hermione, but was trying to be casual about it.

Ron understood. He had fancied her for a couple of years, until they had tried to take a step forward into a relationship the previous summer, just before the war.

She had visited the Burrow, and they had been sitting in the garden, zapping gnomes with their wands, when the sun had set. They were laughing at the gnomes' expressions as they went flying through the air, and Ron looked at Hermione in the light of the setting sun. He was startled by how pretty she looked, and just gazed at her. Hermione had noticed the sudden change in Ron's behaviour and looked at him. She saw the wonder in his eyes and felt her stomach flip. Ron had moved closer to her and leant toward her. As dusk fell, they inched closer together until their lips met. Both of them had been expecting sparks, after the tension they had felt over the years.

But, nothing happened. The magical moment between evening and night was gone, and in the darkness, they backed away, searching for each other's reactions. Seeing the pained confusion mirrored in each other's eyes, they broke off the gaze, looking away, embarrassed. Ron hastily cleared his throat, glad for the cover of darkness to mask his flaming cheeks, sure they would rival his hair. Hermione sighed gustily. Neither of them knew what to do or say. They glanced at each other again. Hermione gave Ron a sheepish half-smile.

"Well, we would never have known if we hadn't tried, right?" She followed with a wry chuckle.

Ron looked at her and felt his throat loosen. She wasn't mad. He gazed at her, suddenly very content with their friendship. He gave her a lopsided grin, chagrined. "Oi, but I had thought it would be different." He laughed.

They were back to the easy camaraderie, beyond the awkwardness. Hermione reached for Ron's hand and squeezed it. Ron looked at it gratefully and squeezed back. Cheerfully, he asked, "Say, you up for a game of Wizard's Chess?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "You only want to play because you know I'll lose."

"Well, it keeps things in perspective to not be perfect at everything, you know," he said lightly.

Hermione swatted him on the arm. "You git!" She stood as he scrabbled backwards to his feet. "Fine. But only because I *will* beat you one of these days, Ronald Weasley."

Ron leered at her, feeling safe with flirting now that they both knew it would never amount to anything. "Oooh, promise?"

Hermione let out an outraged squawk, swatting at him again. She dissolved into giggles. "You're insufferable. I meant beat you at chess, you dolt!" She threw him a

haughty glare and stood to her full height.

He smirked at her, looking down at her amused expression. Throwing a companionable arm around her shoulders, he began leading her back into the house. "I'm sorry things didn't click, 'Mione. I really thought we would, you know?" He sighed. "Well, I guess I better tell Harry I finally made a move. Of course, I'll have to pine for you and tell Harry I was roundly rejected..."

Hermione shoved his side. "You'll do nothing of the sort! Ron, you know we're better as friends. Tonight just proved it. At least we know now." She looked up at him a trifle anxiously. He glanced down at her reassuringly and squeezed her shoulders.

"I know. I was just teasing. Look, we won't go on about this again, okay? But if Harry asks, I'll tell him the truth, just as you would. Deal?"

"Deal."

They had reached the portrait hole by the time Ron's reverie ended. "Phoenix feather." The Fat Lady opened, letting the three climb in through the hole. The common room was full of chattering students. Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way to their favourite seats, waving, nodding, and responding to greetings along the way.

They got comfortable, and Harry spoke up. "Okay, Hermione, tell us more about this play. We need to know what we might be in for." He smiled.

Hermione's eyes lit up again. Her hands flew about as she spoke. "Oh, it's so beautiful and sad and happy at the same time." Ron looked puzzled.

"Okay, well, there's this opera house in Paris, and these two men take over management of it. Well, once they do so, they hear the rumour of the Phantom of the Opera. The chorus girls and the stagehands talk about a man...a ghost perhaps...who lives under the opera in the catacombs. Naturally, the managers don't believe them, but strange things happen and they start to wonder. Eventually their star soprano...a horribly conceited woman...storms off in a huff because of an accident. So, a chorus girl...Christine...moves up to play the role. She has been getting singing training from an unseen tutor, whom she calls the Angel of Music. Her father had died but promised her he'd send her the Angel of Music.

"At the performance, an old friend of hers...Raoul...sees her, and they strike up a re-acquaintance. But, when he shows interest in her, her Angel of Music objects and takes her away from her dressing room through a mirror. It's the Phantom, and he spirits her away to his dungeons. They cross a deep underground lake, and he is bent on seducing her when she faints. She wakes to hear him playing his organ, composing, and sneaks up to pull off his mask. He explodes and she is terrified. He's a monster under the mask. He eventually takes her back to the opera.

"There, the managers receive notes from the Phantom about Christine replacing Carlotta...she's the horrid soprano...or they will regret it. He's threatening them with more 'accidents.' They refuse to comply and Carlotta plays. The Phantom shows up to watch, and Raoul is in his seat. He gets extremely angry and causes Carlotta to croak like a toad, hangs a stagehand, and causes a chandelier to crash! The managers realize then that he's a force to be reckoned with.

"In the meantime, Christine and Raoul have escaped to the roof to be safe and she convinces him that the Phantom is real. They declare their love for each other. The Phantom sees all and is heartbroken. He channels his hurt into vengeful anger and vows to repay them for her betrayal.

"Six months pass, and they've not heard any more from the Phantom, until he shows up at a Masquerade ball. He gives the managers a new opera and rips Raoul's engagement ring from Christine. Later, the whole place is in an uproar about the new opera. Christine doesn't want to do it, but Raoul convinces her that if she does, they can capture the Phantom and she will be safe.

"Christine visits her father's grave, seeking comfort, and the Phantom is there, trying to lure her to him. Raoul appears and saves her. Now the Phantom declares war on both of them.

"On the night of the first performance of the new opera, everyone is in place to capture the Phantom. But he secretly takes the place of the leading man, joining Christine on stage. When he suddenly changes his song, they all realize who it is and Christine pulls off his mask, and he wraps his cloak around her and disappears. They find Piangi...Carlotta's lover and the leading man...dead on the stage bed.

"The Phantom takes Christine back to his lair, to make her his bride. Raoul and others from the opera follow to track down the Phantom. Raoul swims the lake and arrives at the gate to the Phantom's dungeon. The Phantom lets him in, only to secure him in a noose. He forces Christine to make a choice: stay with him and he will free Raoul, or leave him and he will kill Raoul. Raoul begs her to save herself, but she chooses the Phantom and kisses him. After this, the Phantom seems to break down and releases them both. He makes them leave and disappears before the others can come to lynch him.

"All that we see left behind is his mask..."

Hermione trailed off. Most of the other students in the common room had gathered around to hear her tale, and there was a profound silence. A couple of the girls had tears in their eyes. The silence was broken by a sniff.

"That was so beautiful. How sad for the Phantom..." Lavender blotted her eyes on her robes.

"Sad? The bloke was a murderer! He deserved what he got!" Seamus turned to her indignantly.

"But he loved her!" Ginny sputtered.

Suddenly there was an uproar as the Gryffindors argued about the Phantom.

Harry looked at Hermione and grimaced at the noise around them. "So, Hermione, what part would you want?"

Hermione started, flushing slightly. "Well, I would be happy with any part, of course..."

"Oh, give over, Hermione; you know you want to be the lead!" Ron cut in.

Hermione glared at Ron, crestfallen. "Of course I would like that, but I'm not as arrogant as all that. I would truly like to be involved in any way. What about you lot?" she asked, turning the tables on them.

Ron blanched. "Oh, I don't know. I'm not too keen on anything major. I know Dumbledore said they have a spell for us, but I can't sing worth a Knut."

Harry had a distant look in his eyes. "I think I'd like to be Raoul. I think I have a good shot at it. The Sorting Hat said something about me being the heroic type, especially after everything that happened with Voldemort, and Raoul does try to save Christine." He looked at Hermione, then nervously darted his eyes away. "Heh, wouldn't that be something? If you and I got the roles of Christine and Raoul? I have to wonder who might get the Phantom."

Ron wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Oi, can you imagine if Malfoy got it? Ugh, Hermione, that would be ruddy awful if you were Christine and he was Phantom. I can't think of anyone worse..."

Hermione shuddered in disgust. "Well, we'll hope for the best. You realize that we have to take whatever we're given. We can't back out. But really, can you see someone like Colin Creevey as the Phantom?" She giggled and the two boys laughed with her.

"I can't believe that Dumbledore has the faculty involved. Can you see Flitwick as the Phantom?" Harry said, gasping with laughter.

"Or McGonagall as Christine?" Ron continued, looking at the pained look that flashed across Harry's face. "Oh, Harry, I have an even better one... Trelawney!"

Hermione shrieked with laughter at the panic on Harry's face, but relented when she saw him turning a little green. "Ron, stop it. That's horrid. It's all right, Harry. I'm sure she wouldn't be suitable at all. So, even if you do get Raoul, you needn't worry." She patted his hand consolingly, and he clasped her hand in his. She felt the strength in his grip and was taken aback. Glancing up at Harry, she saw something glittering in his eyes. Shaking her head slightly, she glanced to Ron, who was ducking his head to the side, whistling tunelessly.

He flashed them a grin and said, "I'm going to get something from the house-elves. I'll bring you something back." He slid around the table and winked at Harry behind Hermione before giving him a thumbs-up and sauntering off.

Hermione noticed that Harry still had her hand in his. Harry interrupted her scattered thoughts, "Uh, Hermione, you said Christine kisses the Phantom. Um, do, uh, do Christine and, and, um, uh, I mean, does she kiss Raoul?" Harry stammered fiercely, cursing himself under his breath, feeling his palms sweat, hoping Hermione wouldn't feel it.

Hermione gathered her thoughts. "Well, yes. They kiss on the roof and the Phantom sees it. Why?" she asked warily. She wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer, not with the grip Harry had on her hand.

"Oh, you know, after Ron joked about McGonagall and Trelawney, I couldn't help but wonder what I might be getting myself into if I was Raoul. I mean, that would be bloody awful! But, if it was a student, that would be okay, unless it was a Slytherin. I still think it would be nicest if you were Christine and I was Raoul." He looked up from under his lashes shyly, gently rubbing a finger across the back of Hermione's hand.

Hermione felt her stomach flutter nervously. Harry couldn't mean... "Uh, sure Harry, that would be nice. Look, I have some studying to do. Especially if I get a part, I need to make the most of the time I have. Ron did have a point, you know." She tugged her hand from Harry's and stood, feigning carelessness. "If Ron shows up with treats, feel free to have my share. I can't believe he's even hungry after that feast." She rambled on nervously, trying not to see the hurt in Harry's eyes.

Harry pushed back from the table, pretending like Hermione, suddenly guarding his thoughts. "Sure, no problem. We'll see you around tomorrow morning. Come to see the cast list with us?" he asked casually.

Relieved at his reversion to his normal friendly manner, Hermione smiled and nodded. "Sure thing. Good night, Harry." She turned and made her way to her room, not seeing Harry's eyes follow her all the way out.

In her private Head Girl's room, Hermione warded her door and sank down onto her bed, absently stroking Crookshanks when he jumped up beside her. She took a few deep calming breaths, trying to forget the feel of Harry's hand holding hers. She didn't know quite what to make of Harry tonight. She'd never seen that look in his eyes before.

Hermione rose up onto her arms and sighed. Her stomach still roiled. *Boys*. She pushed up off her bed and started for the bathroom, ostensibly to take a bath before settling in for her evening's study grind. As she passed the mirror, she paused, gazing at her reflection in wonder. Just what were they looking at when they looked at her that way? Ron did it the night they kissed... Hermione made a face at the memory. And Harry did it tonight.

She ran a hand over her hair, still brown and bushy, although it was a little smoother now that she had had so many years of practice reining it in. Her eyes were a standard brown. She didn't see the sparkle that came to them when she got excited about something, or the shine that they carried when she was concentrating on something deeply interesting. She still had that handful of obnoxious freckles, although they had faded as she had gained more sun each summer at the Burrow.

Her gaze travelled down. She took off her school robes and laid them across the back of her chair, looking at her figure in her school uniform. She was fairly short. Ron and Harry practically towered over her. She was not fat, nor was she skinny. She was average. Average weight, average proportions, nothing special about her. She didn't know how graceful she was when she walked, her head held proudly, or how endearing she was with all of her little poses and mannerisms.

All she saw was an average girl.

She realized that she was more mature now, of course. She probably wouldn't grow any taller, and her figure was set, unless she gained or lost weight. She was the woman she would be, just lacking polish. She thought about the other girls and didn't see how she could compare favourably to someone like Lavender, the acknowledged beauty of their group, or even Ginny, with her shining hair and ready smile.

Hermione looked at her reflection and frowned. Sternly, she said to herself, *You're imagining things. Harry is NOT interested in you that way. He is your best friend. Just like Ron. There is absolutely nothing to worry about.* And with that, she marched into the bathroom, refusing to ponder the matter any more.

As she slid into the warm water a few moments later, her thoughts drifted to the casting of the play. Possibilities played across her mind.

I would so love to play Christine. Harry said the Sorting Hat said a lot to him. It didn't say that much to me. Just that bit about me being devoted to those I love and being a perfectionist.

Hermione felt a moment of chagrin as she remembered the hat making a sly remark about her fascination with the unknown and her endless quest for knowledge, which sometimes led her to do things that were quite reckless. She couldn't imagine how it had known about all of the things she had done with Harry and Ron, sneaking about, stealing potions supplies, spying... but it did.

Who in the world could play the Phantom? It's such a deep, dark role. Would any of these boys have the depth to portray him? Harry might; he's been through so much heartache, but he said the hat called him the heroic type. The Phantom isn't really heroic. At least, not in the sense that he saves people. Gods, I hope it doesn't cast a Slytherin. I don't know how I could manage if I was Christine and I had to kiss a Slytherin! Considering the romance in it, I'm surprised the Ministry allowed faculty to be involved. I guess that was the reason why it was limited to fourth years and above, too. Of course, the Sorting Hat won't cast something inappropriate. Dumbledore wouldn't allow it. It'll all work out fine, I'm sure. All I know is, this is certainly one of the most agreeable things the Ministry has come up with in years!

Hermione smiled to herself, soaking in the tub. She felt confident in the outcome since Dumbledore was the director. Now she just had to wait till the next morning to find out if she made it. It was going to be hard to concentrate on her homework tonight.

Saturday morning took forever to come to those anxious to know if they had made the cast. Harry and Ron met Hermione at her door and they walked down to the Great Hall together. Harry was careful to be the simple friend and not the nervous suitor.

Ron saw both Harry and Hermione acting as if nothing had transpired and smirked to himself. When he had returned to the Tower, laden with sweets, Hermione had already disappeared and Harry had secluded himself in his bed. Ron had yanked the curtains open and tossed Harry his share of the spoils, but Harry had avoided Ron's eyes, thanking him and closing the curtains again. Ron had shrugged, knowing that Harry would bring it up if he wanted to talk. He wasn't going to push him.

Hermione was rambling, nervous about the cast list and about seeing Harry. She trailed off as they approached the notice board, where there was already a large group gathered.

As they approached, Luna Lovegood turned to them and looked at them with her pale, bulging eyes. She smiled blankly. "It's not there yet. There's a scroll posted, but it's been enchanted to let the list appear at 8:00. We've only a few minutes to wait. I expect to be cast. Do you?"

The trio stammered a bit, looking at each other. Hermione finally answered, "We would be honoured of course to be cast, and we do hope to be involved, but we really don't know what to expect."

Luna merely nodded and turned back to looking at the blank parchment intently. The crowd milled about, shuffling and nudging while they waited. Suddenly, an expectant

hush fell over them as ink started to appear on the scroll. It seemed to rise from the bottom like smoke, filling in the words. As the students saw their names, they yelled and jumped around, hugging and slapping each other on the back.

"There! It says 'Colin Creevey.' That's me!"

"Oh, look Susan, 'Hannah Abbott' and 'Susan Bones.' We both made it!"

"Parvati, I made it and you did too!"

"Lavender, I'm so glad!"

"Hey, Luna, you're on here too!"

"I know, Justin, I was just looking at the faculty cast. Look, there's Trelawney and McGonagall."

"Hey, Dean, looks like you, me and Neville are gonna' be actors!"

"Oh yeah, Seamus, well, it looks like a lot of us Gryffindor blokes are there; Weasley made it too."

"Ron, I'm so glad! Wait till Mum hears we're both in the play!"

"Yeah, Ginny, that's great. Bollocks! Did you see who else is there..."

"Of course I was cast, Weasley, my mother would never have allowed me to not be cast. Pansy, you're cast as my lover... How appropriate."

"Oh, Malfoy, shut up. You don't want to make Millicent jealous!"

"You shut up, Terry Boot; I would not be jealous!"

"Hermione, I got Raoul! Just like I thought I would!"

"Oh, Harry, that's wonderful. Am I on there?"

They crushed closer, watching Harry's name fill in with ink, then the ink moved higher, and Hermione's name began to form.

"Hermione! You're Christine! I knew it, just like I said! It wasn't Trelawney or McGonagall. Isn't this great? We'll have so much fun!"

Harry clutched Hermione in a tight embrace, and she felt her face flush. He had turned so her back was to the board, and she saw the rest of the crowd fall silent, as looks of varying degrees of horror, consternation, and glee suffused their faces. She felt a stab of apprehension and struggled to free herself from Harry's grasp. Ron looked sick; Neville looked ready to faint; Ginny looked like she was about to cry; Parvati and Lavender had joined hands and were staring, mouths agape. But it was the look of malicious satisfaction on Draco's face and smugness on Pansy's that made Hermione the most nervous. She finally pushed Harry away and turned. The list was complete. The ink had finally filled in completely.

It said, "The Phantom-- Severus Snape."

3- From the Dungeons, the Angel of Potions

Chapter 3 of 84

After a bad night, Snape sees the cast list. What is he going to do about it? And who dares cross his path?

Standard Disclaimer applies, see previous chapters for details.

Author's Note: *blows kisses* Thanks for reading still! :)

Chapter 3- From the Dungeons, the Angel of Potions

I wake early Saturday morning from a restless sleep, vaguely remembering disturbing dreams. Grimacing, I fling back the covers, sitting up on the edge of my bed. I rest my head in my hands, rubbing at my aching temples, trying to concentrate on the nightmares. Slowly, disjointedly, images come back.

I see myself on a stage, in front of masses of people. I am singing and dancing like a marionette. I try to stop but can't. The crowd is roaring with laughter, pointing at me and dashing tears from their eyes. I struggle to stop myself, but *can't*.

That's when I see Dumbledore to one side, wand pointed at me, a fiendish smile splitting his face. "*Imperio!*" he cries, over and over, forcing me to dance faster and sing louder. I can't even stop singing long enough to beg for mercy.

Tears start coursing down my cheeks, and my voice grows ragged from overuse. I feel the ache in my muscles, weary from dancing. But Dumbledore continues.

I see Potter to my side, but it's *James* Potter, and Sirius and Remus are with him. They are mocking me, chanting, "Dance, Snivellus, dance!" I look down to see my robes gone, and I am clad only in faded, dingy underwear.

I look back and they have transformed into Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. Neville Longbottom stands behind them yelling at me. "You are the worst dunce I have even seen at performing! You should never have been allowed at Hogwarts!"

I frantically look around me and see Lily Evans gazing at me with contempt. "Really, you should think about washing your pants sometime, Severus."

I blink and she turns into Hermione Granger. Her gaze stings me like ice. I feel the gorge rise when she looks at me with amusement and disgust. "As if you could ever aspire to join the rest of us." Then she laughs at me.

Everyone is laughing at me. I see their faces swim before me as I black out from fatigue.

I shake my head violently. This would be one for the Pensieve. If only it took dreams as well as memories. I rise, feeling the ache in my tense muscles and make my way to the bathroom to look in the mirror. My expression is grimmer than usual, and I have dark circles under my eyes. I look positively haggard. I frown at my reflection and splash cold water on my face, in an attempt to drive away the lingering dread.

It's no use. I get ready for breakfast. I don't know why I bother. My guts are a knot right now, what with all this musical nonsense, and I doubt I can eat anything. Some coffee might help, though. I make my way up to the Great Hall, hoping to arrive and be done before the students make their ways down. As I round the corner, I see the crowd shouting and milling in front of the notice board.

The cast list.

None of them notice my approach. Potter is wrapping himself around Granger like a glove, and the group suddenly quiets. I see her struggle from his embrace and turn around. The group is deathly silent. Granger goes white. Her eyes widen like saucers. *What in bloody hell is going on? What, did she not get what she wanted, poor cry-baby know-it-all?*

Seeing an outlet for my temper, I march up to the throng and stop behind them. Granger turns slowly, looking like she has seen her death. Malfoy crows with delight.

"Ha ha! Take that Granger! See how you like your precious part now! This is brilliant!"

Granger suddenly notices my presence. Her stricken eyes travel up to mine. The others see her looking and turn as one to see me as well. Even Malfoy seems speechless.

"What's the matter, Granger? Didn't get what you wanted? Pity. Try not to cry too much. Gryffindors are supposed to be brave, remember?" I sneer at her, smirking maliciously.

Nobody moves. It's as if someone cast *Petrificus Totalus* on all of them. My stomach clenches painfully. Something isn't right.

"Well? No know-it-all answer, Granger? Ten points from Gryffindor for discourtesy to a professor." I expect her to explode now. She simply shudders. Her mouth opens and closes, like a fish out of water. The other students' eyes dart between her and myself.

The hairs on the back of my neck start to rise. I growl menacingly, growing impatient, "Since Granger can't seem to answer me, can anyone explain why you're all standing here like you've just seen the Dark Lord rise again?"

"P-p-please, sir..."

I round on Seamus Finnegan. "Well, spit it out, idiot boy!"

"Professor Snape, you're on the cast list, sir."

I feel as if someone has kicked me in the chest. All the breath has left my body.

"*What?*" I manage to hiss.

He points to the scroll on the board. Granger is still motionless in front of it, gazing up at me in shock. I push through the crowd roughly, students scrambling to get out of my way. Potter pulls Granger to the side. She wavers like a scarecrow. I look at the list.

It's my nightmare come true.

"The Phantom-- Severus Snape."

Then, "Christine Daae (the ingénue)-- Hermione Granger."

And, "Raoul, Vicomte de Changy (her lover)-- Harry Potter."

I fight to maintain control. My hands clench and my teeth grind. Turning a hateful glare on Potter and Granger, I bellow at them, "This is an outrage! Get out of my sight, all of you!"

They scatter like roaches in the light. All but Granger and Potter. Weasley pauses a few steps down the corridor, seeing his friends aren't with him. Granger is still gazing up at me, supported by Potter.

I narrow my eyes dangerously. "Didn't you hear what I said, Granger? Ten more points from Gryffindor for disobeying an order! Now leave before I give you detention with Filch as well!"

Potter tries to pull her away, but she doesn't move. Suddenly, she gasps and crumples in a heap on the floor. Potter tries to stop her, but can't keep a grip.

"Hermione!" he says urgently, shooting an angry glance up at me. It's all I can do not to twist my hands around his neck.

Weasley is dithering in the corridor, afraid to come closer, but wanting to help his friends.

"Your friend is clearly overwrought and should not be out of the Tower. I suggest you escort her back to your rooms and keep her there until she can handle being about."

Weasley finally rushes over and helps Potter lift her, draping her arms over their shoulders. They shuffle away as fast as they can, her legs dangling and dragging between them. I wait till they are gone and the corridor is clear. Then, I turn back to the fateful list.

It reads, "Cast list for Hogwarts' production of The Phantom of the Opera:

The Phantom-- Severus Snape

Christine Daae (the ingénue)-- Hermione Granger

Raoul, Vicomte de Changy (her lover)-- Harry Potter

Monsieur Firmin (opera manager)-- Neville Longbottom

Monsieur Andre (opera manager)-- Ron Weasley

Carlotta Guidicelli (diva soprano)-- Pansy Parkinson

Ubaldo Piangi (Carlotta's lover, tenor)-- Draco Malfoy

Madame Giry (Ballet Mistress)...Minerva McGonagall

Meg Giry (Christine's friend, chorus girl)...Ginny Weasley

Joseph Buquet (stagehand), ensemble-- Terry Boot

Passarino (servant of Don Juan), ensemble-- Dean Thomas

Ballet Captain/ Wardrobe Mistress/ Confidante, ensemble...Sybill Trelawney

Ballet Girl/ Madame Firmin, ensemble-- Millicent Bulstrode

Ballet Girl/ Innkeeper's Wife, ensemble-- Parvati Patil

Ballet Girl/ Princess, ensemble-- Luna Lovegood

Ballet Girl/ Hairdresser, ensemble-- Susan Bones

Ballet Girl/ Wild Woman, ensemble-- Lavender Brown

Ballet Girl/ Page, ensemble-- Hannah Abbott

Auctioneer/ Reyer/ Policeman in Pit, ensemble-- Seamus Finnigan

Lefevre/ Don Attilio/ Porter/ Fireman, ensemble-- Justin Finch-Fletchley

Slavemaster/ Firechief/ Porter/ Police, ensemble-- Colin Creevey

First cast meeting Saturday evening, 7:00 p.m. in the Great Hall.

Director-- Albus Dumbledore"

I hear a roaring in my ears, and I realize it's my own blood pounding through my veins. I am utterly incredulous. There must be a mistake. I'm vaguely surprised the parchment isn't crackling under the heat of my rage. I whip my eyes from side to side, looking for students. Unfortunately, none are around to be my target.

I rush to the door to the Great Hall and glare inside. The House tables are empty. Viciously, I snort. No doubt they're all terrified of trying to come to breakfast after my little display in the corridor.

Good.

I stomp up the dais to the High Table, snatching up a mug and a pot of coffee. The few teachers present pause for a moment in their conversations to look at me, and I shoot them a poisonous glance. They exchange significant looks and turn away from me. No doubt they haven't seen the cast list, as they weren't out there with the crowd. Seething, I toss back a large gulp of hot coffee, grimacing at the burning in my throat. Coffee isn't going to do it. I need a drink.

I think longingly of the Firewhisky in my quarters. Vowing to drink myself into oblivion as soon as I leave here, I shift in my seat, anxiously awaiting Dumbledore's arrival. He *must* make this right!

Minutes drag while I sit, fidgeting. Sybill Trelawney floats into the Hall. She has a self-satisfied smile on her face. I'm surprised to see her, as she usually takes meals in her quarters, but I realize why she came down from her room today.

She's on the damned cast list too! And she's *happy* about it!

She wafts up near me. "Oh, Severus, isn't it wonderful?"

I simply gaze at her, stonily, forcing her to clarify. Her smile flickers a bit before dying out.

"Surely you've seen the cast list. We are both honoured with roles! I had foreseen that I would be receiving an honour, but the mists of the future were secretive that day, and I had no idea it would be as impressive as this!"

She looks at me, comprehending that I do not share her opinion.

Fatuously, she waves her be-ringed fingers at me, her smile returning. "But you! You, Severus, have received the greatest honour. It is only fitting for you to finally receive such recognition after the war."

I can't bear it any longer and slam my hands on the edge of the table, making her jump back in fear. I push myself to my feet and lean over her, shaking with the desire to rip her tongue from her mouth.

"Hold your tongue, you ridiculous woman! This is no honour. This is no recognition! How much of an imbecile are you to think that this is anything but a farce? A ridiculous affair that will make me a laughingstock!" I pause for a moment and sneer, adding silkily, "Of course, it wouldn't bother you, would it? Seeing as you have been a laughingstock for years already, you must be used to it."

I watch in satisfaction as her eyes fill with tears behind her thick glasses. She gasps and covers her mouth with her hands, staring at me, crushed. I smirk at her evilly.

"Severus, that was not necessary."

Our tableau is broken by the quiet voice of Dumbledore behind me. I wipe my face of any expression and back up hastily. Sybill lets out a choked sob. Dumbledore steps up to my side and places a warning hand on my arm.

"I believe you didn't mean what you said. Surely you would like to tell Professor Trelawney that." His voice is pleasant, but I feel the steel in his grip. I know I am in trouble and I force myself to speak.

In a low tone, I murmur, "Forgive my rudeness, Sybill. Indeed, I did not mean what I said." I feel Dumbledore's hand tighten spasmodically. I continue, eyes cast down, "You have my apologies."

Dumbledore releases my arm and takes Sybill's hands in his. "I see you made the cast! I say, I am delighted. I look forward to seeing you tonight at our first meeting." He beams at her, and she regains her composure, giving him a shaky smile.

"Of course, Headmaster. I am deeply honoured. However, I think I may retire to my quarters for breakfast after all. I do hope you'll excuse me."

"Of course, my dear. Congratulations. Enjoy your meal."

With that, he releases her hands and she nods to him. She flicks a cold glance at me before whirling and hurrying away. Students are starting to trickle in, some offering her their congratulations as they pass her. I see them darting their eyes to the High Table and quickly looking away from my black gaze. They don't dare offer me congratulations. Not if they want to finish the school year unhexed.

I feel Dumbledore's presence heavily as he turns his attention to me.

"Headmaster..."

"Got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, did you, Severus?" His voice is jovial, but I hear the undercurrent. "Perhaps you'll feel better after your morning coffee."

I realize he is offering me an excuse, that he doesn't want to broach the real subject here, in front of students. I nod miserably and sink back into my seat. He looks at my coffee mug pointedly, and I obediently lift it to drink. I almost spit it back out. It's cold. Ugh.

Dumbledore turns to his other side as Minerva enters and congratulates her on making the cast. She smiles primly, but I can see that she's pleased underneath. She looks at me and rakes me with a calculating look.

"Well, Severus, it seems we'll be seeing even more than usual of each other this year, working together on this production. I believe congratulations are in order."

I squint at her sourly, rolling my eyes away again. When I look back, there is a small smile hovering about her lips. But this time I can tell it's an expression of schadenfreude.*

Icily, I bite out, "Indeed. I do hope you plan to keep your charges in line. There is a preponderance of Gryffindors on that list. I do not expect to suffer the vagaries of undisciplined youth any more than I already do in my duties."

She bristles at this and huffily retorts, "Well! My Gryffindors, undisciplined? How dare you insult my House? I notice only three of your House were considered worthy of being cast..."

"Spare me. Worthy? I daresay my three are *worth* all of yours put together..."

She glares at me heatedly, sputtering. I smirk inwardly. It is so easy to bait Minerva. Her House loyalty is astonishing. She pulls herself up stiffly and holds her hand out to me, eyes narrowed.

"Care to make a wager then, Severus?"

I stare at her suspiciously. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I wager that, by the time we finish this competition, and *win*, I might add, you will actually admit, in front of Albus as a witness, that a Gryffindor can be as *worthy* of anything as your Slytherins. Hmm? Care to take me up on that?" Her hand is still extended.

I contemplate for a moment. She doesn't move. Thoughtfully, I ask, "What makes you think I'd even admit it were I ever to have that opinion? I could just keep quiet and not say anything, and you'd lose."

She smiles faintly. "Because I know you have very strict ethics regarding matters of your honour. If you agreed to this wager, you would be honest to the end. After the war, I came to realize just why Albus trusts you as he does. It's a simple enough matter; either you agree or don't. What do you say?"

Taken aback by her compliment, I ask sharply, "And what if you lose, what do I get?"

"Well, I'll be forced to admit the opposite, that your Slytherins are more worthy than my Gryffindors. You'd revel in that, wouldn't you? Come now, Severus, stop dithering and make your choice. Deal or no?"

I think of how miserable life is about to become. This could be one small point of light in the darkness for me. For so many years, she has goaded me about her House being better than mine. Quidditch matches and the House Cup competition are always fierce between our Houses, largely due to the tension between us, the Heads of said Houses. To finally have her admit the inferiority of her House, and just when I will finally be near the end of my long-suffering tenure with the Golden Trio... The year could end positively after all. And this could give me something to look forward to over the horrid months ahead. I extend my hand and enfold hers in a tight grip. She returns it with strength. We shake once and nod.

"Deal."

Dumbledore chuckles, shaking his head. "You two and your House politics."

I start back to the present, having momentarily forgotten him beside me. He turns to me, eyes twinkling. I sit back, moodily.

"Don't sulk, Severus, it's not befitting your age and position," he whispers to me. I turn a black, reproachful look on him.

"Sir, this is preposterous. I am a busy man. I do not have time for these frivolities! Apparently that blasted Sorting Hat gave me the title role! Surely you would agree that my duties as Potions Master and Head of Slytherin leave me little enough free time. How can you expect me to participate in this production?"

I can feel the colour rising in my cheeks, and I duck my head toward him, hissing my words, letting my hair cover my face, shielding me from the prying eyes of the students.

"Come now, you're hardly as busy as you make out, now that the war is over. I thought I had made myself clear on this matter." Steel creeps into his normally light-hearted voice. "The Ministry has decreed that we are to participate, and I expect Hogwarts to win this competition. I expect your full cooperation in every aspect. Now, stop your grousing and set an example for the students. Follow?"

He pins me with a penetrating gaze and I clench my teeth, lips in a thin line. Inclining my head, I mutter, "As you say, Headmaster."

He beams at me again and pats my arm. "Now, you'd best not dally here any longer. You wouldn't want to waste any more of your precious time, would you?" His eyes twinkle more and he suppresses a chuckle. With as much dignity as I can muster under the circumstances, I stand.

"You are correct, sir. Excuse me." I start past him. At the edge of the dais, I am stopped by his voice calling after me.

"Oh, and don't be late for our first cast meeting tonight at seven. See you here."

I jerk my head in response and stiffly continue down the steps. Students are furtively peering at me, but avoiding catching my eye. I can hear their fervent whispers around me. *I swear to Merlin, if I hear one laugh, I will make them wish they were born a Squib* Behind me, I hear the fainter voice of Dumbledore speaking again.

"I say, Minerva, have you seen Mr. Potter or Miss Granger this morning? They received quite important roles. I'd like to offer my congratulations. Where are they?"

Fuming, I remember their faces this morning. *Oh, didn't you hear, Sir? They're all gone, sucked into a vortex just this morning. Tragic, isn't it?* I whip down the corridors to the dungeons.

I wish.

*schadenfreude- taking pleasure in someone else's misfortune

4- Old Friends, New Lovers?

Chapter 4 of 84

What happens with the Golden Trio after Snape loses it? And, see just how little Harry will have to ACT to play his part...

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Chapter 4- Old Friends, New Lovers?

Ron and Harry struggled to carry Hermione to the Tower. In their flustered state, they completely forgot about casting *Ennervate*. When they got to the portrait hole, Harry climbed though first, gesturing for Ron to hand Hermione through to him. He hooked his hands under her arms and pulled her through, Ron scrambling after her. The other Gryffindors who had witnessed Snape's explosion were already in the common room, huddling in small clumps, whispering. A stunned silence fell when Harry and Ron entered with an unconscious Hermione.

Suddenly, Neville rushed up to them, extremely pale. He grabbed Hermione's arm, trying to help Ron and Harry support her. "What did he do to her?" he squeaked.

Harry looked grim. "Nothing besides yell. She just fainted."

Lavender wrung her hands together, distressed. "Who can blame her?"

Ron spoke up, shifting Hermione's weight. "Oi, you girls, d'you know if she's got her door warded? We should put her to bed."

Ginny sprang forward. "I doubt it, but even if she does, I can get in. Come along."

She reached for Hermione's ankle, indicating that Neville should do the same, and the four of them carried the unconscious girl to her room. Ginny opened the door and shooed Crookshanks off the bed. They laid Hermione on the neatly made bedspread of scarlet and gold. Ron saw Harry brush her hair back from her face gently, caressing her face. Fortunately, Ginny and Neville were engaged in arranging her limp form comfortably. Harry sat back, a fierce scowl on his face.

"That greasy bastard! Dumbledore should hear about this. It's not fair! Hermione should never have to play opposite that foul git!"

Ginny and Neville exchanged miserable looks. She took Neville's hand and started to lead him from the room, giving Ron a look that clearly said, "Handle this!"

"Uh, thanks for helping us, Neville, Ginny. Harry and I are just going to wake her up and we'll get some breakfast. See you in the common room?" Ron ran his hand through his hair nervously, making it stick up wildly.

Neville stammered, "B-breakfast? I'm not going down there again! I'll just starve until lunch."

Ginny patted his shoulder consolingly. "Don't worry, Neville, we'll make sure the coast is clear and you can eat with the rest of us. Don't let him spoil your weekends too!" She gently pushed him out ahead of her, glancing back at the others, giving them a pained look. "Let us know if she's okay?"

"Sure thing," Ron replied hastily. She shut the door behind them and Ron let out an explosive breath, turning back to Harry and Hermione. Harry had a murderous gleam in his eye that made Ron very nervous. He stepped closer to the bed, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"I swear I'm going to get him one day, Ron. After everything he's done to make us all miserable, I'm going to pay him back!"

"Harry, shut up! Don't do anything stupid. You've gone mental! Dumbledore will fix this, I'm sure!"

"I don't care. Look what he's done to Hermione!" he spat out savagely. With a lightning-quick change of attitude, Harry took Hermione's hand in his, stroking it. His eyes softened as he gazed down at her face, lightly smoothing her hair back. He leant down and whispered in her ear. "Hermione. Wake up. It's Harry. Please wake up. Everything will be okay." He crooned into her ear tenderly, caressing her cheek.

Ron felt like an intruder. He was uncomfortable around this Harry. Speeding toward the door, he said, "Hey, uh, I'm going to go get something for us to eat when she wakes up. We'd better not try to go back down to the Hall. Tell her I'll be back with breakfast in bed, eh?" Harry didn't look up from his scrutiny of Hermione's face. Ron just nodded and ducked out the door quickly, closing it softly behind him.

Harry continued stroking his fingers over her hair and face. He stood up and settled himself beside her, leaning over her. Gazing at her, he noted how her freckles stood out against the pallor of her skin. Her breathing was shallow. He murmured to her, gently, "Hermione. It's okay. You're safe now. I'm here. Wake up, please." She didn't respond. He trailed his fingertips lightly across her brow, down her cheek, and over her slack lips. He leant closer, whispering even more softly. "Hermione. I want so much to tell you how I feel. I knew I fancied you when I realized how devastated I would be if I had lost you during the war. You've always been there for me. I'm here for you, now. Wake for me, please." He was so close he could feel her faint breath against his face. He cupped his hand around her cheek and chin and tilted his head to the side, brushing his lips across hers. She didn't stir. He took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of her shampoo, and pressed his lips to hers firmly. He felt her start to respond under him. She inhaled slowly, her eyes moving back and forth rapidly under her closed lids. Harry lingered a moment longer, then eased back. Colour was returning to her cheeks. He smiled.

Hermione swallowed and licked her lips. Harry watched her tongue intently, wanting to kiss her again. Her eyes fluttered open, unfocused. Harry saw her confusion. He resumed stroking her hair, holding her hand tight in his. His expression was soft as he crooned encouragingly, "That's it. There's my girl. You're fine. I'm here. Shhh, it's okay."

Hermione's eyes flew about wildly, taking in her surroundings, trying to remember what happened. She recognized her room, realized she was in bed, and saw that Harry was the only one there with her. Her eyes regained focus and she looked at Harry. Her stomach fluttered at the look in his eyes. Then she noticed that Harry was stroking her hair and holding her hand. His lips were smiling softly as he murmured to her. Those lips were very close. He was still leaning over her. Her heart beat erratically. Desperately trying to regain composure, she gasped, "Harry?"

His smile widened and he caressed her cheek. He leant closer to her, his eyes on her lips. "Yes?"

"I... what... um..."

She felt his breath warm against her face. Nervous tremors were in possession of her body. Harry looked into her eyes and she saw his pupils dilate. Holding her gaze, he

moved in, until his lips covered hers again and their eyes closed.

Hermione didn't know what to do. Her mind was spinning in shock. Harry was her best friend! She felt his firm lips pressing against hers. They were unaccountably soft as well. Her body started to tingle. *This is nothing like kissing Ron.* She felt his hand slide up her arm to her shoulder. Both hands slipped behind her and he lifted her. She grabbed at his back for leverage and was surprised at how nice it felt. *Quidditch practice must be more of a workout than I thought,* she thought, distracted.

Harry revelled in feeling her arms around him. He gripped her tighter, pressing her to him. She had begun to respond to his kiss, her lips softening. Gently, tentatively, he parted his lips and slid his tongue along her lips. He heard her startled intake of breath and felt her stiffen, her mouth opening with her gasp, but he didn't release her. He smoothed his hands across her back and pressed his advantage, slipping his tongue along and between her lips. He touched the tip of her tongue with his and felt his senses reeling. When he felt her respond in kind, his heart leapt in his chest. *She's actually kissing me back!*

For the life of her, Hermione couldn't form a coherent thought. She had no idea how she had come to be lying in her bed with Harry bending over her, kissing her. Vaguely, she thought they had been going to breakfast...

Dazed, she struggled to pull back. Harry felt her resistance and reluctantly ended the kiss. He didn't release her from his embrace. His eyes were hooded as he looked at Hermione. She still looked confused.

Faintly, she rasped, "What happened?"

He looked down shyly and muttered earnestly, his heart in his mouth, "I couldn't help it, Hermione. You just looked so sweet lying there, like my own Sleeping Beauty..." His cheeks reddened. "I've wanted to do that for a long time now, and I couldn't resist."

Hermione felt her stomach clench, unprepared for his confession. "Harry, I meant, what happened for me to get here?"

He glanced at her flustered expression and ducked his head again, embarrassed. His grip loosened and Hermione hastily removed her hands from his back and thrust them behind her to hold her up as Harry shoved his hands in his pockets. He could feel his ears burning.

"Well, uh, you... you fainted. So we brought you back up here." He fought to regain control of his clamouring senses.

"I fainted?" she repeated, puzzled.

Harry's eyes darted about the room, avoiding hers. "Yeah. We were going to breakfast and you fainted..."

"That doesn't make sense, Harry," she retorted, exasperated. "Did someone hex me or something?"

Resigned and miserable, Harry finally looked at her. Glumly, he explained, "No. Nobody hexed you. We were heading to breakfast and we stopped to see the cast list and you weren't too happy about it and you fainted." He rushed the end of it.

Suddenly, it all came thundering back to her: the crowd; the jostling; the smoky ink filling in names... the ink filling in Harry's name and then hers; Harry hugging her; the horrified faces...

She sagged back onto the bed as the image filled her mind: Snape. Snape was the lead, opposite her. He was furious and had raged at them. His sallow face contorted in extreme anger was all she remembered before the blackness.

She fought the panic rising within her.

"Hermione?" Harry's voice was wistful; he hesitantly took her hand again. "Don't worry. I'm sure Dumbledore will fix this. It'll be okay." His tone changed to one of forced cheerfulness. "Hey it can't be all bad, can it? I mean, we're all in it too: Ron, Ginny, Neville, Seamus, Dean, Lavender, Parvati, Colin, and even me!"

Hermione managed a shaky smile and looked at Harry again. She squeezed his hand and said, "Thanks."

He smiled back at her. There was a heavy silence. Hermione saw the emotion drowning the vivid green of Harry's eyes. Once again she felt the trembling in her centre.

With careful nonchalance, she sat up and inched away from Harry, smoothing her clothing. "So, it'll be interesting, all of us being in the play, won't it? I'm so glad my friends are in it with me." She saw a flicker of hurt at her choice of words flash across Harry's face before he braced himself and grinned.

"Right you are. So, are you glad you got Christine?" He paused for a moment before he abruptly scooted closer to her on the edge of the bed. In a low, meaningful voice, he said, "Because I am."

Hermione looked down. Before she could really examine how she felt, she blurted, "Yes, I'm glad." Then she frowned as she remembered Snape. She wasn't glad about that at all. The unfairness of it all hit her and she looked at Harry, wailing, "But I'm going to have to kiss Snape!" Her lips trembled and tears welled up.

Harry couldn't bear it and crushed her to him, soothing her. He laid her head on his shoulder and rubbed her back. His other hand stroked her hair, and he whispered reassurances in her ear. After a few moments she was still. He gathered his courage and queried, "Hermione?"

He felt her sigh and then the vibration when she responded, "Hmmm?"

Ruefully, he asked, "Say, you're not going to go mental like this when you have to kiss me too, are you?" He tried to keep the depth of his feelings from showing in his voice.

She gasped indignantly and pulled her head away from his shoulder, glaring at him. "Harry! Of course not!" She broke off when she saw the mischievous gleam of triumph behind his glasses. Her eyes narrowed when she realized she fell for his trap. "You prat. You set me up."

He flashed her a wicked smile that made her insides jump and reminded her that she was again wrapped in his arms. Then he grew serious again and grazed the backs of his fingertips along her face. "I meant what I said earlier."

"Which?"

"That I'm glad you're playing Christine and I'm you're Raoul. There's no one else I'd rather 'declare my love' for on a rooftop, especially if I get to kiss you again."

She nodded, feeling intoxicated. They met each other's lips and kissed heatedly. They were exploring each other with their tongues, hands roaming.

In her hormone-fogged mind, Hermione thought, *Merlin! I never knew Harry could be like this. We'd better be careful not to snog each other senseless in rehearsals!* She giggled inwardly at that, feeling her blood throbbing throughout her body. Then her thoughts went back to Snape and that she would have to kiss him, and she aggressively kissed Harry harder and pulled him with her as she leant back on the bed.

Harry's eyes flew open at her bold move and he felt a stab of desire shoot through him, burning hot in his stomach.

Distantly, they heard a banging on the door, as if someone were kicking it. They flew apart, dishevelled and flushed. Harry recognized Ron's voice calling out, "Hey, open the door, I've got breakfast! Hurry up, this tray's heavy."

Harry stood hastily, ineffectually running a hand through his hair. "All right, 'Mione?" He was attempting to slow his breathing.

Hermione sat up, smoothing her clothes and hair and clearing her throat. She felt her cheeks burning, and she nodded at Harry. They exchanged a bashful, anxious glance before Harry opened the door.

Ron came bustling in, all legs and messy hair. He staggered to the bed and dropped the overly laden tray on it, grabbing for a pitcher of pumpkin juice as it wobbled dangerously. "Look out, mates. There's a lot here. Dobby heard you weren't feeling well, 'Mione, and sent up all sorts of stuff. Looks like Ginny managed to get Neville to go with them back down to breakfast after all. So, it's just us! Tuck in." He looked up at them, grinning widely, and noticed the flush on both of them. There was an awkward moment, and his grin faded, but Ron rushed on. "Are you feeling better, Hermione? You're not near as pale..." He gulped as it dawned on him that that was the *last* thing he should have said. "I mean, you look much better," he finished lamely.

In the pause that followed, Hermione gathered her scattered wits and briskly patted Ron's hand, reaching for a piece of toast. "Yes, Ron, I'm much better now." A flicker of chagrin passed over her features. "It was really thoughtful of you to bring breakfast. Thank you." She gave him a sincere smile.

Harry reached for some bacon. "Yeah, brilliant idea, that. Wouldn't want to go downstairs again right now."

Ron's eyes widened again at the thought, and he looked at them worriedly. "Bollocks! What d'you reckon'll happen now? You know, with *him*." He looked sympathetically at Hermione. "Think you'll be able to stand it?"

Hermione thought about Snape. After the initial shock had worn off, she was just irritated with the outcome. She remembered the battle of wills at the feast the night before. She summoned her Gryffindor courage and set her teeth, then looked at the others, determined.

"Yes, I will. I refuse to let that black bat rattle me again. Honestly, we survived the Final Battle against the Dark Lord! We can handle that overgrown git. We cannot let him ruin this for us!" She turned a sardonic look on them. "Besides, if I have to, I can always have you Obliviate me after every time I have to be close to Snape."

Laughter bubbled out of Harry. Ron looked apprehensive, then relaxed and chuckled. Hermione grinned at them and giggled.

"Want to bet that Snape won't be at lunch?" She smirked wickedly.

Ron and Harry shook their heads "no" vigorously. "Oi, wonder what Dumbledore is gonna' say about all this," Ron wondered aloud.

Hermione dismissed the whole affair with a wave of her hand. "We'll find out tonight. Let's not dwell on this anymore. We've got breakfast, and then we have homework to do."

The boys groaned, rolling their eyes.

"Stop that. We all have roles, so we're going to be very busy with rehearsals from now on. We have to make the most of what time we have!"

Sullenly, the boys looked out the window to the bright sunlight outside. Ron dropped the sausage back onto his plate, and grumbled with his mouth full, "Bu' 'Mio-e, we'b go' Quith-ith pwa-tith."

Hermione grimaced at him in distaste. "Don't talk with your mouth full. It's disgusting. And you can practice Quidditch after lunch. You need to study until then." She pointed a piece of bacon at the door. "Now, both of you go get your bags and bring them here. I'll help you organize a revision and homework schedule."

Petulantly, they both heaved to their feet, whining, "Hermione-e-e!"

"Go!"

Ron scuffed his foot on the floor in a sulk and left, muttering under his breath things that sounded suspiciously like "gone mental... bossy... worst year yet..."

Harry paused at the door and looked pensively back at Hermione. She looked up to see him standing in the doorway, forehead leaning against the jamb, staring at her.

"What?" she asked.

Reflectively, he said in a low voice, "You're not going to ask for an Obliviate after being near me, are you, Hermione?"

Her breath caught in her throat, along with her toast. She coughed. His gaze didn't waver. Shyly, she looked at him through her lashes and shook her head.

"No, Harry, I wouldn't do that."

He smiled warmly at her. Lightly he said, "Good. Well, be back in a flash with my stuff." He seemed almost buoyant as he practically bounced out of the room.

Hermione let out a long breath. *This is going to be onevery interesting year, to say the least...*

5- Overture

Chapter 5 of 84

The first cast meeting is afoot. Dumbledore makes his position clear on supposed personality conflicts and leaves Snape and Hermione to work things out like adults.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

New Disclaimer goes here: It was brought to my attention that another HP/POTO crossover fic is on AFF.net. I would like to state for the record that I have not seen that story, and any similarities that may exist are purely coincidental. I would love to read that story, but I am refraining from doing so until I finish mine, so I don't inadvertently borrow from it.

Chapter 5- Overture

The buzz in the Great Hall was louder than normal during dinner. The students who were in the cast were the subject of much attention. The Gryffindor table was particularly raucous since so many of their lot were chosen. At the High Table, Minerva McGonagall kept casting a stern eye at her House, in an attempt to quiet them at least a little bit. They would obediently muffle themselves to a dull roar, until high spirits caused their volume to increase again.

"Oh, let them talk, Minerva. It's not every day that something of this nature happens at Hogwarts. They're excited, and I for one am very glad they are so enthusiastic." Dumbledore smiled indulgently at her over his spectacles. Her expression softened for a moment as she smiled, then she scowled again as she heard a particularly loud shriek of laughter from the Gryffindors.

"I know, Albus, but I certainly don't want to have to put up with Severus's sarcastic comments about their behaviour, especially after our wager this morning," she whispered.

He chuckled at this and cast a sly glance at Snape on his other side. After his altercation at breakfast with Trelawney, Snape had elected to skip lunch in the Great Hall. Dumbledore laughed to himself as he remembered the palpable relief of the student body when they saw Snape's seat empty. Snape was currently sitting stiffly in his chair, alternating between staring moodily at his plate and glowering at the students with his trademark sour expression.

Albus silently thanked Minerva for the unexpected boon of her wager idea. Anything that could help manage Severus and his prickly behaviour was sincerely appreciated. He loved the man like a son, and respected him a great deal, but he did get tired of his taciturn manner.

At the other end of the table, beyond Minerva, Sybill Trelawney was breathily recounting her vision of being cast, waving her jewelled fingers about. Professor Sprout was beside her, listening with a glazed expression and a forced smile. Professor Vector merely offered up a noncommittal grunt of acknowledgement at suitable intervals, steadily eating, looking everywhere but at Trelawney.

Dumbledore sighed softly, realizing that this venture was going to be quite a volatile one.

As dinner wore on, students began leaving, but the cast remained, waiting for the meeting to start at 7:00. Eventually, when all but the people on cast were gone, Dumbledore stood and addressed them.

"Would you please step forward toward the High Table..."

As the students hastened from their seats, Dumbledore waved his wand and the House tables disappeared. A circle of chairs materialized in the centre of the room.

"Please, have a seat," he said, gesturing toward the circle.

Students scrambled for chairs, trying to sit by their friends. When they were all seated, there were empty chairs on both sides of the Slytherins, separating them from the other students. Professor Trelawney took one of the seats, between Millicent Bulstrode and Lavender Brown. Lavender beamed with pleasure. There were three empty seats between Draco and Terry Boot. Draco sat with a haughty expression, trying to look as if he preferred to be ostracized. The three professors walked to them and filled the large empty spot. Snape sat beside Draco, deciding that as Head of Slytherin he should present a unified front. Dumbledore sat by him and Minerva on his other side, just like at the High Table.

Dumbledore stood and looked around the circle fondly. "I can't tell you how pleased I am to have you all here. This is going to be a wonderful experience, I'm sure, for all of us." He briefly flicked a glance to Snape at his side. As his gaze circled again, he saw Hermione Granger staring at Snape with a very determined look on her face. He chortled inwardly. *I see Miss Granger has made up her mind not to let Severus get to her. Good girl! I daresay she'll be quite the match for the dear boy.* Before he could continue, Harry's hand shot up from where he sat beside Hermione. Dumbledore blinked at the scowl on Harry's face and noticed that it, too, was directed at Snape.

"Yes, Mr. Potter? Do you have a question?"

"Yes sir. Can any changes be made to the cast at this point?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Well, sir, I mean, did the Sorting Hat choose other people, you know, like second choices for any of the parts?"

Snape's eyes narrowed on Harry, and they snapped with sudden interest. He sat perfectly still, tensely awaiting Dumbledore's answer.

Sounding slightly offended, Dumbledore responded, "No, Mr. Potter. There are no second choices. The Sorting Hat was to choose the best people available for the roles, and it did so. All of you are here as a result. I did tell you at the beginning that this was an obligation to be taken quite seriously. No changes can be made at this point. You are the best cast, so you will be performing. You will receive your rehearsal schedules shortly. But first, I have a few announcements to make." He watched Harry, Hermione, and Ron exchange dark looks before Hermione sat up even straighter in her chair, setting her lips in a dignified line and looking coolly across the circle at Snape.

Once Dumbledore began his answer, Snape felt his fragile hope shatter. He cursed to himself at the absurdity of the whole situation again, and looked around the circle under hooded lids.

Hostile glares were being shot across the circle between the Gryffindors and the Slytherins to his right. Snape noticed that Trelawney was watching Dumbledore, completely rapt. Beyond her, Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil were listening intently, almost vibrating in their chairs with excitement. Beside them, Luna Lovegood gazed up at Dumbledore with her bulging blank eyes, her normal unflappable self. To her right were Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan, long gangly legs sprawled in front of them, leaning their chairs back on the rear legs. Snape grimaced at them and they came down with a bang, looking abashed. They sat up straight and focused on Dumbledore, avoiding Snape's eyes.

Snape's gaze slid to Harry, who was brashly glaring at him, as if in challenge. Snape's lip curled and he favoured Harry with a particularly contemptuous look before pointedly looking away, dismissing him as unimportant.

Then he locked eyes with Hermione Granger. The determination in her eyes was unmistakable. Snape remembered the battle of wills they had during the feast and felt his ire rise at her superior attitude.

Hermione felt her pulse race as she locked eyes with Snape. She watched as his speculative gaze smouldered into indignant anger. The force of his personality buffeted her, like a separate entity. She repeated a mantra in her head, *You won't cow me. I'm not afraid of you. You won't cow me. I'm not afraid of you.*

So, she thinks she can win this little challenge, does she? She obviously does not know the real Severus Snape. She will find out. And she will rue the day she ever thought she could measure up to me, Snape thought ominously.

While this exchange was going on, Dumbledore had turned to his chair and snapped his fingers. A tall stack of bound scripts appeared. He picked them up and began walking around the circle, handing them out, starting with Minerva.

"These are your scripts. They contain everything you will need to learn for this production. Your actions are described in the stage directions; your dialogue is written; and your songs are included, with the appropriate music."

He paused as he extended a script to Hermione, who didn't notice, so absorbed was she in her defiance of Snape.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione wrenched her gaze from Snape's and snapped her head up. Sheepishly, she reached for her script. "Sorry, sir."

Dumbledore contented himself with a nod as he continued. Hermione sat, staring at her script, cheeks flaming. She realized she hadn't even been listening to Dumbledore. She kept her eyes down, focusing on the headmaster's speech; so she missed Snape's sneer of amused triumph.

Ha! I knew she would look away first. Look at her, now she won't even look at me again. Pathetic. So much for the vaunted Gryffindor bravery.

Dumbledore handed out the rest of the scripts and stood before his chair again, saying, "I will be creating a rehearsal schedule, which will be posted on the notice board. Rehearsals will most often be held here; but at times you may be asked to practice on your own. Generally, these groups will include a faculty member, so I know I can trust *them* to actually practice..." He looked sternly over his spectacles at the students assembled, who grinned at him. "We will transform the Great Hall into the theatre space required for each rehearsal. Now..." He sat down and raised a hand in acknowledgement. "I know that many of you are very busy, what with lessons and N.E.W.T.s and Quidditch..." Here he smiled at the increased interest on Harry's, Ron's, Ginny's, and Draco's faces. "So, I will endeavour to keep rehearsals to a reasonable expectation until we get closer to the performance date. You will, of course, be expected to learn your lines and songs as quickly as possible."

At the mention of songs, Colin Creevey's hand slowly raised.

"Yes, Mr. Creevey?"

"Sir, you mentioned something before about a spell that can make us sing well..."? His voice cracked nervously and he blushed. Draco smothered a snigger.

Dumbledore nodded jovially. "Yes, I did. There is a wonderful spell that, when cast, will allow the subject to sing in perfect pitch, but will also use the natural voice. It is a very helpful spell in situations such as this, wouldn't you agree?" He chuckled aloud as several heads nodded vigorously around him. He saw Ron's anxious expression and gestured to him.

"Mr. Weasley, you look as if you're dubious about this spell."

Ron looked startled, and squeaked, "Me? Uh, no sir, I'm sure it's brilliant."

Dumbledore pointed his wand at Ron and firmly stated, "*Suaviloquentia*."

"Please turn to your character's first song, Mr. Weasley."

Ron quickly thumbed through his script to his part.

"Now, please read the lines you see there."

"Damnable! Will they all walk out? This is damnable..." Ron's eyes bugged out and the others present all gasped in astonishment at the resonant tones of Ron's voice. Dumbledore beamed at them, smug with satisfaction.

"Thank you Mr. Weasley, that'll do. I trust you no longer have doubts of the efficacy of the spell?"

Ron gulped, stunned. "No sir. That was amazing."

"Excellent. *Finite Incantatem*. Of course, you may sing on your own if you prefer..." He paused, then continued in a mock whisper, "...unless you're so terrible that I must enchant you." A ripple of laughter ran through the cast. "How many of you sing?"

Several hands were raised: Pansy, Justin, Terry, Susan, Professor McGonagall, and Hermione.

Dumbledore gave Minerva an appraising look and said, jokingly, "Let me amend that to: How many of you sing*well*?" He winked at the group as Minerva swatted at him with an indignant squawk. Several people laughed.

Snape rolled his eyes in utter boredom. *How much longer is he going to drag this out? This is abominable!*

"Well, I have something else to give you to aid you in your practice." He waved his wand and a table full of small ornate boxes appeared. He stood and lifted one.

"This is a music box that has been enchanted to play the original recording from the cast in London. I want you all to take the time to listen to your recording carefully so you can hear the complete production. You'll find as you read your parts that many times you will be overlapping with others while singing, which can be confusing. So, pay close attention to what you hear and follow along in your scripts. If you learn to sing along with these music boxes, you will undoubtedly find it easier to remember your parts. We will have bewitched instruments to play for us during performances, but there is a dial on these music boxes that will allow you to turn down the voices but keep the music, so you can practice with your singing as well. For now, bring these with you to rehearsal, so they will be available for practice." With that, he passed the music boxes around to everyone. He flicked his hand and the empty table disappeared.

"I recommend you take the opportunity as soon as you can to read the entire script and listen to the recording. I expect you to have come to some decisions about your characterization by the time we next meet. Think about your characters. Who are they? Where do they come from? What makes them tick? What are their likes and dislikes? Why are they in the position they are in this play? How do they feel? What are their personalities like? You must answer these questions and more to build your characterization and give it life." He paused to let his words sink in.

"This is a very important event for Hogwarts. It is a step toward our future. I trust you will all treat this with the gravity required, but still enjoy the thrill of being the first to win this new competition." He looked at everyone keenly, the challenge clear in his gaze and voice.

There was a rustle as people shifted in their seats, sitting up straighter, proud to be involved. Many students exchanged anticipatory glances, eager to proceed.

"Now, I daresay this is enough for our first meeting. You now have all of the materials you should require. If you wish to be enchanted to sing, we will do that at your first rehearsal. Be sure to check the notice board daily for any changes to the schedule." He stood, and the students stood with him.

"Enjoy the rest of your weekend, and congratulations again for being an integral part of Hogwarts' history!" He clasped his hands in front of him, smiling benevolently on his charges as they gathered their scripts and music boxes and separated into groups as they began to exit. The professors rose. Trelawney was besieged by Lavender and Parvati. McGonagall stepped toward Ginny, amused that she was to play her daughter. Snape sighed, exasperated, and turned to leave.

"Professor Snape, I beg your pardon, would you remain a moment?"

Snape stopped, grimaced, and turned around with a long-suffering look.

"Excuse me, Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, would you join us for a moment? Everyone else is dismissed."

Ron shrugged, perplexed, at Harry and Hermione. They turned equally baffled looks on him and waved. Watching as the rest of the cast departed, Harry and Hermione stood in front of Dumbledore. Snape stood off to one side, arms crossed in front of him, as usual, attempting an air of indifference. He was irritated enough that he wasn't completely successful. Dumbledore waved his wand again and all but four chairs disappeared.

"Please, sit." He gestured to the chairs, and Harry and Hermione sat, curious. Snape affected a look of disdain and flung his cloak behind the back before he sank down, to

lean back languidly.

Dumbledore began, "I wanted to speak to you three in particular. You all have very important roles, and they will require much dedication and discipline on your part. I am also aware of the fact that there may be some... tension... among you." Snape snorted and Harry and Hermione scowled at him.

"I want to impress upon you the fact that I will not tolerate anything but a professional attitude from you all."

Hermione spoke up. "Certainly, sir. We are all adults here..." Snape snorted again at this. "...at least, some of us are," she continued scornfully.

Snape whipped around, shooting up straight in his chair and glaring at her, about to take points off for impertinence, but Dumbledore interrupted.

"That is precisely what I mean! I know you young people have tempers that run hot, but you must refrain from childish comments that only serve to antagonize one another!" He looked pointedly at Hermione, who had the grace to blush, ashamed.

"I'm sorry, Headmaster."

"Now then, if we are all clear on that matter..." Dumbledore paused and looked expectantly at each of them. Harry nodded solemnly and Hermione nodded, schooling her expression into polite attention. Snape, however, was scowling balefully at the students. After a beat, he realized that Dumbledore was waiting for him to respond. He quickly looked over to the man, noting the implacable glint in his eye. Stiffly, Snape inclined his head a fraction. Dumbledore briskly bounced his hands on his knees and said, "Excellent. Now, Mr. Potter, you are dismissed. Miss Granger, Professor Snape, I require but a brief moment more of your time."

Harry stood, casting a distressed look at Hermione. She offered him a reassuring smile and nodded, indicating she was fine. He nodded to the older men, "Headmaster. Professor," and exited.

When he was gone, Dumbledore turned to Hermione and Snape. They were levelling grim gazes at each other.

Sighing, he began in an impatient tone, "All right, both of you, that's enough."

Hermione started at the unusual note in his voice and looked at Dumbledore, surprised. Snape watched her look away and then turned his attention to the headmaster.

When he had their attention, Dumbledore continued. "There will undoubtedly be friction among cast members. However, your roles are the focus of the entire play, and you must learn to look past your ill will and *act* the parts you have been given. That means that you have to get over yourselves and pretend to tolerate each other for the good of the production." The intensity in his voice surprised Hermione.

He must really want to win this competition, if he's this worked up about it.

She spoke up earnestly. "Headmaster, Professor Snape and I are fully aware of your dedication to this venture, and I assure you, you will have no cause for worry."

Snape turned to her with an aggrieved expression, but Dumbledore spoke before he could.

"Yes, yes, of course, my dear. I'm sure you're right. Now, as I've made myself perfectly clear, I will leave you two to work this out like adults." He smiled and patted their shoulders before turning and leaving. Hermione watched him go. Once he disappeared around the corner, Snape's presence hit her forcefully. She looked back to find Snape pinning her with an icy stare.

"How dare you presume to speak for me," he hissed.

Hermione's anger flared and her eyes lit up. "Obviously, Professor, the headmaster is extremely invested in this. I thought it only appropriate to offer him reassurance."

Snape's lip curled. "I can speak for myself, silly girl..."

Hermione interrupted recklessly, "I am not a silly girl! As I said before, we are adults here; and the headmaster left us here to work things out like adults."

Incensed at her interruption, Snape leant toward her menacingly. "Don't interrupt me! You insufferable child, you are not an adult, so don't even dare to compare yourself with me!"

Hermione saw the fire in his eyes and felt her stomach flip nervously, but she refused to back down, especially since Snape was wrong!

"Forgive me, Professor, but you are mistaken. I am eighteen. I *am* an adult."

Snape narrowed his eyes and said silkily, "Miss Granger, I am not a fool, and I do know how to count. You are in your seventh year here, therefore you cannot be older than seventeen."

Hermione felt a shiver slide down her spine at his low, hypnotic voice, but steeled herself. With commendable poise, she retorted, "If my case were the usual, sir, you would be correct. However, I gained an extra year through my use of a time turner in third year. Therefore, I am now eighteen, and a legal adult for all intents and purposes."

Snape recoiled slightly, taken aback. He threw her a black look and sat back, crossing his arms. He sulked, hating the fact that the Know-It-All was actually right, and he had been mistaken. Severus Snape was not used to being wrong. It didn't sit well with him.

Hermione allowed herself a fleeting moment of triumph before she quelled it and mustered up all of her professionalism.

"Professor..."

Snape simply gazed at her coldly, not deigning to answer.

"Professor, please. This isn't such a tragedy. The play is really quite sad and beautiful. Please give it a chance. It's very important to Dumbledore, and I know you could be just as impressive in this as you are in everything else if you allowed yourself to appreciate it."

Snape heard the sincerity in her voice and was slightly mollified. *She thinks I'm impressive? How very astounding...* Then his natural paranoia reared its ugly head and he scoffed at her words.

"Miss Granger, I am not susceptible to flattery. Do not lie to me, it is most unbecoming."

Hermione bridled at this, stung. "Sir, I am not lying. Your vast knowledge of your craft is impressive, and who could forget all you did for the Order, for the final victory over the Dark Lord? Without you, our losses would surely have been much greater. Not many people could have done what you did for so many years. That alone is quite admirable," she said earnestly.

Snape again remembered her words after the Final Battle: *"I happen to care about everyone who helped defeat Voldemort, including you, whether you believe it or not!"* And now she was calling him admirable. He saw the candour in her eyes. It made him slightly uncomfortable.

He looked at her suspiciously, but she returned his gaze frankly. He contented himself with a noncommittal "Hmph."

Shaken from his usual acerbic pose, Snape looked at the girl who had managed to discomfit him twice in as many minutes. He *really* looked at her, past the superficial veneer of know-it-all consort of The-Boy-Who-Makes-My-Life-Hell, beyond the façade of intellectual bookworm. He suddenly realized that she was right.

She was not a child any longer.

Her eyes held wisdom beyond her years, and she had bloomed into the flush of womanhood. The childlike rounding of her face had melted away into the cheek boned planes of an adult. Her overly large teeth had changed. Now they were even and white, and perfectly suited to her. Even her hair had calmed down considerably from the wild mass of flyaway curls she had when she first appeared at Hogwarts. She held herself with grace and aplomb, far above the gawky movements of her fellow classmates. Even her determination to avoid childish sparring with him and to maintain her position as his equal was something he had not experienced before with a student.

The wheels in his brain turned incessantly as he contemplated the young woman he was about to have to spend far too much time with.

Hermione felt like she was prey to his intensely probing gaze. She watched his eyes travel all over her face, felt it as they swept over her body. Her heart pounded, and her palms began to sweat as she sensed the change in his scrutiny of her person. Spasms of nervousness travelled along her spine and through her stomach. Her body responded instinctively to the consuming power emanating from him. She fought to keep from flushing as his stare seemed to strip her bare.

When he looked back up at her, he was surprised to see the effect his perusal had had on her. Their eyes locked again, but this time, he was busy sorting the confused emotions pouring out of her. He saw anxiety, bravery, confusion, respect, and... passion? He blinked. He felt the heat radiating from her, colouring her cheeks, and was momentarily stunned at the fiery response he had engendered. His head swimming with his own confusion, he shook himself and broke off their connection.

Casting back to try to remember their conversation, Snape absently toyed with his script and music box. In one fluid movement, he stood. Clearing his throat, he reasserted his authority. "It is getting late, Miss Granger. I have more important things to do than sit here and prate on all evening with you. We have our instructions. I trust you will give this new assignment as much attention as you do all others." His tumultuous brain kept him from being quite as scathing as usual. Hermione was grateful for the reprieve.

Standing, Hermione gathered her things and offered her hand to Snape.

What is it with women wanting to shake my hand today? he thought distractedly.

Politely, Hermione said, "Professor, I appreciate your dedication to Hogwarts and Dumbledore. I hope we can put aside our differences to work successfully on this endeavour."

Snape, disconcerted by her previous reactions and revelations, hesitantly extended his hand toward her. He quickly grasped it and even more quickly released it. He did not know what to think about the sensation that rushed from his fingers to his centre as they touched. Annoyed at the irrational effects she had on him, he sniffed brusquely and straightened to his full height, looking down his long nose at Hermione.

"Very well, Miss Granger. We shall meet again soon. I hope you can manage to convince your meddlesome friends to behave in a more mature manner as well."

Hermione's eyes flashed at his snide comment, but she courteously answered, "I shall do my best, Professor. Good night." With that, she nodded to him and elegantly walked from the room.

Snape found himself watching her leave, his gaze coming to rest on the gentle sway of her backside as she left. The unexpected tingle in his stomach brought him crashing back to reality.

Gods! The stress from this ridiculous affair has addled my brains. I need a drink.

He ignored the tiny part of his being that kept replaying the burning heat in her eyes, the electric jolt from her touch, and the heady view of her shapely arse as he resolutely headed for his rooms, fully intent on drinking himself into forgetfulness. It would not do for him to look at a child in that way. That traitorous part of his being wickedly flashed up the recently acquired information, *She's not a child. She's eighteen.*

Shaking his head, trying to rid himself of such dangerous thoughts, Snape opened the door to his quarters and, after warding and silencing the door behind him, went straight to his bottle of Firewhisky.

6- Research and Revelations

Chapter 6 of 84

Snape decides to do some research--read the play, and has some startling revelations.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Wow! This was a hard chapter to write. I wrestled with it over days. I hope it manages to convey everything I tried to put in it. *sigh* :) Hope it measures up!

Oh, and for those of you who are interested, the libretto I'm using as their script is at <http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/Stage/1425/libretto.html>

If it's not okay to have that posted here, let me know and I'll delete it instantly! Thanks! :)

Chapter 6- Research and Revelations

Thank the gods for strong libations.

I gasp at the burn of the Firewhisky in my throat, feeling it wend its way down to pool its heat in my belly. Almost instantly I feel the relaxation that follows on the heels of a liberal shot. I take the bottle and my glass to the armchair in front of the fire. When I place them on the end table beside the chair, I scowl again at the script and music box already there.

Damned annoying idiots at the Ministry... I pinch the bridge of my nose in irritation, then rub my temples in an effort to banish the tension headache that plagues me. *Bloody fool Dumbledore...* My hands slap my thighs as I let them fall loosely. Mechanically, I use my wand to send my robes to hang neatly, my boots to stand below them, and I

Summon my lounge wear. With a practiced flick, the loose satin trousers and short robe clothe me. *I suppose it would be a good idea to read the blasted script, if only to find out precisely what I will have to suffer. Consider it research, or gathering intelligence,* I tell myself, mentally smirking at behaving like a spy anymore. Grimly, I think, *If there's anything "intelligent" to gain from it, that is.*

Sighing gustily, I drop into the armchair and pick up the script. *"The Phantom of the Opera."* What is this, some ridiculous ghost story? *"Based on the novel by Gaston Leroux."* Hmm, I thought this was some American drivel. A Frenchman, eh? Well, perhaps it won't be quite as ghastly as I thought.

Turning to the first page, I read, "Prologue, THE STAGE OF THE PARIS OPERA, 1905." I see it is in Paris after all. Lovely city, that. Excellent wines... I take a judicious sip of my Firewhisky while I read through the prologue.

Ah, that Raoul character. Bloody Potter. No doubt he'll be even more irksome with the swelled head he'll have now.

I settle myself into the comfortable contours of my favourite chair and prop my long legs up on an ottoman. I continue reading through the script, looking curiously at the music interspersed among the spoken dialogue.

So, this Carlotta and Piangi are Pansy and Draco? Oho! It will be interesting to hear them try to speak with an Italian accent! I wonder if Dumbledore has a spell for that too. ...

And this Giry woman is to be Minerva? Well, yes, I can see that. The officious manner in which she berates the managers seems like her. As for these managers... Longbottom and Weasley? As if they could manage anything without bungling it. ...

Mercy on us, that abominable Trelawney woman is going to be the ballet captain! I certainly hope they bewitch the girls to dance and don't actually let that woman try to teach them. ...

Hmm, perhaps that blasted hat was on to something: Pansy and Draco do indeed seem to have the appropriate temperaments for their roles. I wonder if Narcissa realizes just how whipped Draco acts around that girl. ...

Well, this "Think of Me" song isn't so bad. Rather melancholy, actually. ...

You know, I doubt there will be much "acting" going on at all in this production! Seems that hat managed to cast everyone but the Phantom with someone who fits the role normally! Really, Ginny Weasley playing Granger's best friend? Oh, that's a stretch. And Potter's character trailing after Granger's like a lovesick puppy; how is that different than his normal behaviour? He was attached to her like a lamprey at the notice board. Foolish girl, she can do so much better than the likes of a Potter.

I realize I have drained my glass and refill it. The fire's warmth is soothing and I consciously relax my defences. I am alone, secure in my quarters, after all. I pause from my perusal of the script and gaze musingly into the fire. The image of Potter hanging onto Granger won't leave my mind. I remember the protective air he assumed when he was at the meeting earlier and snort. *As if he could protect her. Silly girl, getting involved with an arrogant boy.*

Suddenly, out of the whirling thoughts in my brain comes that mutinous voice again. *She's not a silly girl. She's eighteen. A woman, silly or not.* That subversive part of my being that I cannot seem to root out flashes up images of her again: her lips parted, almost panting with reaction when I studied her; the flash and sparkle of her eyes, plainly showing her passion and sincerity; her utterly feminine carriage as she stood and walked out of the room. I shake my head ruthlessly, dashing the images from me. Disconcerted, I down the rest of my drink and pour another. I know I am being reckless, but I don't seem to care.

Resolutely, I pick the script back up and continue. *Just look at that! Raoul simply waltzes back into her life and thinks he can take over! So cocky...*

As I begin the next scene, I feel a frisson of recognition. It's as if the Phantom is echoing my sentiments from mere moments before. I say the words over to myself. *"Insolent boy! This slave of fashion, basking in your glory! Ignorant fool! This brave young suitor, sharing in my triumph!"*

Now, that insubordinate part of me pushes forth the notion that perhaps I'm more suited for this role than I thought; perhaps the Sorting Hat was right after all. Perturbed, I violently clamp down on that line of thought and force myself back to the page.

Merlin, is this Phantom a wizard? "My power over you" and "there inside your mind"? It sounds like he has her bewitched.

I feel another jolt of empathy for my character as I read Christine's words, *"Those who have seen your face draw back in fear."* Morosely, I understand what that feels like. *Oh good heavens, don't get maudlin!*

I persist in my reading. But I feel myself being drawn into the beauty of the poetry. The imagery in the "Music of the Night" swirls in my head. I feel more affinity for my character, remembering how alluring the Dark side was in my youth. Inwardly, I marvel at how much I can relate to this character after all. I feel a cautious excitement begin in my centre. As tumultuous as my thoughts are, filled with memories, imagery from the song, and the intoxicating buzz from the Firewhisky, I feel a growing need to learn more. Just who is this man behind the mask, and is he as much like me as he seems so far? I could never have imagined connecting to something like this, and yet it's happening. I stare at the script in wonder and awe.

I forge ahead to the next scene. My eyes skim the page feverishly; already I feel the trepidation that something dangerous or untoward is about to happen. *How dare she! Heedless, impetuous girl! How dare she take his mask from him!* I feel the Phantom's anguish and fury as if it were my own. I know how devastated I would be if someone were to tear away my carefully constructed façade and see me, vulnerable to prying eyes.

I ache along with the Phantom's wounded pride; and I admire the way he courageously draws attention to his deformed face, as if demanding that she show the strength to take the consequences of her actions. Then, I'm galvanized at the words, searing through my whisky-fogged brain: *"Fear can turn to love - you'll learn to see, to find the man behind the monster: this... repulsive carcass, who seems a beast, but secretly dreams of beauty..."* I close my eyes, reeling. It's like this Phantom is inside my mind.

I take a deep breath. *Stop this nonsense! It's the whisky. You're losing control and getting emotional. It's absolute rubbish to get so into this. Discipline, man!*

I stoically read on. *Hmph! "Fixing his stare" on someone, and "sweeping his cape."* And, *"he will burn you with the heat of his eyes."* I force myself to take this lightly, seeing the self-deprecation in identifying with him because of his clothes and his stare. *How superficial a comparison! Really, the resemblance is shallow at best.*

Slowly regaining my equilibrium after the shocks to my senses, I move on to the next scene. *Here come Longbottom and Weasley again. How appropriate that Weasley got the one who blusters in in a rage.*

I manage to keep track of who's who, even in all the back and forth of the song. Then, my lips curl up in an uncharacteristic smile of delight. *Well well! That Phantom does have a lovely grasp of the English language. I must say, he seems a master at delivering an insult. I can certainly respect that...* I chuckle inwardly, relishing the lines again: *"In the new production of 'Il Muto,' you will therefore cast Carlotta as the Pageboy, and put Miss Daae in the role of Countess. The role which Miss Daae plays calls for charm and appeal. The role of the Pageboy is silent - which makes my casting, in a word... ideal."* It's really not fair to enjoy how much Pansy fits her role!

My smile fades into a sneer of distaste. *Hell's bells... I can only imagine how much Longbottom and Weasley will loathe the pandering to Pansy's ego, even in the guise of*

these parts. "Prima Donna" indeed. ...

So, Raoul thinks he can best the Phantom, does he? Somehow, I doubt it will be that easy. Potter's innate bravado is perfect. ...

Ah, Carlotta is the Countess? What will happen? I daresay it will be positively dreadful, if I'm reading this Phantom right....

Croaking! Brilliant! He is indeed a formidable opponent...

My appreciation rapidly dissipates. Aghast, my eyes race down the page.

He did it! He killed him! He really is dangerous... Grimly, I think of all of the things I did as a Death Eater. I, too, have killed. But I never killed in a fit of pique, revenging myself on someone who only mocked me. In an effort to mitigate the circumstances, I wonder if perhaps he only killed him because he was in the wrong place at the right time to create a "disaster beyond imagination." Would that really be any better? For the Phantom to be a ruthless manipulator? I am reminded of the countless times I have manipulated others, bent them to my will; but I never stooped this low, did I?

The next scene follows Raoul and Christine to the roof. *She's right. The roof is quite the opposite of an underground dungeon.* I cast an appraising look about my quarters and realize anew that I am in a dungeon. It has been home for so long that the fact no longer intrudes upon my consciousness. I return to the script. No doubt the roof is highly symbolic, given the imagery in this play.

Here it comes. I was right. Raoul will finally win what he pursues. Of course, Potter always gets what he wants. How appropriate. Listen to that rot! He's there, nothing can harm her; he'll guard her and guide her! What is she, chattel? I doubt Granger would put up with such a chauvinistic attitude...

Well, how sickeningly sweet. The Phantom will not like this development at all, I'm sure...

Then, I feel my stomach churn with pity. *He saw it all. Damn them! Good gods, he's gone mad...* Fleetinglly, I wonder how exactly we'll stage the chandelier crash. Details...

Having reached the end of Act One, I gaze distractedly into the fire. Absently, I pour another drink. I sip slowly, trying to imagine where the story might go. It is clearly nothing like what I expected. Now that I try to think about it, I no longer remember what I expected.

I feel the lure of the story pulling me back to my research. *"Act two Six months later." Six months is a long time for things to happen. A masquerade? I'm sure the students will enjoy the chance to wear fantastical costumes... So the Phantom has been silent for six months? What fools they are to think he's gone. Even I can tell he's not the sort to just give up and go away... Oh no, they're engaged. This does not bode well for the Phantom's return...*

My gut twists at the Phantom's arrival. Images of Death Eaters clog my mind as I read the description: *"At the height of the activity a grotesque figure suddenly appears at the top of the staircase. Dressed all in crimson, with a death's head visible inside the hood of his robe, the PHANTOM has come to the party."*

I feel the tension in the scene. *There. He reclaims Christine and disappears. That was to be expected... Finally, that idiot Raoul finds out what's going on. Of course, leave it to someone else to spell it out for him.*

Pity swells inside me. *A cage? A genius like him, kept locked in a cage? Brutal. Appalling! Is it any wonder he is as dark and twisted as he is? I know too well how ill treatment and despair can change a man.* I brood for a moment, forcing back my self-pity, before continuing.

Here are our feckless managers again! What are they going to bungle this time? Ha! There's the sarcasm that Phantom is so good at delivering. Ah, our waspish diva and her lackey... I'm sure these scenes will ring quite true, and without much acting either! I smirk with fiendish glee at the derogatory gibes aimed at the characters.

What's this? Raoul thinks he can beat the Phantom again. I have a feeling that they will learn a very costly lesson. ...

Christine is being forced to act against her will. I know what that anguish feels like, being faced with horror and no choice to escape it. Ruefully, I snort, Much like this whole debacle!

I read the next scene, where the piano plays by itself. *Honestly, I wonder if this man isn't a wizard! He appears and disappears; he holds others under his thumb; and now he's even made the piano play on its own and the people sing like they're under a spell! ...*

A mausoleum? How morbid. This song is even more melancholy than the other one. The pathos is extraordinary. Just as I expected, there is the Phantom, come to take advantage of her vulnerable state. He truly does seem to mesmerize her. It's like Imperio but without the spell actually being cast. The intensity of their bond is astounding. It almost vibrates off the page... And there's that interfering fool Raoul. Doesn't he realize he is treading on thin ice? This Phantom is dangerous! ...

Bloody hell! Fireballs? He must use magic. Lightning and flames erupting? This Phantom has to be a wizard. He can't possibly be a Muggle. Pity he's stuck in the Muggle world, or his face could easily have been healed. ...

Ridiculous! As if they could ever get a chance to use a Muggle gun to shoot him. See, he's everywhere. They'll never catch him. ...

The moment of truth... I'm certain the Phantom will evade them. ...

*Oh my. Well, *ahem* well. Mercy on us, this is positively uncouth! What was the Ministry thinking, assigning a play with such talk of sex in it to a school? Especially showing sex as a conquest! Utterly irresponsible... This could make rehearsals very embarrassing. ...*

What? Piangi is dead? That Phantom is diabolical beyond measure...

It's a good thing I'm already seated, else I would have staggered, floored by the realization that Hermione Granger would be playing the role opposite me, not Draco, and the game of seduction would be played out between us. My heart pounding, cold sweat prickles my skin and I toss back the rest of my drink in one gulp, grateful that the burn of the whisky in my throat distracts me, if only for a fraction of a second.

Again, the memory of the electric connection between us earlier batters my whisky-weakened mind. The passion virtually exhalng from her... the excitement evident in her body... my all too noticeable response to her. I groan under the barrage of sensation, feeling the tingle in my core, reacting to her as a woman.

Vehemently, I chastise myself. *Enough! Stop it! You have let this ridiculous play and that damned Firewhisky shatter your self-control! Get a grip on yourself. You can banish these annoying feelings quite easily, just do it! Where is your discipline?*

I shake my head until my vision swims. Breathing deeply, I regain my composure. *There, see? You've done this all your life, it's not that hard. Now, finish this nonsense and forget about these ludicrous feelings!*

I begin "The Point of No Return." But, as much as I just berated myself, I feel the song sucking me back into it. The eroticism is blatant and fiery. Imagining the scene with Hermione Granger as the object of my seduction is doing odd things to my stomach. Vainly, I persist.

I knew it. They disappeared before anyone could catch him. He must have Disappeared. I doubt Christine will ever escape from him now. ...

Such bitterness... so much pain... even his love makes him miserable. ...

Confrontation. Yes, Granger will perform this part quite well. She's had practice with me. Unfortunately, Phantom, fear can turn to love, but love can turn to hate even more easily, as you've just discovered. ...

Raoul, always the hero, back in the fray! Fool! He's blinded by his emotions. That will be his undoing. ...

He's so cruel, so calculating. Will she save Raoul or herself? It's the epitome of the impossible choice. ...

Of course, unless love comes into play. There is only one option for her, because she loves Raoul. Self-sacrifice. Martyrdom. Nobility of character. Christine has it in spades. It's a shame she's wasted it all on an idiot like Raoul.

I'm reminded of how Lily Potter's sacrifice to save her son is what kept him from being harmed and what almost destroyed Voldemort 16 years ago. Love is an even stronger force than evil. I gaze back down to the page.

And the Phantom is broken. ...

He's the one who made the even bigger sacrifice. He let them go because he loved her; and he has no happy ending to look forward to like she does. Even under the evil, manipulative exterior, he, too, has a heart that guides him. Or, a heart that betrays him... It all depends on how you look at it.

I wallow in the despair that courses through me. I knew this play was dangerous. I knew it would take me places I didn't want to go. Too many memories and emotions are cascading over me. It's like I ripped open an old wound, only to throw fire on it, making it worse.

He has disappeared. And this time, I think he has gone for good... Sometimes, an Avada Kedavra does seem tempting.

I know that I am at the end of the play, but I make no move. I look at the fire, burned low, and sigh. Wearily, I lift my feet and place them on the floor, leaning forward in my chair, gently placing the script on the end table. My eyes glance across the music box, but I shy away, unwilling to take that step tonight. My head throbs as I heave myself to my feet. I reach for the bottle and glass, noticing with some surprise how much lower the level is in the bottle. Swaying a bit on my feet, I curse myself for drinking so much. I know I'll need a potion tomorrow morning.

I put the bottle and glass away and move unsteadily to my bedroom. Grasping the corner post of my bed, I draw back the covers. Clumsy from drink, I fumble to remove my robe and trousers, tossing them onto the covers beyond where I lie. I drop onto the edge of the bed, drained from my long, roller coaster day. Sliding down beneath the satin sheets, I gasp at the deliciously cool comfort of the feel of them against my bare skin.

When I am comfortable, I douse the light and close my eyes, willing myself to sleep. But, my mind does not obey. Everything I have read tonight whirls in my mind. Amidst the chaos, Hermione Granger's face keeps forcing its way to the forefront. I toss uneasily as the sensations return as well. Then, I find myself replaying "The Point of No Return," imagining myself behind Hermione, hypnotizing her with my voice, enfolding her in my arms, crushing her against me. I envision her expression melting into one of desire, her eyes crackling with passion as they did this evening. I feel that odd tingle in my stomach again. Then, with dawning horror, I realize that the tingle has moved beyond just my stomach. I feel myself growing hard at these thoughts.

With a groan, I cover my face with my hands in the darkness, feeling the shame war with desire. Blood is warming my face as well as suffusing my cock. Against my will, I reach down and feel myself thickening and pulsing. I pull my hand away like one burned, and I slam my fists on the bed. But in doing that, I pull the sheet tight across my straining cock, and a shudder of pleasure rushes through me.

No! I can't have these thoughts! She's a child! It's a play, not real!

And, sneakily, that unscrupulous part of me that forever taunts me speaks up, stronger in the face of my shattered control. *Remember...* it hisses. *Remember, she's not a child. She's a woman. Eighteen, and ripe for the picking. Remember the fire you ignited within her. It's not a play. You hadn't even read the play when she looked at you like that. She wanted YOU, not this Phantom character. And you want her. Admit it. You can lie with your mind, but not with your body. Look how much you want her! Feel it! You're like to burst with the intensity of it. Give in. You'll enjoy it. I promise...* I feel the wicked amusement of its words and try desperately to ignore them.

I roll over onto my side, hoping to ignore my raging erection enough to sleep, but to no avail. Every which way I move, the sheets caress me, making me grit my teeth against the throbbing.

Finally, spiralling deeper into shame, I can't bear it any longer. I fling the sheet away from me and wrap my trembling hand around my aching cock, gasping involuntarily at the searing pleasure. I know it's my own fault for drinking too much, losing control like this. I start the familiar routine of self pleasure: squeezing around the base, stroking the length, palming the head and smearing the liquid gathered there. Visions of Hermione Granger's arse flash through my brain: her robes stretched taut across it; swaying as she walked. I imagine feeling that arse against me as I press her to me from behind, seducing her with my song. My pace increases with the tingle that image produces.

I think about kissing that innocent mouth, pressing my claim on her lips, tasting her sweetness and strength. I feel the pressure in my balls as they tighten in response.

With reckless abandon, I envision guiding her to the bed where I would have been hiding. But this time, there are no others about but us. I feel her hands against me as I envelop her in my embrace, shutting the world out. I feverishly pump my hand around my swelling cock as I imagine covering her with my body and sliding deep into her to become one.

I picture her face alight with ecstasy and I climax, spilling over onto my hand and belly. Lights explode behind my closed eyelids. Panting, I come down from that dizzying height. A deep, consuming inertia claims me, preventing any more coherent thought as I gratefully sink into an exhausted sleep.

7- At the Other End of the Castle...

Chapter 7 of 84

After their meeting, Hermione returns to Gryffindor Tower and Harry. Just what will happen when they end up alone in her room, supposedly to read the script?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Thanks for coming back, and I hope you enjoy it! :)

Chapter 7- At the Other End of the Castle

"All right there, Hermione?" Harry called loudly from where he had been awaiting her arrival, his expression alert and concerned, as she climbed in through the portrait hole into the common room.

"Of course, Harry," Hermione replied, brow furrowed as she looked about the common room in amazement, quickly covering her ears at the din of multiple music boxes playing and excited conversations.

Harry grinned at her reaction and joined her near the portrait hole, laughing as he turned back to survey the commotion from her point of view. "It is a bit loud, isn't it!"

Hermione rolled her eyes at him in exasperation and jerked her head in the direction of her Head Girl's room. "I'm going to go put my things away and get away from this racket!"

Harry deftly took her possessions from her and gestured for her to lead the way. Hermione took one last look around the chaos and sped toward her room, Harry one step behind her. As the noise dissipated behind them, she slowed down and shook her head, slightly amused by the sights and sounds that had greeted her in Gryffindor Tower. Why, the whole of Gryffindor must have been crammed into the common room!

Harry saw her bemused expression and thanked his luck that it was so easy to get her away from everyone. He moved up next to her and smiled. "Guess they were all rather excited. Half the Tower was waiting for us when we all came back, asking questions and wanting to see the scripts and listen to the music boxes."

She laughed. "Well, Gryffindors *are* naturally curious!" They reached her door and she turned to take her things from Harry. As she reached for them, he swept them behind his back. She looked up at him in surprise and he smiled deviously at her.

"Mind if I come in and we can look over our parts together?"

Hermione saw the glitter in his eyes like earlier and blushed. Unable to think of a way to say no without hurting his feelings, she just opened her door and stepped to the side, waiting for him to enter. He stepped inside and she shut the door, instinctively locking and warding it. Harry walked to her desk and put the script and music box on it. He turned and leant against the edge and looked at Hermione. He was unaccountably nervous about being alone in her room again after that morning, so he did his best to be nonchalant.

"So, what did Dumbledore want with you and Snape?" he asked, with his characteristic smirk of distaste when he said Snape's name.

Hermione was startled by the question, her thoughts having been caught up with what she and Harry had done that morning on her bed. Her mind cast about for the information and she inadvertently remembered the searing look Snape had given her. She felt her pulse quicken even more at the sensations it evoked. "Uh, he just wanted to make sure we understood how important this was to him and that our parts will require dedication and discipline."

Harry looked at her, perplexed. "Hermione, he said all that when I was there. Surely he didn't keep you both there just to repeat himself."

She blinked. "Oh yes, of course." Unwilling to admit the heated looks that had passed between her and Snape...really, she didn't know what to think of them herself...she continued. "Well, he told us to behave like adults and to get over our personality conflicts for the good of the production. Then he left us there to work things out." She looked down, flushing hotly, her stomach fluttering at the memory of being alone with Snape.

"He *left* you there? Alone with Snape? I'm surprised he didn't hex you once Dumbledore was out the door!" Harry went from astonishment to warning anger, shooting away from the desk and advancing on Hermione, hands clenched tightly at his sides. "What did he do? Did he say anything? Did he hurt you? I swear, Hermione, if he does anything to you again, I'll make him regret it! I mean it!..."

Shaking off her uncomfortable thoughts, Hermione focused instead on dealing with Harry. She cut off his tirade, grabbing his arm and pulling him to sit on the edge of the bed. "Harry! He didn't do anything! We talked about the production in a calm and civilized manner." She ignored his disbelieving snort. "Once I explained to him that I was an adult and expected to be treated as such, he calmed down and was rather tolerable."

"What do you mean 'explained that you were an adult'?" Harry's eyes clouded for a moment with confusion.

Hermione rolled her eyes, aggrieved. "Harry, the time turner, third year, remember? I'm eighteen now." Then, a slow grin spread across her face at the recollection of Snape sulking when he knew he was wrong. "I just explained about that to Professor Snape and he agreed to treat the production professionally."

When Hermione grinned, Harry's breath caught. He thought about her being eighteen now, older than he. Seeing her wicked grin made him forget about Snape and the production and focus only on her. A devilish grin of his own widened and he looked at her through hooded eyes. When she glanced up at him again, her eyes flew open wide and her grin disappeared. Warily, she said, "What?"

Harry edged closer to her and said, "So, you're an older woman. You know, I think older women are sexy." His gaze locked with hers and he kept leaning closer to her. His insides jumped when his lips covered hers again. When she didn't pull away immediately, he revelled in his success and slid his hands up and around her.

Hermione was shocked, even as she berated herself for it. She should have known what Harry wanted when he came with her to her room. It was plain in his eyes. She responded to his kiss like she had earlier that morning, feeling the tingling in her centre. She vaguely thought about what they had been doing when Ron had shown up. Her body was responding to Harry's fevered kisses and the warmth of his hands on her back. She felt him trembling under her hands as he devoured her. Gasping for breath, she pulled back.

Harry reluctantly released her a bit and looked at her face. Her lips were glistening and her eyes were dark with whirling emotions. He wanted nothing more than to kiss her into oblivion. His stomach felt like it was on fire. He was breathing heavily, trying to control his hormones. He felt her heartbeat racing under him and knew he couldn't have spoken at that moment if he'd tried.

Hermione searched his face and saw only affection and passion. She could tell that things could go much too far and too fast if they weren't careful. Taking a shaky breath, she finally whispered, "I thought you wanted to look over our parts." Harry's eyes narrowed at the inadvertent innuendo and a smirk played over his lips. Hermione's eyes widened in chagrin. She felt even more colour rise to her already heated cheeks. "I... I meant... you know..."

Harry chuckled at her embarrassment and kissed her quickly, cutting off her attempt at explanation. "I know what you meant. Although, I do think that looking over some other parts could be quite entertaining." He raised an eyebrow at her with an amused smile. When Hermione looked away, he laughed aloud. This made her push him away, petulantly, and she smacked his arm.

"Prat! Don't make fun of me!"

He rubbed his arm where she had slugged him and took a deep breath through his laughter. He tried to regain his composure and dampen the ardour that had been coursing through him. Hermione squirmed away from him, moving to the desk and standing for a moment, turned away from him. Taking a deep breath, she picked up the script and turned around. Very causally, she held it out toward Harry and said, "Here. Let's read the script. That's what you came here for, isn't it?" She gave Harry a challenging look, raising her eyebrows.

Harry had the grace to look away, abashed. Then he gave her a wry grin, looking at her through his lashes... *Gods, I wish he wouldn't do that.....* and retorted, "Well, it was a handy excuse."

Hermione threw the script at him and he caught it like a Snitch. She should have known better; his reflexes were far too fast for her to manage hitting him like that. In a low voice, Hermione said, "Harry, I think it might be better if you went back to the Tower. It's getting late, and I don't want either of us to get in trouble."

Harry stood abruptly, closing the distance between them, putting his hands on the desk on either side of her. He looked earnestly down at her. "Don't make me go. I'll behave, I promise. C'mon 'Mione, let me stay and read the script with you."

Her pulse quickened as she felt the heat from his body on hers again. *It's too risky if he stays. I don't know if I could stop him if he pressed the issue... I don't know that I'd want to stop him...* She set her lips in a determined line and looked resolutely up into Harry's wistful gaze. "No. It's just too much right now, Harry. So much has happened today. We'll just take things as they come, okay? Please, go back to the others and I'll see you tomorrow." She placed her hands firmly on his chest, shooing away the errant thought about how nice it felt, and gently pushed him away from her.

Harry's face fell. He stepped back and stuffed his hands in his pockets. Hermione slid past him and stepped around the bed to the door. He sighed deeply and trudged after her. She opened the door and he looked at her, pouting a little. He covered her hand on the doorknob and stroked her knuckles. "Are you sure I can't stay a bit longer?"

Hermione glanced cautiously into the corridor, to see if anyone were about to see them. The corridor was empty. She was startled to feel Harry's lips near her ear, sending a shiver down her spine. "Please?" he whispered.

Stoically, she turned her head and found herself enveloped in a deep green gaze of want and heat. Gulping, she shook her head "no," not trusting her voice. Her stomach was roiling again. She closed her eyes for a moment and when she opened them, Harry was looking down, defeated. He let go of her hand and stepped past her. She let out the breath she didn't know she had been holding. She felt the goose bumps on her arms from his whisper. It gave her a tingle deep inside again and she knew she had better shut the door before she gave in to her out of control hormones.

She closed the door about halfway and Harry turned back. He manfully put aside his frustration and smiled. He realized he'd have to take baby steps if he didn't want to cock things up. In as normal a tone as he could muster, he said, "So, see you at breakfast?"

Hermione gratefully nodded and shut the door a little more. She paused and said, "Good night, Harry."

With lightning speed...damn those Quidditch reflexes!...he stepped forward again and kissed her. When he broke away, she was breathless. His voice trembled a bit, full of deeper meaning, as he said, "Good night, Hermione. Sweet dreams." He turned quickly on his heel and rushed down the corridor.

Hermione numbly shut the door, locked and warded it. She leant against the heavy wood and took a deep calming breath. *Mercy! I always thought those ridiculous romance novels Ginny reads were exaggerating things. Who knew it could be like this? I never really looked at Harry like that until just recently, and now I could snog him into next week!*

Pushing herself off the door, she picked her script up from where Harry had dropped it. She already knew the story. She had loved the musical when she had seen it with her parents years ago. She had even bought the CD of the soundtrack right after seeing the show. What none of the others at Hogwarts knew, as she had kept it to herself, was that she already knew the whole soundtrack word for word. She was still curious to read the script, however, knowing it had some dialogue that was not on the soundtrack. She idly hoped that the singing lessons she had had as a child would be enough for her to perform on her own without the spell. Her instructor had told her she had a natural talent. Of course, being the perfectionist she was, she knew that if her skills weren't good enough, she'd use the spell in a heartbeat. She loved the play too much to not give it the very best she could.

Humming to herself, she took the script into her bathroom and opened it as she started the water running for her bath. She was a few pages in when the water was ready and she disrobed.

"*Wingardium Leviosa.*" The script hung above the water and she smiled with satisfaction as she soaked in the warm water, reading.

As she read, she pictured each of the cast members in their roles, remembering what the costumes and the set looked like.

It will be so beautiful! She giggled to herself when she pictured Ron and Neville dressed as the managers in their Muggle suits. *Actually, I'm sure they'll look quite handsome. But they'll both be so uncomfortable!* She returned her gaze to the page and rolled her eyes at the thought of Pansy and Draco as Carlotta and Piangi.

Gods, as if she weren't annoying enough! Hmph, she's perfectly suited to playing a conceited bitch. Hermione smirked at the shocked reaction she would get if she ever stated her opinion out loud. They all thought she was such a goody-goody. Well, if word got around that she had been snogging Harry alone in her room on a Saturday night, perhaps her reputation would change. Thinking of Harry again made her stomach flutter. She pictured him in his costume as Raoul and felt her insides jump. *Now, he would definitely look handsome in his suits! He'll look every inch the dark romantic hero.* She smiled to herself. Savouring the lingering warmth from their kisses, she continued reading.

She laughed again as she pictured McGonagall as Giry, complete with her cane. *Really, the Sorting Hat did quite a commendable job on casting. And Ginny will be positively sweet as Meg. I'll bet Dumbledore has something cooked up with some charms to make the magic mirror...*

Her thoughts trailed off as she arrived at the part where the Phantom first sings to her in the dressing room. Her mind's eye saw Snape, but not the Snape of her Potions class, instead, she saw the Snape from just a few hours before. When she relived the piercing gaze that had raked her from head to toe, she felt the same tingling sensations in her body. Her heart sped up and she felt perspiration beading on her lip. She vividly remembered the answering look in his eyes before he had quelled it and had torn his gaze away.

Stop it. You're imagining things. You've let yourself get carried away with this play and you're imagining things that aren't there. Just be grateful that he stopped raging at you.

She forced herself to read again. In her mind she heard the music and sang along in her head with the words on the page. Imagining Snape as the Phantom, she paid careful attention to what he would sing, wondering whether his singing voice would be as commanding and powerful as his speaking voice. She shuddered as she remembered how silky his voice could be. *Really, his voice is the most attractive thing about him.*

She mused over the lyrics of their duet. *As loath as I am to admit it, he really is the only choice to play the role. He certainly has power over people. Witness his classes for proof!* Then her eyes narrowed at the line, "man and mystery... were both in you." *That fits him perfectly. He's always been an enigma. Even in the Order, we never learnt much about him.*

Continuing on to "Music of the Night," she relaxed into the water and closed her eyes. Letting the song play in her head from memory, she put Snape in the place of the Phantom she had seen. She had been much younger then, and couldn't fully appreciate the hypnotic beauty of the song, but now she lost herself in the poetry, imagining Snape's velvet voice wrapping itself around the words.

She remembered the way the Phantom had stalked Christine, circling her as if she were prey, accustoming her to his cold touch. Vaguely she felt a heat pooling in her stomach, but she was immersed in the images and the song in her head and paid no heed. She saw the way Christine caressed the mask and sighed almost inaudibly.

Then, the images of the Phantom changed to those of Snape in his Death Eater mask and cloak. She had seen him wearing them and sleek black gloves not long before

the Final Battle, when he had come to warn them of the impending strike. She had been petrified for an instant until he had ripped his mask away. Then she felt foolish for not realizing it must have been him. Number Twelve was too well guarded for any other Death Eaters to find it. Still, she had never been more thankful to be looking up into the familiar pale, grim face framed by lank black hair. She had smiled in her relief and he had curtly nodded to her before striding purposefully off.

Now her mind was mixing memories from the play with her own memories. She thought about the part where Christine snatches the mask off the Phantom and easily saw Snape whirling on her in anger. It was something she had seen so many times before, even just that morning.

The sadness of his song, "Stranger Than You Dreamt It" tugged at her. She had always felt pity for the Phantom at that point. It wasn't his fault that he was so reviled. She wondered if anyone had ever learnt to "see the man behind the monster" that was Snape. Then she felt a moment of shame. He was not a monster. True, he had done some monstrous things in his past, but he made up for that! He was noble, and, in the end, good.

Harry and Ron never tried to see the man behind the Potions Master, but she did. She knew how much Dumbledore had trusted him, and how dangerous Snape's position had been. It was the least she could do to try and ignore the taciturn manner he used as a front and appreciate the brilliant mind and integrity buried behind it.

Her stomach roiled again. She blinked her eyes open. The water was getting cold, and she hadn't turned a page since the Magic Mirror scene. She was taken aback at how long she had been soaking in her tub thinking about Snape. She flushed again at the feelings she suddenly noticed.

You are not getting turned on by Snape! It's the character... and the costumes... and the romance of the story... and likely you're still a little worked up from Harry earlier! She refused to admit to herself that she had got all sorts of hot and bothered while thinking about Snape.

She drained the tub, putting the script on the sink. As she dried off, she was embarrassed to note how stiff her nipples were, and how the wetness between her thighs was not just bathwater. She sighed in frustration. *It's a good thing I sent Harry away. Gods, just look how out of control I am! It would have been disastrous if he were still here to take advantage of it...*

Hermione finished drying herself and put on her nightgown. The fabric scraped across her hard nipples, making her hiss at the sensation. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror and saw the colour burning in her cheeks and the glint in her eyes. It reminded her of what she had seen in Harry's earlier that day.

She shooed Crookshanks off the bed and turned down the covers. "Accio script. Accio music box." She sat on the bed and tucked her feet under the sheet. She marked her place in the script and set it on her nightstand, on top of a stack of books. Then she put the music box on the edge nearest her and scooted down on her bed, lying on her side and looking at it. It was very ornate, carved and gilded and painted. She smiled at the ingenious way Dumbledore managed to get the recording to them without access to Muggle devices. She had been rather disappointed when she brought her CD player to Hogwarts, only to find out that it wouldn't work. She had actually managed to forget that part of *Hogwarts: A History*.

She picked up the box and rolled onto her back, shoving her hair above her head on the pillow. She saw the little dials and toggles on the sides, marked with their purposes. Smiling to herself, she set them so she could listen from the "Angel of Music/ The Mirror" through to the end of "Stranger Than You Dreamt It." She set the volume at a soft, unobtrusive level and placed the box back on her nightstand.

Rolling back onto her side, she stared at it without opening it. Her stomach still fluttered and roiled. *Too much excitement for one day. You'll feel better in the morning.* She pulled her covers up to her ribs and doused the lights in her room, able to see the box in the glow of moonlight from her window.

She heard the music in her head, but didn't open the box. Images of the play, and of her friends, and of Snape swirled in her head. She closed her eyes, but she could see the box outlined against her lids. Taking a deep breath, she reached out a tentative hand and opened it. Almost immediately, music started, and the Phantom's voice came out of the darkness.

She closed her eyes and it sounded like he was there in her room. The quality of the recording was amazing. She had a fleeting thought of Snape as the Phantom in her room and shied away from the tingle in her body that made her shiver.

She rolled onto her back again and rubbed her hands over the goose flesh that had risen on her arms. Her nipples pressed against her crossed forearms, still stiff. Frowning, she gripped her arms tightly under her breasts, hugging herself. The music swelled around her and she felt the lure of the Phantom's words, "I am your Angel of Music... Come to me: Angel of Music..." Her heart beat quickly against her ribs.

An image of Snape imperiously holding his hand out to her through a magic mirror, willing her to follow him, flashed in her mind. She felt the twisting in her gut as the image of her took his hand and disappeared with him. She remembered the electric jolt she felt when she shook hands with him that night and her breathing quickened.

During the song while travelling to the underground labyrinth, Hermione envisioned the misty lake at Hogwarts that she crossed as a first year. But instead of Hagrid, she saw Snape at the prow. His gaze was magnetic. She heard the extravagant vocalizing that Christine was doing in the recording and felt her senses soaring higher as Christine's pitch climbed. She was mesmerized by the low, insistent tones of the Phantom coaxing Christine to dizzying heights of sound. Her mind turned the Phantom's voice into the dangerously soft purr of Snape at his most cunning and she shuddered.

As Christine hit the peak of her vocal climb, Hermione gasped. Her thoughts raced in a jumble as her intellect...older and more mature than when she had first seen the play...realized that Christine's vocal flight and peak in response to the Phantom's insistent words were very like the build-up and climax of a woman being brought to orgasm by her lover's seduction.

Her mind reeled and she latched onto the song playing next, trying to fend off the throbbing in her body.

It was "Music of the Night." Hermione lay there as if drugged. Her body felt leaden with need and her mind was consumed by the hypnotic lyrics. She released her ribs from her rigid grip and rolled to her side, hugging a pillow against her stomach. She could feel her heart beat in every limb. But she was most distracted by the pulsing in her core. She curled into a foetal position, wrapping herself around the pillow.

Her mind replayed the images of Snape as the Phantom circling her as Christine as he sang his seductive ode to darkness. She was in the thrall of the music and the situation and felt buoyed along in the swift current of emotion. Finally, the song ended. She lay still as Christine woke from her sleep to hear the Phantom composing.

When the Phantom rounded on Christine in rage, Hermione remembered Snape bellowing at her in front of the notice board that morning. She cringed and shivered in terror at the memory. She knew she had fainted in reaction to the shock and Harry and Ron had brought her to her room. She realized that she'd have to get over her terror of Snape's wrath if she was to perform her role correctly in this scene. Christine didn't back down from the Phantom.

She heard the misery in the Phantom's voice and wondered if Snape would be able to show that kind of emotion. She was sure he must have felt that way at some point, but he kept his emotions so carefully locked away that she didn't know if he could even pretend to show such feelings.

Suddenly Hermione was drawn from her musings by the line, "Fear can turn to love." Startled by this notion, she wondered if it was really true. Again, her mind turned to Snape. Most people, with very few exceptions, were afraid of the daunting, imposing Potions Master and ex-Death Eater. Could someone learn to love him? She marvelled at the idea of putting Snape and love in the same sentence. It was too fantastical. She shook her head, momentarily distracted from her physical discomfort by the unlikely nature of her thoughts.

Abruptly, the song ended and the music box stopped. The silence in her room was deafening. She heard her rapid breathing and Crookshanks's contented purr from her armchair. She gingerly uncurled herself from around her pillow and stretched out onto her back. She felt the stirring in her centre and the heat that seemed to pour off her. She sighed, frustrated. *Frustrated. That's exactly it! You're sexually frustrated after so many ups and downs today.* She suppressed a wry grin as she thought about what *else* might have had its ups and downs today as well.

An embarrassed expression took up residence on her face as she analytically pondered the possible solutions.

The recently awakened part of her that fired right up when Harry kissed her smiled devilishly and said, *Well, you could always pretend you're doing a bed check as Head Girl and just 'end up' in Harry's...*

Hermione instantly quashed that dangerous line of thought. She squeezed her legs together at the strong throb that idea elicited.

Well, you could always take a Dreamless Sleep draught, but then you'd have to go to Madam Pomfrey or Professor Snape to get one. And they'd want to know why you need it, and... She let out an explosive breath, shaking her head. *No, that's a bad idea too.* She especially didn't like the idea of disturbing Snape right now, not after the events of the day, and not with her current condition.

So, the rational, practical side spoke up. *You know what you should do. Why are you even bothering with anything else? There's nothing wrong with it. It's completely natural. You'd be more abnormal if you didn't do it. Remember, those books on sexuality you read two years ago said so.*

Hermione blushed, even in the solitude of her dark room. She knew it was normal, but she had only ever tried it a few times before. She always felt like she was doing something naughty and shameful.

Out of nowhere, that newly roused part of her being popped her head up and grinned at the idea of something naughty. *Mmmm, that sounds like fun...*

Writhing in a combination of embarrassment and need, she pulled the covers up to her chin, slipping her hands underneath. She shut her eyes tight and her hands lightly travelled down her torso to lift her nightgown. She felt a shock of surprise that she had neglected to put on her knickers when she got ready for bed. A delicious shiver washed over her. She felt... wanton.

Her hands slid over her belly and down over her thighs. She was momentarily disconcerted by how much moisture she felt leaking out to coat her curls. She gasped as her fingertips brushed over her swollen lips, stunned at how aroused she was. She gave herself over to the pleasure pulsing in her loins as she stroked her fingertips up and down her soaked pussy.

Her breath caught as one finger slipped between her lips and flicked against her clit. She rubbed her fingers along either side of it, letting out a ragged sigh. Her hips rocked as she continued her explorations. She licked her lips, remembering Harry's fiery kisses and felt a surge of excitement. Fleeting, she wondered if it would feel different if Harry's fingers were touching her. A wave of heat crashed over her at the thought.

She sped up, her fingers dancing over her clit and the lips around it. She felt her pulse race and her breathing increase to match it as she went higher and higher toward her peak.

Unbidden, her connection of Christine's dizzying vocal acrobatics and the build-up to an orgasm flashed across her mind. She felt the tightening of her muscles, and knew she was on the edge. Suddenly she heard the low, coaxing velvet voice of her Potions Professor urging her, "Sing for me!" She moaned as she climaxed, her muscles clenching spasmodically. Her head rolled on her pillow; her hand gripped the bedclothes; her toes curled and twitched. Visions flooded her mind as she spiralled down from her crest, and she sank into a sated sleep with the image of one Professor Snape, eyes burning with intensity, locking eyes with her through a mask as he pulled her to him and they disappeared.

8- Establishing Relationships

Chapter 8 of 84

Snape and Hermione wake to the aftermath of their unlikely indiscretions. Hermione establishes her relationship with Harry. Dumbledore sets up a meeting with Snape and Hermione--on their own--and sparks fly as they establish their relationship as well.

Standard disclaimer applies.

Chapter 8- Establishing Relationships

I wake up in the darkness, cold. Groggily, I reach for the covers that are bunched to one side, leaving me bare to the dungeon's chill. As I move, I feel the stuffiness in my head that presages a Firewhisky hangover, and the tight tug on the skin and hairs of my belly. Disconcerted, I run my hand down my skin and feel the dried remains of my lack of control. Shamed at the memory, I quickly cast a cleansing charm and yank the covers over me. Miserably, I shiver under the icy sheets, trying desperately to fight back the images that filled my mind in the explosive moments before I lost consciousness. Slowly, I warm up and stop shivering. My weary body and mind begin spiralling me back to sleep. Grateful when the images disappear and the blackness claims me, I hear naught but my own heartbeat lulling me to unconsciousness.

Hours later, when I wake again, it is with the urgent need to relieve myself of multiple glasses of Firewhisky. Staggering to the bathroom, I curse myself for drinking too much. My head is splitting. After a satisfactory meeting with the porcelain god, I fling open my cabinet, squinting at the contents, searching for my hangover cure. Thankful beyond measure when I find it, I eagerly quaff the whole of its contents. Propping myself against the sink, leaning my forehead against the cool surface of the mirror, I feel the potion course through me, wiping away the ache in my body, the cottony feel in my mouth, and the pounding in my head. Sometimes, it's good to be a Potions Master. Sighing in relief, I start the shower.

Once the water is hot enough, I step in, letting it cascade over me, drenching my hair, sluicing over my skin. I place my hands against the wall and tip my face up to the full spray, then tilt my head down so it falls through my hair down my neck. Nothing like a hot shower to revive you after losing a fight with Firewhisky...

I grab the soap and start washing, my face, my neck, over my arms and shoulders, then over my chest and under my arms. My mind is blank but for the routine of bathing until I soap my stomach and down to my crotch. Then, I remember waking in the night, my spendings dry on my skin. As my soapy hands slide over my cock and balls, I feel a surge, a tightening in them again. Thoughts of Hermione moaning under me surface in my mind. Groaning, I drop the soap and grip my temples, closing my eyes, trying to drive the thoughts away. I feel the pulsing response in my loins, my cock bobbing as it springs to life again. Angry at my lack of control, I roughly rinse under the water, but even the rough touch inflames me. Again, I'm propping my hands against the wall, the water running down the back of my neck as I hang my head and watch my body betray my will.

Viciously, I yank the knobs the other direction, turning the steamy heat to icy cold. Gasping under the onslaught, I feel the goose flesh spreading over my skin and I suppress the shivers that claim me. Wrapping my arms around me, I force myself to stand in the cold spray until my erection flags and finally disappears. Sighing deeply, I shudder as I wrap myself in a large towel, trying to get warm again. I run the towel through my soaking hair and then wrap it around my waist, tucking the end under itself.

The frigid drops from my hair run over my shoulders and chest as I walk back into my room to dress. With a few practiced flicks of my wand, my hair is dry, my lounge wear is folded and put away, my bed is made, and I am once again clad in my robes and boots.

Grumpily, I stomp out of my room and head for the door, on my way up to breakfast. As I pass through my sitting room, my eyes involuntarily glance at the music box on the end table. Scowling, I shake my head and fling my door open, grunting with satisfaction at the echo produced by the violent slam of my door as I lock and ward it behind me. My footsteps echo along the passageway as I stalk up to breakfast.

Fortunately, it is still rather early for breakfast on a Sunday, so the Great Hall is not well-populated. Glaring sourly over those already assembled, I take my customary seat and pour a mug of black coffee. Grateful that I had my potion, otherwise the aromas of breakfast would certainly make me ill, I take a large gulp of coffee, grimacing as it scalds my tongue and throat, but sighing in relief when the comforting heat settles in my belly.

Mechanically, I serve myself from the platters and eat. I'm staring into space, not really seeing anything when she walks into the Great Hall, accompanied by her ever-present cohorts. My eyes focus on her, zeroing in on her face. She's smiling, laughing at something one of them said. I glance at the others and feel my anger rise at the look of over-protective possessiveness on Potter's face. That's when I notice that they are holding hands, and she is blushing prettily at something he whispers in her ear.

I stop eating. I have to, to focus on fighting the urge to stand up and wipe that self-satisfied grin off his face, to rip her hand from his and drag her away from him. My breathing increases and I hear the roar of my blood rushing in my ears. I manage to maintain my composure, but only by sheer force of will. Once I'm under control again, I reel a bit in shock at my vehement reaction. I'm surprised that simply seeing them together like that affects me so strongly.

I'm still watching them, watching her. Suddenly, she flicks a glance at me. Her eyes widen and her smile fades. Her chest rises as she inhales sharply and her eyes darken in confusion as a flush creeps up her throat to suffuse her face. She furtively tugs her hand from Potter's and chews her lower lip, as if she's ashamed.

I realize I'm staring at her; Potter notices this when she pulls away from him. He glares at me hotly, scowling. My eyes narrow menacingly, and I wish for a moment that he could know just how close he came to me throttling him into oblivion. Weasley sees the exchange between Potter and me and nervously jostles his elbow, drawing his attention away. Maybe Weasley's learnt something after all.

I let my gaze float back to Hermione. Hermione? When did that happen? Disconcerted at this realization, I shake my head sharply and reassert my authority. Miss Granger, not Hermione. She is my student, not my equal.

Nevertheless, I look at her again. She is elegantly eating her breakfast, vaguely listening to the chattering around her. Then, like a magnet, her face turns to mine and we lock eyes again. Her cheeks still burn, but this time her eyes glaze over and I see a spark kindle in them. She has stopped eating, toast in one hand and jam spreader in the other. Her chest heaves as her breathing deepens. We are both still and the force of our connection is palpable. I feel the desire from the night before return in response to the invitation in her body language. It's when I feel the all-too-familiar drawing in my loins that I gasp and break our gaze.

I grip the table edge, attempting to quell the rampant surge in my groin. Taking a deep breath, I look back at her, incredulous and startled by the strength of my reaction. She is blinking, puzzled. Her gaze finds mine again and she quickly looks away, abashed. I feel the trembling in my legs as I force myself to stand.

I have to leave. I have to get back to my quarters until I can learn to control my dangerous reactions to her presence. I try to convince myself, as I rush from the Hall, that this is not a retreat, but a strategic repositioning based on new information.

Hermione woke up, stretching languorously under her covers. As she yawned, she threw back the covers to rise. Her yawn ended in a squeak of surprise when she noticed that her nightgown was bunched above her waist, and she had no knickers on. Her cheeks grew hot as she remembered the events of the night before, and her legs squeezed tight with the memory of what she had felt and done. Even now, she could feel the wetness that had pooled between her thighs.

Embarrassed, she scrambled out of bed, quickly yanking the covers over the damp spot under where she had lain. Even though she had bathed the night before, she felt dirty. She padded into the bathroom and started a shower. Something quick, and not dangerously relaxing like her bath last night.

She was startled by a knock on her door. Warily, she crossed her room and opened the door a crack. Exhaling gustily with relief, she smiled gingerly when she saw Harry's familiar smile.

"Morning, Mione. Coming to breakfast?"

She cracked the door a hair more and grimaced. "Yes, but I just woke up. I'm about to take a quick shower, then I'll meet you in the common room, okay?"

Harry's grin widened mischievously, and he stuck his foot in between her door and the frame. "About to take a shower, eh? Need any help?" He leered at her suggestively.

Hermione felt herself blush again, and looked away, shyly. Glancing at Harry, she saw the desire in his eyes again, and felt an answering pang in her centre. She suddenly was acutely aware that she was wearing only a thin cotton nightgown. Unnerved by her own reaction, she poked her bare toes at his foot, shoving it away. "Very funny, Harry. I'm quite sure I can manage on my own. I'll see you lot in a few minutes." She firmly pulled the door closed a little more.

Harry smirked, disappointed, but not really surprised. He saw her shutting the door and, with his unbelievably fast reflexes, grabbed it and held it still. Hermione gasped and looked up at him, startled. She felt his strength holding the door and knew she couldn't close it if he really wanted to keep her from doing so. Harry merely looked at her, thoughtfully, as he leant in closer. She knew he was about to kiss her and, at the last moment, threw her hand up to cover her mouth.

"Harry, I haven't even brushed my teeth yet! Honestly!"

Harry rolled his eyes at this dentists' daughter and snorted. Gazing levelly at her, he took her hand from her mouth and lightly kissed it instead. Then, flashing her a dazzling smile that made her stomach flutter, he dropped her hand and spun on his heel, jauntily heading back toward the common room. He looked over his shoulder at her, wiggled his fingers in a wave, and called, "See you in a few, then!"

Hermione let out a ragged sigh as she shut the door again. *Gods, he is going to be the death of me!* She practically ran to the bathroom, pulling her nightgown off in one smooth motion. She jumped into the shower and began lathering up. Ignoring her once again erect nipples, she soaped up thoroughly and rinsed in a quick, businesslike manner. Firmly diverting her mind elsewhere, she managed to wash away the leftover stickiness from her juices the night before without inciting more cause for arousal.

She dried off and dressed quickly, knowing the boys were waiting for her. Idly, she wondered if Ron knew about her and Harry. Then again, what was there to know about her and Harry? That they had kissed a few times? That he was making lewd suggestions to her? That she was seriously considering taking him up on said lewd suggestions? She giggled nervously. *I'm sure it'll all be fine. I'll just tell Ron that we're exploring the possibility of a relationship. Then I'll make him tell me what Harry may have said about me!*

Waving her wand to settle her hair, she smirked at her reflection, then filled Crookshanks's food bowl and scrubbed him behind the ears on her way out.

Harry and Ron were waiting for her, playing Wizard's Chess, as usual. They both smiled in greeting as they stood. Then, Ron's smile gaped into a huge yawn. He grimaced. "Sorry 'bout that. G'morning!"

Hermione chuckled at him. She looked at Harry, whose eyes had never left her, and sidled up to Ron. She pulled him down to whisper in his ear and Harry scowled. Ron looked askance at Harry's expression, but nodded meekly to Hermione. Hermione threaded her arm through Ron's and led him away from Harry. "Excuse us a moment, Harry. I have to talk to Ron in private."

Harry bristled at the sight of Hermione hanging on Ron, even though he knew nothing was going on. He strained to hear what she was saying, but to no avail. It was rather off-putting to be left out while they muttered to each other, repeatedly looking at him. Self-consciously, he ran a hand through his hair, wishing it would lie down properly. Shifting his weight uncertainly, he stuffed his hands in his pockets. Hermione was smiling and her cheeks were pink, and Ron was grinning but trying to hold it back. Harry sighed impatiently.

"Ron, I have to tell you something, and then I want you to answer a few questions." Hermione glanced back at Harry, seeing him watching them unhappily.

"Sure, 'Mione, what's up?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure you know Harry and I were... well... involved a bit when you brought breakfast up yesterday." She tilted her head, full of meaning.

Ron smirked and rubbed his hand on the back of his neck. He looked back at Harry. "Uh, yeah, it was a little obvious."

"Well, it happened again last night."

Ron's eyes widened at this. "It did? When?"

"After the meeting, I came up here and it was chaos, and he went with me to my room. I'm sure you can figure out why."

Ron shrugged sheepishly. "He *is* a teenage boy, 'Mione."

"I know that, which brings me to my first question: has he told you anything about us? About me?"

Ron looked back at Harry again. Earnestly, he looked into Hermione's eyes and answered, "No. He hasn't *said* anything. But, let me tell you: he's dead gone on you. I can tell. And it's even more serious that he hasn't said anything to me. But trust me, I know him pretty well after all these years, and he really fancies you, Hermione."

Hermione smiled and blushed. Ron started to smile. "So, I take it things progressed better with you two than they did with us?" Hermione looked away, then glanced at Harry again. Ron patted her arm. "'Nuff said. Good for you two. So, is it official?"

Hermione shook her head shyly. "I think this is where we could use your help, Ron. I think he may be afraid of letting it show in front of you."

Ron's eyebrows rose to his hairline and he thwacked his chest with his thumb. "Me? The old bugger must be daft if he thinks I'd be upset! I think it's great!" He grinned conspiratorially at Hermione. "Leave it to me. No worries here." Ron winked at Hermione and turned back to Harry.

Once he and Hermione joined Harry again, Ron stepped between them and threw his arms over their shoulders. Hermione looked up at Ron expectantly and Harry squinted at him, perplexed. "Oi, here's the deal, mates. Harry, Hermione, it's bloody obvious you two fancy each other, and I think it's about ruddy time you two got together!"

Harry's expression changed to one of surprise and he looked from Ron to Hermione and back again. A tentative smile spread across his face as he looked at his best friend. "Really? You don't mind?"

Ron smacked Harry on the back and winked suggestively at him. He leant in to him and said, "Look, if you can succeed where I failed, then more power to you!"

He snorted with laughter when Hermione swatted him and squawked, "Prat!" He backed out from between them and pushed Harry toward Hermione. When Harry took her hand and they smiled shyly at each other, Ron beamed enough to almost rival Dumbledore.

They took off for breakfast, chatting about inconsequentials. As they entered the Great Hall, they were all laughing at a joke Ron had told. Harry glanced about quickly, looking to see who was there. He was waiting for someone to crack wise about him and Hermione.

He leant toward her and said, "So, 'Mione, does this mean you'll sit next to me at breakfast?" She smiled and blushed. They sat beside each other at the table, still holding hands, and Ron took up residence across from them.

Hermione felt a prickling on her scalp, like static electricity, and turned her head, to find Snape staring at her intensely. She could see the suppressed anger crackling in his eyes and gasped.

Then she remembered the thoughts she had had about him the night before and felt the blush creeping up her face. Confused by the conflicting emotions and sensations she felt, she pulled her hand from Harry's, worrying about her physical attraction to two completely different men, one of which was out of the question!

Harry felt her tug her hand from his and looked at her in surprise. He saw her eyes looking at the High Table and turned to find Snape pinning them with an icy stare. Harry's anger grew and he glared back at Snape. Snape's eyes narrowed at him, but Harry refused to back down.

Ron noticed both Harry and Hermione suddenly going quiet and looked to see Harry and Snape locked in a silent battle of wills, and Hermione looking distressed. So, Ron took it upon himself to lean across the table and knock Harry's elbow, to end the confrontation.

Once they were no longer looking at Snape, both Harry and Hermione started to eat breakfast with at least some semblance of normalcy. Ron engaged Harry in talk of Quidditch as usual and Hermione let her thoughts wander.

Again, her thoughts turned to Snape, whom she could feel like a weight against her neck. She turned to see him looking at her again. Hermione saw the fire in his eyes, the same look that had sparked her reaction previously. She felt sucked in by his magnetic gaze and her breathing quickened in remembered attraction. Heat roiled in her stomach once again and her lips parted as she exhaled heavily.

The fire in her body rekindled and she felt drawn to the answering fire she sensed in Snape. Involuntarily, her body leant toward him. Suddenly, she saw him gasp and wrench his gaze away. The intense, fevered connection between them was broken. She blinked, taking shaky breaths, trying to regain her senses.

Snape finally looked back at her and she saw the faint panic in his eyes. She knew he could see her arousal and looked away, embarrassed. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him stand slowly and then hurry from the Hall. She forced herself to not watch him leave, denying herself the thrill from seeing his black robes billowing dramatically behind him. But there was something in the haste with which he fled that made her think he was running like one pursued by demons.

When he was gone, she took a deep breath of release from his palpable presence. Now that she was able to come out from under the thrall of his powerful personality, she resumed eating and listening to the conversations of her tablemates. And, when Harry reached for her hand again, she let him take it and keep it.

I'm back in my lab, forcing myself to brew a replacement for my hangover cure when I hear the flutter of wings behind me. I turn to see the school owl landing on a desk nearby and I deftly remove the scroll from its leg. It flies away immediately, indicating that an answer to the missive is not required.

Dumbledore's seal is on the wax and I frown as I open the scroll, wondering what on earth he wants now. I blanch as I read his words.

"Professor Snape,

I have taken the liberty of scheduling a meeting for you and Miss Granger tonight, to jointly listen to the music boxes I have provided. I expect you to use this time to discuss

what you have determined about your characterizations as well. I have owed Miss Granger with instructions to meet you in your classroom at 7:00 this evening. As a professor, I trust you will manage this meeting well enough on your own. I will not be present, as I will be supervising a similar meeting among other cast members. Be sure to check the notice board for further meeting dates and times.

A. Dumbledore, Headmaster and Director."

My eyes close in pained denial. The little chit will be invading my domain! Abruptly, my brow creases in sudden thought. *Wait a minute; she will be in my domain. I am the one in control here! I'll show her that she can't get to me, in this play or not.* I smile haughtily at the realization.

Determined to meet her on my own territory, I remain in my quarters the rest of the day, brewing potions and grading lacklustre attempts at essays. I take my meals in my sitting room, gazing at the music box, loath to listen to it before the meeting tonight.

Finally, as it nears 7:00, I carry the music box and script into my classroom, placing them prominently on my desk. I settle into my chair, preparing to look imposing for when she arrives. When I note that it is almost 7:00, I school my expression into one of grim indifference. Right on the dot, I hear a tentative knock on my door.

"Enter." I don't look up as she steps quietly into the room. She approaches my desk, scroll and script in hand, and stands politely, waiting to be acknowledged. I continue reading an essay...well, pretending to, really...to make her wait, reasserting my authority. Finally, I can't wait any longer, for her silent presence inflames my senses, and I slide my gaze from the page to meet hers. I look steadily at her for a moment before nodding and saying, "Miss Granger."

She quickly responds, "Good evening, Professor Snape. I received this message from the headmaster saying I was to come here tonight to meet with you." She falters a bit as I curl my lip in distaste.

Boredly, I remark, "Yes, yes. I, too, received such a message. Now, let's get this nonsense over with and you can get out of my sight." Her eyes flash with irritation at my casual dismissal of her. "I believe we are to listen to the recording and follow along in the script. Then, apparently..." I sneer in disgust, "we are supposed to 'discuss our characterizations.'"

She nods and opens her script obediently. I roll my eyes and flip my script to the first page. Steeling myself, apprehensive about going through the play again, especially after the events that had transpired last night, I reach toward the music box. *You were drunk and out of control last night. Now you know better and you'll be fine. Just get this over with and send her away.*

I glance at her studiously keeping her eyes cast down on the page, patiently waiting for me to start the music box. Inhaling silently, I tip it open, startled by the immediate sound of a smacking gavel and the cry, "Sold!" Surreptitiously, I glance to see if she noticed my surprise, but she is sitting like a statue, head bowed, eyes looking at the script. Realizing that I am treading in dangerous territory if I keep staring, I shade my eyes with my hand, leaning my forehead against my fingers.

Closing my eyes, I hear the quality of the recording. It sounds like the people are right there in the classroom. Suddenly, my eyes fly open as I am once again startled, this time by the abrupt and rather loud blare of music. Peeking out from under my hand, I see that she has her eyes closed, a faint smile on her lips. *Did she see that? Is she laughing at me?* Frowning, I bark, "Miss Granger! What, pray tell, do you find so amusing?"

Her eyes snap open at her name, and her mouth forms a small "o" of worry. "Nothing, Professor! I don't find anything amusing, sir. I was just... enjoying the music." She pauses for a fraction of a second before barreling on, "I just love this play, sir. The music is wonderful; and the story is so beautiful and sad at the same time! It really is exquisite..."

Her eyes fill with their characteristic sparkle as she waxes enthusiastic about the play, and I find myself appreciating her vivaciousness on some primal level. Realizing that, I tear my gaze away and dismissively wave my hand at her.

"Enough, Miss Granger. Be good enough to cease your prattling so I can hear the recording. Not all answers require the 'Granger extra.'" I sneer derisively at her, seeing her eyes cloud with irritation. Her lips purse, and she gets that bossy look I recognize all too well. Before she can open her mouth to argue with me, as she is clearly preparing to do, I slam the music box shut and glare at her. She jumps at the sudden gesture and her expression changes to one of apprehension.

"Miss Granger, all that is required of you is to sit and listen. I have no interest in your opinions about the work. If you persist in being a nuisance, rest assured that you will have detentions to fit into your schedule as well." Her eyes narrow in anger and indignation. "Now, one more word from you without being spoken to, and you can rehearse your lines with Filch." Pausing for effect, I raise my eyebrow at her, expecting a response. Stonily, she nods, lips shut in an angry line. Pointedly, she looks down at her script.

Smiling to myself for having put her in her place, I open the music box again, relieved to hear it pick up where it left off. We sit in silence, listening to the swell of the music. She is sitting stiffly, her anger virtually exuding from her body language. Smirking, I relax back in my chair, stretching my legs under my desk. The overture ends and I look to my script to follow along with the song that begins. I quickly realize that there is more dialogue in the script than is in this recording. My eyes skip along the pages, picking up where the lines have been included. Finally, we come to the point where Christine sings her first song. A few lines in, I glance up at Granger, only to see her, eyes shut again, lips moving silently with the song. I gaze fully at her, puzzled. Watching her mouth, I realize she's mouthing the lyrics, but her eyes are closed!

Inexplicably incensed, I slam the music box shut again and shoot forward in my chair, leaning menacingly toward her. "Miss Granger!" I hiss. "Just what are you doing?"

Startled again, she warily eyes me and says, confused, "I'm just singing my part, sir. I didn't make any noise..."

I interrupt testily, "I never claimed you did. *How*, Miss Granger, are you 'singing your part' when you only received it a day ago?"

Blinking rapidly, she stammers, "I already knew the part, sir. I've known this play for years now. I know all of the songs and most of the rest."

Exasperated, I roll my eyes at her. "Yet another area for you to be a Know-It-All, isn't that correct, Miss Granger?"

Obviously torn between anger and fear, she wisely chooses to say nothing, looking down from my irate glare. Irritably, I fling the box open again and flop back in my chair again, arms crossed. *I can't believe this! She already knows it all! Damn her, living up to her insufferable title. It is completely unacceptable for her to be ahead of me. That's it. I will know this play backwards and forwards by the next meeting. She cannot be allowed to think she's better than I at anything!*

We continue to sit in silence, listening. I hear Potter's character again and scowl. Then, after Christine's song, I hear the Phantom for the first time. *Hmm, lovely effect, that echo quality...*

Eventually, the recording proceeds to the Phantom's first song. It's the one that gave me the jolt of recognition when I read the words the first time. I concentrate on the song, ingrain it into my memory, intent on remembering everything to match Granger. I hear the hypnotic tones of the Phantom's voice, luring Christine, and I mentally practice it, smirking to myself, knowing that I can definitely do that part well.

As they begin the duet, I glance up. Again, she is singing silently with the song. Her eyes are closed and her cheeks are slightly flushed. Intrigued, I watch her as I listen. When the Phantom's first line of the duet begins, a convulsive shudder ripples over her. *What was that about?* When she's not mouthing the words, her lips fall open slightly, and I notice she's breathing heavily. Fascinated, I stare at her. The song crescendos, the Phantom murmuring to Christine, coaxing her to higher vocal peaks. I can't take my eyes off her. I'm transfixed by her overtly physical reaction to the music. Her face is even redder now, and her brow is furrowed. Then, when the Phantom cries, "Sing for me!" her hands clench and her head lists back. She sighs spasmodically, trembling.

I realize that I am barely breathing, entranced by her. The Phantom begins "Music of the Night" and she sighs deeply, her body sagging. Her head rolls forward again, and

her hair partially shields her face. Coming back to my senses, I feel the tightening in my trousers, my instinctive reaction to her raw display. The throb of my blood pounds through me, in my temples, my groin, my chest. I let the Phantom's words flow through me as I watch her intently.

She slowly lifts her head again, with a dreamy expression on her face. There is something distinctly sensual about her body language now. She seems to be swaying with the music, and she strains up in her seat as she hears the line, "Let your soul take you where you long to be!" Then, she opens her eyes and looks directly into mine as we hear, "Only then can you belong to me."

The passion in her eyes staggers me, and I feel another answering surge in my lap. I don't blink as I gaze into her eyes, stunned to see the flicker in them at the words, "Touch me, trust me, savour each sensation!" Desperately casting about for control, that voice inside me speaks up. *She's staring straight at you. Use Legilimency to find out what that was all about, what she's thinking right now!*

Not caring about the unethical manner in which I'm about to use my skills, mainly due to the raging erection I'm sporting in my reckless reaction to a student, I send a piercing look straight through her, easing past her lowered defences effortlessly. I almost pull back in shock at what I find.

Merlin's beard! She's coming down from an orgasm! That's what that was! Gods, she's practically burning with heat and want right now. Bloody hell, she wants me? Reeling in awe, I'm distracted by that other voice.

So take her. You want her. She wants you. Take her! She's already hot and bothered for you, wet from coming in front of you. You know you want to. Do it!

My cock throbs. This is dangerous. Steeling myself, I withdraw from the heated turbulence of her mind. *Shite. I can't believe I did that! The Phantom of the opera is there inside her mind! How damned ironic. I wonder if she noticed. Bugger me!* Ruthlessly clamping down on my seething emotions, I look away from her fiery gaze.

This is too much. I have to stop this. I must recall her to our normal relationship. Christine's song in which she takes the Phantom's mask is playing while I am pondering. Then, as the Phantom explodes in anger, I glance sharply back at her, in time to see her jump and cringe. When her eyes reopen, I see the confusion and fear in them again. I let my gaze bore into her, grateful for the song's inadvertent restoration of our normal positions. She is looking at me, frightened, and I hold her prisoner with my gaze. The previous tumult of heat and desire is gone, replaced by the usual wary dislike.

Then, the Phantom's words impinge upon my consciousness and I hear his mood change. Once again, the tone becomes softer, more hypnotic. My chest tightens at the words, "Fear can turn to love. You'll learn to see to find the man behind the monster." My overbearing attitude crumbles and I see her stare turn from fearful to speculative. I can tell from the intensity of her gaze that it's a good thing she has not been trained in Legilimency, otherwise she would be reading my very soul right now. I blink distractedly and let my eyes fall to the page. I curse myself for backing down from her, but I can't seem to maintain my calm, cool façade while I'm around her, immersed in this infernal play!

While I am determinedly reconstructing my indifferent demeanour, the scene ends. I look up again to see her still staring at me, like she's trying to decipher some old runes. Irritably, I shut the book again and scowl at her. In a dangerously calm tone, I bite out, "Miss Granger, is there a problem?"

She blinks and thoughtfully chews her lip before answering, "No, Professor."

"Then why must you persist in staring at me in such a lack-witted fashion? It is obvious you are obsessing over something. What is it that seems to be preoccupying you in the face of our assignment?"

At my question, her eyes dart away quickly. It's obvious she's hiding something. That traitorous voice speaks again. *Use Legilimency again!* I instantly balk at this, still unsettled by what I found last time. She is anxiously clasping her hands and worrying them, still avoiding answering me.

"Miss Granger?" I repeat acidly, one eyebrow slowly arching.

She meets my eyes again and I see the blush staining her cheeks. Then, it's as if a light has gone on inside her. Her nervous twitching stops and she takes a deep breath. With quiet composure, she sits up straight and says, "Well, sir, I was just wondering: are you planning on singing yourself or are you going to use the spell?" I see a mixture of relief and real curiosity in her eyes, and I realize that she just came up with that idea. Nevertheless, I am taken aback by her question.

Narrowing my eyes at her, I glower and sit straight in my chair, reaching for the music box and looking down my nose at her. "Keep your thoughts on your assignment, Miss Granger, not wandering into affairs that are none of your business." She deflates slightly, the spark of real curiosity guttering out, then primly returns her attention to the script. I flip the book open again.

I lean my brow against my fingers again, skimming the lines as the recording continues, consciously avoiding looking at Granger. The silence between us stretches on as the scene with the managers begins. Frankly, I'm relieved that she is just quietly sitting there.

After several minutes, I venture to look up and see her mouthing the words again. *Blast! She wasn't exaggerating when she said she knew all of the songs! Damn it, I better start right away learning this thing; I refuse to lag behind this insufferable know-it-all!* My nostrils flare in a silent huff of irritation.

Minutes tick by as we listen to the multi-part song that leads into "Prima Donna." I now understand how complex it will be for the others to sing their parts in such an interweaving piece. I briefly forget about Granger's presence as I focus on the intricate meshing of several voices. This brings to mind her question about my singing. I frown to myself, knowing I have not yet made that decision. I have not made many occasions to sing, but I don't think I have a bad ear or voice. On the rare occasions I indulged in song, I felt rather pleased with the quality of my performance. However, I know that this is a very important event, and I don't want to do anything that may not live up to the quality needed for competition.

Looking up at her again, I decide. *Hmph. She claims she can sing. Well, we'll just have to see about that. If she sings on her own, I will.* A flare of doubt interrupts me. Glumly, I continue, *Unless, of course, I'm not good enough, in which case Dumbledore will cast the spell on me, in every effort to win.*

Resettling myself in my chair, I scowl at the script, annoyed once more with this whole debacle. Again, I notice that there is more dialogue during the "Il Muto" performance than is on the recording. Briefly, I smirk in appreciation of the Phantom's trick of making Carlotta croak. Then, I hear his diabolical laughter and goose flesh prickles my skin. Involuntarily, I chuckle evilly right along with him.

Upon hearing me, Granger's head snaps up, her eyes wide in consternation. She sees my wicked smirk and hooded eyes and jumps, shying back from me like a frightened colt as a shiver runs through her frame. Delighting in the rush of power I feel at her reaction, I let my laughter grow along with the Phantom's. I'm enjoying the maniacal sounds issuing from both the recording and myself, appreciating the echoing in the dungeon. She shakes her head faintly and forces herself to drop her eyes back to her script. Triumphant once again, I desist and lean back lazily, stretching my legs out under my desk.

The music changes as Christine and Raoul have escaped to the roof. I let my eyes close as I listen, rolling them under my lids at the sickeningly sweet mood when "All I Ask of You" starts. *How disgusting to have to watch Potter moon over her even more. He's besotted as it is. Surely she'll find it as annoying as everyone else does who has to suffer through watching them.* I recall the boy's face as he walked in holding her hand at breakfast. The anger comes rushing back. *Good gods, what is your problem? Why should you care if she's going out with him? Maybe if they're together they'll be less underfoot...* But deep down, the possessive part of me is growling, wanting the girl that has invaded my mind so completely. I set my lips in a tight thin line and open my eyes a crack, watching her.

She is smiling, her cheeks pink, happily mouthing the words. Jealousy rears its ugly green head as I study her. The duet ends and the Phantom quietly sings his betrayal. Her smile falters and she blinks rapidly. She lifts her eyes to mine. Again, she is captured in my gaze. This time I make sure my expression is unreadable, closed. She is conflicted. I can see pleasure and pity and shame all battling for purchase. I refuse to release her from my stare until the scene ends. As the Phantom shouts "Go!" she

jumps again, her eyes never leaving mine. I reach out and shut the box. At the sound of it snapping shut, she blinks, flustered. I study her a moment longer before I rise smoothly, looking into her upturned face. Her expression is wary, her body tense, like an animal ready to flee at a moment's notice.

"As this is the intermission, we will pause for a short break. If you choose to leave, Miss Granger, return in five minutes...no more. We will continue then." I spin on my heel and retreat into my office. In the shadows of my private office, I turn back and watch her, concealed from her view. She apparently watched me leave, as her gaze is fixed upon the doorway from which I spy on her. She is gripping the chair tightly, her knuckles white, her eyes dark with tumultuous emotions.

After a beat, she shakes her head and lifts her hands to her face, sighing. Her fingers are trembling as she rubs her eyes and forehead, massaging her temples. She darts a quick glance toward me again, then stands.

Idly shaking her hands from the wrist, she takes a deep breath. She exhales gustily, then covers her mouth as she yawns. Lacing her fingers together, she raises her arms above her head and leans back, stretching. I inhale sharply at the tightening in my groin as I watch her breasts strain against her robes, her nipples clearly stiff under the fabric. She grimaces and straightens, a look of chagrin on her face before nervously glancing about the room, pointedly at my door, and crossing her arms in front of her, covering her breasts.

My cock is swelling again and I reach within my robes to adjust it. I feel a surge of pleasure at my touch; the wish that it were her hand flashes across my mind. I stifle a groan at the thought and look back out at her. She shifts her weight from foot to foot, watching my door anxiously. After a peek at her watch, she sighs and sits again, fluffing her robes out over her chest, surreptitiously watching for my return. The five minutes are almost up, and I close my eyes, dreading going back in there to suffer more torment.

Setting my jaw, I straighten my robes, ensuring that my erection is invisible, and stride back to my desk. She looks up at me through her lashes, slouching in her chair, her arms folded in front of her. On a wicked impulse, I sneer at her and demand, silkily, "Sit up straight, Miss Granger. That posture is undignified and defiant. I will not tolerate such a display of insolence."

Her eyes widen in shock and dismay. Reluctantly, she slides her arms apart and places her hands in her lap. Then, blushing profusely in humiliation, she looks down as she straightens her spine. Her body is rigid with outrage and shame, and I feel a surge of smug satisfaction as well as a tingle in my loins when her hard nipples poke against her robes. Smirking to myself, I sit indolently and flick the music box open again.

She grips her script tightly, her hands trembling. She is breathing heavily, undoubtedly seething at such injustice! I force myself to look at my script and not at her enticing breasts rising and falling. Silently, I will my desire away, hoping my erection will go away soon.

Reading the stage directions during the introductory music, I muse about how much Dumbledore will revel in the staging of this masquerade. He loves his banquets and holiday balls; no doubt he'll be quite in his element in this aspect! The song plays on, and we are silent in our own thoughts, until the moment when the Phantom arrives. As he begins, I feel a tingling on my scalp, and I look up to find her staring at me in wonder. Nonplussed at her odd expression, I mechanically reach out and close the box again.

"What?"

Seemingly unperturbed by my flat tone, she gazes at me thoughtfully. After a beat, she responds, "I can't help but think of your mask and cloak that you wore to the Death Eater meetings. It just came to me last night when I read through the script."

A cold chill sweeps over me. Utterly floored that she too made the connection that I did, I swallow against the sudden dryness in my throat. "And just when did you see me like that?" I manage to rasp out.

In a low voice, she explains, "Last summer, right before the Final Battle, you appeared at Number Twelve in your Death Eater garb, straight from a meeting. I was afraid for a moment that we were being invaded, but then you pulled off your mask and left to find the other Order Members." She smiles tentatively. "I don't think I've ever been quite so glad to see you as I was at that moment, Professor Snape." A nervous chuckle follows her statement, dying out quickly in the silence.

I'm still staring at her, remembering the day in question. I can see her terrified expression again. It melted into relief when I removed my mask. I remember the jolt I felt when she smiled up at me, radiating her pleasure in seeing me. I didn't know how to feel about the sensations she evoked in me and I purposefully put her out of my mind as I went in search of Dumbledore. Now, the image of her dazzling smile hangs in front of me. Ruefully, I wonder if I could ever elicit a smile such as that one from her again.

Ignoring the pounding in my chest, I blankly turn to the box and restart the music. I glance back at her, my expression inscrutable, and she looks down, crestfallen. The scene ends, and I note that there is an entire scene left off the recording between Raoul and Giry. Vainly, I try to concentrate on the next scene. It's another song with multiple parts mixing together. Several minutes later, through which we have both remained introverted, Christine's song begins where she is faced with being the bait to try to capture the Phantom.

I glance up to see Granger mouthing the words again, her face plainly showing the pain and worry of her character. As Raoul speaks up in response, I picture Potter leading her into something dangerous, as he's done so many times before, and I feel the familiar anger rise. One of these days, Potter is going to do something rash and foolish again, and this time he's not going to come out of it a hero! My teeth grind in irritation and I stew in my resentment of bloody Potter through the next scenes.

Christine sings her melancholy song in the mausoleum, and the sombre mood settles over us in the classroom. The Phantom appears and begins luring her to him, when that interfering imbecile Raoul steps in, drawing her back again. I imagine the confrontation scene with Potter, relishing the idea of shooting fireballs at him. *I wonder how much trouble I would be in if one just so happened to actually strike him?* A black smile hovers on my lips at the thought. Granger is avoiding looking at me anymore.

I flip through my script to the current page, having lost track during my musings. Another scene is skipped, in which the Phantom eludes the bumbling police in their attempts to capture him. The recording proceeds directly on to the scene from "Don Juan Triumphant." My pulse speeds up at the memory of what happened when I read "The Point of No Return" the night before. I know what's coming, and my body responds in kind.

I incline my head, letting my hair cloak my face, and I watch Granger from beneath half-closed lids. As the song begins, I wait for her reaction to the blatant sexuality in the lyrics. Heat races through my body as I think of how I envisioned this scene with her, seducing her with my voice and claiming her with my body. My breathing is erratic and shaky. The tension in the room increases noticeably.

She is mechanically mouthing along with the songs until the import of the words seems to hit her. She stiffens. Her eyes widen and her lips still. Agitatedly, she turns her pages until she, too, is at the correct place. Her eyes blink rapidly, as if she's trying to comprehend something incredibly complex. At the words "sweet seduction," she swallows and I can see her chest heaving. Then, moments later, at her words "In my mind I've already imagined our bodies entwining, defenceless and silent," she gasps audibly and flicks a terrified, agonized glance at me.

I keep my head down, avoiding meeting her questing gaze. I don't want her to see the desire that must be nearly incandescent, it burns so hot inside me. I am as relieved as she when the scene culminates in a scream and the sexual tension abates.

The Phantom takes Christine down to his dungeon and the others follow. I remain still, trying to maintain my composure. Granger is fighting for control over her own emotions. She is breathing erratically and nervously darting her eyes between the script, the music box, and me. Her hands keep clenching spastically. At Christine's words "This haunted face holds no horror for me now. It's in your soul that the true distortion lies," she looks up at me, and her eyes glisten with unshed tears. I still refuse to meet her gaze openly, peering through my shielding curtain of hair.

My lips thin in a grim line of displeasure when Raoul appears. Part of me identifies with the Phantom in wanting to dispose of such a nuisance, but another part of me rebukes me, knowing that my character is unbalanced and such thoughts are unworthy of me. Perhaps I wouldn't feel so strongly about it if Potter weren't the one playing the role. Fervently, I wish the end of the school year would hurry up, so I can be rid of The-Boy-Who-Annoys-Me-To-No-End.

Finally, Christine is faced with her impossible choice. My stomach roils, resenting the fact that I have never known, nor am I likely ever to know, the kind of love that saves Raoul from his fate. There is no one who would ever sacrifice herself to save me. I school my expression into a cold, stony one of indifference. This girl cannot be allowed to see the despair within me.

Eventually, Christine and Raoul depart together, and the Phantom is left a broken man. I see Granger furtively wiping her eyes and sniffing. She gulps in air and sighs, trying to calm herself. By the time the last line dies away, she is composed, but her eyes are red-rimmed, and her nose is pink.

Profoundly disturbed by the fact that I, too, felt moisture threaten at my increasing misery, I lash out at her instead. Forcefully shutting the box, I say harshly, "Come now, Miss Granger. I have no use for your snivelling. Stop being so overly emotional. It is just a play, after all." I finally toss my hair back from my face and snarl disdainfully at her.

Her eyes kindle again, indignant. Shutting her script with a bang, she looks up at me, eyes blazing. "I beg your pardon, sir. I *told* you this play was sad and beautiful. Forgive me for allowing my heart to *feel*. It really is something worth doing. Perhaps you should try it some time."

The silence following her insolent words is charged with electricity. I am momentarily struck dumb in shock that she actually made that comment out loud. Bitter rage surges through me, and her eyes widen slightly as the folly of her remark hits her. The righteous anger fades from her eyes, to be replaced by stunned fear.

I deliberately scrape my boots across the stone floor. Agonizingly slowly, I draw myself up to my full height, towering over her. The silence is deafening as I step around my desk, never taking my eyes from hers, never blinking. She is transfixed, unable to look away, terrified of what I'm going to do. I stop directly in front of her and lean down toward her menacingly. My eyes narrow. A rush of predatory power goes through me. My face is now only a hand's span from hers. Before I speak, a low growl emerges from deep within me. Her eyelids flutter in fright and her lips fall open as she gasps.

In a dangerously low voice, barely more than a murmur, I speak. "I'm certain that you have quickly grasped the enormity of your impudence. I must say that I am shocked at your outrageous audacity, Miss Granger. And after everything you promised to the headmaster, too." A sinister smile curls my lips as I whisper, "Tut, tut."

She gulps nervously, her lips trembling as she opens them to speak, and I quickly place one long, slender finger on her lips, stopping her. I am about to flay her alive with my scathing remarks, but I am stopped by the tingle I feel from my finger on her lips. It shoots through my hand to my centre. I tense in surprise. She, too, is virtually vibrating with tension as she sits as still as possible, cowering below me. As I pause to identify the sensation, I become aware of her breath puffing against my finger. I realize how soft and pliable her lips are against my skin. Rushes of heat spread out from the point of contact to all parts of my body, particularly to my groin, where my cock is once again stiffening.

Distinctly unsettled by these wild emotions running rampant, I look back at her eyes. I feel another jolt as I recognize the passion and desire lurking behind the fear.

"Fear can turn to love..."

We're rooted to the spot. Languidly, her lids droop and I nearly jump out of my skin as the tip of her tongue snakes out to flick lightly against the pad of my fingertip. Desperately fighting for control, I inhale sharply, feeling my blood pulsing through me.

Unable to stop myself, as if I'm under a spell, I speak, my voice rough with suppressed emotion. "Do not presume that I cannot feel, Miss Granger. I may not be as transparent in showing them as you are, but I do have feelings."

Her eyes lock on mine again, and the invitation is unmistakable. Breathily, her lips moving against my finger, she asks, "Then, why don't you try showing them?"

The wickedly amused voice in my head smirks, *Yes, why don't you show her your feelings? Undoubtedly, she'll feel them, deep inside her...* Reeling, flailing about in my mind, I grasp with all my strength onto the thought, *No! She's a student, and you're letting yourself get carried away! End this nonsense and send her away!*

Reluctantly, I back my finger away from her mouth. She leans forward, following it, until I hurriedly snatch my hand away. Her gaze snaps back up to mine. Confusion swirls the lust and fear in her eyes. I straighten my spine and turn away from her, ripping myself from her gaze. I pause for a moment, my robes twirling about my ankles. I can feel her stare upon me, like a brand against my back.

Stealthily, I adjust my straining erection before I return to my seat. Sitting stiffly, I turn my gaze back to her. She is nervously running a hand through her hair, chewing her lip, avoiding my eyes. She has transformed from the passionate woman back to the spooked girl.

Wearily, I say, "I believe we have spent enough time on this tonight. We will just have to save the discussion for another time. You are dismissed, Miss Granger."

She glances up at me, relief mixed with confusion apparent. Hesitantly, she asks, "Professor?"

Irritably, I drum my fingers on the desk. "What is it now?" I huff in exasperation.

She stands and humbly hangs her head. "Professor, I want to apologize for what I said. I was rude and childish, and I didn't mean it. I'm sorry for my outburst, and I will behave more maturely in the future." She pauses, but I don't respond, as it's obvious she's not done. After a few beats, she continues, her voice even lower, almost a whisper. "I know you have feelings. I didn't mean to hurt them. Anyone as brave and noble as you can't possibly be heartless. Please forgive me, sir." Her face is red with shame.

I am once again struck dumb. *What is it about this silly little girl that can completely shatter my faculties?* I know I'm staring at her, incredulous. Finally, after a few moments of uncomfortable silence, she looks up at me. Her expression is a bizarre mixture of dignified hope, humiliation, and apprehension. I blink rapidly. I can't figure out what to say. At last, I manage to grind out, "I'm sure such an immature, undignified display will not occur again, Miss Granger. Now, return to your Tower. Our meeting is over."

Recognizing that that is as close as she'll get to me forgiving her, she accepts the tacit understanding and nods, gathering her script and scroll. Solemnly walking to the door, she pauses and turns back, offering a grave, "Good night, Professor. Thank you for meeting with me."

I am amazed at the courtesy she is determined to show, no matter what invective flows in the meantime. Grudgingly, I am impressed with her attempts at behaving like an adult. That voice pipes up again, *Well, she is new at it, after all...*

As she opens the door, I surprise myself by calling to her. She turns immediately, attentive. I clear my throat, and then speak. "You asked whether I plan to sing myself or not." She smiles faintly, that spark of interest back in her eyes. "I do. That is to say, I hope to do so. I suppose the headmaster will have the final say, of course." I clear my throat again as I trail off.

She smiles, and it reaches her eyes. "Indeed. I hope to do the same thing." She pauses for a beat, looking down, and then locks eyes with me as she continues. "I look forward to hearing you, sir. I'm sure your singing voice will be just as commanding as your speaking voice. But," she breaks off with a little chuckle, "I'm sure you are well aware of the effects of your voice." Her smile is warm and friendly, and a little bit something else.

I feel the tightness in my throat loosen and a soothing sensation flows through me at her smile. It lights up her whole face, like the one she gave me last summer at Number Twelve. Unsure of the very voice of which she speaks, I merely nod at her, a rusty smile tugging at my lips.

She looks down briefly, then back up as she nods. "Good night, Professor." With that, she turns smartly on her heel and exits, softly closing the door behind her.

"I'm sure you are well aware of the effects of your voice."

My thoughts tumble in my mind as I struggle to understand everything that happened this evening. Pensively, I ward the classroom door and retreat to my quarters.

Painfully aware of the effects *she* had on me, I resolutely summon a Dreamless Sleep draught. As I prepare for bed, I toss back the potion. I can't take the chance of a replay of the night before. I have classes tomorrow!

Worriedly, I wonder what class will be like with her in it after tonight. Then, I gratefully feel my cares dissipating as the potion takes hold and I sink into sleep, ignoring the clamouring in my body. Things will surely look better in the morning...

9- Stunning Sights and Shocking Realizations

Chapter 9 of 84

Hermione returns to her room after her meeting with Snape. Unbeknownst to her Harry does the same thing--goes to her room, that is. Harry should now go by the name of "Tom" after what he sees. Hermione figures out her own mind when she's in bed after another bath.

Standard Disclaimer applies as usual.

Chapter 9- Stunning Sights and Shocking Realizations

Hermione managed to make it back to her room without being sidelined by any other students, mainly because the ones most likely to stop her were also involved in their meetings to listen to the music with Dumbledore or McGonagall. She realized that they were probably taking longer since there were more people in those groups to discuss their characters.

We never got to discuss our characterizations, thought Hermione, frowning slightly at the thought of not completing Dumbledore's assignment. Then she remembered *why* her meeting with Snape had been cut short and frowned even more. She was glad no one was around to see her flushed face as she sped to her room.

Distracted, she whirled into her room and slammed the door behind her, heaving a sigh of relief as she placed her script back on her desk. She rolled her head about on her neck, trying to ease the strain in her neck and shoulders, then reached up and kneaded her muscles. Stretching backwards again, she grimaced at the sensation of her clothing rubbing against her stiff nipples. *Gods! I wish they'd just stop that! It's getting ridiculous...*

Scowling at her reflection in her mirror, she removed her robes and laid them across her chair. *Just forget about everything for a while, and try to relax. Take a hot bath and let the tension drain out of your muscles before all of that acid makes you feel worse.*

Hermione knew from her study of the human body that prolonged adrenaline manufacture caused a build-up of acid in the muscles and if they didn't "fight" and get it out that way, then the build-up would be toxic. That whole "fight or flight" urge. She had definitely wanted to "flee" from Snape earlier.

Her eyes widened again, aghast at her cheek making that comment to Snape. She hadn't felt so terrified of what he might do since they had knocked him out in third year at the Shrieking Shack. She made her way into the bathroom and started the water, making it almost scalding hot, adding some bubble bath with essential oils to aid in relaxation.

She was mechanically undressing when she got to her knickers, which she practically had to peel off, they were so saturated. As she pulled them off, embarrassed at the large wet spot, she detected the scent of her arousal, a faint musk that was certainly not part of her bubble bath. Glancing in the mirror, she saw she was blushing fiercely.

Get a hold of yourself! You need to learn to control yourself, especially now that Harry has stirred up that part of you. There's a time and place for things like that, and Snape's classroom is certainly not one of them!

Hissing and wincing at the scalding heat of the bathwater as she stepped in, she gritted her teeth as she lowered herself into the bubbles, goose flesh spreading all over her body. She stretched out, letting her hair hang over the edge where she propped her head. The water rose up to within an inch of the rim, warning her to not make too many sudden moves, or it would slosh over the side. Of course, the idea was to relax in the tub, so sudden moves weren't likely.

She sighed in pleasure at the heat enveloping her, soothing the taut muscles in her neck and shoulders. Even her nipples released their tightness. She slowly ran her hands over her skin, smoothing away the goose flesh. Determinedly, she slipped her fingers down through her curls, rinsing away the remnants of her excitement, ignoring the delicious pangs that sped through her when she brushed up against her clit.

Honestly! It's enough to have randy boy to deal with; you don't need to add to the problem by becoming a randy girl yourself! You have much more important things to be thinking about and spending your time on than having erotic fantasies about... people! Even in the privacy of her own mind, she shied away from acknowledging which people were included in that statement.

She reached for her wand. "*Accio* music box." The music box flew into her outstretched hand and she placed it on the toilet lid beside the tub after setting the volume to a low level. *I might as well practice while I'm in here since I can't do anything else..* She opened the box and settled back into the hot, foamy water to listen, waiting for her parts to start, so she could sing softly with the music.

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Back in the common room, Harry climbed in through the portrait hole ahead of Ron and looked around for Hermione. He frowned when he looked at the time.

"Surely she and Snape must be done by now. There're only two of them, so it couldn't have taken as long as our group did." He looked at Ron, puzzled.

Ron shrugged, glancing around as well. "I dunno, mate. Maybe she's in the library?"

"Maybe. Or she could be in her room, studying. Let's go find out." Harry motioned for Ron to follow him, but Ron didn't move.

Rubbing his hand on the back of his neck, Ron looked at Harry, a half smile on his face and said, "Uh, no. *I'll* go see if she's in the library, and *you* check to see if she's in her room." He winked at Harry and grinned suggestively. "I'll send her up to find you if I see her in the library."

Harry paused, at first irritated at the delay, then he smiled deviously when he grokked Ron's meaning. "Uh, right. Yeah, you do that. I'll see you later?"

Ron shrugged airily and said, "Sure. Just let me know when you get in tonight, eh? I want to know all the gory details." He rubbed his hands together in a caricature of an evil scientist concocting his nefarious plan.

Harry snorted, but he mock-punched Ron in the arm. "You sick bastard. What makes you think I'd tell you anything?" He fought back his grin and looked haughtily down his nose at Ron.

Ron's expression turned to one of dismay and he stretched his hands out, palms up. "Hey! I got you two together, didn't I? I deserve a cut of the profits! Really, mate, you should thank me. If I had really turned on the Weasley charm last summer, she'd be attached to me for life, and you'd never have had a chance, but I let her down easy, since I didn't want to be tied down yet." He hooked his thumbs in his pockets and sniffed arrogantly, looking for all the world like a red-headed Draco Malfoy.

Harry covered his mouth as he let out a huge guffaw. He kept laughing, tears spilling from behind his glasses as Ron affected an offended countenance and stared at Harry. Finally, Ron couldn't hold it in anymore and his egotistical pose cracked as he grinned widely and chuckled along with Harry.

Harry, gasping for breath, gripped Ron's forearm and squeezed in appreciation. "That was bloody hysterical! Gods, you looked like Malfoy! I'll have to remind you to do your ferret impression for Hermione sometime. Okay, you're right. You know I couldn't keep everything to myself anyway, and besides, who else can I talk to besides you, since Sirius is gone?" His smile faltered a bit, but then he recovered himself and looked gratefully back at Ron. Ron nodded understandingly and smiled back. Slightly chastened, he patted Harry on the back and pushed him toward Hermione's room.

"Go on. I'll see you later. Tell her I said hi."

Harry just grinned at him and strode off. Ron rolled his eyes, smirking, and climbed the stairs to his bed.

Harry was still smiling in the aftermath of Ron's silliness. He made his way to Hermione's door and knocked. After a pause, he tried again. There was no answer.

"Hermione? You there?" He looked up and down the corridor and knocked again. Still no answer. Frowning, he tried the knob. He was astonished to feel it turn. *Unlocked? That's not like Hermione. I wonder if everything's all right.* Harry knew he no longer had to be so paranoid now that Voldemort was gone, but old habits die hard, and his apprehension grew.

Quietly, slowly, he turned the knob and opened the door. Just as quietly and slowly, he pushed the door into the room. His wand at the ready, he cautiously stepped into her room and looked around. Nothing out of the ordinary presented itself. Crookshanks walked up and started winding around Harry's ankles, purring. *Crookshanks wouldn't be doing that if anything was wrong,* he thought with relief.

Glancing back out into the corridor, he shut the door behind him, locking it. He walked around to her desk and saw her script and Dumbledore's message on it. *She must be back. Where is she?* He stepped toward the bathroom and saw her school robes draped on her chair. His stomach flip-flopped. Feeling his pulse quicken, he looked at the door to the bathroom. It was pulled closed, but not latched. He heard a faint strain of music from within. *She must be in there; and she's listening to the play. But, if she's in there, what is she doing?*

He took a deep breath and sidled up to the door, listening hard. He could hear the music playing softly, but he didn't hear anything else of note. Standing there, breathing heavily with suppressed excitement, he inhaled the fragrant aromas from inside the bathroom. Wound tightly like a bowstring, he gently pushed the door open a crack. He could see a sliver of the floor, upon which what appeared to be Hermione's clothes were piled. Harry inhaled sharply, a jolt of excitement coursing through him at the view of her clothes rumpled on the floor. It meant that they were no longer on her, and he burned at the thought.

Crookshanks followed Harry to the door, still purring. He tried to wind around his ankles again, to get his attention, to no avail. So, he started to bump his head against Harry's shins. Pushing against him, Crookshanks eventually slid off Harry's leg and hit the door, which pushed open farther. Harry pulled back, terrified that she would see him. Heart pounding, he tried to steady his ragged breathing as he heard the bathwater swooshing. Hermione's voice wafted out, "Hello, Crookshanks. Coming to keep me company? You don't want me to pet you right now, I'm all wet!" He heard more water rippling and dripping against the background of the music. He recognized it as Carlotta singing "Think of Me."

He heard Hermione snort, "Well, be that way, cat. Everything's not always about you, you know!" He looked down to see Crookshanks stalking out of the bathroom, tail high, and an expression of haughty indignation on his face. He gave Harry a supercilious glare as he passed him to curl up in the armchair. *Since when can that cat have such an expressive face?* Harry thought, slightly dazed.

He moved stealthily back to where he could see into the bathroom. He saw her clothes on the floor and felt his stomach flutter again. The sight of her bra draped over her shirt caused a tightening in his groin. Then, he noticed her knickers farther away. He couldn't tear his eyes off them. Even from his vantage point, he could see the large darker moist spot in the centre. He almost felt faint at the sight. *Probably from blood pressure dropping 'cause it's headed elsewhere...* he mused, his cock throbbing. He knew she was in the tub, in all her glory, and he was but a few feet from her. He closed his eyes in pained entreaty. *Gods, what wouldn't I give to be in there too!*

Holding his breath, he moved farther, trying to see the tub. Finally, he could see her, bubbles up to her neck, hair cascading over the end, eyes closed as she listened to the music. He sighed inaudibly, devouring her with his eyes, wishing he were bold enough to charm the bubbles away. He was standing stock still, just staring, when he heard her start to sing softly with her song "Think of Me."

She was singing with her eyes closed, just soaking in the water. The acoustics of the bathroom made her voice sound even better as she sang along with the music box. Harry smiled, charmed by her singing. *Wow. She won't need the spell at all. I never knew she could sing!* He listened to the words of the song, smiling even more to himself as he thought, *I most certainly will think of you. I can't stop thinking of you.* Then, as his part began, he nodded fervently in agreement with his line, "What a change; you're really not a bit the gawky girl that once you were." The music continued, through the part with Meg and onto his duet scene with Hermione in her dressing room. He watched Hermione smile as she sang her part of their scene. *At least she looks like she's happy to share the scene with me...*

Their scene together ended and the music changed. Hermione stopped smiling when the Phantom's voice came on. Harry was amazed by the emotion in her voice when she sang in response. He couldn't tear himself away, watching her in the tub, singing with such intensity. The Phantom's duet with Christine began after he took her through the mirror on his way to the dungeon. Hermione lifted her dripping hands from the water and languidly ran them through her hair, gathering up the stray strands that were making their way into the bubbles. Raising her arms like that brought her body up out of the water slightly and Harry's breath caught, urging her to move up more, so he could see her.

She draped her hands along the sides of the tub, and her chest rose and fell in the water as she breathed enough to sing. Her skin was glistening wet and Harry reached down to adjust his uncomfortable erection. He could hear his breath getting ragged with desire and was glad she couldn't hear him over the music and her own voice. He squeezed himself through his trousers and almost groaned at the pleasure it evoked.

Hermione was singing louder now. Her throat was filling as it relaxed to let the pure sounds out. The duet was coming to its climax and she was matching the recording of Christine's extravagant vocalizing. She was almost bobbing up and down in the water as she filled her lungs for the dizzying climbs of sound. At the final crescendo, her head canted back, extending her throat completely, and she went almost rigid as she hit the highest note. Harry gasped. In doing so, she had risen out of the water and he could see her breasts, shining damp in the light, her nipples dark and inviting. He gripped himself in a spasm of surprise and was even more shocked to feel himself coming, just from seeing her. He suppressed a moan as he felt the shudders course through him, and the warm wetness spread inside his boxers.

Harry backed away and leant against the wall, gulping air, as he tried to compose himself, sheepishly grabbing for his wand...the real one...to cast a cleansing charm on himself. He could feel the heat radiating from his face, and he knew he was probably beet red. He also knew there was no way he could stay here any longer. If she ever found out what he had done, she'd kill him. He didn't fancy the idea of her hexing him either, knowing her prowess. He heard the faint lapping of the water around her as she was quiet, listening to the Phantom's song. He gave himself a few moments to calm down before he moved again.

He warred with himself about looking again before he left, but it was the sound that decided it. He heard her moan softly. Straining his ears to listen, he heard her breathing deeply. The water was barely lapping, and she moaned again. Astounded at the animal quality of the sound, Harry held his breath as he crept closer to look again. She was submerged in the water again, her head lolling back on the edge. She rolled her head back and forth slightly, but her eyes were closed. Her right hand was under the water, and the left was gripping the side edge of the tub. The water lapping was coming from the disturbance under the water.

Harry felt a drawing in his loins again, and was momentarily thankful he was a resilient teenager. *Bloody hell! Is she doing what I think she's doing?* Harry didn't dare blink as he watched her, guessing at what that submerged hand was doing. As the song continued, he nearly burst out of his own skin as she lifted her left hand and arched her back up out of the water. He felt his mouth go dry as he watched her gently run her fingers over her breasts, sliding her hand over her nipples and cupping the underside in her palm. *Oh fuck! She is doing it!*

Her breathing increased and the water sloshed more. Then, as the Phantom sang, "Let your soul take you where you long to be!" she arched up, moaning and gasping, shuddering as she came. She let out a long quavery sigh as he continued, "Only then can you belong to me."

Harry was dumbstruck at the sight. He couldn't have moved or spoken if his life depended on it. He could barely breathe. The song continued in its last verse and Hermione smiled in satisfaction, breathing deeply in her afterglow. As the song finished, she opened her eyes, starting to sit up, apparently done with her bath, and Harry panicked. He wrenched himself back from the doorway, wishing he could Apparate away. Desperately hoping she would not hear or see him, he made a mad dash for the door. He heard the water start draining and the splashing sound of her standing to get her towel. The strains of the Phantom's composing started and he heard Hermione singing with Christine again.

He felt the sweat oozing out of his pores as he tried to unlock the door with shaking fingers. Finally, he got it open and he closed it behind him quietly, hearing the Phantom yelling. Pausing a moment to look up and down the corridor, he sighed heavily and swallowed against the dryness in his throat. Making sure he could walk on his shaky legs, he made his way back to his room.

When he entered, he saw that Ron was still up, reading his script. The others were either already in bed with the curtains drawn or weren't up there yet. As soon as Harry walked in, Ron looked up and threw down the script.

Eagerly, he asked, "So, was she there? What happened?"

Harry felt his colour rise and looked away, disconcerted. "Uh, no. She didn't answer the door. Did you see her in the library?" He kept his eyes averted as he quickly crossed to his bed. Normally he would have just stripped off his clothes and climbed into bed in his shorts, but he was still at half-mast and didn't want to undress in front of Ron like that.

Ron cocked his head, confused. "Um, I didn't go to the library, 'cause I was sure she would be in her room. Besides, if she wasn't there, where have you been all this time?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair, trying to come up with something plausible. *Shite. I can't say I went to the library, 'cause I just asked him if he went. Think!* He sat on his bed and leant down to take off his shoes, hiding his face and giving himself an excuse to not answer right away. When he had taken both shoes off, he sat up and quickly pulled his shirt up over his face to take it off. Then he made a show of catching his glasses in his shirt and having to disentangle himself and resetttle his glasses. Finally, he looked back up at Ron, who had just cleared his throat.

"What's that?" Harry said casually.

Ron scowled at him, exasperated. "I said, where have you been all this time if you weren't with Hermione?"

Harry shrugged airily and said, "Oh, I went down to check the notice board. You know, to see if the next meeting was posted yet. I waited by Hermione's door a few minutes in case she came up, and then I went downstairs."

Ron's eyes narrowed as he eyed Harry calculatingly. "So, if I ask Hermione tomorrow if she saw you, she'd say she didn't?" Ron crossed his arms in front of his chest challengingly.

Harry gulped. *Gods, I hope so!* "Sure, Ron. She didn't see me. Ask her." Harry met Ron's accusing glare and held it until the other boy finally huffed and rolled his eyes. Harry sighed to himself with relief.

"Fine. But, sod it all, I thought I'd at least get to hear something good tonight!" Ron tossed his script to the floor petulantly and sulkily punched his pillow. He shot a discontented glare at Harry who simply shrugged innocently. "Oh, all right. Guess I'll go to bed then." He yanked his curtains around his bed, but paused before completely secluding himself to toss out a resigned, "Good night, Harry."

"Good night, Ron." Harry almost wilted in relief when Ron's curtains were completely shut. He drew his own curtains and lay down on his bed, wriggling out of his trousers and letting them drop to the floor beside his bed. He burrowed under his covers and lay there, staring at the ceiling. *I can't believe I just saw that!* He blinked rapidly. Thinking about it again sent more tingles to his crotch. He yanked his glasses off and ground his fists into his eyes, trying to blot out the images of Hermione pleasuring herself and orgasming. He felt his cock stiffening again and was dismayed.

He knew that all of the fellas wanked off. Hell, he did too. It was just something you didn't mention, since you could usually tell by the sounds, even with the curtains drawn. It didn't matter much, but he didn't want to do it tonight, not with Ron already suspicious. It might lead him to keep questioning him.

I'll just think of something else. Something that will make it go away. Now, what is the most unsexy thing I can think of? He pondered for a moment, thinking of trolls, Voldemort, his parents... But his erection was still there. Then he thought of Snape. His cock bobbed a bit lower. *Aha! Snape. I can't think of anything less sexy than that! Wait, Snape is going to be playing opposite Hermione, trying to seduce her... ugh! Yup, that does it!* Harry felt his arousal melting away. Images of the great greasy git trying to be romantic and seductive turned his stomach and completely obliterated all desire. He sighed with relief that he was back to normal and rolled over on his stomach, to hopefully divert any further attempts to rise again. He felt his adrenaline rush crashing after the events of the evening and gratefully dropped off to sleep.

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Hermione came to her senses, coming down from the high of her orgasm, and briskly decided that she needed to get out of the bath. *I wonder if I need to stop taking baths; they've been far too conducive to, erm, distracting thoughts recently.* She opened her eyes and sat up, reaching to drain the tub. She kept singing with the music as she stood and wrapped her towel around her. Stepping out of the tub, she spied her stained knickers again and flushed.

For Merlin's sake, I need to get a hold of myself. I can't just keep going around in a sexual frenzy! She realized that she had come more times in the past two days than she had in the previous months. She dried off with the towel, rubbing her skin to a soft glow. She was deliciously warm from the water and from her excitement.

Suddenly, the Phantom started yelling at Christine in the recording. Hermione stopped, thinking about her horrible comment to Snape earlier. She had expected him to explode like this once she realized what she had done, but instead he was quiet. Too quiet. She shuddered again in remembered terror. She couldn't stop looking into his eyes, petrified.

In her mind, she saw those black eyes. They were at once both hard and deep. She felt like she could fall into the tunnels of his ebony eyes, but that if she tried, she'd be knocked back by the stony barrier within them. She closed her eyes as she felt his finger on her lips again. She was waiting for him to crush her in those long fingers. Instead, his touch was gentle, feather-light.

Her lips tingled. She licked them. Then, her eyes flew open as it came rushing back to her. She had licked his finger! Gripping the sink edge, her knees suddenly weak, she looked in the mirror. Her face was pale in shock. *I didn't remember that until now. Oh gods, what have I done? How could I dare? I can't face him again. I licked his finger!*

She was trembling. Then she heard the Phantom singing again. "Fear can turn to love..." *Damn it! Why does that line keep jumping out at me?* Shaking her head, trying to calm herself, she shakily gathered up her clothes and dumped them in the hamper, avoiding looking at her knickers and the evidence of how aroused she had been in Snape's presence. She walked into her room and put on her nightgown, hesitating a moment when reaching for new knickers. Then, sternly, she forced herself to pick them up and put them on. *No need to feed the fire...*

She walked back into the bathroom to close the music box, put it on her nightstand again, then crawled into bed and doused the light. Crookshanks apparently forgave her and jumped up to snuggle at her feet, purring.

Hermione lay in the darkness, thinking hard. *I can't believe I did that! Oh gods, he's going to kill me...* Then, her brow furrowed in confusion. *But, he didn't do anything while I was still there... I don't understand. If he was going to punish me for impertinence, he would have done so right then, wouldn't he? He went easy on me. Why? I mean, I know I apologized, but he hadn't even said anything before that. He just... looked at me, and then walked away. I've never seen him look at anyone like that before either.* She shivered lightly. *And then he even spoke to me... voluntarily! It was like he was treating me like an adult, not a student. It was nice. And was that a smile right before I left? It looked like he was trying to smile, but it wasn't evil like his other smiles have been. He should smile more; it made him look so much nicer, so much more approachable.*

A faint, bemused smile played on her lips. Then, that new, randy part of her piped up. *Approachable, eh? Well, you certainly tried to approach him earlier. Just what would you have done if he had taken you up on that invitation? Hmm?*

Hermione's smile disappeared instantly. Apprehensive, she thought back to how aroused she had felt when she had made so bold as to lick his finger and...what had she said? *You practically invited him to "show his feelings" with you! And you know you meant those kinds of feelings when you said it.*

She closed her eyes, writhing in embarrassment. *Bloody hell... I wonder how obvious it was? Could he see everything in my face?* Carefully, she cast back to the very beginning of the meeting, replaying everything that had happened. She remembered his snide comments, how she had got angry at him, him slamming the box shut to yell at her, how annoyed he had been that she knew her part, how she had drowned in the Phantom's song and had...

Hermione's eyes flew open again and she gasped. She remembered her heated response to the song and how she had felt like she had been touching herself like she had the night before during Christine's vocal climb. *That's why my knickers are so soiled! Mercy on me, I actually came in front of Snape!* She felt her stomach clench painfully, and fleetingly wondered if she was going to vomit, but she steeled herself and fought down the rising bile. *Oh, gods! I have completely disgraced myself. It had to be obvious! And he was looking at me afterwards! I remember just staring into those fathomless black eyes. He was the one to finally look away. I bet he was disgusted and appalled. How utterly shameless! And then I had the gall to keep staring at him later too!*

Feeling a new rush of heat to her already flaming cheeks, she recalled how she had been just gazing at him and he had shut the box again, wanting to know what her problem was. *I couldn't dare tell him that I was wondering about him and whom he might have loved previously. Surely he must have had someone in his life. He couldn't always have been so... moody and shut off from everyone. But if I had said that I was wondering about "the man behind the monster," or rather, "the man behind the Potions Master," he would have probably thrown me out of his classroom, taking loads of points off Gryffindor, and giving me a month of detentions!* She sighed in remembered relief that she had come up with that cover question about him singing. *Although, I was truly interested. I really can't wait to hear him sing. His voice does something to me; I can only imagine it'll be even more powerful when he uses it to sing that beautiful poetry.*

Hermione pressed a hand against her chest, trying to calm her rapid breathing and racing pulse. *It can't be healthy to go from terror to desire and back again so much.* She thought, ruefully. *I just need to put it all out of my mind and pretend it never happened. I can only assume Snape will do the same, especially since he didn't say anything about it tonight already.* She paused to fervently hope that would be the case.

This weekend has been far too eventful. Just focus on your assignment and do what you have to to perform well. There's no reason to let yourself get so worked up about things, and it's pointless to develop a crush on a teacher anyway! Even if he felt the same way... She paused as she felt her breath hitch and a twinge in her chest. *He couldn't do anything about it, so it's ridiculous to even think about it. Besides, you have N.E.W.T.s coming up, and Head Girl responsibilities, and your future after leaving school to plan for, and this production to prepare for, and the competition to win... The last thing you need is to waste time and energy thinking about a relationship that could never happen.*

She doggedly recounted all of her responsibilities. Sternly, she chided herself for her heated, lustful thoughts and resolutely determined to put them out of her mind. She did her best to ignore the pang of regret at her decision, involuntarily thinking again of the intensity barely contained within the obsidian eyes of her Potions Master and co-star.

You have to be able to perform with Snape. You have to be able to act professionally. Letting yourself feel these things will only complicate matters and set yourself up to get hurt. Forget about it. It's hopeless.

Hermione rolled over onto her side, trying not to feel a little sad about locking away the feelings she finally admitted, having previously denied them at every turn. Firmly diverting her mind from Snape, she started re-reading *Hogwarts: A History* in her mind, having already memorized it after re-reading it so many times. Focusing on that, she slowly fell asleep.

10- Decisions and Denial

Chapter 10 of 84

Hermione deals with her feelings for both Snape and Harry as classes resume. Snape reacts to Hermione and Harry's new relationship.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Man! This was another hard chapter to write! I guess it's the bridge chapters that are more difficult. I hope this chapter doesn't bog down. Rest assured that next chapter is the first rehearsal with the full cast together... we're getting there! :) Hope you enjoy...

Chapter 10- Decisions and Denial

Hermione was already in the Great Hall the next morning when Ron and Harry showed up. She had gone down early in the hope that she might be able to see Snape. She had racked her brain for an excuse to talk to him and get near him again, but couldn't come up with anything viable. She ended up just sitting there, wistfully watching for his arrival, and then surreptitiously looking at him after he had taken his usual place at the High Table. Only once had she caught his eye, and he had very abruptly looked away.

That just confirms it, thought Hermione, miserably. *I must have acted like a complete hussy and he's so disgusted that he can't even look at me! At least I don't have Potions today. Maybe I'll get a chance to redeem myself at our next rehearsal. Remember, be as professional as possible! Forget about what happened and hopefully he will too.* She rolled her eyes at herself, knowing how vain that hope was. She kept her face down, pretending to concentrate on eating her breakfast, but in reality, she didn't even taste any of it, she was so distracted. She was therefore taken by surprise when Ron and Harry plopped down raucously on either side of her.

"Morning, Hermione," Harry said, rather too brightly.

"Hey 'Mione. Oi, you're here early," Ron observed as he wrinkled his nose in distaste.

She looked from one to the other blankly, then manufactured a smile and said, "Morning, Harry, Ron. How was your meeting last night?"

Ron shrugged, loading his plate with sausages. "Eh, it was okay. What about yours? We looked for you last night, but you weren't around." Suddenly, he let his plate clatter to the table top and he turned an intensely probing gaze on Hermione. "Speaking of, did you see Harry last night?"

Hermione glanced at Harry, who was looking at his plate, his cheeks flushed. He didn't return her gaze. She turned back to Ron, bewildered, and said, "No, why?"

Harry let out a barely audible sigh and Ron scowled. "Well, like I said, we didn't see you, so Harry went to see if you were in your room. He was gone a while, but he said you weren't there. I just thought maybe you lot were still trying to keep things secret from me. But, if you say he wasn't there, I'll believe you." He flicked a calculating glance at Harry, who affected an air of wounded innocence.

Hermione looked back and forth between them and said to Ron, "No, I went to my room and took a bath. I was listening to the music too, so I wouldn't have heard anyone at my door." She turned to Harry. "Sorry. I wasn't ignoring you." She smiled winningly at him and was taken aback when he gave her a shaky half-smile and looked away almost instantly. He looked even more flushed. Concerned, Hermione asked, "Harry, are you all right?"

Harry nodded quickly and ran his hand through his hair. "Uh, yeah, I'm fine. So, you didn't say, how was your meeting with Snape last night?"

It was Hermione's turn to flush and look down. "Oh, it was okay. He only yelled at me a few times." Forcing a laugh, she continued, "Really, in comparison to previous encounters, he was practically pleasant."

Ron snorted and rolled his eyes, unable to comment due to the huge amount of food crammed in his mouth. Harry smiled wanly and reached for the toast. He was so determined to not let Hermione catch his eye and possibly figure out what he had done that he missed her uncomfortable reaction. In all, it was a fairly relieved trio of friends who finished breakfast and headed off to lessons that morning.

By lunch, the next meeting time was posted on the notice board. Hermione gulped quietly as she stepped up among the others crowded in front of it. *Oh, relax. It's ridiculous to react this way just because the last time you looked here it was horrid. Nothing else could possibly be that bad again, so why be nervous about it?*

"Act One roundtable reading- Thursday 7:00 p.m. Great Hall

All actors required to attend.

Bring your scripts.

-A. Dumbledore, Director

Costume Fittings- beginning Friday 7:00 p.m. Great Hall

Detailed roster to come.

Be prepared to arrive promptly for your scheduled time slot.

-A. Dumbledore, Director"

Thursday. Well, that means I'll have to see Snape in Potions before the next rehearsal. I hope that will be a good thing!

Hermione shrugged to herself and sighed, walking into the Great Hall for lunch. She plopped down and immediately pulled out a book, which she then propped up on the table to read as she ate. Even though she purposely did that to distract herself, she still felt her eyes inexorably sliding to look up at the High Table. Snape was eating mechanically, also reading something. She craned her neck a bit, trying to see what it was he was reading, and thought it looked like the script.

Is he reading the script? I guess he might be learning his lines. I shouldn't be surprised; when has he ever not given 100% to something once he's put his mind to it? He's such a dedicated man... Hermione felt the wistful tug again as she gazed up at him. Suddenly, his eyes flicked up and caught hers. She gasped, feeling like she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

Snape merely looked at her, face expressionless, for a moment. Then, he blinked and went back to his reading. Hermione dragged her eyes from him and looked back at her book. She could feel the flush creeping up her face again. *Honestly! Get a grip on your feelings, girl! You have to stop blushing every time you see him!*

She was startled to see her world go black as she felt hands covering her eyes. A husky whisper, full of pent-up mirth, tickled her ear as she heard, "Guess who! And the prize is a kiss if you guess right."

Hermione grabbed at Harry's hands as she chided, "Har-ry! Stop that!" Once she said his name, he laughed and pulled his hands back. As she turned around to scold him, he leant down and quickly kissed her. It wasn't a long fiery one like the ones they had shared previously, but it still took Hermione by surprise, since it was in the middle of the Great Hall.

Harry had a defiant yet sheepish smile on his face as he glanced around at the twitters of reaction to his bold move. Hermione felt her cheeks redden even more and flicked embarrassed glances around to see other students whispering and muttering to each other. She grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him down onto the bench beside her.

"Harry! Honestly! What did you do that for?"

Harry was taken aback by the harshness in her tone. He looked at her, owl-eyed, nervously running his hand through his hair. "What? I... Well, I mean... It's just... Uh, I was just playing around. I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry..."

Hermione regretted being so brusque and felt quite the heel. "No. It's all right. I was just surprised, that's all. I... didn't realize you would be... quite so public about things. I

mean, everyone is looking and talking. I guess that after everything that happened in fourth year I felt embarrassed when I saw people doing that. It's not your fault. I'm sorry I behaved so poorly." She laid an apologetic hand on Harry's and squeezed, giving him a wry half-smile.

Harry relaxed and smiled back, covering her hand with his other one. "It's okay. No harm done. I guess it is all pretty new and weird, huh? I just wanted to surprise you, and I can't help but look for any excuse to kiss you..." His smile deepened into a mischievous one and his eyes twinkled.

Hermione looked down, still feeling rather shy, and turned toward the table. "Well, uh, we should hurry and eat so we aren't late for class." As they settled themselves on the bench to eat, Hermione stole a glance at the High Table again. She was both relieved and disappointed to see Snape was gone.

But did he leave before or after Harry's little stunt? she thought distractedly. Then, she snorted at herself in exasperation. *And why does it matter? Answer: it doesn't! So, put it out of your mind.*

She and Harry were chatting lightly about the next rehearsal and the costume fittings when Ron came barrelling in. He rushed over, barely offering up a "Hello, mates," before he flopped down and started shoving food in his mouth. Harry and Hermione exchanged glances that were both amused and disgusted before returning his greeting and then just continuing their conversation until it was time to go to class.

That night, Hermione and Harry joined others in the common room to work on homework and listen to the music some more. Harry had suggested that they work on their own in Hermione's room, but Hermione squashed that idea immediately, remembering how easy it had been to get distracted when they were alone. Ron joined them and started talking to Harry about the Quidditch practice scheduled for the following evening. Hermione was grateful for the diversion of Harry's attention from her. It did get rather disconcerting to repeatedly look up to find green eyes levelled at you, flickering with feelings that were more than friendly. Eventually, Ginny came over and sat by Hermione.

"Hey, Hermione. How're things?" Ginny grinned at her saucily.

Hermione fought the urge to laugh at the other girl's obvious rabid interest in her and Harry's new relationship. *Of course she's interested. They dated before. Gods help me if she wants to "compare notes"!*

"Oh, fine. How about you? Are you enjoying your role? I do think you'll be positively sweet as Meg, you know." Hermione smiled.

Ginny tossed her glossy hair over her shoulder and shrugged airily. "Oh, thanks. I know you'll be great as Christine. But, you know, I can't help but wonder how 'realistic' you and Harry will be, playing lovers on stage..." She tilted her head meaningfully and winked.

Hermione couldn't help it and laughed aloud at Ginny's expression. "I knew that's what you came over here for," she crowed, jabbing a finger at the other girl who was affecting innocence.

"What? Sweet, pure, innocent, naïve, little me?" Ginny feigned a wide-eyed look of virtue before wrinkling her nose and grinning wickedly. "Yeah, whatever. Anyway, people have been noticing that you two, um, seem a little closer, shall we say? And after his little display at lunch, I have to wonder just what's going on. Are you two an item now?" Her eyes shone with interest. She leant toward Hermione, lending an air of confidential secrecy.

Hermione rolled her eyes and glanced at Harry, seeing him still engrossed in Quidditch talk with Ron. She leant closer to Ginny and blushed. "Well, yes, I suppose so."

Ginny bounced up and clapped her hands, barely suppressing a squeal of excitement. "I knew it! So, tell me all about it! When did it happen? What have you done? Did you enjoy it? I know I did..." That last part came out a little archly and Hermione grimaced.

"Look, it all started when I woke up in my room after I fainted at the notice board. Harry and I were alone and he kissed me. And that's all!" she added sternly when she saw Ginny's eyes crackle with interest. Ginny made a moue of disappointment before she grinned raffishly. Hermione relented a bit and continued, "But I did enjoy it."

Both girls giggled. Ginny eyed Hermione speculatively and said, "So, that's as far as it's gone?"

Hermione gaped at her, shocked, and retorted, "Honestly, Ginny, it's only been a couple of days! What do you take me for?"

In all too matter-of-fact a tone, Ginny answered, "Well, I'd say you were a girl who hasn't been enjoying herself for far too long and should take such opportunities when she gets them. You've kept your nose buried in a book for so long, and you've worked so hard to help get rid of the Dark Lord, that you deserve to have some fun. And, trust me, it is." Ginny's earnest expression dissolved into one of remembered pleasure and she closed her eyes for a second before opening them to see Hermione staring at her, aghast.

"Oh, give over, 'Mione! Don't act like you didn't know. Harry and I had quite the satisfactory arrangement last summer before the Final Battle. There's something about thinking you may not live much longer that makes a chap really randy. It was an amicable enough split after the war was over. But that doesn't mean I've forgotten how much fun we had." Then Ginny's face clouded in irritation as she said, "Really, the only bad thing was Ron. He was so overprotective! But I gave him a piece of my mind enough that he finally laid off. He's not giving you lot trouble is he?" She looked ready to go beat him about the head with a Bludger, so Hermione hastily answered.

"No! Harry was kind of afraid to be obvious about it, but I talked to Ron and he's the one who pushed us to each other. Once Harry knew he was okay with it, he started being a bit more, um, demonstrative, like today..."

Ginny chuckled. "Indeed. So, no more juicy tidbits to toss my way, huh?" She snorted when Hermione glared at her. "Okay, okay, I get it. But, if there are, you'll talk to me, won't you 'Mione? I mean, there's no one else worth talking to around here, and half the fun of the doing is the hashing it out afterwards!" She bounced in her seat again, like a little kid on Christmas morning.

Hermione realized the truth in Ginny's statement and nodded. *But I won't tell her anything about my inappropriate feelings for Snape. Those are best left unmentioned. Maybe if I ignore them, they'll go away... Ha! Un-bloody-likely.*

Ginny grinned conspiratorially at Hermione and then turned a fond, indulgent look on Harry and Ron. "Look at them. Completely oblivious! Talking about Quidditch as usual." She turned a mock-stern scowl on Hermione. "All I know is that you better not throw Harry off his game, or I'll come after you as fast as Ron does. This is my last chance to be on the team with Harry as Seeker, and I want to win this year!"

Hermione shook her head resignedly and snorted. Ginny dropped her fake scowl and chuckled back at her. "Really, Hermione, I'm happy for both of you." She patted Hermione's hand and stood. "Ah well, I better get back to my homework. Snape gave us a horridly long essay to do." She wrinkled her nose in pique, then squinted at Hermione thoughtfully. "Hey, that reminds me. How was your meeting with Snape? Are you going to be able to handle working opposite him?" She frowned sympathetically. "I mean, you took it pretty hard when you saw the cast list."

Hermione looked down quickly and schooled her expression into one of brave martyrdom. "It was tolerable. I'm sure I'll manage. After all, I have Harry to work opposite as well." And she surprised Ginny with a coy look of her own. Again, both girls laughed.

Ginny sighed. "Talk to you later, 'Mione. I'm going to go write my essay in bed so I can fall asleep as soon as I'm done! G'night." And with that, she yawned and grimaced before striding off with a wave.

"Good night, Ginny." Hermione exhaled in relief that she had kept Ginny off the scent of the disturbing aspects of her encounter with Snape. *She's probably right, though,*

about me deserving some fun. I just need to loosen up. She looked over at Harry and Ron. They were gesticulating wildly, apparently talking flying strategy for the next evening. Hermione smiled to herself and gathered her books. Smirking, she stealthily sidled up behind Harry and surprised him by tilting his head back to kiss him good night.

Harry went speechless and Ron sat staring, mouth agape, until it widened into a huge grin. A couple of other Gryffindors still in the room hooted and giggled at Harry's stunned expression. Hermione just simpered at him and watched his cheeks go pink.

"Good night, Harry," she lifted. She turned and glided a few steps from him before turning back, murmuring lowly, "Sweet dreams." Then she blew him a kiss and wiggled her fingers in a wave. Laughter erupted around the common room at her performance and Harry's dumbstruck expression. He was barely able to lift his hand in a weak response.

Hermione grinned smugly and tossed a cheerful, "Good night, Ron!" to the boy gasping and wiping laugh-tears from his eyes. He waved an arm at her, unable to speak. Satisfied, Hermione left the common room and made her way to her own room, revelling in the success of her little ploy. *Surprise me, will you, Harry Potter? Hmph. Turnabout is fair play!*

Tuesday was fairly normal, but Hermione was still getting used to the little hand clasps, fleeting kisses, and affectionate looks she got from Harry at almost every opportunity. When nothing happened that day like Harry's previous display at lunch, the other students lost interest in the new couple and stopped their amused whispering. Still, Hermione was relieved to have time to herself that evening when Ron, Harry, and Ginny were all at Quidditch practice.

She found herself musing about how she would handle Potions the following morning. She had resolved to behave as professionally and unobtrusively as possible, hoping that Snape would ignore her.

Nevertheless, she was very nervous as she parted ways with Harry and Ron Wednesday morning and made her way down to the dungeons for N.E.W.T. level Potions. Since the war was over, neither Harry nor Ron had elected to continue in Potions their last year, and Hermione was secretly relieved, since it seemed that without them in the room, Snape wasn't nearly as volatile in class. It was a fairly small class, and she wasn't afraid to admit that she enjoyed the advanced level of thinking necessary in it.

Now, however, she tried to forget about how she might enjoy Snape's lessons...for an entirely different reason. Taking a deep breath, she entered and took her normal seat near the front, calmly getting her supplies ready for the lesson.

She stiffened as Snape swept into the room. Wiping any expression from her face, she politely looked up to where he stood before the board. His eyes scanned the room grimly and slipped right over her. She let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"Instructions are on the board. Begin," Snape said curtly before taking his seat at his desk. Hermione stole a glance at him as she copied down the instructions. He appeared to be reading. Again, her curiosity got the better of her and she stretched to try to see what it was.

She jumped in guilt as she glanced up at his face to see that even though he hadn't moved his head at all, he was glaring at her stonily. As he captured her gaze in his, he deftly snagged a parchment and languidly dragged it over what he was reading, covering it from her view. Then he arched an eyebrow, and somehow managed to glare at her even harder.

Hermione flushed at the unspoken reprimand and looked down, flustered. *I wonder what he's reading. He obviously doesn't want me to see. I better stop looking or he might do something that will embarrass me in front of everyone else. Gods know I've provided him with enough ammunition to humiliate me into the very dust!* She realized she was grinding her teeth in self-disgust. Resolving to be as responsible as she usually was, she focused on her lesson and avoided raising her eyes from her instructions and ingredients.

Fortunately, she did get involved in her potion and didn't get distracted whenever Snape paced through the room, checking students' progress. Granted, he kept a fairly wide berth from her anyway, so as not to cause himself more trouble.

The class period was almost over when Hermione finished her potion and looked at it, satisfied. She knew it was brewed correctly, and was pleased with herself. She was still immersed enough in the lesson that she didn't even get nervous as she walked up to Snape's desk to turn in her sample. As she placed her vial on his desk, she noticed him reading and instinctively looked to see what it was. His head snapped up and he yanked the parchment over it again, but not before she recognized the script. She looked up at him, surprised by his secrecy, and was startled by the simmering anger in his face.

In a deadly quiet hiss, Snape said, "Miss Granger! You are to keep your prying nose away from my business! Must we add incorrigible snoop to your title of Know-It-All?"

Hermione was confused and hurt, and spoke before she thought. "But, sir, what's the big deal about learning your lines? It's not as if it's a secret that you have the part."

Snape's eyes narrowed menacingly and Hermione involuntarily took a step back, wishing she had kept her mouth shut. "Ten points from Gryffindor for talking back. Now, I suggest you return to your seat before you offer up any other personal opinions or *feelings*." He snarled the last word at her and she realized what he was referring to. Her hand flew up to her mouth and her eyes widened in horror. Taking a long, shaky breath, she spun and hurried back to her seat, trying to fight back the tears that threatened.

Oh gods, he knows, he hates me, oh gods, I can't face him, how awful, oh gods...

Hermione cleaned up her station with trembling hands, glad that, at this level, she didn't have to work with a partner. She sat quietly, head down, waiting for the lesson to end so she could flee from Snape's presence and the shame she felt. Finally, Snape stood.

"Turn in your samples if you have not done so already. Clean your stations. Your homework is 12 inches on the situations in which today's potion is useful and those in which it can be dangerous if not handled correctly. Class is dismissed."

He stood at his desk as students filed up to place their vials on it. Hermione grabbed her things and hurried to the door. She did not look back to see a pair of glittering obsidian eyes following her retreat.

Hermione managed to avoid Snape for the rest of Wednesday and Thursday. She kept herself from looking at him in the Great Hall at meals and stayed away from the dungeons. For her, seeing him at the next rehearsal would be soon enough.

She's already there when I enter the Great Hall for breakfast. I'm surprised that her hangers-on aren't with her. Out of the corner of my eye I can see her watching me take my seat. *Must not look at her. Just eat.* She's looking down again. I flick my eyes to her for a fleeting moment, taking in the slump of her normally dignified posture, the distracted way she picks at her food.

No doubt she's regretting everything that she let show last night. I snort, ridiculing myself. *Please, she's probably regretting ever having those feelings to begin with! No doubt it was all a mistake. She's likely in the thrall of the play. It was nothing. Forget it. There's no way she could possibly feel anything for you, so get over it!*

I force myself to focus on my breakfast, brooding over my cold, solitary life. I feel a tingle on my scalp and I look up to find her gazing at me. Wary that she might see how

much she has affected me, I look away quickly, as if I didn't mean to look at her at all.

Eventually her cronies show up and I take the opportunity to watch her as she talks to them. I still feel the jealousy flare when Potter sits near her. *Look at him. He's such an inexperienced child! He won't even look at her. Hmph. Maybe this relationship of theirs won't last after all.*

Slightly cheered by that thought, I depart to make ready for the day.

Resignedly, I make my way to the notice board to see when then next rehearsal is scheduled. *Thursday. Act One. Very well, I will be prepared for the entirety of Act One by then. If I'm going to be forced to take part in this aggravation, I will show them that Severus Snape does not do anything by halves! Besides, I refuse to take second place to that know-it-all.*

I retrieve my script and take it to lunch. *May as well make use of the time.*

I'm reading, practicing my lines in my head, when I feel that annoying tingle again. I look up to see Granger gazing at me, looking almost forlorn. She instantly freezes when I catch her eye and I can see her trying to hide the longing that stuns me. *Gods, she still feels like that?* I blink at the sudden throb in my chest and I look back to the script, studiously keeping my face blank.

I realize that I am no longer comprehending the words that I see on the page. I feel a flutter in my stomach as I try to come to terms with the idea that she may really have feelings for me. Cautiously, a fragile part of me starts to open. I want to let in the warmth that the thought gives me. I raise my eyes to look at her again, and I see Potter kissing her.

That fragile part of me shatters under the weight of the rage that engulfs me. Bitterly, I shoot to my feet, gripping my script so tightly that the pages are wrinkling. My nostrils are flaring as I breathe heavily, trying to maintain my composure. I can't stand it, seeing them holding hands like that, and I abruptly turn on my heel and stalk angrily out of the Hall.

Resolutely, I pour my energy into perfecting my role, vowing to show them all up at the rehearsal. I try to keep my mind off her, but it's hard when the play keeps me immersed with her. I practice with my script at meals, during lessons, and in my quarters. At least I can avoid seeing bloody Potter mooning over her if I'm reading instead. *Thank Merlin that he's not in Potions anymore!*

I see Granger stiffen as I enter the classroom Wednesday morning, but I refuse to pay her any particular attention. I will not allow her to trifle with me.

"Instructions are on the board. Begin."

I sit and begin practicing my lines again. Ahead of me, I can sense her attention on me again. I keep still and merely raise my eyes to look at her through my lashes. She is obviously trying to see what I'm reading. Nosy chit! Suddenly she notices my glare. She jumps and looks embarrassed as I pointedly slide a parchment over my script and raise my eyebrow at her. She looks down, blushing, and turns back to her work.

The lesson drags on and I periodically circulate through the room. But I avoid her. I try to stifle my feeling of betrayal, but it keeps resurfacing every time I picture her with Potter. Seething, I throw myself into my practice, driving all thoughts but my lines from my head.

Suddenly, I am surprised to notice that Granger is at my desk, openly looking at what I'm reading. Incensed that she managed to catch me, especially after I made such a show of keeping my study from her, I hastily cover my script with the parchment and glare at her.

I manage to control my desire to yell by strangling my words into a bare whisper. "Miss Granger! You are to keep your prying nose away from my business! Must we add incorrigible snoop to your title of Know-It-All?"

Her face is perplexed as she says, "But, sir, what's the big deal about learning your lines? It's not as if it's a secret that you have the part."

"Big deal"? "Secret"? Well, Miss Granger, I was the fool to make a "big deal" about your little "secret," but now I know better. How dare you try to play me... Bitter anger surges within me and I taste the acid on my tongue. I can't hold it back, and I spit, "Ten points from Gryffindor for talking back. Now, I suggest you return to your seat before you offer up any other personal opinions or feelings." I watch with the satisfaction of a wounded man striking back at his attacker and seeing the blow hit home as her hand flies up to her mouth and her eyes widen in horror. Part of me feels ashamed at the tears that are welling up in her eyes, but I ruthlessly shove that unwieldy emotion away as she spins and rushes back to her seat.

She sits, head bowed, as if crumbling into herself. Remarkably, I feel a spark of pity, but I quash it with visions of her and Potter kissing. Finally, the class period is over. I stand.

"Turn in your samples if you have not done so already. Clean your stations. Your homework is 12 inches on the situations in which today's potion is useful and those in which it can be dangerous if not handled correctly. Class is dismissed."

I see her frantically gathering her things and almost running for the door as the other students turn in their work. Internally, I'm warring with myself about how callously I treated her. I can't help but watch her leave, wondering if I have once again ruined any chance I might have had at escaping my lonely life by spurning the one person who has shown any regard for me in far too many years.

Dread settles over me again at the thought of rehearsal the next evening. *Sodding miserable existence...* Sometimes I think that death would be much kinder.

11- Surprises at the First Rehearsal *part one*

Chapter 11 of 84

split into 2 parts due to length The first roundtable read-through happens, and it's an evening full of surprises for everyone involved--some more than others.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Chapter 11- Surprises at the First Rehearsal

Once again, spirits were high in the Great Hall at dinner, as the cast waited for the first roundtable reading of Act One to begin. All of the students had their scripts with them already. Some of the Gryffindors were even listening to a music box at their table, albeit at a very low volume after the glare they got from McGonagall.

Finally, everyone not in the play had left, and the others were standing, waiting for Dumbledore to Summon the round table for their reading. At 7:00, he stood, waving his hand at the doors to shut them, and flicked his wand to Banish the long tables and benches. Then he Summoned a circle of chairs like he had before.

Puzzled, Neville leant toward Ron and asked, "Where's the round table? These are just chairs." Ron merely shrugged at him, equally baffled.

Dumbledore heard the exchange and chuckled. Eyes twinkling faster than normal, he turned to the assembled cast and gestured toward the chairs. "Please, take a seat. I believe the term 'roundtable reading' may have confused some of you. I agree that it seems odd to use a term that isn't accurate, but there will be no round table tonight. We will simply take our seats and go through Act One together. Supposedly, the term refers to the fact that the play will be read 'around' the table. Of course, we don't have a table either, but one was not necessary..." He trailed off, seemingly talking to himself as he shuffled to his seat. The students exchanged amused glances and sat down as well.

Professors McGonagall and Trelawney sat amongst the students that they would be working with, and Snape stood until only one chair was left, which he took with an audible sigh of being put upon.

Dumbledore opened his script and adjusted the dials and knobs on his music box. There was a shuffle around the circle as the cast followed suit and opened their scripts. Dumbledore beamed at the group and said, "We will be using the music without the voices, and I will stop it whenever we have a section where the script is not in the recording. I hope you all have practiced enough to be familiar with your role. We will be stopping to replay some sections, especially those that have multiple voices singing on top of each other. Remember, this is a first reading, so I don't expect you to be perfect, but do not waste this opportunity to try acting your character. Now, let's begin..."

He was interrupted by a squawk from both Colin Creevey and Ron Weasley at the same time. Taken aback, Dumbledore looked up, perplexed. "Yes? Do you have a question?"

They looked at each other, and Ron nodded. He looked back at Dumbledore and cleared his throat. Trying to sound as nonchalant as possible, he said, "Well, sir, we were just wondering when you might perform that singing spell on us. You did say that we could do it at our first rehearsal. So, if we're to sing at all, well, uh, we'd like to have it done right off!" Ron was buoyed by the vigorous nodding of heads around the circle and managed a smile. Colin's expression was one of intense relief.

Dumbledore looked at the hopeful and apprehensive faces around him and laughed. "Why, so I did, Mr. Weasley. You are indeed correct. Do forgive me for forgetting. I am new at this, after all." He winked and shot a wry grin around the circle. "Very well, raise your hand if you wish to have the spell performed on you." Hands shot up all over. He went around the circle, pointing his wand at each person in turn, saying over and over again, "*Suaviloquentia*."

As he neared the end of his circuit, he came to Snape. He paused a moment, noting that his hand was not up, but he didn't expect him to raise his hand like a student, so he asked, "Severus, one for you?"

A ripple of astonishment ran through those assembled as Snape coolly answered, "No thank you, Headmaster."

Dumbledore's eyes flashed at the surprise. He nodded and finished up the last few students. Looking around the circle one last time to make sure he hadn't missed anyone, he noticed that Snape was leaning back in his chair languidly, arms crossed loosely at his chest, one long leg stretched out in front of him, and the other curled under the chair. But it was the fact that he didn't have a script that made Dumbledore stop.

Brow slightly furrowed, Dumbledore looked at Snape and said, "Severus, did you forget your script? Would you like me to Summon another for you? The notice did say to bring your script." He said that last bit with a note of reproach.

Snape turned a level gaze on Dumbledore and smirked. "No sir, I did not forget. Nor should you Summon another for me. I did not bring it because I do not need it." He flicked a smug glance at Hermione before looking back to the Headmaster. Another ripple of shocked mutterings swept through the circle. Hermione found herself staring at Snape in wonder.

He must be serious. He looks far too confident not to be, and he would never just disobey Dumbledore. Oh my... so he's going to sing, and he knows the whole of Act One, huh? This should prove very interesting!

Dumbledore saw the gleam of challenge in Snape's eyes and knew better than to say any more. *Well, if he wants to do it, it's best to just let him.* So, he simply nodded to Snape and turned his attention back to the music box. The tension in the room increased as he opened it, and Seamus began with his cry of "Sold!"

Seamus and Justin flowed easily through the auction scene, and Harry was pleased to hear that his voice was note-perfect when he opened his mouth to sing his first lines. He smiled widely at Hermione and Ron as he sang. All of the Gryffindors were grinning back at him. Then, the overture began and everyone fell quiet, waiting for Pansy to start the scene to come. Some of the students braced themselves for it, expecting her to be awful. Fortunately, she was not awful, and she didn't sing off-key. However, she did not try to sing with an Italian accent. Some of the Gryffindors exchanged disappointed looks that she wasn't horrid. They were hoping to have some ammunition to make fun of the Slytherin in retaliation for all the years of verbal abuse suffered at her hands and at the hands of her Slytherin cronies.

Dumbledore had to stop the music several times in the Hannibal scene since so much of the dialogue was left out. Draco looked exceedingly smug as he said his lines, complete with a passable Italian accent. Neville even managed to do his part without stuttering, and he was surprisingly authoritative.

Finally, the scene progressed to Christine's song "Think of Me." Hermione cast her eyes toward the floor, a bit nervous to sing in front of so many people. Once she began, smiles popped up on faces all around the circle. Harry positively beamed, almost as much as Dumbledore. The clear, pure quality of her voice was astounding, and everyone was entranced by how pleasing it was to listen to her.

If Hermione had been looking up while she sang, she would have seen the various expressions of enjoyment, and would likely have been very flattered. But, as it was, she completely missed the jump and shudder that ran through Snape in reaction to her voice. His composed façade melted away in his shock, and he stared at her, at a loss for words or actions. It took him several moments to regain his composure and reconstruct his indifferent pose. Still, if anyone had cared to look, they might have noticed the tension vibrating in his body, belying his purportedly relaxed posture. They might also have noticed the shakiness and speed of his breathing. And they quite likely would have noticed the crackling fire in his impossibly black eyes.

But, nobody was looking at Snape. They were all focused on Hermione.

Harry managed to sing through his huge grin and Hermione finished the song, delighting the rest of the cast as she effortlessly hit the high notes of her finale. Dumbledore shut the music box in his excitement so he could properly enthuse over her talent.

"I say, my dear, that was brilliant! You have a marvellous voice! Oh, I am certain...without a doubt!...that we will win this competition. And to think that that was your natural ability, not even enhanced by magic! Oh, this is wonderful, simply wonderful..."

Murmurs of agreement flew from all sides, and Hermione blushed. She looked around at everyone praising her and thanked them. But, as her gaze slid across Snape, she was stunned to see his eyes blazing with feelings that she was trying to ignore in her own body. For a fleeting moment, she looked straight at him, feeling the magnetic pull of his intense gaze, then she yanked herself away, looking down in confusion and humility.

What can he possibly mean, looking at me like that? Surely he can't mean it, not after the way he treated me in class yesterday. You must be mistaken. It's this damned play! It twists everything and makes it seem like something more! Likely he just found your singing pleasant, like the others did, but he isn't one to say anything about it. Forget it. Move on. Pay attention to the play.

Dumbledore sighed happily and motioned to Minerva to continue with her dialogue. Once Dumbledore opened the music box again, Snape looked directly at Hermione and sang, "Bravi, bravi, bravissimi..."

A rumble of reaction swept the group again, this time stunned at the resonance in just those four notes. Ginny stumbled to come in on time for her part. The atmosphere of surprise faded as the scene continued through the managers and Raoul to Raoul's duet with Christine. As Hermione said the last line in her scene with Raoul, Dumbledore opened the music box again, to hear the tremulous strains that begin the Phantom's first song.

Heads snapped up as one as Snape boomed, "Insolent boy!..." He was glaring at Harry. Hermione stared at Snape in awe, feeling tingles course through her at the deliciously vibrant tones of his voice. The rest of the cast sat, mouths agape, completely dumbfounded by the unexpected quality of Snape's singing voice.

Hermione found herself unable to tear her eyes away from Snape as she sang her response. Finally, Snape slid his gaze to Hermione, locking eyes with her as he continued.

His lids dropped lower as he began his low, hypnotic lure: "I am your Angel of Music. Come to me Angel of Music."

Hermione felt her insides spinning and quivering in response to the velvet seduction of his voice. Her eyes glazed over and she barely registered that Harry was shouting his lines. Her eyelids fluttered as she began the first verse of their duet. There was an expectant hush in the Hall as she finished her verse.

Snape inhaled deeply, sat up straight in his chair and exultantly belted out his verse. Around the circle, heads snapped back and forth from Hermione to Snape and back again as they continued. Only a few people had the presence of mind to actually sing their parts as offstage voices between the sections of the song.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he sang, "In all your fantasies, you always knew, that man and mystery..." Hermione's lids dropped in kind as she finished the line, "were both in you." Then, they locked gazes as they both sang the chorus. Snape's voice was low and raspy as he said, "Sing, my Angel of Music."

Hermione began the extravagant vocalizing, her eyes closing. Snape urged her on in low, rumbling tones, coaxing her to higher pitches. As she climbed, he increased the intensity of his pleas. Finally, he cried, "Sing for me!" and Hermione hit the highest piercing note, her head canted back, throat extended and vibrating. The note echoed off the vaulted ceiling of the Great Hall.

As everyone was transfixed by Hermione, no one noticed the embarrassed flush on Harry's face and the uncomfortable shifting he was doing in his chair. He kept his script firmly in his lap, covering the bulge that was growing in response to the memories that Hermione's performance evoked.

Snape felt the energy pooling in his gut, and he revelled in the utter awe on the faces around him. But it was Hermione who kept his attention. She was breathing heavily after her wild vocal acrobatics, and her face was flushed. She finally let her head drop forward back to a level, and she opened her eyes to look at Snape.

His chest tightened at the complete amazement in her gaze. It was mixed with delight, pride, and no little sadness. While perplexed at her sadness, he took a moment to feel satisfaction at the reactions to his performance. He was extremely thankful that he had already learnt his lines for Act One, as it allowed him to watch Hermione as he sang to her.

He wanted to blow her away with the power of his performance. He wanted her to see that she was not better than he. And, deep down, he wanted to incite the feelings he had seen in her before, even though he wouldn't admit it to himself.

He began "Music of the Night," knowing how delicately he could wrap his voice around the exquisite poetry of the song, and he invoked every nuance at his command to affect Hermione. He was gratified to see her almost swaying with the music, completely enthralled, never taking her eyes off him. When he came to the line, "Let your soul take you where you long to be! Only then can you belong to me," her eyes widened momentarily and her breath quickened. He saw the heat kindling in response and felt an answering flash flow through him, ending with a throb in his groin.

Thus, it was with an even deeper intensity that he drawled, "Touch me, trust me, savour each sensation! Let the dream begin, let your darker side give in..." He thrilled at the faint shudder that rippled over her and realized that he was the one feeling intoxicated. When his saner voice of reason tried to speak up and warn him to be careful, he viciously shoved it away.

In the meantime, Harry looked at Hermione, remembering what she had done the night before during this song. He was slightly disconcerted to see her once again heady response to the music. It made him very uneasy to see her looking so aroused when it was Snape, of all people, who was singing. He looked between them, and it dawned on him that they seemed to have an almost palpable connection. The air practically crackled with the energy between them. He scowled, disturbed.

As that song ended, people all around the circle started shaking their heads, trying to clear them of the thrall of Snape's impassioned rendition. Snape barely spared a glance at the others as they shifted in their seats, flipping pages of their scripts, trying to get up to speed. He was breathing deeply, but not heavily. Energy surged through him like molten fire. He watched Hermione.

She was sitting up straight, perched on the edge of her chair for better breath control. Her eyes were still slightly glazed and her expression was one of intense concentration as she desperately tried to figure out what was going on with Snape. The heat of her reaction to his powerful, mesmeric performance was simmering beneath the speculation.

Moments later, she softly sang the lead-in to Christine stealing the Phantom's mask. Then, as the music changed, she steeled herself for what was to come. She tried not to cringe as Snape roared, "Damn you! You little prying Pandora..."

Neville nearly tipped his chair over backward in his violent start of fear. Lavender and Parvati clasped each other's hands and gasped. Luna simply turned her even wider than usual eyes toward Snape. Ron blanched, Ginny gasped, and Harry scowled. Even Trelawney raised a trembling hand to her chest and her eyes goggled behind her thick glasses. Most of the other students cringed and grimaced.

Hermione managed to hold her own against his rage, but only by telling herself that it was only an act. She closed her eyes tightly at the first bellow, and then opened them a crack to see Snape boring his blazing eyes into hers, nostrils flaring, face contorted as he shouted through to "Curse you!" Then, his eyes darkened and deepened as his body went slack after his anger. He leant toward Hermione and softly sang, "Stranger than you dreamt it..."

His face seemed to settle into grimmer lines than she had seen before. She felt her heart go out to him, wanting to bring life back to his face, wanting to erase the pain. Her breath caught in her throat at his line, "Fear can turn to love." His voice kept getting lower and lower, turning almost to a whisper by the time he got to "secretly, secretly..." Then, Hermione was devastated to hear the break in his voice when he ground out "Oh, Christine..." She felt a tightness in her chest at the glitter in his eyes and involuntarily leant her body toward him.

Snape let his eyes close and dropped his head. He took a deep breath and resettled himself on his chair. When he opened his eyes again, he was all business, his face a mask devoid of emotion. Curtly, he flicked a glance at Hermione and then away again as he sang, "Come, we must return. Those two fools who run my theatre will be missing you." When he finished, he leant back in his chair, affecting his previously languid pose, arms crossed over his chest. He glared disdainfully up at everyone from under beetled brows. There was a heavy silence during the musical interlude, and everyone looked at Snape with varying degrees of amazement. Most looked away hurriedly, shying away from his menacing gaze.

Hermione sank back in her chair, feeling herself trembling with exertion and reaction to Snape's fervour. She was profoundly grateful that she would have a break for a while before she was required to sing again. Her mind was a tumult of emotion, and she retreated into herself to ponder the shocks she had received in such quick

succession.

Terry Boot came in on time for his lines, but he was still rather subdued after the ferocity of Snape's performance. McGonagall chimed in for her lines and turned a speculative look on Snape, one eyebrow arched, as she said, "he will burn you with the heat of his eyes." Snape simply returned the look with a fierce one of his own, complete with retaliatory eyebrow arch. The exchange was a draw and McGonagall shot him a glare that indicated that he would have some explaining to do before returning to her script. Snape merely smirked and snorted to himself.

"Notes" began, and Neville struggled to once again be as confident as before. He only stammered a couple of times. Ron blustered in satisfactorily. They managed to get through it admirably...no doubt due to their furtive practicing in their dorm room at night...even during the part in which they come in almost on the tail of what the other one says. As they came to the end of their part together, Harry burst in with his lines. They bantered back and forth until Pansy exploded on the scene with her part.

McGonagall and Ginny eventually chimed in. Snape lazily dropped in at his place in reading the "note" and displayed an evil smirk of amusement at the insult delivered. Then, he affected a light conversational tone for his speech, until he got to the line, "Should these commands be ignored, a disaster beyond your imagination will occur." He deepened his voice to a black, ominous tone to finish.

The rest of the scene was marked by multiple stops and restarts as Dumbledore went through the multi-part song for each person involved before allowing them all to try it together. Snape felt his rush waning in the laborious rehashing of the scene. Stretching slowly, he got to his feet and walked to the edge of the Hall, where he Summoned a small table with a pitcher of ice water and tumblers. He poured himself a glass and drank deeply, feeling the coolness soothe his throat. He had no idea his throat would feel so tight and raw after such a short bout of singing.

But, you were singing rather forcefully. You're just not used to it. Certainly you can brew up a potion to restore your throat and help ease the break-in period. He made a mental note to look through his books later to find one.

Hermione noticed him when he stood. She had been absorbed in her thoughts until she was distracted by listening to the others practice their parts. She could appreciate how complex the song was, and she knew she would be involved with some later, so she paid attention to how Dumbledore handled it. But when she saw Snape rise and step away from the circle, her attention was firmly rooted on him again. She watched his robes floating behind him as he walked to the wall and noted the graceful flick of his hand as he Summoned the table.

For all his snide comments about "foolish wand waving" he certainly is deft. She felt a flutter of embarrassment as she wondered what else his hands might be graceful and deft doing. *Oh, for Merlin's sake, not again!*

She spied the frosty pitcher of ice water and immediately thought how wonderful it would feel to cool her parched throat. It felt rather tired and strained already and she hadn't even done very much. *I just need to practice every day and get back into it, so I won't hurt my voice.* Suddenly ravenously thirsty, she stood, as unobtrusively as possible. Dumbledore merely nodded at her as she inclined her head in question. Quietly, she made her way across to the table... and Snape.

Snape caught movement out of the corner of his eye and stiffened. As Hermione edged up to him, the look he turned on her was as cold as the pitcher. Hermione swallowed nervously and schooled her expression into one of polite inquiry.

"Professor, may I have some water as well?"

He contemplated her for a moment, seeing her gaze flick agitatedly all over the Hall as her cheeks flushed. Methodically, he picked up the pitcher and a glass and filled it, presenting it to her with a slight incline of his head. Hermione took it from him with a shaky hand and nodded.

"Thank you, sir. I haven't sung like this in a long time and my throat feels it." Snape quirked one corner of his mouth up and sniffed.

"Indeed."

Hermione looked up at Snape over the rim of her glass as she took a swallow of water. Hesitantly, she lowered her glass a bit and offered, "I know of a tonic for strained throats if you might like to try it, sir. It's not quite a potion, but it has helped me before," she added as she saw his eyebrows arch in question.

He looked at her silently again. "I believe I shall put my trust in my potions over Muggle concoctions, thank you."

Hermione felt chastened and looked away. Snape could feel the tension between them. Idly, he stared out the window, all the while watching her in his peripheral vision. He could sense that she was struggling with herself about something. Finally, she took a deep breath and set her lips as she turned back to him.

"Professor..."

Snape rolled his eyes dramatically as he swivelled his head marginally to acknowledge her.

Straightening her shoulders, she continued, "I just wanted to tell you that I am so pleased you decided to sing. Your voice... it's..." She stammered a bit and trailed off, grimacing.

Snape turned to her. His gaze was stony as he bored his eyes into hers. "It's what, Miss Granger?"

She looked into his eyes and her breath caught. A small smile made its way to play across her lips. "I was right, you know," she murmured cryptically.

He scowled at her, setting his glass on the table and crossing his arms. "Right about what?" he asked, menacingly.

She felt breathless as she tried to answer. "I knew you would be as impressive as usual if you just gave it a chance."

Snape's eyes widened in surprise. He didn't even have to use Legilimency to tell that she was sincere. He felt a flutter of warmth in his centre and pinned her with an intense stare as he stepped closer and looked down into her upturned face. He could see her breathing erratically.

Silently, he drawled, "Miss Granger, when I ask a question, I expect an answer. Now, finish your sentence. My voice. It's what?"

Hermione blinked a few times, unable to find words. Finally, she opened her mouth, and Snape arched one eyebrow, waiting for her response. Faltering, she said, "It's... uh, it's... well, sir, I... umm... it makes me... er, that is, it is... so... evocative."

Smirking faintly, he purred, "And just what does it evoke, Miss Granger?" Hermione opened her mouth but no sound came out. She quickly closed it again, flustered. "Your eloquence seems to have failed you now, but I do remember you saying that I should be familiar with the effects of my voice. Just what are those effects? The only effects I have ever seen in my classroom are fear and loathing. Are there others?" he added, rather mockingly.

Hermione's eyes widened and she inhaled sharply. "Yes! I mean, yes, certainly we're not afraid of you here as you sing..." she finished lamely.

Snape's eyes narrowed at her obvious half-truth and he frowned at her. "Tut tut, Miss Granger..."

He was completely unprepared for the vehemence of her reaction to his simple words, but then he remembered the last time he had said them to her and the events that had then transpired. The feelings she had been trying to bury suddenly blazed up and flared out of her. He felt his answering jolt.

They both stood there, eyes wide and unblinking, staring into each other's very souls. Snape felt the drawing in his groin and reeled back. Hermione stepped backward, her whole being vibrating like a tightly wound bowstring. Snape shook himself, like a duck shedding water, and distractedly picked up his glass, downing the rest of the water in

several gulps. The shock of the icy water coursing through his system matched the prickling of icy sweat that oozed out of his pores.

Fighting for composure, they both turned back toward the group. Dumbledore had gone through "Prima Donna" several times for each individual and was now starting the song for everyone to sing. Snape and Hermione stood silently, avoiding each other's gaze and pretending to pay attention to the rehearsal.

As the end of the song approached, Hermione realized that Snape would need to come in with his part. She turned to speak, and was met with a firm hand waved in front of her face. Snape had his wand out, and he muttered, "*Sonorus*," as he pointed it at his throat. As the song came to its finale, he began his line, "So, it is to be war between us..."

His voice boomed through the Hall, causing everyone to jump in startled reaction, including Hermione, who stared at him in appreciative wonder. As the rest of the group sang the last words, he muttered "*Quietus*." Glancing at Hermione with a smug smirk, he saw her timorous smile in response. He let his gaze slide away from hers, once again unsure of how to interpret her reactions.

Again, she seems so transparent! But she's tarrying with that Potter imbecile. She can't honestly mean what she seems to show. Quite likely she's in the throes of her first love, he thought, grimacing, and you just happen to be one of the unfortunates who gets barraged with the excess of hormone-driven emotion! It would make no sense whatsoever for her to have feelings for you at all. Think logically, man! It's preposterous...

Hermione kept sneaking sidelong glances at Snape. She could see his firm jaw line throbbing as he ground his teeth. After his initial self-satisfied smirk, he had looked away and she saw his eyes darken and his lids lower. His smirk had faded into a tight grim line and his jaw began working.

What's bothering him now? He looks so tormented. But he seemed to have resigned himself to being in the play, and he even threw himself into it to be so very impressive at such an early stage. Why is he so unhappy now? What happened to make him so miserable? Hermione chewed her lip as she thought.

Oh, bollocks! You've probably just mortified him again, staring at him like a lovesick puppy! No wonder he looks so miserable. Would you want someone hanging about you like that if you didn't feel the same way? Of course not! And you've just gone and embarrassed yourself even more. Nicely done! Perhaps you can ask someone to Oblivate you so you can forget how humiliated you are! Too bad you can't cast it on him, so you can both be blissfully ignorant of the whole ruddy mess! Gods, girl, just get away from the poor man and stop making him even more uncomfortable...

Hermione hastily took one last swig of her water before putting it down and turning toward Snape again. "Excuse me, sir. I believe I should rejoin the group. Thank you for sharing your water with me." She looked up at him anxiously, waiting for some response before she walked off.

Snape kept his spine and neck rigid and looked down his nose at her. He saw the embarrassment plainly written on her face, and he was again impressed by her determination to be courteous and professional, even while in the throes of humiliation. *I'll bet most girls would have simply burst into tears and fled. And yet she's still here, thanking me...*

He heard that voice from within reiterate, *See, she's not a girl. You keep forgetting! She's a woman...* Hoping he was not blushing at that thought, Snape nodded stiffly and said, "Certainly, Miss Granger." There was an awkward pause as they both tried to look at each other without the other one knowing that they were doing so. Annoyed that he was flustered, Snape snapped, "Very well then. Off with you."

Hermione bobbed her head and hurried back to her seat. Snape tried not to watch the bounce and sway of her body as she moved. The cast had moved on to the performance of "Il Muto" and he lagged back where he was, not quite ready to go back. He watched Dumbledore taking the cast through the scene, most of it without the benefit of music since only parts of it were in the recording.

Eventually, it came to his line. Still across the room, he whispered "*Sonorus*" again and forebodingly bellowed, "Did I not instruct that Box Five was to be kept empty?" Several heads whipped around to look at him, wide-eyed. He took that moment to begin striding back to the group. He was about halfway to his seat when he said, dangerously, "A toad, Madame? Perhaps it is you who are the toad." He took a few more slow steps as Pansy sang her line and ended with a croak. As she croaked, he stopped, crossed his arms and let out a low, diabolical laugh.

Hermione braced herself, knowing how unnerving his laughter in this scene was, after hearing him in their first meeting. She felt the goose flesh rising on her arms and looked around the group, noting how many people were staring at Snape in fascination. Some of the girls...and Neville...were determinedly not looking at him, apparently terrified.

As his laughter grew during Pansy's horrid croaking, Hermione chanced a glance at him and was met with a bizarre sight. Snape was grinning evilly and his shoulders were actually shaking as he laughed...a full, albeit creepy, belly laugh. He flung his hands out to his sides and crowed, "Behold! She is singing to bring down the chandelier!"

Ron had to punch Neville in the arm to get him to say his lines. Neville sounded as scared as he used to in Potions class and practically squeaked his part. As the ballet scene progressed, in which Buquet falls from the fly system in a noose, Snape casually stepped to his seat and sank down, smirking. He flicked a smug glance at Hermione, who gave him a shaky smile and shook her head in awe.

As soon as the scene dissolved into pandemonium, and Hermione called for Harry as Raoul, Snape's bemused and self-satisfied expression melted into one of black ire.

Hermione looked blankly at the floor as she sang with Harry. Harry kept glancing at Hermione in between looking at his script for his lines. When she came to the line "so distorted, deformed, it was hardly a face, in that darkness..." Harry shot a glance at Snape, only to find him glowering at him, a look of barely-restrained wrath on his face. Harry felt himself quail at the sheer aura of danger surrounding the man glaring at him, but put up a brave front and gazed back at Snape for a moment before turning his attention back to his script.

Hermione began singing about the Phantom's voice, and a ghost of a smile hovered on her lips. As she moved on to her line, "those pleading eyes, that both threaten and adore," she hesitantly looked up through her lashes at Snape. She saw the seething anger in his frame as he glared balefully at Harry. Harry sang, comforting her, "Christine... Christine..." Suddenly, Snape looked at her and caught her eye as he quietly echoed him, "Christine..." the sound of his voice was low but it still reverberated around the Hall, since the *Sonorus* spell was still in effect.

Then, as the music changed for "All I Ask of You," Snape's face took on a closed look, as if he were carved in stone, and he sank back in his chair, tightly folding his arms across his chest. Hermione felt her insides shudder in response and wished she could get him to open up instead of shutting down. She kept her eyes downcast, but she put all of her feelings and will into singing the song to Snape, trying to will him into hearing it and realizing that she cared about him.

Harry, immersed in his song, was revelling in it, and was completely oblivious to Hermione's lack of focus on him. Snape sat, smouldering, hearing the underlying emotion in Harry's singing. He knew that the boy really meant all the flowery things Raoul said in the song. When Hermione sang in response, Snape found himself wishing that he were in Harry's place. As soon as that thought crossed his mind, Snape nearly exploded in self-loathing and anger.

He huffed a harsh exhalation through his nose and shot up in his seat. Fingers twitching with the desire to strangle the boy singing across from him, Snape stood hastily and spun on his heel, exiting the group again. He agitatedly sped to the table and chugged another glass of water. He felt Hermione's eyes on his back, even as she sang the sweet words of her song to Harry. He closed his eyes, railing at himself for even thinking about her again. He should never have allowed himself to want her. Taking a deep breath and holding it, he willed himself to forget the feelings he saw in her gaze, the reactions he sensed in her body. Once stars began to swim against his closed lids, his breath exploded from him, and a sigh that seemed to draw from the deepest recesses of his being hissed out of him.

Back at the group, Hermione was watching Snape as he stalked away. She could see the rigid tension in his shoulders and wanted to soothe it away. Beside her, Harry

was waxing enthusiastic in his singing. Hermione knew that Harry cared for her quite a bit, and their shared kisses spoke of a deeper desire. She recalled the excitement she felt in Harry's arms, and with his lips on hers. Even now, she felt a tingle in her stomach. But then she remembered the intensity of desire she felt when she was with Snape at their first meeting. Again, she felt a tingle in her centre.

She was nearing the end of the song, and she watched Snape, wondering if he would remember his part. As the music slowed and changed, she held her breath, waiting for him to sing. She was not disappointed. But, she was not prepared for the anguish she heard in his voice.

Snape stayed at the table, facing away from the group. He listened for his cue, and, eyes still closed, he sang his lines, his shoulders sagging slightly. The pain of his lonely existence surfaced, finding an outlet in his voice as he sang the words of betrayal and hurt. The cast was beginning to get used to the sound of Snape's voice resounding through the Hall under the spell, and most of them didn't look back at him.

Hermione felt her throat tighten as she sang the last lines with Harry. Resolutely, she forced herself to sing normally and not let her feelings take over. But, the eyes that burned into Snape's back were glistening with tears.

Once Harry and Hermione finished their last lines, Snape's shoulders lifted and he whirled around, face white with fury. The ominous tone of his voice rang through the Hall as he sang, "You will curse the day you did not do all that the Phantom asked of you!" He strode quickly back to the group as he held the note. The music swelled and he seized the back of his chair in a white-knuckled grip as he began laughing maniacally again. Hermione shivered at the sound. He truly sounded unhinged. After a moment, Snape roared, "Go!" pinning both Harry and Hermione with a threatening glare. The music spiralled down into its final notes and Dumbledore closed the music box.

The silence that reigned almost sang with pent-up energy. Dumbledore beamed around the circle and started clapping, saying, "Wonderful, all of you, simply marvellous!"

Snape, sliding his gaze away from Harry and Hermione, relaxed his grip on the chair back and mouthed *Quietus* as he pointed his wand at his throat. All around the circle, others joined Dumbledore in his applause, and multiple conversations erupted. In the sudden tumult of sound, Snape glanced back at Hermione, who was being surrounded by her friends, all of whom were smiling and gushing over her talent. Even McGonagall made her way over to her prize student with a motherly smile and congratulated her on her singing.

Snape saw Draco muttering to Pansy condescendingly about how to do an Italian accent. Seamus and Dean were pounding Neville on the back and praising him for getting through it. Neville was blushing furiously and gave them a wilted smile. Parvati and Lavender were talking over the chorus parts with their idol Trelawney. Everyone was talking to someone except him, and nobody was likely to talk to him either. Once again feeling the sting of being left out, Snape scowled and turned to walk back to the table he had Summoned, for one last drink before he Banished it.

Hermione was quite embarrassed by the deluge of praise and admiration. She kept trying to change the subject or divert attention from herself, but someone would bring up something else she had sung and the group would start all over again. Even Dumbledore was standing on the edge of the group, twinkling and beaming at her. Harry had grabbed her hand and was holding it tightly, stroking her knuckles with his thumb. Feeling rather overwhelmed by the attention, she frantically cast her gaze about the Hall, looking for a way out. She spied Snape making his way to the water table and felt a pang of regret that so much was being made of her and no one had even mentioned his amazing performance.

Yanking her hand from Harry's, she forced her way over to Dumbledore and addressed him. "Headmaster, thank you for your kind words about my performance, but I think you're forgetting someone else who deserves just as much regard." She looked up at him meaningfully and tilted her head in the direction of Snape's departing form.

Dumbledore, knowing Severus as he did, knew he would not appreciate a big to-do being made over him, so he merely smiled at Hermione and nodded. "Of course, my dear, but..." He was cut off by Hermione whirling about and shoving through the crowd toward Snape.

"Professor Snape!"

The Hall quieted again as Snape set his glass down on the table and turned regally toward the group. His expression was cold as he looked at the crowd, with Hermione a step in front of them, looking at him.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

Hermione felt her heart beating wildly, and wished she had some support from those behind her, but she knew they were all too afraid of the man to venture out on the limb where she was. Even Dumbledore just stood, warily watching the scene unfold.

"Sir, I just wanted to say, on behalf of the cast, that we were pleasantly surprised to find you had such a hidden talent. You are a gifted performer, and we are grateful to have you with us." She briefly spun around and fixed the others assembled with a dangerous glare, watching the quicker of them catch on and nod hastily at Snape, murmuring agreement. Draco sneered at Hermione, but stepped forward and began offering his Head of House a round of applause, which was quickly taken up by the other Slytherins and Hermione, and belatedly so by the others.

Snape felt torn between gratitude for the recognition and paranoid doubt at the sincerity of her words. He looked to Dumbledore and saw the man beaming at him, clapping fiercely. McGonagall stepped up beside Dumbledore and gave Snape a calculating look as she applauded as well. It suddenly dawned on Snape that the applause was still going on, and it seemed likely that Hermione would continue it until he responded.

Trying not to appear as disconcerted as he felt, he walked evenly back to the group, glancing at everyone's faces. Hermione was smiling broadly, albeit nervously, as she watched him approach. His eyes locked with hers and he stopped. With a barely discernable quirk of the corners of his mouth, he gracefully bowed. Straightening again, he held up his hand. The applause stopped instantly.

"I appreciate the sentiment. However, I was merely doing my duty to the headmaster, as I expect all of you to as well. Therefore, there is nothing singular in my achievement to merit such recognition." He pinned Hermione with a piercing look before graciously turning to the headmaster and nodding.

Hermione managed to feel rebuked for the fuss the others made over her. She blushed and looked down. Dumbledore chuckled at Snape's words and stepped up to grasp his arm. "All the same, I must say that I was indeed delighted by the quality of everyone's work tonight. If this is how good you are at this early stage, I can only await with bated breath the triumph we are sure to attain at the competition. Congratulations to everyone on a job well done. Keep up the good work. Remember, costume fittings are tomorrow evening, so check the notice board for your time slot tomorrow morning. That is all. You are dismissed."

Hermione felt Harry grabbing her hand and pulling her along with him and Ron and Ginny. She allowed herself to look back at Snape once more before joining the others.

Snape was watching Hermione in his peripheral vision again. He saw Harry manhandling her and felt the fury well up. He ground his teeth and clenched his hands, willing himself to look away. He didn't succeed, however, and saw her look back at him as she left. McGonagall stepped up to him and drew his attention. Irritably, he glared at her.

"Severus, you have some explaining to do."

Sighing, he retorted acidly, "Whatever do you mean, Minerva?"

"What do I mean? Merlin, Severus, what else could I mean?" She planted her hands on her hips and stared at him severely. For a moment, Snape felt the sickening dread that she had somehow noticed his feelings for Hermione and was about to get him fired. Then, the cold trickle of fear vanished as she continued.

"Why have you concealed the fact that you have a wonderful singing voice? Haven't you heard me any of the times I have wanted to start a choir here? I only needed someone else who could sing and help me with the management of it. You have deliberately kept it a secret, just to thwart me!" She bobbed her head at him with each point, absurdly reminding him of a bird pecking at its food. In his relief, he found himself smirking.

"Really, Severus, you are the living end! Oh, don't smirk at me like that. I knew Slytherins were selfish, but to keep that from us for all these years... I must say that I am disgusted. But, I will take a certain pleasure in this performance, just because you will be forced to do it against your will. And I don't like feeling so vindictive! It's not very Gryffindor." She sniffed petulantly and threw him a haughty glare. He rolled his eyes in return.

"Are you quite finished with your little tirade? I would like to retire to my quarters, if you don't mind." He sneered at her.

She narrowed her eyes at him and stiffened, offering a little, "Hmph" before she bade him good night. He turned away from her with a deep sigh of relief and aggravation, only to find Dumbledore directly in his path.

"Headmaster, good night..."

He tried to step around the man, but was stopped by a firm grip on his arm. Dumbledore twinkled at him and said with a chuckle, "Severus, my dear boy, you really were quite impressive. I must say I had no idea! The Sorting Hat did an admirable job in casting, I can tell already. I just wanted to thank you for your hard work and dedication. I know how little you wanted to be a part of this, but you have really stepped up to the challenge. I can see the trophy already! Hogwarts has to win! With you and Miss Granger in the lead roles, and with your formidable talents, we will undoubtedly succeed." He let go of Snape's arm and clasped his hands, clapping softly.

Snape schooled his expression into one of polite attention, all the while squirming at Dumbledore's rapt words. Desperately wanting to be alone, he nodded politely. "As you say, certainly, sir. Good night." He stepped away as quickly as possible, noting that the Hall was empty of the rest of the cast. He marched out of the Hall and turned to go down the corridor toward the staircases, one up toward the Towers, and another down to the dungeons.

part 2 of this chapter is coming up next

11- Surprises at the First Rehearsal *part two*

Chapter 12 of 84

split into 2 parts due to length The first round-table read through happens, and it's an evening full of surprises for everyone involved--some more than others.

part 2 of chapter 11

Once Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny had exited the Great Hall and had made their way about halfway down the corridor, they had slowed and stopped in their excited chatting. Hermione was only vaguely listening. Ginny and Ron had departed to go owl their mother about the first rehearsal, Ginny taking everyone's scripts back to the common room, and Harry was left holding Hermione's hand.

She absently bade the redheads good night before looking back at the doorway to the Great Hall. Suddenly, she felt Harry squeezing her hand and grasping the other one. As other students flowed out of the doorway, he pulled her toward the wall. Hermione, in Harry's grip, followed distractedly.

Harry was grinning widely at Hermione and she instinctively smiled back. He pulled her into the shadows near the wall and tugged her against him in an embrace. She felt his chest warm and hard beneath hers, and his legs fit along her legs. His arms were wrapped around her waist and her hands were trapped against his shoulders inside his arms. He leant back against the wall and settled her against him, each with one leg between the other's. Hermione was taken aback by the embrace and even more so by the look on Harry's face.

He was gazing at her reverently, his eyes fixed on her face. His smile waned slightly as he looked at her lips. She felt his breathing quicken and gasped as he darted in to kiss her. She closed her eyes, letting the sensation flow over her. She could feel the urgency in his mouth and in the tightness of his grip. When he finally pulled back to take a breath, she was bewildered. He leant his forehead against hers and rasped, "I've been wanting to do that since the first moment you opened your mouth to sing tonight. You were amazing. There's more to you than I ever imagined. I want to know you, Hermione. I want to know everything about you."

Hermione reeled under the effects of his words and caresses. She felt her body responding to his. He was tapping into the sexual energy that the play had awakened in her. Her mind was whirling with thoughts she couldn't sort out and her pulse was racing. She felt the excitement in her centre and leant in toward Harry to kiss him. He responded eagerly and she wound her hands up behind his head, threading her fingers in his hair and gripping his shoulder. Harry slid one hand up her back and the other cupped her arse, pulling her against him.

Their tongues were sparring, feverishly exploring each other. Hermione gasped when Harry moved to bite her earlobe; she felt his hot breath against her ear and she shuddered with the goose flesh it evoked. Her nipples were stiffening between them. And that wasn't all that was stiffening between them. She could feel Harry hot and hard against her hip. It both frightened and excited her. She felt drunk with adrenaline. The rational part of her mind was screaming for her to stop, to get out of the corridor, but the recently awakened part of her hungered for the sensations and didn't care where she was.

She felt Harry's hands moving to her sides, travelling up to brush against the sides of her breasts and she moaned into his mouth. With a strangled groan, Harry guided her to turn, and she found herself pressed up against the wall. Harry was kissing her neck and throat, and she was biting her lip to keep from making noise, but their panting breath was echoing loudly to her ears. She shocked her finer sensibilities when she reached behind Harry and grabbed his arse, pulling him against her. He groaned into her neck and bit harder. She trembled at the jolt that coursed through her to her core.

Hermione's hands were travelling all over, from his hair, to his neck, to his shoulders, down his back, gripping his arse, and back again. Harry had reached between them to cup her breasts, lowering his face to the cleavage. He flicked shaking fingers against her hard nipples, causing her to squirm against his erection, panting. He covered her with kisses, even through her clothes. After a few brushes across her breasts, she gripped his hair and pulled him back up to kiss him deeply. He was momentarily surprised by the vehemence of her probing, but quickly overcame that to match her intensity. He began thrusting his tongue against hers, mimicking that which he wanted to be doing a little lower. He could feel her hips grinding against him in time to his thrusts and he groaned into her mouth as she pressed and rubbed her body against his aching cock.

Suddenly, Harry let out a startled cry and Hermione shrieked as they were doused with icy water. Hermione felt Harry being violently yanked away from her and saw him propelled to land unceremoniously in a dripping heap against the far wall. Her hands flew to her mouth in abject terror at the picture of Professor Snape, eyes crackling with rage, wand pointed at Harry in a pile on the floor, but staring at Hermione with what she could only describe as hatred pouring from him.

Harry sat, frozen, eyes wide with confusion and fear. Hermione felt herself sliding down the wall to huddle in a trembling ball, tears falling, unbidden, like the water dripping from her hair. She had never seen Snape like this, even that day at the notice board. He was like an avenging Fury. She could feel the magical energy sizzling off him, and was desperately afraid that he would hex them within an inch of their lives.

Snape pinned Hermione with a glare of pure loathing before he whipped around to Harry. His nostrils flared in his effort to maintain control and not blast that bloody Potter into oblivion. He fought the Death Eater inside himself to not cast an Unforgivable and end up in Azkaban. Seconds stretched on in tense silence, broken only by Harry's shallow panting, Hermione's stifled sobs, and Snape's deep breaths. Harry averted his eyes from Snape's, not wanting to incense the man further.

Finally, Snape hissed, "Fifty points from Gryffindor...EACH...for such revolting behaviour in the corridor. I will not countenance such lewd and disgraceful acts in this school. Mr. Potter, get out of my sight while you still can." He watched with a sense of morbid satisfaction as the boy scrambled to his feet, staggering away from them as quickly as possible before breaking into a run and taking the stairs two at a time. He barely spared a terrified glance over his shoulder as he went.

Snape focused his attention on Hermione, still cowering against the wall in the shadows. He could still sense the heady aura of pheromones around them. He looked at her, gut twisted in jealousy. Again, time seemed to drag on forever while neither of them spoke: he was not ready to, and she wouldn't dare until he spoke first.

She tried to compose herself, sniffing, swallowing her sobs. Her clothes were clinging to her, chilling her, but not nearly as much as his expression did. His shoulders were rising and falling with his heavy breathing, and she watched as they eventually slowed and then stopped moving noticeably. His lips were pulled in a tight thin line, etching deep grooves at the corners where they turned down in severe disapproval. Snape took a step toward her and she flinched.

Deliberately, he stepped closer to her, towering over her cringing form. He stretched a hand toward her and saw her shudder. He stood perfectly still, hand out, until she looked up at him, eyes red-rimmed and bewildered. In a quiet, flat tone, he said, "Get up, Miss Granger."

She glanced at his hand and back up at him, incredulous. Hesitantly, she grasped his hand and he pulled her to her feet. She snatched her hand back as soon as she was steady, trying to ignore the warm strength she felt in his grip. She stood trembling, back against the wall, eyes downcast, awaiting her punishment.

His eyes raked her from head to toe, then his gaze lingered where her wet clothes clung to her stiff nipples, outlining the shape of her breasts. He violently clamped down on the desire that rose within him. Teeth clenched in his fight for control, Snape gazed down at her: hair and clothing drenched, face white and tearstained, petrified and shaking. Unaccountably, he felt a twinge of remorse. Ruthlessly, he pushed it away, but even so, he couldn't bring himself to scourge her with his usual venom.

After several moments in which all she could hear was her heartbeat, Hermione ventured to glance up at him. His face was set again like it was during "Stranger Than You Dreamt It" and she felt that same flash of desire to change that dead expression. She found herself unable to look away from his penetrating gaze, but also unable to delve into those enigmatic black eyes.

Finally, he whispered, "How could you lower yourself to the likes of a Potter?" The incredulous disdain was plain in his tone, and she stiffened in defence of her friend. But, as she opened her mouth to respond, he held his hand up, millimetres from her lips. Her mind reeled at the memory of his finger against her lips before, and at the daring she had showed in licking said finger. She promptly forgot everything she was going to say in Harry's defence. Her lips tingled at his proximity, and she felt as if he were touching her, even though he was not.

Snape saw the change in her demeanour and felt her reaction. He, too, could feel the energy flowing from her lips to his fingers, across the short space. His mouth twisted into a grimace of pain and he spat, "You deserve so much better, Hermione." Then, before he could bare more of his soul, he snapped his hand back to his side and spun on his heel, turning away from her. He stepped away, down the corridor, and stopped, tossing back over his shoulder, "Never let me catch you like that again, or you will regret ever meeting that arrogant boy. As it is, I expected *you* to have better sense. For that, you will serve detention, Monday, with me. 7:00 in the classroom. Do not be late." He started down the corridor again, but paused to fling a drying spell at her before he disappeared down the stairs.

Hermione let out the breath she didn't realize she had been holding and looked dazedly at her now dry clothes. She sagged against the wall, closing her eyes in confusion. Gathering her scattered wits, she shakily started down the corridor toward the stairs. Warily climbing them, she fought to calm herself. As she reached the corridor to the Gryffindor Tower, she anxiously peered down it to see if anyone were waiting for her. Thankful that she didn't see anyone, she decided to use the private entrance to her Head Girl's room, bypassing the common room. The last thing she wanted to do was face Harry and a roomful of spectators.

She stepped through a nondescript door and made her way through the stuffy passageway. Stealthily opening the hidden door to her room, she peered around to make sure nobody was waiting for her *in* her room either. Heaving a sigh of relief, she shut the hidden door and flopped gracelessly onto her bed, her hands pressed against her eyes. Crookshanks jumped onto the bed beside her and butted his head against her arm, demanding attention. She absently scratched his head and wailed, "Oh, Crookshanks, what am I going to do?"

She was startled by the muffled cry she heard outside her door. It was almost immediately followed by vigorous knocking. Then, she heard Harry's muted voice, saying, "Hermione? Are you in there? Open up! It's me, Harry! Are you okay? Please, open the door!"

Gingerly, she made her way to the door and leant her forehead against the wood. Warily, she answered, "Harry, I'm fine. Just go. It's better if you just go to your room. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" She shook her head at the outraged squawk from the other side. Harry banged on the door and she jerked her head off it.

"Hermione, come on! Just let me see you, I need to know you're okay. Please? I promise I'll go then. Really!"

Hermione grimaced, knowing Harry's stubborn streak. He would sit there and keep her from sleeping until she caved in. Exasperated, she snapped, "Fine!" She dropped her wards and unlocked her door, jerking it open a few inches. She looked at Harry, irritated, and saw him, still damp from their dousing.

Harry instantly grabbed the door and pressed up against the opening, eyes wide and worried as he looked at her. Hermione rolled her eyes and huffed. "Honestly, Harry, you could have used a drying spell, or at least changed!" Harry gazed down at himself blankly. He sharply looked back at her, confused by her reaction.

"I was worried about you! Who cares about my clothes? Are you okay? I didn't dare try to stay around, not with Snape that mental. What did he do? What did he say to you?" Suddenly, his urgency disappeared and he dropped his voice to a coaxing tone. "Say, 'Mione, can't you let a chap come in and talk to you? It's stupid to be having a conversation like this through a door." He gave her a shy, hesitant smile and covered her hand on the door with his.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, marshalling her thoughts. She was frustrated, scared, angry, sad, and annoyed. She couldn't even find it within herself to return Harry's smile. Harry's attempt at being endearing faltered when she opened her eyes and he saw her temper rising within them. He was no stranger to Hermione's temper, and he hated it when she got angry and went off. Carefully, he removed his hand from hers and backed away. Sheepishly, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and looked down.

After a few seconds of silence, Harry glanced at her. She was still glaring at him, fuming. Finally, she backed away from the door and opened it a bit more, only to step into the open space with her wand pointing at Harry. He froze, wondering if he had finally pushed her too far and he was about to pay the price, but she simply shot a drying spell at him and primly put her wand away. Still dazed by the shock, Harry mumbled a thanks and ran his hand through his now dry hair.

Idly, Hermione looked at Harry and said, "Satisfied? You can see that I'm not hurt. Now will you please go to your room and let me go to bed? Gee, Harry, I don't know about you, but I've kinda' had a rough evening."

Harry grimaced at her sarcasm. It always reminded him of Snape. "Okay, just tell me what happened, and I promise I'll leave." He held his hands up, palms forward, gazing at her earnestly.

Hermione blinked at him and rolled her eyes. Sighing, she pinched the bridge of her nose and smoothed her fingers out over her brow. "I got detention, okay? He said I should have better sense, and I have to serve detention with him Monday night."

Harry scowled in indignation. "What does that mean, you should have better sense? And if he was going to give detention, why didn't he give it to me?"

She shook her head tiredly. "I can only assume it's because I'm Head Girl. I'm held to higher standards. As for not giving you detention, just be grateful that you won't be around him even more. I really thought he was going to hex you tonight!" She shot Harry a look of worry and fear. "And," she continued reluctantly, "he said not to ever let

him catch us like that again. I really think we should cool it a bit, Harry."

Harry rushed back to her, dismayed. "No! I mean, we just won't be foolish enough to get caught again. That's all. Come on, 'Mione, we have a good thing going. Don't let this one minor setback snuff it out!" He grabbed her hands and held them tightly, looking anxious.

Hermione, however, was incensed. "Minor setback! You call that a *minor setback*?" She yanked her hands violently from Harry's grasp. "Bloody hell, Harry, I haven't been so scared since we faced Voldemort! No, scratch that! It was *worse* than facing Voldemort. At least then, I knew there were scores of others there to watch my back and help me. At least then, I had some idea what was coming, and I had my wand out, ready for it! No, Harry, this was worse."

Harry started backing away, recognizing Hermione winding herself up for a huge blow-up.

"You just don't realize how powerful Snape is, do you? Are you blind? Can't you *feel* it? He probably wouldn't have *needed* a wand to hex the living daylights out of us, he was so livid! You never cared to look past your hatred for him to see the real Snape. He is likely the most formidable wizard in the country, if not the *continent*, save Dumbledore, and he's even *more* daunting because of his knowledge of Dark Magic! Can you even *imagine* what he knows? How *much* he knows? He probably knows hexes and curses that we wouldn't even *begin* to know how to defend against. And I have to serve detention with him. Because of you! I can't *believe* I let myself get caught up in the moment with you. In the *corridor*!" She stamped her foot and cursed.

Harry was standing stock still in the corridor, looking like a deer caught in headlights. He knew that nothing he said would make any difference when Hermione was this worked up. Vainly, he tried to calm her. "Look, I'll go and ask him to give me the detention instead..."

"No! You will do no such thing, Harry James Potter! You'll just make things worse! It's better if you don't bring it up again. Look, I'll manage. At least it's not with Filch." She heaved a huge irritated sigh. Closing her eyes and thinning her lips, she took a deep breath. As she exhaled, she looked at Harry. "Just go. I told you what happened. I'm fine. Just go. You promised," she said warningly. Harry nodded hastily. "And, let's just put things on hold for a while, okay? Things were moving way too fast. We'll just get into more trouble." She looked down, avoiding his stricken eyes.

Harry swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. He felt his pulse racing, his stomach clenching. Wisely deciding not to argue with her, he stuffed his hands in his pockets again, planning to address the issue when she was calmer, later. Nodding shakily, he glanced at her. "Right then. Okay. Well, in that case... um, I guess, good night. I'll see you tomorrow, eh?"

Hermione felt her stomach roiling. She hated hurting him. But she knew it was better if they eased up. Her emotions had been on a roller coaster ever since he made his feelings known. And, with everything she had to think about and deal with, she just couldn't keep it up. Especially since she still had lessons with Snape, and they all would have months of rehearsal as well. She relaxed a trifle at his capitulation and looked down. Quietly, she answered, "Sure, Harry. Good night." She watched him slowly turn and trudge down the corridor, then shut her door and locked it. Mechanically placing her wards, she leant her face against the cool wood of the door and sighed. She was so tired. It was like she had run a marathon. She just wanted to sleep for days, she felt so drained.

Wearily, she turned and started preparing for bed. *Thank Merlin I finished my homework already. I'll just take a bath and go to sleep.* She made her way to the bathroom, listlessly undressing. She started the water and chose scents that are soothing and calming to add to the mix. Sinking onto the toilet lid while she waited for the bath to be ready, she dropped her head into her hands, vainly trying to sort through all that had happened and everything she had felt that night. She groaned at the confusing jumble.

Turning off the water, she stood and stepped into the hot bath, sighing as she immersed herself in it. Her chest and throat felt tight. Idly she wondered if it was from singing, but then she felt the moisture gathering under her lids and realized that she was about to cry. Irritated with herself, she tried to fight it, but some inner voice told her to just let it out and she'd feel better. So, she did.

After several minutes of sobs, she finally devolved into occasional hiccups and sniffles. She did feel better. At least she felt like she could know her own mind again. Having luxuriated in a good cleansing cry, she meticulously started reviewing the evening, determined to figure things out.

Gods, tonight was utterly bizarre! Who knew Snape had such a talent? Then again, why wouldn't he? He's an expert at everything else he does, why not this too? Honestly, though, I have to figure out how to handle it! His voice just gets inside me and I start feeling all those things that I shouldn't be feeling...at least, not for a teacher. I've got to get over that. Just look where it's got me already! I've embarrassed myself multiple times, Snape hates me and I have to work with him, and now I managed to get a detention for acting on those feelings with Harry! I never had these problems when I was just the Gryffindor bookworm. She scowled morosely. Then, she shivered in remembered fear.

Merlin help me, Snape was scary! I'm surprised he didn't rage at us again like at the notice board. He was so quiet. Deadly quiet. Like when I made that horrible comment to him at our first meeting. He's really much more terrifying when he's quiet like that than when he's roaring. But tonight, it was like he was on fire. I can't believe Harry didn't feel the power crackling off him! Thank Merlin he's got such control. If it were Harry in a similar situation, half the castle would probably be in ruins around us! He really needs to learn some restraint. Snape was right about him and his reckless nature. Harry simply refuses to see it, likely just because he can't admit that Snape is right about something! She chewed her lip, frowning.

Harry did have a good question, though. What did Snape mean by that comment? What did he mean by any of it, for that matter? "How could I lower myself to the likes of a Potter?" Why should he care? It's really none of his business. She pondered a moment and then felt a twinge in her chest at Snape's expression when he had said, "You deserve so much better, Hermione."

Her eyes widened and her breath caught. *"Hermione?" Since when does he call me that? And just what does he mean, I deserve so much better? Like what?* She rapidly flashed through all that had passed between them during the rehearsal, and the explosion of feeling in response to his hand near her lips again. Her pulse sped up and her stomach fluttered. She cast back to the rusty smile he had given her and the decency he had exhibited in helping her up and drying her clothes. *Or... not what... who?*

She leant her head back on the rim of the tub and covered her face with her hands. She felt them trembling against her cheeks and took a deep, calming breath. She tried to ignore the harsh thumping of her heart in her chest, and the tremulous sliver of hope that was working its way to her consciousness. It forced its way through and gave rise to the thought, *He couldn't possibly mean himself, could he? Is he... jealous?*

Her body thrummed at the idea, and she felt all the frustrated sexual energy spring back to life. Suddenly, the throbbing wasn't just in her chest, but throughout her body. She knew it was going to keep bothering her, and she felt resigned to taking it through to its logical conclusion. Sighing, she drained the tub and dried off, dressing for bed and feeling the pulsing in her centre the whole time.

She climbed into bed and doused the light, squirming a bit at the heat between her legs. Rather exasperated, she slid her hands under the covers and began stroking her body, sliding over her breasts and down her stomach to her slick curls. She couldn't hold back the gasp as she slipped her finger between her swollen pussy lips and rubbed near her clit. But, her mind kept throwing out images of both Snape and Harry, mixing different moments of desire and fear and anger.

This was different than the other times she had done this. Then, she was in the throes of lust and desire. Now, she was suffering the after-effects of frustration. She really just wanted to sleep, but knew she never would because her body would keep her awake unless she took care of business.

It felt good, just not like before. She felt her senses building, but her mind kept her rather detached from it all. *Oh for gods' sakes, this is supposed to be fun!* she thought, disgusted. She continued, determined to reach the point where she could finally relax. She hit a plateau and nearly cried out in frustration.

Feverishly, she cast about for something to get her to her peak. She recalled the sensation of Harry's mouth kissing her chest, his fingers brushing her nipples, his cock hard against her hip. She felt a jolt inside herself and her fingers danced even faster.

Then, she thought of his teeth biting her earlobe and her neck, the heat from his body radiating against her. A tingle shot through her. She was getting closer.

Concentrating on the feeling of body heat against hers, she suddenly remembered how close Snape had been to her as he had purred at her, demanding to know what his voice did to her. She had felt the heat and power emanating off him and had wanted nothing more than to be pressed up against him, wondering if she did so, would she feel a hard cock between them like she had with Harry? The thought of Snape, hard against her, seducing her with his velvet voice, sent her over the edge and she felt the spasms take over her body. As they subsided, she nearly wept with relief.

Her breathing finally slowed and she curled up on her side, feeling the sated drowsiness sweeping over her. Her last conscious thought was, *Oh thank Merlin, finally!*

12- Consequences and Costumes

Chapter 13 of 84

Friday brings the consequences of Thursday night's indiscretions as well as the eagerly anticipated costume fittings. Will it bring any other interesting interactions?

Chapter 12- Consequences and Costumes

Snape was in a legendary foul mood Friday. More than one student felt as if an entire weekend were necessary to recover from Potions that day. One particularly irreverent Ravenclaw made so bold at lunch as to say that it was as if the class were being taught by a werewolf, since Snape snarled and growled more than he spoke. Snape avoided the Great Hall both morning and midday, so he wouldn't have to see Potter and Granger together. He really felt as if he couldn't be held responsible for his actions if he did see them.

Thus, it wasn't until dinner that evening that he saw the uncomfortable distance and awkward tension between said couple. Despite himself, he was interested in what had happened between the pair. Deep within, he crowed in malicious delight at the obvious breach. Watching them through his shielding curtain of hair, he had to consciously keep the smug smirk from creeping onto his face.

Hermione, too distracted by the strain of being around Harry, barely had time or attention left to register Snape's absence earlier and his scrutiny at dinner. It had been a rough day.

That morning, she had emerged into the common room to find Harry and Ron waiting for her. Ron gave her a wan half-smile, indicating that he had heard the whole story from Harry the night before. Harry, confident that a night's sleep would clear things up, blithely approached Hermione, smiling, and reached to take her hand. His smile froze when she moved her hand out of his reach. She glanced at Ron, who had closed his eyes and grimaced, shaking his head at Harry's folly. When she looked back at Harry, he was staring at her, uneasy.

"Hermione?" he asked, placing a wealth of meaning in that one word.

Hermione sighed, dreading what was to come, but resignedly answered, "Harry, I meant what I said last night. Give it a rest."

Harry's eyes glittered and his jaw clenched. He stiffly shoved his hands in his pockets. Hurt and angry, he ground out, "So, that's it? We don't even get to talk about it? That's not fair, Hermione." He glared at her, eyes narrowed.

Hermione, hating herself for hurting her best friend, gave in a little. "Look, we'll talk about it later. This weekend, after classes are over. We both need to keep our minds on our schoolwork today, so we'll just put it on hold until later."

Harry took a deep breath, slightly mollified. At least he didn't look ready to hit something anymore. Slowly, he took his hands out of his pockets. "All right then. Later." He shot an angry glance over his shoulder at Ron and barked, "Let's go, Ron."

Ron cringed and looked sadly at Hermione. Harry brushed past her roughly and Ron followed, more slowly. Once Harry had climbed through the portrait hole, Ron gave Hermione a quick, apologetic squeeze on the arm and muttered, "I understand, Hermione. Really, I do. He's just got to work it out. Come on with us to breakfast. Avoiding him won't make him deal with it any faster."

Hermione gave Ron a grateful, watery smile and nodded. "I'm coming. I'll just be a few steps behind you. Go on. It's okay." Ron squeezed her arm again and turned to leave. "And Ron..." He stopped near the portrait hole and looked back inquiringly. "Thanks." At this, he broke into a genuine smile and nodded at her, and then he scrambled through the hole. Hermione sighed again.

Alone, she trudged down to the Great Hall. On her way, she stopped at the notice board. Just as Dumbledore had said, the schedule was up.

"Costume Fitting Roster:

7:00- Colin Creevey, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas

7:20- Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, Lavender Brown, Parvati Patil, Millicent Bulstrode, Luna Lovegood, Ginny Weasley

7:55- Sybill Trelawney

8:00- Terry Boot

8:05- Minerva McGonagall

8:10- Draco Malfoy

8:20- Pansy Parkinson

8:30- Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom

8:45- Harry Potter

8:55- Hermione Granger

9:10- Severus Snape

Be on time for your slot.

Wear standard wizard's robes for transfiguration.

- A. Dumbledore, Director"

Chewing her lip in a bemused fashion, Hermione was surprised by a cheerful "Morning, 'Mione" behind her. She turned to see Ginny smiling at her. Ginny glanced around and looked at Hermione, puzzled.

"Where's Harry?"

Hermione shrank in on herself and her smile faded. Instantly, Ginny stepped closer, dropping her voice confidentially.

"What happened?"

Hermione looked into the other girl's concerned eyes and said, "I told him we needed to put things on hold for a bit. He's pretty upset. He and Ron are already at breakfast."

Eyes widening in dismay, Ginny breathed, "Why? I thought things were going well!"

Hermione took a deep breath and said gloomily, "They were. Very well. So well that Snape caught us snogging in the corridor and all hell broke loose." She raised her eyebrows in acknowledgement of Ginny's horrified gasp. "He doused us with ice water and threw Harry across into the far wall! I thought he was going to hex us into oblivion! It was awful, Ginny..." She shuddered at the memory.

"Then, he took 50 points each and told Harry to leave while he still could! I mean, that's a serious threat from the likes of Snape!" Ginny nodded vigorously, completely absorbed by Hermione's tale. "And, after Harry left, he gave me detention Monday night. So, when I went upstairs, Harry was waiting for me and I just got angry and told him to cool it." Her shoulders sagged again under the stress of everything that had transpired.

Ginny made soothing noises and slipped one arm around her friend's shoulders, hugging her. "It's okay. It'll all work out. Wow. Detention? But why not give Harry detention too?" She started slowly leading Hermione into the Great Hall.

"I don't know. Harry said the same thing. I guess it's because I'm Head Girl. Snape did say he expected me to have better sense." It was on the tip of her tongue to tell Ginny about Snape's other cryptic comments, but she stopped herself, not wanting to give her naturally inquisitive and far too clever friend an opening through which she could pry into Hermione's dangerous thoughts about her Potions professor. They made their way to the Gryffindor table. Ron and Ginny exchanged looks before Ginny sat down across from Ron and Harry, pulling Hermione down beside her.

Harry stiffly looked away from them and stared at his plate. Hermione exchanged looks with Ginny and Ron, the former nodding sympathetically and supportively at her, patting her hand under the table, and the latter shrugging faintly and smiling weakly at her. Hermione set her teeth and stoically filled her plate. Ginny and Ron bravely tried to keep up conversation while they ate.

Suddenly, Harry flung his fork down on the table and stood. Hermione started at the clatter and sat up straight. Ron and Ginny broke off their conversation and stared warily up at Harry.

Blushing hotly, Harry grabbed his bag and muttered to no one in particular, "I'm going to, um, go do some reading for class. See you later, Ron, Ginny... Hermione." He pinned her with a steely gaze before he turned abruptly and strode off.

Ron let out an audible sigh and turned to Hermione with a mournful expression. "Harry told me what happened, 'Mione. Oi, but I can't believe you got detention. That's ruddy awful, mate. And I saw Harry when he came into the common room! He was soaked! Snape actually did that to you two? What a bloody great prat!" He scowled in indignation.

Perversely, Hermione found herself defending Snape. "Well, we *were* snogging in the corridor." She faltered and flushed, shooting a sheepish glance at Ginny. "And, well, we were doing a bit more than just that. We weren't exactly following school rules, you know," she added, primly.

Ron wrinkled his nose at her, shaking his head. "Oh, give over, 'Mione. That was completely uncalled for." He lifted his chin haughtily and Hermione choked back a giggle. He sounded just like McGonagall! Hiding her grin behind her glass of pumpkin juice, she took a long swallow and placed it decidedly back on the table.

"I'm done too. I'll see you lot later. Harry and I will talk tomorrow. I'm sure we can work something out. Thanks for being there for me." She stood and reached across the table to squeeze Ron's hand and patted Ginny on the shoulder before she whirled and headed for her Advanced Arithmancy class.

Hermione ended up making a mad dash into the Great Hall for lunch that day, eager to eat and leave, so she wouldn't have to suffer Harry's attitude any more than she already had. He had been positively irritating in their Advanced Transfiguration class. Ron kept giving her apologetic looks all through the lesson, and she felt as if she would scream aloud if she had to sit through another nosy prying stare from any other student. So, as soon as class was over, she raced out and down to lunch, ahead of everyone else. She was halfway through her meal by the time Ron and Harry showed up. They sat silently and began eating.

The silence between them was uncomfortable indeed. After a few minutes, Harry suddenly cleared his throat and spoke up. "Hermione, listen. I know you said we would talk tomorrow, but I think that's waiting too long. I mean, how miserable is this? Do you really want to feel like this?" He turned wistful eyes on her and leant toward her earnestly.

Hermione fought to swallow through her suddenly tight throat. Coughing a bit, she blinked rapidly, trying to choose her words carefully. She returned Harry's gaze evenly and said, "I know no one wants to feel like this, but I also know that you're not going to let our discussion be brief. To give our conversation the proper attention it's due, we need to have enough uninterrupted time for it. We don't have that today. Nor will we tonight, not with costume fittings. And, I would rather we don't stay up far too late and lose more sleep. I promise, Harry, we'll talk tomorrow. And I'll give you my undivided attention, okay?" Her brow furrowed and she leant toward Harry. He scowled and sat back from the table, crossing his arms in front of him. An errant wisp of thought wafted through Hermione's consciousness. *My, doesn't he look like Snape just now!*

Disconcerted by her thought and Harry's juvenile silent treatment, she stood hastily and gathered her things. Casting a quick disappointed look at Harry and a wan smile at Ron, she muttered, "See you later then, Ron, Harry." She avoided the curious stares from other students as she hurried from the Great Hall. She spent the rest of lunch in the library...for a change.

So, there they all were at dinner, the cast members waiting for their time slots. Hermione was answering questions from Lavender and Parvati about the types of costumes in the play, and Snape was watching her covertly from the High Table.

Eventually, only the cast members were left in the Great Hall, and Dumbledore called the first group over to him.

Many of the people on cast stood in small clumps far enough away from the group getting fitted so as not to disturb them. Draco took Pansy by the hand and dragged her away from the Hall, snidely commenting on wasting his time standing about with the others. Hermione was standing with Ginny and the other Gryffindor girls, chatting about the ballet costumes. Harry glared at them darkly and turned to Ron and Neville.

"C'mon mates, you don't have to be here till 8:30, and I'm after you, so why waste our time waiting here? Let's go play some Exploding Snap or something."

The other boys nodded quickly, hoping to appease their friend, and perhaps put him in a better mood. Harry turned sharply and marched out of the Hall, Ron and Neville trailing behind him.

Snape, who had slunk into the shadows, planning to wait just long enough to see what Dumbledore was going to do with the costumes, saw the angry boy stomping out of the Hall. He smiled to himself. His eyes sought out Hermione, among the other girls.

After a few seconds, she started to frown, shaking her head slightly, her eyes darting around the Hall. When she realized Harry was gone, her shoulders dropped in a visible sigh of relief. She went back to her conversation, but quickly started twitching again.

Snape saw her looking around, perplexed. Finally, her swivelling head narrowed its scope to focus in his direction. He was concealed in the shadows, but she was looking straight at him. Her eyes narrowed, searching, and then relaxed again. She shook her head faintly, looking down. With one last keen glance toward him, she grimaced and turned back to her friends.

Snape realized he was breathing shallowly and consciously took a deep breath. She hadn't actually seen him, but she knew he was there! Or, she knew something was there, even if she couldn't figure it out. He thought about their apparent connection, wondering. An odd tingle rippled over him. No one had ever sensed his presence like that before. Thank Merlin, or his days as a spy would have been over long ago. Unsettled by this development, he took the opportunity, while her back was to him, to slip out of the Hall unnoticed. He had a couple of hours before he was scheduled; surely he had something he could do with his time besides staring at schoolgirls!

When he was back in his dungeon, he found himself unable to concentrate on grading, so he reverted to practicing his part, forging ahead to Act Two. He forwarded through the parts he wasn't in and replayed each section of his part several times until he could perform it from memory. He had worked his way through to the scene in the graveyard.

Repeating his lines in which he lures Christine and taunts Raoul, he took morbid pleasure in fantasizing about actually acting out a similar scene with Potter. *I wonder how Dumbledore will stage this scene. I would so love to sing the conceited expression right off that boy's face...*

Continuing in his practice, he eventually came to "Point of No Return." He paused uneasily, remembering all of the inappropriate feelings that had come along with doing this part. Thinning his lips in determination, he doggedly practiced, verse by verse, painstakingly memorizing the song. By the time he had reached the end of the song, at the point where the Phantom begins singing "All I Ask of You" to Christine, Snape was thoroughly uncomfortable.

His rebellious body responded as it had before, no matter how much he tried to will it otherwise. He finally gave up practicing, realizing it was futile, and he needed some time to... calm down before he had to return to the Great Hall. He checked the time and saw that he had about half an hour before he was needed upstairs. Frustrated with his lack of control, he forced himself to go check the potency of his potion ingredients by smell. If anything could dampen inopportune ardour, it was the odour of some of his ingredients.

After several whiffs of particularly pungent materials, his eyes were watering, he was fighting a sneeze, and his erection had finally flagged. Grateful for the relief, he locked everything away again and went back to his desk. However, when he got there, he hesitated. There was nothing he could concentrate on here, not unless he wanted to take the chance of being aroused again. Exasperated, he made his decision and swept out of the dungeon, back up to the Great Hall. He would be early, but he could always wait outside or in the ever-present shadows until it was his time.

As he mounted the stairs to the corridor, he heard Weasley and Longbottom nattering on as they made their way to the stairs up to Gryffindor Tower. Snape grimaced and paused, loath to encounter them and their vacant expressions. As they climbed the stairs out of his range of vision, he crisply strode on, down the corridor to the Hall. He stopped at the door, just outside it, and stealthily peeked around the jamb.

Hermione was sitting with her back against the wall by the doorway, as far away from Dumbledore and Harry as possible. The rest of the students were gone. Snape instantly pulled back, barely keeping her in his line of sight. She was sitting with her arms around her bent knees, fingers interlaced. Her head was leaning back, tilting her chin up, baring her throat. She looked sad and pensive.

Snape frowned blackly. *She must be pining for that Potter dolt. They must have had a lovers' quarrel and they just haven't made up yet*, he thought bitterly. He glanced back in and saw Dumbledore waving Harry away.

Harry strode across the Hall toward the door, glaring at Hermione the whole way. Snape heard her sigh wearily. The last thing Snape wanted to see was her grovelling for his affection, so he spun furiously and secreted himself within the shadows of the opposite wall, across the corridor from the doorway.

Hmph. They're not the only ones who can use these shadows to their advantage...

Hermione stood as Harry got closer. Harry looked sullen. Hermione knew he would sulk until they got to have their talk. When he got close to her, he stopped and said sharply, "Dumbledore is ready for you now."

Snape heard the harsh tone and wanted to punish him for discourtesy, but he stayed secluded. Hermione's voice was gentle as she said, "Thank you. You looked quite the hero in your costume, Harry."

Hero? Of course, Potter-the-bloody-hero! Silly girl, mooning over a jumped up boy...

Harry's voice was coaxing as he said, "Hermione, please reconsider. Let's talk about it tonight. I'll meet you at your room and we can discuss things. What do you say, huh?"

Snape squinted in confusion. What was the boy saying?

"Harry, I said we'll talk tomorrow. Don't push it." Her tone showed her aggravation and held a clear warning. A warning that Harry didn't heed.

Snape pressed himself more securely against the wall as Harry came around the door frame, pulling Hermione with him. She yanked her hand from his grip and glared at him. Harry ignored it and stepped closer to her, putting his hands on her shoulders, murmuring to her, "Hermione, I'm sorry we got in trouble. It won't happen again. We'll just be more careful. C'mon, why don't we talk about it in your room tonight? I miss you already. I miss this..." He pulled her to him and kissed her.

Snape was about to come roaring out of his hiding place, but he was stopped by the vision of Hermione forcefully pushing Harry off her, her face absolutely livid. Snape hardly dared breathe, he was so shocked.

Hermione swatted Harry's hands away from her. In a harsh, furious whisper, she said, "Harry James Potter, that is the last straw! You just don't *listen*, do you? I *told* you we needed to put things on hold. You say you care about me, but you won't even listen to me when I'm not comfortable with what's going on! I'm the one who got in more trouble. I'm Head Girl! That's important to me! You're so childish! You can't even be *civil* to me, just because you didn't get what you want!" Her hands were balled into fists on her hips, red spots burned on her cheeks, and her eyes were snapping with anger. Harry just stared at her, dumbfounded.

Snape didn't dare blink; he didn't want to miss one precious second of this beautiful sight!

"And now, when I have another responsibility, and after I already *told* you we'd talk about things later, you drag me out here and waste the time I'm supposed to spend with Dumbledore! You don't even *care* about getting me in more trouble! I can't *believe* how arrogant you are sometimes, Harry. Not everything is always about *you*!!" She stamped her foot and whirled, charging back into the Great Hall. Harry blinked in amazement.

Snape clapped a hand over his mouth to hold in the laughter that threatened. Harry's cheeks reddened and his eyes narrowed. He scowled and ground his teeth. Stepping quickly to look at Hermione in the Hall, he exhaled explosively. Huffing angrily, he turned and stomped down the corridor and up the stairs.

Snape watched him go, revelling in the boy's humiliation. Smirking, he slipped from the shadows to the doorway.

Hermione was hurrying across the Hall to Dumbledore, who was gazing at her over his spectacles with a grave expression. Swiftly, Snape followed silently behind her. Dumbledore said in a reproachful tone, "Miss Granger, you have been here all evening, and yet when it comes to your time, you disappear. Now, you are late. I must say, I am disappointed. I thought you, of all people, would take this responsibility seriously."

Hermione looked properly contrite and began, "Headmaster, I apologize. I..."

She was smoothly interrupted by a silky voice behind her. "Headmaster, I must apologize. I detained Miss Granger. It is not her fault that she is tardy. Rest assured that she most certainly does take this responsibility seriously."

Hermione whirled, looking up at Snape with wide, incredulous eyes. Had he just *lied* to the *headmaster* for her? Snape quirked an eyebrow and looked down his nose at her. His lips twitched in an effort to contain his amusement at the scene he had witnessed. Hermione was speechless, completely shocked at his words, and disconcerted by the sparkle in his eyes. Was that a glint of *humour*? He looked positively mischievous! Blinking rapidly, Hermione turned back to Dumbledore.

"Very well then, Severus. You are the only one after Miss Granger, so you have only yourself to thank for being behind schedule. Miss Granger, stand by me, please."

Hermione flicked one last stunned glance at Snape and moved by Dumbledore. Snape inclined his head toward her and glided off to the side, coming to rest against the wall, half in shadow. Hermione followed his progress in her peripheral vision and noted that his face was hidden in the dark, but that his long legs were visible, lounging against the wall. Her attention was diverted by Dumbledore speaking.

"Now, Miss Granger, you have several costumes in this play. The first is your costume as a chorus girl in the 'Hannibal' scene. Then, you change into the costume that Carlotta wore in the 'Hannibal' scene as you sing her role. Your third costume is what you change into in your dressing room when Raoul visits. Your next costume is as the page boy in the 'Il Muto' scene. You will don a cloak to leave for 'All I Ask of You,' and then you will once again wear Carlotta's costume, this time from 'Il Muto.' You must of course have a costume for 'Masquerade.' Then you have another for the second 'Notes' scene. After that, you have one for the rehearsal for 'Don Juan,' after which you will don the cloak again to wear for 'Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again.' And your final costume is the one you wear for 'Don Juan,' which will take you to the end of the play."

Dumbledore looked up from his notes. He chuckled at her bewildered expression. "Relax, Miss Granger, we will transfigure most of what is needed. One of the many benefits of magic is the ease in which your costume can change. The only thing that will be separate will be the cloak you wear over your costumes. So, as you are wearing your standard wizard robe, I will show you what each of your costumes will look like, and later, we will transfigure an extra cloak for you. Are you ready, Miss Granger?" He smiled, somewhat amused at her expression.

"I think so, sir. I just stand here?"

"Exactly. Now, here we go." He pointed his wand at her and pronounced a spell that was apparently specific for her and her first costume. He made sure his notes were in order as he went through each spell following that one.

Hermione found herself smiling at the ingenious way in which the multiple costume changes would be handled. Each actor had a separate spell, created specifically for each costume needed, that would transfigure the original robe into whatever was required. Hermione mused that McGonagall must have helped Dumbledore with the lengthy amount of spells needed to clothe the whole cast. Transfiguration was her area of expertise, after all.

After each new costume was transfigured, Dumbledore had Hermione walk and move about, to make sure it fit correctly and was comfortable. Hermione felt like a child playing dress-up and was enjoying herself immensely.

Snape watched from his post, noting Hermione's surprise at how Dumbledore handled everything. Indeed, Snape was rather impressed by the methodical way everything was achieved. If Hermione had so many costumes, he couldn't help but wonder how many the whole cast had. He realized that he would have far fewer costume changes, but he was frankly relieved at that notion.

He felt himself growing aroused, watching Hermione parading in each new, sumptuous, beautiful costume. The corseted bodices of her gowns showed off her figure and highlighted her breasts. He felt his mind wandering to which costume she would be wearing in the scenes with him. Musing on his seductive "Music of the Night," he imagined circling her, mesmerizing her. Then, when they got to the last costume, the one she would wear during "Point of No Return," he felt himself growing hot at the thought of actively seducing her, being able to touch her and hold her.

He looked at her face, feeling a smile force its way to his lips at her candid delight, evinced by the sparkle in her eyes and her enchanted smile. A rush of warmth flowed over him, and he felt a throb in both his chest and in his groin. At that, he came crashing back to reality. His smile vanished, to be replaced by a pained scowl. He sucked in a breath, tearing his gaze away from her, hoping his once-again-present erection would go away quickly. It was almost his turn, now that Dumbledore had gone through all of her costumes. Desperately, he thought of Dumbledore in one of the corseted concoctions Hermione had just been wearing, and his erection flagged in response to that mental image.

Rolling his eyes and shaking himself to drive that image from his mind, he took a deep breath to compose himself, smoothing his robes and resettling them on his lean frame. It was none too soon, for Dumbledore had finished talking to Hermione and turned in Snape's direction.

"Severus, it's your turn."

Snape schooled his expression into one of polite attention and strode toward the older man. Hermione averted her gaze from her tall Potions Master, hoping he wouldn't make her leave. She had seen all of the other costumes so far, and she wanted to see his too.

Dumbledore picked up his notes and recited, "Severus, your first costume is for the 'Magic Mirror' scene, which continues into the 'Music of the Night.' You will also wear a hat and a cape over your costume. Just as with Miss Granger's, we'll have to make those separately. I suppose your costume would be the same for the later scene 'All I Ask of You.' Of course, your costume for 'Masquerade' will be quite different. I think that you'll wear the same costume throughout, unless it changes for you playing another role. Therefore, your costume will stay the same for the graveyard scene, but you'll add the cape again. For 'The Point of No Return,' you'll wear the cowl cloak that Piangi wore before you take over. That will take you through to the end of the play, but you'll need your cloak for the final moment on the throne as well. You don't have anywhere near as many changes as Miss Granger does." He chuckled at Hermione's sheepish smile in response.

Snape glanced at Hermione, torn between wanting her gone and wanting her there. Dumbledore saw Snape's frown in her direction and chided, "Oh, Severus, come now. Miss Granger has been so interested in seeing all of the costumes, surely you don't begrudge her the opportunity to stay and see the last few."

Snape flicked a glance at Dumbledore and eyed Hermione again. He could see the hopeful gleam in her eyes. "As you say, Headmaster." Hermione flashed him a bright, grateful smile before faltering, as if aghast at her temerity.

Blushing, she stammered, "Thank you, Professor Snape, Headmaster. I do so love the costumes. They're all so beautiful."

Dumbledore pointed at Snape with his wand and said the spell for his first costume. Snape felt odd without his voluminous robes. He looked down at himself, grateful that he was still in black, at least.

Hermione stifled a gasp. Her eyes widened in appreciation. Snape was clad in a dapper tuxedo. The snow white shirt was topped with a white bow tie, and the coat fit him perfectly, buttoned closed above trim black trousers that outlined his long legs. Hermione felt a tingle in her stomach at how dashing he looked.

"Now, please walk a bit, to make sure it fits properly."

Snape turned slowly and glided a few steps before spinning on his heel and returning. His face was inscrutable. Hermione couldn't help but think he looked like grace personified.

Dumbledore was satisfied with the fit and moved on to the next costume. The Red Death costume was stunning, even though it lacked the mask, hat, and cape. Snape felt his cheeks growing hot at the spectacle of himself completely decked out in red. Red! Of all colours! It was so... so... Gryffindor! He scowled.

Hermione could see how uncomfortable he was and swallowed her smile. She didn't want to make him feel worse. He stiffly stepped away and back, expression black. Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling as he said the next spell. Hermione thought she heard a faint sigh of relief from Snape as the cowed cloak covered him, over a simple shirt and trousers. It had a hood, and Dumbledore had him raise it before he walked off.

Snape felt better immediately, concealed in the shadow of the hood. He did the expected walk and return. When he looked at Hermione, secure in the fact that she couldn't see his eyes, he noticed how her eyes shone. She had a rapt expression as she gazed after him, but as he walked back to them, her brow furrowed slightly and she looked thoughtful.

Once Dumbledore was satisfied, he transfigured the costume back into Snape's original robes. He cast a calculating eye on Snape and pursed his lips. "We'll have to find more than one thing to transfigure for the rest of your costume. We need your mask and a cape, as well as a hat. And, we'll have to cast a glamour on you for the Phantom's scarred face." Dumbledore paused a moment and then continued with a suppressed chuckle, "Now, Severus, try not to use the glamour to scare students more when you do your night patrols, eh?"

Snape grimaced at Dumbledore and rolled his eyes. Suddenly, Hermione started from her reverie.

"Sirs! Professor Snape, I just remembered! What about your Death Eater mask and cloak? Can't you use them for the transfiguration?" She spoke quickly, excited by the idea.

She was not prepared for the violent snap of their heads toward her, pinning her with equally intense probing gazes. She backed away instinctively, hastily stammering, "I-I'm sorry. I d-didn't mean..."

Dumbledore recovered almost immediately and grasped her arm in reassurance. "That's quite all right, Miss Granger. Don't fret. You just took me by surprise, that's all. Severus," he said, his voice steely, "she does have a good idea. Wouldn't it be fitting for us to use a relic of the Dark Lord's reign in our progress toward a brighter future, free from his tyranny?" He sent a piercing look at Snape, who finally tore his gaze from Hermione to glare back at him.

Snape saw the implacable glint in the old man's eye and knew he was expected to agree. Still reeling from the shock she had given him, he slowed his breathing and pulse and bit out, "As you say, Headmaster."

Dumbledore beamed at him. "Excellent. In that case, why don't you go retrieve them and we'll wait for you here."

Snape blinked at the older man, taken aback by the unexpected request. He shot a glare at Hermione, who was looking down, nervously chewing her lower lip. Dumbledore kept smiling at Snape, waiting for his capitulation. Snape finally clenched his teeth and nodded sharply. "Very well, Headmaster. If you'll excuse me..." He gave a frosty bow and spun on his heel to march out of the Hall. As his steps faded, Hermione let out the breath she had been holding in a long, quavering sigh.

Dumbledore turned to her kindly and said, "Miss Granger, do not worry about Professor Snape. You had a wonderful idea. You simply took us by surprise. It will certainly be helpful for the costumes, and it will be highly symbolic, all things considered. I think it's a marvellous idea, and Professor Snape will come around, you'll see." He patted her shoulder in a grandfatherly manner. Hermione gazed up at him gratefully and smiled hesitantly.

"Thank you, Headmaster. I am doing my best to get along with Professor Snape. I'm trying to be as professional as I can, like you said, and move past our differences to work well together. I want to win this competition, sir, for you and Hogwarts."

Dumbledore squeezed her shoulder in approval and twinkled at her. "Miss Granger, I have no doubt whatsoever that with you and Professor Snape in the lead roles, after what we witnessed last night, we will win the competition! You are simply marvellous, and I am so pleased to see Professor Snape rising to the occasion as well. We have a lot of work ahead of us still, but after such an auspicious beginning, I am looking forward to it!"

Hermione relaxed and grinned at Dumbledore's ringing tones of confidence. She felt much better for the pep talk.

Snape grumbled to himself all the way down to his quarters. *Busybody Know-It-All! "What about your Death Eater mask?" How would she know I still even had it? I could have burned it after the defeat of the Dark Lord. What on earth made her think of it and bring it up?*

He remembered debating over what to do with his Death Eater garments. Part of him had wanted to burn them, to reduce them to ashes like Voldemort. That part had wanted to get rid of any reminder of his decades with the Dark Lord. Even his Dark Mark had faded into a pale white scar, rather than the black stamp on his forearm. He could ignore it so much easier now, as it was harder to see. He could have done any number of satisfying, cathartic things with his Death Eater items, all to commemorate his freedom.

But, when it had come down to it, he had decided against all of those options. He had carefully folded his cloak, smoothed his gloves across it, and laid the mask on top, locking them away in his wardrobe. He knew that they would serve as a reminder of everything he had experienced: his many mistakes, his attempts at redemption, his final release. They held too much of him and his past to just throw away.

He unlocked the wardrobe and removed his Death Eater garb. Memories washed over him. Grimly, he turned and carried them back up to the Great Hall.

Hermione sensed him as soon as he entered the Hall, and she turned to watch him. His expression was closed and his eyes were hard. Briefly, she wondered if it was such a good idea after all. She quailed inwardly at the wall that was suddenly around her enigmatic professor.

Snape strode over to Dumbledore, barely giving Hermione a glance, and offered him the neat bundle. Dumbledore smiled gently at Snape and took them from him. Pensively lifting the smooth white mask, he gave Snape an apologetic look. "Severus, I know you never thought to wear this again. Put it on one last time, and I will permanently transfigure it from an instrument of fear into one of hope. Then, you will never wear a Death Eater mask again."

A multitude of emotions was running rampant in his chest, making it feel tight. He looked at the mask, loath to touch it again. He was distracted by a faint sniff and glanced at Hermione to see her, eyes glistening with unshed tears, soberly sniffing, staring at the mask. Determined not to show any weakness in front of her, he steeled himself and resolutely placed the mask on his face. He closed his eyes, waiting for Dumbledore to cast the spell. Within seconds, the left half of the mask disappeared. He was covered from above his left eye, over his nose, and down along the right side of his mouth. He opened his eyes to see Dumbledore looking at him, the twinkle temporarily drowned out by tears of fierce pride.

Snape took a deep breath and removed the mask, gingerly handing it back to Dumbledore. He watched as Dumbledore shook out the long black cloak and handed it to him. Taking the cloak in nerveless fingers, he flung it about his shoulders and raised the hood, stonily looking at the floor while Dumbledore cast the spell to transfigure it into a less threatening cape, complete with a black brimmed hat. Snape scowled at the snug fit of the hat on his brow and felt it loosen slightly. Sharply looking at Dumbledore, he saw the man twinkling again.

"I wasn't sure if it would work or not, but I thought I'd try to get the hat out of it as well. I'm so pleased it worked. Now we have all of the pieces we need to transform for the Masquerade costume as well. Speaking of..."

He handed the mask back to Snape and waved his hand at him, indicating he should put it on. Snape reluctantly did so, and Dumbledore cast the spell for the Masquerade costume. Now Snape was completely clad in robes, cloak, mask, and hat of brilliant, unrelenting red. He groaned. Hermione clapped her hands in a little burst of excitement. Glaring at her through his Red Death's Head mask, Snape crossed his arms in a fit of pique.

"Excellent! It's marvellous, simply marvellous! Let me go back to your regular costume." Dumbledore eagerly cast more spells and Snape was once again accoutred in his elegant black tuxedo and half mask. He removed his cloak and hat and handed them to Dumbledore. With a long-suffering sigh, he lifted his hands and shrugged.

"Well?" he said, aggrieved. "Are you satisfied now?"

Dumbledore hummed in thought as he scrutinized Snape, and Hermione cleared her throat timidly. Both men turned to look at her, Dumbledore curious, and Snape annoyed.

"Yes, Miss Granger, do you have a comment?"

"Well, Headmaster, it looks wonderful, except for one thing..."

Snape raised the eyebrow not covered by the mask and glared pointedly at her. He crossed his arms again and stood stiffly. Dumbledore glanced back at Snape, considering, and then looked back at Hermione.

"Go on, Miss Granger. What's wrong?"

Swallowing nervously, she looked at Dumbledore, avoiding Snape's hostile glare. "It's... it's his hair, sir."

Snape's hands snapped back to his sides, straight as a ramrod, and he drawled dangerously, "What about my hair, Miss Granger?"

Dumbledore huffed at Snape's forbidding tactics and grasped Hermione's elbow, drawing her attention. Encouragingly, he repeated, "What's wrong with his hair?"

Hermione set her teeth and explained, "The Phantom's hair is short. Or at least, it's pulled back. It looks like it's slicked back. With Professor Snape's long hair hanging loose like that, it detracts from the mask."

Menacingly, Snape hissed, "I'm *not* cutting my hair..."

Dumbledore interrupted him. "No one is asking you to, Severus. Calm down. It's very simple, you'll just have to slick your hair down and tie it back." He glared at the sullen younger man, and was hit with a wicked inspiration. *Oh, he'll be perfectly incensed, but it's so much fun to bait him over such little things. It'll do him good to get off his high horse and let someone else be the expert at something for a change.*

Snape saw the devilish gleam in Dumbledore's eye and was instantly wary. What was the old man going to do to him now? Wasn't all this enough? He recognized that look, and it always meant trouble. He stiffened, on guard, as Dumbledore spoke again.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Granger, why don't you show us what you mean? If you'll just tell me what you need, I'll Summon those materials for you. You can instruct Professor Snape in how to properly arrange his hair for the role." He choked back a chuckle at the abject horror on Hermione's face and the incredulous rage on Snape's.

Hermione paled as she glanced at Snape, who was fuming. But, she couldn't refuse Dumbledore. He was the headmaster and the Director. Gathering up her Gryffindor courage, she faintly listed, "I need a comb, an elastic band, and some hair gel, or pomade."

Dumbledore promptly waved his wand and a tray with the required items appeared. Dumbledore grandly placed a chair in front of him for Snape to sit in, and waved his hand over it, beaming at Snape.

Snape snarled at him and grudgingly sat. Hermione stepped behind Snape at Dumbledore's urging and looked down at the crown of her Potions Master's dark head. *I can't believe I'm doing this!* She pointed her wand at his head and murmured a spell.

Snape heard her and felt the magic around his head. He whipped around to glare at her. "What was that, Miss Granger? What did you just do?" His voice was coldly threatening and harsh with anger.

Backing away a step, she swallowed and answered, "It's... just a charm I learnt to detangle hair, sir. That's all. I wouldn't want to pull your hair combing it back."

He eyed her suspiciously, then sneered, "Hmph. I suppose you, of all people, would learn a detangling charm..." Arching his eyebrow again, he spun and sat back in the chair, stiffly. "Get on with it, then!"

Dumbledore fought to keep the laughter from bubbling out of him at how uncomfortable they both were. Oh, he was going to get it from Minerva when she heard about this. Well, maybe not so much on Snape's behalf, but certainly for her prize student!

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Snape's insult and grimaced at him. She almost stuck her tongue out, but stopped before she did so, remembering Dumbledore watching them. She picked up the comb and reached a trembling hand out toward Snape's hair. Steeling herself, she slid it from the top of his head down the back, smoothing his hair down to the back of his shoulders. When he didn't hex her immediately, she repeated the movement, a little more confidently this time. She combed his locks smooth and looked at the result.

Really, his hair's not so bad. It's pretty glossy and at least it doesn't frizz! She rolled her eyes inwardly at the monstrosity she called her own hair. *I can't believe I have to touch it! I hope it's not as greasy as it looks.*

She reached for the hair product and scooped a bit onto her fingers. Combing his hair back at the temple, she held the comb for a moment while she smoothed the gel across his hair. *It's not that bad. It looks greasier because of how it sticks together when it's not combed, but it's smooth, not sticky.* She continued across the top of his head, slicking his hair back and smoothing it down with her hand. When she had all of it done, she gathered it at the nape of his neck and secured it with the elastic. She patted and smoothed it one last time before declaring, "Done, sir."

Snape was annoyed, at first, by Dumbledore's interfering. He knew the old man was doing this just to get under his skin. But, what choice did he have? He never really had choices when he faced Dumbledore, even now that the Dark Lord was gone. Then, he felt the comb slipping through his hair, lightly tugging at his scalp. He fought down a shudder at the sensation. He had never experienced someone brushing his hair before. He was completely unprepared for the feelings it evoked.

It was soothing. He felt like he was being lulled to sleep by the smooth, repetitive movements. And when he felt her hands spreading the hair gel on his head, he bit back a sigh. His scalp hummed with sensitivity. Every touch, every tug felt like a caress. It was like getting a massage, only better. He wanted to close his eyes and relax into the sensations. He felt all of his anger at the situation, and therefore Hermione, draining away under her gentle ministrations.

Suddenly he understood the blissful expression on animals' faces when they were being petted. He idly wondered if her hands would be as competent and tender stroking other parts of his body. His loins stirred at the thought and his blood pounded through him, hot.

Embarrassed at the turn of his thoughts and afraid they would be noticeable, he ruthlessly diverted his mind from the pleasurable sensations of Hermione's hands and focused on tamping his arousal. He was both disappointed and relieved when she finished and had neatly secured his hair into a thick tail at the base of his skull. He suppressed a shiver at her fingers lightly grazing the tender flesh of his neck as she gathered any stray hairs. He sat forward and stood slowly. Turning, he looked at Hermione and Dumbledore.

There he was, in complete Phantom costume: tuxedo, mask, and shiny hair pulled away from his face. Hermione inhaled sharply at the drastic difference from how her Potions Master usually looked. His regal posture suited the character perfectly, and she gazed up at him admiringly, marvelling at how debonair he looked.

Dumbledore clasped his hands and beamed impartially at both of them. "Splendid job, Miss Granger. I say, Severus, you must see yourself..." With that, he waved his wand and Summoned a tall standing mirror. Snape walked toward it, suspiciously, not sure he wanted to see how he looked. When he saw his full reflection, he stopped.

He was overwhelmed with the change Hermione had wrought with his hair, and the foreign, yet classy, style of his clothing. He stared at himself through the half mask, in awe at how different it looked. It truly no longer looked or felt like a Death Eater mask, and he felt his soul lift, as if a burden that had been weighing it down had disappeared. Gingerly, he reached up to touch the mask, turning his head from side to side, staring at his reflection. As he turned his head, he hesitantly patted his hair, smoothly slicked back. He ran his fingers over it and felt the short, thick tail at the nape of his neck.

Surprisingly, he thought it wasn't a bad look for him. He actually liked it. But, he reminded himself, it didn't allow for using his hair like a shield, hiding his true machinations. He dropped his hands to his sides and looked at his suit, smoothing the coat down and adjusting the bow tie. He turned to see his profile and saw the reflection of Hermione behind him. He was stunned by the expression in her eyes.

Hermione was staring at Snape, rapt in appreciation. Her eyes shone with a mixture of delight, pride, and yearning. She was smiling softly, devouring him with her eyes. Snape stopped as he saw her, scrutinizing her, trying to figure her out. After a moment, she looked up and noticed him staring intensely at her in the mirror. She gasped and blinked rapidly, flustered.

He saw the embarrassment and nervousness cloud her expression as she realized he had been looking at her. Once again unsure of how to react to her, he briskly focused on Dumbledore and said, "Thank you, Headmaster. That will do. May I have my own robes back now?" He took off his mask and handed it to the older man.

Dumbledore bustled about and quickly transfigured the costume back into his normal robes. He Banished the mirror and picked up the other costume pieces along with his notes. "Very well. Thank you for your help, Miss Granger. Severus, I suggest you take these items with you as you'll need them later." He waved his hand airily at the tray with the comb and gel. "The rehearsal schedule for next week will be up soon. Don't forget to check the notice board. Keep up the good work, you two. I'm very pleased with your progress so far. Good night, Miss Granger, Professor Snape." And with that, he shuffled out through the staff door, leaving Hermione and Snape alone.

An uncomfortable silence reigned. Snape stiffly looked down his nose at her, and she nervously chewed her lip, eyes darting around the Hall. Hermione finally looked up at him, and once again found herself staring at him, wide-eyed.

In a flat tone, Snape blurted, "What?"

Hermione shook her head and smiled faintly. "Nothing, sir. It's just that you look so different with your hair out of your face. It's so unusual, and I can't help but look."

Sneering, he drawled, "How ever do you manage to give such a long explanation for 'nothing'?" He saw her smile wane and the spark of indignation flash in her eyes.

"I meant nothing *bad*, sir, as I knew you immediately would think it was. It's quite good actually..." she added, reflectively, gazing up at him speculatively.

Unable to accept that, he countered, "Please, Miss Granger, spare me your insincere flattery. I am well aware that I am not, nor have I ever been, anything pleasant to look at."

She scowled at his self-derision. Haughtily putting her hands on her hips, she eyed him severely and said, "Stop that! Can't you learn to take a compliment? You may not be what others consider conventionally handsome, but you have... an aristocratic quality that can be quite appealing, if you'd ever allow it to be."

He stared at her, completely stunned. First, she talked back to him. Second, she berated him. Third... *she thinks I'm appealing?* He felt dazed, and regretted his lack of concealing hair to hide his shock. Feeling his cheeks warming, he abruptly gathered the hair products and straightened to his full height, not realizing that that was part of what she was talking about when she mentioned that aristocratic quality.

Hermione suddenly realized that she had just been lecturing her professor in her innate bossy way. She gasped and swallowed, her hands wilting to her sides. Cringing at her audacity, she waited for him to flay her with sarcasm, or deduct points, or give her another detention. When he merely stared at her, confusion and surprise swirling in his black eyes, and then spun away to pick up the hair products, she heaved a huge sigh of relief.

Completely discomfited, Snape inclined his head a fraction and said, "It is late, Miss Granger. I suggest you return to your Tower. Good night."

She composed her expression into one of polite regard and nodded. "Of course, Professor. Good night." She turned to walk toward the door. As she stepped away, Snape interrupted.

"Miss Granger." She turned, inquiringly. "Do not forget your detention with me Monday night. 7:00. In the classroom."

She looked down, obediently. "Certainly, sir. I will be there. Good night." With another bob of her head, she spun and walked out of the Hall, the whole way feeling as if two sharp points were being burned into her back. But, she didn't dare turn to see him watching her. Trying to keep her pace steady and not rush away from his dominating presence, she forced herself to act calmly and exit. It wasn't until she was halfway up the stairs that she glanced back, and, seeing no one, ran the rest of the way to her room, her heart racing oddly and her cheeks flushed. She slammed her door shut and hastily got ready for bed.

Tucked under her covers, she closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep, trying to forget how it felt to smooth Snape's hair away from his face, to run her fingers along his neck. She fell asleep to the image of her, facing a seated Snape, looking down into his endless black eyes as she ran both hands through his long hair, tangling them in it as he pulled her into his lap to kiss her.

Snape hated feeling so flustered around Hermione; he needed to reassert his authority. As she started to leave, he remembered the detention he had given her the night before. *Yes! That's precisely it...* His voice was silky as he said, "Miss Granger. Do not forget your detention with me Monday night. 7:00. In the classroom." She lowered her eyes meekly and he was mollified. Having regained a bit of his equilibrium, he gazed after her, watching her smooth stride and her appealing figure. He wished he could see inside her, to sort things out for good, but even as he thought that, he shied away, not sure if he could handle the shocks he might get, like the last time he delved into her mind.

Pensively, he wondered, *She couldn't possibly be attracted to me. It must be the play. Nothing else makes sense.* He slowly made his way back to his quarters as he thought. *But, why does she keep looking at me like she wants to devour me? No one has ever looked at me like that before. And she said... she said I was appealing. She said it was a compliment. That's not the first time she's complimented me either. There were the comments on my knowledge, my skills, my work for the Order, my... voice, and even the day we defeated Voldemort she claimed to care about me. And now she's told bloody Potter to back off! That was priceless! I can't believe she did that. She certainly seemed to be enjoying his... attentions last night!* He scowled at the memory.

I've never known any other students to stop their illicit liaisons just because they got in trouble. She's different from all the other girls... He squinted in his determination to figure out what it was that set Hermione Granger apart from everyone else. He entered his quarters and mechanically changed for the evening, donning his lounge wear and heading for the bathroom.

That alter-ego voice of his whispered, *That's because she's a grown woman. She has more maturity and sense than all of these other dunderheads put together.*

Closing his eyes, he tried to ignore the voice. He entered his bathroom and muttered, "*Lumos.*" Opening his eyes, he was taken aback at his reflection in the mirror. Wonderingly, he gazed at himself, looking at the Romanesque planes of his face, now completely open to view.

He touched his hair again, briefly recalling the sensations from Hermione combing it and smoothing it. He felt a tingle in his centre at the thought. He backed away and straightened. Looking at his posture, so formal and regal, he thought, *I guess I can see her point...*

Then he looked down at his chest, framed by the dark green satin of his open robe. He had never been particularly proud of his body, but he wasn't ashamed either. He knew he was thinner than most tastes preferred, and he was so tall. But, he felt satisfied with the understated strength in his wiry, flat muscles. At least he had never allowed himself to go to fat. And, even though he was thin, he was not weak. In his hyper-vigilance as a Death Eater-cum-Order Spy, he couldn't allow himself to be weak.

The dark hair on his chest stood out against his skin. He rather liked his preternaturally pale complexion. It made for an interesting study in contrasts, with his black hair and eyes set off by his ghostly pallor.

Musing about whether or not someone like Hermione could really find him attractive, he reached up to remove the elastic from his hair. Setting it on the sink basin, he shook his head to bring his hair back to its normal position. Only the ends moved, swinging over his shoulders.

Narrowing his eyes at his reflection, he lifted his hands to run through the slicked back locks on the crown of his head. Separating the tresses with his fingers, he felt the gentle tug on his scalp, reminding him again of Hermione combing his hair. He closed his eyes and relished the sensations in his memory.

Moments later, he opened his eyes again to see himself with a ghost of a smile playing on his lips and his hands buried in his long black hair. Jolting back to reality, he frowned and dropped his hands to the sink, leaning toward the mirror. Staring into his own eyes, he chided himself for continuing to think about Hermione, ordering himself to forget about her as anything but a student.

Closing his eyes to blot out the sight of his own pain, he leant his forehead against the cool glass and sighed. Resolutely, he stood back and opened the mirror, not looking in it again. He withdrew another Dreamless Sleep potion from the cabinet, briefly grateful that he could make as much as he needed without anyone to question him on why he was using so much, and retired to his bedroom.

He doffed his lounge wear, slid under the cool satin sheets, propped himself on one elbow, and downed the potion in one long swig. Settling back on his pillow, he sighed deeply and let the potion pull him into unconsciousness.

13- Detention with the Phantom

Chapter 14 of 84

Hermione faces a long weekend after her fight with Harry, followed by her detention with Snape. Just how bad can a detention with Snape be, anyway? Or how good, for that matter?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Secondary disclaimer goes here: All lyrics quoted from the Phantom of the Opera in this story are sole property of the composers. I just love them and enjoy making the HP characters sing them.

Chapter 13- Detention with the Phantom

Saturday morning, Hermione ventured into the common room to find Ron and Ginny playing Wizard's Chess. Harry was nowhere to be seen. The swift, knowing look that passed between the siblings was enough to warn Hermione that Harry was being difficult. They both gave her overly bright smiles as they stood, moving to flank her.

"Morning, 'Mione! Ready for breakfast? I could eat a hippogriff, I'm so starved!" Ron gently gripped her elbow and pushed her toward the portrait hole. Ginny rolled her eyes at Ron's exaggeration.

"Yeah, well, make sure you don't let Buckbeak hear you say that... So, Hermione, did you like your costumes last night?" Ginny was clearly determined to steer Hermione's thoughts to topics other than Harry's whereabouts.

Hermione sighed, both in annoyance over Harry's childish behaviour, and with affection for her friends' attempts to soften the blow. She stopped and resisted the persistent tug of the two herding her toward the portrait hole. "Listen you two. I'm not glass. I won't break." She smiled patiently at the redheads, noting their identical expressions of anxiety. "Let me guess: Harry's sulking in bed and refuses to see me, even though he was the one who wanted to talk so badly."

Ron's shoulders sagged and she knew she was right. Looking calculatngly at Ron, she added, "And you're supposed to smuggle up breakfast for him, right?" She swallowed a laugh at Ron's hasty gulp and shook her head as he sheepishly raised a hand to rub the back of his neck, eyes darting all around.

Ginny planted her hands on her hips indignantly, and glared at Ron. "Ronald Weasley! You are not going to steal food for that great prat, are you?" she said, warningly.

Hermione snorted at the clear sides being taken and held up her hands, one in front of each of them. Ron's ears were pink and Ginny's brown eyes were snapping. "Stop it. Both of you. It's bad enough Harry's acting like a child, I don't need you two to start bickering. Ron, I know how he is. I've known him as long as you have. Ginny, I don't care if Ron sneaks him breakfast. At least I won't have to try to eat with him glaring at me the whole time. When he calms down, I'll be more than happy to talk to him. Besides, you should really hear my side too." She cast a sidelong glance at Ron as she said the last bit, knowing that Harry had undoubtedly spilled his guts to Ron about everything. Ron jumped, and Hermione knew the shot hit home. Dropping her hands to her sides, she huffed and said, "Come on, let's go eat."

She stepped toward the portrait hole and Ron and Ginny fell into step behind her. Ginny grimaced at Ron and favoured him with a smart thump on the back of his head. Ron gaped in protest, but refrained from making any noise as he didn't want Hermione to yell at him. Instead, he rubbed his head and glowered at Ginny, pointing at her, and then shaking a fist in her direction. She rolled her eyes haughtily and flicked her fingers at him in a clear gesture that meant, "Talk to the hand."

Hermione knew that some exchange was occurring between the two siblings, but didn't care to address it. She brooded over Harry's reaction all the way to the Great Hall.

The three of them were fairly back to normal, eating and chatting about their costumes. Hermione was surprised to hear that one of the coming rehearsals would be a transfiguration lesson for each actor, teaching them how to do their own spells for costume changes. Ginny looked at her, confused.

"You mean, Dumbledore didn't tell you that? He told all of us after he went through everyone's costumes."

Hermione shrugged and opined, "Well, I was late, and then as soon as he finished with me, he started immediately on Professor Snape, since we were behind schedule at that point. I guess it just slipped his mind."

Ginny squinted at Hermione, even more confused. "How were you late? You sat by the door the whole evening!"

Hermione's lips thinned in remembered annoyance and her eyes darkened. Ron and Ginny exchanged surprised glances and Ron murmured, "So, uh, I guess maybe you should tell us your side..."

Hermione looked up at them eyeing her intently. She sniffed primly and began, "I was here the whole evening, and when Harry was done, he came over to tell me Dumbledore was ready for me. He was pretty rude about it, but I told him he looked good in his costume anyway, 'cause he did..." Her eyes flashed and her jaw clenched. "Then, he just... grabbed me and dragged me outside the doorway! He said he missed me and kissed me again. I was so angry! I couldn't believe him. I pushed him off me and went off on him again." She sighed, weary of the drama. "So, by the time I went back in to Dumbledore, Harry had made me late. He was disappointed and said he thought I would have taken the responsibility seriously." Ginny and Ron gasped in indignant defence of Hermione. "I thought I was going to be in more trouble, but..." She trailed off, suddenly unwilling to finish that statement, and reveal that Snape had lied on her behalf.

"But what?" prodded Ginny.

Hermione shook herself and retorted hastily, "Nothing. He didn't say anything else. I apologized. I just couldn't believe that Harry would make me late for Dumbledore just to persist when he already knew I would talk to him today! I mean, what if Dumbledore had seen him kissing me in the corridor right then? Or what if Professor Snape had caught us again?!" She trailed off again, noticing the looks of horror and consternation on their faces, but it was a faint giggling idea that distracted her.

What if Snape had caught us again? He was right behind me when I went into the Hall. Could he have seen us? But, if he did, why didn't he punish us again? ... But, he didn't look angry when I looked at him. He seemed... amused? About what? She felt like cold water had oozed through her gut as she pondered. Could he have seen me yelling at Harry? That might explain the amusement. But... why did he lie to Dumbledore? I can't figure that out!

She shook herself from her musings and quirked her eyebrows knowingly at the others, who were still reacting to the idea of how awful it would have been if either the headmaster or Snape had caught them again. They were silent for a few moments, and then Hermione saw Ron try to surreptitiously wrap some toast in a handkerchief and stuff it in his pocket. Snorting at his lack of stealth, she pulled out her wand and shrank the parcel into a square inch. Ron yelped at the feeling of the bundle shrinking in his pocket and glanced wildly about.

Hermione smirked at him and he looked abashed. "Honestly, Ron, you're a wizard, use your head!" She chuckled at his embarrassed expression and said, "Go on, fix him a proper plate. I'll shrink it for you if you want. He may be acting like a prat, but going hungry won't make it any better."

Ginny looked at Ron in disdain, but refrained from comment since Hermione was being magnanimous. Ron hastily piled a plate with eggs, sausages, bacon, potatoes, and toast. He hesitated only a moment before he reached for a pitcher of pumpkin juice. Glancing imploringly at Hermione, he inclined his head at the pitcher. She rolled her eyes and nodded, casting a charm to seal the pitcher and keep the juice from spilling. Once Ron had everything piled in one spot, she shrank the lot of it and watched Ron furtively shove it into his pockets.

"Thanks, 'Mione. You're the best. I think I remember the counterspells. If I don't, Harry should." He stood, brushing crumbs from his lap. Leaning across the table, perilously close to knocking over a bowl of porridge, he covered Hermione's hand with his and whispered, "I'm glad you told me your side. I'm sorry he's acting like this, but..." His face suddenly creased into a lopsided grin and he winked. "Hey, it's not his fault that you're a girl to fall hard for." He squeezed her hand as Ginny giggled and he waved jauntily as he left.

Hermione sat, slightly dazed by the brazen compliment. She glared at Ginny from the corner of her eye before succumbing to the giggle that was bubbling up. It felt good to laugh. She and Ginny giggled in waves. As soon as one would start to subside, the other one would grin and wink, and it would set them off again. Hermione ignored the curious looks from other students, some smiling at the infectious laughter.

But, she couldn't ignore the sudden tingle she felt on her neck and turned to see Snape watching her. The laughter died on her lips. Ginny saw her wide-eyed gaze and followed it to its destination, her mirth guttering out like a candle flame. She cleared her throat and looked at her food.

Hermione gazed at Snape, reminded of her curious thoughts earlier. Her amused expression turned thoughtful, and she couldn't look away from the endless inky depths of her Potion Master's eyes. She watched him holding her gaze, felt the raw power exuding from him, and felt the roiling in her stomach again in reaction. Her pulse sped up and a flush crept up her neck to her cheeks.

His eyes narrowed, and she felt an odd whoosh, like a breeze in her mind. Startled, she blinked and looked away. The stirring disappeared. Once again faced with her physical reaction to Snape, she tried to quiet her pounding heart, to slow her hastened breathing. Beside her, Ginny watched her, concerned. She nudged her friend to get her attention.

"Hey, 'Mione, what say we get out of here. You look like Snape still has you pretty rattled."

Hermione heard the warning bells go off in her head. "Uh, yeah. It was pretty awful. Sure, let's go." She stood, pointedly avoiding looking back at Snape. *Mustn't give Ginny anything to figure out!*

The two girls departed quickly, heading back to the common room to begin their homework.

Snape walked into the Great Hall through the staff door and saw Hermione laughing with Ginny Weasley. Her other cohorts were absent. Trying to stifle the surge of hope he felt that their absence meant what he thought it meant, he took his seat and served himself, unceasingly gazing at the girls. *Potter must still be angry. Good. Arrogant boy needs to learn that he won't always get what he wants.*

A bare moment after he entered and sat, Hermione turned to look at him. More calmly than he felt, he held her gaze, unblinking. Ginny turned and saw Snape staring at Hermione and looked away quickly. Snape was intrigued by the curious, thoughtful look in Hermione's eyes. When he saw her blushing, he couldn't stand it any longer and, eyes narrowed in concentration, he stabbed into her mind, using Legilimency.

He was surprised at how easy it was to gain access to her mind, then realized it was easier because her mind was focused on him. He saw her view of him when she had whirled on him the night before, when he had surprised her by excusing her to Dumbledore. He read her shocked and confused thoughts. He was about to delve into her other images of him from the night before, which were all hovering about, but she blinked and looked away, effectively cutting him off.

His eyes widened again as he came back to himself. Struggling between shame that he had invaded her head again and frustration that he hadn't been able to see more, he kept his gaze locked on her, hoping she would look at him again, so he could have another chance. He was both disappointed and relieved when she stood and left with the younger girl.

Dumbledore would have my head if he had any idea I did that! He inclined his head, letting his hair fall forward to shield his face as he ate. His thoughts were on Hermione as he mechanically ate his breakfast, wondering why so many images of him were swimming in her head. Absently, he pushed away from the table and retreated to his dungeons.

Hermione went about her business the rest of the weekend, acting as if everything was normal, even though Harry was still behaving like a spoilt child and ignoring her. At least he had given up boycotting meals and sat in the Great Hall with the rest of them after that first breakfast. That he purposely took a seat several spaces away from her, putting Ron and Ginny between them, didn't surprise Hermione. She simply put on a civil face and ignored the situation. Frankly, she was exasperated with his attitude. In her opinion, the drama should stay on the stage... which was where she was certain to face more, all things considered!

Hermione made a conscious effort to not look at Snape during meals. She knew that she would get drawn into those ebony tunnels and she was afraid that someone would figure out how she felt. And with her relationship with Harry already strained, and affecting her relationship with Ron too, she didn't dare give anyone a chance to discover something else objectionable about her! But, her decision had no effect on the buzzing she felt whenever Snape was present. She knew when he entered the Hall because she could feel it. It was like she was a Muggle radio tuned to his frequency, and the static began whenever he was in the same room. Add to that the tingle that slid over her when he watched her, and she was hyper-aware of him at all times.

Meals became an exercise in control. Ignoring Harry's attitude and ignoring the thrum of her body under Snape's watchful eye required strength of discipline that Hermione hadn't used before. However, her ability to focus so single-mindedly on her studies helped her adapt quickly. She was both relieved and frustrated that she didn't have Harry and Ron to distract her as usual. It was easier to focus without them as distractions, but instead they were one of the things she had to focus on ignoring!

As the weekend wore on, she spent more time on her own, since Ron spent more time with Harry than her. She snorted to herself. *It's like Harry got Ron in the divorce!* Smirking at the ridiculous nature of it all, she put away her books, contented to be two full weeks ahead in all of her classes. The only problem was, now that she had no school work, she didn't know what to do with herself. Usually, Sunday evenings were spent spending time with the boys and helping them prepare for Monday, since they usually had put too much off practicing Quidditch over the weekend.

Her mind wandered to Monday. Her homework was complete...a full two and a half times the required length, of course...and she was ahead in the readings. *Maybe there'll be a rehearsal.* Suddenly she frowned, remembering the detention she had to serve the next night. *I hope there isn't a rehearsal after all, or I'll have to miss it. Then again, since Snape and I would both be needed, Dumbledore might just make him reschedule it if there is a rehearsal.*

Hermione frowned, wondering what she would have to do for detention. Her stomach fluttered at the thought of being alone with Snape again. The memories of everything that had happened the last couple of times she had been in the classroom washed over her. *Just stay calm and professional. No more staring at him or talking back. Just go and do whatever is assigned and get out.*

Images of Snape in his Phantom costume paraded in her head. Again she felt the rush of warmth cascading over her. Musing over how different Snape looked in his costume, she opened her music box to practice softly. As she listened, she heard each actor's voice in her head over the recorded one. Once the Phantom began, she bit her lip at the ripple that ran through her centre.

Gods, it's not fair for Snape to have such a seductive voice! How did I manage to not notice it before? ...

I can't get over how much he affects me. It's torment to be around him! But, gods, I love it. ...

Wonderful, I'm a Snape addict! She snorted at herself, ruefully.

Honestly, why did you have to choose the most unlikely person to fall for? He's old enough to be your father; he's your professor; he's horribly rude and sarcastic; he's not handsome; all extremely good reasons for him to be off limits! ...

Then again, he's brilliant; he's loyal; he's noble; he doesn't suffer stupidity; he's got that amazing voice; he couldn't be so good at being sarcastic without a razor sharp wit; he's intriguing; he cleans up well; he's elegant; he's a man, not an immature schoolboy; and he's forbidden; even more reasons to be interested in him! ...

It's so true that what's forbidden is more tempting. The more I know I can't have him, and can't even try to get him, the more I want him!

Hermione tightened her hands into fists and slammed them onto the bed in frustration. She noticed that she had completely ignored the music in favour of her thoughts. Realizing that she wasn't going to be able to focus on it, she closed the music box and got ready for bed. With a resigned sigh, she crawled into bed with her latest acquisition from the Restricted Section of the library, intent on immersing herself in magical theory until she felt tired enough to sleep.

It worked, to a certain degree. Every once in a while, she would find herself rehashing one of several thoughts, the most frequent ones being, "What am I going to have to do at detention?," "Why did Snape lie for me?," and "Did he see me and Harry fighting?" Eventually, she nodded off, and the book slid from her hands. Her dreams were a tumult of images of Snape and Harry and the Phantom of the Opera.

Monday went by a little easier for Hermione. She had got used to ignoring Harry and Snape at meals, and it was easy to ignore Harry in class, since they weren't supposed to talk anyway. However, she did catch Harry surreptitiously glancing at her during dinner a few times. Idly, she wondered if he was finally getting over himself. Her question was answered when, as she looked at the time during dinner and got up to leave, to get to her detention on time, Harry called to her. Surprised, Hermione looked at him.

Harry looked uncomfortable, and his cheeks were red. He was having trouble meeting her eyes, but he got up anyway. Stepping closer to her, he shoved his hands in his pockets and stammered, "Hermione, I just wanted to say I'm sorry you got in trouble and got detention. I hope it won't be too bad. I wish I could serve it for you. Look, I know I've been a right bastard lately, but... I want to be friends again." He finally looked at her, his green eyes wistful.

Hermione smiled gently at Harry and said, "Harry, I've been your friend the whole time. I don't want to be late, so I'll have to talk to you later. But, I'm glad you're talking to me again." She offered him her hand, and his face split into a grateful smile as he grasped her hand in his.

"I am too, 'Mione. Um, good luck with Snape." He grimaced and squeezed her hand before releasing it and smiling shyly at her again.

Hermione smirked and shrugged. "Thanks. See you later." She spun and hurried from the Hall toward the dungeon. When she arrived at the classroom door, she paused to collect herself. *Relax. Just be calm and respectful and professional. It can't be anything worse than gross...* Taking a deep breath, she knocked on the door.

"Enter."

Opening the door with a shaking hand, she stepped into the room, shutting the door behind her. She took measured steps to the front of the room and stopped in front of Snape's desk.

He had stopped himself from raising his head when she entered, contenting himself with peering up through his hair, covertly watching her. When she was standing silently in front of his desk, he straightened in his seat and looked at her.

"Miss Granger, how fortunate it is that you were not late for *this* appointment." His lips twitched before settling into a line, but even that line was not as hard as usual.

Hermione stared at him, taken aback by his gibe. She didn't know how to respond.

She managed a non-committal, "Yes, sir."

Snape gazed at her, drinking her in. Hermione shifted uneasily on her feet, feeling the blush suffusing her face. After a few silent, tense moments, she felt as if she would scream if nothing was said. As she was about to blurt something out, Snape sniffed and drawled, "You are aware, I'm sure, of why you received this detention..."

Hermione, embarrassed, looked down and stammered, "Yes, sir. I was... we were... that is, Harry and I... well, I was engaged in conduct unbecoming a student, particularly one who has been accorded the position of Head Girl."

Snape scowled blackly. "Indeed. Miss Granger, you were the one who insisted that you are an adult. Groping another student in the hallway is not mature behaviour."

Hermione hung her head even more. "Yes, sir."

"Very well then. Now, am I correct in assuming that such a puerile display will never happen again?"

Hermione was puzzled by his tone of voice. He was imposing and severe, but then it seemed as if there were an undercurrent of amused satisfaction. Curious, she looked up as she answered, "Yes, sir. That is correct."

He was glaring down his nose at her, one eyebrow arched. Once again, Hermione thought she saw a sparkle of humour in his obsidian eyes. His lip curled faintly and he began straightening his desk. In a low murmur, he sighed, "Excellent."

Silence reigned for a few moments, with Snape absently toying with the parchment on his desk and Hermione once again shifting uneasily. Snape glanced up at the uncomfortable girl and smirked. He preferred having the upper hand and could tell she was off-balance. Curiosity and apprehension nearly poured off her.

Finally, he leant back in his chair and said, silkily, "Miss Granger, you look as if you'll burst if you don't ask whatever is on your mind. In that case, to save you further embarrassment, you have permission to speak."

Hermione inhaled sharply, about to ask the burning question of why he had lied to Dumbledore, but at the last second, she thought better of it and paused. Snape's eyebrows rose as he watched her, a smug smile quirking his lips. Hermione straightened her shoulders and said politely, "Professor, what am I to do for detention?"

Snape's smile vanished, and his brow furrowed. He wasn't expecting that. He had been certain she would ask him about the little fiction he told Dumbledore. After seeing that image in her mind, he thought it must have been gnawing at her, and he was completely surprised that she didn't take the opportunity he gave her. Recovering from that minor shock, he rapidly glanced about the room.

There were the cauldrons in the corner that could be cleaned. His books could be dusted and straightened. She could actually be helpful in brewing potions if necessary. But, he didn't like being thrown for a loop, and he wanted to regain the advantage of keeping her off-balance. Sweeping his gaze over his desk, he was struck with an idea.

Brilliant!

"Well, Miss Granger, as you so amply demonstrated at our first meeting, you know the play from memory. I, having lacked the opportunity you had, do not. Therefore, as we are certain to have a read-through for Act Two later this week, I wish to be prepared. I have already made progress myself, but it will undoubtedly be beneficial to have someone with which to practice. You will perform your role with me tonight to help me learn mine."

Throughout his speech, Hermione went from relief that she wasn't going to have to scrub cauldrons, to a twinge of disappointment that she wouldn't get to see his books, to a surge of excitement that she would be practicing the play with her sexy-voiced Potions Master, to sick dread that she would embarrass herself again like a randy teenager.

Snape watched the play of emotions across her face and was satisfied with the result. Pointing one long graceful finger at the seat in front of him, he opened a drawer and withdrew the music box and script. Hermione sank into the seat, her legs trembling. She swallowed against her suddenly dry throat and tried to slow her racing pulse.

"I believe I have learnt up to 'Don Juan Triumphant.' It's there that I may not have it completely memorized yet. I will begin where my parts are, and your assignment is to not only perform your part, but also stop me if I make a mistake." He smirked at the goggle-eyed look of incredulity she gave him. In a low rumbling tone, he added, "Miss Granger, you will not offend me if you are following my instructions. If you do not correct me when necessary, I may be forced to change your assignment to one rather less intellectual." He nodded pointedly at the stack of cauldrons and quirked one corner of his mouth at her meaningfully. She glanced in their direction and wrinkled her nose in distaste.

Looking back at Snape, still rather sceptically, she narrowed her eyes and muttered, "Yes, sir."

He smiled faintly and turned his attention to the music box, adjusting dials and toggles. When he opened it, it began at "Why So Silent." He leant back in his chair and looked intently at Hermione as he sang. She jumped when he barked out, "Your chains are still mine. You will sing for me!" Once the swirl of music ended after that part, he reached out and forwarded to his next part.

They listened to Giry reading the beginning of the "note" until the Phantom cut in to continue. Hermione suppressed a shiver at the echoing sound of Snape's voice in the empty dungeon as he sang the rest of the "note."

Snape felt as if he were aiming his voice at her, especially during the line, "She knows, though, should she wish to excel she has much still to learn, if pride will let her return to me, her teacher, her teacher..." His finely honed powers of observation detected the minute ripple that Hermione fought to conceal. He was enjoying the power rush of affecting her so much.

He moved to forward the music to his next part, but paused. He looked speculatively at Hermione, who was suddenly even more nervous under his gaze. Nodding to himself, he adjusted the dials and turned purposefully to Hermione.

"I was going to skip to the duet in the graveyard, but I have reconsidered. Miss Granger, if you would begin where Christine leaves the rehearsal and goes to the graveyard, it would provide the proper lead-up to the scene." He paused a moment, then inquired, "Ready?"

Hermione nodded mutely, swallowing and clearing her throat. Snape inclined his head and opened the box. Hermione softly sang, "In sleep he sang to me, in dreams he came... That voice which calls to me, and speaks my name..." She eyed her professor warily as he settled back to listen to her. His elbows rested on the arms of his chair and he steepled his fingers in front of him, leaning back but levelling his gaze at Hermione.

The music changed and Hermione murmured the introduction to "Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again." She sat up straight in her chair for better breath control and perched on the edge of her seat. She gave herself over to the pathos of the song, feeling the melancholy of the words. As the song progressed, her voice swelled along with the music. Finally, as she neared the end, her voice waned again, becoming even softer and sadder.

Snape watched her sing, transfixed by the beauty of her voice and the effortless command she had over it. His eyes darkened with feeling in response to the amount of poignancy she poured into the song. By the time she reached the end, he felt as if he were being buoyed along in a rush of emotion, and he sat forward in his chair to respond. His voice was a gentle caress as he sang, "Wandering child, so lost, so helpless, yearning for my guidance..."

Hermione focused on him raptly, singing, "Angel or father, friend or Phantom, who is it there staring?" in a bewildered tone.

Snape intensified his tone to a hypnotic murmur, "Have you forgotten your Angel?"

Breathlessly, Hermione pleaded, "Angel, oh speak! What endless longings echo in this whisper?"

Neither blinked as they continued, hearing the recording of Raoul joining in the song. Snape felt the electric connection between them again and focused on reaching Hermione with his voice.

Hermione felt the tingles fluttering in her stomach and wanted nothing more than to cross the short distance between them and deposit herself in his arms. When Snape began the mesmeric lure, "I am your Angel of Music. Come to me, Angel of Music," Hermione felt her breath catch and struggled to compose herself.

When the recorded Raoul confronted the Phantom, Hermione saw Snape's face darken and grow cold. He glared at her through narrowed eyes as he recited the taunts and jeers. Hermione managed to choke out the appropriate protests when needed, but her heart beat wildly and she felt tense with apprehension at the closed, hateful expression on Snape's face. She cringed at his fury when he roared, "So be it! Now let it be war upon you both!"

Mechanically, Snape reached for the box, forwarding it just a bit. He paused the music and glanced at Hermione. "The next part is not on the recording." He handed Hermione the script and pointed to the appropriate part. She nodded hastily and looked down at the page as he sang, "I'm here, the Phantom of the Opera" several times. After a few times, Hermione glanced up at Snape and he nodded. She looked down and read the lines. Then, Snape finished that scene with his short verse. Extending his hand toward Hermione, he nodded to her. She gave him the script back and exhaled gustily.

Adjusting the music box yet again, Snape turned a smouldering look on Hermione. She made a rapid calculation in her head and realized that they were to "Point of No Return."

Snape saw her face go pale and her eyes widen before she flushed anew. He felt the simmering desire within him and hoped he could keep it under control. He slowly sat back in his chair as the recorded Piangi sang her cue line.

She closed her eyes a moment as she sang, "No thoughts within her head but thoughts of joy." But she opened them and looked shyly at Snape as she sang the following line, "No dreams within her heart but dreams of love."

Snape's chest tightened at her look. The recording Passarino spoke and Snape rasped back. Then, he sat straight in his chair, like Hermione was doing, and belted out his opening lines.

"You have come here in pursuit of your deepest urge, in pursuit of that wish, which till now has been silent, silent... I have brought you, that our passions may fuse and merge - in your mind you've already succumbed to me, dropped all defences, completely succumbed to me - now you are here with me: no second thoughts, you've decided, decided... Past the point of no return - no backward glances: the games we've played till now are at an end... Past all thought of 'if' or 'when' - no use resisting: abandon thought, and let the dream descend..."

What raging fire shall Flood the soul? What rich desire unlocks its door? What sweet seduction lies before us? Past the point of no return, the final threshold - what warm, unspoken secrets will we learn? Beyond the point of no return..."

Snape's velvet voice wrapped around the words and Hermione felt drugged by their sultry promise. The crisp way he had enunciated "sweet seduction" had made a rush of heat flash over her. She felt a warm wetness pooling between her thighs. Her eyes closed halfway as she sang her response.

"You have brought me to that moment where words run dry, to that moment where speech disappears into silence, silence... I have come here, hardly knowing the reason why... In my mind, I've already imagined our bodies entwining defenceless and silent - and now I am here with you: no second thoughts, I've decided, decided... Past the point of no return - no going back now: our passion-play has now, at last, begun... Past all thought of right or wrong - one final question: how long should we two wait, before we're one?"

When will the blood begin to race, the sleeping bud burst into bloom? When will the flames, at last, consume us?"

Hermione's body had shifted involuntarily and leant toward Snape as she had drawled, "bodies entwining, defenceless and silent." Snape's breath caught as he felt the drawing in his loins in response. His voice was thick with suppressed desire as he joined her to sing together.

"Past the point of no return, the final threshold - the bridge is crossed, so stand and watch it burn... We've passed the point of no return..."

The music slowed and changed, and they sat, immobile, staring into each other's eyes, reading the passion in them. As the music continued, it was the point at which the Phantom sings "All I Ask of You," but Snape didn't come in on time. Hermione was jarred from her reverie by the lack of what she was expecting.

She jumped, blinking rapidly. Abashed, she looked down, straightening back away from Snape. As soon as she reacted, Snape was jolted back to reality as well. He scowled and shut the music box, resting his hand on it as he tilted his head forward, looking to the side, hiding his face behind his hair. He felt the heat rising in his face and knew he was flushed. Discomfited by the throbbing erection in his lap and the blood pounding in his face, he busied himself with the script, making a show of thumbing through it to the correct page. He then reset the music box before clearing his throat and choking out, "That's as far as I've got. I need to learn the rest from here."

Hermione, grasping at normality, retorted briskly, "Certainly, sir. You've done amazingly well so far. You didn't make a single mistake." She paused before adding, "But that's to be expected from someone as talented as you."

Snape glanced at her sharply, once again disconcerted by her compliment. He really didn't know how to respond to one reasonably. Biting back a sarcastic, defensive comment, he cleared his throat again and managed a stiff, "Thank you, Miss Granger. I do try." He flashed her a dignified, yet embarrassed look as he nodded acknowledgement.

Hermione felt her heart throb at the endearing combination of sophisticated man and shy boy she saw in her Professor. She smiled warmly at him, grateful that he had managed to actually take a compliment this time, rather than denying it as usual.

Snape started the music again, and this time, with the script in front of him, he chimed in to sing, "Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime.. Lead me, save me from my solitude..." He looked up through his lashes at Hermione, his head still bowed to the page. Her expression was tender and a faint smile hovered on her lips. Snape was entranced as he continued, "Say you want me with you, here beside you... Anywhere you go, let me go too Christine that's all I ask of..." He trailed off as the recording took over. Again they locked gazes, souls bared, until the recording came to "Down Once More."

Snape dragged his eyes from Hermione's and read through his song, glancing back up at her every few words. He struggled to address her harshly as his role demanded. By the time the music came to "Beyond the Lake," he had distanced himself enough from his burning desire to focus on the script.

Hermione saw him retreating into himself and wanted to cry out to stop him. But, she reasoned with herself that it was for the best, and did her best to tamp down the ardour she felt. Her struggle to do so helped her effectively sing her disgust to the Phantom. Still, she was reluctant to meet Snape's gaze as she said the hateful lines.

Snape doggedly persisted in his performance of the song with a harsh, cold attitude. After the warmth and passion of their previous song, he hated to lose the sensations it evoked, but knew it was necessary, for far more reasons than just that the play required it.

Hermione steeled herself to sing, "This haunted face holds no horror for me now. It's in your soul that the true distortion lies." She cringed inwardly at the venom in the words. It tore her soul to see Snape's jaw clench and his eyes become hard and flinty in response. She could feel him closing off again, like he had when he had returned with his Death Eater garb. He took a deep breath and sat back in his seat. His voice was poisonous as he sang his lines to Raoul.

The tension in the dungeon skyrocketed, but this time it wasn't alluring and seductive. This tension spoke of a barely concealed rage against the character of Raoul. Hermione felt cold sweat trickling down her neck at the white-hot fury underneath Snape's performance. His voice was a hoarse rasp by the time he ground out, "You try my patience. Make your choice!"

Hermione's heart was in her mouth and her stomach was in knots as she answered, "Pitiful creature of darkness... What kind of life have you known? God give me courage to show you: you are not alone." Her skin tingled with the knowledge that in the play, she would be kissing Snape at that moment. Her eyes were wide when Snape bored his gaze into her. She quailed under the black fury pouring off him. Finally, as the music swelled and changed, he tore his gaze away and stared sullenly at the script as he muttered his lines.

Then, he bellowed, "Go now! Go now and leave me!" His voice cracked under the strain and he slumped in his chair, looking defeated. Hermione wanted to rush to him and comfort him, but forced herself to stay in her chair, rigid. His voice was a fragile likeness of its previous robust self as he lilted his lines. Then, he choked out, "Christine, I love you." Hermione's hands clenched in empathy.

Finally, he gathered himself, and his voice once again resounded through the dungeon, vibrant but destroyed. Once the music faded away, Snape reached out and gently shut the box. Hermione watched his chest rising and falling as he breathed deeply.

In the heavy silence that followed, Hermione struggled to find something appropriate to say. Seeing Snape slumped back in his chair, eyes closed, she was hit with an inspiration. Tentatively, she whispered, "Professor?"

Snape opened his eyes, but they didn't snap with their usual annoyance. Wearily, he asked, "What is it, Miss Granger?"

"Well, sir, it just seemed as if your throat might be dry and giving you trouble, so I wanted to suggest a short break to have some tea." She paused, seeing that he was not going to respond yet, and hurried on. "Actually, that reminds me of that tonic I mentioned at the first read-through. I know you said you'd prefer your potions, but if you haven't brewed anything suitable just yet, my tonic may help in the meantime."

A faint spark of interest glowed in his eyes as he inquired, "Just what is in this tonic of yours?" His voice held a modicum of sneering suspicion, and Hermione was thankful that he seemed to be recovering and returning to normal.

Briskly, she replied, "Nothing unusual. Simply tea, lemon, and honey. Shall I summon a house-elf, sir?" She regarded him with a carefully schooled expression of polite detachment.

Snape raised an eyebrow and snorted. He waved his wand languidly and a tea service appeared on his desk, complete with lemon and honey. Smirking pointedly at Hermione, he waved his hand over it and drawled, "I don't believe that's necessary, Miss Granger. I *am* a Potions Master. As you can see, I am quite capable of acquiring your *ingredients*."

He poured two cups of steaming tea and gestured for her to join him at his desk. Trembling at the idea of being closer to him, she moved her chair beside his desk on the dais and sat. Politely, Snape handed her a cup and saucer. She took it with a murmured thanks.

She was flustered by his proximity and didn't know what to do. Nervously sitting, still as a rock, she was chagrined to see Snape roll his eyes and stare at her, aggrieved. Exasperated, he spoke. "Well, Miss Granger, are you ever going to relate your precious recipe? Is there a particular proportion to be had amongst the ingredients? Or is this just your excuse to have tea with your professor?" His lip curled as he favoured her with a sardonic look. Hermione flushed at his sarcasm and hastily set down her tea to hide the shaking of her hands.

"No, sir! I mean, yes, I'll share the recipe. There really isn't much of one. The tea needs to be hot, and you add a couple of spoonfuls of honey to coat your throat and soothe it, and you add a slice of lemon for taste and reviving energy." Nervously lecturing, she suited actions to words and prepared Snape's cup of tea for him. When she was done, she looked up to see him staring at her with a mixture of consternation and smug amusement. Pretending suspicion, he lifted the teacup to his nose and inhaled the aroma, swirling the tea. Narrowing his eyes at her and hiding a smile behind his cup, he pinned her with an intense gaze as he carefully sipped.

Hermione sat, quivering with apprehension, unsure of how to take his almost teasing behaviour. Owl-eyed, she watched him sample the tea. She let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding when he lowered his cup and gestured toward her in a silent toast.

"Well done, Miss Granger. A successful brew to rival your potions. Cheers."

Hermione nearly gaped in surprise at his compliment. Fazed by the unexpected raillery, she studiously focused on preparing her tea, avoiding his gaze. Once it was done, she glanced at Snape over the rim of her teacup as she sipped its soothing contents.

An unexpectedly comfortable silence fell. They sat and drank their tea almost companionably. Snape felt himself relaxing and thought ruefully how domestic it all seemed when Hermione had prepared his tea for him. It was the first time in a very long time that someone else had seen to his needs and comfort. A yearning he didn't know existed made itself known. He finished his tea and sat back, musing. Hermione reached for his cup and prepared a second helping. Snape stared at her, taken aback by her initiative.

Bemused, he rumbled, "You don't even know if I want another cup. What possessed you to do that?"

Hermione blushed and stammered, in a low voice, "I-I don't know if you want another cup. But... I thought it would be nice, just in case." She sipped again from her cup, hiding her reddened face.

Snape felt a warmth expanding in his chest. He smiled that rusty, genuine smile at her and said softly, "Thank you, Hermione."

Hermione felt like she was about to explode with excitement. *He just called me Hermione! Gods, my name never sounded so good...* She lowered her teacup and beamed at him. There was an awkward moment, and then Snape tore his gaze from hers and drank a bit more.

The silence was now charged with emotion. Unsure of how to deal with it, Snape reverted to familiar duty and opened the script to the parts he needed to learn. Lightly, he said, "In an effort to keep from negating the benefits of your tonic, I believe I'll just recite the lines now, and you can follow along to make sure I'm getting them right." He slid the tea service out of the way and pushed the script in front of Hermione.

Hermione quickly reached for the script and moved her teacup to the side. Politely, she said, "Ready, sir."

Snape rested his forehead against his hand and closed his eyes as he recited the lines from memory. Every so often, he would ask for a hint, and Hermione would provide the first few words. In between his lines, she recited the others. Without the rich music and the emotion imbued in their singing, even "All I Ask of You" was bearable.

Periodically, Snape would repeat what the stage directions said as well, listing the events or actions to happen in the play. Thus, it was that Snape worked his way through the script to the climax, where he glibly recited the fact that Hermione would kiss him after her lines. It wasn't until the words were out of his mouth that he realized what he had done. It had finally been spoken aloud.

He froze and glanced up at Hermione, who was struggling to keep a professional expression and wishing she didn't blush so much. She noticed Snape looking at her and met his gaze with a defiant toss of her hair, her chin tilted up more than usual.

Snape blinked. He wanted so much to kiss her, but he dreaded the revulsion she was sure to show at the thought. He looked down, bitterly resenting the position he was in. He noticed Hermione wringing her hands agitatedly and miserably bit out, "I'm sorry you have to suffer through this, Miss Granger. Rest assured, I shall strive to make things as comfortable for you as possible. I'm sure Dumbledore will allow us to skip that until it is absolutely necessary for performance." His cheeks were hot and he shook his hair forward to cloak his face.

Hermione was stunned at his speech. Panicking slightly at the thought of *not* being allowed to kiss him for months, she desperately cast about for a solution to her problem. Struck, she determinedly said, "Professor?"

Snape flicked a glance at her and retorted acidly, "What now, Miss Granger?"

Hermione gathered her courage and gazed at Snape loftily. "Really, Professor, I thought we were going to approach this as adults." Snape blinked at her, stunned at her tone and words.

Icily, he spat, "Explain yourself."

Hermione took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "We are both adults here, and we can behave professionally. If you insist on treating a simple kiss as if it were a torture not to be endured, you'll just be perpetuating a ridiculous stereotype along with the rest of the cast. Isn't it a valid technique to take ownership of something used to insult and hurt and turn it around to make it something innocuous? I can see how well it worked with transfiguring your Death Eater garments."

Snape squinted at her, clearly puzzled, but intrigued. He flicked his fingers at her and said, "Go on."

Hermione drew courage from her success so far and continued, blithely. "Well, sir, wouldn't it take the wind out of everyone's sails if we were already comfortable with the necessary interactions before they had the chance to try to taunt us about it?" She took a deep breath and took the plunge. "We could practice the kiss, so it becomes second nature to perform it as easily as we would perform anything else. Then it would be no big deal..." She trailed off, hoping against hope that he wouldn't blow up at her and kick her out. It took every ounce of discipline she had to hold his questioning gaze.

Snape couldn't believe his ears. *She wants to practice kissing? Did she put a hallucinogen in my tea? Can she possibly be serious?* He saw the nervous tension in her frame and stared at her, dumbfounded. She brashly gazed back at him, no trace of backing down in her eyes. He began to wonder if he could really have such good fortune.

Cautiously, he nodded, seeing her exhale slowly in relief. He was surprised again to see the hungry sparkle in her eyes. Hoping his voice wouldn't betray his nervousness, he stood and remarked, "Very well. In that case, I believe we should stand." He held his hand out to her and felt his chest tighten as she slipped her smooth hand into his.

She locked her gaze with his as she stood, stepping away from the desk and standing in front of him. Her voice was husky as she breathed, "So... I finish my lines and I reach up and... and kiss you. The script says it's supposed to last a long time..."

Snape's eyes were hooded, and he purred, "Yes, it does, doesn't it?"

She stepped close to him, feeling the heat radiating from his body, and stretched her hand up to rest on his shoulder. She licked her lips and swallowed. Standing on her tiptoes, she reached up toward him. He was still too tall, so she slid her hand up into his hair behind his ear and pulled him down to meet her.

Snape's breath caught as he felt her fingers winding through his hair. He was humming with sensation, and felt her gentle tug to pull him toward her. He lowered his head and heard a roaring in his ears as her lips touched his.

Her lips were as soft and pliant under his as they had been under his finger weeks ago. He could feel them trembling against his. He realized he had closed his eyes and snapped them open to see her reaction. Her eyes were closed. He suppressed a groan as her body melted against him. Her hand tightened spasmodically in his hair and she tilted her head to the side, pressing her lips harder against his. He nearly jumped out of his skin as he felt her tongue flicking against his shut lips. He knew he should be pulling away, reprimanding her for such behaviour, but his body had a mind of its own and it wasn't obeying his voice of reason.

Hermione marvelled at her audacity. Almost cringing at her own brashness, she expected to be shoved away and raged at, but that didn't happen. Emboldened by the positive reception so far, she parted her lips and lightly touched his with her tongue. He stiffened, but didn't draw back. Exulting in her success, she slid her other hand up his hard chest and around his shoulder, adding it to her grip in his hair. Moulding her body to his, she pulled his head tighter to hers and prodded his lips with her tongue, begging entrance.

Snape felt her hands on him, her soft, warm figure fitted against his body, and felt his mind spinning out of control. When her tongue slipped along the seam of his lips, he relaxed, letting her gain entrance. His tongue tentatively met hers and gently tasted her. Unbidden, his hands lifted to wrap around her. His hands splayed against her back, holding her close, he responded to her kiss with his own.

Hermione was almost faint with delight. That warm puddle between her thighs expanded as sizzling tingles shot through her. His hands were on her body, and he was kissing her back, exploring her as she was him. She nestled closer to him, her belly melting against his hips. That was when she felt the searing heat of the hard lump trapped between them. She gasped.

Snape came to his senses when he heard and felt Hermione's gasp. Panicking, he wrenched himself away from her, grabbing her hands and removing them from his head. Panting with shock and lust, he pushed her away from him. He realized he was hard for her, and wildly spun away from her, leaning forward onto his desk. Terrified that she knew, he gasped out, "Go. Return to your Tower. Detention is over."

Hermione was aghast. How could things crumble so quickly? Shaking with desire, she grasped the chair back for support. She didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay with him and kiss him again. When she didn't move, Snape whipped his head around and pinned her with a manic glare. "I said go! Now!"

Frightened by the look in his eyes, she whirled and ran from the dungeon and up the stairs to her room. Her body was singing with the electricity between her and Snape. She was virtually vibrating with need and desire.

Panting with exertion and passion, she cried out, startled, when she hit something and tumbled to the floor outside her door.

14- Mistakes and Misery

Chapter 15 of 84

Hermione and Snape experience the aftermath of her volatile detention. Angst abounds... so consider yourself warned.

Standard disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Heed the warning in the summary... here there be angst. Hope it doesn't drive anyone away! It'll only last so long... :) Cheers!

p.s. Thanks to SnivellusSnape, Laela, and Horserider for their help!

Chapter 14- Mistakes and Misery

"Bugger me! Hermione, are you all right?"

Hermione flopped to one side, sitting on the floor and looking at her scraped palms and knees. She glanced up to see Harry's head and shoulders hovering near her. Tears pricked her eyelids in reaction to the pain in her hands and knees and the frustration in her body and heart.

Harry saw the tears welling up and went white. Hastily he whipped the rest of his Invisibility Cloak off and shoved an end into his pocket, reaching for Hermione. He wrapped his arm behind her shoulders and gently supported her so she could stand. Limping, she opened her door, and Harry guided her to sit on the edge of the bed. He knelt in front of her, carefully examining the abrasions, and looked up when he heard her snuffle. "Oh, 'Mione, I'm so sorry. This is my fault. Hang on, and I'll help make things better." He gingerly patted her forearm and rushed into her bathroom, wetting a flannel with cold water and grabbing a handkerchief from her bureau.

Gazing at her with huge green eyes full of worry and shame, he handed her the handkerchief and knelt again to press the cold, wet cloth to her knee. She gasped and then wiped her eyes and nose. Tears kept slipping over her lids, even though she wasn't sobbing. Harry soothed one knee and moved to the other, then he took her hands in his and bathed them. Once they were clean, he took out his wand and murmured a charm to seal the wound from infection. The raw skin knitted back together, but the area was still red and swollen. He repeated the process for all of her scrapes.

Hermione remained silent for the duration of Harry's ministrations. She was still on tilt from being so abruptly thrown from the classroom after such an amazing kiss with Snape. Her body throbbed and her mind was roiling with sensations and emotions. Dazedly, she looked down at Harry, who was staring at her, anxious.

"Hermione, I'm so sorry. I just... Well, I didn't know how long you might be at detention and I wanted to talk to you so much. So, I thought I'd wait for you. And I didn't want anyone to question me, so I just used the cloak. I wasn't trying to hurt you! I had dozed off, and you just slammed into me. Are you okay? Please don't cry. I'm so sorry..."

He was lightly stroking her palms, smoothing the newly-healed skin. As he trailed off, he clasped her hand in his and lifted it to his face, rubbing his cheek against it and then turning to kiss it softly.

Hermione's heightened senses reacted to that soft brush of lips by sending a shiver down her spine. Harry felt it and looked up at her, bewildered. Never looking away, he lifted her other hand and kissed it. Hermione's breath caught. Her mind was screaming that this was not the man she wanted, but her body didn't seem to care. It was burning with need, and it was revelling in the sensations Harry's tender kisses evoked.

Harry saw her eyes, the pupils already dilated, and felt his stomach flip. He dragged his fingertips over her palm and laced his fingers with hers. Then he released her hand and brought it to his lips again, covering the abused palm with light kisses before crowning the tip of each finger with a soft, moist kiss.

Hermione's eyes fluttered closed and her breathing quickened. She was therefore surprised to feel Harry's gentle kisses on her knee. His hands lightly grazed along her calf, tickling behind her knee, as he grasped her knee to hold it in place while he covered it with hot, breathy kisses. Hermione gasped at the sensation of his warm wet tongue lavng the battered skin. Harry flicked a glance up at her, his eyes crackling with desire. Hermione sighed as his hands slid over her knee and up her thigh, under the hem of her uniform skirt. The tingle it produced just added to the hot, wet puddle spreading in her knickers.

Harry felt his heart beating wildly. His breathing was getting ragged and he thought his cock might burst out of his trousers. He was beyond wondering why she had been running to her room, already so obviously upset. His hormones had taken over and all he could think about was how much he wanted her.

Hermione's legs involuntarily relaxed and spread a bit wider. Harry's hands slid further up her thighs, caressing her, both soothing and inflaming her. He crept forward between her knees and covered each newly exposed inch of smooth thigh with kisses and licks and nibbles. His questing hands slowly wound their way higher, until he felt one finger lightly brush against her knickers. She jumped and gasped, and he felt a surge in his groin. Deliberately, slowly, so she could stop him if she wanted to, he dragged his hands up to her hips, at the crease where her legs disappeared into the soft material of her knickers.

Hermione squirmed. She kept her eyes closed, picturing Snape as the one kneeling between her legs, touching her, driving her mad with need. Her breathing was increasing in speed and harshness. She was so aroused, she knew she needed release. She felt like she was burning with desire.

Harry kept looking up, waiting for any signal to stop his approach, but her eyes were shut tight and her chest was heaving. Excited beyond belief, he slid his fingers along that crease of skin and fabric, his thumbs faintly grazing over the juncture in the centre. Again, Hermione jumped, her head falling backwards and her hands reaching behind her to support her body as she leant back, offering him easier access.

Harry gulped nervously and took a deep breath to calm himself and his straining erection. He pressed more firmly against the apex of her thighs and felt how hot and soaking wet her knickers were. He groaned and screwed his eyes shut in concentration to not come in his pants right then. Hermione hissed with appreciation of feeling his fingers against her sex. Harry swallowed nervously and gingerly pushed her skirt up, uncovering her legs and soaked knickers. He could smell the heady aroma of her arousal and his cock twitched.

He bent his head to kiss and lick along her thigh again as he let his fingers trail along the dark moist stain. When he felt her hips rocking, he shifted and covered her mound with his hand, pressing his fingertips against the hot centre of her sex through the fabric. She shuddered and rocked her hips against his hand. Harry squirmed up onto the bed to her right, his hand still cupping her, and slid his right leg over hers, pressing his erection into her thigh.

With a gasp, Hermione dropped to her back, flinging her arms over her eyes. Harry took the opportunity and dove down to kiss her throat, licking his way up her neck to her jaw, and nibbling along the edge of her jaw to her lips. When he let his lips cover hers, he was taken aback by her vehement response. She ruthlessly invaded his mouth with her tongue, stroking his. A surge went through him as she tangled her fingers in his hair and pressed him harder to her mouth.

Hermione moved her hips, grinding against Harry's hand, wanting more. Passionately kissing him, she lifted her free leg and placed her foot on the edge of the bed. Harry instantly responded by splaying his fingers to cover the widened expanse of damp cloth. Greatly daring, he dragged one finger along the elastic, tugging against it. His heart was hammering in his chest, afraid of what she might do.

Hermione felt him tentatively touching her and wanted more. She needed more. She needed someone to douse the flames that Snape lit within her. She moaned faintly into Harry's mouth. Taking that as a good sign, he slid one finger under the fabric, feeling her wet curls. Groaning, he buried his face in her neck, biting and sucking.

Panting, Hermione tilted her hips, encouraging him to explore farther. Needing no more urging, Harry yanked the cloth to one side and let his fingers slide through her slick curls, feeling the plump lips they covered. He thrust against her thigh, slipping his middle finger inside her.

Harry's senses were on overload. All he could hear was their panting; all he could see was Hermione's flushed face, eyes closed and mouth open; all he could smell was the scent of her sex; all he could taste was her intoxicating mouth; all he could feel was the hot, slippery wetness that enveloped his questing finger, making him want to feel it around his straining cock.

Hermione's nerves were buzzing with tension. She had never been so turned on before. She wanted to feel... everything... all over her. Silently, her body begged for release. She shamelessly bucked against Harry's hand, revelled in the feel of his hard cock pressed against her leg. When his finger slid into her tight channel, she nearly choked on her sudden gasp. She clamped her thighs tight around his hand, trapping it. Feeling the heat building, she ground against him. In turn, he thrust against her as well. Their frantic kissing stopped as all concentration focused on just the sensations between their legs.

Hermione's cheeks burned, and her mouth was going dry from her harsh breathing. She felt her muscles tensing all over. Harry felt the sweat dripping down his temple to land on her throat as he panted against her shoulder. The build-up seemed to last an eternity. Hermione finally reached her peak, straining against Harry, an inarticulate cry being wrenched from her throat. She trembled all over, shuddering in waves. Harry couldn't contain himself any longer at the sound of her orgasm and bucked against her, groaning, as he spent himself, the hot fluid spreading inside his pants.

Hermione rode the waves of bliss, finally released from her frustrated torment. As she spiralled down from ecstasy, she regained her senses. Abject horror and humiliation flooded her, chilling her overheated blood and almost stopping her racing heart. She felt Harry's panting breaths hot against her neck, and the wet warmth against her thigh

that evidenced his climax. His fingers were still cupping her mound, lying against her bonelessly.

Oh gods, what have I done?

She felt her face pale, and her stomach clenched. Harry was still against her, his breathing slowing. She fought to keep back the tears that threatened again. Frantically thinking of what she could do to salvage the situation, she relaxed her legs, releasing the grip on Harry's hand, and gingerly reached down, barely tapping it where it still covered her. He started at her touch and hurriedly snatched his hand back. Hermione felt her cheeks burning...with embarrassment this time...and reached down to cover herself as unobtrusively as possible. In the meantime, Harry shifted his leg off hers and rolled onto his back, sitting up quickly. He agitatedly whispered a cleansing charm, embarrassed by the stain on his trousers. When they were once again clear, he sighed in relief.

In the moments following their climax, an awkward tension grew. Hermione couldn't look at Harry. She felt the nausea spinning in her stomach and hoped she could maintain composure at least until she had got rid of him. Harry didn't know what to think about the whole encounter, other than he wanted to try it again, hopefully with an even better outcome. He glanced at Hermione warily, and noticed that she looked even more upset than she had before they had... well, what *would* one call that? It wasn't sex exactly... Harry realized he could ponder the terminology later and tentatively reached over to take Hermione's hand.

She flinched.

Harry froze, frowning in confusion. He leant forward, trying to catch her eye. "Mione?" His voice trembled with apprehension. He turned his body toward Hermione and grasped both of her hands. She hung her head, avoiding his gaze. His unease growing, he asked, "Hermione, what's wrong? Did I hurt you? Are you okay?"

Hermione shook her head and swallowed. She heard the fear in his voice, felt the tension in his grip, and knew she had to answer him. Taking a deep breath, she shook her head again and whispered, "No, you didn't hurt me. It's not that..."

Harry squeezed her hands and prodded, "Then what? Please, 'Mione, what's wrong?"

Forcing herself to look into his worried gaze, she grimaced and said, "This, Harry."

She saw the disbelieving glint in his eyes and knew he was refusing to understand her.

"What is 'this'? What are you talking about?"

Gently pulling her hands from his, she scooted away from him on the edge of the bed. "Us, Harry. I'm so sorry. I should never have let what just happened happen. I'm so sorry..." She cringed at the incredulous pain in his eyes.

"But... you said we could talk about it. We were going to talk about things tonight. So, let's talk. We have to talk about it!" His voice climbed in pitch and intensity as he rambled in his panic. His eyes were wide and the colour was draining from his face.

Hermione closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. *Gods, this is so horrible! How could I have let this happen?* Resolutely, in a low tone, she retorted, "Harry, I'm sorry. There's nothing to talk about. I just don't feel that way about you. You're one of my dearest friends, and I don't want to spoil that... and I'm afraid we already may have..." She looked at him with pleading eyes, begging him to understand.

He blinked, looking almost dazed. Then, colour returned to his face in the form of two bright spots burning on his cheeks. His eyes went hard and he pinned her with an accusing glare. In a deep, harsh voice, he bit out, "Then what in bloody hell was that? What we just did? You wanted me to do that! You didn't stop me! If you don't feel that way about me, then what the hell was that, Hermione?" His chest heaved as he got more upset. Hermione backed away, frightened by the anger welling up in Harry.

Eyes wide, tears once again spilling over the edges, Hermione gasped, "I don't know, Harry! I wish I could take it back, keep it from happening. I wasn't thinking! You're right, I didn't stop you, and I should have. It's my fault, Harry, not yours. I'm sorry!" She shot up off the bed and retreated to her desk, turning away from him, shoulders shaking.

Harry watched her move away, seething. Part of him hated seeing her cry and wanted to comfort her; part of him wanted to hurt her and make her feel as bad as he felt; and part of him wanted to do whatever it took to get back in her knickers again. Slowly, he stood and walked to the door. As he began to open it, Hermione whirled and cried, "Harry!"

Harry stood with his back to her, jaw clenching. He didn't answer her, but he paused, not moving. Hermione took a gulping breath and whispered, "Harry, please don't hate me. I'm so sorry! I don't want to lose my best friend over a mistake like this. Please, Harry..."

He stood silently for a moment more, then opened the door and walked out, shutting it firmly behind him. Hermione sank to the floor by her desk, dissolving into sobs, wondering if she had just lost her best friend for good.

Snape stood, frozen, until he was sure Hermione was gone, then collapsed into his chair, flinging his arms onto the desk and burying his head against them, his dark locks tumbling over his arms.

Merlin, it's too much. It's just too much!

He grappled with his body, forcing it to regain control, but only by what some would call a Herculean effort. He remained still, face buried in his arms, for a very long time. In that time, he replayed the evening over and over, scrutinizing every nuance of voice and body language, trying to determine beyond a shadow of a doubt what his true feelings were.

It was bad enough, he decided, that he had had such a physical reaction to the girl. *Woman!* said that voice inside him...but when he remembered sharing tea with her, and the caring, comfortable way she had prepared his cup, he realized that his feelings were more than just lustful.

They were serious.

The shock of his explosive feelings for her body was nothing compared to the shock of his deeper feelings for her as a woman. He hadn't felt that way for anyone since he was in school. Being a Death Eater didn't allow for sweet wooing.

Sadly, he thought back to his schooldays, when he fell for Lily Evans. He had wanted her so much, but James Potter snapped her up. Once Potter was in the picture, he never stood a chance. Even now, the bitter fury welled up, and his teeth clenched.

And now, he was falling for Hermione, and another bloody Potter was in the way. Harry. His minute desire to tolerate the boy for Lily's sake dwindled even more in the face of his jealousy over Harry's relationship with Hermione.

But she told him to go away! Don't forget that...

He felt a tiny surge of hope. But it was quickly squashed by, *You're not in school any longer. And she is not a classmate. She is your student, and as such, you cannot pursue her! It doesn't matter how you feel. You are her teacher and she is off-limits!*

A fresh wave of despair washed over him. Grimly, he set his jaw and took a deep breath. *You've survived alone for this long; you'll manage.* He stood and made his way to

his quarters, once again wishing he had not made it through the Final Battle, so he would never have encountered this new misery.

In his burst of self-revelation and castigation, he never noticed that in his multiple replays of the evening, Hermione's feelings were quite clear too. Severus Snape was used to being miserable, and he could not readily accept that Hermione returned his feelings, so he never paid heed to the rapt light in her eyes that bespoke more than just respect for her elders.

Wallowing in his desolation, he flung himself into bed, dragging his pillow over his face and crossing his arms over it. It was the best way he knew to ignore the moisture that managed to sneak past his eyelids. Exhausted by the emotional train wreck that had ended his evening, he fell asleep, his damp pillow still pressed against his face.

Hermione slept poorly and woke up dreading the coming day. She dawdled in getting ready, not wanting to go to breakfast. She was actually sitting morosely on her bed, doing nothing, when there was a knock on her door. Warily, she pressed her ear against the wood and called out, "Who's there?"

"Mione? It's me, Ginny. Are you coming to breakfast?"

Hermione exhaled in relief and opened the door. She grabbed Ginny's hand and pulled the surprised girl into the room, shutting the door behind them. Ginny took one look at Hermione's haggard appearance and was instantly concerned.

"Are you all right? What's wrong?"

Hermione flopped on her bed and shook her head. Ginny sat in front of Hermione and leant earnestly toward her friend. "Hermione, what happened?"

"Have you seen Harry yet today?" she asked in a low voice. Ginny shook her head "no," brow creased in confusion. Hermione took a deep breath and spilled the whole tale to Ginny, leaving out the reason why she was so aroused in the first place, of course. When she finished, she realized that it sounded even worse than it was, since she couldn't explain that she hadn't felt in control of her body after getting so worked up with Snape. She was afraid to look up at her friend, afraid that she'd hate her like Harry must. Finally, she raised her eyes to Ginny's.

Ginny looked completely gobsmacked. She was clearly trying to process the information. She blinked a few times and asked, slowly, "So, you just let him start things, encouraged him even, but then decided that you didn't like it?" She blinked again and looked at Hermione, disbelieving. Her voice whispery with horrified amazement, she continued, "You used him."

Hermione felt the tears well up again at the accusation. Desperately, she choked out, "Ginny! I didn't mean to lead him on. I had no idea it would feel so... wrong until it happened. I just don't feel that way about him after all. It just wasn't right, and I can't pretend it is. Wouldn't it be worse to lie to him and string him on even more, only to postpone the truth?"

Ginny narrowed her eyes and scowled in thought. Hermione knew that Ginny would be protective of Harry, especially in cases such as this, since they had had a relationship too. But, by appealing to her this way, trying to show her that she had hurt Harry only by trying to not hurt him more later, she hoped to win the girl to her side, and not lose another friend over her mistake.

The room was quiet. Hermione made one last plea. "I never meant to hurt Harry. I love him dearly. He's one of my closest friends! I just don't love him that way and I can't make myself do it, no matter how much he wants me to. I had no idea how awkward and wrong it would feel to be with him like that until it happened. I would never intentionally hurt him. I don't want him to hate me. I don't want any of you to hate me. I made a mistake, and I'm paying for it. Please, Ginny, I'm afraid I may have lost my best friend; I don't want to lose you too." She reached across the bed to grip Ginny's hands in hers. Ginny stared down at the hands covering hers.

After a few moments, she sighed and looked back up at Hermione. Her eyes held a mixture of anger and sadness and understanding. Finally, she squeezed Hermione's hands and said, "I don't hate you. I don't know if Harry does, but he's bound to be really hurt. I can't believe it happened like that, but I guess I can see where you're coming from. It still makes me angry to see Harry hurt, but you didn't mean to, so I can forgive you."

Hermione gasped, "I'm so glad! If he does hate me, would you... can you help him understand why I did it? I don't know if he'll listen to me, and he trusts you..." Her eyes begged eloquently. Ginny nodded grimly.

"I'll try. But I can't promise anything."

"I know, I know. Thank you so much. I don't know if I can face him at breakfast though. And Ron will surely know too. It's too humiliating..."

"Hmmm, I can see your point. Listen, how about I go down and bring you something before your first lesson? Maybe if you aren't there, it won't rile Harry any more, and I can test the waters."

"You'd do that for me? Yes, please! You're a life saver. I owe you one, Ginny..."

Ginny quirked a half-smile at Hermione and said, "I'll keep that in mind. I'll meet you outside your classroom at ten till." Hermione nodded vigorously. They stood, and Hermione impulsively hugged her friend, grateful for her understanding and her help.

"I'll be there. Thanks again, Ginny."

"That's what friends are for, 'Mione," Ginny said, as she shut the door behind her.

Feeling a little better, Hermione watched the time until she could go meet Ginny on her way to class.

Snape looked like death warmed over when he stomped into the Great Hall for breakfast. He tortured himself by waiting for Hermione, just so he could see her. As time wore on, and she didn't show, excruciating panic grew inside him.

There's bloody Potter and Weasley. Where is she? Potter looks dreadful this morning. Perhaps that's just the standard side effect of pining for Hermione... He snorted derisively at himself.

Breakfast would soon be over, and he would have to leave for his first lesson, and still Hermione hadn't shown up.

Gods, what have I done? She must be traumatized to not come to breakfast. Is she ill? Did she have a breakdown? I'm going mad... I have to know what happened to her!

He looked up to see Ginny Weasley dashing to the Gryffindor table. She served herself quickly, all the while having an intense, hushed conversation with her brother. They both looked at Harry, who was scowling at his plate. Ron muttered something back and Ginny's shoulders slumped as she began to eat. She had two full plates in front of her, and Snape was momentarily distracted by the thought of the petite girl eating that much food. He was still staring at her, eyes glazed over in thought, when she stealthily drew her wand and shrank the plate, covering it in a napkin. She surreptitiously glanced around and shoved it in her pocket. Then she went back to steadily eating from her remaining plate.

Snape blinked. He took a moment to determine what he had seen, and looked intently at the redhead. She made quick work of her breakfast, whispered a hurried aside to Ron, glanced at the time, and hastened from the Hall. Snape looked at the time. It was fifteen minutes till the first classes began.

It took a moment for him to figure things out, what with the mental torment he had inflicted upon himself. But his deductive skills concluded that Ginny was smuggling food to Hermione. And if she was doing that, Hermione must not want to come to breakfast. And she must not want to come to breakfast because she doesn't want to see someone.

Snape felt his own breakfast start to rise in his throat and swallowed quickly to keep it down. *It's me. She doesn't want to see me after last night. Oh gods, how could I have let this happen?*

Listlessly, he rose and made his way to his classroom, wishing he could just find a dark hole to crawl into and never come out. But, he had his duty, and he couldn't disappear. So, as always, he did what Severus Snape does best: persevere in the face of adversity.

Hermione was reading the notice board over and over, waiting for Ginny before going in to lunch.

"All actors must report to the Great Hall Thursday at 7:00 p.m. for lessons with Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore in Transfiguration.

If you were told that your costume needed more than the standard wizard's robe for transfiguration, bring that item as well.

Scripts and music boxes will not be necessary.

-A. Dumbledore, Director

Act Two roundtable reading- Friday 7:00 p.m. Great Hall

All actors required to attend.

Bring your scripts.

-A. Dumbledore, Director"

Finally, Ginny rounded the corner and swept up to Hermione. "I'm assuming they're already in there?"

Hermione nodded mutely. Glancing miserably at the doorway, she muttered, "I really appreciate you bringing me breakfast. And I know you said you didn't get a chance to try to talk to Harry. So, I was wondering if you might try again now. I can go to the library and wait for you there..." She ended on a rising note of hopeful entreaty.

Ginny thinned her lips and favoured Hermione with a hard look. But when she thought of how awful Harry looked and peered again at Hermione's eyes, puffy from crying, she sighed and caved in. "Fine. But you're going to have to see him sometime."

Hermione closed her eyes briefly and exhaled in relief. "Thanks, Gin. I don't know what I would do without you."

Ginny rolled her eyes in exasperation and shooed Hermione away. As she walked to the Gryffindor table, she muttered to herself, "The things I do for my friends..." She sat down beside Harry, nodding at Ron on his other side. Ron rolled his eyes heavenward and grimaced at her, indicating how bad he had it, dealing with Harry. She pursed her lips in acknowledgement and looked at Harry.

His hair was messier than usual, and there were dark smudges under his eyes. His expression was set in an unpleasant scowl. He stared sullenly at his plate, ignoring the others around him.

In an even tone, Ginny ventured, "Hello, Harry."

He didn't answer her. The only sign that he heard her was the throb of his skin over his jaw as he clenched his teeth. Gently, but determinedly, Ginny persisted. "You don't look so good. What's wrong?"

Harry frowned even more and growled, "Give over, Ginny. I know Hermione told you."

Firmly, she retorted, "Yes, she did. And you're not the only one who's upset. She's really torn up about it."

Barely turning his head so he could glare at her, Harry snarled back, "Oh, I'll bet. She led me on. She toyed with me. She humiliated me. And *she's* the one who's torn up about it. Nice try."

Ginny reached over and gripped his chin, yanking his head about to force him to look her in the eye. Harshly, she whispered, "Funny, I seem to remember a certain green-eyed saviour of the wizard world who cried when he told me our relationship was over when the war was. Seems he just didn't care for me *that way*. I was hurt at the time. And you felt bad about it. I forgave you. How different is this, Harry? We got past it. So can you. She's afraid she's lost her best friend. Has she? Or are you one of those who can dish it out but can't take it?" She paused for effect, boring her stern gaze into his stunned one. "Think carefully, my friend. Is one mistake worth over six years of friendship?" She snapped her hand from his chin and busied herself preparing another plate for Hermione. Harry stared at her, dumbfounded.

When she had shrunk the plate, she fixed another. Ron was rubbing the back of his neck, hoping that his sister's bold tactics had had the desired effect. Shrinking the second plate, Ginny haughtily glanced back at them, saying, "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll go eat lunch with my *friend*." With that, she stood and swept from the Hall.

Harry stared after her. Ron kept his mouth shut, afraid that if he opened it, he'd undo whatever Ginny might have done. He knew from experience that her lectures had a wicked sting, and they could really make a man think. He guessed it was a skill she had to develop in self-defence, living with so many brothers. As he grew older, he found it was a trait that he actually admired in her, and he took care not to incite it.

Harry stared off into space for awhile, then he abruptly got up and disappeared. Ron gaped after him, hoping it was a good sign.

Snape sat through the entire lunch, hoping Hermione would show up. He knew his hopes were in vain when he saw the Weasley girl come in and shrink plates of food again, but he couldn't bring himself to leave, just in case. Dully, he brooded through eating very little, eventually trudging down to the dungeon for his afternoon classes.

His self-loathing tortured him, but he knew he had to see her, to try to figure out what he could do to make things better. He realized that if she didn't come to dinner, at least he would see her in class the next morning.

If only he had some idea what to say or do.

15- Epiphanies and Elation

Chapter 16 of 84

Hermione and Snape manage to meet and revelations abound. And the angst takes a vacation...

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Thanks to SnivellusSnape, Laela, and Horserider for their help and thoughtful feedback. *hugs* Hope you all enjoy this bit, and for those of you who were miserable with the angst, you should be feeling much better soon. Cheers! :)

Chapter 15- Epiphanies and Elation

Hermione waited for Ginny outside the Great Hall before dinner. She knew she should go in this time, after Ginny's report at lunch, but she didn't want to do it alone. She really needed some moral support. She had waited in the shadows to see Harry and Ron go in, and now she was by the notice board.

Snape realized, as he mounted the stairs from the dungeons, that he had not even been to see the notice board for information about rehearsals. He reprimanded himself for neglecting that part of his duty, for, really, what else did he have now, besides his duty? He scowled blackly at the floor as he stomped down the corridor, barely noticing the masses of students who scrambled to get out of his way. Thus, it wasn't until he was almost to the notice board that he could see the familiar bushy hair amongst the crowd. He stopped stock still. If he had noticed, he might have smirked at the terrified faces of the students who had to spin wildly and run into each other in their efforts to not crash into him.

His mouth went dry and his chest tightened. He focused on keeping his expression blank. He knew he should just walk up to the notice board and look; and it shouldn't matter that she was there. But, he felt rooted to the spot, unable to do anything but stare at her.

Hermione felt a familiar tingle and turned. Her stomach flipped as she saw Snape standing a few paces away, staring at her. Her face went through a dizzying spectacle of surprise, delight, apprehension, shame, anguish, and longing in just a short moment. She gazed at Snape, unable to look away.

Snape felt a surge of remorse at her puffy eyes and wan appearance. *She looks like she's been crying and hasn't slept well. Damn it! It's my fault...* Aware that he was on the verge of drawing attention, just standing there, staring at her, he forced his legs to move, closing the distance between them. Gravely looking down into her upturned face, he inclined his head and choked out a gravelly, "Miss Granger."

Hermione gazed up at him, wondering why he looked so awful. He was usually pale and grim, but his face was more ashen than normal, and he looked drawn, almost wizened. Even his deep black eyes had lost their lively fire. Her heart went out to him, wanting to comfort him. The longing in her eyes intensified as she looked into his, merely saying softly, "Good evening, Professor."

Snape's tortured soul faintly perked up at her expression, but he viciously denied the possibility that she really felt that longing *for him*. His lips twisting bitterly as his teeth ground together, he tore his gaze away from hers to glance at the notice board, taking in the information quickly. As he faced her again, he did something he was not wont to do.

In a faint whisper, he said, "Miss Granger, I would like to apologize for... what happened... last night. It's entirely my fault. I hope you can believe that I would never intentionally traumatize you in such a fashion. You have my sincere apology, and I hope you can see fit to... consign it to oblivion, if you will. It would be a very damning thing for my behaviour to be bruited about, and I can only appeal to your generosity to keep my... indiscretion between us."

Hermione gazed at him, taking in his painfully tight expression, his weary, tormented eyes, and the quaver of humiliated entreaty in his whisper. She was aghast. *He really thinks I'm upset because of that? Oh, the poor, misled, insecure man!* At her realization, her face lit up with an incredulous smile and she let out a small laugh.

Snape's eyes shot to hers, utterly stunned by her reaction. He hadn't thought that *she* could be so cruel as to laugh at him. But her expression was not mocking, it was indulgent and tender. Completely confused, he stared at her, silent.

Hermione smiled warmly at him and murmured, "Professor, I am most certainly not 'traumatized' by what happened between *us* last night." At that, her face clouded momentarily in remembered anxiety before clearing again to beam at Snape. "I was rather anxious that *you* seemed so upset, but I just hadn't had a chance to come apologize to you yet. I'm so sorry I got so... out of hand. And... if you'll accept my apology, and you're willing, I'd like to try to practice again. It certainly wouldn't do to have such a reaction as I did in front of the rest of the cast..." As she trailed off, she blushed and looked down, chewing her lip in embarrassment.

Snape leant against the wall, afraid his legs would dissolve beneath him. A flash of realization and hope whipped through him so forcefully that he felt he might have staggered under it. A dawn of life was breaking over his features. Hermione finally looked back up and saw colour returning to his face, his muscles relaxing, and best of all, the light burning once again in his eyes. He gazed at her in dumb amazement.

Hermione watched him, in wide-eyed wonder, and smiled again. She was startled by a cough near her. She whipped around and saw Ginny standing off to the side, warily eyeing them. Hermione grimaced and flushed again and Snape straightened to his feet, schooling his expression into his customary scowl. He cocked an eyebrow and glanced at the Weasley girl before looking back down at Hermione. His eyes narrowed as he noticed her anxious expression and embarrassed flush. Hermione's eyes darted all over the corridor, as she greeted her friend.

"Oh, hey Ginny. Um, I was waiting for you."

"Hello, Hermione, Professor Snape... So, do you want to go in?"

Hermione flicked a nervous glance at Snape. He, now knowing that he was not the reason for her being upset, was keenly curious about what was bothering her so much. Boring his gaze into hers, he drawled, "Miss Granger, I don't believe our conversation is complete. You have not gained permission to go." He turned a cold, dismissive glance on Ginny and said, "Miss Weasley, go to dinner. Your friend will join you when I have done with her."

Ginny nodded sharply, casting a concerned look at Hermione, before spinning and hurrying into the Hall. Hermione chewed her lip again, looking down. Snape contemplated her for a moment, glaring at the straggling students in the corridor, making them rush past for fear of a scathing reprimand. When the corridor was clear, he stepped a hair closer to her and rumbled, "You're upset. You claim it's not because of me. So, what is it?"

Hermione shook her head, not wanting to tell him, she was so ashamed. She couldn't look at him. Curiosity burning in him even more, he added, "If you won't tell me, I will be forced to assume that you lied to me," knowing that would goad the Gryffindor in her.

Hermione looked up at him, agonized with humiliation. But she also couldn't let him think he was at fault! Stammering, she faltered, "I-I was waiting for G-Ginny. B-Because I couldn't go in there alone to face him..."

Snape's eyes narrowed and crackled dangerously. His voice was deep and menacing. "Face whom?"

Swallowing against the lump in her throat, she sniffed and whispered, "Harry. He hates me... after last night."

Snape's nostrils flared in alarm. His eyes widened and he clenched his hands. Urgently, he hissed, "Miss Granger, what does he know of last night?"

Hermione realized her mistake at once, and hastily stammered, "N-Nothing! I never told anyone! I wouldn't! I meant what happened last night in my room."

Snape blinked rapidly. His fear abated, only to be replaced by jealousy. Bitterly, before he could stop himself, he spat, "So you didn't mean it when you told him to back off..." He glared at her accusingly, his eyes cold with disappointment and disapproval.

Hermione gasped, "How could you know that?"

Snape drew himself up to his full height, sneering down his nose at her. "I'm not blind and I have ears! I saw you rail at him in this very corridor!"

Jumping on his words, Hermione stared at him, stunned, and said, "You *did* see us! That's why you were right behind me when I went in to Dumbledore! But, why did you lie to the headmaster?"

Snape smirked cruelly. "Let's just say that I was feeling magnanimous after seeing you take Potter down a notch..." Then he frowned angrily. "If I had known how deceitful you were, I would never have even considered it."

"Deceitful! I never... That's why he hates me right now!" Her eyes sparked with indignation.

Snape rolled his eyes at her in disbelief, briefly wondering why he was allowing himself to engage in such a confrontation in the corridor. He realized it was because of his recently admitted feelings for her, and the insane jealousy at the thought of her with another, coupled with his inability to regain control of himself after the misery of the previous 20 or so hours. Voice dripping with disdain, he spat, "You would have me believe that he was *in your room*, and you just reiterated your desire for a *platonic relationship*? You weren't this upset before, so why should I think you are being truthful now?"

Hermione felt the shameful guilt well up at his words. She really did feel like she had betrayed him, even though there was nothing...officially...to betray. In a choked, tremulous, whisper, she responded, "I *did* tell him that he and I would never work. But I had already made a mistake that made my words hurt him even more. I'm hoping he can forgive me." She paused, then, deciding she had nothing to lose, she plunged on recklessly. "And you should believe me, because... I could never lie to you. Not now." She took a deep breath and stood as straight as possible, looking up at him, almost defiantly. She stared intently into his eyes.

Snape regarded her through narrowed lids. *Should I believe her? I want to, but it's so hard... And what did she mean she made a mistake and hurt Potter even more?* She held his gaze, completely open, hiding nothing. Snape felt the wistful hope and the bitter jealousy burning through him. At his wit's end, he made a decision, one as reckless as Hermione's. Opening his eyes wider, he leant toward Hermione and clearly said, "*Legilimens*."

He was an accomplished enough Legilimens to not need to actually say the spell, but by doing so, he let her know what she was in for, and gave her a chance to back away. He was taken aback by the way she pulled her shoulders back even more and squarely faced him, clearly evincing her willingness for him to invade her mind, her trust in him. It was almost enough to make him stop. But he was too far gone to turn back now. He was at the point of no return.

Hermione felt the whoosh in her mind again, and realized that he had entered her thoughts before. She let her trust in him take the forefront, followed by the ashamed sorrow at what he was about to see. She plainly displayed the joy she felt in his presence, at his touch. The consuming arousal from kissing him enveloped her again. Then she showed her stunned confusion at him rejecting her, followed by her wild flight to her room. Steeling herself, she replayed the events with Harry, glossing over them quickly, but including the entirety of her rejection of him. She let the humiliation and sadness flow through her, and ended with the tender feelings she had for Snape. When she felt him withdraw from her, she closed her eyes and sighed.

Snape was again shocked by her reactions to him the night before. He had suspected, but refused to believe it. Relief washed over him. A pang of remorse hit him again as he witnessed her confusion and self-doubt at his brusque separation and command that she leave. But then he saw her with Harry, and his jealousy flared up again. As she showed him bits of what had transpired, he felt as if he couldn't breathe. Fury welled up, and his hands itched with the desire to beat bloody the insolent fool who had dared lay his hands on Hermione. Morbid satisfaction reared its ugly head at her rejection of Harry, but he also felt a twinge of sympathy at her devastated reaction. He understood now why she had been so upset, and how afraid she was at letting him see all of this. He could feel the plea for understanding and forgiveness, as well as her warm, shy, affection as he retreated from her mind. Once firmly rooted back in his own mind, he lifted a shaking hand to shade his eyes, fingers against his brow.

Hermione looked up to see him that way and her breath caught. *Oh gods, please don't let him hate me too!* Desperately afraid of what she might see in his eyes, she faintly whispered, "Professor?"

Snape stiffened at her voice. He was waging a war within himself to tear down the barriers and let her in. Hadn't she proven herself enough to him? He was hurt that she had done anything with Potter, but he forgave her for her lack of control when she let him feel how she had felt after being with him in the dungeon. He could relate, as he was quite bad off himself that night. *This is the first time in far too long that anyone has... liked me, wanted to be around me. Stop being a hateful, suspicious old fool and enjoy it!*

Slowly, he let his hand drop away from his face, closing his eyes as he set his jaw. Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes and looked directly into Hermione's, letting his guard down. She could feel the change in him. The cold, hard wall he kept between himself and everyone else dissolved. Suddenly, she was able to fall into the deep, black tunnels of his eyes, without fear of slamming against a stony barrier and being flung back out. She could sense the pressure he was feeling, but she revelled in being the one to which he would open himself. A reverent, grateful smile spread across her face as she gazed up at him. She could feel her soul start to soar.

Snape's breath drained out of him as he let himself crawl painfully into the light of Hermione's feelings. The dazzled wonder in her smile made his chest and throat tighten. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, he ran out of air. Inhaling deeply, his lips relaxed into what wasn't quite a smile, but was more of a calm, peaceful rest. In a low, gentle, voice he said, "Go in to dinner. Your friends are waiting for you."

Hermione was slightly crestfallen, but she quickly realized that she had to go in, or it would be suspicious, standing out in the corridor with Snape for so long. Nodding slowly, she stepped back. Once again flashing that dazzling smile at him, she murmured, "Good evening, Professor." She turned and started toward the doorway.

"Miss Granger!" She spun about quickly. His expression hardened and his voice dropped to a threatening purr. "If Mr. Potter ever lays a finger on you again, rest assured that he will rue the day." Hermione's eyes widened and she blinked, nodding carefully. Then, he relaxed back into an almost amused smirk. "Do try not to let him get to you; it doesn't do to reward childish behaviour."

Hermione quirked one corner of her mouth and rolled her eyes. "Certainly, sir."

Snape's face once again softened, and he surprised Hermione with a courtly bow, followed by a silky, "Good evening... Hermione." At that, he spun on his heel and strode down the corridor, disappearing in the side corridor to the staff entrance.

With a thrill in her heart and a spring in her step, Hermione entered the Hall, feeling quite ready to face anything, including a sulking Harry and disillusioned friends.

She hurried to the Gryffindor table, keeping her eyes averted until she took the vacant seat next to Ginny. Once settled, she cautiously looked up and saw Ron across from her, with Harry beside him. Ron's expression was tense, but he offered a noncommittal, "Hi, Hermione." Hermione flashed him a grateful half-smile. Harry was staring at his plate, still looking rather cross.

Hermione gamely ventured, "Hello, Ron, Ginny... Harry." Harry didn't look up, but he jerked...as if he had just been kicked in the shin...and glared at Ginny.

In a tone just above glacial, he muttered a short, "Hi." It was as if a collective breath had been released among the group. Ginny squeezed Hermione's forearm under the table and Ron rolled his eyes heavenward in an exaggerated moue of relief.

Satisfied with that progress, Hermione fixed her plate and began eating. Ron, in a rather over-bright tone, started talking at Harry about the Quidditch practice scheduled for right after dinner. Ginny listened for a moment, to be sure he wasn't going to say anything important, and then turned her attention to Hermione again.

Out of the corner of her mouth, she muttered, "Hey, I told you I couldn't promise anything."

Hermione swallowed hastily, coughing a bit as she choked, and retorted, just as quietly, "No! Ginny, you were great! It's fine, really! I can't thank you enough."

Ginny shrugged. Then, she glanced at Hermione quizzically and asked, "So, what was Snape on you about? He was a right royal git in class today." She scowled in remembered annoyance.

Hermione blinked and hurriedly filled her mouth with another bite of her dinner. "Mmmph," she spluttered, gesturing at her steadily chewing jaw. Frantically, she cast about for a believable lie. As she finally swallowed, she leant toward Ginny and whispered, "I was supposed to organize and file a bunch of potion ingredients and books in detention, but I didn't actually finish. Honestly, I didn't think he would check! But, apparently he did, and he was berating me." She feigned a long-suffering look.

Ginny squinted at her and continued, "Then why were you smiling when I came up?"

Hermione froze. She felt icy sweat oozing from her pores. *Think like a Slytherin!* Taking a quick gulp of pumpkin juice, she grimaced. "Oh! That... Can you believe that he started off by *complimenting* me on how good a job I did? For a moment there, I actually thought he was being *nice*!" She affected an indignant snort and took another gulp of juice, hoping she was convincing enough.

Evidently, it was passable, because Ginny smirked and huffed, "Prat."

Hermione closed her eyes a moment in silent relief. She then focused on calming her erratic heartbeat. The rest of the meal passed quickly, with Ron droning on about the practice. Periodically, Harry or Ginny would interject with a salient point, but Hermione just ate quietly, mulling over the implications of her confrontation with Snape. Eventually, the other three finished their dinners, and Harry stood. He gestured to Ron and Ginny to follow him to the pitch.

"C'mon mates, it's time to get changed." As they stood, Harry turned marginally in Hermione's direction and looked at a spot just above her head. With a visible effort, he said, "Bye, Hermione... See you in the common room." He then spun sharply and stalked out of the Hall. Both Weasleys echoed him as they followed him out, tossing sympathetic and supportive glances at Hermione.

Hermione was both surprised and gratified by Harry's attempt at civility. She waved at the redheads and turned back to her plate. Sighing in relief, she felt as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Taking the opportunity, she glanced around the Hall, finally coming to the High Table. Snape was there, eyeing his plate as he ate methodically. Hermione felt a surge of happiness just looking at him.

Snape felt the sensation of Hermione gazing at him and fought the immediate urge to look up. Waiting a moment, he casually leant back in his chair, raising his head and looking around. He finally locked eyes with her. Once again, he felt the rush of heady emotions and physical desire course through him. And this time, when he saw the answering fire in her eyes, he believed it was for him.

He tore his gaze from hers and looked back at his plate, reeling from the amazing elation he felt. His voice of reason reminded him that it would be unseemly to allow any inkling of his feelings to show for anyone to figure out. *I must talk to her about that as soon as possible. I already put us at risk just speaking with her in the corridor. I can't take the chance to try to meet her again tonight. I'll just have to wait until class tomorrow, and hope she can be just as covert.* He laughed to himself. *Indeed. You have all the training to be inconspicuous. You were the damned spy! How ironic that it may serve me in good stead in this case...*

Unwilling to stay in the Hall any longer and chance anyone noticing their exchange of looks, he rose and strode purposefully off the dais and out through the House tables, wanting to pass by her on his way out. As he swept past her, on unbelievably light feet, he felt the hairs on his arm stand up, straining in her direction. Marvelling at how attuned he was to her, he flicked a carefully blank glance at her, seeing her solemn expression belied by her dancing eyes.

As he exited the Hall and made his way back down to his dungeons, he sent a silent thanks to the Ministry and Dumbledore for getting him involved in this whole production, and giving him what could very possibly be his salvation.

16- Trouble, Transfiguration, and Treats

Chapter 17 of 84

Hermione has Potions the day after her revelations with Snape. How does she manage to get in trouble? And, the transfiguration practice is the next night. Just what kind of assistance will Hermione be giving Snape?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Chapter 16- Trouble, Transfiguration, and Treats

Hermione made her way down to the Potions classroom earlier than usual the next morning, hoping to have a chance to speak to Snape about the previous evening's revelations. She was disappointed that he didn't show up until after everyone was already seated and ready for class to begin. She snapped around when she heard him burst into the classroom, his usual combination of imposing black cloth and sour expression. He stalked up to the dais and spun around, bathing them with his scowl. He skimmed right over Hermione, causing her to gaze at him blankly, taken aback by his utter disregard.

Snape knew he had to talk to Hermione, but he also knew that he had to be as discreet as possible about it. He had fallen asleep pondering the implications of his confrontation with Hermione the night before, and he realized that they were in a very precarious position. If anyone saw him speaking to her before class, it might arouse suspicion, so he purposefully avoided the classroom until time for the lesson to begin.

Determined to behave as normal, he slammed into the room irritably, and made sure that he didn't pay Hermione any particular notice. Even so, he could feel himself reacting to her presence. His senses strained toward her like a magnetic pull. Once he barked the instructions and took his seat, he glanced up through his hair to see the students assiduously copying directions from the board...all except Hermione. She was simply staring at him, confounded. Inwardly seething, *Damn it! She's supposed to be so bloody brilliant, you'd think she'd catch on to the fact that we can't very well go parading around as Hogwarts' newest couple!* Snape gritted his teeth and huffed.

Closing his eyes momentarily, hoping she'd figure it out, he raised his head and glared at Hermione, snapping, "Miss Granger! You may be our resident Know-It-All, but you will still follow instructions in my classroom! Begin your assignment immediately." His stomach clenched at the surprised hurt in her eyes, but he forced himself to maintain eye contact until she obediently bent to her parchment, looking like she had just seen him smack a baby.

Snape was genuinely irritated as he pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. *For Merlin's sake, I have no idea how to treat a woman! And it's not any easier for me when said woman is one I can't even publicly acknowledge! Gods, we've just complicated things even more, haven't we?* He snorted to himself, rolling his eyes at the absurdity of the whole situation.

Hermione was crushed by Snape's hostile attitude. She thought that he'd be different somehow, like he had been the evening before. She was hoping to see the warmth in his eyes and maybe even a smile for her, not a sneer, coupled with an insult! She copied the instructions and began her potion, still brooding.

The period wore on, silent but for the sounds of quills on parchment and bubbling brews. Snape frowned as he graded essays, periodically sweeping the room with his gaze, checking the students' progress. With every pass, he felt his eyes want to linger over Hermione, and he dragged himself away from her. He could tell from her body language that she was upset, and he knew for sure that he was the cause of it this time. It made him uncomfortable, and that annoyed him! Actually caring about how someone else feels and thinks was a new sensation for him, and he didn't care for the lack of control that came with it. It never suited him to have his life in someone else's hands.

Bloody hell! It's not like she's Voldemort. Why are you so damned antsy? She's not an insane megalomaniac! He shook his head. *No, she's an overly bright, inexperienced young woman, who can ruin your reputation and destroy your position with one single careless word or action. Really, old chap, nothing to worry about!* He suppressed a groan and cradled his head in his hands, sighing as he ran his hands through his hair to sit up in his chair. As he sat back, the sensation of his hair tugging at his scalp evoked tender memories of Hermione's hands caressing him. His chest tightened and he dared a glance at her.

Hermione felt a tingle and looked up to see Snape eyeing her. She gazed back, mournfully. His face was devoid of expression. They locked eyes for a moment, and she wondered if he would try to read her again. Just in case, she made sure she placed her hurt at the fore. Suddenly, Snape flicked a glance around the room, scowling. He bored his gaze into her and growled, "Miss Granger, you seem to think that daydreaming and wasting time are part of the instructions. Five points from Gryffindor for inattention." He steeled himself for the blaze of incredulous indignation and hurt that poured off Hermione. As her mouth opened to retort, he barked, "See me after class, Miss Granger." She shut her mouth with a snap and glared hotly at him. He raised his eyebrow and glowered at her until she resumed her work.

He could feel the sweat prickling his skin. *Good gods, man, you spent decades as a spy, and you get nervous keeping up appearances with a girl in a classroom? Oh, how the mighty have fallen...*

As the period drew to a close, students began clearing their work stations and bringing their samples to Snape's desk. Hermione angrily bottled her sample and marched up to his desk, chin held at a haughty angle, glaring icily at him. She placed it on his desk firmly and remained there, challenging him to look at her. Snape clenched his jaw and slid his eyes up to hers without raising his head. They locked gazes again, Hermione defiantly staring at him. On the verge of losing all patience with her uncharacteristic obtuseness, Snape carefully set his quill down and drummed his fingers on the desk. He arched an eyebrow at Hermione and hissed, "I said to see me *after* class, Miss Granger. Take your seat at once."

Hermione's eyes narrowed and she whirled to stride back to her chair, where she primly sat, back straight and dignified and head up. She laced her fingers together and sat with her hands on her desk, waiting for the period to end. She was virtually vibrating with pent-up anger.

Finally, Snape stood, dismissing the class. As the rest of the students filed out, he strode around to lean against the front of his desk, arms crossed over his chest. He glared at the departing students until they were all gone, then he waved his wand at the door, locking it and casting a Silencing Charm. He turned his attention to the angry young witch in the seat below him.

Hermione was brashly glaring at him, obviously in a temper. Snape shook his head and sighed deeply. He favoured her with an aggrieved expression as he quietly said, "You know, for being the brightest student at Hogwarts in recent memory, you really can be quite dense."

Hermione's brows rose to her hairline and her eyes goggled at his remark. Gathering her faculties for a properly indignant rejoinder, she opened her mouth and blinked. But before she could utter a sound, Snape held up his hand and closed his eyes in a pained expression, muttering, "Hermione..."

Hermione's mouth snapped shut at his use of her name. Her anger receded slightly, to be replaced by confusion. She gazed up at Snape, not sure what to say anymore.

Snape opened his eyes and contemplated her for a moment. Ruefully, he finally spoke. "Really... what did you expect me to do? Sweep into class and declare you exempt from the rest of your studies because you're willing to kiss me?" He let his voice highlight the absurdity of it all. Despite himself, he felt himself soften at the shocked dismay apparent in Hermione's face.

Hermione blinked rapidly as her whole being shifted gears. Suddenly she realized what he meant; and she realized she was wrong to have been so hurt and angry at him. Flushing in embarrassment, she looked down at her clasped hands, absently worrying them. She chewed her lip in thought, putting everything together. Looking up at Snape through her lashes, she mumbled, "I-I'm sorry. You're right. I didn't think."

Snape relaxed against the desk a bit more. Relieved that she seemed to be catching on, he eyed her pointedly and drawled, "Now, will you use your formidable focus and listen to me?" Hermione nodded sheepishly, chastened.

"As much as we managed to... come to an understanding... last night, you have to recognize that neither of us are in a position to do anything about it." His stomach fluttered at her instant move of protest. He pressed on, "You may be an adult, but you are still my student. And, as your teacher, I have to follow the rules of conduct." He paused, letting the full weight of his words sink in.

Hermione felt like crying. She knew everything he said was true, but she just hadn't paid it any attention. Caught up in the heady rush of emotion, she had let all sorts of fantastically romantic ideas run rampant. Now, she was crashing back down to earth with a bruising speed. She gazed up at Snape, pouting.

Snape could read her crushed feelings easily enough. Softly, he continued, "Hermione... I can't express to you what you have done to me... for me. I haven't... felt like this since I was younger than you are now. This is all completely new territory for me. I daresay I'll cock things up somehow, but at least give me the chance to do so on my own merits and not due to simple circumstance." He rolled his eyes sardonically and shrugged, hands out to his sides, before letting them drop to rest against the edge of the desk.

Hermione felt a little flutter of joy at his confession, followed by a flash of outraged protest at his self-deprecation. She bounced up out of her seat and rushed forward with an earnest expression. "Don't! Don't say things like that. I admit it, I was wrong to get angry with you. There's no reason to say you'll mess things up!" Then, she paused, looking down and worrying her hands again. She took a deep breath and looked back up shyly. "And... I haven't felt like this before either, so we're both in new territory. Can't we explore it together?"

Snape felt his throat tighten in response. His brow furrowed as he said, "I... would like that very much. But, that doesn't change the position that we're in. We have the entire rest of the school year to go before we can take that chance. And, let's be realistic... you may decide by then that this is all just a fleeting folly, and you will be glad to be rid of such a sour old man as I am." Hermione's eyes widened and she gasped, shaking her head vehemently. Snape held his hand up to stop her. "Enough. It may happen. You don't know how you'll feel later. We are bound by the Hogwarts code of conduct to remain in a scholarly relationship. I cannot abuse the trust that the headmaster has placed in me." He firmly looked at Hermione, determined, but also almost pleading with his eyes for her understanding. Wearily, he added, "And I'm afraid I may have already done so by allowing... that night to happen."

Hermione was in a welter of dismay and desperation. "But, that was my fault! I'm the one who suggested it, and I'm the one who... got carried away. It's not your fault!"

Snape gave her a small smile. "Oh, *certainly*. Of course, I am not the one in a position of authority. I am not the one who should have quashed the idea from the start. I am not the one who should have stopped you when you crossed the line from pretend to reality. I am not the one who had an *entirely* inappropriate reaction to a student in my charge. No, you're right. It's *completely* your fault." He gazed at her wryly.

Hermione pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at his sarcasm, but then she relaxed and sighed in defeat. "Oh, fine, then." Unhappy, she sagged back against her desk.

Snape felt like he was melting, looking at her so sad. Tenderly, he reached his right hand out and tipped her face up with his finger under her chin. Hermione shivered at his touch and felt enveloped in his intense gaze. In a deep murmur, he said, "You see why everything has to continue as it was? We cannot take the chance of letting anyone figure out how we feel. It would cost you your reputation and likely my job. Please..." At that, he cupped her face in his hand. "Please, don't be hurt if I am hateful to you. Know that I don't mean it. Can you do that... Hermione?"

Hermione felt like she was drifting in the endless black pools of his eyes. Half-mesmerized, she nodded, whispering, "I'll try, Professor."

Snape grimaced. Then, looking calculatingly at Hermione, he purred, "Can you do something else for me, Hermione?"

Hermione shuddered again at his voice, breathing, "Anything for you, Professor."

Snape straightened off the desk, closing in on Hermione, his hand still moulded against her cheek. He leant down to her right ear and murmured, "Just once, now, before you leave... call me Severus."

Hermione felt her legs going weak. She could feel the warm breath against her ear as he spoke, and his low purr was extraordinarily seductive. At his words, her breath caught and her eyes closed as she felt a tingle wash over her. Involuntarily, she reached up and covered his hand with hers, pressing it tighter against her skin, and slid her other hand around his neck, tangling her fingers in the hair at the base of his skull. Holding his head by hers, she turned her face to breathe in his ear as she nearly moaned, "Anything for you... Severus." She felt him stiffen in her grasp and a low growl issued from deep within him. After a beat, he slowly straightened and withdrew her hands from his person. Resolutely, he placed her hands at her sides and backed away.

Hermione's pulse was racing, and she felt flushed and light-headed. She wanted nothing more than to throw herself into his arms and snog him into next week. She leant against her desk, trembling.

Snape, even though he had been the one to request it, was totally unprepared for the effect of hearing Hermione say his given name. His cock immediately sprang to life, and he had to fight his mad desire to push her onto her desk and ravish her. Railing against everything his sense of honour and duty required, he forced himself to disengage from her, backing away from temptation.

Breathing deeply to regain his composure, he doggedly retreated behind his desk again, gingerly sitting, trying not to hurt himself by pinching his throbbing erection. With a last look of regret, he waved his wand at the door, removing the Silencing Charm and unlocking it. Resignedly, he looked at Hermione and said, "Go. You must hurry to your next lesson. My students will be arriving shortly as well. Remember what I've said..." His voice deepened into a harsh, forbidding tone as a couple of students entered. "I will not excuse your tardiness to your next teacher, Miss Granger, so I suggest you leave now!"

Hermione, vainly trying to gather her scattered wits, hastened to pack up her things, blushing and flustered. As she was about to turn to go, she said, "Goodbye, Professor. I shall see you at the rehearsal tomorrow evening. Until then, good day to you."

Snape huffed irritably, flicking his fingers at her in dismissal. He managed to imbue a wealth of exasperated disgust in his tone as he responded, "Indeed."

Hermione spun and ran from the classroom, trying to clamp down on her swirling emotions.

Snape waited until she was gone, and her echoing footsteps died away, and then he abruptly rose and disappeared into his office, leaning his forehead against the closed door. He breathed deeply and swallowed several times to ease the tightness in his throat and chest, before he cast a cooling spell on himself, to deflate his erection. Finally composed, but still feeling like quite the martyr, he returned to the classroom for his next class.

Snape lingered at his seat at the High Table as the Great Hall cleared after dinner Thursday night, leaving just those who were in the cast. From his vantage point, he could surreptitiously watch Hermione through his hair as she chattered blithely with her friends. He fought down an indulgent smile that tried to surface. Really, it wouldn't do to send half the cast to the Hospital Wing in shock at the sight!

Dumbledore waved his wand to clear the tables and benches from the Hall and Summon the chairs again. McGonagall spoke to him in a hurried aside before hastening out of the staff door. Trelawney had just floated into the room, and was beaming at her fans. Snape rolled his eyes and felt even more resistant to joining the rest of the group.

Hermione was standing with the rest of the Gryffindors. She was laughing at Ron's and Neville's exaggerated worries about learning their spells. Ginny punched Ron in the arm in mock-severity and then patted Neville on the back kindly. Harry was standing in the group, just on the opposite side of it from Hermione. He, too, was smiling faintly at the other boys' clowning. After a flurry of remarks from the other Gryffindors and a flutter of chuckles, Harry leant in closer to Neville and commented in a stage whisper, "Hey, at least it's not Potions!" Neville blanched comically and the rest of the group broke up in laughter, except for Hermione.

Involuntarily, she glanced up to Snape. He had heard the comment and saw a perfect opportunity to play his usual part. Standing swiftly and swooping silently down from the dais, he appeared behind the group, unnoticed by anyone except Hermione. He glanced at her with a smirk before schooling his expression into icy disdain.

"For once, surprisingly, Mr. Potter, you are correct. It is indeed fortunate that there will be no need for you to do potions. Otherwise, I fear the whole cast would blow up like one of Mr. Longbottom's cauldrons. Of course, he is not the *only* one who should feel so *relieved*." Here he pointedly cast a scathing glare at the Gryffindors, including Hermione, who, in spite of their talk the day before, still felt rather cross at his insulting remarks.

Snape noticed the angry gleam in Hermione's eyes and was satisfied. *Good. That is as it should be. Certainly nothing to suspect here...* He raised one eyebrow and scowled at the group before spinning on his heel and striding off.

Several pairs of hostile eyes followed his departure. Once he was out of earshot, mutters of "Git," "Prat," "Black Bat," and "Bloody Bastard" were heard all through the assembled Gryffindors. Hermione turned to Neville with a sympathetic expression and said, "Well! That was certainly uncalled for. Don't worry Neville, you'll be fine. Both Dumbledore and McGonagall are here to help us." She smiled encouragingly at him and patted his shoulder.

Hermione was stunned to hear Harry pipe up, "Yeah, Neville, she's right. It'll all work out. Don't pay any attention to that bloody git. He's probably just annoyed that we managed to get out of his class and he doesn't get as much chance to ream us anymore." Harry buffeted Neville's other shoulder and gave him a lopsided smile. Then his eyes travelled up to see Hermione's surprised stare and his smile faded. But, he didn't look away immediately.

In the space of a second, Hermione gazed her apology at him and he looked his hurt forgiveness back at her. After that quick exchange, both of their faces softened and they looked away, abashed. Hermione felt the tense place inside her that housed her shame at what had happened with Harry start to ease.

As the students started milling about to take a seat, Hermione lightly touched Harry's arm to get his attention. When he looked around at her, his green eyes darkened with pain, but he managed to say, "Yeah?"

Hermione shot him a grateful smile and simply murmured, "Thanks." Harry darted his gaze around the room and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

Flushing slightly, he ducked his head and mumbled, "Uh, sure." Then he hastened to take a seat a few spaces away. Hermione accepted the small measure of success and

sat. When she took her seat, she felt a tingle on her cheek and turned to see Snape staring at her.

She gasped at the intensity in his gaze. It crackled with jealousy and apprehension. Glancing quickly at Harry again, Hermione turned a wide-eyed stare of innocence and reassurance back to Snape. Snape flicked a glance at Harry and humphed. Resettling his crossed arms more loosely over his chest, he schooled his expression into one of cold indifference.

Hermione smothered a smile at his little show of jealousy followed by nonchalance. She felt a surge of joy that he would even *get* jealous, as well as exasperation that he would do so over *Harry*, of all people! Really, after what had happened, both with Harry and with Snape, he should know that she would *never* do anything with Harry. Honestly, hadn't she made her feelings clear enough? She peered at Snape through her lashes, willing him to look at her.

Snape felt Hermione's eyes boring into him. He knew he should resist looking, but then again, it might be more suspicious for someone to see her staring at him for a long time rather than the two of them exchanging a short glance. Yes, that's right! It would definitely look worse if he didn't glance at her in response to her stare. That being decided, Snape turned a carefully blank expression toward Hermione.

He felt like he had been hit with a tidal wave of warmth as she flashed him a dazzling blaze of affection before wrenching herself away from him again. Dazed, Snape sat, a rather gobsmacked expression on his face. After a moment, he gathered his scattered wits and immediately scowled, for the benefit of anyone who might have happened to look at him. But, underneath it, he wanted to grin like an idiot.

Dumbledore was absently looking over the assembled group, repeatedly glancing back to the staff door. Finally, McGonagall bustled back through, laden with a stack of parchment. She hurried to Dumbledore and handed half of the stack to him. The throng hushed as both of them started calling names to hand out the parchment.

When the students received their sheets, they eagerly perused them, some with more confidence than others. The parchments had the spells listed for each person's costume change, including both instructions on the wand work and the incantations. As Dumbledore came to the end of his stack, he called to Snape.

Snape stood languidly and crossed to Dumbledore, taking his parchment. He was giving it a cursory glance when Dumbledore spoke up. "You know, Severus, I just realized that I left your mask, hat, and cape in my office. Would you be good enough to fetch them? I should rather stay here to help Minerva teach the students their spells."

Snape nodded politely. "Certainly, sir. Where shall I look?"

"Oh, I laid them by the Sorting Hat on the shelf. You know the one." He smiled at Snape.

Snape nodded again and turned to go, but Dumbledore stopped him. "Oh! I just remembered! I want you to do your hair again. Whenever you wear your costume, I want to see your hair pulled back for the Phantom too. You do still have the styling items, do you not?"

Snape swallowed and carefully said, "Of course, sir. They're in my quarters."

"Then would you go prepare before you return?"

Snape felt the chagrin flash across his face before he could stop it. Dumbledore chuckled and stepped closer to Snape. Eyes twinkling like mad, he leant in and, in a conspiratorial whisper, said, "I daresay you may need Miss Granger's help again, my boy. No worries! I'll take care of it." And with that, he turned away from Snape, who was all but reeling with keeping his emotions under wraps, and called to Hermione.

Hermione looked up from her silent practice of the wand work listed on her parchment and strode over to Dumbledore, noting that Snape was eyeing her intently. "Yes, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore laid a grandfatherly hand on her shoulder and whispered, "My dear, I would like you to accompany Professor Snape and help him with his hair again. Perhaps you can instruct him on how to style his hair himself this time, so we don't have to interrupt you again. He will be retrieving his costume items from my office and then I want his hair fixed before he returns. I do appreciate your help, dear."

Hermione suddenly understood why Snape had been looking at her so intently. She struggled to keep a politely calm expression when she wanted to grin and bounce with joy. Looking down briefly to hide her dancing eyes, she replied in a low voice, "Certainly, Headmaster. You know I'm always willing to do whatever it takes to help you."

Dumbledore squeezed her shoulder in approval and beamed at her. "Excellent! Now, you run along. When you return, you can join us in practicing your spells." He glanced at Snape, who was looking decidedly uncomfortable, and chuckled. "Severus, the password is the same as for the last staff meeting."

Snape nodded and spun on his heel, quickly striding out of the Hall. Hermione hurried to follow him, barely noticing the startled looks the other students cast at them.

Snape kept up his pace, and Hermione jogged behind him. However, after a few steps, she dropped back enough to watch the graceful billowing of his robes behind him, emphasizing the way he seemed to glide along the floor. When they reached the stairs, Snape paused and glanced back at Hermione. He was taken aback by the furtive smile hovering on her lips. Narrowing his eyes suspiciously, he curtly asked, "What?"

Hermione reached him at the foot of the stairs and cast mock-innocent eyes up at him. They were twinkling almost as much as Dumbledore's. In a sweet tone, she replied, "Nothing, sir." Snape's eyebrow rose. He could never trust Dumbledore when he twinkled like that and he doubted he could trust this little minx either! It must be a Gryffindor thing...

Not comfortable with her behind him after her little display, he gestured for her to lead the way up the stairs to Dumbledore's office. Swallowing a giggle, Hermione began her ascent. After a few steps, she heard Snape following. Struck with a wicked impulse, she began exaggerating the sway of her hips as she climbed, smirking to herself. Behind her, she heard a stifled gasp and curse.

Snape couldn't tear his eyes from her arse swaying in front of him. His body reacted instantly. His jaw clenched as he felt the throb in his groin. *Damn her! Is she trying to kill me? Or just get me fired? Bloody little minx...*

By sheer force of will, he managed to not say or do anything in response to her enticement. As they reached the gargoyle at Dumbledore's office, he took out his wand to cast a Silencing Charm, but Hermione stopped him.

"Professor, I already know the password. Dumbledore informs the Head Boy and Girl of every change in case we need to report to him."

Snape pursed his lips for a moment and then snidely gestured to the gargoyle. "In that case, Miss Granger, would you do the honours?" He looked down his nose at her.

Hermione primly schooled her expression and turned to the gargoyle. "Lemon tart." The gargoyle moved accordingly. She shot a triumphant glance at Snape. As the opening widened and Snape just stood staring at her, Hermione took the lead and stepped onto the spiral staircase.

Snape followed a few steps behind her, and muttered, "Tart, indeed."

Once in Dumbledore's office, Snape crossed immediately to the shelf and retrieved his mask, hat, and cloak. Silently he inclined his head toward the door, and Hermione exited. Once back in the hallway, Snape looked at Hermione, his gaze smouldering.

Hermione stared back up at him, feeling her pulse quicken. She swallowed nervously. In a deep murmur, Snape said, "Very well, Miss Granger, now you shall accompany me to my quarters." Even he felt the electric jolt between them at his words. Breathing deeply, he led the way back down the stairs. This time, he slowed his pace to allow

Hermione to walk beside him. They were silent the whole way down.

Sneaking a look at her, Snape saw a blush creeping up Hermione's face, and noticed she was chewing her lip nervously. He felt rather agitated himself, and the tightness of his trousers didn't help. *For mercy's sake, if only Dumbledore knew what he had just asked of us... Thank Merlin he doesn't know!*

They passed the Potions classroom and walked several yards more. When they reached the door to Snape's quarters, he waved his wand and it opened. He bowed courteously for Hermione to enter. Wide-eyed, she stepped into the room. Snape followed her and shut the door behind him, allowing the wards to reset. Dropping his costume pieces on the catch-all table by the door, he leant against the door, watching her anxiously. He had never had a woman in his rooms, except for Minerva, and she didn't count.

Hermione was gazing about her, rapt. The room was dark but inviting with the fire in the hearth and the candles all around in sconces. Tapestries in Moorish designs were hung along the walls to fight off the darkness of the dungeon. The floor was covered in an array of thick rugs, including a particularly luxurious one of what looked to be varied shades of alpaca wool in front of the fireplace. Two comfortable armchairs were in front of the hearth, and each had an ottoman in front and a table beside it. She was surprised to see that they weren't in Slytherin colours, but instead were covered with a rich, dark brown velvet. The deep brown of the upholstery matched the gleaming wood of the tables, shelves, and cabinets throughout the room. To one side she saw the hutch that housed various liquor bottles and glasses. There was a small, intimate, dining set not far from it, and bookshelves of varying sizes and shapes were lined along the perimeter. She noticed a door to one side and two doors on the other.

Snape barely breathed as he watched her drink in her surroundings. Her eyes were sparkling and she smiled faintly as she gazed about her. He noted the intense hungry look she shot at the multitude of books along the walls. Then, tearing herself away from her immediate desire to rush to read the titles, she turned her head from side to side, looking curiously at the doors. Finally, she turned and gazed up at Snape. His throat tightened at the frank wonder and delight in her expression.

Clearing his throat savagely, he mumbled, "I left the items in my bathroom, through there." He jerked his head at one of the two doors to the side, then launched himself from the door and sped to said doorway. Feeling the heat rising in his cheeks, he cursed himself for getting worked up. As he flung the door open and stepped in, he glanced at his reflection, noting that he looked positively distressed. Rolling his eyes at himself, he snatched the cabinet open and retrieved the styling products. As he shut the cabinet door and spun to exit, he nearly ran over Hermione.

Yelping at suddenly being slammed into, Hermione bounced backward, flailing for balance. Snape instantly reacted and grabbed for her, succeeding in wrapping his arms around her. As soon as she was steady, they looked into each other's eyes, trying to fathom how best to react.

Snape felt his heart beating wildly at the warm solid feeling of her body against his, and was stunned by the fiery desire crackling in her eyes.

Hermione felt the flutter in her stomach go lower as she realized she was once again pressed up against Snape's hard cock. She watched the lust and affection war with the rising panic in his eyes. She held her breath, waiting for his cue to act.

With supreme effort, Snape relaxed his grip and backed away from Hermione. In a strained voice, he rasped, "I apologize, Miss Granger. Are you all right?"

Inwardly wailing in protest, Hermione merely nodded and whispered, "Yes, sir. Thank you." She nervously turned and stepped back into the sitting room. Worrying her hands, she took deep breaths to try to cool her flaming cheeks and dampen the ardour that continued to pool in a hot wet puddle in her knickers.

Snape straightened and cleared his throat again. Trying to regain his dignity, he stepped through the doorway. The tension in the room was almost buzzing aloud. Nervously trying to bridge the awkward silence, Hermione ventured, "So, what do the other doors lead to?"

Snape blinked at the unexpected question, on the verge of instantly retorting that it was none of her business, but stopped himself just in time. *It's a simple question, and admit it, you hope she'll be here with you eventually. So, why not answer her? It's Hermione, not any of the other dunderheads!*

Still in a gravelly tone, he answered, "Well, the one on the far wall is to my private lab, which continues on to my office, and through it to the classroom. This one is obviously to the bathroom, which, like the door beside us, opens up on the other side to my... bedroom." His voice trailed off. Hermione looked sharply up at him as he came to the word "bedroom." Her eyes fairly glowed with desire. Snape swallowed against his suddenly dry throat.

Once again gazing heatedly at each other, Snape gritted his teeth as he forced himself to look away from Hermione. He stepped past her toward the seats in front of the fire. Glancing regretfully over his shoulder at her, he muttered, "We had best get this done so we can return to the Great Hall. It wouldn't do to keep Dumbledore waiting." He beckoned to Hermione and dropped gracefully onto an ottoman in front of an armchair.

Hermione slowly walked over to him. He gravely handed her the items, and she gasped at the tingle that shot through her as their hands touched. She perched on the edge of the armchair and placed the items on the table beside her, gazing at the back of his dark head for a moment. She could see his shoulders were tense. Her fingers twitched with the desire to touch him and ease the tension out of his muscles. Breathing erratically, hands trembling, she gently tapped his shoulder. He jumped.

"What?" He didn't turn to look at her.

Faintly, she whispered, "Turn around."

Snape stiffened. Slowly shaking his head, he ground out, "That's not necessary..."

Hermione interrupted him, "Please. I want to try something different. Just turn around... Severus."

He couldn't have whipped around faster, so stunned was he by her uttering his name again. He stared at her in shock. Hermione stood and stepped closer toward him. He was forced to crane his neck to look up at her. Senses spinning wildly out of control, Snape vainly tried to redirect her. "We have to get back upstairs. Just finish this so we can go..."

Hermione simply gazed at him thoughtfully and lifted her hands to run through his hair. As soon as she touched him, he shuddered, his eyes closing involuntarily. In a faraway voice, she murmured, "I dreamt about this..." Snape snapped his eyes open again at her declaration, stunned again.

She gently slid her fingers through his long locks, lightly grazing along his scalp. Goose flesh rose along his neck and arms. He even felt his nipples tighten in response. He bit back a groan. Every muscle in his body was tense with suppressed need. Imploringly, he stared at Hermione. When she twined her fingers into the tresses at the base of his skull, he clenched his teeth, strangling what could have only come out as a whimper.

Hermione leant closer to him, unconsciously licking her lips. Snape saw it, and felt a surge in his groin. Desperately, he reached up and gripped her waist, to try to stop her, but she moaned in response and sighed, "Yes... Severus."

It was too much. His fingers tightened spasmodically on her waist and he ruthlessly pulled her to him, across his lap, as he swooped in and kissed her. It was harsh and demanding with pent-up passion. Hermione clenched her fingers in his hair and responded in kind.

She could feel the heat of his erection against her thigh and drowned in desire. Snape's hands were against her back, holding her tightly against him. His tongue plunged into her mouth, battling with hers for dominance. After a few moments of heated, probing kisses, Hermione moaned in delight. It was enough to jolt Snape back to his senses. Straightening away from her with a gasp, he lifted her from his lap. Shaking his head vehemently, he breathed harshly, fighting for composure.

Hermione was once again aghast at the sudden change in his mood. She goggled at him, dazed and dishevelled.

Snape swallowed, jaw tight and nostrils flaring as he huffed. Gazing at Hermione with a mixture of regret, desperation, passion, and frustration in his eyes, he resolutely rumbled, "Hermione... I shouldn't have done that. *We* shouldn't have done that. I thought you understood the position that we're in. We are risking too much going down

that road. Please, we are here for a purpose. We have to return soon before Dumbledore gets suspicious! I shouldn't have allowed myself to lose control like that, but you really shouldn't tempt me like that either! Good gods, woman, you see what you do to me? I'm only a man...have mercy!" He closed his eyes and opened them again, brow furrowed in pained entreaty.

Hermione knew he was right, but she wanted so much more. When he touched her, she felt like she was on fire. Chewing her lip in sulky acquiescence, she stepped back, nodding slightly. "I'm sorry. I was just... overwhelmed with... being here, with you." She glanced at him through her lashes. "I'll be good now. I promise. Turn around and I'll get you fixed right up." She quirked one corner of her mouth up as she regarded him playfully.

Snape narrowed his eyes at her, frowning sternly at her attitude, but turned around on the ottoman. He was grateful when he felt her begin her ministrations in a proper, businesslike manner. He sighed in relief and pleasure at the sensations he felt under her capable fingers and let his eyes close in sensual relaxation as she worked.

Hermione felt both frustrated and slightly ashamed of herself. She was so aroused by him that she wanted nothing more than to mould herself to him and snog him forever, but she could also appreciate the undesirable position that they were in...especially Snape! Quickly smoothing his hair, she began slicking it back with the gel, caressing his head as she worked. Finally, when she finished and was securing it in the elastic, she covered the crown of his head with both hands, slowly drawing them back for one last smoothing gesture. As she tightened the elastic a bit more to be sure, she lightly dragged her fingers along the nape of his neck, revelling in the soft skin there. She heard his startled intake of breath and felt the stiffening in his frame. Firmly kneading his shoulders, she leant down and whispered in his ear, "All done now, sir."

Snape snapped his hands up and gripped hers, stopping their movements. Slowly, he turned to glare at her from under hooded lids. The warning was unspoken, but Hermione understood. Holding her with his intense gaze, he released her hands. She obediently removed them from his person and stepped back, having the grace to look abashed.

Snape stood in one fluid movement and spun to look down at her penitent form. In a firm but tender tone, he said, "Come, we must hurry." He swept past her and gathered his costume pieces, hearing her hurry after him. He opened the door and bowed her through it, making sure the wards were replaced behind him. Satisfied that all was secure, he shot an urgent glance at Hermione and led the way in haste. Hermione scrambled to keep up with him. Jogging up the stairs after her long-legged Potions Master, who took them two or three at a time, she felt flushed and a bit out of breath by the time they reached the corridor to the Great Hall. Snape continued his race down the corridor, leaving Hermione to barely make it to the door to witness everyone's reaction to his entrance.

The cast stood about in a large loose group of smaller clumps. McGonagall and Dumbledore were roving among them, overseeing the practice. There were several people in varying costumes, and others were obviously still trying to master the first spell on their list.

Hermione skidded to a stop as Snape stalked into the Hall. The hubbub died to a complete stunned silence as, one by one, the cast members noticed him. Eyes widened and mouths gaped in amazement. Snape's expression was one of icy disdain. He marched over to Dumbledore, who was beaming with delight, and presented his costume pieces.

Inclining his head, he drawled, "Headmaster, I have my costume, and...as is obvious...Miss Granger has helped me with my hair. Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?"

Dumbledore choked back a chuckle at the gobsmacked crowd and shook his head. "No, thank you, Severus. Here are your costume spells. Everyone must demonstrate mastery with them before leaving tonight's meeting." He handed Snape the parchment and Snape nodded.

Turning to face the staring crowd, Snape glowered blackly at them, satisfied when they jumped and looked away again. He glanced up to see Hermione taking her parchment from Dumbledore. She flicked him a subdued glance as she turned to practice.

Snape surveyed the room, scowling menacingly at anyone he caught looking at him. True to form, Neville and Ron were having trouble and McGonagall was patiently working with them. Somehow, Neville had managed to transfigure his suit, but he had ended up with the colours inverted, so his shirt was black and the coat and trousers were white. Ron kept transfiguring only half of his costume at a time, either trousers or coat, but not all of it at once. Snape snorted. Harry was in his costume, trying to help Ron while McGonagall demonstrated Neville's spell, changing his robe to his costume and back again.

His eyes goggled as he saw Trelawney in her ballet costume. Shutting his eyes firmly, he prayed that he could root that image out of his brain. Sighing, he looked at his Slytherins, making sure they weren't having trouble and embarrassing their House. Fortunately, Draco was doing fine and was pompously assisting the girls with their multiple changes. Eventually he came back to Hermione, who was methodically casting through her list. He watched as she read each spell silently, her lips moving carefully, and practiced the wand movement before combining them to properly cast the spell. As always, she succeeded instantly. He felt a surge of pride that she was so brilliant and fought down a smile.

Suddenly, Hermione looked up at him. She gazed at him softly for a moment before noticing that he wasn't in costume yet. Her brow furrowed in confusion and then she raised her eyebrow in imitation of him as she pointedly nodded at his parchment. Folding her arms in his pose, she regarded him sternly. Snape was caught between irritation that she would dare to behave like that to him and amusement that she would purposefully imitate him to scold him.

Glaring right back at her, he shook his parchment out and looked at it with exaggerated carelessness. He put on his mask, hat, and cloak and cast the spell, transfiguring his robes into the tuxedo. There was a gasp near him. He whipped around to see Ginny Weasley, in her ballet costume, staring at him. Her gasp had attracted more attention and soon there were mutterings and whisperings throughout the room as everyone turned to look at him. Rolling his eyes at the absurdity, he huffed and skipped down the page to his last costume. He cast the spell and immediately pulled up the hood, hiding from the prying eyes of the rest of the cast.

He waited until the rest of the cast went back to their own work before casting the spell for his Masquerade costume. He was seething at being completely shrouded in scarlet, and he wanted to leave as quickly as possible. But, when he cast the spell, it was McGonagall who exclaimed in appreciation.

"Oh, Severus! It looks marvellous!"

Snape frantically cast the spell to change back to his own robes, but not before the rest of the cast had once again goggled at him. Eyes narrowed in irritation, he snarled acidly at McGonagall, "Thank you so much, Minerva. You, of all people, should realize how much I loathe that colour."

McGonagall smirked at him, and gestured with the cane that was part of her costume as Mme. Giry. "Yes, well, it was indeed a rare treat to see you in anything besides black."

Snape grimaced at her and took off the mask, cloak, and hat, once again bundling them together. He stalked off toward Dumbledore. "Sir, would you like to keep these, or shall I take them with me? I have cast all of my costume spells, so I believe I shall return to my quarters."

Dumbledore looked up from helping Hannah Abbott with her Masquerade costume and nodded absently. "Oh, you take them, my boy. It's better for you to have them so you can bring them to any rehearsals that require them. Done already, you say? Of course, that's to be expected from you. Very well, good night, Severus."

Snape nodded graciously at Dumbledore and said, "As you say, Headmaster. Good night." He turned to exit, sweeping the room with another black glare. His eyes widened at the sight of Hermione in her corseted costume, his desire flaring back up at the luscious swell of her breasts and the low neckline. Steeling himself to leave, he stomped out of the Hall, ignoring the furtive whispers around him.

Hermione saw him leaving, and wished she could leave with him. She had almost cast her way through her long list of changes. Sighing at the futility of her wish, she resolutely practiced the last spell. When she was done, she changed back to her standard robes and rolled the parchment to put it in her pocket. She crossed to Dumbledore and said, "I'm finished, sir. May I be excused?"

He looked at her approvingly and said, "That was fast, Miss Granger! And you even had a late start after helping Professor Snape...thank you again, my dear, I'm so glad I can count on you."

Hermione smiled warmly at him and replied, "Of course, Headmaster. I thought about what you said, and I think it would just be easier if I were to fix Professor Snape's hair instead of him trying. It would be faster that way, since I know what I'm doing and can see it better. Take it from me," and she rolled her eyes, "it's hard to do your own hair when you can't see behind your head!" She smiled winningly, hoping he'd agree to let her continue styling Snape's hair for the show. It would give her at least a little time to be near him without suspicion.

Dumbledore chuckled as he tugged on a wayward curl. Winking at her, he leant in conspiratorially and said, "You're not only a brilliant witch and an accomplished singer, but you are a sensible and brave one as well. Spoken like a true Gryffindor! Don't worry, my dear, I'll manage to convince Professor Snape. I promise you won't have to worry about him on that account." He squeezed her hand sympathetically.

Hermione smiled bravely at him, holding in the elation she felt. "Thank you, sir. Good night."

"Good night, my dear."

Hermione spun on her heel and strode toward the doorway, wanting to skip and bounce with excitement.

Snape had returned to his quarters and put away his costume pieces, but he was struck with the desire to go back up to the Great Hall and check the progress of the students...okay, Hermione. Quickly, he made his way down the corridor and up the stairs. He was almost in sight of the upper corridor when he heard footsteps and humming. Stopping in mid-stride, he slunk back against the wall, concealing himself in the shadows. He had only a moment to wait before Hermione jauntily stepped onto the stairs up toward Gryffindor Tower. She was smiling and humming "The Phantom of the Opera" to herself.

Had she paid attention and looked down into the stairwell to the dungeons, she might have noticed a pair of enraptured eyes following her ascent before she disappeared out of sight.

17- Rehearsal and Acting

Chapter 18 of 84

It's the read-through for Act 2 and Snape and Hermione have to keep their feelings a secret from the cast. Are they good enough actors?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Chapter 17- Rehearsal and Acting

It had been a late evening for some of the cast members; they had had trouble with their transfigurations, requiring both McGonagall and Dumbledore to stay and work with them individually until they succeeded at least once in their efforts. Nevertheless, spirits were high again at dinner Friday night, as they awaited the read-through of the second act.

Hermione had taken her cue from Snape and left her script in her room, knowing she didn't need it. The other Gryffindors had theirs, and some were thumbing through them as they chatted about their parts. Ron was regaling the other seventh-year boys with tales of his trials the night before, trying to get his transfiguration spells right. Hermione noted that Harry was looking much better, smiling and laughing with the others. She sighed in relief and smiled to herself, glad that he seemed to be getting over her.

She snuck a peek up at the High Table and thrilled to see Snape leaning languidly back in his chair, idly gazing about the Hall, his head leaning against his left hand. He knew she was looking at him and flicked a glance at her, lazily tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. Hermione's breath caught at the gesture, reminding her that she would be the one running her fingers through those long black locks. She hastily jerked her eyes away and hoped she wasn't flushing as much as she thought she might be.

Snape smirked to himself at her reaction. *That little minx thinks she can tempt and tease me. Apparently she's susceptible to subtle... reminders as well.* His amusement faded as he looked at the time and huffed in impatience. He wanted to get rehearsal started *now*. After the previous occasions of going through "Point of No Return" with Hermione, he felt he was prepared to withstand the sensations it evoked, but, perversely, he craved those same sensations. Besides, there was that part of his pride that still wanted to blow everyone away this time like he had the last time.

They thought they knew Severus Snape.

They had no idea who he truly was.

Except perhaps Dumbledore, and even he didn't know everything. Bemused at the notion, he pondered his new... relationship... with Hermione. It was a strange feeling, but he rather thought that he wanted to let *her* get to know the real Severus Snape.

Then again, there was that niggling uneasy suspicion that Severus Snape was no longer the man he used to be.

The Great Hall cleared, Dumbledore Summoned the circle of chairs, and the cast moved to take their seats. This time, however, Snape quickly strode to the circle and immediately took the seat directly opposite Hermione as soon as she sat. When Harry took a seat a few spaces away from Hermione, Snape smothered a satisfied smirk. Then, he scowled impatiently as Dumbledore went around the group casting *Suaviloquentia* on those who needed it.

Beaming impartially at everyone, Dumbledore took out his music box and script and settled into his chair. "Welcome again. I've been looking forward to tonight's rehearsal since everyone's wonderful performances last week. I hope you have all been practicing the second act as well!" There was a murmur of assurance throughout the group. "Excellent! In that case, let's begin..." He opened the box and the music began.

Snape sat back to wait for his cue. This week, Neville seemed to have more confidence as he bantered back and forth with Ron. As the rest of the cast chimed in with their parts as the chorus in "Masquerade," Snape closed his eyes to listen critically to the blending of voices. His eyes snapped open to zero in on Harry as he and Hermione sang their bit about the secret engagement. Harry kept his eyes on his script, but his cheeks were bright red and his body language spoke of an ill-concealed hurt. Hermione did her best to sing with professionalism, but Snape could see the guilty gleam in her eyes as she gazed at a spot near the ceiling while she sang. Satisfied once the tense exchange was over, and Harry had not exhibited any inclinations to try to get Hermione back, Snape relaxed and closed his eyes again, focusing on the quality of the singing.

Dumbledore will be pleased. It really does sound quite good. I daresay Hogwarts has a chance at winning this competition. Of course, I will do everything I can to make sure my performance will be as perfect as possible... He looked across the circle at Hermione and felt a surge of proud relief that he had such a talented actress opposite him. Playing off someone who was so gifted brought out the best in him as well.

Oh, all right... I know it's not completely acting at this point, since I want her like the Phantom wants Christine, but at least we should be very believable He chuckled wryly to himself. *And if anyone asks, we can always say, "Why, we're just amazing actors, aren't we?" That may be the only thing that keeps us from arousing suspicion. Then again, we'll have to be good actors out of the play, to pretend we still have such antipathy toward each other. Ah well, that will be the real test of our skills.* He let his pensive gaze slide across each person in turn, wondering if any of them would be the type to suspect anything.

Dumbledore is the biggest worry. That man has an uncanny knack for knowing things. Bloody Potter may get in the way just by pining for Hermione... heavy-handed oaf! He may hang about, just to try his luck with her again... Snape felt a flash of fury, but it was quickly followed by a flood of warmth as he remembered Hermione's emphatic rejection of Harry, and her enthusiastic attraction to himself! His lips twitched with the effort of holding in a half-sheepish, half-smug grin.

His thoughts continued. *Weasley is likely too stupid to see something right in front of his face, so I doubt he'll pose a problem. Hmmm, speaking of Weasleys...* He cast a speculative look at the redheaded girl by Hermione. *She's the one closest to Hermione right now. And she did see us at the notice board. That girl seems far too clever for a Weasley. Come to think of it, she's probably our biggest threat after Dumbledore. I must remember to caution Hermione about her.* His ruminations stopped as the song came to its crescendo and his entrance.

He slid forward to perch on the edge of the chair and sat up straight. His voice oozing diabolical amusement, he sang, "Why so silent, good Messieurs?" Hermione looked up at him, her eyes dark with whirling emotions. Snape continued in his light tone. Then, his voice hardened with menace as he sang, "Remember, there are worse things than a shattered chandelier!" He locked eyes with Hermione and his face darkened with anger. His voice rough with rage, he roared, "Your chains are still mine, you will sing for me!"

Hermione flinched involuntarily away from him as he bellowed. Inwardly she was amazed at how powerful he was; so much so that even though she knew he was not really angry at her, she was still very afraid of him like that. *It's just another example of how passionate he is. Everything is so pent-up and restrained that when he lets it out, it's like a blaze!*

She ducked her head to hide the wicked smile that played across her lips. *Just like last night, when he gave in to temptation. Gods, what a kiss! I thought I was going to melt right there! Mmm, I want to make him really crack... I wonder if I can get him to cave enough to just... take me!* She felt herself blushing hotly at the thought...really, it was one that had crossed her mind with increasing frequency...and nervously glanced up at Dumbledore, remembering Snape's cautionary words.

Snape's gaze kept coming to rest on Hermione...well, she was directly across from him...and he noticed her reddened cheeks. Then, when she bit her lip and looked furtively up at Dumbledore, he wondered what was going on. Curious, he eyed her intently.

Hermione felt that familiar tingle and looked over to see Snape staring at her, eyes narrowed speculatively. She gasped and another rush of heat washed over her already flaming cheeks. Her stomach fluttered and she felt the heady warmth pooling in her knickers. Interestingly enough, that also seemed to be happening with increasing frequency. Hermione flicked a glance around the circle, seeing everyone's eyes on their scripts as Harry and McGonagall did the scene that was not included in the recording. Then, she looked purposefully back and Snape and lowered her guard, letting him see her feelings.

Snape was once again stunned by the vehemence of her arousal. It hit him like a hot gust of wind. Shaking his head, he blinked. His body had instantly responded, and he felt his cock swelling. Holding his breath for a moment to regain composure, he glared at Hermione severely, his reprimand plain in his expression. Hermione shrank in on herself, chagrined. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself for concentration on the task at hand and shot Snape a properly contrite look from under her lashes. Mollified for the moment, Snape quirked an eyebrow at her before forcing himself to look away.

The second "Notes" scene began, and Snape was both amused and pleased to hear Pansy trying to speak with an Italian accent. Apparently, Draco had been working with her, but she was nowhere near as proficient as he was. *I really should have been the one to try to work with her, seeing as she is in my House, but Draco seems to be succeeding admirably, and it's so much easier to deal with that boy when he has things to occupy him and keep him from concocting mischief. I must remember to compliment him on his progress, just to keep him appeased...*

As the scene came to the point where Christine and Raoul enter, and Carlotta makes a snide comment, Snape smirked, watching the venom between the actors come through in their roles. Hermione in particular was able to flash haughty, angry glances at Pansy and Draco, glaring at them heatedly, since she didn't have to follow in a script. Snape straightened again as McGonagall started reading the Phantom's note. His voice dripped with mocking derision as he glibly recited the insults. Then he kept his voice light but put forth an undercurrent of warning as he spoke about Christine. Hermione glanced up at him, her eyes sparkling with appreciation of the subtleties in his performance. Snape sat back with a smug, conspiratorial expression as Harry burst in with his plan.

Dumbledore took the moment when McGonagall finished her line, "but we have seen him kill," to stop the practice and organize the multiple run-throughs for each person. Finally, after each person had gone through it, Dumbledore had them all sing at once. He repeated that a few times until it was perfectly timed. As they repeated it one last time, Hermione chimed in at the end with, "If you don't stop I'll go mad!" Then, the Hall quieted completely as she continued, her voice tremulous with unease. Several people around the circle looked up in appreciation of her voice, smiling faintly.

Harry sang his coaxing lines softly, and Hermione edged forward on her seat to sit up straight as she sang her lines, her pain at being caught in such a trap clear in her expressive voice. Snape gazed at her in wonder along with many of the rest of the cast, completely enamoured by the pathos in her song. His chest tightened instinctively in response to the pain she evinced, and he was hit with the urge to comfort her. Blinking rapidly at the lightning-quick reaction, Snape breathed deeply and reminded himself, *She's acting. Control yourself.*

Snape shot a look at Harry as he heard the boy bellowing, "the disaster will be yours!" Harry was glaring at Snape, scowling. Snape's lip curled in a malicious sneer and his eyes narrowed, boring into the boy. They held each other's gaze until Harry finally blinked and shifted away, sullenly. Snape quirked an eyebrow in triumph before he sank back into his chair, arms crossed loosely across his chest.

The rehearsal scene for "Don Juan Triumphant" began, and Snape rolled his eyes at Pansy's spot-on performance of the sour, self-centred Carlotta. Dumbledore repeated the scene a few times to orchestrate the timing of the background chatter along with the written lines. Then, it was finished, and Hermione continued through her introduction to the next song as the others faded out.

Snape inched back in his seat, crossing his arms tighter, knowing how haunting Hermione would be as she sang "Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again." He glanced around the circle and saw faces everywhere transfixed on Hermione as she sang the poignant song. He felt like he could burst with pride, and gripped his arms against his ribs even more. The music and her voice swelled and ebbed, buoying them along on the current of emotion. As she faded away on her last word, Dumbledore shut the music box, overcome.

Wiping at the tears that drowned the characteristic twinkle of his eyes, Dumbledore sniffed and said, "My dear Miss Granger, that was simply astounding. I knew you were talented, but that was beyond all expectations! I apologize for stopping, but I just couldn't help it..." He turned a soft, indulgent gaze on the group and was met with many awed expressions and murmurs of agreement. Hermione blushed and looked at her hands in her lap, worrying them together.

In a voice barely above a whisper, she stammered, "Th-Thank you, sir."

Fishing a great spotted handkerchief from somewhere within his robes, Dumbledore blew his nose with a loud honking sound, effectively ending the awe-struck atmosphere. Titters and grins rippled over the assembled cast and Dumbledore turned to Snape, politely inquiring, "Severus, are you ready?"

Snape inclined his head respectfully and replied, "Certainly, sir."

Dumbledore opened the music box again and Snape gazed across the circle to Hermione, his tone gentle and enticing as he sang, "Wandering child, so lost, so helpless, yearning for my guidance."

Hermione lifted bewildered eyes to Snape as she answered. Snape's gaze smouldered as he dropped his voice to the hypnotic lure again. But, he was distracted from enveloping Hermione in his presence by Harry coming in with Raoul's lines. Brow creasing in irritation, Snape flicked a glance at Harry before focusing on Hermione again. When he and Hermione finally finished the line, "yet your/ the soul obeys!" Dumbledore stopped the music, indicating that he wanted to do each person's part singly before melding the voices again.

The tension in the Hall grew as they finished the practice and began singing together. Snape chanted, "I am your Angel of Music... Come to me: Angel of Music..."

Harry cried, "Angel of Darkness! Cease this torment!" Snape flicked a quick narrow-eyed glance of anger at Harry before gazing more intently, more determinedly at Hermione as he continued his lure. Hermione looked between Snape and Harry, anxiety growing as the scene progressed. When Harry said the lines that finally cause Christine to break from her trance, Hermione flashed an agonized, imploring look at Snape. Then she whimpered Raoul's name.

Harry looked at Hermione, his face a mixture of wistfulness and petulance. Snape tensed. The fury behind his lines as he taunted Raoul was more real than anyone had the right to know, except Hermione. Harry shot a look at Snape when he heard the mocking jeers. He scowled fiercely at Snape in between looking at his script for his lines.

Finally, looking uncomfortable indeed, Hermione begged, "Raoul! Come back...."

Snape's eyes widened and his nostrils flared in rage as he roared, "Don't go!" Then, his expression settled into a grim one of dire foreboding as he continued, "So be it. Now let it be war upon you both!" There was a beat and then Dumbledore closed the music box.

Even Dumbledore seemed loath to interrupt the crackling tension. Hesitantly clearing his throat, he said, "Let's move on to the next scene..." All of the boys except Draco turned their attention to the script for the scene that was not in the recording. Snape gazed coldly at each of them in turn as the scene progressed, eerily tilting his lines to taunt them. When he finished, Dumbledore nodded and opened the music box again, moving on to "Don Juan Triumphant."

Snape was sliding his gaze along the group when he felt the tingle on his cheek. He looked out of the corner of his eye to see Hermione staring at him, an anticipatory gleam in her eyes. Swiftly, like a snake striking, he snapped his head around to give her a stern warning glance. She jerked, blinking owlishly at him, taken aback. Almost imperceptibly, he shook his head. Just as minutely, Hermione nodded back, defeated.

As the scene continued, Snape looked around the circle more, noting the flushing cheeks and uneasy shifting of several of the students as they realized that their professor and peer would be performing the erotically charged scene. Some exchanged disconcerted glances and flicked embarrassed looks at Snape and pitying looks at Hermione. Snape's lips thinned. *Just as I thought. Well, won't this be even more awkward than last week...* He gratefully remembered that at least this week, he didn't have to deal with the torment of his unbidden feelings for Hermione and the misery that they were supposedly unrequited. He flashed a dark warning glance at Hermione, and was satisfied to see her drawing herself up confidently: back straight, chin up, expression determined, and attitude lofty.

Hermione was steeling herself for the onslaught of immature reactions that were already trickling in from her classmates. She was not ignorant of the pitying glances they cast at her. But she refused to bow to their irrational perception of Snape and the dynamics of the scene.

Draco was appropriately pompous and caddish as he sang his last line and laughed. Hermione chimed in with her sweet words and voice. Then, as Dean croaked, "Master," Snape responded in a hushed voice, "Passarino, go away for the trap is set and waits for its prey."

Snape stoically ignored the antsy shifting and rumblings around him as he began "Point of No Return." He simply gazed at Hermione. She took her cue from him and did the same, effectively shutting the others out of their connection. But, they both kept a firm hold on their physical responses to each other and the song. He worked his way through the verses, letting his voice savour the words as he had before, but hiding his raging desire and fiery lust behind a façade of calm composure. Even so, his heart rate increased and sweat prickled his skin under the pressure. As soon as he finished his lines and Hermione began hers, he doggedly recited a mantra in his head, *Maintain control. Show nothing. Now is when you need to act. Act like you feel nothing. Maintain control. Show nothing...*

Hermione recognized the firm grip Snape had on himself by the rigid tension in his lean frame. She had seen the same thing the night before in his quarters when she had pushed him beyond resistance. Now, however, that was something that they couldn't do, or even allow a hint to show. She had been marvelling at his strength of discipline and admiring him for it while he sang, and now she knew she had to match him. She knew that she couldn't completely match him, because she couldn't control the nervous flushing of her cheeks. Inwardly she felt a flash of envy that he managed to stay so cool and pale under duress. Still, she gathered strength from her connection with Snape, locking her gaze with his, and sang her verses with as much emotion as she dared.

Snape could see the struggle for control and discipline within Hermione. He wanted so much to show his approval for her success in mastering her outward reactions as she sang. All he could do was keep eye contact with her, hoping she could read his approval and pride in his eyes, even though he didn't dare make it obvious.

They both sang the final verse. Then, as it ended and the music changed, Snape clenched his jaw, fighting to keep his feelings for Hermione from coming out as he sang "All I Ask of You."

Where Snape's voice had been velvety and seductive and full of sultry, forbidden promise during "Point of No Return," in "All I Ask of You," it was fragile and tender and wistfully hopeful. Hermione felt a thrill cascade over her at the contrast between the sensually dominant man and the tentative, heartsick boy who was daring to bare his soul for the first time in the song. Her heart pounded as she thought about how Snape had been so like the Phantom when he finally let his guard down to her Tuesday night. Again, she felt a pang of remorse for the way she would have to behave toward Snape in the play, since she felt quite the opposite.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment at the ensuing pandemonium. As soon as it began, she sensed everyone's attention diverting from her and Snape and she opened her eyes to give him an apologetic look before taking a deep breath and steeling herself to be hateful. Snape understood and inclined his head a fraction as he did the same.

Snape once again belted out his lines as he began "Down Once More." He held the last note forcefully before viciously singing, "Why, you ask, was I bound and chained in this cold and dismal place? Not for any mortal sin, but the wickedness of my abhorrent face!" Then he continued, letting the anguish of his existence out as he sang, "Hounded out by everyone! Met with hatred everywhere! No kind word from anyone! No compassion anywhere! Christine, Christine... Why? Why?" He glared at Hermione blackly. Hermione set her lips and narrowed her eyes back at him. Around her, the chorus sang and Harry and McGonagall recited their lines. Then, the music changed.

Hermione drew herself up in righteous wrath as she spit, "Have you gorged yourself at last in your lust for blood? Am I now to be prey to your lust for flesh?"

Snape's voice and manner were so cold that some of the girls shivered as he retorted, "That fate which condemns me to wallow in blood has also denied me the joys of the flesh. This face...the infection, which poisons our love..." Then, his voice deepened into a morose brooding for, "This face, which earned a mother's fear and loathing. A mask, my first, unfeeling scrap of clothing." Hermione nearly quailed at the chilling, dangerous spark that kindled in his eyes as he ground out, "Pity comes too late...turn around and face your fate: an eternity of this before your eyes!"

She tilted her chin in a defiant show of bravery and replied, "This haunted face holds no horror for me now. It's in your soul that the true distortion lies." In her peripheral vision, she could see the rapt attention of several cast members, entranced by the battle of wills between her and Snape. There was a very tense pause, during which the whole Hall seemed to hold its breath. Then, Snape's face changed to one of almost manic glee.

His voice was thick with sadistic satisfaction as he sang, "Wait! I think, my dear, we have a guest!" Harry felt uncomfortable with the disturbing expression Snape turned on him, his eyes practically gleaming with malice. Snape continued, a feral grin on his face, "Sir, this is indeed, an unparalleled delight! I had rather hoped that you would come. And now, my wish comes true...you have truly made my night!"

Harry was glad to look down at his script, away from Snape's sinister glare, as he sang, "Free her! Do what you like, only free her! Have you no pity?"

Snape mocked him with, "Your lover makes a passionate plea."

Hermione jumped in. "Please, Raoul, it's useless..."

Harry, blushing furiously, kept his eyes on the page as he forced out, "I love her! Does that mean nothing? I love her! Show some compassion..."

Snape cut him off with a furious snarl. "The world showed no compassion to me!" Around him, students were transfixed by the terrifying realism behind Snape's performance. The fleeting thought that perhaps Snape felt that way crossed a few minds, but it was dashed from them by new, even more frightening displays as the scene continued.

Harry pleaded, "Christine, Christine. Let me see her..."

Snape was all untrustworthy accommodation as he said, "Be my guest, sir." A polite smile graced his face as he continued, "Monsieur, I bid you welcome. Did you think that I would harm her? Why should I make her pay, for the sins which are yours?" His pleasant expression morphed into a chilling one of insanity as he gleefully taunted Harry. "Order your fine horses now! Raise up your hand to the level of your eyes! Nothing can save you now, except perhaps Christine..."

Harry felt goose flesh rising along his arms and the hairs on the back of his neck standing up at the image of Snape looking so deranged, especially as it was directed at him! He swallowed thickly as he remembered the fear that had seized him the night Snape had caught him and Hermione in the corridor. Power had exuded from the man, and it was flowing off him like an aura now. Harry realized that in the play he would be almost suspended in a noose, and fervently hoped Snape wouldn't be the one in control of it!

Snape directed his attention to Hermione, his whole being radiating threatening power. "Start a new life with me. Buy his freedom with your love. Refuse me and you send your lover to his death. This is your choice. This is the point of no return!" By the time he had reached the end of his line, Snape was breathing heavily with emotion and exertion. Something about the role just sucked him in and possessed him beyond reason. His eyes were wild as he locked gazes with Hermione.

Hermione tried to give him as reassuring a look as possible without giving anything away to the others as she forced herself to sing, "The tears I might have shed for your dark fate grow cold and turn to tears of hate!"

Harry came in with his next lines and both Hermione and Snape jumped in to sing their overlapping parts. Dumbledore was so engrossed in their performance that he didn't even stop them to make each one do their part singly before blending. It was a mark of their talent and skill that they managed to interweave perfectly the first time through.

There was a break in the mingling of voices as Snape sang, dangerously, "So do you end your days with me? Or do you send him to his grave?"

Harry scowled fiercely at Snape as he shouted, "Why make her lie to you to save me?" Then, the three of them launched into the next bout of overlapping lines. The Hall was rife with tension as everyone watched and listened in rapt fascination.

Hermione's voice trailed singly as she finished, "you deceived me...I gave my mind blindly..."

Snape's voice held all the venomous hatred in the world as he spat, "You try my patience...make your choice!" Everyone sat, with bated breath, as Hermione gazed directly into Snape's eyes and set her jaw.

Resolutely, she infused all the sympathy she could into her voice as she sang, "Pitiful creature of darkness. What kind of life have you known? God give me courage to show you, you are not alone!" All through the group, wide-eyed stares were ricocheting between Snape and Hermione, with varying expressions of wonder, awe, apprehension, revulsion, and perplexity, as everyone thought about the fact that their Head Girl and their Potions Master would be kissing at that moment in the play. The music swelled and both Hermione and Snape were vibrating with pent-up tension as they stared at each other. Snape's scowl faded and his eyes widened. The fleeting expression of awe disappeared, to be replaced by one of agonized realization and defeat.

When the music changed, it was as if the Hall sighed, as the collective breath of virtually the entire cast was released at once. Both Snape and Hermione visibly relaxed from their fever pitch. There was a flurry of activity around the circle as people hurried to find their place to sing the chorus.

As the chorus sang, Snape chimed in with his lines, his voice dull and lifeless until he begged Raoul and Christine to leave so they wouldn't be found. Then it was wretched with misery. Finally, as he screamed his final entreaty, shudders rippled over the assembled group, his voice like a knife on raw nerves. The music wound down and Snape seemed to wilt into his chair, sagging back against it. His eyes were dull and his face paler than normal. Hermione felt her heart beating wildly as she fought the urge to rush to him and hold him.

The light, tinny sound of the music box in the recording began. Snape seemed to be staring into space, his eyes not focusing on anything within the group. A melancholy, rueful expression crossed his face as he softly sang, "Masquerade... Paper faces on parade... Masquerade... Hide your face so the world will never find you..." His eyes closed and his brow furrowed. His head tilted forward and long black locks tumbled over his cheeks as he almost whimpered, "Christine, I love you."

Hermione swallowed against the tightness of her throat as she watched him. She struggled to sing, "Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime... Say the word and I will follow you..." Wrenching her gaze from Snape's crushed form, she glanced at Harry, to see him staring at Snape in awed consternation.

Harry mumbled, "Share each day with me..."

Hermione joined in with, "each night..." and they both sang, "each morning." Hermione looked away from Harry and back at Snape, to see him open his eyes and sweep his gaze over her on its way up.

Snape leant back in his chair and tilted his head back, gazing toward the enchanted ceiling. His whole being radiated resigned sadness, but with an undercurrent of martyred satisfaction as his voice resounded through the hushed Hall, singing, "You alone can make my song take flight...it's over now, the music of the night." As he finished the last note, his eyes closed again and he swallowed convulsively.

Hermione looked around the circle, seeing all eyes fixed on Snape. The music finally played out and Dumbledore shut the music box. The silence that followed was full of emotion. Slowly, all around, students started to shake off the thrall of the impassioned performance. Snape was still leaning back in his chair, gazing at the ceiling.

Hermione watched his Adam's apple bob multiple times as he kept swallowing. His chest rose and fell like a bellows winding down. Hermione was distracted from her study of Snape by the sound of sniffing and throat clearing. Several of the girls were wiping their eyes and noses and Dumbledore once again honked into that spotted handkerchief. A couple of boys were savagely coughing, muttering about things caught in their throats as they knuckled their eyes sheepishly.

Finally, Dumbledore broke the tableau by standing and deliberately applauding. McGonagall was the first to join him, followed by a wave of other cast members. Hermione rose slowly, clapping fiercely as she watched Snape, like to burst with pride. He blinked rapidly and finally tilted his head back to level, his gaze sliding across Hermione. She noticed that his eyes were glassy and felt a lump come to her throat again. By this point, the whole group was on their feet and looking at Snape. The Slytherins were beaming haughtily at the others with pride for their Head of House. Hermione felt herself smiling, and Dumbledore twinkled brightly at the Potions Master.

Snape was overwhelmed. He blinked around the group, owl-eyed with astonishment. *Why are they applauding me? I didn't do anything extraordinary.* Wanting to slink away from the attention, Snape tamped down the nervous heat that he could feel rising to his face. Uneasily, he straightened and stood in one fluid, graceful movement. Glancing around the circle at the varied expressions of awe, incredulity, appreciation, and pride, he schooled his face into one of humble gratitude and offered a courtly bow, hoping that would be enough to end the display.

Fortunately, it was. Dumbledore cried, "Spectacular! Simply amazing! Oh, I am so pleased with everyone. You have all done wonderfully, and I look forward to our next

rehearsal! Until then, good night, and be sure to check the notice board!" The applause died away and the group broke up into small clumps of buzzing conversations.

Snape stood uncomfortably, seeing the students whispering furtively as they shot goggle-eyed glances back at him. He nonchalantly smoothed his robes, flicking imaginary specks from them. He felt Hermione looking at him and swept a glance over the Hall, noting that she was gazing at him thoughtfully, with a small smile hovering about her lips. He also noticed that the Weasley girl was right behind her, gazing speculatively between him and Hermione. He kept his gaze moving away from Hermione, both hoping that Hermione wouldn't give Ginny any cause for suspicion and wishing he could warn her that Ginny was right there. Cursing to himself, he settled his face into its customary sour expression and began to walk toward the doorway. He both hoped Hermione wouldn't follow him and wished she could.

Hermione was startled from her reverie by Ginny's voice near her shoulder. "Crazy, huh? Who knew?"

Hermione spun and raised her eyebrows in surprised confusion. "Knew what?"

Ginny nodded in Snape's direction and pursed her lips. "That Snape could do that! Crazy, huh?" She tilted her head to one side and quirked one corner of her mouth up.

Hermione glanced at the retreating form of her Potions Master and blinked. Rallying her acting skills, she flashed a look of incredulous surprise at Ginny and grimaced. "I know! Honestly, it's amazing, isn't it? Last week and now tonight... You're right. Who knew, indeed?" Hermione ignored the voice inside her that cried out, *I know, I know! I know how passionate he can be! I've seen the emotions he keeps buried!*

Ginny shrugged and rolled her eyes, smiling. Jerking her head in the direction of the doorway, she turned and started out, Hermione in her wake. Looking over her shoulder at Harry and Ron with the other Gryffindor boys, she leant toward Hermione and whispered sympathetically, "Guess some of that was kinda' awkward, huh?"

Hermione glanced back as well and realized what Ginny was talking about. Grateful to change the subject from Snape, Hermione nodded. "Yes. Very much so. Did you hear Harry when he had to sing, 'I love her!'? I just wanted to crawl into a hole and die!" She sighed. "I hope things'll get better as time goes by."

Snape had exited the Hall and started down the corridor, his senses strained for any indication that Hermione had come out too. He reached the stairs to the dungeon and paused, glancing back at the students who were making their way down the corridor in pairs or small groups. Hermione was not one of them. He turned and descended the stairs, pausing again when he was out of sight of the corridor. Backing against the wall in the shadows, he settled himself to wait until he could see Hermione on her way up to the Tower.

Hermione and Ginny were walking along the corridor. As they passed the spot where Snape had caught Harry and Hermione together, Hermione shuddered. Ginny noticed and looked at her friend quizzically. "What's wrong?"

Hermione jerked her head at the dark alcove and murmured, "That's where Snape caught us." Involuntarily, she quickened her pace. Ginny gazed wide-eyed at the spot before hurrying to catch up with Hermione.

Snape heard the footsteps and voices in the corridor at the top of the stairs. He held his breath, listening hard. Suddenly, he saw bushy brown hair and his chest tightened. He heard rapid footsteps and a shining red head joined her. Ginny's voice floated down to him.

"So you and Harry really are over? Are you sure you won't change your mind and give him another chance?"

Snape froze. Even his heart seemed to stop beating for a moment. A trickle of icy dread threaded through his centre.

Above him, Hermione paused and turned to the other girl. She looked around before replying. Snape felt his heart start beating again at the finality in her tone.

"I will not change my mind! Ginny, it's like if you were to try to date Ron..."

"Eww!"

"Exactly! Did he put you up to this?" Even Snape knew that the warning tone in her voice boded no good to whomever incited it.

There was a strained silence. Finally, Ginny sighed in defeat. "No, not exactly. Ron wanted me to ask you since he was afraid to. He just wanted to be absolutely sure so he could talk Harry out of trying again. *He* understands. He says it was weird for you two, so he gets the idea."

Hermione snorted. Snape felt a flash of jealous anger that Hermione had done anything with that Weasley boy.

"Yeah, all it took was one kiss for us to figure it out. I wish it had been as fast with Harry, so we could have avoided all this horrid tension!"

Snape's anger subsided a little at the revelation that it was just one kiss, but he still wanted to have her only for himself. He gazed up at the back of her head, her long curly hair darting every which way. He was struck with the desire to bury his face in her hair.

Suddenly, Hermione felt a tingle on the nape of her neck. She suppressed a shiver. Her brain started processing the event with previously acquired information and realized that Snape must be around. Her body seemed to come alive and buzzed with the energy that attuned to Snape.

Realizing the opportunity she had at hand, Hermione smiled to herself and said firmly, "Harry is one of my dearest friends. But that's all. Besides, he's still a boy. And I think I'd much rather find a man..." She quirked one eyebrow at Ginny, who grinned back, giggling.

Snape felt a surge wash over him at her words and the implications contained therein. He swallowed back a groan as his cock sprang to life.

Hermione glanced toward the Great Hall. Quietly, she muttered, "Look, here come the boys. Let's go. Race you to the common room?" She glanced challengingly at Ginny.

Ginny smirked in response and said, "Deal. Ready? One, two, three, go!" She immediately pelted off up the stairs.

Snape was gazing up at Hermione and was completely stunned when, as soon as Ginny took off, Hermione whirled, swept the dungeon stairs with a dazzling smile and blew a kiss to the air before spinning and racing off after her friend, giggling.

How did she know I was here? Snape reeled. He heard the boys approaching and flew swiftly down to his quarters, still trying to figure out how Hermione had known he was watching.

18 - A Solution for Staging

Dumbledore hits a wall with his ability to progress as Director. He needs help with the staging. Of course, Snape and Hermione become integral to the solution, but how did the Grangers get involved?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Chapter 18 A Solution for Staging

Dumbledore was in his office, frowning at the parchments on his desk. Looking at the clock...8:36 a.m....he sighed heavily. Fawkes gave an inquiring squawk. Glancing up fondly at the phoenix, Dumbledore grimaced and said, "I'm just trying to work out the rehearsal schedule. I've never done this before, and I feel like I'm flailing about blindly." Fawkes fluttered over to Dumbledore and butted his head against the man's shoulder. "I know that we're supposed to start practicing the staging of the play, but I'm not sure how to go about it. And, we still haven't worked out the charms needed for the glamours. I know we'll have to enchant the instruments to play for the performance, turn the Great Hall into the theatre house, and change the sets efficiently... I just don't know how best to do all that!"

He sighed again, and Fawkes minced over to the crystal bowl near the corner of the desk and picked out a lemon drop, which he then dropped in front of Dumbledore on the parchment. Dumbledore chuckled and picked up the proffered treat. "Thank you, Fawkes. However, I can see I'm going to need some help. Minerva will help me transfigure the Hall, but I don't even know what it's all supposed to look like!

Fawkes ruffled his wings as if to say that Dumbledore was overreacting and pointedly stuck his leg out, cocking his head to the side as he regarded the old man. "Of course, dear friend. I know you're always ready to take messages." He patted the phoenix affectionately. "Very well. I'll send for Minerva and Severus and Filius. Perhaps they can think of a solution. Merlin knows I'll have to draft Filius's services for all the charms soon, so I had better prepare the good man." Fawkes trilled and spiralled up from the desk, then arrowed back to his perch.

Sucking on the lemon drop, Dumbledore wrote the notes to each professor, summoning school owls to deliver them. Fawkes preened on his perch, looking decidedly smug.

Snape looked up from the essay he was grading to see an owl winging toward him. He sat back, allowing the bird to land on the desk and offer its missive. As he took the scroll from the owl, it hopped to the side, waiting. Snape waved his wand absently and an owl treat appeared on the corner of the desk. The owl hooted happily and crunched the treat while Snape read the note.

"Severus, I find I require some help as Director of the play. I would like to have a meeting with you, Minerva, and Filius this morning. Please respond with whether or not you can join us in my office at 11:00. I understand that this is your Saturday, but this is a rather pressing matter. I appreciate your cooperation."

-A. Dumbledore, Headmaster"

Snape glanced at the time...9:02 a.m....and smirked faintly as he scrawled his response under Dumbledore's note.

"Headmaster, I am indeed available at 11:00; and I would be honoured to aid you in whatever fashion I may. I shall see you, and the others I'm sure, shortly."

S.S."

He rolled the parchment again and secured it to the owl's leg. It flew off and Snape went back to his grading, vaguely wondering what particular snag Dumbledore had hit this time.

"Lemon tart," Snape said to the gargoyle. It turned and he stepped onto the spiral staircase. As he was about to ascend, he heard a squeaky voice in the hallway and rapid footsteps.

"Wait! Just a moment, please!"

Snape paused to let Professor Flitwick catch up. The tiny man wheezed as he joined Snape on the staircase. "I appreciate you waiting, Severus."

Snape inclined his head graciously and murmured, "Certainly, Filius." They reached the door to Dumbledore's office and stepped in. Unsurprisingly, Minerva was already there, seated in a chintz armchair near the fire, sipping tea.

Dumbledore turned to the two men and gestured expansively. "Thank you so much for agreeing to meet me on such short notice. Please have a seat. Tea?"

Snape made his way to his preferred brown leather wingback chair set a little back from the group and sat. Flitwick took a chair near the fire, hopping up to sit with his feet sticking out straight. Once Dumbledore made the tea and passed the cups to the men, he sat, turning a thoughtful gaze on them.

"I have come to the conclusion that I need your help to make progress in the play. Minerva was already gracious enough to help me with the transfiguration spells for each actor's costumes." He beamed at Minerva and she smiled modestly, casting her eyes down as she waved her hand in airy dismissal. "I know you were not cast in the play, Filius, but I very much need your help to do all the charms necessary for the sets, the actors, and the instruments." Flitwick nodded amiably, looking at Dumbledore, curious. "And, the main problem we face now is that I cannot even begin the transfiguration of the Hall and the charming of the sets because I really don't have a clear enough idea of what it should all look like and how it should all change!" He wrinkled his nose and sniffed, perplexed, gazing at the other professors. There was a pause, and then he said, ruefully, "So, any suggestions?"

The other professors exchanged blank looks. Snape scowled in thought. Minerva muttered, bemusedly, "The script doesn't give a clear description of the sets. It gives general ideas, but not much detail. If any of us had ever *seen* the play before, we would have a much better idea of what we need and what we can create to serve our purpose..."

Snape was struck with a thought, and he spoke before he realized what he was doing. "Miss Granger knows it. She must have seen it."

All eyes turned to him, and he blinked, surprised at himself for volunteering such information. Dumbledore eyed him speculatively and asked, "How do you know that, Severus?"

Snape put on his snidest front and drawled, "Surely you've noticed that she already knows her part by heart. She knew the play before she was cast."

Minerva cut in sardonically, "Then we could assume that you know the play as well, Severus, since you knew your role from memory at the last two rehearsals, too."

Dumbledore quirked an eyebrow at Snape and added, "It's a lot to assume, Severus."

Snape shifted minutely in his seat, fighting the urge to squirm under their gazes. He huffed and thinned his lips. "I'm not assuming, Albus. She said as much to me herself."

Minerva started and asked, "When would she have done that? She never said anything at the rehearsals." She frowned at Snape.

Snape narrowed his eyes at her and bit out, silkily, "She told me she had known the play for years now. At the first meeting you set up for us, Albus, she was singing along with the whole damned thing...every part! Suffice to say, I'm sure Miss Granger knows more about this play than any of us."

Dumbledore sat back with a satisfied sigh. "Excellent. In that case, we will ask Miss Granger for her help in this matter as well." He shot a twinkling glance at Snape. "Indeed, Severus, I should have realized how much more familiar Miss Granger was with the play when she suggested that your hair was not suitable..." Snape glowered at Dumbledore, almost snarling at the man's amused countenance. He crossed his arms tightly across his chest and glared at everyone impartially.

Dumbledore clapped his hands together and beamed at the others. "Well then, this meeting is over. I appreciate your cooperation. Filius, if you have a few moments, I'd like to go over the extensive list of charms we anticipate needing. Good day to you all, and I'm sure I'll see you at lunch. Perhaps Miss Granger will be there as well, and we can enlist her aid."

McGonagall and Snape stood, Snape scowling for the woman to go ahead of him. She pursed her lips at him in irritation and swept out of the office. Dumbledore had moved to sit near Flitwick and was immersed in conversation about the charms he needed. Snape stalked out of the office, keeping several paces behind McGonagall. Once they were both in the corridor, and the gargoyle had closed, McGonagall spun on Snape, pinning him with a fierce stare. Snape stopped short, looking down his nose at the shorter woman, attempting an air of bored indifference.

"Severus, you had better treat Miss Granger nicely! I will not allow you to harass my prize student! With her, we have a solid chance of winning this competition, and I will not allow you to add more stress to her already full plate..."

Snape rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as he closed his eyes and drew his brows together. In a long-suffering tone, cutting off the woman's tirade, he sighed, "Minerva..."

She fixed her hands on her hips, glaring at him, tapping her foot. Snape huffed and pinned her with an aggrieved expression, "As flattered as I am that you think so highly of me, I *am* an adult, and I *can* behave accordingly. Miss Granger and I have agreed to be professional about this whole affair, and I would never do anything to jeopardize Hogwarts' chances to win the competition. I happen to agree that Miss Granger's talents will go a long way toward that goal, so please refrain from haranguing me for things I haven't done!"

McGonagall's eyes narrowed as she locked gazes with Snape. He refused to back down and they stood there silently for several moments. Finally, McGonagall relaxed her aggressive stance and sniffed. "Very well then, Severus. But if I see so much as an inkling that you're bothering her, I *will* go to Dumbledore." With that, she nodded stiffly to him and murmured, "Good day," before whirling to walk off. Snape sighed heavily at her theatrics and turned to go the other way. He stopped upon hearing her call out, "Severus!"

Gritting his teeth, he slowly turned to look at her again. She was gazing at him with a calculating smile. "I haven't forgotten our little wager. I daresay that I may be closer to winning than you thought, after your admission about Miss Granger's talents." Her eyebrows twitched in malicious amusement. Snape merely rolled his eyes at her and spun around to stalk away. He glowered at the chuckle that echoed behind him.

Damned insufferable woman! If she only knew how right she is. Not that I can admit it, of course. Gods, wouldn't she just crow over me if she knew precisely how worthy I do find a certain know-it-all Gryffindor...

Snape was torn between sullen dismay that he was bound to lose their wager and the cautious happiness that stemmed from the reason he would lose. He decided to head down to lunch instead of trying to do any more work at the moment.

I wonder if Hermione will be there this early? he mused, not realizing that his angry stride had changed to a smoother, lighter gait and that his expression was much softer and more peaceful than his usual sour glare.

Snape took his usual seat at the High Table and leisurely ate his lunch. He idly gazed out onto the raucous House tables. He had been there for a short while when Hermione entered. His chest tightened at the sight of her, gracefully striding to the Gryffindor table, with Ginny, Ron, and Harry in tow. She was talking animatedly, her hands waving about for emphasis, and Ginny was laughing. Ron and Harry were deep in discussion, gesturing wildly behind them. They all took their seats and filled their plates eagerly. As soon as they had all served themselves, there was a lull in their conversations as their mouths were soon too full to talk.

It was during this lull that Hermione felt the familiar tingle on her cheek and airily turned to see Snape regarding her through his curtain of hair. She beamed impartially around her, knowing he would realize her smile was for him.

Snape toyed with his teacup, swirling the dregs distractedly. Dumbledore took his seat next to him and said, "Hello, Severus." Snape glanced at the old man and nodded politely, noting that the headmaster was once again reaching for the lemon tarts. He was suddenly struck with an idea.

Lemon... Smiling to himself, he reached for the teapot and refilled his cup, inhaling the fragrant steam. Then, he waved his wand to bring a small bowl of lemon wedges to him and Summoned a jar of honey. His eyes kept wandering up toward Hermione as he prepared her "tonic."

Snape sat silently, savouring his tea, for a while. Finally, Dumbledore interrupted his reverie. "I say, Severus, you seem to be finished with your lunch. Would you be good enough to ask Miss Granger to meet me in my office after lunch?"

Snape turned to Dumbledore, acquiescing politely. As he pushed back from the table to stand, Dumbledore continued, "Actually, now that I think about it, why don't I go on now and you can just bring her up when she's done. I could use your help in demonstrating the Pensieve."

Snape blinked at him, curious about his plans, but simply murmured, "As you say, Headmaster." Dumbledore rose and Snape hastily followed suit. Dumbledore patted him on the shoulder, beaming, and shuffled out of the staff entrance. Snape strode crisply down the dais toward the Gryffindor table.

Hermione knew when he had stood, and she fought to keep from staring at him. But when she realized he was coming down the aisle near them, her stomach fluttered with anticipation. Trying not to blush, she glanced up, owl-eyed, as Snape towered over her. Harry and Ron cast suspicious glares at him and Ginny looked up, surprised.

Snape sneered at the boys before gazing coldly down at Hermione. Curtly, he said, "Miss Granger, the headmaster would like you to join him in his office when you are done eating. I shall escort you there." He smirked at the starts of dismay from the group. "I will await your presence by the notice board. Do not dawdle." He glared severely at her and swept a scathing glance over the others as he spun on his heel to continue down the aisle.

Hermione shot to her feet. "Professor!" Snape turned to look at her. Struggling to step over the bench without kicking Ginny, Hermione dabbed her lips with a napkin and cleared her throat. "I'm finished now, sir. There's no need for you to wait."

Snape nodded sharply and barked, "Very well then. Come along." He stalked down the aisle toward the door. Hermione cast a baffled yet reassuring glance at the puzzled and worried faces of her friends before hurrying after her Potions Master.

In the empty corridor, she jogged to keep up with his fast pace, and tried to read his expression. It was blank and closed, and she felt a thrill of anxiety. Trying to get something out of him, she asked, "Is anything wrong, sir?"

Snape cut a glance at her and drawled, "Guilty conscience, Miss Granger?"

Hermione scowled and huffed at him. "Of course not! I've done nothing to feel guilty about." Then, she paused, as she felt as if she had been doused with ice water again. Faltering in her stride, she cast a worried look up at the inscrutable man and said breathlessly, "He hasn't found out about us, has he, Severus?"

Snape whirled on her so fast that she barely had time to gasp in shock before he had her backed against the stone wall, his furious face inches from hers. In a savage hiss,

he snapped, "Never, *never* say my name like that where you might be heard! Have you taken leave of your senses? If, gods forbid, Dumbledore ever caught on to what's between us, rest assured I would *tell* you before I just escorted you to your expulsion and my termination! In the meantime, we are safe. But we may not be much longer if you take such risks as you just did! Do I make myself clear?"

Hermione was gaping, wide-eyed. She was completely taken aback by his furious reaction and nodded dumbly, staring at him. She noticed that he was trembling with pent-up anger, and she realized that she was rather shaky at the moment herself. Stammering, she whispered, "Y-Yes sir. I-I'm sorry. I won't be so foolish again."

Snape saw the fear in her eyes and scolded himself for being so harsh. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, trying to calm himself. *Relax. No harm done. There's no need to terrify her!* When he opened his eyes again, they held a mute apology for his overreaction and an appeal for forgiveness. He slowly backed away from her, darting glances down the corridor warily.

Hermione swallowed nervously. She could see his body sag from its tense stance and sensed the shame in his demeanour. In a small voice, she mumbled, "The corridor was empty. I wouldn't do that when people are around." She gazed up at him, wounded.

Snape favoured her with a look that clearly said, "Oh, really?" and gestured for her to follow him again. As they made their way further down the corridor, he gestured silently toward a painting on the wall and glared pointedly at her. Hermione flicked him a confused glance and he stopped, crossing his arms over his chest. He jerked his head toward the chatting people in the painting and narrowed his eyes at her. Hermione blinked questioningly up at him and he muttered, "The walls have eyes and ears." Hermione's eyes widened in comprehension and she flushed in chagrin. Satisfied that she had finally caught on, Snape dropped his hands to his sides and began their trek to Dumbledore's office again. Hermione followed, chastened.

Their journey was a quiet one, as neither spoke the rest of the way. When they reached the gargoyle, Snape muttered the password. He courteously gestured for Hermione to precede him up the stairs and was surprised by a jolt in his groin as his body remembered the last time he had followed her up to Dumbledore's office. Schooling his expression into one of indifference, they emerged into Dumbledore's office, the early afternoon sun beaming through the tower windows. Dumbledore was beaming as much as the sunlight as he turned to welcome them. Hermione offered him a tentative smile, since she was still wary of why she had been summoned.

Dumbledore waved her to a seat in front of the fire and offered her a lemon drop. Snape took up residence in his wingback. Dumbledore settled into a chair across from Hermione and steepled his fingers thoughtfully.

Hermione looked attentively at Dumbledore and asked, "You wished to see me, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore nodded vigorously. "Yes, my dear. I need your help."

"Certainly, sir. Anything."

"Professor Snape informed us earlier that you have known the play for years now. Is this true?"

Hermione glanced quickly at Snape, seeing him ensconced in the shadows of his chair, and nodded. "Yes, sir. I saw it years ago and bought the soundtrack. That's why I know my part. I learnt everything on the recording because I listened to it so much." She smiled deprecatingly. She was distracted by a huff from the wingback chair. It clearly said, "I told you so."

Dumbledore clapped his hands together. "Excellent! Miss Granger, you are just the person to help me. You see, I need to begin staging the play, and I realized that I haven't the slightest idea what the stage should look like or what the sets should be. You do, since you've seen it! So, what I would like to do is remove your memories of the play into my Pensieve, so I may see them and develop our theatre space. It's a fairly simple procedure. Professor Snape can attest to that fact, as the Pensieve was invaluable to us in his role as a spy for the Order. If you'd like, he can demonstrate the use of the Pensieve and we can begin collecting your memories." Dumbledore gazed at her expectantly.

Hermione was crestfallen. She didn't want to let Dumbledore down, but she knew that her memories were fuzzy and incomplete. Her dismay clearly written on her face, she glanced imploringly at Snape before turning back to Dumbledore with a grimace. "Sir, while that is a wonderful idea, I'm afraid I won't be much help to you after all. You see, it was so many years ago, and I was so young, and I don't remember much clearly at all. I'm sorry, sir. If I had known I would need those memories like this, I would have paid much closer attention and kept them fresh in my mind. As it is, I know they're tainted and practically useless." She trailed off as Dumbledore's twinkle faded and his smile drooped to a frown.

Hermione felt like it was her fault that Dumbledore looked so disconsolate. In an attempt to offer a solution, she blurted, "Um, sir? The play is still showing in London. You can always just go see it yourself and then you'd know what you need."

Dumbledore glanced up at her rather blankly. Then, the twinkle resurfaced and he smiled widely. "Miss Granger, how very fortunate I am to have you around! That's just it!"

Hermione blinked at him, confused. "So, you're going to go see the play?"

Dumbledore clapped his hands again and beamed at her and Snape. "No indeed. I'm afraid I sha'n't have the time for that. No. You will go see it again; and Professor Snape will join you." He gazed at them with an expression of supreme satisfaction.

Snape started at his words and stared at the old man, stunned. Hermione's eyes widened and she looked between the two men, gaping.

After a beat of shocked silence, Snape rasped, "I beg your pardon, Albus?" His voice held a note of warning.

Dumbledore waved his hand airily at Snape and chuckled. "Now, Severus, you have been acquiring information for me for years. You're the one who is most skilled at observation. It would be beneficial for all of us if you saw the performance. But, Miss Granger is the natural choice to handle getting tickets to see a Muggle play." He turned a thoughtful gaze on Hermione. "Speaking of, how would you go about it, and can you get there quite soon? I'd like to have the next rehearsal in a week and begin the staging, but I'm willing to wait until you have been able to go."

Hermione bit back the wild desire to laugh. Faintly, she said, "Well, I can owl my folks and have them get online to check availability. If I remember correctly, it shows every evening. They can tell me the exact times."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "Excellent! By all means, do so. As soon as you hear back from them, let me know, and we will arrange everything. I do hope the tickets aren't too pricey... but I'm sure Hogwarts can manage to foot the bill." He winked at Hermione and chuckled at the derisive snort from the wingback chair.

Dumbledore stood, and Hermione shot to her feet. Snape rose slowly behind her. Hermione said briskly, "I'll go straight to the owlery now. And I'll be sure to have the owl wait for their response. It won't take much time to find the information on the internet anyway. Hopefully, we'll have an answer by dinner."

Dumbledore patted her shoulder approvingly as she passed him. "Thank you, Miss Granger. Do let me know as soon as you hear back."

Hermione nodded and exited the office, Snape slinking quietly behind her. They made their way out to the corridor again before speaking. When the gargoyle was shut again, Snape and Hermione turned baffled gazes on each other.

Snape blinked in consternation. Hermione felt her lips trembling as she choked back an unholy shriek of laughter at Snape's expression.

In a low, deliberate voice, Snape murmured, "He's going to send us to London... together... to see the play."

Hermione grinned. Silently, they locked gazes and, as one, they strode down the corridor to a space devoid of any paintings. They paused. Hermione smiled up at him and

drawled, "Really, Professor, it's quite an ingenious solution. And it's really not *that* torturous, is it? Being forced to see the play with me?" She tilted her head and coyly gazed up at him through her lashes.

Snape raised an eyebrow at her and smirked sardonically. "Miss Granger, you do realize how the Pensieve works, do you not?" He straightened to his full height and crossed his arms, looking down his nose at her.

Hermione shrugged and nodded. "Yes..."

"Then surely you are aware of the fact that *whatever* we see will be available for Dumbledore to view..." He trailed off, giving her a significant look. As comprehension dawned once again on Hermione's face, he rolled his eyes and snorted at her expression of dismay. "Exactly. Now, it wouldn't do to arouse suspicion by seeing *each other* too often in the Pensieve, would it?"

Hermione stared up at him, chagrined. "So, we're going to have to sit through the entire thing without *looking* at each other?" Her disillusionment was almost comical.

Snape smirked again. "Come along. You should be getting to the owlery." He lightly spun on his heel and strode off, Hermione hurrying to catch up with him. He glanced at the disgruntled witch beside him, noting her scowl.

She cut a sharp look at him and hissed, "You needn't look so pleased with yourself either! You do so love to have the upper hand, don't you?"

Snape raised his eyebrows at her and purred warningly, "Manners, Granger."

Hermione huffed and looked away again, her chin tilted up defiantly. As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Snape turned to continue down to the dungeons and she stepped forward on her way toward the Entrance Hall. Casting a quick glance around, she saw no one and paused. Spinning around to see the descending back of her Potions Master, she called out, "Good afternoon, Professor." Snape stopped and looked back at her.

Hermione let her irritation dissolve and flashed him a warm smile. Snape pinned her with an intense stare for a moment before allowing himself to crack a faint smile in return. Hermione tilted her head at him and let her affection blaze out, bathing him in its warmth. She saw the answering incredulity and awe gleaming in his eyes.

Then, he let his lids drop, and favoured her with a smouldering gaze that set her heart racing. He watched her eyes widen and her breath hitch and he quirked one corner of his mouth up before slowly turning away from her and continuing his descent. Hermione felt the tingle wash over her at his look. Sighing at the sensations he evoked, she dazedly turned and set off to owl her parents.

Hermione was in the common room reading when she heard the scratching at the window. The owl she had sent was back. Once again grateful that Ginny, Ron, and Harry were practicing Quidditch and weren't around to hound her about her meeting with Dumbledore, she opened the window, letting the bird settle on the table in front of her. She offered it a biscuit from the tray near her and it flew off with its beak full. She unrolled the parchment with a little trepidation. Quickly reading it, she clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her gasp.

"Dear Hermione,

We were delighted as usual to receive an owl from you. Mum says she's sure you're excited about being able to see the play again as well as being in it, of course. She remembers how you listened to the soundtrack virtually non-stop!

I went online, as you requested, and the shows start at 7:30 p.m. But, instead of just booking whatever we could get, I remembered something grand! Do you remember Mr. Campbell, the lovely fellow who set our practice up as exclusive with his bank? Well, we've remained friendly over the years, going golfing and such, and the last time we had him and his wife over for dinner, he mentioned that his nephew was a stagehand at the theatre and was one of the assistant stage managers for the Phantom of the Opera!

So, I called him up and told him about you being in your school production of it and how you needed to see it again, and he called his nephew. Well, long story short, we have two tickets for you in the third row centre for Friday night!

And, his nephew was kind enough to suggest that if you could make it, he could give you a guided tour of the theatre and everything backstage at 8:00 Saturday morning! Isn't that wonderful? Your mum says we should send him a thank you note and remember him for our Christmas card list.

Anyway, your mum and I thought it might be nice if you were able to visit for a bit before you went, and we'd like to offer you dinner here before you go to the show. And, since the tour is available the next morning, wouldn't it be easier if you simply stayed overnight? We do have the guest room for your Professor. It would save you travel time, I'd say.

Talk to your headmaster and let us know what the plan is. It's not every day that you get an opportunity like this, you know. Hope to hear from you soon! We'll keep our eyes open for any owls.

Love, Dad

p.s. By the way, since you told us you wouldn't be able to come home again for Christmas because of the play, we're really hoping you'll be able to come visit, even if just for the evening. We miss you!

Love, Dad, and Mum of course!"

Hermione gaped at the letter. Shaking her head, she resolutely stood and exited through the portrait hole, heading for Dumbledore's office.

Snape was reading the latest issue of *Ars Arcanum* when his fireplace glowed green and Dumbledore's head popped into view. Glancing up at him, Snape drawled, "What can I do for you, Albus?"

Dumbledore twinkled at him and said, "Could you join me in my office again? We've heard back from Miss Granger's parents. Just Floo in."

Snape marked his place in the journal and sat forward. "Certainly. I'll be there shortly." Dumbledore disappeared from the fireplace and Snape stood before it. Grabbing a pinch of Floo powder from the jar on the mantle, he tossed it into the fire and stated, "Dumbledore's office" before stepping into the emerald flames.

He scowled when he stepped out, seeing Hermione sitting there. He brushed the dust off his robes and peered at her through his hair. Her expression was one of pent-up tension, and she was worrying her hands in her lap, eyes wide and alert. She looked as if she were anticipating something. Snape frowned and looked at Dumbledore. He, of course, was beaming and twinkling.

"Do sit, Severus." Snape perched stiffly on the edge of the chair across from Hermione. "Miss Granger's parents went above and beyond the call of duty." He paused to smile heartily at Hermione who flashed a tight smile back before reverting to her owl-eyed moue of expectation. Snape flicked a glance at her and narrowed his eyes.

Suspicion crept through him.

He gazed back at Dumbledore, who was enjoying himself immensely. "How?" he said shortly, knowing he had to play along.

Dumbledore leant forward as if he was about to share something momentous. "They apparently know someone who is involved with the play in London, and they managed to get you two tickets for the Friday night performance. And..." he continued triumphantly, smacking his hand on the desk, "they have even arranged for a guided tour of the facility Saturday morning!" He sat back, grinning.

Snape looked between the two, cautiously responding, "How generous of them. So, it's settled?"

Dumbledore nodded vigorously. "Indeed. You will leave Hogwarts to Apparate to the Grangers' at 5:30 for dinner. Then you will proceed to the play at 7:30. After the play, you will retire to the Grangers' for the night, to be ready for the guided tour Saturday morning at 8:00. After that, you will Apparate back here and meet me to put your memories into the Pensieve while they're still fresh. I'll have the rehearsal that evening since we'll have the information we need by then."

Snape's eyes widened in disbelief as Dumbledore outlined the schedule. His jaw clenched in shock and he felt the colour drain from his face. Stunned, he dragged his gaze toward Hermione and saw her watching him warily. Suddenly, he understood her demeanour. *Dinner?... With the Grangers?... Retiring for the night?... There?*

Glaring at Dumbledore, incredulous, Snape ventured, "Is all that really necessary, Albus? Can't we Apparate from here after dinner and come back that night? We can go back the next morning..."

Dumbledore shot him an offended look and shook his head. "Really, Severus. The Grangers have managed quite a treat for us. I hardly think it courteous to refuse their simple request to have their daughter for dinner and their offer to lodge you for the night. They're offering you hospitality and convenience. It would be rather rude to throw it back in their faces." Snape shot Hermione a look and saw her gazing about her, seemingly oblivious to the conversation.

Snape's thoughts raced. He realized that Dumbledore's mind was made up and, as usual, there would be no changing it. Railing at the uncomfortable position it put him in, he knew he had to capitulate. And there was no need to argue about it even more in front of Hermione. She didn't need to see him held so securely under Dumbledore's thumb. He took a deep breath and swallowed, putting up a façade of polite acquiescence. "As you say, Headmaster. I didn't think of it that way. Indeed, Miss Granger's parents have far exceeded our initial request for help, and it is only fitting that we graciously accept their plan." He turned to Hermione, who was staring blankly at him. "Miss Granger, I will inform you when and where to meet me Friday to depart." She nodded hastily. He looked at Dumbledore again and stood smoothly. "Now that that's settled, if you have no more need of me, I shall return to my quarters."

Dumbledore waved his hand at Snape and murmured, "Of course. Thank you, Severus."

Snape inclined his head in a courteous bow to them both, saying, "Miss Granger. Headmaster," before Flooing back to his rooms.

Dumbledore beamed again at Hermione. "Send your parents an owl accepting their generous offer. This is most helpful..."

Hermione stood. "Certainly, sir. I'll do that right away." She nodded at him as she passed to the door. "Good afternoon, Professor." She exited and rushed down the stairs, heart pounding. As she hurried to her room, one thought kept spinning in her head.

Merciful heavens, Snape will be sleeping at my house!

Snape sat heavily in his chair before the fire, his copy of *Ars Arcanum* forgotten. He stared blankly at the fire, his head leaning against one hand. His chest felt tight and his stomach roiled. Only one thing held his attention above the roaring in his ears.

Bloody hell! I'm going to meet her parents!

19- Anticipation

Chapter 20 of 84

Hermione tells her friends about the planned trip to her parents' Friday night. Needless to say, none of them are too keen on the idea. Snape keeps her after class to go over the details and Hermione leaves him with a threat- or is it a promise? Later that night the cast practices their spells and Snape puts on quite a show with McGonagall. Who knew he was so good with his wand?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: This chapter is supposed to have a lot of things set up in it that we'll see come to fruition later, so bear with me if it seems not as exciting as other chapters. The next chapter or two will make up for the lack of action, I promise!

Chapter 19 - Anticipation

Hermione was on her way back into the castle from the owlery when she heard shouts behind her. She turned to see Ginny, Ron, and Harry jogging after her, windblown and sweaty from their practice. She paused long enough for them to catch up and they walked into the Entrance Hall together.

"How was practice?" she asked them politely.

The other three exchanged pleased glances before turning back to Hermione. Ginny spoke up. "It went really well! We've managed to find a rhythm within the team since we've been together for a while now." Then her face screwed up into a moue of dissatisfaction. "That's why next year is going to be horrible! After you all leave, we'll have to find a new Keeper and Seeker, and nobody can be as good as Harry."

Ron buffeted Ginny, demanding, "Hey! What am I? Chopped shrivelfig?" Harry suppressed a smug grin and looked away modestly.

Ginny glared at Ron as she punched him back. "Well! Honestly, Ron, you know you weren't very good when you started. You've got a lot better, but... Harry's just a natural, you know?"

Ron shot a scowl at Harry, who attempted a look of wide-eyed innocence as he shrugged elaborately. Hermione laughed aloud at their by-play. Ron muttered, "Some best friend... my own *sister* likes him better... and now my other best friend is *laughing* at me..."

Hermione flung an arm around Ron's hunched shoulders and gave him a sympathetic look. "Aw, Ron, I wasn't laughing *at* you, just in your general direction." Ron wrinkled his nose and her and stuck his tongue out. Everyone laughed. As they passed the entrance to the Great Hall, Ron blinked, looking as if he had been struck by a thought. He slowed, looking from the Hall to Hermione and back. The others trailed off in their laughter and came to a halt with him.

Ron squinted at Hermione and asked, "Say, what did Dumbledore want you to go to his office for?" Hermione shrank in on herself, her face paling a bit, and the others all looked at her with sudden concern.

"Yeah, that's right! What happened, 'Mione? Did you get in trouble for something?" Ginny prodded.

Harry even piped up. "Why did Snape have to escort you? Was he being horrible to you again?"

Hermione looked nervously around the corridor and gestured for them to follow her up to the Tower. "No, I wasn't in trouble, and no, Snape wasn't horrible to me. I'll tell you all about it, but let's get upstairs." She turned and hastened down the corridor and up the stairs to the common room. The others eagerly followed her. They clambered through the portrait hole and made themselves comfortable in their favourite seats, Ginny, Harry, and Ron gazing expectantly at Hermione.

Hermione took a deep breath and began. "Dumbledore wanted to ask me about the play, since he found out I had seen it before. Seems he has no idea how to stage it and wanted information. Well, I told him he could go see it, since it's playing in London, but he said he wouldn't have time. So, he's sending me to see it again, and he'll take my memories out into the Pensieve to look at everything here. I was coming from the owlery just now, having sent the note back to my folks about going to see it Friday night." She paused, noting the looks of surprise and interest on the faces around her.

Ginny gazed at her thoughtfully and said, "How did he find out you had seen it?"

Hermione cleared her throat and tried to sound nonchalant as she replied, "Apparently, Professor Snape told him."

"*What?* How did he know?" Harry sputtered.

Hermione swallowed nervously and said, "I mentioned it in our first meeting, after he asked me how I knew my part already. Seems he was a bit put out that I knew more than he did." She forced herself to smirk a bit, knowing the others would expect it.

Ron snorted and sat back, grinning at the others. "I'll bet! Wish I could have seen that..."

"So, how are you getting to London Friday night?" Ginny asked.

Hermione tucked a wayward curl behind her ear as she glanced about. "Uh, well... I'm actually going to visit my folks and stay for dinner before going to the play. Then, they've arranged for us to have a guided tour of the theatre the next morning."

Ginny pounced on her words. "Us? Who else is going? You said Dumbledore's too busy."

Hermione glanced at them and saw their perplexed expressions. But Ginny's expression was sharp and shrewdly calculating.

Hermione's grimace was genuine as she answered, knowing what her friends' reactions would be. "H-He's sending Professor Snape as well, since he's had more experience with gathering information to be used with a Pensieve."

It was like a small bomb had gone off within the group, as everyone reacted to her news. Ron rocked back in his seat, an oath hurtling from his lips as his face contorted in disgust. Harry shot up straight and his eyes kindled like green fire as he scowled fiercely, his hands clenching in his lap. Even Ginny gasped and cried, "Snape?" Her eyebrows shot to her hairline and she regarded Hermione, stunned.

Ron stammered, "Y-You have to go see the play with Snape? Bloody hell! A whole evening with the great git! That's ruddy awful..."

Ginny narrowed her eyes again and asked, "Wait. You said you're going to have dinner with your folks before the play. So, is Snape going to be there for that too?"

Hermione nodded. Ginny shook her head slightly and blinked a few times. Harry spat, "I feel sorry for you and your parents, 'Mione. Who'd want to have to see that greasy git at dinner? It'd be enough to make me lose my appetite." He shuddered.

Hermione bit back an angry retort. *Mustn't make anyone suspicious. Act like you agree with them.* She contented herself with a noncommittal shrug, looking away from Harry's glower.

Ginny pressed on. "And you're going to get a tour of the theatre too? When is that?"

"Saturday morning. Early. Like, at 8:00."

Ginny quirked one corner of her mouth up in a rueful smirk. "Well then, I guess I'll have to wait until after you get back again Saturday to ask you all about the show. I doubt you'd want me pestering you when you get back late Friday night since you'll have to get up so early the next morning."

Hermione swallowed and took a shaky breath. "Well... actually... I wouldn't be back that night anyway. My parents have offered to let us stay the night, and Dumbledore accepted."

Silence reigned after her revelation. The others were too dumbfounded to even snipe in response. They stared at her, completely gobsmacked. Ginny recovered first. In a voice barely above a whisper, she said slowly, "You mean... Snape... is going to... stay the night... at your house? With you there?" Her eyes were wide.

Ron made a retching noise in his throat and moaned, "Ginny, don't say it! It's too horrid!" He gave Hermione a pitying look, turning rather green.

Harry looked as if he had been petrified. He sat, staring stonily at Hermione, his expression a mixture of envy, hatred, and disgust.

Hermione waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, stop it. It's not like I'll be sleeping with him..." Her voice faltered as she felt a pang of desire at her own words. Hastily, she continued. "There's a guest room, you know."

Ginny favoured Hermione with a sceptical look and said, "You know, I was jealous that you were going to see the play, but now, I most certainly *am*!" Shivering lightly, she heaved a deep sigh and turned to the boys. "Anyway, I don't know about you two, but I need a shower before dinner." She stood and stretched. "See you lot back here in 20 minutes?" The boys blinked distractedly and nodded. Hermione stood and worried her hands, looking sheepishly at them.

"Yeah, Ginny. I'll meet you to go down to dinner. See you later." Hermione hurried to leave the common room, retreating to her room. She heard the boys whispering behind her as she left, no doubt about her having Snape stay at her house after seeing the play.

It's not like I'll be sleeping with him...

Hermione's face flushed and a tingle washed over her as she remembered her words. She hurled herself into her room and slammed the door behind her, leaning against

it, panting. Tilting her head back against the wood, she closed her eyes. *Oh gods! Now that I've thought of it, I'll never get it out of my head!* She pushed away from the door and flopped on her bed. The heat that had started in her belly was spreading through her, and she could feel her juices moistening her knickers. She squeezed her legs together in a vain attempt to ease the throbbing.

Get a hold of yourself! This is madness. You can't go to dinner like this. He'll be able to tell! Calm down. Be rational. She pressed her palms against her eyes in frustration. *Oh Merlin, this is going to be a long week...*

Twenty minutes later, the four friends were down in the Great Hall for dinner, still rather subdued after Hermione's news. Hermione schooled her expression into one of indifference, hoping the others would follow suit. All the same, she was both disappointed and utterly relieved to enter the Hall and see that Snape was not at the High Table.

At least he's not here to see the state I'm in!

She saw the others' furtive glances at the High Table, but ignored them. Finally, Ginny started talking about the earlier practice, and the boys relaxed. Hermione only half-listened to their conversation, her mind spinning with the excitement and consternation of her situation.

I hope it won't be too awkward at dinner with my parents. Snape's not quite the easy conversationalist... And I hope my folks don't do anything to embarrass me either! Blast and damn! Dumbledore sure does have a knack for making people do things they wouldn't normally do, doesn't he? She cast a look up at the headmaster at the High Table, noting that Snape still hadn't arrived. *I wonder if he's even going to come to dinner tonight... He certainly didn't seem happy about the whole idea. Oh gods, I hope he doesn't hate me for all this!* Hermione writhed in spirit as she sat waiting for the others to finish eating. Ron noticed her sitting there, and looked at her, concerned.

"You all right, 'Mione?" The others turned to look at her. "You're not eating."

Hermione shook her head and huffed in dismissal. "Not everyone has a cast iron stomach like you, Ron. I'm fine. I'm just not very hungry." She really wasn't, since her stomach had knotted up in anxiety over Snape's reaction. She looked up and saw Harry scowling. She forced a watery smile and said, "Really, I'm just not that hungry. I'm fine. I think I'll go have a bath and read. I'll see you lot later."

Harry looked down, scowling deeply, and glanced back up at her, pain in his green eyes. "You'll holler if you need anything, right? I... uh, that is, we don't want you to feel bad. If there's anything I...uh, we can do to help, just say so." He blushed furiously as he stammered.

Hermione nodded and turned to go. Ginny and Ron exchanged a knowing glance over Harry's telling display. Harry avoided their eyes and focused on his plate as Hermione left the Great Hall.

Snape decided that he didn't feel up to dinner in the Great Hall that night, not after Dumbledore's surprises that day. Besides, it probably wouldn't be a good idea to go amongst students smelling of Firewhisky.

He had been sitting in front of his fireplace for hours, mulling his prospects over several liberal shots of Old Ogden's. He had come to the startling conclusion that since Voldemort's demise, there was no one he'd be more loath to meet than Hermione's parents. Especially as he and Hermione were in the situation of still having to hide their feelings for each other.

I've never... what would this be if we were closer in age? Gone courting? He snorted violently at the old-fashioned notion. *Please, that's not what they call it nowadays... Not that I have any idea what they do call it, considering my lack of prospects over the past twenty-odd years.* His fingers drummed against the arm of the chair. *Perhaps you should view this as an opportunity to see if there could even be a future for you, based on what you can glean from her family. Then again, maybe once she's faced with the idea of having to come clean to her parents about you, she'll realize that it's a ridiculous idea and you'll get your answer even sooner.* Snape scowled into the flames, trying to ignore the panic that fluttered in his chest at that idea.

Oh bollocks! Just put it all out of your head! There's nothing you can do about it, and brooding won't make anything better. You'll follow your instructions and behave as politely as possible under the circumstances. You're not there to win a popularity contest! You have an assignment. Just like you've had for the past twenty years... Only this time you won't have to face Crucios or possible death!

A sudden image of a faceless Mr. Granger hurling himself bodily at Snape after seeing him snogging his little girl flashed across Snape's mind. He choked on his Firewhisky and spluttered. He ground his palms against his eyes in an attempt to eradicate the image, to no avail. Groaning, he sank back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Hang on a bit. Scratch that... Right. Crucios: no. Possible death: yes.

Sunday, the cast saw the next rehearsals posted on the notice board.

"Wednesday November 19, 7:00 p.m. in the Great Hall: spell practice

All actors required to attend.

New spells will be issued for glamours for Draco, Pansy, and Professor Snape

All ballet dancers will be issued enchantments for ballet slippers.

Saturday November 22, 7:00 p.m. in the Great Hall: block from beginning Auction through Hannibal

Actors required to attend: Everyone except Professor Snape

Bring your scripts and a pencil to copy your blocking.

- A. Dumbledore, Director"

Hermione spent time with Harry and Ron, working on their homework the way they usually had done before all of the awkwardness. At one point, when Harry had left the common room for a bathroom run, Hermione squeezed Ron's hand and whispered, "Thank you."

Ron turned a confused look on her and asked, "For what?"

Hermione smiled and murmured, "For everything you've done to help smooth things over with me and Harry. You and Ginny both. I just want you to know that I'm grateful."

Ron smiled warmly at her and patted her hand. "No worries. I'm just glad things are getting back to normal. I *am* sorry it didn't work out though. I thought you two were pretty great together." He paused, seeing her expression cloud and her body stiffen, and pressed her hand harder, effectively stopping her from launching into the tirade that was clearly on its way. "I know! I know. *Really*. You don't have to go through it all again for me. I understand."

Hermione shut her mouth with a snap and relaxed. Sheepishly smiling again at him, she nodded and looked down. "I really appreciate your support, Ron. It means a lot."

Ron twinkled at her reassuringly and said, "Mione, you will always have my support. Whatever you want, I'm there to back you. What else are friends for?"

Hermione squinted at him pensively. In a low voice, she said slowly, "I'm really glad to hear you say that. Just be ready for me to hold you to it..." She looked away, frowning thoughtfully.

Ron's brow furrowed. Perplexed, he asked, "Uh, 'Mione, is there something going on?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I just know that when I do fall for someone, Harry's not going to be very pleased, and it's comforting to know that you'll be happy for me." She pinned him with an intense stare. "You will, right? That's what you said. It won't matter who it is; you'll support me?"

Ron, taken aback by her intensity, blinked rapidly and stammered, "Y-yeah, of course. If you're happy, I'm happy. Simple. End of story. Are you okay?"

Hermione relaxed again and flashed him a smile. "Yes. I am. Just... don't talk about this around Harry, okay? I don't think he's ready to think about it yet."

Ron nodded vigorously, eyes wide. He glanced up at Harry, who was returning, and then quickly looked down at his book. Harry joined them again and they continued working. Hermione was relieved. Like Ron had said, things seemed to be returning to normal, and Hermione hoped that her friendship with Harry would eventually get back to its solid roots.

Wednesday morning, Hermione made her way to the Potions classroom with a nervous flutter in her stomach. It would be the first time since the meeting in Dumbledore's office that she would be close to Snape. They had managed to avoid each other in the corridors and the Great Hall. Several times, Snape hadn't even come to the meals in the Hall. Hermione kept a tight hold on her feelings at all times. Well, except for when she was alone in her room at night.

Ever since her comment, "It's not like I'll be sleeping with him," she had been plagued by highly erotic thoughts and dreams involving the Potions Master. She had even resorted to taking matters into her own hands, so to speak, to relieve some of the tension from being in an almost constant state of pent-up arousal.

And now she was going to have to make it through an entire lesson with the object of her desires in front of her. So close and yet so far. She arranged her materials on her table and sat rigidly on her stool, waiting for Snape to enter the classroom.

Snape burst into the room, stalking quickly to the front. He spun on his heel and swept the room with a baleful glare.

Hermione gasped as he entered and felt a liquid warmth in her knickers. Closing her eyes, trying to maintain a façade of composure, she took a deep breath and set her jaw before looking up at the tall man gazing down on them. She ignored the buzzing in her body, the reaction that was always attuned to Snape's presence.

Snape whipped around and wrote instructions on the board, taking the time to do so by hand so he could fight his own reaction to Hermione in the front row. His chest tightened so much that he almost felt short of breath, and his stomach seemed to turn into a block of ice. He realized afresh how much he was falling for her, and he was terrified.

The more he cared, the more she would be able to hurt him.

Finally sure that his face bore no tell-tale sign of his inner turmoil, he turned and raked the class with a supercilious sneer. "Instructions are on the board. Begin." With that, he sat at his desk and immediately dragged a parchment from the stack to grade. Hearing nothing but scratching quills, he chanced a peek through his hair at Hermione. Her face was flushed, but she was focused on her task.

Apparently both of them were getting better at controlling their emotions, as the lesson went smoothly, with no occasion for them to give themselves away. As the period neared the end, Snape looked up and announced, "Clear your stations. Turn in your samples. For homework, read chapters 26 and 27 and compare and contrast the potion types therein. At least two feet of parchment!" He paused as the students began cleaning up, eyeing Hermione. "Miss Granger, please see me after class."

Hermione glanced up, startled. Darting her eyes around the room, she swallowed apprehensively and answered, "Yes, sir."

"Class is dismissed." The students began pouring out of the classroom, but Hermione stayed put. Snape stepped around his desk and leant against it again, arms crossed as he glared at everyone until they were gone. Waving his wand, he closed the door and locked it, casting a Silencing Charm for good measure. Finally alone, he looked at Hermione and saw the hunger in her eyes as she gazed at him. Clearing his suddenly tight throat, he said in a low voice, "I have the details for you regarding our departure Friday." He felt his eyes flicker away from hers uneasily and cursed himself for being so foolish.

Hermione felt her pulse throb in response and flushed. Gamely trying to act nonchalant, she inquired, "Oh? What are they?"

Snape cleared his throat again and said, "Dumbledore has decided that as I am the more experienced wizard, I will control the Apparition. We are to wear Muggle clothing and walk out to the Apparition point outside the front gate. I am to get the coordinates for our destination from your mind. I am authorized to use Legilimency for that." He cut a sheepish glance at her before looking away again. "He has stated that for security, I am to cast a concealment charm before we Apparate so that we will not be seen as we arrive at your parents' house. When we get there, we are to adjourn to a secluded area to become visible again before we approach the door. We are to be there by 5:30 for dinner. After dinner, we will make our way to the theatre for the show, and return. The next morning, we will go back to the theatre for the tour, and Apparate back here when it's done. When we return to Hogwarts, we are to meet Dumbledore in his office to deposit our memories into his Pensieve. Then, that evening, we can retrieve them at rehearsal after he has retained whatever information he needs." Schooling his expression into one of indifference, he looked at Hermione and added, "Do you have any questions?"

Hermione blinked and said, "How are we to get to the theatre? Are we Apparating there too?"

"He didn't specify. I can't Apparate somewhere I haven't seen. Do you remember the theatre enough to give me coordinates?"

Hermione scowled thoughtfully. "No. We could always ask my parents to drive us, or get a cab, but it could get expensive."

Snape twitched. Dryly, he drawled, "I'd rather not ride in a Muggle vehicle. Where is the theatre? Perhaps there is a wizard location near it we can get to."

Hermione responded absently, "It's at Haymarket, in London." Suddenly, she pinned him with an intense stare. "You said you can't Apparate to a place you've never seen, right?" Snape nodded, clearly aggrieved, but Hermione barrelled on. "And you can get coordinates from my mind. So, if you saw a picture, would that be enough?" She was obviously excited.

Snape thought for a moment. Slowly, he said, "I suppose that should work. It's much the same as me taking the picture you have of your parents' home from your mind. Once I have seen the point to which I wish to Apparate, I can do so." He looked up at her from under beetled brows. "Why? Do you have a picture?"

She flashed him a dazzling smile and said, "No. But I'm pretty sure we can have one when we get there. I'll just have to owl my folks again."

Snape's breath caught at the sparkle in her eyes and her smile. He realized he was staring at her and wrenched his gaze away.

Hermione noticed that he wasn't looking at her very much and felt her gut twist in anxiety. Sobering quickly, she leant toward Snape and said softly, "Are you okay?"

He shot a glance at her, his eyebrows raised, and snapped, "Of course. Whatever do you mean?"

Hermione stepped in front of him and hesitantly laid her hand against his forearm where it was still in front of his chest. As soon as she touched him, a jolt shot through them both. Snape inhaled sharply and Hermione gazed up at him, locking eyes with him.

In a low voice, she murmured, "Are you angry with me for this whole situation? I know you don't want to do any of this."

Snape grimaced and muttered, "You are correct in thinking that I am not entirely comfortable with this arrangement, but I am not misguided enough to hold it against you." He looked down at her, his miserable dismay clear in his black eyes.

Hermione lifted her hand from his forearm and cupped his cheek. Snape stiffened, but found himself leaning into her touch involuntarily. Hermione licked her lips at her sudden increase in desire. Snape saw it and felt a tingle in his centre. Hermione stepped closer to him and started to slide her hand up into his hair, her eyes half-closed. Snape realized she was about to close the gap to kiss him again, and he held his hand up between them, stopping her. Frustration flashed in her eyes and she voiced a petulant whine.

Holding her with his stern gaze, Snape lifted his hand and covered hers against his face. He wrapped his long, slender fingers around her hand and pulled it gently away from him, turning his head to press a soft, warm kiss to her palm. He felt her fingers trembling in his and his gaze softened. He ignored the fierce pounding in his veins and purred, "All in due time, my dear... All in due time." Firmly putting her away from him, he gazed down at her and added, "Meet me in the Entrance Hall at 5:00 Friday with everything you may need to take with you. No doubt I'll see you tonight at the meeting. Now, hurry along to class."

He waved his wand at the door, removing the charm and unlocking the door. Hermione fixed him with an incredulous look of frustration, and he felt his lips twitch, holding back a laugh. Huffing, glaring at him pointedly, Hermione gathered her things to leave. Before she turned to go, she narrowed her eyes and pinned him with a meaningful glare, hissing, "This isn't over, Severus..."

Snape's eyebrows shot up in response and Hermione smirked triumphantly as she spun on her heel and flounced out of the classroom, leaving a stunned Potions Master in her wake.

That evening, the cast gathered again in the Great Hall. McGonagall and Dumbledore began circulating through the group, making sure each person was correctly casting his or her costume spells. After getting everyone started, Dumbledore called Draco, Pansy, and Snape to him.

"Professor Flitwick has been good enough to provide me with the appropriate glamours you will need as part of your costumes. Miss Parkinson, Mr. Malfoy, you both will require glamours that will make you look, shall we say, heavier than you are. And Severus, you, of course, will need the glamour for the Phantom's face." Pansy and Draco exchanged dismayed looks at the idea that they would both have to be made to look... fat.

Draco spoke up. "Headmaster, is this absolutely necessary?"

But before Dumbledore could respond, Snape cut in, silky, "Mr. Malfoy, have you not paid attention to the play? The Phantom clearly says that your character must lose some weight..." He smirked at the pale blond boy. "And I believe that it is a traditional idea that, in opera, diva sopranos were rather... formidable in size as well." Snape turned his smirk on the pug-nosed girl. Dumbledore chuckled.

"Don't worry about your costume spells. Once you've cast the glamour on yourself, your costumes will adjust to fit as well," Dumbledore said reassuringly. "Are you quite ready, then?"

Draco and Pansy looked at each other in chagrin and nodded at Dumbledore. Dumbledore cast Draco's glamour first, immediately followed by Pansy's. Snape watched in fascination and amusement as they seemed to inflate. The four of them were distracted by titters from among the rest of the cast. As one, they turned to see the students sputtering with laughter as McGonagall sternly scolded them. Draco and Pansy scowled and glared at the rest. Dumbledore stepped forward and swept a sober gaze over the group, silencing them with his unspoken reprimand. As the other students went back to their own spell work, Dumbledore turned to Snape.

"Now, Severus, I have taken into account the shape of your mask as well as the description of your character in the play to create your glamour. Are you ready?"

Snape inclined his head. Dumbledore nodded and cast the glamour. Snape felt the magic tingling on his face. He heard Draco and Pansy gasp at the sight and turned to look at them. They were gaping at him in horror. Suddenly, he was startled by a muffled shriek from the group, which caused every head to swivel in his direction. A spatter of answering gasps and cries washed through the group. He scowled at everyone, no doubt looking even more frightening. Dumbledore turned once again to the group.

"Settle down, everyone. There is no need for such a commotion. Professor Flitwick has done a remarkable job with this glamour, has he not?" He gazed amiably over them. A few people nodded slowly.

Snape looked at Hermione and saw her gazing at him sympathetically. She caught his eye and gave him a faint, encouraging smile. Snape continued his scan of the room and noticed that Ginny was eying Hermione, frowning thoughtfully. She glanced back at Snape and blanched before nervously jerking her eyes away from him.

Damn! That Weasley girl is going to be trouble; I can just see it! I have to remember to talk to Hermione about her. Well, I suppose I can tell her Friday. We'll have plenty of time then... He scowled again, watching the students avoiding his gaze.

Dumbledore handed each of them pieces of parchment with the glamour spells on them, leaning close to Snape saying, "Now, Severus, remember what I said before. No terrorizing the students on your night patrols with this new acquisition." He smiled and twinkled at him. Snape rolled his eyes, aggrieved.

Snape stepped away from the chuckling man and muttered, "*Finite Incantatem*." The glamour disappeared and he pocketed the parchment. Dumbledore called to all of the girls who were to do ballet in the play and began instructing them about their slippers, which would now be bewitched to dance properly.

Snape glanced at the girls. They were all listening attentively to Dumbledore. At his direction, they all changed to their ballet costumes. Snape jerked his eyes away at the sight of Trelawney again. Carefully, he focused on Hermione. As usual, beside her stood Ginny Weasley. Hermione flicked a glance at him. A moment later, Ginny glanced at him too. He instantly wrenched his gaze away from Hermione. He scanned the room before idly sweeping his gaze over the girls again. Ginny's eyes were darting back and forth between Hermione and Snape, her brow furrowed.

Bloody hell. She's far too suspicious. I should just leave. At least then there's no way she can catch anything between us!

Snape slowly sidled away from the group, heading for the doorway. He was several steps away when he was stopped by McGonagall.

"Severus," she called, as she detached herself from a pair of practicing students. "Where are you going?" She minced up to him, frowning.

Snape glared down his nose at her and said, "I am leaving. Dumbledore gave me my glamour, so I needn't stay any longer."

McGonagall quirked an eyebrow at him and pursed her lips. Firmly planting her hands on her hips, she drawled, "On the contrary, Severus. The whole cast is here to practice their costume spells. You included. Now, get to work." She smirked at him, clearly enjoying exercising authority over him.

Snape stared at her in disbelief. Icily, he bit out, "Are you questioning my skills, Minerva?" His voice was full of warning.

She thinned her lips at him and crossed her arms. "We aren't making potions here. Your task is to practice."

Snape's eyebrows climbed and his jaw clenched. He felt his pulse quicken with fury. Locking eyes with her, he slowly drew his wand. After a beat, McGonagall raised one eyebrow as if to say, "Well, get on with it." Snape narrowed his eyes.

In a deadly calm voice, he spat each of his transfiguration incantations, whipping through his costumes lightning fast. Each costume was a blur as his robes changed so

quickly. Then, by way of heaping coals of fire, he snarled his glamour spell as well, taking morbid satisfaction at the startled look on her face as she jerked in surprise. Abruptly ending his spell, he sneered at her.

"Satisfied? And, please, Minerva, do I have your *permission* to go now?" His voice dripped with sarcasm as he mocked her.

McGonagall drew herself up and huffed. "Very well then. Good night." She flicked an irritated glance at him and hurried away to another student.

Snape noticed that several students were shooting furtive glances at him, having obviously witnessed the confrontation. He saw Hermione's lips twitching, like she was holding back a laugh. Ginny was casting owl-eyed looks his way. He straightened to his full height, smoothed his robes, and spun smartly on his heel to stride out of the Hall. He fought the desire to look back.

As the girls stepped away to practice their ballet steps, Ginny leant in to whisper to Hermione, "Wow! That was wild!"

Hermione looked at her and asked, "What?"

"That whole scene with McGonagall and Snape! Did you see how fast he flew through those spells?"

"Oh, yeah. It was something, wasn't it?" Hermione kept her eyes down, looking at her feet as the slippers made her dance.

Ginny regarded Hermione solemnly. "Man, I hope you don't make him angry Friday. If he's that quick, it could be a bad thing to do!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I'm sure it will all be fine. Really, Gin, stop worrying about it! He's really not that bad."

Ginny squinted at her in disbelief. "Whatever, 'Mione. I've got almost six years that say otherwise. So, you'll have to come up with something pretty extraordinary to prove he's not so bad."

Hermione thinned her lips. Still looking at her feet, she muttered sardonically, "Fine. I'll keep that in mind." At that point, the slippers were taking over for more complicated steps, and conversation became almost impossible. Hermione was grateful for the reprieve.

In a determined tone, she said to herself, *If I have my way, I will have something pretty extraordinary to prove he's not as bad as everyone thinks.* She smiled to herself. *Of course, to me, Severus himself is what's extraordinary... I can't wait for Friday night!*

20- Dinner with the Grangers

Chapter 21 of 84

It's the day of reckoning. Snape and Hermione have dinner with the Grangers before leaving for the show. Just who will end up more embarrassed: Snape, Hermione, or her folks?

Standard Disclaimer applies.

Chapter 20- Dinner with the Grangers

Friday afternoon found Snape in his quarters, staring thoughtfully into his wardrobe. Slowly, he reached in and produced a small black leather travelling bag, which he tossed onto his bed.

All right. Muggle clothes. I haven't worn these in a long time. I hope they're still acceptable. He opened a drawer within the wardrobe and pulled out the clothing. He pondered the bundle as he turned and laid it beside the bag. *This will serve for the trip there and for the tour tomorrow morning. I really don't know what would be considered appropriate for the theatre, but I can always transfigure these items into something different if necessary. That just leaves tonight, when we return from the play...*

His face settled into a distinctly uncomfortable expression. Even in the privacy of his own rooms, he felt the colour rising to stain his cheeks. *Bollocks! I don't have nightclothes! But that certainly would not be appropriate where I'll be staying...* He ran his hand through his hair agitatedly. Distractedly glancing about the room, he noticed the gleam of green on the shelf in his wardrobe. Relieved, he pounced on it. *Exactly! I have my lounge wear here in case I'm awakened, but it will serve as nightclothes in this case. Perfect...*

Satisfied, he carefully folded his satin trousers and short robe and placed them in the bag. Glancing at the time, he saw that he had about 15 minutes before he had to meet Hermione in the Entrance Hall. Exhaling forcefully, he stalked into his bathroom and gathered his toiletries, all but throwing them into his travel bag. Stone-faced, he quickly changed into his Muggle clothing and reached for his cloak. But, as he shook his cloak out to put it on, he paused, eyeing it.

Muggles don't generally wear these... Sighing, he hung it up and reached into the recesses of his wardrobe again. He pulled the Muggle coat out and shook it, beating the dust and cobwebs off it. Hissing exasperatedly to himself, he pulled out his wand and cast *Scourgify* on it. Grunting, he shrugged into it and closed his bag. Pointing his wand at the bag, he shrank it to palm size and pocketed it. With a final glance in the mirror on his way out, he shook his hair forward and scowled at his reflection. Feeling conspicuous and uncomfortable in his Muggle clothes, he grumbled to himself as he swept out of his quarters, "Not a word. I better not hear anyone say anything!" Decidedly disgruntled, he stomped up the dungeon stairs toward the Entrance Hall, feeling as if he were marching to battle.

Far above, in Gryffindor Tower, Hermione was packing as well. She was already wearing Muggle clothes, as she always did once classes were over for the week. She knew it was a healthy walk to the Apparition point, so she dressed warmly in jeans, a white turtleneck, a beige jumper, and tan leather hiking boots. Her fleece-lined, hooded coat lay beside her overnight bag on her bed.

Whirling into her bathroom, she stopped in the act of gathering her bath products. *Actually, I don't need to take all of this. Mum will have everything there.* Instead, she turned to the sink and grabbed her toothbrush and toothpaste before pausing again and laughing aloud. *Honestly! They'll have these too... they're bloody dentists!* Still grinning to herself, she tossed her brush into her bag, as well as a few assorted clips, elastics, hair pins, and slides. *I have no idea what to do with my hair for the show.*

Hopefully Mum will help.

Pensively, she turned to her closet. *Speaking of the show, I really don't know what to wear. I know it's supposed to be a dressy thing, especially since we're going to be right there in the front, but I don't know what to take!* She eyed the scant choices in her closet. Sighing, she plucked out a rather plain silk blouse and a wool skirt. Looking at them discontentedly, she folded them into her bag. *I better find shoes to match...* She dropped to her knees and dug around in the recesses of her closet. Crookshanks meandered over to see what she was about. He scampered out of her way as she sat back, triumphantly brandishing a pair of plain black pumps. Her hair was mussed from the clothes dragging across her head as she rooted around. Absently pushing her hair out of her eyes with her free hand, she sighed again. *Not very pretty, but they'll do.*

She chewed her lip as she stowed the shoes in the bag with the rest of her things. Brow creased in thought, she mechanically grabbed knickers, socks, and another long sleeve tee from her dresser. She snatched her deodorant and perfume from the top and threw them onto the bed. Then she opened a drawer to pull out a long nightgown. She regarded it with a discontented expression. It was long white cotton with a small button placket at the neck and short ruffles at the collar, cuffs, and hem. She scowled at it. *I need to get new nightclothes. This is positively juvenile!* Rolling her eyes, she folded it and packed it.

Mentally reviewing her list, she realized that she'd need hosiery if she were to wear a skirt to the theatre. She dug around in a drawer and pulled out a pair of tights. Wrinkling her nose at them, she thought, *I hate wearing these things! They're so uncomfortable, and they always roll at the waist.* Her eyes narrowed as she was hit with an inspiration. A slow smile spread across her face as she reached for her wand and transfigured the tights into two stockings and a suspender belt. *Much better...* She rolled them up and stuck them in a corner of her bag.

Looking around for anything she might have forgotten, she saw the time. Her eyes widened and she gasped as she realized that she was supposed to be in the Entrance Hall in a few minutes. Frantically pulling her coat on, she closed her bag and shrank it. Stuffing it in her pocket, she reached down to scrub Crookshanks, assuring him she'd be back the next day. She raced out of her room and rushed down the corridor, barreling through the common room. As she hurtled in, she spied Ginny reading before the fire. Ginny looked up, surprised at Hermione's abrupt entrance. Then, the redhead glanced at the time and grimaced.

Hermione flashed her a pained expression and gasped, "I'm running late!"

Ginny rolled her eyes and yelled, "I know! Have fun... at least, have as much fun as you can!" She shot Hermione a sympathetic look and waved lightly.

Hermione scrambled through the portrait hole and spun to shout back, "I'll try!" before waving and slamming the portrait shut behind her.

Ginny sat, staring, in the wake of her friend's frenzied departure. Slowly, she shook her head and muttered, "He better be nice to her. Or there'll be hell to pay..." Frowning, she turned back to her book.

Snape was in the Entrance Hall, irritably waiting for Hermione to show up. He had frozen any students he had passed with a glacial glare, before coming to rest against the wall beside the huge front doors. He sighed in annoyance that Hermione was late. Scowling blackly down the corridor, he eyed the staircase, waiting to see her.

He didn't have to wait much longer. Bushy hair flying, she came pelting down the stairs, sprinting down the corridor. A few paces from the doors, she looked up and saw him watching her. She skidded to a stop, eyes wide.

Her face was flushed and she was panting from her run. An errant thought that she might look similar in the throes of ecstasy wafted through Snape's brain. Violently clamping down on that line of thought, he straightened and peered down his nose at her, snarling, "No running in the halls. That'll be five points from Gryffindor."

Hermione barely registered his comment, so gobsmacked was she at the sight of him. He had been leaning against the wall, one foot against it, long black hair framing his face. But it was his clothing that stunned her. He was wearing trim black trousers and a snug mock turtleneck cable knit jumper...also black, of course. Add to that ensemble a knee length trench coat, and Hermione felt as if she were meeting a wintry Gothic god.

Snape stared at her, noting that she hadn't even reacted to him taking points from Gryffindor. She was gazing at him, eyes wide with wonder. He glanced around surreptitiously and muttered, "What is the matter, Miss Granger?"

Hermione shivered lightly and blinked, chewing her lip as she looked up at him, abashed. "Nothing, sir." Her eyes raked over him hungrily. "Nothing at all..." she breathed. Snape blinked, taken aback by her reaction. Hermione composed herself with visible effort and said, "I'm sorry I'm late, sir. Shall we go?"

Snape contented himself with a sharp nod of his head and spun on his heel to exit. He pushed the heavy door open and held it, gesturing for her to pass through. Hermione slid past him, thrilling at the close proximity. In silence, they tramped over the brown grass toward the gate. The sun had already set, and the air was chilly, with a light breeze. Hermione pulled her coat closed and stuffed her hands in her pockets. It was cold enough that she could see her breath.

After several minutes, Snape's dry voice caught her attention. "I would assume that you would need to bring some sort of baggage for an overnight visit, but I don't see any. Did you not pack?"

Hermione pulled her shrunken bag from her pocket and presented it with a flourish. "Shrinking spells are elementary. Why should I not use one for ease of transport? I'm assuming you did the same..."

Snape cut a glance at her and quirked an eyebrow in response. Hermione smirked. They walked in silence again. After a few more minutes, Hermione took a deep breath and murmured, "I'm looking forward to tonight. I know you'll enjoy the play..." She cast a sheepish glance at him, knowing he'd pick up what she hadn't said.

Snape snorted and said, "What? Do you not expect me to enjoy meeting your parents?" He tried to hide his anxiety with a derisive tone, but he knew he hadn't succeeded when Hermione gazed at him sympathetically.

Grimly, he continued, "Shouldn't you be more worried that they may not enjoy meeting me?"

They had reached the gate. Passing through it, Snape walked to a clearing to one side of the path. As he stopped and turned to Hermione, she saw his sour expression. Stepping close to him, she laid her hand against his arm and squeezed gently. He looked down into her eyes. In the moonlight, he could see the affection and caring glinting in the brown depths. He slid his gaze away, sullen.

Hermione looked around. Finally, she looked back up at him and whispered, "Severus." Snape whipped his head back to peer down at her. A tender smile played on her lips. Hermione slid her hand from his arm to his chest, holding it above his heart. She held his gaze and murmured, "I'm not worried about them. They'll undoubtedly be impressed by you. They don't have much contact with wizards, and you're a war hero as well as a respected professor. I just hope they don't embarrass me and irritate you." She looked down, sheepish. When she looked back up at him, she tilted her head to the side and said, her voice throaty and rippling with emotion, "You look wonderful, by the way. I wanted to tell you that in the castle, but I knew I couldn't. You really are quite fetching in Muggle clothes..." She twinkled up at him.

Snape's throat and chest felt tight. He didn't know how to respond to her. After a moment or two of simply gazing at her, he cleared his throat and rumbled, "We need to leave. Visualize where we need to Apparate to and I will view it in your mind. Once I have it, I will cast a concealment charm. Are you ready?"

Hermione licked her lips and sighed. Composing herself, she concentrated on her front step and said, "Ready."

Snape muttered, "*Legilimens*," and pierced into her mind. Hermione felt the breeze in her head that bespoke his presence and focused on the image of her front step. But, as she felt him withdrawing, she couldn't resist flashing up her first sight of him in the Entrance Hall, dark and brooding and oh-so-sexy, accompanied by her instantaneous

response to him. She heard his startled intake of breath at the images and sensations and he stared at her, stunned. She turned mock-innocent eyes to him and watched him squint at her speculatively. He held his wand out to encompass them both and cast the concealment charm. Hermione watched him shimmer and fade out, concealed from her view. She glanced down and saw herself, fuzzy, like she was out of focus. Out of the darkness, she heard Snape's voice.

"You will need to take hold of my hand. We must be in contact to Apparate together. Reach out to take my hand."

Hermione reached out and collided with his hand. As soon as he had wrapped his long, warm fingers around hers, she stepped forward, judging his location by where he had been when he disappeared, and by where his hand was holding hers. She felt herself run into him, and ignored his startled exclamation as she released his hand in favour of wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing her cheek against his hard chest.

Snape froze, unable to even form words to scold her. He knew they were completely hidden from view, and she couldn't even see him. He couldn't see her either. All he could do was feel her soft warm body pressed against his, and her arms wrapped around him. Safe in the knowledge that she wouldn't be able to catch him, he allowed himself the luxury of letting the bliss he felt show on his face. His expression was soft and peaceful for a fleeting moment before he sighed and Apparated to the Grangers' house.

Hermione jumped as they landed on her front step. She gazed about her, looking along the street. Reluctantly slipping from his lean frame, she grazed her hand down his arm until she could twine her fingers in his. She was intent on finding a place to become visible and missed the tiny sigh that escaped Snape's lips. Stepping down, she tugged on his hand.

"Come on, this way. We can step between the houses here and become visible in the shadows. No one will see us that way."

Snape followed her, guided by the invisible hand in his. When they were ensconced in the shadows, he cast the reversal charm and they shimmered into sight again. As soon as she could see him, Hermione looked up into Snape's face, hoping he wasn't angry with her. His face was cloaked in the shadows, however, and she couldn't see his expression. With a gentle squeeze, Snape untangled his hand from hers and tilted his head toward her house. She sighed and nodded, turning to lead the way.

She stepped up to the door and rang the bell. A moment later, the door was flung open by a smiling man wiping his hands on a dishtowel.

Her father. Mr. Granger.

Snape stood impassively as he watched the man crow, "Hermione!" and engulf his daughter in a hug, lifting her off her feet and spinning her in the doorway.

Hermione laughed delightedly, shrieking, "Da-a-ad!"

Snape eyed the man intently, sizing him up. He was a few inches shorter than Snape, but still several inches taller than his petite daughter. His hair was thinning on top, but it was a similar brown to Hermione's. He was in good shape, only a little soft about the middle. He put Hermione down and looked at Snape. Smiling cheerfully, he gestured through the open door and nodded to Snape.

"Come in, come in! I apologize. I got a little over-excited. Haven't seen my girl in a while..." Hermione was shrugging off her coat and hanging it in the small closet to one side. Before Snape could think of an appropriate response, the man snapped his fingers and pointed at Snape. "That's right; where are my manners? Can I take your coat for you? Professor Snape, isn't it?" He stretched his hands out for Snape to give him his coat. Snape was blankly slipping out of his coat, about to respond, when they were all distracted by a woman rushing into the foyer. She was beaming as much as Hermione was as she bustled over to embrace her daughter.

"Hermione! It's so good to have you home!"

"Hi, Mum!" Hermione squealed, vigorously returning her mother's tight hug.

Snape stared at them, owl-eyed, slightly overwhelmed. He absently handed Mr. Granger his coat, gazing at Mrs. Granger. She was a couple of inches taller than her daughter, with blue-grey eyes that sparkled like Hermione's. She was petite, like her daughter, but her hair was a light ash blonde. However, it was also apparent that she was the one from whom Hermione had inherited her unruly locks. Her hair was shoulder-length, but it was wavy and flyaway. Snape glanced between the two adults, noting how clear it was that they had produced Hermione. She was truly a mixture of their features.

Hermione and her mother ended their embrace and they turned to Mr. Granger and Snape. Mr. Granger spoke up. "I was just about to welcome Professor Snape to our home." He hung Snape's coat up and extended his hand toward him. Snape gripped the man's hand firmly, about to speak, when Mr. Granger spoke again. "Pleasure to meet you. I'm Geoff Granger, and this is my wife."

Mrs. Granger stepped forward to shake Snape's hand as well, saying, "Welcome. It's so good of you to bring Hermione for this little visit, Professor Snape..."

Snape felt rather desperate and interrupted, with a courtly bow, "Please, call me Severus."

Mrs. Granger's eyebrows shot up and she smiled. "Severus? What a lovely name. Quite unique. My name is Dione, but you can call me Di."

Snape straightened, frowning slightly. "And mutilate such a beautiful name? Certainly not. Dione is a classical name and should be given the respect it deserves." His voice was resonant with the tone of offended sensibilities.

Hermione's mother tilted her head as she regarded him, her hand still clasped in his.

Now I see where Hermione got that trick from...

Bemused, Mrs. Granger murmured, "Yes, I suppose that with a name like yours, you would be familiar with classical names. My family has rather a penchant for uncommon names, as is no doubt obvious with our Hermione, here. Do you know the story of my name?" She gazed at him, a playful smile on her lips.

Snape actually smiled, modestly. "Indeed, madam, I do. Dione means 'divine queen,' and she is said to have borne a child by Zeus. Her child is Aphrodite, the goddess of love..." He trailed off, suddenly disconcerted, seeing her daughter off to the side, twinkling delightedly at him. Hastily manufacturing a polite smile again, he bowed and released her hand. "The headmaster and I would like to express our appreciation for your hospitality." He included Mr. Granger in his gaze.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Granger instantly began offering protestations, claiming it was nothing. Hermione edged between them and cleared her throat. "Um, Mum, Dad, what's for dinner?" She smiled at the equally surprised looks of dismay they exchanged. "And, can we get out of the foyer?"

Mrs. Granger squeaked, "Dinner!" and sped away to the kitchen. Hermione giggled as she looked at Snape's astonished expression.

Mr. Granger hastily said, "Of course, of course, where are my manners? Forgive me. Hermione, why don't you show your professor to the guest room and freshen up for dinner while I help your mum?" He patted Hermione on the shoulder and pointed toward the stairs. Smiling and nodding at Snape, he turned and hurried after his wife.

Snape gazed after his retreating form blankly. He was distracted by a giggle from Hermione and turned to see her twinkling up at him. Grinning impishly, she tilted her head toward the stairs and said, "Come on. The guest room's up here." She jauntily mounted the stairs, glancing back to see Snape following her absently.

They reached the top of the stairs and started down the hallway. Hermione spun and pointed to the door to her left. "This is the guest room." Then, she pointed to the door on her right. "This is my room." She glanced up at him coyly. Her eyebrow quirked. In a low voice, she drawled, "Try not to get confused..."

Snape arched one eyebrow back at her, reprimanding her for her implication, somewhat taken aback by her audacity. Hermione whirled again and continued down the hall. She gestured toward another door. "This is the bathroom. And across here is the laundry. My folks' room is at the end of the hall." She strode back to him and opened the

door to the guest room, waving him into it.

Snape stepped inside, glancing about. The room was comfortable, with a queen size bed dominating the centre of it. On each side there were nightstands, with matching lamps, and a bureau stood against the wall at the foot of the bed. The back wall had a large window, with a set of shelves under it, and a closet door was to the left of the bureau. The room was decorated in a simple colour scheme of earth tones. The carpet was a dusty beige, and the walls were a creamy yellow tint. The lampshades matched the curtains and the bedclothes, which were a stylized print of foliage in varied greens and browns, with lighter cream tones. There was a clock radio on one nightstand, its numbers glowing red.

Snape slowly glided to the bed, reaching into his pocket and fishing out his shrunken bag. He waved his wand at it and restored it to its normal size. Hermione stood in the doorway watching him. Suddenly disconcerted by his presence in a bedroom in her house, she stammered, "Uh, I'll go... put my things away," and retreated across the hall to her room.

Snape idly turned to see her disappear. He briskly put his things in the drawer of the bureau, stowing his bag in the closet. Then, curiosity got the better of him, and he silently sidled across the hall to peer into Hermione's room. He was momentarily struck dumb by what he saw.

Hermione was halfway in her closet, hanging her clothes. She didn't notice Snape goggling at her decorations. The carpet was of varied shades of pink, and the walls were bright white, with a painted border of vines and flowers. There was a canopy bed, full size, with a ruffled canopy and bedspread in pink and white flowers. Her furniture was all white, and she even had ruffled curtains in the window. Her walls were covered with shelves. Those shelves were full of books...of course...and childhood memorabilia. There were dolls and pictures and figurines...quite a few of them were unicorns, he noted...and stuffed animals. Around the mirror at her vanity, there were photos of Hermione at various ages. He noticed one in particular of her in her Hogwarts robes, grinning toothily for the camera. He realized that they weren't wizard photos, as they were all still.

Hermione backed out of her closet and turned, gasping as she saw Snape in her doorway. She began blushing furiously, embarrassed by the look on his face. Defensively, she stammered, "I-it's the same as it was when I was a child. I'm not here much anymore, so I haven't taken the time to change things."

Snape grimaced, trying to hold in a horribly rude bark of laughter. With effort, he rasped, "Of course."

Hermione tilted her chin up defiantly. Snape's eyes were inexorably drawn back to the picture of her in her Hogwarts robes. Pointing his chin at it, he rumbled, "Now *that* I recognize..." Hermione flicked a glance at the photo.

"That was taken the day before I went to Hogwarts the first year."

Snape stepped closer to it, peering at it pensively. In a low voice, he mused, "You were such a little girl..." Then, he shot a glance around the frilly room and came to rest on Hermione, who was gazing at him warily. His expression darkened. "You still are." Hermione's eyes widened in indignation. She drew herself up to her full height and stomped over to him, her hands on her hips.

"I am not! I'm eighteen, and a legal adult! Don't you dare back away from me now, Severus..."

Snape leapt to the doorway, agitatedly shushing her. Listening hard for any sign of the Grangers, he turned pained eyes on Hermione. In a savage whisper, he hissed, "I am over twice your age! Look around you. I don't fit in here! You and I are too different..."

Hermione closed the gap between them determinedly, firmly shutting her door. Snape's eyes widened in panic. Hermione felt a surge of authority, being on her turf. She glared heatedly at Snape, sternly holding his near-frantic gaze.

"We're not as different as you seem to think. I really don't feel comfortable here either." She turned a chagrined gaze on her room before resolutely looking back at Snape. "As for our ages... how many times do I have to tell you that I am an adult, and as such, I can make my own decisions about my feelings?" Her eyes narrowed calculatingly and a smile hovered on her lips. "I know you heard me talking to Ginny on the stairs. I meant it when I said I don't want a boy. I want a man. And the man I want... is you." She let her feelings blaze out.

Snape was held captive by her intense gaze. His pulse was racing, first out of a rare feeling of panic, and then in a heady response to her words and looks. They remained motionless for several moments, gazes locked together. They were startled out of their reverie by Mr. Granger's voice shouting up the stairs.

"Hermione! Dinner's ready. Bring your professor down."

Hermione reached past Snape and opened her door. Still looking at him, she yelled back, "Sure thing, Dad. We'll be right down!" Quirking an eyebrow at him, she said lightly, "I'm going to wash up for dinner. Care to join me, Professor?"

Snape swallowed thickly. Hermione edged past him and strode to the bathroom, leaving him to slink out of her bedroom guiltily. He heard the water running as she washed her hands and hesitantly followed her. She popped out of the doorway, rubbing her hands together. "All yours, Professor."

Snape silently watched her as she passed him, then he entered the bathroom. Idly noting the seashell motif, he washed his hands thoroughly, eyeing his morose reflection. Reconstructing his detached façade, he dried his hands and smoothed his jumper, wrinkling his nose at the lack of his voluminous robes. He always felt vulnerable without them.

He exited the bathroom and saw Hermione waiting for him at the top of the stairs. When she saw him coming, she led the way to the dining room.

Snape suddenly noticed the appetizing aromas filling the house. His sensitive nose identified garlic, onion, pepper...both black and cayenne, saffron...he was surprised at that one, and a certain salty tang that he couldn't quite identify. Then he recognized the rich scent of seafood.

Hermione guided him to a seat on one side of the table, moving to sit opposite him. He was gazing at the china, the flatware, the tumblers, everything. Mr. Granger bustled in, placing a bowl of saffron rice with broccoli and cauliflower on a trivet. He immediately exited into the kitchen again, this time returning with a dish of sautéed shrimp and scallops, glistening in a roux of butter and seasonings. Mrs. Granger followed him, bearing a frosty pitcher of water, from which she filled the tumblers at each setting. Mr. Granger made a third trip, returning with a basket of flat pocket bread and a bowl of figs and apricots.

Hermione gave a little squeal of excitement and bounced in her seat. "Mum! Dad! You made my favourite! Thank you!" She beamed at her parents, who smiled fondly at her.

Mr. Granger retorted, "Of course! Why shouldn't we have your favourite? It just wouldn't do to not celebrate our girl coming home again!"

Mrs. Granger murmured assent before asking, "Severus, would you like tea as well as ice water?"

Snape turned a blank expression on her, startled by the use of his given name, even though he had entreated her to use it. "If you are already making tea, I would be pleased to partake of a cup, but if not, don't go to any trouble on my account."

Mrs. Granger twinkled at him and said sweetly, "Not at all! I'll go start a kettle heating right now." She strode back into the kitchen briskly.

Hermione was helping her father serve the food onto the plates, but she glanced at Snape and called after her mother, "As long as we have honey and lemon too!"

Mrs. Granger's voice floated out to them. "Of course, dear. We do."

Snape blinked, stoically keeping his face impassive, as Hermione brashly winked at him from behind her father. He glared at her sternly. She glared back, unabashed.

Wearily, Snape closed his eyes, wondering what on earth he had got himself into.

He snapped his eyes open again at Mr. Granger's question. "Severus, how much would you like? Is this good?" He ladled a heaping serving of shellfish onto the plate beside a mound of saffron rice.

Hastily, Snape answered, "Yes, yes, that's plenty."

Mr. Granger snorted to himself and shook his head good-naturedly. He added another dollop to Snape's plate, murmuring, "Come now, we don't stand on ceremony here. You're quite a tall drink of water; surely you can stand a bit more." He smiled as he added two pieces of flat bread to the plate and handed it back to Snape.

Snape eyed the heaping plate warily. *Gods, I hope it's good. Otherwise, they'll surely be offended.*

Mrs. Granger reappeared and took her plate from her husband. "Thank you, love." Finally, as everyone was served and seated, Mrs. Granger picked up her glass and beamed at everyone impartially. "I'd like to propose a toast." Everyone raised their glasses to hers. "To Hogwarts' headmaster, for allowing Severus to bring Hermione for this lovely visit. And to Severus, for taking such good care of our girl on the way."

Hermione's eyes sparkled over the rim of her glass as she murmured, "Cheers," and drank to the toasts. Snape tried his best to look indifferent, but felt the heat rising in his cheeks.

Mumbling, "Cheers," he gulped the cold water, sending a shock to his system. Sheepishly eyeing his plate, he gingerly took a bite of the shrimp. His brow furrowed and he looked up at Mrs. Granger. "Dione, this is wonderful. What's in it? I can smell garlic, onion, and pepper, but there's something else..."

Mrs. Granger flushed prettily at the compliment and said, "Oh, it's a little something I picked up in the United States on holiday. It's called Old Bay Seasoning, and it has some mustard, red pepper, salt, and paprika. It's used for cooking seafood along the southern coast, and I loved it. So, I bought some to take home. I'm glad you like it. This is one of Hermione's favourite meals." She turned a fond look on her daughter, who was blissfully chewing, unable to speak because her mouth was full.

Snape took another bite, followed by a bit of the rice. He smiled faintly. "I can see why. It's truly delicious." Hermione nodded from across the table.

Mr. Granger was stuffing a piece of pocket bread with rice and shrimp. He nodded toward Snape and commented, "So, Severus. It's good to finally meet you after hearing about you all these years." He flicked a sly glance at Hermione, who was suddenly chewing frantically, trying to clear her mouth to stop whatever her father was about to say.

Snape glanced at her thoughtfully. "Oh?" he said, politely turning his attention to her father as he continued steadily eating.

Mr. Granger smiled mischievously. "Oh, yes. Though I must say that the things we heard weren't very complimentary at first."

Mrs. Granger cut in, her voice rippling with laughter. "Now dear, don't exaggerate. Really, Severus, we only heard the normal complaints that you were very strict and demanding..."

Mr. Granger chuckled and interrupted her. "Of course, those are the diplomatic terms for them..." Snape shot an amused look at Hermione, who was hiding her flushed face behind one hand, her fork drooping listlessly onto her plate.

Plaintively, she growled, "Da-a-ad! Please!"

Mr. Granger blithely patted her shoulder and chuckled again. "Oh, come on. I'm just teasing. Actually, every time she may have said something that could be construed as a complaint, she always followed up with a comment on how good you were at what you do." Snape's eyebrows rose to his hairline.

Bemused, he drawled, "Really? How astounding."

Mrs. Granger waved her hand airily. "Oh, yes. You should have heard her reaming Harry and Ron sometimes when they called you names. That's our girl, nothing if not fair. She wouldn't stand to hear them trash you and always went on about how hard you work and how selfless you were in your work during the war."

Hermione wished that a hole would conveniently open in the floor beneath her chair and suck her out of sight. She was writhing in embarrassment. Still, she tried to put on a good face and forced herself to eat.

Snape was enjoying her moment of discomfort. It seemed to put them back on a level playing field. His black eyes crackled with suppressed mirth.

Mr. Granger cleared his throat and added, "Mmm, speaking of the war, she told us about how magnificent you were in the Final Battle, protecting them to the end. She told us all about how you were a double agent, spying. She says that if it weren't for you, the good side might not have won."

Snape felt the amusement drain out of him, and his food seemed to stick in his throat. He swallowed forcefully and gazed across the table at Hermione. In an unconscious gesture, he rubbed his forearm where the scar of the Dark Mark lay. Soberly, he said, "I did what I had to do. It was the least I could do to pay back all I owe Dumbledore."

Hermione gazed at him wistfully. "You may say that, but not many people would have done the same in your place. Accept it, Professor, you're a hero."

Mrs. Granger tilted her head again, eyes sparkling at Snape. Enchanted, she drawled, "I've never met a hero before." Her voice was lilting and playfully teasing. Snape blinked, taken aback, and gazed blankly at Mrs. Granger. Completely unsure how to handle her comment, he flicked his eyes around the room sheepishly, writhing at the heat rising in his face.

Hermione was torn between enjoying Snape's embarrassment and being disturbed that her mother seemed to be flirting with him. She noticed him glancing at her with a look like a cornered animal. In an attempt to rescue him, Hermione turned her attention to her father.

"Um, Dad, remember the last owl I sent you?" Mr. Granger looked at her, and Snape heaved a silent sigh of relief to have the subject changed. Mrs. Granger looked expectantly between her husband and her daughter. "Did you find a picture of the theatre so we can get there?"

Mr. Granger swallowed hastily and nodded. "Yes. I bookmarked it on the computer."

Snape's brow furrowed. He didn't understand the terminology. Mrs. Granger patted Snape's arm and leant toward him with a confidential air. "Wizards don't have computers, do they?" She continued without even waiting for an answer. "I say, it's so fascinating to hear Hermione talk about all the differences between our world and yours. I always thought it was all a fantasy... then to find out it's all real!" She sighed dreamily. "We haven't met very many adult wizards or witches, except the Weasleys. I must say, it's enchanting to meet you." Suddenly, she stopped short and laughed. "Oh, how ironic! Enchanting!" Her laugh tinkled like bells as she patted Snape's arm again.

Snape forced a faint smile. "Indeed."

Mr. Granger eyed Snape with mock severity. "Hey... You're not bewitching my wife, now, are you?"

Snape's face went white again and his eyes widened. Straightening formally in his seat, he retorted in a dignified tone, "Certainly not! Sir, I would never..."

Mr. Granger's face creased into a grin and he snorted, buffeting Snape's shoulder and cutting his speech short. "Oh, I was just having you on. You know, a bit of fun... And I said before, we don't stand on ceremony here. I'm no 'Sir.' I'm just Geoff."

Snape blinked rapidly as he rasped, "Of course... Geoff." He seemed to wilt a bit in his chair, staring dazedly at his plate.

Hermione was fighting to hold in an unholy shriek of laughter when they were all distracted by a whistle from the kitchen. Seeing a chance for escape, Hermione stood hastily, saying, "That's the kettle. I'll get it."

But her mother stood and placed a firm hand on Hermione's shoulder, saying, "No, you won't. Sit and enjoy your meal." She pushed Hermione back into her seat. Leaning closer, she commented in a stage whisper, "Besides, I don't think it would be fair to leave your poor professor alone with us Muggles. Surely he thinks we're barking mad..." She chuckled as she winked at Hermione and her husband, turning to see Snape's expression of horrified dismay. She laughed again as she waved airily at Snape. "Oh, Severus, I'm just teasing!" Then she turned and swept into the kitchen to prepare the tea.

At this point, even Hermione felt that her parents were a little overwhelming. Shooting a sympathetic glance at Snape, she saw he was looking a little frazzled. She ate a bit more in silence and watched Snape tentatively take a few more bites, eyeing her father warily, as if afraid of what he might say next.

Mrs. Granger bustled in with the tea service, complete with a dish of lemon and a pot of honey. Hermione saw Snape's face twitch, and his eyes relaxed as he caught her eye. She smiled at him.

"Would everyone like a cup?" Mrs. Granger beamed around the table. Mr. Granger and Hermione nodded.

Snape inclined his head gracefully and murmured, "Please."

Mrs. Granger twinkled at him and lilted, "Such nice manners you wizards have. Is that one of the things they teach at school?"

Hermione interrupted, rolling her eyes. "Mum!"

The tea was poured and everyone began preparing it to their liking. In the silence that followed, Mr. Granger seemed to be struck with another idea. Turning to Hermione with a mischievous smile, he asked in a mock-innocent tone, "So, Hermione, have you a boyfriend back at school that we haven't heard about?"

Hermione nearly spat her tea out. Glancing frantically at her parents, who were both smiling at her, she locked eyes with Snape and flushed. He froze, wondering how she would respond. His gaze held hers with a warning.

Hermione looked down, desperately trying to come up with a response. Mrs. Granger reached out and chucked Hermione under the chin, tilting her face back up. "Methinks I see a maidenly blush. Come now, who is it?"

Hermione's eyes flicked inexorably back to Snape, who sat, impassive. Hermione whispered, "There's no one."

Mr. Granger rumbled and said, "We're not blind. It's obvious there's someone, or you wouldn't be blushing so much. Is it anyone we've met?"

Hermione rolled her head back and practically begged, "Dad! Please! Not now..." She flicked another glance at Snape and hung her head.

Mr. Granger looked at Snape and said, "Oh, come on. I'm sure your professor has seen hundreds of young couples over the years. It's a simple question. We're just interested in your life..."

Snape saw his chance and grabbed it. In a stern tone, he cut in, "I believe I understand why Miss Granger is so loath to expound on her... social life."

All eyes snapped to him. Hermione was gazing at him, puzzled. Mrs. Granger raised her eyebrows expectantly and said, "Oh?"

Snape frowned disapprovingly and said, "You see, I happened to come across Miss Granger and her... beau... involved in a less than scholarly activity, for which I was forced to assign a detention."

Hermione's parents looked at her apprehensively as Hermione gazed at Snape, incredulous. Cheeks burning, she glared at him. Savagely, she bit out, "Harry and I were kissing in the corridor after a rehearsal. Professor Snape caught us. I got detention for breaking school rules."

Mrs. Granger repeated, "Harry?" When did you two start going out?"

Hermione gritted her teeth in remembered guilt and annoyance. In a low voice, she answered, "We started seeing each other the day the cast list came out, but it didn't last long. We only dated a few days."

Mr. Granger gazed at his daughter, perplexed. "But you and Harry have been friends for years; what happened? He seems like such a nice boy."

Hermione shot a look at Snape, who managed to rein in his usual derisive sneer at her father's statement. Hermione tilted her chin up defiantly and firmly said, "He *is* a nice boy, and we're still friends. I realized fairly quickly that we shouldn't be anything more than that. I don't care for him that way." She pinned Snape with a glare. "So, I was telling the truth. There isn't anyone. I *don't* have a boyfriend."

Her parents exchanged disconcerted glances. Finally, they were the ones who seemed flustered. A strained silence fell. Snape managed to finish the food on his plate and sat back, quite full. He drained his tea and gamely ventured, "Dinner was wonderful, Dione. Thank you for having me."

Mrs. Granger flushed and smiled. "Oh, it was nothing. I'm glad you enjoyed it. Would you care for dessert?"

Snape frowned and waved his hands. "No, thank you. The fruit was quite enough. I couldn't eat another bite." He flashed her a polite smile.

"Well then, perhaps you and Hermione can save dessert for a snack later when you get back from the play. It'll be in the fridge, dear." She nodded to Hermione.

"Thanks, Mum. Speaking of, we should start getting ready for the theatre."

"Yes, yes, of course." Mrs. Granger stood and started gathering dishes. Snape instantly stood.

"May I help?"

Mrs. Granger batted at his outstretched hands and scoffed. "No, indeed! You're our guest! At any rate, Hermione's right. You should get ready for the theatre. Geoff, why don't you go call up that picture while I clear everything away."

"Sure thing, love." Mr. Granger stood and looked at Hermione as his wife disappeared. "So you just need to be able to look at it?"

Hermione glanced at Snape and said, "Actually, Dad, Professor Snape will be the one Apparating us there, so he needs to see it. Sir, why don't you go with my dad and see the picture, and I'll go start getting ready. If you need anything, just knock on my door."

Snape nodded soberly at her, not quite willing to go without her to see this computer thing with her father. Schooling his expression into one of polite attention, he looked to her father, waiting to follow him.

Hermione said, "Thanks, Dad," before she gathered a few more dishes and strode into the kitchen, glancing over her shoulder to see Snape following her father into the den.

Her mother was storing the leftovers in the fridge and scraping plates into the rubbish bin as Hermione entered. She looked up at her daughter and smiled absently. "Thank you, dear. Where are your father and your professor?"

"They're in the den looking up that picture for Professor Snape."

"Oh, good. I say, dear, your professor is rather nice. I find it hard to believe he was ever as bad as you and the boys said."

Hermione smiled and snorted. "He's not so bad after all, but he's much snarkier at school. Trust me on this one..."

Mrs. Granger smirked. "Well, I like him. It's a shame we haven't had a chance to meet your other professors as well. Perhaps when we come to see the play over Easter we'll get to meet them."

"Perhaps..." Hermione thought for a moment and said, "Mum, the theatre is a pretty dressy thing, isn't it?"

Mrs. Granger glanced at Hermione and said, "Well, yes. I suppose you could say that. Why?"

Hermione scowled and said, "I just don't have much choice of dressy things and I brought a blouse and a skirt and pumps. Do you think that'll be okay?" She turned anxious eyes on her mother.

Mrs. Granger dropped her dish towel and grabbed Hermione's hands, her face alight. "Oh! I have just the thing! Come with me. I'm sure you'll look marvellous in it." She laughed giddily and pulled Hermione behind her up the stairs.

"I bought it a few years ago for a formal dinner at one of the dental conventions, and it's perfect for a trip to the theatre. You look like you've grown enough to fit into it." They strode down the hallway to Hermione's parents' room. Mrs. Granger bade Hermione to sit on the bed and disappeared in the closet. Her voice was muffled as she said, "I even have a wrap you can use with it, since it's so formal." She popped out of the closet, holding the dress against her, beaming. "So, what do you think?"

Hermione's face lit up at the sight of it. "Mum, it's perfect! Do you really think it'll fit me?"

Mrs. Granger regarded her daughter with an impatient air. "Dear, who in this room happens to be a very accomplished witch?"

Hermione flushed in chagrin. "Oh... yeah." She stood and stepped toward her mother. "So, can I try it on?"

"Certainly, dear! Go on into the bathroom and change, and we'll see how it fits."

Hermione took the dress into her parent's bathroom and changed. It fit fairly well, but Hermione used her wand to adjust it until it was perfect. Grinning at her reflection, she burst out of the bathroom, twirling to show it off to her mother. Mrs. Granger was sitting on the bed, and she clapped, crowing in delight.

"You look absolutely stunning! You say you have pumps?"

Hermione nodded and waved her wand. "*Accio* pumps." The black pumps soared into the room and into Hermione's hand. Her mother gaped at her, impressed.

"My, that's convenient!"

Hermione slipped the pumps on. Her mother eyed them critically and frowned. "Hmmm, they don't quite go... Perhaps if they had higher heels, and they were sleeker..." Hermione gazed down at her feet and pursed her lips in thought. After a moment, she pointed her wand at the shoes and transfigured them into a higher heeled, sleeker version. She wavered a bit on her feet as the heels stretched. Glancing up at her mother, she smiled at the satisfied look on her face.

"How's that?"

Her mother smiled conspiratorially at her and nodded. "Perfect!" Then she narrowed her eyes at Hermione and said, "You did bring hose, didn't you? It'd be improper to wear a formal dress without hose."

Hermione nodded. "They're in my room. I'll put them on when I go back." She turned and looked at her reflection again, grinning at what she saw. Then, she scowled. Spinning toward her mother again, she pleaded, "Mum, please help me do something with this hair! I can't very well dress up and let it run rampant as usual..."

Her mother waved her to the seat at the vanity and stepped behind her. "Don't worry, dear. We'll fix you right up. I know just the thing."

She began brushing through Hermione's hair, twisting and coaxing it into submission. After about 15 minutes of intense struggling, and lots of hairpins and styling products, she was finished. Standing back, she surveyed her work in the mirror and smiled.

"There. That's more like it."

Hermione gazed at her reflection in wonder. Heck, she gazed at her mother in awe. Somehow, she had managed to smooth Hermione's hair into an elegant twist. It wrapped in on itself up the back of her head, ending in a pile of cascading curls...not frizz!...at the crown of her head. She had even succeeded in separating a few tendrils to hang from her hairline, framing her face. Hermione grabbed a mirror and used it to see the view from the back as well and sighed in reverent satisfaction. Turning grateful eyes on her mother, she smiled and said, "Mum, you're a lifesaver. Thank you so much! Too bad I can't keep you with me at school to tame this mess for me."

Mrs. Granger laughed. "I've just had decades more practice than you have, dear. You'll get used to it in time. Besides, it's much easier to have someone else do your hair than to do it yourself." Hermione smirked faintly and nodded in agreement. She stood and pondered her reflection in the full-length mirror. Behind her, her mother eyed her thoughtfully. "You know, you really should have something around your neck. It's missing something without some ornamentation. Let me see..." She turned to her jewellery box and began rooting around. After a few speculative glances back at Hermione, she huffed and turned around, holding a choker. It was a black velvet ribbon with a black carved cameo in the centre. She stepped behind Hermione and fastened it around her slim throat. "There. That's better. With your hair up like that and that sort of neckline, a choker fits better than a long chain."

Hermione beamed at her reflection, feeling rather like Cinderella. Impulsively, she spun and enveloped her mother in a tight hug. "Mum, you're the best!" Her mother returned her hug, chuckling.

"It's nothing. I'm just so glad you're here. These are the kinds of things I miss out on since you're away at school." She pulled away and smiled fondly at her daughter. "Now, why don't you go finish getting ready and I'll get that wrap for you. You should probably check on your professor too; we've left him alone with Geoff for a while now."

Hermione nodded, rolling her eyes expressively, and hurried to her room. She hastily put her stockings on and hitched up her skirt to put on the suspender belt. She smiled to herself as she straightened her dress, feeling it play over her silky stockings, slipping across the suspenders. Squinting at her reflection, she made sure that the suspender belt wasn't visible as lumps under her dress. Pleased with the results, she sat at her vanity and applied some subtle makeup, dabbing perfume behind her ears and in her cleavage. She heard a knock at her door, and, thinking it was her mother with the wrap, called, "Come in!"

She heard a startled intake of breath and spun to see Snape in her doorway, gazing at her, dumbstruck. She stood hastily and stepped toward him, slightly flustered. Flushing, she asked, "Is everything okay? What's wrong?"

Snape was transfixed by the vision in front of him. The dress was black velvet, with off-the-shoulder straps that sat on the points of her shoulders, and a sweetheart neckline. The bodice fit snugly, as if it were boned like a corset, accentuating her breasts and slim waist. The skirt was straight and fell to her knees in front and tapered to just below them in the back, with a slit along her right thigh. Her stockings were smoky and had the sheen of silk. Her legs were shapely above her high-heeled shoes, and

her slender throat was wrapped with the velvet choker. Long bouncy tendrils of curls draped from her temples against her cheeks, and love locks curled along her hairline above her brow and behind her ears. He was seized with the compulsion to cover her bare shoulders and collarbone with heated kisses, but stayed still.

Snape swallowed thickly and rasped, "Nothing..." He raked her with a smouldering gaze and smirked faintly, adding, "Nothing at all." His eyes locked with hers and she recognized her words being flung back at her. Her heart thumped at the incandescent desire in his eyes.

Resolutely trying to maintain her composure, she prodded, "What did you need?"

Snape's eyes crackled with heat as several things suggested themselves to him, none of which he allowed to come out of his mouth. Hermione saw the play of emotions across his face and felt a tingle wash over her, ending with a throb between her legs. Snape stepped into the room and softly shut the door behind him. Leaning against it, he stared at her, unblinking, as he purred, "You're beautiful."

Hermione's breath caught and she looked down, flushing even more. Shyly peeking up at him through her lashes, she whispered, "Thank you."

Snape raked her with another consuming gaze before he shook himself, sighing deeply with his eyes closed. When he opened them again, she could sense his restraint. In a businesslike tone, he said, "I was coming to ask you what I should wear. I didn't think this would be appropriate, but I wasn't sure what would be." He smiled faintly. "Now that I see you, I have a better idea." He paused, looking over her again. "And, your father showed me the theatre on that...what was it called?"

"Computer," Hermione offered faintly.

"Yes, computer. I have what I need to Apparate us there. We'll follow the same procedure as we did to come here." He paused again, then asked, "Do you have any questions?"

Hermione blinked and looked up at him, owl-eyed. "Um... what are you going to wear?"

Snape straightened and gazed primly down at her, but his eyes flashed with wicked amusement. "I will transfigure something appropriate. We need to leave soon, so I shall go do that very thing." And with a mischievous smirk and a bow, he swept out of her room and across to his. She heard his door close firmly.

Snape leant against his door and sighed deeply. He gazed at the trench coat he had tossed onto the bed as he had come upstairs. Resolutely striding to it, he pulled out his wand and transfigured it. Then he looked at his reflection in the mirror on the closet door and transfigured his trousers and jumper. His trousers were still black, but they matched the material of his coat, and they had satin stripes down the outer seams. His shirt was snow white, with a banded collar and mother of pearl buttons. He slipped into his coat, which was now a knee-length fitted opera trench coat. Its standing mandarin collar framed the top button of his shirt as he buttoned the coat closed, snug across his chest. As he turned to exit the room, the bottom of the coat flared out and whirled, reminding him of his school robes. He smiled, feeling more himself.

That faint smile still hovering on his lips, he once again knocked on Hermione's door. At her response, he opened the door and stepped in, closing it behind him.

Hermione had stood hastily at his knock, and as he entered, she grabbed for the back of the chair, feeling her knees going weak. This time, she was dumbstruck, gaping at him. His ebony eyes sparkled with wicked amusement as he gracefully inclined his head toward her and murmured, "Is this satisfactory?"

Hermione shut her mouth with a snap and nodded, dazed. Snape stepped closer, gazing down at her. *She really looks wonderful. Now she really looks like a woman...*

She chewed her lower lip nervously as he closed the gap between them, feeling her skin prickle as he drew nearer. Snape could tell the effect he had on her by the flush rising from her chest and along her neck to stain her cheeks, as well as the heated desire whirling in the dilated pupils of her eyes. Schooling his expression into one of humble entreaty, he purred, "I would like to ask a favour of you."

Hermione blinked, swallowed convulsively, and rasped, "What favour?"

Snape fought to keep the mischievous gleam out of his eyes as he answered, "I think it would be more fitting if my hair was pulled back. Would you help me?"

Hermione's breath caught and she smothered an anticipatory grin. "Of course. Please, sit." She gestured to her chair at the vanity and moved behind it. Snape sank down into it in one fluid movement, managing to fling his coat out of the way. He sat up straight and looked at Hermione in the mirror.

Hermione grabbed her brush and began brushing through his long black locks. His eyes immediately closed in delight. She smiled indulgently at the look on his face. Slowly dragging the brush over his scalp, she followed it with her hand, smoothing the hair. After a few minutes of silence, she grabbed an elastic from her vanity and gathered his hair at the base of his neck, lightly grazing her fingertips across the tender flesh. Snape shuddered. She secured the hair in a thick tail. Looking in the mirror, she noted that he had opened his eyes and was watching her with a smouldering gaze. Peering at his reflection, she saw that some of his hair was too short to be caught in the elastic. Pursing her lips in thought, she stepped around him and stood in front of him, leaning against her vanity table. Snape blinked up at her, taken aback.

"What?" he asked, perplexed.

She tilted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. Pensively, she muttered, "I don't have the pomade, but I don't know that I really want it anyhow..."

Snape stared up at her, brow furrowed. She reached out and lightly ran her fingers along his hairline, causing him to start and shudder again. Frowning, he asked again, "What?"

Hermione merely said, "Shake your head... not too hard."

Snape raised one eyebrow at her. "Excuse me?"

Hermione made a moue of exasperation and said, "Shake your head. You know, like you would if you said 'No.' Just not too hard."

Snape raised his eyebrows at her, clearly thinking she was daft, but complied. As he shook his head gingerly, he felt his hair falling forward again. He frowned, but Hermione smiled, pleased. "There! That's it." She reached out and fingered the short locks forward, smoothing them down to frame his face. Grabbing her brush again, she made a few more swipes at his hair, artfully smoothing the tresses that were pulled back and separating those that were hanging forward. Smiling widely, obviously pleased with herself, she leant back against the table and said, "Perfect."

Snape quirked an eyebrow at her in disbelief. He started to lean around her to see the mirror, but she deftly moved out of the way. She leant down behind him, beaming into the mirror as he gazed at his reflection. It was an interesting mix of his usual look and the slicked back style he wore as the Phantom. He glanced at Hermione and saw the sparkle of desire in her eyes. That decided it. If she liked it that much, he would certainly wear it and revel in the response it got! In one swift movement, he stood and spun, gazing down into Hermione's upturned face, feeling the wisps of hair tickling his cheeks. His eyes flicked at the time and saw that they had to leave soon. With a chivalrous air, he bowed and offered his arm to her.

"May I escort you to the play, madam?"

Hermione smiled and gazed up at him through her lashes. "I would certainly enjoy that, sir." She slipped her hand into the crook of his arm and they made their way downstairs. As they got to the doorway to the living room, Hermione slid her hand off his arm and felt him step away. She stepped through the doorway first, to be met with exclamations of appreciation.

"Oh, Hermione! You look absolutely stunning! Here's that wrap I mentioned." Mrs. Granger stepped forward and draped a fake fur jacket over her shoulders.

"I say, you look so grown up! Where's my little girl?" Mr. Granger beamed at Hermione, stepping forward to take her hands and twirl her in place. He squeezed her hands

playfully and Hermione laughed.

"Oh, Dad, I'm right here. I've just grown up, that's all." She smiled at her parents, basking in their love.

Snape stealthily sidled into the room, keeping a few paces behind Hermione. Mrs. Granger caught the movement in her peripheral vision and turned to see Snape. Her eyes widened and she tilted her head, gazing at him. Hermione saw her attention shift and looked. She choked back a laugh at her mother's dazed look. Mr. Granger followed Hermione's gaze and smirked at his wife's expression.

Snape felt self-conscious with all eyes on him, but he kept his expression calmly detached. Politely clearing his throat, he said, "We need to leave shortly. Do you have the tickets?"

Mr. Granger snapped his fingers and nodded, bustling into the kitchen. Mrs. Granger glanced back at Hermione and seemed to regain her faculties. Waving her hands about, she announced, "Pictures! I need pictures!" She immediately went to a hutch and began rifling through the drawers, looking for the camera.

Hermione rolled her eyes and almost wailed, "Mu-u-um! Please!"

Snape glanced between them, unsure of what was going on. Mr. Granger reappeared, bearing two tickets. He saw Hermione's aggrieved expression and his wife at the hutch and asked, "What are you looking for, love?"

"The camera. I need pictures!" Not a second later, she spun around, triumphantly brandishing a camera. "Here! Now, Hermione, go stand in front of the fireplace." She waved her hand at Hermione, herding her toward the hearth. Hermione cradled her face in her hand, shaking her head. Snape finally realized what her mother wanted and was trying to keep his smirk of amusement from surfacing. By the trenchant look Hermione shot him, he guessed he wasn't entirely successful.

Hermione trudged over to the fireplace and stood there. Glaring at her mother, she huffed irritably.

"Smile, dear!" Hermione forced a wan smile and her mother took some pictures. Then, Mrs. Granger turned to Snape and said, "Severus, come over here and get in the picture too. You both look so nice..."

Snape froze, his amusement fading into abject horror. Hermione's forced smile gave way to a real one of smug satisfaction. She gave him a look that clearly said, "Ha! Laugh at me? Take that!" Mr. Granger looked at Snape and chuckled.

"Oh, go on, Severus. It's just a picture. I know wizard pictures are different, but it won't hurt you." He gestured toward the fireplace and grinned.

Snape swallowed and grit his teeth. He glared at Hermione, who was beaming at him. Stiffly stepping beside her, he stood and grimly regarded Mrs. Granger and the camera.

"Smile for the camera!" Mrs. Granger chirped.

Snape raised an eyebrow and looked down his nose at her. "Madam, Severus Snape does not smile for pictures."

Hermione saw her mother's smile fading and quickly jumped in. "Really, Mum, it just wouldn't do to have evidence of Professor Snape smiling. It could ruin his reputation at Hogwarts..."

Snape glared down at her sternly, but she just smirked back. Mrs. Granger's smile came back as she chuckled knowingly. "Oh, I see. Well, in that case... Hermione, you smile, and Severus, just look imposing."

Snape gazed at her repressively and she cried, "Perfect!" as she took a few shots.

Giggling, Hermione stepped away and said, "Mum, we really have to go. It's after 7:00."

"Oh, indeed! Very well. Remember, there's dessert in the fridge, and don't forget to set your alarms for tomorrow morning. I'll be up at 7:00 to fix breakfast before you two set off for your tour."

Hermione hugged her mother and said, "Thanks, Mum. Will you be up when we get back?" Then she hugged her father.

"Oh, no. It'll be late. We'll be in bed. You two enjoy yourselves!" Mrs. Granger beamed at them as Hermione stepped back to Snape.

"We'll try to be quiet when we get in, so we won't disturb you." Hermione glanced between her parents earnestly.

"No worries, dear. Be careful and have fun!" Mr. Granger patted Hermione on the shoulder and stepped over to his wife.

Snape lightly gripped Hermione's upper arm and said in a low voice, "Are you ready?" Hermione nodded and Snape cast the concealment charm over them both again before Apparating to the theatre. As they dissolved from view, Hermione saw her parents' identical expressions of wonder and suppressed a giggle. Invisible, she grabbed for Snape's hand and twined her fingers in it. He squeezed her hand tightly and they disappeared.

21- The Play and Dessert

Chapter 22 of 84

Snape and Hermione arrive at the theatre and see the play. Upon returning home, they partake of the dessert Mrs. Granger left in the fridge. The evening is almost ruined when Snape crosses a line, but Hermione manages to salvage it after all. Too bad she ends up frustrated...

Standard disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: I hope all you folks out there who are desperately yearning for lemons can make do with this chapter, even though the real lemons are ever-elusive. LOL!!

Chapter 21- The Play and Dessert

When Snape and Hermione Apparated to the theatre, they appeared very close to a throng of people milling about out front. It was only through Snape's quick reflexes that

they didn't bump into anyone while invisible and cause confusion. Snape had his wand in his right hand, and his left hand was entwined with Hermione's right. As soon as they arrived, he noticed that a couple was about to run into them and hastily yanked Hermione toward him and backwards. Hermione, taken unawares by the abrupt tug, flailed wildly, teetering on her heels, and fell against Snape, who promptly wrapped his arms around her to keep her upright. Thus it was that Hermione was pressed hard against Snape's chest and his arms were wrapped around her, his hands splayed across her chest and belly. Somehow, both managed to keep quiet.

As soon as she felt steady on her feet again, Hermione clapped her hands over Snape's, feeling the quivering in her stomach at the feel of his strong hands very near her breasts. Snape tried at once to pull away, but Hermione held on firmly, tilting her head back and hissing, "Over there. We have to get to those shadows to become visible again. Are you ready?"

Snape nodded, then realized that she couldn't see him and quietly grunted an affirmative, once again trying to regain possession of his hands. Hermione wrapped her fingers around his hands and sighed as she let them drop to her sides, pulling him behind her as she wended her way to the shadows. Once there, she quickly spun around and slid her hands along Snape's arms and over his chest, slipping her fingers up to his neck. Snape stiffened in surprise at her touch and backed away, only to find himself up against a wall. He cursed the fact that she was invisible, because he couldn't get a read on what she might do, but a part of him revelled in the heightened sensations caused by the lack of seeing her. His body responded to the forbidden excitement and allure of being so anonymous while with Hermione.

Hermione felt Snape's reluctance in his posture, but she pressed the issue, delighting in the daring impulse. She anchored one hand against the back of his neck and lightly walked her other fingers over his jaw line to his lips, which thinned and trembled under her touch. With a throaty giggle, she pulled Snape's resisting head down to her and kissed him full on the lips, pressing her body against his.

Snape's mind was reeling. He was being thoroughly kissed by someone he couldn't even see, and no one could see how much he was enjoying it either! A low groan emerged from his throat as he gave in and began kissing Hermione back. He felt a tightening in his loins at her faint moan of delight. After a few moments of passionate snogging, Snape fought to regain his senses and pulled back resolutely.

Gasping, he said, "Hermione, we have to stop. It's time to get our seats for the play. And we *have* to control ourselves! We cannot allow anything to show in our memories in the Pensieve! Now, I must reverse the concealment charm. Are you ready?"

Hermione voiced an inarticulate noise of impatience and annoyance. Sighing deeply, she composed herself and trailed her fingertips along Snape's invisible lips. She grinned at his involuntary attempt to nip her fingers. Finally, she muttered, "Fine. I'm ready." In her mind, she was screaming, *I'm ready for everything! I'm ready for you!* She slid her hands down his chest and lightly twined her fingers with his again as he cast the charm. They shimmered into view, cloaked in the shadows.

As soon as they were visible again, Snape squeezed her hand and urged her toward the theatre. Resignedly, Hermione turned and strode toward the doors, with Snape beside her, holding her hand. They made their way into the theatre, offering their tickets to the usher, who showed them to their seats. Snape gazed alertly about him, taking in the décor and the size of the theatre. He realized that they had extremely good seats and reminded himself to thank the Grangers again for their efforts. He guided Hermione to her seat and held her coat for her to slide out of it. He was hard pressed to keep his hands to himself at the sight of her smooth skin and the delectable nape of her neck. Hermione took the coat from him and laid it against the back of her seat.

Snape heard an usher offering him the programme and took one. He turned to sit and was met with the sight of Hermione's thigh peeking through the slit in her dress. Sinking weakly into his seat, he couldn't take his eyes off her leg. She had sat down, and crossed her right leg over her left, causing the slit to spread across her right thigh, showing off the top of her smoky stocking clasped in the suspender. A tiny triangle of creamy flesh was visible above the stocking.

Hermione was absorbed in looking at her programme and didn't realize what effect she was inadvertently having on Snape. After a few beats, she turned to mention something in the programme and saw Snape's expression. He looked rather dazed, and his black eyes were crackling with heat. He even had faint spots of colour burning on his cheeks. Hermione's eyebrows rose and her mouth formed an "o" of astonishment. She followed his gaze and realized just how exposed she was. Gasping in chagrin, she quickly uncrossed her legs, smoothing her skirt. She felt herself flushing in embarrassment, but that turned to calculating amusement as she looked again at Snape. He had shaken his head violently and his eyes darted everywhere but at her. Clearing his throat savagely, he shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his programme conspicuously in his lap.

Hermione smirked to herself. The theatre was filling up quickly and people had taken seats on either side of them. She decided to have mercy on the poor man and affected interest in her programme again until he had regained his composure.

Snape mentally berated himself for his base reactions to Hermione. *Good gods, man! Get a grip! You haven't been this out of control in... ever! You have an assignment and you must focus on it. Ignore temptation. You've always managed to stay focused before! Of course, you've never quite been faced with this kind of temptation before either. Bloody hell... I'm so going to lose my job...* Snape cradled his face in his hands and closed his eyes, suppressing a groan. Disconsolately, he peered at Hermione and murmured, "Once the play starts, be sure to look at everything onstage, even if it's not the focus of the scene. Dumbledore needs to be able to see the whole set. And, every time it changes, look at everything again. Is that clear?"

Hermione turned solemn eyes on Snape and nodded gravely. Snape continued, in a low hiss, "Remember, he will be able to see everything we see. So, please, if you value your education and care for me to keep my job, *please* don't let anything slip!" He gazed at her meaningfully. Hermione looked at him, owl-eyed, and nodded again. The lights began to dim and the buzz of conversation in the theatre turned into a susurrus of whispers. Snape sat back in his seat and firmly turned his attention to the stage. Hermione glanced at him one last time before following suit.

The lights went down and the play began. It was fairly easy to focus on it for a while, since it was rather overwhelming, especially with being so close to the stage. Snape had to consciously think about blinking every time his eyes began to water. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He felt like he was caught up with the swell of music and the current of emotions, and his chest felt like it would burst with enjoyment. Hermione chanced a glance at him, on pretence of leaning over to comment on a costume, and saw the rapt light in his dark eyes. Snape barely registered her whisper, almost mesmerized by the performance.

Hermione saw how much Snape was enjoying the play and sat back again, inordinately pleased. She gazed about with a huge grin on her face, trying to keep herself from mouthing along with the songs. Eventually, it came to the scene with the magic mirror, and Snape leant forward in his seat, staring hard at the stage. As soon as he heard the Phantom start his song, he jerked, sitting rigidly, his expression one of intense concentration. Hermione couldn't help but glance at him as he reacted so physically, and the fleeting thought that if he could "burn with the heat of his eyes," the whole stage would be aflame, so intently was he eyeing the performance.

As the play progressed through to "Music of the Night," Snape completely forgot about everyone else in the theatre, including Hermione. He was so absorbed in the performance, imagining himself in the role, recording the way the Phantom moved and gestured, that he could almost feel himself inhabiting the body of the actor onstage. As the song ended, he slowly sank back in his seat, but he never took his eyes off the Phantom. When the scene changed to the point where Christine snatched the mask off the Phantom, Snape gripped the arms of his seat so hard his knuckles turned white, and he scowled fiercely, breathing harshly in empathy. Hermione started at his vehement response and flicked a wary glance at him before hastily focusing on the play again. Eventually he relaxed again, thoughtfully watching the scenes with "Notes" and "Prima Donna."

When "Il Muto" began, he gracefully leant his chin on two long slender fingers, bemusedly gazing at the scene. When the Phantom's voice echoed throughout the theatre, he rapidly darted his gaze around, a small smile hovering on his lips. As the scene progressed, he smirked maliciously along with the Phantom's laughter and eyed the swinging chandelier. But, when Carlotta left the stage and the ballet began, his smirk faded and he regarded the shadows with growing seriousness. Hermione glanced at Snape again as the garrotted body of Buquet fell from the ceiling and saw his closed, bleak expression.

Christine and Raoul escaped to the roof, and eventually began "All I Ask of You." Hermione sternly kept herself from looking at Snape again, but she furtively snuck her hand over the arm of the seat to nestle in his.

Snape was seething as he watched the scene with Christine and Raoul, thinking about Hermione and Potter. He froze in panic at the feel of her soft hand creeping into his. Frantically, he kept his eyes on the stage, refusing to glance down at her hand in his. *What the hell does she think she's doing? She's going to get us in trouble! Just don't*

look, and maybe she'll move it soon. Has she lost her senses? He forced himself to pay attention to the play, and not to her warm fingers snug in his hand.

As the song continued, and Christine sang, "Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime . . . say the word and I will follow you . . ." Hermione squeezed Snape's hand firmly, hoping to get the point across. Then, when Christine and Raoul kissed, she not only squeezed his hand, but she also rubbed her thumb across the edge of his thumb and forefinger, caressing him lightly.

Snape felt her ministrations and noted the timing of them. His heart thumped oddly in response, and his throat tightened. Stoically, he managed to keep his eyes on the stage, pretending Hermione was not wreaking havoc with his emotions. As Christine and Raoul left the stage and the Phantom sang his betrayal, Hermione gripped Snape's hand tightly. He swallowed thickly, blinking. Then, when the scene ended with the chandelier falling at Christine's feet, Hermione furtively slipped her hand from his to applaud the end of Act One. Snape immediately began applauding as well, grateful that she had released him. As the house lights came back up for intermission, Snape allowed himself to look at Hermione.

In a low voice, he murmured, "I understand your appreciation of the play now. It was already quite interesting as we've been reading and listening to it, but seeing it in action... It's extraordinary." He felt his lips widening into a beatific smile and found he couldn't stop himself. But, the answering smile from Hermione reconciled him to his lack of control. She beamed up at him, her eyes twinkling.

With a saucy tilt of her head, she tilted, "See, I told you it wouldn't be so bad, having to see the play with me..."

Snape arched one eyebrow in mock severity, before he let his faint scowl dissolve into a secretive smouldering look. His lip curling, he purred, "Indeed, it has been most... revealing."

Hermione's breath caught at the sultry note in his voice, and her eyes widened. Inexorably, she glanced down at her thigh, remembering how exposed she had been and how Snape had reacted. Her eyes darted to the programme in his lap before she looked back up at him through her lashes, flushing. Snape smirked.

In a husky whisper, Hermione said, "So, I suppose Dumbledore has no need to see intermission, wouldn't you say?" Snape saw the devilish gleam in her eye.

Warily, he retorted, "I should say not. Why do you ask?" His eyes narrowed on her shrewdly.

Casually, Hermione arched her back, stretching, thrusting her chest forward as she re-crossed her legs, once again allowing the slit to open over her thigh. She stretched her arms out wide and let her right arm drop behind Snape in his seat. Languidly, she glanced over at him and saw him gazing at her, his posture rigid, his eyes hungrily travelling across her chest and down over her thigh before creeping back up again. Enjoying herself hugely, Hermione lightly grazed her fingers along the back of Snape's neck and revelled in the shudder that swept over him as he closed his eyes.

Snape was reeling again. *Merlin help me! This slip of a girl is a bloody vixen! That's it. I'm going to put some things into MY Pensieve before we go to Dumbledore, just to be safe... Hmm... Well, in that case...* Snape came to a decision and opened his eyes, pinning Hermione with a stare that engulfed her in blazing heat and desire. She gasped and blinked rapidly.

Snape surreptitiously glanced around and saw that the people who had been seated around them were all gone, no doubt at the loo or in the lobby buying merchandise. When he looked back at Hermione, she noticed that his gaze had become almost predatory, and she suppressed a shiver, feeling a throb in the vicinity of her knickers. He leant toward her and stopped just millimetres from her ear, his nose brushing against her curls. Hermione could feel his warm breath against her ear, and her eyes closed involuntarily as he spoke.

In a deep, velvet purr, he said, "No, indeed. There are certainly things that Dumbledore does not need to see. Intermission is one of them..." Hermione jumped as she felt his gentle fingertips teasing the triangle of flesh above her stocking, coupled with the tickling sensations of his nose nuzzling her ear and neck. Her eyes flew open and she barely contained a squeak as he nipped along the cord of her neck, bathing it with hot breath, while his hand deftly smoothed the silky material of her stocking, cupping her knee as he came to it.

Snape's mind was screaming that he was going too far, but his body was disagreeing vehemently. He could feel Hermione's pulse racing under his lips and he smiled against her soft skin. The heady aroma of her perfume filled his nose, adding to the welter of sensations and thoughts spinning through him. He heard her shallow, halting breaths and lifted his lips to her ear again, breathing, "Is anything amiss, Miss Granger?" Hermione exhaled on a low note of longing and frustration. Snape heard the other patrons returning and gave a low, throaty chuckle before he retreated to his seat, sliding his hand along her leg again on its way back over the arm to his side. Hermione closed her eyes and swallowed harshly at the vibrations his laughter had sent across the sensitive shell of her ear. Blinking rapidly to focus her eyesight, she dazedly dragged her arm back from behind Snape and let her hands fall limply into her lap.

Snape leant back in his seat languorously, extremely satisfied with Hermione's reactions. A faint smirk hovered on his lips and he gazed at the stage from under hooded lids. He felt the tingle on his cheek that signalled Hermione staring at him and casually turned to her, affecting innocent inquiry. He raised his eyebrows at her as she pinned him with an intense glare.

Hermione was squirming in her seat, uncomfortably aware of how soaked her knickers were after Snape's surprising turnabout. Glancing irritably about at the rest of the theatre, realizing that Act Two was about to start, Hermione narrowed her eyes dangerously at Snape and muttered, "Touché." Tilting her chin up at a haughty angle, she sat back in her seat and buried her nose in her programme. Snape's smirk widened as he watched her eyes and noted that they weren't moving as she ostensibly "read" her programme. The lights dimmed, and he focused once again on the stage as the second act began.

Both Snape and Hermione were dazzled by the spectacle of the Masquerade. Their tête-à-tête was forgotten in the dizzying display in front of them. Snape leant forward in his seat, as if drawn to the performance. As the second "Notes" scene began, Snape sank back into his seat, his eyes darting between the actors as they sang their respective parts. When Christine finally cried out in her frustration, Snape scowled blackly, glaring at Raoul. Hermione was so absorbed in the scene, since she would be performing it, that she didn't even glance at Snape to see his reaction.

Both were silently engrossed in the play as it progressed through the rehearsal of "Don Juan" to Christine's trek to the graveyard. As the scene built, with the confrontation between Raoul and the Phantom seemingly imminent, Hermione snuck a glance at Snape, only to see him hunched forward in his seat, his elbows on his knees, glaring menacingly at the stage. She was impressed by his obvious focus as he stared intently at the Phantom shooting fireballs at Raoul and causing the lightning and flames to flare onstage. Then, as the scene came to an end, Snape pursed his lips and relaxed back into his seat, one finger thoughtfully tracing his mouth.

Hermione cast her attention back to the play as the scene that was not included in the recording began. Soon after that, "Don Juan" began, leading up to "Point of No Return." Hermione shifted discreetly in her seat, doggedly keeping her eyes on the performance, when all she wanted to do was look longingly at Snape.

Snape was once again caught up in the play. He gazed at the performers, a rapt light shining in his impossibly black eyes. When "Point of No Return" began, he unknowingly heaved a long sigh. Hermione heard him, but avoided looking. Then, when the song changed and the Phantom offered Christine a ring, Hermione was startled by Snape's sharp gasp, followed by an explosive exhalation. Flicking her gaze toward him, she noticed that his hands were balled into tight fists on his knees. When Christine finally pulled the Phantom's mask off and the audience could see his face, Snape backed into his seat forcefully, staring in wide-eyed fascination and horror at the gruesome sight. In her peripheral vision, Hermione saw him absently lift his hand to his face, grazing across the area that would be affected by the glamour.

Hermione's attention was drawn back to the performance as the culminating scene in the Phantom's dungeon began. She focused keenly on the interplay between Christine and the Phantom, cataloguing their actions and movements for future reference. When Raoul arrived, and the Phantom secured him in the noose, Hermione glanced again at Snape, to see him watching the actors, completely still, like a statue. She could barely tell he was breathing, and he was hardly even blinking. Her pulse sped up as the climax neared, and when Christine finally kissed the Phantom, her stomach clenched before roiling agitatedly.

Furtively glancing at Snape, she saw his hands gripping so tightly that they were trembling, but they relaxed as the kiss went on, until his fists opened into limp hands drooping over his kneecaps as the kiss ended. She could see his chest rising and falling like a bellows as he breathed heavily in the wake of the climax.

The final few minutes of the play wound down, bittersweet, until the Phantom disappeared and the mob arrived in his lair. Then, the curtain closed on the final image of Meg kneeling by the throne with the Phantom's mask in her hand, reflecting light all over the theatre. Applause erupted around them, and Snape clapped fiercely. As the curtain opened for the cast's curtain call, Snape instinctively shot to his feet, applauding vigorously. Hermione smiled to herself as she joined him and many of the rest of the audience in the standing ovation. Snape showed no signs of slowing as the cast made their way off the stage after their bows, preferring to applaud until they were all completely out of sight and the audience had begun filing out of the theatre. Then, he stopped clapping and sighed deeply, almost reverently, as he took one last, long look around him.

"Amazing," he said, in a voice barely above a whisper.

When he turned to Hermione, his eyes were glittering and his expression was one of someone who had been deeply moved. Hermione smiled gently up at him and reached out to grip his arm. He glanced down, surprised at her touch, and seemed to come to his senses again. Politely, he picked up her coat and held it for her to put on. Hermione flashed a dazzling smile at him and murmured, "Thank you," as she turned to slip into the coat.

Glancing over her shoulder at him, she saw him courteously gesture for her to precede him out of the row. As she exited the row and turned to him, he offered his arm to her with a courtly bow and a small smile. Twinkling at him, Hermione slipped her hand inside his elbow and enjoyed being swept up the aisle on his arm. She kept casting admiring glances up at him, devouring his dashing ensemble and aristocratic air. Without having to discuss it, they strode directly to the spot where they had become visible again and ensconced themselves in the shadows.

Snape withdrew his wand and pulled Hermione against him, wrapping his other arm around her and gazing down into her upturned face. Hermione was taken aback by his initiative, but her surprise dissolved into pleasure at the warmth of his lean frame against her. She smiled as his velvet voice murmured the charm and they disappeared from view. In the darkness, she felt them Apparate.

She voiced a faint squeal of delight to find them back in front of the fireplace in her living room instead of on her front step. A low chuckle sounded above her head and Snape cast the reversal. Hermione backed away a step to look up at Snape in the dim light from the dying embers left in the fireplace. He was staring at her intently, his lips almost quirked up in a smile. His eyebrow arched once and he purred, "Surprise."

Hermione giggled and flashed him that dazzling smile he so enjoyed. Tilting her head, she raised one eyebrow as she grabbed his hand and pulled him out to the foyer, where she placed a finger to her lips and shook her head, flicking her eyes at the stairs. Snape glanced up the stairs and back to her, his solemn expression belied by his dancing eyes as he helped her out of her coat. She quietly hung it up in the closet in the foyer. Grabbing his hand again, she pulled him into the kitchen and carefully shut the door behind her. Snape walked slowly through the kitchen, gazing about him interestedly. Hermione leant against the door, watching him hungrily, admiring his elegant posture and graceful movements. Snape ended up at the sink, where he slowly turned and leant back against the counter, his black eyes coming to rest on Hermione across the kitchen, eyeing him.

They locked gazes for a moment, devouring each other, as if etching the image of the other into their minds, never to be forgotten. Hermione found herself breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling noticeably, and she saw Snape's gaze drop to her cleavage, his jaw throbbing as he ground his teeth.

In a faint voice, Hermione managed to gasp out, "Mum said dessert was in the fridge. Would you like a snack before bedtime?" She smiled shakily at him, suddenly aware of her damp knickers again.

Snape noticed her trembling and smoothly answered, "That would be lovely," trying to maintain some semblance of normality. Hermione nodded and pushed herself off the door to cross to the refrigerator. She opened the door and bent down, peering inside. Snape felt a throb in his groin as he eyed her, her dress tight across her backside and riding up the back of her smoky-hued legs, above her knees.

Hermione moved something and then voiced an inarticulate cry of delight. Hastily standing up, she spun on Snape, holding a bowl and beaming. She crossed to the small table against the wall and placed the bowl on it, excitedly turning and retrieving two smaller bowls and spoons as well. Snape watched her, curious about what sort of food would engender such a rapturous response. Hermione pulled the chairs away from the table and gestured for Snape to come sit. Her eyes sparkled and her grin was infectious as she looked at him.

One eyebrow arching in inquiry, Snape lifted his chin in her direction and asked, "What is it?"

Hermione breathed, "My favourite!"

Rolling his eyes at such an evasive answer, Snape began unbuttoning his opera coat, striding toward the table. Hermione's eyes goggled at him and her grin faltered a moment before she caught herself and smiled again, colour rising in her cheeks. Snape's lip curled in a wicked smirk as he shrugged out of his coat, folding it neatly and draping it across the back of his chair before gracefully sinking into it. Hermione seemed to wilt into her seat, looking slightly dazed as Snape began to undo his cuffs, turning them up twice. Then, when he undid the button on his collar, Hermione swallowed nervously, her eyes almost as black as Snape's, so dilated were her pupils. Snape was thoroughly enjoying the effect he was having on her and leant back languidly in his chair, watching her from under hooded lids. Once again affecting polite interest, he asked, "And what exactly is your favourite?"

Hermione's face plainly showed the rush of answers that wanted to come out, mainly, "You! You're my favourite!" but she swallowed thickly and rasped, "Chocolate mousse, with cherries and whipped cream on top."

Snape leant forward slightly, interested in the dessert, remembering how delicious dinner had been. He looked into the bowl and saw the rich colour of the mousse, topped by the mound of whipped cream. Several maraschino cherries with stems were clustered on top, shining brightly in the light. In a conversational tone, Snape ventured, "So you like chocolate?"

Hermione nodded vigorously. "I don't know anyone who doesn't! But I love the mousse. It has such a divinely rich taste and the texture is so smooth and light. But it's even better with the whipped cream and cherries to complement it!" She chewed on her lower lip, eyeing the mousse with a hungry expression similar to the one she had been casting at Snape earlier. Snape bit back a snort of amusement.

Sitting back in his chair, he raised his hands in mock defence, as if warding her off. "By all means, don't let me stand in the way of your rendezvous with the mousse." He favoured her with a sardonic smirk.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him in pique. He was making fun of her! *Fine, then. Be that way. We'll see how superior you act in a minute...* Hermione huffed haughtily at him and reached into the bowl to lift out a cherry. Pinning him with an intense stare, she slowly brought the cream-covered cherry to her mouth, slipping her tongue out to lightly lick the whipped cream off it. Snape's smirk vanished with comical haste. He shifted in his seat, jaw line twitching, eyes glued to Hermione's tongue.

Hermione exaggerated every movement as she licked the cherry clean, letting her lids droop in decadent delight. Once the cherry was clean, she gently sucked it into her mouth, closing her lips around the stem. Just to torment Snape further, she let it slip out of her mouth with a slight "pop" and then resumed her ministrations. Finally, she sucked it into her mouth and bit the fruit from the stem. As she jerked the stem from her lips, Snape jumped. Hermione closed her eyes in sensual enjoyment as she chewed the cherry and swallowed. Sighing in contentment, she opened her eyes and smirked at Snape. His hands were gripping the table edge, and he was breathing shallowly, looking very agitated.

In a falsely bright voice, Hermione remarked, "I prefer the cherries with the stems. They provide food *and* entertainment." Snape blinked rapidly. Hermione smiled sweetly at him and whispered, "Watch." She put the stem in her mouth and held his gaze as she worked her jaw. After several moments of concentration on Hermione's part and tense observation on Snape's part, Hermione's lips widened into a wicked grin and she lifted her fingers to her lips, pulling out the cherry stem. Triumphant presenting it to a bewildered Snape, she trilled, "Ta da!"

Snape looked at the cherry stem on her palm. It was now tied in a knot. He glanced up at her in dumb amazement. His mind was feverishly trying to handle the sensory and

informational overload. As he grappled with her unusual accomplishment, that riotous voice in his head shouted, *Merlin's bloody balls! Just think what else she could do with her tongue!* Snape closed his eyes, trying to control the manic urge to lunge across the table and teach her *other* tricks to do with her tongue. Finally opening his eyes again, he stoically composed himself and murmured, "Very... intriguing."

Hermione stifled a giggle and reached into the bowl, snagging another cherry. Lifting it, she extended her hand toward Snape, purring, "Want a taste?"

Snape arched an eyebrow at her in unmistakable warning, exhaling fiercely through his nose. His eyes burned with his desire for "a taste." He eyed the fruit a moment and then snorted in a sudden fit of amusement. Hermione was taken aback by his rapid mood shift and her brow furrowed, puzzled. Her outstretched hand dropping just slightly, she asked, "What's so funny?"

Snape's lips were twitching, holding back his laughter. Struck with a wicked impulse, he leant over the table toward Hermione, closing in on her. She looked at him, startled and wary. He grabbed her hand and pulled it between their faces, pointedly looking at it. Then he moved it out of the way and leant closer to Hermione, his voice a low growl in her ear.

"Do you realize you have just offered me *your cherry*?"

Hermione gasped and stiffened. She yanked her hand from his grasp and backed away from his rumbling laugh. Without thinking, she shoved the cream-covered cherry into his mouth, smearing it across his lips, pushing him backward. She felt a rush of satisfaction at his expression of startled surprise and the abrupt end of his chuckle. Then, realizing what she had just done, her eyes flew wide open and she froze, afraid of his reaction.

Snape backed slowly away from Hermione and sank back into his seat. He serenely reached up to pull the stem from the fruit in his mouth, tossing it to the table. Methodically, he chewed and swallowed. Then, his tongue snaked out to lick the whipped cream from his lips. His eyes never left Hermione's as he purred, "Delicious."

Hermione shakily sat back down. Trembling, she silently dished up two bowls of mousse, sliding one across the table to Snape. Her gaze fluttered up to him and back down to her bowl. They ate in silence for a few moments. Then, Snape, high on the rush of adrenaline, endorphins, and other heady sex hormones, spoke.

In that same light, conversational tone, he commented, "I have heard that some people say chocolate is better than sex..." He gazed at Hermione through his lashes, idly licking mousse from his spoon.

Hermione flushed, feeling a tingle in her centre at Snape's voice uttering the word "sex." She glanced about, flustered, and muttered, "I wouldn't know."

Snape snapped to attention. *Virgin!* that voice screamed in his head. He was suddenly overcome with a wave of shame and remorse for his crass comment earlier. He dropped the bowl onto the table with a clatter and savagely cleared his throat. Heat suffused his face as he writhed in embarrassment. *What the hell do you think you're doing? You really are pushing it...*

He shot to his feet, startling Hermione. Snatching his bowl and spoon and rushing to the sink, he rinsed them with the energy borne of self-castigation. Determinedly not looking at Hermione again, Snape said, in a politely cool voice of indifference, "Your mother is quite an accomplished cook. Dessert was just as wonderful as dinner. I must remember to convey my gratitude in the morning." He turned off the water and doggedly strode to his chair, picking up his coat. "Speaking of which, morning will be here sooner than we might like, so I believe it is time to retire."

Hermione was watching him mutely, bewildered by his complete mood shifts. Slowly, she stood, picking up the bowl and placing it back in the refrigerator. Snape grabbed her bowl, dropped his coat again, and proceeded to rinse her bowl like he did his. Hermione leant against the refrigerator, baffled at his behaviour and worried. Tentatively, she ventured, "Are you okay?"

Snape straightened and his hands stilled. He gazed up at the ceiling and then dropped his chin to his chest, defeated. Resuming his vigorous scrubbing, he rumbled, "No. Once again, I must apologize. I was completely out of line, and I am disgusted with myself for my lack of couth. I don't know what came over me. I'm sorry I offended you." His shoulders drooped and he shut off the water resignedly, but he didn't turn around.

Hermione crossed to him and gently laid her hand on his shoulder. He shuddered and pulled away, spinning to face her. Hermione noted the white-knuckled grip he had on the countertop and looked up into his grim face. His expression was bleak with self-loathing and he wouldn't meet her eyes.

Hermione tried to catch his eye, but he kept turning his head, avoiding her. She whispered, "Severus." Snape's eyes closed and his brow furrowed in pain. Hermione stepped closer to him, almost against him, trapping him against the counter. She reached up and gently cupped his cheek in her hand. He started and tried to back away, but she wouldn't let him. She made a "tsk" noise with her tongue and sternly said, "Severus, look at me." Snape miserably faced her.

In a low but strong voice, she said, "I'm fine. You didn't offend me." Snape rolled his eyes and snorted in disbelief. Hermione eyed him severely and gripped his chin, forcing him to look her in the eye again. "Fine, if you won't believe that... I forgive you. Is that what you needed to hear?" She saw the shame in his eyes and smiled gently in reassurance. "I forgive you. For whatever you mistakenly think you did to need it. I'm fine. Please, let's not let such a wonderful evening be spoilt, ending like this." Snape's jaw was throbbing fiercely; she felt it under her hand. Knowing his propensity to wallow in his suffering, she made a decision.

"Let it end like this..." She lifted her other hand and slid it along his hair to the back of his head. His eyes were stunned as she pulled his head down and she stretched up to meet him. She kissed him. It wasn't the deep, passionate snogging from in the shadows before the play. It was a sweet, healing benison of trust and affection. She held him until she felt the stiffness in his posture dissolve. Finally, he slid his hands around her, crushing her in a vehement embrace. He pulled away from her kiss to bury his face in her neck. Hermione smiled and murmured, "Yes, I much prefer this ending..." She felt Snape's bark of amazed laughter.

He trailed his hands deftly across her back, caressing her shoulders tenderly. He pulled back and regarded her in wonder before he enveloped her in his arms again, tucking her head under his chin. He kissed her hair and whispered, "Thank you, Hermione. You don't know how much I needed to know what it was like to be forgiven."

He inhaled the intoxicating scent of her hair and her perfume and rained kisses on her, her hair, her ears, her neck, her shoulders, her jaw, and finally her mouth. When he claimed her lips in a searing kiss, Hermione could feel the change in his demeanour. He was no longer closed off and miserable. Pleased that he was no longer blaming himself, she responded to his kiss with heat.

Their kiss turned into a long, slow, sensual, probing exploration of each other. Snape tasted the chocolate on her tongue and sighed in bliss. Hermione revelled in the shuddering warmth that seemed to end up collecting in her knickers. After several minutes, Snape felt like sobbing in relief that he had found Hermione, and that she had managed to find him.

Him. The real him. Not the Potions Master persona he put on for everyone to see. She saw through that and understood parts of him that *he* didn't even fully comprehend. How could she have known the right things to say and do otherwise? Regretfully, he realized that they had to get some sleep before the tour the next morning. He pulled away from Hermione and slid his hands into the hair at the base of her skull. He felt the hairpins and smiled faintly as he systematically rooted them out, collecting them on the counter beside them. Finally, once they were all out, he gently released Hermione's hair from its twist and finger-combed her curly tresses over her bare shoulders. She watched him with eyes glazed in pleasure.

He smiled at her. "There's my bushy-haired Gryffindor..." Hermione's heart thumped at his words. She gazed up at him, rapt, her breath catching. Snape grazed his fingers over her hair, smirking indulgently at her shiver. In a velvet purr, he said, "It's past your curfew..." Resolutely, he clasped her hands in his and pulled her away from the counter. Deftly snagging his coat, he guided her to the kitchen door. She gazed at him reproachfully. His eyes twinkling, he tilted his head toward the door and placed one long slender finger to his lips, imitating her gesture when they had arrived.

He led the way out and up the stairs, Hermione trailing wistfully behind him. Between their doors, they stopped, facing one another. Snape glanced down the hall at the Grangers' closed door. Inclining his head toward Hermione, he spun and opened his door quietly. He turned and regarded her from the doorway. In a faint whisper, he said,

"Good night. Sweet dreams." Then, giving her one last smouldering look, he closed the door between them, leaving Hermione standing in the hallway.

Hermione sighed. Resignedly, she moped into the bathroom to brush her teeth and wash her makeup off before going to bed. Exiting the bathroom, she tiptoed to Snape's door, listening hard. She couldn't hear anything, and she couldn't tell if there was light coming from under the door or not. Mouth twisting in a moue of disappointment, she turned off the hall light and retreated to her bedroom.

22- A Hard Day's Night

Chapter 23 of 84

After sharing dessert and intimacy, Snape and Hermione separate to get some sleep before the tour in the morning.
Hermione can't sleep and decides to find out if Snape can. How will he react to her invasion?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: For those of you wanting smut, check out my one shot "Eve of Battle" if you haven't already, since it will be a long time coming (no pun) in PoH. *wink* More epiphanies come up in this chapter, and we have sweetened lemonade, what with all the sugary realizations... Hope it doesn't rot your teeth, but if it does, I hear the Grangers are good dentists... Cheers! -Nicole aka Good_Witch

Chapter 22- A Hard Day's Night

Hermione pensively removed her choker and slipped out of her dress. Her cheeks flushed as she carefully removed her stockings and suspender belt, remembering Snape's expression as he eyed her thigh, and the warm feel of his hand caressing her leg. She sighed in frustration. Scowling, she put on her white cotton nightgown and climbed into her frilly bed, setting her alarm.

I really need to do something about my nightclothes and this room! Mercy, I'm an adult, and I feel like a little girl! No wonder he was horrified when he walked in here! But I think I may have managed to convince him that I'm not a girl anymore... A faint smile hovered over her lips and she felt a pulsing in her centre. She squeezed her legs together and realized anew how soaked her knickers were. She snorted. *As if it's any wonder with all that happened tonight..* She rolled onto her side, staring at her door in the darkness.

After almost an hour of staring...she knew how long because she kept watching the clock...she realized that she was not going to fall asleep any time soon. Her mind was racing too much, and every fibre of her being was awake and burning with feeling. All she could think about was wanting to be with Snape... and wanting to *be* with Snape. And that thought both titillated and terrified her.

I can't sleep. I wonder if he's sleeping. If he is, that's not fair! How can he sleep after everything that's happened? I can't believe that he just dragged me up here and shut the door! I mean, this is our chance to be ourselves... together, and he just goes to bed? We won't be able to let our feelings show when we get back to Hogwarts, so why not make the most of the short time we have now? She rolled fitfully onto her back, slamming her hands onto the bed. Irritably, she looked at the clock again. *Maybe I'll be able to sleep if I can just be near him. I can't stand thinking about him just across the hall, so close!*

Determined, she sat up in bed and grabbed her wand. Her pulse racing in response to her risky venture, she carefully tiptoed to her door and opened it. Poking her head out into the dark hallway, she pointed her wand at her parents' door and whispered a Silencing Charm. With a nervous swallow, she padded lightly across the hall to Snape's door and gripped the doorknob. Her hand was trembling and she took a deep breath to calm herself. Slowly, carefully, she turned the knob, hoping it wouldn't make much noise. Once she had it turned all the way, she pushed the door in, millimetre by millimetre, until she could squeeze through the gap and just as slowly and carefully close it again. Holding her breath in the darkness, she leant against the door, listening to see if Snape was awake or not. Gingerly, she crept toward the bed, listening hard.

Snape had fallen into a light, uneasy sleep. He had dressed in his lounge wear and slipped into bed after flicking the switch by the door to turn off the lights. The glow from the clock on the nightstand was enough for his eyes...accustomed to lurking in shadows...to see the bed. Irritably tugging on the short robe to smooth it out under him, he pulled the covers up to his chest, slid his wand under his pillow, and stared at the ceiling. Now that he was in bed, albeit an unfamiliar one, he could try to think through everything that had happened that night. His mind spun with all manner of confusing thoughts, but they all seemed to coalesce into the overriding one that he had finally discovered something...someone...that actually made him feel happy for the first time in far too many years. He rolled onto his side and closed his eyes. Dazed and worn out by the jumble of emotions he had raced through that evening, he quickly dozed off.

Snape's breathing continued to be slow and steady. His eyes stayed shut. But suddenly, every cell of his being was on red alert, attuned to some impending danger. He strained to hear something, anything. Something had awoken him, and he was trying to determine what it was, without letting on that he was no longer asleep. He sensed movement near him and his eyes opened a slit, seeing nothing but darkness. With incredible speed and precision, he grabbed his wand from under his pillow, flung the covers back and leapt to his feet on the bed, shouting, "*Expelliarmus!*" as he went. In the split-second blast of light from his wand, he saw Hermione being slammed back into the door, her wand flying across the room. Then, all was dark again.

There was a beat of electric silence, immediately followed by Snape's strangled curse as he barked several spells to illuminate the room, none of which worked as there were no candles or fireplaces to light. Hermione heard the bedsprings creaking as he trod on the bed trying to turn on the bedside lamps. There was a sound of fumbling followed by a heavy crash and Snape spitting, "Blast and damn! How do you work these confounded Muggle contraptions?"

Suddenly, the room was lit, and Snape was blinking furiously in the glare. Hermione was huddled against the door, but her arm was stretched up to flick the switch by the door. She gazed up at Snape, eyes widening at the sight. He was standing on the bed, poised on the balls of his bare feet, clad in his green satin lounge wear, his chest bare and framed by the short robe, his hair loose and dishevelled, hanging about his face, his wand clenched tightly in his hand, and his expression one of confused alertness and pained horror as he took in the sight of Hermione in a heap on the floor. After a beat of staring at her in mute shock, he bounded off the bed with feline grace and landed in front of her, gripping her upper arms and gazing intently into her face, assessing damage.

"Bugger all! Are you all right? Did I hurt you? Hermione, talk to me!" The urgency in his voice intensified at the sight of the tears that clung to her lashes.

In a shaky voice, Hermione said, "I'm okay, I think. I hit my head and it smarts a bit, but I think I'll be okay." She lifted a trembling hand and gingerly touched the back of her head, where a lump was forming under her fingers. She winced and Snape hissed in wretched empathy. He frowned and started to reach up to caress her hair, but stopped and gripped her arms again, this time more forcefully, and Hermione winced again.

His eyes had widened in horror and he went white as he whispered, "Bloody hell, Hermione, your parents! They must have heard us! You have to get out of here!" His

hands tightened spastically and Hermione made a pained noise in her throat. Snape realized what he was doing and released her as if he had been burned, hastily backing away from her. Hermione reached up and tentatively touched the lump on her head as she started to get to her feet. Snape rushed back to her and lifted her bodily off the floor. He set her on her feet and held her upright by her arms again. In a panic, he hissed, "Get out now! Before they find you here and all hell breaks loose!"

Hermione grimaced at him and murmured, "It's all right. They won't have heard anything. There's nothing to worry about."

Snape's eyes seemed to bug out in his incredulity. "I shouted, you slammed into the door, and then I broke your blasted lamp! What in blazes do you mean there's nothing to worry about?"

Hermione winced again as she said, "Because I put a Silencing Charm on their door. They can't hear anything beyond it."

Snape seemed frozen, staring at her blankly, until the information seemed to sink in. Dazed, he reiterated, "You... put a Silencing Charm on their door? Why would you do that?" His eyes bored into hers.

Hermione glanced up at him and then looked down again, flushing. In a small voice, she faltered, "Because I didn't want to take a chance that they might hear me going to your room..."

Snape stared at her, owl-eyed, and abruptly released her arms again, spinning and striding a few paces away before turning to face her again, his hands running through his hair to clasp behind his neck. He levelled an intense gaze at Hermione and she crossed her arms defensively under her breasts, her eyes darting around the room.

Hermione felt silly for having caused so much commotion. Her head ached and she was afraid Snape would be angry with her. Embarrassed, she finally looked at him, and was struck dumb at the sight.

He stood, his hands clasped behind his neck, the loose sleeves of his short robe falling past his elbows, revealing the white scar of the Dark Mark on his forearm. She goggled at his bare chest, her eyes trailing down his body to see his satin trousers hanging low on his slim hips. A thin line of dark hair wended its way from his navel down beneath the satin. Hermione felt a throb in her centre as well as in the lump on her head. She swallowed against a suddenly dry throat.

With a sigh, Snape let his hands fall back to his sides as he stepped closer to Hermione. His expression unreadable, he gazed down his nose at her and asked in a low voice, "And just what did you think you were doing, sneaking in here?"

Hermione scowled and chewed her lip petulantly. This was *not* what she had had in mind! Her head throbbed fiercely, and she felt humiliated. Unbidden, tears started to well up again, blurring her vision. She saw the hazy image of Snape move away from her, and heard a muttered, "*Reparo*." The bed springs creaked again and she felt a tingling along her scalp, as Snape's low voice uttered a healing charm for her head. Closing her eyes in grateful relief, she sighed. Hanging her head, she turned and trudged to the door, her voice tremulous as she said, "Thank you."

When she reached for the knob, Snape murmured, "What are you doing?"

Hermione refused to look back at him, unwilling to let him see her tears, and said, "I'm going back to bed. I'm sorry I disturbed you."

She started to turn the knob, but a whispered spell from Snape locked it, and it wouldn't budge. Hermione froze. Desperately sniffing, she furtively wiped her eyes. Behind her, she heard, "*Accio* wand." Suddenly, she realized that her wand had flown from her hand when Snape had blasted her, and now he had it. Squirming in mortification, she tried the door again. No good.

Snape's voice was gentle as he said, "Don't you want your wand? You'll need it if you want to leave so badly."

Hermione squared her shoulders and said, "Not if you unlock the door."

Soothingly, Snape said, "Not yet. There are some issues we should discuss. Come here. I won't hurt you again. I promise."

Hermione slowly turned toward him, seeing him sitting on the bed, his back against the headboard, one leg curled in front of him, the other hanging off the side of the bed, his toes on the floor. He idly caressed her wand as he watched her. Reluctantly, she crossed to the bed, standing just out of reach. Snape patted the edge of the bed beyond his foot. "Come. Sit."

Gingerly, she sat on the edge of the bed, her hands worrying together in her lap. Snape sat forward and cast a look of concern at her. "How's your head?"

Hermione shrugged and mumbled, "It doesn't hurt anymore. Thank you."

Snape scooted closer and reached for her hair, pulling back slightly as she cringed. Firmly, he said, "Hold still. I just need to see how badly you cracked your skull. I already promised you, Hermione. I won't hurt you again." He gazed at her soberly, and she nodded, letting his long, nimble fingers graze her scalp, feeling the lump that formed. She heard him murmur another spell and felt the lump tingle as it shrank away. His hands continued stroking her hair, and she fought to suppress the shiver that coursed through her.

"*Accio* handkerchief." Snape held out his other hand as a soft white handkerchief, the initials "SS" embroidered in green, flew from his hanging coat to his grasp. He offered it to Hermione gravely. She took it and wiped her face and nose.

Crumpling it in her hands, she murmured another, "Thank you."

Snape's hand stopped stroking her hair and slipped under her chin, lifting her face to meet his eyes. His gaze bored into her as he said, "Now, would you please answer my question?"

Hermione pretended ignorance. "Which?"

Snape raised one eyebrow at her and favoured her with an aggrieved stare. Doggedly, he repeated, "Just what did you think you were doing, sneaking in here?"

Hermione scowled again and wrenched her chin from his grasp. Snape pulled away from her, surprised. She stared at the handkerchief in her hands as she bit out, "I... just wanted to see if you were sleeping."

"Why?"

She huffed. "Because I couldn't."

"Why not?"

Finally, she pinned him with a frustrated glare and grumbled, "Because! I couldn't stop thinking about you! I couldn't believe that you just dragged me up here and shut the door! I mean, this is our chance to be ourselves... together, and you just go to bed? We won't be able to let our feelings show when we get back to Hogwarts, so why not make the most of the short time we have now?" She paused and looked away again. In a voice barely above a whisper, she added, "I just wanted to be with you."

She was startled by a low chuckle. Incredulous, her eyes snapped up to him, seeing the delighted wonder in his eyes. Bemused, Snape rumbled, "I'll wager that you had no idea 'being with me' would include a concussion..." His eyes softened, and he grimaced as he stroked her hair again.

A rueful smile tugging at her lips, Hermione admitted, "You'd win that wager..."

In one fluid movement, Snape stood, gathered her in his arms, tucked her head under his chin, and said, in a voice thick with emotion, "No one's ever wanted to just 'be with me' before..."

Hermione felt her humiliation and frustration dissolve at the feel of his strong embrace. Her face was pressed against his bare chest, and she was reeling with the sensory overload. He smelled divine, and his skin was soft and warm. She felt her pulse pounding in response and surreptitiously slipped her hands under the folds of his robe, sliding around his waist to hug him tight.

Snape's skin tingled at her touch and he jumped, pulling her away from him and looking down at her, his expression one of startled wariness. Hermione smiled up at him.

"Well, has anyone else ever seen you like this? If they had, they might change their minds..."

Snape glanced down at himself, suddenly realizing how indecent his attire was. Flushing, he backed away from her, wrapping his robe around him and crossing his arms tightly against his ribs. Hermione frowned and followed him, tugging at his arms. "Stop that!"

Snape was immovable. He drew himself up formally and said, "I apologize for my indecent attire. Forgive me for my rudeness."

Hermione rolled her eyes and made an exasperated noise in her throat. "For Merlin's sake! I'm going to stop complimenting you if you keep acting like this!" She scowled up at him and he eyed her, brow furrowed in scepticism.

Hands on her hips, Hermione glared at him. "You. Look. Good. Understand?"

Snape's eyes widened and his grip relaxed slightly. Uncomfortable under her frank gaze, he cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair, his cheeks stained with colour. "You don't have to flatter me..."

Hermione launched herself at him and dragged him to the bed, where she pushed him to sit on the edge. He blinked at her, taken aback by her aggressive behaviour. Standing in front of him, she closed the gap between them, gripping his shoulders as he tried to lean away from her. She pushed her knee between his and stepped close to him, running her hands through his hair and wrapping her arms around his neck. Millimetres away from his face, she paused, eyes locked with his. In a whisper, she said, "Look if you have to. Believe me. You look fantastic. Why do you think I couldn't stop thinking about you? I can't get over how much you make me want you." And with that, she closed in and kissed him.

Snape was reeling. As much as he had seen the signs, he still couldn't believe how much she was attracted to him. And for her to just say it, so bluntly... His stomach lurched and his hands reached up to slide along her back of their own accord.

The intensity of their kissing grew and each felt the other clutching as if for dear life. Finally, after what seemed like ages, Hermione pulled back and looked at him, her eyes glazed with passion. Her voice trembled as she said, "Please, let me stay with you..."

Snape swallowed convulsively and fought a battle within his mind.

You have to send her away. You cannot pursue her...

What do you mean, "cannot pursue her?" She's pursuing you!

Then you have to resist her! She's your student! It's unthinkable...

She's an adult. It's her decision too. Besides, she won't be your student forever.

That may be true, but Dumbledore would have your head if he found out!

So he doesn't need to find out! You're not at Hogwarts. She had a point, you know. Make the most of the time you have here. She wants to be with you. When's the last time someone wanted to be with you?

That's beside the point! Does she even know what that statement could mean? Of course not! She's a virgin!

So? You can control yourself. Just because she wants to be near you doesn't mean you'll defile her! You do have some self-restraint!

Not much around her... You're asking for trouble.

But I deserve this! I've been miserable for so long! Haven't I done enough to make up for my foolishness? She knows what I've been, and she still cares! I can't give that up!

This is foolishness! You're going to make the second biggest mistake of your life if you continue this...

Fuck off! No! I will not force her away! I want to be with her too! I... care about her.

Please, you're succumbing to your baser side, lusting after an innocent.

It's not just lust! Dammit! She makes me feel like I haven't ever felt before. I feel... happy. I'm not going to hurt her again. I already promised. If I pushed her away right now, she'd be crushed. I won't do that to her again.

So instead you'll set her up to be hurt even more later...

How? I won't ever hurt her. Not if I can help it.

So you honestly think that this little liaison will amount to anything?

I hope so. I don't want to lose her. I won't give her up.

Bloody hell, man! You sound like you're in love with the girl! I mean, come on!

She's not a girl. She's a woman. A very caring, amazing woman. And I... I...

You what?

I am in love with her. Merlin help me... I am.

I wash my hands of you then. Mark my words... this will be the second worst mistake you've ever made.

No it won't! It can't be...

Snape looked up at Hermione, his inner turmoil evident, and she held his gaze, hers hopeful and imploring. After several moments of tense silence, during which Hermione's heart thudded faster and faster, Snape blinked, swallowed, and reached up to cup her face in his hands, looking at her with eyes as deep and black as a velvet well. Hermione chewed her lip anxiously, steeling herself for disappointment, remembering how he had sent her away before.

Snape leant up and pressed his lips gently against hers, pouring his feelings through them. After a long moment, he backed away and whispered, his lips brushing hers, "Nothing could please me more."

Hermione felt dizzy with joy. An inarticulate cry of relief emerged from her throat as she kissed him fiercely. He wrapped his arms around her and stood, lifting her off her feet. He felt her surprised squeal against his lips and smiled. Slowly, he let her slide down his body, until she was on her feet again. As he straightened, she trailed kisses over his chin and down his throat, continuing down his bare chest, causing him to hiss in pleasure. She caressed his chest and belly, humming in appreciation. Snape closed his eyes at the moisture that threatened before he clasped her hands in his and held her away from him.

Hermione looked up at him apprehensively, but Snape smiled at her and tilted his head toward the bed. In one lithe movement, he backed onto the bed on his knees, pulling her with him, until she clambered up as well, facing him on her knees in the middle of the bed. Locking eyes with her, he sank back onto his heels, as she did the same. He reached out and caressed her cheek, smiling in awe. Hermione grimaced at the light and scrambled over to turn on a lamp, grinning raffishly at him. With an impish look, she picked up her wand, pointed it at the light switch, and turned off the lights. Looking back at Snape, her breath caught.

His skin glowed in the softer light from the bedside lamp, and his hair cast shadows across his face. She blinked owlishly and crept closer to him. Her fingers shook as she reached out to slide her hands under the edge of his robe, sweeping up over his pectorals and across the points of his shoulders, pushing the soft material off him, baring his lean frame and wiry arms.

He could feel his heart beating madly and struggled to control his erratic breathing. Her tentative touch inflamed him more than he could ever have dreamt. Her hands were cool and soft on his heated skin, and she watched in rapt fascination as her hands roamed his body, feeling the different textures of his skin, smoothing the smattering of dark hair on his chest. One hand slid up to cover his chest and she raised an eyebrow at him, feeling the harsh heartbeat under her palm. Snape covered her hand with his and leant closer to her, his other hand tangling in her hair. He kissed her, trapping their hands between them. Then he released her hand and propped his hand on the bed, slowly lowering them to lie on their sides, facing each other.

Hermione felt like she was drowning in the heady rush of sensations. Her body was clamouring for more. Her mind was still reeling in stunned amazement that she was actually there with him, and he wasn't throwing her out. As they sank onto the bed, Snape straightened his long legs, inching closer to her, his robe a forgotten pile of fabric beyond them. Hermione's hands travelled over his shoulders and across his shoulder blades. As he moved, caressing her and pulling her closer, she thrilled at the play of his muscles under her questing fingers. She began squirming against him heatedly. Finally, she flung one leg across his hip, pulling him against her with the strength of her leg muscles. He groaned at her seductive move, feeling the surges in his groin, knowing how hard he was for her.

Hermione felt the hard heat trapped between them again and moaned. Tingles washed over her; her clit throbbled. She probed Snape's mouth with her tongue passionately. By sheer force of will, Snape backed away, breathless. Gasping, he panted, "Hermione... I have to ask you... something important."

Covering his face with kisses, she asked distractedly, "What?"

Snape moved back more, resolutely grabbing her hand as it began another sweep of his chest. Holding her hand still, he sought her eye until he had her attention. Hermione calmed her frenetic assault on his person, sobered by his expression.

"Severus, what's wrong?"

Snape closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. "What... just what is it you want?"

Hermione's eyebrows rose and her mouth fell open in surprise. Then, she licked her lips and narrowed her eyes calculatingly. "I've already told you. I want you. I want to be with you."

Snape inhaled sharply. His brow furrowed and his gaze bored into her. "Do you know what you're saying?"

"What do you mean?"

Snape exhaled steadily and clenched his jaw. Studying her lips like they were the answer to existence itself, he ground out, "There's being with someone, and then there's *being* with someone..." He flicked a glance at her and then looked down again. "And from what you said earlier, you haven't *been* with anyone before...."

Hermione inhaled harshly. Flushing in embarrassment, she retorted, "No, I haven't. Is that bad?"

Snape hurriedly stroked her hair and hugged her tight, raining kisses on her heated cheeks. "No! I just need to know what it is you want... from me. I need to be clear on this."

Hermione buried her face in his neck and clasped him tightly. "I... want you. I do want to *be* with you. I just... feel so stupid..."

Snape's chest tightened at her words. Completely incredulous that she meant what she said, he took a deep breath and resolutely said, "You're not stupid. You're the cleverest witch born in ages." Then he pulled back from her and tilted her chin up so he could look her in the face. "I would be... honoured... to be with you. But, I cannot allow that to happen until you are no longer my student, no matter how we feel about each other." Regret coloured his tone. Hermione made a moue of protest, which he covered with a gentle kiss.

In a wheedling tone, Hermione ventured, "No one would know. There's nothing to stop us here..." Her eyes were bright with emotion. Snape shook his head gravely.

"No. I can't believe I've allowed this much to happen. I cannot allow us to cross that line." He gripped her arm tightly, searching her face as he said, earnestly, "Do you understand, Hermione? When we return, everything must be as it has been. If, after the school year ends, you still want to be with me, then we will be free to pursue whatever relationship we want. But now, we can't. And I will not compromise either of us by succumbing to...quite formidable...temptation."

Hermione sighed in disappointment. Resigned, she said, "I understand. I may not like it, but I understand." Then she smiled gently at him before she added "I can't help it. You're just so sexy that it drives me mad."

Snape blinked. "Excuse me?"

Hermione grinned. "You. You're incredibly hot. You're even sexier when you're scary, do you know that?" Snape arched a disbelieving eyebrow. "In your long billowing robes, you go sweeping around, glaring balefully at people. You're very sexy when you're snarky." Her fingers marched up his chest to twine in the hair at the base of his skull. She pulled his head back, baring his throat, which she laved with her tongue, nibbling on his Adam's apple. "And that voice... Gods! I don't know how I'm going to get through the play without falling down, you make me so weak in the knees." Snape let out a strangled groan.

Hermione pushed against his shoulder, pressing him onto his back. The leg she had curled over his hip slid out of the way, coming to rest on her knee, so she had him pinned under her, straddling his hips. Her nightgown was bunched up around her thighs as she triumphantly sat up, looking down at his stunned expression. Smirking at him, she continued, "And have you *any* idea how delicious you look in green satin? Mmm... The moment I saw you standing on this bed, I had to have you." She leant down, her hair falling to curtain her face on both sides. She brought her lips to his ear, nibbling at it, smiling at his gasp, then wriggled her hips, grinding against him, feeling his hard cock between them. "I can tell that you want me too, Severus. No one would be any the wiser... Why even have that line that you say shouldn't be crossed? I've dreamt about you. I've fantasized about being with you. Haven't you? Don't you want to try the reality?" Hermione was riding the rush of hormones, high on the power she felt, knowing she had aroused him, feeling it hard and hot against her.

Snape felt her rocking against him and felt a flare of impatience that she would so quickly push the issue, and after he had just explained his position! He was hit with a burst of inspiration and acted immediately. He grabbed her upper arms and rolled, coming to rest over her, throwing one leg over hers, pinning her to the bed with the length of his body. She squeaked in surprise at the abrupt switch. Her eyes flew open wide as she gazed up at him, his face shadowed by his long dark locks tumbling about his cheeks. She could see his lips curling in a feral grin and felt a pang of dismay.

He pressed his bare chest against her, feeling her stiff nipples under her cotton nightgown, then nuzzled his nose against her ear, hearing her startled gasp. With a deft twist of his hips, he rocked against her cleft, grinding his cock on her. His breath was hot against her face as he purred, "You're right. Who cares?"

Hermione exhaled on a shuddering note as she felt one hand scrabbling down her side and over her thigh, yanking her nightgown higher. Hermione squirmed, and Snape pressed her harder into the mattress. Suddenly not quite so sanguine about her impending deflowering, Hermione grabbed at Snape's shoulders, trying to push him away. He claimed her mouth with a forceful kiss as his hand slid up her inner thigh and cupped her mound.

Snape had a moment's shock at how soaked her knickers were, but regained his composure quickly. He could sense the panic growing in Hermione and knew his plan was working. Breaking the kiss, he whispered against her ear again. "You want me? You can have me..."

But Hermione squeaked, "S-stop!" Snape instantly complied, but kept his hand where it was. Backing away to look her in the eyes, he saw the fear mixed with the desire, frustrated confusion whirling amongst them. He stared at her, immobile, until she calmed a bit, eyeing him warily.

"Do I scare you, Hermione?"

He could feel her heart racing under him, and could see her lips trembling. Her voice caught in her throat as she rasped, "N-no."

He narrowed his eyes at her and thinned his lips. Pointedly, he said, "But you said I was sexy when I was scary... The thing is, you don't strike me as particularly interested right now. Instead, you look petrified that I was about to take you."

Hermione closed her eyes in confusion. Her lips twisted and her brow furrowed. Snape could feel her shaky breaths and finally relented. Carefully, he removed his hand and lifted his body off her. He tenderly caressed her hair again, murmuring reassurances in her ear, kissing her face gently.

"Hermione, I would never hurt you. I swear. I'm sorry I scared you, but I think it made my point pretty effectively, don't you? That's a line we shouldn't cross, for a myriad of reasons..."

Hermione nodded, her eyes still closed, but tears managed to leak from under her lids. Snape crooned in empathy and kissed her tears away. Ashamed that he had made her cry, his voice broke as he tried to comfort her. "I'm sorry. Please don't cry. I'm so sorry..."

Hermione opened her eyes and looked up into his worried gaze. Sniffing, she took a deep breath and grazed her fingers along his cheekbone and over his lips. Snape ducked his head to kiss her fingertips. He grimaced as he said, "Please forgive me..."

Hermione gave him a watery smile as she said, "I already told you; I forgive you for anything you think you need forgiveness for." Then she sobered and added in a low voice, "I'm sorry I pushed you. I just have to learn to control myself. I *do* want you. Very much! But I'm afraid too. It's all so overwhelming..." She looked away. "I'll understand if you want me to leave now."

Snape turned her face toward his and gazed vehemently into her eyes. "No. I don't want you to leave me." He paused, then added in a barely audible whisper, "Ever."

Hermione felt like her heart was about to burst. Solemnly, she answered, "I won't." She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. Snape returned the embrace for a moment, then he disentangled himself and sat up. He gazed warmly at Hermione.

"We can still get some sleep before we have to be up for the tour..."

Hermione sat up and smiled. "Do you snore?"

Snape affected outraged dignity and sneered at her. "Impudent baggage!" His sneer turned into a mischievous smirk and his eyes flashed dangerously as he agilely got to his hands and knees, ready to spring at her. Hermione laughed delightedly and spun off the bed, out of his reach. She whirled on him at the nightstand, flashing him a challenging grin as she turned off the lamp. Snape lunged after her as the room was plunged into darkness.

She shrieked as she spun away from his grasp. He growled as he chased her in the dark, his sharpened senses giving him a decided advantage. He could hear her breathless giggle and see her silhouette. Slinking noiselessly toward her, he pounced and grabbed her, securing her arms at her sides as she yelped in surprise. He growled in mock ferocity, "I've got you now..."

Hermione twisted in his arms to face him, sighing, "Yes, you do." Her lips sought his and caught him in a stealthy kiss. Snape relaxed his hold on her and her arms snaked up around his neck again. She pulled him as she stepped backwards. "Come to bed..."

She flung the covers back, pushing his robe out of the way. Then she crawled under the covers and settled herself on a pillow. She felt the bed move as Snape slipped in beside her, pulling the covers over them both. His arm draped across her and she wrapped her hands over his lean bicep. Snape inched closer and leant over her to kiss her. Ever practical, he drawled, "I suggest you set your infernal alarm. And make sure you set it early enough that you can make it back to your room before your parents might discover your defection."

Hermione giggled and rolled on her side to reach over and set the alarm for half an hour earlier than the one in her room. While she was on her side, she felt Snape mould himself behind her. His chest was flush against her back, and his legs bent under hers, as if she were sitting in his lap. One arm snaked up under her pillow and the other wrapped snugly around her middle, coming up between her breasts to rest his hand against her collarbone. His breath was warm against her neck after he pushed her curls above her head so they wouldn't tickle his nose. His chin rested on her shoulder, and he exhaled a long sigh of contentment. Hermione burrowed back against him, having never felt quite so comfortable, so warm and safe and protected.

She felt the vibration of his voice as he rumbled, "Mmm, you feel good."

Hermione smiled and chuckled. "So do you. This is nice."

Snape kissed the hollow behind her ear and murmured drowsily, "Good night, love."

Hermione froze. Galvanized by the endearment he let slip, she felt the quaking joy bubbling up in her heart and felt like crying again. She lay there, silently fighting for composure as she listened to his breathing slow into a steady rhythm. She was touched that he would surrender to sleep so quickly with her. He must trust her to let his guard down so easily.

Once again, Hermione lay awake in the dark, staring at the clock, but this time, her thoughts were much happier and enticing than the frustrating ones from earlier that night. Eventually, comforted by the warm body enveloping her and lulled by his slow, rhythmic breathing, she sank into a contented sleep, determined to have sweet dreams.

23- The Next Morning... Ready For Breakfast?

Chapter 24 of 84

Hermione gets a startling wake up call from Snape, followed by even more nerve-wracking exchanges with her parents. And, somehow, breakfast never tasted so green.

Standard disclaimer goes here as usual.

Author's Note: The sugar warning continues, but at least this time, I think your teeth are safe. Cheers!- Nicole

Chapter 23- The Next Morning... Ready For Breakfast?

Hermione woke in the pre-dawn darkness to the feel of something hard and warm pressing against her arse. As her mind cleared and she remembered that she was curled up against Snape, she realized that that something was his cock, nestled against her, twitching. She glanced at the clock and saw that the alarm would be going off in about 25 minutes. Staying still, she listened to Snape's steady breathing, realizing that he was still asleep. He was still wrapped tightly around her, and she felt a tingle go through her every time his cock prodded her. Experimentally, she wriggled back against it. She stifled a gasp at the forceful jump it gave in response. Feeling her pulse speed up, she rocked back again. She froze as Snape inhaled deeply and flexed his hips forward in response.

Did I wake him?

She lay there, tense, until he settled again. Then, just as she was relaxing, he flexed again, grinding against her. The arm around her squeezed tighter as well, and he sighed. Every nerve in Hermione's body seemed to be super-charged, and she bit back a squeak at the surge of feeling that shot through her body. Just as she was wondering if she should go ahead and get up, since she knew she'd not fall asleep again after such an arousing wake up call, Snape stirred once more. He pressed his body closer to her and his hand slid down from her collarbone to cup a breast as his hips flexed. A rumbling growl bubbled up from deep within, and Hermione gasped in response.

Is he still asleep?

She turned her head toward him, trying to see, but it was too dark. His hand twitched spastically on her breast, and he rocked against her again. Hermione knew, by the throbbing in her clit, that her knickers were getting freshly dampened. Snape started moving more, squeezing and rocking, and Hermione heard the disjointed mumbling and moaning behind her.

Oh gods, is he dreaming?

She turned her head a bit more and whispered, "Severus?" There was no response except for continued grinding. A little louder, she repeated, "Severus?" Obviously it worked that time, as Snape suddenly froze, and she heard his sharp intake of breath. She could almost feel his rapid calculations, trying to remember where he was, and what he was doing. Abruptly, she felt him start to pull away, his hand flattening rigidly as he lifted it from her breast. She grabbed at him and pulled him back, whispering, "Severus, it's all right."

Snape woke at the sound of his name, but he had been in the midst of a particularly sensual dream involving a certain bushy-haired Gryffindor, and it took him several moments to recall his whereabouts and situation. His mind raced to clear the erotic images and regain his usual alertness. As soon as he realized that his hand was cupping a soft round breast, he snapped to attention. His awareness extended to the fact that he had been thrusting his erection against Hermione's arse, and he recoiled in embarrassment. It was one thing to get hard for her, but it was another entirely to use her like that for pleasure, especially after what had transpired before they had gone to bed! He stilled at her hands on his, and her words, but he kept his hips as far back from her as he could.

In a strained whisper, he said, "Hermione, I apologize. I... don't know what to say..." He trailed off in chagrin.

Hermione smiled in the darkness, glad he couldn't see her. Composing herself, she murmured, "It's all right. You don't have to apologize." Once again glad that he couldn't see her in the darkness, as she felt the flush staining her cheeks, she added, "I... was enjoying that."

Snape blinked. Hermione giggled. She could almost *feel* his incredulity. Saucily, she scooted backward, wriggling against him. Snape's eyes closed and he hissed. His cock bounced in response and Hermione hummed.

In a strangled rasp, Snape said, "Bloody hell, Hermione, don't *do* that!"

She chuckled low in her throat in response and repeated the gesture. Still gripping his hand, she placed it back over her breast, holding it there. Snape groaned into her neck. In a threatening purr, he said, "That's not fair, Hermione. We've had this conversation already..."

Hermione smirked in the dark and ground her arse back more. She reached back and slid her hand along his hip, splaying it against his arse, pulling him closer. She felt his sharp exhalation in response and stifled a wicked giggle. She was completely taken by surprise when he abruptly wrapped his leg over hers and pulled her leg straight, sliding his hand down her front, and yanking her nightgown up. She gasped as he covered her mound with his hand again, his voice icy as he murmured, his lips brushing her ear, "Have you forgotten so quickly? Do not push me."

Hermione swallowed nervously and nodded. Snape slowly released her and trailed his hand back up, but as he went, he grazed her skin, sliding under her nightgown until he reached her breast again, where he gently caressed her, palming the soft skin and feeling her nipple harden in response. He sucked on her earlobe, worrying it lightly between his teeth. Hermione moaned faintly, her senses buzzing. She squirmed to turn in his arms, and he lifted his body over her. His hand travelled to her other breast as he kissed her, his body pressing against hers. Hermione's hands slid around him, splaying across his back. She could still feel him hard against her hip, and his hand was teasingly light caressing her breast. She arched her back up to him, pressing her breast into his hand, and he responded by cupping her firmly, squeezing. Her nipple dragged across his palm, stiffening, and she sighed in pleasure into his mouth.

Suddenly, they heard a soft thud. Both froze. Hermione's eyes widened in horror as she recognized the sound of her parents' door shutting. Quite unnecessarily, Snape lifted a finger to his lips, frowning for her to stay quiet. They heard footsteps coming down the hall, stopping between their respective doors. With another display of his impressive speed, Snape rolled, grabbed his wand, spun around, pulled Hermione to her feet, wrapped his free arm around her, and Apparated them to her room, just as they heard Mr. Granger knocking on Hermione's door and softly calling, "Hermione?"

Hermione gasped as they stumbled in her room, Snape whipping away from her and backing against the wall behind her door as she leapt into her bed. The door opened slowly and Hermione sat up quickly, feigning having just been roused.

"Huh? Who's there?" she mumbled, trying to mask the petrified shaking of her voice.

The door opened farther and Mr. Granger popped his head in. "It's Dad, honey. I know it's early, but I'm meeting a friend for an early morning jog and some racquetball and I wasn't sure if I'd be back before you and your professor left for your tour. I didn't want my little girl to leave without me saying goodbye." He stepped into the room, wearing

sweatpants and a windbreaker, smiling fondly at Hermione. Behind the door, Snape gestured frantically to Hermione to speak.

Hermione shook her head and said, "Oh, Dad! That's so sweet!" As she spoke, Snape cast a barely audible concealment charm, and Hermione watched him fade from view. She hastily stood and heaved a ragged sigh of relief as she hugged her father. He hugged her tightly until she squeaked in protest. Then, he released her and sat her on the edge of her bed, sitting with her. Hermione curled her legs up and pulled her covers over her lap. She hoped her father couldn't hear her pounding heartbeat.

"I'm really glad you got to come visit, even if it was for such a short time. We miss you, you know."

Hermione smiled. "I know, Dad. And I really appreciate all you did for me. The show was wonderful, and dinner was incredible, and I know the tour will be amazing..."

Mr. Granger patted her hand. "It was nothing. I'm just glad you enjoyed it. It was nice to meet your professor. You're right; he's quite the interesting fellow."

Hermione swallowed nervously. "He... uh, Professor Snape really enjoyed the show too. He said to thank you again."

"I'm sorry I won't see him again before you go. I think it'd be fun to show him around the Muggle world a bit more. He seemed quite intrigued when I showed him the computer and tried to explain how it worked. Asked all sorts of questions. He's a right smart one, isn't he? But, I guess he'd better be, if he's to teach you lot." Mr. Granger eyed Hermione with mock disdain before dissolving into a chuckle.

Hermione nodded, flicking her eyes toward the spot she had last seen Snape...*had* he left through the open door?...and said, "He's remarkably intelligent and even more clever. It's quite fascinating to be in his class, realizing how much he knows and how much he can teach me."

Heartily glad that he was concealed from view, Snape choked on the implications of Hermione's words, noticing that she was looking toward him, even though she couldn't see him.

Mr. Granger chuckled Hermione under the chin and grinned. "I know my girl, and that's one thing about her, she's always bent on learning everything there is to know. You do us proud, Hermione."

Hermione looked down and smiled modestly. "Thanks, Dad."

"Your Mum will be up in about 45 minutes to go start breakfast. Oh, speaking of, did you two enjoy dessert when you came back last night?" Mr. Granger grinned indulgently at his daughter, knowing her rabid penchant for chocolate.

Hermione blinked, memories of the night before cascading over her. She was glad it was still fairly dim, so he couldn't see the colour burning into her cheeks. Swallowing carefully, she manufactured a smile and said brightly, "Yes! It was wonderful... Mum's so thoughtful to make my favourites."

Mr. Granger laughed. "You did leave some for the rest of us, right?" he added, teasingly.

Hermione grimaced and retorted, "Yes, I did! We each had a bowl. I'm not *that* bad, to pig out in front of my professor!" Hermione flicked her eyes toward the wall by her door again.

Well, apparently she wasn't exaggerating when she said she loved chocolate... Snape thought, amused. He felt his pulse slowing as he stayed plastered against the wall, invisible.

Mr. Granger's grin faded into a wistful smile and he sighed. "No, I don't suppose you would do that. You've much more poise than that. My little girl is growing up." He patted Hermione's hand. "I know it's silly of me to go on about it, but I was so looking forward to having my girl home for the holidays, for one last time before you go off into the world on your own. I know you've been gone, either at school or working for the Order, and we haven't had you back much the past six years, but once you finish school, you'll never be my little girl again." He cleared his throat and glanced around. "When I look at you, here, like this, it's like you're still ten years old and we had no idea you were a brilliant witch. But when I think about how elegant you looked last night, and how grown up you were, especially next to that imposing professor of yours... I realize that you're a woman grown..." He trailed off.

Hermione felt tears threatening and her lips were trembling even as she smiled at her father. She knelt forward and enveloped him in a tight hug.

Snape felt like an intruder. He knew he was witnessing something that he was no part of, and he felt decidedly uncomfortable. He didn't dare move, though. He found that he couldn't help but watch the pair, almost hungrily. The kind of bond between them was one he had never experienced. Part of him was even jealous. He had finally realized that he loved Hermione, and he knew that she had feelings for him as well. But to watch her so clearly showing her love for someone else...even if it was her father, for Merlin's sake...made him jealous. He wanted her love. He wanted to be the only one she loved. It was ridiculous, of course, but the possessive urge was there nonetheless.

"I'll always be your girl, Dad, no matter how old I am. But I'm glad you think I've grown up. I just hope other people recognize it as easily as you have." She cast a meaningful glance at the wall, hoping Snape was still there.

Mr. Granger chuckled. "I'm guessing some already have. You did say you dated Harry, didn't you? I daresay he noticed..."

Hermione's eyes widened and she thinned her lips. "Da-ad! I told you, it was a mistake. We're just friends!" She looked dismayed, and worried her hands together in her lap.

Mr. Granger covered her hands with his, stilling their nervous movements, and he chuckled her under the chin again, lifting her chagrined face to his. With a properly contrite expression, he said, "About that... I'm sorry I embarrassed you in front of your professor. Your poor old Dad was just having some difficulty accepting the new, adult version of his daughter!" His expression sobered even more and he gripped Hermione's hands firmly. "I know we've never had much of a chance to talk with you about relationships, what with everything that's happened, but we hope you'll find someone who appreciates you for *you*. You deserve to be happy as much as the next person, so don't settle for anything less than what you want. If you say Harry wasn't that, then I believe you. You're smart enough to know your own heart. We can only hope that you'll end up as happy as we are." After a short pause, he smiled faintly and then gave her a mock-severe scowl. "Of course, if anyone ever breaks my girl's heart, he'll have me to answer to." Hermione giggled and Mr. Granger dissolved into a chuckle.

"Oh, Dad, you're incorrigible." Hermione playfully buffeted his arm. In the silence that followed, her smile faded into a thoughtful expression. Her father was staring at her hand in his, pensively. Haltingly, her eyes repeatedly flicking toward the wall, she said, "So... if I find someone who loves me... and I... love him... and I'm happy... happier than I've ever been... you'd be okay with it? No matter what?" She gazed at her father, owl-eyed.

He nodded reassuringly. "As long as you're happy, and you truly love each other, I couldn't wish anything better for you. We just want to see you happy, but we also don't want you to settle for less than you deserve, just to be with someone. Keep that in mind, Hermione. You're different than so many other people, even people in your world. Don't short-change yourself."

Hermione nodded, a faint smile on her lips. "Thanks, Dad. I'm glad you came by. I would have been disappointed if I hadn't seen you before we left. Besides, who can object to being woken up to have all sorts of wonderful things said about them?" She grinned impishly and her father laughed.

"I was hoping you wouldn't be upset, being woken up so early." He sighed. "Well, I better get going. You two enjoy the tour, and owl us when you can. We'll see you for the performance over Easter. It's too bad I have to go; I was hoping to hear you sing a bit. Ah well..." He shrugged resignedly and quirked a grin at Hermione, then stood and straightened his jacket. "It was great to have you home. You take care of yourself, you hear?"

Hermione stood and hugged her father. "I will. Thanks for everything, Dad."

Mr. Granger hugged her tightly, as if loath to release her. He sighed and squeezed her once more.

Her voice muffled by her face being pressed into his windbreaker, Hermione murmured, "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you, kiddo." He released her and stepped toward the door. Hermione sank onto the bed. "Sorry there's not much time for you to get any more sleep. You may want to just get up and start getting ready, so the bathroom will be free when your professor wakes. Tell him it was nice to meet him, and thank him for bringing you to visit."

"I will. Bye."

Mr. Granger waved and quietly shut the door behind him as he exited. She heard his footsteps dying away as he descended the stairs. In the silence that followed, she sat rigidly, ears straining for any indication that Snape was still in her room. Several moments passed, and she hesitantly whispered, "Severus?"

Snape was still against the wall, trying to compose himself. He was unutterably moved by the deep love and respect between father and daughter, and he was almost afraid to believe what it seemed she had meant by her comments to her father. Did she feel the same way about him that he felt about her? Did she really mean it when she said she was the happiest she had ever been? He felt his chest and throat tighten in the now-familiar way it did around Hermione. Slowly, stealthily, he glided to her and caressed her hair. She started, but her expression melted into one of relief.

Hermione felt a phantom hand grazing her face, and invisible lips brushed hers before she heard a disembodied purr in her ear, saying, "I'm here."

The bed moved as he sat. Her eyes darted around the space beside her, trying to picture him. Suddenly, he shimmered into view, and she found herself gazing into his deep black eyes. Her breath caught at the bare emotion pouring out of them. Swallowing thickly, she stammered, "W-were you there... the whole time?"

Snape nodded slowly, never blinking. Hermione's gaze travelled over him, taking in his lean frame, the green satin perched low along his hipbones, his strong, capable fingers lightly splayed on her knee. She reached out and slid her hand lightly along his bare chest, over his ribs and back up to rest over his heart. Snape inhaled deeply, his lungs filling under her hand. Hermione felt the strong pulse and closed her eyes, trying to pace her heartbeat with his. She opened her eyes when she felt him grasp her hand and lift it from his chest. His eyes were heavy-lidded as he lifted her palm and placed a gentle kiss on it. Resolutely, he settled her hand in her lap and straightened.

Hermione stared at him, unable to speak, but her very soul screamed at him through the rapt eyes trained on his.

He stood, his lips thinned in regret. In a low murmur, he said, "Your father was right."

Hermione blinked, distracted. "About what?"

Snape smiled faintly. "About a great many things, but the most pressing one was that you should start getting ready for the morning. When you no longer need the bathroom, knock on my door. I shall see you at breakfast."

Hermione didn't want him to go. She wanted to continue where they left off before her father interrupted them. She wanted to tell him so many things. But all she said was, "Certainly."

Snape cast one last look of longing at her before he Disapparated back to his room. Hermione fell back into her bed, overcome with the roller coaster of emotions that had already made up her morning.

Hermione showered, washing the styling products from her hair. Her thoughts kept straying to her stolen moments with Snape. As she washed, she remembered the feel of his hands on her skin. Her shower was a bit longer than usual, as she lingered under the warm water, revelling in the sensations she excited, mimicking Snape's touch. Finally, frustrated and pruned, she finished her shower and dressed. Again grateful that she was a witch, she cast a drying spell on her hair. She courteously charmed away the steam and condensation before she exited and strode down the hall to knock on Snape's door.

"Professor? It's all yours."

From behind the closed door, she heard, "Thank you."

After a moment, in which she stood at his door, waiting for him to open it, she realized that he would not come out until she had left. Sighing, she crossed the hall to her room, shutting her door behind her. There was a pause, and then she heard the door open across the hall. Quietly, she opened her door and watched Snape sweeping down the hall to the bathroom, once again clad in his robe, carrying his travelling bag and the clothes that he had transfigured back into his original jumper and trousers. He disappeared into the bathroom and Hermione stepped out to listen for her mother.

Her mother had come out of her room while Hermione had been in the shower. Fortunately, Hermione had remembered to lift the Silencing Charm from her parents' door as she headed to the bathroom. Her mother had knocked on the door and told Hermione that she was going down to start breakfast. Hermione had called back through the door that she'd be down in about 20 minutes.

Hermione stood at the top of the stairs and heard the radio playing in the kitchen. The smell of coffee and toast was wafting through the house. She heard the sizzling sound of frying bacon and knew her mother was busy. Creeping down the hallway, she paused at the bathroom, hearing the shower going. The frustrated part of her kept urging her on, but the shy virgin part begged her to reconsider her rash idea.

Taking a deep breath against the pounding of her heart, she opened the door and stepped into the steamy bathroom. Almost instantly, Snape's face appeared from behind the shower curtain, eyes wide in shock. His hair was plastered down his face and water dripped from his nose as he hissed, "What the bloody hell are you doing in here?"

Hermione sagged against the door, her knees trembling. Chewing her lip, she stared at him blankly, unable to answer.

Snape's eyes narrowed in indignation. In an icy growl, he said, "Get out, now. I will not tolerate such a blatant disregard of the rules. You are treading a fine line, and I suggest you retreat behind it before you get us both in trouble!"

Hermione stood, frozen. They stared at each other, eyes locked. Snape realized that she seemed to be stuck, and cursed. His jaw clenched, he aimed the spray against the wall, yanked a towel from the bar and wrapped it around himself. Irritably jerking the shower curtain back, he stepped out of the tub and crossed to Hermione, glaring furiously at her. He gripped her upper arms and scowled into her petrified face. His hands left wet marks on her shirt and his hair dripped onto her chest.

"You just don't get it, do you? We. Can't. Do. This. Now. *Think* before you get any other crazy idea like this in your head! If you can't stop yourself from pulling these kinds of foolish stunts, you will cause everything to fall apart! Don't ruin this, Hermione." His expression seemed to crumple into one of pained entreaty. He continued, in a hiss, "Please, this is... good. We... can be good together. Don't cock things up by being rash!" He squeezed her arms and murmured, "This is worth waiting for. Trust me. If you meant what you said to your father, then get out and be patient."

Hermione nodded. Impulsively, she launched herself at Snape and wrapped herself around him in a tight bear hug. Snape made an exasperated noise in his throat and tried to disentangle himself. "Hermione, you're getting all wet!"

Hermione's inability to move disappeared and she started laughing in relief. Releasing Snape, she backed away, giggling up at him. "It's certainly not the first time!" She sputtered anew at the comical play of reactions across his face. Finally settling on haughty outrage, he backed away from her. The effect of his stern glare was compromised as his towel began to slip, and he had to frantically grab for it before he lost his dignity entirely. Hermione's giggles were cut short as she gasped at the near miss and blushed furiously. Wildly, she spun and flung herself out of the bathroom, before Snape could rip her apart with a few more well-placed words. Besides, her little jaunt brought her...almost...face to face with the knowledge that she just wasn't ready to cross that line, no matter how much she might think she wanted to.

She sped to her room and slammed the door behind her, panting. She sank into her vanity chair and gathered her things with shaky fingers, then packed everything and made her bed, shrinking her bag and pocketing it. Finally, she made her way downstairs, noting that the shower was off, but Snape was still in the bathroom.

She stepped into the kitchen to find her mother dishing up a plate of bacon and putting it on the table next to the toast and eggs. "Morning, dear!" Her mother bustled up to her and hugged her, kissing her cheek with a smile.

"Morning, Mum. Breakfast smells great." She sat at the table and began making her plate.

Mrs. Granger turned the radio off, poured some orange juice for Hermione, and said, "I do hope your professor likes bacon and eggs. And I hope he likes wheat toast. Does he take jam with his toast? I have strawberry preserves and orange marmalade. I made coffee. Does he drink coffee? I can always make tea if he'd prefer it." She fluttered around, arranging the dishes on the table and smoothing her apron.

Hermione stared at her mother. *Mercy, is she nervous? She's acting like a schoolgirl with a crush!* She snorted to herself. *And I should know, since I was the one doing that not long ago!* Trying to hold in her amazed grin, she answered faintly, "I'm sure everything is fine, Mum. Professor Snape loved your cooking. He even said to make sure he expressed his appreciation of dessert..."

At that, Mrs. Granger smiled smugly and sniffed. With a preening air, she smoothed her hands over her own unruly locks and said, "Well, I do enjoy making something tasty."

Hermione looked intently at her mother and realized that she was wearing makeup...and that early on a weekend! Feeling a pang of jealous suspicion, she sipped her juice, remaining silent.

Mrs. Granger glanced at the door to the kitchen and asked, "Is Severus up?"

Hermione choked on her juice. She didn't like hearing her mother calling him Severus, not when she was being all twitchy. Coughing a bit, she muttered tersely, "Yes. He was done with his shower when I came down. I'm sure he'll be here shortly."

Mrs. Granger simpered and shot to her feet. "Good. I hope he won't be long. I wouldn't want things to get cold."

Hermione smirked at her mother and said, "Mum, he's a wizard. He can just cast a warming spell on whatever he wants. As a matter of fact..." She pulled out her wand and cast a stasis charm on the food dishes, keeping them from cooling any more. Her mother blinked at her in surprise.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to that."

Hermione snorted and took another bite of her breakfast. Mrs. Granger got up to make a cup of coffee and turned back to Hermione with a quizzical expression.

"Is there a particular reason all of your hairpins were on the counter?"

Hermione choked again. *Shite!* She made a show of clearing her throat and drinking more juice to give herself time to think. Hoping that she could lie convincingly enough, she said, "Oh, those. Well, I'm not used to having my hair up like that, and it made my head ache, so after we got back from the show, I took them out so I could relax while I had some dessert."

Mrs. Granger's face lit up eagerly. "And you said Severus liked it too?"

Before a decidedly disgruntled Hermione could answer, Snape swept into the kitchen, a politely inquisitive expression on his face. "What was it you wish to know if I liked?"

Mrs. Granger started and flushed. Hermione nearly gaped at her mother's juvenile behaviour. With a tinkling laugh, Mrs. Granger waved her hand airily toward the refrigerator and said, "Oh, I was just wondering if you liked dessert last night."

Snape shot Hermione a knowing glance before he smoothly answered, "Indeed I did, Dione. It was as delicious as your dinner. Generally, those who are skilled cooks can carry those skills over into potion making. If you were a witch, perhaps you would be a promising potions student."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Now *he* seemed to be flirting with her mother! Mrs. Granger looked away modestly and batted her hand toward Snape. "Oh, stop. You're embarrassing me." She giggled girlishly and waved Snape to the table. Casting a coy glance at him, she asked Hermione, "Are all wizards this charming?" Then, she bolted upright, a look of surprise on her face. "Oh! Charming! How ironic!" She chuckled again as she turned to get the coffee pot.

Snape shot Hermione an amused glance and she glared back at him. His lips twitched. He began serving himself from the dishes on the table as Mrs. Granger brought him a steaming cup of coffee.

"Would you like cream, sugar?"

"No, thank you. I prefer my coffee black."

Mrs. Granger cast an appraising eye over his snug jumper and trim trousers and quipped, "Like your clothes, apparently."

Hermione snorted and hastily retreated behind a napkin, muttering, "Excuse me."

Snape cocked an eyebrow severely at Hermione as he said to her mother, "You are indeed correct, madam."

Mrs. Granger laid her hand on his arm. "Now, now, none of that nonsense. I'm Dione, remember? Not 'madam.'" Hermione bristled at her mother touching Snape and he stiffened, still unused to casual contact.

Flashing a conciliatory smile at Mrs. Granger, he said, "Of course, Dione. My apologies." She beamed at him and moved back to the counter. Hermione continued eating her breakfast, blackly eyeing her mother and Snape.

Snape began eating, and a slightly tense silence fell. Mrs. Granger kept bustling about the kitchen, and Snape started feeling uneasy around the fidgety woman. Eventually, she fluttered back to the table and asked brightly, "So, how was the play?"

Both Snape and Hermione swallowed hastily and answered.

"It was wonderful, Mum. Thanks so much."

"It was truly an amazing experience. You and your husband have my sincere gratitude."

Mrs. Granger beamed even more. "Oh, it was our pleasure. Speaking of, Severus, Geoff wanted me to thank you again for bringing Hermione for this visit. He's sorry he couldn't be here, but he had a previous commitment." Snape nodded gravely. Mrs. Granger continued, "I can't wait to come see your performance. I know it'll be spectacular."

Hermione and Snape exchanged glances. Hermione finally relaxed and cracked a smile. "No doubt it will be. Especially since everything can be magically enhanced."

Mrs. Granger's expression changed to one of perplexed inquiry. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the headmaster bewitched the Sorting Hat to cast it, those who can't sing have a spell cast on them to give them a good voice, and the sets and even what will be the theatre space will be magically transformed. And, from what we've been told, even the instruments will be bewitched to play, so we don't even need people to play them. I mean, with all that, how could it possibly be bad?"

Mrs. Granger's eyes widened. "So, not everyone in it can sing? But, you're not using the spell, are you?"

Snape interrupted. "Certainly not. Her talent is such that the headmaster believes we could win the competition on her merits alone. She has a true gift." He gazed soberly at Hermione.

Hermione fired right back, "So do you." She looked at her mother and added, "Professor Snape managed to keep it a secret that he has a wonderful singing voice, but it's no secret anymore." She smiled at Snape.

Mrs. Granger's anxious expression dissolved into one of delight. "Really? Oh, Hermione, do sing for me. Your father wanted to hear you sing, but there wasn't a good time for it before you had to go to the play. We haven't heard you sing in so long, dear. Please?"

Hermione looked between her mother and Snape in chagrin. Snape's eyes sparkled and he smiled faintly at her. Silently, he added, "It couldn't hurt to practice, could it, Miss Granger?"

Hermione cut a glance at him and looked at her mother, who was clapping her hands and bouncing, beaming at her daughter. Resigned, Hermione pushed back from the table a bit and sat up. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. Across from her, Snape too pushed back from the table, but he leant back in his chair, settling himself to listen, a faint smile hovering about his lips.

Thinking for a moment, Hermione decided to sing "Phantom of the Opera." Keeping her eyes cast down, she began, "In sleep he sang to me, in dreams he came. That voice which calls to me and speaks my name. And do I dream again? For now I find the Phantom of the Opera is here, inside my mind." She took another deep breath, having planned on only singing that snippet to appease her mother, but she was startled by Snape's voice belting from across the table.

"Sing once again with me, our strange duet. My power over you grows stronger yet. And though you turn from me, to glance behind, the Phantom of the Opera is there, inside your mind."

Mrs. Granger gasped and turned stunned eyes on Snape as Hermione's head whipped up to stare at him as well. His gaze was focused only on Hermione, and she responded to the lure of his seductive voice. She took her cue from him and sang her next verse. They continued the song together, hearing the music in their heads. Hermione perched forward on her chair as she got to the part where she began her vocal acrobatics. Her eyes closed at the deep velvet purr of Snape coaxing, "Sing... Sing, my Angel of Music... Sing for me!"

As her final piercing note died away, she sagged forward in her chair, momentarily dazed by the intensity of their impromptu performance. Mrs. Granger burst into enthusiastic applause, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"That was amazing! Truly amazing! Oh, now I see why your headmaster is so confident! Hermione, you were so beautiful! And Severus, she wasn't exaggerating either. You two were brilliant!"

Snape and Hermione exchanged sheepish glances as they demurred. Hermione took another sip of her juice, her eyes darting around, embarrassed at her mother's excessive reaction. Snape leant back in his chair, idly swirling the last of his coffee in his cup, staring distractedly into it. Mrs. Granger was gazing between them, her expression beatific.

Hermione glanced up to see her mother gazing at Snape with an almost adoring look on her face. She felt a flare of exasperated irritation. Snape, of course, was completely oblivious. *Merlin help me! My own bloody mother has a fan-girl crush on Snape! "Oh, I've never met a hero before." And, "You're so enchanting. You're so charming." Blah blah blah.* In her mind, Hermione viciously mimicked her mother in a shrill falsetto. She suddenly wanted to get out of there, and get Snape away from her mother before he did something else to sweep her off her feet. Hermione rolled her eyes and looked at the time.

"It's getting late. We should probably get going."

Snape snapped to attention and noticed Hermione's discomfited expression. Wondering what was wrong, he coolly looked at the clock and retorted, "Yes. We wouldn't want to be late when we are being offered such an opportunity." With his customary fluid grace, he stood, turning courteously to Mrs. Granger and inclining his head in gratitude. "Thank you again for your hospitality. I shall look forward to seeing you at the performance."

Hermione stood and tensely watched her mother and Snape. Mrs. Granger smiled and waved her hand about again, dismissively. "It was nothing! I'm so glad you enjoyed the play. And I hope you enjoyed your little stay at the 'Granger Bed and Breakfast.'" She winked at Snape and laughed again.

Snape cast a meaningful glance at Hermione and politely said, "Rest assured that I most certainly did. The cuisine was excellent, and I haven't slept so well in ages." His lips twitched as he smiled at Mrs. Granger.

Hermione's breath caught and she felt her heart pound. Hoping she wasn't flushing, she glanced warily at her mother. Mrs. Granger, however, was too enamoured of Snape to notice her daughter's reaction.

Hermione rolled her eyes and muttered, "I'll get the coats..."

Snape murmured, "Please do, Miss Granger," and gestured for Mrs. Granger to exit the kitchen before him. Fluttering again at his gallantry, she hurried through the door, as Snape grimaced in rueful bemusement, following her.

Hermione had already shrugged into her coat and was handing Snape his Muggle trench coat, which he had transfigured back and hung again in the foyer closet before he had gone to breakfast that morning. Snape took the coat from her and slipped into it, shaking his hair back from his face.

Looking expectantly at Hermione, he asked, "Ready?"

Hermione nodded vehemently and rolled her eyes toward her mother. Mrs. Granger jumped, restored to her senses after her glazed stare at Snape. She rushed at her daughter, enveloping her in a tight hug. "Take care of yourself, dear. Owl us as soon as you can. We love hearing from you. Don't forget to thank your headmaster for letting you visit. Tell your friends we said hello. Enjoy your tour. And be careful popping about, you hear?" She pulled back from Hermione and cast a stern eye on Snape. "Do be careful, Severus. We don't know what we'd do if anything happened to our girl." She melted into a smile.

Snape gazed at her solemnly and avowed, "Have no fear on that account. I would never let anything happen to your daughter."

Mrs. Granger pressed a hand on his arm and nodded. "Of course, we know that." She glanced at the time again and exclaimed, "Oh! You must get going! Hurry now..."

Snape lightly gripped Hermione's upper arm and looked inquiringly at her. She nodded and looked back at her mother. "Bye, Mum. Thanks for everything. I'll owl you and Dad about the tour when I get back."

Mrs. Granger darted in and kissed Hermione on the cheek. "Love you, dear!"

"Love you too, Mum. Bye." And with that, she glanced back up at Snape and he cast the concealment charm again. As soon as they were invisible, he Disapparated them back to the same place they had been the night before. He heard Hermione's ragged sigh of relief and felt her groping for him. She buried her face against his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist, leaning on him for comfort and reassurance. Snape draped his arms around her, waiting for her to compose herself. After several

moments, she sighed again and lifted her head. Her whisper floated up to him. "Sorry about that."

Snape glanced around and, seeing no one, reversed the charm, gazing down at Hermione's face as she shimmered into view. Her expression was a grimace of aggrieved irritation. He furrowed his brow and asked, "About what?"

"About my mother! Gods, she was just so... so... she was like to drool all over you!" She scowled at him.

Snape stared at her blankly for a moment and slowly ventured, "I thought... you wanted your parents to like me."

Hermione huffed and pulled away, her hands on her hips. Favouring him with an indignant glare, she hissed, "Like you, yes. Crush on you and flirt with you, no!"

Snape's eyes widened in surprise. "Flirt with me?"

Hermione tilted her head in exasperation. "You really are oblivious, aren't you?" She relaxed visibly and shook her head. "Hmph, she was almost as bad as Mrs. Weasley was about Lockhart." She cut him a fierce glance and muttered, "I don't want my *mother*, of all people, to be swooning over you."

Snape looked down at the irate witch in front of him and laughed. Hermione's eyes goggled at him as the rich, resonant sound bubbled forth. Struggling to speak, he gasped, "You're... jealous!"

Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously and she pursed her lips. In an icy tone, she ground out, "You think that's funny?"

Snape caught the warning and manfully composed himself, struggling to wipe the idiotic grin from his face. Snorting occasionally at the spasms that threatened, he said, "No. No. Not funny, exactly. Just... oh it's just wonderful!"

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at him and did a creditable impression of Snape as she drawled, "Oh?"

Snape closed the gap between them, his grin softening into a smile. He wrapped his arms around her and looked into her eyes, watching her irritation fade as he held her. Quietly, he murmured, "To think that you would get upset that someone else thought I was impressive, for whatever reason... That just... makes me feel appreciated and wanted. It's not something I'm used to, so forgive me any unusual reactions." He quirked one corner of his mouth up in a saucy smirk, and Hermione relaxed completely.

In a mock grumble, she said, "Honestly! She's *married*, and she has no business ogling you like that. You're mine." It slipped out before she thought about it. Snape stiffened and his smile dissolved. Suddenly afraid of his reaction, she cautiously lifted her eyes to meet his.

He gazed at her, his expression inscrutable. His body was completely rigid, tense. His black eyes seethed with emotions. Hermione swallowed nervously. "Er..."

Snape interrupted her stammer. In a voice barely above a whisper, he said, "What did you just say?"

Hermione's heart hammered in her chest and she chewed her lip. Her gaze faltering under his intense scrutiny, she mumbled, "Um, nothing..."

Snape's grip tightened on her spastically. Her eyes snapped back up to his. "Did you mean it?"

Hermione stared at him, owl-eyed. "What?"

In a savage rasp, he repeated, "Did you mean it?"

Hermione looked down. Her voice trembling, she confessed, "It was just... wishful thinking. I'm sorry."

She was completely stunned when Snape swooped down and pinned her with a devouring kiss. After nearly consuming her, he pulled away, leaving her breathless and staring at him. He pressed his forehead against hers and breathed, "Don't be sorry."

Hermione sighed in relief. Snape continued, "If that's what you want, you can have it." He smiled faintly at her. "I doubt I can refuse you much at this point."

Hermione smiled back and playfully retorted, "I'll keep that in mind."

Snape regained his equilibrium after her surprising comment and pulled back, eyeing her sternly. Raising one eyebrow, he drawled, "Planning on testing me?"

Hermione grinned impishly and twinkled at him. She lilted, "Perhaps," and twirled away from him, laughing. Snape followed her and they made their way to the theatre.

24- Behind the Scenes and In the Pensieve

Chapter 25 of 84

Snape and Hermione get the guided tour of the theatre and manage to add to the things they need to keep secret. They return to Hogwarts and deposit their memories into the Pensieve--first Snape's and then Dumbledore's. And the items that belong in each are as different as night and day.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: For the record, I have no idea what the theatre in Haymarket is like, so I just based the one in here on the main stage at Bally's in Las Vegas, where Jubilee! is performed. I was lucky enough to get a guided tour like this one with a bunch of my theatre kids last year. SnivellusSnape was there too! :)

Chapter 24- Behind the Scenes and In the Pensieve

Snape followed Hermione toward the theatre, realizing that they were about to be back to playing their roles as professor and student, and nothing more. A few steps from the entrance, Snape reached out and caught Hermione's arm, causing her to stop and spin to face him, her expression one of surprised inquiry. He gazed down at her, his eyes darkening wistfully.

Hermione's brow furrowed in perplexity and she asked, "What?"

In a low voice, he said, "Once we meet our guide and enter that theatre, we're back to recording memories for Dumbledore..." He trailed off meaningfully.

Hermione's face crumpled into a scowl of disappointment. Sighing, she murmured, "I understand." Snape squeezed her arm approvingly and released her. Resolutely, they made their way to the entrance.

A young man was leaning against the wall, his hands in his pockets. As he saw them approaching, he stood and nodded toward them, flashing a crooked grin as he said, "Watcher! I'm guessin' yer the Grangers' kid, eh?"

Hermione nodded and said, "Yes. I'm Hermione Granger, and this is Professor Snape. Are you to give us the tour of the theatre?" She smiled eagerly and her eyes lit up. The young man grinned raffishly and gave them a bow.

"Deed I am. Name's Neal. Me uncle said this were a special favour, like. Saw the show last night, dincha'?" Both Snape and Hermione nodded. Neal pulled a key out of his pocket and opened the door. Gesturing for them to enter, he continued, "Then yeh've been through here. C'mon, let's show yeh the *magic* behind the scenes." Snape and Hermione started and exchanged a swift glance of surprise. But, upon looking at Neal's self-satisfied smirk, they realized it was just a figure of speech and relaxed. He sauntered down the aisle in the dark house, leading them to the orchestra pit. Light was coming from within it, and Neal tossed over his shoulder, "Yeh'll be seein' a few folk as we go. Every day we've gotta' come in here and fix things that got broke or get things ready for the next show. Yeh'll see. There's lots to show yeh." He led the way up the stairs to the stage and slipped between the proscenium and the curtain. "Hang on a tick..." They heard shuffling and clicking and then the curtain began to open. Lights blazed from high above them.

Snape and Hermione gazed about them, taking in as much as they could of the theatre...the dimensions, the relation between the different areas, even the quality of sound in the open space. They were both called back to reality by a discreet cough near them. As one, they turned to see Neal watching them, an amused grin twinkling at them. "Tell yeh what... We'll start at the bottom and work our way up. Sound all right?" Snape and Hermione glanced blankly at each other and nodded. Neal snapped his fingers and jerked his head to the wings. "C'mon then."

Neither Snape nor Hermione wanted to blink, for fear of missing something fascinating. As promised, they passed a few people, all of whom were at work on some aspect, and all of whom returned Neal's cheerful greetings. They made their way down a steep staircase to the sub-basement of the theatre. Neal kept up a constant lecture on the different things they could see, and how the machinery worked. Hermione caught a glimpse of Snape and noted the expression of intense concentration on his face. Briefly, she remembered her father's comment about wanting to show Snape more about the Muggle world, since he was so interested in the explanations. She smiled at the obvious difficulty Snape was having comprehending things, since he didn't have the basic background to follow the terminology. She could tell how frustrated he was getting, not quite able to follow along.

Neal was explaining the way they used the hydraulic system to lift the various parts of the stage at different times, showing them the multiple set pieces that went up in each scene change. Hermione could tell by the throb in Snape's jaw that he was grinding his teeth in frustration. His eyes were narrowed, and his whole posture was rigid and tense. At every new thing Neal pointed to, Snape glared intently, blinking rapidly, trying to compute what he was hearing. She could almost feel the questions bursting from him, but he didn't even know what to ask or how to ask it! Hermione took pity on him and decided to play the ignorant girl. She knew Snape would despise the attitude, but hoped he would appreciate her ruse for its intent and just play along.

In a girlish voice, Hermione chimed, "Neal?" He stopped talking and turned to her.

"Yeah?"

Hermione grimaced and wrinkled her nose at him. Waving her hand about airily, she lied, "I'm so sorry. I don't understand a thing you're saying." Snape's glare zeroed in on her, and he raised an eyebrow in suspicion.

"Bout what?"

Hermione sighed. "Why, about anything! It's all so technical. Can't you explain things in laymen's terms? I'm not even sure I've *heard* of some of the words you're using."

Neal's eyebrows rose to his hairline and he turned incredulous eyes to Snape. Snape, for his part, cottoned on quickly to Hermione's ploy, and managed to affect resigned exasperation for Neal's benefit. "If you please, do your best to simplify your explanations. We want to make sure everyone understands." He gazed at Neal with an aggrieved expression, and Neal seemed to deflate, nodding.

"Right, then. Well..."

Neal backtracked and started again, repeatedly turning to Hermione to see if she needed clarification before moving on. He even slowed down his speech, almost as if he were talking to someone of substandard intelligence. As annoying as it was to be talked down to like that, Hermione played along, content that Snape would understand more. She kept a keen eye on Snape, and requested further information based on his countenance. Every time something clicked into place for him, he would relax infinitesimally. When he was back to incomprehension, his lips would thin and his eyes would narrow.

Pleased at the success of her dissembling, Hermione kept it up as they made their way through the costume rooms, the dressing rooms, the shop, the prop storage rooms, the wings, the light booth, the sound booth, and eventually even the catwalks among the fly system.

Climbing the stairs to the catwalks made Hermione a little queasy, as the stairs were metal grating, and one could see through them. Never having been fond of heights, Hermione had to force herself to stand at the railing and look out over the stage. Neal took the opportunity to point out the intricate setup used to raise and lower the chandelier during the play. He indicated the multiple chains, cables, lines, ropes, pulleys, etc. that made up the necessary fail-safes for the chandelier and all of the other scenery. He called down to another stagehand below and demonstrated the use of the fly system. Hermione's eyes goggled when he showed them the safety harnesses that the stagehands wore while on the catwalks or working the upper rail.

In a shaky voice, she shrank back from the railing and said, "It all seems so dangerous! People could really get hurt."

Neal nodded sagely and sniffed. "Yep. That's why yeh gotta' train folks up right. We've got a right good crew here. Lots o' folk gotta' work together to run things smooth like. But, we do it!" He beamed proudly and puffed his chest out. Hermione nodded vigorously, her eyes wide in appreciation.

Neal led them back down to the stage, taking them into the wing again to show them how they handled the pyrotechnics. Snape's expression when Neal was showing them how they made the fireballs caught Hermione's attention. He looked calculating, with a smug, malicious gleam in his eye. Hermione made a mental note to ask Snape about it later.

Hermione begged to be allowed to go back to the costume rooms again. She enjoyed the ornate costumes, and wanted Dumbledore to realize how much easier they had it, with transfiguration. Neal introduced them to a wardrobe worker, Emma, and she explained how they made the Phantom's mask, showed them the wigs worn in the show, and even demonstrated using spirit gum to apply hairpieces.

Around them, several other wardrobe girls were gathering costume pieces for laundering. Emma pointed to the multiple copies of each costume, indicating that they had them available in case of damage to the one being worn at the time, and also to allow the actors to wear clean clothes each show, while others were being washed.

Emma walked them over to the dressing rooms and showed them each actor's area for makeup and costume. Some of the actors had photos of themselves in various makeup styles taped to the mirror. Snape peered at the photos, scowling. Emma saw his look and asked what was the matter.

In a deep rumble, Snape asked, "Isn't this a man? Why does he have makeup?"

Emma blithely recounted how all actors wore makeup, whether or not it was supposed to be noticeable. At Snape's horrified expression, Hermione choked back a snort of

laughter and asked what that meant.

Emma picked up each makeup item in turn and explained how it was used. Men wore foundation and eyeliner, regardless, and sometimes blush and lip colour. Others who played older characters wore age makeup, using highlights and shadows to create lines on the face and makeup to grey out the skin and hair...if they weren't wearing wigs already.

Snape glared at Hermione in the mirror. She could practically read his thoughts: "I will NOT wear makeup!" Hermione giggled and wondered how Dumbledore would handle this quandary.

Noticing Snape's agitated expression, Neal tore himself away from chatting up one of the wardrobe girls and suggested that they head back out to the stage. As they followed Neal, Snape scowled at Hermione and she gamely tried to keep from smiling at him. They slowly walked among the set pieces, taking in every detail. Finally, Neal got on a headset and told a fellow in the light booth to bring up the stage lights like they would be during the show. Hermione squinted in the glare and gazed out over the house.

Glancing over her shoulder, she called, "Professor!" Snape turned and strode to her, looking at her inquiringly.

"Stand here and look out." Snape scowled but complied. He was dazzled by the lights and blinked.

In an irritated growl, he said, "And just what am I supposed to see, Miss Granger?"

"Well, what can you see?"

Rolling his eyes and huffing, he retorted, "I can't see much of anything except the lights."

Hermione grinned and said, "Exactly! This is what we need to remember when everyone at Hogwarts starts getting stage fright! People will undoubtedly freak out when they realize that others will be sitting in the audience... *watching them*... and this will help them feel better, since they won't be able to see them!"

Snape cut a glance at her and snorted noncommittally. Grudgingly, he growled, "Perhaps." He crossed his arms and stood there, gazing out into the house, trying to see past the glare. What he didn't want to admit was that Hermione was dead on. He hadn't even thought about what it would be like when they would perform in front of masses of people. His nightmare from weeks ago flashed across his mind. Convulsively tightening his arms, he swallowed against the remembered fear and desperation of the dream.

Relax! It was just a dream. You're much better than you thought, and others agree that you're doing well. You have nothing to worry about. Besides, it's just one performance. It's not like it's Voldemort... He snorted to himself. *Poor old Riddle will forever be the horrible fate with which we compare all other horrible fates* He sighed. *Face it, old chap. If being in a play is the worst thing you have to face anymore, then life is certainly looking up!* He spun on his heel and swept past Hermione, who had been gazing at him pensively.

Neal was leaning against a set piece, waiting for them to finish their conversation. Snape walked up to him, but Hermione stayed on the stage. After a moment, in which Hermione hadn't moved, Neal glanced at the grim man beside him and cleared his throat.

"Uh, Miss? Yeh comin'?" Hermione turned to him and chewed her lip. She flushed a little and worried her hands. Snape stared at her, wondering what was wrong.

"Neal?" Hermione flicked her gaze up at the young man. He nodded at her. "Would it be completely out of line to ask..." She trailed off.

Neal grinned cheekily at her, "Nuffin' hurts t' ask! G'on now, say it."

Hermione licked her lips and whispered, "I'd like to sing. Just a bit. I'm not like to get the chance again to sing on a stage like this. Might I be allowed?" She glanced at Neal, her eyes imploring.

Neal chuckled, batting his hand at her. "Cor! 'Lowed? Ain't no reason to stop yeh! G'on then. Let's hear yeh."

Hermione lit up like a kid on Christmas and beamed. She stepped onto the apron of the stage and took a deep steadying breath. Tentatively, she began "Think of Me." Stagehands in the wings stopped what they were doing to listen. The people in the light booth and sound booth paused and looked out to the stage. A hush fell over the theatre, which was soon echoing the light tones of Hermione's song.

Snape heard the acoustics enhancing Hermione's voice and felt a stab of awe again at her talent. As she sang, he stealthily sidled off to the side and down the stairs into the house. Quietly, he made his way into the centre of the audience, gazing raptly at Hermione as she sang.

As she came to the final run in the song, she closed her eyes and hit the high note perfectly, finishing triumphantly. All through the theatre, there were sudden whistles and applause. But she heard one lone person in the audience, clapping and bellowing, "Bravi, bravi, bravissimi!" Shielding her eyes from the glare, she saw Snape's dark form in the house. Cheers wafted down to her from the catwalks and bubbled up from the orchestra pit. Several of the people in the wings came out to praise her and Neal stood off to one side, beaming, as if he were the one responsible. Hermione blushed and smiled and thanked everyone shyly.

Snape slowly made his way back to the stage, trying to contain his pride in her and his love for her. Neal clapped Hermione on the shoulder approvingly. "Blimey! I reckon yer school is right glad to have yeh wif a voice like that!"

Smugly, Snape drawled, "Indeed." Hermione whirled and fought to contain her feelings. She wanted to take Snape's hand and hurl herself against him, but cast her eyes down instead, to hide her rampant emotions. Snape felt the warning energy between them and turned his attention to Neal. Solemnly, he bowed and said, "Thank you for taking us on such a detailed tour. The whole production is amazing, and seeing things from the other side makes it even more so. We appreciate your time and effort."

Neal shrugged dismissively. "Laws, 'tweren't nuffin'. A proper treat it was to hear her sing like that. Glad t' help! I'd best be off then. Got work t' do. Iff'n yeh'd rather, yeh can take the way out back here. Most of us, we come in through the back, like." Neal led the way to an exit beyond the dressing room hallway. "This'll take yeh out behind the theatre. Would yeh be needin' a taxi? I can go ring one for yeh..." They stepped outside into the wan wintry daylight.

Hermione shook her head and laid a hand on Neal's arm. "No, thank you. We're fine. Thank you again for everything. It's all so wonderful!" She beamed at Neal, and he grinned back. Suddenly changing his demeanour, he covered her hand on his arm and leant toward her engagingly.

"Happy to help. Y'know, any time yeh might wanna' come back, gimme' a ring, and I'll get yeh in with some ace seats and a personal backstage tour after, eh?" He wagged his eyebrows at her, a lopsided grin on his face.

Hermione recognized the come-on and stiffened. Shooting a furtive glance at Snape, who looked like he was inflating, so much was he drawing himself up to blast the boy, like a snake poised to strike, Hermione smiled tightly at Neal and patted his hand, forcefully withdrawing her other hand from his arm. Brightly, she chirped, "I'll keep that in mind! Really, though, we must be going. Right, Professor?" At that, she pointedly turned to Snape and stepped closer to him, effectively shutting Neal down, unless he wanted to try to press his flirt right there in front of her teacher.

Snape glared menacingly at Neal, who blinked in surprise at the tall man's black expression. Neal nervously ran a hand through his hair and stuffed his hands in his pockets as he looked around, avoiding Snape's hostile gaze.

Snape's voice was dark and threatening as he simply replied, "Indeed." Neal cleared his throat and nodded hastily at them.

"Well, good day t' yeh. P'raps I'll see yeh around some time, Miss. Professor. Ta!" And with that, he spun and hurried back into the theatre, as if he was afraid of being pursued. Snape actually took a step forward and smirked in malicious satisfaction at the abject fear on the boy's face as he cast a glance over his shoulder before dashing inside and slamming the door. Hermione grabbed at Snape's elbow repressively.

In a strained hiss, she said, "Severus!"

Snape raised one eyebrow and glanced at her innocently. "What?"

She pursed her lips and rolled her eyes, favouring him with a scolding look. "That was completely unnecessary."

Snape turned to her and stepped closer to her, looking down at her seriously. "That cretin had no business touching you like that. I don't like it. You're mine."

Hermione's eyes went wide and her breath caught. She stared at him, dumbfounded. Snape's hard expression dissolved into one of uncertainty. Flushing, he stammered, "I mean... aren't you?"

Hermione smiled at him joyfully and reached up to caress his cheek. Snape exhaled a long shuddering breath of relief and grasped her hand, pressing it to his face and then kissing her palm. Gently running his hand over her hair, he murmured, "Come, we must return." Hermione nodded and they walked around the theatre to the alleyway where they had Apparated.

Once they were hidden in the shadows along the wall, Snape pulled Hermione to him, enfolding her in his arms. She sighed contentedly against his chest. Snape bent his head and kissed Hermione's hair.

Quietly, his voice muffled in her hair, he said, "When we get back to Hogwarts, we'll go to my quarters to dispose of... certain, shall we say, incriminating memories before we go to Dumbledore. We can't spend much time without arousing suspicion." He pulled back and lifted her face to his. "You do realize that you'll be without the memories of the play and the tour until we retrieve them at the rehearsal tonight..." Hermione nodded. "I'll warn you, it may be rather disorienting. You'll have all the other memories leading up to them, and you'll be aware that you deposited memories into the Pensieve, but you won't be able to remember exactly what those memories are." Hermione furrowed her brow in thought. Snape smiled faintly. "It's an odd feeling, but you get used to it. As for what we put in my Pensieve... I'll have to figure out how best to get your memories back to you. It wouldn't do to have you back in my quarters right away." Hermione gazed up at him in alarm.

"But I don't want to be without my memories of us!"

Snape squeezed her and purred, "I know. It's all right. I'll work something out. But, in the meantime, it's better if you don't have them. That way, no one else can figure them out. Speaking of which... Miss Weasley could be trouble."

Hermione blinked at him. "Ginny? Why do you say that? Trouble how?"

Snape thinned his lips grimly. "She keeps watching us. I've caught her at it several times at rehearsal. Considering her brothers, I'm amazed that she's as clever as she is. You must be careful around her. She's far too suspicious as it is. We can't give her any more reasons to question our relationship. If she were to go to Dumbledore, it could ruin us. By rights, he has to investigate any suspicion of impropriety. And, in doing so, he has all options available to him... including Legilimency and Veritaserum." Hermione's eyes widened. Snape nodded heavily.

Hermione set her teeth and said, "I'll be careful. This little trip has been wonderful, but I promise I won't forget where we are when we return." Her lips trembled and she grimaced. "But it'll be so hard!"

Snape stilled her lips with his fingers and she instinctively kissed his fingertips. He locked eyes with her as he said, "I know. But we have to go back to normal and get through the rest of the year." Suddenly, he closed his eyes and swallowed convulsively. He opened his eyes, but wouldn't meet Hermione's gaze as he said, "And... if, at any time, you decide... you change your mind... or you realize that you don't... want me anymore... just tell me."

Hermione gasped and hugged him fiercely. Releasing him, she reached up and guided him to look at her. "Severus... I had no idea I could feel so happy. *You* did that for me. And, unless you anticipate changing on me, I don't foresee my feelings for you changing either!" Snape finally looked at her, and she basked in the dazed awe in his eyes. "I just can't stand the fact that I can't show you how I feel once we get back to Hogwarts!" Her radiant grin faltered a bit at that. She looked down, her smile fading. When she looked back up, her smile was tight and false. "Besides," she said, with an attempt at a playful tone, "how do I know *you* won't decide I'm just a silly little girl after all and realize you don't want me anymore?"

Snape felt the nervous tension in her body at her words, belying the teasing note. His chest tightened again and the words stuck in his throat.

Tell her! There's no good reason to keep it from her. She claims she feels the same way. So, find out! For good!

Snape swallowed thickly, his unblinking eyes trained on Hermione's. She could feel the energy building in him, flowing off him in waves. Finally, he leant down to kiss her gently. She felt his lips moving against hers as he whispered, "Hermione..."

She pulled back a fraction of an inch, locking eyes with him. "Yes?"

Snape felt like he was reeling on a precipice. Below him were the deep brown depths of her eyes, swirling and eddying with emotions for him. He leant forward and took the plunge. "I've fallen in love with you."

He felt light-headed. The world around him was spinning in a blur. He was going to drown. In her. He felt her warm body in his arms, saw the rapture flaring up to envelop him as he fell, and he realized that he didn't care. If drowning had always been this glorious, he would have flung himself into the lake ages ago.

Hermione felt all the air leave her person at once. She went weak, and if she hadn't been held up by Snape, she would likely have fallen. Gasping for oxygen, she gazed into the deep black tunnels of his eyes, speeding into them. Breathless, she somehow managed to rasp out, "I'm so in love with you, Severus Snape." Once the words were out, she was crushed in a soul-searing kiss, one that melted them until they were inextricably bonded together.

Clutching her to him, Snape feverishly groped for his wand, glancing down the alley before he cast the concealment charm on them both. Invisible, he backed Hermione against the wall, his hands roaming over her body. He heard her low moans and whimpers as he caressed her and deftly flicked a Silencing Charm around them for good measure.

His agile fingers worked their way under her shirt, tracing her bra. Hermione inhaled sharply. Then, a deep velvet purr vibrated along her ear as Snape said, "Now, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted this morning?"

The import of his words soaked through her lust-fogged brain and she exhaled on a long shuddering note. She both cursed the fact that she couldn't see him and relished that she couldn't anticipate what he would do next.

She felt the cool air against her belly as he pushed her shirt up. Hot, moist breath travelled over her exposed skin, giving her chills and further tightening her stiff nipples. She felt his hands over her breasts, lightly cupping them and palming her nipples. One hand slid behind her and quickly unhooked her bra. A high-pitched moan emerged as she felt his strong fingers grazing her bared breasts. "Oh, gods, Severus..."

She heard a wicked chuckle in response. She barely had time to wonder at his diabolical laugh when she nearly jumped out of her skin. His warm, wet tongue was flicking one nipple, circling it, then lavaging it slowly. A surge of excitement shot through her, ending in her knickers, where her clit throbbed.

Snape felt her fingers twisting in his hair and grinned. Her impassioned declaration had fired his ardour instantly. He felt dizzy and pushed on with reckless abandon. He

knew he loved her, and she loved him. They were going to be removing incriminating memories into his Pensieve anyway, so what would be the harm in a little indulgence before they returned to their lives of secrets and deception? He wanted to claim her, show her they belonged to each other and to no one else. He couldn't take her, not like that. He had already made that vow, and he wouldn't break his word. But, there were other things besides just that...

He revelled in tasting her smooth skin. Her delighted noises spurred him on further. He only wished he could see her face, wanting to know if she looked anything like she had when she had run through the castle to meet him. He promised himself that he'd see her face alight in ecstasy if it was the last thing he ever did. He spread his feet for balance and thrust one leg between hers, holding her up. Trailing kisses along her neck and jaw, he fondled her breasts. Distractedly, he noticed that she had squeezed her legs against his and was rocking on it.

Once that revelation filtered through, he was hit with an impulse. Abruptly, he reached down and cupped her through her jeans. She cried out, panting. He could feel her flexing her hips and his cock throbbed violently. He pressed against her experimentally and she moaned. Rhythmically, he ground his hand against her. Gasping, Hermione whimpered, "Please..."

Snape grinned wickedly, feeling the surge of power pulsing through him. "Please what?" he breathed in her ear.

He was taken aback by Hermione's growl of frustration and the adamant way she gripped his hand and held it against her as she frantically pulled at her jeans, ripping the button open and unzipping hurriedly. Snape was stunned for a moment at her brazen move, but when she panted, "Please, I want you..." he pinned her with a deep kiss and slid his hand up, slipping beneath the soft material of her knickers.

He couldn't contain his groan as he encountered the wet heat coating her curls. Hermione moaned into his mouth and rocked her hips forward. He could feel the slick moisture on his fingers and wanted to bury himself in her. Shaking his head ruthlessly, trying to banish the thought of her impaled on his cock, he traced one finger along her lips, parting them effortlessly and sliding along her cleft.

Hermione felt like she was dying. She couldn't hear anything beyond the roaring in her ears and the occasional growl from Snape. She couldn't open her eyes, and colours flashed against her eyelids in dazzling succession. All of her muscles were coiling with tension. Her lungs seemed unable to hold any more air and she felt light-headed from lack of oxygen. When Snape's finger brushed her clit, a sizzling flare swept over her, wrenching an inarticulate cry from her throat.

Snape circled her clit, nuzzling her ear the whole time, savouring the evocative sounds he incited. Her panting increased and her pitch climbed. Snape knew she was close to orgasm, and he wanted it desperately. Barely whispering, he urged, "Yes, Hermione, love... Please... Sweet Merlin, Hermione... Gods, yes... I want to tell you... I want to show you... How much... Gods, Hermione... I love you..."

The vibration of his words against her ear sent delicious chills down her spine to combine with the indescribable sensations pooling in her centre. She was so close, teetering on the edge, and when he said, "I love you..." she tilted over it, shattering on her way down into the abyss.

As she climaxed, she keened his name, shuddering and convulsing. Snape buried his face in her neck, biting and kissing. He pressed his body against hers, holding her up as she came down from her peak. He could feel the shaking in her limbs, hear it in her breathing. His fingers stilled. Silence descended over them, broken only by Hermione's deep breaths. Snape claimed her mouth in a probing kiss as he smoothly slid his hand from her knickers. She whimpered at the sensations. Snape silently gave thanks that they were invisible as he brought his fingers to his lips. He could smell her scent and he inhaled deeply. Reverently, he licked her juices from his fingers, savouring her taste. How he longed to taste her directly, to bury his tongue inside her and bring her to ecstasy again! His hum of pleasure sounded like a feral purr.

Hermione shuddered at the sound, still trying to recover. She felt hot breath against her ear again and held her breath as he murmured, "Delicious..." Her eyes flew open in shock as she understood his comment. Flushing madly, she was once again grateful that he couldn't see her. She was startled again as she felt Snape lift her from the wall, placing himself against it and settling her back against him. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her head. Hermione leant back and felt his erection against her back. She gasped. From above her head, she heard an amused voice say, "You needn't worry about that. It'll go away."

She was speechless. For once, Hermione Granger didn't have an answer. She felt his chuckle. Smoothly, he pushed her forward and slid his hands under her shirt again. She yelped in surprise, but he just arranged her bra and hooked it again. She could hear the smug satisfaction in his voice as he said, "There, that's better." She took his cue and hastily fastened her jeans again. Reasonably sure that she was acceptably dressed...she couldn't be positive until she could see herself clearly...she spun in his arms and snaked her hands around his neck.

Laying her head against his chest, she sighed, "Gods, that was... unbelievable!"

Snape laughed, making Hermione smile at the sound. He squeezed her before purring, "Believe it. And, rest assured, there's more where that came from come the time you leave Hogwarts."

Hermione thumped his arm in irritation, but it was only half-hearted. "Well, then I guess I know what to expect for an end-of-school present..."

He kissed her, cutting their laughter short. When she pulled away, she pressed her forehead against his and sighed, "I love you. Remember that when we get back to Hogwarts."

Snape hugged her tightly and solemnly intoned, "I will if you will."

"Always."

After one more moment of silence, Snape cleared his throat and queried, "Ready to go back?"

Hermione huffed and said, "No, but I'll go anyway."

Snape smiled to himself. "Very well then. Hang on." He gripped her arms and Disapparated.

They appeared in the clearing just outside the gates to Hogwarts. Snape muttered, "Get ready, I'm about to cast the reversal."

Hermione stepped away from him and furtively ran her hands over her clothing, straightening them. At his soft incantation, they both shimmered into view. They simply stood there, gazing intently at each other. After a moment, Hermione smiled gently at Snape and he nodded slightly at her, his lips twitching.

Taking a deep breath and straightening formally, Snape gazed down his nose at Hermione and said, "Come along then, Miss Granger. Dumbledore is waiting."

Hermione nodded politely and retorted, "Certainly, Professor." They turned and entered the grounds, striding silently to the side door that would take them down to the dungeons.

Snape muttered a password, and the side door opened. Courteously gesturing for Hermione to enter first, he surreptitiously glanced around, looking to see if anyone were watching them. He didn't see anyone, but that didn't mean they were unnoticed. Scowling, he glanced around again before shutting the door behind them. They were in a dark passageway, lit only by a couple of torches that flickered near them. Snape strode forward and the torches in front of him flared to life. When Hermione moved to follow him, the torches behind her guttered out. Snape heard her sharp inhalation and smirked. Glancing over his shoulder at her, he saw her gazing at the torches pensively.

"This passageway is accessible to all teachers, but it remains locked to keep students from using it to sneak out. It's been charmed to light only the area around the person using it. If we were to separate and move away from each other, the torches around each of us would light, but the ones in between us would die out." They were proceeding down the corridor, and Hermione was trying to guess how long it was, but since she couldn't see very far, it was difficult.

"Where does it end?"

"Near the potions classroom. I used this passageway whenever I was summoned. It wouldn't have been very pleasant to encounter students while in Death Eater garb..." His voice was sardonic.

Hermione snorted mildly in agreement. In a low voice, she said, "I can't even imagine what you went through."

His voice leaden, he curtly retorted, "It's best that way."

Hermione chewed her lip as she followed him, reading his unease in the tension in his shoulders. She decided that it was probably best to drop the subject. Finally, they came to a door and Snape pushed through it into the corridor to the dungeons. Hermione stepped out and glanced around, finally able to place where they were. Silently, Snape jerked his head toward his quarters and strode off. Hermione sprang after him, hastening her stride to keep up with him.

She was surprised when he led her to the potions classroom instead of to his quarters, but he stopped her inquiry with a quelling look. Once inside the classroom, he locked and warded the door before immediately crossing to his office. Hermione followed him into his office and watched in fascination as he muttered an incantation that disclosed a concealed door in the wall behind his desk. He beckoned her through it, into his private lab.

Hermione gazed about her, fascinated by the intricate setups within his lab. The sheer diversity around her almost overwhelmed her senses. She would have loved to poke around, examining everything, but Snape urged her through to the door to his chambers. Glancing longingly back over her shoulder at his lab, she stepped through to his sitting room.

As soon as she recognized his sitting room, she felt memories flood over her of the last time she was in his quarters, when he had kissed her so passionately. She smiled and glanced shyly at him, noting his faint smirk. He raised an eyebrow at her and murmured, "I'll be right back."

Hermione meandered over to his bookshelves, idly noting the variety of titles as he disappeared into his bedroom to retrieve his Pensieve. A moment later, he entered, bearing a stone basin with runic inscriptions around the rim. She could see his face under-lit by the glow from within it. He crossed to his dining table and placed it carefully upon it.

"Come. We have to hurry and get to Dumbledore. Let me show you how to do this. Think of the memory you want to remove. Concentrate on it. Place your wand at your temple, like so, and withdraw it slowly." He closed his eyes and slowly moved his wand back from his temple, the silvery tendril extending between him and his wand. Once he reached about a foot in length, the tendril snapped away and he dropped it into the Pensieve. He opened his eyes and looked at Hermione. "Look into the Pensieve. You can see which memory I stored."

Hermione bent closer and saw their exchange from intermission. Her breath caught at the thought. She glanced up at Snape and licked her lips unconsciously.

He pinned her with a penetrating gaze and said, "You need to store the same memory. Try it now."

Hermione nodded and concentrated, placing her wand at her temple. She drew her wand away and felt the cool caress of her memory slipping from her mind. She felt the snap and opened her eyes to drop it into the Pensieve. She blinked. She had the uncomfortable feeling that she should be able to remember something but couldn't. She narrowed her eyes and looked at Snape uneasily. He nodded reassuringly.

"I know. It's an odd feeling, but you'll get used to it. Now, we both need to empty our memories of everything but the play and the tour. Anything that Dumbledore shouldn't see must be stored here. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded, albeit hesitantly. Taking a deep breath, she remembered their embraces and kisses as they Apparated. They disappeared as she dropped them into the Pensieve. Snape continued withdrawing memories as Hermione did. Their encounter during dessert disappeared. So did everything from the point that she had snuck into his room. Her intrusion while he was showering was gone; and, especially, their intimacy in the alley near the theatre, not even an hour before, disappeared.

Hermione thought hard and remembered the play, the tour, and their return to Hogwarts. She knew more had transpired between them...she could feel it...but she didn't remember what exactly. She shook her head, discomfited. Snape saw her consternation and nodded grimly.

"I'll figure out how to get these back to you soon. I promise. Now, we must go to Dumbledore and deposit the play and tour memories into *his* Pensieve." He grimaced. "By the time we leave his office, we'll actually remember very little of our trip. But we will get our memories back from him tonight at rehearsal."

Hermione's eyes kept darting about, and her brow furrowed. She glanced irritably at Snape and muttered, "I don't like this. How ever did you *do* this all the time?"

Blackly, he sighed, "Those were memories I was far from loath to part with..."

Hermione's eyes widened as she realized what he meant, and she extended her hand in a gesture of apology. Snape shook his head briskly and straightened. "Let's go. Do try to act as if you've not experienced this before when you get up there..." He gazed at her warningly. She nodded solemnly and followed him back through his lab, to his office, where he pinched some Floo powder from a jar and tossed it into the fireplace. "Dumbledore's office." The flames sprang up, casting a green glow on them, and he gestured for Hermione to precede him. She stepped into the flames and out again into Dumbledore's cheerful office. A moment later, Snape appeared, and they both brushed the soot from their clothes.

"Severus! Miss Granger! How wonderful to have you back. Do sit. Lemon drop?" He proffered the tin on his desk and both Snape and Hermione declined, seating themselves in the chairs in front of his desk.

Beaming, Dumbledore sat back in his chair. "Well? How was everything?"

Hermione smiled and said, "It was wonderful, sir. Thank you for allowing the trip. My parents asked me to thank you as well." Dumbledore twinkled at Hermione and then turned to Snape expectantly.

In a bored tone, Snape drawled, "I daresay it was successful, as we both have extensive visual information for you, ready to be deposited into the Pensieve."

Dumbledore chuckled at Snape's tone and stood, shuffling to a shelf and retrieving his Pensieve. Hermione examined it as he placed it on his desk, mentally comparing it to Snape's. Silvery swirls eddied within it, and Dumbledore said, "Let me empty it so you won't have to deal with my memories in your way..." As he spoke, he drew tendril after tendril of the substance and redeposited them in his mind. Once the bowl was empty, he smiled at them encouragingly. "Severus, won't you demonstrate how it's done for Miss Granger?"

Snape scowled. "I have already explained the process." Flicking an aggrieved glance at Hermione, he barked, "Pay attention, Miss Granger." He began withdrawing his memories of the play, dropping the tendrils, one by one, into the stone basin. Hermione watched him attentively. He paused and sneered, "Your turn, Miss Granger."

She straightened and set her shoulders. Concentrating, she began withdrawing her memories of the play. After a few, Snape held up his hand imperiously, stopping her. He leant forward, prodding the substance with his wand, peering into it. He saw scenes from the play through her eyes and nodded. Curtly, he snapped, "Very well then. Continue." Hermione worked her way through all of her memories of the play and the tour. Snape beside her following suit. When she was done, she felt curiously empty. Her head began to ache with the odd blankness and her vain efforts to remember what she had removed. Blinking rapidly, her eyes unfocused.

Dumbledore patted her hand reassuringly. "Don't worry, dear. You'll get them back this evening. I know it feels unnerving right now, but that will fade. As for your headache..." Hermione looked at him sharply, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "Yes, dear, I know you're getting one. It's normal when so many memories are removed at once. As I was saying... Severus, surely you have a potion that you can give Miss Granger to assuage her headache until you two can retrieve your memories tonight..." He looked meaningfully at Snape, practically ordering him, with his gaze alone, to be kind to her.

Snape concealed the flare of excitement that he could get her memories back to her so quickly and affected irritation. Rolling his eyes and huffing dramatically, he crossed

his arms and glared at Hermione. "Very well then, Miss Granger. I can see that I'll not be allowed to finally be rid of you, even after having suffered your continued presence for far too long." Hermione narrowed her eyes at the insult but returned his gaze steadily. Snape stood gracefully and peered down his nose at Hermione. "Come along." He turned to Dumbledore and nodded sharply, scowling. "Headmaster." He stepped to the fireplace again, waiting for Hermione to follow.

Hermione stood, smiling at Dumbledore. "I'll see you at rehearsal, sir. I'll be glad to get my memories back!" She rolled her eyes expressively and Dumbledore chuckled.

Snape huffed and snapped, "Hurry up! I can't wait to get out of these insufferable Muggle clothes!" Hermione ducked her head hurriedly and crossed to the fireplace, her eyes bright with contained merriment. Snape tossed in the Floo powder and barked, "Potions Master's office." Hermione stepped in and Snape followed.

As soon as they emerged in his office, Hermione turned dancing eyes to Snape and bit her lower lip, struggling to hold back a grin. As he brushed the soot from his clothes, Snape glared at her. "What is so funny, you insufferable girl?"

She smirked at him and murmured, "I can't wait to get you out of those Muggle clothes either..." She laughed aloud at the stunned expression on his face.

His eyes narrowed and he growled, "Cheeky minx..." Casting a stern eye over his shoulder at her, he crossed to his potions cabinet and withdrew a headache remedy. "Here. Not that you deserve it after that sass." His expression was forbidding, but she could see the amused glint in his eyes.

She tossed back the potion in a few chugs, grimacing at the taste. "Ugh!"

Snape's lip curled and he purred, "Serves you right, little impudence." Hermione wrinkled her nose at him, but her eyes relaxed in relief as her headache disappeared. Smirking wickedly at her, he crossed his arms and leant against the cabinet, drawing, "Perhaps I shouldn't let you have your memories back, after such an insolent display."

Hermione's eyes widened in dismay and she scowled. Petulantly, she said, "Fine. I'm sorry, sir. Please let me retrieve my memories, sir." She glared at him in pique. Snape snorted and relented.

"All right. Just a moment." He disappeared into his quarters and returned with the Pensieve. He placed it on the desk between them and indicated that they should both begin retrieving their memories.

As Hermione input each memory, she gasped. The sensations and emotions coursed through her anew with each one. By the time she had them all safely back in her mind, she was tingling with desire and love for the dark man opposite her. Looking into his eyes, she saw that he too had been affected. She stepped toward him and he held up a warning hand between them.

"Hermione, no."

She frowned, gazing longingly at him. His eyes softened, but he set his teeth as he murmured, "Return to your Tower. Be careful around Miss Weasley. Do whatever it is you do with your friends. Just keep everything about us to yourself. And that includes when you're around me. It's a secret, and it must stay that way." He pointed his chin at the door, effectively dismissing her. Hermione sighed in frustration and disappointment. She pinned him with an intense stare before turning and crossing to the door. Her hand was on the knob when Snape said, "One more thing, Miss Granger." She turned back to him, resignedly expecting more instructions and admonishments. Snape gazed at her soberly. "Especially, don't forget... I love you."

Hermione's wistful expression dissolved into a radiant smile and she nodded slowly. "I won't forget." She paused and smiled tenderly at him. "Good afternoon, Professor." She nodded at him and exited, leaving him alone in his office, basking in the warmth of her smile.

25- Suspicions

Chapter 26 of 84

Hermione returns to her friends after leaving Snape's office, only to find herself at odds with them again. Later that night is the first blocking rehearsal, in which everyone is delighted with the Great Hall's transformation.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Chapter 25- Suspicions

Hermione made her way up the stairs from the dungeons only to realize that lunch was taking place in the Great Hall. Deciding that her unpacking could wait, she strode straight to the Hall and entered. At the Gryffindor table, she saw Harry, Ron, and Ginny sitting together. Ron looked up and saw Hermione. He lit up and smiled across the Hall at her, waving for her to hurry up and join them. Ginny looked over as well, her anticipation evident, but not quite as blatant as Ron's. Harry stared at her, his expression guarded, but he rippled his fingers at her in a tiny wave as she crossed to them.

Hermione smiled impartially at them as she stepped over the bench to sit by Ginny, across from Harry. She shrugged out of her coat and reached for platters to fill her plate. "Hi, you lot! How are you? Did I miss anything while I was gone?"

Ron wrinkled his nose dismissively and shook his head, his mouth full. "Naw, nuff'n happ'n..."

Ginny kicked Ron under the table and he yelped. "Ron! If Mum could see you... Swallow! Stop talking with your mouth full. It's disgusting." She turned to Hermione, eyeing her. "Nothing out of the ordinary happened here. It was kinda' weird to not have rehearsal on a Friday night, but we'll have it tonight, so no big deal. You seem pretty cheerful. I guess Snape didn't hex the daylight's out of you..." She raised one eyebrow in inquiry.

Hermione choked a bit on her food, remembering Ginny's comment about Snape's speed with his wand and how it would be a bad thing to get on his bad side, especially considering she *did* end up with a concussion as a result of his ultra-sharp reflexes! Coughing a bit, she swallowed and said, "No, everything went fine. We just came from Dumbledore's office. He's got everything he needs now, and we'll likely see the results tonight."

Ginny frowned enviously at Hermione and said, "I wish I could have seen the show. How was it?"

Hermione blinked, disconcerted. She *knew* she had seen it, and she knew she had enjoyed it, but she couldn't *remember* it! Hesitantly, she ventured, "Uh... It was fine. I think..."

Harry scowled and drawled, "You *think*? You were there, with bloody Snape. It was *fine*? Jeez, Hermione, she asked a simple question, the least you could do is give a real answer."

Hermione glared angrily at Harry. Icily, she bit out, "I'm not being evasive! I don't remember!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Please..."

Ron and Ginny exchanged a look, dreading the coming row. Perplexed, Ron asked, "How do you not remember?"

Hermione continued to glare at Harry as she explained, albeit in a calmer tone. "Do you know how the Pensieve works?" She glanced at Ron, who was shaking his head. "You *remove* the memory from your mind and place it in the Pensieve. Once that's done, you *don't remember* it anymore." She cast a glance around the group. Ginny looked thoughtful, and Ron looked confused. Harry was glaring sullenly back at her. She shot a very Snape-like sneer at Harry and said, "Really, Harry, I would have expected *you* of all people to be able to appreciate that I wouldn't be able to remember things, since you were the one to tell us about your encounters with Pensieves."

Harry's eyes narrowed and he cut his eyes away. Hermione rolled her eyes and looked back at Ron, who was gazing at her, his head tilted to one side, as he puzzled things out. "So, what *do* you remember?"

Hermione thought for a moment, considering her response, making sure she wouldn't say anything that might arouse suspicion about her and Snape. "Well, I remember the trip there, dinner with my folks, getting ready for the play, and the trip to the theatre. After that, there's a big blank, and then I remember coming home again. This morning, I remember getting ready for the tour, heading back to the theatre, and meeting this chap, Neal." She smirked a bit at that and shot an amused glance at Ginny. In a stage whisper, she said to her, "Remind me to tell you about him later..." Ginny grinned interestedly and Hermione snorted. "Then there's another big blank. After that, I remember coming back here and going to Dumbledore's. It's really odd, the way it feels: *knowing* you did things, and feeling like you should be able to remember, but not being able to. I had quite the headache, let me tell you!" Her eyebrows rose and she shook her head.

Ron gazed at her with concern. "Does your head hurt still?"

"Not now. Professor Snape gave me a potion for it."

Ginny's eyes narrowed. "I thought you said you went to Dumbledore's. Why would Snape have a headache potion there?"

Wow! Severus was right! Ginny is a suspicious one... Hermione cleared her throat and continued carefully, "He didn't. Dumbledore knew I'd have a headache from removing so many memories at once, and he ordered Professor Snape to provide me with a potion for it. We Flooed to his office and he gave me one from his cabinet. I came straight up here to lunch. I haven't even unpacked yet."

Ginny stared fixedly at Hermione, but didn't say anything else. Hermione resolutely ate more, pretending that she wasn't sweating bullets under her scrutiny. Ron huffed and said, "I still can't believe that you had to spend so much time with the great bat. What was dinner like? Was he horrible?"

Hermione shot Ron an aggrieved glare. "No, Ron, he was not horrible."

Ginny piped up, "So, how was your visit?"

Hermione smiled. "It was great. My folks made my favourite meal, and even my favourite dessert! And my Mum let me borrow a dress and jewellery to wear to the theatre, since it's a dressy thing. I got to talk to my dad this morning too, and that was nice. They said to tell you all hello."

Ginny grinned knowingly. "Well, what chocolate concoction did they have for dessert?"

Hermione affected shock, but she dissolved into a blissful grin as she breathed, "Chocolate mousse... with whipped cream and cherries too!"

The girls broke into laughter. Harry was still sitting silently, brooding. Ron merely said, "Mmm, sounds yummy!"

Ginny cocked her head to one side and squinted. "What did your folks think of the black bat?"

Hermione bit back an angry retort at the name-calling and took a deep breath. "They liked him."

Ron snorted and coughed, his eyes bugging out. Harry rolled his eyes contemptuously, and Ginny raised one eyebrow sceptically.

"Honestly, you lot, you act as if he were a troll or something! He *is* an educated man of good breeding... My Mum was actually rather taken with him, what with him being a war hero and all." She flung that tidbit out loftily, knowing it would get a reaction. She wasn't wrong. Once again, the three others expressed their disbelief vehemently. She glared repressively at them. Then, in a spiteful poke, she added, "But, she wasn't nearly as bad as your mum was with Lockhart..."

Ginny rocked back in her seat, taken aback by the barb, and Ron voiced an indignant "Oi!" Hermione smirked and sat back, arms crossed, clearly ready to parry any other thrust they sent her way. Harry smothered a snort of amusement and ducked his head from Ron's accusing glance. Ginny huffed and pursed her lips sourly.

"Yeah, well, she wasn't the *only* one who was taken with him, *Hermione*." Ginny glared pointedly at her.

Hermione raised her eyebrows and regarded Ginny from under hooded lids. Scathingly, she retorted, "I was *twelve*."

The two girls gazed stonily at each other for a moment. After a beat, Hermione cleared her throat and broke their connection. She neatly piled her napkin and cutlery on her plate and nodded coolly to Ron and Harry. "I have to unpack and check on Crookshanks. If I don't see you before then, I'll see you at dinner." She cut a glance at Ginny and stood haughtily.

Ron interrupted her. "So, when will you get your memories back so you can tell us about the show?"

"I'll get them tonight at rehearsal. But you won't need me to tell you much, since Dumbledore will be creating the set tonight anyway." She shrugged and turned away, heading for the door. She flung a casual "Bye" over her shoulder.

Harry watched her go, his eyes bright with emotion. Ginny noticed his intent stare and momentarily forgot her pique with Hermione in her regret that such a rift had happened between Harry and Hermione. With a sigh, she tossed her napkin on the table and stood, saying, "Come on, you lot. We need to practice." The boys stood hastily and the three of them headed out toward the Quidditch pitch under the wintry sun.

Hermione spent most of the afternoon in her room working on homework. Only most of the afternoon, because she kept interrupting her own work to daydream about Snape and bask in the memories of their time together. She had unpacked her bag earlier, and when she had gone to put her nightgown away, she had paused, holding it to her. It was then that she had realized it smelled like Snape, as he had been pressed against her while they slept. She had buried her face in it, inhaling deeply, and she had tucked it under her pillow, resolving to wear another nightgown and keep that one to curl up with.

Eventually, it was time for dinner and she went out to the common room. Ginny was curled up by the fire, reading again, and she looked up at Hermione's cordial, "Hello, Ginny."

The girls eyed each other coolly for a beat, then they both seemed to decide to move on, and Ginny's cold expression relaxed. "Hey, 'Mione. Say, you mentioned something about a chap named Neal..." She quirked her eyebrow in inquiry and Hermione grinned conspiratorially back.

Giggling, Hermione took up residence beside the redhead and leant in confidentially. "He's the bloke who gave us the tour. He's the nephew of my folks' friend. Well, I don't remember the tour, but I do remember after it. We were in the alley behind the theatre, getting ready to return to Hogwarts, and he actually made a pass at me!" She nodded solemnly at Ginny's incredulous expression.

Fascinated, Ginny asked, "What happened?"

Hermione smirked and said, "Well, he touched my hand and offered to get me good seats if I wanted to come back to the show again, but then he said he'd give me a 'personal backstage tour'! And his expression was positively lascivious!"

Ginny grinned delightedly. "So, what did you do? Are you going to see him again?"

Hermione blinked and grimaced. "Ginny! No! Eww... Honestly... I just said I'd keep it in mind and that it was time to go. So, we left." She composed her expression primly.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "But you said you wanted a man, not a boy! So, he's not a boy, is he? He must be older than us to be working in the theatre like that. Why not take a chance and have a bit of fun?"

"Really, Ginny, he wasn't my type. But I thought you'd find it amusing to know that I got hit on..."

Ginny stiffened and her eyes widened. "Bloody hell! Where was Snape when this happened?"

Hermione fought the smile that was hovering on her lips. Dramatically, she pronounced, "Standing *right there*."

Ginny's mouth dropped open and she gasped. Apprehensively, she whispered, "What did he do?"

Hermione choked back a giggle and murmured, "I thought he would hex the poor fellow right there! And Neal had no idea Professor Snape's a wizard! He glared at Neal so hard that I thought he might burst into flames! And when Neal started back into the theatre, Professor Snape even stepped after him, like he was going to follow him! It was too funny." She finally allowed the grin to surface, her eyes dancing.

Ginny shook herself like a dog shedding water and blinked rapidly. "Wow. I don't know how you could put up with him."

Hermione shrugged dismissively. "Oh, it wasn't that bad. I mean, I'm flattered, of course. But Neal and I have nothing in common..."

Ginny made an inarticulate noise in her throat and rolled her eyes heavenward. "I wasn't talking about *him*! I was talking about Snape! Really, 'Mione, how can you stand him so much? Acting like that just because some bloke liked you... Who does he think he is?"

Hermione stiffened defensively. Coldly, she retorted, "Professor Snape is my teacher, and he is in a position of authority over me. We were there on business, and he was protecting me. He acted completely within reason. I was not interested in Neal's advances, and Professor Snape put a stop to them quite effectively." She was building up to quite a bursting point.

"And, you know, Ginny, I'm sick of you and the boys always acting like Professor Snape is so horrible! He has done more than we can ever imagine that required bravery and courage and patience, and I, for one, will give him the respect he deserves! And if you can't do that, then don't talk to me about him. Keep your petty opinions to yourself! He's a brilliant, honourable, decent man, and I can 'stand him' just fine, especially as I have to perform opposite him! Even you can't deny that he has a great talent for his role, and once again, Hogwarts is that much closer to success because of Professor Snape and his myriad of skills and willingness to do whatever it takes to help us!" She paused, breathless in the intensity of her harangue. Ginny gaped at her, completely gobsmacked. Finally, she managed to speak.

"Okay! Okay already! Calm down. I'm sorry! I had no idea that you would get so upset. For Merlin's sake, 'Mione, it's not like we're saying things that haven't been said millions of times before!" Hermione broke in.

"...But that doesn't make it right!"

Ginny held her hands up defensively. "Okay! I get it! Man, I haven't seen you this worked up since S.P.E.W." She rolled her eyes. "Forget I said anything. I'm sorry..." She trailed off. They sat, uncomfortably looking anywhere but at each other. Hermione realized that she rather overplayed things, and was regretting her vehement reaction.

Chewing her lip and worrying her hands, Hermione said, hesitantly, "So, um, you wanna' go to dinner?"

Eagerly grasping at normality, Ginny nodded, shooting to her feet. "Sure, let's go!" Hermione stood hastily and the two girls strode to the portrait hole. "Harry and Ron will probably already be there."

Hermione nodded and they exited, grateful for the distraction. The whole way down, Hermione berated herself for her strong words, especially to Ginny, and after Snape had warned her about her in particular! Ginny kept casting sidelong glances at her friend, wondering what was wrong with her, to have got into so many rows in just a few hours since her return from London with Snape.

Harry and Ron were already eating, and they acknowledged the girls' approach with vague nods, as they were deeply engrossed in a tactical discussion of Quidditch. The girls were silent, eating mechanically, until Ginny was drawn into the boys' discussion, offering her objections and counterpoints. Hermione was grateful for the distraction, surreptitiously glancing toward the High Table, noting that Snape was not there. Dumbledore was intensely involved in a conversation with McGonagall and Flitwick, no doubt about the spells needed for the set. Dinner wore on, and most of the students dispersed, leaving the cast behind, waiting for rehearsal to start. A low buzz of excited anticipation droned through the Hall.

Finally, as the hour approached, Dumbledore stood and addressed the cast. "Professor Flitwick has been good enough to assist in the charms work needed to create our theatre space and sets, but we need to clear the Hall first before we can make any changes. Please exit and remain in the corridor until you are summoned. Remember, you need your scripts and a pencil to take notes of blocking. If you do not have them with you now, retrieve them before we begin. Now, if you would be so kind as to vacate the premises..." He gestured expansively toward the doors, and the students obediently filed out. Colin Creevey jumped as the door slammed shut behind him.

Neville grimaced and muttered, "I forgot my script and pencil. I'll be right back. Tell Professor Dumbledore that I'm on my way if you lot start before I get back, will you?" He lightly touched Hermione's arm to get her attention and she nodded reassuringly.

"Oi! I forgot too! Hey, Neville, be a sport and grab mine for me, eh?" Ron raised his voice and jerked his head at Neville.

Harry's head shot up and he whipped around. "Me, too. It's by my bed. Thanks, mate!" Neville nodded and hurried away.

Hermione scowled at her friends and planted her hands on her hips. "Honestly! You two... Neville is not your servant. It's not right to take advantage of his good nature like that. You knew what you were supposed to have for rehearsal. Pay attention!"

Ron and Harry gazed at her, taken aback by her censure. Ron coloured guiltily and he sputtered, "Well, you knew too, and yet I don't see *your* script!"

Hermione glared at him disdainfully and pulled something out of her pocket. She held it in her palm and flicked her wand at it, enlarging her script and pencil in her hand.

Ron rubbed the back of his neck and glanced around sheepishly. "Oh... well, yeah."

Hermione cast a smirk at Harry and drawled, "I would have thought you would remember that after smuggling meals out of the Hall..."

Harry scowled at her and turned away. Ginny stifled a giggle. Harry and Ron sidled away from the girls and closer to the other boys. Ginny and Hermione exchanged amused glances and rolled their eyes as if to say, "Boys!" They leant against the notice board and Ginny remarked, "So, I guess your folks were glad to see you."

"Yeah, especially since we don't get to go home for Christmas. They had resigned themselves to that while the war was still going on, but now that it's over, they were hoping that I'd be back again. They were so nice. I do miss them sometimes. My dad and I had a nice little chat, and he realized that I'll likely not be home again, unless it's for a visit, once I finish school. My room will probably be converted into a second guest room once I get my stuff out of it and into wherever I'll be living." She paused a moment. "My dad even got serious and talked to me about relationships!" Ginny's eyebrows rose. "I know! But, it wasn't bad. Dinner was bad!" She rolled her eyes in remembered humiliation.

"I thought you said dinner was good. What happened?"

She fixed Ginny with an aggrieved look and said, "While we were eating, my dad suddenly piped up and asked me about *my love life*!" Ginny gasped in horror and Hermione closed her eyes in pained remembrance as she added, "In front of Professor Snape!" Ginny clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the horrified exclamation. "I thought I would expire on the spot! Then, as if it wasn't bad enough, Professor Snape chimed in and told them about catching me with Harry in the corridor! I was mortified." She sighed. "The only saving grace was that his revelation at least made my parents uncomfortable too, so they shut up after that." Ginny's eyes were limpid with sympathy. She laid a gentle hand on Hermione's arm, offering comfort.

"Wow, 'Mione, that's ruddy awful! I'm sorry..."

Hermione nodded wearily. "Yeah, it was pretty embarrassing. Don't tell the boys, okay? They don't need this kind of ammunition..." She cocked a wry smile at Ginny, who chuckled in response, shaking her head.

"I won't. Gee, after all that, I would hate to have to see Snape again. Good thing he's not required to be at this rehearsal! I was surprised to see he wasn't at lunch or dinner, but maybe he's recovering from his encounter with your parents too!" She laughed. Hermione wrinkled her nose at the girl, rolling her eyes.

"Ha ha, very funny. He may not have to be here, but I'm sure he'll show up." She spoke with quiet confidence. Ginny stopped laughing and looked at her, perplexed.

"Why? I'd think he'd stay as far away from us all as possible when not required."

Hermione blinked in acknowledgement of that perception, but added, "True, but he'll undoubtedly be here to retrieve his memories, just like I will. Besides, I have a feeling that he'll be at all of the rehearsals, whether required or not, simply because he's dedicated to making this production a success. And, he's so methodical, it'd be out of character for him *not* to be thoroughly aware of every step of the process."

Ginny blinked rapidly as she absorbed Hermione's assessment of Snape's character. Gazing warily at Hermione, she murmured, "You know, I never thought about it like that. Jeez, you blew up earlier, and now you offer up this in-depth analysis of Snape... Since when do you know so much about him? Just what *happened* between you two for you to come back so 'in touch with Snape'?"

Hermione froze. Swallowing hastily, she fought a nervous stammer as she retorted, "Nothing *happened*. I've always thought like this; it's just that there's never been a reason to talk about it. Now that we're all thrown together in the play, you're just suddenly bringing up the topic. I've always respected Professor Snape, and he's demonstrated the finer qualities of his character through his work for the Order..."

Ginny snorted and cut in, "Yeah, but he's demonstrated his nasty git-ness more often!" Hermione glared at Ginny loftily and the redhead rolled her eyes. "Fine! I remember. 'Keep my petty opinions to myself.' No problem. It's just weird, that's all."

"What's weird?"

"You! You and your 'let's stick up for Snape.' It's like he's your new pet project. Has he replaced S.P.E.W.? Are you going to pass around badges that say, 'We love the greasy bat of the dungeons.?'?" She saw Hermione's jaw clench in anger and she subsided, slightly ashamed at her outburst. "Sorry. Forget I said that."

Icily, through gritted teeth, Hermione said, "I'll try."

The girls were back to an awkward silence, which was fortunately broken by Neville running up to the group, laden with scripts. Only a moment later, the door to the Hall opened and Dumbledore poked his head through, his eyes twinkling like mad and his grin wide enough to split his face.

"It's ready! Do come in and take your places in the front of the audience."

The doors opened wider and the group gasped as one at the transformation of the Great Hall. It was now an ornate theatre, complete with burgundy velvet seats in row after row, leading up to the raised stage beneath the huge proscenium. The students filed down an aisle, gaping, staring about them in rapt appreciation. The professors were standing in front of the first row, beaming at them.

Dumbledore gazed upon them fondly, and he said, with an indulgent air, "Go on. Have a look around. This is what we'll be rehearsing in from now on."

The students began milling about, taking in the spectacle. Hermione climbed the stairs to the stage, her brow furrowed with the nagging sensation that this should all be familiar to her. She peered down into the orchestra pit and looked up into the balcony and Boxes. Excited mutterings were sounding on all sides. She was standing on the apron, idly touching the curtain when she felt a tingling on her neck. Turning around, she shielded her eyes from the glare of the lights and saw Snape standing in the doorway to the Hall. His face was impassive as he gazed about. She saw his eyes narrow, and felt sure that he was as disconcerted as she was, not being able to remember. He slowly glided down an aisle, glaring at the students in his way who scurried out of his path.

Dumbledore noticed his approach and crowed, "Ah, Severus! Welcome. So, what do you think?" He gestured airily at the whole space.

Snape scowled and retorted flatly, "About what?"

Dumbledore blinked and stared at him. "Why, about the transformation! Isn't it wonderful? Didn't Filius do a fantastic job?"

Snape sighed and drawled, "I'm certain Professor Flitwick was excellent in his work. However, I cannot comprehend how you imagine I can offer an opinion on the success of the transformation, as I cannot remember what the bloody place looked like." He favoured Dumbledore with a pointedly aggrieved expression.

Dumbledore blinked at him, perplexed for a moment, before he snapped to attention. "Oh! Yes! Of course. I do apologize, Severus. I was so caught up in the transformation that I completely forgot you hadn't retrieved your memories yet. I meant to bring the Pensieve with me, but it slipped my mind." He turned a searching gaze on the theatre, finding Hermione on the stage, watching them thoughtfully. "Miss Granger! Please, come here." Hermione quickly strode to the edge of the apron near where the men were standing, looking down at them from her height on the stage.

"Yes, sir?" She flicked a careful glance at Snape and politely added, "Evening, Professor."

Snape nodded coolly and turned his attention to Dumbledore, pointedly ignoring looking up at Hermione's legs in her snug jeans. Dumbledore continued, "Unfortunately, I forgot to bring my Pensieve with me to rehearsal so you two could retrieve your memories. Severus, would you be so kind as to escort Miss Granger to my office; and you both can retrieve your memories while you're there..."

Snape rolled his eyes and sighed on a long-suffering note. "As you say, Headmaster. Come along, Miss Granger, I see I am not to be spared your presence once again." He cut a glance at Hermione, who hastily strode to the edge of the stage beside the orchestra pit and sat, dangling her legs over the edge, ready to drop to the floor. Snape closed the gap between them and stopped her with a firm hand on her knee. Staring intently at her, he chided, "Miss Granger, it would not do to have our star injure herself in a poorly calculated drop from the stage. Do be more careful in the future." As he spoke, he reached up and gripped her waist, gracefully lifting her from the stage edge to stand her on the floor. Hermione's eyes were wide as she fought to hide her instant reaction to the feel of his hands on her and their close proximity.

Flushing, she cast her eyes down, chastised, and murmured, "I will, sir. Sorry."

Dumbledore gazed sternly at her and echoed, "Professor Snape is right, my dear. You must be careful. We can't take the chance of anything happening to you, or to any of the cast." He suddenly gazed thoughtfully about. "I wonder if I should cancel Quidditch..."

Hermione choked and coughed, hurriedly stepping away from Dumbledore, afraid to be anywhere near if he were to suddenly cancel Quidditch, knowing that Harry, Ron, and Ginny would likely lose their minds. Snape matched her pace and they quickly wended their way up the aisle to the door again. As they went, Ginny called out to Hermione.

"Mione, where are you going?"

Hermione spun and pointed exaggeratedly at her forehead. Ginny caught on and nodded, flicking a glance at the sour Potions Master beside Hermione. She inclined her head at Snape politely and offered a short, "Professor."

Snape drawled, "Miss Weasley." Hermione shot a glance up at Snape and hastily spun again, continuing toward the door. Snape watched Ginny turn her attention back to her companions and then followed Hermione out into the corridor.

Hermione had learnt her lesson the last time Snape had escorted her up to Dumbledore's office from the Great Hall. She kept quiet until they reached an expanse of corridor that was devoid of portraits. Then, she discreetly whispered, "I miss you already," glancing furtively up at him.

Snape felt his chest tighten again and his lips tugged in the desire to smile, but he ruthlessly clamped down on it. Who knew when a school ghost or Peeves might materialize out of nowhere? He merely gazed down his nose at her, his black eyes glittering with the feeling he dared not show. His voice was deep and low as he responded, "And I, you."

Hermione smiled to herself. They reached the statue at the entrance to Dumbledore's office, and Snape muttered the password. It slid back, and he gestured for Hermione to precede him on the spiral staircase. They rode up in silence, both stepping directly to the desk where the Pensieve lay. Snape withdrew his wand and nodded pointedly to Hermione, who did the same. Together, they dipped their wands into the silvery, eddying mass, pulling strand after strand of memory out and depositing it back in their minds. Hermione marvelled at how completely Dumbledore had managed to recreate the theatre. Her suppressed unease at the absence of her memories subsided as she regained them. Eventually, they finished the retrieval, and Snape curtly said, "Very well then, Miss Granger, after you." He pointed at the door and Hermione exited.

They retraced their steps, once again coming to the empty expanse of corridor. Hermione whispered, "Severus..." Snape glanced down at her fondly, raising one eyebrow in inquiry. She stared at him, her steps faltering. He stopped with her, glorying in the light in her eyes that was for him alone. They locked eyes for a long moment. Finally, Hermione sighed, "It's going to be so hard hiding from everyone. Is there any way we can talk privately in the duration?"

Snape pursed his lips thoughtfully, glancing about the corridor. Then, he smirked wickedly and purred, "I can always give you detention..."

Hermione's eyes widened indignantly before narrowing again in pique. Then, she noticed the gleam in his eye and remembered her last detention with him. Feeling a throb in her centre, she bit her lip and flushed. Shooting him a sardonic glare, she dryly said, "I'd rather not tarnish my record any further, if it's all the same to you, *Professor*."

Snape jerked his hair forward to cloak his face, hiding the grin that stretched across his lips, covering his mouth in a feigned cough to mask the bark of laughter that erupted at her remark. Masterfully composing himself again, he sombrely gazed at her and said, "I'll think of something. Just don't do anything rash. Come, let's go. You have a rehearsal to attend." He lightly gripped her elbow and steered her down the corridor, releasing it immediately as soon as they came within range of portraits. In companionable silence, they trekked back to the Great Hall and rejoined the rest of the cast.

Dumbledore had already started the blocking of the opening Auction scene. Hermione stopped and stared delightedly at the exquisite re-creation of the theatre and the sets. Snape glanced down and saw her rapt expression and smiled to himself. Silently, he melted away from her and sidled into the shadows to watch unobserved.

After a few moments of beatific gazing, Hermione turned to speak to Snape, only to find that she was alone. She spun and looked around, puzzled. Her frown dissolved as she closed her eyes and just "felt" for him. Slowly, she walked down the aisle toward the rest of the cast, her eyes heavy lidded as she concentrated. As she reached the front row, she turned and scanned the theatre. Finally, she zeroed in on one of the Boxes. She looked up at the darkness within it and felt the tingle that signalled Snape's eyes on her. Her lips widened into a smile and she sank into the seat gracefully, pleased that he was there after all.

Up in the dark Box, Snape watched Hermione searching for him. He couldn't get enough of watching her, feeling his chest tighten at the knowledge that she loved him. He settled himself comfortably to watch the rehearsal, feasting his eyes on Hermione and watching to make sure nobody bothered her. He was satisfied that the Potter boy was busy onstage, far away from her.

The rehearsal wore on, with Dumbledore indicating the blocking for each actor, watching them write it down. Professor Flitwick remained to help with the scene change to the rehearsal for Hannibal. Enchanted oohs and ahs resounded through the theatre at every new set piece. Dumbledore demonstrated how the scenery would fall, using a carefully controlled levitation spell. Finally, when the blocking had been done up to the point where Christine sings "Think of Me," Dumbledore announced that he wanted to go back to the beginning and do a simple read and walk-through of the scenes. Actors scrambled back to places and a methodical rehearsal began.

No one sang at this stage. Dumbledore simply wanted to set the motions and see the flow. After a jerky run-through, he indicated that they should all start from the top again one more time. Things were smoother that time, and he beamed in satisfaction at the group.

"Excellent! Check the notice board for the next rehearsal time, and study your roles and blocking in the meantime. Thank you all for bearing with us on this time-consuming venture. I believe a resounding thanks is due our inimitable Professor Flitwick, for the wonderful job he did on our theatre!" Applause and thanks echoed through the stage as Flitwick bobbed nervously, beaming with pleasure. "Also, I'd like to express my gratitude to Miss Granger and Professor Snape, who were kind enough to bring me such clear images of all that you see here." He nodded at Hermione, who smiled wanly and looked down, uncomfortable with the stares directed at her. Dumbledore looked around, searching for Snape. "Oh dear, where is Professor Snape?" Hermione couldn't contain a glance at the Box where Snape was stationed. Ginny watched her eyes flick up to the Box and turned to look into it.

Snape saw Ginny gazing intently up at the Box and cursed silently to himself. Swiftly, he flew down the stairs and swept down into the theatre from the back. He startled everyone assembled as his deep voice boomed out through the darkness in the audience. "What can I do for you, Headmaster? I believe you were inquiring on my whereabouts." He strode purposefully down the aisle, satisfied to see Ginny glance at him with a confused expression, staring back up at the Box he had just vacated. Hermione forced herself to look down and not meet his eyes.

Dumbledore beamed once again and beckoned to Snape. "Yes, my boy! I wanted everyone to appreciate that you and Miss Granger took valuable time out of your schedules to provide me with the information needed to produce this recreation." He patted Snape on the back and Snape blinked under the buffeting.

Closing his eyes with a long-suffering sigh, Snape growled, "Yes, well, thank you. Like I've said before, I was just doing my duty." He bowed primly to Dumbledore and swept the group with a stern gaze. "I believe I have other duties to attend now, so I shall take my leave. Good night, Headmaster, Professors." He nodded to them in turn before he spun on his heel and glided up the aisle and out the door. Dumbledore chuckled and regarded the actors.

"Good night! Hurry to your rooms, children. It wouldn't do for you to be out past curfew!" He beamed impartially as the students gathered their scripts and proffered

salutations as they passed him. Once everyone was gone, he and the other professors transformed the Hall back to its normal dimensions and decorations.

Most of the Gryffindors were quiet as they trudged up to the Tower. Several yawned on the way.

Ron yawned so hugely that Hermione heard his jaw crack. Rubbing the back of his neck, he muttered, "Blimey, it's been a long day! I'm fair knackered. Wouldn't'a been so bad if we hadn't practiced all afternoon too..." He trailed off into another yawn.

Harry yawned back and slugged Ron in the arm. "Quit that! It's contagious, you know!" He grinned and batted away Ron's half-hearted flail. They all trooped into the common room and sank into the squashy chairs.

Ron looked blearily about and focused on Hermione. "Say, 'Mione, you got your memories back now. So, now can you tell us about everything?" Harry and Ginny and even Neville turned to look at her.

"You saw most of it. It was a replica of what I saw. The performance was wonderful! I can't tell you much beyond that, since you would have to have seen it to understand." Ron scowled. Patiently, Hermione added, "Think about it this way, you can tell someone all the plays that happened in a Quidditch game, but you can't re-create the emotions for him. He would have to have been there to appreciate it."

Ron's brow smoothed as he understood the analogy. Wrinkling his nose, he conceded, "I get it. It's a shame though. Wish we could have all seen your memories like Dumbledore did, then we could have seen the show too!"

Murmurs of agreement swept through the group. Hermione shuddered to think how dangerous that could have been. Shrugging, she sighed, "Well, that's too bad. Perhaps you can all go see it yourselves sometime. I can always owl my folks with money and ticket requests." She smiled brightly at the rest.

"Maybe..." Ron started to speak and was cut off by another gaping yawn. Hermione snorted.

"Go to bed. You're out on your feet. I'm tired too, so I'm off myself. See you lot in the morning." She stood and strode toward her room, unmindful of two pairs of eyes trained on her, one green and jealous, and the other brown and speculative.

26- Clarification, and Dumbledore's Great Idea

Chapter 27 of 84

Snape finds he is in need of a little reassurance, and his inner Slytherin acts out. Dumbledore surprises the cast with a holiday-inspired idea.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: This was one chapter, but it was far too long to upload as one, so I ended up splitting it into two separate chapters. Proceed immediately to the next one for instant continuity. LOL

Chapter 26- Clarification, and Dumbledore's Great Idea

Things settled into a fairly normal routine once again. Hermione helped the boys with their homework Sunday evening, all the while forging ahead in her study schedule preparing for N.E.W.T.s. She managed to keep herself from looking too often at the High Table at mealtimes, but she did contrive to smile overtly when she knew Snape was looking at her. She noticed, in her repeated stolen glances, that he was now ending his meals with a cup of tea...complete with honey and lemon. After a few meals, she decided to do the same, and by the time she had Potions again that Wednesday, she was fairly sure that he had noticed her adoption of his ritual, especially as she had made sure to make her cup at the same time he made his.

Hermione was holding back an anticipatory grin as she made her way down to the dungeons for class that morning. She knew he would be as sour as usual, if only to keep up the façade, but she was looking forward to spending time near him, since the next rehearsal wasn't until that Friday night.

She was curious about how methodical Dumbledore would be with the rehearsals, especially as she thought she could anticipate the pattern, based on the notice *"Friday November 28: block Think of Me through the first Angel of Music. Actors required to attend: Everyone except Justin, Colin, Dean, Terry, Draco and Pansy."*

She had spent some time calming the boys' considerable anxiety about interference with Quidditch practices when she saw that rehearsals looked like they would be held weekly on Friday nights. It was a good idea. If they went longer, past curfew, at least the students had a good reason to be out, and they could sleep in the next morning without having to worry about classes. After seeing the impressive reproduction of the theatre and sets, Hermione was much more sanguine about Dumbledore's abilities as a director.

She was startled out of her thoughts by the slam of the potions classroom door as Snape stormed in, sweeping to the front and spinning, causing his robes to swirl about his ankles as he scowled at the students. Hermione bit her lip and cast her eyes down at her hands, fighting the indulgent smile that wanted to surface, especially after she had told him how sexy she found him when he did that.

Snape glanced at her and saw her flushed face. He, too, remembered her confession, and suddenly felt rather abashed. Discomfited, he turned to the board and scrawled the instructions, allowing himself time to regain composure. His expression was once again coldly stoic as he spun back. "You know what to do by now. Get on with it."

Hermione felt his gaze on her after he sat at his desk. Tentatively, she caught his eye and he scowled at her. His eyes flicked around the room with lightning speed, and then he glared pointedly at Hermione. She understood the message and schooled her expression into one of studious concentration as she went back to her supplies.

Well, if he was worried about her being indiscreet, she'd just have to show him how trustworthy she was. Setting her formidable focus on that task, as well as her potion, Hermione went through the whole period without paying any more attention to Snape.

She didn't look at him once.

And Snape was sure of it, because he kept peering at her through his hair, both while at his desk and while circulating through the room. As time wore on, he became increasingly bothered by her complete detachment. Worry began to gnaw at him.

Was it all really a passing fancy, embellished by the sumptuous surroundings of the play... and our clothing... and the time we were forced to spend together? Did she really

mean everything she said? Or was she exaggerating in her youth and inexperience? His stomach roiled uncomfortably and he could feel his shoulders tighten and ache. His jaw started throbbing from clenching his teeth so forcefully. As the period neared its end, he sank irritably back into his chair at his desk and glared around the room. Students were starting to decant their potions and clear their stations. Snape wanted to keep Hermione after class to talk to her, but he knew it would draw attention if he just ordered her to stay after again, without any reason.

Then it hit him. He smirked to himself; he wasn't a Slytherin for nothing...

Hermione bottled her potion and labelled it, setting it on her table. Then, she gathered the leftover ingredients and strode off to replace them in the cabinet. As she turned away from her desk, Snape flicked a barely audible spell at her bottle, knocking it over and causing it to roll off her desk and shatter messily on the floor. Everyone jumped at the crash, and Hermione whirled in dismay, seeing her hard work splattered on the stones. As one, the class turned frightened eyes on Snape, who instantly shot to his feet and leant menacingly over his desk, glowering at Hermione.

"Miss Granger!" he bellowed. "Five points from Gryffindor for ineptitude! Remain after class to clean up this mess. And I suggest you prepare another sample for your grade quickly before I Vanish what's left and leave you with no credit for the day." He glared at her, ignoring the pang of guilt at her aghast expression.

Hermione put away the ingredients with trembling hands and quickly returned to her desk, hastily decanting another sample before Snape made good his threat. Holding her breath in exaggerated care, she gingerly stepped up to his desk and submitted the sample. Snape avoided catching her gaze, afraid she'd see the guilt in his eyes. Hermione spun back to her desk, clearing her things nervously. She had just stuffed her supplies back into her bag when class was dismissed, and the rest of the students rushed out of the room, leaving her standing by the puddle of potion and shards of glass.

Shaken by such an unusual occurrence, Hermione kept her eyes cast down as she stammered, "H-how shall I clean this up, sir? By hand or with magic?" She was completely taken aback as Snape sent a locking and Silencing Charm at the classroom door. Glancing up at him warily, she was even more stunned when he grimly pointed his wand at the puddle and Vanished the entire mess at once.

She stared at him, utterly confounded, and gasped, "But... what?"

Snape scowled at her as he slouched down in his chair, crossing his arms. He eyed her blackly for a moment before he sniffed and stared at an imaginary spot on his desk. In a low, accusing tone, he said, "I thought you had agreed that if... your feelings changed, you'd tell me."

Hermione blinked rapidly, trying to compute what he was saying. Her pitch climbed as she weakly queried, "Wha-at?"

He pinned her with a hostile stare as he spat, "You never even looked at me." He paused a brief moment before adding, with emphasis, "Not once."

Hermione lifted a shaky hand to her forehead, gripping the desk with the other as she was hit with comprehension. She didn't know whether to laugh or scream. Incredulous, she turned her wide eyes to him and slowly said, "I was being discreet! Like *you* told me to!"

Snape fought the uncomfortable urge to squirm. He felt rather foolish. Unsure of what to say, he simply stared at her.

Hermione closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them again, her gaze was softer, but still disbelieving. In a low voice, she murmured, "Honestly, Severus, give me a *little* credit!"

Snape felt thoroughly ridiculous for overreacting in such a juvenile manner. Shaking his hair forward to shield his flushing cheeks, he rumbled sheepishly, "Yes, well... As I've said before, I'm not used to being wanted, so forgive me any unusual reactions..." He trailed off.

Hermione sighed audibly and relaxed. Her voice rich with humour, she retorted, "And, as I've said before, I forgive you, Severus, for anything."

Snape flicked a glance at her, seeing her eyes alight with indulgent affection, and grimaced. Clearing his throat, he stood and adjusted his robes nervously. Determinedly reconstructing his composure, he shook his hair back out of his face and coolly regarded Hermione, whose eyes were twinkling up at him, a faint smile lurking about her lips. "Well, in that case... Ten points to Gryffindor for following instructions so thoroughly." He nodded briefly to her and flicked his wand at the door, unlocking it and removing the Silencing Charm. "Hurry along to class, Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded slowly at him and shouldered her bag. She inclined her head and murmured, "Yes, Professor." She retreated to the door, but paused on the threshold to look back at him. Primly, she remarked, "Oh, and enjoy your *tea* today, sir. I do hope your throat continues to benefit. Good day, Professor." And with that, she flashed him an impish grin and spun out of the room.

Snape sank back into his chair and cradled his head in his hands. *You are an absolute emotional cripple! Good gods, you don't deserve her.* He shook his head in disgust with himself. Then, he remembered her dazzling smile again, and felt a sheepish grin creep across his face. *You may not deserve her, but she didn't change her mind. Get over yourself and your hyper-paranoid habits and learn to appreciate the good things in life for once.* Having sternly ordered himself thusly, he straightened back up and took a deep breath. *Now, get a grip and get ready for your next class.* He began briskly moving the potion samples to his storage cupboard, suddenly remembering Hermione's parting comment.

Enjoy my tea? When he put it all together, he realized that she had been mimicking his new ritual, making it something that they shared, and, in his surprise, he dropped the bottle he was carrying.

"Sod it..." He jumped back as the potion splattered his robes, and saw that it was Hermione's sample. *Damn! Damn! Damn!* He heaved a supremely irritated sigh as he realized he'd have to give Hermione full credit for the day's work, since she was not responsible for the destruction of her sample...either of them. Rolling his eyes, he admitted fairly, *Well, at least I know she did it right, since she's never botched a brew yet, and it looked perfect every time I checked.* His lip curling in annoyance, he glared at the mess at his feet and simply Vanished all of it, following it with a quick cleaning charm.

Students began filing into the classroom again, as he finished storing the rest of the samples, and he rolled his head back on his neck with a long-suffering sigh. Well, even though he had humiliated himself, his neck had stopped hurting! Snorting at himself, he smothered a wan smile at his cabinet and shut it firmly. Mastering his expression into its normal sour disdain, he spun back to his desk, equilibrium regained, and ready to face the rest of the day.

Hermione cast a furtive glance at Snape at the end of lunch, noticing him preparing his tea, and began to do the same. The next time she snuck a glance at him, he was peering at her through his hair as he sipped the "tonic." She smiled gently and took a sip of her own. Now that she was certain he understood the gesture, she felt like she had at least some kind of connection to him while within the walls of the school, even though they couldn't do anything else. Harry noticed her faraway look and secretive smile and frowned.

"What's up, Mione?"

She blinked and the smile vanished. Turning a blank look on Harry, she asked, "What?"

"You looked like you were off in another world. Knut for your thoughts."

Hermione looked down hastily and shook her head. "Oh, it's nothing. I was just thinking about the play."

Harry grimaced and drawled, "Which one? The one you saw or the one we're doing?"

Hermione smirked and retorted, "Aren't they the same?"

Wrinkling his nose at her deliberate obtuseness, he said, "You know what I mean."

She snorted and sighed, "Either. Both. It doesn't matter. I've just got a lot to think about."

His tone both wistful and hopeful, he queried, "Want to talk about it? Can I help?"

Hermione sat back and shook her head. Then, seeing the hurt look in his eyes, she added, "Really, Harry, it's nothing. I'm just trying to keep up with everything that's going on. Thanks for the offer though." She pushed back from the table and rose. "Speaking of, I had better hit the books! See you later." She flashed him a smile and strode off quickly, before he could pursue matters more. *I hate putting him off like that, but he's still not back to normal, and I can't take the chance that he'll ever think I'm encouraging him to try anything again!*

Fortunately, he didn't press the issue, and they made their way to Friday's rehearsal without any more awkward moments.

The rehearsal proceeded much like the last one had, with the students leaving the Hall long enough for it to be transformed before filing in to take their places. Although several people weren't required to attend, they showed up anyway, begging leave to watch the rehearsal from the audience. Dumbledore agreed, provided they sat quietly and avoided distracting those who were working. The atmosphere was not charged with as much excitement as the last time, but it was still enthusiastic. Not even Snape's presence quelled the buoyant spirits.

He was only required to attend by dint of his disembodied voice approving Christine's performance. Since he wasn't needed for blocking, Snape retired into the back of the house, concealing himself in his beloved shadows, content to watch Hermione. When they reached the point where he would speak, he used the *Sonorus* charm to let his voice echo through the theatre.

As his deep voice resounded, many of the cast members jumped, startled, and Snape had to suppress a snort of amusement, lest it too be broadcast. Hermione's eyebrows rose at the sound, but her surprised expression dissolved into one of delighted amusement. She grinned at the others' reactions and searched the theatre for Snape.

Unable to see him, she once again felt for him, determining that he was hidden in the back of the house. At least this time, it didn't matter, and Ginny wasn't eyeing Hermione suspiciously. Then again, Ginny was much more concerned with her blocking at the time.

Dumbledore followed the same pattern as the last rehearsal, leading the cast through the scenes and allowing everyone to make note of their blocking, then running through it two more times to check for flow. Considering his lack of activity, Snape would likely have been bored, but he was saved from ennui by the enjoyment of feasting his eyes on Hermione, without anyone having any cause to be suspicious. However, by the time rehearsal was over, he was wistfully thinking that it had been a week since their idyll, and he missed her more than he had thought he could.

He glided down to the front row to join the others when Dumbledore gathered them for an announcement. Glaring at several students who dared to look at him as he approached, he thinned his lips and drew himself up straight and formal as he pointedly directed his attention to the headmaster, setting an example.

Dumbledore was idly peering at a parchment of his notes as he spoke. "Excellent work, everyone. I'm so pleased with everyone's efforts thus far. I will post on the notice board as well, but I want to let you know now that our next rehearsal will not be Friday, but Wednesday. And we will not be continuing from this point. We will be running through the scenes from the last two rehearsals, complete with singing. I want to make sure we go back through what we've done, so you don't have a chance to forget it!" He looked up and twinkled jovially over his spectacles at the grinning cast. "So, everyone must be here for Wednesday's rehearsal, not only for the run through, but also for a little fun I've decided to include amongst our cast." He beamed at them all as curious glances swept through the assembled group. Snape's eyebrow rose, and he narrowed his eyes warily.

Fun? Merlin, help us! If he thinks it's fun, that likely means it'll be hell...

Dumbledore gazed about the group, drawing out the suspense. Finally, with a chuckle, he said, "All right, I'll tell you... Next Wednesday, everyone will need to be present to submit his or her name into a box, from which each person will draw another's name. And you will be that person's 'Secret Santa!'" Exclamations and gasps met his announcement. Whispers flew through the group like a gust of wind.

Snape blinked and stifled a groan. Then, his eyes closing in a pained expression, he pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed gustily. Dumbledore continued blithely in his explanation.

"Since you are all required to remain at Hogwarts over the holiday, and you may not see your families, I want you all to look upon this cast as a separate family of its own. We must all help each other and support one another in this endeavour, and we should get to enjoy ourselves together as well! But, in the interest of fairness, I decided that we would do a 'Secret Santa' gift exchange, so everyone could start from the same place. I'll have the details for you next week, so you needn't worry about them now. But at least you have something nice to look forward to!" He clapped his hands happily as he beamed at them. "Very well then, that's all I have for you tonight. Good work, everyone, and good night!"

Excited muttered conversations erupted all around as the cast dispersed in clumps. Snape stared after the shuffling form of the headmaster in resignation. *The man is positively daft, I swear it!* He ignored the furtive glances sent his way, rolling his eyes at the terror in the students' faces at the thought of having to be *his* "Secret Santa." He swept his gaze over the group, and saw that Hermione's attention was involved by her fellow Gryffindors. Stifling a sigh of regret at not being able to catch her eye, Snape stealthily sidled past the rest of the students in his way and left the Hall. A quick glance back showed Dumbledore waving his hands at the excited students to get them out so he could transform the Hall back to its original state.

Snape stalked down the corridor and began his descent to the dungeons. Once again pausing in the shadows several steps down, he waited for the chattering gaggle of Gryffindors to climb the stairs to their Tower. He was rewarded by the vision of Hermione climbing the stairs with the other Gryffindor girls. Their heads were all bent earnestly toward one another as they whispered about the gift exchange. Snape gazed longingly after Hermione's bushy hair as she disappeared out of sight. Sighing again, he hastily swept down the stairs, intent on vacating them before his Slytherins arrived. As he turned a corner, he heard their voices descending, and he thankfully disappeared into his rooms before they caught up with him.

A gift exchange... I hadn't realized how close we are to Christmas already. He snorted. *Not like I ever care to make note of it anyway. The only thing worth celebrating is that there are fewer students about to have to suffer. But this year, no such luck.* He made his way into his sitting room and absently flicked his wand to change into his lounge wear. Sinking gracefully into his chair, he propped his feet on an ottoman and rested his chin on his fingers, thinking. *I really should thank Albus for reminding me how little time there is before the holiday. I would like to give Hermione something. The only question is: what? Hang on, make that two questions: what and how? I can't very well give her something that could arouse suspicion. Nor can I just blithely hand her a present in front of everyone. But I would like to give her something special. This bears thinking...*

Snape sat and stared pensively into the fire, mulling things over in his head. Mechanically, he summoned a tea service, complete with honey and lemon of course, and prepared a cup. The tender feelings that went along with the "tonic" gave him pause, and he scowled.

So, whoever draws Hermione's name out of the box will give her a gift. No, that won't do at all. What if that bloody Potter drew her name out, or some other idiot? No. I want to give her her present. I want to be her...bloody hell, it's so ridiculous a term!..."Secret Santa." Then I'll just have to be sure to draw her name out of the box... A positively wicked smile crept across his face. Suddenly, the full force of his innate Slytherin nature manifested itself as he plotted. Tracing his lip with his fingertip, he smirked. ...Yes,

I believe that will do quite nicely...

Hermione sat among the other Gryffindors in the common room, listening to their talk about the gift exchange. Several people were sharing anecdotes about secret gift exchanges they had been part of before. Gales of laughter erupted at frequent intervals. Eventually, she noticed Ron looking more worried than amused and she drew him a little apart from the others, concerned.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Ron grimaced and nodded hastily before sucking in his breath, like he was about to speak, then just sighing explosively and shrugging. "Yeah, I'm fine... I just... Oh, I dunno'..."

Hermione patted his arm and murmured, "Is it about the gift exchange?"

Ron rubbed his hand on the back of his neck and screwed his freckled face up, nodding. He glanced at the group and inclined his head toward the chessboard, looking pointedly back at Hermione. She smiled and walked over to it, away from the others, watching him nervously arrange the pieces. In a low voice, he finally said, "I just don't have much money, and I don't know who I'll get, or what I'll have to get for them." He flushed as he spoke, and clenched his hand tightly as he hissed vehemently, "I *hate* being poor!"

Hermione reached over and covered his hand sympathetically. "Don't worry, Ron. I'm sure Dumbledore has guidelines for us, and he won't expect people to spend much. It's just supposed to be a light-hearted, fun thing, not anything major. Besides, you don't *have* to buy presents for everyone you have on your list. Worry about your family. Your friends don't need anything; we just like having you for a friend!" She smiled winningly at him and he half-smiled back.

Then he scowled and said, petulantly, "But *I like* giving my friends things, especially things I know they'll like!"

Hermione chuckled and squeezed his hand again. "We know that! That's one of the things that makes you the Ron we all know and love. You have the biggest heart around, and you're generous to a fault." She smiled as he flushed modestly. "Look, stop worrying. We'll find out the details next week, and we can worry about it then, okay?"

He nodded resignedly. "All right. I'll try to stop worrying." He gave her a lopsided grin and squeezed her hand back. "Thanks, 'Mione."

She grinned at him and tilted her head. "What are friends for?" They both chuckled and stood, hands still clasped. Neither noticed that Harry was eyeing them with a gaze that was greener than usual with jealousy. Before they rejoined the group, Ron pulled Hermione into a quick hug. Harry scowled even harder. Ginny noticed his black expression and glanced around in surprise. She saw her brother releasing Hermione from a hug before he sprawled onto a squashy chair. Hermione was smiling gently as she curled up on a footrest near Lavender. Glancing once again at Harry's face, Ginny sidled over to Hermione and nudged her. Hermione turned to her pleasantly.

"Hey, Ginny. What's up?"

Ginny leant in and whispered, "Just what was that all about with Ron?"

Hermione's eyebrows rose in surprise at the accusatory tone of the younger girl's voice. "Not much. He was feeling a bit down, so we talked a bit about it and I helped him feel better. Why?"

Ginny's eyes narrowed. She glanced again at Harry, who was eyeing Ron heatedly. Hermione followed her look and put two and two together to make four. The redhead muttered, "And just how far will you go to help him feel better?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. Thinning her lips in anger, she stood, gripping the other girl's elbow and dragging her away to the corridor leading to the girls' dormitory. Ginny stumbled along in surprise. Letting go of Ginny's elbow, Hermione planted her fists on her hips and glared at her. Ginny's gaze flicked around guiltily.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley! I cannot believe you would even *imply* that I would do something with your brother, after all that we've gone through already. And just *why* are you so concerned?" She couldn't catch Ginny's eyes, as the other girl was keeping her sullen gaze firmly averted. Hermione stepped closer and hissed, "I saw where you were looking. I know Harry was jealous. And he's just as *stupid* to feel that way as you are to feel angry for him! Honestly! Gods forbid I comfort a friend, for fear Harry will take it the wrong way... He needs to get over it. And you're not helping things by being like this either. I know you still have feelings for him, but it's not fair to take your anger out on me since he's pining for *me* right now instead of *you*!"

Ginny's brown eyes widened. Hermione had bulls-eyed *that* target. The younger girl's face flushed and she looked down uncomfortably. She picked at a fraying edge of her jumper and murmured, "I'm sorry," her shoulders slumping.

Hermione sighed in exasperation and leant back. "Boys! Honestly, are they even worth the trouble?" She didn't expect an answer to her rhetorical question, but Ginny spoke up anyway, her voice a wistful whisper.

"I think... some are, at least." She glanced back out at the common room before ducking her head and picking at that frayed spot again.

Shaking her head, Hermione muttered, "This is why I want a man, not a boy..." Then she thought about Snape's little display after class Wednesday and snorted. "Though they might not be much better!"

Ginny glanced up quizzically. Hermione shook herself and briskly said, "Come on. Let's get back in there, before Harry starts to get jealous of *you* too." She jerked her head at the common room and gestured for Ginny to precede her. Ginny shot Hermione a grateful, penitent look and flashed her a tentative smile. Hermione smiled back and rolled her eyes. "Forget about it. And, keep trying, Ginny. I know you lot have shared so much already, it really would make sense for you two to get back together." She smiled again at the flare of hope in the other girl's brown eyes.

They joined the others long enough for Hermione to say good night and head for her room. It had been a long enough day even without tempers and emotions running high. Besides, she wanted to have some time alone to think about what she could give Snape for Christmas. The thought both warmed and worried her. She secured her door and idly scrubbed Crookshanks behind the ears as she shrugged out of her clothes and headed for the bathroom. She turned on the taps and drew a hot bath, knowing she might come up with something while relaxing in the tub. A wicked smirk crossed her face as she thought about just how "relaxing" her baths had come to be of late.

She sank blissfully into the steaming water and let her hair hang over the edge of the tub as she leant back.

I hadn't even thought about Christmas since I got back from my folks'. I really need to get started on my shopping! And I want to get Severus something. But what do you get for someone who likely already has everything he might need or want, and you can't find out what he likes in particular since you're not allowed to be seen with him! She huffed in frustration.

All right, let's go over what we already know... Oh gods, I'm talking to myself, and as if I were more than one person! I hope I never do that out loud... Anyway, he likes to read and research. Fine. Only I have no idea what he doesn't have, which is probably not much, considering the extensive library he has down there. He likes black. Ugh. That's not helping! He already has that fabulous satin lounge wear, so that's no good... I have no idea what kind of music he likes. Wait! I do know he loved the play... But I can't very well take him out to see a show. We're a secret! I'd love to spend time with him, but I can't even do that. Of course, even if I think of something, I have to figure out how to get it to him unobserved. Well, maybe I can swipe Harry's Invisibility Cloak if necessary... Damn! Why does he have to be so hard to shop for!

Hermione sloshed water over the edge of the exceedingly full tub in her petulant twitch. Grimacing at her failure to come up with anything suitable, she irritably drained the bath and retreated to her room, unable to even get in the mood to take care of business while she fantasized about Severus and inhaled his scent from her old nightgown.

She curled under the covers and hugged the nightgown to her, burying her face in it. *Maybe I'll see something in Hogsmeade that'll just scream Severus... Although, I'd like to be the one screaming that!* She chuckled to herself at that lascivious thought and cuddled closer to the nightgown, reliving...for the umpteenth time...their times together in London. She drifted off to sleep with a smile on her face.

27- Secret and Not-So-Secret Santas

Chapter 28 of 84

Hermione gets a surprise package from her parents, and Snape puts his plan in action. Names are drawn for the gift exchange, with interesting results.

Please see the previous chapter for the Author's Note.

And PLEASE note that this was originally all one chapter with chapter 26, but it was split into two separate chapters due to length. Make sure you read chapter 26 before you get into this one! :)

Chapter 27- Secret and Not-So-Secret Santas

Breakfast was fairly raucous the next morning, as the notice board not only had the posting about Wednesday's rehearsal, but also had a new posting about a Hogsmeade outing scheduled for the following Saturday, December 6th. Excited conversations about holiday shopping rippled along the House tables. Hermione was relieved to note that Harry was no longer acting the jealous prat, and she joined him, Ron, and Ginny in chatting about what kinds of things they might be able to get for whomever they chose for the gift exchange. Ron kept mentioning Fred and George's shop as a failsafe. Even Ginny rolled her eyes at that.

"Ron, their stuff would be fine for any student, but there are teachers on cast, and *someone* will draw their names too!"

Ron simply shrugged and muttered, "Well, there're only a few, so I just feel sorry for whoever gets them. But, come on, don't *you* want your own brothers to make some money?"

Ginny shook her head and said, "You know that's not the point! Fine, I won't stop you from spreading the word after Wednesday's rehearsal."

Monday morning, Hermione was surprised to receive a thin package from her parents, dropped onto her plate of toast by a school owl. Curious, she opened it and pulled out a letter from her mother. Fortunately, Ron was more concerned with stuffing his face than with Hermione's mail. Harry was interested, but he couldn't see clearly from his angle, and he was at least trying to be discreet about his snooping. Hermione sipped her pumpkin juice as she read.

"Dear Hermione,

We hope your rehearsals are going well. Mr. Campbell told us that his nephew was quite impressed by your singing ability. You never said you were going to sing there! What a shame we weren't along with you to hear it. He also mentioned how imposing your professor was. Apparently, his nephew was rather intimidated by him. Honestly, I don't understand it; he seemed so polite while he was here! And you two looked so nice when you dressed for the play.

At any rate, I got the pictures developed, and I thought you might like some copies for yourself. Perhaps, if you wanted, you could get copies of the one of yourself for your friends. Christmas is coming up, after all. I must say, it is nice to have an updated picture of you, and one that's not in wizarding robes, so we can display it around here!

We'll be sure to send your Christmas packages early, so the owls won't get overworked. And I think you'll be pleasantly surprised with one of your gifts... Say hello to Harry and the Weasleys for us. And please tell Severus it was a pleasure to meet him. We look forward to seeing him again when we come out to see the performance.

We hope you'll enjoy the holiday, even though you're staying there. Hopefully your headmaster will do something fun to celebrate with all of you who have to stay. We miss you, dear!

Love, Mum

p.s. Tell Severus we wish him a happy Christmas!"

Hermione's eyes goggled with a mixture of reactions, and she struggled to swallow her juice instead of spitting it out all over her breakfast.

"We" indeed! Honestly! I can't believe she's still so enamoured of Severus... Oh, all right, I can believe it, since I'm utterly besotted, but that's different! So, Neal blabbed to his uncle, eh? Severus must have really scared him for him to go on about it. Hmph... Oh! There're the pictures! How wonderful! She pulled the photos out of the package enough to see what they were, and hastily shoved the one of her and Snape back in.

Harry was craning his neck to get a glimpse, and ventured, "So, what's up with your folks? Anything important?"

Hermione glanced up at his curious look and grimaced. "They just got some pictures developed and sent them to me. No big deal."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Pictures? Of what?"

"My mum did the whole 'Must have pictures!' thing before we went to the play, and she sent them to me." She wrinkled her nose in annoyance.

Ron perked up at this and asked, before Harry had a chance, "You got dressed up for that, didn't you? Let us see!" He reached across the table toward the package, and Hermione yanked it out of reach, scowling at him.

Harry looked at her and wheedled, "Come on, let's see! Why won't you show us?" He smiled winningly at her.

Flushing, Hermione tucked the package into her bag, hiding it from the boys. Struck, she remembered her mother's suggestion. "It's almost Christmas, and I might want to include a photo in presents..." She eyed them severely. "So, it would be better to keep them until I decide to show them or give them out. You'll see them when I decide you can, and not until then. So, don't try to badger me, you two!" She wagged her finger at them and scowled. The boys exchanged smug grins and smirked back at her.

Eyes twinkling, Ron held his hands up and solemnly intoned, "I promise, I won't badger you. I won't ask to see the pictures again." He grinned raffishly at her and she eyed him suspiciously.

Her suspicions were well warranted, as another redhead plopped unceremoniously beside Hermione and promptly asked, "What pictures?"

Hermione buried her face in her hands and groaned as Ron and Harry burst into gales of laughter. Ginny smiled blankly at them, waiting patiently for someone to fill her in on the joke.

Harry beamed at Ginny, explaining, "Her folks sent her pictures from the night she went to the play, but she won't show them to us. Ron just promised not to badger her, and no doubt he won't have to, if I know *you* at all..." His green eyes sparkled with amusement, and Ginny's brown eyes widened. Her smile faltered a bit before she turned her attention to Hermione, hoping she wasn't flushing as much as she thought.

"You have pictures? I want to see them! You said that dress your mum lent you was smashing. I want to see it!" She reached out, trying to get into Hermione's bag, and Hermione swatted her hand away, dragging her bag out of reach.

"No! You're as bad as the two of them! I may want to give copies out for the holiday, so no one gets to see them now. Forget it, I'm not budging!" She pinned them all with a fierce glare, exasperated. They all grinned at her. Annoyed that she wouldn't get a moment's peace until the pictures were safely put away, Hermione drained her juice and stood, shouldering her bag away from the others. "These are getting put away, so don't even bother trying to find them later." She tilted her chin up haughtily at their laughter as she walked away. With a little sigh of regret that she wouldn't get to have her "tonic," she glanced up at the High Table and saw Snape watching her with a puzzled frown. She minutely shook her head and smiled, indicating that nothing was amiss. He inclined his head a fraction in response and relaxed.

Slipping out of the Great Hall, Hermione allowed herself to grin in anticipation of seeing the pictures of her and Severus together. Her stomach and chest did a little flutter in excitement as she skipped up to the Tower and into her room.

Warding the door behind her against any intruders, she flopped on her bed and pulled the package out again. The first picture she withdrew was of her in front of the fireplace by herself. She eyed it with satisfaction, pleased with how it turned out, and especially with how she looked in the dress and choker her mother lent her. *Too bad my smile isn't real. It'd look better that way, but no such luck.*

Taking a deep breath, she reached in and pulled out the picture of her and Snape. She exhaled on a long note of satisfaction as she gazed at it. *Now that's a real smile! Oh, but look how forbidding he is!* She laughed aloud. *My, we do look nice together. Bless my mum for her motherish tendencies!* She opened one of her bureau drawers and hid the pictures under her clothes. Then, before she shut it again, she pulled out the one of her and Snape and kissed his image. Smiling tenderly, she hid it again and shut the drawer. She tossed the letter onto her desk and gathered her things again to head to class. As she hurried through the corridors to her first class, she was lost in thought.

I think I will get copies made to give to my friends. And, I want to give one to Severus too, but I have to figure out how to get it to him! ... You know, I think I'll give him a copy of the one of us together too. Hopefully I can find a nice frame for it, and I can surprise him with it for Christmas. I just have to be sure that no one else could find out I gave it to him, or that would arouse too many questions! ... I hope he'll like it!

Over the next few days, Hermione wavered between wanting to kill each of her best friends. Harry kept looking at her with amused puppy dog eyes and whispering, "Please?" at inopportune moments when she couldn't easily say no; Ginny kept elbowing Hermione at meals and in the common room, repeatedly asking to see the pictures, in an attempt to wear her down enough to give in; and Ron pointedly didn't say anything about them, but made a show of sealing his lips and looking exaggeratedly at the ceiling, pantomiming that he *wasn't* badgering her. Hermione was deeply relieved that Wednesday night's rehearsal had arrived, giving them something else to obsess over.

As they sat at dinner that night, Hermione thought back to Potions class that morning.

She was pleased that Snape was in the classroom when she arrived early. Smiling as she entered, she quickly walked to her seat and offered a cheerful, "Good morning, Professor."

Snape's eyes glittered as he watched her. Glancing at the door, he flashed her a smile before settling his expression back into its normal cold scowl. He responded silkily, "Good morning, Miss Granger." A smirk crept over his lips at her delighted shiver at his voice and the way she bit her lower lip as she looked up at him through her lashes.

In a low, falsely polite voice, she murmured, "My parents owed me Monday, and they wished me to reiterate how much of a pleasure it was to meet you." She quirked one eyebrow at him and drawled, "Of course, it was my mum writing, so she was particularly emphatic about it..." Snape shook his hair forward to hide his amused smirk as he snorted.

"Yes, well... Likewise." He rolled his eyes and glanced again at the door. He could hear students on their way down the corridor, but no one had arrived yet. On impulse, he pinned Hermione with an intense stare and mouthed, "I miss you."

Hermione flushed with pleasure as she beamed at him. Then, students started pouring in and she looked down, letting her hair fall forward to shield her face. Perhaps Snape had the right of it after all; it *was* a handy trick.

Snape stood as everyone took their seats, glaring at them to settle quickly.

"Prepare to take notes from today's lecture. I do hope you will at least *try* to keep up; but I have my doubts about your success." He gazed disdainfully about the room, watching everyone take out parchment, quills, and bottles of ink. A small, evil smile quirked his lips as he began circulating through the room. He turned to see Hermione's head bent as she opened her bottle of ink and dipped her quill in it, pausing with her quill poised over the parchment, ready to write as soon as Snape started speaking.

Perfect... He paced about the room, his velvet voice filling every corner as he lectured. He timed his circuit so he would come around near Hermione again as her quill would be near empty. As he paused for the students to catch up in their writing, he covertly pointed his wand at her ink bottle, barely muttering, "*Evanesco*." He was inordinately pleased when she dipped her quill into the bottle again, only to find it empty.

Blinking in surprise...she could have sworn that bottle was at least half full!...Hermione hastily reached into her bag to fetch another bottle of ink. As she pulled it out of her bag, Snape repeated his action. He resumed lecturing, meandering past the flustered girl. Dismayed, Hermione searched her bag in vain, finding no more ink. Finally, she caved in to the inevitable and raised her hand.

It was what Snape had been waiting for. Turning slightly on his heel to regard her from under hooded lids, he paused in his lecture and drawled, "And just what do you think is so important that you must interrupt my class, Miss Granger?" The rest of the class looked up, all action suspended, holding its collective breath as they awaited her answer.

Hermione swallowed and faintly rasped, "I seem to have run out of ink, sir. I need more to take notes."

Snape strode over to her desk and leant over her, glaring down his long nose. "So, our resident Know-It-All, Perfect Miss Head Girl, cannot even maintain the most basic of school supplies. How disappointing. Five points from Gryffindor for being unprepared!" He straightened away from her, trying hard not to think about the scent of her shampoo wafting in his nostrils. Whirling, he stalked to his desk and whipped out a bottle of ink, which he proffered to her with a flourish. "Never let it be said that I would stand in the way of a student's quest for an education. You may use my ink, Miss Granger." He placed it on her desk and sneered down at her. "I brew my own, so I *hope* it meets with your *approval*."

Cheeks hot, pride stinging under his scathing words, Hermione still looked up at him and politely said, "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your help." Then, she focused on opening the bottle and loading her quill as Snape stalked away.

"Now, let me continue from the point at which I was so disappointingly interrupted..."

Excellent...

As the period ended, and Hermione was putting her materials away, she frowned as she looked into her empty bottles of ink. Shaking her head, she tucked them in her bag. The other students were dispersing, and Snape was finally seated at his desk, having settled there as he finished his full-class lecture. Hermione stepped up to his desk, his ink bottle in hand.

"Thank you for allowing me to use your ink, sir." She held it out, waiting for him to take it.

Snape flicked a glance around the room and saw a few lingering students. Eyeing her with one eyebrow raised, he rumbled, "Miss Granger, you have other classes, do you not?" Not waiting for the answer to his question, he continued, "I would assume that you may need to write in those classes, provided my colleagues are not remiss in that aspect of your education. Keep the ink, Miss Granger." As the last student disappeared, he gazed at Hermione, his expression softening a bit once they were alone.

Hermione nodded. "Thank you."

Snape leant back in his chair and smirked. "Besides, I know you'll need it to fill out the bits of parchment for this ridiculous gift exchange at rehearsal tonight. And, since you won't be able to get to Hogsmeade until Saturday, you'll need ink for the rest of the week."

Hermione nodded again, fervently, a perplexed frown crossing her face. "Too true. I just don't understand it! I could have sworn those bottles were at least half full." Snape ducked his head and cloaked his face with his hair, once again concealing his guilt.

Clearing his throat, he offered, "Could any of your friends have possibly borrowed them without your knowing?"

Hermione shook her head thoughtfully and retorted, "I don't think so. I don't know. Oh well, I'm sorry I interrupted your lecture..." She cast a properly contrite expression at him, then followed it with a wicked grin, adding, "and not just for your sake."

Snape smirked again and narrowed his eyes, leaning toward her. In a deep purr, he said, "Well, if you missed anything, I can always go over it... again." Hermione shivered and bit her lip, her eyes closing in appreciation.

Sighing, she looked hungrily at him and murmured, "Perhaps... See you at rehearsal tonight, Professor." Tucking the ink into her bag, she spun on her heel and briskly strode out of the classroom, feeling Snape's eyes burning into her back the whole way.

Before heading to dinner, Hermione grabbed a scrap of parchment and wrote her name on it, ready to place it in the box for the gift exchange name drawing. She tucked it into her script, slid a pencil inside the pages, and shrank the lot down, placing it in her pocket. As she rose from her desk, she stepped to her bureau and uncovered the picture of her and Snape, smiling at it and blowing it a kiss. It had become a habit ever since she had hidden the picture under her clothes earlier that week.

Slipping down to the common room on light feet, she warily peeked in, wondering how much she would be harassed this time about the pictures. As she approached her friends, she was relieved to find them too deep in conversation about the rehearsal and upcoming name drawing to remember to tease her.

When they had finished eating, and were just waiting for rehearsal to start, Hermione reminded the others to get their slips of parchment ready, pulling her script out and restoring it to normal size, showing them her name already written down. A flurry of chagrined yelps rippled through the rest of the Gryffindors. Several of them jumped up to race back to their dorm to retrieve their materials. A few of them had their schoolbags with them and pulled out a bit of parchment and a quill to write their names down before rehearsal started. Reshrinking her script and pocketing it again, Hermione bit back a prim smile as she watched Harry and Ron race out of the Great Hall, Neville trailing after them. Ginny had strolled over to Luna, who had her bag with her, to wheedle a scrap of parchment off her.

Dumbledore stood and shooed the cast out into the corridor. Snape stalked down from the dais and joined the few remaining students outside the doors. Arms crossed over his chest, he glared impartially at the milling bodies. Noting Hermione's smug expression, he barked, "Miss Granger! I trust you are better prepared for tonight's activities than you were for class today."

Hermione pursed her lips and withdrew her script, enlarging it. With a great show, she opened it and showed him the parchment with her name on it, picking it up and waving it lightly. "Yes, sir. I learnt my lesson this morning."

Snape's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "Indeed. Five points to Gryffindor for being prepared." Hermione blinked with astonishment.

Glancing around to see if anyone else witnessed such a stunning event as Snape giving Gryffindor House points, she nodded uncertainly and stammered, "Th-Thank you, sir."

Snape merely inclined his head in acknowledgement and stared at her, a faint smirk hovering about his lips. She averted her gaze, looking around, making sure no one was noticing their interaction. The echoing sound of racing footsteps heralded the return of several of the other cast members. The Gryffindor boys pounded down the stairs and corridor, skidding to a stop as they noticed Snape glaring menacingly at them.

Ron and Neville blanched at Snape's expression as he barked, "No running in the halls! Three points...each...from Gryffindor!" Harry narrowed his eyes mutinously but bit back a retort. With a final hostile glare, Snape spun and strode to the doors, leaving Hermione to soothe her disgruntled House-mates.

As soon as Snape was out of earshot, Harry hissed, "Sodding bastard! Gods, I hope he gets nothing but coal for Christmas...as black and hard a lump as his shrivelled heart!"

Ron snorted in agreement, and even Neville squeaked a faint, "Too right!" Hermione rolled her eyes, torn between irritation at the name-calling and amusement at Harry's descriptive turn of phrase.

Sardonically, she murmured, "My my, Harry, I had no idea you could be so poetic." Then, she grimaced and leant in closer, whispering, "Just be glad it wasn't *more* points. He took five points off me for running in the halls!"

Harry's eyes widened in indignant surprise, the angry sparkle flashing again. "What? When?"

Hermione glanced over her shoulder to see Snape watching them through his curtain of hair. Deliberately interposing herself between Harry and Snape, she muttered, "When I had to meet him in the Entrance Hall to go visit my folks. I was running late, and the first words out of his mouth were to take points off." She frowned, glad of an opportunity to shore up the façade of her dislike for the sour man.

Ron interjected, "Oi, 'Mione, I don't know how you'll manage to act with Snape..."

Hermione interrupted doggedly, "*Professor* Snape."

Ron sighed exasperatedly and tossed his head. "Fine! *Professor* Snape. Professor or not, he's still a git."

Determined to be fair, Hermione persisted, "Look, we *aren't* supposed to be running in the corridors anyway, so he's just doing his job!"

Harry curled his lip in distaste and muttered, "Yeah, well, he doesn't have to *enjoy* it so much!"

Hermione was saved from having to answer by the doors opening and Dumbledore's beaming face poking out.

"Come along! Let's begin." He waved everyone inside. As they all trekked down to the front of the house, Dumbledore announced, "On the stage you'll see the box in which you must place the parchment with your name on it. Please do so now, so we can proceed undistracted." There was a crowd around the edge of the stage, as everyone pressed forward to drop their slips in.

Snape hung back a moment, watching Hermione drop her slip in and edge between some other students to take her seat again. A tiny smug smile flitted across his face. Once the throng abated, he glided forward and dropped a scrap of parchment in, his name penned in his distinctive spidery scrawl. He swept the assembled group with a glance of disdain as he trod past them, back into the shadows at the rear of the house.

Dumbledore stepped up to the box, making a show of dropping his name in as well, before he shrank it and tucked it into his robes. From another pocket, he withdrew a music box and placed it on the edge of the stage. Turning to the group, he asked brightly, "Now, who needs the singing spell?" Hands shot up, and he briskly intoned "*Suaviloquentia*" over each person. Clapping his hands and twinkling merrily, he said, "Excellent! Places, everyone!" Then, he turned to Minerva and stage whispered, "Oh, I've always wanted to say that, just like a Muggle!" Minerva smiled indulgently and titters rippled through the students as they took their places onstage.

Once they were ready, Dumbledore opened the music box and pointed, crying, "Action!" He chuckled delightedly over getting to say that as well.

The rehearsal progressed fairly well, with Dumbledore only having to stop every once in a while, to correct some blocking or timing issue. Snape relaxed in the dark, once again watching Hermione and delighting in her voice as she sang "Think of Me." He had been languidly leaning back in a seat in the back row, but as she took the stage to sing, he leant forward, resting his chin on his arm as it lay across the seatback in front of him. His chest tightened with pride and love for the woman whose sweet voice filled the theatre. The tender, blissful smile on his face would likely have been enough to send anyone into cardiac arrest had they seen it, but he was comfortably hidden in the shadows.

He once again used the *Sonorus* spell to lilt his one line after her performance. At least her expression of delighted wonder was in keeping with her role, as she gazed about, enraptured at his voice.

Finally, they had run through the scenes once, and Dumbledore took them back to the beginning, to go again, without stopping. Everyone was smiling with relief and pride when they finished the second run-through without a hitch. Dumbledore called everyone to sit in the front rows as he put away his script and music box. Hermione smiled to herself as she edged into the third row, to sit in the seat she had occupied beside Snape at the play. Once everyone was settled, Dumbledore waved his wand over them and murmured, "*Finite Incantatem*."

Hermione felt a tingle on her neck and turned to see Snape taking a seat at the end of the row behind her, his eyes glittering with recognition of where she was seated. She flashed him a secretive smile before turning her attention back to the headmaster.

Dumbledore retrieved the shrunken box and restored it to its original size. He placed it on the edge of the stage and pulled out a scroll. As he unrolled it, it became obvious that the scroll was the cast list that had been posted on the notice board. He looked fondly over his spectacles at the assembled group, most of them alight with suppressed excitement.

"When I call your name, please come select a slip from the box. Do not tell whose name you have. If by chance you select your own, you may show me and then choose another before replacing your name in the box. In the interest of fun, keep your identity a secret from the person whose name you have chosen. I will give you the details of when we will do the gift exchange later. After the gift exchange, you will have an opportunity to identify yourselves. We'll go over the guidelines for gifts once everyone has chosen a name. Be sure to put away the slip you choose, so it remains a secret. Ready?" Vigorous nodding answered him. "Very well. Let's begin." He looked at the scroll in his hands and called, "Professor Snape."

Snape carefully hid his exultation that he would be first to choose, since the one hitch to his plan was that someone else might draw Hermione's name before he had a chance. Standing in one fluid movement, he strolled to the box, his expression one of deliberately constructed irritation. With a long-suffering sigh, he turned his back on the group and stuck his hand into the box, feeling the slips of parchment against his hand. Barely breathing the incantation, "*Adverto*," he clenched his teeth in smug satisfaction as he felt his fingertips tingle while the parchment with Hermione's name...written in his bewitched ink...moved to stick to his fingers. It was like a magnetic attraction, and he triumphantly curled his fingers around the slip, crumpling it in his grip as he lifted his hand from the box. Giving it a cursory glance, he rolled his eyes and shot an aggrieved look at Dumbledore, who nodded, twinkling at him. Sneering at the group as he walked past them, he sank back into his seat, his whole countenance one of supreme boredom. Inside, however, he grinned at the success of his ploy.

Hermione was next. Dumbledore beamed fondly at her as she gracefully stepped up to the box and dipped her hand in. She furrowed her brow in a mock show of concentration and pulled out a slip. As she looked at it, Dumbledore overtly leant forward, trying to see the name, and she snatched it out of sight hastily. Everyone, except Snape, of course, chuckled merrily at the byplay. Glancing once again at the slip, she folded it and tucked it into a pocket, gazing at everyone, purposefully not eyeing just the person whose name she had drawn.

How odd that I should draw Ron's name. I guess I'll get him something for this and then the normal something I would get him anyway, being one of my best friends. She ignored the curious grins directed at her and sat, affecting obliviousness. Sniggers greeted her performance as Harry's name was called next.

Harry grinned mischievously as he stuck his hand in the box. But when he pulled his slip out, he wasn't able to completely hide the look of dismay that washed over his face. Gamely trying to recover, he gulped and looked at Dumbledore, offering him a watery smile before he crumpled the slip and stuffed it in his pocket. His teeth set, he trudged back to his seat as Neville was called up.

I wonder whose name Harry got. He certainly didn't seem too happy about the prospect... Hermione's musings were cut short by Neville's squeak of surprise as he looked at the name on his slip. His eyes goggled, and he shot Dumbledore a look of pure consternation. Cheeks tinged pink, he nodded jerkily and rushed to his seat. Ron was next. His expression was thoughtful, especially after the previous reactions. But, when he read his slip, he visibly relaxed and shot a lopsided grin at the group. Almost jauntily, he traipsed back to his seat and lounged back in it, smiling benevolently at everyone.

Mercy, this is certainly an interesting study in human psychology. I can't wait to find out who got whom, especially after the variety of reactions everyone is displaying!

Pansy's naturally sour expression barely flickered as she read her slip, but she gave a resigned little nod as she flashed a fake smile at the headmaster. Draco's sneer became more pronounced and he rolled his eyes before clearing his expression and nodding ingratiatingly at Dumbledore. McGonagall cast a chiding gaze over the group before drawing her name. A tiny smile grazed her lips as she huffed in satisfaction. Inclining her head to Dumbledore, she flicked a stern gaze over the students in her House before sitting again. Ginny bounced up to the box and grinned at Dumbledore as she plunged her hand in, coming up with a slip. Scanning it quickly, she shrugged complacently and grinned again as she reclaimed her seat. Terry Boot's eyes almost bugged out as he read his slip. Then, he composed himself with a brusque throat-clearing and nodded solemnly to the headmaster, taking his seat with a rather martyred expression.

Hermione choked back a laugh. *Oh, please! It can't be that bad! My goodness, people are really making this out to be more trouble than it is...*

Dean wrinkled his nose before he caught himself and his eyes widened in chagrin, glancing warily at the headmaster. Seeing Dumbledore's chastening gaze, he grimaced and offered a fake smile as he scrambled back to his seat. Trelawney floated up to the box, self-important as always, and delicately plucked a slip from the box. Glancing at it, she beamed fatuously at the group, murmuring, "I knew I would draw this name. I saw myself providing a gift for this very person..." Snorts and titters ushered her back to her chair. Hermione rolled her eyes and chanced a glance at Snape, seeing his hand covering his eyes as he shook his head.

Millicent blinked as she read her slip, but otherwise betrayed nothing. Parvati smiled until she read hers, at which point her smile vanished with almost comical haste. Her brow furrowed, until she saw Dumbledore gazing benignly at her. Then, she pasted a cheery smile on her face and walked dazedly back to her place. Luna's bulge-eyed complacency was unruffled as she read her name and nodded pleasantly at Dumbledore. Susan actually blushed and gasped as she read her name, glancing furtively about before scurrying back to her seat. Lavender held her breath as she drew, releasing it in a sigh of relief as she read her slip, smiling. Hannah voiced a surprised, "Oh!" as she read hers, blinking rapidly in thought. Seamus shrugged, nonchalant. Justin soberly read his and nodded courteously to Dumbledore, his demeanour unchanged. Colin was virtually twitching with anticipation, knowing he was almost the last to go. Nervously grinning, he pulled out one of the last two slips and read it. He stilled in shock and went white. Turning pleading, terrified eyes to the headmaster, his mouth opened, but no sound came out. Dumbledore shook his head gravely at the implicit plea, and Colin's colour returned, reddening his face all the way to the tips of his ears. Curious murmurs and whispers wafted through the group at his extreme reaction. Almost numbly, Colin pocketed the parchment and stumbled to his seat. Dumbledore plucked out the remaining slip and read it, smiling contentedly as he tucked it away. He shrank the box and secreted it somewhere in his robes before turning to the cast.

"Wonderful! Now, you all have someone for whom you will be 'Secret Santa.' I understand that's another name for Father Christmas in the States. This is for fun, so I want to impress upon you that you are not expected to spend scads of money on the gift. Ideally, a gift that you *make* is even better. Otherwise, you are to spend no more than a few Galleons for the gift. We will be having a cast Christmas party, and we will do the gift exchange there. Now, I know this weekend is a Hogsmeade weekend, so keep your eyes open for good ideas while you're out! I urge you to keep your chosen person a secret, to keep the fun alive. But, if you are in dire need of help in coming up with ideas, please feel free to discuss it amongst yourselves. There is no need to bandy about this cast's doings with others who are not a part of this 'family.'" He swept them with a stern but friendly gaze before he beamed once more, his eyes twinkling brilliantly under the lights. "Until Friday... Good night, everyone! And, excellent work. I am most pleased..."

The cast began shuffling, muttering excited asides as they exited the theatre. Snape slunk into the shadows to watch them leave, a smug smirk quirking his lips. The cast separated into clumps in the corridor, excitedly querying each other about whose name they drew. Snape finally appeared in the doorway, and several people turned, their voices dying as they took in his tall black figure. Crossing his arms forbiddingly, he glowered at them.

"Mere seconds after the headmaster asks that you keep things a secret, you lot gad about, spilling your guts! Five points from each House for reckless disregard of the headmaster's request." He smiled grimly at the shocked faces turned his way. "Now, clear off and get to your rooms! This instant!" he added, when too many students simply stared at him, struck dumb. His bellow echoed in the corridor, sending them scurrying off. He watched with morbid satisfaction as the corridor cleared of annoying dunderheads, leaving him free to stalk to his quarters undisturbed.

Up in the Gryffindor common room, Hermione sat by Ron, leaning in and whispering, "See, I told you we wouldn't be expected to spend a lot on this gift exchange. You were worried over nothing." She smiled at him and he grinned back.

"Yeah, you were right. So, who'd you get?" He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head at her.

Hermione shook her head emphatically and retorted, "None of your business. You heard the headmaster, and even Professor Snape! I'm not blabbing." She was interrupted by Harry plopping down near her with a dejected sigh. Looking at him with concern, she asked, "You all right, Harry?"

Harry shook his head and nearly whined, "I can't believe whose name I got!"

Ron leant forward, interested, but Hermione held her hand out, warning him not to say the name. Eyeing Harry sternly, she said, "Don't say it!"

Harry scowled at her petulantly but merely said, "Fine. But I will tell you that it's a Slytherin." Ron frowned sympathetically.

Hermione primmed up her mouth and remarked, scathingly, "Just because someone is a Slytherin doesn't necessarily mean they're bad." Both boys eyed her askance, and Ron wagged his hand in front of her face.

"Hello-o! Have you *gone* here for the past seven years? This is Hogwarts. You know, the place where Slytherins hate Gryffindors and vice versa?" Hermione swatted his hand away and narrowed her eyes.

"Well, just because that's been the case doesn't mean it's right!" Harry and Ron exchanged glances and rolled their eyes. Hermione shot to her feet in pique. "Don't go telling whose name you drew. I don't want Gryffindor to get in trouble again!" She planted her hands on her hips and glared at them until they nodded acquiescence. "Right then. Good night." Turning on her heel, she flounced away to her room.

She had only had time to get to her room and fling the slip of parchment with Ron's name onto her desk when there was a knock on her door. Brow furrowed, she crossed to the door and leant close to it, calling, "Who is it?"

A muffled voice answered, "It's me, Colin. Can I talk to you?"

Hermione relaxed, glad that it wasn't Harry or Ginny, and opened the door. Smiling cordially at Colin, she bade him enter and gestured for him to sit in her armchair. Closing the door, she perched on the end of her bed, smiling gently at him. "What would you like to talk about, Colin?" She knew from his demeanour that he was here to talk to her as Head Girl, and she put on her best Head Girl voice.

Colin was still looking miserable, even a little green. He turned imploring eyes on her and desperately croaked, "I really need your help, Hermione."

She nodded encouragingly and answered in a soothing tone, "Of course, Colin. I'd be glad to help you in any way I can. Why don't you tell me what's bothering you."

Colin swallowed convulsively and dug in his pocket, pulling out the crumpled piece of parchment and extending it toward her with a trembling hand. Perplexed, Hermione shook her head and said, "Colin, you know Dumbledore asked that we keep the names a secret."

His voice was almost shrill as he exploded, "But not if we needed help! And I need help. Lots of it!"

Hermione sighed in resignation at the wretched boy and took the slip from him. Realization washed over her as she recognized the distinctive script. Her pulse sped up as she thought, *He got Severus! And he's petrified... Poor thing, he really is quite overwrought. But what can he possibly want me to do?* Voicing that thought, she asked, "Um, Colin, how am I supposed to help you?"

Colin leant forward, mute appeal in his eyes as he faintly rasped, "Trade with me?" His voice climbed at the end in entreaty.

Hermione's mouth opened in an "o" of surprise. Glancing between the slip and Colin, she battled within herself.

You could get Severus's name instead! It's perfect!

But you're not supposed to trade. That wasn't in the rules.

Just look at Colin! He's traumatized already. Do you really want the guilt of putting him through this?

It's not that bad! Honestly, what is wrong with people?

Oh, come on... Not everyone is in love with the man. And you admit that he's scary!

But Colin needs to learn to grow up!

That's not your responsibility. Can you really turn down such a perfect opportunity?

I didn't draw his name!

So? Who else will know besides you and Colin? He won't breathe a word of it if you tell him not to, out of sheer gratitude! Besides, wouldn't you rather someone who actually cares about Severus get his name? Could you live with yourself if he had to suffer what anyone else might think appropriate for him?

That decided it. Hermione succumbed and took the slip from Colin. She was immediately rewarded by the abject relief that flooded Colin's face. He wilted in the chair, practically gasping for breath. "Oh, thank you! Thank you so much! How can I ever repay you?" He gazed at Hermione adoringly and she smirked, huffing. Crossing to her desk, she picked up the other slip and handed it to Colin.

"Here. Now you get Ron. I hope you can manage that at least." Colin nodded vehemently. "As for repaying me... Don't tell anyone that I switched with you. It must remain a secret. It's not fair, and I don't want either of us to get in trouble. Understand?" She stared down at him sternly. He nodded again in an excess of relief.

"Yes. Perfectly! I won't tell a soul, I promise! You're a lifesaver, Hermione, really. I can't thank you enough." He stood and grasped her hand, pumping it with each protestation. "Whew! What a weight off my mind. Seriously, I almost lost it when I drew his name. I mean, what in the *world* do you get for someone like him?" He grimaced in consternation. Hermione thinned her lips and rolled her eyes. She pointedly tugged her hand from his grip and looked toward the door. Colin caught on and hastily headed for the door. "Of course. I better get back to my room. And I'll let you get back to studying, no doubt." Hermione graciously opened the door and smiled tightly at the effusive boy, gesturing for him to exit. He stepped halfway out before turning to her. "You know, you're not only the most brilliant witch at Hogwarts, you're the nicest too. Thanks, Hermione." And with that, he ducked in and planted a swift kiss on her cheek, before blushing uncomfortably and racing down the corridor. Hermione was rooted to the spot in shock. After he disappeared, she managed to regain her faculties and shut her door.

Merlin! What was that all about? I can understand being grateful, but... Honestly! She dazedly walked back to her desk, idly smoothing the crumpled piece of parchment. Looking again at the spidery writing, she smiled. *Now you know he won't get something horrible... But what are you going to give him? You can't give him anything revealing in front of everyone. And it will eventually be revealed who had whose name, so you can't rely on it staying secret either. You have to come up with something nice but still impersonal enough to be safe. You can always figure out how to get your real gift to him later.*

She frowned at the parchment in thought. Crookshanks wound around her ankles, but she paid no heed. After a long while, Crookshanks gave up and sauntered haughtily off to curl up in her armchair. Later, he was startled out of his doze by a triumphant crow from Hermione. Opening one eye, he watched his mistress bouncing in her chair, giggling.

"It's perfect! Oh, I can't wait..." Beaming, she snatched up a quill and parchment and began writing. A few minutes later, she rolled it up and sealed it, turning to Crookshanks. "You know, sometimes I wish you were an owl; it'd be much more convenient. It's too late to go to the owlery now, so I'll just have to wait till tomorrow to send this to Mum." She arranged her school things for the morning and laid the scroll on top of her bag. Briskly, she changed and got ready for bed, scooping up her familiar and setting him by her pillow. With an affectionate scrub, Hermione leapt back to her bureau, unearthing the picture of her and Snape and kissing it. Carefully hiding it once again, she hopped into bed and curled up under the covers, dropping a joyful kiss on Crookshanks' head. He purred his forgiveness of her earlier inattention. Wrapping her arm around her warm, furry friend, Hermione murmured, "Don't worry, Crookshanks. I love you just the way you are, you fuzzy beastie." Crookshanks simply purred, lulling her to sleep.

Down in the dungeon, Snape lay between his cool satin sheets, pondering what to give Hermione for Christmas. He twined his fingers together behind his head, staring up at the ceiling.

What would be appropriate to give her for this horrid gift exchange? It has to be something completely innocuous, but not ridiculous. ... As for giving her a real present, I can always send her something anonymously, or slip her a note about coming to get it. ... Perhaps I can send it through a house-elf instead of by owl. If I use owl post, she may open it in the Great Hall, and all of her bloody hangers-on will see. ... What was it Albus said? Something about ideally making something for someone... Well, I could hardly send her a potion; that would be far too obvious, not to mention absurd. What sort of gift is a potion, anyway? ... And yet... I could make something specifically for her... A slow smile spread across his face as an idea took shape.

His low chuckle echoed in his chamber as he rolled onto his side, settling himself for sleep. *Yes, I think it just might work...* With a deft flick of his fingers, he doused the light in his room, plunging it into velvet darkness. He drifted off to sleep with images of Hermione running rampant in his head.

28- Preparations

Chapter 29 of 84

Rehearsals continue, and preparations for the Secret Santa gift exchange begin. Just what will Snape and Hermione be giving each other?

Author's Note: I'm really interested in your ideas on what it is Snape is making in this chapter... So post a review and tell me your ideas! LOL Hope you enjoy the continued journey... Thanks for reading! :)

Cheers, Nicole aka Good_Witch

Chapter 28- Preparations

Snape peered into his potions ingredients cabinet. It wasn't fair to call it a cabinet, really, considering that it was more of an armoire with drawers, many of which were set up with dividers like an apothecary's would be. One side of the huge fixture was a series of shelves and hooks, upon which various things were laid or hung, drying to the proper consistency and potency. Snape was standing inside the open doors, which were taller than even his lanky frame, methodically eyeing the pieces of bicorn horn in one of the drawers' compartments. Most potions that required bicorn horn needed it in a powdered state, and one could easily buy that at the apothecary. But Snape found

that he preferred to powder his own, and pay the lower price for the whole horn, since he used so much in his research and in the preparations he made for Hogwarts.

But this time, he wasn't inspecting the horns for potions quality. He was looking for one that was smooth and lustrous, and of a deep rich colour. Finally, comparing a few pieces, he decided on one and carefully put the others away.

He strode over to his lab table and placed the horn on the surface, clamping it down tightly. Reaching for the sharp knife he needed, he measured how thick of a slice he wanted. Satisfied, with surgical precision borne of years of practice, he sliced off the disk, pleased with the shine that bespoke a smooth cut. After he put the rest of the horn back, he returned to his table, gazing thoughtfully at the disk. He picked through his tools and came up with a sharp pointed pick, much like the kind Muggle dentists use to clean between patients' teeth. Rooting around some more, he found another tool, which was a tiny, sharp V. Muttering a few charms to hold the disk in place and yet leave him free to work, he leant close, his nose almost touching the sliver of horn, and began to trace an image on the disk. A tiny curl of horn wound up from beneath the point.

His deep concentration was evident in the tense furrow of his brow and the thin line of his lips. His shoulders were tight, controlling the precise, finicky movements of his steady hand. After nearly an hour, he finally eased back, a thin sheen of perspiration on his face, even though the dungeon was fairly cool. He surveyed his progress grimly. Then, with a satisfied sigh, he placed the tool on the table and shook his hands loosely from the wrist, easing their cramp. Rolling his head on his neck, he stretched his arms over his head and leant back, sighing at the audible cracks along his spine.

Looking at the time, he realized that it was late, and he should get some grading done before his after-hours rounds. Standing gracefully, he cast one last scrutinizing look at the project on his table, smiling faintly before he strode out of his lab and into his office.

On her way to the owlery, Hermione glanced again at the notice board. *"Friday December 5: block Dressing Room through the second Angel of Music. Actors required to attend: Harry, Ron, Neville, Millicent, Hermione, Professor Snape."* Idly, she wondered how many people would show up, since very few were required. At least Ginny wasn't supposed to attend, so hopefully she wouldn't be there to scrutinize Hermione's relations with Snape!

Friday's rehearsal was a small one, and most of the rest of the cast that was not needed didn't show, preferring to plan their Hogsmeade outing for the next day. Ginny was hanging around in the corridor, waiting with Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Neville for Dumbledore to finish transforming the Hall. Draco and Pansy were waiting several feet away with Millicent, showing Slytherin solidarity until it was time for the rehearsal to begin. Snape appeared at the end of the corridor, at the top of the dungeon stairs. As he approached the Great Hall, Dumbledore threw the doors open wide, gesturing for everyone to enter. Snape nodded approvingly at Draco and Pansy as they left their friend and passed Snape on their way to the dungeons.

Closing the doors behind him, Snape followed the group down to the stage. Hermione was muttering earnestly to Ginny, who was looking rather petulant. He was idly watching them, curious about their conversation, when he was startled by Dumbledore at his side.

"Severus," he said sharply. Snape whipped his head around, instantly attentive.

"Sir?" He schooled his expression into one of polite inquiry and spun his body to face the older man. Dumbledore was eyeing him sternly, and Snape felt a curl of apprehension in his gut.

"Didn't I tell you that when you are onstage, I want your hair back as it's to be for the Phantom? I'm disappointed that you have not followed my instructions." His brows drew together and he tilted his head forward, peering at Snape over his spectacles.

Snape felt relief flood his gut, washing away the apprehension. Tilting his head to one side, he slowly said, "Actually, sir, I recall you wanting my hair back whenever I wear my costume. As we are not wearing our costumes yet, I hadn't thought any more about it."

Dumbledore frowned. "Well, I can't very well see how the light will play on your face in the blocking if your hair is in it, now can I?" he huffed irritably.

Snape assumed a properly contrite expression and nodded to the headmaster, smoothly saying, "Of course not. How foolish of me not to think of that. I apologize. If I may go remedy the situation now..." He trailed off on an up note, and Dumbledore nodded.

"By all means." He nodded crisply to Snape and turned to the rest of the group, effectively dismissing the dark man.

Snape instantly spun to seek Hermione. Striding quickly to her, he interrupted her and Ginny in a heated conversation. "Miss Granger!" he barked. Both girls jumped, turning wide eyes on him. He noted the blush on Ginny's face deepening under his scrutiny and wondered what they had been talking about.

"Yes, Professor?" Hermione asked in a respectful tone.

"Come with me. The headmaster requires my hair to be styled as the Phantom's every time I am to be onstage. From now on, you will assist me in this before each rehearsal in which I appear." He glared down his nose at her.

"Yes, sir." Hermione ducked her head to hide her dancing eyes and nodded meekly. Snape jerked his head sharply at her and glared his dismissal at Ginny. The redhead scurried away, and Snape stalked up the aisle, with Hermione in his wake.

They made their way down to the dungeon in silence. Snape cast several sidelong glances at Hermione as they went, seeing colour rising along her throat to stain her cheeks, and watching her chewing her lip, a faint smile quirking her mouth. He, too, felt a sense of excitement, or anticipation, knowing they were about to be alone again in his quarters. He passed his wand over his door, dropping the wards, and opened it, gesturing for Hermione to enter. She glanced up at him shyly, smiling.

Once inside, Snape shut the door and leant against it. Hermione had stepped a few paces into the room, and stood there, her back to him, tension growing in the air.

Snape stared at her, devouring her with his eyes. Hermione stood still, her body trembling with the buzzing that Snape's gaze on her provoked. Finally, Snape moved behind her, his body heat crossing the short distance between them. Hermione closed her eyes and shivered as every hair on her arms stood on end, straining toward him. His presence enveloped her like a warm blanket, and she felt the pulsing in her centre that bespoke her desire for him.

Snape stood millimetres away from her, not touching her, but almost. His breath stirred her curls as he looked down at her. He could hear his heart beating fiercely in the silence, and wondered if she could as well. His breath was ragged as he fought for control to not catch her up in his arms and cart her off to his bed on the other side of the door. Mastering himself, he merely whispered, "Hermione..."

She sighed in response, leaning back, giving herself over to him. Her body came to rest against his, and his breath caught. He closed his eyes, and was surprised to feel her hands scrabbling for his. She gripped his hands and brought them around her, wrapping herself in his arms. A content smile hovered on her lips and she sighed again.

Snape's chin was resting on her head, and he lifted it, tilting his head forward, kissing her hair as he murmured, "I've missed you."

Hermione lifted one hand to caress his face above her head, and her voice shook as she said, "I love you."

Snape's chest tightened almost painfully and he held her tighter. The gentle kisses on her hair suddenly travelled down over her ear and along her throat with more urgency. Hermione leant her head to one side, giving him easier access, moaning in delight at the sensations.

Hermione pressed back against him and once again felt him hard against her. A thrill coursed through her, and she struggled to turn in his arms. Snape's kisses trailed over

her jaw and up her cheek as she spun to face him. Once she was facing him, she snaked her arms up around his neck, her fingers sliding through his hair. Finally, Snape pulled back and locked gazes with her. Hermione's breath caught at the intensity in the inky depths of his eyes.

Eyes locked, excruciatingly slowly, they closed the space between them and their lips touched. As pent up as their passion was, their kiss was as sweet and tender as any unspoken declaration of love could be. Their souls spoke to one another through gentle caresses of tongues and lips.

After what seemed like hours, Snape pulled back and took a deep breath. With eyes filled with regret, he gently put Hermione from him, lightly running his fingertip across her lips.

"We've stolen enough time already. We need to do my hair and get back up there. Dumbledore was rather annoyed as it is that I hadn't remembered to have you do my hair. Come, let's get this done." He clasped her hand in his and urged her to the chair in front of the fireplace.

Dazedly, Hermione sat, blankly watching Snape retrieve the hair products. He sat on the ottoman in front of her. Hermione chewed her lip in frustration and tried to steady her breathing. Determinedly ignoring the heat flowing through her body, she reached out and began combing Snape's long black locks, smoothing the pomade through it. Snape's eyes were closed in pleasure.

Hermione finished quickly, knowing they had spent too much time locked in that heated embrace. Still, as she finished, she couldn't resist leaning forward and planting a soft kiss on the nape of his neck, below the point where the elastic held his hair in place. Snape shuddered and groaned at the tingle that travelled from that point straight to his cock. Doggedly pulling away, he turned and cupped Hermione's cheek in his hand, his expression apologetic.

Firmly, he murmured, "We have to go now. Next rehearsal, you'll be back again. But now, we must return."

Hermione rumbled her discontent but nodded. Snape stood and pulled her to her feet. He led her to the door, where he stopped and faced her again. In a velvet purr, he said, "I wanted to tell you, you've been very good at being discreet. Keep it up. Especially now. And remember... I love you."

Hermione beamed joyfully at him, pleased with the praise and basking in his love. He smiled warmly at her and jerked his head at the door. She instantly composed herself and nodded politely at him. His smile vanished and he opened the door, ushering her out.

They hurried back up to the Hall, and as they went, Snape blandly inquired, "What were you and Miss Weasley so intent about when I interrupted you?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and huffed. "She's not needed at this rehearsal, but she wants to be here anyway, simply because she still wants to get back together with Harry."

Snape's brows rose in surprise. "Back together?"

Hermione nodded. "Didn't you notice? They were together last year before the war ended. I would have thought it was obvious, especially with the way Ginny was completely taken with him. She has been to some degree since she was ten!"

Snape grimaced. In a deep voice, he muttered, "Why did I even ask? I don't want to know these things..."

Hermione giggled. She cut a glance at Snape and continued, "I was trying to convince her to leave. And not just for her sake, if you know what I mean..." She favoured him with a pointed look and he snorted.

Nodding solemnly, he averred, "I believe I do. It would be safer if she weren't at rehearsal."

Hermione sighed. "We'll see if she's still there, I guess." They arrived at the double doors, and Snape opened one, politely waving Hermione in ahead of him. Dumbledore was onstage with the others, having already blocked the beginning of the scene. Ginny was perched on a seat in the audience, gazing intently at Harry. As Hermione passed her, Ginny glanced at her, doing a double take at the sight of Snape a few paces behind her. Snape saw Ginny staring at him and glared coolly at her. She blinked and wrenched her gaze away, turning back to watch Harry again. Hermione joined the rest onstage, attentively pulling out her script and pencil.

When they reached the Magic Mirror scene, Snape quickly strode onto the stage, his script bewitched to float by him, and a Dicta-Quill poised above it. Even Hermione goggled at the impressive display of magical skill, as he serenely repeated the blocking, the Dicta-Quill recording it on the hovering script. He allowed a tiny smug smirk to quirk his lips at the amazed expressions on Ron's and Neville's faces.

Dumbledore simply chuckled and remarked on how convenient that must be. Once they reached the beginning of the Labyrinth Underground, Dumbledore stopped them and began again. As usual, they ran through the scenes twice more, walking and talking through them. Finally, when they were done, Dumbledore shooed them all into the house, extolling their virtues and reminding them to go straight to bed since they had the Hogsmeade visit to look forward to the next day.

Ginny hovered near Harry as they exited, brightly commenting on how well he was doing. Ron and Neville were comparing notes on their roles, and Millicent hastened away from all of the Gryffindors. Hermione followed the others a few paces behind, and Snape detained her at the doorway.

"Miss Granger." Hermione turned instantly to him. Snape eyed her sternly and drawled, "Every evening that we have a rehearsal, I shall collect you after dinner, and before rehearsal is to begin. You will then assist me with my hair. Is that clear?"

Hermione politely replied, "Certainly, sir. I'll be sure to be ready." Then, she flicked a glance around, and seeing nobody looking, winked saucily at Snape. His eyebrows shot up, and he narrowed his eyes at her warningly.

Inclining his head, he merely murmured, "Good night, Miss Granger." He swept past the rest of the students and down the corridor in a flurry of black cloth, leaving Hermione to watch him go, savouring the graceful billowing of his robes. Swallowing her grin, she hurried to catch up to the others.

Harry was scowling and muttering to Ginny as Hermione stepped beside them. Ginny was looking sympathetic.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

Harry grimaced and said, "I was just telling Ginny that I have no idea what to do for my Secret Santa..."

Hermione cut him off warningly, "You didn't say who you have, did you? Did he, Gin?"

Ginny shook her head as Harry huffed. "No! But like I said, it's a Slytherin, and I am at a complete loss. Do you two have any ideas?"

Ginny shrugged and said, "Well, there's always candy. You know Honeydukes has those sampler baskets."

Harry nodded restlessly. Hermione added, "Or, you can always find a nice quill, or some candles. If it's a girl, you could go with hair stuff, or perfume, or some baubles in Slytherin colours. There're loads of things, Harry. You'll come up with something." She patted his shoulder, and was taken aback by the flash in Ginny's eyes and the tightening of her lips.

Harry didn't notice. Ginny took the opportunity to lay her hand on Harry's arm and say, "Of course, like Ron said, you could always get stuff from Fred and George. They'd probably even do a discount for a friend." The possessive air with which she glared at Hermione made Hermione stifle a snort.

Hermione edged away from Harry, all too willing to let Ginny move in. Harry sighed and admitted, "Yeah, you're right. I wouldn't take a discount, though. They need to make money too. I'll see if I find anything tomorrow in Hogsmeade. Thanks, Ginny." He flashed her a lopsided grin, and she beamed at him. Hermione managed to stealthily hang back, allowing Ginny to keep walking with Harry. Hermione noticed that Ginny didn't release his arm until they reached the portrait hole.

Hanging back, Hermione smiled at Ron and Neville and asked, "So, have you figured out what you'll give your person for the gift exchange?" Neville nodded nervously and Ron grinned.

"Yeah, I reckon I have an idea. I'll be on the lookout tomorrow in Hogsmeade," Ron said cheerfully.

"I think I know what I want," Neville ventured. "That's a good idea to look tomorrow."

Hermione nodded as they clambered through the portrait hole. "Indeed. You know, I think we should all make sure that we get some time on our own tomorrow, since we're supposed to keep things secret from the rest of the cast too..."

Harry looked up, brows knitted. "Keep what secret?"

Ron looked over and said, "The gift exchange thing. 'Mione had a good idea about making sure we all get some time on our own tomorrow in Hogsmeade so we can get what we need without everyone else knowing."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess that would be a good idea." Harry relaxed visibly. He ran his hand through his hair and sighed. "Yeah, we should probably all split up so we can do our regular Christmas shopping too." He flashed a grin at them. "I don't want you lot to see what I'm getting you and spoil the surprise!"

Everyone chuckled. Hermione yawned and stretched. "Good night. I'm turning in. I have some things to figure out for my shopping list tomorrow. See you in the morning!" The rest murmured their good nights, and Hermione saw Ginny engaging Harry in a low conversation before she exited the common room. *That girl wasn't kidding when she decided that she wanted to get Harry back! Hmph, more power to her. If she does, it'll keep both of them off my case, so I hope she succeeds!*

Hermione sat down at her desk and penned another scroll to her parents.

"Dear Mum and Dad,

I really like Mum's idea of having copies of the photos made for me to give to my friends for Christmas. However, I don't know that I could find anyone in Hogsmeade here that could do it. Would one of you please forward me some contact information for some mail order photo shops? I haven't decided what size I want to get yet, or how many copies I want. If you could just send me the names and addresses of a few out of the phone book, I'd appreciate it. Thank you!

Love, Hermione"

She readied the scroll and put it in her bag, planning to take it to the owlery the next morning before she left for Hogsmeade. Distractedly, she prepared for bed, completing her now nightly ritual of kissing the picture of her and Snape, hugging and smelling the old nightgown, and sending a silent wish of "Good night, sweet dreams, and I love you" in the direction of the dungeons.

Spirits were high at breakfast the next morning, with over half the student body chattering about the impending trip to Hogsmeade. Hermione and her friends were arranging how they would split up and for how long, so each of them would be guaranteed a chance to do their shopping in secret. Considering Hermione was involved, it was no surprise that there was a timetable being drawn up on some parchment between the toast and the pumpkin juice. Sputters of arguments sprang up periodically, as all of the Gryffindors on cast were involved in the negotiations. Finally, as the final result was agreed upon, the morning post flew in.

Hermione looked up in time to see a large grey owl arrowing toward her. It stopped on the table and extended a leg, allowing her to remove the scroll. As she was untying it, she saw it was from her parents, and she said, "Wait a moment, please. I have something for you to take directly back to the same place." The owl hooted its understanding and Hermione fished her letter out of her bag, attaching it to the owl's leg. She politely handed it a sausage, and tucked the postage into the sack on its chest. It fluttered its wings in acknowledgement and hopped away, winging back up and out again.

She opened the letter from her parents and saw that it was the recipe for the chocolate mousse. Smiling, she placed it in her bag, hoping she could find the right kind of chocolate at Honeydukes. Glancing up at the High Table, she saw Snape watching her through his hair, sipping his tea. She felt a pang of dismay that she had missed mixing her tea at the same time he had, but she had been busy with the shopping timetable, and hadn't noticed. Shrugging sheepishly, she prepared her cup.

Not long after, Dumbledore announced that those who were going to Hogsmeade should assemble in the courtyard to be checked off the list with Filch. The Hall looked like it was a roiling mass as students shot to their feet as one, eager to get outside. Snape followed the crush of bodies out the doors, barking reprimands at those who were running or pushing. Once outside, he stood, arms crossed over his chest, glaring stonily at the teenagers as Filch checked them off his list. When all were accounted for, they began their trek to town. Snape followed the chattering throng, eyes seeking a familiar bushy brown head.

"What is Snape doing here?" Harry mumbled irritably to his friends.

"Professor Snape..." Hermione chided.

Ron cut in, "Yeah, we know. Professor. Good question. He's not going to spy on us while we're in town, is he?"

Ginny piped up, "Hope not."

Hermione heaved an exasperated sigh. "Perhaps he has shopping to do as well. He did have to draw a name too, you know."

Ron shuddered. "Yeah, and I hate to think what he might give as a present. It's bound to be something slimy and nasty."

Ginny glanced swiftly at Hermione, wondering if she'd blow up at Ron like she had with her. Hermione's eyes had narrowed and were sparking dangerously. Suddenly, she swung and smacked Ron solidly on the arm. He jumped and howled.

"Oi! What the bloody hell was that for?" He eyed her incredulously, rubbing at the sting on his bicep.

Hermione glared at him and growled, "Just shut up, Ron. You don't know what you're talking about."

Several yards behind them, Snape stifled a snort at the yelp the Weasley boy let out when Hermione walloped him. *Merlin! Wonder what he did to deserve that. Besides being a general idiot, of course... Note to self: Do not antagonize Hermione. Seems she has a rather fierce swat...*

Ginny just frowned thoughtfully. As Hermione simply tilted her chin up haughtily and kept walking, effectively ignoring the looks Ron and Harry were giving her, Ginny turned around and looked back at Snape.

Damn! Why is she looking back at me? That girl is far too clever. I guess I should go to Diagon Alley instead, so she can't possibly deduce what and whom I'm shopping for!

Once they exited Hogwarts' grounds, Snape paused. Grimly casting one last look at the woman he loved, blithely walking off with her friends, he Disapparated to Diagon Alley.

Snape gazed about at the milling crowd. Saturdays were always busy in Diagon Alley. He stepped into the walkway, interposing himself deftly between other shoppers. He let himself be carried along in the current until he came to Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. Gracefully stepping aside, he entered the shop, scanning the place for

any sign of what he wanted. Even though he was taller than most people, he still couldn't see past several of the displays, and he sighed in resignation as a cheerful voice addressed him.

"Good morning! What can I help you with today?" He looked down to see a short witch in sky blue robes smiling up at him.

Clearing his throat, he glanced about stealthily. "Would you be so kind as to point me in the direction of your... ribbons, please?"

Madam Malkin blinked. Her smile faltered a moment before plastering itself back, albeit a little crookedly. "Ribbons... sir?"

Snape's eyes narrowed dangerously and he sucked in a deep breath. In a deadly quiet voice, he retorted, "Yes. Ribbons. Which way?"

She swallowed nervously and spun. "Oh, uh, that way. To the right. Just behind the display with the blinking spangled robes."

Snape inclined his head and murmured, "Thank you." Then, drawing himself up regally, he swept away, dramatically flapping his robes. Madam Malkin stared blankly after him for a moment before scurrying behind her counter near the front.

Snape stalked up to the shelves of ribbon and cast a wary eye at them. He really felt quite out of his element. But, he felt a surge of relief when he found what he was looking for. He examined the ribbon, testing the tensile strength, evaluating the nap, feeling the softness. Grunting in satisfaction, he gazed around, looking for the notions section. He ignored the startled look a young housewitch gave him as he stalked up to the wall, picking out an appropriate clasp. As he turned to head back to the front counter, he caught the apprehensive eye of the young witch. He nodded gravely to her in passing and she bobbed her head nervously at him, sighing with relief when the intimidating man in black was gone.

Snape approached the counter and proffered the items to Madam Malkin. She briskly took the ribbon spool from him and inquired, "How much would you like?"

Frowning thoughtfully, Snape said, "Ah... Well... I suppose... Two feet?"

Madam Malkin's brow furrowed in perplexity and she squinted at Snape. "Don't you know how much you need?"

Snape felt the heat rising to his face and shook his hair forward. "Just... make an even yard and be done with it."

She shook her head in wonder as she measured out the ribbon. Once she rolled up the piece, she picked up the other item, and her expression cleared into one of comprehension. "Oh! I see. You're making some sort of accessory or adornment, aren't you?"

Snape pinned her with an intense stare and she shrank back a bit. Hesitantly, she added, "It's just that you have ribbon and clasps, and that's usually what they're used for..."

Snape voiced a noncommittal, "Mmm." Madam Malkin tallied up the purchase and Snape paid her, declining her offer of a bag and pocketing his purchase. Grimly offering her a frosty bow, he spun on his heel to leave.

A slightly uncertain, "Thank you! Come again!" followed him out. Exhaling gustily, he mentally shook himself, shedding the uncomfortable experience before entering the throng again to make his way to Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour.

He stepped into the parlour, instantly sticking out like a sore thumb against the light colours and cheerful décor. A fresh-faced young clerk stood at the counter. Snape sidled over and leant in secretively. The clerk stared at him, wary. In a quavery voice that broke somewhere in the middle of the sentence, he said, "How can I help you... sir?"

Snape drawled, "I would like to speak to Mr. Fortescue."

The youth's Adam's apple bobbed as he stammered, "He, uh, he's busy right now. Coming up with a new flavour, you know. Uh, I can help you."

Snape glared at him, aggrieved, and said, "I doubt that. Go get Mr. Fortescue. Tell him Severus Snape is here to see him."

Torn, the youth dithered. "I don't know..."

Snape leant over the counter a bit more and growled, "Now." The youth backed away hurriedly and scrambled to the door leading to the back room. Snape leant back from the counter and glanced around. Several patrons jerked their gazes from him as he caught their eyes. Rolling his eyes and snorting grimly to himself, he was pleased to see Florean Fortescue emerging from the back room, the youth trailing after him anxiously.

Pleasantly, he stepped up to the counter. "Ah! Severus. Long time, no see. How are things at Hogwarts?" He turned to the clerk and waved his hand airily at him. "Go on, do some work or something. I have business to attend." The youth hastily made himself scarce at the other side of the shop. "What would you be needing today?"

Snape nodded at the other man, answering politely, "Hogwarts is still standing, even with the usual crop of imbeciles blowing up cauldrons. Actually, I'm not here for my usual research materials. I have a favour to ask of you." He leant over the counter, turning his back to the patrons, who were surreptitiously eyeing them.

Florean's eyes gleamed with interest and he laid one finger along his nose, also turning his back on the curious onlookers. "Well, what favour would that be?"

In all seriousness, Snape said, "I need a recipe for chocolate mousse."

Florean's brows shot up in surprise. Mildly, he drawled, "I would never have guessed that one..." Snape rolled his eyes. All too casually, he added, "And just what would you be needing that for?"

Snape grimaced and sighed. "It's the latest freak of Dumbledore's. We have a secret holiday gift exchange, and we're supposed to make something. I know the person I have been assigned likes chocolate mousse, so I thought it'd be a good enough idea. I just need a good recipe." He flashed an ingratiating smile at Florean and added, "And what better person to ask than you, England's most accomplished purveyor of gastronomical delights?"

Florean visibly preened. "Well, since you put it that way..." He shot a smug smirk at Snape and sniffed. Straightening off the counter, he murmured, "Just a moment. I have just the thing..." He briskly strode into the back room again. Snape turned and rested his hip against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at anyone who dared stare at him.

Several very quiet minutes later, Florean returned, bearing a parchment with his neat, clear writing on it. "Here you go! If you have any questions about the ingredients, let me know. I can tell you where best to get them if you like."

Snape took the parchment, scanned it quickly, and muttered, "No, that's not necessary." He knew he could get all of the ingredients through the kitchens at Hogwarts. "This is precisely what I needed, Florean. Thank you."

Florean shrugged. "Don't mention it..." Snape's head snapped up.

Flicking a glance around again, Snape murmured, "Actually, I would rather you not mention it either..." He affected a grimace at Florean's narrowed eyes. "Secret gift exchange and all that, you know..." The other man nodded understanding and winked broadly at Snape. Snape pocketed the parchment and nodded politely. Straightening formally, he said, "I appreciate your help, Mr. Fortescue. Good day." He spun on his heel and headed for the door.

"Any time, Professor. Ta!"

Snape exited and stood on the pavement for a moment. He looked back to see several faces plastered curiously against the windows. Sweeping a baleful glare over them, he snorted in morbid satisfaction at the haste with which they disappeared, leaving the glass smudged. He stepped off into an alcove between shops and Disapparated back to Hogwarts.

Hermione eagerly stepped into the bookstore in Hogsmeade, glad that she was alone, thanks to the timetable. She made her way straight to the proprietor. The droopy little man with a permanently red nose smiled benignly at her.

"All right there? What can I do for you this time, lassie?"

Hermione smiled. "Well, I was wondering if you have a Muggle Liaison, you know, to get Muggle books."

The man blinked thoughtfully and said, "You know, I don't. Never had much call for it here. But I can put you in touch with Flourish and Blotts. I know they have one, being there in London and all."

Hermione almost bounced in excitement. "How soon can you do that? I'm looking for something for a Christmas gift."

The man chuckled and jerked his head toward a dusty office near the back. "You can use the Floo to call them right now, if you like. You've made Floo calls before, right?"

Hermione nodded. "That would be perfect! May I just go back there?"

"Sure thing, lassie. The powder's on the mantle. Let me know if they can help you."

"Certainly. Thank you!" Hermione hurried back to the office and turned the corner, seeing the fireplace to her right. She picked up a pinch of powder and knelt on the hearth. Tossing the powder in, she said, "Flourish and Blotts," and stuck her head into the green fire. After a moment's dizzying spin, she opened her eyes to see another office, very like the one she was in, only larger. She saw someone hunched over a desk, back to her. Tentatively, she said, "Hello?" The person jumped and whipped around.

"Oh! You startled me! Hang on a tick, who're you?" The dishevelled woman peered at Hermione over her spectacles.

"I'm calling from the bookstore in Hogsmeade. My name's Hermione Granger, and I'm hoping to speak to your Muggle Liaison, please."

The woman relaxed visibly and said, "Oh. Well, he's out right now. But I can take down what you're looking for and give it to him when he gets back."

Hermione smiled gratefully. "That would be wonderful, thank you!"

The woman rummaged through the stacks on her desk and finally came up with an order form and a quill. "All right then. Title?"

"The Phantom of the Opera."

"Author?"

"Gaston LeRoux."

"And do you have any specifics on edition or anything?"

"Yes. I'm looking for a hardback edition. Good condition. The older the better. It was written over 80 years ago, so that should give you an idea. Illustrated is preferable. And if there's an edition out there that's leather bound, I want it."

The woman glanced up at Hermione. "Don't ask for much, do you?"

Hermione shrugged and grimaced. "I don't know what's out there, but it can't hurt to be specific, can it?"

The other woman blinked. "You've got a point. Okay, I've got all that. Now, if he can't find the perfect edition, what do you want to sacrifice first?"

"Oh, I don't know. Can you just have him contact me when he finds anything? I can be reached at Hogwarts by owl post. And I have a Gringotts account, so I can arrange for payment when he finds what I want."

"Sounds good then." The woman finished jotting down notes and smiled politely at Hermione. "I'll have him contact you."

"Perfect! Thank you so much!" Hermione beamed at the woman and added, "Goodbye!" before she pulled her head out of the fireplace, closing her eyes once again at the whirling sensation. Carefully getting to her feet, she emerged into the store again and cheerfully approached the proprietor. "I reached them, and I placed an order to be handed over to their Muggle Liaison. Thank you so much for your help!"

He smiled again and said, "Eh, no worries. Anything to help a bonny lass like yourself." Hermione chuckled.

"You wouldn't happen to know where I might find picture frames in town, would you? I'm trying to do my holiday shopping today."

Again, he blinked thoughtfully. "Now, I'd say you could check in Dervish and Banges. They've got a lot of bits and baubles there."

"I'll try there next. You've been extremely helpful. Thanks again!" She beamed at him as she hastened to the exit. He waved serenely at her.

"Good day to you, lassie!"

Hermione burst out into the chill sunlight on light feet. She bustled on to Dervish and Banges, glad that the shop was nearby. If it hadn't been in the same area, she would have had to wait until the next stage of the timetable to go in. But, as it was, she went straight in and to the section with clocks and mirrors. Pleased that her instinct had been correct, and that picture frames were in the same section, categorized as "things that hang on walls," she looked over the array of frames.

There were several sizes and materials. The wood ones were nice, in varying shades, but her eye was caught by the metallic gleam to one side. There were several shelves of metal frames, some black, some grey, some silver, some bronze, and some gold.

One frame style struck her fancy. It was for 5X7 photos, and the metal was engraved with vine and inlaid with gems. It was available in both silver and gold, and the sign on the shelf claimed that the gems could be altered to any colour the purchaser wanted. Hermione smiled as she saw one silver frame with green gems amongst the engraved leaves. *Slytherin colours... Severus would prefer that, I'm sure.* She picked up that one and pursed her lips in thought.

I want to give my friends pictures too, so I should probably get more. But they wouldn't want Slytherin colours! Peering through the selection, she picked up a gold frame with red gems and smiled. *Perfect! Gryffindor colours for the rest...* She grabbed a few gold frames along with the silver one and strode up to the counter to make her purchase.

Having arranged for the frames to be delivered to Hogwarts for her, so she wouldn't have to carry them around and chance anyone seeing them, she checked the time and noticed that it was almost time for a zone change based on the timetable.

Eventually, after several zone changes throughout the day, she made it to Honeydukes. Relieved to finally be there, she headed straight for the chocolate. The delicious aroma filled her nose as she pulled the recipe from her bag. *Let's see... 3 ½ oz. milk chocolate, 3 ½ oz. semi-sweet chocolate... Okay, here they are.* She looked at the blocks of chocolate in the display and glanced around to find someone to help her. A cheerful woman with rosy cheeks saw her seeking look and came over to her.

"What can I get for you?"

Hermione pointed to the two batches of chocolate and said, "I would like 3 ½ ounces of each of these, please."

The woman deftly broke off pieces and weighed them, wrapping each in thick white paper. "Anything else for you today?"

Hermione spent a few minutes meandering through the store and picking some of her favourites as well as some selection for her friends to add to the photos she'd give them. Bagging her purchase, the rosy woman beamed genially at Hermione as she paid and left. Hermione managed to stuff her Honeydukes sack into her bag before she met up with the rest of her mates for the trek home.

29- Crisis Averted

Chapter 30 of 84

Hermione takes the next steps in her plans for Christmas, and Ginny gives Harry something to think about. And somehow, Snape manages to witness it!

Author's Note: Just a warning: there's quite a bit of Harry and Ginny in this chapter. Don't worry, it won't become a regular thing.

Nicole aka Good_Witch

Chapter 29- Crisis Averted

Dinner that Saturday was a subdued affair, since those who had gone to Hogsmeade were fair knackered. Hermione was pleased to see another owl coming toward her. Ron and Harry looked mildly interested in what she was getting, but Ginny remarked, "You're awfully popular lately. What are you expecting now?"

"Oh, I owled my folks to send me some contact info to help me get started on my Christmas gifts, and this is it." She thanked the owl and offered it a spear of broccoli. It screeched, and she rolled her eyes and handed it a chicken bone instead. Hooting its appeasement, it flew off.

The four of them sniggered at the owl's indignation. Hermione scanned the list of photo shops. Seized with the compulsion to begin immediately, she gulped down the last of her pumpkin juice and wiped her mouth with a napkin, folding the letter and stuffing it in her pocket. "I need to go get started on this. I'll see you all later." She stood and flicked a glance at the High Table. Snape was staring blankly at her, perplexed at her sudden departure. She shrugged and quirked one corner of her mouth up. He scowled, but inclined his head, peering through his hair at her, so as not to draw attention. Briskly, she strode out of the Hall, disappointed that she couldn't explain to Snape why she was leaving so abruptly.

Out in the corridor, her stride faltered as she was struck with an idea. *Oh! Now I have even more messages to send!* She grinned to herself...and it was a rather Slytherin grin for a Gryffindor.

Up in her room, she sat at her desk and began writing her letters. She wrote the same thing over several times, to send to the various photo shops, but the last letter was different.

"Dear Fred and George,

I know this isn't one of your official order forms, but I know exactly what I want, so I was hoping you could just send it to me directly. I need two bottles of your invisible ink. That's it. I'm going to enclose payment, and I know you won't mind sending me whatever the change is...you're tricksters, not thieves. I really need it as soon as possible, if you can manage it. Hope your shop is doing well, and I hope you two are also. Things are really busy here with the play rehearsals and getting ready for the holidays. Ron and Ginny are both doing really well in rehearsals. You all should be proud of them. Thanks in advance for your help, and, as always, discretion is a must.

Thanks!

Hermione"

Once again grinning in satisfaction, she sealed all of the letters and prepared them to take to the owlery the next morning. Pleased that her self-appointed tasks were complete, she turned to the packages on her bed. Her purchases from Hogsmeade had been delivered, and the house-elves had brought them up to her room. She unwrapped each parcel and looked over the items, arranging them in piles. She had managed to almost complete her shopping all in that one trip to Hogsmeade. Once she had the photos copied, she could put them in the frames and wrap the gifts. Smiling, she hid the gifts in her closet.

Returning to her bed, she stared at the chocolate. *How am I going to get the mousse made? I don't have the facilities up here...* She pondered the chocolate, frowning in thought. Suddenly, her face brightened and she snatched up the recipe, barrelling out of the room.

Several hours had passed since she had retreated to her room. She burst into the common room, quickly glancing about. *Damn! Harry's not here.* There were a few students lounging about, conversing in low voices. None of her mates were there, so she began the climb to the boy's dormitory. Reaching the seventh years' dorm, she paused, hearing them talking. Taking a deep breath, she knocked on the door. The talking stopped for a moment and she heard Ron call, "Yeah? What's up?"

"It's Hermione. Can I talk to Harry for a moment?"

There was silence on the other side of the door for a long moment. Then, it was flung open and a warily curious Harry eyed her, his pyjama shirt half buttoned.

"What's up?" Harry tried hard to sound casual, but he was too perplexed to succeed. Hermione looked past him and saw the other boys watching them avidly. She rolled her eyes and jerked her head.

"Can I talk to you, *privately?*" Harry glanced over his shoulder at the others, who suddenly found the ceiling or the floor very interesting. Grimacing, he nodded and stepped out into the corridor, pulling the door closed behind him.

"Is everything okay?" He frowned at Hermione, concerned.

Hastily, she retorted, "Yes! Everything's fine. I just needed to ask you a favour, and they don't need to hear it." She gave him a significant look and tilted her head.

Harry's eyebrows rose in interest. "What do you need?"

Lowering her voice, knowing that the others might have Weasleys' Extendable Ears, she said, "I need to go down to the kitchens, and I was wondering if I could borrow your Cloak. It's for something for Christmas... I won't be long."

Harry relaxed as he heard her request. Quirking his lips knowingly, he murmured, "Is it for the Secret Santa thing?"

Hermione shrugged noncommittally, but Harry smirked. In a deliberate voice, Hermione said, "If it were, I couldn't tell you and keep it secret, now could I?"

Harry grinned conspiratorially and nodded. "Okay, I get it. No problem. Sure. Hang on a tick, and I'll get it." He spun back into the room, nearly ploughing the door into Ron. The redhead grimaced sheepishly at them and rubbed the back of his neck. Neville, Seamus, and Dean laughed. Harry punched Ron on the arm and he yelped. Scowling at Harry, Ron flicked a glance at Hermione and cringed at her look of scathing disdain.

Harry opened his trunk, stuffed the Cloak into a bag, and glared at Ron as he walked back into the corridor. Shutting the door firmly, he waited a moment, his finger pressed to his lips and looking at Hermione. After a few beats, he nodded sharply to Hermione and flung the door open again, cracking it on Ron's head and knocking him over. Harry snorted at Ron's howls of pain, and the other boys all dissolved into guffaws. "Nice one, Ron," Harry muttered. He rolled his eyes and shut the door. "Here you go. Be careful. And get it back to me as soon as you can."

Hermione nodded gratefully. "I promise. Thanks, Harry. I should have it back to you tomorrow." She took the bag from him and smiled. He smiled back at her wistfully, his eyes darkening. Hermione felt a chill of recognition at his expression and hastily backed away. She turned and hurried off, glancing back to see him staring after her.

She emerged into the common room again and was surprised to see Ginny, curled up in her nightgown in her favourite reading spot near the fire, staring blankly at Hermione. Hermione stopped, colouring guiltily in spite of herself. Ginny gazed at Hermione, glancing at the stairs to the boys' dorms and back at her. She noted the bag in her hand and her flushed countenance. Ginny's eyes flashed and her lips thinned.

"Uh, hi, Ginny," Hermione ventured, trying to sound nonchalant.

"A bit late to be out visiting, isn't it, Hermione?" Ginny's voice was thick with suppressed venom. Her brown eyes sparked with anger. Hermione blinked, flustered.

Before Hermione could answer, they heard footsteps pounding down the stairs, and Harry burst into the room, right behind Hermione. He said, "Hey, 'Mione..." before he saw Ginny staring. Stopping, he glanced between the two girls, noting the tension. Ginny looked at Harry and saw his pyjama shirt half open. Her eyes widened, and she shot an incredulous look at Hermione. Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head, opening her eyes again to gaze imploringly at Ginny.

Harry ran his hand through his messy hair and backed against the wall, leaning against it, trying to be casual. Faintly, he said, "Uh, hey, Ginny. How's it going?" Ginny turned to him, her eyes raking him from head to toe. He was taken aback by the intensity with which she devoured him. He hadn't seen that look since before the war.

Hermione saw the exchange and jumped at the opportunity to escape. Quickly crossing to the portrait hole, she muttered, "Um, I have to go do something. I'll get this back to you tomorrow, Harry. Good night, Ginny."

The other two didn't respond and she hastily scrambled through the portrait hole, slipping the Cloak on. *Wow! That was awkward...* Relieved to be out of there, she sped down to the painting that covered the entrance to the kitchens.

Back in the common room, Harry was dazedly staring at Ginny, who had him pinned under her fierce gaze. Ginny glanced around the otherwise empty room quickly as she stood. Deliberately crossing to him, she said, "Why were you following her? How long is it going to take for you to see that she's not interested like that?" She stepped up to him, gazing up at him soberly. Harry's green eyes were filled with a welter of emotions. He shrugged half-heartedly and averted his eyes.

Stuffing his hands in the pockets of his pyjama bottoms, he mumbled, "I dunno'. It's just... hard, y'know?"

Ginny closed in on him, making him press himself closer to the wall as she invaded his personal space. He blinked owlishly at her as she lightly traced a finger down his bare chest. She locked eyes with him and murmured, "Yes. I *do* know." Harry's breath caught at the hunger and desire glowing in Ginny's eyes as she placed her palm flat against his skin.

Her voice was barely above a whisper as she said, "Why do you torture yourself by keeping after her, when there are others who are just waiting for you, ready to jump at the chance..." She stretched up and gently pressed her lips to his. He gasped, unsure of how to react.

"Ginny, I..."

"Shhh..." She placed a finger on his lips and tangled her other hand in his hair, pulling his head down so she could whisper in his ear. "Didn't we have fun? I can help take your mind off her, you know." She nibbled on his ear the way she knew he liked, and smiled at his choked groan. "I've missed this, Harry. Why should we all be miserable? Quit chasing her. She doesn't want you." She pressed her body against his, feeling his reaction hot between them. Boldly, she slid her hand down his back and gripped his arse, pulling him tight. Her voice was low and husky as she pulled back and locked eyes with him again. "I do." At that, she closed in on him and kissed him passionately, her pent-up lust and longing pouring out.

Harry responded instinctively. He knew how to kiss Ginny. He remembered how she liked it. And it was clear that she remembered what he liked too. His body hadn't forgotten.

They broke apart at the sound of footsteps on the stairs from the boys' dorm. Ginny hastily retreated to her chair and buried her flushed face in her book. Harry glanced about wildly, desperate to hide his rampant erection that was threatening to poke through his pyjama bottoms. He flung himself onto a couch and grabbed a pillow to cover his lap. He could feel his face burning, and knew his hair was even messier than before, from Ginny running her fingers through it.

Both green eyes and brown gazed warily at the doorway. They saw two large feet and bony ankles under too-short pyjamas descending, and then Ron popped into view. He scowled in confusion as he saw only Harry and Ginny. "Where's 'Mione?"

"She left already," Harry said, hoping he sounded normal.

Ron glared at Harry reproachfully. "My head still hurts from that crack you gave me."

Harry huffed. "Serves you right! You shouldn't have been eavesdropping."

Ginny looked up. "Ron! What did you do?"

Ron shrugged. "I just wanted to know if she had changed her mind about Harry. Hey, I snoop because I care!" He glared indignantly at Ginny, who was rolling her eyes in exasperation.

Hotly, Ginny averred, "She didn't."

Ron squinted at her vehement retort. Then he glanced at Harry, who was sheepishly studying the seams on his pillow. "So then, what'd she want?"

Harry cleared his throat. "She just wanted to borrow the Cloak. Said she needed to go to the kitchens for something relating to the Secret Santa. She'll give me the Cloak tomorrow. That's all she'd say. The only reason she asked to speak to me in private was because the other blokes don't know about the Cloak. Why do you think I put it in that bag?"

Ron's brow smoothed again. "Oh." He rubbed the lump on his head absently. Then, he grimaced in confusion again. "So then, what took you so long? I was wondering what was going on...you know, if things were looking up or if you two had got in another row. So I figured I'd come check. But if she's gone, what have you been doing?"

Harry felt the colour rising on his cheeks again and wished he had more control over his body. Ginny furtively shrank in on herself, trying to be inconspicuous. Ron glanced between the two oddly silent teenagers. Comprehension dawned.

Harry gamely ventured, "Oh, Ginny and I were just talking about 'Mione. Right, Gin?"

Ginny's bright brown eyes peeked over the top of her book. Vigorously nodding her shiny red head, she added, "Yeah, that's right."

Ron's blue eyes kindled with a brotherly protective light and his lips thinned. Darkly, he retorted, "I see."

Suddenly, Ginny popped up from behind her book and spat fiercely, "Drop it, Ronald! We needn't go through this again, do we?" She glared at him warningly and he crossed his arms, scowling. Harry simply sat, afraid to move and draw attention to himself during this familial confrontation.

Ginny and Ron held each other's gazes for several moments, until, finally, Ron huffed harshly through his nose and jerked his head a fraction. Glancing sharply at Harry, he started to turn around, to head back upstairs. He cast a meaningful glance at Ginny as he said, "Good night, then." Ginny visibly relaxed from her tense posture. Ron stepped through the doorway, and then looked back over his shoulder at Harry. Pointedly, he said, "Don't be too long coming to bed, mate."

Harry nodded weakly and Ginny glanced at him. "Uh, sure thing. Night, Ron."

Ron nodded grimly and retreated back up the stairs. Harry sank back against the couch, his eyes closing in relief. He lifted one clammy hand to remove his glasses, rubbing the heels of his palms over his eyes. He was therefore surprised when he felt someone pouncing on his lap, pinning him to the couch. His eyes flew open to see Ginny straddling his legs, peering intently at him. He squinted up at her, shoving his glasses back on.

"Um, uh... G-Ginny?" Harry felt his heart hammering in his chest. He was rather bewildered by the unexpected turn of events.

Ginny looked down at her hands where they lay against his bare chest. Avoiding his eyes, she whispered, "Harry, I'm not going to beat around the bush here. We've been through enough to skip that." She flicked a solemn glance at him before averting her eyes again. "I... really liked what we had. And I can't help but want you back." She shrugged minutely. "If you want me to leave you alone, I will." She tossed her head and made a moue of displeasure. "I won't *like* it, but I'll do it." She looked at him through her lashes. Almost shyly she added, "Do you want me to leave you alone, Harry?"

Harry felt her resting against his still half-erect cock. His mind flooded with memories of their dalliances. Dazedly, he became aware of her hands gently smoothing over his skin, under his pyjama top. He closed his eyes to concentrate.

Do I? I mean, we did have fun, but... She's not Hermione.

Right. Which means that she actually wants you!

But, I love Hermione...

Fine! Keep loving her. She is your best friend.

But I want to be more than friends with her!

Give over already! She doesn't love you that way and she made it pretty damn clear that she won't! You might as well move on. What's the point in pining any longer? You just make yourself miserable and strain the friendship.

But is it fair to Ginny to take up with her again when I still love Hermione?

Oh, for Merlin's sake! Can't you see how much Ginny wants to be with you? You did have a good thing going before. She already knows about your feelings for Hermione, and she still wants to get back with you.

Yeah, she does seem pretty insistent...

So get with the programme, you dolt! Jeez...

And she is really pretty...

Yeah, we know all this already.

And we had loads of fun in bed...

I'm still waiting to hear a negative...

Fine! I give up.

That's what I've been waiting for! And so has Ginny, I daresay...

All right, all right. I get it. I'll give it another try.

Brilliant!

Harry opened his eyes to see Ginny gazing at him, her cheeks flushed and her eyes crackling with heat and want. He licked his dry lips and saw her inhale sharply, staring intently at his mouth. His voice was gravelly when he spoke.

"No, I don't want you to leave me alone."

Ginny's face lit up in delight and she smiled broadly at him. He grinned crookedly back at her. She laid one hand on his cheek and leant closer to him. Harry slid his hands along her thighs and gripped her arse as he stretched forward to meet her. Their lips met with an explosion of energy, and they easily slipped back into their old habits of pleasing each other.

They had been snogging passionately for a while, Ginny grinding against Harry's lap, when Harry finally wrapped his arms around her and shifted her to one side, laying her down on the couch. He gingerly arranged his legs between hers as he kept kissing her, covering her body with his. Neither of them noticed when the portrait hole opened.

Hermione tickled the pear in the painting and it swung forward, letting her into the kitchen. She glanced quickly around at the host of house-elves staring at her warily. Smiling in reassurance, she nodded at them and politely said, "I'm looking for Dobby. Is he around?"

The house-elves nodded in relief and pointed. Hermione thanked them and hurriedly strode over to Dobby. Dobby sensed her coming and spun around, crowing, "Miss Granger! Oh, Dobby is so glad to see Miss Granger! Dobby is always glad to see friends of Harry Potter. Is there something Dobby can do for Miss?" He gazed joyfully up at Hermione with his huge watery eyes.

"Actually, Dobby, there is something I need help with..."

Dobby wriggled in excitement. "Oh, Dobby loves to help friends of Harry Potter! Just tell Dobby what you need, and Dobby will help right away!"

Hermione glanced about, then she leant down confidentially. In a low voice, she said, "I have a recipe that I need to make..."

Dobby clapped his hands. "'Dobby would be honoured to make Miss's recipe!"

Hastily Hermione clasped Dobby's thin shoulder, gaining his attention. "No, thank you, Dobby. I need to make the recipe myself. That's what I need help with. You see, I don't have the facilities to do that in my room, so I need a kitchen to work in. But, you know that we're not supposed to be down here. And, I'm making the recipe as part of the headmaster's secret gift exchange, so I have to make sure no one finds out about it."

Dobby's eyes goggled more and more as she explained. Nodding breathlessly, he whispered, "Of course, Miss! Dobby understands. Dobby can help Miss whenever is wanted."

Hermione beamed. "Perfect! Here's the recipe. '3 ½ oz Milk chocolate, 3 ½ oz Semi-sweet chocolate.' I have those already. 'Three large eggs separated, a dash of salt, one cup whipping cream chilled.' I'll need those. 'Melt the chocolates in top of a double boiler over hot, not boiling water, stirring often. As soon as the chocolates melt, transfer to a 5- to 6-cup serving dish. Set aside and cool. Use a fork to froth egg yolks. Use a rubber spatula to combine egg yolks with cooled chocolate. Beat egg whites with salt until they hold their shape, but are still moist and shiny. Use a spatula to stir 1/4 egg whites into chocolate mixture. Fold in remaining whites. Whip cream until thickened. Fold into chocolate mixture. Use a spatula to smooth surface. Clean around the bowl. Cover and refrigerate overnight. Serve chilled. Makes 8 servings.' That's all of it. So, can I get all of the utensils and the rest of the ingredients here to make this?"

Dobby nodded solemnly and pointed around the kitchen. "Dobby can get everything Miss wants. When will Miss be wanting to make the recipe?"

Hermione thought for a moment. "Well, would it be too hard to get in here after curfew on Christmas Eve?"

Dobby shook his head. "No, Miss. House-elves is busy that night, but Dobby can make time to help Harry Potter's friend. Will Miss be showing up like tonight?"

Hermione nodded. "Exactly like I did tonight. That'll be perfect, Dobby. Now, remember, don't mention this to anyone! It's supposed to be secret, per Dumbledore's orders. All right?"

Dobby stared at her and nodded reverently. "Yes, Miss. Dobby won't say nothing to no one. Not even Harry Potter!"

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, Dobby. I'll see you Christmas Eve, and I'll bring my own chocolate. Good night, Dobby!" She spun and quickly retraced her steps to the painting at the entrance.

Dobby waved at Hermione and called, "Good night, Miss! Dobby will be ready!"

Hermione poked her head out of the doorway and snuck a peek down the corridor. Grateful that it was empty, she stepped into the corridor and covered herself with the Cloak to trek back up to the Tower.

Counting her blessings that she didn't even run into Filch's cat on the way back, she muttered the password to a sleepy Fat Lady and furtively crept through the portrait hole, only to be met with the sight of Harry and Ginny writhing on the couch, snogging feverishly.

Oh! My word! She stifled a stunned gasp and stared, gobsmacked. She couldn't look away. Ginny's arms were wrapped around Harry and her fingers were dragging across his back and into his hair. Harry's hand was tightly gripping her bare thigh where it hooked around his hip. His glasses were lying askew on the floor, and they were panting and whimpering as they probed each other's mouths with their tongues. Hermione felt a pang of arousal, remembering such antics with Snape. Then, she shook herself and exhaled gustily.

Well, it looks like Ginny managed to get through to him... She carefully tiptoed over to them and stood behind the couch, trying not to notice Harry's arse as he was grinding and flexing against Ginny. Quickly, she took the Cloak off and whirled it over them. They disappeared, but she heard their startled squeaks.

Looking pointedly away, she hissed, "Here's your Cloak. Um, I'm going to bed. And I'm going to pretend, as Head Girl, that I didn't see any of this. Um, have fun, you two." She flashed a half-hearted smile at the couch and spun quickly to hurry out of the room. At the doorway, she paused and flung over her shoulder, "Oh! And, good for you, Ginny. And you too, Harry. I'm glad you two are back together. You're a really cute couple." Then, she whisked away on light feet.

Harry and Ginny stared at each other, stunned. Neither spoke for a long moment. Finally, Harry said, in a strained whisper, "I can't believe she caught us. I'm sorry. I should have thought..."

Ginny shook her head vehemently and hissed back, "No, it's my fault. It's okay. She didn't seem upset..." She peered intently at Harry, her expression worried. "I'm more concerned about you. Are you okay?"

Harry held his breath for a moment as he thought. Ginny could see the play of emotions across his face. Tensely, she waited for an answer.

Harry's eyes darkened as he seemed to turn inward, shutting Ginny out. After a few beats, he shook his head and sighed deeply. He looked at Ginny's apprehensive expression and gave her a wan, lopsided smile. He could feel the relief flow through her body, pressed against his as it was. He leant down and lightly touched his lips to hers. "Yeah. I'm okay."

Ginny closed her eyes and hugged him fiercely. Harry smiled gently into her hair. He pulled back a bit and looked at her, querying, "Are you?" He could see her eyes shining with unshed tears as she nodded at him.

In a choked voice, she murmured, "Never better." She gave him a watery smile and pulled him back down to her, holding him close. Harry idly stroked her thigh as he cradled his face in the curve of her neck. Ginny sighed.

They lay there, silent for a long moment. Then, Ginny murmured, "Harry?"

"Hmm?" He pulled back enough to see her pensively fingering the cloth of the Cloak.

"This would cover two people, wouldn't it?" She narrowed her eyes at him mischievously.

"Ah... yeah. If we hunched down. Why?"

Ginny's face split into a positively wicked grin. "Wanna' get out of here and find some place more... private?" Her eyes glinted once again with desire. Harry felt an answering jolt in his centre. A slow grin crept across his face.

"Why? What did you have in mind?" His voice was low and rumbling.

Ginny smirked and quirked one eyebrow at him. "Oh, I'd much rather show you than tell you." She grinned at him challengingly. "Whaddya' say? *Up* for a little adventure?" She wriggled against his still hard cock as she spoke and Harry's eyebrows shot up.

He smirked back and said, "Hey, you're talking to the Boy-Who-Lived-Twice. I'm always up for adventure." He pushed up and sat back on his knees, pulling Ginny up with him. She giggled as they stood and Harry settled the Cloak around them. Muffling the sounds of their mirth, they tiptoed to the portrait hole and left.

Snape eased back again from his work table. He eyed the sliver of horn before him. Pleased with his progress, he laid the tool on the tabletop and stretched, shaking his tense hands.

Excellent. A few more sessions, and it'll be ready. Then we move on to the next stage.

He glanced at the time and was surprised to see how late it was after curfew. *Damn! I was supposed to start my rounds a while ago.* He hastily stood and crossed through his office to the classroom. As he stepped to the doorway, he cast a Silencing Charm on his boots, as he always did before beginning his patrols. It both amused and annoyed him that none of the students seemed to figure out how he managed to slink about so silently. He quietly stepped into the corridor and made his way up to begin his policing of the usual hiding spots.

He had been pacing the corridors for a while, traipsing up and down stairs, covering as much area in as little time as possible. After so many years at Hogwarts, he had discovered the best path through the castle to hit the most trouble spots. His ears strained to hear anything out of the ordinary and his eyes peered through the shadows, searching for movement or light.

Suddenly, his vigilance was rewarded. He heard the unmistakable sounds of students engaged in less-than-scholarly behaviour. His lips stretched into a malicious anticipatory grin and he skulked closer to the doorway of the classroom from which the noises were emanating. He could hear the heavy breathing and moaning, rhythmic in their utterances. He edged to the doorway and cast a barely audible concealment charm...really, a good spy uses as much as possible to his advantage. Peering around the doorjamb, he could hear the sounds more clearly, but he couldn't see anything.

He scowled. Squinting in the darkness, he searched the room for any place to hide. All he could see were tables and chairs, neatly lined up. Perplexed, he paused and listened again, trying to zero in on the sounds. Carefully stepping in the direction he thought they were coming from, he darted his gaze about the room. Suddenly, he noticed it.

One of the tables was shaking. The chair backs were blocking his view of part of it, but he could see the movement of the table against the stone floor. Stealthily, he sidled around to one side. There, in the moonlight through the window, he saw two disembodied feet, splayed against the desk, sole up.

Potter! Recognition of the use of the Invisibility Cloak hit Snape like a mallet. He vividly remembered using that Cloak to sneak into the Shrieking Shack four years before. He was frozen to the spot.

That has to be bloody Potter! And he's shagging right here in a classroom! Oh, Dumbledore can't overlook this. He has to expel him! Or at least punish him severely... Snape's imagination took wing as he thought of all manner of torturous things Potter could go through for punishment. And yet, even Snape never thought of making Harry write lines with a quill that would cut into his hand.

He was brought back to reality by a particularly loud grunt from the table, followed almost immediately by a high pitched feminine squeal. Snape stepped closer to them, about to rip the Cloak off them and scare them near to death. The thought made him positively quiver with predatory glee.

His hand paused in midair. A single thought galvanized him. *What if that's Hermione under there?* He nearly staggered at the pain that seized his gut. Choking back the bile that rose in his throat, he fell back a pace. *No. It can't be. She rejected him. She loves me. Me, not Potter!* He felt his legs going weak and stumbled to another table, leaning against it.

Numbly, he stared at the disembodied feet on the table before him. *I have to know. I have to be sure!* Gritting his teeth, he pushed forward again and tentatively reached out to the table edge, feeling for the Cloak. He felt the fabric rustle against his fingers and he grasped it. His heart pounding painfully, he gingerly lifted the cloth.

In the moonlight, he could see the girl's hair fanned out against the tabletop. It was dark, but even in the pale light, he could see that it was straight, not bushy curls, and it gleamed red. Reeling in relief, Snape closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He dropped the edge of the Cloak and backed away. Desperately trying to regain his composure, he barely noticed the increase in speed and pitch of the cries and gasps coming from beneath the cloak.

Finally, he heard a high pitched keening. A breathless voice hissed, "Yesss, Harry! Oh gods, yes!" The moaning that followed was a series of ululations. The deeper grunts got harsher and harsher until they culminated in an oath and a growling groan.

"Fuck! Ahhh, fuck yeah..."

Snape was rooted to the spot, unable to move. It was like a train wreck; he couldn't look away, completely in the thrall of morbid fascination. His rational mind kept telling him to break it up and punish Potter once and for all, but his newly stirred emotions disagreed.

But at least those emotions were Slytherin...

Don't do anything! If Potter and the Weasley girl are shagging, then he's certainly not going to pursue Hermione any more! Just leave it be, and hope this is the end of that idiot's juvenile fascination with her...

He heard their breathing slow, and there was the sound of humming as they kissed wetly.

There was a contented sigh, followed by, "Gods, I forgot how great that was..."

A low, delighted giggle answered that remark. "I hadn't. Why do you think I suggested it?"

Snape's eyebrows shot up. *She suggested it? Merlin's balls! What would Molly and Arthur say if they knew?*

Harry's deep chuckle mixed with the sound of them kissing again. "Mmm, definitely a good idea." There was rustling as Harry sat up, the Cloak lifting up and exposing Ginny's satisfied smirk. Then, Harry's head emerged, flushed and dishevelled. He grinned at her and adjusted his pyjamas, resettling his glasses. Ginny sat up and smoothed her nightgown.

Snape stared, fighting every impulse to flay them alive with vitriol. He was surprised at the way Harry reached out and smoothed Ginny's hair, and the boy's next comment stunned him into a grudging respect.

"Uh, Ginny? I know we didn't get a chance to talk about it before, but, um, do we need to cast a contraceptive charm? Or get a potion from Madam Pomfrey?" Harry gazed

at her, concerned.

Ginny shook her head and smiled. "No. I've stayed on the weekly potion ever since we were together the first time around." She ducked her head and blushed. Sheepishly, she mumbled, "I guess you could say I wanted to be prepared. Wishful thinking and all that."

Snape was hit with the memory of Hermione using the same words after she had said he was hers. He blinked at the boy in front of him. If he had any sense at all, the Potter boy should realize the huge compliment inherent in such a confession.

Harry nodded and smiled shakily. He looked at Ginny through his lashes and murmured, "Oh. Well, that's good then." He shuffled back and spun to drop to the floor. The Cloak lay in a heap on the table as Harry reached up to help Ginny slide off the table. As she got to her feet, Harry wrapped his arms around her and gazed down into her eyes.

Snape averted his gaze, uncomfortable indeed witnessing such intimacy.

Softly, Harry said, "Let's get back to the Tower. Ron may have backed down, but I don't want to rub his nose in it by being gone so long. Besides, he can hex me while I'm sleeping if he wants!" Ginny wrinkled her nose at him and giggled. They kissed tenderly once more before Harry draped the Cloak around them.

Snape watched them disappear from sight. He heard their faint footsteps crossing the classroom and let out a breath he hadn't known he had been holding. *Bloody hell! I can't believe I just witnessed that and didn't do anything!* He snorted. Grimly, he thought, *Just wait till I tell Hermione of my self-restraint...* He pondered her possible reactions, and smirked to himself, hoping that he would be properly rewarded for his sacrifice.

He reversed the concealment charm and retreated to the corridor again, to finish his patrol. Fortunately for his shattered nerves, he didn't encounter any more rule-breaking students.

As he entered his quarters and prepared for bed, he amused himself picturing the delighted smile Hermione would give him when he confessed the evening's events and his out-of-character response. He slid between his cool sheets, smiling at the image of a beaming Hermione in his head.

30- Correspondence

Chapter 31 of 84

Harry and Ginny go public, and Ginny confides in Hermione. Hermione's order arrives and she writes a letter to Snape. He gets a surprise along with her homework, and rises to the challenge.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Chapter 30- Correspondence

Sunday morning, Hermione flopped onto the bench at the Gryffindor table across from Ron. "Morning, Ron."

He looked up at her and absently rippled his fingers in greeting as he mumbled, "Hey, 'Mione." His expression was thoughtful and he looked as if he hadn't slept well. Hermione rather thought she had an inkling of why.

"Everything all right?" Hermione gazed at him as she dished up some eggs. He blinked at her and frowned.

"Yeah, sure." He looked sharply at the doorway, scowling. Hermione reached across the table and laid a hand on Ron's arm. He jerked his eyes back to her. "What?"

Gently, Hermione said, "Ron, please don't be like this. You know it will just make everyone unhappy. Look, Ginny never really got over him, and she's been hoping to get back together for some time now. It's for the best, really. Now that he's got Ginny, he'll finally stop trailing after me. And we all know *that's* for the best too." Ron looked at her with mutinous eyes. Hermione sighed. "Please, Ron? Give them a chance. Let them make each other happy."

Ron scowled at his plate. "She's my baby sister!"

"Who is anything but a baby now. She's a young woman, Ron. She knows what she wants, and after all we've been through, she can handle it. She's not a child. None of us have been for a while now." Her voice was tinged with sadness for their lost childhoods. Ron made an impatient movement with his shoulders.

"It was weird the first time they were together, and it's weird now. He's my best friend. I love him, you know? But she's my sister. And I know that if anything bad happens, I'll be on her side, and that kills me!"

Hermione sighed in exasperation. "Why do you think something bad will happen? The war is over..."

Ron cut her off with a hiss. "I mean, if he hurts her, I'll have to hurt him!"

Rolling her eyes at his theatrics, Hermione leant forward. "Dear, I must remind you that if he hurts her, *she'll* be the one to hurt him, not you. Have you forgotten her hexing prowess? No? Well, neither has Harry, I guarantee it." She snorted. "They have a history, Ron. It's complicated, but it's theirs. Don't interfere. Please." She gazed at him eloquently and Ron finally sank in on himself. He nodded his capitulation and sulked.

After a moment of silence, he muttered, "I just can't believe he had the gall to come in so late last night after I'd already all but caught them in the common room." Hermione's eyebrows shot up.

Musingly, she murmured, "But, I caught them in the common room..."

Ron squinted at her and said, "What time? And how did you catch them?"

Hermione leant in again and whispered, "I had to use the Cloak and they were there when I came back. I just tossed the Cloak on... the couch and went to my room. I must have got back around 12:00 or so."

Ron scowled and growled, "He didn't come to bed until after 1:00. Gods, I don't even want to *think* about what they were doing... ugh!"

Hermione closed her eyes in sympathy and patted his arm ruefully. Ron shook himself and applied himself to his breakfast again, obviously determined to distract himself from that image. Hermione fought a smile and began spreading jam on her toast. She glanced up to the High Table, but Snape wasn't there yet. Well, it was early, so she wasn't too surprised.

She had pretty much finished her breakfast a while later, but she was dawdling, hoping to see Snape before she left. That was why she was still there when Harry and Ginny walked in together. They had been holding hands and smiling as they chatted, but when they saw Hermione and Ron at the table, they furtively dropped each other's hands and awkwardly approached the table, flushing uncomfortably.

Hermione, in a valiant effort to ease their feelings, smiled brightly at them and offered a cheerful "Morning, you two!" She was greeted by muttered, "Hi, 'Mione's. Ron clenched his teeth and stiffly turned to them.

Harry sat by Ron and Ginny by Hermione. Both of them were warily glancing between the other two. Hermione lightly said, "So, did I see you two holding hands on the way in?" Ron's jaw line throbbed and he stared at his plate stoically. Ginny and Harry turned uncertain expressions on Hermione. She smiled reassuringly and added, "I hope so. You two really fit well together." She tried to ignore the furtive glance they exchanged that resulted in renewed blushing.

Ginny looked at Harry inquiringly and he bravely retorted, "Uh, yeah. We were. Um, we're... together again." He shot Ginny a soft look and a lopsided smile. She relaxed and smiled back, before glancing at her obviously uncomfortable brother and sobering again. Harry sat tensely beside Ron.

Pointedly, Hermione said, "That's wonderful! Isn't it, Ron? Aren't you glad that two people you care so much about are happy?" She eyed him sternly. He rolled his eyes petulantly and huffed.

Finally, he ground out, "Yeah. It's spiffing." Ginny rolled her eyes at Ron, but cast a grateful gaze at Hermione. Hermione nodded and squeezed Ginny's arm under the table.

They all sat, frozen, for several long moments. Finally, Hermione ventured, "So, are you all going to practice Quidditch today, since yesterday was busy?"

The other three slowly began to discuss the merits of the idea, and Hermione fell back into the background as usual, relieved that they were at least talking. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a flash of black. She turned her head to see Snape stalking to his seat at the High Table. He sat and began serving himself from the platters before him. After a moment, he looked up and saw Hermione watching him. She saw the faintest ripple of acknowledgement cross his face before she saw an odd succession of expressions that she didn't quite understand.

His eyes had widened a bit, before narrowing again. His shoulders tensed and his lips thinned. She could see his breathing get faster and shallower. Then, a faint flush of colour stole over his cheeks, and he shook his hair forward almost sheepishly. But, it was when he averted his gaze and blinked rapidly that Hermione was really confused.

What was that all about? Puzzled, she reached for the teapot and began making her "tonic." Snape furtively glanced up again and saw it. The tension in his shoulders drained away, and he took a deep breath, regaining his composure. Offering him a tiny smile, she took the first sip of her tea, as he was hastening to prepare his cup. After they had both partaken of their brews, she sighed and realized she should get started on her work. She stood, noting that the other three were apparently back to normal, animatedly talking about Quidditch, and tossed them a, "See you all later."

They all turned to say goodbye, but Ginny jumped to her feet and followed Hermione quickly. Casting a glance over her shoulder at the boys who were watching them, Ginny whispered, "We're going to wait till Tuesday evening's practice after all, and I was wondering if you'd be around later. I'd kind of like to talk to you, if you don't mind." Her bright brown eyes begged silently. Hermione smiled and nodded.

"Sure, just come by whenever. I'll probably be studying in my room today." Ginny squeezed Hermione's arm gratefully and flew back to the table, jumping back into the conversation. Hermione glanced one last time at the High Table and was startled to see Snape staring oddly at Ginny. He suddenly flicked his eyes toward Hermione and started, looking... guilty? Snape averted his gaze and seemed absorbed in his breakfast, making Hermione look around hurriedly, afraid someone had seen them looking at each other. She didn't see anyone staring at her, so she made her way out of the Hall and back to her room, wondering why Snape had seemed so...odd.

Later that day, Hermione was interrupted in her studies by a knock at her door. She opened it to find Ginny standing there, full of pent-up nervous energy. "Hi, Gin. Come on in." The younger girl stood awkwardly until Hermione sat cross-legged on her bed, her back against the headboard. Ginny glanced at the armchair at the foot of the bed, but shook her head. She bounced onto the end of the bed, tucking her feet under her, facing Hermione. The two girls stared at each other silently.

Finally, Ginny said, "Thanks."

Quietly, Hermione asked, "For what?"

Ginny grimaced and looked about the room, flushing, "Oh, you know. For last night. And for this morning. And, well, just for helping. I know you talked to Ron... Oh, bugger, 'Mione... thank you for not wanting Harry! If you had, I'd never have got him back." She looked at Hermione, both defiant and ashamed. "Are you really okay with it? I mean, *really*?" Hermione could see the girl steeling herself for the worst.

Laughing, she said, "Ginny! I think it's wonderful! And I hope Harry realizes what a great thing he's got this time and doesn't cock things up again." She smiled at the abject relief in Ginny's eyes.

Ginny chewed her lip and murmured, "We... we were... together again... last night." She glanced up at Hermione and her eyes glowed with remembered joy. "It was better than I remembered!" Hermione looked away, slightly embarrassed. Ginny leant forward. "'Mione, I wanted him so much. And he wanted me again! It was incredible. I can't tell you how perfect it was, being with him like that..." Hermione suddenly felt all of her inexperience weighing on her. She felt left out. Glancing up again, she saw the rapt light in Ginny's eyes being drowned by tears. Concerned, she reached out and gripped Ginny's hand.

"Gin? You okay?"

Ginny sniffed and smiled. Her voice was barely above a whisper as she said, "I'm great! I've never been better. Gods, I know now... I love him, 'Mione. I really love him." She sniffed again, gazing at Hermione in delighted wonder. Hermione smiled back.

She scooted closer to Ginny and hugged her friend, murmuring, "I understand. I know how you feel. It is amazing..."

Ginny pulled back and blinked at Hermione in confusion. "You know? Are you in love with him? I thought you said you weren't..."

Hermione's brows shot up and she hastened to reassure Ginny. "No! No, I'm not in love with Harry. He's all yours, and may all happiness be yours..."

Still unconvinced, Ginny cut her off, "Then how do you know? How can you understand?" Hermione looked away, flushing. She backed away from Ginny and began rooting around for a handkerchief to give her. Ginny tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. "Who are you in love with?"

Hermione jumped and turned her back on Ginny, making a show of searching for a handkerchief. "Nobody! I just meant that I can imagine how you must feel, and I'm happy for you." She turned and thrust a clean hankie at Ginny. Desperate to change the subject, she eyed the redhead sternly and said, "However, I cannot condone you two getting busy in the common room! What if a first year had walked in? Or Ron? What if he had come back down while you two were practically *wearing* each other?"

Immediately distracted by the need to defend herself, Ginny retorted, "You're the one who covered us with the Cloak!"

Hermione added, "But that doesn't stop sound, and it could easily have moved off you!"

Ginny tossed her head and glared at Hermione. "Well, for your information, we didn't do it there in the common room anyway. We're not completely stupid! We used the Cloak to find somewhere more... private." She lifted her chin and eyed Hermione pointedly.

Hermione's eyes widened. "You were out after curfew?"

Ginny smirked and drawled, "Spare me the Head Girl tirade, 'Mione, or need I remind you that *you* were the one coming in from your little jaunt after hours?"

Hotly, Hermione spat, "But I wasn't off having sex!" She gasped at the thought of sneaking to Snape's quarters to seduce him. She so stunned herself that she almost missed Ginny's vehement retort.

"It wasn't just sex! I love him! We were making love! There's a difference, you know!" Tears glistened in Ginny's eyes as Hermione blinked at her blankly.

Hermione crossed to her friend and sat gently by her, laying an apologetic hand on her arm. Chastened, she said, "I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I just don't want you lot to get in trouble. After everything that we've all been through, it would be criminal for you two to get expelled now for shagging, of all things!"

Ginny calmed down and sniffed again, nodding. Impulsively, she hugged Hermione and whispered, "I'm sorry I yelled at you. I know you're just trying to be a good friend. I promise we'll be careful."

Hermione pulled back, her brow creased with worry. "Ginny! Speaking of careful, please tell me you took precautions and you can't get pregnant!"

Ginny grinned and mused, "You know, Harry asked the same thing. Isn't he wonderful? It's okay. I've been on the weekly potion since the first time we were together." Hermione exhaled gustily in relief.

"Oh, thank Merlin..."

Ginny snorted. "Come on, 'Mione. Give me some credit. I'm not a little girl." She smirked at her.

Hermione quirked one corner of her mouth at Ginny and said ruefully, "Funny, that's just what I said to Ron this morning." Both girls laughed, and harmony was restored. Ginny stood.

"Thanks for everything. I'll let you get back to it. Um, can I talk to you about things? You know, if I need someone to talk to? I mean, you know you can talk to me about anything, right?"

Hermione smiled and nodded. "Of course. But, please don't be offended if I don't want to hear the gory details."

Ginny laughed and waggled her eyebrows at Hermione. "Fine. But don't be offended if *you* get with someone and I *do* want to hear the gory details!" Hermione affected a look of outraged dignity and Ginny snorted. "I'll see you later."

Hermione watched Ginny leaving and called out "Bye!" as the door shut behind her.

Wearily, Hermione sank into her desk chair and heaved a deep sigh. *Mercy! I can't believe how close she got to finding out that something's up!* She ran a hand over her face and through her hair. *I hope she'll get distracted enough now that she won't be so damned keen on everything* Silently sending a kiss to Snape, Hermione bent back over her desk, getting back to work.

Monday morning, Hermione got some responses from some of the photo shops she had contacted. Ginny eyed her interestedly again, saying, "So, are you going to be getting mail all the time now?"

Hermione just shrugged and said, "I told you I'm working on some stuff for Christmas. So, unless you want me to forget about giving you anything, I'd advise you to stop bugging me about it!" She cast an aggrieved look at her friend, seeing the other girl wrinkle her nose and stick her tongue out at her. Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, *that's* the way to convince us of your maturity..." Ginny made another face at her, and they both laughed.

Tuesday morning, Hermione was pleased when an owl dropped a package from Fred and George on her breakfast plate. Gingerly wiping fried potatoes off the package, she smiled that Slytherin smile again.

Perfect! Opening the package, she read the note included and shook her head fondly at the twins.

"Hermione,

Here's your order. Your change is included. You're right, we're not thieves, or Mum would have our guts for garters. She's got an uncanny knack for finding out about our antics anymore. But, lately she's been off track, likely because she's so excited about Ron and Ginny being in the play. Really, we're not quite sure how we feel about our relations being in something like that. At least they haven't disgraced us completely, like a certain prat who sha'n't be named. Dad's over the moon, of course, since it's doing something Muggle.

At any rate, we can't help but admit we're curious about why you want our ink. Could the Head Girl be up to something clandestine? We know, not bloody likely. Actually, we figure they're for gifts, since Christmas is right around the corner. Speaking of, it's a ruddy shame you lot can't leave Hogwarts for Christmas. We've been testing some new party crackers and we were hoping to try them out with everyone at home.

As for discretion... You wound us! Having to mention it? Really, Hermione, have you met us? We're the poster children for discretion! How long did we keep our business a secret from Mum? And that's saying something, since she's so blasted suspicious. Thestrals couldn't drag it out of us, honest! There, having reminded you of our utter trustworthiness, we'll leave off with a wish for you all to have a Happy Christmas, and, any time you want to send any business our way, feel free! Thanks for your order.

Sincerely, Fred and George Weasley

Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes"

Hermione hurriedly stuffed the package in her bag. A frisson of anticipation ran through her as she thought about writing letters to Snape. Inordinately pleased with her stop-gap solution, she went about her business that day with a bounce in her step.

That night, she secluded herself in her room to write her first letter to Snape. She dug out the package and read the instructions that came with the ink.

"Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes' Disappearing Ink is specially created for ease of use. What good is it to write something with ink that disappears while you're still writing? Once you've cast Aparecium on our competitor's ink, it's revealed for good.

Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes has taken that problem into consideration and has come up with an ingenious solution. Write with our ink, finish what you're writing, and then simply tap the page with your wand and say Celo. Instantly, the page looks blank! Your correspondence is completely safe from prying eyes until the counterspell is cast. To reveal the hidden ink, again tap the page with your wand and say Aperio. Everything will instantly reappear! The added benefit of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes' Disappearing Ink is that the spells can be used more than once. So, you can write, conceal that writing, reveal it, and then conceal it again to keep it safe.

Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes sincerely hopes you find our product to your liking. We offer a complete 100% satisfaction guarantee. If ever you are dissatisfied with a Wizarding Wheeze product, send it back for a full refund. We are confident that you will enjoy your purchases, and hope to do business with you in the future. Thank you for your patronage."

Hermione chuckled to herself and began writing, humming happily under her breath. It seemed that her Potions homework just might have some extra parchment along with it when she turned it in the next morning.

Hermione struggled to hold in the grin that kept threatening to erupt on her lips as she entered Potions Wednesday morning. She waited stoically until Snape had given the class instructions and everyone moved to gather ingredients and turn in their homework. Discreetly letting others ahead of her, she stepped up to his desk and paused after she deposited her homework parchment on the stack.

Snape, of course, was completely aware of Hermione's presence, even though he was managing to not watch her. As she stepped up to his desk, he involuntarily inhaled deeply, trying to breathe her in. When he noticed that she hadn't moved away after turning in her homework, he glanced up, his scowl in place, puzzled. In an icy tone, he drawled, "What is it, Miss Granger? Why are you standing here instead of following my instructions?" His black eyes held hers questioningly and he could sense her suppressed excitement.

In a properly polite voice, Hermione spoke, holding out a small box that held a bottle of ink and a folded paper. "Sir, I wanted to thank you again for lending me your ink when mine ran out. I would like to repay you for your kindness. Please allow me to replace the bottle I used. This is for you, sir." She cast her eyes down, the model of submission, but after her little speech, she looked up and sent him the tiniest of winks.

Snape's brows rose in surprise. Blankly, he stared at the box. He was perplexed, but he knew, especially after that wink, that he should accept the ink. He still felt a pang of guilt about what he had done to her ink, but he quickly masked it. Slowly reaching to take it from her, he murmured, "Very well, Miss Granger. I must say that I am surprised that you managed to display the common courtesy of restitution. Perhaps there is a modicum of hope for the manners of your generation." He rolled his eyes scathingly and Hermione ducked her head again, hiding her dancing eyes.

Bobbing a curtsy, she said, "Yes, sir. Thank you." Then, she spun and proceeded to gather her ingredients for the day. Snape opened a drawer and placed the box of ink in it. But, before he closed the drawer, he unfolded the paper, reading the instructions on how to use the ink.

Disappearing ink? What the blazes... Snape's brow furrowed. He glanced up through his hair to watch Hermione beginning her work. A small, rather smug smile was hovering on her lips. She suddenly looked up and caught him peering at her. One corner of her mouth quirked up higher and one eyebrow twitched at him meaningfully. She inclined her head in the slightest of nods. Snape looked back down at the instructions. His eyes widened in astonishment as a surge swept through him.

That little minx! Oh, she's clever... He closed the drawer thoughtfully and gazed at the stack of homework. Sour sneer firmly in place, he gathered the stack and dragged it in front of him. He saw Hermione pause and glance up, tense with anticipation. He began thumbing through them, matching up each assignment with each student in class. As he came to Hermione's, he noticed that it was even thicker than usual. Pulling it from the stack, he flipped through it, noting that there were several *blank* pages at the end. Shaking his head at her audacity, he took that moment to begin a trek through the room, checking progress. He saw Hermione shrink in on herself in disappointment. As he passed her, he paused and said silkily, "Focus, Miss Granger. Don't let your distraction lose points for Gryffindor."

Hermione nodded and set her teeth in determination. Snape glided away, but cast a glance back at her, satisfied that she was working with her usual precision and grace. After a few acid, barked comments, some lost House points, and several aggrieved sighs, he made his way back to his desk, where he sank into his seat languidly. He was pleased to note that Hermione was no longer watching him, but was instead absorbed in her task. Covertly, he pulled his wand out and barely intoned, "*Aperio*," as he tapped the parchment. Hermione's clear, crisp handwriting filled the page with a suddenness that made him start in alarm. Hastily, he tapped it again and muttered, "*Celo*." Instantly, the page was blank. He exhaled in relief and appreciation of her subterfuge. He gazed about the room again, looking for distracted students, before he turned his attention back to the page. Furtively whispering "*Aperio*" again, he rocked back in his seat, tingles of feelings threading through him as he read the first words in amazement.

"Severus my love,"

He glanced up at Hermione, his chest and throat tightening. A love letter? He had never in his life received a love letter! He felt a suspicious prickling in his eyes and blinked furiously. Deliberately rebuilding his composure, he looked back at his first love letter in cautious wonder. As he read, he continually flicked his eyes between the page and the class, hyper-paranoid that he would somehow be caught.

"It's so hard to just look at you and not be able to talk to you or be close to you! Just like last Saturday, when I left dinner early, I couldn't tell you why, and I wanted to so badly. But, I guess it's a good thing after all, since that's what gave me the idea to get this ink so I could at least write to you. It may gall you to believe it, but Fred and George are good for something!"

He glanced at Hermione, who was working, chewing her lower lip, and snorted disdainfully. He swept the room once again before dropping his gaze back to the letter.

"I can just hear you snorting now."

Snape's surprise was betrayed by a slight jump. His eyes widened dazedly and he sent a rather aggrieved glare at the oblivious Hermione before he continued reading.

"And I can picture that eyebrow arching too. Mmm, I love that eyebrow. Like I said before, you're sexy when you're snarky."

Snape consciously lowered his eyebrow, piqued that she had him so pegged. Then, he blinked rapidly, assimilating the fact that she had just written that he was "sexy when he's snarky"! He felt his lip curl in scathing denial, but he stopped as he realized that was precisely what she was talking about! He felt his palms start to sweat and his pulse increase in his unease about reacting exactly how she thought he would. Trying to fight his natural impulses, just to prove her wrong...she was right when she said he "so liked to have the upper hand"...he kept reading.

"I can't wait until rehearsal Friday. More importantly, I can't wait until I get to come to your quarters to do your hair. I really miss you."

He paused, inhaling against the constriction in his throat. He eyed her through his hair, silently answering her. *Gods, Hermione, I miss you as well.* He held back the indulgent smile that wanted to surface and turned back to the letter.

"I have a confession to make... I kept the nightgown I wore the night we were together to sleep with it under my pillow. It smells like you, and I love it. I just think about being close to you, and how perfect it felt when you were wrapped around me, and... it does things to me. I feel that tingle deep inside, and I relive our liaison in that alley."

Snape closed his eyes at the memory. He felt the heat building in his loins. His nostrils flared as he remembered her scent, her warmth, her softness, her taste, the sound of her voice as she reached orgasm under his hands. He stifled a groan at the tight pinching of his trousers against his now throbbing cock. Swallowing against a suddenly dry throat, his eyes opened and returned inexorably to the letter.

"I don't think you fully comprehend just how eagerly I am anticipating finishing school! Mmm, I can just picture the intensity in those incredible black eyes of yours. You make me feel so good... and I can't wait until you can make me feel that kind of good again."

Snape felt his breathing go shallow and he glanced at Hermione, his eyes blazing. Shaking her head a bit, she glanced up at him and gasped at his expression. They locked eyes, and Hermione felt her knickers get drenched as she shuddered under his fiery gaze. Hermione licked her lips and took a deep breath as she vainly tried to focus on her work again. Snape smirked as he watched the flush creep up her neck to suffuse her cheeks. Shifting against the uncomfortable tightness of his trousers, he looked down again at the letter.

"You know, I'll bet you've got the wickedest little smile on those talented lips of yours right now. Gods, I want to feel them again!"

His smirk vanished. Scowling that she again had gauged his reaction so well, he had to reread the second sentence before he comprehended the meaning. Then, he felt another surge of sensation and he unconsciously licked his lips. He wanted to oblige her desire to feel his lips, sweet Merlin, how much he wanted to do that...

"You must be so smug that you've got me so completely under your spell... Gee, I can just hear my mum now, 'Oh! Under your spell! How ironic!'"

He snorted again and shook his head, rolling his eyes at the unfortunately true absurdity of it.

"Don't roll your eyes, dearest...it isn't dignified."

Finally, he huffed and rocked back again in his seat, crossing his arms, annoyed. Damn her anyway! How did the little minx get in his head so easily? *Because you want her there?* Oh. Well. There is that. He watched Hermione again, pensively. She looked up periodically and flashed him tentative smiles. She didn't quite know what to make of his speculative gaze, but she kept her mind on her task as best she could, knowing he would be quick to chastise her otherwise. Eventually, Snape turned his attention back to her letter.

"I wonder when you'll read this. Are you at your desk in class? Are you in your office? Or are you lounging in front of your fire?"

Have I told you how much I love your quarters? You really have quite elegant taste. Those tapestries are beautiful. I'd love to sit across from you in one of those comfy chairs and just enjoy the silence with you, reading one of your innumerable rare books. It would be so comforting to look up and see you, those long legs propped up on an ottoman, your hair shadowing your face in the glow from the fire, and those amazing fingers caressing the fragile pages."

He took a deep breath and sighed. His mind wandered over the images she had created. The tranquil domesticity was enticingly attractive after his life of tense intrigue and espionage. Just like that time when she had made his tea and they had sat together so comfortably. *Was that really how this all began?* he mused. His face was almost peaceful as he thought about spending time with Hermione like that. His lips not quite smiling, but definitely relaxed, he read more.

"Oh my... those fingers! Just... wow. I remember the feel of them yet! Gods, you've got me squirming here..."

Suddenly, the erection in his lap gave a vehement jump. All thoughts of tame, domestic joys were quashed by thoughts of intimate, sensual delights. The very fingers she talked of gave an involuntary twitch along the parchment.

"I had no idea I could feel like this. It's hard to believe that it's been barely one short month since I realized my feelings for you. I'm going to have to send a thank you to the Ministry..."

The force of his love for her felt as if it would burst from his chest. He clenched his jaw to hold in the indulgent smile that threatened to appear, especially since he had echoed her sentiment previously. *Indeed. This time, the Ministry did something good for a change...* His eyes sparked with amusement as he looked back at the parchment.

"I can't wait for rehearsal. Of course, we'll have to do our best to tamp down our feelings, with Dumbledore right there."

His amusement dissipated quickly at the sobering thought of the headmaster figuring out what was between them. He closed his eyes tightly and summoned his inner discipline, willing his inopportune erection away. As he regained control over his body, he swept an inscrutable gaze around the room again. Sternly reminding himself to stay disciplined, he returned to the letter.

"But, no matter what the situation is that calls for it, I will always welcome the chance to be near you, especially if you can touch me. Do you feel the tingle and spark when we touch? It sings through me."

So much for control. An answering flash of sensation washed over him, revitalizing his erection and obliterating his meticulous façade of self-control.

"And I love the way I can feel you looking at me. How else could I have known where you were hiding in the Hall at rehearsal, or known you were watching me from the dungeon stairs when I was talking to Ginny?"

He shook his head in wonder. *I remember that! It was strange. She's just full of surprises...*

"I've never felt anything like it before, and I can't help but think it must be something special. Then again, I think you're something special, so it must come with the territory."

Snape sat back and closed his eyes. His fierce affection for her was fraught with the sickening fear that she would leave when she found out he wasn't anything special after all. Fighting down the panic that rose at the thought of being without her, he swallowed and doggedly read on.

"Stop it. I know you're doubting me. Just stop it! I can just see you getting all grim again, not believing the way I feel about you."

He shot a piercing glance at her, unnerved by her ability to read him, even before he had the chance to react! Feeling the small hairs on the back of his neck stand up, he warily looked back to the letter.

"I love you. All of you. I know you have done things in the past that you're not proud of, and that's okay. It's in the past, and you're a different person now. Like I've said before, I forgive you everything. You made the right decisions when they counted, and that speaks volumes about who you are. I've always respected you, but now, I admire you more than ever, and I love you in a way I have never felt before. I don't want it ever to end, Severus. I can only hope you feel the same..."

Goose flesh rose along his body, joining the hairs on the back of his neck at attention. He felt like he couldn't breathe. Once again, he was reeling on a precipice, ready to tip forward and drown in the love and affection he felt both for and from Hermione. His soul screamed his devotion. *I do feel the same, my love! I've never felt like this before either. I hope it never ends. I don't know what I would do if you left me...* He screwed his eyes shut in pain at the thought and sighed deeply. Swallowing against the lump in his throat, he continued reading.

"I had no idea I could feel this happy. I just want to yell and laugh with joy, and tell the world I love you. The only thing keeping me from perfect contentment is that we have to keep us a secret and I can't be with you like I so want to be."

It was like a balm to soothe his soul. To think that he, the black-hearted bat of the dungeons could make someone happy...

"And I do want to be with you, Severus. I think about it far too much. It's quite distracting to find oneself going about with damp knickers all the time..."

Snape nearly choked at the electric jolt in his groin. The fervent desire to experience Hermione in the most intimate way possible throbbed in his veins.

"Ooo, I think I heard that sharp inhalation, my love. You like that idea, don't you? I do. Shall I share something with you? Hmm, I think I will..."

Snape tore his gaze away from the parchment to stare incredulously at Hermione. *Good gods! I can't believe her! Merlin, help me, what is she going to say now?*

"I know I already told you how much I like your quarters, but I hadn't yet mentioned how divine I think that rug you have before the hearth is. It looks so rich and soft and luxurious. Just the sort of thing I'd love to feel against my skin as you press me to the floor with the weight of your body covering mine..."

Snape cradled his head in his hands and stifled a groan. He could hear the roar of his blood rushing in his ears. Erotic images flashed against his closed eyelids. It was a torment of the best kind. Steeling himself, he repeatedly took calm, steadying breaths, until he was at least at a point where he wasn't about to launch himself across his desk to snatch her up and deflower her right there in front of the rest of the Advanced Potions class. Practically mesmerized, he was drawn back to the letter.

"What's wrong, beloved? Is your throat dry? Mmm, that's what comes from such panting, you know. I wish I were there to find out whether or not you want me right now. I know just how to check... If I pressed my body against yours, would I find something hot and hard between us? Every time I've felt that, it's sent shocks of pleasure through me. You make me want you more and more."

Violently propelling himself away from the desk, Snape agitatedly ran a hand through his lank black locks. He glowered at the swift, apprehensive glances the students cast his way at the noise. Hermione glanced up, and her brown eyes glinted with a knowing look. She tilted her head forward again, but peeked up at Snape through her lashes as she continued working.

Snape was breathing raggedly, and he was discreetly trying to adjust his painfully pinched cock under cover of his desk. Desperately, he glared around the classroom, until his erection subsided enough for him to circulate again. He avoided looking at the parchment again, almost afraid of what else she may have included. As he stood to begin his circuit of the room, he furtively tapped the letter and uttered, *"Ce/o."* Heaving a relieved sigh as the writing disappeared, he stepped off the dais and glared at Hermione. Studiously keeping her expression blank, Hermione crowed with delight to herself at the success of her plan.

A while later, Snape arrived back at his desk. Curtly reminding the class of the time remaining, he gracefully sank into his seat, scanning the room again. He toyed with the idea of reading more of the letter, but he realized it was likely a dangerous prospect, given the turn Hermione's writing had taken. Idly, he stacked the other homework with it and stalked to his office, leaving them on his desk there. He spent the rest of the class period lightly drumming one hand's fingers on the desk while resting his chin in his other hand, apparently lost in thought. Finally, as the period ended, and the students were cleaning their stations and turning in their samples, he swept to his office door, glaring from that vantage point.

Hermione was surprised that he had vacated his desk like that, but as she glanced at his agitated expression, she smothered a smirk that he might be eager to get out of there to finish reading her letter. *I wonder how far he got...* Acceding to his supposed wishes, she briskly gathered her things and exited the classroom with the rest of the students, not even attempting to remain behind to talk to him. Snape watched her leave with a mixture of feelings. As the room emptied, the foremost one was relief, and he locked the door and retreated to his office. Eagerly grabbing her letter, he distractedly strode through his office, through his lab, and into his quarters.

As soon as he saw the alpaca rug before the hearth, he groaned and felt his cock throb again. Feverishly, he dropped onto his favourite chair and revealed the writing again. His aching cock twitched as he read the next words.

"I want to explore you. I want to learn the details of your flesh, the secrets of your body. I want to know what will drive you mad with desire, and what will quell the hunger I create. I want to memorize every contour of your muscles, feeling them flex and twitch under my touch. I want to turn you into a shuddering bundle of nerves, until you can't bear it any longer and you snap, exploding with passion and taking me to dizzying heights of rapture!"

Snape's head rolled back and he exhaled harshly, his need growing along with his desire. Gazing ruefully at the dark stone ceiling, he thought, *Bloody hell! Have mercy!* Reaching within his robes to adjust his straining cock, he closed his eyes and hissed at the jolt of pleasure he evoked.

"Are you all right, love? Have you a problem, the solution for which you may need to take matters into your own hands?"

His hand was still resting on the bulge in his trousers and his eyes narrowed. *Bloody teasing minx! That's cold...*

"Don't glare at me like that, Severus; it wouldn't do if your face got stuck that way."

His lip curled in a mocking gesture and he rolled his eyes, his hand squeezing and stroking against his confined erection.

"I have to say... I've found myself in the same predicament as you many times over. The only way I've managed to keep from throwing myself at you in front of everyone is to... take matters into my own hands. Let's just say that my evening baths have become much more relaxing, in a different way, and that it's a good thing the house-elves who change the bedding are discreet."

His eyes closed involuntarily. The images of Hermione pleasuring herself in the bath and in her bed flooded his mind, and his stroking became more urgent. Knowing that she was aroused like that, because of *him*, and that she succumbed to the need as well served to heighten his arousal such that he found himself coming, crying out in surprise and relief. The wet warmth spread through his trousers and he came down from the peak of his lust, rueful that he had just shot in his pants like a randy teenager. Sheepishly casting a cleansing charm on himself and his clothes, he slowed his laboured breathing and hoped his face wasn't flushed from his unexpected activity. Noticing that he only had about ten minutes before his next class arrived, he turned his attention back to her letter, hoping he could finish it before he went back to the classroom.

"Mmm, that makes me wonder about your bedding. That's the one room I haven't seen in your quarters. Will I get to see it, dear? When? Is it too much of a temptation to let me in there now?"

He snorted. *Damn right it's too much of a temptation!*

"I wish I knew what it looked like, so I could picture you in bed. You're so peaceful when you sleep. Did you know that? I want to be able to imagine you in those delicious satin trousers, sprawled in a comfortable bed, sleeping soundly, those long locks spread across the pillow, the lines of strain and worry in your face smoothed away. And I'd love to picture myself there with you, curled up beside you, blissfully watching you sleep. I want to see you wake up. I want to see those deep black eyes open and find me smiling at you."

He found himself smiling at the wonderful thought of doing exactly as she said.

"I want to see your normally stern face transform into that delightful smile you have. You really should smile more, dearest. It's truly charming."

Embarrassed, he tried to wipe the grin off his face at her compliment, but couldn't. Instead, he felt heat rising to his cheeks as he grinned like an idiot, and barrelled on.

"Gods! I hate having to be patient! How ever did you manage all you did over the years? You must have more patience than I could ever dream of having. That, and self-control. I am in awe of your self-control. I know you're brave enough to be a Gryffindor...oh, stop grimacing!...but your ability to think under pressure and consider all the angles is distinctly Slytherin."

He huffed in dark amusement at her interjection, reflecting that she was right to think he'd be insulted to be compared with a Gryffindor. Smirking in unconscious pride at her appreciation of his Slytherin talents, he thought, *Patience is a virtue, and it's pretty much the only one I have, love. I thought it best to refine it and perfect it over the long, hard years. Be glad you never had to suffer the circumstances that necessitated such persistence...* His face drooped almost sadly and he read on.

"Perhaps I need some tutelage in the wily ways of the snake from the best of the lot. What do you think, my love? Can you help me learn to be more methodical and... calculating? I think it would serve us in good stead in our current situation."

Unexpectedly, Snape threw his head back and laughed aloud. Still shaking with chuckles, he mused, *Oh, my dear, I would love to teach you the ways of the snake, but I doubt it's the same snake you mean!* He snorted and regained his composure, only a faint smirk lingering on his lips. *You're on the right track... a letter such as this is worthy of a Slytherin, you tease.* He pressed on.

"Oh, I suppose I should tell you: I'm almost certain that we won't have to worry about Harry any longer. And, unless I miss my guess, I think Ginny will be rather less interested in our doings as well. In case you hadn't noticed, it seems they are back together."

Snape's jaw clenched, and he felt an uncomfortable heat staining his cheeks. Swallowing nervously, he thought, *Trust me on this one: I noticed.* He shook himself to stop replaying the scene in his mind.

"Frankly, I'm relieved. It's better for everyone involved that way. He stops chasing me, she stops chasing him, they keep each other occupied and don't notice us! I'm glad. They do make such a cute couple. And she's really besotted with him. Hopefully, he'll realize what he has this time and won't be so stupid as to throw it away again."

Snape sighed and rolled his eyes. *Spare me! I couldn't care less about the Potter brat and his love interest! And I can't stand anything "cute"! Really, Hermione, what a way to spoil the mood...*

"I know, you really don't want to hear about it. But, since it did have some bearing on us, I thought I'd clue you in. Fine, from here on out, unless it has something to do with us, I won't mention The-Boy-Who-Gets-On-Your-Last-Nerve again."

Instantly, Snape's characteristic glare surfaced and he thought acidly, *Oh, really? Wouldn't that be a boon?*

"There goes that eyebrow again! Oh, Severus, I love you, even with all your grim snarkiness! I suppose I should end this letter. I'm sorry to inflict...what was it you called it? Oh, yes, 'the Granger extra'...on you. But, you had better get used to it, because until we have a better way of keeping in contact, this is it. However, if you have any brilliant ideas about how I can get letters to you outside of Potions class, I'm all ears. I wouldn't want to draw suspicion by handing you parchments just anywhere or anytime. I suppose I can always give you a letter when I come to do your hair before rehearsals, but I'll be able to actually talk to you then, so they're not as vitally important at that point. At any rate, I miss you terribly, and I love you more than I can adequately explain!

Yours, Hermione"

Snape's expression softened as he read the last of the letter. He recognized the need to come up with something to discreetly exchange letters. But, as one part of his brilliant mind began pondering that point, another part was focusing on how amazing Hermione was. It didn't take much to see that he was likely as besotted with Hermione as Potter was with the Weasley girl. His gaze lingered on her sign-off. *She signed it "Yours." She's mine. She wants to be mine. I can't believe my good fortune. Merlin, what kind of karmic debt will I have to repay for her wanting me? Please, clue me in now, you gods, so I can get started right away! I don't want to take any chances to lose her. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me...* His fervent gratitude was evident as he glanced back at the letter.

"p.s. Hmm, I think I may go take a bath now... Wouldn't it be nice if you were here to join me?"

Once again, a rush of heat flashed through him and incited a raging desire, noticeable in his lap. He glared at Hermione, railing at her in his head. *Again with the teasing! That girl is behaving like quite the hussy. Well, we'll just have to see what can be done about that...*

"p.p.s. Keep scowling like that, beloved, and I'll just have to kiss it away..."

Snape closed his eyes. That was it. The letter was finished. He felt a sort of let down, having finally reached the end. Then, his delight at receiving his first love letter resurfaced, and he relaxed in his chair, smiling contentedly. Noting that his next class was about to arrive, he stood and crossed into his bedroom. Gently caressing his fingers down the parchment, he tapped it with his wand and murmured *"Celo."* Glancing about surreptitiously...even though he was in his own room, it was force of habit...he tucked the letter under his pillow, smoothing the covers back over the pillow. Heaving a regretful sigh, he turned and strode briskly back through to his classroom, unlocking the door with his wand and preparing for the influx of students.

His students the rest of that day were cautiously surprised at the lack of usual Snape orneriness. He still deducted House points and flayed students with his sarcastic comments, but everything was delivered with a distinct decrease in venom. He seemed rather bemused, lost in thought, as he roamed the classroom or sat staring from his desk. Had anyone been looking, they might have keeled over at the smile that crept across his face as he opened a drawer and looked at the bottle of ink so innocuously nestled in the box Hermione had given him.

Shoulders actually shaking with suppressed wicked mirth, he traced his mouth with one long finger and thought *Turnabout is fair play, my love. You may have exhibited some distinctly Slytherin tendencies, but you are no match for me...*

When his classes for the day were over, he eagerly caught up the bottle of ink and retreated to his quarters, intent on penning a letter to Hermione that would visit upon her twofold what he suffered at her hands that day.

31- Game On, a Row, and More Rehearsal

Hermione gets a letter back from Snape. Is it what she expected? Finally, Friday night's rehearsal arrives, and Snape and Hermione have a row in his quarters before going to the Great Hall. Just what do Harry and Ginny have to do with it? Then, Snape channels the Phantom in the blocking rehearsal for Music of the Night, to great effect.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Check out my LJ here:

http://www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon/

to see any random updates I may post about what's going on with me and possibly even the fic. LOL

Nicole aka Good_Witch

Chapter 31- Game On, a Row, and More Rehearsal

Thursday morning, three owls dropped mail for Hermione on her breakfast. Ginny rolled her eyes at her friend, commenting, "You know, maybe we should all sit farther away from you to be spared splattering bits of breakfast!" as she gingerly picked bits of scrambled egg off her school robe.

Hermione grimaced and muttered, "Sorry. But, you may want to keep in mind that, until Christmas, I may be getting a lot of mail." She picked up the letters and began sorting them. One did not have a return address, and it was definitely not from the Muggle world, being on parchment instead of stationery. Puzzled, she examined it. It seemed fairly familiar, for all that it was unexpected. Then, it hit her: it reminded her of the letter she had received telling her she was accepted to Hogwarts. She glanced around surreptitiously and noticed that Snape was sitting languidly at the High Table, a faint smirk on his lips as he idly swirled his tea.

Hermione's eyes narrowed and she hurriedly gathered her mail and began stuffing it in her bag. Under cover of her bag, she hastily opened the mysterious letter. Peeking inside, she saw that the parchment was blank. Comprehension dawned and she bit back a grin. She composed herself and went back to her breakfast with a studiously blank expression. Inside, she was itching to go read her letter, wondering how Snape had reacted to her little venture. She forced herself to eat normally, and prepared her tea with honey and lemon, smiling a bit as she did so. She looked up at Snape over the rim of her cup as she drank, seeing him eyeing her through his hair, and thought she could detect a hint of excitement in his posture and demeanour. Finishing her breakfast, she stood and tossed a casual goodbye to her friends before sauntering toward the entrance to the Great Hall. She felt Snape's gaze on her the whole way.

She hurried to her first class and snuck into the empty classroom, as it was early yet. There, she pulled out her letter and tapped it with her wand, whispering, "*Aperio*." Instantly, writing filled the page. Her brow furrowed as she realized that the writing didn't look like Snape's penmanship. *He must have used a Dicta-Quill instead, just like at rehearsal*. She glanced over the neat, precise writing and returned to the top, to read.

"My dearest Hermione,

I do hope you have exhibited enough sense to keep this letter secured from prying eyes. Obviously, I have not written this by hand, as my script is far too recognizable, even from a distance. However, do not think me impersonal. I believe you'll find that this letter shall encompass many things, several of which will be quite personal..."

Hermione's breath caught at the implication of those words. She realized he was being cautious, and she felt relief mixing with a tingle of anticipation threading through her.

"I will admit that I was rather surprised at your artful manoeuvre in procuring such ink, and in the cunning way you provided me with it. What a shame I cannot award points to Gryffindor for your ingenuity."

She pursed her lips, able to hear his voice in her head, a silky sardonic drawl. Then, a smug smirk crossed her face as she realized he had just praised her, and without prodding or turning it into a subtle insult!

"As for the Weasley twins, I will admit to nothing other than that I am heartily relieved they are no longer here to plague me. As for the current resident Weasleys... well, I fervently try not to think about them as much as possible. The less I see of them, the better."

Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation, shaking her head.

"Face it, love, your friends are irritants, just as you were before you grew up."

An inarticulate cry of indignation spewed from her. At the sound of her voice in the empty room, she cringed and looked around warily, afraid that someone might have heard her. No one was there yet, and she sighed in relief. Then, looking back at what she had just read, she again recognized not just what he had said, but what was implicit as well. A flash of triumphant joy swept over her as she thought, *So, he finally admits that I've grown up!* Smiling to herself, she continued.

"Just because they are your friends does not mean that I will simply ignore their immature behaviour and embrace them as my new companions. I doubt they'd care for me to do so either."

Hermione paused, frowning, as she tried to picture her friends and Snape enjoying each other's company. Her elation subsided a bit as she realized that it would be a hard road ahead, trying to get her friends to accept Snape.

"I must say that I am apprehensive about how your family and friends will react to you when we go public after school is over. Personally, I couldn't care less what they think of me, but I would not want to see you hurt by their likely unwelcome attitudes."

Hermione nodded ruefully. *I know you don't care what people think of you, but I do! I hope my parents at least will be more receptive, since they like you already, my love. At any rate, I don't care how hard it is. I love you and I want to be with you no matter what...* Thinning her lips in determination, she returned to the letter.

"I have already promised never to hurt you, Hermione, and I would like to add that I will always do whatever lies within my power to keep others from hurting you as well. Know now that I vow to address any wrongs done to you, and that includes any perpetrated by your fellow Gryffindors. Granted, I am well aware that you are capable of redress yourself...is the Weasley boy sporting a bruise after that nasty wallop you gave him? That was a sight I shall treasure, my dear."

Hermione laughed aloud again, sheepishly glancing around. Conflicting reactions were battling for purchase within her. Part of her was thrilling to his powerful protective urge, warmed by the formidable security he represented. But, another part of her was antagonized by the chauvinism inherent in such an attitude. She remembered his overt menace toward Neil at the theatre, and felt both irritated and valued. Not quite sure how to reconcile these opposing views, she shook her head and forged on, snorting at his comment about her smacking Ron.

"I am deeply grateful that neither of your cohorts chose to enter my class this year, and not just for the extremely selfish reason that I may have you all to myself."

Hermione smirked and thought, *Well, you and I agree on that point, dearest. It's much nicer being able to concentrate without them there to distract me. Now I have only*

you to distract me in class! She reflected for a moment on his classroom persona and smiled indulgently at his dominating presence as she read on.

"That being said, I must say also that I am aware of Potter and the Weasley girl's... renewed attachment. They owe you a debt, Hermione. If it weren't for you, they would have found themselves before the headmaster in a heartbeat. Let's just say that it is a good thing for them that I do have that self-control you so admire. Without it, and without you to temper my actions, I would have had the perfect legitimate opportunity to rid myself of... how did you put it?... The-Boy-Who-Gets-On-My-Last-Nerve once and for all. You should all be grateful for my restraint. However, I cannot promise that I will exercise such restraint again, should I find them in another such... compromising position. Perhaps their Head Girl could keep a firm eye on them?"

Hermione nearly choked in surprise. *What?* She blinked rapidly, trying to decipher the veiled meaning behind his words. The letter was all but forgotten as she thought furiously. *How could he have known? And why do they owe me a debt? What did they do that could have landed them with the headmaster?* Icy dread trickled through her veins. *Wait... "compromising position"? "Restraint"? "Self-control"? Bloody hell! Did he see them together? They did sneak out... Oh, gods, how mortifying! What can he mean? Severus Snape, you have some explaining to do!* Trying to calm her nervously racing pulse, Hermione narrowed her eyes at Snape's deliberately cryptic statements and vowed to get to the bottom of things as soon as she had the chance. Solemnly, she thought, *We shall have some things to talk about come Friday night...* Her expression grim, she turned her attention back to the letter, noting the sound of students in the corridors.

"As for ways in which we can exchange letters, is there something wrong with owl post? Since you have so cleverly addressed the issue of anything being read inadvertently by someone else, I see no reason why we cannot avail ourselves of the normal delivery methods. I did notice you seem to be receiving mail quite regularly already, so my letters shouldn't stand out. As for letters to me, you may include them with your homework as you did this week, or you may use school owls as well. However, if you wait until after the morning deliveries, the owls can come directly to my office at any time in the afternoon or evening, avoiding any sort of public display in the Great Hall that might draw attention. As for conversing when you come to my quarters... Well, I can think of several things that might keep us from being able to talk normally while you're here."

Students began filing into the classroom, and Hermione glanced up, hiding the letter behind her bag. She had hurriedly scanned the paragraph about exchanging letters, not really registering his final comment until she caught sight of it again when she looked at the page to cast *Celo* on it. As the writing disappeared, and she stuffed the letter out of sight, the import of his words soaked in. *Oh!* Hermione's cheeks grew hot at the thought of what else could be occupying her mouth to keep her from talking. She absently responded to the greetings of her classmates, trying to ignore the tingle that spread to her knickers. Shifting furtively in her seat, she reconstructed her studious pose, all the while cursing Snape in her mind. *Sneaky Slytherin! He would just go on about nothing out of the ordinary and then just toss in something like that!*

Throughout the morning, Hermione found that her attention kept wandering back to her letter, trying to imagine what else he might have said. Several times, she had to sharply drag herself back to the lesson, firmly admonishing herself for being distracted. All the same, she was eager for her morning classes to be over, so she could have a moment to continue reading. Rushing to the library, she ensconced herself in an alcove and furtively opened the letter again.

"That reminds me, you impudent minx... You have some nerve to include such... intimate imaginings in a letter you gave me during class! And yet you claim you need tutelage in Slytherin ways..."

She snorted at his reprimand, admitting to herself that she had an inkling of what he must have gone through, considering how distracted she had been since she started reading.

"You want my help in learning the ways of the snake... There are many things I want to teach you, my love. If I have my way, we will be slithering against each other, our bodies hot and slick with sweat. I will have you undulating like the best serpent alive under the influence of my hands and tongue. You will hiss in rapture at the pleasure I incite within you..."

Hermione gasped and clapped a hand over her mouth, stifling her squeak of surprise. Her brows shot up and her eyes widened in shock. Dazed by the sudden turn of his writing, she blinked rapidly, envisioning his description. She kept her hand clamped over her mouth to suppress the moan that bubbled up in response. Heat was radiating from her face; no doubt she was red as a beet. She fought to steady her breathing and slow the pulsing that centred in her core, drenching her knickers again. She flicked a glance around, ensuring that no one was watching her, but the library was empty, as the students were at lunch. Steeling herself for what might come next, she looked back at the letter.

"Is anything amiss, my dear? You seem a tad feverish. Do you need a trip to the hospital wing? Remember, love, you started this little skirmish. You have no one but yourself to blame."

Hermione's jaw dropped in amazement. *Oh! So that's what this is about? A competition? Why am I surprised? Hmmm, very well then. Game on, Professor...* A calculating look on her face, Hermione read more.

"I have a confession to make to you as well. I, too, relive our liaison in the alley. I can still taste you on my tongue. I can still feel the firm texture of your nipples on my lips. My fingers... yes, those fingers you so crave... still feel the heat of your arousal bedewing those silky curls. You couldn't see me then, but you will. You'll see me licking your juices from my fingers, like you laved that infernal cherry. And your nectar is far more delicious than any chocolate mousse or whipped cream on any cherry ever could be."

Hermione struggled to swallow against a suddenly dry throat. *Sweet Merlin... Forget it! I concede!* Her breathing was erratic as she feverishly consumed Snape's words.

"I will devour you. I will immerse myself in your heat. I will revel in the evidence of your passion. I will taste every inch of your supple skin, learning the contours of your lithe body with my lips. I will reduce you to a trembling, gasping creature of lust. I will discover the hidden places that will make you burn with desire."

Hermione was startled by what sounded curiously like a whimper coming from her throat. She could feel his raw power exuding from the page. Casting back to her own letter, she realized a fundamental difference. Whereas she spoke in terms of what she *wanted* to do, which meant that it was possible that they might not happen, he spoke... quite firmly... of what he *would* do. There was no mistaking the earnest intent of his claims.

"You want to see my bedroom? You will. It will be the first place I take you when the year is over. Once you are free of this school, I will spirit you away to my bed, to show you all the things I plan to do to take you to your peak again and again."

Hermione closed her eyes, her head falling back weakly. Her breath was raspy as she panted for air. Somehow, the library seemed rather hot and stuffy. Incredulous, yet lured back to the letter, Hermione continued.

"I will carry you through the doorway and lay you on the bed. You'll feel the softness of the velvet under your fingertips as I divest you of your clothing. I will worship you as my own goddess of love, Dione's daughter. When I have offered proper reverence to you, I will join you between the satin sheets and claim you completely. At that time, you will become one with me in a way that you can never be again."

Hermione thought she could feel the sensations of velvet under her fingers already, so vivid was her vision of them together. Her body throbbed with desire for him. Soberly, she pondered the truth of his statement. She could only give her virginity once. Her stomach fluttered as she anticipated giving it to him.

"I want to possess you utterly. When I can join my body with yours, consummating our love in that most intimate manner, I want to meld us together in an unbreakable bond. I want you to be mine for the rest of our lives. I want to be yours."

She felt a burning, prickling in her eyes and started when her vision began to swim. Blinking, she gasped as the tears that had welled up fell onto the parchment. Quickly dabbing at the drops, hoping the ink wouldn't smear, she sniffed and took a deep breath to try to still the roiling sensation in her stomach. She thought about spending her life with Snape, and was dazed to find that it was an entirely appealing prospect. Her heart pounded frantically in her chest and she fought against the desire to run headlong to him and wrap herself in his strong embrace. Her lips trembling with a beatific smile, she focused back on the letter.

"You have healed my soul, Hermione. I have never been happy like this before. My whole life has been one of deceit and misery and deprivation, until now. You have given me life. Your love has changed me. I can only assume it will be for the better. I know I am pleased with the changes you have wrought within me. You have taken up residence as the one thing I value more than my own life. And the fact that that life is no longer in constant danger bodes well for our future, my love."

The reverent awe she felt was almost overwhelming. She closed her eyes for a long moment, shivering throughout her body. Her mind was spinning with one thought, *I love you I love you I love you I love you...* Swallowing thickly, she inhaled deeply through her nose and opened her eyes, reading once again.

"I think about you endlessly. Any time I can see you, I savour those glimpses, to add to my collection in my mind of you and your beauty. I look forward to Friday night's rehearsal as well. We must both maintain control of our senses. I hope we can quench our rising desire at least a small amount when you are in my quarters... take the edge off, perhaps."

A faint giggle bubbled up in her euphoria. She clapped her hand back over her mouth and shot a furtive glance around again. She was still alone, but she did notice that lunch was almost over. With renewed urgency, she continued reading.

"I look forward to the day when we can curl up together, basking in the glow of our spent passion, and sink into a sated sleep, secure in each other and our love. Until then, know that I fall asleep every night with your name on my lips and your face in my mind, whispering to the stones of my devotion."

"Your humble servant, Severus"

A long, contented sigh escaped her. *Who knew he could be so poetic? Then again, I'm really not all that surprised, not with everything else he's shown he can do. He's just so enigmatic...* Chewing her lip pensively, she glanced back down at the letter, noticing his postscript.

"p.s. Just to help you along with that picture in your mind... I only had that satin lounge wear because I was at your parents' house. I prefer to sleep au naturel. The satin sheets feel much more sensual that way..."

Her eyes flew wide open and she gasped. A particularly strong throb of desire coursed through her. *That devil!* Then, her eyes narrowed and her jaw set as she muttered *"Celo"* and stuffed the letter in her bag. Hastily, she jogged back to the Great Hall to grab a quick bite before her afternoon classes. As soon as she entered, her gaze zeroed in on Snape at the High Table.

Snape noticed Hermione's arrival, and he smirked to himself in satisfaction that she had shown up. He had begun to get nervous when she had missed most of the lunch period. He lifted one languid eyebrow and gazed at her from under his lashes. He saw her almost stumble as she caught his eye. Her chest rose with her sharp intake of breath, and her face and neck were deeply flushed. She pinned him with an intensely hungry look for a bare moment before hurrying to the Gryffindor table to scarf some food.

Snape inclined his head and peered at her through his hair. She had obviously read his letter, and it seemed to have had the desired effect, judging by her heated, flustered demeanour and the blazing passion in her eyes. Inordinately pleased with himself, he stood in one smooth movement and strolled out of the staff entrance to prepare for his afternoon classes. His step was almost cheerful as he contemplated their meeting Friday before rehearsal.

Hermione was sitting beside Ron, across from Harry and Ginny, at dinner Friday night. Ron had manfully put his squicked feelings aside and was graciously accepting...well, as gracious as Ron could get...of Harry and Ginny's relationship. Talk had turned to Christmas, and Hermione found herself involved in the conversation. She was therefore surprised when she saw a shadow enveloping her and felt a looming presence at her back. She quickly turned and looked up into Snape's face. All four of them fell quiet as Snape glowered coldly at them. His lip curled and his eyes narrowed so much when he looked at Harry and Ginny holding hands that they warily separated, feeling rather abashed. A minute shudder rippled over Snape's tall form as he screwed his eyes shut for a moment before peering down his nose at Hermione.

"Miss Granger," he began, in a harsh growl, "your assistance is required to prepare for rehearsal tonight. Follow me." He stepped back a pace, allowing Hermione to spin on the bench and rise.

She flashed a tight smile at her friends and murmured, "See you later." Then, she faced Snape and politely stated, "I'm ready, Professor."

Snape rolled his eyes before raking a black glare over the others. He spun on his heel and stalked out of the Great Hall, Hermione in his wake. They strode in silence through the corridor to the dungeon stairs. As they descended, Hermione kept glancing at Snape, noting that his scowl was firmly in place. It wasn't until they reached the door to his quarters that he looked at her and his expression softened a trifle. He waved his wand over his door and opened it, gesturing for Hermione to precede him. She ducked inside the door and turned to him as he followed her in and shut the door behind him, locking and warding it.

Snape slowly turned to Hermione, his face inscrutable. Her lips curved up in a faint smile and she gazed up at him, a welter of emotions whirling in her eyes. Snape felt his love for her surging up and he clamped down on his emotions, fighting the urge to envelop her in his embrace and snog her into eternity. A slight sigh escaped him, and the tension in his shoulders released as he simply said, "Hello, Hermione."

Hermione stepped closer to him, almost pressing herself against his body, and peered up into his face. Chewing her lip, she inhaled deeply and breathed, "Hi..."

Slowly, he leant toward her, watching her stretch up to meet him. Their lips locked in a soft, yet fervent kiss. After a long moment, they parted, and Snape rested his forehead against hers. His arms came up to wrap around her and she gripped his waist tightly. Sliding her forehead off his, she burrowed against him, pressing her cheek against his chest. Snape smiled to himself and rested his chin on her hair. Her voice was muffled by black robes when she spoke.

"I miss being close to you. You feel so good. So warm and strong..."

Snape hugged her tighter and she squeaked. He chuckled, a low, rumbling sound, deep in his chest, and murmured, "Hmm, you know, flattery will get you everywhere..."

Hermione giggled and sighed, "I love you." Then, she raised her head to look him in the eye again. A wicked smirk crossed her face and she drawled, "Flattery will get me everywhere? Really? Will it get me here?" And at that, she snaked her hands down from his waist and gripped his arse, squeezing. She laughed aloud at his shocked expression.

He pulled back and stared at her, incredulous. A cascade of reactions flowed over his face, and finally, a spark of mischief flared in his eyes. He grabbed her hands and held them to her sides as he leant down, his voice a silky growl in her ear, tickling her with his nose. "Such impertinence! Manhandling a teacher in such a fashion... Really, Miss Granger, you have shown a shocking amount of impudence in your recent *homework*. I must admit I am interested in what you thought about my response."

He smirked at her gasp, but was puzzled by her pensive expression when he pulled back to look at her. His smirk dissolved into a frown. Hermione's eyes were narrowed shrewdly on his, and he dropped her hands in confusion. Her hands instantly perched on her hips and she pursed her lips. He was bewildered by her bossy stance and intense stare. Darting his eyes about nervously, he uttered a flat, "What?"

In a low voice, Hermione said, "You've got some explaining to do." Snape's brows shot up. Barrelling on, Hermione queried, "What did you mean when you said you

already knew about Harry and Ginny, and that they owe me a debt? Talk about cryptic! And you keep looking at them all weird. What happened?"

Snape backed away, his face set. This was not what he had expected for a reaction. Striding away to gather the hair products, he coldly snarled, "Your imbecile friends put themselves in a very precarious position. Had I chosen to, I could have had them both expelled, provided the headmaster didn't bend the rules as he is wont to do for that blasted boy."

He crossed to the ottoman and sat, flicking a dark glance over his shoulder to Hermione, who was staring after him, perplexed. He jerked the pomade at her and tilted his head at the chair, indicating that she should join him to do his hair. Hermione slowly walked across the room, brow creased in thought.

She took the products from him and began brushing his hair back. "They never said anything about you. What did they do?"

His voice thick with disgust, he spat, "I caught them engaging in carnal activities after curfew when I was on my patrol! They didn't say anything because they did not know I found them." As he spoke, Hermione's hand stilled, and he spun on the ottoman. She was staring at him, aghast, and looking a little sick.

"You... saw them having sex?"

Snape snorted impatiently. "Not exactly, but in so many words, I suppose so."

Hermione's brows climbed toward her hairline and she grimaced. "Not exactly? What does that mean?"

Huffing, Snape shot her an aggrieved look and ground out, "I heard them. When I entered the room, I saw... feet. They were under that damned Invisibility Cloak. Their... activity... was unmistakable. I considered dragging them before Dumbledore, but I decided against it. All of you should be grateful for my restraint."

Hermione stared, dumbfounded. Finally finding her voice, she rasped, "You... watched... my friends... having sex." She shook her head and shot him a reproachful look. He rolled his eyes.

"I did not 'watch' them! I couldn't see anything beneath that Cloak!"

She blinked rapidly. Her face screwed up in disgust, she squeaked, "Did you *want* to?"

At the end of his patience, Snape shot to his feet, eyes heavenward, his hands clenching at his sides. He paced away a few steps before he spun and faced Hermione, one hand running through his hair. Heaving a deep, irritated sigh, he glared at her and said, in a dangerously soft voice, "I will not even dignify that with an answer. You seem to be missing the point here. If this is the kind of response I will get, believe me, I will *not* succumb to any further charitable impulses."

After a beat, Hermione asked, "So, did you leave?"

Snape blinked. "What?"

"Did you leave? Once you had your 'charitable impulse'? Or did you just stay there and watch them shagging?" She gazed at him with disgust.

Snape's hands curled into trembling fists and his eyes closed as he fought to not yell at her for her obtuseness. Silently counting to ten, he took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Clenching his teeth, he looked at Hermione staring at him and spat, "Bollocks!" Then, he was struck with an idea. Pointing one long finger at Hermione, he murmured, "Don't move."

He briskly strode into his bedroom, returning after a brief moment with his Pensieve. He made a show of placing it on the table beside Hermione's chair and settled back on the ottoman. Hermione's eyes widened as she grasped his intent. He resolutely placed his wand to his temple and drew out the silvery strand of memory, placing it in the Pensieve, then prodded the surface with his wand, pulling it to the surface. His gaze was darkly challenging as he locked eyes with Hermione.

"Look for yourself. Then perhaps you'll understand."

Hermione shied away from the Pensieve, but Snape held her gaze, inexorably pointing to the images eddying on the surface. Hesitating, Hermione leant forward. Snape murmured, "Closer. Let it draw you in." She edged closer to the bowl and felt it enveloping her. Suddenly, she was within Snape's memory. A moment later, Snape joined her. He shot a grim glance at her and ordered, "Watch."

She saw him patrolling the halls, hearing the tell-tale sounds of lascivious behaviour. She was disconcerted by the sadistic smile that flitted across his face. A separate part of her was impressed when he cast the concealment charm, understanding how he was able to sneak up on people so well. The sequence of events was harder to follow, now that he was invisible too, but she could recognize the noises the two teenagers were making. Her cheeks flushed in embarrassment.

She saw the edge of the Cloak being lifted, revealing the top of Ginny's head, before it all disappeared again. She stood there, extremely uncomfortable, hearing their copulation reaching its peak. She folded her arms under her breasts and tightly gripped her ribcage, her eyes darting around the dim classroom, wishing she could leave Snape's memory. Finally, Ginny's head appeared, and Hermione was struck by the beatific look on her face.

She really does love him...

Then, Harry emerged and she watched their interactions. She was surprised by the tenderness Harry displayed, and was gratified that he had the sense to question her about needing contraception. Eventually, they disappeared under the Cloak again and she heard their steps fading from the room. She turned to Snape and saw his set expression. He nodded sharply and gripped her elbow, pulling them from the memory. When they found themselves back in the sitting room, Snape pinned her with an intense gaze and muttered, "Now do you understand?"

Hermione swallowed nervously and shook her head. Snape closed his eyes in pained acknowledgement. Looking at her again, with an almost weary expression, he sighed, "What do you still not understand?"

In a voice barely above a whisper, she said, "What made you stop? Why didn't you reveal them? I know you said you exercised considerable restraint, but I want to know why."

Snape's eyes were sad as he whispered haltingly, "I was... afraid... you were with him..."

Hermione gasped. Snape looked down uncomfortably. Unable to speak, she simply twined her fingers with his. He looked back up at her and added, "And when I knew it was Miss Weasley, I couldn't help but think that he would finally leave you alone. It struck me as the best possible way to keep both of them off our trail."

Hermione thought about the fact that she had thought the same thing, and her disgust drained away. Gently, she gestured for him to turn around again. His eyes were wistful before they dropped and he spun on the ottoman. His shoulders sagged dejectedly. Hermione began brushing his hair again. She smoothed the pomade through it in silence, securing his long locks into a thick tail at the base of his neck. When she was done, she rested her hands on his shoulders and felt him jerk at her touch. She persisted and slid her arms around him, resting her cheek against his back. He stiffened in her embrace.

Softly, she murmured, "I'm sorry, Severus. Please don't be angry with me. I do understand now."

The tension in his frame dissolved and he covered her hands with his. He pulled out of her embrace and turned again, searching her face for any more signs of disgust. It had cut him to the quick to see that in her eyes when she had looked at him. She curved one hand along his cheek and smiled softly, her eyes limpid with sympathy and chagrin.

His chest tightened and he gripped her hand, turning his face to press a fervent kiss into her palm. Hermione inhaled sharply at the sensation coursing through her. She leant forward and kissed him. The gentle expression of love quickly turned into a heated expression of passion. Snape reached forward and pulled her into his lap. She moaned at the hot lump against her hip. A low growl rumbled up from Snape's throat as he spun again on the ottoman, facing them toward the alpaca rug before the hearth. Hermione closed her eyes at the delicious tickling of his lips and nose nuzzling her ear and neck as he murmured, "I was quite taken with your vivid description of how you would like to experience this rug. You inspired my imagination."

Hermione groaned, her eyelids fluttering. Snape smirked against her neck and continued, "Now, I ask again, what did you think of my response?"

She whispered, "You're... diabolical..." She heard his deep chuckle in response.

His voice was velvety as he said, "You started it, my dear."

She opened her eyes and turned to pin him with a heated gaze as she muttered, "Oh, there are other things I'd like to start..."

Snape's brows rose in mock surprise, but his lips widened in a delighted smile. He ducked in and kissed her quickly, before pulling back and sighing, "That does indeed sound quite appealing, but we have other things to start soon. Namely, rehearsal." Hermione gasped and looked at the time in alarm.

"We've only a few minutes!" She jumped off his lap and chewed her lip in anxiety.

Snape sighed regretfully at the absence of her pliant warmth in his lap and stood. "I know. Come along then." He cast a sly glance at her and added, "We'll just have to continue our conversation another time."

Hermione licked her lips as she devoured him with her eyes. He extended his hand to her and she placed her hand in his. They crossed to his door, where he cupped her face in his hands and swooped down to kiss her thoroughly. Pulling back, he smirked at the dazed look in her eyes.

He gathered his Phantom mask from the table by the door. Dryly, he said, "Do try to compose yourself. We have to hurry."

He jumped when Hermione favoured him with a sharp crack on his arm, glaring pointedly at him. One eyebrow cocked, he looked down at her in surprise. Hermione sniffed and muttered, "Sneaky Slytherin..." Then, she tilted her chin up at a defiant angle and gestured for him to open the door. He opened the door and she swept regally past him, not even looking back.

He warded his door, rubbing against the sting on his arm. *Guess that note to self didn't do much good, did it, mate?* Snorting to himself, he followed Hermione up to the Great Hall.

Dumbledore had already transformed the Hall when they entered, and he turned to them, beaming.

"Ah, Miss Granger, Professor Snape. Good evening. I trust you are ready to begin the blocking for the Labyrinth Underground and Music of the Night?"

Hermione fished her shrunken script from her pocket and enlarged it as Snape did the same. Dumbledore nodded happily and stepped up onto the stage, casting the spells to create the set pieces. Snape enchanted his script and Dicta-Quill to float near him again, and Hermione wrinkled her nose at him behind Dumbledore's back.

As the headmaster cast the charms to move the set pieces and transform the stage during the Labyrinth Underground, Snape and Hermione watched in fascination. He went through them once, and then directed Snape and Hermione to interact with the sets, blocking the scene. They dutifully recorded their blocking, maintaining a detached, professional attitude. Once they had gone through to the start of Music of the Night, Snape interrupted.

"I beg your pardon, Headmaster, but I would like to try some of my own ideas for blocking in this scene, if you don't mind."

Dumbledore blinked at Snape, taken aback. "Of course, my boy. Certainly. You're the one who has to perform it, so we do want you to be comfortable. What did you have in mind?"

Snape turned gravely to Hermione and said, "Miss Granger, if you would kindly take this position, I would like to go through my song." Hermione nodded and quickly took the position he indicated. She gazed curiously at him as he strode away.

Dumbledore retreated into the house to watch, and Snape stood for a moment, obviously hesitating.

"What's wrong, Severus?" Dumbledore peered up at the tall dark man.

Snape thinned his lips and finally said, "I would prefer to actually do the song. May I?"

Dumbledore twinkled genially and fished a music box from within his robes. "As you wish. Here, let me set it for you." He adjusted some dials and toggles and then set it on the edge of the stage. Looking expectantly up at Snape, he inquired, "Ready?"

Snape nodded once sharply, and Dumbledore opened the music box. Snape took a deep breath and turned his intense gaze on Hermione, who was still staring up at him, bewildered.

Snape began singing, his voice filling the Hall and sending shivers through Hermione. He deftly slipped among the sets, gesturing to their surroundings as he sang, "I have brought you to the seat of sweet music's throne... to this kingdom where all must pay homage to music... music... You have come here, for one purpose, and one alone... Since the moment I first heard you sing, I have needed you with me, to serve me, to sing, for my music... my music..." At that point, he closed in on Hermione again, pulling her closer within his lair.

He circled her, his hands floating about, expressive in their movements, as he continued, "Night-time sharpens, heightens each sensation... Darkness stirs and wakes imagination... Silently the senses abandon their defences..."

He hovered just behind her ear, his left hand curled into a fist in front of her. "Slowly, gently night unfurls its splendour..." His fist uncurled and his fingers undulated in front of her face. "Grasp it, sense it - tremulous and tender..." As he said "grasp," he swiftly clenched his fist again and dropped his hand from her view. His other hand crept around from the other side and he gripped her chin, guiding her to turn to the right as he sang, "Turn your face away from the garish light of day, turn your thoughts away from cold, unfeeling light - and listen to the music of the night..."

Hermione felt drugged by his velvet voice and the novelty of his touch as the Phantom. She thought that she'd be very convincing as Christine, reacting that way!

Snape passed a hand in front of her face, not touching her, and then spun away, gesticulating widely as he sang, "Close your eyes and surrender to your darkest dreams! Purge your thoughts of the life you knew before! Close your eyes, let your spirit start to soar!" His hands rose and extended as he held the long note. Then, when it was done, his hands dropped to his sides and he gazed levelly at Hermione again, singing, "And you'll live as you've never lived before..."

He deliberately stepped closer to her again as he sang, "Softly, deftly, music shall surround you..." He slid his hands down her arms, gripping her hands and guiding her to wrap her arms around her own waist, with his arms enveloping her as well, during the lines, "Feel it, hear it, closing in around you..." Hermione's eyes closed involuntarily. She could feel his breath on her ear as he continued, "Open up your mind, let your fantasies unwind, in this darkness which you know you cannot fight - the darkness of the music of the night..." He released her arms and slowly backed away, spinning as he crescendoed.

"Let your mind start a journey through a strange new world! Leave all thoughts of the world you knew before!" He stopped and faced her again, purposefully striding to her again as he sang, "Let your soul take you where you long to be!" Then, as the climaxing note died away, he lifted his hand to lightly caress her cheek with the backs of his

fingertips as he sang, "Only then can you belong to me..."

He took her hands in his and led her toward the large mirror draped with a dust cover. One hand held hers while the other fluttered in the air as he sang, "Floating, falling, sweet intoxication!" Then, he lifted her hand and held it to his face, tilting his head into her touch on his mask as he crooned, "Touch me, trust me, savour each sensation!" As she independently caressed his face, he let go of her hand and circled behind her as he sang, "Let the dream begin, let your darker side give in to the power of the music that I write - the power of the music of the night..." During his last line, he pulled the dust cover away from the mirror, revealing the wax image of Hermione, in a wedding dress. Hermione stared at it in wonder, reaching toward it, and the wax dummy thrust its hand at her through the mirror. Hermione gasped and crumpled, falling against Snape where he stood behind her. He easily picked her up and crossed to the bed, gently laying her limp form in it. As he settled her comfortably, he caressed her hair, tucking a loose curl away from her face. He slowly backed away from her and stood as he sang, "You alone can make my song take flight - help me make the music of the night..."

When the song finished, the music box stopped. Hermione opened her eyes, gazing at Snape in rapt amazement. Dumbledore was in the house, applauding vigorously. Snape turned his back to the headmaster and cast a tender smile at Hermione before schooling his expression into his customary grim one, turning back to Dumbledore.

"Oh, I say, Severus, that was beautiful! Truly marvellous! Miss Granger, you were absolutely perfect too. Such a mesmerizing performance! Severus, that was wonderful. You have such sharp instincts; I wouldn't change a thing. Do remember to mark it all down, lest you forget any of it. Why don't you two do that right now, while I do the same..." He beamed at them and then began busily writing in his script. Hermione and Snape exchanged an amused look as they copied him.

Snape's deep drawl buzzed as he murmured instructions to his Dicta-Quill. After several moments, they were all finished, and Dumbledore briskly indicated that they should go back to the beginning of the evening and repeat the scenes. He twinkled contentedly as he ran the charms for the moving sets, humming to himself as Snape dryly spoke his way through the last song, methodically repeating the movements that had been so natural and impassioned moments before. Hermione bit back a sigh that he was being so distant, but ruefully admitted to herself that it was for the best, lest Dumbledore sense there was more between them.

They worked their way through the scenes the usual three times before Dumbledore dismissed them for the night, beaming brightly at them. They bade him good night and filed up the aisle to exit the Hall as Dumbledore reverted it back to its original state.

Out in the corridor, they made their way to the staircases, parting as Hermione began her ascent and Snape began his descent. Pausing on the stairs, they turned to each other and locked eyes, pledging their devotion anew through one intense look. Gravely, Snape offered, "Good evening, Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded politely and retorted, just as dignified, "Good night to you, Professor." They tore their gazes away from each other and started walking. After a few steps, Hermione paused again and looked over the banister, down at Snape. She was surprised to see him already gazing up at her, his eyes deep and black, from several steps down.

She glanced around and shot a quick smile at him. His breath caught at the dazzling beauty of her smiling down at him. His eyes burning with the intensity of his love, he mouthed, "I love you."

Hermione sighed blissfully and mouthed back, "I love you, Severus." Then, she spun and jogged up the stairs, out of sight. Snape leant against the wall and closed his eyes for a moment, his chest and throat tight. Swallowing thickly, he continued back to his quarters, resolutely heading for his lab, to work on his gift for Hermione some more.

He had already spent over an hour in this session, his muscles tight from the finicky, controlled movements necessary. Heaving a deep sigh, he eased back from his worktable, stretching and twisting, hissing at the pops and snaps of his protesting bones.

That's enough for tonight. It's coming along nicely. I hope she'll like it. It's not like this is a sure thing like the mousse will be! He snorted to himself. *I do need to arrange to make that mousse though...* He went to his desk and rooted around for the recipe. Skimming the page again, he absently summoned a house-elf. *Hmm, "Six ounces of semisweet chocolate, chopped coarsely, two Tablespoons powdered egg white, 1/4 cup and two Tablespoons water, two Tablespoons sugar, 1 1/2 cups whipping cream, whipped. Place chocolate in top of a double boiler; bring water to a boil. Reduce heat to low; cook, stirring occasionally, until chocolate melts. Remove from heat, and set aside. Beat powdered egg white and water in a large bowl with a high speed mixing charm until soft peaks form. Gradually add sugar, beating until stiff peaks form. Stir one-fourth of whipped cream into melted chocolate; stir into egg white mixture. Fold in remaining whipped cream. Cover and use a cooling charm for at least two hours." Well, Florean, I hope this is as good as you purport it to be.* At the muffled pop of the elf's arrival, Snape turned and regarded the short creature blandly.

The elf bobbed its head and stared up at him with bulging eyes. "Yes, Master Snape? What can Tandy do for sir?"

Snape proffered the parchment and said, "I have a recipe that I would like to make. I know that you elves have these ingredients in the kitchens. I can prepare the recipe in my lab, but I need the ingredients brought to me. Listen carefully. I need six ounces of semisweet chocolate, two Tablespoons of powdered egg white, two Tablespoons of sugar, and 1 1/2 cups of whipping cream. Bring these items to me Christmas morning. Do you understand?" The elf nodded vigorously. "There's more. Do not speak of this with anyone. Not even your fellow elves. Can you keep this a secret?" Again, the elf nodded. "Good. I know all of you will be busy Christmas, with more students staying over the holidays, but I must receive these items that morning. You may bring them to me as early as 7:00. Do you remember the ingredients?"

"Yes sir! Six ounces of semisweet chocolate, two Tablespoons of powdered egg white, two Tablespoons of sugar, and 1 1/2 cups of whipping cream. Tandy won't forget, Master Snape. Tandy will bring them to you Christmas morning."

"Excellent. Thank you, Tandy. I shall see you then." He waved his hand at the elf in dismissal and it bobbed a farewell at him before it popped out of existence again. *There, now that's taken care of...* He smiled to himself as he prepared for bed, climbing between the cool satin sheets, whispering, "Good night, Hermione, my love."

32- Christmas is Coming

Chapter 33 of 84

Hermione and Snape finish their preparations for each other's gifts, and rehearsals continue. Ginny begs Hermione for a rather volatile favor, and Hermione bargains with her to get research material. Finally, Christmas Eve arrives, and Hermione concocts her Secret Santa mousse, complete with a little something extra. And see just how busy the house-elves get for the holiday!

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: We're covering several days in this chapter, moving things along a bit. Hope you don't mind... *snort* And, I'm trying to get better about posting on my

Livejournal, so feel free to check it out for update info. http://www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon/

Without further ado, I hope you enjoy the following:

Chapter 32- Christmas is Coming

Saturday morning, Hermione received a letter from the Muggle Liaison in Flourish and Blotts. Her cheeks warmed with excitement and she smiled faintly as she stuffed it in her pocket to finish eating. Her friends simply rolled their eyes at her getting more mail. When she was done with breakfast, she nodded to the others and briskly got up from the table, flashing a cheerful grin at the High Table as she left the Hall. Snape watched her from his vantage point of languidly leaning back in his chair, his chin propped on his fingers. Once she was gone, he smoothly stood and exited through the staff entrance, returning to the dungeons.

At her desk, Hermione read the letter from the Muggle Liaison.

"Miss Granger,

I have found a few books in my search for your specifications. However, none of them meet all of your listed requirements. I have included the descriptions herein, and I need your response soon. Thank you for your business.

Book 1- hardback edition, illustrated, published within the last 20 years, pages crisp and clean, firm in the binding, no creases or stains

Book 2- hardback edition, leather bound, published in 1940s, pages dark with age, no illustrations, cover has the title gilded and embossed, some cracks in the gilding

Book 3- hardback edition, glossy cover, illustrated, published in 1990, pages tight, clean, glossy, no creases

I can keep searching, but I have already exhausted all of my sources. If you want one of the above books, let me know which one. I can have it sent to you as soon as I have confirmed payment.

Thank you,

Andrew Mosten

Muggle Liaison

Flourish and Blotts."

Hermione pursed her lips as she considered her options. *I figured it'd be hard to find just what I wanted, but these are decent. Hmm, which would be better, the leather binding, or illustrations? I really like the idea of the gilded title... I'll go with the leather one. It's the oldest of them too. It may not be pristine, but I doubt Severus cares about that. Old books have character, and I'm sure he can appreciate that.*

She immediately wrote a response to Andrew Mosten, choosing the oldest book, and included her authorization for him to debit her Gringotts account when he shipped the book to her.

There, that's taken care of. Perfect! Now, I just need to get the photos copied. She scanned the responses she had received from the photo shops and chose the one with the best options for her. Filling out the order form, she bounced to her bureau and withdrew the photos. Carefully, she packaged them with her order form. Satisfied, she gathered her correspondence and trekked to the owlery.

On her way back, she paused by the notice board and looked at the next rehearsal notice. *"Wednesday December 17: Run through Dressing Room to Music of the Night, including songs. All actors required to attend."* She began humming to herself as she climbed the stairs to Gryffindor Tower.

Down in his lab, Snape was back at work, carving the bicorn horn. His eyes gleamed with pride and satisfaction as he lifted the completed carving from the tabletop, turning it in the light to see it from several angles. It was black, but with an iridescent finish that looked purple and brown depending how the light hit it. He carefully put away the finished carving and took out the ribbon he had bought.

How long should this be? I don't want to make it too large, but I also don't want it to be too small... He closed his eyes and focused on Hermione's slim throat. Opening his eyes, he splayed his hand and looked at it thoughtfully. He stretched his fingers and thumb apart, slowly curving his hand into a C. *I'll find out for sure at the next rehearsal.* He stretched the ribbon out on the tabletop and clamped it down, leaving it until he had his answer.

The week seemed to be passing quickly, and Hermione was eagerly anticipating Potions class and rehearsal. She had written another letter to Snape, including it in her homework. It was a breezy, chatty letter, full of tidbits about what she'd been working on, her thoughts on her classes, how she had been getting along with her friends, and of course, how much she missed him and loved him. After reading *his* letter, she felt quite out of her depth in trying to write steamy things. So, she decided that she'd learn more before writing anything too lascivious.

When she turned in her homework, she caught Snape's eye and nodded minutely, glancing at the parchment. His eyes narrowed suspiciously and she bit her lip, sheepishly shaking her head "no" and shrugging. Snape's lips rippled as he held back a smile.

He indulged his curiosity and read her letter during class, feeling warmed by the sweet confidences within. One part gave him a pang of dismay.

"I know using owl post is okay right now, since I've been getting so much mail, but that's about to end. So, we do need to figure out how you can get letters to me outside of class and rehearsal. Don't worry too much about it until after the holidays. I'm going to be getting mail through then. People don't mind so much when you're acting secretive when it's Christmas time. Besides, I threatened everyone with keeping their presents if they bugged me too much! So, keep that in mind, you sneaky Slytherin. If you annoy me, I just may keep your present for myself!"

He felt his chest tighten. *So she has a gift for me? Beloved, you're the greatest gift I could ever receive...* He peered at her through his hair, feeling like he was almost buoyant with happiness. *But, I'm so glad I am almost done with her present. I do hope she'll like it.*

Snape marched down from the High Table to collect Hermione before rehearsal. At this point, it was an established fact that he would be doing so, and the other Gryffindors stopped acting shocked about it. For her part, Hermione saw him coming and finished her meal, clearing her throat and dabbing her lips with her napkin before rising and facing him as he stalked down the aisle toward her. He barely flicked a dark glance at the others as he reached her, merely grunting in response to her polite, "Good evening, Professor." Nodding sharply at her to follow, they exited the Hall and made their way down to his quarters.

In companionable silence, they entered his room. Once the door was shut and warded behind them, Hermione spun and advanced on Snape, actually slamming him into

the door as she pressed herself against him. Snape's surprised cry was muffled by Hermione's passionate kiss. His arms came up around her involuntarily and a low groan issued from his throat as he succumbed to her enthusiasm.

Pulling away to gasp for breath, Snape stared dazedly down into her dilated eyes. Dryly, he rasped, "Well, hello to you too." Hermione grinned impishly at him and bit her lip.

In a tone that was anything but repentant, she said, "Sorry. That was building up for a while. Just be glad I managed to contain myself until we got here!" She giggled as he raised one eyebrow at her.

His tone sardonic, he drawled, "Indeed, how very fortunate." Glaring his reprimand at her, he removed her hands from his person and decidedly set her away from him. "Come now, you know the drill..." She made a moue of disappointment and sulked over to the chair as he collected the hair products.

As he sat on the ottoman in front of her, Hermione said, aggrieved, "You know, it's not fair that I do this for you every time, and I don't get someone playing ~~with~~ my hair."

Snape chuckled and glanced over his shoulder at her. "I promise that I will return the favour. But I must request that you teach me that detangling charm before I even *try* to address those curls, my dear." He ducked away from her indignant swat, chuckling again. She tugged on a lock of his hair and he spun quickly, capturing her hands. "Now now, that's completely unnecessary." She struggled half-heartedly and he smirked at her. Favouring her with a particularly menacing glare, he released her hands and turned back around.

Hermione huffed and went back to her task. As soon as she was done, Snape stood in one fluid movement and whirled behind her chair. She started to look at him, but he placed one large hand against the crown of her head and directed her to face forward again. She blinked, puzzled, but her eyes fluttered closed as she felt his deft fingers grazing along her hairline, slipping into her curls, massaging her scalp. A blissful sigh that sounded suspiciously like a moan erupted from her lips.

Snape thrilled to the sounds she was making, and gently caressed her cheeks and neck. Suddenly, he was hit with an inspiration, and he slid his hands around her throat in a languid caress, paying attention to how much of his fingers stretched around her. *Excellent! Now I can finish the ribbon, since I know how long it needs to be...* He dragged his nails along the sensitive flesh below her ears, scraping them up into her hair and pushing her head forward. He could feel the goose flesh under his fingertips as she shivered in ticklish delight.

After a few moments of rubbing her neck and shoulders, he gathered her bushy hair to one side and leant down, pressing nibbling kisses along the column of her neck. Whimpering mews met his ministrations and he smiled wickedly. With a regretful sigh, he withdrew, letting her hair fall back.

"That's all you get this time. We have to go."

Hermione's eyes snapped open and she whipped around to glare at him heatedly. Mutinous eyes pinned him as she practically growled her displeasure. "Bloody hell!"

Snape bit back a smirk at her impatience and cocked one eyebrow. "Language..."

Hermione shot to her feet and wrinkled her nose at him. "Oh, sod off..."

Snape sputtered with laughter as he waved her past him. Snorting at her incensed reaction, he gathered his mask from the table by the door and dutifully composed himself for their trek to the Hall.

The rest of the cast was entering the Hall as they arrived. Dumbledore was casting *Suaviloquentia* on those who needed it as everyone took their places to begin the run-through. Snape slunk into the wing to await his cues, concealing himself in the shadows. Dumbledore set out a music box and called for places.

Ron, Neville, Millicent, and Harry entered the stage, crossing to the door of the dressing room, where Hermione sat waiting. As Harry entered the dressing room, they exited the stage into the wing. Harry and Hermione began their scene, and Dumbledore started the music for them to sing. Once Harry departed, Snape's music started, and he stepped up behind the mirror, still hidden from view. Once again, he used the *Sonorus* charm to let his voice echo throughout the theatre. They sang through "Angel of Music," Harry bursting back onto the stage and through the dressing room door right after Snape pulled Hermione through the mirror. At that point, Dumbledore was hard pressed to keep the set changes flowing as they continued through

Phantom of the Opera" in the "Labyrinth Underground."

The rest of the cast scrambled out into the house to watch the scene progress, since they hadn't seen the previous rehearsal for the blocking. Eyes goggled in rapt attention at the intricate set changes, and the smooth performances of their Head Girl and Potions Master.

Hermione felt mesmerized by Snape as they continued on to "Music of the Night." Snape put forth his usual intense effort, focusing on Hermione and relegating the rest of the cast to the realm of the unimportant. Therefore, he didn't hear the susurrus of gasps and whispers that met his hypnotic seduction through song.

When he wrapped his arms around Hermione and touched her face, Ron and Harry exchanged pained glances. Ginny was staring at them intently, brow creased in thought. Finally, as the scene progressed through to the point where he unveiled the wax form resembling Hermione, and it thrust its hand toward her, several of the girls jumped, startled. As Hermione crumpled, he deftly caught her and swung her up into his arms with consummate ease, gently depositing her on the bed. As he tenderly arranged her limp form, a few of the girls sighed, completely caught up in the pathos of the moment. When the song was finished, and the music stopped, Snape abruptly pulled up, coldly exiting the stage as Hermione opened her eyes and stared after him.

Ginny shook her head, trying to come out from the thrall of his intense performance. Mutters and shocked whispers buzzed through the rest of the cast, unprepared as they were for seeing such a side of their black-hearted professor.

Dumbledore beamed at everyone, calling for them to take their places again for a second run-through. This time, everyone put a little more effort into their performances, feeling rather outdone by Snape. He ignored everyone except Hermione, once again excelling in his part. Finally, Dumbledore had everyone go through the scenes one last time, satisfied that it was running smoothly. When it was over, he ordered everyone into the house for notes.

"Marvellous! Everyone is coming along splendidly! This Friday is our next rehearsal, and we will be blocking through 'Prima Donna.' I know those scenes are much longer than these have been, but the blocking will be fairly simple, so don't worry. Also, I want to remind everyone that we will be having our Secret Santa gift exchange on Christmas. Friday's rehearsal is the last one before Christmas, and we won't have another one until the 27th. I'll post about them on the notice board of course. Now, about Christmas..." Interested looks ricocheted through the group.

"We will have our normal holiday luncheon for everyone who is staying at Hogwarts for the break that day at 11:00. The Hall will be decorated for the holidays as usual, and if you've never stayed at Hogwarts over Christmas, you're in for a treat, as we have a wonderful feast to celebrate! That evening, after dinner, we will have a Christmas party for the cast. It will be a formal affair, so prepare your best outfits. We will have music and treats and we will do our Secret Santa gift exchange then. So, if you haven't yet taken care of your gift, make sure you do so soon! After the exchange, we'll reveal who chose whose names. The party will last until midnight, so we can all enjoy ourselves as a family. Remember, this cast is a family in and of itself, and we should take these opportunities to bond." The group exchanged varied looks, from excitement to disdain. Snape glanced at Hermione and saw a pleased smile on her lips. He nodded wryly to himself, knowing his Secret Santa gift would meet with approval, if nothing else!

Clapping his hands, Dumbledore twinkled at the cast and dismissed them. Excited murmurs arose throughout the group as they split into small clumps. Snape hung back, watching Hermione being pulled along with her House-mates. He was startled by an amused voice at his shoulder.

"Everything going all right with you, Severus?" Snape spun and politely nodded to the twinkling old man.

"I believe things are satisfactory at the moment."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Are you ready for the gift exchange?"

Snape rolled his eyes and sighed. "Yes. I have already taken care of that task. You needn't worry."

A jovial hand clapped Snape's shoulders, knocking him forward. "Excellent, my boy! I must tell you, you really are wonderful as the Phantom. You surpass yourself every time..."

Snape ducked his head uncomfortably. "Yes, well... I am merely doing my part for the success of the production."

Dumbledore crowed with delight. "Pun intended, Severus?" He laughed at Snape's grimace. Once again patting Snape's shoulders, he leant in confidentially and said, "Well, keep it up. You and Miss Granger are simply amazing together!"

Snape froze for a second, icy sweat prickling his skin. Thinking quickly, he responded, "Hmph. Fortunately, she does have some skill. It's a good thing for Hogwarts that we have a capable actress for an occasion such as this. She has been quite professional about her role, and I will admit that I find her almost tolerable to work with."

Dumbledore beamed at him. "Good to hear, good to hear. Very well then, run along. Keep up the good work." He waved his hands at Snape dismissively, and Snape inclined his head before spinning on his heel and stalking up the aisle to leave. The rest of the cast was gone already, so he missed one last chance to watch Hermione before he retired to his quarters. However, she was the only thing on his mind, as he headed straight for his work table, to finish the ribbon.

Once he had cut it to the appropriate length, he attached the clasp to the ends. Then, he retrieved the carving from his cabinet and used a Permanent Sticking Charm to attach the cameo to the ribbon. Humming in his throat, he smiled at the finished product. The choker was as close to the one she had worn to the play as was in his power to recreate. Every line was carved with the care borne of deep devotion, and he hoped she would be able to appreciate the time and attention he gave to his self-appointed project. Safely storing her gift out of sight, he made a mental note to acquire appropriate gift wrap, and soon.

Hermione was at the notice board, reading "Friday December 19: block the next morning, Notes, and Prima Donna. Actors required to attend: Everyone except Justin, Colin, Dean, Draco, and Seamus," when Ginny popped up behind her.

"Hey 'Mione!" Hermione spun to see the redhead grinning at her.

"Hey Gin, what's up?" She smiled at her friend as they continued into the Hall for lunch. "Just checking on rehearsal tomorrow night..."

Ginny saw Ron and Harry already at the table and pulled Hermione away from them, whispering, "Can I talk to you in private for a bit?" Hermione's brows rose but she nodded and followed the other girl to some seats down the table.

"Sure, what's going on? Is everything okay?"

Ginny nodded vigorously, a secretive smile on her face. "Oh, yes, everything's great. I just *have* to share with someone or I'm going to burst..."

Hermione leant closer as she filled her plate. "What?"

Ginny glanced around furtively and whispered, "I just got the sexiest outfit to wear for Harry for Christmas! I ordered it from a catalogue Lavender had. I know it's an outfit for me, but me wearing it is definitely for Harry!" She giggled.

Hermione blinked blankly as she felt colour rising in her cheeks. Lamely, she retorted, "That's... great, Gin. Really... I'm glad things are... going so well."

Ginny giggled again and smirked archly. "They are. I even managed to sneak into the boys' locker room after Quidditch practice Tuesday evening and we had a quickie before coming in. It was really exciting..." She laughed aloud at Hermione's shocked countenance.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley! You are going to get yourselves into so much trouble! What were you thinking?"

Ginny shrugged. "Oh, give over. It was no big deal. I told you, it was a quickie! Anyway, I wanted to ask you if you'd be willing to help us out for Christmas. I want to be able to wear the outfit for him, and I want it to be special, but we don't have a good place to meet. His dorm is out of the question, and you know he can't get into my dorm..." She turned imploring eyes on Hermione.

Hermione's eyes goggled and she choked. "No! You can *not* use my room!"

Ginny gripped Hermione's arm eagerly. "Please? If you won't help us, we'll just have to sneak out again..." She shot Hermione a challenging look. Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"I can't *believe* you! I should just turn you in myself..."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Come on, 'Mione! It's just for a couple of hours. I promise we'd leave everything in ship shape. You know I'd do the same for you if our positions were reversed." She favoured Hermione with usually-effective puppy-dog eyes.

Hermione stared at the redhead speculatively. Surreptitiously glancing around, she leant in and whispered, "I'll think about it. But if I agree, you owe me big."

Ginny's eyes lit up with hope. "Anything! You name it, it's yours!"

Hermione snorted and sat, pensively eating for a few moments. Ginny ate her lunch with an attitude of pent-up energy. Finally, Hermione took a deep breath and muttered. "I want to borrow some of your smut."

Ginny went still. Blinking rapidly, she queried, "What?"

Hermione fought the blush that was suffusing her face, to no avail. Looking decidedly embarrassed, she repeated, "I want to borrow some of your smut. You know, your trashy books. The ones your mum would throw a fit about if she knew you had them. I need them. For research..." She looked down at her food sheepishly.

Ginny swallowed. Dazedly, she stammered, "A-all right. You can come get them whenever you want... Research?" She regarded Hermione with a completely puzzled expression.

Hermione glared heatedly at Ginny and hissed, "Don't make me change my mind..." Ginny gasped and her brows shot to her hairline.

Vigorously shaking her head no, she grabbed Hermione's elbow and squeaked, "Really?" Hermione simply cut her a black look and Ginny bounced in her seat. "Oh, thank you! You're the best. Borrow whatever you want! I don't care!" She laughed delightedly and cast a wicked glance at the oblivious boys down the table. Turning solemnly back to Hermione, she averred, "I swear, I won't say anything to anyone, not even Harry. It'll be a surprise. I figure we can skive off from the Christmas party a bit early. It'll be perfect! Thank you so much..." She gave Hermione a quick squeeze and beamed at her.

Hermione morosely eyed her plate. "I hope I won't regret it..." Ginny went back to eating, and Hermione cast a glance up at Snape. He was watching her thoughtfully

through his hair. One eyebrow rose in question about her interactions with Ginny. Hermione grimaced and rolled her eyes. Then, sighing, she reached for the teapot to prepare her tea, and relaxed again when she saw Snape doing the same.

Well, at least I can start my research... Oh, Christmas can't get here soon enough!

Friday evening found Snape strolling down the aisle by the Gryffindor table, glaring at Hermione as she stood to follow him. They made the familiar trek to his quarters, entering in companionable silence once again. As soon as the door was closed, Snape reached for Hermione and cupped her cheek in his hand, gazing down at her, eyes gleaming with feeling.

She sighed and tilted her head into his caress, eyes closing. Her eyes snapped open again at his velvet purr. "I could easily get used to this..."

"This?" She looked up at him curiously.

He pinned her with an intense stare as he said, "Coming home... to you." Hermione's breath caught in her throat as she stared back at him. Slowly, he leant down and covered her lips with a gentle kiss. His hands slid into her hair and hers snaked up around his neck, pulling their bodies together. After a moment, Snape pulled back from the kiss and enveloped her in a tight embrace.

Hermione's voice trembled as she murmured, "I love you, Severus."

Snape's breath stirred her hair as he sighed, "Hermione, my love..." Then, he released her and smiled down at her. "Ready?"

Hermione grimaced in regret and nodded, knowing what he was referring to. She crossed to the chair and he retrieved the hair products from the bathroom. As he took his seat on the ottoman, he asked, "What were you and Miss Weasley so intent about yesterday at lunch? You looked quite flustered. Is she causing problems... she's not onto us, is she?" He shot a concerned glance over his shoulder. He blinked in surprise when Hermione firmly gripped his head and turned him back around.

"Hold still or I can't finish." She was grateful that he was facing away from her, since she was blushing again. "No, she was asking me for a favour. Nothing about us."

Mildly curious, Snape continued, "What favour? You didn't look like you were too pleased about it."

Hermione snorted and drawled, "I'm not, but I struck a bargain with her. So, it'll all work out. As for what favour, you needn't know. It's better that way..."

Snape's eyes narrowed in perplexity. "Just what is going on?" His voice hardened. "Will I run the chance of happening upon those two imbeciles again? I can't promise that I'll let them off again if I do..."

Hermione huffed in irritation. "I said it's taken care of, Severus! And no, you shouldn't find them again. Just don't worry about it." She finished his hair and let her hands slap onto her lap. Snape swivelled immediately and pinned her with a severe gaze. Hermione returned it with equal intensity. He squinted at her. "Look, you're the one who suggested their Head Girl should keep an eye on them. I am. So, forget about it." She thinned her lips and eyed him, showing no signs of backing down, folding her arms across her chest.

Snape stared at her for a moment, finally exhaling his displeasure, but capitulating. Scowling, he growled, "Fine. I will trust that you have things under control. Do not let my trust be misplaced." At that, he cocked an eyebrow and stood, crossing his arms as well. Hermione rose, letting her hands fall to her hips.

With grave dignity, she said, "Thank you. Now, shall we go?"

With equal solemnity, Snape drawled, "Certainly." He waved her ahead of him and they made their way up to the Hall.

Down near the stage, Dumbledore waved them to take their places from the end of "Music of the Night." "Severus, why don't you do what comes naturally. You do have such wonderful instincts about all this..." Snape nodded crisply. He took his place at the pipe organ, and Hermione sank down onto the bed. "Miss Granger, just respond as naturally as possible to whatever Professor Snape does. We'll change things later if we need to." Hermione nodded and looked to Snape. He turned from her and faced the keyboard.

Hermione began the scene, rising from the bed and reciting her lines, crossing to Snape at the organ. She quietly snuck up behind him, hesitantly reaching for his mask. Finally, as she finished her lines, she grasped it and pulled it from his face. Instantly, he covered his face with his hand, whirling on her in a rage. As he roared, "Damn you! You little prying Pandora! You little demon..." Hermione gasped, eyes wide, scuttling backwards, falling to the floor and cowering away from him.

Out in the house, the students gasped as well, terrified for Hermione as Snape advanced on her in fury. He was menace personified as he towered over Hermione, his free hand flailing wildly, making her cringe away from him. He paced the stage like a caged tiger as he continued, "Is this what you wanted to see? Curse you! You little lying Delilah! You little viper! Now you cannot ever be free..." He ended up back at the organ, leaning over it, and slammed his fist against it as he bellowed, "Damn you!" He drew a ragged breath and flung his hand violently outward as he spun away from her, his shoulders sagging as he cried, "Curse you!"

There was a beat of electric silence before he turned back to her, the side of his face that was usually covered by the mask turned upstage. His expression was cold and hard as he glared at her. He began, "Stranger than you dreamt it. Can you even bear to look or dare to think of me - this loathsome gargoyle who burns in hell but secretly yearns for Heaven. Secretly... Secretly..." Then, he deliberately stepped toward her, closing the distance between them as he continued, "But Christine... Fear can turn to love. You'll learn to see to find the man behind the monster - this repulsive carcass who seems a beast, but secretly dreams of Beauty. Secretly... Secretly..." He sank to his knees in front of Hermione as he neared the end, his voice fading softer and softer, until it broke as he rasped, "Oh, Christine..." He reached toward her and she flinched away from him, causing him to grip his hand into a fist and pull back, as if he had been burned. His face fell at the rejection, and Hermione hesitantly proffered his mask, gazing at him warily.

Snape took the mask, turned his back to the house, put it on, and turned more so that the mask was visible to the audience before rising and crossing back to the organ. Once there, he squared his shoulders and spun, composedly snapping, "Come, we must return. Those two fools who run my theatre will be missing you." He extended his hand imperiously, crossing back to her. Hermione took his hand and rose, stumbling after him as he dragged her into the wing.

In the wing, he faintly whispered, "Are you all right?" giving Hermione a searching look. She nodded hastily, flashing him a warm smile before they exited back onto the stage. Dumbledore was beaming at them again.

"I knew it! That was perfect. Now, let's get that copied down before we move on, shall we?" He began scribbling in his script and Hermione and Snape followed suit. Once they were done, Dumbledore changed the sets to the next scene with Buquet and the ballerinas. Terry Boot took the stage and recited his lines, standing where Dumbledore told him. The girls gathered around him, watching his performance. Dumbledore called out, "Severus!" Snape immediately emerged from the wing.

"Headmaster?"

"You and Miss Granger are supposed to come up through a trap door in the centre of the stage. I haven't yet figured out how we'll be handling that. So, for now, just go to the spot where it should be and pretend you've come up from below."

"As you say." He gestured to Hermione to join him centre stage. They took their position and Snape pinned Terry with a dangerous stare before he wrapped his arm around Hermione and led her back offstage. The ballerinas scampered off into the opposite wing, passing McGonagall as she entered and then recited her lines to Terry.

Dumbledore changed the sets again to the Managers' Office, and Neville nervously took his place at the desk. He took a deep breath and began reciting his lines, taking him to the point where Ron burst in to stomp over to the desk in a temper. They made it through their lines with ease, and Harry entered, joining them at the desk as well.

Neville stood once Harry handed his note to Ron. They read through the note, and Pansy flounced onto the stage, radiating haughty indignation.

Eventually, McGonagall and Ginny entered as well, adding to the line forming across the stage. Dumbledore directed Neville to cross to the centre when he took the note from McGonagall. Everyone else crowded around behind him to read along. Snape stood in the wing, *Sonorus* spell ready to chime in for the note.

As he finished the note, the group onstage spread out, Pansy stepping downstage to claim focus as she began her tirade. Ron and Neville flanked her to appease her. Harry, McGonagall, and Ginny stood to the sides behind them, each adding their own bits to the tumult. Their positions remained the same through "Prima Donna," and Snape bellowed his final threat, his enspelled voice echoing through the Hall.

Dumbledore clapped his appreciation as he called everyone back to begin again. The students watched again in fascinated wonder as Snape and Hermione performed the beginning scene with such expression. Slowly, they moved through the scenes, practicing the blocking. Then, after they finished the second time through, they repeated it once more, much more smoothly.

Dumbledore offered his ebullient praise again, reminding everyone that the next rehearsal would be after Christmas, and to be ready for the cast holiday party and the Secret Santa gift exchange. Smiles and chuckles met his reminders, and he wished everyone a pleasant break. Snape stalked up the aisle, glaring at anyone who was in his path. Students ducked away from him, even more fearful of him after his terrorizing performance. He sighed in annoyance, but was grateful that it was now the break, and he wouldn't have to deal with the dunderheads for two weeks, outside of rehearsals.

He secluded himself in his quarters, rereading the letters Hermione had sent him, letting his mind wander to the myriad things he wanted to do with her. His arousal tented the lounge wear he wore, and he retreated to his bedroom to strip down and get comfortable in his bed. Sprawling out on the cool satin sheets, he pillowed his head in his left hand, his right hand snaking down his body to tease his heated flesh.

Hermione... Gods, how I want you...

Long fingers wrapped around his cock, stroking and squeezing. His breath caught in his throat, and he exhaled forcefully, his body twitching at the pleasure arcing through him. His eyes closed, and he pictured Hermione, her lips parted, swollen and wet from his demanding kisses. He imagined her body, revealed to him in all its naked glory, her nipples stiffening and pointing toward him where he hovered over her. He remembered the taste of her skin, and how smooth it was under his tongue, and he increased his languid pace, fisting his cock harder. His left hand pulled out from behind his head and travelled down to cup his balls, holding them tightly, but not painfully.

His panting echoed through his room, but in his mind, he relived Hermione's whimpers and moans as he brought her to orgasm. Licking his lips, he yearned for the taste of her juices again. He envisioned her fantasy of taking her on the rug before his hearth, covering her with his body, sliding into her tight heat. At that thought, his strokes became more erratic, and his muscles tightened, heralding his impending orgasm. Squeezing with both hands, while still stroking furiously, a deep groan poured forth as he shot his come over his belly and hand. He felt the warm wetness cool quickly on his skin in the clammy dungeon air.

Each muscle relaxed in succession, until he felt as if he were melting into the mattress. Breathing deeply in the wake of his climax, he marvelled at how intense his lust was for the young woman who had changed his life so completely in the previous two months. But it was the matching intensity of his deeper feelings for her that made him smile in the darkness, idly reaching for his wand to clean up his mess before sinking into a sated slumber, his deep rumbling voice pervading the room as he murmured, "Good night, Hermione. Sleep well, my love."

Hermione was excited to receive her mail Saturday morning. It so happened that the packages from both the photo shop and Flourish and Blotts showed up at the same time. The Hall was practically empty that morning, as most of the students had already left the evening before to go home for the break, and those few that were left were having a lie-in to start the break off right. Hermione, never one to miss an opportunity to study for N.E.W.T.s, had decided to take advantage of the peace and quiet and got up early, her Arithmancy text on the table in front of her. She was amused to note that Snape hadn't even arrived at breakfast yet, and the morning post was arriving.

Happily offering the owls bits of bacon, she took the packages from them, glancing around furtively before tearing into the photos. Riffing through them, she was pleased to note that they were all good copies, and she looked forward to finishing her gift wrapping later that day. Then, she carefully opened the package from Flourish and Blotts, eagerly uncovering the book she had bought for Snape. As she unwrapped it from the tissue paper, she sighed in contentment to see the quality of the book.

It was aged leather, and the pages were indeed yellowed, but the binding was of obvious quality, and the pages of thin, strong, silky paper. The gilded, embossed title lent it a rather aristocratic air, and she was inordinately satisfied that it would suit Snape perfectly. Reverent fingers caressed the pages, gently flipping through them, and she leant closer to inhale the aroma of old book. It was a scent that Hermione revelled in, and this particular book was redolent with the almost musty smell of aging paper and old leather, strong glue and dark ink. Almost bouncing in her seat with joy, she gingerly wrapped it again and put it away, the wheels of her mind already forging ahead to how she could include the photo of her and Snape together with the book.

Excited to finish her holiday gifts, she gathered her things and left the Hall, feeling a moment's regret that she had not stayed long enough to see Snape. Once in her room, she took all her gifts from the hiding places in her closet and spread them on her desk and bed. She had just begun placing all the photos with the frames when there was a knock at her door.

"Who is it?"

Through the door she heard Ginny's muffled voice. "It's Ginny. You coming to breakfast? The boys are waiting in the common room."

Hermione snorted and called back, "I already ate. I'm wrapping gifts, so go on and I'll catch up with you lot later."

She heard Ginny's chuckle before she answered, "All right. See you later!"

Hermione continued putting the photos in the frames, and packaging them with the other bits and baubles she had got to add to each gift. As she finished each package, she transfigured parchment into colourful wrapping paper and wrapped them, gaily adding ribbons and bows for decoration. She left Snape's gift for last. After putting a photo of her in the silver and green frame, she wrapped it in tissue paper and placed it in a box. Once the book was ready with the other photo, it would join the framed one in the package, completing his gift. Sitting on her bed, leaning against the headboard, she gazed thoughtfully at the book. She skimmed through it, wondering where would be an appropriate place to add the photo. As she pondered, she decided that she would include an inscription on the flyleaf. But, in the interest of being safe, she realized she should use the disappearing ink.

Moving to her desk, she opened the ink and dipped her quill in the bottle, soberly thinking about what she wanted to write. Closing her eyes for a moment, she took a deep breath and wrote, *"For Severus, my love. In celebration of that which enlightened me to the man behind the Potions Master, and which indeed proved that fear can turn to love. This story will always have a special place in my heart; for without it, we may never have been brought together. I love you, my very own Angel of Music. Happy Christmas, beloved. With love, Hermione."* She chewed her lip, reading her words. Finally, she cast *Celo* and reached for the photo of her and Snape together.

Thumbing through the book, she realized that she wanted him to read the whole thing before finding the photo. Turning to the blank page between the final chapter and the epilogue, she used a gentle Temporary Sticking Charm to attach the photo to the blank page, following that with a concealment charm, of which the revelation would hinge upon reading the last line of the final chapter. Then, smiling to herself at her manipulations, she included a transfigured bookmark, upon which she wrote, *"Be sure to read the end of the last chapter aloud. Then you'll truly see the effects of your voice."* Giggling under her breath, she tucked the bookmark inside the flyleaf and lovingly wrapped the book, first in tissue paper, and then, after placing it inside the box, in silver paper with green ribbons. She didn't bother with placing his name on it. It was the only package in Slytherin colours, after all.

She hid all of the wrapped gifts again, warding them, just in case anyone somehow managed to snoop. Then, she gathered her gifts for her parents and trekked out to the owlery to send them on.

The days leading up to Christmas were filled with leisurely exploits. The Gryffindors played innumerable games of Wizard's Chess and Exploding Snap, sometimes even inviting some of the other remaining students to join them out in the snowy lawn, throwing snowballs and building snowmen and forts. Laughter rang through the castle and the grounds as the Hall was decorated by the staff for Christmas, with huge trees and wreaths, non-melting icicles and snowflakes, ribbons and garland, and festoons of holly and mistletoe. Every day there was something else added to the spectacular decorations.

In the interest of allowing students more freedom, the first Monday of the break, a notice was placed on the door of the Great Hall, informing the remaining students that meals would not be held in the Hall until the Christmas feast, and that they could order meals from the house-elves to be eaten in their common rooms during regular meal hours. It was both a novel experience for the students, and a welcome respite for the staff, who could adjust the Hall at will, without having to worry about clearing things away before mealtimes. Because of the new rules, Hermione saw very little of Snape before Christmas, a fact that caused her no little frustration.

She missed seeing him, sharing tea with him...well, at least at the same time as him...and most of all, she missed being in class and rehearsal with him, having the chance to be near him. She was looking forward to making the mousse for him, hoping he would like it. But, she was most excited to send him his gift. She had already decided that she would avail herself of Dobby's vehement desire to be useful, and have him deliver her gift to Snape's quarters Christmas Eve after she had made the mousse in the kitchens. She didn't want to take the chance that anyone would notice the package when she took her gifts to the house-elves before Christmas for distribution.

Dumbledore had always asked the house-elves to help with the festivities by keeping track of all of the presents that were sent for students who were staying at Hogwarts over breaks. Then, overnight, on Christmas Eve, they would distribute the gifts to the respective recipients, much like the elves in the lore of Santa Claus. That way, students were able to wake up to their gifts Christmas morning, and they had no chance to sneak peeks before they were supposed to. Dumbledore took great pleasure in his emulation of Father Christmas... not but what you'd notice with the twinkling and the jollity and all that.

Christmas Eve was fast approaching, and Hermione pulled Harry aside one evening. Glancing around to make sure no one was listening, she said, "Harry, I need to ask a favour again."

Thankfully, Harry had finally managed to revert to his former self, the one who was friends with Hermione and not trailing after her like a lovesick puppy. Ginny had really done wonders with him since they had got back together. Harry grinned at Hermione expectantly and said, "Sure, 'Mione, what do you need?"

"I need to borrow your Cloak Christmas Eve. Same thing as last time. Will you help me?" She looked at him, silently imploring.

Harry laughed. "No problem. Just make sure you come get it that evening. I'll say this; I can't wait to find out what you're up to!" He laughed again at Hermione's grimace and raspberry.

Hermione rolled her eyes and drawled, "You'll see at the gift exchange. Not much longer now!"

Harry wrinkled his nose and shrugged. "I'll be glad when it's all over. I really had no idea what to give a Slytherin."

Hermione huffed in exasperation. "Honestly, Harry, you make it sound like Slytherins are a completely different species or something. They're people too, you know!"

He eyed her askance and muttered, "You sure about that?" Hermione was about to smack him, incensed on Snape's behalf, but Harry continued, "I thought they were ferrets." At that point, she clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the bark of laughter that escaped. Eyes dancing with mirth, she forgave him his attitude and shoved him instead.

Giggling, she murmured, "Cheap shot, Harry, cheap shot!"

They chuckled and joined the rest of the lounging Gryffindors for a team game of Exploding Snap.

Christmas Eve was a raucous one in the Gryffindor common room. The remaining students were so excited about the holiday that they just couldn't settle down to sleep. Hermione had already retrieved the Invisibility Cloak from Harry earlier that day and was anxiously awaiting the time to sneak down to the kitchens. The hour was getting later, and it was already after curfew. Hermione was starting to get nervous about being able to get out of the Tower, what with everyone hanging about in the common room. Finally, she dragged Harry to one side again and hissed, "I can't get out of here with everyone hanging around! I can't very well sneak out under your Cloak right in front of them!" Her brow was creased with anxiety.

Harry patted her arm and whispered, "No worries. I'll take care of it. Go in the corridor and put the Cloak on. Then, come tap me and I'll go open the portrait. You can slip through that way."

Hermione's eye lit up with hope. "Will it really work? What will you do?"

Harry smirked. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it. Just go get the Cloak and tap me, okay?" Hermione nodded quickly and flashed him a grateful smile before dashing off. Harry wandered near the portrait hole and leant against the wall. Several minutes later, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Yawning hugely, he stretched his arms out, feeling Hermione slip past him. "Ahhh, I wonder if the house-elves are delivering gifts yet." He opened the portrait hole and made a show of looking out into the corridor. Pulling back, he felt Hermione edging past him.

Colin looked up and queried, "What'd you say, Harry? Why'd you open the portrait?"

Harry shrugged and said, "Oh, I was just wondering if the house-elves had started delivering gifts yet. Thought I'd have a look. I don't see any out there yet, but maybe they'll start soon." He paused, shutting the portrait. Frowning thoughtfully, he added, "Say, come to think of it, maybe they won't until we're all in bed. You know, like Santa's elves in the stories..." Several people perked up at that.

Colin muttered, "Well, maybe we should all clear off, so they can get to work. I don't want to miss out on my gifts just because we're down here too late." A murmur of agreement rippled through the group. Harry grinned.

"Well, then I suggest we all turn in. Come on, mates, off to bed with you."

Ron looked around, puzzled. "Oi, where's 'Mione?"

Harry cleared his throat and said, "She went to bed already. Didn't you lot notice? Oh well, we'll see her in the morning. So, let's move, folks!" He started making shooing gestures at everyone, urging them to vacate the premises. Stretching and yawning, they began to disperse, calling out "good night"s to the others. Harry waited until he saw that everyone was departing before he headed to the stairs to his dorm. Ginny caught him as he passed the shadows on his way to the stairs.

"Hey, you. Do I get a good night kiss?" She grinned impishly at him. He smiled back and pulled her to him. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her soundly.

"Does that qualify?" He cocked an eyebrow at her roguishly. She sighed and nodded happily.

"By all means. I hope you'll like my gift for you... Happy Christmas, Harry, and sweet dreams." She tilted her head and gave him a coy look before bouncing up and kissing him again.

As she pulled away from him, Harry drawled, "They'll be sweet dreams if I dream of you..." Ginny laughed and tossed her head.

"Smooth talker..." She rippled her fingers at him in a wave and climbed the stairs to the girls' dorms. Harry grinned to himself and headed for bed, looking forward to the next day more than any Christmas before.

Hermione crept down to the kitchens, carrying her chocolate and Snape's gift. She tickled the pear in the painting and was stunned by the sight that met her eyes as she entered the kitchens. House-elves were scurrying about, carrying loads of gaily wrapped gifts. They were stacking them in four piles, presumably for each House.

As she stared, wide-eyed, at the bustle, stuffing the Cloak into her robe, Dobby appeared by her, clapping his hands and bouncing in his excitement as he squealed, "Miss is here! Oh, Harry Potter's friend is here, just like Miss said! Dobby has everything ready for Miss. Just follow Dobby..." He gripped her elbow and guided her through the maze of preparations.

They arrived at a stove, with all of Hermione's ingredients and utensils stacked on the adjacent counter. Hermione fished the recipe out of her pocket and stuck it to the cabinet above the stove with a Temporary Sticking Charm. Turning to Dobby, she flashed him a dazzling smile and said, "Thank you so much, Dobby. I can manage from here. Don't let me keep you from your other tasks. I promise I'll clean up when I'm done. You've been such a help. Just remember, this is a secret. All right?"

Dobby nodded so vigorously that his ears flapped and his eyes widened so much that Hermione feared that they might fall out of his head. Breathlessly, Dobby said, "Oh, yes, Miss. Dobby understands. If you need anything else, just call for Dobby. Dobby hopes Harry Potter and all his friends have a happy Christmas. And now, Dobby must help deliver gifts, Miss..." At that, Hermione jumped and grabbed Dobby's arm.

"Oh! Thank Merlin you reminded me! Dobby, I have a package that needs to be delivered. Would you do that for me? It's a secret too, which is why I didn't just put it with the others..." She gazed solemnly at the elf, and he puffed his chest out in pride.

"Dobby will help Miss, with anything! What should Dobby deliver, and where?"

Hermione gravely handed him the silver-wrapped package and whispered, "This needs to be delivered to Professor Snape. Tonight, when you're all taking the rest of the packages around. It isn't labelled, but you know whose it is, right? And you can take it for me, can't you?" She smiled brightly at Dobby, holding the package out.

Dobby eagerly took the present and stood ramrod straight. "Dobby will take Miss's package! Dobby will deliver it to Professor Snape tonight! Thank you for letting Dobby be of service!" He bobbed and bowed as he backed away deferentially, carefully holding the gift. Hermione nodded in relief and waved pleasantly before turning to her recipe.

Then, face set in intense concentration, she set about brewing the chocolate mousse with all the seriousness that she approached any potion Snape had ever set them. *Whew! Thank Merlin that's done. Now, for the mousse... It has to be perfect!*

Perspiration was beaded on her upper lip by the time she had finished. Full of pent-up excitement, she dipped a spoon into the mixture and tasted it. Her eyes closed and she exhaled a long sigh of contentment. *Oh, it's good...* Smiling in satisfaction, she cleaned up the area and prepared the mousse for transport to her room, where it would remain until the cast party. As she turned to go, she was struck with a thought. *I wonder if they have any cherries...* Searching for Dobby in the organized chaos that surrounded her, she despaired of ever finding him. Catching the eye of another house-elf, she asked, "Do you know where Dobby is?"

The other elf nodded and dashed off, returning moments later with Dobby. Once he had presented Dobby to Hermione, he scampered off again before Hermione could even finish thanking him properly. Dobby gazed up at Hermione again.

"What can Dobby do for Miss?"

Hermione smiled gently at him and whispered, "I've finished my recipe, but I was wondering if you had any maraschino cherries, you know, the bright red ones with the long stems?"

Dobby snapped his fingers and grinned widely. Snapping his fingers again, a jar appeared in his hand, which he proffered to Hermione. Hermione uttered a little cry of delight and took the jar, impulsively hugging Dobby.

"Perfect! Thank you, Dobby! You just made my Christmas even better!" She beamed down at the elf. Dobby gazed at her in awe. He clasped his hands tightly and seemed to tremble from head to toe. Hermione's grin faded in apprehension. Hesitantly, she asked, "Are you all right?"

Dobby's eyes watered and two large tears welled up, dripping down his cheeks. Hermione frowned at him in consternation. Dobby seemed to choke as he gasped, "Miss hugged Dobby! Harry Potter's friend treated Dobby as a friend! Oh, this is a great day for Dobby..."

Hermione blinked, disconcerted by the creature's abject adoration. Uncomfortably, she said, "Oh. Well, good. You've been a great help, Dobby, and I am your friend. Just like Harry. But I have to go back to Gryffindor Tower now, and you have to finish your deliveries. So, good night, and Happy Christmas, Dobby!" She ducked away and hurried off, before the elf could prostrate himself more.

She made it to the painting and pulled the Cloak on again, gripping the bowl of mousse and the jar of cherries tightly. Her heart pounded as she snuck back up to the Tower, hoping that she wouldn't be found out by any delivering house-elves. She whispered the password to a sleepy Fat Lady and ducked quickly through the portrait, rushing to her room.

Once she was safely back in her room, she heaved a sigh of relief and hid the mousse and the Cloak. Warily climbing into bed, she hugged herself in glee over the success of her plan and almost immediately dropped off to sleep with Snape's face in her mind, smiling in pleasure at her gifts.

33- Christmas and the Cast Party- part 1 of 2

Chapter 34 of 84

part 1 of 2 Christmas finally arrives, and we find out what everyone gets for their presents. Then, it's the cast party that night, and how will Snape surprise Hermione (and everyone else, for that matter)?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: I know this took more than the usual 2 weeks, but I ended up doing what had to be split into 2 chapters, so PLEASE make sure you read both of them, and in the right order! LOL Oodles of thanks go out to: Ladyofthemasque, Laela, Horserider, SnivellusSnape, and yutamiyu. And, thank you so much to everyone who reviewed

and kept asking about the next chapter! :) Remember, you can find out about the current status of my work on my livejournal at http://www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon/ . Also, Becky has been doing all sorts of ROCKIN' fanart for me for this fic. You can see it at photobucket at the address listed on my livejournal. *bows down to Becky* Anyway, here it is at long last, hope it's worth the wait! :)

Nicole aka Good_Witch aka pern_dragon

Chapter 33- Christmas and the Cast Party- part 1 of 2

Snape slept fitfully, waking often, afraid to miss the house-elf's arrival with his ingredients Christmas morning. He grumbled to himself as he saw every hour on the clock through the night. Finally, around six o'clock, he gave up and got out of bed to get ready. After his morning ablutions, he dressed in his lounge wear and headed into his sitting room to await the house-elf. He was surprised to see more than the usual obligatory gifts on his dining table.

Every year, from Minerva he would receive a tin of shortbread, from Albus a bag of lemon drops, from Filius a sharp new raven feather quill, and from Pomona a brave potted seedling. And every year, Snape would manage to eat one or two biscuits before the rest went stale, resignedly pucker over one lemon drop before just dumping the rest into Albus's bowl when he wasn't looking the next time he was in the headmaster's office, snag parchments trying to use the sharp quill, and sigh over the over-optimistic idea that any plant could thrive...well, even survive!...down in the dungeons as he watched the seedling wither and die.

Christmas generally didn't hold much interest for him... until now. Among the standard gifts from his fellow Heads of House and the headmaster was a shiny silver package, decorated with green ribbons. His pulse quickened along with his pace as he strode across the room to examine it.

There's no name on it! Here are the others, as always, but this one is new. It must be from Hermione. Granted, I suppose I can understand why she didn't label it... Feeling the anticipatory excitement threading through him, he sat at the table, negligently shoved the other gifts out of the way, and began untying the ribbon. With the ribbon off, he carefully untaped the sides and removed the thick, shiny paper. Opening the box, he gingerly lifted the tissue-covered book, laying it on the table and gently unwrapping it. His eyes lit up as he saw the book. Reverent fingertips grazed along the leather cover, tracing across the gilded, embossed title. A delighted smile broke over his face, making him look for all the world like any child getting just what he wanted on Christmas.

He opened the book and saw the parchment bookmark, with Hermione's inscription. *"Be sure to read the end of the last chapter aloud. Then you'll truly see the effects of your voice."* How curious... What has the little minx done now? His smile widened indulgently as he flipped through the pages, caressing them with obvious care. Black eyes shining, he closed the book again, to savour the leather binding. After a pause, he frowned thoughtfully and opened the book to the bookmark, where it lay inside the flyleaf. On a whim, he pointed his wand at it and murmured, *"Aperio."* Instantly, writing appeared, but not on the bookmark as he had expected.

Slightly taken aback, he began reading Hermione's dedication on the flyleaf, and his chest tightened painfully. Closing his eyes against the moisture that threatened to escape, he breathed deeply, love and gratitude almost overwhelming him.

Hermione... my love. His head bowed for a long moment before he closed the book gently and reached for the tissue paper to toss away. Pulling the box to him, he felt that it still had something in it, and he peered inside, surprised. More tissue filled the bottom, obviously wrapped around something else. Mouth falling open in amazement, he picked up the second gift, tearing the tissue away. His breath escaped his lungs forcefully, as if someone had kicked him in the gut. Weakly falling back in his chair, he gazed at the photo of Hermione, looking sophisticated and charming in her elegant dress and accessories.

Memories of the evening they had gone to the play flooded him, bouncing from one extreme to another. It took a moment for him to realize that his knuckles were white, so tightly was he gripping the frame. Consciously relaxing his hold, he took a deep breath and attempted to view the gift objectively. Wrenching his gaze from her image...which was static, like all Muggle photos...he noticed how ornate the frame was, with its carved silver viney inlaid with green gems. A tender smile graced his lips as he thought, *Even in this, she caters to my Slytherin side. The wrapping paper, the frame... So thoughtful.*

He was startled from his reverie by the muffled pop that indicated a house-elf had appeared. Hastily shoving the photo under the discarded tissue, he stood and spun, face once again a mask of indifference. The house-elf stood near the hearth, a tray of ingredients in its hands.

"Master Snape, Tandy has the recipe ingredients. Tandy isn't late. Master Snape said Tandy could come as early as 7:00, and Tandy is here, as promised, sir." The creature bowed and bobbed at Snape, who quickly strode over to the elf and retrieved the tray of ingredients.

"Excellent, Tandy. I thank you. You have been most helpful. That will be all." He nodded politely at the elf, who nodded and beamed back at him.

"Thank you, Master Snape. Tandy is glad to help. Happy Christmas, sir."

Snape inclined his head gracefully and gently replied, "It is, Tandy, thank you. Happy Christmas to you and the other house-elves as well. Good day."

Tandy practically wriggled in ecstasy at being wished a happy Christmas, clasping her hands and grimacing in abject gratitude. Bowing and bobbing again, she gasped, "Thank you, Master Snape! Thank you!" Then, with another pop, she disappeared, leaving Snape to gaze at the fire in the hearth, musing on his good fortune.

Sighing, he briskly turned to the table and picked up the photo, carefully cradling it as he entered his lab to begin the mousse. He propped the photo up on his table, so he could look at it as he worked. A ghost of a smile flirted with his lips as he methodically prepared the recipe. When he finally finished, he tasted the concoction, hoping it was good.

The rich flavour spread over his tongue, and he closed his eyes in appreciation. *Mmm. Not exactly like her mother's but delicious nonetheless. I daresay it will meet with her approval...* Quickly tidying his workspace, he cast the cooling charm on the bowl and put it away in a cabinet, adding a stasis charm for good measure. Satisfied, he returned to his quarters to dress for the Christmas lunch, even though it was hours away.

He whiled away the time before it by lying on his bed, reading the book, and glancing at the photo now placed on his nightstand, occasionally running his fingers over it, as if to reassure himself that it was indeed real.

Hermione awoke, excitedly realizing that Christmas had come at last. Rubbing her eyes, she sat up in bed and saw a stack of gifts waiting for her in the armchair. Crookshanks purred at her from the foot of the bed. Stretching, she reached down and scrubbed his head. "Happy Christmas, Crooks!" She hastily threw the covers back and bounded to the stack, immediately ripping into them as if she were a five-year-old.

Wrapping paper flew all around her, and Crookshanks watched with amused disdain as she squealed and gasped and laughed and made comments on her gifts. Upon opening one package from her folks, she clasped her hands and breathed, "Oh! How wonderful! I can't believe she let me have it!"

Eyes shining, she lifted from the box the dress that she had worn to the play with Snape. A note fluttered to her lap. Picking it up, she read, *"Dear Hermione, I decided that you must have this dress. It was perfect on you. Hopefully, you'll have occasion to wear it again. You look beautiful in it, darling, and I hope you are pleased to have it. Happy Christmas! Love, Mum."*

Hermione hugged the dress to her and closed her eyes, beaming. A cascade of memories washed over her from the night she and Snape had gone to the play. Sighing, she murmured, "It's perfect, Mum. Thank you so much!" Then, as she looked at the dress again, she laughed aloud, bouncing in place. "Oh! It is perfect! I can wear it tonight to the party! Won't Severus be surprised? I can't wait to see his face!" Grinning in anticipation, she carefully folded the dress back into the box and tore into the rest of her gifts. Eventually, she came to a small, narrow box, wrapped in gold paper, but with silver ribbons. Her name was on it, in Snape's distinctive writing.

Inhaling sharply in excitement, she paused, wondering what could be inside. *Just like us: Gryffindor gold and Slytherin silver! What could it be? Well, it's too small to be a book!* Giggling, she pulled the ribbons off and unwrapped the box. Opening it, she saw the choker lying against a bed of scarlet velvet. Her eyes widened in wonder as she lifted the black velvet ribbon, examining the iridescent cameo.

Why, it looks like my mum's! But it's not. Hers was solid black, and this has a sheen to it. It's beautiful! Is it... no, it couldn't be... Is it bicorn horn?! Someone had to have made this in the wizarding world then! I wonder where he found it... It's so lovely. This is even better! I can wear this with the dress tonight, and it will be like when we went to the play! When we finally realized how much we felt for each other... I can't wait to see him. I just wish I could thank him at lunch! It will be so hard to just sit there when all I want to do is spend Christmas with him...my best gift ever!

Tenderly placing the choker back in the box, she noticed a bit of parchment tucked in with the velvet. Curious, she pulled it out and unfolded it. It was blank. Grinning mischievously, she tapped it with her wand and said, "*Aperio*." Snape's writing appeared, cramped and spiky. Tears pricked her eyes as she read it.

"My beloved Hermione, I made this choker for you in the hopes that the memories it may evoke are as cherished by you as they are by me. Know that every line etched was filled with my love for you. I hope that when you wear it, you will feel me close to you, as I long to be. Happy Christmas, my love. Mine is already, as you are the best gift I could ever receive. I love you, Hermione."

Yours completely, Severus."

Sniffing against the tears that clung to her lashes, she got up and placed the note with her other letters from him. Belatedly, she cast *Celo* on it, the writing disappearing instantly. Chewing her lip, she mused, *A thousand blessings and good fortune on Fred and George!* Then, chuckling, she returned to her gifts, finishing the last few and Vanishing the wrapping paper.

Hugging Crookshanks in the excess of her happiness, she kissed his furry face and laughed as she spun to the bathroom, seeing his smug cat expression. Humming in contentment, she bathed, knowing that the other Gryffindors would soon be clamouring for everyone to get together in the common room to celebrate before lunch.

She was just finishing drying her hair when she heard a loud banging on her door, accompanied by hoots and shouts of laughter. Grinning, she ran to the door and flung it open, to find Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Neville all crowded around her door, grinning and jostling each other in high spirits. As one, they cried, "Happy Christmas!" and tumbled through her door, hugging her as they came.

Laughing, Hermione responded, "Happy Christmas to you, too!" She flopped on her bed and beamed at her friends, who all found spots in her chairs or on her bed as well. Ron was already happily eating a chocolate frog, and Harry was sucking on a candy cane.

Ginny tugged on Hermione's arm and said, "All right, we're all checking out everybody's loot! What do you have, 'Mione? Oh! And we all agree that the photos are great, even if they are Muggle." She grinned and Hermione laughed.

Ron piped up, "Yeah, you looked smashing, 'Mione! You were so pretty, I almost didn't recognize you!" Ginny squawked in indignation and punched Ron in the arm, making him yelp. "Oi! What was that for?"

"Really, Ron, you *are* an idiot sometimes! I can't believe you'd insult Hermione like that...and on *Christmas!*"

Ron's eyes were wide in confusion. "Insult her? I was complimenting her! I said she looked smashing!" Everyone else giggled at Ron's oblivious expression and Ginny's exasperated rolling of her eyes. She tossed her hands up as if to say, "I give up."

Hermione leant over and patted Ginny's hand. "It's okay, Gin. I understand a Ron compliment when I hear one. Don't worry about it." She grinned at her friends and crossed to her pile of gifts, plopping down amongst them. "Okay, here it is!" She went through her gifts, thanking them for what they had given her, explaining who had given her what otherwise, and generally having a good time. She could barely contain her excitement as she opened the dress box and showed it to them.

Ginny clapped her hands and squealed in delight. The boys exchanged bemused glances. Then, Neville asked, "Isn't that the dress you were wearing in the photos you gave us?"

Hermione nodded. "My mum said I should have it. It was hers. But now it's mine!" She continued through more gifts, until she came to Snape's. She hesitated a moment, but Ginny spied the small box and pounced.

"Ooh! What's in there? Good things come in small packages! That looks small enough to be a jewellery box. What is it?" Her eyes gleamed with interest.

Hermione slowly opened the box, unsure of what to say. Harry cut in, "Wow! And your mum gave you the choker too? That was really nice of her!"

Hermione reeled in relief and gladly grasped Harry's supposition, acting as if it were the truth. Fortunately, Ginny interrupted before Hermione could respond. "Perfect! You can wear them together! They do go together so well... Oh! 'Mione! I have an idea!" The redhead bounced on the bed, eyes wide. "Why don't you wear them to the cast party tonight? Dumbledore said it was formal, and you'd look positively smashing!" She beamed at Hermione hopefully.

Hermione laughed and said, "I think that's a great idea, Gin. I'll do it." Ginny clapped her hands again, grinning. Then, Hermione added, "So, let's get out of here. I want to know what you all got!"

They all scrambled to their feet, hurrying to the common room. The morning passed pleasantly enough among the cheerful teenagers, until it was time to go to the holiday lunch. Everyone traipsed down to the Great Hall, lively with happiness, and hungry for the excellent feast about to be set before them.

They entered the Great Hall to see it resplendent with wintry decorations. Instead of the usual High Table and House tables, there were smaller tables, set in a pentagon, one side for members of each House and one for the staff. It was much more intimate than the normal setup, since there were far fewer students present. Students took seats, and some even sat with their friends from other Houses...except for Slytherin. They glared loftily at the others for mixing. Cheerful greetings rang through the Hall as people filed in. Even the staff smiled at the students and wished them a happy Christmas.

Snape stealthily entered, keeping to the edges until he could take a seat at the staff table. His eyes sought Hermione, laughing with her mates. It was but a moment before she unerringly turned to see him watching her, her beatific smile even more joyful upon seeing him. He pressed his lips together firmly to keep from grinning back. But, he hoped she could see in his eyes the wonder and delight he felt at her gifts. He nodded slightly at her as he took his seat, politely responding to the well-wishes and greetings from the other staff present. He gravely, if a trifle coolly, thanked the other Heads of House, as he did every year.

Eventually, Dumbledore was the only one not present. Everyone began whispering at his tardiness. Curious eyes glanced about, looking for him. Finally, he burst through the staff entrance, creating quite a spectacle.

A ripple of murmurs and whispers flowed through the assembled group as they goggled at him. He was wearing a long robe of bright red velvet, trimmed with white fur. Atop his head was a cap of the same materials, and over his shoulder was slung a large, bulging bag. As he entered, he bellowed, "Happy Christmas, everyone!" beaming and twinkling to rival any Father Christmas anywhere.

A multitude of voices responded, shouting, "Happy Christmas to you!" Laughter bubbled up as he approached the tables, letting the bag swing around his shoulder to the floor behind his chair. He made a show of opening the bag and withdrawing a string of bells, which tinkled as he shook them. Pointing his wand at them, he uttered some spells that made them hover over the tables, playing Christmas melodies. A couple of students clapped at the display. Then, he reached in and began pulling out crackers, tossing them to the waiting hands of the students. Cheering resounded through the Hall, accompanied by the bells chiming merrily.

Snape closed his eyes, grimacing at Dumbledore making such a fool of himself. He glowered in disdain as the old man thrust some party crackers at him. As Dumbledore moved to hand out more, Minerva leant toward Snape and sniffed. "Really, Severus, do try to look as if you're having a good time. You wouldn't want to ruin Christmas for the poor children, would you?"

He cut a black glance at her. Acidly, he stretched his lips into a horrific caricature of a smile. Rolling her eyes, Minerva snorted and muttered, "Never mind! That's worse than the glaring..." At that, Snape's lips rippled in amusement as he snorted. His expression softened into his usual smirk, and Minerva cast a long-suffering look at him before she smiled indulgently and whispered, "Happy Christmas, Severus. Remember, this is the first one since Voldemort's defeat, so there is something to be happy about."

Snape inclined his head graciously and drawled, "How could I forget? Happy Christmas to you as well, Minerva." She blinked in astonishment at his amiable rejoinder before nodding at him and sitting back in her seat, turning her attention back to Dumbledore and his antics.

My dear Minerva, if you only knew how much I had to be happy about this Christmas.. He glanced back at Hermione, feeling his chest tighten at her radiant smile and infectious laughter.

Dumbledore finally finished distributing his loot and contentedly sat, beaming at his charges. With a dramatic gesture, he announced, "Let the feast begin!" Glorious food appeared along the tables, sending the students into sighs of rapture. Immediately, the hubbub died down as everyone filled their plates and began stuffing themselves.

After a long, leisurely lunch, replete with every delectable dish ever concocted for the holiday, the group settled into sated conversations, erupting into laughter as they pulled crackers and shared stories. Snape idly watched the interactions among the students, relieved to see that Potter and the Weasley girl seemed quite involved with each other, and neither of them looked to be giving Hermione any more grief. In fact, everyone seemed to be perfectly happy, enjoying themselves hugely.

In his silent ruminations, Snape thought forward to the evening's party, wishing that he could be free to involve himself with Hermione like the younger couples would certainly be doing. He hoped that she had liked his gift, and he wished he could do more to please her, after the double surprise she had sent him. His gaze trained on some faraway point as his thoughts turned inwards, and he never even noticed anyone looking at him, not even when they were staring at him with a puzzled air, trying to determine what was different about him. His whole demeanour was somehow calmer, more peaceful, and it unnerved some of the students and perplexed some of his colleagues.

Thus, it was with no little consternation that Minerva regarded him when he seemed to stiffen in his chair, his eyes flashing and his whole person suddenly full of pent-up energy. The ghost of a smug smile on his lips was even more disconcerting. He pushed back from the table abruptly, drawing Dumbledore's attention.

"Leaving so soon, Severus?" Dumbledore eyed him genially.

Snape inclined his head as he murmured, "I would hardly call it soon, Albus. We've been here for hours already. I do have some things to attend to in my quarters, before the festivities this evening." He stood, nodding politely to the staff. "Good day to you, and... Happy Christmas." One corner of his mouth quirked up in amusement at the surprised looks the other teachers gave him.

Dumbledore nodded and said, "Very well then. We shall see you this evening. And Happy Christmas to you, too, dear boy." Snape swept the Hall with a pensive look as he strode to the exit.

Hermione glanced up at him as he rose, wishing she could leave with him so they could spend some time together. A tiny sigh escaped her lips as she watched him leave.

"Odd, how different he seems, isn't it?" Hermione started and turned to see Ginny's speculative frown as the other girl leant toward her.

Apprehensive, Hermione simply said, "Different? What do you mean?"

Ginny tilted her head and wrinkled her nose. "I dunno' really. He just seems... different. Like, I would have thought he'd be snarkier, having to be here, with all of us around too. He's still a mean git, but he hasn't been quite as unrelentingly horrid as usual. It's like he's changed, but I can't explain how."

Hermione blinked, frozen in fear that Ginny would figure things out. Tentatively, Hermione ventured, "Well, it *is* Christmas. And the war is finally over. So, maybe he's actually getting a chance to relax. He *is* a human being, after all."

Ginny shrugged noncommittally. "I really have no idea, but it's just odd. I see it in rehearsals sometimes too. I mean, he hasn't ripped you to shreds, and you have to spend so much time with him... Then again, even you say he's not bad, so there has to be some answer to why he's not as much of a bastard as he used to be."

Hermione struggled to keep breathing evenly. Icy dread gripped her heart, but she forced her attention to her plate, toying with the remains of her pudding. In a tone of bored indifference, she said, "Hmm. Who knows. It's really none of our business, if you think about it."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I know that! But you know me. I'm just naturally inquisitive." She schooled her expression into a prim façade, and Hermione laughed.

"Naturally inquisitive'? Try nosy, Gin. That suits you much better..." She laughed again as the redhead shoved her arm indignantly and stuck her tongue out at Hermione.

From behind her, Harry drawled, "Hey Gin, don't stick it out unless you plan to use it..." Ginny's brows shot up before she grinned saucily at Harry's wicked smirk.

"Tempting..." she lilted, and Hermione covered her face with her hands, groaning.

Hermione's voice held a long-suffering note as she said, "T.M.I.!" Then they all laughed, and Hermione heaved a sigh of relief that Ginny was once again distracted from her unnerving near-discovery of Snape's reason for being happier.

Eventually, everyone dispersed, the cast members ready to relax and likely take a nap before the party that night. As Hermione returned to her room, once again gazing at the choker and dress in amazed appreciation, Snape was in his room, reading the book she had given him, well on his way to finishing it before the festivities.

Later that evening, Hermione was getting ready for the cast party. She had taken a long, hot bath, soaking in the scented water. Then, she used some of the new lotion she had received for Christmas and slathered it all over. It was a lovely fragrance of citrus and honey, sweet but subtle. Once again putting on her transfigured stockings, suspender belt and shoes, she slipped into the dress, admiring how perfectly it hugged her body. Reverently, she clasped the choker around her throat, feeling her throat and chest tightening and tears pricking her eyes as a great surge of love overwhelmed her. Smiling, she looked at her reflection. Then, she frowned.

Blast! I don't know how to do my hair like Mum did... And it just doesn't look right just hanging like this. That's it. I need help... Resigned, she spun and burst out of her room, heading straight for Lavender's dorm room.

At her knock, Lavender opened the door, gasping in amazement at Hermione's elegant look. "Oh, Hermione! You look wonderful!" She beamed at her and pulled her into the room. Lavender was wearing a silk kimono, having been applying her makeup before dressing.

"Hi, Lavender. Where's Parvati?" Hermione glanced around, looking for the dark beauty.

"Oh, she's still in the bathroom. That's such a beautiful dress!"

"Thanks! My mum sent it to me for Christmas. Um, listen, I was wondering if you could help me." She looked at Lavender sheepishly.

"With what?" Lavender sat back at her vanity, continuing with her makeup, eyeing Hermione in the mirror.

Hermione worried her hands and replied, "Well, my mum did my hair this really nice way, and I want to do it again, but I don't know how. If I showed you a picture, do you think you could help me?" She gazed at Lavender's reflection imploringly.

Lavender blinked at her in the mirror before spinning and facing Hermione. Her eyes gleamed. "You want me to do your hair?"

Hermione shrugged and nodded. "Would you, please?"

Lavender jumped up and flew at Hermione, hugging her impulsively. "Of course! Why, I've always said that you could do so much with your hair, if you only tried. Yes. I will do it. Just show me what you want, and I'll do it!" She grinned at Hermione, who was torn between relief and anxiety.

Faintly, Hermione said, "I'll just go get the photo. Be back in a tick." Then, she hurried from the room, heading to Ginny's dorm, hoping to borrow the photo she had given her for Christmas.

She knocked on the door and heard Ginny call out, "Who is it?"

"It's Hermione. Can I come in?"

Muffled by the door, she heard Ginny say, "Sure, come on in!" Hermione opened the door and stepped in. Ginny had the dorm to herself over break, as the others had all gone home. Hermione stopped dead in her tracks, stunned by the sight before her.

Ginny was standing proudly, her hands flung to the sides as she crowed, "Ta da!" Hermione's eyes bugged out, unable to look away from her scantily clad friend. Ginny was wearing a sheer, lacy bra in deep blue, which stood out against her pale skin. The matching knickers were barely that, more realistically a triangle of the same see-through lace held on by thin string. The bra and G-string both had sapphire rhinestones at the corners, glittering in the light. Along with that salacious ensemble, Ginny wore a suspender belt of the same deep blue, but in satin, and the clasps held up dark, smoky stockings. As Ginny spun, Hermione saw that the stockings had seams up the back, and she tried not to notice her friend's bare arse. When Ginny faced her again, she put her hands on her hips and asked, "So, what do you think?"

Hermione cleared her throat, flushing madly. "Ginevra Molly Weasley! What *are* you wearing?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and sighed. "Mione! I *told* you I bought this to wear for Harry! Remember?"

Hermione passed a hand over her eyes and groaned. "Yes..."

Ginny smirked again and said, "So... what do you think?"

"I think it's more than I needed to see. Wait, make that *less* than I needed to see. Honestly, Gin, I don't need proof that you're a natural redhead..." Ginny burst out laughing at Hermione's sardonic tone.

Taking pity on her obviously embarrassed friend, Ginny slipped a robe on. "Well, if it scandalizes you that much, I daresay Harry will like it."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Oh, definitely! Hey, listen, can I borrow the picture I gave you? Just for a bit. I need to show Lavender, so she can do my hair that way for tonight."

Ginny clapped her hands. "Of course! That's great! You really do look fabulous; I should have said something sooner, but we were too busy dealing with your prudishness..." She wrinkled her nose at Hermione in jest. Hermione grimaced back. "Oh! Speaking of..." She whirled and hastened to her trunk, rummaging through it. When she spun around again, her arms were full of books and magazines. Brightly, she queried, "Do you want to borrow these now?"

Hermione blushed again. Uncomfortable to say the least, she took the items from the grinning redhead and shrunk them to the size of a matchbook, tucking them in her cleavage. Ginny snickered at her, but subsided at Hermione's glare. Ginny cheerfully handed Hermione the photo, and Hermione muttered, "Thanks. I'll bring it back soon." She turned to head for the door.

Behind her, Ginny teased, "Don't worry about bringing the rest back soon. Take all the time you want in your *research*." Hermione turned a black look on her, which just made the other girl laugh.

Huffing in exasperation and shaking her head, Hermione sighed, "Thank you, Ginny. I'll see you later..." She shut the door behind her, blocking out the sound of Ginny's giggles.

When she returned to Lavender's room, she was taken aback to find the other young witch waiting for her, pointing to the chair before the vanity, a dazzling array of hair products before them.

Imperiously, Lavender said, "Sit!" Hermione obeyed, handing Lavender the photo. Pursing her lips critically, Lavender murmured, "Hmm. Looks like a twist. That shouldn't be too hard. All right, let's go!" She placed the photo on the vanity and immediately took charge of Hermione's head, tilting it, turning it, then pulling and twisting her hair.

Hermione kept her mouth shut, not wanting to antagonize Lavender, since she really wanted her hair to look nice. Parvati returned and offered a short greeting before she started getting ready herself. Hermione watched in amazement as Lavender coaxed and cajoled Hermione's mass of frizz and curls into a replica of the picture's sleek twist and cascade of smooth curls with long tendrils framing her face. Granted, where her mother had used pins and spray and gel, Lavender used charms and potions. But, the result was just as pleasing. Finally, after one final, minute adjustment, Lavender eased back, smiling in satisfaction.

"There. How's that?" She met Hermione's eyes in the mirror.

Hermione beamed, marvelling at the change. "Lavender, it's perfect! Thank you so much!" She stood and hugged her in gratitude. Lavender grinned, smug.

"Glad you like it. I must say, it does make a difference. And you're right, your hair looks much better up with this dress and jewellery. Now, just go do your makeup, and you'll be set! Unless you want me to do that for you too..." She raised her eyebrows in question, obviously eager to do Hermione's makeup as well, but Hermione shook her head.

"No, thank you. I can do that. Besides, you have to get ready yourself. I really appreciate your help though. It's wonderful."

Lavender preened at the praise. "Just remember, all you have to do is end the enchantments the normal way we do with all of them." She leant closer. "I'm not going to say it, or we'll have undone all that work, but you know what I mean."

Hermione nodded and crossed to the door with her picture. "I do. Thanks again. I'll see you two downstairs later!" She hurried to Ginny's room again, knocking.

"Come in!"

Hermione hesitantly entered, afraid of what she might see this time, but Ginny was dressed, putting on makeup. Relieved, Hermione handed her the picture and said, "Thanks."

Ginny looked up at Hermione and whistled. "Wow! She did a good job! You look gorgeous, 'Mione! It's a good thing Harry's over you now, or I'd never have had a chance to get him back after he saw you like this."

Hermione laughed. "Whatever, Gin. But thank you. I'll see you later." Waving, she left Ginny's dorm, secluding herself in her room, where she carefully did her makeup, copying what she had done when she had gone to the play. Pleased with her reflection, she took her Secret Santa gift out of its hiding place, wrapping it in paper different from any that she had already used. She had made sure to cast sufficient cooling and stasis charms, as well as a charm to keep it from shifting in the box before she had tucked the jar of cherries in beside the bowl and sealed the package. Instead of writing Snape's name on it, she attached the original piece of parchment that he had put into the box for the Secret Santa drawing, with his name written in his own writing.

She contemplated going to the common room to get some dinner, but decided against it, still not really hungry after the huge feast that morning, and positive that she could find enough at the refreshment table if she got hungry during the party. In all, there wasn't much time left before they could all head down to the Great Hall anyway. She kicked off her shoes and carefully settled herself on the bed to read a bit in her Ancient Runes text while she waited for 7:00 to roll around.

Down in the dungeons, Snape had spent the day devouring Hermione's gift, and he finished the book that evening, eagerly anticipating reaching the last line, so he could read it aloud and find out what else the clever witch had in store for him. It was after 6:00 already, but he wasn't too concerned about showing up after the party started; after all, he would likely not stay the whole time anyway. He raced through the pages, absorbed in the growing tension of the tale, until he reached the end.

He found his pulse racing, and his throat was tight in empathy for Erik. His eyes closed for a moment, deeply grateful that he, unlike Erik, had the woman he loved, and would, gods willing, keep her for the rest of his life. A sharp pain lanced through him as he thought about what it would be like if Hermione loved someone else, and he would be compelled to set her free. Although others would probably not believe it, Snape could understand how someone could consign himself to misery, in the hopes that it would bring happiness to one he loved. Thank the gods and Merlin that he was not faced with such a choice.

He reached the last line of the final chapter, and, sitting forward in excitement, read it aloud, his voice ringing through the silence of his quarters. As the last word died on his lips, his eyes widened in surprise as the concealment charm lifted from the facing page, revealing the photo of him and Hermione, standing together in front of her parents' fireplace. His breath caught in his throat at the joyful smile on her face. Stunned eyes roved over the image, looking curiously at himself in the clothes he had transformed for the play. He looked at his hair, and remembered the way Hermione had reacted to him. He unconsciously licked his lips as a wave of arousal swept over him.

Leaning back once again, he laid the book against his chest, caressing the leather as he stared, unseeing, at the ceiling. *So clever. So sweet. How could she ever want me? I don't know what I did to warrant this bliss, but I plan to cherish and enjoy it for as long as I am able. So many surprises... She revels in making me happy. I wish I could return the favour. I've already sent her her present, and she'll get the mousse tonight. What else could I do to please her? Well, at least, what else can I do in public to please her?* A smug smirk crossed his lips at that thought.

He sat, pensive, for a moment more, before he sighed and sat up, once again marvelling at the photo she had hidden in his gift. Then, suddenly, his head rocked back as a bellow of delighted laughter echoed against the stones. His uncharacteristic mirth gripped him for several moments, before he subsided, a grin still plastered on his face. Aloud, he murmured, "Yes. I believe that should work..." With that, he briskly stood, reverently closing the book and placing it on his nightstand. He crossed to his bathroom, shedding his clothes with a practiced flick of his wand, and started the shower, intent on getting ready for the party that was about to start upstairs.

Hermione jumped at the knock on her door, startled from her absorption in Ancient Runes. "Yes?"

"We're about to head downstairs. You coming?" She recognized Ron's voice.

"Yes, hang on..." She bounced up and put her shoes back on, taking one last look in the mirror at her hair and makeup. Smoothing the dress and caressing the choker, she grabbed her Secret Santa gift, shrunk it to fit in her palm, and crossed to the door, opening it and smiling.

She was met with a low whistle. Ron's eyes travelled up and down, giving her a very appreciative once-over. "Wow! Bloody brilliant!"

Hermione laughed and bobbed a saucy curtsey. "Why thank you!" She closed her door behind her and tilted her head at him. "Shall we go?"

Ron nodded vigorously, grinning crookedly at her. "Yeah, the others are waiting. Really, 'Mione, you look even prettier than you did at the Yule Ball in fourth year. You sure you don't want to try dating again?" He wagged his eyebrows at her suggestively.

Hermione laughed again, elbowing him in the ribs. "Oh, please! We both know the answer to that one..." She smirked at him.

Ron snorted and nodded again, cheerfully shrugging. "Hey! You can't blame a guy for trying! What red-blooded male wouldn't think that way when faced with a beautiful woman like you?" He shook his head at her rolling her eyes and tucked her hand through his arm, leaning closer. Gently, he murmured, "Honestly, Hermione, you look great." He affectionately dropped a light kiss on her cheek. "Happy Christmas."

Hermione smiled back at him. Squeezing his arm, she whispered, "Thanks, Ron. You're looking rather dapper yourself." His dress robes were a far sight better than those he had worn to the Yule Ball.

Assuming an arrogant air, he thumbed his nose and sniffed. "Of course I am. I know. It's the Weasley smashing good looks, you know."

Hermione burst out laughing, and Ron dissolved into chuckles as they arrived in the common room. All of the Gryffindors on cast was there, chatting excitedly. Cheerful greetings flew from all sides as they entered.

Hermione raised her voice over the hubbub and queried, "Does everyone have their Secret Santa gifts?" At the nods and affirmatives, she continued, "Good. Well then, let's go!" The group jostled to get through the portrait hole, laughing as they did so.

They met the other student cast members in the corridor leading to the Great Hall, and the noisy crowd surged through the doors as one. The decorations were as opulent as earlier, but the lighting was more subdued, casting pools of golden light on the round tables set about, and leaving dim shadows in between, above which stars glittered. There was a large dancing area, with one side edged with tables full of refreshments. In the very centre of the far edge of the dancing space, there was a table set up for the gifts. Dumbledore was there, beaming at everyone from above his twinkling robes of black velvet set with silver spangles.

"Welcome! Come, leave your Secret Santa gifts here, and enjoy yourselves! Now that you're here, let the music begin!" He waved his wand, and music filled the Hall, from the Wizarding Wireless Network. Christmas songs wafted above them as they traipsed across the dance floor to drop off their gifts. One by one, Dumbledore took the gifts and placed them on the table, concealing them from everyone until all were there, continuing the secretive nature of the exchange.

Hermione meandered over to the refreshment table, choosing a dainty selection of treats, and found a seat at one of the round tables. She gazed about her appreciatively, and wistfully wondered when Snape would arrive. She nearly choked on her punch when Trelawney floated through the doors. Her hair was bigger and wilder than ever, with glittering baubles throughout, and her robes were covered with what reminded Hermione of strings of Muggle Christmas lights, blinking and chasing in a myriad of colours. Apparently, Sibyll was enormously pleased with her ensemble, and she beamed fatuously at Lavender and Parvati as they approached her with protestations of admiration.

Stifling her urge to laugh aloud, Hermione bit her lip, looking down at the table, thinking, *Oh, how much fun Severus and I could have in the face of that outfit! He has about as much use for the old fraud as I do... I can just imagine his razor sharp comments now!*

Fortunately, Trelawney and her followers moved out of Hermione's line of sight, and she glanced around, watching people chatting in small groups, couples sitting separately, their heads tilted close together, and others dancing to the occasional song that wasn't a Christmas song coming over the WWN. She looked over to the gift

table, noting that Dumbledore was still stationed there, keeping the concealment charm in effect. McGonagall was standing with him, her head bent toward him as she talked. Hermione thought she looked irritated, and wondered what could be bothering her. Dumbledore laid a hand on her arm and spoke softly, looking like he was soothing her. McGonagall shut her mouth with a snap and straightened, huffing in resignation.

Hermione had been sitting there for about 30 minutes already, when she thought she understood what may have annoyed McGonagall. Where was Snape? Everyone else was there, and they couldn't do the gift exchange until everyone had arrived. So, where was he, and why was he late? Exasperation welling up, Hermione stood and strode over to the punch bowl again, refilling her cup. Colin and Neville were standing nearby, chatting about the food.

Hermione's thoughts were wandering, when she was startled by Colin squeaking, "Bloody hell! Is that *Snape*?" She glanced up to see Colin and Neville looking decidedly disconcerted and whirled to see Snape, framed in the doorway of the Great Hall. No one, including Hermione, noticed when she gasped and promptly dropped her cup of punch on the floor. Everyone was staring at Snape, dumbfounded.

Snape looked at the scattered cast members, secretly enjoying their shock. His expression was quite regal and haughty as he smoothly glided across the floor to the gift table. Glancing at Hermione, he rejoiced in the success of his ploy, noting the flush rising up her throat...the throat that wore his gift!...to suffuse her face. Her eyes were almost black, so dilated were her pupils, and they sparked with desire. He tore his gaze away from her, inordinately pleased that she was wearing the choker, and apparently with the very same dress she had worn to the play! She was beautiful, and he couldn't allow himself to look at her for too long, lest anyone notice.

Harry and Ginny had been sitting close together, completely immersed in each other's eyes, when Snape entered and galvanized the room. At the airy gasp, followed by a sudden hush, Harry looked up, eyes widening in disbelief as he took in the image of Snape at the door. An inarticulate sound of incredulity erupted from his lips, and Ginny whipped her head around to see what had shocked him so much. Her eyebrows shot to her hairline and her mouth fell open in awe. Blinking rapidly, she shook herself, trying to determine if she was hallucinating. Was that Snape? Professor Snape? Black hearted git of the dungeons? Greasy dreaded Potions Master of Hogwarts?

If it was, he certainly looked... different!

proceed immediately to the next chapter for part 2!

33- Christmas and the Cast Party- part 2 of 2

Chapter 35 of 84

part 2 of 2 Christmas finally arrives, and we find out what everyone gets for their presents. Then, it's the cast party that night, and how will Snape surprise Hermione (and everyone else, for that matter)?

See previous "chapter" for pertinent information.

part two

Snape was once again wearing the knee-length opera trench coat with the white Mandarin collared shirt and the satin striped tuxedo trousers he had worn to the play. Not only was he *not* clad completely in his black robes, but he had done his best to fix his hair the way Hermione had, pulling it back into the tail at the base of his skull, but pulling the shorter locks forward, to frame his face. He could feel the wisps of hair floating as he walked.

For the first time, he didn't feel paranoid about the stunning entrance he had made, and all of the eyes pinned on him. It was Hermione's reaction that mattered, and when he saw that he had surprised her, and that she obviously appreciated his venture, he was content with his lot. Let them stare. It didn't bother him in the slightest. He fought to conceal the satisfied smirk that threatened, not wanting to cause any more of a scene. He would be laughing about this moment later, when he was alone in his quarters with no one to hear him.

He coolly crossed to Dumbledore, handing over his Secret Santa gift as he inclined his head, murmuring, "I apologize for my tardiness. I lost track of the time. Good evening, Albus, Minerva..." He slid his gaze over the gobsmacked woman standing beside Dumbledore and nodded at her. Dumbledore was beaming at him, trembling with the force of the laughter he was holding back. He seemed to think it all a huge joke, and quite enjoyed the stunned faces around them.

"Don't worry about it, Severus. I must say, if your arrival was delayed by you getting ready, the result was worth it. You look quite ripping, my boy. Indeed, it's a refreshing change from years' worth of black teaching robes!" Chuckling merrily, he clapped a hand on Snape's shoulder and urged him to relax. "Go on, find a seat. We'll probably do the gift exchange soon. Have some refreshments. The lemon pie is quite tasty..." He gently pushed Snape toward the refreshment tables, chortling.

Snape found himself propelled toward Hermione. On the other side of the tables, he saw Colin and Neville gaping at him. Mildly, he drawled, "Mr. Creevey, Mr. Longbottom, do close your mouths. You are not codfish." He snorted at their violent starts, and the hasty way they shut their mouths. With mumbled "Yes, sir"s, they hurried off, wanting to be anywhere but in his path. His gaze returned to Hermione, who was staring at him, rapt. He flicked a glance around again, worried that someone else might notice the light in her eyes. Her hand was motionless, limply held in front of her. His keen eyes saw the puddle at her feet, the fallen cup on its side. Deftly withdrawing his wand, he pointed it at the mess and muttered, "*Evanesco*." Then, he paused, drawing himself up and looking sternly down his nose at Hermione.

"Miss Granger, do you think it appropriate to be spilling punch at a formal affair? And then leaving the mess for someone else to clean up, while you stare off into space like a half-wit?" He pointed his wand at the cup. "*Accio* cup." It flew into his outstretched palm. Hermione jumped, startled from her daze.

"Oh! I-I'm sorry, sir. I hadn't realized I had dropped it. I didn't mean to make a mess, and I certainly wouldn't have expected you to clean up after me. I'll put it away, sir, if you'll give me my cup back." She schooled her expression into a properly contrite one, extending her hand toward him.

Snape snorted in disdain. Stepping closer to her, he put her cup in her hand, touching her fingers with his as he leant forward and murmured, "Had I but known my appearance would cause you such problems, I might have changed my mind..."

Hermione's eyes flashed with instant denial. Forcing her breathing to remain even, she gasped, "Oh no! Don't change on my account, sir. You look... nice." She grimaced at the restrictions on what she could say, noting the glint of amusement in his black eyes.

He let his hand drop away from hers and backed away a step. Eyeing her slyly, he drawled, "Indeed. I could say the same to you." Then, inclining his head in both dismissal and goodbye, he strode away to a table in a corner, dropping gracefully into a seat, casually gazing at everyone who kept staring at him.

Hermione gripped her cup tightly to still the shaking of her hand. Cheeks burning, pulse racing, and knickers damp, she refilled her cup and weakly crossed to the nearest table, sinking into a chair.

Several minutes later, Hermione felt that she was sufficiently in control of herself again, and the rest of the cast had returned to their own pursuits, rather than staring at Snape. Snape, for his part, simply sat quietly, sharp black eyes watching the festivities, a bemused look on his face.

Not long after that, Dumbledore stepped out onto the dance floor and raised his hands, commanding everyone's attention. A curious silence fell.

"Now that everyone is present, I believe it is time to exchange gifts! Come; gather 'round. Take a seat, all of you..." He waved his wand and arranged a circle of chairs, just like he had done at the first read-through. A susurrus of excitement whipped through the group as they approached the circle.

Snape stood and hovered for a moment, waiting until Hermione had taken a seat, and then took one opposite her. As everyone sat, Dumbledore stepped to the table and cast the reversal of the concealment charm. Murmurs of anticipation rippled around the circle at the sight of the brightly wrapped packages.

"I shall distribute the gifts to you all; but I want everyone to wait until all of the gifts have been presented before opening any. We will all open them at the same time, understood?" He peered over his spectacles at the hasty nods of the students. Smiling, he turned to the table and picked up two packages, reading the names and handing them to the appropriate people. As he continued, the air of excitement grew heavy, and soon everyone had a package in their laps.

Dumbledore took his seat, contentedly holding his gift, and beamed around the circle. "Very well then. Happy Christmas, everyone! Open!"

There was a wave of ripping sounds as Spello-tape and paper were torn from the packages. Cries of surprise and laughter mixed from all sides, as eyes darted from one person to the next, all trying to see what everyone got, and wondering who had drawn that person's name to begin with.

Hermione was slower than the others in opening her gift, as she was curious to see what her friends had received, and she was idly pulling the tape loose before peeling back the paper.

Across the circle, Snape was also trailing behind the others, so intent was he on watching Hermione, wanting to see her reaction to his gift. As the hubbub increased around him, with inquisitive and cheerful shouts ringing on all sides, he realized he couldn't be caught watching Hermione like that, and he focused his attention on his package, deftly breaking the tape and unfolding the paper.

Hermione smiled at her friends' pleased reactions, looking at their gifts as she opened the box. When she looked down into the open box, her eyes went wide, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the little shriek of surprise that emerged from her throat.

Opposite her, Snape opened his package, and, as he saw the chocolate mousse in it, he was struck by the absurdity of the whole situation, and how ironic it was that they should both have the same idea about what to give the other, for he was immediately certain, beyond a doubt, that Hermione had somehow drawn his name as well. Glancing up through his lashes at her dumbfounded countenance, he couldn't help it...

Just as he had done hours before in his quarters, Severus Snape threw his head back and laughed. Loud and long. He fell back in his chair, and his deep, resonant peals of laughter rose to the enchanted ceiling. He laughed so richly and with such abandon that he felt tears of mirth collecting in the corners of his eyes. And, as he did so, his laughter filled the Hall, in no small part due to the fact that everyone else had gone deadily silent at the first sound of his amusement.

Eyes goggled at him warily from all around the circle. It seemed that the whole Hall waited with bated breath for the culmination of such an unnerving, bizarre event. Even Hermione sat across from him, still and white with shock, her hand clamped over her open mouth.

Dumbledore's smile was genuine, if a bit puzzled, as he leant forward and asked, "For Merlin's sake, Severus, what in the world did you receive?"

Snape manfully tried to compose himself, breathing deeply and clearing his throat against the spasms that still threatened. Passing a hand over his eyes, he vainly tried to sober his expression. But, the delighted grin refused to budge. Not quite trusting himself to speak, he simply reached into the box and withdrew the bowl of mousse, holding it up for all to see. Then, he picked up the jar of cherries and flourished it as well. A fresh wave of laughter swept over him, and he sputtered and snorted as he tried to contain it.

As strange as it was to see Snape laughing, his laughter was infectious. As he unsuccessfully tried to stop, lopsided smiles appeared on a few incredulous faces. Finally, as Snape looked across the circle at Hermione, his black eyes sparkling with glee, she succumbed to the humour of it all and began giggling.

As one, every head turned toward her, stunned once again by another odd occurrence. Flushing, her eyes bright with merriment, Hermione pulled out her gift and presented it, nodding across the circle at Snape.

In the shocked and bewildered silence, Dumbledore began chuckling as well, and Snape cut him an amused side glance, wryly drawing, "Well, Albus, I do believe we know who drew whose name..." At that, Hermione burst out laughing in earnest.

"Indeed, Professor. Great minds think alike?" She grinned at Snape, twinkling impishly at him. He quirked one sardonic eyebrow at her and smirked.

Noncommittally, he tossed his head, flinging the wisps of his hair out of his eyes and voiced a dry, "Hmph."

Dumbledore clapped his hands together and chuckled. "How fun! I would dearly love to hear how you two managed to come up with the same gift idea, but first, I'd like to see what everyone else got, and allow people to share whose name they drew." He beamed around the circle, drawing attention from the unexpected spectacle of Snape and Hermione's matching gifts.

As the other students focused back on their presents, Dumbledore announced, "I'll go first! I received a tin of lemon drops. But, they have been masterfully transfigured into the shapes of lions, obviously in a nod to my Gryffindor background. I say, I am quite charmed by the clever idea. And my favourite candy too... Come now, who drew my name?" He gazed amiably around the circle, pausing as an embarrassed Neville raised his hand.

"I-I did, sir."

"Why thank you, Mr. Longbottom. Did you transfigure them yourself?"

Ears violently pink, Neville nodded, glancing sheepishly around.

"Excellent job! Five points to Gryffindor for such a unique demonstration of your skill in transfiguration. Now, what did you get, my boy?"

Neville perked up and sat straighter as he excitedly brandished a book. "It's an illustrated book on Magical Plants, sir! The pictures show the plants as they go through their whole growth phase!"

Dumbledore smiled indulgently at the boy's enthusiasm. "Quite appropriate for you, Mr. Longbottom. And, who gave him that lovely gift?"

McGonagall smiled primly as she raised her hand. "I knew of Mr. Longbottom's interest in Herbology, and I thought he would like it."

Neville smiled joyfully at his Head of House. "I do! Thank you!"

McGonagall preened. "You're quite welcome." Then, she looked at Dumbledore and continued, "I was given a lovely set of monogrammed handkerchiefs... and they're edged in Gryffindor colours!" She chuckled in appreciation and the students laughed as well. "And to whom do I owe my thanks for their impeccable taste?" She smiled around the circle, stopping on Hannah Abbott, who had timidly raised her hand, blushing.

"I'm glad you like them, Professor McGonagall. I really didn't know what to get a teacher, but my mum just reminded me that you're a person just like she is, and I thought I'd get them for you just like I do for my mum." She paused at the titters that sounded around her.

McGonagall puffed up, eyeing those students with a silent reprimand. When they subsided, she smiled again at Hannah. "I thank you, Miss Abbott. What did you receive?"

Hannah looked down quickly and held up a variety of items. "It's a selection of hair and makeup insta-glamours. I've seen them in Witch Weekly, but I've never tried them. They look fun!" She glanced around the circle expectantly and Ginny waved at her, grinning.

"Glad you like them! I'd like to see how they turn out." Hannah nodded and Ginny lifted her gift from the box. "I got a calendar of UK Quidditch teams. It looks great!" She grinned and laughed, managing to conceal her surprise that Millicent Bulstrode lifted her hand.

Coolly, Millicent offered, "I figured since you were on the Gryffindor team, you could appreciate it." She looked at Ginny solemnly.

Ginny tilted her head and insisted, "I do! Thanks, Millicent."

Millicent shrugged minutely. Stiffly, she retorted, "You're welcome." She seemed to thaw a bit as she lifted her hand and showed off the charm bracelet on her wrist. "I got this. Isn't it pretty?" She smiled faintly as she gazed at the bauble.

Harry cleared his throat. "Uh, I drew her name. I'm... glad you like it." He glanced around uncomfortably, but relaxed a bit at the approving looks he got from Ginny and Hermione. When he saw the grudging look Draco sent him, he sat up straighter, proud that he had made a good choice.

Millicent gazed at Harry gravely and uttered a slightly strained, "Thank you."

Heaving a relieved sigh, Harry replied, "You're welcome. So, I got these Quidditch gloves! They fit great..." He looked brightly around, and saw Susan Bones's pleased smile.

Flushing, she said, "I'm so glad. I hoped they would fit."

Harry beamed at her and said, "Thanks, Susan! I'll put them to good use." Chuckles rippled through the group and Susan ducked her head in gratified embarrassment.

Susan held her hand out, palm up, and a dainty miniature unicorn pranced and snorted. It was a magical figurine, and Susan smiled. "Someone remembered how much I love unicorns!" She laughed as the figurine bobbed its head.

Ron sniffed and shot her a lopsided grin, leaning complacently back in his chair. "Yeah, I remembered. Do you really like it?"

Susan leant forward in earnest as she said, "I do, Ron, really! Thank you!"

His ears turned pink as he sat forward again and said, "You're welcome." Then, he pulled a bright orange scarf from his package and wrapped it around his neck, beaming above it. "It's a Chudley Cannons scarf! Ruddy brilliant..." He saw Colin smiling timidly at him. "Good one, mate! Thanks!"

Colin nodded and shot a quick glance at Hermione as he heaved a sigh of relief and said, "No problem. You're welcome." He showed off his gift. "I got a book on photography in the wizarding world! There're different chapters on all the types of cameras, the potions you use in developing, and even tips on composition and style, so the images will be comfortable!" His eyes were almost glowing, and the words tumbled out.

Justin Finch-Fletchley grinned and called out, "Thought you could use something like that."

"It's great, Justin, thanks!"

"Sure thing, Colin. I'm gonna' have to keep my gift separate, or I might end up annoying the professors..." He chuckled at the puzzled looks cast at him. "I got Zonko's gag parchment and Everchanging Ink. I doubt the professors would appreciate grading an essay that kept changing colours on them, especially if the parchment turned into something else in the middle of it!" Laughter erupted throughout the circle, particularly at the indignant expression on McGonagall's face at the thought.

Lavender piped up, "If you get them mixed up, don't blame me, I just gave them to you, I never said to use them for homework!" She grinned at Justin as he nodded back to her.

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind!"

Lavender sent him a mock-stern look and giggled, "You better!" Then, she leant forward, showing the necklace that was around her neck. "Isn't it great? It's a miniature crystal ball pendant! I think it's adorable!" Her beatific smile faltered into an expression of disbelief when Draco raised his hand haughtily. The other Gryffindors exchanged stunned looks.

With a sneer, Draco drawled, "Don't look so surprised. We Malfoys have good taste." He smirked, casting a smug glance at the shocked Gryffindors.

In a faint, dazed voice, Lavender said, "Th-thank you, Draco..."

"Don't mention it. Everyone knows how much you love Divination." Near Lavender, Trelawney visibly preened. Draco suddenly shifted in his seat, and said, "Anyway, I got this quill. It's perfect Slytherin colours, and according to the tag, it writes in either black, green, or silver, depending on which you want at the time. Rather clever, actually." His smile seemed like it didn't quite know how to fit on his face, since it wasn't arrogant or evil. He looked up expectantly and saw Parvati timidly waving her hand.

"Well, 'everyone knows' how much pride you have in your House, so I thought it was nice. Glad you like it." Her posture showed an awkward tension, but when Draco responded, it drained away.

Gravely, Draco inclined his head to Parvati and smoothly said, "Thank you for the gift." He sat back, looking fairly satisfied with his display of manners.

Parvati exhaled on a long note and faintly said, "You're welcome." Brightening, she picked up the variety of hair clips and accessories to show them off. "These are really cute; they move. See, the butterflies' wings flutter, and the flowers bloom. I love hair stuff!" She grinned around the circle, until Dumbledore waved at her, at which point her eyes opened wide, and her mouth formed an "o" of surprise.

"I say, I'm so pleased you like them. I saw them at a shop in Diagon Alley, and I thought they were charming. Wear them in good health, my dear." He twinkled fondly at her.

She gamely recovered herself and shot a contented smile at the headmaster. "I will, sir. Thank you!"

Dumbledore chuckled merrily to himself and gazed about the group, noting that several people hadn't gone yet. "Well, I suppose it was going too smoothly..." Titters met his wry statement. "Very well then, let me see... Ah, Sibyll, what did you get?"

Trelawney lit up as she spoke. "It's a selection of teas. Several different varieties, and all loose, so I can read the leaves when I'm done!"

A cough drew everyone's attention. Terry Boot spoke up, "That was my intent, Professor Trelawney. I thought you could both enjoy drinking them, and then use them."

Beaming at him dreamily, she lilted, "Perfect, my dear boy. A perfect choice. Perhaps you have a gift as a seer..."

Terry ducked his head and cleared his throat again. "Uh, thanks. Um... well... I got this really ace basket from Honeydukes! It has all sorts of candies in it: Ice Mice, Pepper Imps, Chocolate Frogs, the works!"

Seamus grinned at him. "Cheers, mate! Reckon you might share any of it?" he waggled his eyebrows at Terry, eliciting laughter from the other students.

Terry chuckled and said, "Maybe. Thanks!"

Seamus gave him a mock-salute and sat up. "I got a Deluxe Exploding Snap game. So, anyone who wants to play, come by Gryffindor Tower tomorrow and I'm game!"

Luna tilted her head at him and said, "That would be nice. I really liked that set. I almost didn't want to give it up, but I couldn't keep it. It's for you." She gazed at him pleasantly with her bulging light blue eyes.

"Gee, thanks, Luna. We can play tomorrow."

"All right." She smiled blankly at him before she lifted her gift. "I got a book on odd creatures. It's quite interesting. There's a section for creatures in the Muggle world too. I expect my dad and I will go looking for some of them come next summer. It should be fun."

Pansy spoke up. "I thought so. It just seemed like such a 'you' thing." Her tone was faintly contemptuous, but since Luna was patently pleased with the gift, Pansy decided to give up on the subtle insult. Shrugging airily, she continued, "I got this perfume. It's pretty nice. Not the really froufy stuff from Paris, but it smells nice." She sniffed her wrist again, then offered it to Millicent, who was sitting next to her. Millicent sniffed and nodded, agreeing.

Dean Thomas sighed dramatically and said, "Well, Pansy, *I am* just a poor student right now, so that's the best I could do. But, maybe in a few years, I can afford to give you the top notch stuff." His teasing grin gleamed white against his dark skin. Pansy grimaced back at him, but it was remarkably without malice.

Surprisingly, she managed a creditable, "I do like it, Dean. Thank you."

Dean blinked, taken aback, but accepted the proverbial white flag. "You're welcome. I'm just glad you're not allergic to it!" More titters greeted his frank admission. "I got a variety pack of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. There's a little bit of everything in it. Some fireworks, gags, Skiving Snackbox stuff, and even a bottle of Disappearing Ink..."

Both Snape and Hermione snapped to attention, zeroing in on the oblivious boy. For a fraction of a second, their gazes met, senses on red alert, before they hastily looked away again.

Trelawney's dreamy voice attracted everyone's attention. "I remember the Misters Weasley quite fondly. Considering their successful endeavour into business, I thought it was the least I could do to support them. Besides, I understand that you young people quite enjoy those types of things..."

Dean's smile was strained, as he was fighting down an inappropriate snort of amusement. "We do indeed, Professor. Thank you."

"Oh, you're quite welcome, dear boy..." She was interrupted by Dumbledore's satisfied declaration.

"There! That's everyone. Now," and he turned eagerly to Snape, "I'd like to know just how you and Miss Granger managed to come up with the same gift idea!" He gazed attentively at Snape, a small smile on his lips.

Snape cut a glance at Hermione, collecting his thoughts, immediately weighing whether it would be better to fudge matters or to just tell the truth. *He's likely to ask her as well, so just stick to the plain facts. First step in getting away with things: don't offer more details than you need to; they only give you more places in which to trip up.*

Straightening regally in his chair, he nonchalantly rippled his fingers in a casual wave of dismissal. His voice was silky as he said, "Oh, it's quite simple, really. When you sent us to London for the play, Miss Granger's mother prepared chocolate mousse for dessert. It was quite delicious. I remembered her parents' comments on how much she enjoyed chocolate, which was evident when we partook of the dish that night. As you had mentioned that making a gift was desirable, I thought it would be a safe bet that Miss Granger would appreciate such a gift. Therefore, I made what you see before you." He pointed at the bowl in Hermione's lap.

Everyone's eyes darted between Snape, Hermione, and Dumbledore. Hermione had forced herself to breathe normally through Snape's explanation, admiring how unremarkable he made it all sound. *Damn, he's a good Slytherin...*

Dumbledore blinked a few times, then turned to Hermione. "Hmm. So, tell me, my dear, how did you come to the same conclusion as Professor Snape?"

Hermione took a page from Snape's book on how to dissemble and calmly retorted, "Well, just like Professor Snape said, my mother made mousse for dessert. Professor Snape complimented her on it, and I thought, if he enjoyed it, I could easily get the recipe from my mum." She brashly held Dumbledore's gaze, projecting innocent coincidence.

Dumbledore looked from one to the other, a bemused expression on his face. "Extraordinary..."

Desperately, Snape cut in, "Really, Albus, there's nothing extraordinary about it. It's a coincidence, based on the same circumstances. It's quite logical, if you think about it." He shot an exasperated look at the old man, hoping he would move on instead of dwelling on it, afraid he might be tempted to ask too many dangerous questions. Feeling the nervous sweat prickling his skin, he forced himself to maintain an expression of utter boredom.

He suppressed a relieved sigh as Dumbledore stood, gesturing expansively. "Well, I am pleased that our little venture was a success. Everyone did quite well. We have the rest of the evening to ourselves to enjoy. Have fun! And Happy Christmas to Hogwarts' Phantom family!"

Cheers erupted around the circle, and people started milling about, showing off their gifts, thanking each other again, and waxing enthusiastic. Some upbeat, more modern music began, and several students took to the floor to dance. Small clusters of friends stood about, more interested in their holiday gifts and outfits than in the disconcerting appearance and behaviour of their Potions Master, and they ignored Snape. Hermione stood, glancing surreptitiously at Snape. He caught her eye and tilted his head toward the refreshment tables. She immediately strode to them.

Snape stood lazily, straightening his clothes before crossing to the refreshments as well. He slid behind them, stopping across from Hermione. Glancing at her with a faint, amused smile hovering on his lips, he picked up a spoon and held it out to her. She grinned back and took it.

"I do hope it is to your liking." Snape's voice was low and sultry. Hermione bit her lip at the tingle that raced through her. Deliberately, she dipped her spoon in the mousse, locking eyes with Snape as she slowly licked it clean. She saw his jaw twitch as he clenched his teeth, watching her tongue snake across the spoon.

Involuntarily, her eyes closed in bliss at the delicious flavour. Savouring it, she finally slipped the spoon from her mouth, opening her glazed eyes and looking up at him. Her pulse raced as she rasped, "It's wonderful, Professor. Not exactly like my mum's, but divine nonetheless. What recipe did you use?" She was gamely trying to calm herself, asking polite questions to distract herself from his appearance.

Snape picked up a spoon and served up a portion of his mousse. Before he ate it, he murmured, "Oh, I managed to acquire a recipe from none other than Florean Fortescue himself." He cast a smug glance at her as his lips closed around his spoon.

Hermione's eyes widened, both aroused...remembering those same lips closing around her nipples...and impressed. "Wow! No wonder it's so good." After a slight pause, she queried, "How is it, sir?" tilting her head at the mousse she had made for him.

He regarded her from under half-closed lids. One corner of his mouth quirked up as he purred, "Delicious." Hermione suppressed a shiver at the memories he evoked. Her eyes closed for a moment. Then, as Snape said, "I miss the whipped cream. And I must open that jar of cherries soon..." her eyes snapped open again, blazing with desire. Snape snorted mildly. Briskly, he picked up the jar of cherries and opened it with a pop. Reaching in with deft fingers, he withdrew one cherry by its stem. The bright red liquid dripped into the jar. Politely, he asked, "Would you care for one, Miss Granger?"

Hermione licked her lips and breathed, "Yes, please." Snape offered her the fruit and she delicately plucked it from his fingers, languidly bringing it to her mouth and sucking it in. Snape's intense gaze never left that cherry. Hermione pulled the stem from it and chewed. Snape shot a furtive glance around to see if anyone were watching their exchange. Focusing once again on Hermione, he exhaled forcefully. Hermione smiled. Cherry stem in hand, she put her mousse back in its box and looked up at Snape through her lashes. "I'm going to put this away for now. It's really quite delicious, sir. Thank you." Her fingers caressed the choker, and she murmured, "For everything..."

Snape inclined his head in acknowledgement. "It was my pleasure, Miss Granger. Quite." He followed her lead and packaged his mousse back up, tucking the jar of cherries in securely. Tilting his head at the gift table, he began crossing to it, Hermione trailing after him. They both placed the boxes on the table, locking eyes one more time. His voice a low rumble, so low that Hermione strained to hear him, he said, "And, I believe you'll find it interesting to know that 'Erik is dead.'" He pinned her with a meaningful stare, his gratitude and wonder visible in the black depths.

She blinked in surprise. Her eyebrows rose as she rasped, "Already?" Then, she gazed up into his face and saw how much he appreciated her surprise. Hermione felt her love for him surging forward. Beaming at him, she whispered, "Yes, that is quite interesting..." She cast a quick glance at the rest of the cast, noting that Ginny was watching her. Frowning, she turned back to Snape. She rolled her eyes in Ginny's direction. He flicked a glance at the redhead and nodded almost imperceptibly, his lips thinning, and the crackling light in his eyes dimming. Hermione sighed as she realized she had to move away from Snape, lest it invite more questions. Politely, she said, "Happy Christmas, Professor. And thank you again."

Snape nodded to her and drawled, "Good evening, Miss Granger." She flashed a tiny regretful smile and walked off, leaving him at the table alone. Black eyes bored into her as she moved, causing that familiar tingle to flow over her.

As Hermione sat at an empty table, she noticed that she still had the cherry stem in her hand. A wicked grin slid across her face, and she popped the stem into her mouth. Several moments later, she pulled it out, tied in a knot. Giggling to herself, she palmed it, wondering when she could deliver it to Snape.

Suddenly, there was a commotion amongst the students. Bursts of laughter were rippling through the throng. Hermione peered over at the people milling on the dance floor, trying to see what they were all focused on. Squeals erupted from within the crowd. Curious, Hermione rose and crossed to the others, wondering what was going on. As she shouldered through the outer ring, she saw a sprig of mistletoe hovering in the air, seemingly targeted on people. Apparently, Dumbledore had turned it loose on the dancers, as he was sitting to one side chuckling, a long-suffering Minerva beside him.

Snape wondered what was going on, and stealthily glided around to the students. He saw the mistletoe bobbing above their heads and shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose as he cast a resigned glance at the laughing headmaster. He stood off to one side, positioning himself so he could see Hermione in the circle. She was staring about, a bemused smile on her lips.

It looked as if the mistletoe wouldn't move on from one person until that person was kissed. It wafted over to Harry, and Ginny shot a warning glare at the other girls before stretching up on tiptoe to kiss him. Then, the sprig floated over to Ron. He grinned lopsidedly and spread his hands out.

"All right, ladies, who gets to be the lucky one?" Snorts and barks of laughter met his quip, and the girls all looked at each other.

In the pause, Draco piped up, "Looks like no one wants to kiss you, Weasley." He and the Slytherin girls laughed haughtily.

Ron's eyes narrowed, and he looked as if he would let his fists answer Draco, but he was interrupted by Susan stepping forward.

Laying a restraining hand on his arm, she shot a venomous look at the Slytherins before saying, "I do!" Ron's brows shot up as he regarded her in surprise. Susan smiled shyly at him and added, "Thank you for the lovely gift, Ron." She stretched up and kissed him sweetly on the cheek. Flushing, she looked down again.

Ron's ears turned pink, and he rumbled, "You're welcome." Susan's hand remained on his arm, and he looked at her thoughtfully. The mistletoe moved on.

It stopped at Neville, who immediately blushed uncomfortably. Dean stepped forward, a huge grin splitting his face. "Come here, Neville!" As he closed in on Neville, Neville swatted at him, shoving him away.

In a low voice, Neville mumbled, "Oh, sod off, you!"

Dean yelped in pain at the sharp thwack across his skull. He whipped around to see Parvati glaring at him. Disgustedly, she hissed, "Honestly, Dean! Grow up..." Then, she stepped forward, smiling at a stunned Neville, and cupped his cheeks, kissing him full on the mouth. Hoots and catcalls sounded around them. When she pulled back, Neville's eyes were glazed over, and she smirked, satisfied. When Neville didn't blink, she waved a hand in front of his face. "Neville?"

He started and shook his head. "Huh?" Everyone laughed again.

Parvati patted Neville's cheek and gently said, "Happy Christmas, Neville."

He still seemed a bit dazed as he replied, "You, too." Sniggers rippled through the group again as they watched the mistletoe floating. It hovered over Hermione, who stared up at it warily.

When it was obvious that it wasn't going to continue on, she couldn't help but flick a glance at Snape. His posture was stiff, and his glare was cold and menacing. Ginny noticed where Hermione was looking, and gazed at Snape as well. She was taken aback by the intensity of his disapproval. Pulling back and hiding behind Harry, she furtively glanced back and forth between Hermione and Snape.

Hermione shot a cautious glance around the group, her cheeks growing hot under the scrutiny. Finally, she saw movement, and she zeroed in on Colin crossing toward her. His Adam's apple kept bobbing as he swallowed convulsively. Nervously, he cleared his throat and said, "Thanks for helping me with the gift exchange." He tilted his head meaningfully and darted in to kiss her like he had when he had left her room the night they had changed Secret Santa names.

With a tight smile, she said, "You're welcome. Don't worry about it." She glanced apprehensively at Snape again, knowing how possessive he was, from his actions with Neal, and his letters. Ginny frowned as she saw Hermione looking at Snape again.

Snape was standing behind a chair, his hands gripping the back of it so tightly that his knuckles showed white through the skin. His lips were thinned into a forbidding line, and his scowl was harsh. Hermione heaved a huge sigh of relief when the mistletoe floated away. She deftly extricated herself from the group, noticing that Ron and Susan were off to one side talking, and Harry and Ginny were backing away from the outer edge. She quickly escaped to the gift table, relaxing once again when she looked at the two bowls of mousse. A tender smile crossed her lips. She didn't see Ginny eyeing her from across the room.

Snape watched Hermione through slitted lids. As inconspicuously as possible, he backed away from the chair, sidling to one side. He shot one last foreboding glance at the oblivious Colin before he smoothly strode to the refreshment table, catching Hermione's eye on the way. She looked up at him sheepishly. It was obvious to her that he was extremely jealous, but she had no idea what to do about it. She sent him an imploring glance and a watery smile. Shrugging lamely, she looked down again, toying with the spoon in her mousse. Snape filled a cup with punch and tossed it back like a shot. Grinding his teeth, he tried to compose himself.

Neither of them saw bright brown eyes trained on them from afar.

As casually as he could, Snape strode to the gift table again. He tilted his head forward, wishing his hair could hide his face as usual. Head bent, he muttered, "So, just what did you do to help Mr. Creevey with his gift?" Insecure jealousy made his voice acidic.

Hermione pointed to the label on Snape's gift and said, "I traded names with him." Snape's head shot up and he stared at her through wide eyes.

Incredulous, he snapped "You *what*?"

Hermione nodded slightly. "He drew your name. He begged me to trade with him. Poor boy was petrified. Can't imagine why..." She quirked one eyebrow at him sardonically. Snape huffed. "So, I thought it would be in everyone's best interests to trade with him." She gazed at him calmly before looking down again. In a faint voice, she added, "I had no idea you had my name too. I just wanted to do something nice for you."

Snape blinked rapidly. Awed love fought with baseless jealousy, driving it away. Finally, his shoulders relaxed, and he ran a hand through his hair, feeling the wisps falling back against his face. Sighing, he murmured, "I'm sorry, Hermione."

She glanced back up at him, and their gazes locked. A joyful smile slowly crept across Hermione's face. Across the Hall, Ginny's eyes widened in stunned recognition of that look.

Hermione remembered the cherry stem in her hand and giggled. Snape cocked an eyebrow at her in query. With a mischievous smirk, she reached over and placed the knotted stem on top of the jar in his box. Snape's eyes goggled and he inhaled sharply. He pinned her with an intense gaze, full of lust. Hermione gasped in response, the smirk melting away into an answering look of desire.

Ginny choked. Coughing, she tore her gaze away from the unlikely pair at the gift table. Harry solicitously turned to her. "Are you okay?"

Ginny waved a hand at him and nodded, coughing. Gasping, she said, "I just need a drink."

"I'll get one for you..." Harry started to rise, but she stood quickly and put her hand on his shoulder, pushing him back down in his seat.

"No. I'll get it. Don't worry about it." She looked up to see that Snape and Hermione were no longer at the gift table. Snape was watching the students dancing, and Hermione was admiring Susan's figurine, sitting at the table with her and Ron.

Hastily crossing to the refreshment table, Ginny got a drink and sipped it, nonchalantly walking over to the gift table. She picked up her calendar, pretending to look at it again, but her keen eyes sought out Snape's mousse. Brow furrowed, she saw the knotted cherry stem on the jar lid. Once again, she froze, dumbfounded.

What in bloody blazes is going on here? Ginny dropped her calendar back on the table and resolutely made her way to Hermione.

"Hey, Ron. Hi, Susan, Hermione. Um, 'Mione, can I talk to you for a minute?" She tilted her head meaningfully at the other girl, pinning her with an intense stare.

Ron nodded at Hermione and rippled his fingers. "Go ahead. I'll see you later." He then turned his attention back to Susan. Hermione knew a dismissal when she heard one.

Standing, she stepped away from the table and looked at Ginny with concern. "Is everything okay? You look like something's wrong."

Ginny cocked an eyebrow at her and said, "Can we go to your room and talk?"

Hermione frowned at her in puzzlement. "What's wrong?"

Ginny gripped Hermione's wrist and murmured, "I need to talk to you. In private."

Hermione glanced over at Harry and sighed, "Ginny, I can just give you the password to my room so you two can go. I'm not going to renege on my part of the deal..."

Ginny squeezed her wrist again and said, "Not yet. I *really* need to talk to you first."

Glancing at Ginny curiously, Hermione muttered, "All right. Let's go." Ginny started toward Harry, pulling Hermione with her. "Gin! You can let go now." Ginny cast her an appraising look and dropped her wrist. Hermione rubbed it idly as she followed the redhead over to Harry.

Ginny smiled winningly at Harry as they arrived. "Hey there! Listen, I'll be back in a little while. Um, Hermione and I have to go take care of something. Don't go anywhere! The evening's not over yet..." She cocked an eyebrow at him suggestively and he grinned back.

"No worries. Just don't be too long, okay?"

"Sure thing!" Ginny blew him a kiss and made a beeline for the door, Hermione in her wake.

They walked in silence down the corridor to the stairs. Hermione kept glancing at her friend, perplexed. "Ginny, what's wrong?"

Ginny made a slashing gesture with her hand and barked, "Not here!" Hermione jumped in surprise and shut her mouth with a snap. They trekked up to Hermione's room without another word.

When Hermione had shut the door behind them, Ginny whirled on her, her arms crossed, her expression serious.

"All right, Hermione, spill it! Just what is going on between you and Snape?"

34- Found Out!

Chapter 36 of 84

Ginny's figured out what's going on, and now Hermione has to try to salvage the situation. Just how far is she willing to go to protect Snape?

Author's Note: A thousand apologies for the excruciating delay in getting this chapter up! RL exploded on me... :(As always, check out my livejournal for info and update notices. It's listed in my profile. Thanks to Ladyofthemasque, SnivellusSnape, and Laela for pre-reading and feedback. And thanks to everyone who has reviewed and popped by my LJ! You guys make me very happy. :)

luff

Nicole

Chapter 34- Found Out!

It was as if the world had turned upside down. Hermione felt herself falling back against her door, grateful that the thick wood helped keep her upright as her mind spun in shock. Her vision blurred around the edges until the only thing she could see was Ginny, her bright brown eyes narrowed calculatingly at Hermione.

An icy tingle swept over her body, stealing her breath. She could hear her own voice shrieking inside her head, telling her to *make something up, dammit!* Desperately, she sucked in a gasping breath and blinked rapidly, trying to regain control of her senses. Her voice sounded like it was coming from far away as she said, "What on earth are you talking about?"

Ginny pursed her lips in exasperation and advanced on Hermione. She dropped her arms and her hands rested on her hips. Boring her eyes into Hermione's, her voice low, Ginny retorted, "You know bloody well what I'm talking about. I saw the way you were looking at him downstairs. Don't think I don't know that look." Hermione simply stared at her, unable to speak. Ginny tossed her head impatiently. "Merlin's beard, Hermione! It's obvious you have a crush on Snape!" She shuddered and grimaced. "Snape! Really... how?"

Hermione struggled to breathe, fighting to slow the panicked racing of her heart. She felt the colour draining from her face, and briefly wondered if she was going to faint. Then, the violent roiling of her stomach stole her attention from her circulatory system, and she swallowed convulsively to keep from retching in her horror.

Her voice shaky, she tried again. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I do not have a crush on Professor Snape." Well, that part was true at least, she didn't have a crush on him; she was fathoms deep in love with him. Very different from a crush!

Ginny raised her eyebrows sceptically and sucked through her teeth. Deadpan, she said, "Uh-huh. Yeah. Right. Sure, 'Mione, I believe you. 'Cause you totally look like you're telling the truth right now. Thank the gods you don't play poker, 'cause you have a ruddy lousy poker face." She rolled her eyes at Hermione.

Warily, Hermione ventured, "What in the world makes you think I have a crush on Professor Snape?" Her mind was racing. *Find out what she knows, and counter it!*

Ginny shot her an incredulous look before spinning and flinging her hands to the sides. She whirled around again and pinned Hermione with an adamant glare. Ticking off points on her fingers, she recited, "One, you were all googly-eyed looking at him earlier. Two, you get all riled up any time anyone says anything bad about him. I mean, think about it! *How* many rows did you get into with us when you came back from your folks'? Three, you keep telling us that he's *nice*, and not a git like we know he is. Tonight, you kept talking to him, even though you don't have to. And you know what I really want to know?" She planted her hands on her hips again and squinted at Hermione, head cocked. "What in the world was that cherry stem all about? First, you two get each other's names, and then you make the same thing, and you give him cherries? I don't get it."

Hermione's legs were getting weaker every second. Horrified despair washed over her, and she sagged against the door, slowly sliding to the floor in a heap. At Ginny's last point, she buried her face in her hands and stifled a sob.

Ginny gazed at her, perplexed, for a moment before warily sitting on the bed. Her voice strained, she murmured, "Hermione? You're really freaking me out. What the hell is going on?"

Hermione choked on her tears and vainly tried to compose herself. She shook her head, wishing it were all a bad dream and she'd wake up any moment. The tense silence stretched on, Hermione frantically trying to figure out what to say, and Ginny waiting for an explanation. Finally, Ginny couldn't take it anymore and growled, "Are you going to talk to me, or do I need to go get Harry and Ron?"

Hermione's eyes flew wide open in abject terror at the thought. An agonized "NO!" wrenched from her, her hand outstretched in a pleading gesture.

Ginny scowled at her. "Then talk."

Hermione bowed her head. Taking a deep breath, she whispered, "Ginny, are you my friend?"

Ginny cocked a quizzical eyebrow. "Of course. Why?"

Hermione looked wearily up at her. "Fine. I'll tell you. But you have to promise to keep it to yourself."

Ginny's face cleared a bit and she shrugged. "Sure. Go on..."

Hermione leant her head back against the door and closed her eyes. Her brow creased in a pained expression as she ground out, "I'm in love with him."

She opened her eyes at Ginny's inarticulate sound of disgusted disbelief. Ginny was staring at her, grimacing. "*What?*"

Hermione levelled her gaze at the other girl, repeating, "I'm in love with him."

Ginny shook her head in denial. "That's just crazy. Have you gone mad? It's *Snape*, for gods' sakes!

Even in her despair, Hermione shot an icy glare at the younger girl. Her voice steely, she ground out, "I'll remind you to keep your petty opinions to yourself."

Ginny's brows shot up and her eyes widened. In an incredulous whisper, she said, "Bugger me! You're really serious!"

Hermione merely gazed at her, not dignifying that statement with a response. Ginny seemed to wilt a bit in bewilderment. Grimacing in confusion at Hermione, she murmured, "When on earth did this *happen?*"

Hermione wiped her face, frowning at the makeup smeared on her hand; undoubtedly it was all over her face too. In a low voice, she said, "Last month. Right around the time all hell broke loose with Harry."

Colour drained from Ginny's face. She was breathing shallowly in astonishment, seemingly unable to respond.

Hermione's face crumpled again and she whispered, "Now you know why I could never be with Harry. I didn't feel that way about him. I was already falling for Severus." Her eyes snapped back to the stunned redhead when she heard a strangled gasp.

"Who?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and sighed. "Professor Snape. His name is Severus. You know that."

Ginny's mouth began working, like she was sucking on something bitter. "I can't believe I'm hearing this..."

Hotly, Hermione spat, "You're the one who said to talk! I'll shut up any time now, but you *have* to keep this all a secret! I can't risk getting expelled or Severus losing his job!"

Ginny blinked rapidly. Her voice tight, she said, "Hang on a tick. Why would you get expelled? Or him sacked? You said you were in love with him. You didn't say anything had *happened*." Her voice trailed off at the guilty lowering of Hermione's eyes, and the sight of Hermione worrying her hands together agitatedly. Her eyes even wider with morbid fascination, Ginny sucked in a long breath and breathed, "Merlin's beard! Something *has* happened! Oh gods, is *that* why you wanted to borrow my stash?" Her lips twisted in a grimace as she gazed imploringly at Hermione to deny it. When Hermione simply bit her lip and blushed, tilting her chin up defiantly, Ginny closed her eyes in defeat, slumping forward and cradling her head in her hands.

Hermione's heart was hammering in her chest. She was terrified that everything would fall apart. Hesitantly, she ventured, "Ginny?" There was a long beat of tense silence, broken by Ginny's faint muttering. It sounded suspiciously like, "Get image of sex with Snape *out* of head... Get image of sex with Snape *out* of head!" Hermione continued, "Ginny, please. Just listen, okay?"

Resignedly, Ginny raised her head and looked cautiously at Hermione. "I just don't get it. I mean, he's such a prat to all of us. How could you ever even *like* him?"

Hermione shook her head minutely. In a deliberate voice, she stated, "He's not really a prat. He just gets annoyed easily. And, he's had to keep up his façade for so long that it's hard to just shed it all at once now that Voldemort's gone."

Hermione tilted her head and eyed Ginny speculatively. "Remember how you kept mentioning how he's changed recently?" Ginny nodded slowly. "Well, he has. He's finally free from Voldemort, and spying, and all that dangerous stuff. His Dark Mark has even faded." She paused when Ginny blinked in surprise. "Hmm, you didn't know that, did you? I did. I've known it since the Final Battle. He finally has a chance to make a life for himself, and to be happy. *Think* about that. He hasn't had a chance to just be happy for, oh gods, decades!"

Ginny stared owlishly at Hermione's fervour.

"Do you remember when you saw us at the notice board?" Ginny nodded once again. "Do you remember how awful he looked that day?" She sighed at Ginny's scowl of thought. "And you wanted to know why I was smiling when you walked up on us..." Ginny blinked again, refocusing on Hermione.

"The whole reason what happened with Harry *evenhappened* is because I had got so confused in detention with Professor Snape the night before. I thought I was going to have to do something horrible for detention, and instead, he just had me help him practice for the play. It's when he's the Phantom that I feel so connected to him. He really lets himself go that way. You know what I mean; you've said it yourself."

Dazedly, Ginny murmured, "He *is* really intense when he performs..."

Hermione nodded vigorously, warming to her tale. "Exactly! Well, that night, we were practicing, and we came to the kiss. Ginny, if you could have seen how bitter he looked when he told me he was sorry I had to 'suffer' through it... It broke my heart! I was already attracted to him, so I... I..." She paused, looking down and flushing. "I told him we should practice the kiss too, like adults. Like professionals..." She looked back up and saw Ginny's shocked, and slightly impressed, expression. Squaring her shoulders, she levelled her gaze at the redhead again and continued, "It was... amazing." Her breath sighed out of her in a sigh of remembered pleasure, her face relaxing into a beatific smile.

Ginny rasped, "He kissed you?"

Blinking rapidly to come back to her senses, Hermione shook her head. "No. *I* kissed *him*. And then he kissed back. I was in heaven. But when it became obvious that he had feelings as well..." She trailed off, looking away sheepishly. Clearing her throat and ignoring the heat suffusing her cheeks, she said, "He threw me out. I was devastated. I didn't know what to think. And when I ran back to my room in tears, I fell over Harry and... well, you know the rest."

There was a beat of complete silence. Hermione forged on. "Severus was torturing himself about the whole incident in detention, and he thought I was so upset because of *him*. That's why he looked so awful, and that's why I was so happy at the moment you found us, because we had come to an understanding, and he knew I didn't regret it."

Ginny's voice was shaky and weak as she muttered, "This is all so... so... bizarre! I just can't see him being nice..."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and drawled, "He lied to Dumbledore for me the night of the costume fittings. *That's* why I didn't get in trouble. He said *he* had detained me, when it was really Harry's fault I was late." She lifted her eyebrows briefly in triumph as Ginny's look of surprise. "Exactly. I'm sure you'll be nothing but surprised at how nice he's been." Despite herself, Hermione smiled tenderly. Ginny shook herself, marshalling her faculties.

"You said you kissed him. But he threw you out." Hermione nodded. Ginny squinted at the Head Girl. "Has he done anything since then? Like, has he made any advances toward you?"

Hermione chewed her lip and flushed again. "Um, a few. Most of the time, I've been the one doing the advancing..."

Ginny drew herself up stiffly. "If he's taken advantage of you, the headmaster needs to know! He can't be allowed to do that to a student!"

Hermione sprang forward, incensed. "Shut up! He did no such thing! How *dare* you imply that he took advantage of me, that he's so vile! He's honourable, and trustworthy, and he *won't* be with me until I leave Hogwarts anyway! Don't think I haven't tried otherwise..."

Ginny actually reeled back on the bed, catching herself before she fell. The import of Hermione's angry words sank in, and the colour drained from Ginny's face. Barely audible, she whispered, "You what?"

Hermione's eyes widened as she realized what she had said. They stared at each other, practically petrified. Ginny retreated into officiousness. "Sweet Circe, he's got you bewitched. That's it, I'm going to Dumbledore. This is all too wrong..." Ginny sat forward and started to rise. She stopped short and squeaked as she lifted her eyes to see Hermione's wand trained at her throat, Hermione's blazing eyes locked on her.

Hermione was fighting the trembling of her hands as she levelled her wand at Ginny. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, making everything feel almost surreal. Ginny's shocked eyes locked with hers.

In a deadly quiet tone, Hermione bit out, "You will do no such thing. You are my friend, Ginny, but I love Severus, and I will not allow you to harm him. Now, you have two choices: sit back down and come to your senses, let me explain everything, and swear to keep it a secret, or persist in your misguided attempt to snitch to Dumbledore and I *will* Oblivate you. Don't make me do it."

Ginny swallowed convulsively in the heavy silence that followed. She weighed her options, noting the frighteningly manic gleam in Hermione's eyes.

Bloody hell! She's really ready to Oblivate me! I can't believe this is happening! There's no way I could reach my wand before she did it, either... In a shaky whisper, Ginny said, "Mione, would you really hex me? I'm your friend..."

Hermione resolutely gazed back at the younger girl. Her voice was low, but there was a hint of steel under it, mixed with regret. "Yes. In a heartbeat. I can't let you hare off and blow things for us, especially since you're unfairly biased against Severus. There are just some things that aren't negotiable, Ginny. It's like when Ron told me he was worried about you and Harry being together, since he knew that if anything bad ever happened, he'd have to come down on your side, because you're his sister. And he said it would kill him to do that since he loves Harry too.

"You're my friend, Ginny. I love you dearly. But Severus fills a place in my soul that I didn't know was empty until he crept into it. I've never felt as happy as I do with him. I cannot allow you to jeopardize that..." Her wand hand steadied as she spoke, and her posture stiffened in confidence, but her eyes softened, mutely begging Ginny to understand.

The silence following her impassioned speech rang in their ears. Finally, after what seemed like ages, Ginny sank back onto the bed. Hermione stepped back, but kept her wand trained on the girl. Ginny shook her head and lifted a trembling hand to rub her eyes. She gazed sombrely at Hermione and murmured, "Okay. I won't say anything. I swear."

Hermione's shoulders sagged a bit, and she dropped her arm. She grimaced in agonized indecision. "How do I know you mean it? What if you change your mind?" Her wand hand snuck back up.

Ginny lifted both hands, palms out. Eyes wide, she earnestly said, "I swear on Harry's life. You know how I feel about him. Honest, 'Mione. If you're so serious that you'd actually Oblivate me, I think it's best that I trust you." She paused and looked warily at Hermione's wand. Locking eyes with Hermione again, she repeated, "I promise." Hermione lowered her hand and Ginny heaved a sigh of relief. Blinking rapidly, she ran a hand through her hair and glanced back up at Hermione. "So, you said you'd explain..." She tilted her head in inquiry.

Hermione nodded and staggered back against the door again, trembling in the wake of her adrenaline rush. In a weary voice, she said, "What do you want to know?"

Ginny glanced wildly around and flung her hands out to the sides, voicing an inarticulate gargle. Glaring at Hermione, she drawled, "Everything!"

Hermione snorted softly. "Could you be a bit more specific?" She slid down the door again and leant her head against it, closing her eyes and rubbing her temples.

Bewildered yet fascinated, Ginny queried, "You said you're in love with him. Does he feel the same way?" Hermione nodded, smiling in spite of her fatigue. Ginny marvelled at how Hermione seemed to light up. Ginny breathed, "How can you be sure?"

Hermione's eyes seemed to gaze tenderly at something invisible to Ginny as she murmured, "He told me. And he shows me. When we're together, he shows me a side of him that we students don't get to see. But, he's said it. I think that was the most glorious moment of my life so far..." She trailed off, reliving that moment in the alley.

Ginny blinked. It would take a bit of work to get used to this paradigm shift, but she had to admit to herself that Hermione seemed almost transformed, glowing with love when she talked about Snape. *Wow... If she's really this happy, maybe he isn't such a git after all.* Clearing her throat, she tentatively asked, "So, he's good to you?"

Hermione's beatific smile changed to a smirk and she purred, "Oh, he's *very* good to me..." Then, she realized what she had said and voiced a startled, "Oh!" as she blushed, clapping a hand over her mouth and blinking at the embarrassed redhead.

Ginny fought the heat that coloured her cheeks, but to no avail. Still, she couldn't help but ask, "When?"

Hermione chewed her lip and looked sheepishly at the floor. "Well, I kissed him in detention, then he kissed me when I went to his quarters to fix his hair for rehearsal, and then there was intermission at the play..." She licked her lips unconsciously.

Ginny's eyes goggled. "Merlin's beard! That's right! He stayed over at your house after the show! Just what happened there, Hermione? I'd wager there's a lot to tell about that..." Ginny's curiosity was piqued, and she was interested in spite of her qualms about Snape.

Hermione tossed her head and tilted her chin up defiantly. "So there is." She narrowed her eyes at her friend's obvious interest. One corner of her mouth quirking up, she murmured, "Tell me; what do you think of what he's wearing tonight?"

Ginny frowned in thought, sitting back. She recalled the image that had so shocked her earlier, of Snape framed in the doorway to the Great Hall, stunning in that opera coat and artful ponytail. Ruefully, she admitted, "He really didn't look like Snape!"

Hermione chuckled and nodded. "That's what he wore to the play. We both decided to wear what we wore to the play, to surprise each other tonight. See what I mean about how he shows me he loves me?"

Ginny's brows rose in surprise, but she nodded thoughtfully. "But, how did he tell you? What happened for him to say such a thing?"

Hermione idly caressed her wand as she spoke. "We were both trying to tease each other at the play, trying to gain the upper hand. Then, when we got back home, my folks were in bed and we adjourned to the kitchen to have a bit of a snack before turning in. Well, everything we said to Dumbledore was true. My mum made chocolate mousse, and we each had some. Hers had whipped cream and cherries on top." At this point, Ginny interrupted eagerly.

"Yes! What is that all about?"

Hermione flushed again at the memory. "I was trying to tease him again, and I... ate one of the cherries... provocatively. It seemed to have the desired effect, but I decided to push it a little, and I popped the stem in my mouth and tied it in a knot with my tongue, just to torment him. His expression was priceless! But, when I offered him a cherry, he suddenly stopped staring at me like he would pounce on me right there and laughed. I was quite taken aback, and when I asked 'what,' he just leant toward me and purred...oh gods, I love that voice!..." "Do you realize you just offered me your cherry?" She paused for effect, noting Ginny's shocked gasp. "Well, I was mortified, but things got better after that. So, we went upstairs, and he went to bed. So did I." She paused again, recognizing the disappointment in the sudden sag of the younger girl's shoulders.

Ginny retorted, "Oh. So, that explains the cherry stem..."

Hermione waited until the silence after Ginny's statement became charged, then dropped her bomb. "But then I snuck into his room."

Ginny's eyes flew open again, and she regarded Hermione with a mixture of wonder and admiration. Rapt, she breathed, "What did he do?"

"Remember that little display with Professor McGonagall when we were practicing our costume spells?" Ginny nodded quickly. Ruefully, Hermione continued, "You were right about him. I snuck in, and as soon as he woke up and realized someone was in his room, he blasted me with a really hard *Expelliarmus*, and I hit my head on the door. It was quite a nasty bump, until he healed it for me..."

Ginny's mouth hung open. "You're lucky he didn't hex you! Or worse!"

Hermione shrugged. "I know. But, after that, we got a chance to be together..."

Ginny gasped again, leaning forward. Brow furrowed, she whispered, "I thought you said he wouldn't..."

Hermione cut her off with a quick shake of the head. "He won't. We were... lying together in the bed, and I wanted to... or so I thought. He told me he couldn't be with me like that until I wasn't a student any longer. But I pushed the issue, and he... he showed me how *not* ready I was anyway." She grimaced, then her expression cleared, and she smiled again. "But, he let me stay with him. I can't tell you how perfect it felt to fall asleep with his arms wrapped around me..."

Ginny gazed at Hermione speculatively. It was obvious to her just how deeply Hermione felt for Snape. It virtually exuded from every pore. Her eyes narrowed as she pondered that last revelation. Finally, she huffed and grumbled, "No fair... You get to spend the night with him..."

Hermione laughed at the unexpected envy in Ginny's voice. Then, she sobered. "But, now we're back here, and we have to keep our feelings a secret until school is over. You at least get to be with Harry otherwise..."

Ginny shrugged acknowledgement. "Yeah, but we have to sneak around to get any privacy." At that, Hermione shot up straight and clapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide. Ginny blinked at her in surprise. "What?"

Hermione's hand slipped down, and she whispered, "You *have* to stop doing that!"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "C'mon, 'Mione, you know we're careful..."

Hermione shook her head vehemently. "No! You don't understand! You two nearly got expelled!"

Ginny scowled. "What are you talking about?"

Hermione eyed her severely and hissed, "Severus caught you! He was going to drag you both to the headmaster, but he decided not to, as a favour to me. Granted, I didn't know about it until after the fact, but still!"

Ginny's eyes had widened as Hermione spoke. Colour drained from her face, but she gulped and said, "I don't believe it. I doubt Snape could ever pass up a chance to get Harry in trouble. Maybe he was making it up..."

Hermione squinted angrily at Ginny. "He wouldn't lie to me! Anyway, I saw it myself!"

"What?"

"Severus has a Pensieve too, and he *showed* me the whole thing when I didn't believe him either!"

Ginny swallowed convulsively again. Her breathing went shallow and she fidgeted nervously. Faintly, she rasped, "It's not possible."

Hermione pinned Ginny with an aggrieved glare and muttered, "Trust me. Severus and I had a row over it. I rather agree with him: we all owe him for his 'charitable impulse.'"

Ginny buried her face in her hands. Her whisper was shaky as she said, "How much did you see?"

Hermione thinned her lips in embarrassment. "Fortunately, you were under the Cloak. But, like I *told* you when you were on the couch, that doesn't stop *sound*..." She glanced up at her miserably mortified friend and took pity on her. Gently, she added, "But, when you got ready to leave, it was obvious how much Harry cares for you. I'm glad you're back together..."

Ginny nodded dejectedly. "Thanks, but I still can't believe I owe Snape." She flicked an apologetic glance at Hermione. "I have to say, 'Mione, I really don't know *how* I'm ever to face the man again, after everything I've learnt tonight..." She quirked one corner of her mouth up in an attempt at lightheartedness. Hermione smiled faintly in return.

"Best to act as if you didn't know anything, since it's all a secret anyway. Of course, I *can* always Oblivate you..." She tilted her head sheepishly and grimaced at Ginny in an attempt to show her apology for the threat earlier.

Ginny rolled her eyes at her and shook herself. Wrinkling her nose, she rumbled, "Don't think it's not tempting..." Both girls let out a short bark of strained laughter, then sighed.

After a few beats, Hermione ventured, "I suppose we should get back to the party. People might get worried..."

Ginny shot a shrewd glance at Hermione and drawled, "No doubt. And I certainly wouldn't want to have Snape coming after me, ready to hex me for dragging you away from him." She held Hermione's exasperated glare. "That reminds me... You should really keep an eye on Colin. I think he's Snape's next target, after kissing you under the mistletoe."

Hermione heaved a sigh and covered her face with her hands. "I know! He gets jealous so easily..."

Suddenly Ginny's eyes lit up with mischief. "Like with Neal?"

Hermione peeked through her fingers and snorted. "Yes. Exactly like with Neal." She dropped her hands to her lap. Softly, she said, "You know, it was right after that whole incident that he told me he had fallen in love with me..." She sat, pensive, while Ginny watched her, still trying to assimilate all of the evening's startling revelations. Looking up, Hermione added, "He also told me to watch out for you. You were our biggest threat of exposure."

Ginny blinked, taken aback. "Really? He said to watch out for *me*?"

Hermione nodded. "Said you were far too clever..."

Ginny's mouth dropped into an "o" of astonishment at the compliment. Then, cheeks colouring in spite of herself, she flashed an impish grin at Hermione and said, "Well, he *was* right..."

Hermione rolled her eyes and shot to her feet, huffing noisily. Ginny giggled. Hermione paused and pinned Ginny with an intense, calculating gaze. Ginny stopped laughing abruptly.

As if to herself, Hermione murmured, "I need to let Severus know that you've found us out, but that you've been sworn to secrecy..." She glanced around the room and then made a beeline for her bureau, snatching open a drawer and pulling out her bottle of Disappearing Ink. Crossing to her desk, she slid a piece of parchment in front of her and dashed off a note explaining the situation. Ginny watched curiously. Pointing her wand at the parchment, she said, "*Celo*," and the writing vanished. Ginny gasped.

"You got that from Fred and George!"

Hermione spun on her and said, "So I did. Keep that to yourself as well, if you please." She smirked and added, "It seemed the logical thing to do if I wanted to be able to write him."

Ginny eyed her with outright admiration. Grinning in appreciation, she murmured, "Very nice!" Then, her eyes glinting with more rabid curiosity, she queried, "So, has *he* been a part of your copious mail deliveries?"

Hermione nodded, smiling secretively. "Yes, and I hand my letters in with my homework."

Ginny laughed out loud at that. Eyes twinkling saucily, she asked, "Did he send you a letter for Christmas?"

Hermione paused, her eyes softening again, making Ginny stare at her in awe of the transformation. Tenderly, she answered, "No, but he did include a note with my gift."

Frowning, Ginny asked, "The mousse?"

Hermione shook her head and whispered, "No. This." She caressed the choker at her throat lovingly. Ginny scowled in confusion. "This isn't my mum's. Severus gave it to me. Here..." She rummaged in the drawer again and pulled out the bit of parchment. Opening it, she handed it to Ginny and muttered, "*Aperio*." The note appeared, and a dazed Ginny read it, completely overwhelmed by the glimpse into her professor's unexpectedly tender side.

She raised awed eyes to Hermione, breathing, "Wow..."

Hermione felt as if her chest would burst with pride and love for Snape. Gently, she took the note back, vanishing the writing and placing it back in the bureau. Then, she briskly handed Ginny the note she had just written. "Here. I've still got the Invisibility Cloak. Use it and go back to the Great Hall. Give this to Severus, and cast *Aperio* on it

as soon as he opens it. Then, follow him to meet me. After that, you can go back to the Hall and get Harry, and you two can use my room until 1:00, no later!" She shot a warning look at the younger girl, who nodded vigorously in response. "I'll set the wards so they'll recognize you. Now, come on."

Ginny stood hastily and said, "Wait!"

Turning impatiently to her, Hermione asked, "For what?"

"Your face."

"What?"

"Your face. Your makeup is all messed up from crying. You can't go anywhere looking like that."

Hermione crossed to her mirror and grimaced. "Oh, bugger me!"

Ginny stepped up behind her and patted her shoulder. "No worries. I can fix you up in a tick. Hold still. I've been practicing with glamour spells." She pointed her wand at Hermione and muttered a few incantations. Hermione felt the tingle of magic on her skin and looked at her reflection to see her looking as good as new.

She smiled gratefully at her friend and murmured, "Thanks, Gin. Come on. We've been gone for a while now." She turned and started for the door, but she was stopped by Ginny enveloping her in a tight hug. An interrogative squeak was squeezed out of her.

Ginny hugged her tightly and whispered, "Hey, I'm sorry about everything I said earlier. I promise again, I won't tell anyone about you and Snape. I'm glad you told me, and if you want to talk about him, I'll listen. I mean, I had no idea he could be so... different, and... I'm glad you're happy."

Hermione felt a surge of gratitude and squeezed back. "Thanks, Ginny. That means a lot to me. Listen, I'm sorry I threatened you. I'm glad you understand now. And I might need someone to talk to, so I'll keep that in mind. You're a great friend."

They released each other, smiling. Hermione grabbed the Invisibility Cloak and gestured for Ginny to exit. She reset her wards and they trekked back down to the corridor outside the Great Hall.

"Here, use this, and give that note to Severus. Remember, it's *Aperio*. I'm going to the meeting point now. I'll be waiting, so try not to be too long, okay?"

Ginny nodded, took the note, and flung the Cloak around her, disappearing. Hermione nodded sharply and set off down the stairs to the dungeons.

Ginny entered the Hall, seeing Harry engaged in conversation with Seamus and Dean. She looked around and saw Snape sitting off to one side, his black eyes darting between the frolicking students and the doorway. For one terrifying moment, she thought he could see her, but then his gaze flicked away again and she regained her ability to move. She stealthily snuck through the Hall, edging behind the tables on her way to Snape. Her pulse and breathing sped up in anxiety. A few paces away from him, she paused, taking a moment to gaze at him unobserved, still trying to accept all the incredible things she had learnt from Hermione.

Snape was leaning languidly back in his seat, but his impatience was belied by the agitated tapping of his fingers on the table beside him. His eyes constantly roamed the room, returning repeatedly to the doorway. Ginny squinted as she looked at him, taking in his unusual attire and hairstyle, remembering how dramatically his looks had changed when he had actually been laughing earlier. Of course, now he was scowling forbiddingly at the students, back to his customary expression.

She thought back to the note he had included with the choker he had carved for Hermione. Her stomach clenched and she felt colour rising to her cheeks at the passion in his words. *I would never have thought Snape could be so... human. But, just look at him now. He even looks as different as he's been acting. And that laugh!* She closed her eyes at the shiver that rippled over her. *Hermione's right about his voice, though...* She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath, sidling closer to Snape.

Smoothly, she slipped the scroll from under the Cloak and flicked it into his lap. Instantly, he shot up straight in his chair, snatching the scroll almost before it finished landing. Ginny jumped at the incredible speed of his reflexes. *Damn! He's quick!*

She jumped again as he whipped his head around, shooting his piercing gaze right through her, then she exhaled gustily as he jerked his eyes from her again, secure that he couldn't see her under the Cloak. He narrowed his eyes as he gingerly unrolled the scroll, surreptitiously glancing around as he did so. As soon as it was opened, he peered down at it, frowning at the blank page. Ginny pointed her wand at it and whispered, "*Aperio*." Hermione's writing appeared and Snape stifled a sharp inhalation, his brows rising in surprise. Hastily covering it with his arm, he lifted his head a fraction and scanned the room. Ginny blinked at how inconspicuous the movement was, impressed by his ability to contain his shock and not draw attention. *Now I see how he must have managed all those years as a spy...*

Snape smoothly resettled his legs, sliding back behind the table so it shielded the letter in his lap. Affecting boredom, he leant his forehead in his hand, blocking his eyes. *Blast! Wish I hadn't tied my hair back. It's always useful hiding my face.* He glanced down at the parchment, scanning it quickly. Again, he suppressed his shock at the message it contained.

"Severus,

Ginny brought this to you. She's nearby under the Invisibility Cloak. She figured it out and knows everything. But, she's sworn to secrecy, so please don't hex her. I'll explain everything. Just come meet me in the passageway we used to enter the castle when we returned from London. Bring Ginny, but don't let her be seen. Don't forget to Vanish this after you've read it. I know I shouldn't have to remind you, of all people, but I thought you might like to know that I'm thinking like a Slytherin, dearest. Please, make haste, my love. It's dreadfully important.

Your Hermione"

Ginny saw his shoulders tense as he read. He quickly reached the end of the note and covered it with his hand as he scanned the room again, affecting a yawn and a weary stretch, swiftly casting his hand about and running into the Cloak that covered Ginny before she could move away. She gasped as he grasped the material, and he thinned his lips in acknowledgement. As he stood, he hissed, "In the corridor. Now!"

Ginny backed away, tugging the fabric from his grip. She hurried back through the maze of tables and stepped outside the Hall, plastering herself against the wall by the doorway.

Snape felt the material slip from his fingers and strained his ears to hear her light footsteps as Ginny departed. Quietly, he whispered the spell to Vanish the note crumpled in his hand. As it disappeared, he stretched his fingers, satisfied. He strode over to the gift table and picked up his mousse. Casually, he crossed the dance floor toward the doorway. Dumbledore called to him, causing him to pause and turn to the older man.

"Yes, Headmaster?" He schooled his expression into a politely attentive one, ill-concealing his irritation at the interruption. But, at least that was in character for him anyway.

"Leaving so soon?"

Snape inclined his head gracefully and cocked an eyebrow at the students. "I shall return, sir. However, I wish to properly store my gift, as well as check the corridors for those students who have already disappeared. We seem to be missing some cast members, and there are other students still here for the holiday. Indulge my desire to perform my duties. It sha'n't take long."

Dumbledore nodded jovially, his blue eyes twinkling as always. "Very well then. Do hurry, Severus. There are other professors still here to keep an eye on the rest of our charges. Besides, I have a smashing idea for when everyone returns." He chuckled at the long-suffering grimace on Snape's face.

Dryly, Snape retorted, "Oh, how I look forward to that..." Then, nodding sharply to the headmaster, he spun on his heel and strode out the door, absently shrinking his gift and placing it in his pocket.

As soon as Snape appeared, Ginny hissed, "Pssst!" Snape stopped abruptly and turned his head to where she was hidden. His expression was stern as he growled, "Follow me." He jerked his head toward the stairs and set off at a rapid pace. Ginny scrambled to catch up. Behind him, Ginny stared at his graceful stride, noticing for the first time how lithe his tall frame was. Shaking her head to rid herself of the disconcerting notion, she fought the colour rising in her cheeks, glad to be hidden from view.

Once they were halfway down the stairs to the dungeon, Snape paused and cast a hooded glance over his shoulder. "Remove that ridiculous Cloak," he barked.

Ginny swallowed nervously and lifted it over her head, sheepishly winding it in her hands. In a low mumble, she said, "Yes, sir." She tried not to quail under his intensely piercing gaze.

Standing with one foot on one step and the other two steps above it, Snape crossed his arms and drew up to glare imposingly down his nose at the wary redhead. Ginny felt awkward and worried the edge of the Cloak in her hands.

"So," he began, darkly, "you've figured it out." Ginny merely nodded. Snape leant closer to her, towering forbiddingly. "I'm certain that Hermione has imparted to you the... sensitive nature of our situation."

"Yes, sir." Ginny swallowed against her dry throat.

Narrowing his eyes at her, he snarled, "Why should I not Oblivate you right now? Why should we trust you to keep our secret?"

Ginny shuddered at the menace in his tone. "B-because Hermione already threatened to do that, sir. Like I told her, if she's that serious...to be willing to do that to her friend...then I have to trust her. She... she told me how much she loves you..." Her voice faded into a whisper as she trailed off.

Snape's brows rose a fraction and he leant back. He regarded her thoughtfully for a moment. A sneer curled his lips and he spoke. "Very well then. But I have something to share with you which you might find interesting." His voice lowered to an almost silky purr, and Ginny shivered again. "If I think you're even *toying* with the idea of betraying us, I shall go to the headmaster and enlighten him about a certain... tryst in which you and Potter... indulged after curfew. I have a very good memory, Miss Weasley, and it would be in your best interests if I did not have to use it."

Ginny blinked at him owlishly. She could feel the spots of heat on her cheeks. Voice shaking with mortification, she stammered, "Y-yes, sir. Hermione already told me. Thank you for... keeping that to yourself, sir."

Snape leant back more, once again peering down his nose at her. He sniffed and resettled his arms more loosely across his chest. Sliding his eyes to one side, he cleared his throat and muttered, "Yes... well... consider it a one-time thing, Miss Weasley." He thinned his lips and pinned her with another dark gaze for several beats of loud silence. "It seems that it might be to our mutual benefit to reach... an agreement of sorts, Miss Weasley."

Frowning in confusion, Ginny queried, "Sir?"

Snape rolled his eyes and sighed. "And here I thought you were clever... Miss Weasley, you and I both have possession of rather... damaging information. In exchange for your silence, I will offer mine."

Ginny's brows shot up and she voiced a soft, "Oh!"

Snape flung his hands to the sides and let them slap to his thighs as he huffed irritably, tossing his head. "Oh!" she says!" Hands clenched into fists at his sides, he growled, "Do. You. Understand? Miss Weasley."

Ginny could feel his anger exhaling from him. Hastily, she gasped, "Yes! I understand!" Snape visibly relaxed from his domineering posture, but his scowl remained. Ginny's mind was racing. She tried to reconcile the man before her with the one whose passionate words she had read not an hour before. *Does he really mean it? Can he really be so tender?* Her misgivings rose up all at once and made her reckless. Her brown eyes flashed with a protective light as she narrowed them on Snape.

Snape watched the quick-fire play of emotions on her face, only to be taken aback by the righteous expression that surfaced. He blinked in surprise.

Ginny seemed to stiffen as she stared at him brazenly. Her chin tilted up, and her voice was clear and strong as she said, "I require one condition, sir."

Snape's eyes widened with incredulity. *How dare she?* Rage boiled up within him. In a deadly whisper, he hissed, "Just who do you think you are, to make demands of me?"

Ginny gazed back at him defiantly, refusing to back down. Determined, she ground out, "Do you really mean it?"

Snape closed his eyes for a moment, trying to fathom what *inblazes* the imbecilic girl was *talking* about. Still seething with fury, he snapped, "What?"

"Do you really love her? I have to be sure you're not playing games with her. Because, if you are, all bets are off. Our 'agreement' is null and void." She levelled blazing eyes at him.

Snape stared at her in astonishment. Unbidden, an admirable comparison to Molly Weasley rose up in his mind. Apparently, her daughter could be just as formidable when provoked to protect those she loved. Despite himself, in response to her query, his love for Hermione surged forward and drowned the anger suffusing him. He gazed mutely at the girl, in shock. The tense silence seemed to stretch on for an eternity.

Finally, Snape took a deep breath and levelled a serious gaze at Ginny. Gravely, he murmured, "Yes." It was all he said, but the sincerity rang in his tone. He held Ginny's eyes frankly until she relaxed from her aggressive posture.

It did odd things to her stomach, seeing the clear admission in Snape's black eyes. Ginny felt abashed at her audacity and was first to break away from his gaze. Breathing shallowly in the wake of her adrenaline rush, she cleared her throat and sheepishly mumbled, "Good."

Snape simply stood there, completely still, watching her. Ginny began to fidget under his scrutiny. Eventually, his sombre tones drawled, "Are we in agreement then, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny glanced up at him, flushing, and hastily retorted, "Yes, sir."

There was another beat of silence before Snape tilted his head toward the dungeons and said, "Come along then. Hurry."

He sped down the stairs, Ginny racing after him. They turned down the dungeon corridor and hastened down it. Suddenly, peeking past Snape's shoulder, Ginny saw Hermione waiting tensely by a door. Her face lit up when she saw them. Pushing forward, Ginny glanced up at Snape, slightly embarrassed by the softening of his face and the release of the tension in his shoulders as he gazed longingly at Hermione. Ginny shrank back again, trying not to blush.

They all arrived at the door, and Snape immediately began a complex incantation to get through the wards and open it. As soon as it was unlocked, he opened it and

shooed the girls inside, eyes darting furtively about for any observers. Shutting the door behind them, he turned to look at Hermione, and she beamed up at him in the light from the torches that had sprung to life near them.

"Thank Merlin you're here. What took so long?" She crept closer to him and insinuated her hand into his larger one, gazing up at him, rapt.

Snape fought the survival urge to snatch his hand away, reasoning that since Ginny knew, there was no reason why he shouldn't touch Hermione. Still, he was rather reserved in his response to her. Briefly squeezing her hand, he slid his eyes toward Ginny and murmured, "Miss Weasley and I had a... short discussion."

Hermione glanced blankly at Ginny and Ginny shrugged in agreement. Hermione turned back to Snape apprehensively and asked, "Do you think anyone else suspects?"

Snape ran his hand over his hair and sighed. "I don't think so. Dumbledore did stop me as I was leaving. I told him I was going to put the mousse away and check on you missing students. He said to hurry back, as he apparently has a 'smashing idea.'" He pinched the bridge of his nose and heaved an aggrieved sigh. Hermione made a moue of sympathy and caressed his arm. Ginny watched, owl-eyed. It was still amazing to see the easy affection Hermione displayed for the dark man before her.

"Then I sha'n't take long. It's very simple, Severus: Ginny figured it out, and I told her everything." She paused, cringing at the startled and horrified look Snape turned on her. "Well, not *everything*, but enough." She glanced at Ginny, who cautiously nodded at Snape. "She knows about the mousse, and the trip to London, and the letters, and the choker." Hermione could see Snape's jaw line throbbing as he ground his teeth in embarrassment. Gently, she reached up and smoothed the tense muscle. "It's okay, really..."

Ginny looked away, feeling like an intruder. Snape snapped his gaze to her, noting her discomfort. Inwardly writhing, he reached up and covered Hermione's hand with his, pressing it to his face, before turning and kissing her palm. She inhaled sharply, smiling at him.

Ginny was studying the torch sconce as if it held the answer to the universe, determinedly ignoring the byplay between Snape and Hermione. Therefore, she started when Hermione sharply called her name. Wheeling, she stammered, "Wha- huh?"

Hermione was standing close to Snape, her arm around his waist. Snape stood stiffly and glared at the redhead, his arm protectively draped over Hermione's shoulders. Hermione extended a hand and said, "Hand me the Cloak. I'll give it back to Harry tomorrow. You should get back to the Hall soon, before Harry asks too many questions."

Ginny thrust the wadded-up Cloak at her, nodding. "Right. Um, see you later then."

Snape cleared his throat. "Miss Weasley, it could be troublesome if you were seen returning to the Hall. Allow me to assist you with that problem." Smoothly, he pointed his wand at Ginny, and she froze, eyes wide.

"Wh-what are you going to do?" Her voice trembled.

Snape rolled his eyes, heaving an exasperated sigh. "Miss Weasley, we *have* an agreement." He favoured her with a meaningful glare. "I shall cast a concealment charm on you for your trip upstairs. When you reach the Hall, simply end the charm."

Ginny gulped in relief. "Oh. Thank you, sir." She smiled wanly. Hermione stifled a chuckle at the other girl's obvious consternation.

Snape muttered the charm and Ginny blurred, then vanished. From the ether, they heard an impressed, "Brilliant!" Snape smirked and Hermione grinned at him. Briskly, Snape opened the door and peered out. "It's clear. Good evening, Miss Weasley. We'll see you back upstairs."

Ginny's voice sounded near them. "Right then. See you later, Hermione... Professor. Thanks." They listened to her steps as she exited, and Snape shut the door firmly behind her. He turned back to Hermione with a long exhalation, only to find her wrapping herself around him.

"I love you, Severus..." She pressed her cheek against his chest and hugged him tight. Gratified, he enveloped her in a fervent embrace.

"And I, you." He kissed her hair before pulling away from her and tipping her chin up to look her in the face. He narrowed his eyes at her and rumbled, "Now, just *what* did you tell Miss Weasley? How... detailed were you?"

Hermione grimaced and flushed. "I told her we were in love. And, I told her you let me stay with you when we were in London. But," she hastily added, "I made sure she knew that you haven't taken advantage of me..." She glanced coyly up at him through her lashes, making his breath catch. "No matter how much I've tried otherwise..." She slid her hands up his chest and around his neck, pressing herself against him. Snape growled in his throat and gripped her tight.

A low, delighted laugh bubbled out of her and she stretched up to kiss him. He dipped his head to catch her lips with his, glorying in her sweetness. Involuntarily, he twisted with her to trap her between him and the door, his hands sweeping along her sides to pull her hips against him.

Hermione felt his desire growing between them and moaned into his kiss. Revelling in the fabulous tingle chasing through her centre, she rocked her hips against him, feeling his strangled gasp. He pulled away from her and rested his forehead against hers.

"Gods, I've missed you. You are so beautiful tonight. I wished nothing else but to be with you. But, we've not been careful enough as it is. If Miss Weasley noticed, others may as well. We *have* to come up with another way to be in contact. It's far too dangerous to try using owl post anymore. All it takes is one person with too much suspicion to draw conclusions that could destroy us." Snape caressed her hair as he spoke.

Hermione clutched his shoulders and pressed kisses along his throat and jaw while she retorted, "I know. You're right, as always. It's just so hard. I couldn't believe it when I saw you enter the Hall. You look so devastatingly sexy in that ensemble. And then to find that you had made chocolate mousse for me! Just *how* am I supposed to keep my composure when you keep springing surprises on me?" She pulled back to give him a mock-stern glare, only to find him grinning charmingly down at her.

His cheeks had warmed with colour, and his voice was almost shy as he said, "So you really liked it?"

Hermione gazed up at him, nearly overwhelmed by a surge of love. In answer, she practically pounced on him with a devouring kiss. Snape's eyes flew open wide and his surprised grunt was swallowed by her lips. Staggering back under her onslaught, he fell against the wall and started sliding down it, dragging her with him. Hermione ended up curled in a heap across his lap, snogging Snape feverishly.

Her hands gripped his coat, keeping him from pulling away. As they settled on the ground, Snape ran one hand down her back to cup her arse, adjusting her weight in his lap. She squealed in response and wriggled against him. His hand tensed spastically on her arse and he groaned at the sensation of her pressing against his confined erection.

Hermione felt the hard heat along her thigh and gasped as her knickers suddenly became even more soaked. She sucked on his lower lip, dragging her teeth along it as she pulled away, smirking at his feral growl. Locking eyes with him, she moved off his lap enough to face him, hiking her skirt higher, the slit splaying over her right thigh as she resettled herself on his lap, straddling him.

Snape's pulse increased painfully at the blatant lust in her eyes as she sank down onto him. Almost panting in his struggle to not ravage her, he allowed his hands to slide up her stockinged thighs until they passed over the points where they clipped to the suspender belt. His breath caught when he felt her smooth skin, warm and soft under his fingers. The sound emanating from Hermione's throat was a cross between a sigh and a purr. Her eyes closed in delight and she rocked against him.

Snape's hands savagely slid up her thighs, gripping her arse and pulling her tight against him. The sensation of her rocking along his hard length was torturously exquisite. Hermione descended on him again, her mouth hot and demanding on his. He slowly caressed her, the realization that he felt no knickers under his fingers nearly strangling him with desire. Feverishly, he explored further, finally coming in contact with the thin scrap of fabric that furnished the back of her thong. The image of her in a thong and

suspender belt and stockings flooded his brain, and his eyes rolled back.

Hermione was practically quivering with bliss at the feel of his strong hands travelling further and further under her skirt. The heat of his cock between them was almost unbearable, and she idly wondered if she would soak through her completely decorative lace thong. Her body felt like it was on fire, and she couldn't get enough of moulding herself against him.

The passageway echoed with the sounds of their laboured breathing. Hermione began grinding on his lap, eliciting a low groan from Snape. Snape, however, was distracted by something digging painfully into his hip as she moved. Finally breaking their kiss, he slipped his hands down her legs and gripped them firmly, hissing, "Stop..."

Hermione blinked to clear the fog of lust from her mind and stilled. "What?"

Scowling in irritation, he regretfully pushed her off his lap, shoving his hand in his pocket to remove the offending object. Hermione was frowning in impatience and confusion. Withdrawing his hand, he opened it to see the shrunken bowl of mousse in his palm. Snape's harsh curse echoed in the darkness beyond them. Passing his other hand over his face, he fought to regain his composure. Glancing at Hermione, he saw her staring at him, puzzled.

Huffing harshly, he cleared his throat and muttered, "I told Dumbledore I was going to put this away properly. Bollocks, Hermione, we have to get back up there!" He closed his eyes at her look of angry defiance. She stretched toward him, laying her hand on his chest.

"No! I don't want to leave you again..." Her voice was almost a wail of exasperation. Snape took a deep breath and clenched his jaw.

"Ye gods, I don't *want* to either! We've been gone far too long as it is. You'll have to return by yourself first, at any rate, and I'll show up after a suitable interval. There mustn't be any indication that we were together." He closed his hands into fists, willing himself under control.

Sullenly, Hermione remarked, "At least I have the Cloak to get back upstairs without being seen, so you don't have to worry about that."

Snape flashed her a grateful look, reaching up and caressing her hair. "Indeed. Now, you must go." He gazed into her eyes, cupping her face in his palm. One eyebrow quirked up at the sudden wicked gleam that surfaced as she locked eyes with him.

A slow, devious smile spread across her face, and she purred, "*Ido* have the Cloak, don't I?"

Snape's eyes narrowed warily. "What?"

Hermione leant closer to him, sliding her hand down his chest as she said, "Let me come to you. Tonight. I have the Cloak. No one will know. We can be together again, just like in London..." At that, she deliberately slid her hand over the waist of his trousers, coming to rest against the visible bulge.

Snape's eyes widened in shock at her bold move, but as her hand covered his straining cock, he gasped. Then, when she squeezed lightly, his head fell back against the wall and all of the breath in his lungs seemed to escape in one huge explosion. His eyes closed, but he could see lights swimming against his eyelids. His mind was reeling at the incredible sensations. Reason warred with need. It wasn't until he felt the hot tickle of her breath on his ear as she whispered, "Please, Severus," that he managed to open his eyes again, turning to find himself drowning in the swirling love and lust in her brown eyes.

There's only so much a man can bear. Heart beating wildly, he struggled to breathe again. Finally sucking oxygen into his starving body, he rasped, "Yes."

The blaze of promise and exultation in Hermione's gaze was reward enough. With another brazen squeeze, she stroked his length through his trousers, eliciting a strangled groan. Darting forward to pin him with a passionate kiss, she pledged her love to him with her lips before drawing back and edging away.

She picked up the Cloak from where she had carelessly dropped it and scrambled to her feet. Dashing to the door, she turned a meaningful look on Snape. "I'll see you back upstairs in a bit. Then... I'll see you tonight, my love."

Snape sat sprawled against the wall, staring dazedly up at Hermione. He was so astonished that he couldn't formulate a logical response. Nodding mutely at her, he marvelled at her initiative.

Hermione flashed him a beatific smile before opening the door and peering out. Seeing no one, she looked over her shoulder at Snape and blew him a kiss before slipping past the door and shutting it. Snape remained where he was, stunned. "Bloody hell... She'll be the death of me yet."

35- All Good Parties Must Come to an End

Chapter 37 of 84

Ginny, Hermione, and Snape eventually rejoin the party, only to find out what Dumbledore has up his sleeve. Hermione once again finds herself defending Snape, but this time, she has support from Ginny. As Ginny points out, it's a good thing she's on their side... Isn't it?

Standard Disclaimer still applies.

Check out my LJ for random info about me and this fic: http://www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon/

Sorry for such a long time between updates! Hope you enjoy this...

Chapter 35- All Good Parties Must Come to an End

Ginny stopped outside the Great Hall and peeked in. Scanning the corridor as well, she ended the charm and briskly strode into the Hall to rejoin the party. Harry, Seamus, Neville, and Colin were loitering at the gift table, chatting about their presents. Colin and Neville were both animatedly pointing at things in their books, while Harry and Seamus nodded along. Ginny smiled at the tableau and crossed the dance floor to join them. As she neared, Harry looked up and saw her, his face creasing into a huge grin.

Grinning back, Ginny sidled up to him, letting him draw her in close, wrapping her arm around his waist as he draped his arm across her shoulders possessively. Harry ducked his head near her ear after everyone exchanged greetings and murmured, "Everything all right?"

Ginny nodded hastily. "Oh, yes! I needed Hermione's help with something."

"With what?"

Ginny glanced up at him and surreptitiously jerked her head at the other boys, giving him a significant look. Harry cottoned on and nodded. Sliding his hand down her back, he slipped it around to grasp her hand and began leading her away from the group.

"Back in a bit, fellas. I think it's time to dance with my girlfriend again." He flashed Ginny a winning grin and nodded at the boys. The others waved at them cheerfully. It was easy to pick a spot on the dance floor that wasn't near anyone else, since the party was a fairly small one anyway. Pausing, Harry spun Ginny into his arms and pulled her close. "So, what did you need Hermione's help with?"

Ginny smiled up at him and tilted her head. "Your Christmas present..."

Harry's brows shot up in surprise and he sputtered, "My present? But you already gave me a present."

Ginny wrinkled her nose saucily and purred, "Oh, I have something special for you, just between us..." She chuckled low in her throat at the stunned curiosity in Harry's eyes.

Harry grimaced in incredulity. "And *Hermione* helped you with it?"

Ginny giggled and rolled her eyes. Stretching up to his ear, she whispered, "We should really skive off early if we can. We've only got 'til 1:00 to use her room." She delighted in the strangled gasp from Harry's mouth and the way he tightened his grip convulsively around her waist.

He hissed, "Are you *serious*?"

Ginny pulled back enough to lock eyes with him. Cocking one eyebrow up, she drawled, "As a Cruciatus Curse..." Harry blinked rapidly as he processed that information, then his jaw throbbed as he ground his teeth. A wicked smile slowly spread across his face, and Ginny responded with a mischievous smirk.

Harry bent his head lower and touched his forehead to Ginny's. In a low voice, he murmured, "Best. Christmas. Ever!"

Hermione swathed herself in the Cloak and dashed down the corridor to the stairs leading up from the dungeons. As she went, she tried to compose herself, to quiet the roaring in her ears and to still the tremors that had taken possession of her body. In her mind, a voice kept shrieking, *Yes! Yes! You get to be with him again! Brilliant!*

Jogging up the stairs, she paused at the landing to regain her breath and to find a good spot to stash the Cloak for later. There were several alcoves along the corridor, many of which created shadowed nooks. Resolutely, she strode down the corridor and stepped into the shadows near the doors to the Great Hall. After a quick glance around to make sure no one was watching, she whipped the Cloak off and folded it into a tight bundle. Shoving it into the dark corner as far as it would go, she even went so far as to mask it with a concealment charm like the one she had used to hide the photo in Snape's gift. Confident that no one would find it, she straightened and smoothed her clothes and hair, turning to enter the Hall again.

As she entered, she saw Harry and Ginny dancing, almost plastered against one another. Stifling a snort, she scanned the room and saw Ron and Susan still at the same table where she had left them. But, now, they were sitting closer, and leaning toward each other, completely absorbed in their conversation, to the exclusion of everyone else. Hermione could tell by their expressions that they were exploring a new-found fancy for one another.

Colin and Neville were still at the gift table with Seamus, and the other Gryffindors had joined them. As Hermione walked up to the group, they all smiled in greeting. Parvati was trying on the different hair accessories that Dumbledore had given her, and they were all laughing at the trinkets' antics. Hermione reached in to pick up her mousse, and suddenly found herself the centre of attention.

Lavender looked solemnly at her and said, "I tell you, Hermione, that was the weirdest thing I've ever seen, you and Snape laughing like that..."

Colin and Neville blanched at the thought and nodded. Neville squeaked, "Are you really going to *eat* that? I mean, Snape made it. It could be poison!"

Hermione rolled her eyes at the rumble of agreement that rolled through the rest of the group. "Please. Do you honestly think that Professor Snape would poison a student? Use your head!"

Neville grimaced and retorted, "He was perfectly ready to poison Trevor that time we made Shrinking Solutions!"

Hermione fixed him with an aggrieved stare and said, "Trevor is not a student! Besides, you're all being ridiculous. The mousse tastes divine!" And a faint smile flitted across her face as she spoke.

Colin's eyes bugged out. "You already ate some? I can't believe it!"

Hermione picked up the spoon and served up a dollop. Glaring heatedly at their horrified faces, she popped the spoon in her mouth and swallowed the mousse, her eyes closing involuntarily at the flavour. Sighing happily, she opened her eyes to see them all looking at her as if they were waiting for her to explode. Again, she rolled her eyes and huffed. "It's really good! Why don't you try it?" She proffered the bowl.

Vehement head shaking erupted on all sides. Hermione narrowed her eyes and set her jaw. Spooning up some more mousse, she whirled on Colin and ordered, "Eat it!" Colin's eyes widened. Hermione glared at him with all the severity of Snape and added, in a deadly quiet voice, "Now."

Colin, never much for standing up for himself, completely quailed under Hermione's forceful demand. Swallowing nervously, he opened his mouth, unwilling to incite Hermione's wrath. Hermione firmly deposited the spoonful of mousse in his mouth and then pulled back, crossing her arms.

"Go on. Swallow." Colin grimaced but complied. After a beat, Hermione jerked her chin at him. "There. See? Perfectly fine. And how did it taste?" She eyed him warningly.

Colin blinked a few times, working his mouth. His worried expression slowly smoothed into a bewildered one. Plainly incredulous, he stammered, "It... It was... good!" Hermione's lips thinned in satisfaction.

Dean cocked his head and said, "Seriously?"

Colin shrugged sheepishly and nodded. "It tasted good..."

Hermione flashed a triumphant look at the rest. "There. Happy now?"

There was an awkward shuffling. Neville shot Colin a reproachful look, and Colin grimaced. "What do you want from me? It was really good! Try it yourself if you don't believe me!"

Hermione pinned Neville with a challenging stare and said, "Why not, Neville? It's obviously safe. Or are you scared?" She knew she was goading him, but she couldn't help herself.

Neville's ears turned pink and he scowled. Clearly steeling himself, he mumbled, "Fine. Give it here." Hermione handed him the bowl and the spoon. He served up a

moderate helping and screwed his eyes shut as he shoved it in his mouth. Almost instantly, his eyes popped open, widening in surprise. He swallowed and licked his lips, looking thoughtful. Finally, he glanced around the group almost apologetically. Smiling wanly, he murmured, "He's right. It *is* good."

Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes heavenward, placing the bowl on the table again with an air of "Duh! What did I tell you?" As the others began muttering heatedly amongst themselves, Hermione noticed Harry and Ginny making their way back to the group. As they arrived, Harry caught Hermione's eye and flushed, looking away hurriedly. She smirked, looking at Ginny to confirm that the other girl had clued Harry in on their deal. Ginny nodded minutely before brightly addressing the others.

"What's up, mates?" She glanced back and forth between the other Gryffindors, who were scowling and shooting suspicious looks at Hermione, and Hermione, who was standing there with a long-suffering look on her face.

When no one volunteered an answer, Hermione sighed loudly and explained, "They couldn't believe I would eat the mousse Professor Snape made for my gift. Some even thought it might be poisoned! So, I made Colin and Neville try it, and they admit it tastes good! But, the others are still too chicken to take a chance and taste it." She cast a withering gaze over the rest of the group.

Ginny's brows rose and she shook her head. "Oh, give over! Snape would never hurt Hermione!"

Everyone zeroed in on Ginny in consternation, including Hermione, who felt a sudden surge of panic. She glared at Ginny as icy sweat prickled her skin. Harry was perplexed enough to be drawn in, forgoing his embarrassed avoidance of Hermione. Squinting, he queried, "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

Ginny realized her mistake and glanced warily at Hermione, noting the other girl's tense posture. Quickly, she heaved a sigh and rolled her eyes. "Honestly! She's only the lead in the show! Dumbledore would have Snape's guts for garters if he did anything to hurt her!" She gazed loftily around the group, feeling relief wash over her as they accepted her logic. Hermione closed her eyes and sent a silent thanks to the powers that be that Ginny hadn't spilled the beans so quickly.

Then, in an attempt to divert attention even more, Ginny stepped up and said, "Here. I'll try it. I'm not afraid." She extended her hand for the mousse, and Hermione recovered enough to hand it over. Ginny airily ate a spoonful and smiled. "Oh! This is top notch stuff!" She deliberately turned to Harry and offered him a spoonful. He hesitated only a moment before tasting it. His brows rose in appreciation.

Swallowing, he glanced at Hermione with a rather impressed expression and said, "Ruddy good, that was..."

At that, Seamus and Dean stepped forward for their chance, and then Lavender and Parvati followed. Eventually, they had all tried it, reluctantly admitting that it was quite tasty. Finally, when they had all come around, Hermione retrieved the bowl with a possessive air and said, "Good. I'm glad you all can agree that Professor Snape isn't a monster who would poison a student in the guise of a Christmas gift! Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to take *my* gift back, thank you very much, before there isn't any left for *me* to enjoy!" She eyed them all severely, and they sniggered back.

The others began to disperse, some to the refreshment table, some to the dance floor, and some to the tables along the edges. Hermione looked up to see Ron and Susan dancing, smiling shyly at each other. A fond grin spread across her face, and she caught Ginny's eye as Harry twirled her out to the dance floor again. The two girls looked at Ron and then locked eyes again. Beaming, they chuckled indulgently, both hoping Ron was having a good time. Good ol' Ron deserved it as much as anyone ever could.

Snape leant against the wall for several moments after Hermione's departure. His head swam with a welter of emotions. Every time he came up against the fact that she would be sneaking to meet him that night, his cock throbbed. He kept waiting for his erection to flag, so he could get to his quarters and back up to the Hall, but it wouldn't budge. Gingerly reaching down to adjust himself, he hissed at the jolt of pleasure his touch incited. *Bloody hell, I can't go back up there like this! This is just out of control...* He shifted on the hard floor, once again gasping at the surge in his groin. Rolling his head back along the stone, he closed his eyes and gave in to the inevitable.

Deft fingers slid down his length, stroking through his trousers. Inhaling sharply, he resolutely unbuttoned his trousers and reached into his pants to grasp his erection. His hands felt cold against its hot skin, but he rather enjoyed the contrast. It certainly served to heighten the sensations. His breath came more raggedly as he squeezed and stroked. He knew it wouldn't take long to reach his peak, not with how aroused Hermione had made him. Envisioning her, remembering the feel of her bare arse in his hands, and the taste of her tongue battling his, he pumped his fist faster. Harsh huffs and grunts echoed in the long passageway. Then, the tickle began in his balls. He could feel his cock getting harder as his sac drew up tight against his body. His spine stiffened and his hips thrust forward into his furiously pounding hand as he came, a guttural groan oozing from his throat. All of his muscles twitched, spasming in rhythm with the spurts of semen that dripped over his fingers. As he came down from his euphoric high, he blinked to clear the sparks that were swimming against his closed eyelids, taking deep breaths and swallowing convulsively.

In the aftermath of his tumultuous giving-in-to-temptation, he noted that at least he was finally able to clear his head, and he briskly reached for his wand to cast a cleansing charm on himself. Tucking away his spent member, he pushed himself up from the floor, straightened his clothes, and retrieved the shrunken mousse. Heaving a cleansing sigh, he regained his equilibrium and peeked out of the door, checking for observers. Seeing none, he quickly shut the door and strode to his quarters, where he restored the mousse to its original state and placed it securely in a cabinet, after refreshing the cooling and stasis charms on it. Making a quick pass through his bathroom to check his appearance in the mirror...mercy! his hair was dishevelled...he headed back out to the Great Hall.

When Snape entered the Hall again, he saw several couples dancing, and Dumbledore and McGonagall deep in a discussion at a table near the door. Swiftly glancing about, he saw Hermione sitting at a table, idly stirring a cup of tea, her chin propped on the back of her other hand. She was gazing at Ron and Susan on the dance floor, a faint smile on her face. As Snape looked at her, she blinked and started, turning her head to see him near the door. With a minute tilt of her head, she clinked her spoon in the teacup, quirking her lips up even more.

Snape felt the heat rising to his cheeks as he thought about his wanton activity not ten minutes prior. Ducking his head a bit, he sidled to the opposite side of the room, giving Trelawney a wide berth at her table.

He was safely ensconced in a chair, alone, when Dumbledore and McGonagall apparently wrapped up their discussion. With a decided nod of his head, Dumbledore beamed about the room, while McGonagall sat back with an almost resigned air, but also smiling primly. As Dumbledore scanned the Hall, he spotted Snape. Clapping his hands, he crowed in delight as he shuffled eagerly over to the younger man.

"Ah! Excellent, Severus, you're back!"

Dryly, Snape retorted, "So it would seem..."

"And it looks as if all our charges are accounted for as well."

Snape flicked a tallying glance around the Hall. "Correct again."

Dumbledore grinned at Snape, and Snape felt the unease creeping into his gut again. *Oh, for gods' sakes, what now?* With a jovial air, the headmaster sank into a chair beside Snape, chuckling to himself. "Now we can move on to the next event of our festivities."

Snape clenched his teeth and simply looked at the older man, utterly silent.

Maddeningly, Dumbledore continued, "Don't you want to know what that is, Severus?"

Snape narrowed his eyes scathingly at his employer. "Certainly you know me better than that by now, Albus. I would rather *not* know, but I'm sure you're going to tell me anyway." He heaved a long-suffering sigh.

Dumbledore responded with what sounded suspiciously like a snort, causing Snape to eye him sharply, but then he cleared his throat, briskly tapping his hands on the table. "Indeed... I have decided that since we have to choreograph the Masquerade, we all need to learn how to dance properly. So, now that you're back, you can help the rest of us instruct the students."

As he spoke, a wave of horror rolled across Snape's pale face. Then, a spark of cunning lit in his eyes and a smirk crept to his lips. Almost triumphantly, Snape retorted, "Aha! But, Albus, the Phantom *does not dance* at the Masquerade. He merely arrives to cause chaos and then disappears..."

Dumbledore shook his head amiably. "Tut tut, dear boy. You are still a teacher here, and I need your help in instructing the children. It's not so very difficult. Minerva and I have worked out a basic pattern that can be varied and repeated in the scene. I daresay you can manage it." He pinned Snape with a steely eye, once again making Snape feel like he was caught in a trap.

Damn him! Snape felt his triumph dissolving, and he slumped dejectedly back in his chair. In a deadened voice, he droned, "As you say, Headmaster."

Dumbledore clapped him heartily on the shoulder and chortled. Snape's head rocked on his neck, and he rolled his eyes in defeat. "Wonderful! Minerva and I will get things started, so just be ready to join us when we call you." With that, Dumbledore stood and glided back to McGonagall, offering her his arm. Gracefully taking it, McGonagall stood and joined him as he stepped to the centre of the dance floor.

With a snap of his fingers, the music stopped, and all heads turned toward him, wondering what the headmaster wanted. Gazing merrily at the cast, Dumbledore waved his hand and called, "Gather 'round, please! I have some important news for you all." The students exchanged curious glances as they crowded in front of him and McGonagall. Snape sat listlessly in his chair, brooding about how little he wanted to partake of this new idea.

"Professor McGonagall and I have been working hard to ready this presentation for you. As you all know, you will all be dancing during 'Masquerade.' Well, as we have a perfectly ripping dance space available to us right now, we have decided to use this time to instruct you in the basic dance patterns we will use during that scene." Several students gaped at each other, clearly discomfited by the notion, while others grinned cheerily, looking rather expectant.

Dumbledore pulled a music box from within his robes and fiddled with the dials. With a satisfied sniff, he placed it on a table at the edge of the dance floor and gazed around the group. He beckoned to Trelawney, gesturing for her to man the music box for him. Then, he cleared his throat as he waved at Snape. Snape glared at the old man as he slowly straightened and trudged over to the rest of the assembled group. Several students eyed him warily and edged away from his forbidding presence.

"Severus, Sibyll, pay close attention to the steps as we demonstrate." He and McGonagall stepped into their dance position and looked at Trelawney. At Dumbledore's nod, Trelawney opened the music box, and the headmaster and his Transfiguration professor began to dance.

Grimly, Snape watched their feet, counting in his head with the measures. After several bouts of the same steps, he raised his gaze to watch their frames. He absorbed the placement of their hands and the shape of their arms, as well as the sway of their bodies as they spun and minced along the dance floor. Suddenly, Dumbledore announced, "Now, this is a bit different..." They launched into a different pattern, but Snape could see that the basic idea was still the same. Eventually, the demonstrators showed several variations on the initial pattern, easily mixing them up as they danced. When the music ended, they glided to a stop, turning smiling faces to the students, who had immediately begun applauding.

McGonagall bobbed an amused curtsy and Dumbledore offered an exaggerated bow. Chuckling, he murmured, "Thank you, indeed. Now, Severus, Sibyll, join us, please."

Snape stalked over to them, horror welling up at the thought that Dumbledore would make him dance with that old fraud of a Divination professor. Something of his panicked revulsion must have shown, because McGonagall gripped his elbow reassuringly and muttered, "Come now, Severus, let me show you how it's done, while Albus teaches Sibyll." Despite himself, and his usual animosity toward the Head of his rival House, he couldn't help the look of abject relief and gratitude that washed over his face. McGonagall simply chuckled understandingly.

Shooting a black glare over the assembled students, Snape stiffly took his place with McGonagall to begin. Dumbledore and Trelawney stood to one side.

"Miss Lovegood, would you be so kind as to open the music box again on my mark? Thank you. Now, everyone, pay attention!" Dumbledore cast a meaningful look at Snape, who nodded icily. Before starting the music again, the headmaster described the steps, slowly showing them to the group as he went.

McGonagall waited patiently until he went through it once, then she nodded sharply and turned to Snape. "All right then. Position!" Snape sulkily gripped her hand and waist, feeling the light weight of her hand on his shoulder. Trying not to stare at his feet too much, he followed the instructions as McGonagall repeated them in a low mutter, just as Dumbledore was doing with Trelawney.

After a couple of run-throughs, they paused again, for Dumbledore to explain the variations. The more they practiced the steps, the more confident Snape felt. Relieved that it wasn't more difficult, he grudgingly admitted to himself that the ease with which he picked up on the steps was in large part due to the skill of his partner. Fortunately, McGonagall was maintaining a completely professional attitude, and the instruction was going smoothly.

Hazarding a glance at the students again, Snape saw them all watching with intense concentration...some of the boys more so than the girls. Having actually succeeded to a reasonable degree, he felt a bit smug as he saw the petrified anxiety on Neville's face. *At least I don't have to bother with learning all this to do so on stage...*

Having practiced all of the steps, Dumbledore said, "Now, let's try with the music, shall we?" All traces of smug satisfaction disappeared from Snape's countenance. McGonagall saw the flare of unease in her partner's face and chuckled.

In a bare whisper, she said, "Easy there, Severus. It's not that bad. You've caught on; just pay attention to the rhythm as we go." Snape swallowed and thinned his lips in acknowledgement. Quirking her lips in an indulgent smile, she took her position and nodded to Snape. "Ready now..."

Dumbledore nodded to Luna, who opened the box again, and the music began. At McGonagall's subtle urging, Snape gingerly stepped off to begin their first set. Firmly focused on reciting the steps in his head, he paid no attention to the rest of the cast.

Hermione fought down a tender smile and thought, *Oh, he looks so uncomfortable! And I thought he was about to bolt when it looked like he was about to be paired up with Trelawney. Poor dear! But, it looks like he has rather got the hang of it. I hope the rest of us can catch on so quickly. I'll bet he's just rejoicing in the fact that he doesn't have to do any of this in the play!*

As they danced, Dumbledore called out variations, and each couple transitioned into the new steps on the next set. There were a few minor stumbles, but by the time they had reached the end of the music again, each pair had shown that they were comfortable with the patterns.

Coming to a stop, Dumbledore released Trelawney and clapped his hands. "Wonderful! I say, Minerva, Severus managed quite well, don't you think?"

McGonagall smiled primly and patted Snape's arm where he had crossed them over his chest defensively. "Indeed. You picked it up very quickly. Well done."

Snape narrowed his eyes but nodded minutely. Dumbledore then turned to Trelawney and clasped his hands in front of his chest. "You caught on well, my dear. Very well then! Everyone gather 'round and partner up to learn." He beamed expectantly at the students, who all began to shuffle and mutter amongst themselves.

After a long moment, Harry stepped forward and offered up a rueful smile, idly rubbing the sting on his bicep where Ginny had thwacked him. "Might as well see if The-Boy-Who-Lived can also be The-Boy-Who-Can-Dance!" Titters greeted his wry comment as he politely stepped up to his Head of House and bowed. "Professor McGonagall?" He grinned at her cheekily, and she stifled an amused snort.

"Very well then, Mr. Potter. Follow me." She stepped away to give them space to practice. It was as if a dam had broken. Draco was hissing to Pansy furiously, propelling

her forward to join Snape, and Parvati was smiling winningly at Dumbledore as she stepped forward. Terry Boot approached Trelawney with a grave, pompous air, and all four couples spread out to practice.

Low murmurs buzzed throughout as all four teachers explained the steps to the students. Snape kept telling himself that the torture would all be over soon, and showing how much he loathed his current task would just goad Dumbledore into more sadistic ideas. He was cool and precise in his instruction, attempting an air of detached indifference as he guided Pansy through the steps. Of course, since he wasn't as adept at the dance as Dumbledore or McGonagall, they had finished with their students before he had finished with his. Surreptitiously glancing about, he noted that Trelawney was still working with Terry, and Snape felt a pang of relief that he wasn't behind *everybody*.

As Parvati rejoined the spectators, Lavender took her place with Dumbledore. Neville, feeling rather an affinity for his Head of House after receiving his lovely gift, smiled shakily as he took Harry's place.

A few minutes later, Snape and Pansy finished their practice, and he coolly nodded at her in dismissal. She offered a quick thanks and scurried back to the other Slytherins. Just at that moment, Trelawney and Terry finished as well, Terry hurrying back to the group. Millicent had already begun her trek to take Pansy's place with Snape, and there was an awkward silence as no one else stepped forward to take Terry's place. Snape rolled his eyes and sighed. Standing straighter, he pinned the students of his House with a warning glare, and Pansy shoved Draco. With a startled look at Snape, Draco caught on, a resigned look on his face for a fleeting moment before he schooled it into a superior sneer. Swaggering forward, he cast a contemptuous glance over the others before joining Trelawney. Once in position, Draco shot a questioning glance at Snape, who responded with a slight nod of approval. Pleased, Draco returned to Trelawney's instruction, while Snape went through it all with Millicent.

Again, Dumbledore and McGonagall finished with their partners, and Hannah jumped forward to claim Dumbledore with an air of exaggerated relief that she wouldn't end up with Snape. Colin took Neville's place at the other Gryffindor boys' jovial urging.

When Draco and Millicent were done, they joined a solitary Pansy to one side, whispering and sniggering at the other students as they learnt. When Snape was once again alone, the other girls exchanged uncomfortable glances. Hermione looked at Ginny with a mute pleading in her eyes. Ginny realized that Hermione couldn't very well volunteer to join Snape right off, or she might garner some suspicion. That decided it. Ginny thought about the agreement she had come to with Snape, and the human side she had been witness to, and she firmly made up her mind. Casting a haughtily amused smirk over the shocked audience, she boldly stepped forward to join Snape.

Snape's brows rose in surprise. As Ginny approached him, with her back to everyone else, she quirked one corner of her mouth up and shot him the slightest of winks. Snape blinked. Steeling himself to keep his composure, he gravely intoned, "Miss Weasley."

She politely retorted, "Professor." Silently, they took their positions, and Snape repeated the instruction. Ginny had been paying close attention each time the others had practiced, and was anticipating each instruction. After a few times, Snape went silent and she glanced up at him. His face was inscrutable.

"It seems you do not need me to repeat the instructions."

Ginny shook her head faintly and shrugged. "I paid attention already."

Snape's lips twitched. "Indeed." They performed the set a few times before Snape suddenly changed to a new pattern. Ginny almost stumbled, but caught herself quickly and recovered. Snape's lips curved in a smirk. In a low rumble, he said, "Ah, so our inestimable Miss Weasley doesn't necessarily figure *everything* out..."

Ginny's eyes widened as she recognized the jibe. Astonished that Snape would tease her, she tilted her head and, before she could reconsider, flashed, "Maybe not everything, but mostly the important stuff!" Snape's brows rose at her cheeky retort, but she could have sworn she saw a spark of amusement.

With a non-committal "Hmph," Snape turned them away from the rest of the group as they continued on to a new step. Dryly, he muttered, "How pleased Hermione will be to know she rates as 'important stuff.'"

Ginny choked back a snort of laughter. Snape eyed her shrewdly. Rather enjoying this opportunity to banter with a not-so-evil Snape, Ginny remarked, "Apparently you are too, sir." Snape blinked again.

Thinning his lips to fight the urge to smile, Snape murmured, "Miss Weasley, you are full of surprises."

A wicked impulse rose up in Ginny, and she slyly drawled, "Reckon it's a good thing I'm on your side, eh?" Before Snape could do more than snap his warning glare to her, she continued in a bare whisper, "I could always provide alibis..."

Snape cast a furtive glance about the room again, seeing Dumbledore and McGonagall pairing up with Susan and Ron, while Trelawney was dancing with Justin. In a strained hiss, he said, "Just *what* are you implying?"

Ginny pretended to be watching her feet as she lied, "Well, I could be useful as a go-between... and I could always tell people she was with me if she was with you..." She gasped and snapped her eyes up to his blazing ones as he gripped her painfully.

Boring his gaze into hers, Snape bit out, "This is not a childish game! Have you any idea of the scandal that would result if we were found out?" Ginny nodded dumbly. Swallowing and closing his eyes for a moment to regain control, he stared icily at her and added, "Enough. We're done here." With a final warning look, he guided Ginny back to the group and she bobbed a curtsy as she scrambled back to Hermione.

Hermione looked back and forth between them, wondering what was wrong. After a bare moment's hesitation, she resolutely stepped forward to join Snape. As they politely nodded to each other, Trelawney had finished with Justin, and everyone stifled their chuckles at Seamus's stage whisper saying, "Go *on* Dean! She gave you a ruddy Christmas present, the least you can do is dance with her!"

Dean scowled at Seamus as he slunk forward, shaking his fist at his dorm-mate when Trelawney's back was turned. Snape deftly guided Hermione away from the others and began reciting the instructions. She paid attention until she was comfortable with the steps, and then she glanced up at him worriedly.

"What's wrong? You're upset." She gently squeezed his shoulder, willing him to look at her.

Snape glanced around furtively before muttering through set lips, "She said she could provide *alibis* for us!" Hermione's eyes widened and her mouth formed a stunned "o." "Can we trust her? It seems like she thinks this is all a game!" He shut his lips tightly again and Hermione could see his jaw throbbing. Fleeting, she wished she could reach up and soothe it.

She cast a quick glance around the room and focused on her feet again as she formulated her response. Slowly, she murmured, "I don't think she meant it like that. She's just trying to be helpful. She probably feels like she owes me one anyway."

Snape frowned and ground out, "Owes you one? For what?"

Hermione grimaced uncomfortably and shrugged faintly. "Um, I'm loaning my room to her for a bit tonight. Long story..."

Snape's brows shot up, and his hands clenched spastically. In a hiss, he spat, "Loaning her your room?! Dare I ask for what?" He eyed her sternly.

Feeling the heat rising in her cheeks, she muttered, "Their Head Girl is taking care of things, remember?" Glaring at him, she tilted her chin up defiantly. Snape's lips curled and he shuddered.

"I'm sorry I asked..."

Hermione retorted a frosty, "Indeed." They were silent for a few moments, broken only by the low murmurs of Snape instructing her in the next set of steps. Eventually, Hermione ventured, "You know, she could be useful..."

Snape blinked warily. His tone was short and flat as he said, "How?"

Sneaking a glance up through her lashes, she drawled, "Well, we can't use owl post with impunity, and I only have Potions once a week..."

Comprehension dawned, and he regarded her with a frankly stunned admiration. "Since when did you Gryffindors get so cunning?"

Hermione stifled a smirk and purred, "Perhaps it comes from such close association with you Slytherins. Perhaps you're rubbing off on me..."

Snape swallowed hastily and fought the embarrassed flush that wanted to stain his cheeks at the thought of just *what* he had been rubbing off earlier. Fortunately, Hermione continued, and didn't seem to notice his discomfiture.

"Ginny can pass letters for us..."

Snape cut her off with a scathing, "She knows how to reveal the writing!"

Hermione worked her jaw in irritation at being interrupted, and Snape recognized his rudeness at once. Clearing his throat and inclining his head in tacit apology, he schooled his expression into one of polite interest as she glared at him.

"As I was saying... She can pass the letters for us, and we can make sure that we get them from her as soon as possible, so she doesn't have time to try to pry."

Snape muttered the last steps' instructions to Hermione, and they glided through them. As they neared the rest of the watching group, Snape mumbled, "We'll talk more about this later." With that, they wound up where they had started, and within moments, all of the other pairs were finished as well.

Dumbledore gazed happily at them all and crowed, "Marvellous! Just as I had expected! Everyone did quite well. I'm so pleased! Thank you all for your attention and hard work. Now, that's all I have planned for you this evening. The rest of the party is yours. Happy Christmas to you all!"

Applause and answering shouts met his announcement, and the students all ambled off, some discussing the dancing, some crowding around the punchbowl, and others gliding off to dance together *their* way. Ginny pulled Harry off to one side and whispered, "I'm going to head on up and put my calendar away. I'll be waiting for you in Hermione's room. Don't be too long... We've only got until 1:00." Then, she flashed him a wicked grin and squeezed his arm before she dashed off to the gift table.

Harry stood alone, watching Ginny collect her gift and say goodbye to her friends on her way out the door. Once she had disappeared, the import of what he was about to do hit him, and he glanced around anxiously for Hermione. She was politely listening to Colin, who seemed to be worrying about the dance steps. Harry took a deep breath and resolutely strode over to her.

"Hey, Hermione, Colin. Um, could you excuse us for a moment; I need to talk to Hermione." He tried to look nonchalant as he eyed Colin. Still not quite over his hero worship of Harry, Colin immediately demurred and backed away.

Hermione looked at Harry quizzically. "What's up?"

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets uncomfortably and looked down. "Um, nothing much. I just wanted to... uh, I guess, thank you... for... well, you know."

Hermione swallowed a smile and glanced away. "Well, it's better than you two sneaking around and taking chances. Just..." She glanced at him with a hint of anxiety, but shut her lips in a thin line and shook her head. "Never mind." She relaxed a bit and smiled faintly. "Happy Christmas, Harry."

Deciding that it was easier to just leave it at that, Harry flashed her a grateful half-smile and murmured, "Happy Christmas to you too, Hermione." He nodded to her and spun away, crossing to Ron and Susan at the gift table to say good night. Hermione watched him leave, nervously tossing his Quidditch gloves as he walked.

Glancing around the Hall, she saw Trelawney shaking hands with Dumbledore, on her way out as well. Looking at Snape, she saw him lounging in a chair off to one side, dark eyes darting around the room. He caught her eye and paused, just staring at her. She felt the urge to smile and forced herself to look away. Briskly, she strode over to the gift table and picked up her mousse.

"Hi, Ron, Susan. Ron, can I talk to you for a second?" She smiled reassuringly at Susan, who suddenly eyed Hermione warily.

"Sure. Be right back, 'kay Susan?" He smiled ingratiatingly at Susan, who relaxed and nodded. Ron and Hermione stepped away and Hermione stifled a smirk as Ron positioned them so her back was to Susan, but he could easily look past Hermione to see her. "What's up?"

Hermione twinkled up at Ron and whispered, "Looks like you two hit it off..."

Ron ducked his head and grinned, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

Hermione reached out and squeezed his arm. "That's great, Ron. Ginny noticed too. We're both happy for you. And you were worried about your Secret Santa gift..." She playfully poked him and he flushed. "Susan seems really sweet. I hope you two have fun." At that, Ron beamed at her.

"Me too!" His gaze shifted suddenly, glancing past Hermione and then back. A sheepish grin surfaced as he said, "Listen, I better get back over there. It'd be rude to leave her all alone for long."

Hermione nodded sagely. "Of course! Go right ahead. Happy Christmas, Ron!"

He gripped her shoulder and squeezed. "Happy Christmas!" And with that, he hurried back over to Susan.

Hermione wandered over to Luna, who was sitting at a table, leafing through her book. As Hermione approached, she was relieved to see that at least it was right side up. "Hey, Luna. Mind if I sit here?"

Luna turned big, solemn eyes on her and gravely said, "I don't mind a bit. Would you like to hear about the platypus? It's a very unique animal..."

Hermione smiled and sat, casting spells on her mousse until it was secure and shrunken enough to fit in her palm. "Sure. I've heard about it before, being Muggle-born, you know. But what does the book say about them?"

Luna turned the book to Hermione, glibly reciting the facts about the animal as she pointed at glossy pictures. Hermione surreptitiously glanced about and noticed that Snape had finally stood, and was crossing to Dumbledore.

Trelawney was long gone, and Snape decided it was time to make good his escape. He stepped over to Dumbledore. "Good evening, Albus. As there are no other events planned for the rest of the party, I shall retire. I daresay the students enjoyed themselves." He inclined his head in a gesture of grudging approval.

Dumbledore grinned jovially at Snape and said, "The students weren't the only ones who enjoyed themselves, Severus! I seem to recall a certain Potions professor who shocked the cast with his unusual gale of mirth..."

Snape lowered his gaze and shrugged sheepishly. "Unusual circumstances warrant unusual results."

Dumbledore laughed aloud at that and clapped Snape on the shoulder again, making Snape blink under the buffeting. "Indeed, my boy, indeed. Well, I suppose I should let you go. I did allow Sibyll to leave already, and you have already participated more than is your wont. Very well then, Severus. Good night! And Happy Christmas." He smiled fondly at the younger man, who inclined his head politely in response.

"Thank you, Headmaster. Good night." Snape spun slightly and saw McGonagall off to one side, watching the dancing students. Raising his voice enough to carry the short distance, he said, "Good night, Minerva."

McGonagall turned to him and nodded. "Good night, Severus. Happy Christmas. I must say that it seemed a holiday miracle to see you not only dress for a party, but enjoy yourself for once! I do hope it is the beginning of a trend." She smiled gently at him.

Snape rolled his eyes, but his lips twitched with suppressed humour. "Perhaps I was carried away with the celebratory spirit of a Christmas without the Dark Lord. I'm sure it was a passing flight of fancy." One corner of his mouth cocked up as he cut a sly glance at her. She burst out laughing.

"Perhaps! We'll just have to wait and see, I suppose." Smiling at him, she nodded again and turned back to the students. At that, Snape spun on his heel and smoothly strode out of the Hall. He contained the impulse to glance back at Hermione.

As he trekked down to his quarters, one thought consumed his being: *Hermione will be here soon!*

Hermione had listened to Luna waxing enthusiastic about several creatures in her book, and found herself stifling a yawn. Snape had been gone for a while, and she decided that it was time to leave. As Luna hit a pause in her lecture, Hermione cut in. "Luna, I'm really beat. I think I'm going to turn in. Thanks for sharing with me. That's a really interesting book."

Unperturbed, Luna gazed at her. "Sure. I know you like books too. Well, maybe I'll see you tomorrow when I come to play with Seamus."

Hermione nodded brightly. "Maybe! Well, good night!" She stood and stretched before walking toward the doors. Luna waved and then went back to her book. As Hermione passed McGonagall, she offered a cheery, "Good night, Professor!" McGonagall returned the greeting, and Hermione passed by Dumbledore. "Good night, sir. The party was lovely. Thank you."

Dumbledore beamed. "Why, thank you, my dear. I thought it was rather spiffing, myself. I do hope you had a good Christmas."

Hermione grinned broadly and nodded. "Yes, sir. It's been great. Hope yours was, too!"

Dumbledore nodded and chuckled. "Couldn't be better. I haven't had this much fun in years..."

Smiling politely, Hermione ventured, "Well, I'm fair knackered, so I'm going to turn in. Good night!"

"Good night, my dear!" He nodded benevolently at her as she edged away and out the doors.

Once she was in the corridor, she cast one last keen look through to see if anyone was about to exit, and then dashed to the dark alcove where she had hidden the Cloak. Eyes darting about, she grabbed it and hurriedly enveloped herself in it. Finally releasing a deep breath when she was concealed from view, she slowly began her journey down to Snape's quarters. She tiptoed, making as little noise as possible, hoping that she wouldn't run into anyone on the way down to the dungeons. Her stomach roiled with excitement and trepidation. It felt like a Muggle washer on the final spin cycle.

She crept down the corridor, freezing when she heard voices behind her. Backing against the wall, she whirled and saw Draco, Pansy, and Millicent traipsing out of the Great Hall. Breathing shallowly, she waited for them to pass her, hoping they wouldn't hear her or brush against her. Draco was condescendingly droning on about how to do the dance steps properly. Falling into step behind them, Hermione stealthily followed them down the stairs.

When they reached the lower corridor, the three Slytherins branched off toward their common room, and Hermione once again slowed down to carefully pick her way to Snape's quarters, senses alert for Filch, or Mrs. Norris, or any of the ghosts. The trembling in her stomach intensified as she passed the potions classroom. Mentally screwing her courage to the sticking point, she determinedly sidled up to Snape's door. Once there, she paused for a long moment.

Anticipation warred with fear, and she took several deep breaths to calm herself. Shifting the shrunken mousse from one sweaty palm to the other, she swallowed convulsively and lifted her hand to knock.

TBC, of course

I know! Don't hate me, and don't kill me! The whole next chapter will be in Sev's rooms. I'm already writing it! I thought it'd be nicer to give you this in the meantime, rather than make you wait even longer for 2 chapters at once. Was I mistaken? LOL Hope you enjoyed it!

Good_Witch

36- Alone At Last

Chapter 38 of 84

Hermione arrives at Snape's quarters and they come to terms with spending another night together. Somehow, it's not all sweetness and light, even though the flames of passion are burning.

Standard Disclaimer goes here as always.

Author's Note: Check my Livejournal at http://www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon/ for updates on the status of this story. Humble gratitude goes out to Ladyofthemasque who spent hours of her time betaing and lovingly tweaking this chapter with me. And thanks to Horserider, SnivellusSnape, Laela, and yutamiyu for their continued support! And you readers and reviewers rock my world!!! *fangirls the readers and reviewers* LOL Hope you enjoy this very citrusy chapter! :)

Chapter 36- Alone At Last

Even though she rapped fairly gently, the noise seemed echoingly loud to her hyper-sensitive ears. Worried that Snape might not have been able to hear that, she lifted her hand to knock again, but was startled by the door opening a crack. One suspicious black eye peered out through the narrow opening. Hermione breathed, "Severus."

At that, the visible eye widened and Snape whipped the door open wide, stepping out of the way for Hermione to scramble inside. As he felt her brush past him, he poked his head out the door and scanned the corridor, satisfied that it was empty. Swiftly, he shut the door again and spun, leaning against it. Hermione's head was visible, floating in midair. Ever paranoid, Snape jerked his chin at her and hissed, "Put it back on. Anyone could see you from the hearth if they Floo called. Come, follow me." He extended a hand to her and gestured toward the first door on the left. Hermione hastily pulled the hood back over her head and followed behind him.

Snape opened the door and stepped back, allowing Hermione to enter first. She stepped through, and almost immediately stopped. Snape nearly knocked her over running into her invisible form from behind. With a startled oath, he scrambled to catch her and help her keep her balance. Out of the ether, her head appeared again, turning wide eyes to him. He could see the anxiety in her eyes as she licked her lips and swallowed at the sight of his bedroom.

Waves of conflicting emotions cascaded over Hermione. She was finally in his bedroom, and her attention was invariably drawn to the large bed dominating the centre of the far wall. But she didn't want to seem like she was staring, so she kept averting her gaze. Of course, Snape was embracing her again, and she revelled in the feel of his arms about her, but she was also terribly nervous about spending the night with him again.

Snape wondered if she could feel his racing pulse. He recognized many of the same feelings he was having playing across her features. In a low murmur, he said, "I apologize. I didn't realize you had stopped. I didn't mean to run into you."

Hermione flashed him a tight smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "It's okay. I'm fine."

Snape carefully relaxed his grip and released her, drawing back awkwardly. "It should be safe to take off that Cloak now."

With a startled "Oh!" Hermione slipped out of the Cloak and rolled it into a tight bundle. Her mousse was still clutched in her hand. Courteously, Snape extended his hand and said, "Would you like me to store those for you until you need them again?"

She glanced up at him and nodded. Faintly, she said, "Yes, thank you." He inclined his head and took the Cloak and the mousse, abruptly exiting the room. Hermione heaved a ragged sigh once he was gone, trying to regain her composure. *Calm down! It's not like you haven't been here before. And you spent the night together already, so what's the big deal?* She deliberately crossed to the bed, noting the rich velvet covers and the gleam of satin pillowcases. Her brows rose in surprise at seeing that his bedding was not Slytherin green or silver. Much like the brown tones in his sitting room, the sheets were a rich sienna, and the bedspread was a deep chocolate tint, with black edging. Remembering the seductive promise in his first letter, she closed her eyes against the throb of heat that spread from her centre out, renewing the wet pool in her knickers. At the sound of the door opening, she whirled around, looking very much like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Flushing, she looked down and bit her lip, worrying her hands.

Snape paused on the threshold, dazedly staring at Hermione by his bed. His gut clenched with desire, wanting to see her thus every day of his life. Still unsure of how to behave, he edged over to his wardrobe and muttered, "I daresay we've been clad in fine feathers for long enough. Would you like to change and get more comfortable?"

Swiftly, Hermione jumped on the idea. "Oh yes! That would be nice. May I use the bathroom to wash my face and take my hair down?"

Snape nodded. "Certainly. I shall take the opportunity to change into something more casual." He gestured for her to enter the bathroom, and she scurried past him, shutting the door firmly.

She sighed deeply as she gazed at her reflection. Eyeing her hair, she ended all of the charms and enchantments, finger brushing her tortured locks back to their normal bushy state. Grimacing at herself, she turned to the bath and retrieved a flannel. She let the tap run a bit until the water was hot, and then soaked the cloth. Once again turning to the bath, she grabbed the bar of soap and lathered up the cloth, wishing she had makeup remover instead. *This is why I don't mess with it on a normal basis!* After a few minutes, she dried her face and wrung out the cloth, replacing it in the bath. Looking once again in the mirror, she wrinkled her nose at the plain face reflected back at her. Shrugging in resignation, she opened the door to the bedroom again, peering out to see Snape standing there in his green satin trousers, his arms folded self-consciously across his bare chest.

The matching short robe was lying on the foot of the bed, and he jerked his chin at it. "I thought you might use that. It's really the only reasonable thing I have."

Hermione stared at him owlishly. "Oh. Right. Thank you."

Snape nodded sharply and muttered, "Well, I'll leave you in possession of the room to change. I shall be in the sitting room." With that, he sped past her and charged out of the room.

Hermione gazed about the room. She saw his opera coat hanging on the door to his wardrobe, and his white shirt was draped over the back of a chair near the wardrobe, lying atop his discarded trousers. She picked up the robe and let the satin run through her fingers. Then, in a sudden flurry of motion, she unzipped her dress and stepped out of it, clad only in her thong, suspender belt and stockings, and heels. Quickly, she shrugged into the robe, wrapping it tightly around her and tying the belt. Even so, she felt vulnerable. As she moved, the satin slid across itself and pulled looser than she felt comfortable with. Frowning, she tried to tuck one side back under the other again, but it kept slipping.

Scowling in pique, she picked up her dress and went to lay it on the chair with Snape's clothes. As she smoothed the dress over the back of the chair, on top of his shirt, her clouded expression cleared, and she smiled in satisfaction.

Snape paced the sitting room, paranoid that Dumbledore would somehow discover her presence in his quarters. He went to run a hand through his hair, only to realize that it was still pulled back. Irritably, he tugged the elastic from his hair, tossing it on his end table. In a move reminiscent of a dog, he shook his head violently, feeling somewhat more secure when his face was once again shrouded in his long locks. He still felt tense, and vainly cast about for something to do. Finally, he decided to summon a tea service. It would be nice to relax with a cuppa, wouldn't it?

As he was arranging the items on the tray, he heard a timid knocking on the door from his bedroom. Dropping the sugar tongs with a clatter, he hastily crossed to the door and entered. It was a good thing he hadn't tried to carry the tea service in at that moment, else he would likely have dropped it at his feet. He was struck dumb by the sight that greeted him.

Hermione was standing at the foot of his bed, hair once again long and bushy, with a shiny, pink, fresh-scrubbed face. She had chosen to appropriate his white shirt instead of the robe, and she was still in her stockinged feet, her heels kicked off and resting under a chair. Even buttoned almost all the way to the top, his shirt was far too big for her, and the yoke fell to one side, pulling the collar lopsided. The sleeves reached past her fingertips, and she had the cuffs shoved over her knuckles, once again worrying her hands. Snape had never seen a more innocently sexy vision.

Hermione looked up at him nervously and blurted, "I hope you don't mind. The robe just... wasn't right for me. This would work, though. Unless you don't want me to use it?"

Snape opened his mouth to reassure her, but found he couldn't speak. Frowning, he cleared his throat savagely and managed to rasp, "No! It's fine. As long as you're comfortable." They stared at each other in silence for a moment more, both etching the other's image in their memory. Finally, Snape shook himself and said, "I'll be right back. I thought it might be nice to have some tea." He raced out of the room and retrieved the tray, darting back in and placing it carefully on his nightstand.

He turned to face Hermione, and they stared at each other solemnly, both silent. Jaw throbbing from clenching his teeth, Snape gestured courteously to the edge of the bed. Faintly, he said, "Please, sit."

Hermione nervously turned to perch on the bed, and picked up the robe, moving it out of her way. Politely, she turned to Snape and proffered it. "I didn't know where to put it..."

Snape snatched the robe from her and hastily donned it, unable to completely conceal the relief that washed over his face. "Well, ah, since you sha'n't be using it, I may as

well." He waited for her to sit, then sank onto the bed near the headboard, shoving his pillows up behind him. He started to reach for the teapot, but realized that his hands were shaky, so instead, he used his wand to pour the tea. Casting a glance at Hermione, he murmured, "Honey and lemon?" A ghost of a smile flirted with his lips. Hermione smiled wanly back.

Gamely trying to salvage the awkward situation, she ventured, "Only with you." Snape snapped his eyes to hers, his expression intense. Hermione's smile faded and she licked her lips reflexively. Snape inhaled sharply at that and returned his focus to the tea.

As he prepared their cups, Hermione squirmed further onto the bed, pulling her feet up and sitting cross-legged. She tucked the front panels of his shirt within the curve of her legs, and shoved her fists onto the bedspread between her legs, leaning forward on her knuckles.

Snape handed a cup to Hermione and noticed that his shirt was riding up her thighs, baring the tops of the stockings clipped onto her suspender belt. Closing his eyes for a moment, he picked up his cup and turned a heated gaze on Hermione, who was staring at him, wide-eyed.

"Cheers." He nodded at her and lifted his cup. She did the same, wrapping her hands...still shrouded in the too-long cuffs of his shirt...around the cup. As they sipped, Snape let his gaze linger over her and determined that she was the most endearing thing he had ever laid eyes on. A faint smirk surfaced, and he tilted his head. "Is it satisfactory?"

Hermione blinked and regarded him in surprise. "What? Oh! The tea! Yes, it's lovely."

His smirk widened and, in a sardonic tone, he said, "One would hope so. It would be a bit of an embarrassment if a Potions Master couldn't even brew a decent cuppa." As he sipped again, he cast a mischievous look at Hermione over the rim of his cup.

Hermione saw the humorous gleam in his eyes and finally felt herself beginning to relax. A grateful smile spread over her lips, and she took a deep, calming breath. Silence reigned again, but this time, it wasn't awkward so much as companionable. Snape, too, relaxed and resettled himself on the bed, leaning back on the pillows against the headboard. His left leg was curled in front of him, and his right leg was dangling over the edge.

Hermione seemed to be staring into her cup, and Snape queried dryly, "Attempting Divination, my dear?"

Hermione let out a bark of laughter and rolled her eyes. Her tone scathing, she retorted, "Hardly."

Pressing on, Snape said, "What's got you so pensive? Knut for your thoughts..."

Hermione looked at him thoughtfully and finally said, "It's just interesting to think that this is how all this got started."

He squinted. "'This'? 'All this'?" He tilted his head in perplexed inquiry.

Hermione lifted the cup and gestured to the tea service. "This." Then, her expression softened and she gazed at him shyly, gesturing between them. "And all this."

Comprehension dawned and Snape grinned delightedly. "Indeed! Our positions have changed for this go 'round.'"

A wicked gleam surfaced in Hermione's eyes and she ducked her head, glancing up at him through her lashes. Her voice playful, she murmured, "So, will they still be reversed for what comes after?"

Snape frowned in thought, computing what the devil she was referring to, but as he remembered their first kiss that night, his brows rose in appreciation of her subtle barb. One corner of her mouth quirked up at the sight of Snape's understanding. She tilted her chin up in a gesture of challenge. Snape's eyes darkened, and he resolutely put his cup on the tray. He extended his hand to her, and she primly handed him her cup, which he just as resolutely placed on the tray beside his.

He pulled his right leg up onto the bed and got to his knees, leaning forward to cross the distance between them. His eyes never leaving hers, he propped himself on his left hand and chucked her chin with his right, tilting her lips up to meet his. Gently, he kissed her, the barest brush of lips. Her eyes closed, and a faint sigh souged out of her in response. Pulling back to look at her, he felt his chest tighten with love. She opened her eyes in inquiry. Sliding his hand up to cup her face, he purred, "Come, sit with me." Hermione nodded dazedly.

He backed away, piling his pillows against the headboard. Then, he sat back against them, his long legs sprawled down the bed, resting on either side of Hermione's knees. He reached toward Hermione and smiled. "Come here."

She scrambled to her knees and crept up to him, squirming to turn around and lean against him. Strong arms wrapped around her, and she felt him resting his chin on her hair. A happy sigh exhaled from her as she snuggled in his embrace, wrapping her hands over his forearms. "Mmm, you feel good..."

She could feel the vibration of his laughter. "Thank you." He squeezed her tightly and whispered, "You feel amazing." There was a contented pause, then he solicitously asked, "Would you like more tea?" He jerked his head back at her head shaking "no," pulling his nose out of range of being tickled by her hair.

Snape kissed her the crown of her head, revelling in being so close to her. She bent her legs, pulling her knees up and drawing his attention. The shirt bunched at the juncture of her thighs, and her suspenders were visible again, clipped onto her stockings. Snape felt a surge of lust pounding through his veins and swallowed.

Apparently oblivious to the effect she was having on him, Hermione said, in a conversational tone, "I don't want to mess these up, and they're starting to get annoying. I'll just take them off and put them with my dress." She briskly unclipped the stockings, shifting against Snape as she turned to reach the back clips. Snape was mesmerized by the smooth skin of her thighs as she moved.

Once the stockings were unclipped, she carefully began rolling them down her legs, leaning forward as she went. Her hands smoothed along her skin as she rolled the stockings, making Snape wish he were the one doing that. As she pulled one off, she flung it onto her dress at the chair, then proceeded to repeat the task with the other one. Having tossed both stockings to the chair, she furtively squirmed, sitting forward and reaching under the shirttails to unhook the suspender belt. Whisking it from beneath the shirt, she threw it to join the rest of her clothing.

Snape watched her actions with keen interest. His pulse sped up in desire, and he could feel his cock stiffening between them. With every item that she tossed away, he swallowed a groan. Finally, she leant back against him again, only to gasp in surprise at the hot lump gouging into her back. Her eyes rolled back in a heady response to his obvious reaction. As she settled back onto him, a low moan emerged from her throat, causing Snape to pull her tighter against his throbbing body, nuzzling her ear and neck from behind.

Wriggling back in his embrace, Hermione leant to one side and turned, finding his lips with hers. Her hands slid along his satin-clad legs as they kissed heatedly. After several moments of passionate snogging, Hermione pulled away. Blinking to clear her head, she panted as Snape continued trailing nips and kisses along her jaw and throat. She gripped his arms, pushing them from around her ribs. At that, Snape pulled back, wary.

"What's wrong?" His voice was rough.

"Nothing. I just want to turn around. Get a little more comfortable..."

He released her, his gaze smouldering as she crept forward and spun to face him. She watched his chest as it rose and fell with his laboured breathing, framed by the front panels of his green robe. Her eyes followed the thin trail of hair down his belly to where it disappeared beneath the waist of his trousers...which were quite obviously tented with his arousal. Hermione's eyes went wide and she gasped, sucking her lower lip between her teeth. Feeling the flush warming her face, she forced herself to meet his eyes again. He was still watching her, his dark eyes glittering, his hands fisted against the bedspread.

Feeling greatly daring, Hermione crawled to his side and tugged on a pillow behind him. He leant forward and she yanked it free, laying it at the head of the bed at his side. Swallowing nervously, she inched back until she was lying on her side, gazing at him.

When she had noticed his raging erection, Snape had heard the roaring in his ears increase. He watched her shift on the bed, pulling a pillow over to lie down beside him. The curve of her hip swelled up from beneath his shirt, and she bent her left knee up, displaying a length of creamy thigh. She had absently pushed the cuffs over her knuckles again as she settled, sliding her right hand under the pillow. Staring up at him, Snape knew she had no idea just how ingenuously seductive she looked. Acceding to the unspoken request, he slid down the bed beside her, settling himself so that he mirrored her, trying to ignore the delicious pangs of his cock rubbing inside the satin.

After a beat of silence, he rumbled, "Better?"

Hermione reached up and tucked errant strands of hair behind his ear, caressing his cheek. Snape turned to kiss her fingertips as she withdrew. She smiled at him shyly and whispered, "I love you."

His chest and throat tightened painfully. Edging closer, he stroked her hair. She lifted her arm to rest it over his ribs and run her hand along his back. As he lifted his head to hover over her, he murmured, "My love..." Then, as he descended to pin her with a deep kiss, she instinctively moved her leg to hook over his hip and curl behind his legs. When she pulled him against her with her leg, he groaned into her mouth, feeling her heat along his straining cock.

His hand travelled over her back, trailing fingertips over her neck and shoulder blades and revelling in the shivers and goose flesh it evoked. Her fingers spastically pressed his back, alternating with clenching into a fist, then dragging her nails across the satin in reaction to his ministrations. After several long moments of the same, Snape ventured further, letting his hand glide down her back and over the shirttails, where his fingers curved around over her hip. As she squirmed into him, he gripped her thigh, holding her tight against him and thrusting his right leg under her left one. A breathy moan met his ears as she bucked her hips on his leg.

Hermione felt the wet heat spreading in her knickers and was vaguely surprised to find herself grinding on his thigh. His cock pulsed against her front as they grasped and rocked, tongues exploring each other's mouths. She wanted more. Pulling him along with her, she rolled onto her back, freeing the hand trapped under the pillow. She snaked that hand around his neck, tangling her fingers in his hair. Impatiently, she slid her other hand down and around his waist, once again pulling on him. His bare chest was pressed against her breasts, and she insistently pushed her right leg against him, wrapping her left leg more firmly around his hip and tugging.

Eventually, Snape cottoned on and groaned as he shifted, allowing her to slip her right leg beneath him, curling it around his hip to match her other leg. He braced himself on his elbows as he found himself covering her body with his, her legs wrapped around him, one hand firmly enmeshed in his long locks, and the other sweeping long strokes up and down his back. She tightened her legs and rocked her hips, grinding herself against his trapped cock.

Snape closed his eyes in pained pleasure, hissing. When he opened his eyes again, it was to the sight of Hermione wearing the most wickedly wanton grin he had ever seen. He felt a pang of apprehension as well as a surge of lust. She grabbed his head and pulled him down to ravage his mouth with hers. Faint moans bubbled up from her throat and Snape responded with a low growl. He moved away from her lips, trailing kisses back to her earlobe, which he suckled and bit, delighting in the explosive little shrieks at his ear. As she breathed, "Severus..." he decided that he would leave her able to speak, since the quaver in her voice fired his passion.

He continued down her jaw line, laving her throat and kissing the hollow at the base. Inarticulate noises of encouragement spurred him on. Nibbling along her collarbone, he leant on one elbow and lifted his hand to caress her shoulder. Glancing up to see her eyes screwed shut in bliss, he smiled a feral grin and dipped his tongue to the skin just above the spot where she had buttoned his shirt. She twitched and rocked her hips against him in response.

Breathing harshly at the sensation, he gingerly undid the top button, exposing more flesh to his reverent kisses. When she felt his hot breath on her chest, her head canted back and she gasped, gripping her hands in his hair and pulling him tight to her. He traced his fingertip down the vee made by the opened button, looking up at her and waiting for her to look back.

Hermione felt a tingle and opened her eyes to find Snape gazing at her, his eyes blazing with desire. His finger toyed with the edge of the shirt fabric and Hermione inhaled sharply, involuntarily holding her breath. Watching her shrewdly, he murmured, "We're not invisible now..." She nodded in acknowledgement. Gently, he traced the next button. His voice deep black velvet, he queried, "Hermione?"

Her heart was racing, and she felt the throbbing deep in her centre. She understood what he meant. He had done amazing things to her, made her feel wonderful, but he hadn't been able to see her, or she, him. She wanted whatever she could get to try to quench the fire in her core. She opened her mouth to answer, but her lips were trembling, so she shut them firmly, sucking the lower lip between her teeth as she nodded.

Never taking his eyes off hers, he slowly pushed the button through the hole. She let out an explosive breath and he paused. When she had started breathing again, albeit rapidly, he ventured down to the next button just above her navel and prized that one free. At that, he lifted his body from hers and moved up again, hovering over her, his hair falling like a curtain against his cheeks. They stared at each other for a long moment, then he whispered, "Hermione... I love you." As he lowered himself to pin her with a consuming kiss, she strained up to meet him. After devouring each other for several moments, he tentatively balanced to one side and slid his hand up her side. She twitched beneath him and squealed. Instantly, he pulled back, concerned.

Sheepishly, she grimaced and muttered, "Sorry. Ticklish." His expression smoothed with relief and he dove in to kiss her more, firmly running his hand up her side and over her shoulder to her collarbone. Slowly, he inched his fingers lower, caressing her gently as he smoothed over the skin exposed beneath the unbuttoned shirt. He spread his hand out flat and slid under the shirt to mould his palm against her ribs. He could feel her heartbeat pounding quickly.

Once again pulling away from her lips, he nibbled back to her ear again, as his hand crept up to cup her breast, savouring the warm weight of it against his palm. A low groan issued forth as Hermione arched her back, pressing her breast into his hand. Carefully, he stroked his thumb against her skin, edging closer to her nipple each time. Her breathing grew even more ragged. When he slid his thumb up and over her stiff nipple, she shuddered and moaned. He could feel the tremors of her body where she pressed against his erection, and he buried his face in her neck, suppressing a sharp cry of pleasure.

Fighting for control, he re-focused on Hermione, circling his thumb around her nipple, feeling it contract even more. He lightly dragged his lips and nose over her throat and down her chest, into the valley between her breasts. Glancing up, he noted that her face was flushed, and it was slowly spreading to encompass her body. Swallowing for composure, he nudged the shirt with his nose, pushing it to the side, uncovering her breast where it was moulded into his hand. As the fabric finally pulled free of her nipple, she gasped and trembled again.

His breath was hot on her skin, and she pried her eyes open to look down. His dark head was pressed against her ribs, pressing fluttering kisses along the curve of her breast. Her hands gripped convulsively in his hair. She could see the stiff peak rising and falling as she breathed. Snape sensed her gaze upon him and glanced up, locking eyes with hers. Watching her, he circled her nipple with his thumb again, seeing her eyelids flutter.

Hermione saw the flicker of wicked intent in his black eyes and felt a pang of apprehension. It seemed to only serve to heighten her lust. Lips curving in a diabolical grin, Snape held her gaze as he moved above her breast, gently squeezing it in his palm. But then, he dipped his head and snaked his tongue out to flick against the hard nub. It sent a shock of pleasure straight to her centre, where it swirled with the mad desire that pulsed there.

She felt her insides clench as she watched him envelop her nipple in his lips and suckle. Afraid of what she might do, she flung her hands from his hair and gripped the bedspread, knuckles white. She felt as if she couldn't get enough oxygen, and her hips rocked involuntarily.

Her voice held a strained plea as she keened, "Severus!"

He didn't even move his lips from her breast as he mock-innocently queried, "What, love?" She trembled again at the vibrations of his voice on her sensitive flesh.

She narrowed her eyes at him and grabbed his robe, vehemently pulling him back up to her. Startled by her strength, Snape overbalanced and fell on her, his bare chest on her bared breast. She pounced on him with a kiss, and began shoving his robe past his shoulders, yanking it from under him, clearly wanting it off. Snape struggled to regain his balance, not wanting to crush her, but found he could only use one arm at a time, as she was pulling so hard on his robe. Trying to back away, he muttered,

"Hermione... What... Careful!... Bloody hell, woman!"

She kept nibbling on his jaw and throat as he pulled away. Eyeing him fiercely, she paused and growled, "Robe. Off. Now!" Snape stared at her, stunned. In his shock, he stopped struggling, and Hermione succeeded in wrenching the offending garment from him and tossing it to the floor. Then, she snaked her hands up his back, caressing his shoulder blades and spine, once again kissing him deeply.

She gripped her legs around him tighter and squeezed him in a bear hug. Snape grunted and struggled to perch on his elbows again, afraid he would crush the air from her lungs otherwise. Finally regaining purchase on the bedspread, he resettled his body against hers, enjoying the feel of her hands roaming over his skin.

They explored each other with hands and lips and tongues, their pleased moans and sighs filling their ears. Hermione tightened her legs around Snape's legs, her heels pressing against his arse, driving him against her. With every squeeze, his hard length was ground along her cleft, sending jolts of sensation straight through her. She found a rhythm, and her breathing started to come in tandem with her rocking and grinding. Snape kept gasping at the exquisite pressure on his cock as she moved. He recognized her reaction from the way she had sounded in the alley. The knowledge that she was going to bring herself to orgasm with him...on him...nearly sent him over the edge.

Hermione's eyes were screwed shut, and her face was deeply flushed. Her hands began stroking along his back in time with her rocking hips. He clenched his teeth as she dragged her nails across his skin. The pinch of them digging into his back only heightened his pleasure. He dipped his head to trail kisses and nips along the cord of her neck, laving the bitten flesh with his tongue to soothe away the sting. Her rhythm was growing faster, and more erratic. Her breathing was harsh, and inarticulate noises of increasing passion were bursting from her throat. Then, just as she seemed to be reaching a fever pitch, Snape purred against her ear, "Yesss, Hermione."

Her hands slid down his back to grip his arse hard, and Snape was taken aback that not only was she doing so, and pulling him even tighter against her, but that she had slipped under his trousers, digging her nails into the bare skin of his arse. Desperately fighting the urge to come with her, his eyes rolled back in his head and he grimaced. Hermione, in the meantime, had hissed his name in a voiceless shriek, shaking violently under him.

As her trembling eased, Snape regained his self-control, and he wickedly rocked his hips, thrusting his raging erection along her cleft again, making her jump and squeal at the aftershocks. He was keenly aware of her hands spastically gripping his arse, and he noted that they were slowly going slack.

Hermione was panting in the wake of her orgasm, and Snape simply watched her, hovering over her. *I promised myself I would see how she looked in the throes of ecstasy... Oh, but she looks even better than I thought she would, much better than the way she looked the day she ran through the castle to meet me...* He waited patiently until she opened her eyes again, her pupils so dilated that her eyes were almost black. He could see the uncertain shyness and embarrassment beginning to surface, and he eyed her firmly. In a low, reverent murmur, he said, "Incredible... *Know* that, Hermione. You are beautiful in your abandon. *Never* be ashamed or embarrassed for what you feel." He could see her struggling to accept his words, and he gently kissed her. It was a tender benison of comfort and love, very different from their earlier lust-crazed snogging. When he pulled away again, she was smiling at him, albeit with trembling lips.

"I-I'll try. Good gods, Severus. I don't know what to say, or think, or feel after that! It was... unlike anything I've ever experienced. Better than ever before..." She blushed and looked away in chagrin, but he gripped her chin and turned her back to face him, once again eyeing her sternly.

"What did I just say?" She blinked solemnly at him and took a deep breath, giving herself a good mental shake. Then, she set her teeth, tilted her chin up out of his grasp, and smiled firmly at him. His eyes warmed and a pleased smile crept across his face. She felt love pouring from him, and she basked in it. "Much better." He leant down to kiss her, and she deepened it to a more passionate snogging again. Chuckling to himself, he decided to go with the flow and enjoy the hell out of it.

Hermione marshalled her scattered faculties and persisted in re-igniting the passion they had just shared. However, in her afterglow, she realized that her hands were down Snape's trousers, and she moaned at the surge of pleasure that shot through her again. Determined that she wouldn't be so selfish again, she started to roll to one side, pushing Snape so that he could once again lie beside her, with her arm and leg wrapped around him.

Snape felt her pushing against him and rolled off her. He slid his arm behind her and kept her pressed firmly against his chest. He could still feel the stiff point of her bared nipple between them. As they rolled onto their sides, he once again thrust his thigh between her legs, which she squeezed. She had reluctantly removed one hand from his arse as they rolled, so her arm wouldn't be pinned beneath him, but the other one was firmly determined to remain where it was, rubbing and kneading.

Snape slid his hand up her back, under the shirt, dragging his fingers across her skin, raising goose flesh in their wake. In his travels over her back, he dipped low, colliding with the top of her thigh. A guttural groan emerged from his throat, muffled by Hermione's lips on his. Hermione responded with an encouraging moan. She could feel his cock still hard and hot between them, and she began obsessing over it.

While Snape kept kissing her, pausing every now and then to turn his attention to her throat or her earlobes, his hand trailed lazy designs over her back, periodically toying with the edge of her thigh. Hermione kept squeezing her legs on his thigh, rocking against him, pressing herself against his erection. She used the hand on his arse to pull him closer with every forward motion. Deep grunts and harsh gasps met her ears as Snape drowned in the sensations. She began idly rubbing small circles on his arse, feeling the muscle tension as he started to thrust toward her with every movement she made on his leg.

Heat coiled in her belly again, and she could feel the slick puddle soaking her knickers as she ground on his thigh. She hummed in pleasure and purred in response to every low growl from Snape. Her slow circles widened until she was caressing his sharp hipbone on each pass. Taking some initiative, she leant forward, pushing Snape back a little, tilting his body, so she could drag kisses down his chin and over his throat.

Snape bared his throat to her ministrations, canting his head back in bliss. His eyes were shut tight, all of his focus on the overwhelming sensations of Hermione in his bed with him. Hermione pulled back and glanced down...a little intimidated by the tenting of his trousers...while she gripped his hipbone and slid him a bit further back, his thigh slipping between her legs. She went back to nibbling along his collarbone, once again caressing his hip and arse. Finally, she gathered her courage and took a deep breath, grazing her teeth along his throat as she slid her hand around his hip, down through the patch of coarse hair, to rub along the sueded steel of his cock.

It was at that moment that several things happened in quick succession.

With a strangled roar, Snape shocked Hermione with another display of his astonishing speed and agility, ripping her hand from within his trousers and flinging her away from him before he twisted, jumped off the bed, and raced to the bathroom, somehow managing to snatch his wand from the nightstand as he went. Aghast, Hermione was too stunned to react, or to even make a sound other than the initial startled gasp at his abrupt actions.

Completely bewildered and impossibly confused, Hermione thought, *What happened? What did I do?*

Snape had slammed the bathroom door shut and had fallen back against it, panting in arousal and panic. He could still feel the spot where Hermione's hand had touched his erection, like a brand burning his skin. Shaking his head violently, his wand clattered to the floor, forgotten, as he thrust his hand down the front of his trousers, trying to wipe away the lingering sensation of her touch.

He let out an anguished groan at the jolts of pleasure that shot through him as he stroked his cock. One hand flew up to grip his hair, threatening to tear it from his scalp as the other one feverishly pumped along his length. He was so overwhelmed by the fervent build-up and the shocking sensation of her hand that it took only a few fierce strokes to bring him to completion. As he convulsed in ecstasy, spurts of come shooting over his fist, he dropped his other hand to press against the door, desperately trying to hold himself up. His legs were trembling weakly, and he slid to the floor in the wake of his startling orgasm.

Hermione was still on the bed, frozen in fear and uncertainty. She could hear Snape's groan through the door, and worried that he was hurt. Her heartbeat was echoing loudly to her ears as she strained to hear anything else through the bathroom door. After several beats of petrified silence, Hermione gingerly slipped off the bed and tiptoed to the door. Hands gripped into fists at her sides, she tentatively said, "Severus?"

Snape was sprawled on the floor against the door, his softening cock still enveloped in his sticky hand. Hearing her voice roused him from a stupor, and he blinked rapidly,

shaking his head to clear it. Panic once again possessed him, and he frantically searched for his wand to clear away any traces of his indiscretion. Finding it near him on the floor, he cast a cleansing spell on his hand and the crotch of his trousers, furtively tucking himself back in. He could feel the heat suffusing his face in mortification.

Hermione waited a few moments, but heard nothing except some muffled muttering. Having not received a response, she tried again. "Severus?"

Snape grimaced and leant his head against the door. He passed a hand over his face and through his hair. Desperately trying to figure out a reasonable response, he was silent once again.

Hermione cautiously laid a hand on the door and placed her ear almost on the surface. Getting more and more worried the longer she went without an answer from Snape, she raised her voice. It shook with suppressed alarm as she said, "Severus! Are you all right? Please, answer me!"

Snape's throat was tight, but he managed to choke out a short, "Yes!"

Hermione heaved a relieved sigh, but she frowned in confusion again. "Then, what's wrong? What happened? What did I do?"

The last part came out as more of a wail, and Snape cringed at the sound. Resignedly gathering his feet under him, he stood, still leaning heavily on the door. His eyes were closed in thought as he said, "Nothing's wrong. I'm fine. Just a moment."

He stood still for a beat, then turned to the sink, turning on the cold tap. Cupping his hands in the stream, he scooped water onto his heated face, tossing his hair back before it fell into the water. He glared at himself in the mirror in disgust, watching rivulets drip off his chin and nose. With one last black look at his reflection, he buried his face in a towel, drying his face and hands reluctantly.

Hermione heard the water running and backed up. Not wanting to be caught eavesdropping, she skittered back to the bed, where she jumped onto the centre against the headboard, tucking the shirt between her legs and pulling her knees up so she could wrap her arms around them. Staring at the door, owl-eyed with apprehension, she waited for Snape to come out.

Snape gripped his wand in a tense, white-knuckled grip as his other hand rested on the doorknob. Steeling himself, he opened the door and glanced at Hermione on the bed. The way she sat...all curled up into a ball and wide-eyed...hit Snape like a Bludger in the chest. She looked small and vulnerable.

Hermione gazed at him, worried about what she had done to make him tear off like that. His expression was closed and tense, his posture was stiff and formal, and he didn't sit as he reached the foot of the bed. She kept trying to meet his eyes, a myriad of questions obvious in hers, but he kept avoiding her gaze guiltily.

Her voice was quavery as she said, "Are you all right?"

Snape cleared his throat and rumbled, "I told you: I'm fine."

Hermione felt tears start to prick her eyes at the curt tone of his voice. Lips trembling, she tried again, "What did I do? I did something wrong, didn't I?"

Snape glanced at her, noting the tears welling up, and cursed inwardly. Closing his eyes, he ran a hand through his hair and gripped the back of his neck, looking down. He ground out, "No. You didn't do anything wrong. Quite the contrary."

Hermione blinked in confusion. Frowning, she said, "What's *that* supposed to mean? I must have done something. One second, we're having a marvellous time...or at least I *thought* we were...and the next, you're vanishing like a demon was after you! I messed things up somehow! I'm sorry!" Tears clung to her lashes and she sniffed desperately, gulping air to maintain composure.

Snape felt horrible. Mentally kicking himself, he writhed at making her cry. He gingerly sat on the edge of the foot of the bed, and his voice was strained as he said, "Hermione, listen to me. You did not 'mess things up.' We *were* having a marvellous time. That was the problem."

Her voice climbed in pitch as she gasped, "What problem? I don't understand!"

Snapping, Snape yelled, "You didn't do anything wrong! In fact, you *were* doing everything right. Too right! I couldn't control myself. I had to..." He trailed off, uncomfortable.

"You had to what?"

Cutting an acid glance at her, he growled, "Leave. I had to leave before I lost control completely."

Verging on hysterics, Hermione spat, "Why? What would have happened? I thought you were enjoying things too!"

"Bloody hell, woman! What do you think I'm trying to tell you? I *was*! But I wasn't about to... do *that* to you!"

Hermione rolled her eyes impatiently. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, Severus, do *what*?" She pinned him with an exasperated, angry glare.

He stared at her through slitted lids, jaw throbbing. His voice was icy as he spat, "Climax. On you. Like that."

Comprehension dawned, widening her eyes. She stared at him, dumbfounded. Completely incredulous, she blinked. "Well, why on earth not?"

His brows shot up and his lip curled in distaste. "Excuse me?"

She shot him an aggrieved glare and said, "I said, why not? I did."

Snape blinked, taken aback. He didn't know what to say to that.

Hermione continued, "So what happened?" Snape glanced at her and looked away quickly, cheeks colouring in embarrassment. Her expression changed to one of hurt as she said quietly, "You took care of things without me? Was I not good enough?"

Snape made an exasperated move with his head, snapping, "Aren't you listening? I already told you. You were bloody well *good enough* to have me almost losing it like a randy teenager!" His voice dropped to a poisonous whisper, and he added, "And I will *not* allow myself to behave like that damned Potter."

Hermione jerked back like she had been struck. Her arms fell from around her knees. Gobsmacked, she stared at Snape. "You have *got* to be kidding me! Since when would I ever even *think* of Harry when I'm with you? Do you honestly believe I would ever compare the two of you? For gods' sakes, Severus, you *know* how awful I feel about that!"

There was a long pause, filled with crackling tension. Snape couldn't bring himself to meet her eye. Sadly, Hermione finally whispered, "I just wanted to make you feel good. Like you did to me. I know I don't know what I'm doing, but I thought it couldn't hurt to try. I guess it could..."

Snape murmured, "Hermione..."

She cut him off, her voice sharp with hurt and irritation. "And you know what? You have some nerve to do what you did to me, and say all those things to me, and then bolt like that when I try to return the favour!"

Snape exploded, "I didn't do those things to you to form some sort of obligation to me! It would kill me to see you look at me with revulsion, after I just... erupted all over you!" He clenched his teeth in humiliation. He really couldn't remember being more embarrassed and upset in his life.

Hermione's eyes blazed with indignant fury as she said, "I would never do that! I can't *believe* you would have such a double standard!"

Snape's brows climbed to his hairline in incredulity. His voice was almost shrill as he choked, "...Double standard?"

She narrowed her eyes at him as she hissed, "You tell me not to be ashamed of showing my feelings, and ~~ye~~*you* run and hide! You think the worst of me! I love you, you idiot! I want to learn every part of you, including what it's like to make you come! Do you really think that I would be so repulsed by the evidence of your ecstasy? Shite, Severus, mine's all over your damned leg!"

Snape snapped his gaze down to his satin trousers, finally noticing the dark wet spot on his thigh where Hermione had been grinding while they had kissed. He froze.

Hermione launched forward onto her knees, leaning toward Snape in righteous indignation. "Should I be ashamed? Should I go lock myself in the bathroom, now? Is that the mature way to react, Severus?"

Snape turned wide, startled eyes back to her, once again struck dumb...not only by the sight of her, but by her piercing words. She was on her knees, hands on her hips and leaning toward him, eyes blazing in anger, and his shirt had fallen open, revealing the inner curves of her breasts. Her nipples were visible as protruding points under the shirt edges. Her hair was tangled and wild, and her eyes and nose were red from her suppressed tears. An errant thought wormed through his stunned consciousness. *Gods, she's beautiful!*

Snape went white in shock. He forced himself to breathe, trying to regain his voice. Finally, he managed to rasp, "Hermione, gods, I'm so sorry..."

Hermione blinked in surprise. She was wound up and ready for a row, and now he had apologized, looking like he had seen a ghost...well, something more disturbing than a ghost, as he was obviously used to them at Hogwarts.

There was a pause. Snape's mind raced. His eyes seemed to see something Hermione couldn't as he stared into the middle distance, thoughts obviously turned inward.

She's absolutely right. I was holding her to a double standard. If she's willing to open herself up to me in that way, it's only right that I do the same. ...

It's not like I don't want to... Holy mother of Merlin, I want to! Just look at her! She's beautiful. ...

But she's not just that. It's not often that someone stands up to me. She's quite my equal in intelligence. I could never abide a lackwit. And...ye gods!...she's bloody brilliant when she's practically bursting with righteous indignation. ...

Life is certain to be anything but dull with her around... Good gods, I haven't looked forward to the future for so long that I can barely remember what it's like. ...

This is a good thing. Get over yourself and accept it! Stop holding back. If you want to make something of this, you have to give as well as receive... hell, receive as well as you give!

Hermione watched a rapid succession of expressions flicker over Snape's face. It was one confusing jumble, and she could sense the internal struggle he was having. She was surprised when he ended with a grim snort and a derisive smirk, finally meeting her questioning gaze again.

Colour crept back over his cheeks as he turned sheepish eyes to hers. He heaved a deep sigh and twisted to sit on the edge of the bed, both feet flat on the floor. Propping his elbows on his knees, he ground his palms into his eyes, then cradled his head in his hands. His voice was weary as he said, "I told you I'd cock things up on my own merits."

She gave a dismissive hiss. The bed moved as she crawled closer to him.

He felt her hand tentatively resting on his shoulder, offering mute sympathy and forgiveness. Snape shook his head in exasperation. Barely audible, he muttered, "I have no idea what I'm doing..."

Hermione exhaled gustily as she caressed his shoulder and trailed her fingertips over the protruding points of his spine. Wryly, she said, "I heard that." Snape shoved his hands through his hair and clasped them behind his neck, groaning and curling forward even more, his head bowing between his elbows. Hermione slid her arm across his back and laid her cheek on his shoulder blade. "Stop it. I don't know what I'm doing either. Didn't we say we'd explore this together?" There was a muffled snort in response. She squeezed his shoulder. "It's been pretty smashing so far! We can figure things out as we go. Just... talk to me, all right? Don't scare the hell out of me like that again!" She smoothed her hands over his back gently as she sat up again.

A non-committal rumble vibrated under her hand. Slowly, Snape eased back up, his head still bent forward, hair masking his face. He dropped his hands to his lap. Voice dripping with derision, he said, "I've been a right pillock. I regret that you ever had to witness that."

Hermione made an impatient noise and reached forward to brush his hair back from his face, trying to tuck it behind his ear. He wouldn't look at her, and she crept closer still. She cupped his face in her hands and turned him to face her. She could still see the shame in his eyes when he flicked a glance at her. Resolutely, she murmured, "Severus." He looked at her through slitted lids. Gazing indulgently at him, she smiled faintly and said, "I reserve the right to love you no matter how much of a pillock you are."

He scowled at her and she laughed. Huffing, he jerked his chin from her grasp and fell back on the bed, flinging his arms over his face. His voice was a sulky growl as he said, "You're not making this any easier."

Hermione looked down at his sprawled form, eyes lingering over the taut muscles of his torso stretched along the bed. Her attention was once again drawn by the line of hair wending its way below his navel and beneath the edge of his trousers. She caught her lip between her teeth at the pang of lust that tingled over her.

He's so damned contradictory! I have never been so frustrated in my life... Both ways! Gods, but I want to make him lose control. He's always so guarded... I know it must be hard for him, but we have to be open with one another!

A wicked smirk curved her lips as she realized the innuendo in her thoughts. Lying down on her side beside him, she propped herself up on one elbow and leant down near his ear. Her voice was low and sultry as she lifted, "But I'd like to make it *harder*..."

Snape stiffened at her proximity and the provocative tone of her voice. Lifting his arm, he peered down his nose at her, frowning. Formally, he said, "I beg your pardon?"

Hermione lightly trailed a finger down his chest and over his navel, following the line of hair to his waistband. As she did so, she purred, "You heard me..."

Snape glared at her in disbelief and swatted her hand away as he shot up and off the bed. Hermione was once again taken completely by surprise. As Snape paced agitatedly, she queried, "What? What's wrong? I thought everything was okay!"

Snape stopped and pinned her with a harsh glare. She cringed under his baleful look and drew her legs up again to wrap her arms around them.

His jaw was tight and she could see the tension in his frame as he clenched his hands into fists at his sides. After a long moment of charged silence, Snape spoke, his voice strained. She could tell that it cost him no little effort to speak.

"This... isn't just about fun and hormones, Hermione."

Eyes wide in earnest, she retorted, "I know!"

He narrowed his eyes on her and whipped out, "Do you?" There was a pregnant pause. Then, in a softer voice, he repeated, "Do you, really?"

She nodded silently. He passed one hand over his face and planted the other on his hip. He took a deep, cleansing breath and exhaled a long sigh. "I don't want to be with you simply for sexual release. Although I am exceedingly attracted to you in that fashion...witness every blasted time I get near you!..." he interjected ruefully, "I don't want you to think that's all I'm interested in." He locked eyes with her, his gaze sombre.

"You make me feel young again. It's like I can regain my squandered youth with you. But, I can't stand being anything even remotely like your teenage cohorts! I've spent far too many years catching students in their hormonal liaisons to not realize that we are exhibiting the same juvenile behaviour. And, as temporarily gratifying as it may be to experience a bout of heavy petting, I am more interested in ensuring that you understand exactly what I wish for between us." He closed his eyes for a moment, seeming to steel himself for further revelations.

"I found myself...moments ago, in the face of your ire...thinking of how bracing life with you would be. The future, Hermione. Our future. The last thing I want to do is jeopardize what is quite honestly the best thing that has ever happened to me by crossing the lines of decency and respect. I'll be the first to admit that I am completely beyond my ken. I'm sure you realize that no one has ever seen the part of me that I am baring to you. Falling in love with you has terrified me in a way that I have never experienced before. Do forgive me if I am particularly cautious." As he spoke, he stepped closer to the bed again, gazing down into Hermione's upturned face. He paused, his expression intense, and Hermione swallowed convulsively.

Never taking her eyes off his, she released her knees and slid her feet over the edge of the bed. She rose slowly, standing very close to him, craning her neck to maintain eye contact. He refused to back away and give her space. She could feel the energy pulsing from his body as she returned his fierce gaze.

Her voice low but clear, she said, "I want the same thing you want, Severus. Believe it. Why do you think I have given myself over to you so utterly? I trust you implicitly. In every respect. I merely ask that, if you truly want what you've described, you trust me the same way I trust you." She laid her hand over his heart and whispered, "Do you trust me, Severus?"

Snape's jaw clenched convulsively. He could see that she did understand, and he felt that he could weep with the relief of it. He held his breath for a moment before he breathed, "I trust you not to break my heart."

Hermione's face glowed as a beatific smile spread her lips. "Not a chance..." She slid her hand up his chest and around his neck, pulling him down to seal her promise with a kiss. His hands were trembling as he clasped her arms. She wrapped her arms around him and broke the kiss to bury her face against his bare chest as he tightened his grip around her, resting his chin on her head.

He could feel a wave of weakness washing over him in the wake of his relief. He silently urged her to drop to the bed again, and they sat, holding each other. Hermione lifted her head and peered at him. "Do you mind if I curl up with you for a little while?"

Snape shook his head and one corner of his mouth quirked up. "Not at all." He released her and stretched out on the bed, adjusting the pillows, then spread his arms out, waiting for her to join him. She crawled beside him, his shirt falling open again, giving tantalizing peeks at her flesh. She lay down within the curve of his left arm, pillowing her head on his bicep, resting her cheek against the side of his pectoral. Her right arm curled around her ribs, and she draped her left arm over his chest, snuggling close to him. Her left knee bent and she covered his leg with hers. As soon as she settled, Snape curled his arm around her, resting his hand on her shoulder. His right hand idly stroked her arm where it lay across his ribs.

Hermione's murmur stirred him from his contented daze. "This feels so right. I love how I fit so well against you."

Snape responded with a deep "Mmm."

Hermione released his ribs from her tight grip and began lightly tracing her fingers along his torso. She smiled at his sharp inhalation. Goose flesh popped up where she had touched. Lifting her head, she grinned impishly at him. "Are you ticklish?"

Snape glared at her from under hooded lids. Warningly, he intoned, "Don't you dare..."

Hermione wriggled back and propped her chin on her hand. Her other hand rested lightly on his belly, which she could feel was taut with tension as he eyed her warily. Wickedly, she purred, "I thought you trusted me."

His brows rose, but he narrowed his eyes. A dangerous spark lit within them. "Are you trying to manipulate me?"

She teased her fingers over his ribs up to his nipple. He did his best to suppress a shudder. As she circled his nipple, she glibly retorted, "Only in the most derivative sense of the word."

He closed his eyes and hissed through his teeth at the resurgence of desire at her feathery touch. He opened his eyes to shoot her a reproachful look, and she tilted her head, exasperated.

"Severus, I *understand*. But what *you* need to understand is that I have only a few hours to enjoy with you, and I very much would like to make the most of them." And with that, she deliberately leant forward and licked his chest. Snape's breath exploded out of him.

His voice was rough as he said, "Just what did you have in mind?"

Hermione grinned wickedly at him and dragged her tongue across his nipple. Her voice was throaty as she said, "I believe turnabout is fair play... isn't it?"

Snape's eyes closed involuntarily and he swallowed. *Give and take. Equally. Take that step. Show her you trust her. Let her in.* He opened his eyes to find her gazing at him hungrily. Another jolt sang through him. Breathing shallowly, he rasped, "I daresay you are correct, as usual."

Hermione's eyes flashed with triumph and she inhaled sharply. She pressed forward, slithering along his body until she was hovering over his face. They stared at each other heatedly for a moment before crushing their lips together.

They were snogging feverishly again, writhing against one another, when Snape pulled away and scrambled for his wand. Hermione blinked at him in perplexity until he pointed it at his clock, setting the alarm. Then, with a deft flick, he doused the lights in the room, plunging them into darkness. Hermione voiced an appreciative squeal and pulled him into her embrace again.

Feeling somewhat more secure in the dark, Snape slipped his hands down Hermione's back, sliding under the hem of the shirt again. Then, as she curled her leg over his hip again, he boldly drew his hand along her thigh, dipping underneath it and brushing against her soaked knickers. A shuddery moan met his ears.

Hermione's fingers travelled over his throat and face, gripping his hair and pulling him to her. Her breath was hot on his ear before she hissed, "I was under the impression that I was getting a second chance." As she spoke, she rocked her hips against him, grabbing his arse and pulling him tight.

A groan bubbled up in Snape's throat as he felt himself growing hard again. Deliberately fighting his nervousness, he gave thanks that he had had the presence of mind to turn out the lights. He swallowed convulsively and steeled himself to step out on the proverbial limb. Unsure of his voice, he growled, "Very well then." He cleared his throat before adding, "Where were we before we were interrupted?"

Hermione gasped in delighted surprise at his capitulation. She smiled wickedly in appreciation of his provocative rejoinder as she resolutely slipped her hand down the back of his trousers. Kneading his arse, she breathed, "Oh, I remember exactly where..."

37- Taking Baby Steps

Chapter 39 of 84

Hermione and Snape are still in his bed, but after all of the stops and starts already, can they come to an agreement and be comfortable together? *graphic sexual descriptions contained herein*

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Check out my LJ (www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon) for all the reasons why this took so long to update this time. *rolls eyes* And, now more than ever, profuse thanks go out to Ladyofthemasque for her beta services, including real-time online betaing and ensuing discussions. Thanks to everyone who has left me so many supportive reviews and LJ posts and emails. I appreciate it more than I can say. Oh, and check out my Photobucket (http://photobucket.com/albums/y116/Good_Witch/) for more PoH goodness from Becky and tainted_sanity on LJ! And thanks to my posse: Lotm, Laela, SnivellusSnape, Horserider, and yutamiyu as always! *luff and hugs* And now, I point you to the smuttague...

Chapter 37- Taking Baby Steps

Hermione was once again grateful that it was dark, so Snape couldn't see the abject nervousness that belied her confident pose. Although she wanted to take the step that had sent him scurrying off, she couldn't help but feel anxious that she would "do it wrong." Not that she *knew* what would constitute "doing it wrong," of course. She just felt incredibly inexperienced, but she wanted to remedy that as much as possible under the circumstances.

Snape's breath caught at the feel of Hermione's hand on his arse again. He felt himself tensing in anticipation of her touch. All of his focus centred on her soft hand down his satin trousers, and he felt a tingle of relief at the tell-tale tremble of her fingers. *At least I'm not the only one a bit unsure of all this...*

In his musings, Snape had become distracted enough to cease responding to Hermione's kiss. Eyes snapping open in the dark, Hermione pulled back and queried, "Severus?"

Snape's attention shot back to Hermione and he quickly retorted, "What?"

Hermione's voice was uncertain as she said, "Is everything okay?"

Snape blurted, "Yes! Of course." Then, after a tiny pause, he asked, "Why?"

Hermione's hand stilled, and she murmured, "It's just that... you stopped kissing me back..."

Snape's mind raced. *Shite! Way to go, old chap. Keep that up and you won't have to worry about doing things with her, since she'll just leave!* Hastily, he squeezed his arms tighter around her and attempted a winning tone. "Did I? Well, I'll just have to remedy that." With that, he pressed a demanding kiss on her lips, his eyes rolling back in relief as he felt her respond. Pulling back slightly, he felt her smiling. His voice a throaty growl, he added, "Satisfied?"

Hermione laughed and tilted, "At least once already..." Snape snorted mildly at her quip and relaxed again as she pinned him with another fierce kiss.

By paying more attention to the passionate snogging, Snape managed to not tense up as much when Hermione began smoothing her hand over his arse and around his hipbone. Hermione pressed forward, tilting Snape's body back again. She cupped his hip as she settled him on his back, partially covering him with her torso. Anxiety flared in Snape's gut.

Hermione trailed light kisses over his jaw and down his throat, making him cant his head back. As she nibbled, she heard his breath catch. He seemed to be holding his breath for a beat, then exhaling heavily, only to gasp and hold his breath again. She could feel his chest rising and falling unevenly beneath her.

Gathering her courage, she nipped and licked her way back up to his ear, tracing it with her tongue as she ever-so-slowly slid her hand around his hip and over his taut abdominal muscles. When her fingertips grazed along the edge of his patch of wiry hair, she both heard and felt his sharp inhalation. She paused for a moment, waiting for his exhalation, but he held his breath. In the charged silence, she inched her fingertips hesitantly down, sliding through the hair until her fingers ran up against the erection once again tenting his trousers. As she touched his cock, his tightly-held breath exploded out in a harsh whoosh.

Snape flung his hands to his sides, gripping the bedspread. His heart was racing, between her stimulation and his nerves. Eyes squeezed shut in a supreme effort to maintain his composure, he swallowed against his now dry throat. Every muscle in his body was as rigid as the straining cock which Hermione was tentatively touching. Incredulous at the intensity of his desire to come again, Snape thought disgustedly, *Bloody hell! You've come twice already this evening; you should have a little more control by this point!*

Hermione dropped feathery kisses down his throat again, dipping lower to his chest. Laying her cheek on his chest, she could hear his heartbeat thundering. *Good! I'm glad I'm not the only one nervous about this!* As she slid her fingers along his erection, she marvelled at the contrast: hard, yet soft. She, too, held her breath as she carefully dragged her fingers along his hard length, sucking her lower lip between her teeth at the surge of wild lust that washed over her.

When she reached the tip, which was pressed against his trousers, she slid her fingers around to wrap against the underside, gently angling it away from the satin. Running her hand toward the head, she felt the moisture that had seeped through the fabric against the back of her knuckles.

Snape pressed his head back into the bed as she gingerly stroked his raging erection. A strangled sort of noise erupted from his throat. Hermione's head jerked off his chest at the sound, wary that she had done something wrong. He was panting shallowly. Worried, her hand stilled and she said, "Severus?"

Snape heard the anxiety in her tone and swallowed again, grinding out, "Everything's fine, love." In his head, he added, *Trust me on this one...*

Heaving a relieved sigh, Hermione resumed her explorations, taking his shuddering exhalation as a good sign. She wrapped her hand around his cock, feeling the soft texture of the skin sliding along the searing hot stiffness within. Holding him in a loose grip, she slipped her hand lower, once again coming in contact with his coarse hair. Very carefully, she opened her grip and gently trailed her fingertips over his balls, eliciting a deep groan from Snape.

Emboldened by his reaction, she expanded her target area. Lightly, she caressed his hips, the tops of his inner thighs, his balls, and eventually back up the length of his cock, the satin tight against her arm.

Snape felt dizzy from the rush of sensations. The combination of his erratic breathing, his fluctuating blood pressure, and the tickling bliss of Hermione's touch nearly overwhelmed him. As her fingers once again wrapped around his shaft, he was taken aback to hear a raspy "Good gods...", apparently from his own mouth.

Hermione lifted her head at his utterance, smiling in the dark. Ears straining to catch every minute sound that might come from the man within her grasp, she tightened her grip around the base of his cock. She was rewarded by a sudden bucking that rippled the abdomen pressed against hers. A thrill washed over her, making her giddy with a rush of accomplishment. *I may actually get him to lose control! Oh, I wish I could see that... But something tells me that he wouldn't let himself go if it were lit in here.* *Hmmm... Small steps, Hermione, just a bit at a time...*

Tightening her grip around the pulsing hardness, she heard a hiss followed by a low moan. Instantly releasing her hold, she whispered solicitously, "Did I hurt you?"

Snape's voice was thick as he growled, "Not at all." Hermione's hand squeezed again, and Snape's muscles seized, seeming to force out a strained, "Quite the contrary."

Hermione felt encouraged by his reactions and slowly drew her hand up his shaft, concentrating on the feel of his skin, the throbbing of the veins under her fingers, and the twitching of the whole thing in her hand like it had its own reflexes. As her hand smoothed up to the head, she felt the ridge against her skin, and heard Snape's harsh exhalations in time with the spasming of his cock.

She slid the pad of her thumb up across the tip, smearing the drop of moisture that had leaked out. Snape gasped and held his breath again. Hermione curled her forefinger up to meet her thumb and drew it over the tip and down the underside of the head, having released her tight grip around his cock. When her fingertip grazed the soft spot underneath the head where the ridge smoothed out, Snape's body gave a violent jerk, and a shuddering moan escaped him. Filing that information away for future reference, she decided that such a reaction was interesting and tried it again. She was surprised, on her second swipe over that spot, to feel Snape's hand fly up and clasp her shoulder tightly.

Swallowing against his dry throat, Snape panted, "Hermione."

Innocently, she queried, "Yes?"

Snape snorted involuntarily at her tone. Gritting his teeth, he rumbled, "Spare me the innocent act, impudent minx."

Hermione giggled. In a sugary voice, she lilted, "Whatever do you mean?" And with that, she pulled her fingers back from his skin and lightly dragged her nails down the underside of his cock, raking them gently over his balls.

Snape's grip tightened so much that he fisted the shirt she was wearing in his hand in his attempt to avoid bruising her shoulder. Arching his back in surprise at the sensation, he hissed. Head pressed back into the pillow, eyes rolling back in his head, he gulped in air as she continued to rake her nails along his skin...over his balls, under them, along the creases of his groin and legs, around the perimeter of his hair. His free leg twitched and bent at the knee, drawing up toward his body, allowing her easier access in her explorations. As his thigh rose off the bed, she slid her nails up the inside as far as she could reach within the confines of his trousers, letting her fingertips caress him as she swept back down to his crotch, feeling the goose flesh her touch had raised.

Snape's guttural moan made Hermione shiver, feeling a delicious throbbing, drawing sensation deep in her core. Her legs squeezed together of their own accord, reminding her of the slippery puddle of juices that had thoroughly drenched her knickers and his thigh.

The hand that wasn't threatening to rip his shirt from Hermione's body had flown up to his face, grinding his palm against his shut eyes and shoving his fingers through his hair, scratching along his scalp before gripping his hair and pulling. As Hermione once again wrapped her hand around his shaft, he was mortified to realize that his hips were shamelessly bucking into her encircling grip.

Hermione, on the other hand, was ecstatic that she had caused such a reaction. Crooning encouragingly, she took the tacit instruction and began stroking along his length, delighting in the hoarse groans and deep sighs that met her ministrations. She moved off him, lying flush against his side, dropping kisses on his chest and throat as she slowly slid her fist up and down his cock.

The soft sound of her hand stroking him seemed to roar in his ears along with his pounding blood. His left arm was tucked about her shoulders where she lay curled up against him, and his right hand was still tangled in his hair. Her slow pace was agonizingly exquisite. Waves of pleasure rolled over his body, rippling his muscles. His spastic reflexes calmed as she continued, lulling him into a state of euphoria, in which the deep desire to climax simmered as the heady sensations built.

Hermione noticed that his startled reactions had ceased, and, as he grew quieter and calmer, she started to worry that she wasn't doing things right, and that he had got bored. Leaning close to his ear, she whispered, "Severus?"

Snape was pulled from his euphoria by her voice and gently caressed her hair with his right hand, saying, "Shhhh..."

Hermione didn't know what to say to that and simply concentrated on his body. She maintained the slow rhythm she had begun, and every once in a while, she felt his hips rock, thrusting his cock deeper into her grip. Snape's hand rested against her hair, idly rubbing her scalp. All she could hear was the sound of their skin against each other, and their breathing. Everything seemed magnified in the utter blackness. After several moments of the same, at a gentle caress of Snape's fingers along her scalp, Hermione hummed in appreciation. That sound seemed to kick start something in Snape, and a low growl issued from his throat.

Lost in the erotic feel of Hermione's hand stroking his erection, Snape envisioned sliding into her virginal heat, slipping through her slick curls to rest deep within her. He could almost feel the sensual encounter of thrusting slowly into her clutching depths. So immersed in his imagination was he that he rocked his hips into Hermione's hand, picturing instead his cock enveloped in her cunt. When he heard her croon, a savage jolt of pleasure arced through him, and he felt his lust mounting.

His hand travelled down her shoulder and along her arm, squeezing and caressing in time with her strokes. Hermione could feel his focus and waited, senses heightened, for the next step in their venture. She stifled a moan when his hand snaked down to pull his trousers away from her arm, tugging them down below his balls, freeing her movements from the confining boundaries of the satin. Then, Snape's long fingers wrapped around her wrist and squeezed; at the same time, he barely breathed, "Faster."

Hermione eagerly complied and was startled by his vehement exhalation and the renewed thrusting of his hips. Stroking faster, Hermione was entranced by the sound of Snape's panting breaths, and the rhythm of his hips rocking into her grasp. Snape's fingers began clenching around her wrist in time with his movements, and she daringly tightened her grip in kind, squeezing and releasing at the same time his hand was doing so on her arm. A low, quavery groan issued forth at her attempt, and she smiled shakily in the darkness.

The tension increased as Hermione kept pumping Snape's cock in her fist. His breathing became faster and shallower, and every so often, a faint grunt would accompany a particularly energetic tilt of his hips. When Snape's hand released her wrist in favour of travelling over her hand and wrapping around hers, encompassing his cock, Hermione's eyes fluttered at the surge of lust that fired her veins and she moaned her appreciation.

Snape trapped her hand inside his as he guided her to stroke him exactly the way he wanted. He increased the speed, varying it every so often, squeezing and caressing, pressing her fingers against his skin. He could feel the tightening in his balls, the energy coiling in his gut. The roaring in his ears intensified as his blood pounded through him.

Hermione felt him rocking so hard that his arse was lifting from the bed and gasped at the surge in her centre as she thought of him sinking into her with those strong thrusts. His left hand was spastically clenching on her shoulder and back as she stroked him. She was mildly surprised to hear what sounded like keening whimpers emerging from her own lips as she delighted in the erotic abandon of Severus Snape coming apart in her grasp.

Snape's spine stiffened and his cock pulsed in Hermione's hand as he hit the excruciatingly divine peak of his pleasure. An inarticulate roar filled the room as he exploded, comparatively little come spurting out to drip on his and Hermione's hands since he had already done so twice in the previous few hours. As he came, he held Hermione's hand still, squeezing against the pulsing of his cock.

Hermione knew her eyes were wide with the impact of feeling his cock throbbing in her hand, spewing forth on her knuckles. Even after all that they had done, she knew she was flushed, both with excitement and embarrassment. Fighting the embarrassment, she froze, afraid to do or say anything until Snape had done so first.

Aftershocks coursed through him, rippling his muscles and making him buck against her. He felt his balls slowly retracting, his body relaxing from its fever pitch. As his breathing evened out, he became painfully aware of Hermione beside him. He could practically *feel* her avid interest, and it made him self-conscious again. Gently releasing her hand, he hoped she would follow his lead and let go of his deflating cock.

Hermione could feel his come cooling on her skin as he removed his hand from hers. Carefully easing her grip, she felt his cock softening, becoming more pliable and velvety. Unable to resist, she started touching him again, only to elicit a pained yelp. Again, she froze in uncertainty.

Snape's body had gone rigid again, and he swallowed before gritting, "No more. Not now." Hermione's hand mercifully disappeared, and Snape heaved a sigh of relief as he relaxed once again.

In the strained silence, he could sense the myriad of questions waiting to burst out of Hermione. In an attempt to stave some of them off, he murmured, "Too much." Then, he carefully reached for his wand, adding, "Give me your hand."

Hermione placed her hand in his, and he laid it on his chest, where he cast a cleansing spell on it before doing the same to his own flesh. He was taken aback by her soft sigh of disappointment. Perplexed, he queried, "What?"

Hermione seemed to toss her head on his shoulder before snuggling closer to his side. "Oh, nothing. Just... I didn't really get a chance to appreciate it before you magicked it away."

Snape's brows rose. Incredulous, he said, "What? There's nothing to appreciate when it dries, Hermione. It's just a sticky mess that's better got rid of."

Stiffening in his embrace, she asked dangerously, "So is that what I should do? Here, hand me a wand and I'll tidy up my knickers in a tick."

Snape recognized the warning note in her voice and sighed. *Bloody hell, not again!* Out loud, he ventured, "Stop that. Gods forbid I try to be as couth about this as I can, under the circumstances. This is not another double standard, Hermione. I'm simply trying to spare you an unpleasant experience."

Hermione stilled in thought, considering his explanation, and finally relaxed against him again. Still, her voice held a hint of pique as she murmured, "Fine, but *you* got a taste. I didn't!"

Snape's hands clenched violently as the meaning of her petulant comment sank in. Before he could censor himself, he rumbled, "Good gods, Hermione, what wouldn't I give for you to have a taste..."

Hermione's head shot up off his chest again, and Snape realized what he had just said. Closing his eyes in mortification, he cursed himself for his lapse in control.

When Hermione's lips tickled his ear, he froze, only to hear her trembling whisper, "You have no idea how much I would like to try that."

Snape groaned and gathered her in his arms, capturing her lips with his. As he held her close, she wriggled against him and he felt her smooth thigh against his bare crotch. They both gasped at the definite twitch of his cock on her leg.

Hermione made an inquisitive noise in her throat, and Snape pulled back to rest his forehead on hers, playfully purring, "Have mercy, woman! You wouldn't want to break me before you get a chance to partake fully, would you?"

Hermione smiled wickedly. "I thought a man of such power could certainly withstand the fumbling attempts of an innocent girl."

Snape inhaled sharply, his voice deep and intense as he retorted, "I told you to spare me the innocent act. What you may lack in experience, you make up for in natural aptitude. Sweet Circe! I assume you are pleased with yourself?"

Hermione's voice was husky as she said, "That depends on whether or not *you* were pleased with me."

Snape groaned. His tone sardonic, he said, "I thought that was obvious, love! I couldn't have faked that if I tried."

Hermione giggled in satisfaction. Wrapping her arm around him, she trailed it along the line of his back, down over his arse. His trousers were still bunched below his groin, and she bit her lip in curiosity. After a beat, she finally asked, "Why did you make me stop?"

Snape snorted and drawled, "Too sensitive."

She felt his pubic hair tickling her thighs as she pressed against him and asked, "Is it still too sensitive now?"

Snape considered his response carefully. Slowly, he said, "It's not over-stimulated as it was then, but it is still sensitive. I'm suffering no discomfort right now, if that's what you mean."

Hermione buried her face in his neck and mumbled, "Well, I just wanted to touch you again, if that's okay."

He contemplated for a long moment. Finally, he asked, "Why?"

Hermione's brows rose. "Why? Because I want to. What do you mean why?"

Snape felt his cheeks growing hot as he mumbled, "Well, it's far too soon for me to have a reaction again..."

She cut him off indignantly. "That's not the only reason why I would want to touch you! I *like* touching you. It feels good. Wait... Doesn't it?"

"Yes! Of course!"

"Then isn't that reason enough? I enjoy making you feel good. And I like the way you feel. Can't you understand that?"

Snape was silent for a few moments before finally sighing, "Yes. I can."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I *can* understand that reasoning, as I feel that way about you. It's just... difficult for me to believe anyone could feel that way about me. Forgive me, Hermione, I'm still trying to get used to the unbelievable notion that you care for me."

Hermione reached up and caressed his cheek. Chest and throat tightening, she whispered, "*Believe* it, Severus. I don't just care for you. I love you. I am in love with you. Completely. Besottedly. So much so that it frightens me sometimes with the intensity. And everything I learn about you, or experience with you, just serves to further

cement that feeling in my heart. Who knows how such things come to be? I can only be grateful for it and enjoy it with all my being."

Snape felt tears pricking his eyelids at her impassioned words, and he swallowed convulsively. His voice was ragged as he said, "My love... Hermione." He tightened his embrace and rained kisses over her face, finally claiming her lips with a kiss that expressed his devotion. A few drops managed to streak back to his temples from the corners of his eyes, and he sheepishly thanked the gods that it was dark and she couldn't see his weakness.

He didn't think to contend with her roaming hands, however, which eventually caressed his face and ran through the tell-tale traces of moisture. He could feel her concern in the stiffening of her body, and could hear it in her voice as she whispered, "Severus?"

Embarrassed, he said, "It's nothing. Ignore it, I beg you."

Hermione, however, would do nothing of the sort. Humming a soothing sort of sound, she rolled until she was straddling him, lying against his bare chest, her fingers smoothing his face as she murmured terms of endearment and kissed the tears away. Her voice low, she said, "Just answer one question. Were they brought on by something bad or good?"

"'Good' is not a good enough word to do it justice."

She smiled against his cheek and kissed him again. "Then they can happen all they want, and I won't mind a bit." At that, she kissed him deeply, tangling her hands in his hair.

Their snogging was both lazy and passionate, focusing on both giving and receiving pleasure. It went on for what seemed like hours, before Hermione let her hand snake back down to caress Snape. She gingerly slid her fingers through his wiry hair, kissing him harder when he started and stiffened in her embrace. Deliberately, she teased him with her tongue while she carefully threaded her fingers through his nest of tangled hair to caress his flaccid cock.

At the feel of her fingers, Snape pulled away from Hermione's kiss and rasped, "Hermione!" His tone bordered on plaintive, and he nervously grabbed at her hand.

Hermione set her teeth and resisted his attempt to pull her hand away from his groin. "Give over, already!"

There was a long pause, charged with their silent battle of wills. Snape gnashed his teeth and railed inwardly that he would fall for such a stubborn witch. Finally, after some rapid mental calculations, he growled, "Very well then. But, keep this in mind: I reserve the right to respond in kind." He smirked at Hermione's gasp of comprehension.

Slowly, she said, "That's only fair..."

His voice imbued with both a threat and a promise, he simply retorted, "Indeed."

Resolutely, he released her hand, allowing her to resume her explorations. Nimble fingers traced along his cock, gently cupping him. A tiny sigh escaped him, much to his chagrin.

She ran her fingers through his hair, feeling how prone it was to tangling, and gently pressed on his inner thigh, urging him to lift his knee. After a bare moment's hesitation, he complied, and she soothingly caressed his skin, rubbing with a firm touch. Another relaxed sigh drew up from the depths of his chest, and she allowed herself a moment of triumph.

Impishly, she pulled her hand away, only to approach again with one finger, lightly dragging the back of her fingernail along the crease of his groin, down under his balls, which were now nestled heavily between his thighs. He twitched and hissed. Stifling a giggle, she cupped his balls, lifting them gingerly and feeling the weight in her palm. A low moan of contentment rewarded her initiative. As she stilled, savouring the intimacy of his trust in her, she felt the skin shifting in her hand, drawing up tighter where it touched her palm, and releasing on the other side. Fascinated, she shifted his weight, once again feeling the contracting and relaxing. *Damn! I wish I could see...*

Snape forced himself to relax under her touch, holding onto his trust in her like a lifeline. When she calmly and gently began touching him, he could feel her simple wish to give him pleasure, and he succumbed to her desires.

Eventually, she drew her attention back to his cock, which was now quietly resting in its surrounding nest of hair. Lifting it, she marvelled at how different it was from before. Still, he gasped and held his breath for a second before exhaling harshly, but he wasn't burning hot and stunningly hard any longer. His skin was soft and velvety, and his flaccid penis was almost spongy under her tentative squeezes. The loose skin bunched and rolled as she stroked her hand from the base to the tip. Still, she could feel the ridge of flesh around the head, and she experimentally flicked her fingertip against the sensitive spot under the head, wondering if it would still get a reaction.

It did.

Snape was once again nearly overwhelmed by sensation. He felt like he was floating in a pool of contented relaxation, and his senses were being further dulled by Hermione's gentle caresses. Until she deliberately flicked that spot.

Muscles seized in reflex all along his body, making him buck and choke as he gasped. Hermione froze at the unexpected vehemence of his reaction. In the strained silence, she whispered, "Oops..."

Snape's lip curled and he rolled his eyes. Sardonic, he murmured, "So much for relaxed euphoria..."

Abashed, Hermione stammered, "S-sorry."

Snape heaved a huge sigh and reached down to carefully lift her hand from his body.

Hermione guiltily blurted, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to ruin it..."

Snape cut her off, mildly saying, "Nonsense. You didn't ruin anything. I am merely invoking my rights."

Hermione blinked rapidly, trying to compute his meaning. Snape, meanwhile, had laid her hand on his chest and reached down to tug his trousers back up. Then, he rolled Hermione onto her back and propped himself up on his elbow to hover over her. Finally, Hermione figured it out, and a startled "Oh!" of comprehension burst from her lips.

Snape smirked wickedly in the darkness, ready to give himself over to returning the favour. He leant down to kiss her as his free hand cupped her cheek, slowly trailing down her throat and over her collar bone. As he released her lips to move back and suckle on her earlobe, he slid his hand down between her breasts, smugly enjoying her little squeals in reaction. Trailing his hand lower, his wrist caught against the shirt where it was still buttoned. Deliberately, he withdrew his hand from her person and slipped the button from its hole. Hermione gasped in surprise. He paused for a moment, allowing her a chance to protest, but when she didn't, he dropped to the last button and freed it, opening his shirt so he could bare her completely.

Hermione's breathing quickened, and Snape languidly dragged his fingertips back up her belly and between her breasts to rest his hand over her rapidly rising chest. His voice dripped with wicked intent as he purred, "Let me see... Oh yes, responding in kind. I believe I can manage that."

Hermione moaned softly at his tone, her heart thudding beneath his palm. Snape slowly pushed the panels of his shirt to the sides, baring Hermione's breasts and belly. As the fabric fell away, Hermione shuddered, feeling her nipples contracting.

"I remember this..." Snape leant down and kissed her ribs, nibbling up between her breasts. Hermione jumped, panting. He worked his way up to her throat, which he kissed and licked, smiling at Hermione's whimpers. Then, he paused, letting the tension grow.

With mock perplexity, he murmured, "Hmm, there's something missing. What is it?" In the charged silence he heard Hermione's shallow breaths. "Ah! Yes..." Hermione gasped and held her breath in anticipation, wondering what was next. Snape let the moment swell before finally acting.

He swiftly and determinedly slid his hand along her belly, his fingertips stealing beneath the waistband of her knickers. As his fingers travelled over her damp curls, Hermione arched her back, moaning. Snape inhaled sharply at the flash of lust swirling in his gut. Clenching his teeth and panting through his nose, he firmly stroked along her plump lips, sliding through her slick juices. His attention was diverted for a moment by Hermione's right hand scrabbling against his shoulder, digging her nails into his flesh.

He resumed his feathery kisses and nips along her chest, circling her breasts, at times moving onto the soft swell of her breast, but never closing in on the nipple. Hermione squirmed in torment, vainly trying to direct her stiff nipples into his mouth. After a few long slow strokes along her pussy lips, Snape dipped further down, completely cupping her mound in his palm, savouring the heat pouring from her flesh. His fingertips wedged between her thighs, and he pressed his hand against her, making her cry out.

When her hips rocked against his hand, he descended on her, pinning her to the bed with a savage kiss. As she thrust her hips up, her thighs parted, giving him the chance he wanted. Deftly, he pressed down, slotting his middle finger between her slippery lips, aligning his first and third fingers along the sides. She shrieked into his mouth, gripping his shoulder tight.

Sweet mother of Merlin, she feels so good! At her excited response, he felt his cock stirring again, and he wondered incredulously at his abilities of recuperation when with Hermione.

Snape slid his finger along her cleft, up one side of her clit and around to the other. Hermione writhed under him, moaning. He could feel her arousal building quickly, no doubt fired by her exploration of him and her successful attempt to get him off. His gut clenched at the copious amount of slick juices soaking through her knickers and drenching his hand. Once again dipping his head to feast on the bared flesh of her chest, he circled her clit with his finger, groaning at her heated cries.

Hermione's brain seemed to stall. All rational thought ceased at the sensation of Snape's fingers stroking the centre of her lust. A fleeting memory of a similar situation with Harry whipped through her, but it was quickly chased away by the pulsing waves of pleasure that rippled out from the hard nub being rolled under Snape's fingertip. Her head rolled from side to side in delight, and her right hand clutched at Snape's shoulder, digging into his skin.

As her breathing quickened, Snape increased the speed of his stroking. He could feel her hips twitching, tilting her pelvis up into his hand. When he slipped his finger down, she canted her hips up, and his fingertip grazed the edge of her sopping opening. He sucked in a breath and she voiced a ragged groan. Heart racing, he leant down beside her ear and rasped, "Hermione?"

She heard the unspoken question in his voice, and knew he had noticed her reaction. Head swimming, she gasped, "Gods, please..."

Snape panted at the surge of excitement that washed over him and closed the distance between them with a vehement kiss. Hermione instantly reached up and gripped his hair, holding him to her and crooning into his mouth. Snape pushed up onto his elbow and knee, pulling away from her kiss to trail his tongue over her jaw and down between her breasts as he backed away from her, still stroking her into a frenzy.

Hermione felt the loss of something to hold onto when he backed out of her reach. Grabbing the bedspread on either side of her, she felt as if all of her focus zeroed in on the sensations Snape was inciting between her thighs. As every tingle was suddenly magnified, she arched her back, grinding herself against his hand.

A guttural groan sounded from past her knees. Snape knelt between her legs, his hand still rubbing her swollen flesh. As he sank back onto his heels, he let his free hand trail along her body, sweeping over her breasts and down her ribs, coming to rest on the soft curve of her belly just above her pubic bone. After a pause, he hooked one long finger into the edge of her knickers and eased them down, away from his other hand. Hermione gasped and keened one long exhalation.

Removing his busy hand from its awkward position, he quickly twisted it to a more comfortable orientation and touched her again, rubbing his thumb in a circle around her swollen clit. His fingertips lightly traced along her pussy lips, nudging them apart. She arched, bucking against him.

He laid his free hand back on her belly, stroking her skin soothingly, quieting her; he could feel his heart pounding in anticipation of what he would do next. Never stopping his stroking of her clit, he gently used his first and third fingers to prod her slippery lips, opening them to allow his middle finger to trace along the hot flesh within. He could feel the slickness pouring from her opening, no doubt evidence of her earlier orgasm. Shuddering gasps met every tentative touch of his finger. As she unconsciously spread her legs further in invitation, Snape circled her opening more firmly, swallowing a groan at her ululating cry. Then, taking a deep breath, he pressed his fingertip in, sinking into her. His eyes closed involuntarily at the erotic bliss in her voice when Hermione rasped, "Oh, gods, yes!"

She was quivering around his finger, and he carefully slid deeper, past the first knuckle to the second. Her hips rocked, silently urging him further. He could feel the resistance of her hymen against the back of his finger and he hesitated, not wanting to hurt her. In an automatic response to her grinding hips, he rubbed faster around her clit. His free hand was smoothing over her abdomen in a lazy figure eight.

He could feel the clutching of her walls around his invading finger, and he wished fervently that he would know the feeling of her gripping his cock the same way. Cautiously, he slid his finger in and out, staying fairly shallow, constantly circling her clit. As she neared her second orgasm of the night, she made the same noises that Snape had come to recognize. A triumphant grin spreading his lips in the darkness, he stilled his free hand, resting it just above her mound. Finally, unable to stand the build-up any longer, he pressed down with his free hand, at the same time he slid his pumping finger in, curling it forward, pressing against her throbbing wall. Hermione convulsed in shocked ecstasy, completely overwhelmed by the intensity of her orgasm.

Blinding pleasure radiated out from the sensitive spot she didn't even know she had, but which Snape had obviously found, manipulating it from both inside and out. Coupled with the tingling from her clit, she shuddered and flailed, shrieking incoherently.

Snape felt her cunt clamping down on him, and bit his lip fiercely, maintaining focus on Hermione, drawing out her climax. She bucked and shivered, whimpering and keening in delight. He held her down as much as he could, pressing on her, still massaging her clit as he fluttered his finger against the spongy mass inside her body. Her juices coated his hand, pooling out into his palm. He was hit with a desperate desire to bury his tongue in those juices, lapping at her essence, but he fought it, knowing there was such a thing as too much. Gods willing, they had much to look forward to, and anything more in this moment would lessen the impact of what they had experienced already.

Slowly, Hermione floated down from the stratosphere, panting and swallowing against her parched throat. Her heart thundered in her ears, and she could sense the ringing that followed her deafening shrieks. Her body felt both weightless and extremely heavy. It was like all of her bones had disappeared...gods forbid, was Lockhart around?...and she was melting into the bedding. She could feel Snape slowing his movements, eventually stopping. She savoured the sensation of his hands on her, *in* her. As he carefully, lovingly withdrew, she couldn't help but sigh in disappointment. He had felt so *good*. When he leant back, separating from her entirely, she voiced a petulant whine.

Snape chuckled deep in his throat, steeling himself to regain his self-control. Resolutely, he tugged on her thong, slipping it back up her legs and easing it back into place. Hermione struggled to lift her hips to assist him, sighing deeply. When she felt the bed shifting, indicating that he was crawling back up to join her, she furtively adjusted the thong so it was more comfortable...well, as comfortable as arse-floss could be.

Snape settled himself back at her side, propping himself up on one elbow and resting his head in his hand. He was amazed to note that he was half-erect again. Shaking his head in rueful wonderment, he gently reached up and caressed Hermione's hair, drawing his little finger down her face and feeling the clammy skin where her sweat was cooling.

As his hand passed over her lips, Hermione could smell the scent of her arousal on his fingers. Colouring in embarrassment, she screwed her eyes shut. Snape couldn't see her reaction, but he felt her body tense, and he guessed the cause. Leaning over her face, he waited until she stilled, practically hearing her attention reorient on him.

His voice was a seductive purr as he said, "I've told you before, Hermione... Delicious." He drew the word out on its final sibilant. Hermione's breath caught, and he dropped his fingers to her lips, covering them with his mouth.

His kiss was deep and sultry, his tongue snaking over his fingers, probing between them, to caress her tongue. He drew her own tongue out through his fingers, revelling in her taste, willing her to understand how much he loved it.

Hermione's stomach quivered nervously when Snape's damp fingertips alit on her lips, just after his comment sent a tingle of heat chasing through her core. When he descended on her, licking her lips and his fingers, giving her a sensuous taste of her ecstasy, she felt her heart pounding again, and her mind went spinning. As he pulled back a fraction, breathing heavily, she found herself sucking his finger into her mouth, eliciting a sharp grunt from Snape. His head rolled back and he groaned as she swirled her tongue around his finger, pushing it out and then sucking it back in. Faintly, she heard Snape choke out, "Unreal!" She smiled around his finger, and a moment later, he lunged back up, wrenching his hand from her mouth and pinning her with a demanding kiss.

Snape inched closer until he lifted his body over hers, propping himself up on his elbows and threading his hands in her unruly locks. One leg draped between hers, and he rested on his hip, letting his bare torso press against hers. Her nipples were hard between them, but her skin was softer than silk. Snape couldn't get enough of her, and feasted on her mouth, alternating between aggressively and languidly. Their soft sighs and croons blended with the moist sounds of their kisses.

After a while, their racing pulses slowed to a desultory, sated pace. Fatigue was creeping up on them, particularly after such a manic evening. Their kisses stretched out infinitely, savouring each other.

Snape was drawn from his contented haze by a short squeak from Hermione, followed by what felt like a jerk away from him. Blinking to clear his head, he paused, concerned. "What's wrong?"

Hermione was writhing in mortification. She felt like she couldn't keep up with him and his apparent wealth of experience. How to explain?

"Um... As much as I love kissing you... Well, it hurts." Hermione grimaced as she forced herself to speak.

Snape was taken aback, and he pulled away from her in worry. "Hurts? How?"

Hermione tossed her head on the pillow. Her voice was strained as she bit out, "My chin. It stings. So do my lips. My skin feels raw..." She was utterly stunned when Snape fell onto his back beside her, peals of laughter echoing off the stones. A bit put out, she snapped, "Why is that funny?"

Snape instantly composed himself, rolling back up to caress her face in apology. His voice still held a ripple of laughter as he spoke. "Dearest, I'm so sorry. I'm not laughing at you. It's my fault completely. You should have said something sooner, before my stubble rubbed you raw in my enthusiasm for your rather formidable charms." He murmured healing charms, and she felt the tingle of magic trailing after his fingers, soothing the abraded flesh. He rested his forehead against hers for a moment and rumbled, "I hesitate to even *think* how late it is, and it's obvious that it's been far too long since I shaved for the party. I should have been more mindful; I apologize."

Hermione let his words mollify her ruffled feathers, reaching up and sliding her fingers over his jaw, feeling the rough sandpapery texture of his beard growth. Wryly, she said, "Perhaps this is a sign that we should take a break for a little while?" Snape snorted and she smiled.

"Perhaps." He backed away to drop a gentle kiss on the tip of her nose. She giggled and walked her fingers over his nose so she could do the same. Snape huffed and grumbled, "Not like you could miss that target."

Hermione squawked in indignation and smacked his bicep. He yelped and jerked away. She snapped, "Stop that!"

Bewildered, Snape said, "What was *that* for?"

Hermione pushed him onto his back and aggressively poked him in the chest. "Don't insult the man I love, you hear me?"

Snape cottoned on and covered his eyes with his hand, muttering, "Oh, bloody hell..."

Hermione drawled, "I heard that..." Snape grunted in response and she giggled.

With mock asperity, Snape queried, "Are you quite finished abusing my person?"

Hermione stifled another giggle and leant near his ear, lilting, "Well, perhaps just for the night."

Snape groaned and wrapped his arms around her, squeezing. He drawled a long-suffering "Impertinence..." as he shifted her, tugging the covers out from under them. As he slid back down, pushing the covers below their feet at the end of the bed, he manoeuvred her to rest comfortably within his arm, smiling in spite of himself at her happy sigh when she laid her head on his chest.

Snape pushed her wayward curls away from his face and remained to stroke her hair as she pressed herself against him. His shirt bunched beneath her, and her breast was soft and warm along his side. She laid her arm across his ribs, idly rubbing his side and tracing the bones beneath his skin. When she flung her leg over his, her thigh rubbed across his satin-clad cock, making his muscles ripple at the sensation.

Hermione lay quiet, listening to the steady beat of his heart in her ear. She could hear his breathing as well, and after a long moment of calming herself to match his rhythm, she felt her emotions welling up at the simple joy of lying curled up with him. Her embrace tightened and she whispered, "I love you."

Snape sucked in a breath at the surge of love that engulfed him in response. He lifted his free arm to clasp her to him and kissed the crown of her head. His voice was thick with gratitude for the gift of her love as he murmured, "And I love you, Hermione."

There was a pause, filled with the unspoken devotions of the two lovers, and Hermione smiled in supreme contentment, wishing she could stay in his arms forever. That thought, however, spurred others, many of which were more troublesome. Recognizing her chance to finally talk freely with him, Hermione decided to broach some of the questions that had been nagging her ever since they had realized their connection.

In a low whisper, she said, "Severus?"

Snape felt more at peace than he remembered feeling in the rest of his miserable excuse for a life. At her tentative query, he simply responded with a "Mmmm?"

Hermione smiled at the vibration of his deep voice rumbling beneath her cheek, but her smile vanished as she posed her question. "What will happen when school is over?"

Snape frowned in the darkness. "To what, specifically, are you referring?"

"I mean, when school is over, we can come clean about our relationship, right?"

"Ye-e-es."

Hermione heard the hesitation in his tone and grimaced. "Well, I'm not so naïve as to think that there won't be repercussions. I just want to know: what do you expect those repercussions to be?"

Snape heaved a sigh from what seemed to be his toes and resignedly answered, "I won't lie to you and pretend that we won't cause a scandal. There will undoubtedly be

an inquest to determine if our relationship affected your grades...not that there could possibly be any evidence to that effect. The headmaster will likely disapprove, and I can't say, with any certainty, that he'd be inclined to allow me to keep my position as a professor."

Hermione's voice was small as she choked, "I don't want to cause you to lose your job!"

Snape patted her shoulder consolingly. "Shhh. Hermione, love, think about it for a moment. The war is over. I no longer need this position to serve the Order. I am free to do whatever I wish for the first time in my life." His voice dripped with sarcasm as he said, "Has it never occurred to you, you maddeningly bright witch, that perhaps teaching was not my first choice in profession?"

Hermione blinked. "Oh!"

Snape snorted and stroked her arm. "Indeed. When this school year is over, I should like to take a new path. The mere thought of being spared a recurring multitude of dunderheads inspires me." He paused, letting his words sink in. Hermione was silent. His voice dropped to a wistful yearning as he said, "I have experienced so much that the wizarding world has to offer, but most of it has been on the Dark side.

"I have always been fascinated by how much we are able to accomplish by honing our natural abilities. My years as a Potions Master have provided me with a marketable trade, and with the downfall of the Dark Lord, I can make good use of it, *outside* of the walls of Hogwarts. My reputation has been cleared enough by the events of the Final Battle that I can find buyers for my wares. And, in my free time...about which I fantasize most longingly, contemplating the thought of not having classes to deal with...I have hundreds of ideas of things I would like to research, to expand our knowledge of the boundaries of our magical abilities..."

Hermione marvelled at the depth of feeling in his voice, showing how much he craved his freedom. Her heavy heart lifted. In an awed whisper, she said, "I had no idea..."

Snape chuckled dryly. "Of course not! I hardly dared entertain the notions myself until the war was over. I had kept my inclinations buried so long from sheer necessity of survival that they took a while to resurface." He paused for a long moment. Then, patting her shoulder firmly, he said, "I daresay things will be quite awkward and difficult when we go public, but you needn't worry that I will lose my job and we will end up eking out a living somewhere off Knockturn Alley."

He kissed her head again in reassurance, and Hermione hugged him, but she still couldn't completely quell the niggling anxiety in her gut at the eventual exposure of their true feelings.

Solemnly, she said, "You are a wonderful man, Severus Snape, and quite the enigma."

Snape made a rude noise. Scoffing, he retorted, "Not quite, Miss Know-It-All, but I appreciate the sentiment nonetheless. Of course, I daresay you're biased..."

He gave a wicked chuckle that sent a stab of heat straight to her centre. "Hmmm, I may be biased, but you don't give yourself credit. As for the enigma that is *you*, I hope to spend quite a long time unravelling your mysteries."

Snape closed his eyes as another wave of emotion crashed over him. His voice was low and fervent as he said, "I hope you do, my love. I sincerely hope you do." He held her tight for a moment, before relaxing again and sighing. "The alarm is already set. Fancy a turn in dreamland before you have to depart?"

Hermione smiled as she snuggled closer to him, making herself comfortable. "I feel like I already am in dreamland, since mine have come true with you."

Fighting a grin, Snape chided, "Now, now, beloved, be careful what you say, or I might become as conceited as that idiot Lockhart." Then, he teasingly added, "Oh, wait, you fancied him, didn't you?"

Hermione groaned in embarrassment. "Don't ruin the moment, Severus! Honestly, bringing up that prat when I'm as close to perfectly content as I think I can be! Hmph, see if I whisper sweet nothings to you anymore..."

Snape chuckled again and sighed, "My dear, you couldn't possibly whisper sweet nothings, as you never speak but that you say *something*." Hermione swatted his chest and he grunted. Catching her hand, he lifted it to his lips and kissed it. "Now, shall we fall asleep, or would you rather continue this charming little quarrel?"

Hermione finally gave in and giggled. In a tone of affectionate indulgence, she murmured, "Good night, dearest. Happy Christmas."

Snape relaxed and Summoned the covers over them. "Sleep well, even if it is only for a short while. Happy Christmas to you, my love." A peaceful silence descended upon them, blanketing them with comfortable drowsiness. Feeling safe, secure, and content, they succumbed to sleep in each other's arms.

38- Post-Holiday Blues and a Hanging

Chapter 40 of 84

It's the morning after Christmas night, and Snape and Hermione wake up together, loath to part. Rehearsals start up again, and House rivalries stir up a hornet's nest. And to top it all off, there's even a hanging!

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Obviously, this has been AU from the start, but after the shocking events in HBP, it's even MORE so. So, now I'm including that in the warnings.

Author's Note: I apologize profusely to everyone who has been waiting for over a month now for this chapter update. As was related on my livejournal (www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon) work went crazy for a long while, and it has finally gotten back to normal. Add in the reading of HBP twice, and those are my reasons for having such a long hiatus. *hangs head in shame and looks mournfully up at impatient readers, pleading for forgiveness.* As always, much love and thanks go out to all you wonderful folk who give me so much support over this fic, and hugs and chocolate to the inestimable Lotm, who rocks my world as a beta, and to SnivellusSnape, Laela, yutamiyu, and Horserider! And, last but certainly not least, I have to direct you all to Melanie's fanart for this fic, which can be found at: <http://www.deviantart.com/view/21561691/>. Go check it out! I fangirled Melanie big time... LOL!! Anyway, on with the show...

Chapter 38- Post-Holiday Blues and a Hanging

Snape woke to the persistent tingle of his alarm clock. He had it charmed to rouse him that way first, before emitting any sounds. Usually, the sensation was enough to wake him, and he could respond to the summons before the actual alarm began. Considering how short his sleep was, he felt surprisingly rested when he waved his wand at the clock to stop its emanations.

Hermione was still asleep, half-sprawled over him. Snape smiled in the darkness, caressing her arm. He could tell that his left arm would be stiff from where it had been trapped under her head, but he fondly thought that the minimal discomfort was worth waking up with her in his embrace. Sighing regretfully, he gripped Hermione's arm and gently shook it. Whispering, he said, "Hermione, love, it's time to wake up."

Hermione grumbled incoherently and stirred, snuggling closer to him. Snape stifled a chuckle and prodded her insistently. "Hermione. Wake up."

Hermione seemed to growl and tossed petulantly, muttering, "Tired... Bit longer..."

Snape's lips thinned. As much as he would love to keep her in his bed, she had to get back to her room before anyone discovered that she was missing. Deepening his tone to an approximation of his classroom demeanour, he crisply retorted, "Get up this instant, young lady, or I shall be forced to resort to drastic measures."

Her only response was a sleepily irritated huff, followed by her shifting onto her back, rolling her head away from him along his bicep.

Sighing to himself in exasperation, he murmured, "You've left me no choice." With that, he whipped the covers off them, throwing them past the foot of the bed. At Hermione's confused protest, he yanked his arm from under her head, hearing her squawk of indignation as her head dropped to the mattress. As he moved, the bed shook, and he barked, "Up! Up! Get up! Now!"

He grabbed his wand and launched himself up onto his knees, straddling hers. A quick flick of his wand and a rumbled "*Lumos*" bathed the room in light, causing Hermione to shriek in frustration and fling her arm up over her eyes, blocking out the painful brilliance.

"Severus! What are you *doing*? That's too bright! Get off me!" She heard his sharp inhalation and felt his movements still. Wondering at his sudden silence, she peered past her arm, struggling to see. Blinking furiously in the light, she gazed up at Snape, her vision clearing until she could see his stunned expression.

He was staring at her, his lips parted in incredulity. Both arms hung limply at his sides, and his eyes were wide as he looked at her, unblinking. But, she noticed, he wasn't looking at her face. Bewildered, she glanced down to see what had stunned him so completely.

Embarrassed heat flooded her cheeks as she realized that she was nearly naked. When she had rolled away from him, the shirt she was wearing...which had never been rebuttoned...had fallen open on both sides. Her thong was a bare scrap of decorative lace, and with all that had transpired, it had pulled and twisted, revealing tantalizing glimpses of dark curls.

She felt a wave of mortification wash over her, immediately followed by a tingle of excitement. Her nipples had stiffened in the cool dungeon air and were proudly standing at attention. She glanced back up at Snape, understanding his dazed expression. She watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed convulsively, blinking rapidly as he attempted to regain his composure.

He tore his gaze away from her breasts, which were rising and falling quickly as Hermione panted in reaction. A faint pink stained his cheeks as he shifted his position, straddling her knees. He tried to resist looking at her again, but failed. His eyes darting back to the vision before him, he hungrily drank in the smooth gleam of her skin, the soft curves of her breasts, and the darker peaks of her hard nipples. His mouth watered with his desire to suckle them again. The thought sent a lance of heat straight through his body, ending in his cock, which he suddenly realized had sprung to life and was bobbing within his trousers.

Hermione glanced down, her eyes widening at the sight of his tented trousers. Memories of scant hours prior cascaded over her, and she shivered, her eyelids fluttering closed. When she opened them again, she looked up to see Snape gazing at her, his chest rising and falling rapidly with his shallow breaths.

They locked eyes for a long moment, reading their unquenchable desire for each other. Finally, Snape cleared his throat and rasped lamely, "It's time to get up."

Hermione nodded solemnly. Then, she flicked a glance at his erection and her lips quivered with a suppressed smirk. Her voice a husky drawl, she lilted, "I see that."

Snape's brows shot up in astonishment at her cheek, and he ducked his head, chagrined at his obviously base reaction. Carefully, he backed away from her, averting his eyes and sitting on the edge of the bed. "Forgive me for staring like that. I just couldn't help it. It's not often a man like me wakes up with a beautiful young woman half-dressed in his bed."

Hermione had squirmed to a sitting position, fumbling to wrap his shirt closed, crossing her arms tightly under her breasts. When he spoke, she crept closer to him, resting a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right. It's not like we weren't all over each other last night...er, this morning." She shrugged ruefully at her correction.

Snape tossed his head. Pressing herself against him from behind, she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed, planting a light kiss on his trapezius. Snape closed his eyes and gripped her arms, leaning back into her embrace.

Hermione trailed a line of kisses along his neck and over his jaw, crooning as he turned his head to meet her lips with his. Mindful of his stubble, he gently kissed her, sliding one hand into her hair, pulling her around to settle across his lap. As she slid, the shirt opened again, but neither seemed to care as they were lost in a kiss that quickly turned passionate. Hermione pressed her bared breasts against his chest, dragging her nails along his back.

Snape groaned, gripping her tightly and standing, depositing her on her feet in front of him. He cupped her face in his hands, kissing her, travelling all over her face and down her throat. Hermione's head canted back, and she settled her hands on his shoulders, sighing blissfully as his fingertips lightly brushed along her throat and over her collarbone, brashly pushing the shirt open. He dropped to his knees and reverently caressed her breasts, gazing at her as if she were the most precious treasure on Earth.

Hermione snaked her hands into his hair, grazing her nails over his scalp. When she looked down at him from under hooded lids, she was struck by the sheer power of his love and desire for her. It hit her like a gale force wind, buffeting her in his grasp. Pupils dilating, she locked burning eyes with him and whispered, "I love you."

Snape buried his face in the hollow between her breasts, wrapping her in a painfully tight bear hug. His fervent declaration was muffled against her skin, but she knew he had said the same thing. They remained motionless for a long moment. Then, Snape pulled back and glanced up at her resignedly. "You have to go."

Hermione nodded sadly, but made no move. Snape knew he would have to be the one to force the issue, to be the stronger one. Grimacing, he pulled away even more, but darted back to drop a light kiss on each nipple before he stood.

Hermione gasped at the sensation and reeled. Snape was suddenly towering over her, his hair cloaking his face again. His voice low, he said, "Get dressed. Every minute we waste increases our risk."

He stepped sharply away from her, striding to his wardrobe and grabbing a fresh set of clothes. He glanced at her and nodded before disappearing into the bathroom, leaving her to change.

Hermione crossed to the chair where her clothing lay. Picking up her stockings, she rolled them tightly into a ball, wrapping her suspender belt around them. With a tender smile, she tucked the choker securely inside the wad of cloth. Slowly, she shrugged out of Snape's shirt, eyeing it wistfully as she dropped it onto the chair. Slipping back into her dress, she stepped into her shoes. Then, she cast a furtive glance back at the door to the bathroom. Grabbing her wand, she hurriedly shrank the white shirt and hid it within the bundle of her stockings. Half-heartedly patting at her hopelessly tangled hair, she heaved a deep sigh and yawned, shuffling back to the bed, where she dropped morosely onto the edge.

A few moments later, Snape reappeared, fully dressed, carrying her mousse and the Cloak. He gravely handed them to her, remaining standing, obviously waiting for her to get up and don the Cloak for departure. She peered up at him sulkily and he cocked an eyebrow at her. Sighing gustily, Hermione stood and flung the Cloak around her. Once again shrinking the mousse, she palmed it, burying it under the wad of her stockings. She glanced up at Snape, her head the only part of her still visible, floating in midair.

"I shall escort you to your Tower. The last thing we need is for Filch or Mrs. Norris to catch you. He wouldn't question me prowling about the halls..."

Hermione nodded and tugged the hood up, disappearing from sight completely. Snape felt her Cloak-covered hand scrabbling for his and gripped it. Inclining his head, he led her through the door to his sitting room and out of his quarters into the deserted dungeon corridor. In silence, they trekked up staircase after staircase, warily on the lookout for signs of anyone else.

Eventually, they came to the corridor to Gryffindor Tower, and Snape felt Hermione tug on his arm to pause. Pretending to have heard something in the room they had just passed, he doubled back and entered it, peering out into the corridor again before speaking.

Barely whispering, he queried, "What is it?"

Hermione whispered back, "I'm afraid to say the password to the Fat Lady. I don't want her to be able to tell anyone that I came back to the Tower at this time of the morning."

Snape frowned and pursed his lips in thought. "Can't you use the bypass to your room?"

"You know about that?" Hermione asked in surprise.

Snape snorted and muttered, "All Heads of Houses know of the Head Boy's and Girl's bypass passageways. We can all use them if necessary. I know you were instructed to keep it a secret..."

Hermione huffed and replied, "I have! Even Harry and Ron don't know where it is. The thing is, Professor Dumbledore told us that he would know every time we used them! As long as we weren't using them outside of curfew, it wouldn't matter, and we weren't to abuse the privilege... But now, he'd certainly find out if I used it, and I'd get in trouble for sure. I suppose I could wait outside the portrait hole until someone came out and then go through..."

Snape interrupted, "No. If you're in the corridor, Filch or Mrs. Norris might find you. There's nothing for it. I shall simply have to enter the common room. You can enter behind me."

"But what will the Fat Lady say?"

Snape drew himself up and scowled forbiddingly. "Am I or am I *not* a professor at this school? Is it or is it *not* my responsibility to look after students who are here over holiday?"

Hermione, though invisible, refrained from rolling her eyes at his attitude. Quickly, she muttered, "Okay, I get it. As long as that works on paintings as well as students..."

Snape smirked and gave a mock bow. "There are very few on which it doesn't work, my dear."

Hermione made a noise of exasperation, but she cupped his elbow to indicate they should continue. Snape tossed his head smugly and led the way again down the corridor.

When they arrived at the portrait, Snape cleared his throat to wake the dozing Fat Lady. She started and shook her head sleepily, blinking at him.

"Professor? What are you doing here?"

Snape crossed his arms and sneered down his nose at the Fat Lady. Before he even spoke, she blanched under his regard. "I am patrolling for rule-breaking students. Open up at once."

Grimacing in confusion, the Fat Lady ventured, "But... you're not a Gryffindor..."

Snape snorted and rolled his eyes. Voice dripping with disdain, he spat, "For which I am eternally grateful. Are you going to open up or not? I daresay that the precious little Gryffindors are the ones most likely to break rules, if I am to use that Potter brat as an example..." His demeanour grew more and more disapproving and agitated, and the Fat Lady cringed, hastening to open the portrait.

"All right! All right. Go on, then..." She swung forward, and Snape felt Hermione brush past him, behind the portrait. He peered into the common room before folding his long legs to clamber through the hole. Once through, he felt Hermione scramble after him, and he kept his hand on the portrait, to stop it from swinging shut.

The common room was deserted, and Hermione dared to look up from within the Cloak, her face becoming visible for a fleeting moment, flashing a grateful smile and a mouthed "I love you" to Snape before vanishing again. He nodded sharply and scanned the room again, straining his ears to hear her footsteps as she headed to her room. Satisfied that she was safely gone, he climbed back out of the portrait hole, scowling at the Fat Lady as she swung shut.

"I trust there were no problems, Professor?"

Snape's lip curled nastily. He offered a non-committal, "Hmph," before spinning on his heel and stalking away. He pretended not to hear the Fat Lady's relieved sigh, sending silent thanks to the gods that they had not been found out.

Fortunately, he made his way back to the dungeons without encountering anyone else. Finally relaxing once he had re-entered his quarters, he headed back to his bedroom, intent on sleeping a bit more before facing the rest of the day. When he stepped through the door, he paused, overwhelmed with Hermione's lingering presence. His sheets were rumpled, the covers still in a pile on the floor at the foot of the bed, and he could still detect her faint scent. A pang of loneliness stole over him as he undressed again. Dropping naked onto his bed, he gazed at the wrinkled sheets, noting the spots where her juices had left stains. A surge of lust made his cock twitch, and he snorted faintly.

Sliding under the restored covers and inhaling deeply, he doused the lights, comforted by the scent clinging to his bed. His thoughts focused on the wonderful moments with Hermione as he fell asleep.

Hermione hurried to her room, holding her breath as she opened her door, hoping that she wouldn't find a sleeping couple sprawled on her bed. When she poked her head through, she saw nobody but Crookshanks. Exhaling thankfully, she shut her door, taking in the pristine condition of her room. *Well, at least Ginny was conscientious about leaving it clean...*

She flung the Cloak onto her chair, quickly shimmying out of her dress and shoes. Unwrapping her stockings, she tossed them to the floor and reverently put the choker away in her bureau. Crookshanks purred at her sleepily. Scrubbing his ears with one hand, she restored her mousse and Snape's shirt to normal size. After storing the mousse in her closet, she picked up the shirt, holding it to her face and breathing deeply. Smiling, she shrugged into it again, wrapping it around her like Snape's embrace.

After a quick trip to the loo, where she gratefully disposed of the uncomfortable thong, she snuggled into bed, feeling dreadfully tired after so much excitement and lack of sleep. As she lay there, flashes of the previous night crowding her mind, Crookshanks jumped up to curl up beside her. She rolled over to lie close to him, idly petting his back as she drifted off to sleep.

Hermione woke to a persistent knocking on her door. Grumpily, she croaked, "Who is it?"

A muffled voice called out, "It's Ginny! Aren't you coming to breakfast?"

Hermione groaned. "Is Harry with you?"

"No. It's just me. Harry's with Ron, listening to him go on about Susan. Why?"

Hermione forced herself to get up, wrapping Snape's shirt tightly around herself. Staggering to the door, she crossed her arms under her breasts and opened the door a crack. Ginny's expression was curious as she peered in at Hermione's dishevelled state.

Hermione quickly scanned the corridor before letting Ginny in. Shuffling back to her bed, she burrowed back under the covers, eyeing Ginny bleakly.

"Are you okay?" Ginny's brow creased in concern.

A slow smile stole across Hermione's face in spite of her exhaustion. At that, Ginny's eyes widened, and an astonished gasp escaped her.

In a breathless whisper, Ginny queried, "What happened?"

Hermione pinned her with a warning gaze before answering, "I just got back here... oh... less than three hours ago."

Ginny's mouth dropped open, but no sound came out. Blinking rapidly, she closed her mouth, struggling to speak.

"I don't think I'm ready to come to breakfast just yet. I'm going to get some more sleep first. I haven't had much..."

Ginny finally recovered herself and narrowed her eyes at Hermione, who was watching her with a faint, amused smirk. Tilting her head meaningfully, Ginny said, "And *why* haven't you had much sleep? Where were you until a few hours ago?"

Hermione's smirk widened into a beatific grin. Nodding slowly to confirm Ginny's suspicions, she simply said, "You know. You're a bright girl."

Ginny instantly shot up from the chair where she had been sitting and crossed to join Hermione on the bed. Her face was alight with eager curiosity and a conspiratorial gleam as she hissed, "I can't believe you! And you nag *me* about getting caught!"

Hermione's chin lifted mutinously as she retorted, "I had the Cloak. And he escorted me back this morning."

Ginny sank back, trying to come to terms with this new Let's-Flout-The-Rules Hermione. Eyeing her intently, she noticed the shirt Hermione was wearing. Pointing a slack finger at it, she said, "That's his, isn't it?"

Hermione chewed her lip and flushed. "Yes."

Incredulous, Ginny said, "I can't believe he let you have it! What if someone saw it? Or if the house-elves found it?"

Hermione's eyes shifted guiltily as she confessed, "He doesn't know I have it. I nicked it when I was getting dressed. And I'll keep it hidden! I do the same thing with the photos!"

Ginny blinked again. "You stole his shirt?" A look of grudging, delighted admiration crossed her face. "You really are a rebel! I think I like it..."

Hermione grimaced at Ginny, making the other girl laugh. Hastily changing the subject, she asked, "So, how was last night? I appreciate you leaving the room in such good condition."

Ginny's face lit up. "It was spectacular! We had the best time ever. I can't thank you enough."

Hermione smiled uncomfortably and muttered, "Yes, you can. In fact, you have already. So, as glad as I am that everyone involved had a good time, I'd rather not hear the details, thanks."

Ginny nodded, smirking. "Fine. I get it. But, can I ask you about *your* gory details?"

Hermione fixed the redhead with an aggrieved glare and said frostily, "I can't stop you from asking, but don't expect answers."

Ginny stuck her tongue out at her friend before adding saucily, "All right then. So, did you two... you know?"

Hermione shook her head quickly. "No! I told you. He won't. We won't. Not until I'm out of school."

Ginny shrugged in resignation. "Oh well. I understand, of course, but I can't imagine being in your position and not being able to go forward, you know? It'd be torture! I doubt I'd have that kind of self-control."

Hermione nodded ruefully. "Well, he does. And it's a good thing, too. As for torture... Well, it is, in a way, but there *are* other things than just *that*, you know."

Ginny perked up and said, "You mean like oral?"

Hermione covered her face with her hands. "Ginny! Honestly!"

"What? What did I say?"

Groaning, Hermione peeked through her fingers. "No. Not that either. Just... other things. Being close. I'm not going to draw you a bloody picture, so forget it. Besides, I'm fair knackered, so go have breakfast and let me go back to sleep."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Fine! I'll go. But, what do you want me to tell the boys?"

Hermione frowned. "Just tell them I'm tired after the party, especially since I had to *make myself scarce* until after one a.m.!" She favoured Ginny with a meaningful glare, and the other girl had the grace to blush, even though she was grinning from ear to ear.

"Um, yeah. That'll shut Harry up, I'm sure. As for Ron, he's probably too interested in eating so he can go visit Susan to worry too much about your absence. Anyway, I'll see you later." With that, she stood and crossed to the door. Turning a positively wicked expression on Hermione, she murmured, "So... have *pleasant* dreams, eh?"

Hermione grabbed a pillow and flung it at the chuckling redhead as she ducked out the door, dodging the missile. It smacked against the wood with a muffled thunk. Summoning it back to her, Hermione settled into her bed again, still tired. After several minutes, she managed to sink back into a sleep that was riddled with erotic dreams involving a certain dark Potions professor.

Fortunately, Harry was so caught up in the afterglow of his night with Ginny that he didn't pay too much attention to Hermione when she finally joined the living later that day. Ginny had been right about Ron, and he was off spending time with Susan. Hermione spent Boxing Day lounging about the common room with the other Gryffindors, occasionally joining Seamus and Luna in their games of Exploding Snap after Luna showed up to dreamily take Seamus up on his offer.

That evening, when dinner appeared on the tables in the common room, Dobby, too, appeared, anxiously twisting his hands and gazing hopefully at Hermione.

"Miss! Dobby wanted to ask Miss if her Christmas plans went well..."

Hermione glanced around quickly, beckoning to Dobby to follow her to her room. Smiling at him, she murmured, "Everything was perfect, Dobby, thank you. I'm glad you came by. I have something for you." She gestured for him to precede her into her room, and he gazed at her raptly.

She crossed to her closet and emerged with a package, which she handed to Dobby. His huge eyes immediately began watering as he trembled in an ecstasy of gratitude.

"This is for you, Dobby. I found it when I was out shopping for the holidays, and I knew you'd like it. I couldn't resist. Please take it as a token of my thanks for all the help you've given me, and Harry, and Dumbledore, and...oh, all of us here!" She beamed kindly at the elf, who breathlessly unwrapped the package and pulled out a badge...very much like those that she had made for S.P.E.W....that blinked the message "I love Harry Potter!" in glowing primary colours.

In the wake of the Final Battle, the euphoria of victory led to an embarrassing upsurge of Harry Potter mania, with fan clubs popping up amongst teenage girls...and adults, disturbingly enough...all over Europe. Harry had been mightily mortified at the propensity of small crowds of girls for wearing Harry Potter memorabilia and squealing shrilly whenever they caught a glimpse of him in the aftermath of the war. The badge Hermione had given Dobby was just one example of the dross that Harry would flush hotly over, scowling. It was a relief for all involved that Dumbledore had put his foot down at the start of term about anyone behaving in such a fashion, and Harry's life had settled down to almost normal...well, as normal as life could be for one whom the public called The-Boy-Who-Lived-Twice.

Dobby sighed reverently and pinned the badge to the Weasley sweater Ron had given him. Thrusting his chest out proudly, he sniffed and beamed up at Hermione. "Miss... Dobby is honoured to have such a present. Dobby will wear it proudly! If there is ever anything I can do for Miss or her friends, just say the word, and Dobby will do anything to help!"

Hermione cleared her throat at Dobby's excess of emotion, but patted his shoulder kindly. "I'll remember, Dobby, thank you." Then, with a stifled smirk of wicked amusement, she added, "Oh, and no matter what Harry might say to you when he sees your present, don't let him tell you to get rid of it. You deserve it."

Dobby gasped in horror. "Of course not, Miss! Thank you, thank you!" Bowing away from her, he cast her an elated grin before disappearing with a pop. Hermione giggled as she made her way back to the common room.

She was lazily buttering a roll when Colin plopped down near her. He reached for a plate and offered her a cheerful, "Evening, Hermione."

"Hello, Colin. Been enjoying the holiday?"

Colin flashed her a smile before flushing. "Oh, yes! I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable with that whole mistletoe thing yesterday, though."

Hermione inclined her head and waved her roll airily. "Don't worry about it. It was all just silliness anyway. I doubt anyone will remember all that rot when we get back to work." Silently, she added, *I hope Severus will forget about it...*

Colin blinked and furrowed his brow. "That's right. I forgot. When is the next rehearsal?"

"Tomorrow. We're to block the 'Il Muto' scene through Buquet's hanging."

Colin shuddered and grimaced. "I tell you, I wouldn't want to be Terry... or Harry! Can you imagine being hanged?"

Hermione snorted and said, "Honestly, it's not like he's really going to be hanged. Surely you realize that none of us are at risk, not with Dumbledore around."

Colin leant toward Hermione earnestly. "Maybe, but just think for a second. Snape certainly doesn't like any of us, and he's supposed to be the one hanging Harry! Wouldn't you be a little worried if you were in his place?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed with anger and Colin backed away hastily, confused by her reaction. Her voice was icy as she spoke. "You're always so quick to think the worst of Professor Snape. All of you! It's disgusting. Just like with the mousse. You tasted it! It was wonderful! And yet you *persist* with your unfounded suspicions..."

At that moment, Ginny and Harry walked over and took a seat at the table, serving themselves from the platters, cheerfully offering, "What's up?" Harry took in Colin's frightened, white face and Hermione's scathing, angry expression and whistled, querying, "Oi, Colin, what'd you do to set Hermione off this time?" He shot a lopsided smirk at the younger boy. Ginny eyed them all keenly.

Hermione glared silently at Colin, fuming. After a beat, he swallowed nervously and stammered, "I was just talking about how much I wouldn't want to be Terry or you, since you both get hanged... especially you, since Snape's the one to do it, and she just got mad..."

Harry's brows rose in thoughtful contemplation of Colin's point. "Huh. Now that you mention it, it really is kind of a touchy matter, isn't it? I know Dumbledore is there and all, but I can't say that I really welcome the idea of Snape using me as a target."

Hermione drew herself up to launch into a harangue, but she was interrupted by Ginny smacking Harry's arm and starting her own tirade. Both boys regarded the redhead in astonishment as she raged at them.

"Harry James Potter! I can't believe you! Hermione's right. You may not like the man, but for gods' sakes, how can you think he would do anything to you after all he's done to protect and help you?" She huffed in disgust and favoured them with a clearly aggrieved expression. "Ever since this whole production began, Snape has given his best efforts to it, and you still prate on about how untrustworthy he is. Give *over* already! He may not be my favourite person, and he may still act like a git, but have a little respect, please! Really, after thinking about what the man has to put up with, I can't say I blame him overmuch for being in such a bad mood..."

Hermione was shocked speechless by Ginny's unexpected defence of Snape. Apparently, the boys were too, as they simply stared at her like she had grown a second head. She glared at them before rolling her eyes.

Harry tilted his head and muttered wonderingly, "Who are you and what have you done with my girlfriend?" Colin stifled a nervous giggle and even Hermione coughed as she tried to suppress a bark of laughter.

Ginny narrowed her eyes at Harry and sneered, "Oh, ha ha. Really funny. Come on, Harry, don't be a prat."

Harry blinked at her before cautiously turning his attention to his dinner. As he pushed the food around on his plate, he cast a glance at Colin and said, "Right. Snape is a good ol' chap. Let's keep that in mind, shall we, Colin?"

Colin nodded faintly. "Sure thing, Harry. Um, anyway, I'll see you lot tomorrow at rehearsal. Bye, Hermione, Ginny, Harry." He stood hastily and scuttled off, darting wary glances over his shoulder as he went.

Hermione stared at Ginny while Harry avoided their eyes, concentrating solely on his meal. Ginny stared back, giving Hermione a half-self-conscious look and a defiant shrug. Hermione's lips curved in a faint appreciative smile and she shook her head slightly. At that, Ginny's lips twitched. Hermione shot a furtive glance around the room before mouthing "Thank you" to Ginny. Ginny cut her eyes to Harry before smirking rather sheepishly and mouthing back "Sure."

Clearing her throat, Hermione stood, brushing crumbs off her clothes. "Well, I've got some reading to do, so I'll see you tomorrow. Good night!" She snorted at Harry's half-hearted finger ripple. Ginny nodded at Hermione, having just taken a large bite of her dinner.

Well, I'm not going to stick around and give Harry the chance to ponder the oddity of that whole scene. I'm sure Ginny will be able to distract him from thinking about it. She briskly secluded herself in her room, shrouding herself in Snape's shirt before snuggling on her bed with a thick book on the theory of merging different branches of magic. As the hour grew late, she laid the book aside, peeked in her bureau at the photo of her and Snape, blew a kiss in the direction of the dungeons, and curled up under her covers, eagerly anticipating seeing Snape the next day at rehearsal. After so much concentrated time together, even one day apart seemed like forever.

The evening of Saturday, December 27th found the whole cast trooping down to the Great Hall for rehearsal. Spirits were high, and the raucous voices of the students echoed through the corridors as they converged on the entrance. After only a few short moments, the doors opened, and the group bustled in, eager to continue with the production.

Dumbledore was onstage, beaming impartially at everyone. "Welcome back to work! I hope you have all enjoyed your holiday so far. But, we must forge ahead in our duties. Come, everyone onstage. Except for Professor Snape." He inclined his head at the man who had just glided smoothly down the aisle. As one, heads turned to look at him, many people wondering if he had any other surprises in store for them like at the cast party.

Hermione glanced around and saw that everyone was looking at him, so she could too, without raising suspicion. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Colin and Harry exchanging meaningful glances. She bit back a smile.

Nodding politely to the headmaster, Snape queried, "Where would you like me to be, sir?"

Dumbledore pursed his lips as he gazed about. "Hmmm. Wherever you feel most comfortable. I wouldn't go into the Boxes, though. Mistrs Potter, Weasley, and Longbottom will be there. Just... follow your instincts. You seem to do best that way." He beamed encouragingly at Snape, whose face was impassive as he swept a cold glare over the assembled students.

"As you say, Headmaster." With that, he spun sharply on his heel, his robes swirling satisfactorily around him, and stalked off into the shadows at the back of the house. Hermione felt a tingle race over her at the graceful flair of his exit.

Everyone's attention quickly returned to Dumbledore as he began giving them their places to begin the scene. Obediently scribbling notes in their scripts, everyone moved to their starting positions. Dumbledore waved his wand to Summon the canopied bed that was necessary as the set. When everyone was ready, he closed the front curtain and gestured for Harry, Ron, and Neville to begin their lines.

As soon as they took their seats in the Boxes, the curtain opened, with Pansy, Hermione, Ginny, Professor Trelawney, Susan, and Hannah already onstage. Susan, Hannah, and Professor Trelawney recited their lines before the curtains on the bed opened to reveal Pansy and Hermione. At that point, the two girls stared blankly at Dumbledore, an awkward tension between them.

"Is something the matter?" Dumbledore asked.

Pansy wrinkled her nose and said, "The script says I'm 'kissing Serafimo passionately.' She's a *girl*!" A catcall hoot met her declaration and a ripple of sniggers swept through the male half of the cast. Dumbledore and McGonagall raked the Hall with a chastising glare, unable to pinpoint which boy had started the reaction.

Dumbledore turned his attention back to Pansy. "Yes, well, I'm sure you two can work something out. It *is* acting, after all. We don't need to see realism, not in this kind of production."

The girls exchanged disgusted glances, but Hermione ground out, "Certainly, sir. We'll manage."

Pansy rolled her eyes and sulked, while Draco shot out onto the stage scowling in disdain. "It's not just that she's a girl, she's a Gryffindor! It wouldn't be so bad if she was a Slytherin..."

Before Dumbledore could reprimand Draco, a thundering voice of cold fury boomed from the darkness at the back of the house. "Mr. Malfoy, you will shut your filthy mouth this instant, or I will shut it for you!" All heads whipped around to see Snape charging down the aisle like an avenging Fury, black eyes snapping with anger. Draco froze, somehow managing to go even paler.

Surging up onto the stage, Snape paused to tower over the stunned boy, nostrils flaring in rage. His voice was a steely hiss as he continued, "How *dare* you presume to insult the House of your headmaster in such a fashion? Ten points from Slytherin for such blatant discourtesy!"

He paused, trying to regain some measure of composure. Eyes darting over the assembled cast, who were all staring at him, dumbfounded, he straightened stiffly and turned to Dumbledore. "My apologies, sir. It pains me that one of my own House would be so arrogantly uncouth as to voice such *opinions* in mixed company." He cut an icy glance at Draco again. In a dangerously low voice, he continued, "Perhaps a detention would be useful in teaching you how to behave, Mr. Malfoy..."

Dumbledore cut in, "Now, Severus, that won't be necessary. It wouldn't do to spoil the holiday. I'm sure Mr. Malfoy didn't mean anything by it. Did you?" He gazed bemusedly at the boy, who was starting to sweat under the combination of the lights and everyone's scrutiny.

"No, sir. Of course not. I forgot myself. I apologize." He glanced up at the old man warily.

A growl sounded from behind him. "Apologize to Miss Granger as well. The headmaster was not the only one you so rudely insulted."

Draco stiffened at Snape's command, turning to see Hermione staring at him, wide-eyed. Pansy was avoiding his gaze, staring fixedly at the fringe on the bed curtains. Grinding his teeth, he sucked in air and hoarsely uttered, "I apologize, Miss Granger, Headmaster." He quickly returned his attention to Dumbledore, unwilling to focus his apology on Hermione.

Hermione glanced at Dumbledore, who nodded slightly. Flushing uncomfortably, she stammered, "I accept your apology."

Dumbledore smiled and turned to Snape. "Very well then. That should be it. Please resume your position, Mr. Malfoy. Let's move on with the blocking, shall we?" He raised one eyebrow at Snape, who thinned his lips in acknowledgement. Casting one last baleful look at his charges, Snape stomped back up the aisle to once again hide in the shadows.

Hermione's mind was racing. *Wow! He was so angry! Thank Merlin he played it off as being about Dumbledore. I can't believe he actually made Draco apologize to me! That was certainly shocking. I hope no one thinks too much about it. Damn! Looks like I may have to remind him about not drawing attention to ourselves!* She sighed, and cut a surreptitious glance at Pansy. The girl was pouting, her arms crossed under her breasts. *Why do I have to be the one to kiss everyone in this damn play?* Suddenly, a thought struck her. *That's it!*

Hermione bounced up and called, "Sir?"

Dumbledore looked up from his script and said, "Yes, Miss Granger?"

Hermione glanced back at Pansy, who was glaring at her, and said, "I have an idea how to work this out. May Pansy and I go discuss it for a moment?"

Pansy blinked, narrowing her eyes at Hermione suspiciously. Dumbledore merely nodded, adding pleasantly, "Of course, my dear, but do be quick about it."

Hermione beckoned to Pansy, urging her to step into the wings, away from everyone else. Pansy cast a glance at Draco, but he was determinedly not looking at them, staring moodily into the distance. Tossing her head, she stood and followed Hermione.

Acidly, she whispered, "What do *you* want, Granger?"

Hermione set her teeth and retorted, "I already said: I have an idea."

Pansy rolled her eyes, "Oh goody, what does the Know-It-All have in store for us now?"

Hermione scowled at the other girl and spat, "Do *you want* to kiss me, Parkinson?"

Pansy's eyes widened in outrage and her mouth opened in instant protest, but Hermione cut her off. "That's what I thought! Now, shut up and listen." Pansy shut her mouth with a snap and glared at Hermione. "Instead of you kissing me, why don't I kiss you?"

Pansy grimaced and sneered, "Oh, that's even worse..."

Rolling her eyes and stomping her foot impatiently, Hermione hissed, "Would you *just listen*?" When the other girl was once again glaring at her, she took a deep breath and forged on. "Okay. Plays set in the time period when 'Il Muto' would have been written were obviously very lavish and caricatured. Like Dumbledore said, it's *not* realism. If I'm supposed to be your servant, and we're having an affair, why not have me be the one offering the affection? I can make it look like I'm... kissing your hand and arm, and I can make it exaggerated," she offered. "So, as the curtains open, I'll start, and as I'm getting further up your arm, that'll be your cue to start singing, which will make me stop!"

Hermione could see the wheels turning in Pansy's head, actually considering the idea. After a long moment of silence, Pansy spat, "Fine! Whatever. Just... let's not *do* it until we have to, okay?" Her lips twisted and she shuddered. In a resigned tone, she droned, "Come on..." Spinning on her heel, she flounced back to the bed, plopping on it again. Hermione followed her, heaving a relieved sigh that at least *that* hurdle was fixed.

When they had rejoined the cast, Dumbledore continued with the blocking. Justin emerged onstage as Don Attilio, and the scene progressed to the point where the Phantom's voice was to chime in.

Snape stood, leaning against the back wall, arms crossed. He had already used the *Sonorus* spell, and was simply waiting for his cue. When they reached it, he let his still-bubbling ire be heard in his voice as it echoed throughout the theatre.

When Pansy recited her insult, Snape's voice somehow became even more ominous in his retort. Pansy forged ahead in her part, and even croaked believably. So believably that other students laughed at her. She stopped, scowling furiously at them.

"Enough!" Dumbledore chided. "There is absolutely no call for that sort of thing. Miss Parkinson is putting forth a great deal of effort...for which I am grateful...so I would appreciate it if you all did not undermine her work." He cast a serious gaze over the chastened cast. A few mumbled "Sorry, sir"s met his stern look.

In the pause that followed, he continued, "Well, as we're stopped right now, I'd like to take the opportunity to test the charms for the chandelier." He pointed his wand at the huge fixture over the stage and it immediately began rocking forebodingly. Several people gasped. Smiling to himself, he turned back to the stage and said, "Very well then, let's go on." Gesturing politely to Pansy, he indicated she should pick up from her line.

This time, when she began croaking, Snape laughed. Just like at the read-through, it was dark and sinister, and truly disturbing. Hermione watched as several people shuddered uncomfortably at the evil sound. Dumbledore pointed his wand at the chandelier, and it rocked wildly, adding to the tension as Snape cried, "Behold! She is singing to bring down the chandelier!"

Pansy finally broke down and Draco rushed out to escort her from the stage as Ron and Neville raced down to the stage for their parts. Once they announced the ballet, Dumbledore stopped them again.

"Just a moment, if you please. Mr. Boot, would you join me for a moment?"

Terry hurried out to Dumbledore. "Yes, sir?"

Dumbledore beamed kindly at Terry. "I want to go over the spells for your 'demise.'" Terry nodded eagerly and Dumbledore drew him closer for a muttered exchange. Terry kept bobbing his head at each point, and Dumbledore finally backed away and gestured for Terry to climb up the stairs along the fly system to access the catwalks above the stage.

The rest of the cast watched with bated breath as Terry came into view high above them. "This one, sir?" he asked, pointing to a cable near him.

"Yes. That's the one. Go ahead and put it on like I told you. Let me know when you're ready."

Terry pulled the cable to him and began wrapping it around his body, using his wand to cinch it comfortably. After a few moments, he called down, "Ready, sir!"

"Excellent, Mr. Boot. Now, on my mark, jump!"

Everyone stared up at Terry, holding their breaths. When Dumbledore lifted his wand, Terry stepped off the railing of the catwalk and dropped. Several girls muffled frightened shrieks behind their hands. As he plummeted toward the stage, Dumbledore flicked his wand at the boy, and he stopped, jerking and swinging within view of the audience. Gasps sounded throughout the stage and wings, but Terry burst out laughing. A huge grin split his face as he cried, "Brilliant!"

Hermione could see that he was suspended by magic, and not the cable, since the cable was not taut. Dumbledore noticed too, as he mumbled, "Hmm, must see about shortening that cable..." Then, he shuffled over to stand beneath Terry where he swayed. "Now, Mr. Boot, you must look as if you have been hanged. So, droop your head to one side and let yourself go slack, please." Terry did as he was bid, but Dumbledore added dryly, "Mr. Boot, you have just been murdered. Do try not to look as if you were enjoying it..."

The cast laughed, as Terry was still grinning from ear to ear. Grimacing, he said, "Sorry, sir. I'll work on it." Dumbledore chuckled and waved his wand, shooting Terry back up to the catwalk. Taken by surprise, he yelped, which set the rest of the cast giggling again.

"All right then, let's go from your part, Mr. Weasley. Ballet dancers, are you ready?" As people scrambled back to their places, Ron recited his lines, and the girls trooped out to dance. After a moment or two, Dumbledore gestured to Terry again, and he dropped into sight once more, causing the girls to scream in fright.

Hermione called for Harry, and he rushed out to her. As they exited the stage, Neville and Ron were shouting their lines in which they tried to handle the pandemonium that ensued after the hanging.

At that, Dumbledore began the complex set change to transform the stage to the roof of the Opera House for the following scene. He directed Harry and Hermione in their flight to the roof as the sets changed, until they were where they were supposed to be for their scene together.

"Now, we will be starting with 'All I Ask of You' in a later rehearsal, so we'll just continue up to that point. Carry on."

Snape didn't like what he knew was coming, and thanked the gods for small favours that at least *they weren't* doing that scene tonight. He didn't think he could bear to see Hermione singing that song to Harry when their night together was still so fresh in his mind. Slowly skulking down the side aisle in the shadows as they proceeded through

the scene, he was off to one side when he echoed "Christine." As soon as Hermione hissed "What was that?" Dumbledore stopped them to go back to the beginning of the night's blocking.

Snape lurked in his dark corner while everyone scrambled back to their starting positions. Hermione felt the tingle of his gaze and turned searching eyes his way, glancing around before flashing a tender smile at him. The anxiety in his gut eased a bit, and he silently slunk back to the rear wall again.

It was rather interesting to see the scenes run through again, without the stops and starts. Snape could see how it would be quite engaging once the music and costumes were incorporated. From his vantage point, the hanging looked quite terrifying, and he imagined how much of a shock it would cause among the audience when they performed. Smirking at the thought, he returned his attention to the rehearsal, determined to never miss his cues.

As usual, after the second round, they went through it once more, cementing their blocking and timing in their minds. At Dumbledore's request, Hermione and Pansy even practiced their kissing scene, and Terry managed to "play dead" effectively. By the time they were through, everyone felt that it had been a successful evening indeed.

As they crowded onto the stage for Dumbledore's final notes, Hermione caught Draco casting a hateful glare her way. When she looked away, she noticed Snape had arrived onstage as well, and he was scowling angrily at the pale boy. A flare of anxiety shot through her gut, and she chewed her lip, darting her gaze between the two Slytherins. Fortunately, once Draco had realized that his Head of House was glaring at him again, he had subsided from staring at Hermione, and had taken to shooting defiant glances up at Snape, unable to maintain eye contact under the searing black gaze.

Hermione turned her attention away from them, only to find Ginny sneaking a glance at her, with a knowing, gloating gleam in her bright brown eyes. Blinking in surprise, Hermione ducked her head, smothering a smile. Finally, Dumbledore announced that the next rehearsal would be a run-through of "the next morning" to the hanging, including the songs, on the following Tuesday, December 30th.

Chuckling, he added, "...I wouldn't dream of calling you all to a rehearsal on New Year's Eve." As the cast tittered in response, he made shooing motions at everyone and they trekked into the house on their way out of the Hall.

As they were all bustling out, Draco purposefully bumped into Hermione as he passed her, hurling a snarled, "Watch it, Granger," over his shoulder. Harry and Ron both saw the incident and charged forward to have words with the other boy, but they weren't fast enough to make it there before Snape swooped down on him, seemingly from out of nowhere.

Snape stepped smoothly in Draco's path, almost causing him to run into the taller man. When Draco stopped short and looked up in surprise, he quailed under the cold fury in Snape's face. Only those closest to them heard the Potions Master's silky voice as he said, "You are treading a fine line, Mr. Malfoy. I had hoped that you might have learnt manners at some point in your spoilt life, but I see that my hopes were an exercise in futility. I saw your little 'accident' just then with Miss Granger. Keep it up, and you and I will be seeing much more of each other... over a stack of cauldrons that you will be scrubbing with a toothbrush."

Draco's eyes flashed grey fire and he hissed, "But, sir! She's just a Mudblood..."

Snape's hand whipped up and grabbed Draco's robes at the base of his neck, hauling him about and marching him against the back wall. By this point, the students who had seen the start of this little exchange were stock still, staring in rapt fascination.

Snape shoved the slight-framed boy against the wall, gripping his collar. Leaning down until they were almost nose to nose, Snape growled, "Silence! The war is over, little boy. The Muggle-borns are on the side that won. You and those that share your opinions *lost*. Or have you forgotten that your illustrious father is in Azkaban?" Draco blanched at that. "If you cannot modify your views to those more in keeping with what is socially acceptable, at least keep such unpopular epithets to yourself! I told you already: shut your filthy mouth, or I will shut it for you. Never let me hear of you bandying about such vile terms again. Is that clear?" He stopped and bored his unyielding gaze into Draco's mutinous one.

Draco's jaw worked as he breathed heavily in suppressed anger and humiliation. Finally, he muttered, "Yes, sir."

Releasing Draco's robes, Snape stood straight again and retorted darkly, "I sincerely hope so." Then, he brushed his hands together and stepped back. "Go," he barked curtly. Draco shot a sullen glance over the remaining students before sprinting from the Hall.

Hermione was staring at Snape, awed by his intimidating manner. Harry and Ron were blinking perplexedly at each other, and Ginny was looking smug, her chin tilted up. Snape whirled and saw them.

"Miss Granger!" Hermione jumped.

"Sir?"

Snape scowled at the Gryffindors and snarled, "Report to my office before rehearsal on Tuesday. You know the drill by now. No later than 6:30."

Hermione nodded hastily. "Of course, sir. I'll be there."

Snape inclined his head sharply, swept them all with a glare, and spun, stalking haughtily from the Hall.

Free from his presence, the four friends finally were able to move again, and they headed up to the Gryffindor Tower. Harry and Ron were speculating about Snape's surprising outbursts regarding Draco and his old-hat comments.

Hermione bit her tongue to keep from responding. Eventually, as they all headed to their respective dorm corridors, Ginny remarked, "Listen, Snape is finally free from Voldemort. That means he doesn't have to cater to the Slytherins anymore. And he did have a point. With Malfoy's dad in Azkaban, Draco really shouldn't be spouting off at the mouth and making even *more* enemies. I'm kind of surprised he hasn't figured that out for himself already. I mean, Draco's not stupid, by any means, just utterly misguided and a royal prat."

Hermione laughed at Ginny's summation, but merely nodded in agreement as the boys grimaced and shrugged, keeping her opinions to herself... for once.

"Maybe," Ron opined, "but it's certainly been weird seeing all these changes in Snape recently. Kinda' makes me wonder what other surprises he might have in store for us."

Hermione was heartily glad that Ginny managed to not look at her after that comment. Airily, both girls shrugged. Nonplussed, Ginny said, "I dunno", but it's really not my problem. Being sleepy is. So, on that note, I'm going to bed. Night, all." She darted forward to kiss Harry, waved at Ron and Hermione, and disappeared.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron all exchanged good nights and parted ways. When Hermione reached her room, she penned a quick note to Snape chiding him for his explosive reactions to what was really nothing but childish behaviour on Draco's part, reminding him that such vehement outbursts simply drew attention and invited speculation. Then, she soothed the sting of her reprimand by launching into how much she missed him and loved him, revelling in her happiness.

Vanishing the ink after she finished the letter, she rolled up the parchment and sealed it, vowing to get it to Snape somehow the next day, even if it meant asking Ginny for help.

39- Unwelcome Encounters and Welcome Research

Chapter 41 of 84

Hermione has an unwelcome encounter with a Slytherin, and another argument with Snape. Dumbledore still struggles with rehearsal. The Gryffindors throw a party, and Hermione has another unwelcome encounter. But, she manages to do some very welcome research in the meantime.

Obviously not mine...

Author's Note: Special thanks to the webmistress of Playwitch.net, who graciously allowed me to reference her publication. Marquise, you rock! Also, very special thanks to the lovely person who nominated me for Round Four of the Multifaceted Awards! *tear* I can't tell you how much it warmed the cockles of my heart when I found out. *beams* Super-Beta thanks to Lotm, for her continued support and skills. And thanks to Laela and SnivellusSnape for pre-reading. Also, if you haven't seen Melanie's fabulous art, go here: <http://www.deviantart.com/view/21561691/> As always, check out my LJ for update info: http://www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon/ Okay, I'll shut up now... Here you go! :)

Chapter 39- Unwelcome Encounters and Welcome Research

The next morning, Hermione plopped down by Ginny in the common room, reaching for the platter of toast. Smiling cheerfully in response to the younger girl's greeting, she glanced around before leaning close and whispering, "Can you come to my room after breakfast?"

Ginny's brows rose, but she nodded quickly. Swallowing her pumpkin juice, she murmured, "Sure thing. What do you need?"

Hermione shook her head faintly and muttered, "I'll tell you there."

A knowing smile spread across Ginny's face, and she winked. Hermione rolled her eyes in response, turning her attention to the boys as they entered.

The Gryffindors spent a leisurely breakfast together, Harry eventually suggesting that they go practice for Quidditch later, since the weather was clear. When the boys got up to go change, Hermione and Ginny stood too.

Ginny dropped a light kiss on Harry's cheek and said, "I'll meet you lot on the pitch in a few minutes." Harry nodded, and he and Ron bade the girls goodbye as they climbed the dorm stairs, Ron musing whether or not Susan would like to come watch him practice. Following Hermione to her room, Ginny queried, "So, what's up?"

Hermione ushered her into the room and shut the door. Crossing quickly to her desk, she picked up the scroll and handed it to Ginny. "I need to get this to Severus, but I daren't owl it myself. Would you send it?" Her expression was one of eloquent appeal.

Ginny grinned wickedly. "Ooo, is it steamy?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and glared. Huffing in exasperation, she chided, "Ginny! Honestly..."

Brown eyes sparkling with laughter, Ginny retorted, "Ah! So it *is*!"

Scowling at her impudent friend, Hermione growled, "It *isn't*! Stop teasing me!" She chewed her lip and shot a reproachful look at Ginny. "I thought you were going to help me."

Ginny stifled her amused grin and tried to look repentant, failing spectacularly. "I am. I'm sorry."

Hermione scoffed and muttered, "No, you're not. Seriously, Gin, I had to remind him to not get so bent out of shape about Malfoy. You saw how livid he was last night! It just makes people wonder, and we can't have that."

Hermione's earnest words sobered Ginny. Her amusement vanished, and she blinked in agreement. "You're right. Sorry. Really," she added, grimacing.

Finally relaxing, Hermione sank onto her bed. "Thanks. I'll talk to him before the next rehearsal, but I wanted to get to him before anything else could happen."

Ginny pocketed the missive. In an effort to make up for her inappropriate comments earlier, she offered, "Well, seeing as it isn't steamy, I won't even try to read it..." She shot a lopsided grin at Hermione when the other girl glanced at her, startled.

Seeing that Ginny was just teasing her, Hermione smiled faintly. "You'd better not read them at *anytime*!" Then, she twisted her mouth in a moue of petulance and added, "Besides, I can't write steamy letters. I haven't a clue how!"

Ginny snorted and tilted her head. "Weren't you going to do some 'research'?"

Hermione looked away uncomfortably, flushing. "I haven't even looked. I've kind of had other things on my mind."

Smiling gently, Ginny stood. "Well, I must say that I'm surprised Hermione Granger, Swot Extraordinaire, hasn't begun researching the very moment she got the books!"

Hermione stuck her tongue out at the other girl, making her chuckle. Defensively, she said, "Well, it's not like it's for school. It's not as important as N.E.W.T.s."

Ginny tossed her head, rolling her eyes exaggeratedly and flinging her hands in the air. "Not *important*? Merciful heavens, it's *extremely* important!" She glared at Hermione, hands on her hips. "Consider it a homework assignment, deadline: the end of the school year!" Hermione blushed even more. Spinning and striding to the door, Ginny paused and flung over her shoulder, "Trust me, 'Mione, that's one 'exam' you *don't* want to fail!"

Hermione gasped, utterly scandalized, and shot an incredulous look at Ginny. The redhead chuckled again, opening the door. As she stepped out into the corridor, she blithely said, "I'll get this out today, I promise." Flashing a grin, she added, "See you later, *bookworm*." With that, she shut the door on a dazed Hermione.

Snape was in his office when he heard the beat of wings. Lifting his head, he saw a school owl flying toward him, a scroll tied to its leg. Absently conjuring an owl treat, Snape retrieved the letter, waving for the bird to depart. As he unrolled the parchment, he saw it was blank. Smiling in spite of himself, he glanced up quickly to see that no one was at his door, and then he retreated to his quarters to read the letter.

Settling himself on his bed, he muttered, "*Aperio*," and watched Hermione's familiar script materialize. As he read, his brow furrowed in a frown, and his lips thinned in annoyance. However, his cheeks also warmed with a faint blush, and his expression altered slightly to one of almost sheepish discomfort. Sighing gustily, he dropped the

letter to his lap, gazing at the ceiling for a long moment, his eyes unfocused as he seemed to have a debate within his head.

After a beat, he looked to his nightstand, reaching toward it. His hand closed on thin air, but as he brought his hand back toward him, the picture of Hermione in its frame appeared, its Disillusionment Charm broken by the movement. Cradling the frame in his lap, he gazed tenderly at it and spoke softly, his voice a trifle sulky.

"Fine. I understand. Point made, you maddening harpy. See if I try to defend *you* anymore." He grimaced and humphed, before cocking a wry smile at the photo. "Good thing I love you, else I wouldn't suffer such nagging."

He sighed again as he replaced the photo on his nightstand, waving his wand to cast the charm again to hide it from view. Leaning back against the headboard, he read her letter again. *I wonder if she sent this herself from the owlery. Hmm. I suppose I shall just have to ask her before our next rehearsal.*

Pensive, he stood and secreted the letter in his wardrobe, tucking it in the pocket of his opera coat, where the rest of Hermione's letters were rolled in tight scrolls. An unusually gentle expression on his face, he went back to his office to continue his work.

The holidays seemed to pass quickly for everyone except Hermione, who felt as if they were dragging on, tormenting her with keeping her from seeing Snape. She, for one, would be glad when they at least returned to having meals in the Great Hall. She was even more quiet and reserved than usual, her mind occupied not only by missing him, but also with the increasingly irresistible lure of beginning her research.

Tuesday rolled around, with the promise of meeting Snape in his office before rehearsal, and she became tenser, wound tightly in anticipation. While she couldn't blame him for not chancing sending her an owl, she was nonetheless disappointed that he hadn't written her back... *somehow*.

Sitting in the common room with Harry, Ron, and Ginny, she idly picked at her food, her stomach fluttering in anxious excitement at meeting Snape at 6:30. Ron took note of how little she had eaten and made a sympathetic face.

"Not looking forward to tonight, eh?"

Hermione blinked at Ron blankly. "Huh?"

Grimacing, he continued, "Tonight, having to go back to Snape before rehearsal. You haven't touched your dinner. I feel sorry for you, mate." He shook his head dolefully as he took another mouthful of shepherd's pie.

Hermione caught Ginny's keen glance and stifled her instinctive angry reaction. Affecting indifference, she said, "Oh, that. Yeah. It's no big deal, really. I just... have a lot on my mind, you know, what with N.E.W.T.s coming up."

Harry and Ron both rolled their eyes. Harry piped up, "Crikey, Hermione! It's the holiday! Give it a rest, would you?"

Ron nodded vigorously and mumbled through his mouthful of roast potatoes, "'Ur gon' kill 'urself stu'in' s'mush."

Ginny swatted Ron, glaring at him. "*Stop* talking with your mouth full! How many times do I have to remind you?" Rolling her eyes at his bulging-cheeked grimace, Ginny cut a piercing glance at Hermione and said, "Leave her alone, you two. Sometimes *research* is *very* important."

Hermione's eyes widened and she glared hotly at the smugly amused redhead. Sucking her teeth, Hermione tossed her napkin on the table and rose. Her voice icy, she pinned them all with a haughty glare and muttered, "Indeed. On that note, I had better get going, so I'm not late to meet Professor Snape."

Ginny's lips twitched and she furtively shaded her face from the boys, winking at Hermione. Hermione rolled her eyes and tossed her head in an exaggerated moue of exasperation. As she spun, she flung a long-suffering, "See you lot in a bit at rehearsal," over her shoulder as she clambered through the portrait hole.

Hermione hurried down the stairs and corridors to the dungeons, hoping to arrive early and spend a little more time with Snape. As she rounded the corner to head down the corridor to the dungeon, she was startled by a voice near her.

"Oi! You there!" Hermione spun to see Draco scowling at her as he approached. She froze, noting that Pansy was with him. Draco closed the distance between them and sneered hatefully at her. His voice was low and cold as he said, "What are you doing down here, Mudblood? And all by yourself? Tut tut. That's not a very smart idea, now is it, Know-It-All?" He crowded Hermione, making her rear back from him. Pansy smirked gloatingly over his shoulder.

Hermione stepped backwards, repelled by Draco's manner, and was taken aback to feel her back against the stone wall. Clamping down on the flutter of panic in the belly, she tilted her chin up defiantly and glared back. "You better shut your filthy mouth, Malfoy; else someone else shuts it for you." Her eyes narrowed in satisfaction as she saw his sneer falter, showing that her shot hit home.

His grey eyes blazed with humiliated fury, and his nostrils flared as he ground out, "Shut up! If anyone needs their mouth shut, it's you, you brown-nosing, stuck-up, Know-It-All, Mudblood *bitch!*" His voice rose with every epithet, his face contorting more and more as his anger grew.

All three students whirled in shock at the booming roar that was Snape, bellowing down the corridor, his livid tones echoing off the stones. "Mr. Malfoy! Five points from Slytherin for using profanity! Return to your common room this instant!"

Draco gazed imploringly at his Head of House. "But, sir! She was sneaking around down here. This isn't Gryffindor territory! She was probably up to something!"

Snape strode sharply up to them, glaring icily. He cut a glance at Hermione, narrowing his eyes before replying, "Miss Granger is here on my orders, in preparation for rehearsal this evening." Draco blinked in confusion. "Do as I say, Mr. Malfoy. Return to your common room until time for rehearsal. Your zeal is misplaced." He peered down his nose at Hermione. "And you, Miss Granger. Report to my office as specified." Hermione nodded hastily and scurried down the corridor, glad to be away from Draco's disturbing presence. "Oh, and Miss Granger..." Hermione paused and turned to look back at Snape. "Five points from Gryffindor for being late to our appointment."

Hermione's wide-eyed look of astonished indignation was enough to make Draco and Pansy smirk, but they quickly composed themselves as Snape glared at them in dismissal. Slinking back to their dungeons, they left Snape to watch Hermione disappear into his office, her shoulders tight with righteous anger.

Snape waited until he was sure that Draco and Pansy had entered the Slytherin common room, then he briskly strode back to his office, his lips thinned in the anticipation of finding Hermione in a right snit. He wasn't disappointed. As he entered, Hermione whirled to face him, her expression coldly impassive.

Snape waved his wand to shut his office door and open the door to his lab, gesturing silently for Hermione to precede him through it. She tilted her chin up loftily and marched ahead of him. Hermione paused at the door to his quarters, barely flicking a glance back at him as he opened the door for her. Once they entered his sitting room, she shot a withering look over her shoulder at him and made a beeline for his bathroom.

As she disappeared into the bathroom, Snape stared after her, incredulous. Rolling his eyes, he leant against the dining table, crossing his arms to wait for her reappearance.

When she popped back through the door, laden with the hair styling products, she stopped short, noticing him standing across the room from her, watching her. They locked eyes for a long moment, his swirling with exasperation and chastisement, and hers blazing with indignation and anger. Finally, Hermione jerked her head toward the chairs before the hearth and smoothly uttered, "If you would have a seat, Professor, I can finish your hair in a trice."

Snape gazed at her silently, making her fidget under his scrutiny. As she glared at him, he eventually murmured, "Not yet."

In a flash, Hermione retorted hotly, "Oh, but I wouldn't want to take up too much of your precious time, sir, and lose *more* House points, especially since I was already *late*." Her eyes narrowed as she spat the last word.

Snape's jaw twitched as he ground his teeth in annoyance. Darkly, he said, "I already told you: not yet. There is something I feel the need to discuss with you."

Hermione tossed her bushy curls and strode regally to the table by the armchair. Depositing the items on it, she coolly said, "Very well then. What would you like to discuss, Professor?" Her arms crossed defiantly in front of her chest.

Again, they regarded each other from across the room, like two warriors squaring off for battle. After a charged moment of silence, Snape whipped his wand out of his robes. Hermione jumped warily. Holding her gaze with his, Snape muttered, "*Accio* Hermione's letters." The door from his room opened and several scrolls flew to his outstretched hand. Hermione, frowning in confusion, watched them sailing toward Snape.

Breaking their gaze to search through the scrolls, Snape selected one and placed the rest on the dining table. Cocking one eyebrow at Hermione, he unrolled the letter, cast *Aperio*, and stepped forward from the table. Brandishing the parchment, he peered down at her, smoothly saying, "All right then, *Miss Granger*, did you or did you not send this letter to me?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed at the use of her surname, and she stiffened. Tersely, she said, "I did."

Snape stepped closer. "I am curious, Miss Granger. Did you send this letter yourself?"

"No. I had Ginny take it to the owlery for me."

Snape's brows rose. Cryptically, he murmured, "Indeed?" Then, he stepped forward again. Lip curling, he drawled, "And am I to assume that you did so under the guise of being discreet...so as not to arouse suspicion?"

Hermione clenched her teeth and hissed, "I know what discreet means!"

Snape closed the distance between them, towering over her, waving the letter near her face as she scowled up at him. His voice dropped to a low rumble as he said, "Well, if you know what discreet means, then don't you remember scolding *me* about it? In this very letter?" He gripped her arm, pulling her against him, pinning her with his intense gaze.

Her breath catching at the instant physical reaction to the feel of his body against hers, Hermione choked out a shaky, "Perhaps..."

Snape's lips curved in a predatory smirk as he purred, "Then you, of all people, should *understand* why I took points from Gryffindor, *in front of Mr. Malfoy*." He dropped his head forward, his hair brushing her face as he leant nearer her ear. Hermione's eyelids fluttered.

Protesting weakly, she insisted, "But I wasn't late! Or, if I was, it was all his fault. He stopped me in the corridor..."

Snape's lips tickled the shell of her ear as he replied, "I know. I heard the end of the confrontation, remember? I was anticipating your arrival and had the office door open. When I heard voices, I came to investigate. I daresay it was a good thing I did so, else events might have escalated. And I will admit that I would likely find it difficult to contain my impulses for revenge if he were to succeed in doing anything to you."

Hermione bit back a moan as Snape's hand travelled up her back, pressing her to his chest. Her voice was faint as she tried to reprimand him. "I'll bet. You really had people asking questions after your little display at the last rehearsal."

"A point that you made abundantly clear in your letter. Now, with that in mind, wouldn't you say that my actions in the corridor were much more in keeping with discretion?" He nuzzled her neck with his lips.

Hermione's eyes closed and she sighed. Her hands lifted from where they had fallen at her sides, and she slipped them around his waist. Turning her head toward his, she breathed, "Yesss..."

A low chuckle met her ears and Snape continued, "Excellent. I'm so glad you see things my way." With that, he abruptly pulled back, seating himself with a flourish and turning expectantly to Hermione, who was blinking rapidly, bewildered by the sudden shift.

Hermione shook herself, trying to dispel the tingling that had crept through her body at his seductive persuasion. Marshalling her scattered faculties, she turned disbelieving eyes on Snape, who was smiling faintly at her, brows politely raised in anticipation of her task.

Conflicting emotions rose up within Hermione. She was bloody well turned on, but she was also indignant about the underhanded, sneaky way he had "convinced" her that his actions were acceptable. Shaking her head slowly, she took a deep breath and muttered, "You... Slytherin! I can't believe you!"

Snape regarded her with a look of wounded innocence. "What?"

Rolling her eyes, she finally saw the absurdity of the whole situation and bit back a laugh. Resignedly picking up the brush and the pomade, she stepped behind the ottoman. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. Honestly..."

Snape's eyes closed in pleasure at the sensation of Hermione brushing his hair again. Heaving a contented sigh, he smirked and drawled, "Well then, five points to Gryffindor for catching on." He snorted when Hermione poked him in the back of the head and clouted his shoulder. He tilted his head back and eyed her from under hooded lids. "Now, shall I count this discussion as over... Hermione?"

She rolled her eyes heavenward and huffed. Smiling wryly at him, she said, "Fine... Severus."

He reached back and pulled her down to him, kissing her awkwardly upside-down. As she backed away, he quirked one corner of his mouth up. "Hmm... I think I like that much more than arguing."

Hermione laughed aloud, tilting his head forward again to finish his hair. She slicked his hair back, musing in silence. After a few minutes, she said, "Just so you know: that won't always work."

Snape frowned in confusion. "What won't always work?"

"Using... intimacy to get your way."

Snape's face relaxed and he snorted. "That wasn't what I was doing, Hermione. I was simply trying to get you to see past your anger to the logic and reason of why I did what I did. You're not unreasonable. I knew you would understand once you faced the facts. I just had to... distract you from your ire."

Hermione grimaced. "Is *that* what you call it? I thought you were simply manipulating me."

Snape spun on the ottoman, quickly grabbing her and pulling her into his lap. Eyeing her haughtily, he said, "Only in the most derivative sense of the word." Her eyes widened in recognition of her words being flung back at her and he smirked wickedly. Then, he slid his hand up her leg, cupping her arse and squeezing. She squealed and

wriggled in his grasp, making him silence her with a kiss.

After a long moment of snogging, she pushed him back and gasped, "We'd better finish and get upstairs."

Nodding, Snape murmured, "I'm usually the one to say that."

Squirming off his lap, Hermione returned to her almost-complete task. Quickly, she smoothed the rest of his hair and secured it with the elastic. "Done!"

Snape stood and extended his hand. She took it and they crossed through his lab and into his office in silence. As they entered his office, they dropped hands, composing themselves to exit and head up to the Great Hall.

The rest of the cast was trooping down to the main corridor to the Hall as Snape and Hermione reached the top of the dungeon staircase. Snape paused, letting the students surge ahead of him as they thundered down the stairs from the Towers. Most students passed him, eyes averted, but Ginny flicked a glance at him and offered a polite, "Evening, Professor," on her way past him.

Snape inclined his head gravely. He watched the rest of the students entering the Hall and swiftly strode in behind them.

Dumbledore was at the foot of the stage, gesturing for them all to take their places quickly. "Come along! Remember, we're running through the scenes from the next morning to the hanging, including songs. Now, raise your hand if you want the spell." He busily swept from one student to the next as he cast *Suaviloquentia*. Clapping his hands, he continued, "Excellent! Now, everyone, please take your places. I shall be handling the set changes tonight." He smiled in satisfaction as Snape took the stage. "Ah! Severus, you remembered the hair. Well done, Miss Granger, thank you."

The rest of the cast sat in the house or stood in the wings, awaiting their scenes. Dumbledore conjured the appropriate set pieces, and Snape and Hermione took their places.

Placing the music box on the edge of the apron, Dumbledore gazed up at them and said, "Whenever you're ready." Hermione and Snape exchanged sober looks and he nodded. She nodded back and looked at Dumbledore, nodding to him sharply. As he opened the music box, Hermione settled on the bed, feigning sleep, and Snape affected composing at the organ.

If the cast had thought that Snape and Hermione had performed with amazing expression the first time they'd rehearsed the scene's blocking, they were completely unprepared for the eerie beauty and the pathos of seeing them actually singing with the music as they performed. Terry and the girls had to shake off the thrall of that scene before they could rush out to do theirs. Snape guided Hermione out to the centre of the stage during Terry's part, indicating that they would somehow be appearing there in the performance. They passed Ron and Neville in the wings as they exited.

The "Notes" song went smoothly, to the obvious delight of all involved. As the sets were moving, changing to the scene for "Il Muto," Hermione and Pansy took their places on the curtained bed, eyeing each other warily.

Pansy sneered at Hermione and hissed, "You better not give me some gross Muggle disease, Granger..."

Hermione narrowed her eyes balefully at the girl and muttered, "Shut it, Parkinson, or I might end up ~~biting~~ your arm instead."

They exchanged hateful grimaces, just managing to scramble into character as the bed curtains opened. As the scene continued, Hermione's fearful glance at the swinging chandelier was far from feigned. So, too, were the nervous expressions on the other cast members' faces at the menace inherent in Snape's disembodied threats.

Pansy exited the stage, wailing, escorted by Draco, and Ron and Neville raced down to the stage. As the ballet girls began dancing, everyone in the wings stared upward, waiting for Terry to come plummeting down from the catwalk. When he did, he stayed limp, and some of the girls screamed, effecting pandemonium. Dumbledore smoothly transitioned the sets as Hermione and Harry entered the stage and headed for the roof. When the shifting sets were still, Harry and Hermione were stopped in the middle of the stage, finishing the lead-up to "All I Ask of You."

As soon as Snape's faint echo of "Christine" sounded, Hermione whispered, "What was that?" and dropped character, stepping forward, out of Harry's embrace, looking politely to Dumbledore.

Off to one side in the shadows, Snape sighed with relief that Hermione had so quickly removed herself from Harry's arms. Even though he knew it was strictly acting, he still didn't like seeing it!

Dumbledore surged forward, beaming. "Everyone, come out! All of you, that was excellent! Absolutely wonderful! I'm so pleased. Now, let's try it again, to be sure it wasn't a fluke..." He chuckled merrily at the ripple of laughter that flowed through the group.

He reset the stage and they ran through the scenes again, with more confidence than before. After the second time, they did it again, proving that they indeed knew what they were doing.

As Dumbledore called everyone out again for final notes, he frowned in thought, his twinkling eyes darting between Snape and the centre of the stage. Stroking his beard, he stared silently for so long that Snape finally huffed and said, with an aggrieved air, "Is something wrong, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore regarded Snape for a long moment before finally sighing and saying, "I'm just trying to figure out what to do about the trap door problem. I know we've transfigured the Hall to match what you saw, but that's just this one 'level.' The catwalks are included because they're visible from the stage. Whatever mechanisms are used to operate a trap door and all the shifting of the sets from beneath the stage are not part of this transfiguration, since they aren't visible in their workings. I know you saw much of it during the tour, but I can't reconcile what was seen with what they do. If I were to create a trap door in the stage, I wouldn't know how to get you in it anyway!"

Snape pondered the problem for a moment before noting that the students were all staring at them curiously. Sniffing, he straightened and said, "Well, I'm sure you'll arrive at a satisfactory solution, sir. If I can do anything to help, please, just let me know." He inclined his head politely and Dumbledore waved his hand airily.

"Oh, I know that, Severus. Ah well. I shall simply have to give the matter more thought." At that, he turned to the cast. "Excellent work, everyone! I shall post it, but you may as well know that the next rehearsal will be Saturday, the 3rd. We shall be blocking 'All I Ask of You' through the end of Act One. So, only those of you in those scenes need come. Enjoy the arrival of the New Year, and good night!" He beamed at everyone as they poured into the aisles on their way out of the Hall.

Snape stood to one side as the students filed past. As Hermione neared him, he said, "Miss Granger..."

"Yes, sir. I shall be there at 6:30. I remember."

Taken aback by her interruption, he merely snapped his mouth shut in a thin line and nodded sharply. As she continued past him, she politely said, "Good night, Professor."

Gravely, he intoned, "Likewise, Miss Granger," before casting a frosty glare over the rest of the students nearby and stalking off.

As Hermione trekked back to Gryffindor Tower with her friends, she mused that it was a good thing Draco hadn't acted up again in rehearsal, and nobody gave Snape any reason to draw attention to himself or to her, other than performing their roles.

Once they were all back in the common room, the other Gryffindors began talking about throwing a New Year's Eve party the following night.

"I can get Dobby to give me some snacks and goodies from the kitchens," Harry offered.

Ron and Ginny exchanged a look and Ginny said, "Ron and I have some of the twins' firework prototypes. It should be entertaining to set them off."

"So, uh, are we allowed to invite anyone who's not in Gryffindor?" Seamus queried.

Dean punched Seamus in the arm, slyly remarking, "You want to invite Luna, don't you?"

Seamus flushed and scowled at his best mate, snidely retorting, "You certainly didn't have a problem with her coming up here after she gave me that Deluxe Exploding Snap for Christmas. I seem to recall *you* playing with the rest of us!"

Dean rolled his eyes, but Ron piped up in Seamus' defence, declaring loudly, "We should be allowed to invite anyone we like, as long as they have a place to stay, since the party would obviously be after curfew." He glanced around eagerly, his ears bright pink.

Harry shrugged and said, "I don't see why not. But, you know we can't let girls stay in our dorms, and it wouldn't be very nice to leave people here in the common room either. If we invite anyone else, like Luna," he nodded to Seamus, "or Susan," and here he cut a smirk at Ron, who glared at him, "they would need to stay in the girls' dorm." As he finished, he turned a meaningful gaze on Ginny, who blinked at him blankly before cottoning on.

"Oh! Sure! They could stay in my dorm. I'm the only one here now anyway. I'm sure the other girls wouldn't mind. Unless Lavender and Parvati want to share..." She glanced at the other girls, who quickly shook their heads.

"No, that's all right. You have more room in your dorm anyway." Lavender smiled brightly at Ginny, while Parvati nodded vigorously over her shoulder.

Ginny glanced at Ron, who was beaming at her. "All right then. If you invite them, they can stay with me. I don't mind a bit." She smiled indulgently at her brother, who was blushing under his freckles.

Harry bit back a grin. "Perfect! Then it's settled. Party here tomorrow night, after curfew! We'll ring in the New Year right. It *is* the first one without Voldemort, after all." He rolled his eyes at those in the group who still flinched a bit at the name.

Conversation dwindled after that, and people began breaking away from the group to go to bed. As soon as the first person retired, Hermione took the opportunity to leave as well. Rising from the squashy chair she had been curled up in, she said, "Night, all. I'll see you in the morning." Waving and nodding at the returned farewells, she retreated to her room.

Having locked and warded her door, she readied herself for bed, casting nervous glances at the drawer in which she had stashed the books and magazines she had borrowed from Ginny. Taking a deep breath, she pulled out a glossy magazine, on the cover of which a handsome wizard was grinning cheekily at her, while flexing his muscles and barely maintaining his dignity behind a loosely tucked towel around his hips.

Blushing madly, she threw the magazine face down on the bed while she climbed in, burrowing deep under the covers. Once she was thoroughly ensconced within her thick blankets, she doused the lights in the room and lit her wand to read the magazine. Taking a deep breath, she picked it up, steeling herself for sensory overload.

The cover sported the jaunty title of "Playwitch: The Magazine for the Modern Witch." Glancing down, she saw the cheeky wizard in the towel waggling his eyebrows suggestively at her, brazenly inching the edge of the towel lower as he tilted his hips from side to side. Quickly scanning the rest of the cover, she determinedly ignored the wizard's attempts to hold her attention.

It was with a sigh of relief mixed with a swallow of trepidation that she opened the magazine. Perusing the table of contents, she blinked in surprise at the variety of sections: The Master's Bedroom Advice Column, Magical Beauty Tips, Floored Desires Bazaar of Advertisements, Cassandra's Horoscope, and even Merlin's Sex Toys! She had expected the sort of articles that included interviews with handsome wizards and reviews of the latest books to hit the best-seller lists, as those sorts of items seem ubiquitous in any type of periodical, magical or Muggle.

Quickly scanning the articles as she went, she kept forcing herself to look at the pictures of strapping young wizards in various stages of undress, varying their expressions from flirtatious to mysterious and grim. Reaching the middle of the magazine, she encountered the "Wizard of the Month" feature, including the lascivious centrefold.

The magazine was July's issue, and that month's star was a tall, wiry man, with artfully dishevelled, long, dark hair. His photo spread placed him in various scenes among ancient ruins apparently somewhere in Greece. The photos depicted him going through a slow sort of striptease, until his final photo, which was the centrefold, culminated with him leaning against a stone column, smoothing his hands over his bare skin, drawing attention to his own "Doric column" that stood out from his body, casting a shadow down his leg in the bright summer sun.

Dark hair traced his nipples and veed down his chest, condensing to a single line that continued over his navel and then re-spread at his groin. His lean muscles rippled as he shifted his pose, obviously enjoying his own touch as he glanced out of the photo from under hooded lids.

Hermione's throat went dry, as did her eyes, since she forgot to blink. Breath exploding from her as she shook herself, blinking furiously at her watering eyes, she felt her pulse racing at the sight of the man's erection bobbing gently. A tingle swept over her body when she looked back at the man, remembering how much she loved that masculine line of hair that snaked down Snape's belly and disappeared beneath the waistband of his trousers.

So, that's what it looks like, huh? Attempting professional detachment, she focused on the man's cock, absorbing the visual details and matching them against what she remembered from touching Snape. Thinking so much about what it felt like to stroke his hard length riled her up again, and she felt the pulsing, drawing sensation in her core, making her knickers damp.

Tearing her eyes away from the photo, she determinedly turned the page, forging on to the advice column and an article entitled, "Make Magic in the Bedroom." Eventually, she came to the colourful pages showing off "Merlin's Sex Toys," and her eyes bugged out at the wizards and witches in the photos demonstrating the toys advertised.

By the time she had perused the entire magazine, she was disconcerted to realize that she was extremely aroused. Furtively shoving the magazine under her pillow, she doused her wand and stared into the darkness, suddenly focused on the throbbing heat expanding from her centre.

Closing her eyes, she could see the model's erection bouncing in her mind. Imagining what Snape would look like completely nude, she superimposed the model's cock onto Snape. It wasn't that difficult to do, really, since the model already had similar long locks hanging in his face, and he had a lean build, much like her lover's. Ignoring the fact that the model was gleaming tan in the sun, whereas Snape glowed pale in moonlight, she nevertheless pictured Snape standing naked before her, his elegant, deft hands snaking over his body as he pinned her with a smouldering gaze.

Keeping her eyes screwed shut, she slid her hand into her knickers, gasping as she felt the slick juices coating her curls. Writhing at the delicious pangs that shot through her as she circled her clit, she thought back to what Snape had done to her, making her orgasm so forcefully. Now that she had felt his fingers filling her, she recognized the missing piece in her self-pleasure. While she could enjoy manipulating her clit, she wanted penetration as well, eagerly hoping she might find that glorious spot that Snape had come across.

Her other hand snaked down her belly, pressing above her mound, imitating Snape's actions. She could feel a fraction of the sensation, but it was nothing like what she had experienced with his finger pressing inside her. Resolving to pay closer attention to the sex toy ads in the next magazine, Hermione feverishly stroked and pressed, her excitement mounting as she relived the intense encounter in Snape's bed.

Considering how turned on she was after so much visual and mental stimulation, it wasn't surprising that she reached her climax as quickly as she did, her pleasure spiking mere minutes after she had begun. Her moans were muffled as she turned her face to her pillow, shuddering and gasping in orgasm. As she spiralled down from her peak,

she sank into a languorous sleep, a dreamily satisfied smile on her face.

The next day, Ron nervously approached Susan about attending the party that night, and returned to the common room, a sheepish grin hovering on his lips and his ears a bright shade of pink. Trying not to laugh at her friend, Hermione smiled and said, "I assume by your expression that she'll be coming tonight?"

Ron ducked his head, rubbing the back of his neck, and murmured, "Uh, yeah. She'll be here." His lopsided grin drew an answering one from Hermione, even as she felt a pang of envy that he would be able to ring in the New Year with his girlfriend, while she would be alone.

Resolutely tamping that undesirable emotion, Hermione patted Ron's arm and offered a sincere, "That's great, Ron. I'm really happy for you."

Parvati swatted a laughing Dean as he gesticulated wildly, trying to draw attention to a determinedly-casual Seamus, who was nonchalantly telling a blithely oblivious Luna about the party as well. Ginny rolled her eyes at Dean's immature behaviour and responded to the imploring glance Seamus cast her way as Luna stated that a party sounded like fun.

Sidling up to her dotty friend, Ginny muttered, "You can stay with me, Luna. I've got plenty of room in my dorm. Susan Bones will be staying too. It should be fun. See you tonight!"

Luna smiled absently and retorted, "Okay. That'll be nice," airily twisting her hair around her wand. Seamus sighed gustily in relief and beamed at Ginny, who winked at him as she departed.

Ginny flopped on the ottoman near the chair Hermione was in, smiling fondly at Ron and Harry talking excitedly over a game of Wizard's Chess. Shooting a cheerful grin at Hermione, she said, "Tonight should be fun! I'm glad I could help Ron out by letting Susan stay with me. He's pretty smitten with her right now." Rolling her eyes indulgently, she chuckled. Then, she noticed that Hermione didn't seem too keen on the idea. Frowning, Ginny queried, "What's wrong?"

Hermione shrugged and attempted a wan smile. "Oh, nothing really. I'm just not as excited about the party as you are."

Ginny leant forward, instantly attentive. "Why not?"

Hermione cast a surreptitious glance around the room before answering, "I just miss him, y'know? I wish I could ring in the New Year with *my* boyfriend like everyone else is doing." Hermione was completely taken aback by Ginny's grimace and sputter of laughter. Indignant, she huffed, "What's so funny?"

Ginny clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles, shooting an apologetic look at her annoyed friend. Gasping, she tried to compose herself. "I'm sorry! I just... Oh, 'Mione, I can't help it! It's just..." She coughed and took a deep breath, managing to get herself under control. Bright brown eyes dancing with suppressed mirth and mischief, she murmured, "I can't believe you called him your '*boyfriend*! I mean, seriously! It *is* a pretty ridiculous notion: trying to reconcile *him* with the idea of '*boyfriend*..." She trailed off, glancing furtively about, grimacing apologetically at Hermione's stone-faced reception of her explanation.

Coolly, Hermione hissed, "And what, exactly, would you suggest I call him?"

Ginny tossed her head impatiently. Gripping Hermione's forearm, she wheedled, "Don't be mad, please? I didn't mean anything by it, really! It's just so *weird* to use such a juvenile term for someone like him. He's *way* past being 'boyfriend' material." Hermione regarded the redhead impassively. Sighing, Ginny continued. "I don't mean it like that! He's just so much more mature, and intimidating, and *adult*..."

At that, Hermione's composure cracked, and one corner of her mouth twisted up in amusement. Wickedly, she murmured, "'Adult' is a good word for it."

Ginny's brows shot up and her mouth formed an "o" of astonishment at Hermione's innuendo. Then, she burst out laughing again. "Indeed! I'd say perhaps 'lover' is a better choice?" She beamed at Hermione, understanding that she was forgiven by Hermione's tolerant smile.

Smirking with a cat-that-got-the-canary sort of expression, Hermione lilied, "Mmm, perhaps." Then, she sighed, sagging forward, propping her chin on her hand dejectedly. "It's no wonder then that I'd rather be with him to celebrate, is it?"

Ginny made a sympathetic moue and draped her arm around Hermione's shoulders. "I know. I wish I could help, but it's just too risky. Surely you realize that?"

Hermione nodded hastily. "I do. Honest! I'll be here for the party, never fear. I just won't make any promises on how long I'll stay. It wouldn't do for me to turn positively green with envy, now would it?"

Ginny hugged Hermione and said, "Hey, it could be worse!"

Hermione grimaced half-heartedly and shrugged again. "You're right. Anyway, I'm going to go do some reading. I'll see you later." She rose, and Ginny grabbed her wrist.

Grinning devilishly, Ginny murmured, "Gonna' do some 'research'?"

Hermione smirked back and wrinkled her nose. "Maybe..." Both girls laughed, and Hermione paused to smile gently at Ginny. "Hey, thanks, Gin. I appreciate you listening."

"No worries. See you later." Ginny grinned impishly at Hermione and departed to join Harry and Ron. Hermione retreated to her room, wistfully thinking of Snape.

Hermione passed a few hours revising for N.E.W.T.s, then she rejoined the others in the common room for dinner. Blinking in surprise, she couldn't help but smile at the festive decorations brightening up the already-cheerful room. On one of the tables, stacks of party hats and noisemakers sat beside the box of Fred and George's Wildfire Whizbang prototypes.

While everyone ate, Harry summoned Dobby, asking him if he would bring up some sweets for their celebration, and the house-elf beamed with the extreme pleasure of granting Harry Potter's wish. Not long after the dinner dishes disappeared, Dobby showed up with a host of elves, all laden with refreshments.

Hermione was helping arrange the snacks when there was a knock on the portrait. Ron and Seamus both hurried to open it, nervously expecting their dates. Fortunately, both Susan and Luna were waiting in the corridor, having met on their way up to the Tower.

The party progressed happily, with lots of laughter and smiles. Ginny and Ron caused quite the sensation when they set off the twins' fireworks. The common room was filled with diving, shrieking people, desperately trying to avoid the flying hazards that were characteristic of the twins' sojourn at Hogwarts. After they all pitched in to clear the room of the smoke and fumes, it was near midnight. Everyone settled down with their party hats and favours, contentedly awaiting the strike of the clock...everyone, that is, except for Hermione.

Hermione sat to one side, alone, watching the others, in pairs or small groups, clearly enjoying themselves. Her three best friends were totally absorbed in their dates, and she felt woefully left out. A few minutes before midnight, Harry disentangled himself from Ginny's encompassing embrace to address the rest of the group.

"All right, mates, it's almost midnight! You know what that means: find someone to kiss to ring the New Year in right!" A spate of chuckles met his brazen announcement. With that, he plopped down with Ginny again, grinning impishly at her and wagging his eyebrows. Ron and Susan were smiling shyly at each other as they edged away to a more private corner.

Luna gazed complacently at Seamus and said, "Seamus, I'd like to kiss you, if you don't mind." Seamus reddened instantly, trying his best to ignore Dean's hoots and

catcalls behind him.

"Uh... sure, Luna. I don't mind a bit. That'd be great." He attempted a smile, but his nerves made it look more like a grimace. It didn't seem to faze Luna, however, and she blinked serenely at him, taking his hand and snuggling next to him on the low couch.

This time, Lavender was swatting Dean to get him to behave. Hissing, she said, "Honestly, Dean! When will you shut up?"

Dean turned his white smile on her and blithely retorted, "When your kiss renders me speechless, Lavender, dear."

Blinking at him in surprise, Lavender giggled and flushed. Parvati turned to Neville and Colin and laughed. "Looks like he's pretty glib all the time!" The boys chuckled nervously, glancing furtively at each other and then at the clock. Parvati noticed the exchange and smiled fondly. "So, Neville, can I count on you to return the mistletoe favour and kiss me tonight?"

Neville's eyes went round, and he seemed to both pale and flush at the same time, leaving him splotchy. Colin's shoulders sagged minutely, but he really wasn't too broken up about it. He smiled faintly at Neville's stunned reaction. As Neville stammered something barely coherent, Colin noticed that there were only a couple of minutes left before the hour.

Hermione was startled from her musing reverie by Colin approaching her. Looking up, she saw that his lips were set in a determined line, and when she glanced around the room at the apparent couples, realization hit her like a Bludger. Brows climbing to her hairline, she sat back, gaping stupidly at the younger boy.

Colin sat by her and nodded briskly. Before Hermione could say anything, he blurted, "So, uh, looks like it's you and me then!"

"Oh, uh, Colin... I don't think..."

He cut her off, ducking his head. "I know we're just friends, Hermione. But a little kiss couldn't hurt. Please?" He looked up through his lashes, imploring. Hermione cast a quick glance at the clock, saw that there were only a few seconds before the chime, and resigned herself, not wanting to make a big deal and draw attention. So, she shrugged and nodded weakly at him.

As the others started chanting the countdown, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes, offering her cheek to Colin. She was therefore surprised when she felt his lips firmly planting on her own. Her eyes shot open, and she gasped, her mouth falling open. Colin mistook her reaction and pressed his advantage, tickling her lips with his tongue, delving between them to hers.

Hermione froze in shock. After a second or two, she gathered her scattered wits and pulled away, breaking the kiss. Colin was quite pink, and his lips were glistening in the firelight. Mind racing in panic, Hermione fluttered backward, blinking rapidly. Glancing wildly about, she saw that everyone else was still engaged in their kisses, some more deeply than others.

"Happy New Year, Hermione," Colin said shyly. Hermione didn't want to hurt his feelings, but she had to get away.

"Oh! Um, you too, Colin. Listen, I was just waiting for the clock to chime. So, um, I'm gonna' go to bed now. Enjoy the rest of the party..." She stood hastily and edged past him toward her room. He looked as if he were about to say something, but she practically ran past him and disappeared, slamming her door shut and warding it behind her.

Crookshanks greeted her with an ankle rub and a purr. She abruptly scooped him up and hugged him tightly, dropping to her bed. "Oh, Crooks, I can't believe Colin kissed me like that! What will Severus say?" It never occurred to her to just not tell Snape about the incident, as that was tantamount to lying. Shaking her head worriedly, she sighed and released Crookshanks.

Crossing to her bureau, she tenderly uncovered the photo of her and Snape, smiling fondly at it. As feelings of love and attraction welled up inside her, her mind flitted to the previous night's imaginings. A tingle chased through her at the erotic images that blossomed in her mind's eye. Chewing her lip pensively, she buried the photo again and went rummaging through her desk, finding more of the books and magazines she had borrowed from Ginny.

Humming under her breath, she meandered into the bathroom to draw a hot bath, her nose stuck in the thick book as she went. It was titled *Sex Uncovered: the Raw Truth about What People Can Do Together*. She scanned through the chapter titles as she disrobed, running the taps at full blast and adding scented bubbles.

The book included chapters about virtually every aspect of sex, including touching, kissing, masturbation, oral sex, heterosexual intercourse, homosexual intercourse, various positions, anal sex, using toys, role playing, fetishes, and even multiple partners! Overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information, Hermione charmed the book to hover above the bubbles as she soaked in the fragrant water.

She flipped through some chapters faster than others, skimming section titles and glossing over the pictures of wizards and witches demonstrating the activities described. When she got to the chapter on oral sex, she was fascinated, staring unblinkingly at the photo of a couple taking turns pleasing each other. Tumultuous thoughts about doing that with Snape made her flush, perspiration beading along her upper lip. She remembered his comment, "Good gods, Hermione, what wouldn't I give for you to have a taste..." and her answering whisper, "You have no idea how much I would like to try that."

The bath water had cooled to a tepid pool, so long was she in the tub reading. Finally dragging her prune body out of the bath, she took the book back to bed, completely absorbed in perusing the dazzling array of sex toys listed therein. Once she had dressed and snuggled under the covers, absently stroking Crookshanks as he curled up beside her, she frowned in concentration and turned to the chapter on virginity.

As a testament to how thorough the book was, the chapter included information on potions in which virgin's blood was used, and directed readers on where to find more detailed instructions on how to properly acquire it. Pausing to consider that, Hermione grimaced and thought, *I hope he doesn't bring that up. That's kind of a mood killer...* She forged ahead to the illustrations on how to tell if a woman's maidenhead had been breached. With a nearly clinical interest, she scanned the various pictures of hymens. *I wonder what mine's like.*

Her musing turned to the passage describing the spectrum of what could be expected when losing one's virginity. At the thought of the possible pain of rupturing her hymen, tearing the flesh, she chewed her lip pensively. *I could feel it when his finger was rubbing against it, sliding into me...* Her eyes closed briefly in remembered delight. *It's not like his finger is very big. If there's that much there that I can actually feel it, I can only imagine that it would hurt quite a bit if he were to penetrate me* She set her jaw and inhaled deeply. *Make that when he makes love to me. Not if. Just a few more months, and we can be together completely.* A radiant smile spread her lips at the thought, and a surge of heat washed over her. *I really don't want to have our first time together be marred by pain. I want to enjoy feeling him so close to me. Hmm, we do have several months yet. I'm sure I can be prepared by then...*

With that, she closed the book and laid it on her nightstand, a tiny calculating smile on her face. Dousing the lights, she burrowed deeper under the covers, formulating her plan. If all worked out the way it should, by the time she and Snape were together, she would still be a virgin, having never had sex with anyone, but she would not be subject to the physical trauma of rending her flesh to prove it. If her plan succeeded, there would be nothing to mar the bliss of their eventual union.

40- A Kiss Is Not Just a Kiss

Chapter 42 of 84

Hermione faces the repercussions of Colin's New Year's Eve kiss, and gets more than she bargained for. Snape and Hermione have another misunderstanding--one that blows up beyond all logical expectations--and it affects the next rehearsal, where they practice "All I Ask of You" through the end of Act One. Need some more angst in your life? You've come to the right place...

Author's Note: School has been keeping me busy, but here's the next chapter, finally. Heed the angst warning! As always, thanks to my wonderful beta: Lotm. Muchos smooches to everyone who reads and even more to all of you fine folk who review as well! Y'all make my day. :) And, on a side note: go see Serenity. It's bloody brilliant! Oh, and keep up with my goings-on at my LJ: http://www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon/ Cheers!

Chapter 40- A Kiss Is Not Just a Kiss

Hermione woke early New Year's Day, even though she had been up late reading. Dressing briskly, she hoped that everyone else would be having a lie-in, so she wouldn't have to face them after the previous night's encounter with Colin. Peeking into the common room, she saw that only one other person was there: Luna. The dotty blonde was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the fire, toasting bread on a long fork.

Sidling into the room, Hermione sat at the table and served up a dish of porridge. Luna pulled the bread to her face and inspected it closely. Clearing her throat, Hermione ventured, "You know, you don't have to toast it yourself. There's toast available over here."

Luna smiled blankly at her and poked the fork back toward the fire. "I know. I just like it fresh." After a moment of awkward silence, Luna brought the toast close to her face and sniffed. "Perfect." She took a bite off one corner and munched contentedly, while Hermione stared at her, not quite sure what to say.

Luna said nothing more, and Hermione focused on eating, so the room was silent except for the crackling of the fire. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Luna spun on the carpet and brushed the crumbs from her jumper, remarking, "Colin likes you."

Hermione choked on her pumpkin juice and coughed, spluttering into her napkin. After a few beats of clearing her throat and regaining normal breathing ability, during which Luna gazed serenely at her with her bulging eyes, Hermione rasped, "What are you talking about? We're friends."

Luna nodded sagely. "True. But he likes you more than that. He's in my year. He talks about you a lot in classes. Thinks you're a brilliant witch."

Flushing uncomfortably, Hermione demurred, "Oh, that's different. He may admire my abilities, but that doesn't mean he *likes* me."

Luna tilted her head. "You left early last night. You weren't here to hear him talking about how much he enjoyed kissing you. I heard him telling Neville. He was disappointed that you rushed away so quickly. Seems he wanted a chance to spend more time with you."

Hermione's eyes widened in horror at Luna's matter-of-fact recital. *Oh, no. Not now. For mercy's sake!*

Suddenly, the porridge she had eaten sat queasily in her stomach. Swallowing hard, she stood and headed back toward her room. As she reached the doorway, Luna called out a cheerful, "Bye!" completely oblivious to the torment she had inflicted on Hermione.

It wasn't until dinner that evening, when Hermione was forced by hunger to leave the sanctuary of her room, that she saw anyone else. If she thought people had been lazy and relaxed after Christmas, they were doubly so after the late hours of the party the night before. Several people were just sitting in the common room in their pyjamas and robes, unwilling even to expend the energy to get dressed. Fortunately, Luna had returned to her Tower, so she wasn't there to spout off about Hermione and Colin. Unfortunately, Colin himself was there, surreptitiously watching Hermione from across the room.

Hermione nodded in return of the greetings sent her way, tensed and wary, ready to flee at a moment's notice. She sat down near Ginny and Harry, glancing around the room. Serving up her dinner, she asked them, "Where's Ron?"

Harry and Ginny exchanged amused grins and Ginny said, "With Susan. He's eating dinner with her."

Harry smirked and added, "They're kind of inseparable right now. You missed it last night. Things got kind of hot and heavy with those two after midnight. Don't worry, 'Mione. I played your part and finally broke them up and dragged Ron to the dormitory. Ginny here had to escort Susan to her room. I swear, you'd have thought that they were stuck together with a Permanent Sticking Charm!" He ended his speech with a chuckle and a roll of his eyes.

Hermione smiled faintly. "Oh. That's great, I guess. I was afraid things might turn into one big make-out session. Not sorry I left..." Inadvertently, her eyes flicked toward Colin, who hastily looked away. But, it served to confirm her fear that he was watching her. She closed her eyes wearily, sighing.

Ginny noticed the glance and quietly remarked, "Speaking of... Colin seems to be telling folks that you two made out." She eyed Hermione shrewdly, head tilted to one side.

Hermione's eyes flew open in indignation. Harry was grinning cheekily at her, trying to wolf whistle around a mouthful of bread. Shrilly, Hermione said, "We most certainly did *not*!"

Ginny nodded almost imperceptibly and continued. "So, what happened then?"

Hermione felt her cheeks growing hot. Breathing heavily through her nose, she leant forward and hissed, "I thought he was going to kiss my cheek, like at the cast party! But he kissed me! I mean, *really* kissed me!"

Ginny's eyes widened in recognition of the magnitude of such an event. Aghast, she breathed, "Tongue?"

Hermione grimaced and nodded. Ginny gasped. Harry kept looking between them, puzzled by their extreme reactions. "What's the big deal? It's just a kiss."

Both girls blanketed him with disgusted, withering glares. He cringed under the weight of their disapproval. "What?"

Ginny snapped, "Hermione doesn't *like* Colin that way. He shouldn't have done that."

Harry blinked, bewildered. Shaking his head slowly, he murmured, "I swear I don't get you girls sometimes. I thought you girls *liked* it when a bloke made the first move!"

As one, both girls drew themselves up regally and gazed haughtily down their noses at Harry. In a lofty tone, Ginny said, "Right, you fellows generally aren't known for understanding the complexities of women. Don't worry, dear, we've learnt to deal with the burden."

Harry coloured at the insult to his masculine intelligence and frowned. Wrinkling his nose at Ginny, he muttered, "Hmph! I tell you, Colin's likely better off being alone than trying to figure the likes of you folk out. Maybe I'd better warn the poor sod..." With that parting shot, Harry shoved away from the table and stalked off in high dudgeon, leaving the girls to discuss the problem.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Ginny ducked closer to Hermione and hissed, "Bloody hell! What if *he* finds out?"

Hermione's brow furrowed and she cradled her face in her hands. In a whispered wail, she retorted, "I *know*! He's going to be so angry when I tell him."

Ginny's brows shot to her hairline. "Tell him?" she squeaked. Wildly, she glanced around to see if anyone had heard her. Lowering her voice again, she gazed at Hermione in astonishment and said, "Don't *tell* him!"

Hermione shot the younger girl a reproachful look and retorted, "Of course I have to tell him! If I don't, it'll be like lying. And we're not supposed to keep things from each other. Besides, can you imagine how awful it would be if I *did* try to hide it from him and he found out somehow later? He'd never trust me again!"

Ginny closed her eyes in mute defeat. Slumping forward, she sighed gustily. "Bollocks!" Casting a weary glance at Hermione, she added, "I see your point." Then, she narrowed her eyes and screwed up her mouth before adding, "You *would* have to pick someone so dangerously possessive, wouldn't you?"

Hermione glared back at Ginny and taunted, "Oh, like you're not?" She held the other girl's indignant gaze until Ginny deflated and puckered her lip in a moue of petulance.

"Fine! You're right." Ginny sighed and her expression changed to one of pity. "I really wouldn't want to be in your shoes, mate."

Hermione ran a hand through her hair and breathed, "Tell me about it..." She glanced over at Colin, and he smiled tentatively at her. She flashed a wan smile back, unsure of how to handle the situation without hurting him and without giving him false hope. Then, she looked back at Ginny, who was regarding her with a mournful expression, and sighed. "I'm gonna'... go. I'll see you later."

Ginny nodded and Hermione retreated to her room, away from Colin's watchful eyes.

Hermione remained in her room as much as possible over the next few days, waiting for Saturday night's rehearsal. It was too unnerving to appear in the common room only to be watched. Even if she tried to study out there...with the rest of the Gryffindors who finally realized they had better get cracking on their holiday assignments...she found she couldn't concentrate.

Saturday evening, she was hastily eating her dinner, anxious to head down to Snape's quarters. Preoccupied with the thought that she would be seeing Snape again in minutes, she didn't notice that Colin had quickly got to his feet when she left the table to go to her room. Checking her appearance in the mirror, she shrank her script and pocketed it, bounding to her door and excitedly wrenching it open. She started forward and almost immediately stepped back, eyes wide and mouth open in a surprised "o".

"Hi, Hermione." Colin was leaning against the doorjamb, attempting a winning smile, but his cheeks were pink and his lips were tight with nerves.

Blinking, Hermione choked out, "Oh! Hi, Colin."

"Can I talk to you for a tick?" He shoved one hand in his pocket, tugging at his collar with the other.

Hermione felt trapped. Heart pounding, she stared dumbly at him. She knew she was blushing, and she hated herself for it. Feebly, she said, "Um, I can't right now, Colin. Maybe later?"

He swallowed and set his jaw, stepping closer to her. "It shouldn't take long..."

Hermione was conflicted: she didn't want to let him get so close to her, perhaps giving him the mistaken impression that she wanted him, but she also didn't want to back away, into her room, allowing him to *really* trap her inside it, and perhaps give him the mistaken impression that she wanted him alone in her room with her!

Desperately glancing down the corridor in the vain hope for rescue, she saw no one. Looking back at Colin, she saw he was only inches away from her, and he was staring at her mouth. Afraid of what his next move might be, she backed away, trying to circle around him a step. Unfortunately, he was canny, and intercepted her smoothly.

Hermione swallowed her rising sense of panic. Attempting a reasonable tone, she said, "We'll just have to talk some other time. I have to go."

Again, she tried to step past him, but he clasped her arm, stopping her. His expression was shyly winsome, and he murmured, "Was it really *that bad*?"

Utterly confused by his question, Hermione paused, frowning. "What?"

Glancing anywhere but at her, Colin stammered, "Kissing me. Was I that bad at it? You haven't even spoken to me since then."

Hermione felt a surge of guilt wash over her. *Dammit!* Not wanting to damage his self-esteem, she quickly blurted, "No! It wasn't bad. There's nothing wrong with the way you kiss, Colin..."

He interrupted her with a coaxing, "I bet I could still get better with more practice."

Hermione mouthed wordlessly, dumbfounded. Taking the plunge into the silence, Colin continued, "I like you, okay? I really liked kissing you. And, I mean, you're not with Harry anymore, and I thought there couldn't be a better chance..."

Hermione made an inarticulate noise of protest, cutting him off. He looked at her imploringly, and she stared back at him, aghast.

Haltingly, she croaked, "Colin... I'm sorry... But, I don't...think of you like that. It has nothing to do with your ability to kiss, honestly. I just..." She trailed off, feeling horrible at the way he ducked his head to hide his crushed expression, the way his shoulders sagged in defeat, and the way his grip on her arm loosened reluctantly. Softly, she added, "Can't we just be friends?"

He turned away, dejected. Hermione took the opportunity to edge past him and close her door. She knew she was late, but she couldn't just leave the poor fellow there like that! Hesitantly, she queried, "Colin? Are you going to be okay?"

He nodded slowly, unwilling to look at her. Stuffing both hands in his pockets, he shrugged half-heartedly and mumbled, "Yeah. Sure, Hermione. I'll be fine. Sorry to bother you."

Grimacing and railing inwardly, she lightly touched his arm and said, "I'm sorry. I still want to be your friend. We can still talk later some time, but I really do have to go..."

He shrugged her off and tossed his head. His cheeks were bright red, and his eyes were glassy, but he said, "It's okay. Go on. I'll see you later."

Hermione wavered with appeasing his self-esteem and dashing off to see Snape. Finally, she shook herself and flashed an apologetic smile at Colin. "Right, then. Bye." With that, she spun and hurried down the corridor and through the common room, already late for her meeting with Snape.

She flung distracted responses over her shoulder to several greetings as she charged through the common room and out the portrait hole. Rushing through the deserted corridors, she worried about Snape's reaction to her tardiness. How on earth was she to explain?

Down in the dungeon, Snape was sitting comfortably in front of his fire, reading, eagerly anticipating Hermione's arrival. He, too, was feeling the effects of not even being able to see her from afar during meals, and he found himself reading the same paragraph over and over, unable to comprehend its meaning. Glancing again at the clock, he noted that it was almost time for her to arrive. Deciding that he should meet her in his office, he shot to his feet and strode through his lab, settling himself at his desk, where he perched on the edge of the chair, full of pent-up nervous energy. Flicking his wand at the office door, he opened it, worried that Draco might engage Hermione

again. If so, he should be able to hear it with the door open.

The clock ticked closer to 6:30. Snape's fingers drummed restlessly on the desk, his ears straining to hear her footsteps approaching. When he realized that he was holding his breath in his attempt to hear her, he exhaled heavily, shaking his head. As the second hand crept inexorably around the clock to mark the time, anxiety built within him. *It's not like Hermione to be anything but punctual...* When it was exactly 6:30, Snape blinked incredulously at the clock, unable to believe that she was actually late. *She's never been late before.* Unreasonable panic trickling like ice through his veins, he stood and crossed to his open door, peering into the corridor, stunned to see it empty.

Falling back a step within the room, he tried vainly to compose himself. Forcing his rapid, shallow breaths to even out, he clenched and relaxed his hands, swallowing hard. *Get a grip on yourself! For Merlin's sake, so she's a little late. It's not the end of the world!* Shaking himself like a dog shedding water, he ran a hand through his lank hair and exhaled gustily. *Shake it off. You're paranoid.*

He forced himself to sit at his desk again, trying to avoid looking at the clock. That taunting voice within him insisted, *She's Head Girl, and a Know-It-All. What could possibly have made her late? For an appointment... with you?* He scowled, jaw tight. *You haven't seen each other for days, and she's not even here on time now?* The voice was oily with malicious amusement, and Snape vehemently pushed it away.

There could be any number of reasons why she's late. Perhaps another Gryffindor needed her help as Head Girl, or she lost track of time studying...

The mocking laughter within his head stopped his excuses. Angry at himself, he stalked back to his desk and yanked the chair back, flinging his body into the seat. He leant his head in his hands, elbows on the desk, fighting the dual waves of worry and insecurity. Finally, he heard the echo of swift footsteps on the stones, and his hands dropped to the desktop, his stormy scowl turned toward the open door.

Preoccupied as she was, Hermione still remembered to be vigilant when she descended the dungeon stairs, in case Draco was about. Hand clenched tightly around her wand in her pocket, she glanced around the corridor, listening for any indication that the Slytherins were nearby. Peering anxiously down the corridor, she thought she could see light from Snape's office door. *He's waiting for me.* Her stomach roiled uncomfortably as she contemplated arriving late for a scheduled appointment.

Jogging down the corridor, she lurched to a stop inside his doorway, frozen by his black expression. This was not the Severus she had come to know. There was no welcoming warmth. This was pure Professor Snape venom, aimed at her. Meekly stepping forward, she gasped, "I'm sorry I'm late..."

Snape stood brusquely and waved an imperious hand at her, cutting her off. Flicking his wand at the door, he shut it, jerking his head toward the door to his quarters. Curtly, he snapped, "Then, hurry up."

Hermione nodded and hastily crossed to the door, her cheeks flushing in shame. Unwilling to even glance back at him, not wanting to see his anger, she pushed on through his lab, into his sitting room. As soon as she heard the door shut behind her, she whirled, nervously backing away, blurting, "I'll get the stuff right away." With that, she spun again and sprinted to the bathroom, where she gathered the hair products and took a moment to try to compose herself.

When she emerged, Snape had seated himself in his chair instead of the ottoman, facing away from her. Feeling like she was treading a minefield, wondering when she would step on one and cause an explosion, she swallowed hard and approached him, scanning the tight set of his shoulders and the agitated drumming of his fingers on the armrest. Not sure what to say, she dropped the items on the side table, standing behind him. He glanced at the clatter, but didn't catch her eye.

She picked the brush up in trembling fingers and started working on his hair. As she carefully picked through the snarls, she ventured, "I'm sorry I was late."

He snorted. His voice cold, he retorted, "Far be it from me to think you might show up on time to our appointment." He paused, and Hermione cast about for something to say. Before she could figure out anything, he continued, "Miss Granger is usually prompt. In fact, I can only remember one time when Miss Granger was not on time for an appointment with a professor. Of course," he said, his lips twisting, "Miss Granger was snogging Mr. Potter in a corridor at that time. Certainly such wouldn't be the case this time."

Hermione had brushed his hair back and had begun smoothing the pomade through it by this point. At his sneering remark, she paused, stunned at how close he had come to hitting upon her secret. She knew she had to say something, and she knew she had to tell him, so she just dove in headfirst, hoping she'd be able to come up for air soon.

"Um... no, of course not. Actually, it was Colin...only, he didn't snog me this time," she added hastily, in response to the instant stiffening of Snape's posture. She gasped and jumped when Snape's hand snapped up and painfully gripped her wrist, stopping her ministrations.

His head turned slowly to pin her with an accusing glare, his voice a strained hiss. "*This* time?"

Oh, shite. Land mine!

He looked like a Hungarian Horntail about to breathe fire. Back-peddalling frantically, Hermione blurted, "Well, you were there at the Christmas party. You saw it." She knew she hadn't been very convincing, especially when his eyes narrowed and she felt the breeze in her head again, signalling his invasion using Legilimency. In her desperate attempts to *not* think about Colin kissing her, all she could think about was just that. Snape's nostrils flared at the images of every time Colin had kissed her, especially the deep one from New Year's Eve.

Hermione's eyes widened, but Snape's brows lowered so much that he was glaring at her through dark slits. Vainly, Hermione wrenched her eyes from his, cutting off the spell, but apparently Snape had seen enough. As she glanced wildly about, she saw his hand wrapped around her wrist, knuckles white with the intensity of his grip. Gaining awareness of how painful it was, she quavered, "You're hurting me."

Snape's hand sprung open like a steel trap being released, and Hermione instantly dropped the brush and cradled her wrist in her other hand. Daring to glance at Snape, she saw mute misery and fury swirling in his eyes. After a beat, he ground out, "Turnabout is fair play."

Blinking in confusion, Hermione felt goaded to reply, "I haven't touched you!"

In a savage whisper, Snape bit out, "No. *You* kissed that imbecile!"

Comprehension dawning, Hermione closed her eyes in guilt, but smarted under the unjust accusation. Trying to clarify, to prove her innocence, she said, "I did *not*. That *imbecile* kissed *me*. I had no idea, and I certainly didn't want it!"

Rising like a shot out of a cannon, Snape towered over her, roaring, "I saw it! You *let* him do it! His bloody tongue was in your mouth, Hermione! And you didn't do anything about it!"

Hermione stared up at his contorted face. Indignant anger started bubbling to the surface, mixing with the shame of knowing that there was a grain of truth in his statement. Still, she wasn't willing to shoulder all of the blame, and she felt bad enough about it already. She still had to *live* in the same Tower as Colin, and she had shot him down pretty hard. Never one to handle such unfamiliar emotional anguish with aplomb, she lashed out, trying to shift the focus away from her self-blame.

Voice rising to match Snape's, Hermione yelled, "Speaking of which... How dare you invade my privacy like that?"

Snape actually jerked back, brows climbing to his hairline. Stunned, he rasped, "What?!"

Planting her hands on her hips, she scowled at Snape. "You! You just burst into my mind, without any warning, or asking for *permission*! That's an invasion of my privacy and an abuse of my trust."

Snape seemed to rise up, his jaw actually dropping in incredulity. He looked about to explode again, but he suddenly froze, then spun away from her. His shoulders trembled, and then he finally deflated. Hermione took a deep breath and marvelled at her audacity, trying to turn the tables on him. Snape slowly turned back, his face cold and impassive.

In a deadly low voice, one that sent a shiver of dread up her spine, he said, "That is not the issue here."

May as well be hanged for the sheep as the lamb... Tilting her chin up defiantly, Hermione retorted, "It wasn't until you violated me."

He inhaled sharply at her words, eyes widening. His hands clenched at his sides, and Hermione tensed in wary fear. His eyes closed, and his whole being seemed to be wrestling with something huge. After a moment, his hands lifted to run through his hair, and he stopped in mid-swipe. Snapping his eyes open, he glared at the pomade on one hand, his lips twisting in a snarl.

Darting a baleful glance at Hermione, he growled, "Finish with this, and let's get to the Hall." He dropped to the chair again, boiling rage personified.

Hermione bent to retrieve the brush, and almost collapsed from the weakness of her knees. Gingerly, without daring to speak, she finished doing his hair, wanting to pull it to give vent to her outraged feelings, but not daring to do so, cowed by Snape's wrath.

Quickly, she finished his hair and stepped away. Snape stood stiffly, turning to her. She gazed back at him, hating that they were fighting again, but completely at a loss about how to fix things. After a moment, his lip curled disdainfully, and he sneered, "Daring to meet my eye? Aren't you afraid I'll 'violate' you again?" His voice was trenchant as he hurled her word back at her.

The shot hit home, for Hermione did feel as if she may have overreacted, using such an extreme term for his action, but he wasn't making things better by being so hateful about it! He should realize that if she exaggerated a bit, it was just to get her point across. But, no! Hermione gazed at him with a mixture of reproach and contempt. Straightening with as much dignity as she could muster, she shut her lips firmly, not willing to reply.

Snape made a noise that was a cross between a hiss and a snort. Tossing his head, he flicked his fingers at the door. Hermione regally turned and strode to it, exiting before he had caught up with her. Determined to not look back, she trekked down the corridor to the stairs. However, her ears strained to hear the clicking of Snape's boot heels on the stones. When she was almost to the stairs, she finally heard him shut the door to his quarters.

Climbing the stairs, she fought to keep back the tears that insisted on welling up. She had rehearsal to get through, and if she couldn't pretend she was fine, then there would be awkward questions, none of which she wanted to deal with on top of everything else!

She hurried to the Hall, only realizing once she got there that she was early. Usually, she and Snape made the most of their time together preparing for rehearsal, but this time, they had finished early, even with her late arrival. The doors to the Hall were closed, and she whirled around, looking down the corridor to see if anyone else was coming yet.

Snape appeared at the top of the dungeon stairs, but stopped at the sight of Hermione gazing down the corridor, alone outside the doors to the Hall. He stared for a long moment, still boiling with anger. *I'll just wait in the staff room until Albus has the Hall ready.* Having come to that decision, he stepped into the corridor. After a couple of steps, he paused, distracted by a noise from below. Returning to the stairs, he listened carefully.

The faint echo of footsteps wafted up to him, and he heard a cross voice saying, "So what if I'm not in the scene tonight? I told you, I want to keep an eye on that Granger bitch. Look, I really don't care if you come or not. You're not needed, so suit yourself."

Draco! Snape whipped his eyes back to the lone figure of Hermione waiting down the corridor. Draco was apparently mounting the dungeon stairs, and Snape warred with himself about whether he should secret himself in the staff room, as he had planned, or not, keeping a weather eye out for possible altercations between Draco and the Gryffindors. His anger voiced a mutinous protest at doing anything for Hermione, after what had just transpired, but his better self triumphed, reminding him that he still had a duty to keep students safe...never mind the fact that, even though he was still furious, the thought of any harm coming to Hermione sent an icy swirl of panic to his gut.

He quickly strode down the corridor, grimly noting that Hermione nervously looked away, worrying her hands. However, he did not go all the way to the Hall doors; instead, he paused at the side corridor leading to the staff room and the staff entrance to the Hall, leaning stiffly against the wall, arms crossed, scowling blackly.

Draco appeared at the top of the stairs, pausing to frown when he saw both Hermione and Snape waiting in the corridor already. As he slowly sauntered toward them, Harry, Ginny, and Parvati came into view, descending the stairs from the Gryffindor Tower. They were chatting blithely as they came, and Hermione felt a surge of relief that she would have her friends to focus on, to serve as a buffer between her and a livid Snape. A mere moment after they appeared, Justin arrived from the Hufflepuff quarters. He waved cheerily at the Gryffindors as he joined them.

Soon, all of the students reached the doors, and Trelawney surprised everyone...especially Snape, who had been so intent on his injured feelings that he missed the sound of her approach...by popping out from the side corridor. As the students were awkwardly returning her greetings, they were distracted by someone else pelting down the stairs from Gryffindor Tower.

As one, heads turned to see Colin, face pink with exertion and embarrassment, rushing down the steps. Breathless, he gasped, "Oh, good! You haven't started, then?"

Hermione's throat seemed to constrict. Eyes wide, she glanced from Colin, who was obviously attempting nonchalance, to Snape, who had gone even paler with hatred and rage, glaring at the boy with a look that seemed to scream *Avada Kedavra*.

Parvati turned to Colin in surprise. "You're not required for this rehearsal. What are you doing here?"

Colin stammered, "Oh, uh, just wanted to see things as they go along. You know, keep up with it all..." As he trailed off, the doors opened, startling everyone. Dumbledore beamed out at them.

"Come along! Time to begin." He threw the doors wide and gestured for them all to enter. Snape stalked over to the group, garnering a few baffled, wary glances. The students hung back for Trelawney to go first, then Draco pushed ahead, casting a contemptuous look over them. As Colin passed Snape, the man's eyes narrowed even more, making Hermione's heart skip a beat in fear of what he might do. But, he stayed as still as a statue as they filed past, Ginny casting a curious look over her shoulder at Hermione once they were inside the Hall.

While Dumbledore began fixing the sets for the start of "All I Ask of You," Ginny gazed worriedly at Hermione, jerking her head first at Colin in the house, then at Snape's retreating back as he slid into the shadows. Raising her eyebrows in query, she sidled closer to an obviously upset Hermione.

Hermione nodded mournfully and Ginny made a silent moue of sympathy, draping her arm over Hermione's shoulders in comfort. Ducking her head so her hair shook forward to shield her face, Ginny whispered, "It'll all work out. Don't worry."

Harry piped up, "Hey, what are you two talking about?"

The two girls looked up guiltily. Then, Ginny flashed a smirk and claimed, "I was just reminding Hermione that you're taken, thank you very much, so she should stick to acting up here!"

The other Gryffindors chuckled and Hermione flashed a shaky smile at the redhead, grateful for the ruse. Playing along, she added, "She threatened me with a Bat-Bogey

Hex if I got too into things!"

More laughter followed her assertion, and Dumbledore smiled benignly as he joined them again. Dryly, he said, "Now, if you young people are all finished marking your territory, may we begin what we came here for, please?"

Snorting and mumbling apologies, Harry and Hermione took their places, and the others sat in the house. Dumbledore turned to look out into the darkness. "Severus, where are you?"

He seemed to materialize in the darkness, his pale face appearing from the shadows as he stepped forward, replying, "Here, Headmaster."

Gesturing for him to come onstage, Dumbledore continued, "In the script, it says that you appear from behind the statue. Now, I don't want you to have to stay there while we work out the scene, so feel free to remain in the wings or in the house until it's your cue. We'll also have to take some time to go through the set change at the end and effect the fall of the chandelier. Oh! And you won't mind riding the statue back to the top of the proscenium, will you?"

Jaw tight, Snape murmured, "I have every faith in your abilities, sir."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Good to know, my boy..." He turned away, and missed seeing Snape rolling his eyes at the term of endearment. "Very well! Let's begin." He lifted his hands, descending from the stage, while Snape slunk off into the wing.

Harry and Hermione embraced, as they had been at the end of the previous rehearsal. Harry released Hermione and grasped her shoulders, directing her attention to his face as he began reciting the beginning of "All I Ask of You." Sliding his hands down her arms, he held her hands in his, until he got to "Let daylight dry your tears," at which point he gently brushed his fingers over her cheek. Hermione shyly turned away from his caress, facing the audience, and Harry stepped to her right side, one arm around her back and cupping her far elbow as he said, "I'm here, with you, beside you, to guard you and to guide you..."

Hermione stepped forward, wrapping her arms around herself and closing her eyes as she said, "Say you love me every waking moment." She turned her face to glance back over her right shoulder as she said, "Turn my head with talk of summertime." Harry darted forward, smiling, to her left, and cupped her chin, turning her to face him. Hermione opened her eyes and clasped her hand over his against her face as she continued, "Say you need me with you now and always. Promise me that all you say is true. That's all I ask of you."

Harry took her hand and pulled her downstage, looking out into the audience, once again positioning himself at her shoulder and corralling her in his arms. Gesturing out over the audience, he said, "Let me be your shelter. Let me be your light." Wrapping his arms securely around her, he continued, "You're safe: no one will find you. Your fears are far behind you."

Leaning back into his embrace, Hermione spun out of his grasp, pirouetting as she said, "All I want is freedom, a world with no more night." Then, she stopped short, gazing at Harry, adding, "And you, always beside me, to hold me and to hide me."

Harry bounded across the stage to her, taking her hands and twirling her as he said, "Then say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime. Let me lead you from your solitude." He spun her into his embrace, saying, "Say you need me with you here beside you." Then, he whirled her back out to stretch their clasped hands between them. Dropping her hand, he placed it on his heart and bowed, saying, "Anywhere you go, let me go too. Christine, that's all I ask of you."

Hermione curtsied in response to his bow, smiling playfully, patently delighted with his impromptu dance moves. Playing coy, she retreated, turning away from him as she said, "Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime. Say the word and I will follow you." Peering back over her shoulder at him, she saw him open his arms to her, and she spun to face him.

Together, they advanced to meet in the middle as they both said, "Share each day with me, each night, each morning..." Harry gripped her hands and pulled her close to him, trapping her hands against his chest between them as he wrapped his arms around her torso.

Hermione looked up at him and said, "Say you love me..."

To which Harry instantly retorted, "You know I do," lifting one hand to cup her cheek.

They stared into each other's eyes as they recited in unison, "Love me, that's all I ask of you."

And, finally, they were to... the kiss. The momentum they had built through the scene suddenly came to an awkward, screeching halt. After a beat, they both blinked nervously, glancing into the house, where they knew Ginny sat watching. Both flushing, they avoided each other's eyes for a moment, as Harry cleared his throat and ran a hand through his messy hair. Hermione smoothed her clothes and glanced back at Harry, attempting a businesslike manner. She touched his arm to get his attention again, and he started. Nodding sheepishly, they took their position again, reciting, "Anywhere you go, let me go too. Love me, that's all I ask of you."

Again, they paused awkwardly, releasing each other. Hermione stepped back from Harry and drew a hand to her throat in startled chagrin, saying, "I must go! They'll wonder where I am." Extending her hand toward Harry, she continued, "Wait for me, Raoul."

Harry reached toward her in return as he said, "Christine, I love you."

With an excited air, Hermione leapt across the stage to Harry, clasping his hands between them, saying, "Order your fine horses! Be with them at the door!"

Harry tucked her against his side, saying, "And soon, you'll be beside me."

Hermione laid her hand against his chest and retorted, "You'll guard me and you'll guide me..." Then, Hermione stepped away from Harry, pulling him to follow her, and they exited the stage.

From the opposite wing, Snape skulked onstage, scowling fiercely. But before he could take his place and begin his lines, Dumbledore interrupted, calling out, "Just a moment, if you please, Severus. I want to pause to allow the students time to write their blocking in their scripts before we move on." Snape stopped, nodding sharply at the headmaster, crossing his arms and glaring out into the house.

His gaze travelled over the audience, pausing first on the platinum head of Draco Malfoy. *That boy is going to be trouble. Damn him and his arrogance! You'd think he might have learnt some humility after Lucius was imprisoned, but no. He's not even needed here tonight. Well... so long as he keeps his prejudiced mouth shut...* His eyes narrowed as they skipped away from the sullen blond. Unfortunately, that simply brought his gaze to Colin, who was sitting with his elbows on his knees, and his chin cupped in his hands, staring raptly at the stage. His whole demeanour was one of wistful adoration.

Snape's jaw clenched. Exhaling harshly through his nose, he fought to stay still, and not lash out at the infatuated youth. Wounded, bitterness surged through him. *How could she? With that dunderhead? He's so insipid! I thought Potter was bad, but Creevey? And he's still a child!* At that thought, the irritating voice in his head reminded him that Hermione was only a year ahead of the boy. *Shut up! Blast! She's not a child. Not now... Bloody hell, what am I doing, defending her? She just betrayed me! I never should have let her worm her way into my heart. She's toying with my emotions...*

He shot a dark look into the wing, where she and Harry were busy scribbling in their scripts. Responding to the connection they shared, Hermione looked up at him almost instantly, eyes wide with trepidation. Their eyes locked for a brief moment before she tore her gaze away and looked down again, abashed. The sting of it sent Snape into another tirade.

There! See her? She won't even look at me anymore! I don't understand; it's not like I haven't used Legilimency on her before. She even welcomed it! How dare she accuse

me of violating her? I promised her I would never hurt her, and she says I violated her? In all the time we spent together, and everything we explored, not once did I push her. I never did anything that she didn't want.

She begged me to open up! I did. I trusted her. I let her in! I shared things with her that I have never shared with anyone, and she kissed someone else! If she truly hadn't wanted it, she would have resisted. She would have pulled away, lambasted him, hell, even hexed him!

But she didn't. She didn't do any of that. She even spent time with him instead of coming to see me. We had an appointment. Practically the only time we can spend together alone, and she didn't even care enough to be there on time!

I thought she loved me. She swore she loved me! But she kissed him, and didn't even have the shame to apologize! She just... attacked me. Like I was the one at fault. She's the one who said we should be honest and share with one another, but I make one simple dip into her mind to get to the bottom of the situation and she acts like I attacked her! I can't understand it... His whirling thoughts were interrupted by Dumbledore's voice.

"All right then. Severus, we're ready whenever you are. You may just step behind the statue to start."

Snape nodded and took his place in the shadow of the statue. Before he began, he gazed into the wing again, seeing Hermione glancing worriedly into the house. *She must be looking for that idiot boy. Why else would she be so concerned about what's going on in the audience?* His sense of betrayal reared up, flooding his soul with pain. Simply reciting his lines, he gave voice to the Phantom's disillusion, his own misery and anger evident in the suppressed shaking of his voice. Quietly at first, he spoke.

"I gave you my music... Made your song take wing... And now, how you've repaid me: denied me and betrayed me..." As he spoke, he slowly reached around the statue, letting his hand become visible, gripping the stone. Then, almost as if he were pulling himself from behind the statue, he emerged, head bowed, but looking to the wing.

Both Harry and Hermione were staring at him in awe. Hermione's hand rose to cover her mouth, and her eyes were suddenly glassy and bright.

Snape stepped forward, leaning disconsolately against the statue, propping himself up as he continued, his voice rippling with disdain, "He was bound to love you, when he heard you sing..." Heaving himself away from the statue, he staggered forward, where he dropped to his knees, palms flat on the stage, head drooping as he croaked, "Christine... Christine..."

In the wing, Harry crashed back to reality and jostled Hermione's elbow, reminding her of their lines. Faintly, they both said, "Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime. Say the word and I will follow you."

As they spoke, Snape clapped his hands to his ears, shaking his head violently. When they continued, "Share each day with me, each night, each morning..." he slid his hands up over his hair, covering his head with his arms, curling forward, and rocking back and forth as if in agony. Then, when they had trailed off, he tore his hands from his head, and, with a roar, slammed his fists on the stage, snapping his head up and glaring out to the house, eyes alight with a manic fire, saying, "You will curse the day you did not do..." As he paused, he lurched to his feet, grabbing the statue and climbing onto it, gesticulating wildly and continuing, "all that the Phantom asked of you!"

Once Snape was wrapped around the stone, Dumbledore broke the horribly tense atmosphere by stepping forward and announcing, "Pause there, please, Severus. I need to work the set changes, and the others need to take their places. Are you comfortable?"

Snape shot an aggrieved glare at the headmaster, and Dumbledore smiled. "Very well, then. Just sit tight until I can lift you to the top of the proscenium." With that, Dumbledore began shifting the sets back to the opera house stage, and the rest of the cast hurried out to take their places for the "curtain call" at the end of Act One. As they were emerging onstage, Dumbledore nodded at Snape in warning and began the statue's ascent to the top centre of the proscenium arch.

When Snape...on the statue...was back at the top of the stage opening, and the other actors were taking their bows, Dumbledore said, "Here we go. Severus, your last line is the cue. Now, everyone, don't fret. I have everything under control." Of course, immediately on the tails of that, everyone glanced upward apprehensively. Dumbledore was pointing his wand at the chandelier, making it rock and shake.

Snape nodded his head sharply and barked, "Go!" Then, with a soft, "Now," Dumbledore flicked his wand at the chandelier, and the whole thing lurched down, falling over the orchestra pit, careening straight for Hermione.

Even though she had complete faith in the headmaster's abilities, it was hard for her to simply watch the huge crystal piece looming closer, on a collision course with her. As it crashed at her feet, she shrieked, jumping and hiding her face, turning away.

Snape, from his vantage point above, could see the finesse that Dumbledore was exercising in the chandelier's controlled descent. Still, as he watched it rushing toward Hermione, his grip tightened on the statue, his body bowing forward, adrenaline surging with his rising sense of panic. As it got closer to her, he found himself whipping out his wand, ready to cast a deflection spell if necessary. When she shrieked, his heart leapt to his throat, and he had to force himself to breathe, seeing that she was unharmed.

A murmur rippled through the students present. Heaving a sigh, he scanned the group, seeing Harry emerging from the wing, startled concern on his face. Scowling, Snape turned his gaze from the boy, sweeping through the house. He saw Draco smirking, chuckling to himself, apparently amused by Hermione's fear. Lips thinning, he looked past the Slytherin to see Colin watching, hands clenched tight on the seatback in front of him, eyes wide with terror for Hermione. At that sight, Snape's hurt and anger boiled back up, ridiculing himself for preparing to save her, after she had betrayed him so casually.

Dumbledore was onstage, soothing the cast members, chiding them for their fear, reminding them that he wouldn't allow anything to harm them. Hermione was the centre of attention, since she had been the farthest forward on the apron, and the chandelier had crashed literally at her feet. She was smiling shakily at the headmaster, apologizing for her reaction, and trying to calm her indignant friends.

"I'm okay! Really, Harry, I'm fine. I just wasn't expecting it, that's all. It won't frighten me like that again. I'll be ready for it next time."

Dryly, Dumbledore said, "Well, don't anticipate it too much, my dear. It wouldn't do for you to be blasé about it." His eyes twinkled at her, and she smiled and nodded.

"I understand, sir. I'll be fine."

Dumbledore clapped an approving hand on her shoulder, saying, "Well then, in that case, let's go back to the start again and run it through. Places, everyone!"

As the students scrambled to their spots, Dumbledore began shifting the sets again. Looking up, he peered at Snape on the statue. "Hold tight, Severus! I'm bringing you down now."

He gently wafted the statue back to its place onstage, and Snape hunkered down behind it. When Dumbledore peeked around the stone, he queried, "Severus?"

Glaring sullenly up at his employer, Snape growled, "I'll remain here this time."

Nodding, Dumbledore retreated to the stage again, calling, "Ready? Begin!"

Snape crouched behind the statue, staring into the shadows at the back of the stage, unwilling to watch Hermione acting so lovey-dovey with Harry. And, he didn't want to look into the house either, only to see another ever-present Slytherin thorn in his side and Hermione's latest besotted swain, staring after her.

On his cue, he crept out from behind the statue, once again reciting his lines, but this time, avoiding looking into the wings. He focused on staying balanced as he rode the statue up to the proscenium, and fought to remain impassive as the chandelier once again plummeted threateningly toward Hermione. When he was being lowered back to

the stage for their third run-through, Dumbledore spoke up.

"All right. This is the last run-through of this scene tonight. Therefore, as we have done before, I want you to perform it to the best of your abilities, including timing, gestures, inflection, everything. That means," and he looked at Harry and Hermione, "you must at least stage a kiss, as that is in the stage directions." Harry and Hermione flushed awkwardly but nodded. "And," he continued, turning to Snape, "I would like to hear the Phantom's laughter as he tampers with the chandelier." Snape inclined his head gravely, staring straight ahead. "Excellent. Now, I am going to play the music box, so I can make sure I have the timing down for the set changes. You may sing if you wish, but you do not have to. That will be addressed later."

He stepped off the stage, fishing the music box out from within his robes. Adjusting the dials and toggles, he smiled in satisfaction before looking up at the cast. "Is everyone clear on the expectations?" Murmurs of assent met his query. "Good." He whirled his wand once more, setting the stage back to its necessary scene. "Places, please!"

Harry and Hermione scrambled to their spot, embracing again. Snape slunk back to the statue, hiding behind it. Music flooded the Hall, and Harry and Hermione smoothly went through the scene. Hermione sang lightly, and Harry wavered between singing and reciting.

As they came to Hermione's line, "Say you love me," Snape was behind the statue, twitching with growing agitation. Like a tongue will seek out the sore tooth, he felt morbidly drawn to watching them. Quietly standing, he plastered himself against the statue and peered around it, just in time to see them saying, "Love me, that's all I ask of you." On the tail of that line, Harry and Hermione inched closer, closing their eyes and pressing a chaste kiss on each other's lips.

Bile rose in Snape's throat at the sight. His breath came fast and shallow, and he panted through his nose, his teeth clenched. The pair separated, and continued with the swell of music, "Anywhere you go, let me go too. Love me, that's all I ask of you."

As the music trailed off, Harry ducked his head and kissed Hermione again. Her eyes flew open, clearly taken aback. Behind the statue, Snape, also unprepared for another kiss, gripped his hands into fists so tight that his nails dug crescents into his flesh. After a short beat, Harry pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. Hermione could feel the heat creeping up her cheeks, and she made a mental note to berate Harry later for surprising her like that.

The music changed, and Hermione gratefully backed out of Harry's embrace. They continued with the rest of their scene, finally scurrying off into the wing. In the heavy pause that followed their exit, Snape took a deep breath, mastering himself for his part.

He oozed out from behind the statue, his voice shaky with incredulous pain, sounding fragile as he sang. When he collapsed to the stage, croaking, "Christine... Christine..." his voice broke altogether, and what sounded like a choked sob issued from his throat.

Hermione was in the wing, staring in guilty horror at the emotional wreck that was Severus Snape, singing the Phantom's betrayal with an all-too-frightening realism. Harry felt horribly uncomfortable watching him, and stuffed his hands in his pockets as he hunched up his shoulders, glancing around. When it was their cue again, he hastily joined Hermione.

She watched, fascinated, as Snape writhed and groaned during their lines, shrinking back as he exploded, his voice once again robust as he roared, "You will curse the day you did not do all that the Phantom asked of you!" He mounted the statue, and it began rising swiftly as the rest of the stage shifted. Hermione rushed out to take her place with the others, shivering at the demented sound of Snape's laughter mixing with the tinkling of the shaking chandelier.

Then, at the drum beat, Snape bellowed, "Go!" and the chandelier plunged toward the stage, falling to the shrieking sound of the music, once again crashing at Hermione's feet, making her cringe, even though she knew she was safe.

Dumbledore bounced up and shut the music box, clapping enthusiastically. "Excellent! I say, everything just keeps getting better and better! Marvellous work, everyone." He stood beaming at the cast, until a pointed cough from above directed his attention to Snape, who was still astride the statue, glaring down at them in irritation. Dumbledore snapped his fingers and yelped, "Oh! Of course. My apologies, Severus. Here we go..." With that, he pointed his wand at them and lowered the statue and Snape to the stage.

Stiffly, Snape inclined his head and muttered, "My thanks, Headmaster."

"Certainly, Severus." Dumbledore turned his attention to the rest of the group. "In case you hadn't noticed yet, tomorrow we will begin having meals in the Great Hall again. Of course, term starts Monday, and your classmates will be returning tomorrow. Next Tuesday evening, we will be running through all of Act One, *including* the songs. So, I suggest that you all revise your scripts, for your lines, your blocking, and your cues. If you would be so kind as to spread the word to your fellow cast members who were not needed here tonight, I would appreciate it. The notice will be posted on the notice board as usual. Now, run along. And thank you all for your continued hard work."

The cast exited the stage, joining Draco and Colin in the aisle in the house. Trelawney floated out of the staff entrance, which was still secreted to one side, and Dumbledore began transfiguring the Hall back to normal. Colin surged up to Hermione, expression anxious, and said, "Are you all right? I tell you, it looked terrifying from out here, that huge thing crashing at you..."

Hermione, still distressed by the whole evening, paused, unsure of how to react, and afraid of getting too near the hatefully smirking Slytherin a few paces ahead.

Snape, incensed, stalked past the rest of the cast on his way out. He passed Draco, and the boy sidled closer to the Gryffindors. His low drawing voice mocking them, he said, "It's a right shame the bloody thing didn't fall on her. We'd be rid of a useless Mudblood if it had..."

The students froze in shock at his disgusting taunt, sure that Snape would round on Draco. Snape's steps had slowed, and his posture jerked stiffly upright. But, he didn't turn around. After a charged beat of silence, Colin puffed up, face red with indignation, and called, "Professor Snape! Draco just insulted Hermione again!"

Snape turned, eyes black slits as he regarded the students. Draco had frozen, worriedly glancing over his shoulder at his Head of House. Hermione didn't dare look up at Snape, and kept her flushed face averted.

Bitterness pumped through Snape's veins, and his voice was an icy murmur as he said, "I heard nothing." A sick sort of triumph beat within him at the collective gasp of astonishment, and the stricken look in Hermione's eyes as she finally gazed up at him. Jaw throbbing from clenching his teeth so hard, he cut an acid glance at Colin, who was staring at him. Lip curling, he added, "Five points from Gryffindor, Mr. Creevey."

Blinking in stunned outrage, Colin blurted, "For what?"

Snape stepped closer to the boy, leaning in menacingly as he hissed, "Nobody likes a tattletale. Be very careful whom you betray, boy." With that, he swept a baleful glare over the assembled students, cutting a cold glance at Hermione, and spun on his heel. He gripped Draco's robes and propelled him up the aisle before him. "Mr. Malfoy: back to the common room with you."

The Slytherins disappeared through the door to the corridor, and the stunned observers broke out in excited mutterings. Hermione glanced around at the confused and indignant faces and felt overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. Shaking her head, she battled at the hands reaching toward her in comfort and hurried up the aisle, struggling to hold back the tears until she was closeted in her room. Ignoring the confused calls from behind her, she ran up the stairs, her heart pounding painfully, and sobs clogging her throat.

When she reached her room, she flung herself on her bed, her heartbreak pouring forth in the torrent of tears that soaked her pillow and a consoling Crookshanks's fur. Feeling utterly desolate, she wore herself out crying, vainly trying to think of some way to mend the breach between herself and Snape, and fell asleep fully clothed, exhausted by the turmoil in her soul.

41- Bubble, Bubble, Toil and Trouble

Chapter 43 of 84

Snape and Hermione are still at odds, Colin is VERY trying, and Ginny steps up to the plate as glass breaks, someone gets steamed in the Great Hall, and bubbles break loose in the Potions classroom. Snape comes to the startling realization that Ginny is not just Hermione's friend but a hero as well...and that she's quite the force to be reckoned with. And why is it that people think tea fixes everything?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: To see just how Real Life keeps butting in the way of my writing, check out my LJ at http://www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon. Oodles of thanks go out to the lovely Lotm, who not only lovingly betas for me, but also provided me with the utterly brilliant Chapter title. A flash of pure genius, my dear! LOL I have to take a moment to pimp Lotm's Mobsite to those of you who have not yet seen it. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MoITWF> And I HIGHLY recommend reading her fics there! (Especially In Annulo, her latest story of incredibly in depth intrigue and suspense, liberally laced with lemony goodness!) Okay, now that I've pimped, I shall bring on the next installment of PoH. Thank you, you marvelously loyal readers who make my heart go thump with every read and with every review. *hugs and smooches!"

Chapter 41- Bubble, Bubble, Toil and Trouble

Snape ignored the persistent tingle of the alarm for a while...long enough that it actually began making noise. Finally, in a flare of groggy petulance, he flailed toward his nightstand, smacking at the offending clock. His disoriented fumbling knocked against the concealed photo frame, sending it clattering to the floor, and jolting him awake in a flash, a shock of apprehension washing over him at the ominous tinkling sound of glass.

Bollocks! Please tell me it's not broken... Snatching his wand and snapping, "*Lumos!*" he rolled to the edge of the bed, peering down at the shards of glass that littered the floor by his nightstand. With a sinking feeling in his gut, he held his breath as he gingerly reached for the frame, picking it up and turning it over to assess the damage. Heaving a relieved sigh, he noted that the photo was intact, even though the glass had broken. Waving his wand at it, he murmured, "*Reparo,*" and watched the glass knit back together.

Cradling the repaired frame in his hands, he rolled onto his back, gazing pensively at the picture as he propped it on his chest. His stomach roiled with conflicting emotions.

After rehearsal the night before, he had marched Draco down to the Slytherin dorm, coldly silent. When he had seen that the boy was safely within the dungeons, he had retreated to his quarters, still seething with anger and hurt at what he saw as Hermione's betrayal. Unable to forget the images that had replayed over and over in his mind...of Hermione and Colin, and even Hermione and Harry...he had tried to distract himself by reading, to no avail. Eventually, he fell into a fitful sleep plagued by nightmares, giving him no rest, and resulting in the morning's bad start.

Although he was still angry, he was more in control of himself. Plus, he had more than just anger to come to terms with, especially after his reaction to the possibility that he had damaged Hermione's gift to him. If he were angry enough at her that he no longer wanted to be with her, he wouldn't have been so panicked at the thought that he had broken the frame. Even now, as he gazed at the picture, his chest tightened painfully with both love and hurt.

Face it, old chap, you've got a lot to work out now. Can you forgive her? Should you forgive her? He looked at Hermione's radiant smile in the photo and remembered how happy they had been in their stolen moments together. His throat tightened, and he closed his eyes, only to see another replay of her kissing Colin. Scowling at the impotent fury that welled up, he shot up, dropping the frame to the bed between his knees, and running his hands through his hair. *No! It's not that simple! She's the one who betrayed me. I can't go on like nothing happened... I can't stop seeing what happened, every time I close my eyes! I will not be trod on like this.* With that, he slammed his hands on the bed and set the frame back on the nightstand, muttering the concealment charm in passing as he rose to get ready for breakfast.

Down in the Great Hall, the few students who had remained over the holiday were trickling in. Snape sat at the High Table and glared at everyone impartially. He had irritably noted that he looked like hell when he had seen his reflection before showering. Bitterly, he had refused to care, thinking, *Who am I supposed to try to look good for anyway? I've never been handsome, nor will I ever be, and everyone should just get used to it!*

Even as he wallowed in his self-pity, he couldn't help but perk up in attention when he saw some Gryffindors entering the Hall. Ducking his head and peering through his hair, he waited for Hermione to arrive. But, she never did. Even when Harry and Ginny walked in holding hands, they were unaccompanied by their bushy-haired friend. Then, a few moments later, Ron entered, alone, only to make a beeline to the Hufflepuff table to join Susan. Frowning, Snape was wondering where Hermione could be, and fighting a giggling spike of apprehension, when Colin arrived. Suddenly, all concern for her whereabouts and well-being fled his thoughts, crowded out by a surge of hatred and fury at the sight of the boy who had dared to accost the woman he loved.

Colin scanned the Gryffindor table eagerly, then frowned in disappointment as he sat, realizing that Hermione wasn't there. As he ate, he kept glancing toward the doorway, obviously waiting for Hermione to show up.

Snape watched him, completely absorbed in the task. Thus, he never noticed that Ginny was eyeing him keenly.

Ginny noticed that both Colin and Snape had been keeping an eye on the doorway, and she had seen Snape's reaction to the boy when he had entered. Thinning her lips grimly, she cast a glance at Harry, who was in conversation with Neville about Parvati, then looked back at Snape, hoping to catch his eye.

Ginny had gone by Hermione's room the night before, but the other girl had refused to answer the door. The same thing had happened that morning, when Ginny had gone by to try to convince Hermione to come to breakfast. She had knocked and called, but there had been no answer. Resigned to trying again later, she had joined Harry to head downstairs. If only she could get Snape's attention, she could find some way to tell him how distraught Hermione was, and how it wasn't her fault that Colin had kissed her. But, the sullen man only had eyes for the boy who was the focus of his ire.

After he had eaten, Colin simply sat, waiting, watching the doorway. Finally, as breakfast was drawing to a close, he got up and sat near Ginny. Taking a deep breath and shooting a glance at Snape, who was glowering at them, she turned to Colin and said, "What's up, Colin?"

In a too-bright voice, he said, "I haven't seen Hermione yet. She's cutting it kind of close, isn't she?"

Ginny regarded him gravely and spoke in measured tones. "I haven't seen her this morning, but I'm fairly certain that she's skipping breakfast today. You shouldn't wait for her, Colin."

"Oh! Then I'll go back to the common room and wait for her there..."

Ginny interrupted him. "Don't!" There was an awkward pause, until she continued in a low voice, "I said you shouldn't wait for her. I didn't mean just here. I meant at all."

Colin's eyes widened and his smile faded. Grimacing, she said, "Look, she doesn't like you that way. You know that. She told you herself. Just... leave her alone. She's your friend, and nothing more. You need to accept that. Why keep chasing after her?" The question was really rhetorical, so she was unprepared for his quick retort.

"Why not? It worked for you."

Blinking in confusion, she said, "Huh?"

Colin leant closer and murmured, "It worked for you. You and Harry got back together. Persistence paid off for you. Why shouldn't it pay off for me too?"

Ginny felt herself go pale, then redden. Her mouth went slack, and she struggled for words. "I... but... you're... it's... Colin! I love him!" Discomfited, she glanced around furtively, noting that Snape was still watching them through narrowed eyes. Desperate to make him see reason, she favoured Colin with a heavy glare and said, "I've loved Harry for years. It's different. Can you honestly say you're in love with Hermione?" Scepticism saturated her question.

Colin flushed and looked at his lap, where he had a napkin crumpled in his fists. "I... I think she's really great..."

Ginny patted his shoulder awkwardly and said, "But that's not the same as being in love. See? You need to let it go. She's not interested in you that way. Please, Colin, if you want her to be happy, just back off."

Colin looked crushed, and Ginny cringed in sympathy, but when she looked back up at Snape, her determination to steer Colin as far away from Hermione as was humanly possible strengthened under the menacing gaze of their Potions Master.

Colin nodded faintly and stood. "Um... I'll see you later, Ginny. Bye." With that, he spun and trudged away and out of the Hall. Ginny watched him go, then heaved a sigh of relief when he was gone. Casting a glance back at Snape, she finally caught his eye. Pinned by his black gaze, she rolled her eyes toward Colin's retreating form and shook her head faintly, trying to give him a reproachful look. His expression didn't change. Afraid she might be caught staring at Snape, she glanced around casually. By the time she looked back at him, he had shot to his feet and had begun storming out of the Hall through the staff entrance. Anxiously watching him go, she was surprised when he snapped a cold glare at her over his shoulder before he exited.

Sagging in her seat, she resolved to get the details from Hermione soon, so she could help figure out how to fix things. Not only was Hermione her friend, but she had developed a newfound appreciation for her Potions Master, who had been remarkably more civil since he had begun his relationship with Hermione. So, as altruistic as it all seemed, trying to straighten out this lovers' quarrel, she did have a vested interest in keeping Snape happy too!

When she and Harry returned to the common room, Harry resignedly went off to work on his homework, and Ginny took the opportunity to beard the lion in its den, heading to Hermione's room.

Knocking on the door, she called, "Mione? It's me, Ginny. We missed you at breakfast. Can I come in?"

In the pause that followed, she could hear Crookshanks meowing, but Hermione didn't answer. "Come on. I need to talk to you." Knocking harder, she leant against the door and pressed her ear against the wood. Muffled sounds of movement spurred her to say, "I can hear you in there. Please open the door!"

A low, "Go away," met her ear.

Rolling her eyes, Ginny continued, "Hermione, if you don't open this door, I'm still coming in." She heard a frustrated wail and a sniff, but still, the door remained closed. After counting to one hundred in her head, Ginny stood back and tried the doorknob. It was locked. With a smirk, she muttered, "*Alohomora*," and tried again. It still wouldn't budge. So, cocking her head, she whispered the password that Hermione had used to set the wards for her and Harry on New Year's Eve. It worked. Smiling in triumph, she opened the door, only to be met with a dishevelled Hermione whirling in her desk chair and pointing her wand at Ginny's face.

"What are you doing?" Hermione's eyes were red and puffy, but they were wide with indignation at Ginny's entry. There was a pile of parchment on the desk, and wads of crumpled parchment all around her on the floor. There was a bottle half-full of ink, and a quill lay where Hermione had dropped it in despair.

Ginny held her hands up and out in a gesture of appeasement and said, "I told you I'd get in. You never reset the password for the wards." Hermione sagged and lowered her wand, listlessly crossing to her bed, where she curled up in a ball near the headboard. Dropping her hands and shutting the door behind her, Ginny crossed to Hermione's bed and sat on the edge. Gently, she said, "I'm worried about you. You wouldn't answer the door last night or this morning, you skipped breakfast, and now you still want me to go away. Talk to me, please?"

Hermione stared at Ginny in misery. "I don't know what to do. He was so hateful! And I can't even talk to him. I wouldn't know what to say even if I could. I've been trying to write to him, but everything I write comes out all wrong! I finally had to give up, or I'd waste all of my Disappearing Ink. What's the use of writing to him when he hates me? Oh gods, Ginny, what am I going to do? I can't bear it. It hurts so much..." She buried her face in her hands again and choked back a sob.

Ginny sat beside Hermione and hugged her. "Just tell me what happened, and I promise I'll help as much as I can."

Hermione wiped her eyes and sniffled. "Colin ambushed me outside my door as I was leaving to meet Severus, and he told me he liked me. I told him I only liked him as a friend, and he looked crushed. I was late getting to Severus's because of Colin. So, Severus was already upset that I was late, especially since we hadn't seen each other since rehearsal, and he got me all flustered. You know how he does..." Ginny nodded and patted Hermione's shoulder encouragingly. "Well, he made a comment about the only other time I had ever been late for an appointment with a teacher was when I had been snogging Harry in the corridor, but that he certainly couldn't expect that to be the case this time." Hermione paused, gazing piteously at Ginny. "I knew I had to tell him about Colin sometime, so I figured I should get it out of the way."

Ginny's eyes widened in horror and then she grimaced in sympathy. "Oh, Hermione... You shouldn't have brought up something like that when he was already upset. That's just asking for trouble!"

Hermione's face crumpled. Defeated, she wailed, "I know that now! So, I said that Colin had made me late, but that he hadn't snogged me this time." Again, Ginny's eyes went wide. Before she could comment, Hermione continued, "It was awful! He grabbed my wrist and was squeezing it so hard it hurt. The look in his eyes when he turned around and said, 'This time?' killed me. So, I tried to make it better, and I said something about how he had seen Colin kiss me at the Christmas party, but then he used Legilimency on me!" Even in her despair, her righteous indignation burst forth.

Ginny jerked back in shock. "He what? Just out of nowhere? Did he say anything first?"

Hermione shook her head vehemently. "He got so angry. And I didn't know what to do. Then I snapped back at him for invading my privacy like that without asking, and said he had abused my trust in him by violating me like that."

With a groan, Ginny lifted her hands heavenward and then covered her face, shaking her head. Faintly, she said, "Oh, no. You *didn't*."

Shrinking in on herself again, Hermione sniffed and mumbled, "I did. He acted like I had slapped him in the face..."

Ginny cut in, "*Of course* he did!" Taking a deep breath, she dropped her hands and looked pityingly at Hermione. "I can't believe you both cocked things up so royally. Now I understand why he's so upset, and why he acted the way he did at rehearsal."

Anxiously, Hermione eyed her friend. "Why?"

Gently capturing Hermione's hands in hers, Ginny began, "You said yourself that he was already upset, and that he had mentioned you kissing Harry. So, he was already paranoid that you didn't want to see him, and imagining you with another man is his worst fear. When you just blurted out that you had been with Colin, he already felt

betrayed. Now, I figure, you hadn't objected to him using Legilimency on you before, so he probably didn't think you would mind. I mean, you had even *welcomed* it before when you two had problems to work out. Then, seeing Colin kissing you just realized all his worst fears. He felt betrayed and probably jealous too."

Hermione interrupted with a wan, "He said that I had let him do it, and I hadn't even done anything to stop it."

Ginny nodded sagely. "Exactly. He probably feels like you should have shoved him away or something."

Worrying her hands in her lap, Hermione mumbled, "I was too shocked. He took me completely off guard. But, I still felt guilty. That's when I yelled at him for violating me."

Ginny cringed. "And that's another thing..." Hermione nodded, ashamed. "That's a really extreme word, Hermione. You said he promised you he'd never hurt you. I can't really blame him for feeling like that was a slap in the face. I mean, he just did something he had done before, and you hadn't had a problem with it then, so you can't really expect him to think you'd feel so strongly about it this time. Plus... it's not like he raped you or beat you up or anything. And that's what I think of when I hear the word 'violate.'" She paused for effect, letting her words sink in.

Hermione gazed at her, comprehension dawning. After a moment of utter astonishment, her face fell, and she whispered, "What am I supposed to do, Ginny? I made things worse, and I don't know how to make them better."

Ginny hugged her again and said, "I'll try to talk to him. Maybe he'll have calmed down a bit by now. I have to tell you something else though..."

Hermione looked up wearily. "What now?"

"Colin kept looking for you at breakfast. When it was almost over, and you hadn't arrived, he sat by me and asked about you. I told him to quit waiting for you, and he said he'd wait up here, but then I told him to quit waiting for you at all, and to give up and stop chasing you."

"Thank you..."

"Hang on, there's more." Ginny's voice was grim, and Hermione thinned her lips in worry. "He shot back by saying it worked for me, so why shouldn't it work for him?"

"What worked for you?"

"Persistence."

There was a heavy silence. Hermione rolled her eyes and groaned, "Oh, no."

Ginny nodded and added, "I know. I tried to get through to him, and it may have worked, but I can't be sure." Hermione nodded, dejected. "And, there's one more thing."

Grimacing at Ginny, Hermione breathed, "What?"

Attempting an encouraging air, Ginny retorted, "Snape kept looking for you, too." Hermione blinked in surprise. "He looked really angry when Colin came in and kept waiting for you, but after I shooed him off, I caught Snape's eye and rolled my eyes after Colin, trying to get the point across that you don't want anything to do with him, and that you're really upset about the whole thing too. He stalked off, but he did look back at me before he left. I'm pretty sure I can talk to him. Don't worry; it'll all get better. Somehow." She gave Hermione a very determined look, and the other girl managed a watery smile.

"Thanks, Ginny. I don't know what I'd do without you."

The redhead grinned mischievously and said, "Well, first, you'd starve..." With that, she pulled a shrunken plate from her pocket, performed the reversal spell, and flourished a plate of toast and bacon at Hermione.

Dissolving into a smile of gratitude, Hermione took the plate, but she set it aside to embrace Ginny. In a low, shaky voice, she said, "Thank you."

Ginny pulled back and coaxed, "Come to lunch, please?"

Hermione nodded and sighed. "I will. Listen, let me shower and change. I need to start thinking positively. I'll eat, I promise."

Ginny stood and said, "You better. See you later. And try not to worry yourself sick. We'll work things out." And with that parting admonition, she departed, leaving Hermione to her self-appointed tasks.

At lunch that day, Hermione forced herself to join Ginny in the Great Hall. Ginny, for her part, played the bodyguard role to perfection, keeping Colin away from her fragile friend. Even Harry remarked on how poorly Hermione looked, recommending that she see Madam Pomfrey to ward off whatever it was she might be coming down with, especially since term was about to start and they couldn't have her missing rehearsals as well. Listlessly agreeing to go to the hospital wing later, Hermione cast a woeful glance at the High Table, where Snape slouched in his chair, sullenly scowling at everything in his field of vision.

After a short period, during which Hermione noticed Colin repeatedly looking her way, she gave up on suffering through the rest of lunch and stood, waving reassuringly in response to Ginny's concerned expression. "I'm fine. I'm just not very hungry. Yes, Harry, I'll go see Madam Pomfrey. See you later." Then, cutting a glance from Ginny to Colin and then to the High Table and back to Ginny, she chewed her lip and turned away.

As Hermione was disappearing from the Hall, Colin rose to follow her, but Ginny had been waiting for such an instance and spun to stop him. Whirling on the bench, she stuck her foot out in front of him and grabbed his wrist. Almost tripping over her, Colin yelped and shot a glance at Ginny, confused inquiry written on his face. Stonily, Ginny murmured, "I told you to back off."

Colin scowled and said, "I just want to check on her. She doesn't look too good."

Harry, having heard Colin's comment, interjected with a reassuring, "No worries, mate, she's going to see Madam Pomfrey. She promised me." Beaming smugly, he nodded and returned to his meal.

Ginny cast a swift glance at Snape, who was seething as he stared at them, and set her teeth. In a low voice, so she wouldn't be overheard, she said, "Nice try, Colin, but you're the last thing she needs to worry about dealing with right now. She'll be fine. Give her some space. I mean it!" Tightening her grip on Colin's arm, she pinned him with a fierce glare, emphasizing her command.

Colin's eyes went wide at her manner, but he tugged his arm free and stepped back, conceding defeat for the moment. Disturbed by her vehemence, he muttered, "Okay, okay. Never mind." Backing carefully away, he sat back down and stared moodily into his plate.

Closing her eyes in relief, Ginny sighed, then glanced at Snape again. He glared at her for a moment before shooting to his feet and sweeping out of the Hall. Hanging her head wearily, she thought, *Oh for heaven's sake, this is gonna' be a tough one.*

Hermione dutifully visited Madam Pomfrey, who gave her some Pepperup Potion and instructed her to take the full dose with her meal that evening. Thus it was that Hermione sat in the Great Hall for dinner, with steam shooting out of her ears, in the middle of the noisy throng made up of all of the students who had just returned from their holidays.

In the animated chatter and high spirits, it was easier to pretend that all of the drama of her personal life was not happening, and Hermione gratefully grasped the distractive lifeline of talking to several of her schoolmates about their holidays. Still, her appetite was minimal, and her smile a little more of the pasted-on variety, but no one seemed

to think anything was amiss other than the obvious need for the Pepperup Potion.

Snape, from his vantage point, felt a pulse of anxiety at the sight of Hermione with steaming ears, worrying about her health. Then, as he covertly watched her through dinner, he noted that even though she appeared to be cheerfully engaged in conversation with other students, he could tell that she was not truly herself, and she was hiding her real feelings from everyone. Remorse and concern warred with anger and hurt. Yes, he was still angry. Yes, he still felt hurt and betrayed. But, seeing Hermione's condition, and how miserable she seemed to be, in addition to the fact that she was avoiding Colin like the plague, made him wonder if he mightn't give in a little on the chance for them to work things out after all.

Dinner lasted quite a while, and with rather the air of a party. The noise level grated on Snape's nerves, causing his temples to throb with a dull ache. Resolving to take a headache draught when he reached his quarters, he left the Hall, absorbed in thought about how to handle things with Hermione.

Once Snape had left, Hermione felt the tension drain out of her at once, leaving her fatigued in the face of all the mirthful energy around her. Claiming she still felt a bit ill, she skived off to the Tower, leaving the rest of the students to continue their raucous welcome back.

Monday's classes went smoothly, and the professors were all eager to get the students back into the work routine after the holiday. Hermione was grateful that she was back in classes, as they gave her something else to focus on, and they kept her away from Colin. At each meal, Ginny shadowed Hermione faithfully, repeatedly thinking about what she could do to help her friend.

Tuesday, Ginny had Potions class. She arrived early, hoping to get a chance to speak to Snape about Hermione, but he didn't arrive until the period was about to begin. He swept in, robes swirling in characteristic fashion, and behaved in his usual sour manner. Vainly trying to catch his eye, Ginny realized that he was avoiding her gaze.

As the period wore on, Ginny started to feel desperate. Finally, on impulse, she fished a piece of Drooble's Best Blowing Gum out of her bag and started chewing feverishly on it. While everyone was concentrating on the last stages of their potions, Ginny started blowing huge bluebell-coloured bubbles that wafted about the classroom. As surreptitiously as she could, she directed one particularly large bubble toward Snape, who was focused on the essay in front of him. As it floated into his field of vision, bouncing lightly on the desk, he scowled, looking at it with a bewildered expression.

Snape looked up and gazed about the room, seeing bubbles dancing around students' heads, wafting along on the steam from their cauldrons. One by one, the students glanced around in confusion, and a low mutter rippled over the class. Slamming his quill on the desk, Snape peered around the room for the culprit, eyes blazing. When his gaze passed over Ginny, she stared brazenly at him and gave a decided chomp. He stopped, pinning her with a steely cold glare. Around her, students were stifling giggles as they batted the bubbles away from their faces.

In a deadly hiss, Snape said, "Miss Weasley! How dare you disrupt my class with what has clearly been listed as banned material?" She held his gaze, greatly daring, and he sucked in a breath at her cheek. At another stifled giggle, he snapped his eyes from hers and roared, "Stop batting at them, you imbeciles! You're just making it worse!" With that, he shot to his feet and pointed his wand at each bubble, Vanishing them one after another, until the air was once again clear. In a growl, he added, "Class is almost over. Decant your potions now and clean up." Glaring at Ginny again, he stalked toward her desk, towering over her. Jaw twitching as he clenched his teeth, he rumbled, "Spit it out, Miss Weasley."

Ginny simply sat there, staring up at his angry countenance. Then, she chomped again and deliberately blew another bubble. A gasp of fearful astonishment whooshed through the room, followed by an expectant hush. Snape's eyes narrowed, even as his brows rose. Ginny swallowed nervously as the lone bubble blithely bobbed up toward him.

Snape's hand snapped up to grip the bubble with lightning speed. Several people gasped again. Then, holding her gaze, he tightened his grip, and the bubble burst with a loud pop. Every student jumped. In an icy whisper, Snape said, "Remain after class, Miss Weasley. Twenty points from Gryffindor for insolence."

Throat dry, Ginny rasped, "Yes, sir." As Snape straightened, he blanketed the room with a baleful glare and barked, "Finish your work! All of you! Or you shall all lose House points." Everyone lurched into action, and in the frenzy, Snape glanced back at Ginny. He was completely stunned to see her shoot him a shaky, conspiratorial smile. Blinking, he spun on his heel and retreated to his desk, where he focused on the samples that were being turned in.

When everyone else had scurried from the classroom, away from Snape's wrath, Ginny remained. As soon as the room was clear, Ginny whipped out her wand and cast a locking and Silencing Charm on the door, causing Snape to marvel at her, utterly dumbfounded. Finding his voice, he hissed, "Just what do you think you're doing, you impudent girl?"

Carried away by the adrenaline rush of her audacity, Ginny turned and strode purposefully to Snape's desk, lips thin in determination. Stepping onto the dais, she leant forward, hands on his desk, looking him full in the face as he stared back, incredulous.

"It's about Hermione." Her voice was low but intense.

At her words, Snape's brows drew together and he frowned. "You are here to discuss the details of your detention for disrupting my class, Miss Weasley, *not* anything else!"

Tossing her head impatiently, she scowled right back at him and snapped, "She's ruddy well miserable, and it's your fault!"

Taken aback by her accusation, he instantly retorted, "My fault?! She's the one who betrayed me, and that's my fault?" As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized what he had said and clamped his lips shut. Attempting to regain control of himself and this interview, he growled, "I am not having this conversation with you, Miss Weasley..."

Before he could continue, Ginny interrupted, "You better! I'm the only one here you *can* have this conversation with, *sir*." She tilted her chin up and defiantly held his outraged gaze.

Nostrils flaring in anger, he spat, "My personal life is none of your business!"

Again, Ginny quickly countered, "*Hermione* is my business, and she's worried herself sick over you! Or hadn't you noticed the steam pouring out of her ears?" Her tone was scathing, and Snape bridled, goaded to respond.

"How dare you presume to know anything..."

Jerking her head and tossing her hair, she barked, "She told me what happened! I *know* Colin kissed her. I *know* she cocked up telling you about it. I *know* you used Legilimency on her. I *know* she hurt you!" After that rapid-fire list, she paused, her gaze softening. "But you hurt her too. And I can't stand by and watch her suffering like this. I'm *trying* to help." At that, she stood up and crossed her arms over her chest. "Honestly, Professor, since when would I chew gum in class? It was all a plan to make you keep me after class so I could talk to you. Truthfully, I really don't care for Drooble's all that much." With that statement, she cocked one corner of her mouth up in a wry half-smile, and tilted her head, regarding him frankly.

Snape sat, stunned. *Who is this witch? Sweet Circe, do Molly and Arthur know what they've spawned?* There was a tense silence that stretched longer and longer, but Ginny showed no signs of backing down. Finally, Snape thawed a trifle and muttered simply, "She betrayed me."

Feeling weak with the relief flooding her, Ginny heaved a huge sigh and said, *He* kissed her. She didn't want it."

Folding his arms defensively, Snape rumbled, "She didn't stop him. I saw it myself."

Planting her hands on her hips and tilting her head again, she favoured him with an aggrieved glare and said, "She was in shock! Haven't you ever been so surprised by

something that you couldn't react right away?"

Snape cut a glance at her and sulked. Unbidden, the first kiss he and Hermione had shared replayed in his mind. Yes, he had experienced that situation before. Still... Glaring at Ginny, he refused to answer.

Knowing she had won a minor point, she continued. "She told him she didn't like him. Surely you realize that." Again, Snape glared at her, silent. "Now, about the Legilimency... You shouldn't have done that."

Stung, he shot forward in his chair, indignant. "What? She was trying to hide the truth from me! And she didn't object before!"

Closing her eyes and grimacing, Ginny stretched her hands forward placatingly. "I know! But, she was just trying to figure out how to tell you the truth without hurting you so much, especially since she already felt guilty that it had happened in the first place. And, you *did* just barge into her head without so much as a by your leave." She cast him a reproachful look.

Anger boiled up again within Snape, and his eyes narrowed on the brash girl in front of him. In a cold whisper, he said, "Did she tell you what she said to me?" He felt himself coiling to strike, and was abruptly robbed of the wind in his sails by the limpid sympathy in Ginny's eyes as she simply answered, "Yes."

Blinking at her, his mouth worked soundlessly as she dropped her hands in front of her and ducked her head, murmuring, "She told me. And you're right. She overreacted. I told her that, and she feels horrible about it." She glanced up at him again, imploring him to understand. In a quiet tone, she continued, "In all fairness, you both could have handled things better. But, I can understand where you're both coming from. That's the advantage of being on the outside of it, you know..." She gave him a wan smile, and he blinked at her again, deflating into his chair. "But let me ask you this: you obviously are angry at Colin for accosting Hermione without invitation, but how is it any different from you accosting her mind without permission?" She regarded him seriously for a long moment, and Snape's face went slack and pale as her words sunk in.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head forward, shaking his hair forward to cloak his face in his shame. As he brought one hand up to pass over his eyes and rub his forehead, Ginny murmured, "Please, talk to her? Can't you forgive her? Is one mishap worth ruining all that you've enjoyed so far?"

Suddenly weary from the whirlwind of emotions, Snape sagged back in his chair and opened his eyes. The silence wore on, heavy and waiting. Without looking at her, Snape murmured, "How can you stand it?"

Frowning in confusion, Ginny faltered, "Stand what?"

Again, his voice barely audible, he spoke. "Seeing them together, kissing, holding each other..."

Even more perplexed, Ginny queried, "Who? Hermione and Colin? I told you, she doesn't like him..."

Snape cut her off with an impatient toss of his head. "Not them!" He paused, clearly gathering the courage to speak again. In a whisper, he continued, "How do you stand watching your *paramour* being intimate with your friend?" His lips twisted as he drawled the word "paramour," distastefully referring to Harry.

Ginny's brows shot up in comprehension. "Oh! Them..." She blinked a few times, considering her answer. "I don't like it, certainly, but I just get over it. I mean, it's just acting. It doesn't mean anything, you know?" She grimaced at the black look he levelled at her. "Oh, sorry... Guess you don't, or you wouldn't be asking."

A growled, "Indeed," countered her remark.

Taking a deep breath and resettling her shoulders, she barrelled on, "Hermione loves Harry...like a brother!" she added hastily at the sight of Snape bristling. Rolling her eyes, she doggedly persisted, "She's not *in love* with him. She's in love with *you*." At the almost bashful way Snape averted his eyes, Ginny smiled. Saucily, she lilted, "Besides, I know who he's going home with at the end of the night, if you catch my drift."

Snape's eyes snapped up to meet hers, taken aback by her implication. Then, after staring at her for a moment incredulously, he shook himself, snorting, and saying acidly, "Believe me, Miss Weasley, when I say that I have been studiously trying to banish that memory from my mind."

Ginny flushed uncomfortably at the reminder, and ducked her head. In an embarrassed mumble, she said, "Sorry, sir."

There was an awkward pause. Unsure of what to say, Snape flicked a glance at Ginny and waved his hand at her. "Gather your things. Report to my office Monday at 7:00 for detention."

Ginny's jaw dropped, and it was her turn to look gobsmacked. Her voice a squeak, she queried, "Sir?"

Rolling his eyes irritably, he snapped, "While I understand your motives now, Miss Weasley, I cannot allow your misbehaviour to go unpunished."

Righteous indignation sparked in Ginny's brown eyes, and she opened her mouth to retort, but shut it again with a snap, bright pink spots burning into her cheeks. Abruptly, she spun and charged to her seat, where she angrily shoved her materials into her bag.

Snape drummed his fingers on his desk, watching her fierce actions. When she was done, she stiffened and cut a livid glance at him, biting out, "Are we done then, *sir*?"

Nodding curtly, Snape flicked his wand at the door, unlocking it and lifting the Silencing Charm. Ginny tilted her chin up haughtily and marched to the door. But, before she opened it, Snape called, "Miss Weasley!"

Without turning around, she snapped a frosty, "Sir?"

There was a pause, then Snape said softly, "Please tell Miss Granger that I look forward to meeting with her tonight before rehearsal."

Ginny's shoulders relaxed, and her voice was a tone warmer as she said, "I will." Then, she reached for the doorknob, only to be interrupted by Snape again.

"Another thing, Miss Weasley..."

"What's that, sir?"

A ripple of amusement in his voice made her turn a puzzled look over her shoulder as Snape said, "Do try to remember that we have to maintain my reputation. Show up Monday at 7:00, but feel free to bring whatever you may need to do for homework that evening." He cocked one eyebrow and one corner of his mouth lifted. "Good day, until we meet again at rehearsal." With that, he inclined his head in a polite bow, once again throwing Ginny for a loop.

As she stood there staring at him, mouth half-open in amazement, his lips curved in a wicked grin of smug amusement. Gathering her scattered wits, she cottoned on to his remark and shook herself, casting an aggrieved glare at him before finally dissolving into a relieved smile. "Indeed, Professor. Good day to you." It was with a considerably lighter heart that she exited the classroom, eagerly anticipating telling Hermione the good news.

Hermione was already in the Great Hall for lunch when Ginny arrived, making a beeline to sit beside her. The air of suppressed excitement hovering about the redhead made Hermione's heart throb in her chest, and she felt light-headed with hope. Not daring to take her eyes off her friend, Hermione gripped Ginny's elbow as she sat next to her on the bench. Throat tight, she rasped, "What's going on?"

Ginny settled herself and scanned the Hall quickly before leaning closer to Hermione and grinning triumphantly. Brown eyes sparkling, she whispered, "He says to tell you he looks forward to meeting with you before rehearsal tonight."

A wave of relief crashed over Hermione so forcefully that she swayed in her seat, eyelids fluttering. Unbidden, tears welled up, and she buried her face in her hands, choking back a sob. Startled, Ginny wrapped her arm around Hermione's shoulders and crooned, "It's okay. Shhh. Don't cry. Everything will be fine..."

Wiping her face with her napkin, Hermione nodded and snuffled, desperately trying to compose herself. Breathlessly, she said, "I know. I'm okay. Honestly. I just don't know what to say..." She turned red-rimmed eyes to Ginny and croaked, "Thank you. For everything."

Ginny smiled and hugged her. "No worries. Now, I did the best I could, so *please try* not to cock things up again." She heaved an exaggerated sigh of being put-upon, but winked to show she was kidding.

Hermione gave her a watery smile and retorted, "I'll do my best. Believe me!" Both girls chuckled ruefully and Ginny released Hermione. As one, they reached for their plates, casting a glance at the High Table. Snape was not there.

Ginny noticed the minute slump of Hermione's shoulders in disappointment. In an attempt to distract her, she glibly announced, "Oh, and I have detention with him Monday evening." The incredulous look of indignation that Hermione turned on her made her smirk. In a conspiratorial whisper, she added, "He got me with that, too." Chuckling at Hermione's confusion, she said, "He told me we had to maintain his reputation, and after what I had done in class, I couldn't go unpunished."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "What did you do?"

Biting her lip to keep from laughing, Ginny mumbled, "I started blowing Drooble's Best Blowing Gum bubbles around the classroom. Then, when he told me to spit it out after he had already Vanished them all, I blew another one in his face." If Hermione's eyes got any wider, they'd fall out of her head, and Ginny spluttered with laughter. "I needed to get him to keep me after class! It worked, didn't it?" She cut a mischievous glance at Hermione, who was staring at her, jaw dropped in amazement.

"I can't believe you did that!" She paused, staring at Ginny a beat longer, and dissolved into a hearty peal of laughter. Ginny cracked and joined her, giggling madly.

Snape entered the Hall and sat at the High Table, furtively glancing at Hermione, who was absorbed in conversation with Ginny. Neither girl noticed his arrival, and he filled his plate while he watched them. When Hermione suddenly burst out laughing, he jerked to attention, and hurriedly glanced around to see if anyone had noticed. Shaking his hair forward again, he gazed at the two girls, wondering what was so funny. His chest tightened as he realized that Hermione had been crying again, from her tell-tale red-rimmed eyes and pink, blotchy complexion.

As the two girls' mirth subsided, Snape found himself watching Hermione with a familiar longing. Ginny's tirade had worked its magic, and he had struggled through some harsh realities with himself, resolving to mend the breach with Hermione as soon as he could.

Dashing tears of laughter from her eyes, Hermione sucked in air and fought the tremors of her belly, trying to regain composure, but the fluttery joy within her kept bubbling up. Feeling a tingle on her cheek, she turned to see Snape eyeing her. Gasping, her laughter fled, and her stomach twisted with apprehension as she locked eyes with him.

The sounds of the Hall diminished to a dull roar in his ears as he read the multitude of emotions pouring from Hermione's damp, brown eyes. Trepidation, remorse, hope, love, shame, joy, relief, sorrow... All he wanted to do was wrap her safely in his arms and comfort her, but he could do nothing. The moment seemed to last an eternity, and an idea came to him. Fighting the urge to smile, he broke their connection and searched the High Table. Briskly, he Summoned a teapot to him, followed by a dish of lemon wedges and a pot of honey.

Hermione's heart was beating wildly as she locked eyes with him, and she felt her breathing go shallow as they gazed at one another. When he wrenched his eyes from hers, she shuddered, reeling from the intensity of their exchange. It took several beats for her to realize what he was doing, but when she recognized him mixing a cup of her "tonic," a fresh wave of euphoric relief and love washed over her. Finally, Snape looked up at her, lifting his cup to drink, and his black eyes gleamed at her over the rim of the cup, looking even softer through the faint steam from the tea.

Sighing deeply, a slight smile on her face, Hermione scrambled to retrieve the ingredients on her table. Hands trembling with the excess of her happiness, she prepared a cup of tea as well, quickly taking a gulp, sharing that bond with Snape. As one, they set their cups down, and when Hermione saw Snape's gaze flicker past her for a moment, she turned to see what he was looking at.

Ginny was still beside her, face flushed with pleased accomplishment, for she had surreptitiously watched the exchange between Hermione and Snape. Glancing up at Hermione when she turned to her, Ginny was content to see the sparkle back in her friend's eyes, and the joy that seemed to be radiating from her once again.

Hermione swivelled her head back to see Snape still looking at Ginny. Ginny caught his eye, and Snape inclined his head a fraction, lifting his cup with a minute gesture of acknowledgement. Ginny smiled, abashed, and tilted her head to demur. Hermione looked back at Ginny and favoured her with a dazzling smile.

In a fervent murmur, Hermione said, "Thank you so much. I owe you."

Ginny shrugged, still smiling, and retorted, "I'll keep that in mind."

Again, both girls chuckled, and returned to their meals. Hermione and Snape covertly watched each other until they had to leave, and Hermione eagerly awaited dinner, after which she would be able to personally make up with Snape, and hopefully put all of the misunderstandings and misery behind them.

42- Concessions and Confessions

Chapter 44 of 84

Snape and Hermione hash things out and make up, causing Snape to admit to some surprising things. Rehearsal moves on, and Dumbledore faces more directorial frustration. And, just how confused can good ol' Neville get before he shrugs it off?

Author's Note: I know. I know! I've been AWOL for FAR too long now. *cringes* I'm sorry!! But, see? I promised I wasn't abandoning this, and I haven't! *small voice* Please don't hurt me... Anyway, Lotm has been the usual rockin' beta and muse-feeder. So, go express your gratitude for her inestimable help by reading her cool fics too! :) Hope everyone had a lovely holiday! Keep an eye on my LJ for what's up in my life: http://www.livejournal.com/users/pernn_dragon/ Thanks so much to all of you who kept sending me notes of support and requests for updates! You rock my world!!!! And so... here we go:

Chapter 42- Concessions and Confessions

Tuesday evening, at dinner, Hermione looked much better than she had...so much so that Harry even remarked on her visible improvement, congratulating himself on extracting her promise to visit Madam Pomfrey. Too relieved and happy to be arch about his attitude, Hermione simply contented herself with averring that she felt much better, exchanging knowing looks with a smirking Ginny.

Allowing herself to be drawn into the animated conversation about Ginny's daring exploit in Potions class, Hermione joined the others in casting furtive glances at the High Table, where Snape sat, impassively gazing about the Hall as he ate. Anxiously anticipating retreating to Snape's quarters, Hermione finished her meal quickly, unable to eat much with the fluttering in her stomach. Finally, after having made her tea, drinking hers while Snape drank his, Hermione clasped her hands in her lap, masking the trembling of her fingers. Her heart pounded fiercely in her chest when Snape stood, smoothly gliding down from the High Table toward her.

As his tall figure moved down the table, the Gryffindors fell silent under his shadow, peering up at him warily. Snape barely spared them a glance. He had eyes only for Hermione. Stopping behind Hermione, he flicked a glance at Ginny, who solemnly gazed up at him, her serious demeanour belied by the mischief dancing in her eyes. Jaw twitching in an effort to suppress a wry smile at the redhead's audacity, Snape gazed down into Hermione's upturned face.

"Miss Granger, come with me." His voice was devoid of anything but professorial authority. Hermione nodded hastily.

"Yes, sir." Rising quickly, she rippled her fingers at her friends in farewell. Snape stepped back, waiting for her to free herself from the bench, then spun and strode away, certain that she would be on his heels. Ginny and Hermione locked eyes one last time, Ginny's offering encouragement, and Hermione's glowing with gratitude, before Hermione scurried after the rippling robes of her Potions Master.

In the corridor, Snape glanced over his shoulder, jerking his head toward the dungeon stairs, and Hermione nodded, quickening her pace to catch up with him. They descended in silence, neither one daring to look at the other. As they continued down the dungeon corridor, Snape paused near his office door, frowning as he peered back the way they had come. Apparently coming to a decision, he briskly strode farther, beckoning for Hermione to follow him to the entrance to his quarters. Obediently, she joined him, crossing the threshold at his polite nod. Snape stepped inside and shut the door behind him, sighing heavily as he locked and warded it, focusing on the grain of the wood as he gathered the courage to turn around and face Hermione in the privacy of his rooms.

Straightening, he set his teeth and turned, his sombre gaze seeking Hermione's. She stood a few paces in, hands worrying in front of her, bottom lip between her teeth, brown eyes wide and anxious as she waited for him to speak. They gazed at each other for what seemed an eternity, until Hermione couldn't stand it any longer.

Voice cracking, she burst, "I'm so sorry!"

As soon as she began to speak, Snape held up a hand and closed his eyes, murmuring, "Hermione..."

The pause that followed was charged with emotion. Snape opened his eyes to see Hermione's lips trembling. Her shoulders were high and tight with tension, and his chest tightened with a surge of compassion. Stretching her hands toward him in entreaty, her voice barely a whisper, Hermione said, "Please, forgive me, Severus."

At that, Snape couldn't resist any longer, and he crossed to her, gripping her hands in his, pulling her to him. As she collapsed against him, gulping great, shuddering breaths, he wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her hair, murmuring, "Hermione... Shhh... Of course I forgive you. I was wrong to blame you as I did. For that, it is I who must ask for your forgiveness."

Hermione's arms snaked around his waist, squeezing hard in the excess of her catharsis. Like a litany, she rasped, "Yes, yes, yes! I forgave you long ago. I've been so miserable since then. Please, let's never let such a misunderstanding happen again!" Her fervent words were punctuated by more squeezing around his waist.

Snape laid his cheek atop her head and caressed her hair. "All I can say is that I promise I'll try." He lifted his head and dropped a gentle kiss on the crown of her head. They stood that way for a long moment. Finally, Snape pulled back enough to tuck his finger under her chin and tilt her face up, his black eyes searching hers. His brows drew together as he struggled to put things into the right words. "I don't know if you can appreciate just how wounded I felt..."

Hermione's eyes went wide and she earnestly interrupted him. "I can! I didn't..."

Snape grimaced and covered her lips with his fingertips. "Let me finish."

Hermione went silent and he took a deep breath to continue. "I've already told you that I haven't felt like this for anyone before. I had no idea how much I feared being without you until you weren't here when you were supposed to be. I won't even pretend that my reactions were rational. We both know they weren't. But, when I realized that you had kissed someone else..." Again, Hermione drew breath to protest, but Snape stopped her.

"I know. Miss Weasley...Ginny...told me all about it. I know you didn't invite it." He paused, swallowing hard, and forged on. "I panicked. I can't control myself around you. I did the only thing I could think of to get to the truth as quickly as possible. Believe me when I say that I had no idea you would object so vehemently to me using Legilimency again. It seemed the most logical course of action." His lips twisting, he looked down, avoiding her eyes.

His voice grew fainter as he said, "You're right. I shouldn't have done that without your agreement. I realize that now... that by invading your mind like that, I was no better than the imbecile who forced his affections on you against your will." Shame saddened his expression as he lifted pained eyes to hers again. "Ginny enlightened me about how I was in the wrong as well. Neither of us is blameless..."

Hermione's eyes dimmed beneath an upwelling of tears. She lifted a shaking hand to Snape's face and moulded her palm against his cheek. Snape's eyes closed as he leant into her touch. "Severus..." Hermione breathed.

At his name, Snape opened his eyes again, and Hermione stretched up to him, damp eyes bright with the glow of adoration. As her lips neared his, she stared into his eyes and whispered, "And I've told you before: I forgive you for anything you feel you need forgiveness for. I love you, Severus."

Snape felt dizzy with the joy that threatened to explode from him, and his lips brushed against hers as he replied, "And I love you, Hermione." On the tail of his words, their lips met, and the rest of the world faded into nothingness as they exchanged absolution through their kiss.

Clutching each other fiercely, they feasted on each other until they were both breathless. Tearing themselves apart, fighting for air, they pressed their foreheads against one another, glorying in the sublime sense of *rightness* that flooded them in the wake of their reunion.

Stroking her hair, Snape whispered, "Come now, my love. We have a task at hand."

Hermione nodded and swallowed, wiping her face and composing herself. "Yes, of course." Peeling apart, they clasped hands, gazing at each other. Offering a watery smile, Hermione squeezed Snape's hands and said, "Go on. I'll fetch everything." Sliding her hands from his, she crossed to the bathroom, and Snape moved to his sitting area, allowing himself to sink weakly into the chair.

Hermione returned, laden with the styling items, and beamed at Snape. The joy in her face was enough to crack Snape's solemn exterior, and he found himself smiling back. As his lips slowly curved upwards, and his eyes softened, Hermione's breath caught in her throat, moved by the beauty of the transformation.

Absently dropping the items to the side table, Hermione goggled at Snape, fervently whispering, "Ye gods, Severus, you should smile more..."

Snape was taken aback by the awe in her voice, and his brows rose, even as his smile widened. Feeling almost giddy with relief, he felt a ripple of amusement surfacing. Slyly, he murmured, "What? And ruin my reputation? Rubbish!"

Hermione laughed aloud, shaking her head. "You and your reputation!" Caressing his brow and cheek, she directed him to face away from her so she could begin brushing his hair. Snape turned away, eyes closed with the pleasure of her touch. As Hermione began drawing the brush through his long locks, she continued, "Ginny told me how you 'got her' about detention. You're so Slytherin..." She snorted affectionately, and Snape humphed.

"Everything I said is true! I couldn't *believe* her antics. I felt for a moment as if I had her obnoxious brothers back in my class instead of her." He paused to voice an aggrieved huff, then continued, in a low voice. "I must say, though, she certainly is a one-of-a-kind. I daresay that if Arthur and Molly ever truly find out what they've spawned, they'll be horrified."

Hermione frowned. "What do you mean? What's wrong with Ginny?"

Snape tossed his head, and Hermione spread her fingers over his hair to still him. "That girl is quite the manipulator! It's a wonder she wasn't sorted into Slytherin..."

Hermione jumped to Ginny's defence. "All of the Weasleys are in Gryffindor! They're all very brave..."

Snape snorted in wicked amusement. "Ginny must have been either very brave or very stupid to do what she did in my classroom."

Slightly put out on her friend's behalf, Hermione said, "I think she's brilliant. Where would we be if it weren't for her? She's a true friend, and..."

Snape's hand snapped up and gripped Hermione's wrist, and he twisted to face her, interrupting. "I know!" He gazed into Hermione's startled eyes, and his mouth twisted wryly. "I'm not belittling her, Hermione. I agree: Ginny is a true friend. And I know we'll need all the friends we can get."

Suddenly, Hermione's eyes narrowed and she pursed her lips. Eyeing him suspiciously, she drawled, "Wait just a minute. 'Ginny'? 'We'll need'? Since when do you call her Ginny?" She trailed off at Snape's abashed look, peering at him as he ducked his head and released her wrist.

Blinking, and staring into the middle distance, Snape's jaw worked as he fought with himself. After a long moment, he levelled a sober look at Hermione. "Miss Weasley was merely my student, no more needful of my attention than any other. But, in light of all that has happened, I realize that Ginny is not just another tedious child, boring me with her inanity." Hermione's brows rose, and her eyes widened in astonishment. "She has proven to be quite astute, wickedly clever, and surprisingly generous. She has managed to surprise me several times over with her maturity and loyalty, and the fact that she has a nimble mind worthy of a Slytherin is one of the highest compliments I can give her." Almost shyly, Snape captured Hermione's hands, lightly stroking his thumbs over her knuckles. "It occurred to me, in the wake of her bold manoeuvre, that she truly is on our side. It would be arrogant in the extreme for me to reject such a kind overture of friendship."

Hermione's face lit up, and she smiled. "You've accepted Ginny as your friend?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "That's the simple way of stating it..."

Hermione raced around the chair, throwing her arms around his neck, hugging him fiercely. "That's wonderful! Wait till I tell Ginny!"

Snape disentangled himself from her embrace, muttering, "Hermione!" He glared at her sheepishly. "You'll do no such thing!"

Taken aback, Hermione gazed at him curiously. "Why not?"

Snape's expression went from mutinous, to embarrassed, to exasperated, and finally stopped on supercilious. Arching one eyebrow, he gravely intoned, "That is a matter that should be addressed between myself and Ginny. We are not children playing a game of 'do you like me, check yes or no.' Allow me to give her the respect of treating her as an individual, and not simply as an extension of you."

Hermione's mouth dropped open in surprise. Blinking rapidly at the unexpected reference to a pre-pubescent ploy, she assimilated his words. Slowly, she replied, "All right. I sha'n't mention it." Then, she smiled again. "But it still makes me happy."

Snape snorted and quirked his mouth in a wry smile. With a deft caress of her cheek, he murmured, "That is my noblest ambition, now that the war is over: to make you happy, my love." Then, ghosting a kiss over her lips, he whispered, "Carry on. We must be in the Great Hall soon."

Hermione sighed resignedly and slid behind him again, smoothing the pomade through his hair. As she worked, she said, "I have to admit; I can't help but be curious about what you two talked about. She told me about the bubbles..." A short giggle snuck past her attempt to stifle it.

In a deep tone of annoyance, he growled, "It's not funny, young lady." Hermione masterfully contained any more bursts of amusement. "As for our conversation, I sha'n't repeat it. It's not my place to divulge what may have passed between us in confidence. Suffice to say that she led me to consider things in a wholly different light, after which I determined that it was not worth sacrificing our happiness to an unfortunate concatenation of circumstances."

Still curious, Hermione offered, "I'd tell you what she and I talk about..."

Snape held up a hand. "Please! I would rather not know. I already have too much first-hand information about Ginny Weasley's secrets."

Hermione bit her lip. Chagrined, she mumbled, "Oh dear, that's true..."

A beat later, Hermione finished securing his hair into a thick tail, and she rubbed his shoulders. "Finished!" Snape stood and spun to face her, extending his hand for her to take. She slid her hand into his and stepped closer, smiling up at him. Lips trembling again with emotion, she whispered, "I'm so glad you don't hate me any longer."

Peering intently into her eyes, Snape said, "I never hated you. I was angry, yes. Hurt: very. But I didn't hate you. My hatred is reserved for Dark Lords and dunderheads and infamous Boys-Who-Live, of which you are none."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh, but then she sobered. Sadly, she queried, "Do you really hate Harry so much?"

Snape's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. Shooting her an aggrieved glare, he growled, "Bloody hell, woman, why do you have to be so damned perceptive?" Stepping back and running a hand over his hair, he stared into the hearth. Heaving a huge put-upon sigh, he crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. "Fine. Hatred is the wrong word. I used to. I loathed him. But, after everything he did to defeat the Dark Lord, I don't hate him any longer." He flicked a dark glance at Hermione, seeing her smiling indulgently. "Oh, stop that! I don't like him either. He's still obnoxiously irritating, and it still makes me want to rend him limb from limb when I see him holding you and kissing you onstage!"

Hermione's smile disappeared instantly. She crossed to him and laid a hand on his arms in sympathy. He stiffened and closed his eyes, holding his breath for a moment. Then, exhaling slowly, he shook himself and opened his eyes, obviously composing himself with effort. He looked at Hermione, a flicker of insecurity in his eyes, and rumbled, "Ginny said she deals with seeing it by knowing that he'll be with her at the end of the night. Yet, I don't have that sort of reassurance."

Hermione's eyes widened in comprehension, and she slid her hands up his arms and along his throat to mould them against his jaw. Her voice was low, but determinedly fierce, as she said, "You *do*. We may not be able to be together at the end of every night in person, but I will always be with you in here." She gestured to her chest before cupping his jaw again. "And I *will* be with you at the end of the night come June. At the end of *every* night, if you'll have me."

Snape's chest tightened, and he swallowed against the constriction of his throat. Uncrossing his arms, he covered her hands with his, then pulled them from his face to plant kisses in her palms. His voice was rough as he merely said, "Indeed." He swooped in to plant a devouring kiss on her lips, crushing her against him. They gripped each other tightly, as if they could become one flesh by doing so, until Hermione pulled back, aghast at the time she had noticed on the mantel.

Galvanized, she gasped, "We have to go! We'll be late..."

Snape whirled around and saw the time. Eyes wide, he snatched her hand and pulled her to the door. Grabbing his Phantom mask from the table by the door, he yanked Hermione through, pausing only long enough to lock and ward his quarters before he enveloped her hand in his and sped down the corridor at a run, dragging Hermione behind him. She scrambled to keep up, trying not to trip. As Snape launched up the stairs 2-3 at a time, Hermione found herself lurching forward, breaking her fall against

the stones by wrenching her hand free from his and landing splay-fingered on the stairs with a little squeak.

Snape stopped in mid-stride, spinning to see her sprawled on the stones, and, with lightning-quick reflexes, whipped his wand out and barked, *Mobilicorpus!* Hermione stifled a shriek at the sensation of being lifted into the air, turning startled eyes to Snape. Nodding sharply at her and placing a finger over his lips for silence, he flicked his wand and started charging up the stairs again, Hermione floating along behind him.

He didn't stop until they were at the doors to the Great Hall, where he placed a steadying hand on Hermione's arm and ended the spell. Staggering to regain her balance once her feet hit the floor, Hermione stared at him, owl-eyed and speechless with astonishment. He passed a cursory glance over her before turning to the doors, which were open, and inside which Harry and Ginny were standing, goggling at the sight of their Potions Master floating their friend down the corridor.

Snape stopped short, abruptly straightening, his face coldly devoid of expression.

Harry sputtered, "We were just coming to look for you. We were worried. What happened? Hermione, are you all right?"

Hermione gathered her scattered wits and hastily retorted, "I'm fine!"

Snape's lip curled and he sneered, "Miss Granger clumsily slipped on the stairs from the dungeon. I was simply ensuring that she arrived at rehearsal on time and without further chance for injury. Do step out of the entrance, Potter, you're in the way."

Ginny's brows rose, and she flicked a glance between her friend and her professor, clearly unsure whether or not to believe them. Harry merely scowled up at the tall man and edged back, allowing them space to enter. Snape arched one eyebrow at him and cut a glance at Hermione. Irritably, he snapped, "Well, go in! I shall explain to the headmaster why we are tardy."

Hermione ducked her head and hurried past him, catching Ginny's eye and shaking her head minutely to indicate that the other girl shouldn't ask questions. Ginny blinked back at Snape before following Hermione down the aisle again. Harry stomped into the rest of the group, sulking at Snape's attitude.

Dumbledore turned an inquiring gaze on Snape and the others. Hermione felt her face flushing under the scrutiny, but Snape smoothly stepped up to the older man. "Forgive our tardiness, Headmaster. Miss Granger took a minor tumble on the stairs. She is not hurt, and I took the liberty of transporting her here as quickly as possible. However, I did not take the time to address the abrasions from her fall..."

Dumbledore cast a concerned look at Hermione, who did her best to dissemble, and glanced at her scraped knees. "Are you certain you're not hurt, my dear?"

Hermione held her palms up and said, "Just a scrape, sir. Nothing to worry about. I'm fine."

Dumbledore nodded and smiled gently. "Very well." He turned to Snape and said, "Then, would you please take care of those minor injuries, Severus, while I get everything ready for the whole of Act One?"

Snape nodded politely. "As you say, Headmaster." He gestured for Hermione to come closer. "Miss Granger, have a seat in the front row." Hermione hastened to the seat, and Snape gazed down his nose at her. "Palms out, Miss Granger." She extended her hands, and he muttered the healing spell that disinfected the wound and knit the flesh together. Face impassive, he said, "Extend your leg." She poked one foot out, shyly pulling the edge of her skirt up to bare her knee, and Snape repeated the spell. A barked, "Next," made her poke the other foot out to heal her other knee.

Finally, mended, she decorously smoothed her skirt back over her knees and solemnly raised her face to his. "Thank you, Professor." Snape nodded sharply and spun away, focusing on Dumbledore's preparations.

Exhaling a long breath, Hermione jumped when Ginny plopped down beside her, avidly hissing, "What really happened? Is everything okay?"

Hermione smiled at her friend and whispered, "Yes! We were late, and he was running up the stairs too fast for me to keep up. I did stumble and fall, and he just whisked me up here! But, everything is much better now, thanks to your help." She patted Ginny's arm and smiled again.

Ginny ducked her head to demur. Flushing with pleasure at the praise, she muttered, "Good! I'm glad to hear it." Then, flashing a mischievous grin at Hermione, she added, "You can give me all the details later, 'kay?"

At Hermione's glare of mock outrage, Ginny laughed, and Hermione joined her. They stopped quickly when Dumbledore arrived and said, "I trust Professor Snape has put you back in tip-top shape?"

Nodding, Hermione smiled and said, "As good as ever, sir."

Dumbledore chuckled and said, "Excellent. In that case, would you please take your places for the beginning of Act One? Remember, everyone is to do exactly as we've rehearsed, including singing."

The girls rose quickly and hurried to their places, Ginny pausing only long enough to have Dumbledore cast *Suaviloquentia* on her.

A nervous buzz swept through the assembled cast as Dumbledore set up the music box. Snape melted into the shadows in the back of the house while others waited anxiously in the wings or in the front rows. At Dumbledore's cry of "Action!" the Auction began.

Snape watched his employer as he handled the complex wand work to effect all of the set changes from the Auction scene to the Opera House stage. *I wonder if he's going to do all of that from the house during the performance... It might draw too much attention. I shall have to ask him about it.*

When Pansy was singing, and the drop fell, Snape felt his lips twisting in a smirk of amusement. He rolled his eyes as she and Draco stormed off in a huff, musing, *Well, at least her accent has got better.*

The rehearsal was moving fairly smoothly, with only a few points at which the actors struggled for a line or shuffled into the right spot onstage at the furtive urging of their co-actors. Dumbledore manned the music box, stopping it and starting it at the correct intervals. Then, when it came time for Hermione to sing, Snape sucked in a breath and held it, anticipating the pure sounds that washed over him like a warm, drugging bath.

In the middle of the song, as Dumbledore transformed the stage, Hermione took the opportunity to practice her costume change, barely intoning the spell in between lines. Her casual clothing morphed into the sumptuous gown, and a delighted gasp filled the Hall. Eyes sparkling in amusement and satisfaction, she smiled as she sang the triumphant finale of the song, curtsying at the spontaneous applause from several of the cast members.

Snape stopped himself from joining in the applause, mindful of maintaining appearances. Fighting down the surge of pride, he glided down the side aisle of the house, coming closer as the dressing room appeared onstage, eyes locked on Hermione as she drifted downstage, lost in thought. From one side, Snape didn't even bother with the *Sonorus* charm, crooning, "Bravi, bravi, bravissimi."

Hermione started at the sound and blinked, head turning as she sought out the source of his voice. Ginny edged up behind her and drew her attention, and Snape slunk away toward the stairs to the wings. The few students who were in the wings on that side quickly ducked out of his way as he took his place near the magic mirror.

While the scene with the managers was happening outside the dressing room door, Hermione stepped behind the screen that was part of the dressing room set and cast the spell to return her clothes to normal. While she was out of sight, she felt the tingle that signalled Snape watching her and cast a quick glance into the wings, pausing and blinking when she saw Snape's dark eyes pinned on her. His expression was blank, but she knew he was no longer angry with her. Smiling tentatively, she nodded

and ducked back out from behind the screen.

Snape took a deep breath of relieved contentment and donned his mask. If he needed it for later, he might as well wear it the whole time. Onstage, Harry and Hermione were singing "Little Lotte." Smoothing his robes and settling his shoulders, Snape stepped behind the mirror, ready to sing.

As soon as the music started, Snape felt a surge of energy course through him, and he belted out his opening lines. Hermione responded with an equal intensity, and by the time Snape had grasped Hermione's wrist to pull her into the mirror, he and Hermione both felt the electric connection between them.

Completely in the thrall of the play, moving through the swiftly changing sets, Snape and Hermione locked eyes as they sang their duet. Coming to a stop in the Phantom's Lair, Hermione hit the high peak of her vocalizing, and Snape deftly launched into "Music of the Night."

Ginny joined several of the others as they slunk out into the house to watch the rehearsal. She felt goose flesh prickling her skin at the emotion crackling between Hermione and Snape. Gazing intently, she mused, *Thank the gods that they've made up. Amazing! Oh, but it's gonna' be awful when everyone finds out. I just hope that people will realize that they belong together. How anyone can see them together like this and not see it is beyond me.* She crossed her arms tightly against her ribs, soberly watching the beauty of Snape pouring his love into his song. Shuddering at the overwhelming nature of their connection, she sighed, a faint smile of accomplishment on her lips at the thought of her role in bringing about such happiness.

She was brought out of her pondering with a start when the other girls gasped at the wax dummy's reach. Even knowing what she did, she couldn't help but marvel at the gentle way Snape lifted Hermione's limp body to lay her on the bed. It was just so at odds with his usual persona. During the lull after his final line, the students in the audience shifted, rustling as they came out of their trance.

Snape crossed to the organ and began miming playing it. Hermione slowly awoke, creeping up behind him. Finally, she snatched the mask off, and Snape whirled, roaring. Ready for it, after having seen it before, Ginny watched the rest of the cast, smirking as several of them lurched back into their seats, cringing in horror. Idly, she wondered how long it would be before she no longer feared him, like Hermione. They were all just staring as Snape's song wore on, and Hermione gingerly handed his mask back to him. When he crossed back to the organ, Ginny realized how close their cues were and jostled the nearest elbow.

In a hiss, she urged, "Hurry! We have to get ready!" There was a muffled scrum as they all rushed toward the stairs into the wings, nervous about missing their cues. As Snape guided Hermione offstage, the girls and Terry scampered on. They tried not to notice when Snape and Hermione glided back out, until the point where they were supposed to see them, at which point they all skittered off, passing McGonagall on the way.

Snape and Hermione took a fleeting moment to squeeze hands and exchange a parting caress in the wings as the sets changed to the managers' office. Snape exited the stage and made his way up to the tier of boxes to watch and wait for his next cue, and Hermione snuck out into the house to watch the scene.

She felt a surge of fond pride at how well Neville had risen to the challenge, playing his role. As Ron joined him, and Harry followed, she found herself smiling in delight at the presence they all displayed onstage. They were really coming into their own, growing up.

Pansy and Draco burst onto the scene, and Hermione frowned in dislike, but her brows rose in grudging admiration at the quality of Pansy's performance, especially since she was one of the few who hadn't used the singing spell. McGonagall entered, as prim and austere as ever, with Ginny in tow. Again, Hermione grinned in appreciation of her friends' work. When they began reading the Phantom's letter, Snape's voice rang through the theatre. Hermione glanced around, seeking his hiding spot, and smirked when she zeroed in on his location within one of the Boxes. Her attention was drawn back to the rehearsal as they approached "Prima Donna." Now would be a true test of their improvement, seeing how well everyone meshed. So far, they had managed fairly well.

Hermione choked back a snort at the charmingly ingratiating manner that Neville adopted toward Pansy, and the absurdly winning smile that Ron flashed while they sucked up to her. Everyone spread out to their places, and they forged on, voices fading in and out of understanding as they overlapped and trailed off. Hermione noticed Dumbledore watching intently, his hands and head moving unconsciously, as if conducting them.

Eventually, as they neared the end, Hermione jumped at the booming sound of Snape's voice bellowing his threat, and she realized that she needed to be backstage. Hastening to the stairs, she raced to her place as Harry, Ron, and Neville started the next scene.

Contenting herself with an aloof nod at Pansy, both girls climbed onto the bed that Dumbledore slid out onto the stage. Taking a deep, steadying breath, Hermione clasped Pansy's arm and mimed kissing it as the bed curtain opened.

The scene progressed, and everyone onstage paused as Snape's voice rang through the theatre. Harry, Ron, and Neville leant over the edge of the Boxes they were in, gazing about in concern. Snape stayed in the shadows in another Box, anticipating the hanging. Pansy began croaking, and Snape's creepy laughter echoed through the Hall. Ron and Neville tore down to the stage as Draco led a weeping Pansy into the wings. The ballet girls skittered onstage, and Dumbledore suddenly paused the rehearsal.

"I apologize, everyone, but I just realized something." He spun and searched the Boxes. "Severus!"

Snape stepped forward and peered out from the Box. "Sir?"

"I need you. Could you come down for a moment, please?"

Snape nodded curtly. "Certainly." In a flurry of robes, he swept down to the house, joining Dumbledore in front of the stage. "What can I do for you, sir?"

Dumbledore stroked his beard as he gazed thoughtfully at the stage. In a low voice, he mused, "Apparently, there are supposed to be large shadows playing across the backdrop, indicating that you are above the stage, ostensibly wreaking havoc. So, we need to get you up there and figure out what lights will work to that effect. Mr. Boot is already on the catwalk, ready to be hanged. If you would, please join him."

Snape inclined his head and strode off to the stairs, entering the wings and climbing up to the catwalk. Terry nodded gravely at him when he arrived. From below, Dumbledore called, "Severus, take a look around and see if you can find some lights that will serve our purpose."

Snape peered about and noticed a few spots near some lights that would work, but he was on the wrong catwalk to reach them. "I believe that there are a few. I shall have to go back and enter a different catwalk. Just a moment."

Snape backtracked and entered a catwalk further downstage. Stepping in front of the light, his shadow was cast over the backdrop, and Dumbledore crowed, "There we go! Now, are there any others that can cause bigger shadows?"

Snape glanced around, squinting against the heat and glare from the lights. Frowning, he retorted, "Yes, but I can't get to them easily or quickly. I'd have to go all the way back to the wings and back out on a different catwalk each time."

Frustrated, Dumbledore huffed and said, "How in the world do the Muggles do it?"

Clearing her throat, Hermione spoke up. "Sir?" Every head turned to look at Hermione. At Dumbledore's encouraging nod, she continued, "I'm sure that it wasn't all done by the same actor who played the Phantom. Really, anyone could make those shadows, while the Phantom is where he needs to be. Of course, it *would* be easier if Professor Snape were able to just pop about to all the different places he's needed..." She trailed off with a shrug.

Dumbledore stroked his beard again and nodded solemnly. Above him, Snape rolled his eyes with impatience and called, "I'm sure we'll work something out. Shall we carry on?"

Nodding absently, Dumbledore muttered, "Yes, yes. Very well then, everyone back to places. We'll pick up where we left off. Sorry for the delay! Keep up the good work, everyone." He shuffled back to the music box and looked up. "Here we go!"

As the music started again, the ballet girls danced, and Snape postured in front of the light, casting his shadow on the stage. The ballet girls fluttered and squealed in fright, and Terry peered purposefully down at the headmaster. As the music swelled, Dumbledore aimed his wand at Terry, and the boy stepped off the catwalk, the cable secured about him. He plummeted toward the stage, and the girls shrieked, scattering to the wings. As pandemonium reigned and Dumbledore started the shift of the sets for Harry's and Hermione's flight to the roof, Snape climbed back down into the wings, hoping to get to the statue in time to move onstage with it.

Unfortunately, there wasn't enough time for him to get back down and cross behind the stage to the statue before it was sliding into place. Annoyed, he paused in the wing and scowled toward where he was supposed to be. Displeased, he crossed his arms and seethed, waiting for Harry and Hermione to finish their song, so he could creep out to his place.

Harry and Hermione were singing, "All I Ask of You," smiling and touching, and Snape ground his teeth, trying not to let it get to him. Suddenly, he was startled by a touch on his elbow. Rounding with a fierce glare on whomever had the audacity to disturb him, he was surprised to see Ginny gazing up at him with understanding sympathy. She flashed a wan smile at him and dared to squeeze his arm before she let go and stepped back. His expression softened, and he inclined his head in tacit gratitude. Nodding at him, Ginny melted back into the wing, leaving him alone again.

Bolstered by the unexpected support, Snape took a deep breath and settled his shoulders, forcing himself to watch the scene, holding his renewed faith in Hermione like a talisman in his heart. As they exited the stage, Snape furtively slunk out to his place behind the statue. Dumbledore paused the music.

"Severus?" Dumbledore regarded Snape with ill-concealed surprise.

Scowling under the scrutiny, Snape rumbled, "There was not enough time for me to get down from the catwalk and to my place behind the statue. I apologize." He ducked his head.

Dumbledore grimaced and nodded ruefully. "I understand." He sighed and added, "I must work something out!" Frowning in determination, he huffed and then waved his hand at Snape agitatedly. "Carry on, Severus."

Dumbledore started the music and Snape began his song. When he neared the end, and climbed onto the statue, Dumbledore wafted it toward the proscenium and changed the sets back to the opera stage. Hermione stepped out onto the apron and Dumbledore shook the chandelier above their heads. Snape roared, "Go!" and the chandelier crashed at Hermione's feet to the accompaniment of the rushing music.

On the tails of the finale, Dumbledore called, "Severus! I'm bringing you down now." The statue floated back down and Snape stepped neatly off it. At Dumbledore's urging, the cast gathered on the stage for notes. Dumbledore gazed about silently for a moment before turning his attention to the cast and smiling. "All right, everyone, pay attention..." He spoke to each actor in turn, commending what they had done well and offering suggestions for what they still needed to work on. He came last to Snape, and he grimaced ruefully. "I promise that I'll figure things out for you, Severus. You're doing spectacularly. Just bear with me while I work out the snags."

Snape inclined his head politely. "Of course, Headmaster. I'm sure you'll come up with a brilliant plan as always." He blinked as the older man chuckled and buffeted his shoulder before turning back to the rest of the cast.

"I was going to have you all run through Act One more than once tonight, but I think I'll just let you go now, since I want to figure out how to fix some issues before we try again. Keep practicing, and don't forget all we've done here. We shall begin with Masquerade next rehearsal, so revise your dancing before then! Now then, run along to your dormitories, and we shall meet again Friday night. Good night, all!"

Surprised mutters rippled through the cast as they moved to leave. On his way through the house, Snape passed by Hermione and snapped, "Miss Granger, I shall collect you after dinner Friday evening as usual."

Hermione nodded soberly. "Of course, Professor. Good night."

Snape sniffed and cocked an eyebrow up as he spun to leave, raking his glare over the assembled students. Once in the corridor, he stalked off, leaving the rest of the cast to break off into smaller groups on their way back to their rooms.

Ginny pulled Hermione to one side and whispered, "You two were fabulous! I can't imagine how everyone else can't see the connection you have." She shook her head slowly in awe.

Hermione smiled. "I sincerely hope they *don't*! But it *is* amazing. Thank you again."

Ginny shrugged eloquently. "No worries. Hey, things really are starting to come together aren't they? The play, I mean."

Hermione nodded, beaming. "They really are. You were great, and the boys are doing well, too." She laughed. "I couldn't help but laugh at the way Ron and Neville were treating Pansy for 'Prima Donna!'"

Neville poked his head past their shoulders. "What are you saying about me now?"

Both girls spun to face him, smiling fondly. Neville's smile was mostly playful, but a little bit truly anxious. Ginny patted his arm and said, "We were just talking about how well you're doing. I can't wait for next rehearsal!"

Neville grimaced and flushed. "I've been practicing the dancing as much as I can. I don't want to mess up."

Ginny tucked her arm through his and beamed up at him. "You'll do fine. You were great at the Yule Ball years ago, and I'm sure you'll be great this time too."

Neville's ears went pink, and he ducked his head sheepishly. "Aww, thanks, Ginny..."

Harry suddenly appeared beside them, taking in the picture of Ginny hanging on Neville's arm and smiling at him, while Neville blushed. Affecting suspicion, he crossed his arms and frowned. "Oi, Neville! What are you doing with my girlfriend?"

Neville's eyes went saucer-round and he started stammering, ineffectively trying to pull his arm from Ginny's grip. Ginny held on tight and flashed a repressive glare at Harry. Eyes narrowed in admonishment, she tartly rejoined, "You be quiet. I was just complimenting Neville on his dancing. And I can hang on him if I like. *He's* the one who asked me out first, you know." Her chin tilted up defiantly, and Harry approached them. Neville eyed Harry nervously, unsure of what to do. Hermione looked on in resigned amusement.

Stopping directly in front of the pair, Harry scowled at Neville, then said to Ginny, "Yeah, well, obviously I've wised up since then." At that, he flashed a wickedly unrepentant grin at them both, chuckling at Neville's abject relief that Harry was only teasing. Harry jovially punched Neville in the shoulder, making Ginny drop his arm. "Honestly, Neville, did you really think I was serious? Come on, mate, you should know better than that. I'd think that if you had enough sense to realize how special my girl was, you'd have enough sense to know when I was taking the piss. Ease up." He threw his arm around Neville's shoulders and hugged him, pulling him into a playful headlock and mussing his hair.

Both girls intervened, swatting at Harry. Neville wrenched free of Harry's grip and smoothed his hair, rolling his eyes at Harry. Ginny smacked Harry in the gut and tugged him away.

"Honestly, Harry, don't be such a prat!" Dragging Harry down the corridor, Ginny glanced back over her shoulder. "Sorry about that, Neville. I'll teach him a lesson, I

promise. And I meant what I said about the dancing!" She flashed him an encouraging smile before turning forward again to struggle with the laughing boy in her grasp.

Hermione reached up to pat Neville's hair back into place, shaking her head. "Sorry. He doesn't know when to stop playing sometimes."

Neville shrugged. Turning a wry smile on Hermione, he tilted his head down the corridor to indicate they should continue as he said, "Eh, it's all right." They walked in silence for a moment, then Neville continued, "So, do you really think I'm doing okay?" He turned anxious eyes on Hermione. "I mean, I know I can't even come close to how fabulous you are. And, I never thought I'd be saying this, but even Professor Snape is really good. I just can't imagine I'd measure up to you."

Hermione smiled. "You really are doing well. Everyone is." She snorted. "I know what you mean about never thinking you'd be saying that, since I thought the same thing about Pansy earlier. She's really improved, and it's even more impressive since she's not enspelled. Actually, that's what Ginny and I were talking about: how funny it was to see you and Ron playing up to her for 'Prima Donna.' We know you loathe her, but you acted beautifully!" They laughed.

Arriving at the portrait hole, Neville stopped laughing and paused, regarding Hermione solemnly. "I could say the same to you. You really are a great actress, since you actually look like you enjoy being with Snape." He shuddered lightly and grimaced. "Really, better you than me."

Hermione froze at his words, pulse speeding up in worry. She took that moment to open the portrait and climb in, composing herself. Once inside, she straightened and faced Neville. In a low voice, she said, "Thank you. I appreciate the compliment. But, I have to say, Professor Snape isn't as bad as he used to be. Try not to let past impressions rule you, Neville. They can blind you to the truth."

Neville's brow creased in confusion, but Hermione simply squeezed his arm and whirled, retreating to her room before he could respond. Blinking after her, Neville pondered her cryptic statement as he headed up to his dormitory. But, as he climbed the stairs, his thoughts turned to how he could get back at Harry for scaring him, and all thought of Hermione's impressions of Snape disappeared from his mind.

Fortunately, after making up with Snape, things returned to normal for Hermione. Potions class was enjoyable instead of unbearable from the tense shame that had driven a wedge between them. Her appetite came back, and meals were fun again, especially since Colin had stopped staring after her. By the time Friday night's rehearsal rolled around, a crackle of nervous excitement rippled through the cast, some eagerly anticipating the Masquerade, and others dreading it.

At dinner that evening, Dumbledore excitedly approached Snape as he was mixing his tea after eating.

"Severus, I think I have hit upon a solution for your problem."

Snape looked at his employer blankly. "What problem would that be, Albus?"

Dumbledore beamed. "The one that keeps you from being able to get to your places onstage in time!"

Snape blinked. "Oh. That one. Very well. What is it?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "I'll explain everything tonight. Right now, I need to check on a few things first. Meet me here before rehearsal."

Slowly, Snape said, "Rehearsal begins in approximately 35 minutes. Doesn't now qualify as 'before rehearsal'?"

Dumbledore waved his hands about airily. "I'll have dinner end a bit early. Be back here in 20 minutes." He patted Snape's shoulder as he stood and announced, "I do beg your pardon, but dinner will be ending early this evening. You have about 15 minutes left before you will have to vacate the premises."

A curious mutter swept over the students still eating. Puzzled faces cast questioning glances at one another, to be met with eloquent shrugs of ignorance. Snape shot up straight in his seat. Dumbledore was turning to go, but Snape stopped him with a hand on his sleeve. Aggrieved, he said, "This means I have less than 20 minutes to collect Miss Granger to prepare for rehearsal?"

Dumbledore spun and gazed at him absently. "Oh! Well, I guess it does. Get a move on then, Severus. I shall see you back here at quarter 'til." He shuffled away quickly, leaving Snape staring after him, annoyed.

Snapping his gaze to Hermione, he saw her looking curiously at him. Lips thinning in aggravation, he stood, slamming his teacup on the table. Hermione's brows rose. Sharply, he whipped around the High Table and down the dais to Hermione. Hastily, she stood.

As he strode up to her, she queried, "Professor Snape?"

Scowling, he growled, "Hurry, the headmaster requires me to be back here at quarter 'til. Move along, Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded, eyes widening in comprehension. Even as she replied, "Certainly, sir," she jumped over the bench and raced down the aisle to the doors, Snape fast on her heels. Neither saw the owl-eyed looks cast their way by the other Gryffindors.

Rushing down the corridor and the dungeon stairs, neither spoke, saving their breath for making haste. Barrelling through the door to his quarters, Hermione made a beeline to his bathroom to fetch the hair products, and Snape snatched up his Phantom mask, cradling it in his lap as he sat, awaiting Hermione's return.

When she had stepped up behind him, briskly drawing the brush through his hair, she ventured, "What's going on? What does Dumbledore want?"

Snape snorted, annoyance apparent in his voice and posture. "Bugger if I know. He says he's figured out how to solve my problem... The one that keeps me from being able to get to all my places in time."

Hermione's hands were deft as she smoothed the pomade, but Snape sulked at the loss of the sensual enjoyment of her slow, loving ministrations. A trifle vaguely, she replied, "Oh. Well, that's good, isn't it?"

Snape rolled his eyes in pique. "Well, he could have bloody well chosen a better time to tell me! Nothing like making us rush..."

Hermione chuckled ruefully. Leaning closer to one ear as she pulled his hair into the elastic, she murmured, "He has no idea that it would be such a problem, thank the gods. I'm as disappointed as you are, dearest, but do try not to let it get to you so much. Else, he might begin to question why you're so put out."

Snape voiced a non-committal "Mm" as she patted his shoulders, indicating he was done. Rising in one smooth motion, he took her hand and pulled her to the doorway. But, before he opened the door, he startled her by pressing her against it and pouncing on her with a demanding kiss. It was fierce and deep, and it served to disarm her utterly.

Her hands scrabbled against the wood as his hand moulded against her jaw, his fingers slipping into her hair behind her ear. When he just as suddenly pulled back, she blinked up at him, dazed. His eyes were blazing with pent-up passion, and Hermione felt like she'd been hit with a Jelly-Legs Jinx. Before she could do anything more than gasp, he straightened, opening the door and thrusting her through it. After he locked and warded the door, he whirled on her, seeing her staring at him, still stunned.

A wicked smirk graced his lips and he murmured, "I shall see you in a bit. I must hurry to meet Dumbledore. Take your time recovering. You're not required for a while yet..." Smug amusement danced in his eyes before he nodded sharply and set off down the corridor, his footsteps echoing off the stones.

43- Birthday Surprise

Chapter 45 of 84

Rehearsal sees the Masquerade staged, and Snape finds out about Dumbledore's solution. Plus, Dumbledore has another surprise up his sleeve... It is January 9th, after all.

Author's Note: I know this chapter isn't as long as some have been, but it really lended itself to stopping here. I'd like to thank all you fabulous folk who read and review and even leave posts on my LJ. *hugs everyone* Speaking of my LJ, I have a request for assistance for all you fine people. I'm interested in knowing what kind of "get-to-know-you" questions you think two people who are in a new relationship should ask each other. Anything from the obligatory "What's your favourite colour?" to more obscure stuff. So, if you have suggestions (and these will help me in future chapters), please post them on my Livejournal at [Pern dragon's Livejournal](#) Thanks!!! And, as always, the lovely Lotm, Beta Git Extraordinaire, ROCKS! :)

Chapter 43- Birthday Surprise

Snape couldn't help but smirk to himself most of the way up the dungeon stairs. As he reached the top, he wiped his face of any expression, seeing a handful of students loitering outside the Great Hall. They backed away to the opposite wall as he approached, averting their eyes. Snape simply swept past them, entering the Hall and slamming the door behind him. Dumbledore was onstage, twinkling down at Snape as he strode down the aisle.

"Severus! There you are!"

Snape briskly mounted the stage, replying, "All right, Albus, what is it that you've come up with?"

Dumbledore clasped his hands over his belly, beaming. Excitement underlying his voice, he said, "Last rehearsal, Miss Granger made a comment that spurred me in a new direction."

Brow creased in perplexity, Snape queried, "What comment was that?"

"She said something about how it would be easier if you could just pop about to wherever you need to be. So, you shall!" He ended with a triumphant gesture, but Snape grimaced his incomprehension.

Curtly, he said, "How?"

Dumbledore rolled his eyes and drawled, "You'll Apparate, of course!"

Snape blinked. Eyeing Dumbledore as if he had finally gone daft, Snape slowly enunciated, "Albus, this is Hogwarts. I *cannot* Apparate within the grounds. Remember?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Oh, but my dear boy, it's so simple! Surely, you remember Apparating here? Here, in this very Hall?"

Comprehension dawned and Snape's face went slack. Eyes wide, he gazed at Dumbledore. After a beat of stunned silence, he hissed, "How? You daren't lift the wards from the whole Hall as was done for Apparition License classes! As soon as the students realize that the Hall is open to Apparition, they'll take advantage of it, and they'll obviously know once they see *me* Apparating. It would be irresponsible, Albus." He frowned in disapproval.

Dumbledore clapped a hand on Snape's shoulder and leant closer. "Lifting the wards for the Hall is not my plan. I can arrange it so you, and you alone, can Apparate within the castle. Now, you won't be able to Apparate from inside to outside or vice versa, but you'll be able to get where you need to be inside these walls. So, you see, it's perfect for you to just pop about like the Phantom! Now, just after dinner, I double-checked the spells to allow your magical signature to slip through the wards. So, when we finish rehearsal tonight, I'll need you to remain for a bit to allow me to cast the spells."

Snape stared at Dumbledore, incredulous. "Can you really do that? I thought the wards were woven unalterably..."

The older man chuckled and smiled conspiratorially. "You're not Headmaster yet, my boy. We do have a few secrets still." He snorted at the acid grimace Snape shot him.

Snape rolled his eyes as he mumbled under his breath, "As if I would ever want to be Headmaster! Gods save me..." After a beat, during which Dumbledore beamed at him, Snape continued, "Why can't you do it now? Isn't that why you brought me here?"

"It will take more time than we have right now, and I want to make sure it works. I wanted to tell you all about it though, so you'd be ready to stick around after rehearsal. We need to get ready for the rest of the cast to arrive." With that, he pulled out the music box and descended into the house. Snape stared after him, slightly dazed by the unexpected turn of events.

Humming under his breath, Dumbledore shuffled up the aisle to the doors, flinging them open to the cast assembled in the corridor. Snape slowly walked back into the house, sinking into a seat in the front row, lost in thought.

The hubbub grew as the students entered, chattering nervously in anticipation of staging "Masquerade." Snape was staring into the middle distance, his chin propped on his fingers, oblivious to the tumult around him.

Hermione eyed him curiously, and Ginny poked her in the ribs, cocking an eyebrow in question. Casting a mystified glance at her friend, Hermione shrugged. Dumbledore buzzed about, ensPELLing students, before directing everyone onstage. Everyone except Snape clambered up, many shifting from foot to foot in anxiety. Dumbledore arranged the set and placed everyone, explaining what he would be doing during the Entre-Acte. Then, hot on the tails of his explanation, he beamed at them and cried, "Action!"

At the swell of music, Snape snapped to attention, gazing up at the shifting sets and cast members. Once the opening scene with Neville and Ron finished, Dumbledore paused, pairing everyone up for the dancing. Snape slid his fingers over his lips to hide the smirk that heralded a gale of laughter at the horrified expressions on the faces of some of the boys, especially the one paired up with Trelawney. Shoulders shaking, he took a deep breath to regain his composure, interested despite himself in the staging of the elaborate Masquerade.

It took a long while to dry run the blocking and then match it with the music, all in short bursts. Eventually, they were to the point where the Phantom appears, and Dumbledore turned to Snape. "Severus, I need you to mount to the top of the staircase to start the next part of the scene."

Snape shot to his feet, putting on the Phantom mask. "Certainly, sir." He charged up the stairs into the wing and strode purposefully onstage to climb the staircase set piece. Once he was at the top, Dumbledore resumed giving blocking directions before walking them through the next part.

Snape descended the stairs, reciting his lines, gazing about at the rest of the cast staring at him in shock. He advanced on Hermione menacingly, miming ripping the chain from her neck. At that point, Dumbledore paused again, saying, "All right. Now, Severus, if you would please exit to the wing..." Snape nodded and stalked off, and Dumbledore directed the exodus and explained the way the sets would shift while Harry and McGonagall did their scene.

At his mark, everyone exited, and Harry called after McGonagall while the sets moved around them. They recited their scene, and when they reached the end, Dumbledore called everyone back out onstage. "Very well then, let's go back to the Entre-Acte and begin again. This time, we'll go through without stopping. Places!"

Snape climbed atop the staircase set piece and hunkered down on the top step, waiting until the piece slid onstage. As Dumbledore shifted the sets, he blinked in surprise at Snape ensconced on the stairs, then smiled in comprehension, nodding his approval. Snape inclined his head and leant forward, propping his elbows on his knees as he waited for the dancing to finish and for his cue to come up.

Dumbledore walked them through the dance again, smiling to himself at the way the students kept casting disconcerted glances at their Potions Master sitting so casually above them. *Now that I think about it, it's so nice to see the dear boy loosening up. He finally seems to have relaxed this year. It's quite refreshing...*

At the end of his part, Snape whirled and sped up the staircase again, riding it offstage as Harry and McGonagall continued. When they finished, the whole cast went through the scene in time to the music. Snape had to admit, from his vantage point behind everyone, that the dancing wasn't half bad. If everyone kept practicing, it should turn out pretty well. Still, he was heartily glad that he wasn't required to dance, too.

When the third run-through was done, Dumbledore called everyone onstage. "Well done, everyone! Now, next rehearsal, we'll go through the whole of Act One, on through this scene. However, I have an announcement to make, so if everyone could gather 'round..." The students sank onto the apron in a ragged semi-circle around Dumbledore. Snape stepped in from the wing, leaning against the proscenium, arms crossed, Phantom mask dangling from one finger. Dumbledore waved a hand to Snape. "Severus, come along..."

Snape frowned, sidling closer to the group, eyeing Dumbledore warily. *Surely, he's not going to tell them about the Apparating. Why create an uproar?*

Dumbledore was twinkling at almost twice his usual rate, making Snape's skin prickle with apprehension. "Everyone, today is a very important day. And, as befits our Phantom family, I would like you all to join me in wishing our very own Phantom, Professor Snape, a happy birthday!"

All heads turned to Snape, whose own eyes had widened so much that a complete ring of white surrounded his irises. McGonagall clapped a hand over her mouth. Snape couldn't breathe. It was like someone had kicked him in the gut. He felt his chin drop, and his mouth opened, futilely attempting a properly indignant response.

The beat of silence was charged with electricity, while Snape struggled to draw breath, and everyone stared at him, completely taken aback. Dumbledore chuckled and waved his hands at the cast. "All right, everyone, on the count of three, we'll all sing 'Happy Birthday' to Professor Snape. Ready? One, two, three..." He slashed the air with his hands, conducting them in song.

After "three," the cast began to sing, albeit hesitantly. Since they were still enspelled from rehearsal, at least they sounded fine, but the bewilderment was obvious in their voices.

When they began singing, a shudder rippled over Snape, seeming to release him from his paralysis, and he glanced wildly about, taking in the variety of the rest of the cast's expressions. His Slytherins looked mildly pleased and arrogant, apparently appreciating that their Head of House was being singled out by the headmaster for notice. McGonagall was twinkling nearly as much as Dumbledore, clearly holding in laughter at Snape's obvious discomfiture. Oh, he'd get back at her for that, hand on wand!

Some of the other students wore expressions of polite indifference, but when his gaze swept over the assembled Gryffindors, he was met with the most disparate expressions yet. Ron looked torn between turning green and laughing, the result of which was a particularly painful combination. Neville looked both confused and apprehensive...really, how different was that from his normal expression? Harry glared mulishly as he spat the words to the song. Ginny was actually smiling a little as she sang, apparently *meaning* the well-wishes. But, Hermione...

Snape fully expected to see Hermione beaming at him, persistent in her belief that people would like him, and that he deserved good wishes. But, he was galvanized to see her staring at him, eyes bright with a few unshed tears, as she tried vainly to master the hurt and anger that was writ plainly over her features. Swallowing hard, Snape stared dumbly at her, utterly confused at her reaction, and a frisson of unease swept over him. She shook her head minutely as the song finished, before brusquely turning away, refusing to look at him any longer.

When they finished singing, Dumbledore led the cast in applause, and Snape tore his gaze away from Hermione to glance at his employer, weakly nodding a demurral. The applause died away, and Snape cleared his tight throat, forcing out a stiff, "Indeed, Headmaster, you shouldn't have..."

Dumbledore chuckled again and waved his hand in dismissal. "Nonsense! You are an excellent role model for this cast, and you deserve a happy birthday, Severus. The least we could do is extend our regard. Of course, I sha'n't commit the faux pas of asking your age... or is that reserved only for ladies?" He turned a questioning glance to McGonagall, who tsked and swatted his arm.

"Oh, leave him alone, Albus. It's not nice to overwhelm people like that." She thinned her lips in a prim line, but they twitched when she eyed Snape. "In earnest, Professor Snape, one would hope that you would appreciate seeing another birthday, now that Riddle is no more."

Phantom mask hanging limply from one finger, Snape nodded woodenly, sweat oozing from his pores at the fact that Hermione had yet to look his way again, and her body language bespoke ill-concealed outrage. Throat dry, he rasped, "As you say, Professor McGonagall."

Dumbledore finally took pity on his embarrassed Potions Master and clapped his hands once. "Very well, then! Thank you all for joining me in wishing Professor Snape a happy birthday. You are free to go. Good night!"

Snape looked on in perplexity as Hermione shot to her feet, one of the first to leave the stage. She hurried up the aisle, leaving everyone behind with her long, angry strides. Snape blinked, feeling his chest grow tight with anxiety, and his gaze came to rest on Ginny, who was looking at him, brow furrowed in confusion. He kept his face blank as he locked eyes with her, but she glanced around furtively before nodding once and offering a wan smile, obviously meant to be reassuring. She started up the aisle, but Snape barked, "Miss Weasley!"

Whirling, she gazed up at him in polite inquiry. "Yes, Professor Snape?"

Staring hard at her, hoping her agile mind would pick up on his unspoken plea, he said, "Do not forget your detention Monday night. In my office, 7:00."

Her eyes widened in comprehension, and she nodded to herself before replying with grave courtesy, "I won't forget, sir. I'll be there."

Snape inclined his head in dismissal and she spun around, charging up the aisle after Harry. Frozen in place, Snape watched as the Hall emptied, leaving him alone again with Dumbledore. When the doors shut behind the last cast member, Snape forced himself to turn his attention to the headmaster.

Dumbledore took out his wand and looked purposefully at Snape. "All right. Let's get on with it, shall we? Just relax, Severus." He nodded reassuringly at

the still-stunned man and began a complex incantation, uttering what sounded to Snape's keen ear like a mixture of Latin and Gaelic and other things he'd never heard before.

Standing still, listening to the rhythmic sound of Dumbledore's low chanting, he slowly became aware of a brightening around him. Darting his eyes from Dumbledore to the space around his body, he saw a vague shimmering coalescing to encase him. It glowed a pearly bluish-white, and he felt his skin prickle with what felt like a static charge.

As Dumbledore droned on, gesturing with his wand in precise, finicky movements, a different kind of light developed. What looked like a grid work of faint yellowish-white lines spread around him, flowing throughout the Hall, and implicitly beyond. The light of the grid wavered and flickered like candle flame, and Snape could see how they intersected the man in front of him. Glancing down at his hands, he saw the lines did the same to

him, even through the bluish-white glow.

He was startled to realize that Dumbledore had stopped reciting, and jerked his eyes up. Dumbledore's face was set with concentration. Still, he nodded

soothingly to Snape. "I need to give the grid a chance to spread out to the extremities of the boundaries. It should take a few minutes. Once it has, I need only cast the spell to allow your magical signature to slip through them. If you look at the distance between each line in the grid, you'll see that there is very little space. These lines are keyed to the magical signatures of humans, which is

why the house-elves can pop about as needed. If a person tried to Apparate, the space within these lines is so little that one cannot occupy it successfully, which is how we are prohibited from Apparating within the grounds.

"During Apparition License classes, we have a way of impeding the connection of these lines within the space of the Great Hall, which allows the Apparition to occur in this area. However, what *you* will experience is unique. We are

recalibrating the grid to respond to your signature, and it will expand the space between lines to allow you to occupy that space successfully. It will all be easier to understand once we're done and you do it. Then you'll be able to *see* the results in the light around you and in the lines themselves."

Snape listened, rapt, as Dumbledore explained. A trickle of excitement crept through him at experiencing something so unusual. Gazing about him, he ventured, "Won't everyone throughout the grounds wonder what they're seeing?"

Dumbledore smiled and said, "Oh, heavens, no. Only those present at the time the spell is cast may see the grid. No one else should have any inkling about what's going on here." They stood in silence for a few moments more, until Dumbledore nodded, exhaling in satisfaction. "Ah... There we go. All right, the grid is complete, and now, I shall cast the next part, which will recalibrate the settings. Ready?"

Snape nodded, body tense with anticipation. Dumbledore began gesturing with his wand again, intoning more unintelligible words. Snape felt the charge that surrounded his body shifting, and he looked down at the bluish-white glow. It seemed to pulse, and as Dumbledore finished his incantation with a flourish, the glow shrank into him, almost disappearing. But then, in a flash of blinding light, it expanded, only this time, it seemed to *push* the grid lines out of the way, until they snapped to frame Snape. Staring about in wonderment, Snape watched the grid lines bending and retreating before him as he lifted his arm. The lines all backed away, leaving a short distance between the glow around him and the closest lines, very much like the distance maintained between two like-charged magnets.

Dumbledore clapped his hands together, pleased with his success, and Snape blinked at him, startled. A huge grin split the headmaster's face, and Snape felt his lips stretching into an answering delighted grin in spite of himself and the horrors he had just experienced at the hands of this scheming old man. Eyes sparkling with keen interest, Snape took a tentative step, watching the grid morph around him. After it settled, he took another, bolder step. It happened again. On a lark, he spun on his heel, peering over his shoulder at the swirl of his robe. It, too, was contained within the adjusting grid.

Before he could try anything else, Dumbledore urged, "If you would be so kind, Severus, Apparate to the opposite end of the stage. We need to test the results."

Snape nodded and concentrated. As Dumbledore looked on, Snape blinked out of existence where he stood and appeared on the far end of the stage, bluish-white glow still strong. A triumphant cry burst from the headmaster's throat at the successful Apparition. Snape gazed across the stage at him, a smug smirk gracing his lips.

"Excellent, Severus! Now, Apparate to all the places you need to be for the play so far."

Snape nodded again, looked around into the Boxes, and onstage, and above them on the catwalk. With a decided toss of his dark head, he disappeared. Dumbledore glanced around, but didn't see him.

"Where are you?"

Snape's voice, magnified by a *Sonorus* spell, echoed throughout the space. A ripple of suppressed laughter threaded through his voice as he said, "I'm here, the Phantom of the Opera."

Dumbledore burst out laughing, and Snape suddenly appeared onstage again, his expression one of devilish amusement.

"Well done. So, where were you?"

Snape tilted his head up to one of the Boxes. Then, without warning, he was gone again. Dumbledore glanced around, but stopped as he saw the looming shadow on the back wall of the stage, cast by Snape in the catwalks. It darted about, growing larger and smaller, until Snape appeared onstage again, at the spot where the trap door was supposed to be located.

"Very nice. So, I take it you're experiencing no ill effects?"

Snape strode briskly back to Dumbledore, posture proud and confident. "None, sir. I feel as good as ever."

"Glad to hear it. Obviously, it worked. As soon as I say the words, the grid will disappear, as will the light around you. We're the only ones who could see it anyway, but I daresay you'd rather not have a full-body night light if you could help it." He winked at Snape, smiling.

Snape snorted, lips quirking in a half-smile. "Indeed not." He looked back down at his hands again, and then cast a thoughtful look at the older man. "It just occurred to me, Albus: obviously I can Apparate within the confining grid, but what about Miss Granger? Several of the times I have to pop about, she has to be with me. Will you be casting this same spell on her?"

Dumbledore waved his hand dismissively. "No need. You'll simply take her as a Side-Along Apparition. Since *you're* the one who will be doing the Apparating, *your* signature will be let through. Of course, you must have complete control, and, I daresay, a firm grasp of anyone you're taking along. Miss Granger is a level-headed witch, I'm sure she'll grasp the concept easily."

Snape looked away quickly before Dumbledore could possibly see Snape's reaction to the thought that Hermione would definitely not object to however firm a grasp Snape had to take, but then he was assailed by doubts, remembering her angry countenance from earlier. Swallowing back his unease, he focused his attention back to the task at hand. Slowly, he said, "I'm sure you're right. However, forgive me if I would rather not make a first attempt with a student." Looking back up at Dumbledore, a challenge clear in his black eyes, he continued, "Would you allow me to take you on an Apparition, Albus?"

Dumbledore eyed Snape shrewdly. Slowly, he inclined his head, giving his assent. Then, stepping closer to the dark man, he remarked, "Prudent idea, Severus. Very well."

Snape's lips twitched, and he reached forward, gripping Dumbledore's arms just above the elbow. He was fascinated by the way the grid lines sprang to surround Dumbledore as well, once he had a firm grip on him. It certainly eased his mind about trying it with Hermione, especially since he wouldn't be able to see the field around them by then. Glancing slyly at Dumbledore, his voice low, he said, "Ready?"

Dumbledore nodded, and they winked out of view.

An instant later, Dumbledore let out a startled oath, grabbing for Snape as they found themselves precariously perched in the catwalks above the stage. Whipping a stern gaze around to meet Snape's devious one, Dumbledore frowned in reproach, and Snape tried to stifle a snort of amusement.

"Severus, really, that was completely unnecessary." He straightened, composing himself with dignity, but, all the same, he didn't let go of Snape's sleeves.

Snape cocked an eyebrow at him and drawled, "On the contrary, Albus. Now *you* know how disconcerting it is to be taken so by surprise. I merely thought to impress upon you exactly how 'completely unnecessary' that little show was earlier." As he finished, he pursed his lips in a disgruntled scowl.

To Snape's surprise, Dumbledore once again burst out laughing. That roguish twinkle back in his eye, he simply retorted, "Touché."

Rolling his eyes, Snape heaved a long-suffering sigh and said, "Shall we return, then?"

Dumbledore lazily replied "By all means, whenever you're ready." Snape inclined his head, and they popped from the catwalk back to the stage. Releasing the older man, Snape stepped back, and Dumbledore brandished his wand again. "Now, to finish the spell..." He pointed the wand at Snape, muttering a few words, and Snape watched the glow around his body get sucked into the wand, followed immediately by the light of the grid, all in one dizzying flash. The static charge he had felt along his skin disappeared, and he felt a stab of apprehension that he would no longer be able to Apparate. Seeming to read his thoughts, Dumbledore said, "Try it, Severus. It will work."

Snape concentrated and Apparated to the back of the house. Exhaling gustily in relief, he popped back onto the stage an instant later. Dumbledore beamed at him, about to speak, but before he could say anything, Snape asked, "So, I'll be at liberty to Apparate within the castle, but not the grounds?"

Dumbledore blinked at the interruption, but said, "Exactly. You may Apparate within the confines of the castle, or outside, but within the boundaries of the grounds, but you won't be able to Apparate from within the castle to the outside, nor from the grounds inside. Nor will you be able to Apparate from within the boundaries outside of them, or vice versa. Of course, there may be parts of the castle itself that are protected by other wardings, so you won't be able to Apparate into them..." He raised one brow at Snape, clearly indicating that his private quarters were so warded, and Snape would be foolish to try to gain entry.

Snape snorted mildly and nodded his understanding. Composing his expression into one of polite curiosity, he said, "Since you cast the spell, can you undo it?"

Dumbledore grinned. "Of course I can undo it, but it's just as complex as casting it. Don't worry, my boy, I sha'n't revoke it without your knowledge and consent. I know I can trust you not to abuse it."

Doing his best to ignore the pang of guilt he felt at those words, Snape ducked his head and murmured, "So you can't track my Apparitions, like you keep track of the doors to the secret passages?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "It doesn't work like that. However, must I remind you that you needn't misuse this privilege? Do try not to frighten the students with it."

Snape snorted and lifted his head, that devious gleam back. "Ah, but just *think* how much faster and easier my patrols will be, now that I can get to all the best spots so much more quickly..."

Dumbledore clapped a hand on Snape's shoulder, laughing, and guided him to descend into the house, to leave the Hall. As they strode up the aisle, Dumbledore said, "I do hope you'll enjoy the last hours of your birthday, Severus. Perhaps you could view this as my gift to you."

Snape shot him an aggrieved glance, then sighed. "Thank you, Albus. I will say that I shall enjoy not having to worry about encountering any dunderheads on my way back to my quarters..." And with that, he sketched a bow to Dumbledore and Disapparated.

Dumbledore rolled his eyes and chuckled, turning to the Hall to restore it to normal before he trekked up to his own quarters for the night.

When Ginny and Harry arrived in Gryffindor Tower, Hermione was nowhere to be seen. Ginny's first thought was to go immediately to Hermione's room to find out what was wrong, but she stopped herself before she said anything, loath to draw attention to Hermione's curious reaction. It wouldn't do to have people wondering. Resolving to address the matter later, Ginny allowed Harry to pull her onto a big squashy armchair in a corner, wrapping her in his embrace and snogging the daylights out of her. Under such an enjoyable onslaught, Ginny's worry over Hermione faded into the background.

Later, when they were interrupted by Ron whacking them with a pillow, gruffly saying, "Oh, give over already and go to bed!" Ginny remembered her distraught friend. But, by that time, it was already late, hence Ron's irritated assault on their persons, and she promised herself she'd talk to Hermione in the morning.

Saturday morning, Ginny went to breakfast with Harry, only to see a depressed Hermione toying with her eggs. Glancing up at the High Table, she saw that Snape was peering furtively through his hair at Hermione, and he cast Ginny a stone-faced look when he caught her eye. Only because she had got to know more about him recently did Ginny notice the tightness of his posture and expression, belying his purported indifference. Taking a deep breath, she sat by Hermione and said, "Morning. You feeling okay?"

Hermione shrugged listlessly and muttered, "I'm fine."

Harry poked his head around Ginny and said, "Do you need to see Madam Pomfrey again? You don't look so hot."

Hermione scowled and gave a petulant toss of her rather-bushier-than-normal hair. "I said I'm fine. Stop smothering me."

Harry jerked back in surprise. Wounded, he said, "Fine then. I was just concerned. Forget it." And, huffing indignantly, he sat back to fill his plate.

Ginny squeezed Hermione's arm until she looked at her. Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy. Tilting her head in sympathy, Ginny whispered, "You've been crying again. What's wrong?"

Hermione shook her head and sniffed. "Not here." And with that, she dropped her fork on her plate and pushed to her feet. With a mumbled, "I'm not hungry," she fled the Great Hall. Ginny stared after her in confusion. Flicking her glance back to the High Table, she saw Snape ostensibly contemplating his teacup. But, as she looked closer, she noticed that his grip on the handle was so tight that his knuckles were white. It was a wonder it hadn't broken off in his hand.

Turning her attention back to eating, she was involved in the usual breakfast chatter when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Snape rising to leave. He stood slowly, his posture one of carrying a burden, and as he departed, she noticed that his stride was slower. It was obvious to her that he was upset, likely very worried, and she felt for him. Especially since it had been his birthday. It's horrid to get something sad on your birthday. Really, it was a shame Hermione hadn't told her it was Snape's birthday, or she might have taken a moment to wish him many happy returns herself at some point.

She and Harry had returned to the Tower, and Harry was talking about dragging Ron away from Susan long enough to get in some Quidditch practice, but Ginny said, "Just wait a bit, would you? I want to talk to Hermione."

Harry bristled and snapped, "Why? She'll just bite your head off."

Ginny grimaced at him and sharply retorted, "Maybe it's girl stuff, Harry! I'll be back later." Favouring him with an aggrieved glare, she spun and flounced off to Hermione's room. She knocked briskly on the door, calling, "Hermione, it's me, Ginny. Can I come in?"

After a beat, the door opened, and Hermione climbed onto the bed, huddling against the headboard with a pillow in her lap. Ginny shut the door and perched on the foot of the bed. Crossing her legs, she propped her elbows on her knees and cupped her chin in her hands. Gazing soberly at Hermione, she murmured, "What's wrong? Why are

you so upset?"

Hermione levelled a sour gaze at her and drawled, "I'll give you three guesses and the first two don't count."

Ginny rolled her eyes at the sarcasm and said, "Snape?" At Hermione's nod, she continued, "What's wrong now? You weren't upset when rehearsal started last night, so what happened?"

Hermione worried her hands together and watched them, muttering, "It was his birthday."

Blinking at the vague answer, Ginny said, "Right. And? That reminds me, why didn't you say anything? I think it would have been nice to say something to him personally, you know, now that he's not being a raging git."

Hermione's eyes flashed angrily as she growled, "I didn't*tell* you because I didn't*know*! He never told me!"

Ginny rocked back, surprised. A weak "Oh..." issued from her lips. She stared at Hermione in shock, trying to assimilate the ramifications of that little fact.

Hermione tilted her chin up defiantly. "Exactly. Understand now?"

Casting about vainly for a reasonable excuse, Ginny offered a lame, "Maybe he forgot?"

Hermione's answering snort was scathing. "How can one forget his own birthday? I don't think so, Gin. I can't help but wonder what else he hasn't told me. I thought we were supposed to share things. I mean, this is something so *basic*, and he didn't care enough to tell me? It hurts. And it makes me wonder if he really cares about me as much as he claims, if he's going to keep things from me like this. I mean, is he going to open up to me or not? There *has* to be more than just the physical part!" Her hands clenched into fists, and she pummelled the pillow in her lap.

Ginny listened in mute sympathy. After a long moment, she finally ventured, "You know, you really haven't had much time together. Maybe it just slipped his mind in favour of more important things. It's not like you two can just sit and chat for hours. Give him a chance to explain, at least? He seems really worried. I thought he was going to shatter his teacup this morning. You two really have it tough, what with the hardly having a chance to talk and share and all that. Remember, you have to give him a little credit, until you can get to the bottom of things. Everything else worked out, didn't it? I'm sure this will too." She leant forward and patted Hermione's hands where they were fisted on the pillow.

Hermione's head fell back against the headboard with a dull thunk. She grimaced and rolled her head from side to side. Eyes closed, she said, "Why does this have to be so *hard*? It's not fair!"

Ginny saw the change in the other girl's posture that signalled her reluctant agreement to accept Ginny's reasoning. Her voice wry, she replied, "I've always heard that anything too easy to get was hardly worth having. So, if you think about it that way, proportionally, yours should be the greatest relationship ever, considering the difficulties you both have to face!"

Hermione opened her eyes, staring at Ginny, incredulous. Then, after a beat, she covered her face with her hands and groaned, before finally ending in a weak chuckle. Eyeing her friend through her fingers, Hermione said, "Leave it to you to come up with something like that."

Ginny grinned, glad she had been able to cheer Hermione up at least a little. Shrugging, she added, "Just remember, I'll do what I can to help."

Hermione smiled back, albeit wanly. "Thanks. Anyway, you should probably go find Harry. I'm sure he was bleating about Quidditch practice earlier."

Ginny laughed. "How did you know?"

Hermione smirked. "Of all the men in my life, Harry is by far the *least* complicated."

Both girls laughed, and Ginny rose, crossing to the door. "True. Which is why I'm clever enough for the both of us." Wrinkling her nose at Hermione, she waved and ducked out the door, shutting it behind her to the sound of Hermione chuckling.

44- Questions and Answers

Chapter 46 of 84

Ginny has her detention with Snape, and things become much clearer to all concerned. Hermione forges ahead with her probing for intimate details, and gets surprised in more ways than one.

Standard Disclaimer goes here as always.

Author's Note: Thanks as always to my super-awesome beta Ladyofthemasque, and to SnivellusSnape for pre-reading. Also, as usual, check out my Livejournal for update information and to see what's going on in my life that affects the speed with which I am able to update. <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/> And, here's my plea now: don't hurt me! I fear I may receive some irritated responses to the end of this chapter. But, I'll leave you to the reading of it to decide whether or not you'll be among them... LOL!! Thanks to all of you who are still reading this labour of love, and to all you fine folk who have left reviews and sent me emails and left posts on my LJ for all your support! *hugs for everyone!* :) Hope you enjoy...

Chapter 44- Questions and Answers

Snape trudged into the Great Hall for dinner Saturday night, having skipped the midday meal in favour of distracting himself from his worry by popping about to all the nooks and crannies that often held students in varying states of disarray. Methodically, he went through his usual patrol, flitting from one place to the next. Since it was daytime on a weekend, he knew that the chance of actually running into any students on his practice jaunt were slim to none. He had been quite pleased with the amount of time he realized that he could save on each of his duty nights, but that contentment faded as he took his place at the High Table, wondering whether Hermione would at least acknowledge his presence.

About ten minutes after he had arrived, Hermione entered, in the midst of a group of Gryffindors. As she strode down the aisle to a seat, Ginny elbowed her sharply, barely inclining her head toward the High Table where Snape sat watching through his hair. Hermione nodded and sat, taking a moment as she reached for the potatoes to glance at Snape.

His fork was gripped tightly in one hand, and he was rather unnaturally still, almost as if he were holding his breath. Hermione nodded and smiled faintly, looking away from him to find the teapot. Thus it was that she missed seeing him almost wilt, so much did he sag with relief at her smile. Passing a weak hand over his face, he exhaled slowly, calming his roiling stomach and pounding heart. When he looked again, Hermione was preparing tea with honey and lemon, a gentle smile on her lips, even as her eyes still held a shadow of sadness. Throat tightening in joy, he scrambled to do the same, Summoning the teapot with almost reckless haste. Flitwick squeaked as it went whizzing past his ear. Gravely, Snape turned to the little man and intoned, "I beg your pardon, Filius."

"Must be a powerful thirst, Severus..." Flitwick cast an aggrieved eye at Snape.

Snape nodded and his lips quirked. Flitwick was surprised at seeing the man almost smiling as he retorted, "Indeed, a thirst." Then, when Snape said no more, Flitwick shrugged and turned his attention back to his own meal.

Although it seemed as if Hermione had got over whatever she had been upset about...and it still galled him that he had *no idea* what that was...Snape still felt a nagging apprehension at the shadow in her usually bright eyes. Oh, what wouldn't he give to be able to just go to her to find out what was wrong...

All at once, it hit him. *Yes! Go to her. Apparate to her! But how? I've never seen her room, and I daren't be seen popping into the Gryffindor common room. No doubt Minerva would have an aneurysm... I can't Apparate blind. But how will I ever get to her room to be able to see it, so I'll know where I'm going when I Apparate there?* As he finished his dinner, he was absorbed in thought about this new puzzle. Standing to leave, he considered Apparating out of the Great Hall, but thought better of it, preferring to keep it a closely guarded secret until the next rehearsal, when he could surprise everyone with it. That decided, he cast one last longing look at Hermione before exiting and retreating to his quarters.

Hermione was still trying to get over her anger about Snape not having told her about his birthday. It was a small thing, a trifle really; but to her, it just served as an example of a larger problem. It was going to be difficult enough for people to accept them when they went public as a couple; if she couldn't even answer basic questions about the man she claimed to love, who would take her seriously? Only two days ago, she wouldn't have been able to answer the question of when his birthday was! Part of her anger also stemmed from the fact that she felt ashamed at not having asked very much about Snape. If they were to build a relationship, they'd need to learn as much as possible about each other, especially *before* they came out to the wizarding world at large.

In light of such considerations, Hermione began compiling a list of questions over the weekend that she'd ask Snape the next time they were together. Of course, there were far too many to ask in one sitting, but this was something that they could continue throughout their relationship, certainly.

Monday, the cast members took note of the new rehearsal date on the notice board, "*Tuesday January 13: Run through Act One through Masquerade, including songs.*" Hermione noticed that what had previously been on Wednesday nights seemed now to be on Tuesday nights. With a wry twist of her mouth, she wondered how the Gryffindor team would deal with the change of schedule. Sitting down for breakfast, she heard Harry and Ginny discussing that very fact.

"Harry, as team captain, you can schedule practice whenever you want. That's your prerogative." Ginny had a gentle hand laid on his arm.

Harry was frowning. "I know, but it was working out fine before. I wish Dumbledore hadn't changed it around." He sighed, running a hand through his messy hair. "I suppose I could change practice to Monday nights."

Ginny sat up straight with a guilty look. Sheepishly, she muttered, "Not tonight, though. I have detention tonight. But if we start next week on Mondays, that should be fine."

Harry scowled in irritation. "Then what are we going to do this week? I guess we could try for Wednesday night, but we may run into the Slytherin team trying to use it, since they'll have to reschedule too. I tell you, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff have it easy, being able to practice when we're rehearsing. Can you imagine the nightmare it'd be if people from every team were on cast?" Then, he turned a dark look on Ginny. "Don't go getting any more detentions, will you? Of course, it is Snape, so we can't expect him to be reasonable..."

Ginny rolled her eyes and said, "Can you honestly say McGonagall or Flitwick would have done any differently if I had done the same thing in their classes? Snape wasn't being unreasonable or favouring Slytherin or anything. I admit it: I got a wild hair and acted out. So, I got detention, end of story. It's just this once, and we'll be able to work out a new practice schedule, I'm sure."

Hermione stifled a laugh at Ginny's comments, leaning around her to say, "If you're that stressed about it, Harry, you could always ask Dumbledore if the schedule will stay this way when we have rehearsal Tuesday night."

Harry shrugged and nodded. "Yeah, I guess so..." With that, he gazed across the Hall at the Hufflepuff table, seeking out Ron where he sat eating with Susan. "I'll go talk to Ron about the change of practice time." Still looking as if the weight of the world were on his shoulders, he strode over to Ron.

Both girls rolled their eyes and giggled. Ginny said, "Honestly, sometimes he acts like being team captain is some huge burden. So I have detention tonight, big deal!"

Hermione glanced up at Snape. "Speaking of, are you going to just take your homework?"

Ginny nodded. "But I'm sure he'll come up with some clever story for me to tell everyone, so his reputation doesn't suffer." They grinned at each other again, two co-conspirators. Then, still with the scheming smiles on their faces, they looked in unison up to the High Table, where Snape gazed at them in consternation, clearly wondering what they were up to.

Giggling at his wary expression, Hermione started gathering her things for class, and leant closer to Ginny, whispering, "Listen, when you're there tonight, would you mind trying to let him know what happened? I'll get to talk to him tomorrow night, but it'd be nice if he at least had some sort of inkling."

Ginny nodded, retorting cryptically, "Something tells me it'll come up."

Hermione smiled. "Thanks. See you later!" Shouldering her bulging book bag, she shot one last smile at the High Table before exiting the Hall.

That evening, Ginny brought her book bag to dinner, so she could head straight to detention after eating. Snape had left the Hall earlier, but she hung around until it was time to head down to the dungeons. Waving casually at her mates, she set off at a brisk pace, thoughts whirling with curiosity about what the evening would be like. The door to Snape's office was open when she arrived, but Snape didn't look up. Knocking softly on the doorjamb, she queried, "Professor Snape?"

Snape irritably waved his quill at her, eyes still on the essay he was grading. His voice peevish, he said, "Enter! Sit. Shut the door."

Ginny spun in place, having stepped forward to sit at the desk opposite him, and reached back to shut the door at his command. Her blithe assurance that this detention would be a breeze faltered at his sour demeanour. After carefully closing the door, trying not to make any undue noise, she sat, quietly waiting for his attention.

Several minutes passed, and Ginny watched Snape's face go through a multitude of disgusted, exasperated, frustrated, dumbfounded, and aggrieved expressions, his quill scratching red comments on the essay all the while. Finally, as he reached the end, he threw the quill on the desk in aggravation and passed his hands over his face, raking his fingers through his hair as he heaved a huge sigh. Then, leaning back in his chair, hands clasped behind his neck, he levelled a dark look at Ginny and drawled, "Never become a teacher."

Ginny's brows shot up, and she blinked in surprise. Not quite sure how to respond, she merely said, "All right then."

Snape's brow rose as he noticed her reaction and he snorted. Arranging the stacks of parchment on his desk, he continued, "What have you brought to work on, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny picked up her book bag and said, "I have homework. I just wanted to be sure it was still okay to work on it, sir."

Snape regarded her with a slightly offended air. "Do you doubt my word, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny shook her head, but narrowed her eyes, pinning him with a shrewd gaze. "Of course not, sir. I simply wondered if there might not have been other pertinent information that you had *kept to yourself*." With that shot, she tilted her head to one side, eyeing him meaningfully.

Snape frowned in confusion, giving a frosty, "I beg your pardon?"

Ginny sighed and folded her hands on the desk. "Why not make the most use of the opportunity at hand, sir?"

Snape scowled even harder. Mystified, he murmured, "Miss Weasley, if you plan on making any sense this evening, I would appreciate it if you'd hurry up. I'm not accustomed to playing games."

Ginny returned his gaze frankly. "Fine. I'll try to be as plain as possible: why didn't you tell Hermione it was your birthday?"

Snape's brows shot to his hairline and his mouth dropped open in surprise. Incredulous, he croaked, "Sweet Circe, is *that* what she's so upset about? For Merlin's sake, I thought it was something important!"

It was Ginny's turn to scowl. "Important? It was dreadfully important to Hermione!"

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose, rubbing his eyes. "What? Why? I've not taken any notice of my birthday for ages. Why would she be upset? *I* was the one ambushed by that barmy old codger of a headmaster. *I'm* the one who should be upset!"

Ginny rolled her eyes and dramatically fell face first onto her crossed arms. Shaking her head into her forearms, she gave a frustrated groan. After a beat, she raised her head, gazing mournfully at Snape, who was staring at her, bewildered.

"You don't think it would have been nice to let her know it was your birthday, so she could have done something nice for you?"

Before she could continue, Snape burst out, "It's just a day! I'm not going to go trolling for gifts..."

Ginny sat up straight, frowning and planting her hands on her hips. "Professor!" Snape paused, taken aback by how very like Molly she looked at that moment. She pursed her lips for a beat before saying, her attitude haughty, "No one is accusing you of 'trolling for gifts'! It's not a far-fetched idea that a person might like to acknowledge the special day of a person she loves..."

Snape scoffed, "'Special day'; it's not that special..."

"Oh for Merlin's sake! Have you *still* not figured out that what you think is special or not may differ from what Hermione thinks? While you may not think it's worth fretting over, I can certainly see where Hermione's coming from. I'd be hurt too, if the man I loved didn't see fit to share intimate details with me." She sat back in her chair, her fingers drumming a staccato on the desk as she let the import of her words sink in.

Snape started to retort, but whatever he was going to say died on his lips as he stared at Ginny, completely thrown for a loop. His indignant posture wilted, and he sank into his chair, trying to fathom the mysteries of feminine anger.

His gaze turned inward, and he seemed to be staring into the middle distance, his expression one of chagrined befuddlement. After a long moment, he blinked several times, lifting his gaze to meet Ginny's. His voice was faint as he said, "Is that really all she's mad about? There's nothing else that I should know about?" He eyed her askance as she shook her head. Then, rolling his eyes, he continued in a very put-upon tone, "If there is, I beg you to share it with me, Ginny. I need as much forewarning as possible with Hermione."

Ginny blinked, and her mouth formed a stunned "o". Snape, seeing her astonished expression, frowned and queried, "What? There's more, isn't there? What is it?"

Ginny's lips widened into a gentle smile as she insisted, "No! No, there's nothing else. Honestly..."

"Then what was that all about?" he asked, making a vague gesture at her face.

Smile turning into a grin, wrinkling her nose, she tilted her head to one side and murmured, "You didn't call me Miss Weasley."

Snape's brows rose, and he ducked his head sheepishly. Clearly taken aback by her reaction to his unintentional slip, he cleared his throat and muttered, "I beg your pardon."

Ginny tossed her head and said, "No! It's fine, really. I just wasn't ready for it." She could see how uncomfortable he was, so she took pity on him. "You know what you said about needing forewarning with Hermione?" He glanced up and nodded, reluctant curiosity on his face. "Like they say, 'Forewarned is forearmed.'" She leant forward, affecting secrecy as she added, "Just don't tell anyone where your other two arms are."

The blank look on Snape's face was almost comical, as he processed the pun. Then, he seemed to crumble under the absurdity of it all, and Ginny witnessed a complete transformation. His lips curved in a smile, and he shook his head as a laugh bubbled up from deep within, startling her with its resonance. His shoulders shook with mirth as he laughed, black eyes nearly lost in the creases of his face.

Still, as unprepared as she was for such a reaction, his laughter was infectious, and she found herself chuckling along with him. He slowly wound down, wiping his eyes as his gales of laughter ebbed away. He shot her an appreciative look, and she couldn't resist shrugging and saying, "Old monster hunter joke..." At that, he snorted, chuckling more, until he trailed off, his breathing ragged.

Inclining his head in a slightly mocking bow, he politely offered, "My thanks, Ginny. I needed that."

Ginny flushed even as she found herself beaming at him. Nodding in return, she graciously replied, "My pleasure, sir. Anything I can do to help..."

Snape rolled his eyes and straightened in his chair. "Yes, well... I shall talk with Hermione tomorrow before rehearsal. In any case, I believe you said you have homework?" He tilted his chin pointedly at her book bag.

Ginny pulled out a textbook and parchment. "Yes, sir. Thank you." Dutifully, she bent her head to her work.

Snape pulled another essay in front of him and dipped his quill into the red ink pot, a faint smile still tugging at his lips. He had no idea he could feel so comfortable with another person who wasn't Hermione. But the camaraderie he felt between himself and Ginny was strengthened by the shared regard they had for Hermione; and, once he had begun appreciating Ginny for herself, it was easier to let his guard down in her presence.

They worked in companionable silence for a while, until Snape needed a break again from the travesties that masqueraded as essays. Abruptly pushing back from the desk, he looked up at Ginny, who glanced up, startled by the sound of the chair scraping on the stone floor.

He stretched his arms above his head until joints popped, and Ginny smirked. Shaking his hands loosely from the wrists, he politely inquired, "Would you care for a drink? I'm rather parched myself."

Ginny smiled and nodded. "That would be lovely. May I have some pumpkin juice? I sha'n't presume to ask for tea with honey and lemon..."

Snape snorted and grimaced at her. "Indeed. And suffice it to say that I shouldn't share that with anyone but Hermione anyway."

Ginny laughed and Snape Summoned a pitcher of pumpkin juice and a tumbler for her and one of ice water for him. He deftly floated them toward her, and she plucked them from the air, saying, "Thank you, sir."

Proffering his glass in a silent toast, he inclined his head and drank, leaning back in his chair, pondering the situation with Hermione. Ginny indulged in a few swallows before turning her attention back to her work. Snape watched the redhead for a while, thinking about how to mend things with Hermione this time, and how he could surprise her with his ability to Apparate in Hogwarts. It was a good thing Ginny wasn't looking at him, because eventually his expression became quite calculating and an almost wicked smirk crept over his face.

Banishing the water pitcher, he composed his expression into one of apprehension, all the better to make his pretence believable. Sitting forward in his chair, he rested his elbows on the desk, clasping his hands in a show of anxiety. Taking a deep breath, he lightly said, "Ginny..."

She looked up, politely attentive. "Yes?" Noting his expression, she sat up, brow creasing in concern.

Snape averted his eyes, staring at his hands as he haltingly ventured, "You said you'd do anything to help, right?"

Immediately, Ginny nodded. "Of course! Why? What can I do?"

Snape bit back the flare of triumph at her instant response. Affecting reluctance, he murmured, "Well... Never mind. I shall manage without it. It's nothing."

Ginny leant forward in her eagerness to help. "No! Please, tell me. I'll help, honestly."

Such a Gryffindor... Feigning his reticent acceptance of her coaxing, he continued, "I know you've told me what Hermione was upset about, but it would be so much better if I were to see it for myself..."

Ginny frowned in confusion. "Huh?"

Snape glanced around and leant forward, smoothing his hands before him on the desk, furtively whispering, "I have a Pensieve. If you'd allow me to see your memory of the conversation you had with Hermione, I could see firsthand how she acted."

Ginny's brows shot up and her eyes widened. Her own voice barely above a whisper, she said, "That's right! I remember Hermione telling me about it." Then, she flushed uncomfortably and ducked her head. "She told me you used it to convince her about seeing me with Harry."

Snape blinked, once again embarrassed, but shook himself to get back to the task at hand. "Yes, well... Enough about that. I'm more concerned about Hermione and how I can make things better."

Ginny nodded and wiped her face, doggedly ignoring her remembered humiliation. "Of course. Certainly, sir. I'd be glad to help. What am I to do?"

Snape flashed her a grateful smile, inwardly cheering the success of his ploy. Rising quickly, he said, "I'll return shortly with the Pensieve. It's not that difficult to use. Just a moment..." He spun on his heel, crossing to the wall where the door to his lab was disguised. Ginny's eye goggled as he waved his wand and the door appeared. He exited and shut the door behind him, but not before she caught a glimpse of his extensive potions equipment.

I'm so glad I had detention tonight. It'll be so much easier for them tomorrow night this way. She waited, a trickle of eager anticipation threading through her at using a Pensieve. While not unheard-of, they still weren't too terribly common.

Snape returned bearing the Pensieve. With a flourish, he placed it on his desk and gestured for Ginny to stand. "Come here. Watch me." He touched his wand to his temple, drawing it away slowly. Ginny stared in fascination as a silvery strand spanned the distance between his wand and his head. "This is a memory. As I concentrate on it, I can withdraw it to place it in the Pensieve." He drew it out to a little over a foot in length, then jerked his wand so that it broke off, floating into the basin and swirling there, silvery-white and glowing. Pointing at it in the basin, he said, "Look. It's the memory of you arriving tonight."

Ginny bent toward the basin, watching as the image of her arriving at the door to his office coalesced. What she found so fascinating was that the whole room was included. She could see Snape sitting at the desk, grading, even though the memory was his. She looked back up at Snape in wonder. "Wow! This is incredible."

Snape quirked one corner of his mouth up as he dipped his wand back into the basin, drawing the memory back up to his head. "Ready? Think of the conversation with Hermione, and draw the memory out with your wand. When you reach the end of it, break it off and drop it into the Pensieve."

Ginny straightened, solemnly placing her wand at her temple and screwing her eyes shut in concentration. Snape allowed himself a smug smile of satisfaction for a brief moment. As Ginny pulled the wand tip away from her head, the silvery strand stretched between them. Opening her eyes in anxiety, she let out a huge sigh of relief when she saw the glow by her head. Closing her eyes again, she drew the strand out for several inches, well over a foot, then finally snapped it off and dropped it in the basin.

Snape leant over the Pensieve, ready to enter the memory. Stopping short, he looked gravely at Ginny and said, "It's easier if I enter the memory. Just wait until I finish, and you can have the memory back immediately." Ginny stood back, unsure of what to expect, and nodded.

Heart beating faster at his success, Snape bent over, dipping his face into the surface of the memory, letting himself be drawn into it. As it replayed, he not only took note of his surroundings, committing them to his memory, but also listened to the plaintive tone of Hermione's voice as she lamented about him not sharing with her. A pang of remorse hit him, and he realized just how important the little things were to her. Stepping closer to her, he reached out to caress her hair, his hand just passing through her instead.

Sighing, he paced through the room, listening to the girls' conversation. He paused to appreciate the fact that Ginny had wanted to offer her regard for his birthday as well. A warmth spiked through his chest at the thought that he not only had Hermione, but he apparently had a friend too. The memory was nearing its end, and Ginny was crossing to the door. Snape cast one last look at Hermione and retreated from the Pensieve. Coming back to himself, he straightened, seeing Ginny staring at him, owl-eyed. Inclining his head in gratitude, he said, "That was more helpful than I can tell you. Thank you, Ginny."

She smiled brightly. "You're welcome! So, how do I get the memory back now?"

"Place your wand in the basin and draw it back out. Deposit it in your mind again, and you'll be as you were."

Ginny did as she was bid, beaming at him in delight. "That was one of the coolest things I've ever seen. Thank you!"

Snape snorted, picking the Pensieve back up and crossing to his lab. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. It was immensely worthwhile for me. I shall be right back." He disappeared again, and Ginny sat down, marvelling at the unique experience.

Snape returned and sat at his desk, looking completely satisfied. Ginny complimented herself on helping him. Hermione would surely benefit, too, of course. Snape snagged another essay and murmured, "I appreciate your help. Forgive me while I go back to work."

Ginny nodded and followed his lead, turning her attention to her homework again. Once again, they settled into companionable silence, with only the scratch of quills on parchment and the soft sound of pages turning accompanying them as they worked.

A long while later, Ginny finished her assignment and shut the book, sitting back in her chair. Snape glanced up, blinking rapidly to focus on her instead of the horrid penmanship of the essay in front of him. She smiled and blithely announced, "Finished!"

Snape checked the time and shot up straight in his seat. "Indeed. I daresay your 'detention' has gone on long enough. You may return to your Tower."

Ginny stuffed her things into her bag. "So, what shall I say my punishment was, Professor?" She glanced up at him, eyes twinkling with merriment.

Snape affected intense thought. Circling his lips with his fingertip, he murmured, "Well, since your crime was chewing gum in class, perhaps your punishment should fit the crime. Tell anyone who asks that I had you scraping off whatever might have been stuck under the desks and chairs." He levelled a haughty look at her. "Yes. That sounds sufficiently dreadful as to discourage any copycats of your abominable performance."

Ginny bit her lip and averted her eyes to hide the giggle that was threatening. Swallowing back her smile, she composed her expression to a dutifully contrite one, looking solemnly back up at Snape. She was taken aback at his rather violent snort.

Rolling his eyes at her, he hissed, "You needn't play the innocent with me, *Miss Weasley*. You forget that I know better." With that, he cocked one eyebrow up in a smug look, his lips twisting wryly. Ginny's brows rose, and she blinked rapidly, flustered by the jibe. Snape saw her chagrin and a snorting laugh sputtered forth. "If only you could see your face!" Smirking at her, he drawled, "Gotcha..."

Ginny stared at him in amazement. Pursing her lips and glaring at him, she wagged a finger in his direction as she stood, shouldering her book bag. Leaning forward, she murmured, "You're evil! Don't think that I sha'n't warn Hermione about your sneaky tricks..."

Snape tossed his head and snorted again. "I daresay you wouldn't be telling her anything that she doesn't already know, my dear. As for me being evil... Well, what kind of ex-Death Eater Slytherin spy would I be if I weren't?" He flashed a feral grin at her, hands outspread, but then he sobered, a shadow seeming to cross his face, and his hands dropped to the desk again. His voice was low as he said, "In truth, Ginny, I do hope I haven't offended you. It was all in fun..."

Ginny felt a rush of compassion for him, and she took an involuntary step forward as she replied, "Oh, no! I know that! Really, I do. I would never have said that if I was serious. I'm just not used to a..." She trailed off, looking sheepish.

Curiosity piqued, Snape said, "A what?"

Gazing apologetically at him, with a wan smile, she mumbled, "*A playful* Snape."

Snape's face seemed to turn to stone as he absorbed her words. Disbelief oozing from every word, he repeated, "A... playful... Snape? Merciful heavens, you make me sound like a bloody puppy."

They stared at each other for a beat, and then Snape rolled his eyes. "Oh, for heaven's sake, off with you. Get to bed before Filch comes looking for students out after curfew. Besides," and he levelled a dark glare at her, his voice dropping to a growl, "if you stay too long, I might get too excited by having company and piddle on the floor."

His voice was full of scathing disdain, but Ginny was so surprised by his remark that she clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the shriek of slightly hysterical laughter that burst forth. Hurrying to the door, she paused to turn back to him. "Sorry, sir. Good night. I'm sure everything will work out fine tomorrow night. I'll be sure to talk to her."

Snape nodded, but when Ginny simply stared at him instead of leaving, he lifted one long finger, pointing imperiously at the door. Deciding not to push her luck with this new side of Snape, Ginny whirled and beat a hasty retreat, shutting the door behind her with a sigh of relief and trekking back up to Gryffindor Tower.

Ginny was glad that Harry wasn't waiting for her when she arrived in the common room, and she made a beeline for Hermione's room. Knocking briskly, she smiled at the curious expression on Hermione's face as she opened the door.

"Come on in." Hermione gestured toward the bed and sat against the headboard as usual. Once Ginny was settled comfortably, Hermione ventured, "So, how was it?"

Ginny blinked rapidly, her face contorting into a swift succession of expressions. Hermione frowned in confusion. Finally, Ginny cast her eyes heavenward and spread her hands in a gesture of giving up. "It's so hard to describe. It was fine, really. But, I've never seen Snape like that before either. He *teased* me!" She broke off with a laugh, shaking her head at the memory.

Hermione's eyes lit up, and she grinned in delight. "Really? What happened?"

Ginny quickly recounted the gist of the evening, noting how pleased Hermione looked at the revelation that Snape had been so casual and friendly with Ginny. Of course, she left out the exact wording of Snape's request for assistance, and she didn't bother detailing the whole Pensieve event. She wanted to savour that for herself. "So, anyway, he knows why you were upset, even though he can't fathom it. I explained some, but you can talk to him about it tomorrow night. Oh! And he said to tell anyone who asks that since I was in trouble for chewing gum, I had to scrape stuff off the undersides of the desks and chairs." She laughed again.

Hermione wrinkled her nose and nodded. "Figures. Thanks, Gin. I appreciate your help. *Again*." At that, Hermione rolled her eyes and sighed wearily before flashing a smile at the grinning redhead.

Shrugging nonchalantly, Ginny said, "No worries. I like being able to help. Especially if it's with something secret and dangerous! Legacy of living with the twins, I reckon." Tilting her head, she shot a lopsided smile at Hermione as she stood, shouldering her bag. "But, I'm gonna' head to bed. I'll see you in the morning!"

Hermione squirmed off the bed to the door, ushering her friend out. "Right. Good night!" She shut the door behind Ginny, locking it. Crossing to her desk, where she had been working on the questions she wanted to ask Snape, she scratched a few more ideas before she neatly rolled it up, stuffing it in her school robe's pocket. She couldn't wait till rehearsal.

Tuesday evening, Hermione watched Snape descending from the High Table with eager anticipation. Unconsciously shoving her hand in her pocket to check for the scroll of questions, she wiped her mouth with her napkin and sat back, preparing to stand when Snape reached her. As Snape paused behind her, he merely intoned, "Miss Granger," before continuing on down the aisle, confident that she would be following. Rippling her fingers in farewell to her friends, Hermione briskly trotted behind him, absently watching the swirl and flap of his robes.

As they reached the dungeon stairs, Snape paused for her to catch up, and they descended in tandem, both secretly sneaking glances at the other. Snape marched them directly to his quarters, past caring whether anyone was watching. Silently, he opened the door and gestured for her to enter. Nodding gravely, Hermione stepped in, and Snape shut the rest of the world out with the firm slam of his door.

Immediately, Hermione spun and advanced on Snape, wordlessly wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face against his chest. Relieved, but still apprehensive, Snape enveloped her in his embrace, tilting his head to lay his cheek atop her curly pate.

There was a long moment of loud silence, filled with unspoken pledges and atonements. Eventually, Hermione lifted her face to look at him, softly whispering, "Happy belated birthday..."

Snape closed his eyes, suppressing a grimace. Eyeing her with a mixture of reproach and remorse, he murmured, "I thank you for the sentiment. Although, I'm sure you realize by now that I've not been one to celebrate my natal day."

Hermione nodded mournfully. "That's horrible. Even if one doesn't make a big deal out of it, one should still recognize it as a special day!"

Snape heaved a deep sigh of aggrieved acquiescence. "Obviously, *now* I understand how you feel about that; but you must realize that my omission of that fact was in no way a reflection on us or my feelings for you. There's no need to get so upset, love." His brow creased with puzzled concern, and he squeezed her tighter in his embrace.

Hermione rolled her eyes and groaned, letting her head loll back in petulance. Pulling out of his grasp, she took his hand and pulled him toward the hearth, guiding him to sit while she went for the hair products. Snape sat, bemusedly watching her as she emerged from the bathroom.

Hermione took her place behind him and gently turned his face away. Brushing through his hair, she launched into her explanation. "I know Ginny tried to tell you what I was so upset about, but I don't know that you fully understand where I'm coming from." Before Snape could even form a response, she barreled on. "I realized that I am fathoms deep in love with a man I scarcely know, in regards to all the mundane little things that people learn about each other. I mean, think about it, Severus, it's going to be hard enough to deal with the reactions when people find out about us. How can we possibly hope to be taken seriously by anyone when we can't answer some basic questions about each other? I just couldn't believe that you would keep from me something so simple, yet so indicative of the intimacy we should, by rights, share. I felt hurt that you hadn't told me, so I could at least celebrate the day that the man I love was brought into this world, and I felt guilty that I hadn't even thought to *ask* about something so basic. And, of course, since I couldn't exactly *talk* to you about it, it festered and rankled."

Snape interrupted desperately, "I never intended to hurt you, Hermione..."

Hermione caressed his head lovingly. "I know, dearest, but it hurt nonetheless. At any rate, I thought about why I was so upset, and I decided that there was only one thing to do that could fix the problem."

Wary, Snape queried, "What's that?"

Smoothing the pomade through his hair, she blithely announced, "I came up with all sorts of questions that we should ask each other, so we can get to know each other better. Some are more detailed or probing than others, of course."

Snape blinked in dismay. "Are you suggesting that we play '20 questions'?"

Hermione deftly gathered his hair into the elastic and snorted. "Well, to be honest, I thought of many more than that. But, it's not supposed to be an interrogation. It's just spurring us to share things that might not come up as easily otherwise, given our strained circumstances."

Patting his shoulders to indicate she was done, she leant forward and placed a light kiss on his neck, eliciting a shudder. Snape stood and spun to face her, grasping her hands and pulling her to him. Gazing down at her, he noted the sparkle in her eyes at telling him her idea, and he realized that, as loath as he was to divulge intimacies generally, he needed to make an exception on her part, since he wanted to be with her always, and everything would come out eventually. Really, for all intents and purposes, her idea was not without merit. Glancing quickly at the clock, he saw they still had a while before rehearsal, and he swooped down to kiss her, once again amazed at the instant response of his body to the taste and feel of her lips on his.

Hermione melted against him, delighting in his strong embrace and the intensity in his kiss. Sliding her hands around his neck, she let out a soft moan of pleasure as he nipped and nibbled his way back to her ear. A ripple of heat swept through her at the sensual timbre of his voice as he murmured, "While I can certainly appreciate your idea, I must say that when we're together, I can think of much better things with which to occupy my mouth." With that, he suckled her earlobe, sending chills over her skin.

Hermione gasped, clutching convulsively at his shoulders. Desperately trying to maintain control of her faculties, Hermione reproached him, "Severus! I told you that wouldn't always work..."

His hands slid down her back, cupping her arse as he nuzzled her throat. "Mmm, what wouldn't always work?"

Panting shallowly, she forced out, "Using intimacy to get your way. I don't think I'm being unreasonable..."

Snape paused, soaking in the import of her words. He heard her take a breath and hold it, and he pulled back to look her in the eyes. "Hermione, I am not trying to 'get my way.' I merely thought you might enjoy a chance to be together while we had it. I'm not ignoring your solution."

Hermione bit her lip, chagrined. "Oh. I'm sorry. I just wanted to get to know more about you too, while we had some time alone." She looked down, chastened.

Snape kissed her, suckling on her lip where she had bitten it. She voiced a breathy moan and relaxed even more in his arms. His voice a deep rumble, he said, "Very well then, ask me something, and I shall answer it." He continued nipping her neck and throat as he spoke.

Hermione blinked rapidly, trying to marshal her scattered wits, as they were dancing away on the surge of sensation that Snape was awakening in her again. Scrambling for the scroll in her pocket, she wrestled it open, trying not to knock Snape in the head as she unrolled it. Clearing her throat, she rasped, "All right. First, since you already have access to this information about me, I wanted to even the score. What is your middle name?"

Snape looked up at her incredulously, as if he couldn't believe that she was actually forging ahead with the whole business. Sighing in resignation, he straightened, tugging her in front of the chair, where he sank down and pulled her into his lap. Making a concerted effort to take her seriously, he composed his expression and replied, "Donovan."

Hermione stared at him blankly. She looked as if she had had the wind abruptly robbed from her sails, and Snape bit back a smirk.

Her voice weak, she said, "Really?"

Arching one eyebrow at her, he affected asperity and said, "Yes, 'really.' Why do you ask?"

Hastily caressing his arm in apology, Hermione said, "I didn't mean anything by it, honestly! I just... I guess that with a name like Severus, I expected something more unusual." She trailed off, flashing a sheepish half-smile. Then, recomposing herself, she briskly said, "So, Donovan, eh? That's a nice name."

Still feeling a trifle put out at her initial reaction, Snape retorted, "It's got a bit more to it than, say, 'Jane.'"

Hermione cut an acid glance at him. "Don't I know it! You needn't heckle me about it. I know my middle name is downright boring."

Ducking in to kiss her, making amends, Snape contritely said, "It may be the epitome of plain, but 'Hermione' is unique enough for such a one-of-a-kind woman, my dear."

Hermione smiled and kissed him back, taking a moment to revel in it, deepening it and squirming on his lap, where she could feel the definite beginnings of evidence of the effect she was having on him. Grinning as she pulled back, she explained, "My folks wanted to give me a name that no one could possibly take issue with, and they obviously opted for the simplest of the bunch. I was always at liberty to choose which name I wanted to go by. But, as you might have guessed, I always felt different enough to feel I warranted a different name. Hence, I stuck with 'Hermione.' I daresay part of that feeling was due to the fact that I was a witch." She paused and chortled ruefully. "So, tell me, what's the story behind your names?"

Snape was eyeing her lips wistfully as she talked, and Hermione chuckled indulgently as she leant forward, nibbling his throat as he attempted to formulate a response. A note of warning in his voice, Snape said, "Hermione..."

Murmuring against his skin, she replied, "Go on, love, I'm listening."

Closing his eyes in exasperation, Snape took a deep, steadying breath and began. "My mother was a witch, and my father was a Muggle. She was the one who suggested

'Severus.' My father wanted to give me a 'normal' name as well, and he preferred to draw from his Irish-Gaelic family heritage. So, my mother looked up several choices and presented them to my father. He liked the rhythm of 'Severus Donovan Snape,' and he also appreciated the meaning."

Intrigued, Hermione pulled back from suckling his earlobe to interject, "Oh! What does it mean?" before ducking back down to attack his flesh again.

Swallowing hard against the growing desire to stop all this infernal talking and put their tongues to better use, Snape doggedly forged on. "It means 'dark warrior.' My father thought it sounded strong, and with the family colouring, he figured I'd be dark instead of fair. He was right."

Gazing at Snape delightedly, Hermione felt a thrill run through her at the romance of the choice. "He was indeed. You are a dark warrior, in more than one sense. How funny that it all came so true! So, what are you parents' names?"

Hermione suddenly noticed that Snape no longer seemed to be completely there. It was as if a curtain had fallen between them, and he seemed closed off. His voice was bland as he said, "Tobias and Eileen."

Lifting a hand to mould against his cheek, Hermione searched his face worriedly. "Severus? Are you all right? What's wrong?"

Snape closed his eyes, his brow creased in remembered pain. Gripping her hand in his and turning to kiss her palm, he said, "I just don't particularly enjoy talking about them. Ours wasn't the perfect family."

Heart throbbing in sympathy, Hermione whispered, "'Wasn't'? As in past tense?"

Snape nodded faintly. His voice was low as he said, "They're both dead. Long ago."

Hermione impulsively wrapped him in her arms, burying her face in his neck, murmuring, "I'm so sorry, love. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories. I didn't know."

Gently caressing her back, Snape retorted, "Nor should you have known. I'm not famous for spreading my personal history around. Don't fret, love." He pulled away, encouraging her to lift her face from his neck. Looking in her eyes, he continued, "Now, I understand that you want to ask me everything on that bloody scroll of yours, but I insist that you cease with the questions at this point, and allow me to properly make up for upsetting you." As he spoke, his expression slowly changed from serious to mischievous, and the glint in his black eyes made her insides quiver.

Biting her lip, peering at him through her lashes, she flushed under his heated gaze and nodded faintly. "You don't need to do that..."

Snape lifted a hand to tangle in her hair at the back of her neck, and his voice was a low purr as he cut her off, saying, "Oh, but I *do* need to..." Closing the distance between them as he spoke, he pinned her with a searing kiss, his other hand sliding up her leg to cup her arse where she perched in his lap. A deep growl of contentment issued from his throat, and he shifted her weight against his throbbing erection.

Hermione gasped into his mouth as he devoured her, feeling tingles of sensation racing through her at the feel of his cock pressed against her arse. Clutching his robes, she pulled closer to him and traced a hand around his neck, below the ponytail, sliding it beneath his collar, caressing his warm flesh.

Ever mindful of the time, Snape spared a fleeting glance to the clock, noting how close they were to rehearsal. A flare of triumph followed his thought that they could make out longer than usual since he could Apparate them to the Hall.

After a few moments of heated snogging, Hermione squirmed off his lap, pushing him back in the seat as she straddled his legs. When she planted herself astride him, Snape wrapped his arms around her, groaning as she rocked her hips on his hard length. He wrenched away from her lips, and a breathy, "Hermione" met her ears as he travelled down her throat, leaving a trail of hot, wet kisses until he reached her breasts.

Nuzzling her chest through her robes, Snape could feel her nipples hard under her clothes. Cupping a breast in one hand, he squeezed gently, groaning again as she ground her hips on him more fervently. Her lips were warm on the shell of his ear as she murmured, "Gods, Severus, you make me want you so much, so easily!"

A rumble, "Indeed" vibrated against her neck. Overcome with raging desire, Snape gripped Hermione, lifting her and setting her on her feet. She blinked hazily at him. He guided her to turn around, and pulled her back onto his lap, pressing her against his chest and enveloping her in his embrace. His nose tickled her ear as he purred, "I can give you some of me... as much as we can now."

Hermione felt a surge of liquid warmth spreading in her knickers, and she let her head loll back, abandoning herself to the exquisite delight of his deft fingers stroking her thighs. Accepting the unspoken plea, Snape caressed her thighs, hiking her skirt higher with each pass. Hermione whimpered, eyes closed in bliss.

Snape felt his cock jumping in excitement. Oh, how he wished he could just take her! Glancing at the clock again, he increased his ministrations, trailing his fingertips up to the juncture of her thighs, lightly rubbing over the damp cloth of her knickers, smiling ferally at the heat pouring from her, and at the amount of her juices soaking the fabric. Hermione shuddered and moaned, her legs spreading wider of their own accord. Needing no further invitation, Snape slid his fingers to the elastic band, dipping underneath, stroking through her slick curls.

A strangled cry wrenched from Hermione's throat, and she curled forward, quivering. Grabbing wildly for the armrests to steady herself, she saw the clock, gasping in horror at the time. Frantic, she hissed, "We're going to be late! Severus, you must stop! We have to go!" Desperately grabbing for his hands, Hermione struggled to regain her composure under the sensual onslaught.

His voice low but forceful, Snape said, "Relax, love. We'll not be late. Trust me!" He resisted her attempts to remove his hands from her person, slipping a finger between her plump lips and circling the stiff nub he found there. Hermione shivered again, her back arching in ecstasy despite herself. Lost to the sensations, Hermione panted, keening moans emerging from her lips as he increased his attack.

Cupping a breast with the other hand, he palmed her nipple through her clothes, suckling on her earlobe. Her noises increased, and he exulted in the ease with which she responded to his touch. She was about to orgasm, and Snape's cock pulsed violently. As she crested the peak, he breathed in her ear, "Hermione, love..." It pushed her over the edge, and she gasped, convulsing in his grasp, drenching his fingers as she shattered in orgasm.

Her voice was hoarse as she said, "Oh gods, Severus. That was incredible, but what were you thinking? We'll never make it to the Hall in time, and how will you explain to Dumbledore?" He heard the note of panic in her voice as she weakly pushed out of his embrace, straightening her clothes and smoothing her hair.

Standing gingerly, so as not to pinch his erection, he regarded her with a supremely satisfied expression. "I told you, dearest, don't fret! I have everything under control." The wicked smirk and the devilish gleam in his eyes did little to reassure her, and she eyed him warily.

"How so?" She was finally mastering her breathing, and she smoothed her skirt and robes.

He stepped closer to her and gripped her waist. Her hands loosely circled his elbows. A mischievous grin on his face, he purred, "Do you trust me?"

Hermione's brows shot up at the question. Indignantly, she retorted, "Of course I do!"

His grin widened, and his eyes narrowed in challenge. In a silky purr, he said, "Very well then. Hold on!" And with that, he Disapparated, taking her with him.

45- Apparition Practice and an Introduction

Chapter 47 of 84

Snape surprises Hermione and the rest of the cast with his ability to Apparate, and has far too much fun for his own good. Hermione plies him with another question from her getting-to-know-you scroll, and Snape manages to get to know yet another close friend of Hermione's.

Standard Disclaimer goes here as always.

Author's Note: I'm so glad many of you weren't upset about the "cliffie" last time. And I'm pleased that there wasn't a rousing chorus of "Ewww, that's not a good middle name for Snape!" LOL This chapter answers some of the questions you've been asking, so I hope you enjoy it! Deepest gratitude as always to my lovely Beta Goddess, Ladyofthemasque, and to SnivellusSnape for pre-reading and sounding board action. Don't forget, you can always check out my LJ for progress and other updates: <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/> Muchos smooches to all you fab folk who read and review and make my life happy! *hugs* And off we go...

Chapter 45- Apparition Practice and and Introduction

Hermione did her best to stifle the shocked cry that threatened to burst from her mouth as they reappeared. There was an unnerving bare moment of pitch blackness before torches sputtered to life around them. Convulsively gripping Snape's arms, she glanced about wildly, realizing that they were in the corridor they had used to enter the castle after going to London. Snapping her gaze to Snape's face, she blinked in astonishment to see him grinning like a kid at her shock. Smug glee was etched in every line of his face, and she gasped, "Wha-a-at? Severus?"

One eyebrow bobbed up and down as he chuckled wickedly. "Surprise! You're the first to know. Well, besides Dumbledore of course..."

Baffled, Hermione cut in, "But, how?"

Snape sniffed, tossing his head airily. "It was all very complex, I assure you. That's why I had to meet Dumbledore before rehearsal last time. He told me what he had planned, and I had to stay after for him to cast it." He paused, once again grinning in delight. Hermione's heart fluttered at his radiant expression, making him look years younger. "We'll be popping up there in a moment, but I wanted to surprise you first." At that, his rampant grin softened, and his smile became shy.

Hermione smiled back. Grasping all the ramifications, she let out a little laugh, squeezing his arms gently. "Oh, how wonderful for you! I can't wait to see you flitting about as the Phantom."

Snape nodded. "Indeed." He took a deep breath and exhaled heavily, obviously composing himself for rehearsal. "Now, if you're ready?"

Hermione beamed at him and nodded sharply, gripping his elbows again. Snape murmured, "Now," and they Disapparated again.

They appeared at the back of the house, cloaked in the shadows. Snape quickly let go of Hermione, but with a subtle parting caress, and Hermione stepped forward to join the other students who were trooping down the aisle toward the stage. Snape stayed in the shadows, watching in amusement as she startled Neville by bouncing up to him.

Brow furrowed, Neville queried, "Hermione? Where did you come from? You weren't outside with the rest of us..."

Tilting her chin up loftily, she said, "Oh, I was assisting Professor Snape as usual, and we just Apparated up here."

His mouth fell open in disbelief, and his head swivelled around, searching for the Potions Master. In a somewhat strangled hiss, he said, "Are you serious? *How?*"

Hermione cut an amused glance at him and merely said, "I'm sure Dumbledore will explain. Come on, let's get up there." With that, she surged ahead onto the stage with the rest of the milling cast, leaving Neville to gape after her in consternation. Snape stepped forward from the back, smirking to himself. As Dumbledore searched the house for him, Snape realized that he had forgotten his Phantom mask in his single-mindedness.

Dumbledore saw him and raised a hand to him, gesturing for him to join the cast. But Snape stayed where he was, calling, "I do apologize, Headmaster. It seems I have forgotten my mask. I shall go fetch it right now."

Dumbledore waved his hand and nodded, turning back to the students who needed the singing spell. Snape concentrated for a moment and Apparated to his quarters, where he took a second to adjust the erection still tightening his trousers. At his slight touch, a jolt of pleasure shot through him, and he immediately made a rash decision.

Snatching up his mask from the table by the door, he strode into his room, flinging himself onto the bed. Long fingers made short work of opening his robes and unfastening his trousers, pulling his hard cock from within. Sighing in relief, he gripped it firmly, uttering a throaty groan at the tingles of pleasure spreading from his cock throughout his body. Stroking quickly, he turned his formidable focus on the task at hand, bringing himself to a satisfying orgasm in a few short moments. Heaving a contented sigh, he cast cleansing charms on his trousers, cock, and hand, briskly tucking himself away and straightening his clothes as he picked up his mask and stood.

Passing through the bathroom to look in the mirror, he directed a wry snort at his reflection before settling himself and Apparating back up to the Hall. He arrived back in the spot he had so recently vacated, and saw the cast congregated on the stage. Eyes narrowing from the calculating grin that spread his lips, he Disapparated to join them.

Startled cries echoed in the theatre as Snape suddenly appeared in the midst of the crowd, and several of the students near him staggered away from his surprising materialization. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and smirked, casting a superior glance over the students. Everyone was giggling at him, except for Hermione and Dumbledore. Dumbledore burst out laughing, causing the students' gazes to whip from Snape to him.

"Well done, Severus. Pleased with yourself, are you?" Dumbledore grinned at Snape, arching an eyebrow in subtle reprimand.

Snape didn't bother to reply, but simply offered a mocking bow, smug smirk still firmly in place.

Draco burst out, in a rather accusatory tone, "How'd you do that?" Belatedly, and at the chiding glance from every teacher present, he tacked on a sulky, "Sir."

Snape sniffed and straightened, affecting boredom. "I Apparated, of course."

Still incensed, Draco continued, "But... you can't Apparate within Hogwarts! Everyone knows that." He whirled and scowled at the faint snort from Hermione. Hermione composed her expression into one of polite interest and refused to meet his glare.

Dumbledore answered him. "You are correct, Mr. Malfoy. However, we headmasters have certain information bequeathed to us that allowed me to adjust the school wards to let Professor Snape Apparate within the castle. It's really the best way we have for him to perform the Phantom role, as I'm sure you'll see tonight as we go on. Now, I'd like to take a moment to tell you that Professor Snape is the *only* one who can Apparate. I did not lift the wards from the Hall, as was done for your Apparition classes. Do

not waste your time trying to Apparate; you will not succeed." With that parting admonition, he swept a stern gaze over the assembled students and said, "Now then, we are running through the whole of Act One, and through the Masquerade. If everyone would please take their places..."

There was a scrum as students all at once began dashing for their places. Snape stood where he was, watching the melee, then cocked one corner of his mouth up and disappeared. Even though it wasn't a surprise anymore, several students voiced startled cries at the sight.

In the wing, Ginny pulled Hermione by the elbow to a corner and hissed, "Merlin's balls!" Ignoring the slightly scandalized look Hermione shot her, she continued, "Did you know he could do that? That's incredible!"

Hermione grinned. "I didn't know until he surprised me tonight. That's how we got here. Wild, huh?"

Ginny's eyes narrowed. Envy oozing out of every pore, she breathed, "Man, I wish I could do that. Lucky bastard." At Hermione's smack on the arm, she blinked and said, "Oh, sorry. You know what I meant..."

Hermione snorted and they pushed forward again, peering out from the wing to watch the scene unfolding. As the music changed, and Dumbledore started shifting the sets, they raced out to take their places onstage for the next scene.

Snape was watching from his vantage point in Box Five. Although he had always felt a surge of energy when he was performing, tonight, riding on his high of excitement from surprising Hermione and the rest of the cast, he felt buoyant, and he eagerly anticipated his cue. Unknown to him, a delighted smile kept creeping across his face, evidence of the sheer fun he was having.

As the rehearsal progressed, Snape leant forward, crossing his arms on the ledge of the Box, resting his chin on his forearms, engrossed in the drama and the music playing out before him. When Hermione took the stage to sing "Think of Me," he heard footsteps approaching. Bolting upright, a scowl marred his peaceful expression, and he whipped around to glare at whomever was intruding.

Harry appeared in the doorway, coming to an abrupt halt when he spied Snape frowning at him. Lower jaw pushing forward mulishly, he growled, "Excuse me, Professor, but you're in my spot."

Snape narrowed his eyes. Although the words were passably courteous, insolence dripped from Harry's voice. Shooting to his feet and towering over the younger man, Snape sneered and said, "Watch your tone, Potter." And, with a final twitch of disdain, Snape spun and Disapparated. Harry blinked, disconcerted. Huffing in annoyance and resentment, he flung himself into the seat to await his cue.

Snape emerged at the back of the house again, pushing back his irritation with The-Boy-Who-Won't-Go-Away, and losing himself in the clear tones of Hermione's voice. Finally, the dressing room set wafted onstage, and Hermione faded away from the performance area. Snape cast *Sonorus* and intoned, "Bravi, bravi, bravissimi." He smiled fondly at the rapt look on Hermione's face as she looked around for the source of the voice.

When Harry arrived for "Little Lotte," Snape decided it was time to move to his next spot. Closing his eyes, he Apparated to the area behind the magic mirror, glancing quickly around at the students in the wings as they goggled at his abrupt materialization. Flashing a wicked grin, he turned back to the mirror, excitement coiling in his gut as he let himself be pulled into the role. As Harry exited the stage and the music changed ominously, Snape took a deep breath and burst forth with his song. He hadn't ended the *Sonorus* spell, and his voice thundered through the space, instantly drawing everyone's attention.

Hermione turned to the mirror, watching in fascination as Dumbledore's spells caused it to de-solidify and Snape's figure became clearer through the shadows within it. When Snape's hand stretched through it toward her, she eagerly gripped it and stepped through the distortion of light, following Snape as he led them through the journey to the Labyrinth Underground.

As they sang their duet, they played off each other, a synergy flowing off them in nearly palpable waves. The rest of the cast, while staring in awe, all seemed to set their teeth in determination to measure up to the sheer magnetic power that their two leads were showing. No one wanted to pale in comparison.

Snape and Hermione smoothly flowed through "Music of the Night" and "Stranger Than You Dreamt It." Even now, some of the students shuddered at Snape's ferocity when he rounded on Hermione in fury for taking his mask.

Moving through to the next scene, the sets slipped away again, and Terry and the girls entered. Snape stood with Hermione in the wing, watching for their cue. Never taking his gaze off the scene, he muttered out of the corner of his mouth to Hermione, "We'll be Apparating out there, so hold tight." She nodded and squeezed his arm in understanding. They were poised and ready to go when, out of nowhere, Dumbledore stopped the music and cried out, "Stop!" Onstage, all of the students froze, bewildered. Snape frowned, irritated at the interruption. Peering out from the wing, he saw the headmaster charging up onto the stage.

Bustling to the centre of the stage, Dumbledore roared, "Severus!"

Snape's head jerked back as if struck, and he turned a surprised and disconcerted gaze toward Hermione, who simply shrugged and blinked at him. Hastily stepping out to join Dumbledore, Snape queried, "Is something wrong?"

Dumbledore turned a beatific grin on the confused man and crowed, "On the contrary! Something is most definitely *right*!"

Snape glanced around at the puzzled faces, slightly relieved that even Minerva looked as perplexed as the rest of them, and said, "What do you mean?"

Dumbledore dropped to the ground, hunkering down and running his hand lightly across the floor. "Remember what I said before about not knowing what to do about the trap door?" Snape nodded quickly. Patting the floor, Dumbledore said, "Now that you can Apparate, I can put the trap door in, and you can Apparate to inside it and climb out like you're supposed to! Let me transfigure it now..." With that, he dragged his wand along the stage, drawing a large square. When he was done, he tapped the area within the outline, and it transformed into a trap door, complete with hinges on one end and a carved-out groove for a handle. Beaming triumphantly, he gripped the handle and lifted, opening the trap door to reveal... more solid floor.

Blinking, Dumbledore's grin faltered a moment before he gathered himself and coughed lightly. Repositioning himself, he aimed his wand into the blank section of floor and muttered, drawing a pattern in the air. On cue, the solid mass disappeared, leaving a large open space. Dumbledore sank onto the stage, hanging his feet in the opening, faintly humming to himself as he fashioned a staircase and adjusted the size of the space. Then, beckoning for Snape to follow, he descended, the tip of his hat eventually sinking below the surface of the stage. Snape followed, lighting his wand to inspect the area. As he spun in place, Dumbledore was adding finishing touches: smoothing the floor and walls, expanding the space, and adding some lanterns for light.

Backing against the stairs, Dumbledore looked at Snape and said, "You can Apparate here, then climb up. This should be adequate for our purposes. Would you please climb out and then Apparate back in, just to practice?" Snape inclined his head and ascended the short staircase, emerging to see a circle of curious faces peering at him. Flicking a glance at Hermione, he strode back to the wing and stopped. Visualizing the space he had just left, he Apparated back into it.

Dumbledore clapped his hands, voicing a little cheer. "Perfect! Now, let's go back and continue where we left off." With that, he beamed at Snape and climbed out to take his place in the house again. Snape rejoined the cast onstage, closing the trap door behind him. He beckoned to Hermione to join him as he strode back to the wing.

Gazing up at him curiously, she said, "What are we to do, Professor?"

"Instead of Apparating to that spot onstage, we are going to be appearing in the space underneath, then climbing out. Regardless, we'll still be Apparating. Are you quite ready, Miss Granger?"

Hermione gave an emphatic nod. "Of course, sir." Snape nodded and looked back out to see what was happening. Dumbledore was back in the house, resetting the

music. Terry and the girls took their places again, and the scene began.

Gripping Hermione firmly, Snape snapped a glance at her in warning, then Apparated them to the space beneath the trap door. When they arrived, Hermione gasped at the sensation again, then turned eagerly to inspect the area that had been created right before her eyes. Her inspection was cut short when Snape spun her around, surprising her with a searing kiss. Her stunned cry was muffled by his lips, and she lost her balance as strong arms wrapped around her, pressing her against him. She scrambled against his shoulders, trying to regain her balance, and he growled low in his throat. A tingle shot through her, ending in the slick pool still dampening her knickers.

A moment later, he released her, flashing her a grin that was both feral and playful. As he straightened away from her, he gestured upwards, indicating that they had to listen for their cue. Hermione glared at him, shaking her head in disbelief at his actions. Above them, Terry was coming to the end of his lines, and Snape began their ascent, clasping Hermione's hand and pulling her along in his wake.

When they emerged, the girls scattered, and Snape curled Hermione protectively in his arms as he led her offstage, glaring at Terry as he went. Once again in the wing, Snape gave Hermione's shoulder a quick squeeze as he released her, and she primly stepped a proper distance away from him. Onstage, the sets were shifting, leading into "Notes." Snape nodded gravely to Hermione, swept a stern gaze over the rest of the students in the vicinity, and Disapparated again. Hermione pretended not to notice the sharp glances everyone cast at her after Snape was gone. Instead, she focused on Neville, who was performing with gusto as the "Notes" scene progressed.

Luna sidled up beside Hermione. "Wow. Neville's really pulling out all the stops tonight."

Hermione spared a glance at the blonde. "What do you mean?"

Luna tilted her head toward the performers, which included Ron and Harry at this point. "He's really into it. Look at them. They all are." She paused, and both girls watched the others performing. Luna turned a dreamy smile on Hermione. "It looks like you and Professor Snape have really upped the ante. And the rest of us had better join you, or we're gonna' look dreadful." Then, Luna winked and chucked Hermione's shoulder. "Of course, that must have been what you and the professor have been talking about so much: getting us all to increase our effort. Well, I must say: well done!"

Hermione's eyes went wide in shock, mind racing with the knowledge that Luna had noticed her interactions with Snape so much. Feeling icy sweat prickling her skin, she swallowed nervously, nodding with as much nonchalance as she could muster. "Oh, thanks. Yeah, that... Well, Professor Snape wants to win this competition as much as Dumbledore, so he was very adamant that we give every rehearsal our full attention and effort. I'm just glad that it's rubbing off on everyone else." With that, she gave Luna a wan smile and turned quickly back to watch the performance again. Fortunately, Luna didn't say anything else.

"Notes" ended with Snape's magnified voice ringing through the space, and everyone scrambled for their places as the sets changed again. Hermione and Pansy jumped onto the bed as it was sliding onstage, taking care to keep the curtains of the bed closed. When the overture was finished, Hermione heard Harry, Ron, and Neville projecting from their spots in the Boxes. The scene started, and Hermione took a deep breath, turning politely to Pansy and whispering, "Ready? Give me your arm." Pansy sneered, but held her tongue, stretching her arm toward Hermione as if she were offering herself to a chopping block. Rolling her eyes, Hermione took Pansy's hand and got in position for the curtains to open.

Snape watched from the back of the house, ready for his cue. Well-practiced from decades of use, Snape's voice was menacing as he demanded, "Did I not instruct that Box Five was to be kept empty?" When Hermione reacted, and Pansy insulted her, he allowed a sinister smile to curl his lips and alter his tone as he said, "A toad, Madame? Perhaps it is you who are the toad..."

To his surprise and no little pleasure, Pansy rose to the occasion and croaked believably, acting with great presence as she performed her breakdown. Pride in a member of his House bubbled up, even as he chastised himself for not working more with Pansy before now. Just because she had done so well now did not excuse his lack of attending to his duties as Head of House. Returning his attention to laughing maniacally, he trailed off as Ron and Neville arrived onstage and Draco escorted Pansy into the wing. When they exited, and the ballet girls came out, Snape Apparated to the catwalk above the stage, noting that Terry was already in his place, securing the cable around him for his plunge.

Popping from one light to another, Snape cast threatening shadows along the backdrops onstage. Peering down, he saw Dumbledore in the wing looking up at Terry. At his decisive nod, Terry stepped off the catwalk, allowing Dumbledore to control his drop. While pandemonium reigned below him, Snape watched the sets changing, focusing on the statue behind which he was to hide. Of course, he didn't really have to be there during the whole scene, since he could just show up when he needed to for his cue, but he decided that it would be better for his characterization to be there to witness everything just as the Phantom would.

As soon as the set was complete as the roof of the opera house, he hunkered down and Apparated to the shadow behind the statue while Harry and Hermione were singing. They came to the end of their song, and Harry crooned, "Christine... Christine..."

Snape barely intoned, "Christine..." However, since he still had the *Sonorus* spell in effect, it was a very otherworldly sound. At that point, he ended the spell, simply listening to Harry and Hermione as they sang "All I Ask of You," allowing it to affect him as it would the Phantom, pulling him down into the welter of betrayal and despair and rage. By the time they had finished the scene and exited, Snape was seething with the Phantom's pain and fury.

He emerged from behind the statue, blazing hurt and anger. When he reached the end of his song, every person in the Hall was rooted to the ground, staring at him, completely in the thrall of his magnetism in the role. As he whirled around and mounted the statue for its intended flight to the top of the proscenium, Dumbledore scrambled to begin the set change, and cast members burst into frenetic action from all sides, rushing to their places as Snape's demented laughter rang out around them and the chandelier rocked. As he roared, "Go!" the chandelier hurtled toward Hermione, and she cringed, covering her face.

The chandelier crashed, and the music wound down. On the tail of the final note, Dumbledore closed the curtains with a whoosh, and Snape Apparated down from his position high above the stage. He stood at the back of the stage and watched as Dumbledore hurried up, waving for everyone to join them.

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the chandelier, sending it back to its position, calling, "Come along, everyone! We're going to forge on to the Masquerade. I know that when we perform you'll have an intermission, but I'd rather not take that much time tonight." He paused, beaming around at the cast. "I must say: you are all doing wonderfully well! Oh, but you've all raised the bar tonight. I can see that trophy in Hogwarts now..."

A ripple of laughter swept through the cast, and they all exchanged pleased grins. At Dumbledore's urging, everyone dispersed, taking their places for "Masquerade." Snape strode to the wing again, suppressing a smirk at the nervous expressions on several of the students' faces at having to dance again.

Dumbledore hurried over to Snape. "Severus, when you appear at the top of the stairs, would you go ahead and produce a bit of smoke, just for effect?"

Snape nodded sharply. "Certainly. Would you like me to do the same when I leave?"

Dumbledore snapped his fingers and said, "Yes! Do that." Then, patting Snape's arm in farewell, he spun and descended from the stage. Snape backed to the side wall, leaning against it casually, compartmentalizing the emotions that were still flowing through him from the role, tamping down the anger that still pulsed in his veins. While it wasn't really his, it was, and he consciously separated himself from the role again, watching the rehearsal as it progressed.

Dumbledore set the music box again, and called, "Ready?" At the multiple affirmatives that came his way, he beamed and announced, "Action!" The music began, and Ron and Neville came out to start the scene. After their exchange, the curtains opened and the Masquerade began.

Brows were furrowed in intense concentration all over the stage as everyone tried to remember the dancing as well as their parts in the singing. There were a few stumbles and bobbles, but overall, the quality of performance was better than the last time they had all rehearsed. Snape prepared himself to Apparate to the top of the staircase and wordlessly cast a trifling spell that would shoot smoke out of his wand.

It worked perfectly, and he descended the stairs through the haze. After miming ripping the ring from Hermione's necklace, he whirled, casting more smoke from his wand to surround him, and Disapparating again. From his new vantage point in the wing, he saw everyone looking from the smoke fading onstage to Dumbledore, who had shut

the music box with a snap.

"Excellent! Simply astounding! Congratulations, all of you. You have improved immensely. There's really nothing else for me to say other than keep up the good work! Well done, and good night!" He clasped his hands over his belly, beaming at everyone, then gestured for them to head off to their rooms. Students broke from their final tableau and scurried into the house, buzzing with conversations.

Snape slowly stepped from the wing. Dumbledore saw him and waved a hand at him. "The smoke worked perfectly, Severus. Don't forget about that next time."

Snape inclined his head, slipping his Phantom mask from his face. "As you say. Good night." And, before Dumbledore could respond, Snape was gone.

He appeared in the corridor, startling the first students who had exited the Hall. They hurried away from him, but he remained where he was. He crossed his arms over his chest and waited, mask dangling from one long finger. Eventually, Hermione emerged, amidst her Gryffindor friends. As they approached him, Hermione and Ginny both offered grave nods, murmuring, "Professor." Harry kept his mouth shut and stared at the opposite wall, pretending he hadn't seen the tall man in black. Snape nodded in response. His face remained impassive, but his eyes softened as they lingered on Hermione. Her lips twitched in a faint smile as she passed him.

Snape fought the urge to turn his head and watch Hermione climbing the stairs. Stiffly staring ahead, he was finally rewarded with the sight of his Slytherins exiting. They blinked in surprise to see him waiting there, but they all greeted him politely. He nodded smoothly to them, gesturing that they should all continue down to the Slytherin quarters.

"Miss Parkinson, I have been remiss in my duties to you. But you have accomplished a great deal even without my assistance, for which I would like to offer my congratulations. Not only has your dedication garnered my approval, but I feel compelled to award ten points to Slytherin for your perseverance and talent." He ended his speech with an approving nod at Pansy, whose eyes widened and whose cheeks flushed at the praise.

"Thank you, Professor," she replied archly, visibly preening. Draco seemed torn between pride that his girlfriend had earned House points and envy that he hadn't been recognized for his effort.

Snape saw the struggle playing across the boy's pale face and moved to intercept the problem. "Mr. Malfoy, I would like to tender my appreciation for your assistance to your fellow Slytherins during these rehearsals. Thanks to you, both your and Miss Parkinson's accents are quite acceptable."

Draco straightened, a smug look crossing his face. Sniffing, he smoothly replied, "It was my pleasure, Professor. Thank you." Then, after a beat, while they were all descending the dungeon stairs, Draco added, "It must be handy to be able to Apparate, sir. Can't you cast the spell on anyone else?" He flashed what he hoped was a winning smile at Snape, who arched a disbelieving eyebrow at him.

"Mr. Malfoy, weren't you listening when the headmaster explained? He is the only one who knows the spell, and I am the only one on whom it has been cast." He frowned at Draco, sternly adding, "Pay attention, else I shall be forced to deduct points from my own House. And I daresay Miss Parkinson would not be pleased to see you squandering what she has worked so hard to earn." They had reached the foot of the stairs, and Snape paused, letting his warning sink in. Draco's grey eyes darkened and his wan cheeks coloured with humiliation at Snape's threat.

Gritting his teeth, Draco ground out, "Of course, sir." Then, he abruptly whirled, gesturing sharply at the girls. "Come on." Glancing back at Snape, they all muttered, "Good night, Professor," before charging off to the dorms.

Snape watched them walk away, pondering what he could do with himself now. Once he was alone again, his mind immediately went back to Hermione, replaying all that had transpired that evening. His body reacted again to the remembered sensations, and he idly thought, *I could always pop into her room...* Suppressing a shiver at the thrill that coursed through him at the illicit thought, he closed his eyes and Disapparated.

Arriving in his bedroom, he deftly undressed and made ready for bed. It would be an early night for him, but he had a lot to think about, and if he didn't settle himself now, he'd continue to consider a jaunt to Hermione's room. After his nightly ablutions, he stripped out of his lounge wear and slid between the sheets. Upon lying down, his body remembered his stolen interlude from earlier in the evening. Sensations flowed through him again, making his cock twitch.

I could go to her right now. It's not difficult.

You don't know if she's alone, and it's early yet.

Fine, then I could wait until later and go.

What if you scared her, and she shrieked? Someone would hear her. And how would she explain that?

She's clever; she'd think of something. Besides, I doubt she'd scream.

Can you take that chance? Anyway, how could you be sure that you wouldn't run into anyone or anything?

I saw the whole room. I'm not unskilled at Apparition...

But what if she was in the spot you chose? You could inadvertently hurt her, running into her like that.

If I wait long enough, she'll be in bed, surely.

This is Hermione Granger. You can't be sure she won't be up studying for N.E.W.T.s!

But it could be so much fun, popping up there and surprising her...

Since when do you care about fun?

Since I've finally been able to have some! It was brilliant tonight, being able to surprise everyone, sneaking right under Dumbledore's nose...

About that! You had better be more careful, ol' chap! You're not a teenager anymore, no matter how much she may make you feel like one. If you're caught, you face much worse than expulsion. And what about Hermione? Do you want to ruin her education and reputation? You're the more seasoned, supposedly wiser adult here. You can't let your hormones and imagination run away with you. It would be madness and folly to Apparate into her room right now, and you know it!

Snape writhed in his bed, torn between wanting to follow his dangerous impulses and recognizing the truth his voice of reason offered. Scowling in the dark, jaw grinding in resentment, he heaved a huge sigh and caved. Slamming his fists against the mattress in what could only be described as petulance, he stared into the blackness and sucked his teeth.

Fine! I get it! There are too many unknown factors right now. If I'm to surprise Hermione, I need to gather as much information as I can. I must simply do a little reconnaissance...

With that, he rolled over, lips spreading into a calculating smile as he formulated his strategy to enter her room and plan his surprise visit.

Wednesday morning, Hermione checked her bag for the scroll of questions, intent on staying a moment after Potions class to ask another one. As she passed the notice board, she saw the new post about the next rehearsal.

"Friday January 16: block Raoul/ Giry scene and Notes

Actors required to attend: Harry, Professor McGonagall, Ron, Neville, Draco, Pansy, Hermione, Professor Snape, Ginny."

Spirits were high among the cast members, having had such a successful rehearsal the night before. All the same, those who were not required for the next rehearsal were looking forward to a Friday night off.

Hermione debated which question to pose if she got a chance, determining that her choice would likely be dictated by how much time she had available. Perhaps she should send him the list by owl, or turn it in with her homework... But, that would be so impersonal. No, better to ask them whenever she had the opportunity.

Potions class was uneventful except for the very start, at which Snape startled the class by Apparating to his desk at the front of the room instead of banging through the door as usual. Stifling the urge to either laugh or chide him, Hermione bit her lip and stared down at her textbook, wondering if anyone else would notice the mischief dancing in his eyes and the grin threatening to overtake him. Sneaking glances at the other students, she saw them nervously preparing their materials, unnerved by their normally grim professor apparently enjoying himself.

I'm sure they'll get over it. I mean, honestly, let the poor man have a chance to relax. He certainly deserves it!

Fortunately, Snape had enough respect for class time to not abuse his students by sneaking up on them through Apparition, and eventually the atmosphere went back to normal. When the period was over, he assigned the homework and tidied his desk, the students filing out into the corridor. Hermione pretended to take a while copying down the assignment and waited until everyone else was gone. As soon as the room was empty of other students, she snatched her scroll from her book bag and darted up to Snape's desk.

He looked up, carefully controlling his expression in case anyone happened to look through the open door again. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

Hermione flashed him a quick smile before saying, in a low voice, "I just wanted to ask you another question."

Snape's gaze snapped to the scroll, which he recognized as the very same one he had encountered in his quarters the night before. Closing his eyes to hide their impulse to roll in exasperation, he sighed. In a put-upon whisper, he said, "Very well. Proceed."

Hermione unrolled the scroll and quickly said, "I'm pretty sure I know what you *don't* like, after all the bushes you blasted at the Yule Ball fourth year, but I have no idea what you do like..." She glanced at his expression, which clearly said, "Get on with it," and hastily said, "What's your favourite flower?"

Snape's head jerked back and up, his chin pulling toward his throat, and his brow furrowed in perplexity. Blinking, he repeated, "Favourite *flower*?"

Hermione cast a swift glance over her shoulder at the open door and said, "Yes. Flower. I can't decide between carnation, gardenia, and plumeria. I really like the flowers that have definite, sweet scents, you know?"

Snape blinked again and muttered sardonically, "I do now..."

Hermione barrelled on, "So, what's yours? Surely there's some flower that you like."

Snape was silent for a moment, pondering, then he looked up at her and quietly said, "Lily. I like lilies."

Hermione beamed at him for a moment before asking, "How come?"

Snape's eyes suddenly seemed shadowed, and he looked down at his desk, absently tracing his fingers along a groove in the wood. "They remind me of someone... a friend of sorts."

Her smile faltered as her agile mind raced to a startling conclusion. Eyes widening, she breathed, "Oh. I see."

Snape looked up at Hermione, noting her comprehension. His eyes begged for understanding, and his voice was a strained murmur as he said, "She was all a lily is: pure, sweet, and of a rare beauty of spirit. No one deserved her fate."

Hermione felt a queer tightness in her chest. Her heart thundered in her ears as she whispered, "Did... did you love her?"

Snape shook his head instantly, ruefully snorting. Regret coloured his tone when he replied, "I never got the chance. Believe me, Hermione; we were just friends, and barely that once Potter came into the picture." His lips still twisted when he said "Potter," and Hermione realized afresh how deep the wounds went in his history with Harry's parents.

Extrapolating from this new information, suddenly Hermione understood how Snape could have such vehement reactions as he had to her with Harry, especially once he had begun having feelings for her. Once again, her simple desire to learn more about him had resulted in her opening an old wound. Would she ever be able to ask him the most innocuous of questions and not get a startlingly painful answer? Heart flooding with sympathy and love for the man before her, she gave him a watery smile and dared to reach across the desk to cover his hand.

He shot a glance at the door again and then turned his hand in her grasp to grip it firmly. He lifted wistful eyes to hers, and she barely whispered, "Still waters run deep... I love you, Severus Snape."

He gazed at her solemnly, love welling up in his eyes as he squeezed her hand in an almost painfully tight grip. "And I love you, Hermione." With a regretful sigh, he released her and slid his hand back, straightening in his chair. His voice regained some of its classroom tone as he said, "Run along. You'll be late, and we needn't invite speculation on your extended stay here."

She nodded gravely, rolling her scroll again and gathering her things. "Of course. So, Professor, I shall see you before rehearsal Friday, correct?"

Snape cleared his throat, affecting detachment in the wake of their unexpected emotional land mine. "Indeed. Until then, good day to you, Miss Granger."

Hermione crossed to the door, pausing on the threshold, hearing other students trooping down the corridor. "Good day to you, Professor." And, with a final affectionate look, she left.

Students began entering the classroom, and Snape shot to his feet, turning his back to them, trying to shake off the melancholy that assailed him. Determinedly shifting his mind away, he repeated to himself, *Remember, carnations, gardenias, and plumerias. Those are the flowers she likes. File that away for future reference, ol' chap, as it may come in handy one day!* Thus composed, he turned back to the new class.

The next day, Snape went to breakfast early, eagerly awaiting the arrival of Hermione and her friends. He had already broken his fast when they arrived, and he remained only long enough to have some tea "with Hermione" before he departed. Briskly descending to his quarters again, he went over the details in his mind.

All Gryffindors have classes right after breakfast, but I have a planning period first thing. The house-elves are all busy cleaning up after breakfast. That leaves me plenty of time to explore her room without a chance of being interrupted.

Once he had retreated to his bedroom, he checked the time again, anxiously awaiting the start of the first class of the day. When it was time, he exhaled a long steadying breath and nervously tugged on his robes, as if to straighten them, even though they were as immaculate as always. Gripping his wand tightly, every nerve on edge, ready to react should his arrival go badly, he focused on an open area between her bureau and the foot of the bed and Disapparated.

Appearing in her room, he felt a thrill of triumph race over him, followed quickly by a jolt of apprehension at an unexpected hissing sound. Whirling, wand poised to strike, he saw a squash-faced ginger cat hissing at him from an armchair, bottle brush tail puffed out to three times its normal size. Pulse pounding, he froze, staring at the cat who was staring back at him.

Mentally railing at himself for forgetting about her blasted familiar, he fervently hoped that the cat wouldn't raise the hue and cry at his presence. Seconds ticked by in agonizing slowness, until finally the cat's tail returned to normal size, and his flattened ears perked up again. Snape relaxed his battle-ready posture a fraction and warily eyed the animal as it leapt lightly from the chair, padding over to him.

Crookshanks crossed to Snape, peering up at him for a moment, as if sizing him up; then he circled his feet, sniffing at his ankles. After several moments of this, during which Snape felt like he was being judged, Crookshanks sat back on his haunches and looked up at Snape, voicing a rusty yowl.

Snape gazed down at the animal, bewildered. Relief washed over him, since it seemed obvious that the cat wasn't going to attack. Still wary, he didn't move, and Crookshanks meowed again, this time leaning forward and butting his head against Snape's shin.

The errant thought that perhaps the cat had done that too many times, and that's how its face ended up so smushed wafted through his head, but he tentatively leant down, reaching toward him, still ready to snatch his hand back if the animal swiped.

Crookshanks was rubbing his face against Snape's leg, pressing so hard that his mouth was stretched as he ground his cheeks against the black fabric. Snape gingerly touched the crown of Crookshanks's head, gently raking his fingertips through the fluffy fur. The cat arched into Snape's hand, butting his head into his palm and practically throwing his body against Snape's shin. Slowly, Snape became aware of a rumbling sound, and he realized that Crookshanks was purring. He was idly amused to note that if he had shifted his leg back, the cat would surely have fallen over, so forcefully was he pressing against him. Finally relaxing, Snape scrubbed the animal with more confidence, and was rewarded with more vehement purrs.

A faint smile appeared on his face, and he murmured, "Good morning to you. I'm sorry I don't know your name, little one."

Crookshanks lifted his head and eyed Snape reproachfully, but he stopped writhing on Snape's leg and crossed to a double bowl in the corner. Pausing to look over his shoulder at the man, he pointedly twitched his whiskers at the bowl. Snape's brows rose in surprise at the obvious intelligence that the beast displayed, and he strode over to peer down at the name painted on the bowl.

"Ah. Crookshanks." Crookshanks meowed at him in response, and Snape smiled. "Well, you're a bright one, aren't you?"

The cat sneezed and began winding around Snape's feet again, purring continuously. Snape chuckled. "Indeed. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Crookshanks. I'm a friend of your mistress." Crookshanks gave a little burble and marched off, jumping onto the bed and pawing at the bedspread where it covered the pillow. Snape followed him and queried, "Is there something under there that you want?"

Crookshanks sat back on his haunches and meowed, staring up at Snape. Then, he deliberately pawed at the covers again. When Snape reached out to lift the covers from the pillow, Crookshanks rubbed his head against Snape's arm, purring again. Snape uncovered the pillow, intrigued by the cat's actions, and Crookshanks buried his face under the pillow, rooting around until he backed out with something in his teeth. Walking backwards, he dragged more of the fabric into sight, and Snape recognized the shirt he had worn to the cast party.

Eyes widening in shock, he burst out, "My shirt!" He straightened in indignation that Hermione had made off with his clothing and said, "That little minx! And to think that I had thought the house-elves had lost it." He frowned, abruptly noting that Crookshanks was kneading the shirt, purring contentedly. He stared at the cat on his shirt, images of Hermione wearing it flashing through his mind. Shaking his head, he muttered, "She's a clever witch, indeed." Crookshanks meowed. Looking sharply at the beast, he snorted at the smug expression on his face.

Smirking in amusement, Snape said, "Oh, so you agree, do you?" In response, Crookshanks stretched languorously and flopped to one side, writhing onto his back and eyeing Snape upside-down. The narcissistic entreaty was unmistakable. Chuckling at the animal's antics, Snape perched on the edge of the bed, reached out and scratched under his chin, scrubbing his bared belly. He could feel the vibrations of Crookshanks's purring under his fingers. Sarcasm dripping, he said, "Mercy, you do have such a rough life, don't you? Indeed. It's obvious how neglected and abused you are. Terrible thing, really, how you suffer..." Crookshanks didn't move; only his tail flipped from one side to the other in lazy arcs, his whole demeanour one of utter bliss.

Smiling indulgently, calmed by the peaceful feeling of petting a happy feline, Snape turned his attention to the room, gazing about. He saw her nightstand by the bed, a lamp almost blocked by the tall stack of reading material. Her desk was equally cluttered with books and parchment and bottles of ink. Quills stuck up from an empty ink bottle, listing haphazardly to one side. The bookcases along the walls were full to bursting, much like his often became before he periodically took the time to arrange and magically expand them. Her bureau had toiletries along the top, and her closet door wasn't shut tight. A clothes hamper stood by the door to her bathroom, a stray sock dangling over the edge. The armchair that Crookshanks had so recently occupied bore tell-tale signs of the animal's preference, being rather coated with cat hair. Making a mental note to avoid sitting in that chair unless he had cast a cleansing spell on it, his gaze returned to the multitude of books and magazines stacked on her nightstand and on the floor by her bed.

On closer inspection, he was intrigued to see the glossy cover of a wizarding periodical, seeing a partially obscured wizard moving in the picture. Taking careful note of how everything was arranged...so he could replace it all exactly...he lifted the books lying atop it and nearly choked in astonishment.

A nearly nude wizard waved cheekily at him, barely maintaining decency by covering himself with a scanty towel. Snape's brows shot to his hairline and his eyes nearly bugged out. *Playwitch! Magazine for the Modern Witch! Bloody hell!*

Suddenly, he was distracted by a swat on his now-still hand. Crookshanks had lost patience with his lack of scrubbing and had swiped at him, reminding Snape of the cat's presence. Snape jerked his hand away, too stunned by what he had found to bother with the animal. Crookshanks, sensing that he was being ignored, got to his feet and regally stalked off, tail stiff in high dudgeon. Giving up on the new human for the moment, he returned to his position on the armchair, curling into a ball and dozing off.

Snape quickly thumbed through the magazine, blinking rapidly at the succession of nude or scantily clad men in provocative poses. To spite him, his cheeks warmed in embarrassment. Swallowing against a dry throat, he slammed the covers closed, frantically looking around at her other books. Were they all like this? A quick scan sent a wave of relief over him. No.

Exhaling slowly, he peered more closely at the stacks by her bed, feeling his face burn again at the sight of several more books of erotica or plain ol'...let's not mince words here...porn. Looking at the book he had lifted to uncover the magazine, he saw that it, at least, was a more scholarly publication, but it too was all about sex. Carefully setting it back in place, he mentally shook himself.

Oh, give over. It's not like you haven't seen such things before. You've had your own collection. If she's curious, that's normal! How else is she expected to learn, especially if she's not going to experiment with anyone because of you?

A sharp, white-hot flash of jealousy burned in his chest at the thought of Hermione "experimenting" with anyone besides himself.

Really, she reads about everything else, why not this too? She's obviously not completely ignorant in this arena, so why are you so bothered?

He rose and stepped back from the bed, then realized he needed to put it back the way it was. Neatly smoothing the bedspread over the pillow after tucking his shirt under it, his wicked streak flashed up images of Hermione in bed reading about sex, looking at those naked models, and he felt his trousers get tight.

I wonder if she gets aroused by them? Does she like the way they look better than the way I look? What kinds of fantasies are these things feeding her, and how can I be sure I can measure up to them?

Giving the room a quick once-over, checking that he wasn't leaving any clue behind that he had been there, he shot one last apprehensive look at the pile of erotica and frowned.

I'll just have to figure out a way to find out if she's been reading these things a lot, and what kind of effect they've had on her.

He focused on his own rooms again, Disapparating. Crookshanks opened one eye drowsily, and, seeing that the new human was gone, yawned and went back to sleep. There wasn't anything to worry about anyway: that was the human whose scent was on the shirt under his mistress' pillow. Of course, Kneazles are good judges of character, and that man just oozed trustworthiness to Crookshanks. Besides, he gave good skritchies, and anyone with long, strong fingers like that was okay in his book.

46- Getting to Know You

Chapter 48 of 84

Snape crashes back to reality after his reckless behaviour, and another rehearsal comes and goes. But, this rehearsal offers our couple a chance to get to know each other better, as well as giving Snape a chance to one-up Harry. Just how does this drive a wedge between Harry and Ginny, and how far will Hermione go to fix it?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Well, dear readers, it's Spring Break, which of course means that I have a tiny bit of time to write. LOL Thus, you are getting this chapter now by virtue of me spending 2 days in front of my computer as much as I could get away with outside of work and sleep and eating and other various and sundry tasks. Uber-thanks as always go out to my intrepid beta, Ladyofthemasque, and to SnivellusSnape for sounding board action. Hope you all enjoy learning about our beloved couple in this chapter. And thank you to everyone who reads my little labour of love, and to those of you who review: you make my day! :)

Cheers! Nicole aka Good_Witch

p.s. don't forget my LJ at <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/>

Chapter 46- Getting to Know You

Snape arrived back in his bedroom, satisfied that he had successfully scouted Hermione's room, but disconcerted by the things he found there. Realizing that he'd have to wait to ask her about them later...whenever he either confessed to his intrusion or showed up and surprised her...he resolutely put the matter out of his mind and determined that he should carry on as usual. Briskly crossing through his quarters and lab into his office, he picked up a stack of papers that still needed abusing...well, grading, rather...and swept into the classroom, intent on getting as much done as he could before his second period class arrived.

Settling himself at his desk, he twitched a paper from the stack, grabbing his quill and reaching forward to dip it in the red inkpot. Blinking, he looked more closely at his sleeve, frowning as something unusual caught his eye. What was that? Lifting his arm toward his face, his brows rose and his eyes widened in dismay. Heart beating faster at the idea that he could have forgotten such a basic cover-your-ar-se, he stared at the ginger hairs stuck to his sleeve, standing out like a beacon against the black fabric. Swallowing against a suddenly dry throat, he pointed his wand at the cat hairs and muttered, "*Scourgify*." They disappeared from his sleeve, fluttering off the fabric and sprinkling along his desk.

Snape scowled and pushed back in his chair, peering down at his robes. There! Ginger hairs were *everywhere*, clinging to his clothes! Standing, he brandished his wand at his robes, hissing an agitated, "*Scourgify!*" The hairs wafted away, floating to the stone floor. Rolling his eyes in exasperation, he mentally congratulated himself on never having had a cat, and aimed his wand at the scattering of hairs all over the floor and his desk top. "*Evanescor!*" Thankfully, they disappeared. Heaving a sigh of relief, he twisted and turned, eyeing his robes critically. *Finally!* Secure that they were free from clinging hairs that would certainly invite questions, he sat at his desk again, cradling his head in his hands, shaken by his lack of attention.

Really, if you can't pay attention to what's going on around you...hell, even on you...then you have no business whatsoever pretending to be a practised spy! That was an inexcusable near miss... Perhaps you should rethink your clandestine behaviours, if you are going to be so careless about them. This is not a game, and the repercussions are severe! I suggest you think long and hard about trying such reckless stunts again anytime soon.

Thus chastened by his own voice of reason, he took a deep breath and resumed his grading, shaking his head at himself as the bell rang for the end of first period.

Friday rolled around, and Hermione was once again furtively eyeing Snape at the High Table, sipping her tea with honey and lemon as she waited for him to collect her on their way to the dungeons. Of course, she had her scroll of questions. This time, at least, they'd not have to rush or be secretive when talking.

Harry was across from her, wistfully remarking, "I wish I could get a Friday night off," as he turned an envious eye on the Gryffindors not needed at rehearsal that night.

Ginny squeezed his thigh in reassurance. "Look at it this way: there'd really be no point in you getting a Friday night off if I still had to rehearse, right?" She grinned impishly at him. "So, since I have to be there...even though I don't have any lines!...you may as well be there too!" With that, she gave a decided nod and sniggered at Harry's wry grin.

Hermione smiled. "She's got a point, Harry."

Harry grimaced at her and said, "I know that, thank-you-very-much. No need to rub it in..."

They all laughed. In her peripheral vision, Hermione saw Snape rising from the High Table and descending from the dais. Hastily composing herself, she gathered her things and pushed back from the table, standing as Snape strode down the aisle by the Gryffindor table. Harry's laughter died as he watched the sour man glaring coldly at the students as he passed them. Stone-faced, he glared right back when Snape stopped by Hermione.

Hermione offered a polite, "Good evening, Professor Snape," glancing in irritation at Harry's expression.

Ginny ground her heel on Harry's toe, saying, "Evening, Professor." Harry scowled and shot her a pained, indignant look.

Snape guessed what the girl was doing and bit back a smirk. Eyes narrowing, he murmured, "Miss Granger. Miss Weasley." Relishing the opportunity to exhibit a little more couth than the boy, Snape coolly nodded at Harry and added, "Mr. Potter." All three students cut a surprised glance at him, but Harry looked especially suspicious. Lips twitching in amusement, Snape turned to Hermione and said, "Come along, Miss Granger." Flicking another glance at Harry and Ginny, he swept down the aisle, Hermione a step behind him.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Harry hissed angrily, "What did you do that for? That hurt!"

Ginny glared heatedly at him. "When are you going to get over yourself? There's no reason you can't behave with some civility, Harry James Potter! Why don't you try looking past your old prejudices and giving the man a chance, huh?"

Harry's eyes widened in incredulity. "Are you serious? The man's a menace!"

Ginny huffed and primly replied, "He was civil to me, and he's been civil to me ever since we began this production. I think it's changed him. I'm sure I'm not the only one to think so either. The least you could do is *pretend* you have manners."

Harry blinked in astonishment. Voice faint, he said, "You girls baffle me..."

Cuttingly, Ginny retorted, "That much is obvious..."

Frowning, Harry pushed back from the table. "Forget it. I'm gonna' go sit with Ron. I'll see you at rehearsal."

Ginny watched him go, petulance personified. Rolling her eyes, she sighed. Inner voice sounding both annoyed and a trifle sad, she thought, *If only I could get him to start seeing Snape as a person before the end of the year... Honestly, Hermione's gonna' need all the help she can get in predisposing folk to accept her and Snape as a couple. Harry's the one with the strongest antipathy. I think everyone else'll be able to come 'round eventually...* Lips thinning in determination, she added, *Well, I'm not giving up, so he'll just have to get over it!* At that, she rose and joined Neville further down the table, chatting pleasantly about the rehearsal to come.

As soon as Snape and Hermione exited the Hall and stepped to one side of the doorway, Snape paused, grabbing Hermione's elbow. Hermione glanced up sharply, and he nodded, muttering, "Ready?" She inclined her head and secured her grip on his arm, and Snape Disapparated.

They appeared in his sitting room. Immediately, he looked down at her and his expression relaxed into a fond smile. She smiled back, and they stepped closer, embracing each other in welcome. At Hermione's contented coo, Snape chuckled, and Hermione heard the rumble where her ear was pressed against his chest. Pulling back just enough to be able to look up at him, she sighed and said, "Hi."

Reaching up and caressing her hair, Snape replied, "Hello, love." He gazed at her for a moment before leaning down and placing a soft kiss on her lips. When she reacted and made to deepen the kiss, Snape pulled back and chided, "Come now, first things first."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione huffed and squirmed out of his arms. Aggrieved, she said, "Fine," grimacing at him and crossing to the bathroom for the hair products. Snape smiled after her indulgently, feeling his heart beating faster with the thrill of happiness that coursed through him at being with her. He sat, waiting for her to return.

Hermione bustled in, deposited the hair stuff on the side table, and resolutely pulled her scroll from her robes. Snape eyed it with a little shake of the head and a suppressed sigh. Hermione's keen observational skills catching those minute signs, she said, "Now, Severus, stop that. You know it's not all that horrid. Besides, I thought that since we have a little more time to ourselves tonight, we could trade off asking questions. Isn't that a bit more fair?"

Snape cocked an eyebrow at her, mildly surprised. "Well, yes." Hermione unrolled the parchment and he added, "So, who goes first? And, am I to ask whatever I wish?"

That made Hermione pause, frowning in consideration. Chewing her lip for a moment, she said, "Well, I was hoping we could talk about the things I have in here, but," she added magnanimously, "if you cannot find anything in here that you wish to ask, you may come up with something else." She nodded at him with the air of one conferring a great favour, and Snape stifled a snort. Gravely handing the parchment to Snape, Hermione continued, "However, I do think that I've come up with rather a variety of questions, so I'm sure you'll find something."

Snape quirked his lips, taking the list and turning in his seat for Hermione to begin working on his hair. Holding the parchment high enough for her to see it over his shoulder, he said, "Very well, who goes first?"

Hermione retorted, "Well... since they are my questions, I think I should go first."

Snape snorted and murmured, "Of course. Fire away."

Hermione leant forward, scanning the list as she brushed through his hair. "All right, I'll start with something simple: What is your favourite colour...or colours, I suppose?"

Snape sniffed. "That's simple?"

Hermione frowned. "Isn't it? I daresay it's a simple enough question."

Snape smirked, murmuring, "Well, which would you like to know: favourite colour to look at, to wear, or to live with?" He smirked more as he felt her pause in her ministrations. He turned slowly to glance at her, and was met with a scowl.

"You're maddening, you know that?" Hermione pursed her lips in frustration and rolled her eyes. Cocking an eyebrow at him, she said, "Fine. Start with the first one," gripping the crown of his head and turning him away from her again.

Enjoying the way he confounded her, Snape blandly said, "Teal."

"What?"

"Teal."

"Teal what? Which one are you talking about?"

Slowly, Snape said, "The first colour is the one I most enjoy looking at. That is teal. Is there a problem?"

Hermione stepped around in front of him, gazing at him in consternation. With a vague gesture to his quarters and his person, she said, "I don't believe you. If you really liked teal so much, wouldn't there *be* some around here somewhere? You're just trying to mess with me."

Snape affected haughty indignation at her accusation. "On the contrary... One's favourite colour to look at is not necessarily one's favourite colour to *live* with. That would be brown." He paused for a bare moment before adding, "*Obviously*."

Hermione eyed him in astonishment for a moment before casting a long glance around the room. Her gaze took in the brown velvet chairs, the rich wood furnishings, and she remembered the chocolate and sienna colours of his bedspread and sheets. Blinking, she looked back at him. Lip curling in a petulant sneer, she said, "Well, I guess I needn't ask what your favourite colour to *wear* is, do I?"

Snape smiled serenely. "It would seem rather obvious, I suppose." His smile changed to one more mischievous and Hermione stuck her tongue out at him before she resumed her task. He chuckled under his breath at her exasperated sigh.

There was a moment of silence, and Snape prodded, "Aren't you going to tell me your favourites?"

Hermione's voice was poisonously sweet as she retorted, "Why, which one would you like to know first?"

Refusing to rise to her barb, Snape pleasantly replied, "Oh, whichever you like."

Snorting, Hermione gave in. "Going by your categories, I guess I'd say I like to look at purples and violets; I like to wear blues best; and I think earth tones, like tans and sand colours, are the easiest to live with. Satisfied?"

Snape's tone held mild rebuke when he said, "This was your idea, dearest..."

"I know, I know. All right then, your turn."

Snape lifted the parchment again and scanned it. His eyes lit up when he hit upon one particular question. *Perfect! Now I won't have to worry about possibly slipping up and mentioning that furry beast without having properly met it yet...* Affecting only polite interest, he said, "Ah, here we go. What sorts of pets have you had?"

Hermione blithely began, "Oh, well of course, right now I have Crookshanks. I got him in Diagon Alley at the Magical Menagerie right before third year. He's not just a cat; he's part Kneazle."

Ah! That certainly explains a lot.

Hermione continued, "It's quite interesting to see how intelligent he is sometimes. And he's a brilliant judge of character. Plus, he's very nice to cuddle with." She laughed.

"Is he the first pet you've had?"

"Oh, no. When I was in year three, I had a hamster. He was tan with little black marks, and he was so cute." Snape rolled his eyes at the squealing tone in her voice. "His name was Bandit, since his markings reminded me of an eye mask, like one a thief might wear."

Snape snorted lightly and drawled, "Clever."

Hermione buffeted his shoulder and protested, "I was eight! Give me a break!" Then she laughed, smoothing the pomade through his hair. "He lived a couple of years, and I didn't get any other pets after he died. So, what about you?"

Snape cleared his throat. "Well, I have only had one pet, but I didn't buy it. When I was a child, I found a turtle on the bank of the river near my home, and I brought it home to keep as a pet. Fortunately, I could supply food for it without having to buy it, as my parents weren't about to spend any on a ridiculous pet."

He felt Hermione's hand squeeze comfortingly on his shoulder. Gently, she said, "What was its name?"

Snape hesitated, then almost defiantly said, "Sheldon."

Hermione's brows rose, and she giggled. Almost instantly, she realised that that was not the most acceptable reaction. She could feel his body tense under her hand, and the whole air around him seemed to grow colder with frosty dignity.

His voice was stiff as he added, "It was *a* turtle. It had a *shell*. I was *six*."

Hermione impulsively wrapped her arms around him from behind, laying her chin on his shoulder and pressing her cheek against his ear. "I wasn't laughing at you, love, I promise. It does make sense; and really, it's quite clever for a six-year-old to play on words like that. I think it's darling."

Snape sniffed, feeling both mortified and appeased. Patting her arms, he growled, "It's one thing to appreciate the name; it's another thing to say it's 'darling.'" He grimaced. "Let's not use such terms again, shall we?"

Hermione laughed and kissed his cheek before straightening again. "Fine. Although, there's no shame in being cute at six, Severus. Matter of fact, it's rather an expectation. Of course, one wouldn't dare call you cute now..."

He whipped around to pin her with a stern glare, voice oozing offence as he spat, "I should think *not*!"

Hermione smiled at him indulgently and once again turned his head around. "Indeed. Now, sit still so I can finish. I'm almost done." She began gathering his hair for the elastic, peering over his shoulder at the list again. "Okay, here's another easy one. What are your favourite smells? Food and non-food."

Snape thought for a moment and replied, "Food: steak grilling over charcoal, and frying bacon."

Hermione snorted. "Carnivore much? I can just imagine hearing your arteries hardening from here."

Snape huffed and said, "And yours?"

Tightening the elastic around his hair and smoothing everything into place, Hermione said, "Baking bread, popping popcorn, and fresh-cut citrus." At that, she patted his shoulders to indicate she was done, and strode around to face him, smiling.

He looked up at her and smiled. Stretching his arms out, he nodded his head and beckoned, gesturing for her to join him in the chair. Beaming, she perched on his lap, squirming and shifting to get comfortable cuddling in his embrace. Sighing in contentment, she said, "What about non-food?"

Snape rested his chin on the top of her head and inhaled. "You mean, other than your hair?"

Hermione giggled and hugged him. "Yes, other than that."

Snape paused and said, "My potions storage. It always smells safe and secure, and comforting. It's like coming home."

Hermione tilted her head up to gaze in his face. "That's beautiful..." She moulded her hand to his jaw and kissed him.

When they separated, spurred on by her reaction, Snape continued, "Rain on the way in autumn. Especially if it's been crisp and chill, and the leaves have already turned. When the wind shakes them from the trees and the front moves in, I love the scent of the oncoming rain."

Hermione's eyes lit up in appreciation. Kissing him more fiercely, she broke away and murmured, "Remind me to be with you next autumn, when a shower approaches."

Snape grinned. His voice low, he nuzzled her ear and said, "I hope you'll always be with me, from summer on." He held her tight, revelling in the feel of her softness in his arms. They listened to each other's heartbeat for a long while, then Snape whispered, "What about you?"

Hermione dreamily sighed, "Mmm, the scent of new parchment. Petrol. Bergamot oil. And... your shirt."

He pulled back to look at her. Keeping his expression to one of puzzlement, he mentally crowed at what he was sure would be her confession. "My shirt?"

Hermione flushed, and she guiltily peeked up at him through her lashes. "I know I should have asked. Or, at least said something about it earlier. But, I suppose I should come clean. I took your shirt. The one..."

Snape cut her off, affecting indignation. "...That I wore to the cast party! *You* took it? Do you know how many times I've questioned the house-elves about losing my shirt? Really, Hermione, that was unfair. I suppose I shall have to offer an apology to them, but of course, I daren't say what actually happened. What on earth possessed you to abscond with my shirt?" He gazed at her in reproach, watching her bite her lower lip in shame.

"I'm sorry. Please don't be angry with me. I just... I wanted something to remind me of you... of the time we had spent together. It was all so wonderful, and I hated to leave. So, I shrank it and tucked it away in my things, and I've kept it with me in my bed ever since. It smells like you. In a way, it lets me sleep with you, even though you're not there..." She trailed off, voice waning to almost a whisper.

Her words had a singular effect on Snape. Love welled up within him, but it was accompanied by a surge of lust at the thought of sleeping with her. Inhaling sharply, his cock twitched against her legs, and his grip tightened around her. Her eyes went round and she looked up, unable to tear herself away from his intense gaze.

Breath shaky with the effort of maintaining control over his mutinous body, Snape whispered, "I cannot tell you how much I wish I were there." His hand slid along her thigh, cupping her arse and squeezing as he closed the short distance between them and stole her breath with a fiery kiss.

Hermione moaned into his mouth, trailing her hands around his neck and pressing her breasts against his chest. She could feel his erection prodding her legs, and she shuddered at the surge that spread into a slippery puddle in her knickers.

When they eventually parted again, both were panting for breath, wrestling against their desires to divest each other of clothing and consummate their relationship once and for all. Resting their foreheads against one another, Hermione sighed, "Good gods, Severus, I could kiss you forever."

Snape closed his eyes, breathing deeply, rebuilding his self-control. His tone was wistful as he replied, "As could I, my love." Lifting his head, he resolutely tucked hers beneath his chin, once again inhaling the intoxicating scent of her hair. Jaw throbbing as he clenched his teeth with effort, he muttered, "I beg you, Hermione, do not squirm. Not now."

It took a beat for his words to make sense, and when they did, Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a bark of laughter. Pulling back to look him in the face, her eyes were dancing with impish mirth, and he glared at her repressively. Swallowing her giggles, Hermione made a concerted effort to tamp down her heady feelings and cleared her throat. "Of course. Sorry." There was an awkward silence in which they were both obviously casting about for something to draw attention away from their indiscretions. Hermione glanced around and saw the parchment on the side table. "Oh! Um, your turn to ask a question." She looked at the time. "Provided we have the time. We could always go up early. Or walk up like before..."

Snape shook his head, loath to cut short his time alone with her. "No. We'll Apparate up." Grabbing the list, he saw a question that made one corner of his mouth quirk up in devilish amusement. "You say you could kiss me forever. Does that mean I am better than your first kiss? Tell me about it." He cocked one eyebrow at her, and she blinked in surprise.

"Oh! You're bloody well right you're better than my first kiss!" She shook her head and snorted. Glancing at him sceptically, she added, "Do you really want to know?"

Nodding, he assured her, "Yes. Do go on."

Giving him one last look of disbelief, she said, "All right. It was fourth year. I'm sure it won't be a surprise to you that it was with Viktor."

"Krum?"

Favouring him with an aggrieved look for being obtuse, she said, "Yes, Krum. How many Viktors were there?" She rolled her eyes and his lips twitched in amusement. "He kept coming to the library, and at first it was annoying, since he always had a fan club following him. But, he kept disappearing among the stacks until they'd leave, and then he'd sit near me and watch me study, nodding pleasantly. It got unnerving to have him just sit and stare, so I finally spoke to him, and I discovered that he's really very interesting, not just all Quidditch, like you might think he would be. Over the weeks, we became friends, and he'd help me find the books I needed for assignments."

"How kind of him."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Snape. "You asked!"

Snape inclined his head in apology. "I did indeed. Forgive me for interrupting. Please, continue."

Hermione sighed and resumed her tale. "One day...it was about two weeks before the Yule Ball...we were in the stacks, and he just sort of stepped up really close, and he got all nervous, trying to say something. He kept stuttering over words, and I finally stopped him and told him to relax and just say it, whatever it was. He smiled at that and said, 'I knew you were different from the other girls. Only you would not know what I am trying to do.' I was really confused then, and I just repeated, 'Trying to do?'" She paused and laughed at the memory. "That's when he just leant in and kissed me. I think I was too stunned to react."

Unbidden, a caustic comment burst from Snape's lips. "That seems to be a pattern for you."

Hermione snapped a reproachful glance at him, and he felt his cheeks warm with embarrassment. Ashamed at his venomous attack, he gazed at her in apology, caressing her arm. "That was uncalled for. Forgive me, please."

Hermione nodded, lamely adding, "Anyway, he was the first, and you already know of the others. There haven't been many."

Still sorry that he had hurt her, Snape hugged her tight and kissed her temple. "A fact I hope you won't regret." Placing one fingertip under her chin, he tilted her face up and kissed her gently, once again apologizing through the touch of his lips on hers.

Opening her eyes again, Hermione whispered, "Tell me about your first kiss. What were things like for you as a teenager?"

Snape grimaced. "My adolescence was nothing to write home about. Even my first kiss wasn't driven by someone liking me, like yours was."

Hermione caressed his cheek. "What do you mean?"

He sighed. "I was in second year..."

"My, you started early, didn't you?"

Snape shot her a quelling glare. "As I was saying... I was in second year, and the Slytherin girls were having a game of truth or dare in the common room. One of the

second year girls had taken a dare, and she was told to kiss me. So, there I was, barely twelve years old, and already a target of ridicule." His lips twisted bitterly and Hermione kissed his throat, cooing in sympathy. Suddenly, he seemed to wilt, and his voice was weary as he continued, "I will say that at least she was nice about it. And she didn't abuse me later either. Good ol' Gwen was nice enough for a Slytherin."

"Gwen? Was that short for something?"

"Gwendolyn Wright. She was always pretty soft spoken. But, she had ambition in spades. Last I heard, she had moved to the continent and had begun her own business. Can't rightly remember what it was, but she was said to be successful."

There was a long moment of pensive silence, broken by Snape squeezing her leg and saying, "It's nearly time for rehearsal. Come." He patted her legs, urging her to stand, and she struggled from her comfortable position in his lap. Smoothing her robes and hair, she waited for Snape to do the same. Nodding at her, he slipped past her to grab the Phantom mask from the table by the door and briskly strode back to her spot by the chair. Extending his hand to her, he smiled wistfully. "Ready?"

Hermione nodded, slipping her hand into his and stepping closer. Snape released her hand so he could tuck it through the crook of his elbow, resting his other hand on it. At his murmured, "Now," he Disapparated them up to the Hall.

Hermione blinked in surprise when they arrived, as they were standing on the stage. Straightening with dignity, Snape released her hand, and she primly slid it from his arm, both watching the few others wend their way down to the stage.

Hermione could see the envy plainly in Ginny's eyes as she gazed up at them. Smiling faintly at her friend, Hermione shrugged. Dumbledore joined everyone onstage, and the group quieted, turning attentively to him.

"We have only two scenes to block this evening. First, we have the scene after the Masquerade between Raoul and Madame Giry, and then we have the next Notes scene with everyone here." He looked at Snape. "Severus, you aren't onstage for either of these scenes, so I suggest you find a comfortable spot from which to speak your lines." Snape nodded gravely, turning slightly to gaze about the theatre before Disapparating. Dumbledore waved his hands to shoo everyone but Harry and McGonagall from the stage. "Very well, places please. Remember, this section is not available on the music boxes, so we'll have to rely on the scripts alone." At that, he retreated from the stage, gesturing for them to begin.

Hermione stood in the wing with Ginny, edging away from Ron and Neville. Ginny whispered, "So, how are things with you two?"

Hermione smiled. "Fine. We've been enjoying a chance to get to know each other better."

Ginny's eyes lit up and she grinned ferally. "Carnally?"

Hermione huffed and shoved the other girl in reprimand. "Ginny! Honestly!"

Ginny giggled, sputtering, "I'm sorry! I was kidding, really!"

Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Anyway, things seem really good right now. I'm just hoping they'll stay that way." At Ginny's vehement nod, Hermione chuckled. They turned their attention back to the stage, where Dumbledore was instructing Harry and McGonagall where to stand and move for their scene. When he was done, they quickly wrote the notes in their scripts.

Dumbledore called for the next scene to start, and Ron and Neville strode out onto the stage. Dumbledore shifted the sets back to the managers' office, and they began. Draco and Pansy burst in from the opposite wing at their lines, and Hermione and Ginny scrambled to cross behind the sets to the other side of the stage so they could enter from the same side as everyone else.

Harry glanced around impatiently, looking for Hermione. When they arrived, he beckoned to her. "Hurry up, it's almost our cue!" Hermione hustled forward, and Harry grabbed her hand, pulling it through his arm and draping it inside his elbow, much like Snape had done to Apparate upstairs. Hermione pulled her shrunken script from her pocket and held it in the hand on Harry's elbow. She whispered the spell to enlarge it again, and tucked her wand back in her pocket as she and Harry entered on their cue.

Moments later, after Hermione and Pansy spouted venom at each other in their roles, McGonagall and Ginny entered. Finally, everyone but Snape was spread out across the stage, and Dumbledore paused long enough to make some adjustments and allow them all to write down their blocking before letting McGonagall start reading her note.

Snape once again was ensconced in Box Five, watching the rehearsal. When McGonagall began reading the note, he cast *Sonorus*, leaning back languidly as he recited his lines. When he was done, he ended the spell, eyes on Hermione as she acted, showing her fear and worry.

Harry showed his excitement as he outlined his plan, and Ron and Neville reacted accordingly. Since they were practicing without the music, they were a little ragged on the timing of their lines. When they all got to the next interweaving of parts, Dumbledore paused them and had them go slowly, just to be sure they were coming in at the right places. During the build up, Dumbledore instructed Ginny to cross to Hermione, expressing mute concern at her increasing distress. Then, when Hermione burst forth with, "If you don't stop, I'll go mad!" Ginny backed away, returning to McGonagall as Hermione turned to Harry for her lines.

At the end of the scene, Dumbledore urged Harry to move downstage and face front, addressing the Phantom by shouting to the empty air above the audience. When they were done, everyone marked their scripts, and Dumbledore returned to the beginning of the previous scene.

"Now, let's see if you can go smoothly through all of that. Ready? Action!"

They ran through the scenes a second time, at normal speed, and Dumbledore beamed at them. "Well done! All right then, let's try it with the music where available, and with everyone singing." There was a ripple of concern, and he looked at the group in surprise. "What's wrong?"

Ron rubbed the back of his neck and said, "The spell, sir?"

"Oh! Of course. I do apologize. Here you go." He cast the spell on those who wanted it and said, "Places!"

They ran through the scenes a third time quite successfully. From his vantage point, Snape proudly thought that the other schools couldn't possibly be better than Hogwarts. When Dumbledore gathered everyone onstage for notes, Snape Apparated back down to join them. Ron, Neville, and Harry still started at his abrupt appearance, but the rest of the group seemed used to it by now.

"Good work, everyone. We'll be continuing from here next week. Of course, I'll post it on the notice board, but we'll be doing the rehearsal scene through the graveyard scene next time. So, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom, you may have a night off, as you shan't be needed for those scenes." He smiled and nodded at them, and they grinned. "Keep practicing, and good night!"

The group began to disperse, and Ron said, "Oi, the graveyard scene, isn't that the one where the Phantom shoots fire at Raoul?"

Neville glanced anxiously between Harry as they strode up the aisle and Snape's tall figure still on the stage, hissing, "It is."

Both of them turned wide eyes on Harry. Continuing up the aisle, Ron gave a low whistle. "I wouldn't want to be you, mate."

Harry grimaced and shrugged. Unwilling to show his apprehension, he simply said, "Come on! Dumbledore won't let Snape do anything to me right in front of him..."

They all jumped as a silky voice behind them retorted, "Wouldn't it be a shame if there were to be an *accident*?"

Everyone stopped dead in their tracks, whirling to face their smirking Potions Master. Hermione's eyes nearly bugged out of her head in her reproachful glare, and even Ginny looked surprised. Harry scowled darkly, and Ron and Neville gaped, owl-eyed, at Snape. Neville's gaze flicked from Snape's position right by them to where he had previously been on the stage a mere moment before. Snape noticed it and cocked an eyebrow at him.

His tone sardonic, he said, "Well done, Longbottom. Yes, I *did* Apparate here. So convenient..."

Hostility pouring off him, Harry growled, "I suppose then, *sir*, that we'll all have to be especially careful and avoid *accidents*."

Snape's eye narrowed dangerously, but he saw the warning anger blazing in Hermione's eyes, and he curled his lip in a sneer. "Indeed." Then, straightening rigidly and glaring down his nose at them, he swept them with one last baleful look before Disapparating.

Hermione and Ginny exchanged a significant look, and Harry hissed, "Ruddy git..." Lower jaw shoved forward, he spun and marched up the aisle, shoving the doors open and exploding into the corridor. The other Gryffindors looked at each other warily, following quickly.

Harry was muttering under his breath as he charged up the stairs. Jogging to keep up, Ginny and Hermione wracked their brains to figure out how to soothe Harry's temper. At Harry's snarl of the password, the Fat Lady huffed in reproach as she opened the portrait. When they had all scrambled inside, Ginny desperately ventured, "Harry..."

He whirled on her angrily, cutting her off, hands thrown out to the sides. "*What?* What, Ginny? 'Give the man a chance,' 'He was civil to me,' 'Pretend you have manners.' You heard him! He's no different! Not to *me*..." He trailed off bitterly, his voice fading away.

"I'm sure it was a joke..."

Harry cut her such a scathing glance that she flushed and stopped. His voice a deadly whisper, he said, "If that's his idea of a joke, or yours for that matter, neither of you are very funny."

The common room was silent for a long moment. Hermione wanted so much to be able to explain things, to promise that Snape wouldn't hurt Harry, but she couldn't. Still, she had to do something...

"Harry..." He looked at her sharply, as did the rest of them.

"What?"

Worrying her hands, Hermione faltered, "I-I'll talk to him. I'm sure it was just a barb to get under your skin."

Harry's brows rose in scepticism. "*You'll* talk to him? Why would that make any difference?"

Hermione looked at the floor. "Well, we have been working together quite a bit, and he's been professional with me. I do have a chance to speak to him before rehearsals, so I can try to talk to him. You know how he is; I agree with Ginny. I'm sure it was just a joke." She trailed off lamely.

Everyone stared at her. She swallowed nervously. Harry's expression was one of incredulity. Finally, he snorted and spat, "Right. Whatever. I'll believe it when I see it." He shot another sulky look at Ginny, who was still morosely sagging near the portrait. "I'm going to bed." He whipped around and sprinted up the stairs to the dormitory.

When he was gone, there was a sound like air escaping from a balloon as everyone exhaled at once, releasing their tension. Exchanging bewildered looks, Ron and Neville sank into squashy chairs. A beat later, Ginny flopped onto a sofa, lying back and throwing her arm over her eyes. Hermione stood awkwardly, unsure what to say.

Neville turned anxious eyes on Hermione. "Do you really think you can talk to him?"

Hermione attempted a wan smile and nodded. "I'll be sure to before our next rehearsal."

Ron and Neville exchanged looks again and Ron said, "Yeah, but do you really think it'll do any good? Wouldn't it be a bad idea to antagonize Snape? He might take it out on Harry even more."

Before Hermione could answer, Ginny spoke up. "I know she'll do it. It'll all be fine. I have confidence in her." At that, she flung her arm away and sat up, eyes pink but expression determined. "Really. Professor Snape has been acting differently since we began this play, and I really think he's changing. He's been fine with me, even when I was in detention. And he's been great with Hermione, working on all this play stuff. If anyone can get through to him at this point, it's her. You'll see." She offered a supportive smile to Hermione, sniffing.

Hermione inclined her head in thanks and said, "I'll do my best. Harry'll calm down, and I'll talk to Professor Snape before rehearsal next week. Let's not worry about it anymore now. I don't know about you, but I'm ready for bed." She gazed expectantly at them, and they nodded.

Heaving to his feet, Ron said, "Right, then. See you in the morning. G'night." On his way to the stairs, he passed Ginny and gave her a quick hug, patting her back in an awkwardly comforting way.

She smiled and murmured, "Night, Ron." Then, she turned to the others and said, "Night, Neville. Hermione." With a little wave, she disappeared into the doorway to the girls' dormitory as Ron ascended the stairs.

Neville hesitated, glancing at Hermione. It was obvious that he wanted to say something. Gently, Hermione asked, "What is it, Neville?"

He stared at his hands, mouth opening and closing, before he finally forced out, "Aren't you scared to keep going off with Snape? I mean, you have to go to his office before every rehearsal, and now he can just drag you along Apparating." He looked up at her, worried. "Is he really being nice to you? Because, if he's not, we could go to Professor McGonagall. Or to Dumbledore..." His eyes were round, his tone earnest.

Hermione smiled and patted his arm. "Neville, I'm fine. Honestly. Professor Snape and I have quite a... satisfactory working relationship. He treats me like an adult and I give him the same respect. There's no reason to fear him. You don't even have him in class any longer. Think about it: you thought the worst about the chocolate mousse at Christmas, and it was divine! He's even been treating Ginny like a human being in detention."

She chuckled at his sceptical expression. "The war is over. Surely you know how difficult it was for him, keeping up facades on both sides, treading a thin line of deceit. How could anyone go through that for *years* and not let it affect his persona? Finally, it's all over, and Professor Snape can start living a normal life. He's changing. Surely you've noticed too. It won't all happen at once, but it is happening. I really think that I can talk to him. It'll be okay. Just... give him a chance. Like Ginny said. Okay?"

Neville searched her face for any sign that she wasn't sincere, that she was saying those things out of a feeling of coercion. But, her eyes betrayed nothing untoward and he relaxed a trifle. Taking a deep breath and exhaling forcefully, he tried to shake off his almost phobic fear of the Potions Master.

"Okay. I'll try. I won't make any promises, though. Somehow, I don't think my boggart would be any different now than it was in third year..." He cast a wry lopsided smile at her and she chuckled.

Beaming at him, Hermione said, "That's all I ask. Really, Neville, you're a man now. There's no reason to be afraid of Professor Snape. You fought bravely in a war against evil. Just remember that, eh?" She darted forward and hugged him, kissing him on the cheek as she pulled away. He blinked, and his ears immediately began to turn pink. Smiling fondly at him, she spun and strode off to her room. "Good night!"

When she was gone, Neville shook himself, straightening and smoothing his clothes. He gazed around the empty common room and murmured, "That's right. I'm a man. And I *am* brave." He snorted to himself and added, "Hey, if I can change so much, maybe Hermione's right. Maybe Snape *is* changing." He turned and headed toward the stairs to the dormitory. Shaking his head and climbing the stairs, he muttered, "All the same, I'm still glad I'm not in Harry's place..."

47- A History Lesson

Chapter 49 of 84

Neville gives Harry an earful, Ginny gives Snape an earful, and Snape gives Hermione a... a letter-full? Finally caving-in to Hermione's prodding, Snape sends her a letter answering many of her questions about his personal history. Will she be able to handle it?

Standard Disclaimer goes here... as if you haven't seen the disclaimer by now. *snort*

Author's Note: Oodles and lots of thanks to my fantabulous beta, Ladyofthemasque (and congrats on the book deal, dearest!), and to SnivellusSnape for feedback. And, of course, thank you thank you thank you to all you fine folk who are still hanging in there with me as I forge ahead in this epic. Your reviews make my day! I will say that this chapter was very draining to write, as I hope you'll understand once you've read it. These characters wring my heart when they suffer, and this chapter bowled me over. I hope you enjoy it, even though some parts are a downer! Sorry for the longer time in posting, and please check my Livejournal for update info: <http://perndragon.livejournal.com/> *luffs all the readers* :)

Nicole aka Good_Witch

Chapter 47- A History Lesson

Hermione noticed that Harry and Ginny were fairly distant over the weekend. Harry had reverted to his sulky demeanour, avoiding everyone and scowling when spoken to. Finally, it was Monday morning, and Harry was at least attempting to be civil at breakfast, thanks to a stern talking to by none other than Neville.

Neville had spent some time ruminating on Hermione's words, stiffening his resolve to stop being afraid of Snape, and he had used his newfound courage to approach Harry in the dormitory before breakfast Monday morning. He had waited until everyone else had gone, and then he had barred the door with his arm when Harry had tried to leave.

Scowling, Harry had growled, "Out of the way, Neville," trying to shove his arm down.

Neville had resisted, stepping into the doorway, face white but set as he said, "No. I have something to say."

Rolling his eyes, Harry had glared at him. "Move, now!"

Neville had shaken his head and taken a deep breath. "Not until you shut up and listen!"

Harry had reared back, blinking in astonishment at his usually reticent friend's uncharacteristic behaviour. Curiosity overtaking anger, Harry had taken a step back, muttering, "Fine. What?"

Heaving a sigh of relief that Harry had retreated, Neville had cleared his throat and stammered, "You need to stop treating everyone badly. We don't deserve it. Especially Ginny. She's your girlfriend, and you should be nicer to her." At the end of that statement, he had paused, gazing at Harry with trepidation, wary of how he would react.

Harry had simply stared at him. Seeing Neville stand up for himself and others was such a rare occurrence that it served to make Harry re-evaluate the situation. Processing his friend's words, he had mutely blinked at him.

Neville had taken the opportunity to continue. "Look, I know you hate Snape. I know he's been a git. But, if the girls say he's changed, why not take the chance to see if they're right? People can change. I have."

Harry's eyes had narrowed in annoyance and consternation. "You were *there*. You heard what he said! How has he changed?"

Neville had swallowed nervously before retorting, "Just because he said something like that doesn't mean he's ~~to~~ anything. The girls may be right. Maybe he's just goading you. You can't honestly say you haven't done the same sort of thing with Malfoy." He had paused to fix a stern eye on Harry. "I witnessed some of it myself." He had locked eyes with Harry, refusing to back down until Harry had looked away first, sheepishly stuffing his hands in his pockets. Relaxing a trifle at his seeming success, he had added, "Look, we'll see how he acts at rehearsal. I think I may just show up to see for myself if he's changed as much as the girls claim he has. But in the meantime, stop being such a prat to everyone. You wouldn't want to put us in mind of another great git, would you?" He had tilted his head meaningfully, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

Harry had glared at him, obviously incensed at the comparison. He had opened his mouth to speak, but shut it again, frowning. Finally, he had deflated, sighing loudly. "All right! I get it. Fine. I'll stop acting a prat. Let's go eat, okay?" He had rolled his eyes, aggrieved, gesturing past Neville, and Neville had grinned in relief.

"Sounds good. Let's go." Smiling to himself at the success of his ploy...especially without getting pounded...Neville had traipsed down the stairs on light feet.

Harry had kept quiet almost all the way down, until they were about to enter the Great Hall. Then, he had punched Neville's arm and said, grinning, "Good on you, mate. Look, I promise I'll stop sulking. Last thing I need is for you to go all Mrs. Weasley on me again." He had sniggered and shot a lopsided smile at Neville, who had jerked away, startled at Harry's buffet.

Rubbing his arm to ease the sting, Neville had smiled shakily back at Harry before quipping, "Good, because I don't think I'd look very good with red hair."

Both boys had laughed as they entered the Hall, and Neville had seen the girls eyeing Harry warily. They had exchanged a grateful look at Harry's apparent better mood, and smiled brightly at both boys as they had taken their seats.

Harry had immediately turned away with Ginny, whispering an intimate conversation, and Hermione had regarded Neville with an air of one granted an unexpected reprieve.

In a low voice, Hermione had said, "Wow, he looks like he's finally come 'round. Thanks be!"

Neville had leant closer to her and murmured, with no little pride, "I've been thinking about what you said the other night, and I wouldn't let him leave the dormitory until he agreed to stop being so horrid."

Hermione had beamed at him, causing him to flush in pleasure. "Oh, Neville, that's wonderful! We all owe you one." With an exaggerated roll of her eyes, she had laughed and patted his arm. "You just keep it up, and you'll be completely unaffected by Professor Snape in no time."

Eyes round, Neville had heaved a huge sigh and said, "One can hope!"

Ginny and Harry had made up, and the rest of the day had proceeded as normal. Tuesday, Ginny went to Potions class with a definite idea. While she wasn't willing to court detention again, she knew she needed to talk to Snape. So, she daringly slipped a scrap of parchment, on which she had scrawled, "I need to talk to you," on Snape's desk when she turned in her assignment. A deft twitch of the parchment sent the scrap sliding further down his desk, and Snape saw its movement.

He shot a questioning glance at Ginny as he quickly covered the scrap with one hand. She gave a slight nod at the note, before turning to fetch her materials for the day's assignment.

When everyone had turned in their homework, Snape finally lifted his hand, peering at the scrawl. He maintained a blank expression, even though he was surprised at her venture. Casting a quick glance over the working students, he settled himself at his desk, sifting through the stack of assignments. Pulling Ginny's from the pile, he glanced vaguely through it. Vanishing the scrap, he stood and said, "Miss Weasley, join me for a moment."

Ginny eyed him, startled. The rest of the class looked on curiously. Nodding, she strode up to his desk. "Yes, Professor Snape?"

Snape gestured at her assignment and frowned. His voice low, he said, "Just what is the meaning of this? Clearly, you did not devote your full attention to this assignment. Would you care to explain yourself?" He held her bewildered gaze for a moment, until his ruse became clear.

Ginny's eyes lit up with comprehension, and she rose to the challenge. Affecting humiliation, she muttered, "I'm sorry, sir. I've been worrying about other things. I didn't understand some of the concepts, and I know I turned in unsatisfactory work." She hung her head in pretend shame, inwardly grinning at his dissembling.

Snape sniffed and heaved a put-upon sigh. His tone was stern and aggrieved as he said, "You will stay after class, Miss Weasley, and I will re-explain the assignment. You will then re-do it, and I will generously accept it tomorrow for three-quarters credit. Is that clear?" He gazed down his nose at her, and she looked up, nodding quickly.

"Yes, sir. Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity, Professor."

Snape rolled his eyes and waved her away. "Indeed. Continue your work, Miss Weasley, and be sure to give it your *undivided* attention."

Looking down humbly, Ginny murmured, "Of course, Professor," and hurried back to her seat. She pointedly ignored her tablemates who tried to ply her with questions, and Snape assisted her in that task by glaring at those who were pestering her, scowling forbiddingly. Fortunately, they subsided quickly.

When class was over, Ginny meekly made her way up to Snape's desk, hands clasped in front of her, gazing at the floor. As soon as the last student was gone, Snape flicked his wand at the door, shutting it firmly and locking it. Then, he turned to Ginny, who was now gazing up at him in appreciation, a crooked grin on her face.

Unnerved by her grin, he uttered a flat, "What?"

Ginny shrugged eloquently and blithely voiced a cryptic, "You."

Snape frowned, eyes narrowing. "What about me?"

Hastily, in an effort to abort the impending Snape attitude, Ginny said, "That was just brilliant, is all. I wasn't sure how to get to you, but this was a great idea."

Mollified, Snape grunted and jerked his chin at her. "Very well then, what's so important?"

Ginny sobered quickly. "I just wanted you to know that your comment to Harry at rehearsal really stirred up a hornet's nest." Snape curled his lip in disdain, and Ginny barrelled on. "Seriously! He was really upset, and Hermione said she'd try to talk to you about it." At Snape's instant reaction of alarm, Ginny nodded sagely. "Exactly. I tried to play things off to the others that you had changed since the end of the war, especially with this whole play thing, and that you were even decent to me in detention, but they're still wondering why Hermione should have any effect on you, and why *her* talking to you should make any difference!" She gasped for air at the end of that one long statement.

Snape frowned, drumming his fingers on the desk in agitation. He was silent for a long moment, then said, "Do you think anyone suspects?" He eyed Ginny keenly, as if his eyes were laced with Veritas serum.

Ginny shook her head slightly. "I don't think so. But I don't know. I am *trying* to get them to start viewing you differently, so they don't think any changes are strictly the result of Hermione's influence..." Snape's lips twitched. "But, if we're to convince people that you've really changed, you've *got* to stop harassing Harry like that!"

Snape's eyes narrowed coldly. He spat, "Do not presume to reprimand me."

Ginny closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. In a placating tone, she replied, "I'm sorry. Really! I'm not trying to lord over you. Just consider it advice from a friend." She gazed at him imploringly, brown eyes candid with warmth and appeal.

Snape relaxed a trifle, sliding his eyes from hers. "So, Hermione is supposed to talk to me?" Ginny nodded. "Well then, I suppose that if she's lecturing me about the care and handling of your *precious Potter*, at least I won't be badgered with questions."

Ginny bit back a retort in Harry's defence. Inwardly, she mused on the delicate handling needed for *this* prickly specimen, and marvelled at Hermione's apparent success in that venture so far. Wisely saying nothing, she simply gazed at Snape until he looked back at her.

Cutting a glance at Ginny, Snape muttered, "Very well then. You've made your point. I shall expect to hear from Hermione on the matter soon. Off with you." With that, he flicked his wand at the door, opening it, jerking his head at Ginny to leave.

Ginny obediently gathered her things and hastened to the door. Peeking down the corridor, she said, "Thank you for revising the assignment with me, Professor. I'll have it for you tomorrow. Thank you, sir." Nodding at him, she ducked out the door and down the corridor against the flow of students who were on their way to Potions for the next period.

Snape sat at his desk, chin propped in one hand, leaning on one elbow, the other hand drumming on his desktop. He frowned in thought, wondering what Hermione would have to say to him when next they met. Wishing he could dare to pop into her room, he forced that mutinous thought back; he was unwilling, in light of this newest incident, to take even the slightest chance that he should be caught. Firmly shutting away the wistful desire to be with his love, he turned his focus to his approaching class.

Ginny had reported to Hermione on her covert conversation with Snape. Thus, when Hermione went to Potions class the next day, she knew that he was going to expect some sort of contact about the issue. And, of course, she was prepared. She had spent time the night before writing him a note which she included with her homework that morning. The supposedly blank pages were attached to her assignment, and she cut a pointed glance at the parchment when she deposited it on the stack on his desk.

Snape merely met her gaze for a moment of acknowledgement before turning his attention to writing instructions on the board for the day's work. When everyone was settled and involved in their potions assignment, he sat back in his chair and snagged her parchment from the stack, separating the blank pages from the others. Wordlessly, he pointed his wand at the pages and cast *Aperio*. Hermione's writing filled the pages.

"Dearest Severus," it read, "We really must talk about Harry before this Friday's rehearsal. I know Ginny already told you, and I know it's likely the last thing you wish to discuss. But, it really is important, if we're to sow good seeds betimes regarding public opinion about us when we make our relationship known. I'm sure that by now it's practically second nature for you to make quips like that to Harry...and any other people who annoy you...but I know a different Severus Snape, and he doesn't feel the need to belittle and threaten others at every turn."

Snape paused and glanced up, feeling both as if he were chafing at her restraints and pleased that she had brought out the better side of him. He watched her work for a moment, admiring her calm and efficient manner, before turning back to her letter.

"I guess I just don't understand why you would go out of your way to say something like that. I mean, you already admitted that you don't hate him any longer. I know you cared for his mother, and I know you and his father never got along, but I firmly believe that you two could call a truce if you'd only allow it. There's really no good reason to continue antagonizing each other. I can't help but wonder how much more there is to the story that caused you to dislike Harry and his father so much. I'd love to learn more about you, love. You know that. Maybe it's time to get rid of such festering resentment and hostility by purging those memories by sharing them with me. I want to be able to understand the enigma that is the man I love. So, to that end, I'll stop badgering you about getting along with Harry and move on to another important issue."

Snape clenched his jaw, peering up through his lashes at the class. He hated the roiling feelings that surfaced with the memories of all that he had suffered at the hands of James Potter and his cronies. *She doesn't understand. It's not something I can just shake off.* As he gazed blankly at the students, a small voice sounded in his head. *Well, if she doesn't understand, perhaps you should tell her just what you went through! She may be right about purging the residual pain. Can you truly let her in to understand all that made you who you are today? She loves you. It would certainly be a clear demonstration of your love for her if you shared those most intimate memories with her.*

Closing his eyes, he sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Passing one hand over his brow and rubbing his eyes, he swallowed back the uncomfortable sensations swirling within him and focused back on the note.

"I'm sure you remember just how many questions I managed to come up with on that scroll. Most of them were fairly general...the kinds of things you could ask anyone. But, I'd really like to take the time to learn about your life. You know, things like:

What were your parents like?

How did they meet?

What did they do for a living?

What ended up happening to them?

What did you do while you were here at Hogwarts?

What did you do after you finished?

How did you get into Potions?

How did you get involved with the Death Eaters?

What brought you back to the good side?

How did you manage to survive and maintain your sanity all those horrible years of leading a double life?

I know... I'm terribly nosy. But you're just so fascinating to me; I really want to get inside your head... among other things...

I couldn't help it! I haven't said anything even remotely racy to you in a while, but it's never far from my mind, dearest. I'm just trying to keep it at bay so I don't drive myself crazy with need while we're forced to wait. There's only so much I can do to take the edge off, and it really doesn't compare..."

Snape's brows shot up at her naughty innuendo. It was rather a shock to see such a change after so many serious questions. He bit back a wicked grin at her lascivious confession, doing his best to ignore the tingle in his trousers at the thought of her "taking the edge off." Clearing his throat and composing his expression, he read on.

"Anyway, you know I'll tell you anything you want to know about me, of course. Although we both know that my life history is nowhere near as interesting as yours."

Nor as desolate and wretched. His bitterness reared its ugly head and a caustic voice within him said, *Perhaps if you tell her the details of your blighted youth, she'll stop hounding you with more questions!* He scowled and shoved the letter away, sulkily casting *Celo* under his breath. Needing to get away from the invasive queries, he shot to his feet and started stalking around the classroom, looming over students as they worked.

Hermione dared to eye him questioningly, but he simply glared at her, in full irritated Potions Master persona. Shrinking away from his glower, she focused on her assignment, loath to do anything that might further sour his mood.

Is he so upset from reading my letter? He was reading it, wasn't he? Oh, I do hope he isn't this angry about Harry. I'm really not looking forward to getting into a row over that.

Eventually, Snape returned to his desk, sinking into his chair and leaning back in it, one elbow on the arm of the chair, fingers braced against his cheek and covering his mouth as he stared around at the students, lost in thought. He didn't read any more of Hermione's letter, nor did he attempt any grading. He simply sat, brooding, until the period ended and he barked a dismissal at the students.

Hermione refrained from trying to get his attention. She could tell he was in no mood to deal with her. Hoping he would work through whatever had him so grim, she left with the rest of the class.

Snape's thoughts whirled all day long, and that evening, he forbore going to dinner in favour of secluding himself in his quarters, Hermione's letter in front of him and a blank sheet of parchment staring up at him under his motionless quill. He was completely still, so submerged within his memories that he didn't even notice when the house-elf from which he had requested a light meal appeared, placing the tray on the other end of the table. He didn't hear the soft pops of Apparition, and he eventually became aware of the aroma of the soup and toast a few feet away.

He shook himself from his reverie, clearing his throat and scrubbing his face with both hands before heaving a deep, cleansing breath and shoving the parchment out of the way. He pulled the tray closer, determinedly dipping the toast into the cooling soup and eating. It was a rather half-hearted attempt, and after a few bites and sips, he stopped, stomach roiling under the alimentary assault. Firming his resolve, he Summoned a tea service, managing a faint smile as he mixed a steaming cup laced with honey and lemon.

Pushing the trays away, he once again positioned the parchment to begin his reply to Hermione's letter.

"Hermione, my love,

There are many things in my life that are very difficult to talk about.

That extraordinary understatement out of the way, I will admit that I understand your desire to learn about those same things. In an effort to show you how deeply I care for you, and how much I am willing to... no, suffer really isn't the word I'm looking for... ah, here we go: endure, I am writing this missive to you, to at least give you a bare-bones outline of my history, without subjecting you unnecessarily to the horrid, painful details. I must say that I feel almost exhausted just thinking about this task, but it must be done, and Severus Snape is not a man to shirk his duty.

My mother, as I have said, was a witch, née Eileen Prince. Her family had a small market/ herb shop in a factory village frequented by both wizards and Muggles. To the Muggles, it was simply a family-owned market that also happened to carry a wide variety of plants, grown in the family garden between the shop and their home. To the wizards, it was a reputable shop for quality herbs and ingredients for potions, saving them a trip to Diagon Alley. She had no siblings.

My father, Tobias Snape, was a Muggle who lived in the same village. He worked in the factory nearby, and he came to the shop each day to buy something for his lunch. According to my mother, as soon as she finished Hogwarts, she worked the front counter of the shop, preparing to take over the family business. Somehow, they became friends, and then lovers. Once I was old enough to understand, my mother told me she and my father had begun meeting in secret, behind her parents' backs. They apparently descended from a very old, thinned-out branch of a Pureblood wizarding family tree. She knew they would never approve of her relationship with a Muggle. Supposedly, Muggles were fine to do business with, just not to marry.

Unfortunately, they were not careful enough in their liaisons, and she became pregnant with me. My father wanted to marry her right away and take a flat near the factory. He had no idea my grandparents would be so averse to their union. When my mother told them the situation, they fought bitterly. Disgraced by their daughter's indiscretion, they turned her out, telling her never to darken their door again. Hurt, and dreading the confession she knew she had to make to my father, she only told him that they objected to their relationship and had disowned her when she refused to terminate both the pregnancy and her relationship with my father. Of course, properly indignant and full of righteous anger, he immediately put his plan in action and took the flat, marrying her in a civil ceremony within days.

Once they were living in such close quarters, it became more difficult for her to hide her heritage, especially when he asked her why she was so fixated on 'a stick.' Finally, she sat him down and explained that she was a witch, desperately afraid he'd leave her too. Obviously, he didn't. But, things were never the same after that.

My father was a fairly simple man. Not devoid of intellect, just... uncomplicated. He was one of those people who see things in finite terms of black and white. My mother's 'secret' made things complicated. He didn't particularly care for that. He also felt betrayed. When the truth was finally out, my father reproached my mother for deceiving him. Then, when he had her demonstrate her abilities, rather than being impressed or proud, he pulled away even more, resentful that she had gifts he could never have.

I learnt very early on that the strange things my mother could do were not normal. It was like a shameful, dirty little secret we had to hide from the neighbours.

My father kept advancing in the factory. He quickly became an engineer, adept at fixing the machinery that kept the factory going. He had a gift... working with his hands. But, until his salary increased to match the respect he was given at work, my mother took a position in a florist shop. She always had an affinity for plants, and she used to talk fondly about Herbology classes here. I was very young when we moved to the house at Spinner's End, not far from the river beyond the factory. It was bigger than the flat, but it was clearly a working-class neighbourhood.

I went to primary school, but I didn't have many friends. I felt so guarded, with our family secret, and sometimes things would happen that I couldn't explain... and that didn't make me very popular either. Anytime my parents found out about these occurrences, my father would get this grim, closed look on his face, and my mother would get nervous, waiting until he was out of earshot to whisper to me that it was only because I was like her, and when I got older, I'd learn to control it like she did. I remember the day she let me hold her wand. When I flicked it, a shower of multi-coloured sparks burst forth, and I was terrified and excited. She hugged me tight and told me that she was proud of me, but I still needed to be as 'normal' as I could possibly be around my father. He didn't approve of 'foolish wand waving.'

I wasn't a Muggle, but I wasn't allowed to really be a wizard either. It was a very trying way to grow up.

Obviously, the other children didn't know what to make of my random bursts of magical energy, and I was labelled 'weird.' I retreated into books, learning to read at a young age, and practically devouring everything I could get my hands on. It wasn't long before I was reading at a level far beyond my age group. I daresay you could understand what that was like, my dear.

A few years after we moved, my grandparents died, which was rather a shock to my mother. But, what was more shocking was that they had actually included her in their will. It was then that we inherited an extensive library of old wizarding books, most of which included the Dark Arts. I spent as much time as I had available to me reading about the wizarding world. It was like a beacon, a light at the end of the tunnel, something to strive for.

I was a good student, a fact about which my father was proud. Finally, there was something I could do that both parents appreciated. The day I got my Hogwarts letter was a singular day in my life. My parents had frequent rows, and my father was prone to yelling and belittling. Over the years, my mother just shrank under it more and more. She refrained from using her magic, and she just cowered away from him whenever he would fly off into a temper. Gods forbid I got worked up enough to be subject to a stress-induced burst of wandless magic. Those incidents were the worst.

My mother actually dared to tell my father, the day I got my letter, that at least I would be going to a prestigious school where I would learn to control my gifts. He suddenly went quiet, and I had never been more afraid of him in my short life. The venom in his eyes when he pinned me with his gaze froze me to the spot, and the hiss of his voice when he said that I'd be better served learning a trade, knowing how to actually do something, being a man instead of wasting time on mumbo jumbo... I'd never heard him sound like that before, and it made quite a lasting impression.

I escaped to my room, and I vowed that I would somehow do both. I would manage to make both of my parents proud of me, even as a wizard.

When I came to Hogwarts, I was overwhelmed. Unfortunately, what with the way the other children had treated me in primary school, I never really had developed good social skills, and since I felt like I was hopelessly behind everyone else who knew more about being a wizard than I did, I wasn't quick to make friends. I didn't even know much about the Houses. My one, all-encompassing thought was to become the best wizard ever, and to make my parents proud. I suppose it was that driving ambition that caused the Sorting Hat to place me in Slytherin House. Even when I was in school, Slytherin and Gryffindor had a sort of instant rivalry. It didn't take long for Potter and his cronies to pick me as their target.

Because of my inhibitions, I didn't adapt as quickly as I had hoped to charms and transfiguration. I needed extra help early on, a fact which Potter's gang used to their advantage. However, I was an instant star in Herbology... thanks to my mother's affinity, which she encouraged in me... and I was almost as quickly a force to be reckoned with in Potions. You see, Potions was a skill one could learn and practice, one that could be enhanced by a gift in using one's hands. My father could actually respect that.

Albus worked with me early on to bring my wand work up to snuff. How swiftly I came to idolize the man... I'm sure you can understand; you know him. He filled the gap my father left open.

Whenever I would go home on holiday, I would carefully tailor my reports of school to whichever parent I was around. It wasn't until I was older that I realized just how much my mother's magic had suffered. It had atrophied from disuse.

At school, as I excelled more and more in Potions, I began being courted by some other Slytherins, older than I. They flattered me and made me feel important. They were my friends. I'm sure it will come as no surprise to you that they were Riddle's followers. They were very smooth with their anti-Muggle sentiments. They had to tread carefully, seeing that I was a half-blood. To my shame, they seeded their ideals in the fertile ground of my resentment of my father. You see, as I recognized how much my mother had declined due to his forbidding attitude about magic, I started to blame him for her condition, and I became ashamed of my Muggle heritage, since my father was such a closed-minded specimen.

My rebellion to his autocratic ways led to my downfall, and the worst mistake of my life.

My father was killed in an accident in the factory toward the end of my fifth year. By the time I was home on summer holiday, my mother had almost withered away. I was all she had left, and I wasn't around during term. I think that her self-esteem and her identity had crumbled so much under my father's tyranny that she couldn't move on without him. As my final two years at Hogwarts passed, I feared for her sanity and her life. She no longer used any magic, always repeating her litany about not wanting to upset my father any time I urged her to practice again.

Riddle's gang pulled me in deeper too. I was so angry at my father for doing that to my mother, and I felt sick every time I had to deal with her in her state. With them, at least I felt powerful. I wasn't helpless. I was encouraged to continue my Potions studies, so I could join the ranks of his most trusted, valued disciples. Gods forgive my vanity, and all the destruction it caused.

I finished at Hogwarts in June of 1978, and by early 1979, I had taken the Mark. I joined several other Death Eaters in a flat while I worked in my Apprenticeship. Riddle's anti-Muggle endeavours increased. He instigated an attack on Muggleborn wizards, killing several. It was at that point that Regulus Black had second thoughts. In truth, so did I. But, we were too firmly entrenched to be able to escape. Regulus tried it, and he was killed that year.

I was scared. I had thought it all to be mere rhetoric. I wasn't prepared for there to actually be murders. It seemed to send Riddle into a bloodlust. He called us all together more and more, instigating attacks and planning more ways to infiltrate the Ministry. He spewed his pure-blood propaganda at every turn.

Then he began including blood-traitors.

My mother was on the list. According to Riddle, she was the worst kind of blood-traitor. Not only did she sully herself by marrying a Muggle, she insulted wizardkind even more by not using her magic, by letting it deteriorate to the point of extinction. She was worse than a person who was born without magic because she had the gift and refused it.

Riddle ordered the attack on my mother in early 1980. She was killed, and the Dark Mark was set above the house. I found out about it after the fact. With her death, Spinner's End passed to me. I kept it, but I didn't return there. I've thought many times that I should just sell it, but I can't. I just can't.

When my mother was killed, I didn't know what to do. I knew that I had to pretend that it didn't bother me, or Riddle would just as soon kill me too. That's when my practice at self-control really came into play. I told you, love, that the reasons I had for developing my self-control and patience weren't happy ones.

I couldn't think of anywhere to turn. I was alone. No mother. No father. Then, I remembered: Albus. The man whom I had so often wished had been my father, making me wonder how much happier my life would have been if he had been.

It was spring of 1980, and I was nearing the end of my Apprenticeship. I didn't know what to do, since I obviously didn't want to put my skills at Riddle's disposal, but I also didn't want to be killed as a traitor. I contacted Albus, asking if I could meet with him at his convenience. He asked me about what I had been doing with myself. I told him my Apprenticeship was almost done, and then I mentioned my mother's death. The amount of sympathy for my loss and approval of my achievements nearly drowned me in its intensity. Albus told me to meet him at the Hog's Head for a drink and some time to visit, as he was going to be there interviewing someone for a teaching position.

I went to meet him, and the bar man told me he had taken a room for privacy. When I went up, I didn't know that Albus was still interviewing Trelawney. I heard her Prophecy as I arrived. Suddenly, I had even more weighing on my conscience. Once Trelawney left, it was all I could do to remain coherent as I poured my soul out to Albus, begging for help, for a way out.

He gave me one, but it was a way out with an exceptionally long path. I count myself lucky that I made it all the way down that path alive.

It was that night that I came back to the Light. Albus outlined a way for me to be a spy for him, helping him to defeat Riddle. He suggested that I take one more year of study to get my Potions Mastery, after which he could hire me to teach. In the meantime, he began an intensive course of teaching me Occlumency. He was surprised and impressed to find that I had already developed a fairly strong rudimentary form of that skill by the way I had grown up, tightly controlling my magic, my words, even my thoughts. It was a crash course, but my desperate need for salvation spurred me to great lengths very quickly.

Riddle was pleased with my advanced course, and he left me alone in deference to my studies. He wanted me to serve him as a Potions Master, and praised me for my dedication. September 1, 1981: I began my tenure as Potions Master at Hogwarts, at the tender age of 21.

It was difficult. There were students in my advanced level classes that had been my Housemates while I was a student! And, while I loved learning, I found that I was not as keen on teaching. I doubt you'll find that surprising in the least...

October 23rd, I went to Albus with the information that Riddle was planning an attack on the Potters, based on his knowledge of the Prophecy. You can imagine my relief when the Fidelius Charm was performed the next day.

Well, I'd not recommend you imagine my horror and grief at learning that they had been betrayed, and that Riddle had killed the Potters. When Riddle tried to kill Harry, and the curse rebounded onto him, every Death Eater felt it. In a frenzy, I tore about, finding out what had happened, where he had gone. It was mere moments after he had killed James and Lily that I arrived on the scene. The house was in shambles, and I could barely breathe for fear of what I would find. I couldn't find Riddle anywhere, but I came across James, dead. Then, I found Lily... dead. Harry was alive, and I knew I had to get away before I was found at the scene of the crime.

Apparating away from Godric's Hollow, that was the closest I've come to splinching since I first learnt to Apparate. As soon as I re-appeared, I hit the ground, unable to feel my legs anymore, and unable to stop heaving. I wished I could have Obliviated myself then and there, but I didn't dare.

I still owed James Potter, as much as I loathed it, a life debt. Lily had been a friend of sorts. I cared for her. Even my precarious position as a spy hadn't been able to save them. But, all was not lost. Harry still lived. I had too little to look forward to if Riddle succeeded in his plans, and I had nothing left to lose but my own miserable life in my attempts to thwart him. I vowed that I would do whatever lay within my power to protect Lily's son so he could fulfil the Prophecy and rid the world of the evil incarnate that was Riddle.

I did.

Albus put me on the path to atone for my sins, and my journey is over. But, after so long, it's like I have to learn how to live again, without the guilt hanging over my head. It is... difficult. But, my love, you have shown me what my new life can be. I finally have something good to look forward to, to anticipate with joy.

You wanted to know what my life was like. Now you know what has made me the man I am today, the man you claim to love so dearly. I hope that now we can both put my past behind us, and focus only on the future, our future.

Now, in that vein, I shall end this with a request...

Instead of my collecting you from the Great Hall after dinner as usual, can you manage to meet me earlier? I will wait for you in my office as early as six. We have much to discuss, and I feel we should likely benefit from a reasonable amount of time in which to do so.

Don't worry about replying to tell me if you'll be able to make it here early. I'll be waiting regardless. Be sure to express my gratitude to Ginny for her assistance in delivering this to you. I'll not be in a position to do so when I give it to her.

I am eagerly awaiting seeing you again, beloved. Until then, I hope you are well, and I shall dream of you in my arms.

Yours,

Severus"

As he finished signing his name, his quill slowed to a weary stop. The tip bored into the parchment, leaving a spreading blot of ink while his head drooped forward onto the desk in exhaustion. He hadn't realized that he had fallen back into his adolescent habit of writing furiously with his nose mere millimetres from the page. Lank locks draped along either side of his face, spreading over his writing.

He sat there for a long moment, hand almost spasming with cramp, eyes closed as he breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of parchment and ink. Eventually, he sat back, hissing at the crick in his neck. Gingerly releasing his quill, he stretched his fingers, shaking his hand from the wrist while the other hand reached up to rub at the knotted muscles joining his neck and shoulders.

Frowning at the blot of ink, he picked up his wand and tapped it on it, Vanishing the unsightly blemish. He leant his head back, letting it stretch his neck in the other direction, dangling his arms to each side. Staring at the dark stones of his ceiling, he idly wondered what time it was. Heaving a huge sigh, he turned to look at the time.

That late? Blast! I've missed my rounds... Ah, no matter. I daresay this task was more important than searching for miscreants.

He gazed down at his letter to Hermione. The perfectionist in him wanted to re-read it, but he shied away from dragging himself through all the turmoil yet again. Lips thin and tight, he deliberately rolled the parchment into a scroll, sealing it. Still acquiescing to the paranoid voice in his head, he took the scroll with him to his bedroom, secreting it under his pillow, secure that no one could find it there.

Movements slow with fatigue, he undressed, sliding between the cool sheets. Lying flat on his back, he scrubbed his face with both hands, raking his fingers over his brow and along his scalp, letting his arms fall to both sides with his hands still entangled in his hair. He closed his eyes, trying to will himself to sleep for the few remaining hours, but sleep evaded him. His mind was whirling with memories, and he couldn't settle it enough to fall asleep.

Scowling in frustration, he snatched his wand from the nightstand and growled, "Accio Dreamless Sleep Draught." Fortunately, he had left the bathroom door ajar, and the bottle wafted quickly into his outstretched hand. Struggling to half-sit, he downed just under half a dose, knowing he had just a few hours left to rest. Wearily setting the bottle on the nightstand, he fell back onto the pillow, flinging one arm up, resting his forearm against his brow as he was sucked down into oblivion.

Ginny hurried to get to Potions early the next day, hoping to arrive before anyone else. When she arrived at the dungeon classroom, she peeked in, exhaling heavily in relief that it was empty. Anxiously awaiting Snape's arrival, she jerked her gaze to the door at the slightest sound. Disappointed, she saw that it wasn't Snape, but a classmate. Fingers agitatedly rubbing at a frayed spot on her jumper sleeve, she waited.

A few more students arrived before Snape finally entered. She stared at him, hoping to catch his eye, but he merely swept past her to his desk. Sitting with his customary flourish, he fished a scroll from his robes and shot a glance at Ginny.

"Miss Weasley, come here."

Ginny shot to her feet and approached the desk. "Yes, sir?"

His gaze bored into her as he brandished the scroll and said, "Your make-up assignment was much more satisfactory. Perhaps Miss Granger is not the only Gryffindor with two brain cells to rub together." The way his brow furrowed as he said "Miss Granger," and the way he cast a fleeting glance at the scroll at the same time told Ginny that Hermione was somehow involved with this scroll.

Ginny quickly took the scroll from him, nodding faintly and saying, "Thank you, Professor. Hermione did help me. I'll be sure to thank her as soon as I see her." Considering the fact that Ginny hadn't really given Snape anything but her original assignment on Tuesday, she could only assume that she was to deliver the scroll to Hermione. She made a show of stowing the scroll in her robes.

Snape's lips thinned in silent approval and then he said, "Indeed. Be sure to pay attention in class, Miss Weasley, as Miss Granger will not always be available to assist you."

"Of course, sir." Ginny ducked her head and returned to her seat, once again checking the scroll in her robes, making sure it was secure.

Class proceeded as normal, and Ginny hastened to pack up her things when the period ended, catching Snape's eye and nodding as she headed toward the door. She'd be able to give the scroll to Hermione at their next meal, but curiosity nagged her to the point that she detoured into a lavatory, locking herself in a stall and fishing the scroll from her robes.

Furtively, she unsealed it and peeked at the heading. "*Hermione, my love*"... *Oops! Okay, definitely not for me, then.* Firmly averting her eyes from seeing anything else, she re-sealed the scroll and pocketed it once more.

When they met in the Great Hall, Ginny sat beside Hermione, waiting until everyone was busy serving themselves to surreptitiously hand over the scroll. Hermione peered at her questioningly, quickly shoving the scroll into her bag. Ginny tilted her head and cocked an eyebrow meaningfully, barely jerking her head toward the High Table. Hermione's eyes widened in comprehension, and she flashed a grateful smile at her friend.

"Thanks!"

Ginny nodded and leant closer, whispering, "I *did* unseal it, but just to be *sure* it was for you. I didn't see anything else but your name, I *swear*!" As she backed away, she gazed at Hermione, eyes wide in earnest.

Hermione smirked, muttering, "I believe you. Thanks for telling me though." She patted Ginny's arm under the table in reassurance.

They joined the rest of the students in eating, but Hermione's mind was stuck on the letter, wondering what it contained.

I would love to go off and read it now, but I daren't get into it while I still have classes to focus on today. I'll just wait until after my last class, so I won't get distracted. Thus decided, she tucked into her sandwich, wishing Snape had come to lunch. His seat was empty, and she fleetingly worried about him, especially since he had seemed so grim after reading her letter.

Her mind kept returning to the scroll that seemed to be burning a hole in her bag, so much did she want to read it. But, she refused to open it until her afternoon classes were done, at which point she raced up to her room, shutting herself away from prying eyes.

Locking her door, she threw her things onto her desk, hastily fishing the scroll from her bag. Bouncing onto the bed, she sat back against the headboard, crossing her legs and absently stroking Crookshanks as he took up residence in her lap. Eagerly unsealing the letter, she settled back comfortably, Crookshanks purring on her legs.

Upon reading his opening paragraphs, her eyes went round in surprise and satisfaction. *Finally! Oh, I'm so glad I'll learn about him now...* Her eyes raced over the parchment, back and forth, devouring his words.

Not long after she began, her expression shifted to one of pity, her lips parting as she sucked in a breath in shocked sympathy. Indignation kindled in her eyes and she whispered, "That poor woman! How horrid of them! What kind of parents would do that to their own daughter?" Blinking at her own question, she stared off into the middle distance, wondering if her folks could ever be so hateful to her, even if she were to show up pregnant out of wedlock. *No. They'd likely be disappointed, but I don't think they'd disown me. I know it'll be difficult when they find out about Severus and me, but I'm sure they'll eventually come around when they see how much we're in love, and how good he is.*

Returning to the letter, her expression was sombre as she read on. Her eyes went glassy at the terse report of his lonely childhood and the ridicule he had suffered at the hands of his peers. Her bottom lip pushed forward, and she fought to stop its trembling, blinking back tears. But, when she reached the point where he quoted his father's opinion about "foolish wand waving," her eyes widened and her chin dropped in stunned recognition. *Good gods, so that's where that came from! Does he even realize he's echoing his father?*

She closed her eyes for a moment before continuing. At his wry comment about reading, she smiled gently. *I do understand about loving to read, dearest. That's something I knew early on we had in common.* A beat or two later, she snorted. *Of course you were a good student, love! It's clear you're brilliant!*

When she came to the line, "My parents had frequent rows, and my father was prone to yelling and belittling," she felt a frisson flash over her. *Wait a minute... Why does that sound so familiar?* She glanced around the room, frowning in concentration, and when she saw her desk, with parchment and quills strewn over it, it hit her. One hand flew up to cover her gasp and her brows shot upward. *My letter!* She remembered what she had written: "I'm sure that by now it's practically second nature for you to make quips like that to Harry...and any other people who annoy you...but I know a different Severus Snape, and he doesn't feel the need to belittle and threaten others at every turn."

Oh dear, I daresay he doesn't even realize how much he's behaving like his father after all...

She returned to the letter, forging on to the part where he recounted his father's reaction to Snape receiving his Hogwarts letter. She shook her head slowly. *I can certainly imagine what he must have been like, dear heart. It sounds almost as if you were describing yourself. I know full well how terrifying you are when you get so angry that you get even quieter. I'll not likely forget it any time soon...*

Moving on, she paused again later, thinking, *So, apparently he and Harry's father were enemies from the start, but he hasn't really said why or what happened to foster such long-lasting loathing!*

As she read his reasoning on favouring Potions, she sat back, nodding and sighing in satisfaction that he had actually answered one of her questions so clearly. *Of course, it makes perfect sense, all things considered.*

She got sucked back into his tale, feeling her stomach clench in sympathy at his words, "My rebellion to his autocratic ways led to my downfall, and the worst mistake of my life." She read on, eyes filling up again as she pictured the misery of his existence, painted in such stark terms. When she read his concise explanation of his descent into the Death Eaters, her heart ached for the simplicity outlining his logic. Tears dripped down her cheeks as she shook her head in sorrow for the loss of what his life could have been, had circumstances not urged him on the path he had taken.

She continued in morbid fascination, feeling a shudder of foreboding wash over her at his cold statement of fact: "Then he began including blood-traitors." Before she could go on, she thought, *Gods no... His mother was going to be next, I just know it.* Forcing her eyes back to the letter, she felt her stomach roil with horror that her dread was right.

She began wiping at her streaming eyes, sniffing, as she persisted. When she read his directive to her that his practice in self-control and patience hadn't been for happy reasons, she closed her eyes and buried her face in her hands, sobbing for him. Crookshanks stretched up and butted his flat face against her hands, purring in comfort. Hermione wrapped her arms around him and pressed her wet face against his fur.

"Oh, Crooks, it's just so sad! I can't believe he managed to live through so much misery. I feel awful for badgering him so much, now! My poor, brave Severus... I wish I could go to him right now and just hold him close; I just want to keep any more sadness away from him no matter what!"

Crookshanks purred loudly and rubbed against her, kneading his paws in her lap. Hermione hugged him for a long moment more, then released him, wiping her face again and resuming reading the letter. At his mild statement, Hermione fervently thought, *We all should count ourselves very lucky that you made it down that path alive, my love. Without you, I shudder to think how much worse everything would have turned out. Harry definitely needs to realize how integral a part you played in his success after all these long, horrible years.*

As she read his account of the night Harry's parents had been killed, she realized that she was almost hyperventilating, so shallowly was she panting in sadness and rising horror. Swallowing hard, she forced herself to breathe deeply, but her chest and throat felt so tight that it hurt to do so. Tears welled up again, trailing down her cheeks.

As his tale wound down, Hermione hung her head, gulping air, sniffing vainly as she wiped her face. In response to his words, "Now you know what has made me the man I am today, the man you claim to love so dearly," she vehemently thought, *I do! I hadn't thought I could love you even more than I did, but I do! Particularly now that I know just how much you suffered, and how much you've given up for all of us. You are a greater man than most could ever aspire to be, my love, and I can only count myself to be the luckiest woman in the world that you love me. If people only knew just what you've been through, I can't imagine anyone not loving you for it. I certainly do, among a myriad of other reasons. You are a one-of-a-kind man, Severus Snape, and I'm proud to be yours.*

Heart nearly bursting with love, she continued on to his request. *Of course! I'll be there, dearest. I promise.* She slowly lowered the parchment, eyes staring off into space. *I'll be sure to thank Ginny, too.*

After a long while, she rolled up the parchment again, sealing it. Patting Crookshanks, she urged him off her lap so she could secret the scroll in her bureau. While there, she gazed lovingly at the picture of her and Snape, longing for the time when they could be together, unfettered by restrictions and public opinion. Sighing heavily, feeling drained by the intensely emotional revelation of her love's history, she dragged back to the bed, sinking down onto it and curling up beside the napping Crookshanks.

With a yawn, she murmured, "You've got the right of it, Crooks. I think a nap will do me good." Closing her puffy, red-rimmed eyes, she drifted off into a weary sleep.

48- Fathers and Sons

Chapter 50 of 84

Hermione meets Snape before rehearsal, and learns the details of how James saved him years ago. Her insistence that he treat Harry better shakes things up and leaves Snape reeling. Once they recover from the emotional overload, they take their newfound awareness to rehearsal, with startling results.

A/N: I know this took a while, but it's REALLY long, so I hope you all forgive me! Special thanks to Ladyofthemasque, Beta extraordinaire, SnivellusSnape, katydid, and yutamiyu. Now, go forth and read! ;)

Chapter 48- Fathers and Sons

Hermione woke with a start, disoriented. *Oh! What time is it? Blast! Dinner will be over soon...* Jumping up, she straightened her clothes and vainly patted at her hair. Peeking quickly at her reflection, she grimaced at her puffy eyes and pale face. *Ugh! Maybe Severus will have already gone by the time you get there, and he won't have to see you looking so dreadful.*

Feeling a pang of envy that he could Apparate instantly to the Great Hall, while she still had to hurry down staircase after staircase, she bustled out of her room and through Gryffindor Tower, hastening downstairs.

Bursting into the Hall, she immediately noted that Snape was not there. Feeling both let down and relieved, she slid into a seat at the Gryffindor table, reaching for the serving plates and nodding in response to her mates who had greeted her.

Ginny frowned at her and said, "You okay?"

Hermione nodded, gesturing with her fork at her now-full mouth. Rolling her eyes toward Snape's usual seat, she looked meaningfully at Ginny, who blinked in comprehension.

Harry looked over and piped up, "You sure? You look kinda' under the weather."

Swallowing, Hermione gasped, "I'm fine! I was just a little tired and fell asleep. I can't believe I almost missed dinner."

Ginny wisely left well enough alone, knowing that the real reason Hermione's eyes were puffy was likely linked to whatever had been in that letter. But Harry persisted.

"You look like you've been crying...ow!" He cut a fierce glare at Ginny who had stomped his toe under the table and was staring at him in reproach.

Hermione, seeing an opportunity to distract Harry, said, "I may have teared up a bit earlier when I was reading. It was a very affecting love story." Harry blinked and bit back a grimace, obviously not fond of girlish romances. Suppressing a wicked grin, Hermione added, "I could tell you all about it..."

Harry's eyes widened in alarm and he hastily waved a hand at her. "No! No... that's all right. Really. No problem. I was just concerned, that's all. Glad you're okay." He ducked his head, running his hand over his hair.

Ginny smirked at his uncomfortable reaction and winked at Hermione. There was an awkward silence as Hermione continued with her meal. Eventually, Harry broached a new subject.

"So, looking forward to rehearsal? You've got your big song tomorrow night."

Hermione nodded gravely. "You know, that song is so sad. I hope I don't get all teary from it, too."

Harry's brow furrowed in comic dismay, and Ginny giggled. Patting his shoulder, she offered a solicitous, "It's okay, dear. I'll protect you from the weepy girl."

Harry scowled at her, and Hermione chuckled. "Anyway, I know you're not particularly looking forward to tomorrow night, but I *will* talk to Professor Snape before rehearsal, like I promised."

Harry's attention snapped to her, and he frowned. Tone dubious, he said, "I don't know why you think it'll do any good. You don't have to mess with it. Leave the git alone, so he'll leave you alone."

Hermione's jaw clenched. In a measured voice, she retorted, "I can't leave him alone and he can't leave me alone, Harry. We have to work together. He's not as horrid as you think. Not anymore. Besides, without his help, you would have had a much more difficult time finishing off Riddle."

Harry squinted at her, perplexed. "Riddle?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and said, "Voldemort!"

Tossing his head, Harry said, "Since when do you call him 'Riddle'?"

Hermione was taken aback by the question. Blinking, her mind raced. *That's what Severus called him all through that letter. Oh my, this is awkward...* Floundering for a response, she glanced at Ginny, who was also eyeing her quizzically. "I heard Dumbledore and Professor Snape call him that. I guess it's a way of denying him his self-styled importance." Feeling nervous sweat prickling her skin, she diverted the topic. "Anyway, that's not important. What's important is that Professor Snape has no reason to try to harm you, Harry. Honestly!"

Harry huffed, shaking his head slightly. "Sure. We'll see."

Eyes narrowing in pique, Hermione shot back a heated, "We *will* see, won't we?" Then, clearing her throat and composing herself, she continued loftily, "I daresay you'll be pleasantly surprised at just how professional and civil he can be."

Ginny jumped in with a soft, "It's true, Harry. Just wait."

Harry looked between the girls, struggling with his knee-jerk loathing of the man. Remembering Neville's assertions as well, he exhaled heavily and fixed a sceptical eye on them. "Fine. I'm reserving judgment until rehearsal. If he can treat me with respect, *then* we'll talk, okay?"

Both girls' faces lit up with approving smiles. Once again, Harry shook his head, clearly thinking they were daft. Casting a speculative glance at Ginny, he said, "So, what'll I get if I'm nice to the ol' Professor, eh?" He waggled his eyebrows and leered suggestively, at which Ginny burst out laughing and swatted his arm.

"Opportunist! Come on, you pervert, and I'll give you a preview." Smirking at Hermione's reaction of cradling her face in her hands, she stood, pulling an unresisting Harry with her. "See you later, 'Mione."

Hermione kept her eyes covered with one hand and waved resignedly at them with the other, making both teenagers snigger. Harry let Ginny drag him away, tossing an amused, "Bye, Hermione!" over his shoulder.

Hermione sighed in relief and finished her dinner in peace; she wondered how Snape was faring since he wasn't there for her to see, and was looking forward to the next evening with a mixed bag of anticipation.

Friday saw Hermione heading to dinner as soon as it was available, consuming her meal with ill-disguised urgency. A few minutes after she had begun, Colin wandered over and took a seat opposite her. Acknowledging his presence with a perfunctory nod, she continued with her meal.

"Hi, Hermione. You're here early tonight. Excited about rehearsal?" He pasted on a bright smile.

Warily wondering if he was still trying to pursue her, Hermione replied cautiously, "I have some things to take care of after dinner and before rehearsal, so I have to hurry. Rehearsal should be fine as usual."

Colin nodded vigorously. "Oh, I'm sure! I know you'll be brilliant with your song tonight." His cheeks started going pink and he tacked on an airy, "Of course, you're brilliant with anything you do."

Hermione blinked and swallowed hard, feeling a knot of unease in her gut. Offering a wan smile that didn't reach her eyes, she said, "Thank you, Colin, but you're exaggerating. I just do my best."

Eyes wide, he retorted, "I know you do! It shows!" He paused, awkwardly toying with his food in the lengthening silence. Hermione determinedly ignored the Head Girl-urge to engage in some sort of conciliatory conversation with him, afraid of stirring up more trouble for herself.

Several minutes passed, and she finished eating, hoping that the food would settle in her tense stomach once she left Colin's disconcerting presence. He was morosely picking at his meal, eating little.

Clearing her throat and gathering her things, she pushed back from the table. Colin glanced up wistfully. Gamely trying for some semblance of normality, Hermione said, "Well, I'll see you later. Gotta' run."

Colin nodded and gazed at her, his expression forlorn. He managed a faint, "Right. See you."

Hermione hastened away from the table, eager to be free of him, and she didn't look back to see him staring after her.

Bollocks! He would try to do that when no one else is around. Honestly! Please don't ever let me endure such discomfort again! Ugh... Now to just drop off my things and get to Severus.

She bustled up to her room, blowing a quick kiss to a drowsing Crookshanks before leaving again. Hoping that none of the people she passed and exchanged greetings with would ask about her destination, she made her way down to the stairs to the dungeon, furtively glancing about to see if anyone noticed her descent so early in the evening. Working out a plausible excuse about needing clarification on her Potions homework, she smoothed her palms over her hips, wiping the nervous sweat from them.

Heaving a huge sigh of relief that she hadn't had a run-in with any Slytherins, she forced herself to walk instead of run to get to Snape's office. The door was closed when she arrived, and she hesitated a bare moment before knocking.

Snape was at his desk, brooding over an essay when he heard the knock, the remains of a sandwich going stale on a plate to one side. Brows drawing together in perplexity, he glanced at the time. *It's not six yet; could that be Hermione?* Swallowing back the agitated pulse of his heart in his throat, he snapped, "Enter."

Hermione opened the door and locked eyes with him as she stepped in. Her heart throbbed in an excess of emotion, but she forced herself to maintain her outward composure. "Professor."

Snape's expression was inscrutable as he said, "Miss Granger." After a beat he added, "Shut the door." When she did as she was bid, he stood, stepping around to the front of his desk. His voice soft, he said, "You're early."

Hermione stepped closer, still gazing up at him. "I couldn't wait any longer."

They stared for a long moment before he nodded sharply. "Come." He offered her his hand, and when she took it, Apparated them to his bedroom.

Hermione's eyes widened as she took in her surroundings. She gasped, glancing sharply at him in query.

He stepped back, hands up and palms out in a gesture of appeasement, shaking his head ruefully as he murmured, "No. Nothing like that. I merely wish to avoid the possibility of anyone inadvertently seeing you if they Floo-called. Of course, if you'd rather not discuss things here, we can go elsewhere."

Hermione exhaled slowly, extending a hand toward him in apology. "No! I was just surprised. It makes perfect sense. I'm fine." She looked up at his solemn face and grimaced. "Actually, I'm *not* fine."

Snape frowned, squinting at her in confusion. Everything she had felt when reading his letter came rushing back to her, and tears welled up, spilling over onto her cheeks as her lips trembled. At the sight of her tears, Snape's eyes widened in alarm and he stepped forward just as she threw herself at him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face against his chest, uttering a strangled, "Severus!"

Quickly enveloping her in his embrace, he caressed her hair and back, muttering reassuring nonsense and kissing the crown of her head. He could feel her shaking as she sobbed, and he was bewildered and dismayed at such an unexpected occurrence. Urgently, he whispered, "Shh, it's okay. Hermione, love, what's wrong? Tell me, please. What can I do?" and guided her to sit on the edge of his bed.

Hermione gulped back her sobs and sat. Pulling away from him enough to wipe her face, she sniffled and fumbled for her wand to Summon some facial tissues. Snape watched her compose herself, waiting for her explanation for her behaviour.

Finally, Hermione Vanished several soggy tissues and swallowed hard, facing Snape. His unease was apparent, and she impulsively reached up to cup his jaw in oblique apology. "I love you so much."

His eyes closed at her words, and he covered her hand with his, turning to plant a kiss on her palm. "And I, you. But what happened?"

Gazing solemnly at him, she whispered, "Your letter."

His face fell, and he pulled back a bit, letting her hand drop to her lap. His jaw clenched and he avoided her eye, simply uttering a flat, "Oh. That."

Reaching up again, she gripped his chin and guided him to look at her again. His eyes were flat and dull, closed off. Hoping her love was visible in her eyes, she pinned him under her intense gaze and murmured, "Thank you, Severus."

His lip twitched and he seemed to shrug in derision. "For what? Traumatizing you so much that you burst into tears even a day later? Oh yes, that's certainly something to be grateful for..."

She shook her head in exasperation and insisted, "Stop that! I *am* grateful that you would share so much with me. I'm glad I know more about what you've been through. I can appreciate you so much more now."

Snape snorted and looked away, body tense. Hermione leant back again and pursed her lips. Her tone was verging on stern as she said, "Severus!" He snapped his eyes to hers in surprise. Holding his gaze, she eyed him and challenged, "Do you not believe me?"

Snape's eyes went wide and his lips parted as he inhaled sharply. Closing his mouth again, he swallowed hard and finally nodded. His voice gravelly, he said, "Yes. I believe you."

Hermione smiled at him, and he caught his breath again at the way she lit up. Relaxing under her fond smile, he gave himself a minute shake, trying to dredge himself out of his funk. He reached over and squeezed her hand in mute apology and she caressed his fingers.

Chewing her lip, she ventured, "So, may I ask you something? Without you sinking back into that pit of despair? Because remember, I'm here now, and you shouldn't ever have to feel that way again."

His lips twitched in a faint semblance of a smile. Heaving a gusty sigh, he blinked and said, "Ask."

Hermione held his hand in a firm grip, her thumb stroking in little circles as she said, "You wrote something about owing a life debt to Harry's father. What happened?"

Snape searched her face for a long moment. His voice was low when he said, "Do you *really* want to know?" She squeezed his hand and nodded. He thinned his lips and murmured, "I'll show you."

Hermione's eyes went round as she comprehended his intent. Staring at him, stunned by his offer, she sat frozen as he stood and crossed to his wardrobe to retrieve his Pensieve. Basin cradled in his hands, he crossed back to the bed, standing on the other side of it and depositing the Pensieve on the centre of the bed. Hermione squirmed around and knelt facing it, gazing soberly up at him.

He closed his eyes and scowled as he lifted his wand to his temple, withdrawing the silvery strand of memory. When he dropped it into the basin, he opened his eyes again and gazed at Hermione, his expression grave. Folding his arms over his chest, he nodded pointedly to the swirling mist.

Hermione blinked, glancing down at the basin and then back up at him, uncertain. "Er, aren't you going to look with me?"

Snape's lip curled and he tossed his head, growling, "I've seen it more than I care to count. It *is* my memory, after all. No. I think you should experience it alone. So you can get a better feel for what I experienced."

A tremor of fear washed over her. Then, she steeled herself. *It's just a memory; nothing can harm you.* Leaning forward and supporting herself on her hands, she glanced up at him again. "All right, then. I'll look." He nodded again and she took a deep breath, bending closer to the eddying surface until she felt herself being drawn in, falling into the memory. She stifled a shriek as she dropped.

Glancing about wildly, she saw that she was in a corridor in Hogwarts, and she saw a lean boy with long greasy black hair peering intently out of a window. With a jolt of recognition, she realized it was Snape. His expression was as sour as she had often seen on adult Snape. He shuffled to one side and craned his neck as he stared outside. Curious, Hermione edged closer, trying not to feel disconcerted by encountering a Snape younger than she was. Glancing out the window, she could see what looked like a woman guiding a shrouded figure toward the Whomping Willow. She gasped as she realized what she was witnessing.

This is what Sirius and Lupin were talking about before Snape caught us all in the Shrieking Shack! That's Lupin going off to the Shack to transform, so it must be a full moon night... She looked up, seeing the sun dipping lower in the sky. She jumped when Snape suddenly moved. He had been almost unnaturally still, and when he had stepped back from the window, it had startled her. She watched his eyes narrow in calculation as he strode rapidly down the corridor and barrelled down the stairs. She took off at a jog, attempting to keep up.

When he shot down the next corridor and out a door, she raced after him, pausing only when she saw a young Sirius lounging near a tree outside. It was apparent that Snape hadn't seen him, as he was heading in the opposite direction, but she saw Sirius notice Snape, and she stopped short at the unsettling look of predatory glee on his face. He pushed away from the tree and bounded after Snape, calling out, "Oi! Snape!"

Snape stopped and whirled around, wand in hand. He eyed Sirius warily. Sirius merely regarded him with a smug smirk as he loped closer. Snape bit out, "What do you want, Black?"

Hermione edged around to a better vantage point for seeing them both. Sirius eyed Snape keenly. "It's getting darker. Where're you going?"

Snape flicked a glance at the Whomping Willow and then scowled at Sirius. "None of your business, Black."

Sirius stepped closer, idly twirling his wand through his fingers. "You haven't seen Peter, have you? He's supposed to be meeting me..."

Rolling his eyes, Snape scoffed, "Now why would you think/ would have seen your bloody friend?"

Sirius cut a shrewd glance at him and murmured, "Because you're always watching us, Snape. Don't think it's not obvious." He snorted in amusement at the pink stain travelling up Snape's pale face.

Hermione wished she could do something to end such an uncomfortable confrontation, feeling totally helpless. Even she reacted with relief when Peter Pettigrew came jogging up to them, puffing heavily and sweating.

Snape's eyes flickered between the two Gryffindors, glittering in the fading light. Peter gasped, "Sorry... I was... late."

Sirius turned a benign smile on him and said, "No worries, mate. I was just passing the time with Snape here while I waited." Peter looked from Sirius to Snape, eyes round with apprehension and confusion. Sirius draped an arm over Peter's shoulders and guided him away, turning them to face away from the wary Snape.

Hermione hurried to get closer to them, barely hearing Sirius whisper to Peter, "Just shut up and play along, okay?" Peter nodded eagerly and Sirius spoke in a low voice, but one that was still audible to Snape where he stood, straining to overhear their conversation. "Lily and her friend are already under the Willow, waiting for me and James. Where is he?" Peter, afraid to say anything, merely stared at Sirius, breathless with anticipation, and shrugged. Sirius winked at Peter with the eye out of Snape's view and continued, "Listen, I know they won't wait forever, so we should split up and both go look for him. Just *remember to tell him to use a long stick to press that knot on the trunk to get the branches to stop flailing.*"

Peter kept nodding, whispering back, "Right, tell James to press the knot on the trunk with a stick. Okay."

Sirius grinned and said, "Good man. Now, let's hope we find him soon. Lily said she was really looking forward to her *blind date*."

Hermione's jaw fell, aghast at Sirius' manipulation. She could see Snape listening hard, and she saw his eyes widen at the news that Lily was waiting and he could press the knot to get past the Willow. Knowing what she knew now about his youthful feelings for Harry's mother, she felt a throb of sympathy for him, being tricked by someone using those tender feelings as bait.

Sirius winked at Peter again and nodded. Straightening and turning to face Snape, who was still eyeing him darkly, Sirius said, "Well, ah... it's getting late, and you know we're not really supposed to be out after dark. So, you should probably get back to the castle too, Snape."

Snape bristled and spat, "Don't tell me what to do, Black."

Sirius looked back at Peter and jerked his head, indicating that the other boy should go. Peter scurried away. Sirius narrowed his eyes at Snape and murmured, "I don't have time right now to deal with your attitude, Snivellus. Just know that you'll get what you deserve one day. Soon." Then, with one last look of contempt, he took off, leaving Snape standing alone in the growing darkness.

Hermione watched Snape staring after Sirius, heart aching for him. He glanced around and finally looked at the Willow. Taking a deep breath, he tugged at his robes, smoothing them. He pocketed his wand and stealthily moved toward the tree. Peering around at the ground, he saw the branch lying where someone had dropped it after prodding the knot. Eyes darting around excitedly, lips widening in a faint smile, Snape picked up the branch and poked toward the knot, ducking to avoid the reach of the Willow's flailing branches. On the third try, he pressed it. The branches froze in place, and a fleeting expression of triumph graced his face.

Stepping closer, he withdrew his wand and muttered, *Lumos*." The wand's light threw the opening in the tree roots into relief, deepening the shadow of it. Breathing faster, he crept forward, sliding into the hole. Once he was out of sight, Hermione glanced anxiously at the sky, seeing the moon, round and full. Remembered terror gripped her. She knew what Snape was sliding into, and she remembered how frightening Lupin had been when he had changed.

She was about to dive down after him, when she heard pounding footsteps approaching. Looking around into the expanding blankness, she thought, *Everything is disappearing. It must be because this is Snape's memory, and he's moving further away from this point. How fascinating!* She was relieved to see another boy come into view, one who looked startlingly like Harry. *James!*

James skidded to a stop, panting, looking panicked. He looked up at the moon and hissed, "Dammit, Padfoot!" before launching himself into the hole. Hermione dove after him, grateful that she couldn't be hurt by the descent.

Once he hit the ground, James yelled, "Snape!" He lit his wand and took off down the passageway. Hermione ran with him. She could hear him muttering what sounded like a litany, "Not yet, Moony. Please, not yet."

Looking ahead, Hermione saw the pinpoint of light at about the same moment James did. Again, James yelled, "Snape! Stop!"

In the distance, Hermione could see Snape's face under lit by his wand. He scowled back at James and spat, "Too late, Potter! You may as well go back."

James's eyes widened in fear as he saw Snape pushing up the panel that covered the opening into the Shrieking Shack. Arm outstretched, he raced ahead, voice almost strangled in terror as he said, "No! Snape! Don't go in!" Then, several things seemed to happen at once.

Hermione heard the menacing growl just as Snape whipped around to see the glistening jaws of a snarling werewolf peering under the panel. His face went sheet white and he seemed petrified with fear. James reached Snape and grabbed his robes, yanking him backward, bellowing, "*Colloportus!*" at the panel as it fell back down. There was a flash of light as the spell burst over the panel, making an odd squelching sound, sealing it. From behind it, they could all hear the snarling, snapping growls of the werewolf as he tried to scratch through it. Snape's wand was on the ground to one side, giving off a feeble light.

James dropped to his knees, panting. Shoving his glasses back on straight, he peered anxiously at Snape, who was sprawled on the dusty ground, obviously shaken. James reached for Snape's wand, offering it to him as he gasped, "You okay?"

Snape turned wide, shocked eyes on James and snatched his wand away, scuttling backwards like a crab. His expression was a mixture of terror and loathing as he voiced a harsh, "Get off me!"

James jerked back as if stung, taken aback by Snape's lashing out. Blinking, trying to marshal his scattered wits in the wake of so much panic, he lit his wand again and said, "Are you hurt?"

Snape's wand was vibrating with the force of his trembling. Hermione could see that his thin chest was rising and falling rapidly; he was almost hyperventilating in his shock. His voice verged on hysteria as he said, "Very funny, Potter! You and your friends nearly got me *killed!* Oh, Dumbledore will expel you for sure. You *and* your little gang!" Snape struggled to his feet, looking almost deranged.

Hermione stood to one side, hands over her mouth, tears trickling over her fingers, unable to look away.

James swallowed and attempted a reasonable tone. "Snape, listen! It was a mistake! Honest! Sirius really crossed a line this time. I told Peter so when he told me. And I'll tell Sirius the same thing when I find him." He paused at the hair-raising sound of howling and yelping from behind the panel. Glancing at Snape, who was staring, horrified, at the panel, he reached out to grip his arm. Snape jumped and batted his hand away. James backed up and said, "Let's just get out of here, okay?"

Snape pointed his wand at James again, edging around him in the tunnel. In a low rasp, he said, "You first. I don't want you behind me."

James nodded slowly. He stepped past Snape and began the trek back up the tunnel, Snape at his heels. Hermione stuck close to them, and she was surprised to be able to smell the acrid odour of fear-sweat wafting off Snape. When they got to the other end of the passage, James turned to Snape.

He spoke softly and with great care, as if he were trying to calm a skittish animal. "I'm really sorry this happened. It was all a mistake. Look, I'll go with you to Dumbledore to explain what happened..."

Snape cut him off. "Don't think you'll get out of this one, Potter. I daresay *attempted murder* is against school rules!"

James ducked his head, clearly trying to maintain his composure. He looked back up gravely. "Come on, Snape. I just saved your life. Let's be reasonable here. You owe me."

A look of pure disgust washed over Snape's face. His voice shook with barely concealed fury as he hissed, "Don't flatter yourself."

There was a long moment crackling with hostility, then James said quietly, "Have it your way. Let's go." He turned and climbed out of the tunnel, with Snape hot on his heels. Hermione followed, watching them trek up to the castle through the moonlit night. As they got farther away, Hermione felt the blankness encroaching, and she suddenly found herself whirling up through the mist and back onto Snape's bed.

When she re-oriented herself, kneeling beside the basin, she looked up, seeing Snape backed against his wardrobe, arms crossed tightly over his chest, expression closed and sullen. She felt her tears cooling on her cheeks in the dungeon air, and she sat back on her heels, wiping her face. Staring at Snape, she tried to find her voice, but couldn't think of anything to say. Mutely gazing at him in sympathy, she watched him grimly skulk over to the Pensieve and replace his memory. His jaw clenched and his

brows drew together as his eyes closed.

Casting a fleeting glance at her again, he picked up the basin and replaced it in his wardrobe. When he closed the door, he placed his hands against the wood and braced himself, facing away from her. She could see the tightness in his shoulders, and his head bowed between his outstretched arms. His voice was strained and bleak as he said, "Satisfied?"

She suddenly let loose the breath she hadn't known she was holding. As it souged out of her, she whispered, "Severus."

At his name, Snape's hands seemed to claw at the wardrobe door, clenching. He pushed back and let his hands fall to his sides as he spun, turning blazing eyes in a set, white face on her. Hermione's hand lifted toward him involuntarily. After staring at each other for a long moment, Hermione finally choked out, "I'm so sorry."

His eyes narrowed and he snorted. "Funny chaps, Potter and his gang, wouldn't you say?"

Hermione sucked in a breath and eyed him with reproach. "No! Of course not! That was awful."

Snape seemed to be sucked into reliving the anguish and he spat, "And of course you *know* what happened after that. That bloody berk had the bollocks to harass me even more, and no matter what I did, I couldn't stop them! Not all of them!"

Hermione scrambled off the bed and crossed to Snape where he was pacing feverishly. Gripping his arms, she peered up at him in confusion. "Severus, wait! What are you talking about?"

Snape pinned her with a harsh glare and growled, "Like you don't know. Surely Potter relished telling you all the humiliating details of what his *heroic* father and *beloved* godfather did to me just weeks later during our O.W.L.s!" He looked so angry that Hermione stepped away from him, afraid.

In a would-be rational voice, she said, "I don't know what you mean. What was Harry supposed to have told me?"

At her claim of ignorance, Snape stopped, rounding on her and glaring. His voice was a hoarse whisper as he goaded, "Surely you remember his tale when I refused to teach him Occlumency anymore! There's only so much I was willing to endure under Dumbledore's orders, and he crossed the line that night! Oh yes, I'll wager you all had a good laugh back in Gryffindor Tower, taking the piss out of the greasy git!"

Hermione began to get irritated with his ranting, especially since she was none the wiser to what he claimed she was supposed to know. Frowning, she planted her hands on her hips and forcefully said, "I *said* I have no idea what you're talking about! Harry said you figured he could carry on himself since you had taught him the basics, and that's why he wasn't studying Occlumency with you anymore. I *tried* to tell him he shouldn't stop the lessons until you were sure he'd got it all under control, but he just cut me off and told me to drop it. But, judging by your reaction right now, I'm guessing there was more to it. What happened?"

Snape's eyes widened, and he stared at her, dumbfounded. She could almost see the rapid calculations racing in his head. Holding his gaze, she waited.

Snape finally blinked. Then he blinked again, several times, rapidly. The rigidity in his frame drained away, and he seemed to deflate, confused astonishment writ plainly on his face.

Hermione didn't move or speak. She knew that he was wrestling with something huge, and she didn't want to interrupt whatever alteration was occurring.

Finally, Snape turned blank eyes on her again and faltered, "He didn't tell you?"

Tamping down the flare of annoyance, she slowly murmured, "Tell me what?"

Snape sank onto the edge of his bed, looking almost lost. "He... I caught him snooping in the Pensieve... prying into my most personal memories..."

Hermione's brows shot up. A jolt of anger at Harry flashed through her, quickly followed by a pang of pity for Snape having his privacy violated like that. Carefully, she perched beside him, gingerly laying a hand on his knee.

"No. He never said anything. And it's not like we didn't ask."

Snape's mouth worked like he had tasted something sour. His voice was low as he said, "After that night at the Shrieking Shack, Dumbledore swore me to secrecy to protect Lupin. I couldn't *believe* he didn't expel them for nearly getting me killed."

Hermione dared to interject, "But James saved you."

Snape snapped his gaze to hers, his black eyes crackling with fury. "Don't you think I *know* that?!"

She jerked away, startled by the vehemence in his retort. Warily, she stared at him, loath to say anything again.

He dropped his head to his hands, elbows propped on his knees, and raked his fingers through his hair. Hands clasped behind his neck, he stared unseeingly at the floor as he continued, "I *know* he saved me! It made me sick to owe *him* anything! And after I tried to convince Albus to expel them, they all determined they'd get me back. They had *detention* for the rest of the year, until it was time for our O.W.L.s."

She cringed at the derisive note in his voice. He ploughed on, his eyes locked on the images replaying in his head.

"After our Defence Against the Dark Arts exam, Potter set upon me, with Black and the others right along with him. Lily tried to get them to stop, and I lashed out at her in my humiliation, hurting her feelings and ruining whatever chance I may have had at remaining her friend." He sucked in a ragged breath. "I owed a life debt to one of the people I most despised, and my one chance to really pay it back disappeared in a flash of green light at the end of a maniac's wand."

Hermione waited in the heavy silence. Hesitantly, she moved closer to him and rested a hand on his shoulder, offering what comfort she could. Eventually, he turned to look at her, his eyes glassy, expression defeated.

Gently, she urged, "Harry is not his father. He was wrong to snoop into your private things, but he didn't betray them to us. I think he knows enough about what it's like to have a deprived childhood and hateful enemies to be able to identify with what you've suffered." Snape's brows furrowed and he blinked. "You may not have been able to pay back that debt to James Potter, but you've admirably fulfilled your vow to protect Harry and help him. I think you've more than paid back that debt to Harry, since James is gone." Snape sagged under her hand and she smoothed it in small circles, soothing him. Snape simply gazed at the floor, bewildered.

"Severus?" She reached up and tucked a lock of hair behind his ear, and he shuddered at her touch. Grasping at normality, in an attempt to free him from his misery, she squeezed his shoulder and said, "Why don't I start getting you ready for tonight, okay?" Rising from the bed, she crossed to the bathroom and retrieved the hair products, returning to crawl back on the bed and kneel behind him.

Snape allowed her to pull him straighter, and Hermione began brushing his hair. His eyes closed and he breathed deeply, trying to pull himself out of his torturous memories.

She smoothed the brush through his hair slowly, caressing him after each pass. After a long while, she could tell he had relaxed again, and she began applying the pomade. When she had finished, and his hair was secured in the elastic, she let her hands fall to his shoulders, and she leant forward to brush a soft kiss along the nape of his neck. He shivered, and his hands lifted to cover hers. He gripped them and murmured, "Thank you."

Hermione pressed her forehead against him and whispered, "I love you, Severus."

He leant forward out of her grasp, standing and facing her. Once again sitting back on her heels, she peered up at him. He couldn't quite meet her eyes, and he cleared his throat awkwardly before muttering, "I didn't mean to yell at *you*, Hermione. Can you forgive me?"

Hermione offered him a watery smile and whispered, "How many times do I have to tell you that I forgive you for whatever it is you think you need forgiveness for?" He jerked his head in acknowledgement and sniffed. There was a pregnant pause, and then Hermione added, "Not all sons become their fathers."

He snapped a perplexed gaze to hers. "I beg your pardon?"

Hermione patted the bed, and he slowly sank to the edge again, facing her. "Harry is not his father, no matter how much you think he takes after him. And you are not your father, no matter how much you may mimic his behaviour."

Snape's eyes widened so much that she saw a thin ring of white around the black centres, and his mouth opened in indignation. "Mimic? Are you mad? I would never treat my family like that!"

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, marshalling her thoughts. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes and met his accusing glare. "I'm sure you don't mean to..."

His eyes narrowed, and he reared back in anger, hissing, "How dare you accuse me of being like him?"

Chin jutting forward, she inhaled sharply and forged on. "That! That right there! You said yourself that when he was most furious, he didn't yell, but instead was deathly quiet. You do that yourself, Severus! And it's terrifying! I *know*."

He froze, and she wondered if she had actually gone too far. She could feel her heart pounding, and she waited for the next explosion.

It didn't come. His lips barely moved as he rasped, "Go on."

Gulping nervously, she stammered, "D-do you remember your first year speech?" At his slight nod, she continued, "You said, 'As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic.' I remember. Does that phrase not ring a bell?" At the answering silence, Hermione's voice faded even more and she said, "You wrote that your father didn't approve of 'foolish wand waving.'"

With that, Snape's eyes widened again, and his breath caught. She hurried on, watching his face change into an expression of stunned pain.

"You wrote that he was prone to yelling and belittling..." Her face crumpled in response to his, and she whispered urgently, "Don't you see? Not only should you stop harassing Harry because he's not *his* father, you should stop harassing him because you're not *your* father! You don't have to be that man. Harry has done nothing to you that deserves such intense loathing, and you don't have to be the one to constantly degrade and insult and threaten him!"

Snape cradled his head in his hands again, and Hermione wrapped her arm over his back and pressed her cheek against his shoulder. "I'm not saying you have to like him, or be his friend, but don't goad him or attack him at every turn! You two have more in common than you may want to admit, love, including the fact that I care about you." At that, he jerked upright, whirling to face her, eyes cutting through her in accusation.

Not wanting him to misconstrue her statement, she immediately cupped his face in her hands and gazed fiercely into his eyes, willing him to understand. "I love you, Severus. I'm in love with you. I don't ever want to be without you. But I love Harry. He is a dear, dear friend, and I don't want to lose him either. You know it's going to be hard enough when we go public, dearest. Can't you see that if you two called a truce, it might be just that little bit easier later?" She searched his face earnestly.

Snape gazed at her, obviously assimilating the deluge of information he had just encountered. Finally, he swallowed, closing his eyes for a moment. Covering one of her hands with his, he opened his eyes again and held her gaze as he lifted her palm from his cheek to plant a soft kiss on it. His voice was low and gravely as he said, "I can make no promises... but I can make an effort."

Crying out in jubilant relief, Hermione leapt forward, enveloping him in her embrace and fervently whispering, "Thank you, thank you, thank you..."

Snape hesitated before wrapping his arms around her in return, but when he did, she crooned in encouragement. Relieved by her response, he tightened his embrace, eventually gripping her so tightly that she squeaked in protest. Releasing her only slightly, he buried his face in the curve of her neck, cushioning it in her hair. Her hands stroked lovingly up and down his back, and she kept pressing tiny kisses on his shoulder and neck.

Mindful of how long they had been in his rooms, Hermione squeezed him and whispered, "What time is it?"

Snape glanced up at the clock and murmured, "We've about ten minutes before rehearsal starts. Good call." He pulled back from her embrace and looked at her. His lips twisted as he smoothed her wild hair back from her face, where it had stuck to her tear tracks. Rising, and pulling her to her feet, he gently wiped her cheeks with the backs of his fingers. "Come. Let's get you presentable. We mustn't incite questions from the others with you having such a bedraggled appearance."

Hermione huffed at him in pique, but she stepped past him to the bathroom, knowing she must look a fright after crying so much. In front of his mirror, she desperately tried to tame her flyaway locks, and she washed her face in cold water, gasping at the shock of it.

When she straightened again, icy water dripping from her nose and chin, she was startled to see Snape's reflection. He was standing right behind her, and he met her eyes in the mirror. His expression was pensive as he murmured, "Are you all right?"

Hermione nodded slowly, hearing the plops of water droplets hitting the sink. Snape politely handed her a flannel. Her expression solemn, she took it and retorted, "Are you?"

Snape snorted. His lips thinned, and he looked away, but then he locked eyes with her again and said, "Not exactly. But I'm beginning to think I will be. Eventually." His lips quirked at the end of his statement, and he caressed her hair.

Hermione smiled faintly at him, from beneath the damp cloth. She was therefore surprised to see him frown at her. "What?"

His voice was wistful as he said, "You look tired. I do hope you haven't been losing sleep over any of this."

Hermione shrugged ruefully and drawled, "No more than usual."

He tilted his head at her in reprimand, and said, "What time have you been getting to bed, young lady?"

Hermione gripped the sink basin and glared at him. "I'm *fine*."

Grunting in a noncommittal fashion, he said, "You must get your rest. We need you for this performance, Hermione. How late do you stay up?"

Lifting her chin defiantly, she said, "I generally try to get to bed before midnight, but sometimes that doesn't happen. I spend a lot of time on my assignments, you know." She ignored his rolling of the eyes. "And N.E.W.T.s are coming up, so I have to be prepared."

Snape grasped her shoulders and spun her to face him, enunciating, "How. Late?"

She looked down and muttered, "Sometimes I'm up till two, two-thirty. It's okay! I can handle it."

He thinned his lips in disapproval and growled, "You don't have a Time Turner this year, Hermione. Please, don't stress yourself like that. You're brilliant, and you know it. You don't need to stay up so late revising all the time."

Hermione seemed to both preen and sulk at the same time, and Snape felt himself starting to smile at her demeanour. Lifting her chin with one finger, he pinned her with his gaze and said, "Hermione?"

His expression was one of expectation, and she mentally railed at his request. Sounding like a petulant child, she said, "What?"

Warmth crept back into his eyes along with his regained equilibrium. Softly, he said, "Promise me that you'll get to bed earlier tonight and get the rest you deserve?"

Her eyes darted around, and then she cocked an eyebrow at him and said, "I can make no promises, but I can make an effort." His brows shot up in surprise to hear his own words flung back at him like that, but he nodded slowly.

"Fair enough. It's a deal."

She nodded, and his fingers slid up her chin to cup her jaw, holding her still as he ducked down to seal the bargain with a kiss. When he pulled back, his gaze was loving and regretful as he said, "Come, let's get upstairs."

Taking her hand, he guided her into the sitting room and over to fetch his mask from the table near the door. Once again tucking her hand in the crook of his elbow, he courteously looked at her and inquired, "Ready?"

She nodded, and they Apparated into the corridor in front of the Great Hall, startling the group of students who were waiting there. As soon as they appeared, Hermione slid her hand from Snape's arm, and he dropped his hand to his side, straightening formally. Hermione stepped forward to join the other Gryffindors and Snape faded back from the group, waiting for the doors to open.

Ginny flicked a glance between Snape, Hermione, and Harry, hoping Snape had decided to be civil to Harry. Her keen eyes saw the evidence of tears on Hermione's face, and even Snape looked like he had been rather harrowed. Tension coiled in her gut as she watched Harry cut a sulky glance at Snape.

Fortunately, the doors opened, and they all began trooping into the Hall. On her way, Ginny cast a furtive glance at Snape, managing to catch his eye. He gazed inscrutably at her for a fleeting moment before rolling his eyes and huffing, inclining his head in the slightest of exasperated nods. She knew her relief was apparent when he blinked at her and snorted. She glanced around, seeing no one watching, and flashed Snape a grateful smile before hurrying down the aisle.

Snape herded the students into the Hall, bringing up the rear and closing the doors behind him. He paused a moment and leant against them, mentally trying to prepare himself for rehearsal, determined to hold back the instinctive venom that welled up any time he dealt with Harry.

Dumbledore was casting spells on the students, and those in the scene ascended the stage, waiting for him to place the sets and tell them where to go. Snape strode slowly down the aisle, noting that Harry and Ginny were sitting in the audience, whispering to each other. As he watched, she leant in and dropped a light kiss on his cheek before she darted up to join the others. Ron and Neville edged past Harry to take seats beyond him, and they all settled in to watch the scene.

As Dumbledore began shifting the sets, Neville squirmed in his seat, turning to peer over his shoulder and seeing Snape standing behind them. He blanched at the sight, and Snape gazed down his nose at the nervous boy. But then, Neville seemed to give himself a shake, and he looked back up at Snape, politely nodding and murmuring, "Evening, Professor."

Snape blinked in astonishment that the boy had spoken. Usually, Neville was one to shy away from him as much as possible, always looking positively terrified at the mere sight of Snape. Taken aback by such an extraordinary occurrence, Snape simply inclined his head and retorted, "Longbottom."

Ron and Harry both turned in their seats at the sound of Snape's voice, and they stared, wide-eyed, between their mate and their teacher.

Snape saw the consternation and amazement in their faces, and he stifled a pang of amusement. Flicking a glance at the stage and seeing Hermione, he remembered his vow to make an effort. Inhaling deeply, he turned his gaze back to the other Gryffindor boys and offered a grave, "Weasley."

Ron's eyes seemed about to fall out of his head, and he choked out a creditable, "Sir."

Snape then let his gaze rest on Harry, and he fought to control the swirling emotions that accompanied his perusal of the boy. The part of him that was determined to be fair piped up and reminded him that Harry had not told the others what he had seen. He had actually obeyed Snape's injunction. Focusing on that, Snape held back the sneer that was almost always ready to curl his lip any time he encountered the boy. Determined to be irreproachable, he murmured, "Potter," nodding faintly.

Harry stared at him, green eyes glittering with confusion and incredulity. Snape forced himself to hold his gaze, without devolving to hostility. The moment seemed to stretch eternally, until finally Harry blinked several times, almost stuttering as he attempted to respond. Licking his lips, he cleared his throat and uttered a low, "Professor."

Snape exhaled, glad that attempt at civility was over, and promptly whirled, Disapparating. The boys all exchanged bewildered looks, unsure of how to interpret such a benign greeting from Snape.

Eventually, it was Neville who broke the silence. "Well, that was interesting..." Ron and Harry both made inarticulate noises of agreement. Letting out a rather nervous chuckle, Neville continued, "So, Harry, think maybe the girls are on to something after all?"

Harry frowned, casting a sceptical glance at Neville, but his eyes were clouded in thought. He sank down in the seat, growling, "We'll see."

Neville decided not to push the issue, and instead relaxed into his seat, marvelling at the fact that he had instigated an interaction with Snape, and it hadn't resulted in insults! A little spark of pride warmed his chest, and he gazed up at the stage with a faint smile.

Onstage, the actors were in their places for the rehearsal of Don Juan. As they began practicing, Dumbledore pulled a scrap of parchment from his robes and muttered to himself as he read it, waving his wand half-heartedly. When the scene proceeded to the point where Reyer left the piano, Dumbledore turned to the piano and murmured the spell he had just been practicing, making the piano play on its own.

Unfortunately, the cast wasn't quite ready for such an occurrence, and they all stopped, spinning to stare at the piano playing feverishly. Dumbledore flicked his wand, and the piano went silent. He gazed at them with raised eyebrows, clearly questioning what was wrong. A rumble of sheepish apologies rolled through the cast.

Favouring them all with a stern look, he gestured for them all to resume their places. Then, he enspelled the piano again, and they all reacted according to the script, reciting the chorus.

Dumbledore was busy shifting sets as they performed, beckoning for Hermione to edge away from the others as the rehearsal set faded away and the graveyard set moved in. Once the rest of the cast was offstage, he paused, gesturing to Hermione.

"I know this is going to be a very emotional song for everyone, and I know you can perform it brilliantly. So, what I'd like to do is have you just do whatever you feel is natural, and we'll make changes if we need to, all right?"

Hermione nodded, smiling faintly. "Certainly, sir." She returned to her previous spot and waited for Dumbledore's nod. Moving closer to the mausoleum, she lightly recited her lyrics. But once she reached the crypt, she dropped to the stage and began singing.

Snape was watching from Box Five again, and he was transfixed by the eerie beauty of her song. It built and swelled, and he felt as if his chest would burst. As she faded

back to the quiet tone of loss, he realized it was almost his cue. Frantically shooting to his feet, he Apparated to the stage, hunkering down behind the crypt, pulse racing and breathing shallowly.

When she finished her line, he gripped the top of the crypt and pulled himself up, appearing above it from behind. Gently, coaxingly, he began his lines. Hermione gazed up at him slowly materializing on the crypt, and stared fixedly at him, rapt.

He crept forward, out of the shadows, hand outstretched. He could hear a furtive whispering coming from the house just beyond the edge of the apron, but he ignored it, looking only at Hermione, who had begun to rise, moving as one in a daze.

They were locked on one another, until the source of the whispers became clear. Harry stepped out from the wing, having been instructed to enter there by Dumbledore. Hiding behind a statue, Harry watched Hermione drawing closer to Snape where he reached toward her from atop the crypt.

Snape leant forward, gripping the pike impaled in the pile of skulls on the crypt for leverage, stretching his other hand toward Hermione, urging her to step closer. Hermione moved toward him, entranced.

Harry barked his lines, interrupting them. Hermione ignored him, and Snape kept murmuring his lines, beckoning to her. Harry darted forward, stopping by Hermione and desperately trying to gain her attention. He grasped her arm, but she stepped forward, out of his grip. Then Harry faced Snape and bellowed, "Let her go! For God's sake, let her go! Christine!"

Closing her eyes at his impassioned yell, Hermione shook her head and glanced up again at Snape, who was still reaching toward her. Clapping a hand over her mouth, she gasped, then spun, turning wide eyes on Harry. Barely audible, she stretched her hands toward Harry and said, "Raoul," hastening to him and throwing herself into his embrace.

As Harry wrapped his arms around her protectively, Snape snatched his hand back, pulling up as if he had been burned. Before he could proceed, Dumbledore suddenly barked, "Wait!"

All eyes turned to him, wrenched from the tense spectacle before them. Dumbledore hurried onto the stage, crossing to Snape. "Severus, that pike and skull are charged to shoot fireballs. The incantation is *Inflamare*. If you'd just cast it non-verbally, that'd be best." He beamed up at Snape, who merely nodded. Dumbledore shuffled offstage again, saying, "Very well, continue!"

Snape looked at Hermione and Harry. Harry was eyeing him warily, and Hermione hoped her warning wasn't too obvious to everyone else. Snape peered curiously at the pike, lifting it from the pile of skulls on the crypt. Frowning at it, he thought, *Inflamare*, and a ball of fire streaked out of the skull toward Harry.

Harry yelped and jumped back as the flames dashed onto the stage at his feet. Hermione gasped, and the rest of the cast reacted noisily. Snape was gaping, wide-eyed, at Harry. He saw the accusation and anger burning bright in his eyes, and he realized that Hermione's expression was just as hostile.

He was aghast. He hadn't meant to shoot at Harry. He hadn't meant to shoot at all! It seemed that the pike was quite sensitive. It had all been a mistake, and everyone was staring at him like he had done it on purpose. The hot-cold prickle of shame washed over him, and he shut his mouth. Swallowing hard, he rasped, "I do beg your pardon, Mr. Potter. That was completely unintentional. Are you all right?"

Another susurrus of shock whipped through the cast, this time at Snape's apology. Harry's brows shot up, and he stared at Snape as if the man had grown a second head. Snape stood frozen, actually looking chagrined and uncomfortable. Blinking, Harry glanced around, seeing identical expressions of astonishment on many faces. But he also saw Ginny and Hermione gazing intently at him, a flare of triumph in their eyes as they silently urged him to recognize that Snape was being civil.

He exhaled heavily, running a hand through his hair and adjusting his glasses. Cautiously, he said, "I'm fine. Just startled me, that's all."

Snape actually bowed toward Harry in a gesture of apology. "I shall be more careful."

Harry eyed the man suspiciously, remembering that he had said those same words to Snape at the end of the last rehearsal, but there was no indication that Snape was being facetious. Suddenly, he felt a jab between his ribs. Hermione was poking him fiercely. Flashing her an annoyed look, he grudgingly muttered, "Thank you, sir." With that, he glared mutinously at Ginny, who was beaming at him, and shrugged away from Hermione in a fit of pique.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and said, "Why don't you all take a moment to write down your blocking so far. We'll pick back up in a minute." Everyone bent over their hastily opened scripts, scribbling. Once they had all tucked their scripts away again, Dumbledore nodded and said, "Action."

Hermione stepped back toward the crypt, and Harry tried to stop her. Snape resumed his hypnotic murmur. This time, when Harry yelled, and Hermione ran to him, Snape deliberately snatched up the pike, carefully aiming it in front of Harry's feet. Hermione was hidden behind Harry, curling in on herself.

At a thought, a fireball streaked from the pike to Harry, splattering on the stage before him. Harry glared up at Snape, but used it to stay in character. Snape immediately launched into the Phantom's taunting. Harry and Snape went back and forth, and after each of them spoke, Snape cast another fireball. Fortunately, they merely evaporated once they hit the stage, so no one was in danger unless hit with one directly.

Hermione cried, "Raoul, no," and Harry stepped closer to Snape. With each successive fireball, Snape landed them closer to him, as if pulling Harry forward with them. Harry was halfway to the crypt when Hermione spoke up again, pleading, "Raoul, don't."

Harry snapped a furious glance over his shoulder at her and hissed, "Stay back!" He turned back to Snape, advancing more, and Snape landed more fireballs at his feet. He was almost to the crypt when Snape reached the end of his goading lines. Hermione suddenly rushed forward and grabbed Harry's arm, desperately yanking him away, gasping, "Raoul! Come back..."

Snape had been leaning forward, bending toward Harry in anticipation. At Hermione's frantic move, he straightened, pointing the pike at them as she dragged Harry offstage, roaring, "Don't go!" Once they were out of sight, Snape dropped the pike to his side again and snarled, "So be it! Now let it be war upon you both!" With that, he slammed the pike back into the pile of skulls, and viciously thought, *Inflamare!* Flames shot from the pike and blanketed the stage as Snape plunged his hand into his robes, gripping his wand and casting *Sollumaren*. The stage was engulfed in a bright flash of light, and Snape Disapparated in the disorienting blaze.

There was a burst of noise among the cast, unprepared for such a dazzling display. Snape looked out from his position back in Box Five and saw everyone shielding their faces from the light, glancing about, searching for him. When Dumbledore waved his hands at the cast to quiet them and began searching for Snape as well, Snape Apparated back to the stage, expression inscrutable.

Dumbledore cast him an incredulous glance before breaking out into a grin. His voice was coloured with laughter as he drawled, "That was quite the impressive display, Severus. Someone's been paying attention to the stage directions..."

Snape felt relief wash over him. He had been steeling himself for a public reprimand at his reckless use of the pike and his spontaneous use of the Blaze of Light Charm. Apparently, Dumbledore was rather taken by his theatrics.

Harry and Hermione emerged from the wings, and Snape snuck a look at them. Harry's expression was pensive. Realizing that it would serve many purposes...staying in Hermione's good graces, covering his arse with Dumbledore and McGonagall, and keeping the other students guessing...Snape politely inclined his head toward Harry and said, "I trust you were not singing, Mr. Potter?"

Harry blinked at him and cast a disconcerted glance at the other students, but retorted, "No. I'm fine. Sir." Snape's lips twitched at the obvious afterthought of the "sir," but he didn't take him to task. Behind Harry, Hermione's eyes lit up with pleasure at their courteous interaction.

Below them, Dumbledore was making notes in his script. Waving his quill at them, he said, "Come now, mark your blocking! That was brilliant." They all quickly wrote their notes, and Dumbledore shooed them all out of the way so he could reset the stage. "All right, you know the drill. Let's go through it again. This time, see if we can make it without stopping." He didn't notice the aggrieved looks shot at him from the cast, since *he* had been the one stopping them!

Snape slunk off into the wing to await his cue, deciding he could simply enter the stage with the set piece as it rolled in. As cast members passed him, they nodded courteously, and he did the same. It amused him to see the perplexed looks with which some of the students gazed at him. *Perhaps it could be entertaining to benice for a change. They certainly don't seem to know what to do with themselves.*

The scene progressed, and Snape felt much more at ease controlling the pike. A fleeting thought that Dumbledore should be very careful about who could get access to such a device crossed his mind, and the succeeding image of Draco and Harry using it against each other made him suppress a groan.

They ran through the scene a third time, with the music, and everyone sang. It was still haunting to listen to Hermione pouring out such sorrow in her song, but once everyone was involved with the music, things flowed quite well. After the final dazzling flash of light, Dumbledore called everyone out for notes.

Snape gravely approached Dumbledore and handed him the pike. In an undertone, he said, "Perhaps you should keep a close watch on this device. It seems that some might find it enticing, for entirely inappropriate reasons." At Dumbledore's curious look, Snape tilted his head toward Draco, who was glancing longingly at the pike, then shooting furtive calculating looks at the Gryffindors who were milling onstage.

Comprehension dawned, and Dumbledore took the pike from Snape, nodding ruefully. "Point taken. Thank you." Snape jerked his head and edged away. Clapping his hands for silence, Dumbledore announced, "Next Tuesday we'll be running through the Raoul/Giry scene from last time through the end of tonight's scenes. Don't forget to keep practicing what we've already done. It wouldn't do to end up back at square one when we do the full run-throughs of the Act." He cast a stern but pleasant look over the cast, and they smiled back.

Dumbledore tucked the pike under his arm, saying, "Very well then. Run along! Good night," then turned to the stage and began restoring things back to normal. Everyone trundled up the aisle, buzzing with conversations.

Harry was assailed on all sides by his mates. Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Hermione surrounded him as they exited the Hall.

Ginny slid her arm through his and squeezed. "See? That wasn't so awful, now was it?"

Ron nodded and gazed at him with a puzzled look. "Yeah, how odd was all that? Snape being decent? I would've thought he'd have enjoyed shooting fire at you."

Harry nodded, and Neville added, "I swear it looked like he was really sorry about that first one." He shook his head and snorted. "I gotta' say, Harry, I think he *has* changed."

Harry paused, glancing back at the tall figure in black still behind them. He looked at Hermione, who was eyeing him with visible hope, and rolled his eyes. Heaving a huge put-upon sigh, he rumbled, "Fine! So he wasn't a total prat. It's a start, I guess. But that doesn't mean he's my new best friend!" His lips twisted in a sneer, and Ron buffeted his arm.

Pretending to be offended, Ron said, "I reckon not! He's got to get past me, first."

They all laughed, and the boys jostled each other down the corridor. Hermione and Ginny exchanged joyful, relieved looks. Hermione piped up, "Hey, what am I? Don't I count, too?"

Harry smiled at her and said, "You know better than that." Then, his eyes narrowed and he gazed at her speculatively. "I guess you talking to him *did* make a difference." Hermione shrugged. Harry nodded at her and added, "Thanks."

Smiling softly, Hermione murmured, "It was nothing. Don't mention it."

Harry rolled his eyes and snorted. "No doubt! 'Don't mention it.' Sounds perfectly spiffing to me! Let's drop this whole ruddy subject and get to bed, eh?"

Climbing the stairs, they all mumbled in agreement, and Harry flung his arm around Ginny. Falling back to trail behind the others, Hermione glanced back at the corridor, seeing Snape watching her from afar. Daring to smile and ripple her fingers in a wave, she hoped he could tell how proud she was of his efforts. She turned back to the stairs, and when she glanced over her shoulder again, he was gone.

It didn't take long for them all to head off to their respective dorms once they arrived in Gryffindor Tower. Hermione secluded herself in her room, stroking Crookshanks and thinking about everything that had transpired that evening. Finally released from the excitement of the rehearsal, she felt her energy flagging.

I guess Severus was right. I am tired. I know I would usually spend some time studying before I settle in, but I'm positively drained from such a roller coaster of emotions! She went about changing for bed, yawning. *Of course, I did promise Severus I would try to get to bed earlier. He made such an effort tonight; it's only fair that I do the same.*

With that justification in her mind, she snuggled under her covers, burying her face in Snape's shirt and breathing deeply. Crookshanks joined her by her pillow, and she scrubbed him, lulled by his drowsy purr. Exhaling a long, slow, cleansing breath, she smiled in contentment and thought, *Thank you, love. I know everything tonight was hard for you. But, it makes such a difference to me to know what you've been through and how much effort you put forth in trying to please me. I love you, Severus.* Succumbing to sleep, her hand stilled on Crookshanks, but he didn't mind. He enjoyed the comforting weight of her touch, and he, too, drifted off.

Down in his quarters, Snape sat in front of his fireplace, staring into the flames. He was clad in his comfortable lounge wear, and his fingers covered his mouth where he had propped his chin on his hand. A long time passed, and the fire burned low. Eventually, his eyes closed in fatigue, and his head drooped forward.

Muscles going slack in sleep, his chin slid off his hand, and his head fell forward, startling him awake. He looked about, disoriented. Relaxing again, he glanced at the time. Inhaling sharply, he rose, stretching and yawning. *Get to bed, you daft sod!*

He looked at the time again and idly thought, *I wonder if Hermione has gone to sleep yet. I know she said she stays up, but she looked so tired. Surely she kept her promise...* He stopped, straightening as a rash idea took shape. Gazing furtively about his own sitting room, he swallowed, smoothing his robe and hair.

It is after two... With that, he disappeared.

49- Growing

Chapter 51 of 84

Snape's destination... a couple of rehearsals... a Gryffindor dogpile... Snape's unnerving, courteous persona... lemony zest abounds... some foreboding behaviour on Colin's part... and a daring venture on Hermione's part.

Standard disclaimer goes here.

A/N: This has been a long time coming, but again, it's really long and covers several days, so please forgive me. As always, check out my LJ for update and progress info. <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/> And, check out this awesome "trailer" xtahsee made for this fic on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1gA-K0pbSM> It's fantabulous! Anyway, thanks, luff, and chocolate to Ladyofthemasque, SnivellusSnape, and yutamiyu! *hugs* Hope you all enjoy...

Chapter 49- Growing

Crookshanks's eyes snapped open, instantly alert. He recognized the dark man crouching on the far side of the armchair in the shadows and relaxed again. Lifting his head, he wriggled out from under Hermione's lax hand and trotted to the foot of the bed. Gazing amiably at the figure creeping forward, Crookshanks meowed in greeting.

Snape had judged his arrival to hide behind the armchair, just in case Hermione was awake after all. Seeing the room dark but for the moonlight shining through the window, he inched forward, to better see her as she slept. He froze as he saw movement, but relaxed when he realized it was the half-Kneazle. The creature plopped at the end of the bed and watched him. Then, he meowed.

Snape immediately dropped to the floor, panicked that Hermione would wake. Staring up at the squashed face looking down at him where he was sprawled on the carpet, he gestured urgently for Crookshanks to be quiet. In the silence following Crookshanks's greeting, Snape could hear his heart pounding. He looked imploringly up at the beast, wondering if Legilimency worked on magical animals. On the bed, Hermione shifted, resettling with a tiny sigh. After several long moments of silence, Snape looked back at Crookshanks, who was staring at him with a rather amused air.

Locking eyes, Snape thought hard at the animal, *Don't wake her! I'm not supposed to be here. You know I mean no harm. Just don't wake her!* He wasn't sure if it worked, but Crookshanks merely gazed at him a moment more, then yawned, dropping to the bed regally to curl his tail around him. Blinking sleepily, he purred.

Snape exhaled slowly in relief, being sure to make no noise as he did so. Upon hearing the purr, Snape cautiously lifted himself off the floor, peering warily over the edge of the bed at Hermione's slumbering form. Easing back onto his heels, he stayed in a crouch, reaching up and scrubbing Crookshanks behind the ears in gratitude.

Crookshanks purred more, leaning into his touch. Snape felt a small smile spreading his lips, and he shook his head wryly at his panic. His stroking faltered as he focused on Hermione again, rising from his crouch. Crookshanks butted imperiously at his hand, demanding more attention. Rolling his eyes at the animal, he resumed dragging his fingers through the thick fur as he edged around the bed, gazing down at Hermione.

The moonlight was enough to show her face, smooth in a peaceful sleep, riotous hair shoved above her head on the pillow. She was on her side, hugging a second pillow, with Snape's shirt mashed between said pillow and her face. Snape was hit with an almost overwhelming desire to replace that pillow with his person, so she'd be wrapped around him instead.

He stood to one side, simply watching her steady breathing as she slept on, oblivious to his scrutiny. Utterly enthralled, he stood there for what seemed like ages. Finally, Hermione stirred again, and Snape jerked away, blinking rapidly and inwardly protesting the stiffness of his muscles after so long without moving. He backed stealthily away to the armchair again, noting that Crookshanks was lying in the seat, eyeing him.

Shooting a sheepish half-smile at the animal, Snape reached down with both hands and made as if to scoop him up. Raising an eyebrow in query, he inclined his head toward Crookshanks, and Crookshanks stood, stretching luxuriously. Peering up at the man with lofty acquiescence, Crookshanks remained silent as Snape smirked and picked him up, sitting in the chair and depositing him on his lap. Settling himself with studied nonchalance, Crookshanks began purring again, vibrating against Snape's legs as the man stroked his fur and scrubbed under his chin.

Snape leant his head against the back of the chair, gazing at Hermione as he enjoyed the warmth of Crookshanks in his lap. Lulled by the purr, Snape dozed off.

The moon had changed position in the sky by the time Snape was awakened by Crookshanks standing on his lap, front paws on Snape's chest, butting his head against Snape's face. Glancing wildly about, disoriented, Snape tamped down his panic and stifled his sharp breathing. Looking down into the furry face inches from his own, Snape sighed in relief that Crookshanks had woken him before Hermione had a chance to wake. Lifting his hands to thread into the thick ruff of fur behind his ears, Snape pressed his forehead against Crookshanks's and barely whispered, "Thank you, my friend." Crookshanks rubbed against him and backed away, looking smug.

Snape stood slowly after Crookshanks leapt from his lap. Vainly brushing at the ginger hairs clinging to his lounge wear, he cast one last longing look at Hermione before he nodded farewell to the animal and Disapparated.

Crookshanks sneezed and jumped onto the bed to curl up with his mistress again. It really was a shame the dark man couldn't stay...his lap was ever so comfortable, and his caresses were soothing...almost as good as Hermione's!

The weekend sped by, and the cast was looking forward to Tuesday's rehearsal. After the surprising events at the last one, many of the Gryffindors were wondering if Snape was going to be as civil again or if he'd revert back to his usual sour self.

Monday, wary whispers circulated to the effect that Snape had been almost decent in classes, and the shock of it made students wonder what could be wrong with him. Hermione and Ginny, upon hearing the incredulous mutterings, exchanged amused looks, eyes dancing with suppressed laughter.

Tuesday, Ginny managed to grin up at Snape during Potions class, while everyone else was otherwise occupied, and Snape cast a quick glance about the room before smirking back, one brow arching slightly.

At the end of the period, when everyone was filing out, Ginny offered a bright, "See you at rehearsal, Professor."

Snape looked at her and inclined his head politely, responding with a pleasant, "Indeed. Good day, Miss Weasley." He saw the startled looks that the remaining students snapped between him and Ginny, and he stifled a snort of mischievous glee. The wicked look on Ginny's face was almost enough to break his composure, as it was

obvious she was enjoying how his new demeanour confounded everyone.

That evening, Snape collected Hermione at dinner, going so far as to individually greet everyone seated with her, "Good evening, Miss Weasley, Mr. Potter, Mr. Longbottom," with a cordial nod. Puzzled looks and stammered retorts gave evidence of the success of his ploy, and when he and Hermione reached the corridor, she peered up at him with a smile that expressed both exasperation and amusement before he gripped her arm and Apparated them to his quarters.

Safe in his sitting room, Hermione dissolved into giggles. Gathering her into his arms and gazing down his nose at her, he murmured a lofty, "Pray tell, what is so amusing?"

Voice rippling with laughter, Hermione said, "You know bloody well what's so funny... You! I've heard the gossip about you being nicer lately. And I can tell you're enjoying disconcerting everyone with it, too!" She snorted and peered up at him through her lashes, her mood shifting. "I do want to tell you how glad I am that you have made such an effort, dearest. It means a lot to me. Particularly with how you've treated Harry. Thank you." She lifted one hand to mould it against his cheek and stretched up to plant a tender kiss on his lips.

Snape tightened his embrace, enjoying her kiss and the feel of her body against his. Backing away slowly, he murmured, "For you, love, I'll do whatever I can. Come, let's get going." Releasing her, he stepped to the chair, nodding for her to get the hair products.

Hermione retrieved them from his bathroom cabinet and took her familiar place behind him, brush in hand. Blithely, she said, "Severus, may I ask you some more questions?"

Snape dropped his face into his hand, stifling a groan. As she tugged his head back up, he said, in a long-suffering tone, "Haven't we dug up enough bad memories already? Must we continue?"

Hermione caressed his shoulder soothingly. "I'm not talking about anything heavy. More like the little things we discussed before. Like, I know what your favourite scents are, but what about your favourite foods or drinks? See, simple things." She squeezed his bicep encouragingly and Snape gave a long, gusty sigh.

"Very well. All right, my favourite meal is one my mother made every Sunday for dinner: baked chicken, fried potatoes with onions, and shredded green beans. When money was most tight, we wouldn't often have meat, but she always made sure we had a chicken on Sundays. Simple fare, but it tastes of good memories."

Hermione beamed, smoothing the pomade through his hair. "Sounds lovely. I like all of those choices too. If there were any special seasonings she used, do tell me, so I can remember to use them whenever I decide to make your favourite meal."

Snape blinked, his chest tightening. His voice low, he said, "You would do that?"

Hermione gently turned his head, leaning around his shoulder to face him. "Of course, dear heart. If I have my way, I'll be happily making your favourite meal every Sunday for the rest of our lives."

Snape sprang forward, kissing her fiercely. When he finally backed away, he flashed her a sheepish grin and mumbled, "So... what about you?"

Hermione resumed her task and said, "Well, you were there for one of my favourite meals. But, I'd say that I would rather have sautéed shellfish, a baked potato with lashings of sour cream, and steamed broccoli and cauliflower." She paused for a moment before adding, "With chocolate mousse for dessert, of course."

Snape burst out laughing at her comment. "But of course! And what would you have to drink with such a feast?"

Hermione thought for a moment before saying, "Well, a chocolate milkshake would be good, but if I was really thirsty, I'd love an ice cold orange fizzy drink." The tone of her voice indicated an almost reverent regard for said beverage.

Snape drawled, "If you're going to drool, do try to avoid getting it in my hair."

Hermione voiced an inarticulate sound of indignation and shoved his shoulder, making him duck away from her attack. "Severus! That's disgusting!"

Snape turned a wickedly unrepentant smirk on her and said, "What? You sounded positively enamoured. I've seen you with the mousse; I doubt I'd like being between you and this 'fizzy drink' you speak of with such devotion."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips in pique. "Fine! Never mind that. What's *your* favourite drink?"

Black eyes still glittering with amusement, Snape queried, "Alcoholic or not?"

Hermione pulled up, blinking. "Oh. I never thought of that. Um, not."

Snape settled back in the chair, allowing Hermione to finish with the pomade. "It should come as no surprise to you that my favourite choice now is tea with honey and lemon."

Hermione smiled, darting forward to plant a kiss on his neck. "Smooth talker..." Snape turned his head and she kissed him. As she backed away, she frowned and said, "So, you have a favourite alcoholic drink too?"

Snape nodded slowly, sensing her unease. He uttered a short, "Firewhisky. Wizarding alcohol."

Hermione was silent. After a pregnant pause, she said, "I didn't realize you were a drinker."

Snape could tell from her tone that she was verging on distressed. In an effort to appease her, he said, "I don't drink often. Well... anymore. I used to use it as an aid to relax from the stresses of my days as a spy. Clearly, I don't have as much stress anymore, and I haven't had any since the night..."

He had stopped rather abruptly, and Hermione urged, "Since the night you what? Go on."

Snape cleared his throat. His voice was low as he said, "The night we found out we would be going to see the play. I was overwhelmed with the prospect of meeting your parents. But, I didn't drink very much that night. The last time I indulged *too* much was the night I first read the play. That was the night I first recognized my attraction to you. I had been struggling with the whole situation of being cast, and I drank more than I should have. I lost my self-control under the influence of the Firewhisky and went to bed wallowing in the guilt of wanting you." He trailed off lamely, clearly embarrassed at his indiscretion.

Hermione secured his hair in an elastic and caressed his shoulder as she stepped around in front of him. She was twisting her hands together, and her shoulders were tense. "I don't care for alcohol. I've learnt too much about the negative things it can do to people, and I don't like the way it smells, let alone tastes. I've seen people get stupid and make poor decisions just because they'd been drinking, and I don't like being around it. But, you're a grown man, and it's not my place to tell you not to drink if you want to."

Snape reached out and grasped her hands, stilling their nervous movements. "Hermione, love, it's not even an issue. Really. If it makes you uncomfortable, I'm certainly not going to throw it in your face."

Hermione gazed anxiously into his earnest face, relaxing and heaving a deep sigh. "Okay. Thank you. I'm sorry I'm so odd about this."

Snape looked at her fondly and tugged her into his lap. "It's all right."

Hermione snuggled against him, quiet for a moment as she enjoyed his embrace. After a beat, she said, in a tiny voice, "I do like virgin piña coladas..."

Snape chuckled, hugging her. Teasing, he said, "Hmm, so my plan of getting you roaring drunk so I may take advantage of you isn't completely foiled; I can still ply you with piña coladas, claiming they're virgin when they're not..."

Hermione scowled at him and pushed at his chest, giving up after a token resistance when he strengthened his grip around her in his lap. Finally, her expression cleared and she smirked at him, "You needn't use alcohol to get into my knickers. I'll have you know that you intoxicate me quite enough to be able to 'take advantage of me.' Besides, is it really taking advantage if I'm egging you on?" She giggled at the reproachful glance he cut at her.

Snape felt a tingle race through him at her words. Forbidden thoughts of Apparating to her room and "taking advantage" of her in her own bed ran rampant through his mind. His reproachful look morphed into a smouldering one, and Hermione gasped.

A surge of excitement ended with a liquid surge in her knickers as Snape closed the distance between them, pinning her with a deep, sensual kiss. One hand snaked up her leg, cupping her hip under her robes and skirt. She moaned into his mouth and squirmed, feeling his erection beneath her legs.

They snogged heatedly for a moment, before Snape jerked back, shaking his head violently to clear it. With a muttered oath, he saw the time and rolled his eyes. "We have to go."

Hermione slid off his lap and straightened her clothing, patting her hair and fanning her hands to cool her flaming cheeks. Snape stood somewhat gingerly, crossing to pick up his mask by the door. Beckoning for Hermione to join him, he Apparated them upstairs, depositing them about halfway down the corridor leading to the Hall. Releasing each other, they strode quickly to the doors, joining the rest of the cast as they entered.

Most of the students cast curious looks at Snape, wondering how he would behave this time. Ignoring their glances, Snape glided regally down the aisle after them.

Dumbledore eagerly gestured for everyone to take their places to begin rehearsal. Fiddling with the music box, he nodded absently to Colin's muttered query about the singing spell. Most of the cast lined up, waiting for Dumbledore to finish his adjustments and cast *Suaviloquentia* on them. When he had done so, Dumbledore said, "Tonight we run through the scenes from Raoul and Mme. Giry to the graveyard. I shall be handling the sets again, and we'll still be using the music box. I'd like to see how smoothly we can get through everything. So, stay alert, and do your best!"

Determined nods bobbed all around him as the cast took up the challenge. There was a scramble as everyone rushed to their places. Dumbledore pointed at Harry and McGonagall and cried, "Action!"

The first scene flowed well, and Neville made sure he and Ron were with the office set as Dumbledore shifted it onstage. As they sang their parts, Pansy and Draco took their positions in the wing, preparing for their entrance. Harry and Hermione stood further back, awaiting their cue, and McGonagall was in a back corner, revising her blocking with Ginny.

Snape absorbed all that in an instant, having Apparated to a corner by the fly system. He gazed at Hermione and she tilted her head, distracted, finally turning to see him. Harry felt her movement and turned as well, seeing Snape watching them. He frowned, suspicion welling up as Snape stepped closer to them.

Pansy and Draco marched onstage, and Snape stopped beside Hermione, glancing down at her before eyeing Harry soberly. His voice barely audible, Snape said, "Mr. Potter, do remember your blocking later. If you manage to perform the same as last time, there should be no danger from the fireballs. I shall be quite precise in my aim, so as long as you are just as diligent in your positioning, everything should go smoothly." He curbed the sneer that wanted to surface and managed to incline his head politely instead.

Harry's eyes goggled, but he nodded weakly. In a faint rasp, he said, "Certainly, Professor."

Both Harry and Hermione were staring at Snape in surprise...and no little delight, on Hermione's part...so neither of them heard their cue. Suddenly, from the house they heard a bellow.

"Where are my Christine and Raoul?"

Gasping, Harry and Hermione exchanged one swift look of "Oops!" before dashing onstage. Dumbledore had stopped the music, and he was gazing sternly at them over his spectacles, arms crossed, fingers drumming in frustration on his arm.

Flushing guiltily, they both stammered apologies. But, when Dumbledore inhaled in preparation for scolding them, Snape stepped out from the wing, offering a conciliatory bow and saying, "I do apologize, Headmaster. Mr. Potter and I were discussing the blocking for a later scene. I distracted them from their current parts. It won't happen again."

Harry snapped a stunned gaze to Snape so fast that he nearly gave himself whiplash. Hermione, too, turned to blink at Snape in astonishment. Dumbledore scowled at Snape for a moment, silent, before sighing and grumbling, "Indeed, I hope not. Very well, let's back up. Mr. Malfoy, if you would be so kind as to give them their cue again, once the music is at the correct point..." Draco nodded as Dumbledore adjusted the music box.

Harry and Hermione sheepishly slunk back into the wings, casting owl-eyed looks at Snape, who nodded graciously at them again and murmured, "I beg your pardon," before Disapparating.

Neither of them knew he had reappeared above them on the catwalk. He heard Harry's disconcerted, "I don't know if I can take the stress of Snape being 'nice!'" Smirking and stifling a chuckle, Snape watched as they appeared on time and the scene progressed.

After that instance of Harry and Hermione missing their cue, everyone doubled their efforts, not wanting to be the target of Dumbledore's ire. If some of the set changes were a bit rocky, no one wanted to be the one to say anything about it, since it was all being handled by Dumbledore; no doubt it was complicated and required quite a bit of effort and concentration.

Snape stayed perched on the catwalk, watching everyone, unobserved, until it was time for him to take his position onstage for the graveyard scene. Apparating behind the crypt, he closed his eyes and suppressed a shudder at the eerie beauty of Hermione's song.

Climbing up, he offered his gentlest, most coaxing tone as he began his part, luring Hermione closer. Harry appeared, and a part of Snape's mind that was listening as an outside observer admitted that the three of them were doing well. Even Harry's performance had strengthened, and the scene swelled with tension and pathos.

Feeling much more secure with his handling of the pike, Snape wielded it almost carelessly, a pose that belied his actual control. That same observer part of his being noticed that if Harry still harboured any doubts about Snape's intentions, he buried them behind his performance as Raoul. Despite himself, Snape was impressed with the boy.

Meticulously, Snape aimed the fireballs to land in front of Harry as he approached the crypt. Hermione agonized as Christine, torn between Raoul and the Phantom's lure. Snape taunted and bullied, making the Phantom frighteningly compelling. The same sort of righteous wrath that Harry had used to his and the wizarding world's benefit in destroying Voldemort contorted his youthful features into a visage more befitting a man, and one who had witnessed a lifetime of atrocities. As the scene culminated, Snape reluctantly recognized again the strength and maturity that lay hidden beneath Harry's adolescent self.

When the flames that bathed the stage and the flash of light that Snape cast both died away, Snape heard the rest of the cast bursting into spontaneous applause. He Apparated back to the stage, joining Hermione and Harry where they entered from the wing again. Hermione was beaming, flushing prettily, and Harry was struggling between looking proud and embarrassed. Snape suppressed a smile and crossed to the pair.

Inclining his head, he murmured, "That worked well, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger." He cast a wry look about at the cast clapping as they swarmed the stage, before cocking a sardonic eyebrow at them. "Obviously."

Harry's eyes widened again in astonishment. Here was Snape, being polite and approving! Would wonders never cease? He stared at the man, dumbfounded, until he was distracted by Ginny throwing her arms around his neck and crowing in delight.

Snape watched Harry's befuddlement, smirking to himself, amused. Catching Hermione's eye, he twitched one corner of his lips and bowed slightly as he edged away. She gazed after him with a mixture of pride and suspicion.

Dumbledore spoke over the hubbub of the crowd. "Excellent, everyone! Now, let's all get back to work and start again. Come now, it's no good celebrating unless we can be sure to be able to duplicate such a stellar performance every time. Places!"

Scrambling back to their spots, everyone couldn't help smiling with the excitement of feeling that they were sure to win the competition. They ran through the scenes again, without stopping, as everyone was extremely conscious of their cues. Snape felt even more comfortable brandishing the pike, and when they were done, he almost strolled down to join the rest of the cast in the house for notes. Had he been the type, he might have whistled. But, needless to say, he was not the type at all.

Dumbledore surveyed his cast with visible pride. "Oh, but I'm so pleased with the progress everyone has made. By the time we're done, I'm sure our company could give anyone a run for their money!" He paused as a ripple of appreciative laughter swept through the group. "At any rate, this Friday, we'll pick up from where we left off, and we'll stop at the end of the Don Juan performance scene, right before the Phantom appears as Don Juan for 'Point of No Return.' That will come later. Now, they'll be short scenes, but the first one is not included on your music boxes, so you may not be familiar with it. I know several of you are facing exams next week, so I thought I'd go easy on you." A rumble of groans met his teasing words. Chuckling, he continued, "Very well then, off with you! Good night."

Everyone began shuffling up the aisle, and McGonagall rounded furiously on Dumbledore for springing the news of upcoming tests on them before she had. Her brogue became more pronounced as she berated Dumbledore, "Albus Dumbledore! How dare you spill the beans like that? What is the good of a surprise test if you spoil the surprise? Really, Albus..."

Snape snorted as he passed them, noting the unrepentant twinkle in the old man's eyes. He passed several Gryffindors in the corridor, just outside the doors, and coolly passed his gaze over them, intoning, "Mr. Weasley, Miss Weasley, Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Potter, Mr. Creevey, Miss Granger, good night." He held Hermione's gaze as he pointedly said good night, reminding her of getting to bed at a reasonable time. Nodding in response to the varied retorts, he swept past them and Disappeared.

Several gusty sighs followed his disappearance.

Ron shuddered as they trooped down the corridor. "I reckon I'll never get used to Snape being polite."

Neville nodded, noting Colin's pale, rather shell-shocked face. "Well, I guess people *can* change. I'm just glad I can manage to be in his presence now without losing it."

Ginny beamed and clapped a hand on his shoulder encouragingly. "I think it's brilliant. And you've bloody well improved, Neville. I'm duly impressed." She mussed his hair, shrieking and laughing as she ducked away from his attempt to catch her.

Harry was frowning thoughtfully, and Hermione poked his arm. "You still with us, Harry?" They dropped back a pace or two behind the others as they climbed stairs toward Gryffindor Tower.

Harry shook his head, blinking. "I'm with the others. I can't believe that Snape has changed so much. It's unnerving, that's what."

Hermione smiled. "And you haven't? Everyone changes, Harry. It's called growing."

Harry grimaced at her. "Snape's been a grown up for ages!"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione said, "Not ageing, Harry, growing! People can grow no matter what their age is." They reached the corridor leading to the portrait hole, and both of them were distracted by the echoing shouts, shrieks, and laughter that were coming from Neville, Ginny, and Ron as they chased each other. Smiling at their antics, Harry and Hermione rushed forward, past a bemused Colin, joining in the melee.

Gasping the password, they all tumbled through the portrait hole, sprawling on the carpet as they tripped each other, grabbing arms and collars, tickling and tousling hair. Neville was trying to catch Ginny to pay her back for messing up his hair, but Ginny was almost as quick off a broom as she was on one, and she kept eluding him.

She ducked behind a sofa, and Ron joined her. As she turned to him, grinning, he grabbed her, holding her arms behind her back and standing, shouting, "I've got her, Neville!"

Ginny voiced an inarticulate shriek of fury at his treachery, and she struggled, hissing, "Ronald Weasley! How could you turn on your own sister?"

Neville sprinted over, grinning in anticipation of teasing Ginny, but as soon as he got to them, Ron dropped her arms and launched himself at Neville, pinning him and bellowing to her, "I'm hurt that you thought I'd really do that, sister dear! Blood is thicker than pumpkin juice!" He beamed at his stunned sibling and chuckled at the squirming Neville. "Sorry, mate, but you understand, eh?"

Ginny darted over to tickle Neville where he was pinned, and all three of them started tussling, rolling around and howling with laughter. Harry and Hermione were watching from where they had fallen in a heap on the carpet, laughing. Harry yelled, "Ron! That was positively Slytherin of you!"

At that, Ron paused, pulling up and staring at Harry with a wounded look. "Harry! Ouch!" Dramatically putting his hand over his heart, he fell over, feigning unconsciousness. At that moment, all four of them, Ginny, Neville, Harry, and Hermione, exchanged one calculating look before descending on Ron's prone form in a group.

Attacked from four angles, Ron curled into a foetal position, trying to protect himself. Laughing, breathless, they finally fell away, panting and coughing, sagging onto the floor.

Colin stood in the doorway to the boys' dormitory stairs and muttered, "Seventh years, prefects, Head Girl, stars of the school play..." Then, shaking his head and rolling his eyes, he spun and disappeared.

The others exchanged unrepentant grins, shrugging. Turning to eye Hermione meaningfully, Harry said, "Gee, so much for growing, huh?"

Hermione laughed, picking herself up off the carpet and dusting off her robes. "Well, everyone deserves a moment or two of regression." She extended her hand to Ginny, pulling the other girl up. "I don't know about you lot, but that just finished me off. See you in the morning!" She waved at the three boys still sprawled on the floor and smiled at Ginny as she departed for her room.

Still smiling, Hermione prepared for the next day, dressing for bed. After her nightly ablutions, she crawled into bed with a book, stroking Crookshanks where he lay beside her. Drained from the evening, it wasn't long before she doused the light and went to sleep, her last conscious thought, *See, Severus? I'm going to sleep just like you said.*

Hours later, far below in the dungeons, Snape glanced at the time, nodding to himself. Standing, he Apparated to Hermione's room again.

This time, Crookshanks barely acknowledged his presence, and Snape gratefully scrubbed the cat's thick fur. Settling into Hermione's armchair, Snape gazed at her, his heart warming with the pleasure of seeing her so peaceful. Once again, he dozed off, starting awake as his head fell forward. Realizing that he had been there for a while, he regretfully stood, rolling his neck and grimacing against the crick in it. Daring to step beside her bed, he gently smoothed a curl away from her face before

Disapparating.

Hermione felt so rested the next day that she wondered if she *had* been neglecting her sleep too much. She felt like smiling at everyone all day, and caught herself beaming at Snape more than once in class. Blushing every time, she dutifully tore her attention away from his warning gaze and focused on her work. It wasn't until dinner that night, when she heard other students commenting on how much more mellow Snape seemed, that she realized how much he had changed, and not just in his interactions with her.

Good. Then hopefully people will understand us when the time comes.

Friday, Snape merely beckoned to Hermione as he made his way down the aisle to collect her before rehearsal. Bouncing up from her seat before he had even arrived near her, she bade her friends goodbye and strode down the aisle, pausing at the door to look over her shoulder at Snape as he caught up with her.

In the corridor, he gripped her arm and Apparated them to his quarters again. As soon as they arrived, Hermione turned and plastered herself against him, stretching up and pulling his head down so she could kiss him soundly. Arms wrapping around her instinctively, he returned the kiss with equal fervour.

Finally breaking away, Snape murmured, "I don't know that I should have even collected you tonight, as I'm not onstage at all for these scenes. But I couldn't resist any excuse to get you alone."

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad you did. I miss you." She quirked a mischievous brow at him. "Can't imagine why..."

Taking the bait, Snape growled at her, muttering, "I'll show you why," as he lifted her into his lap and sat in his armchair. He pinned her with a fierce kiss, snaking his hand under her robes, sliding along her leg and cupping her arse. She squealed in response, squirming on his lap and threading her hands through his hair.

He broke the kiss to nip along her throat, squeezing her arse. A low moan urged him on. He was suckling her earlobe when she breathed, "Oh, yes, I remember now..." Chuckling darkly, he slipped his hand around her thigh, lightly tracing his fingertips along the warm, now moistening, centre panel of her knickers. Hermione bucked against his touch, gasping.

His breath was hot against her ear as he said, "I'm so pleased I've managed to refresh your memory."

Hermione opened glassy eyes to look at him. Her voice husky with quickly awakened need, she murmured, "Gods, Severus, refresh my memory some more."

Lips widening in a feral grin, Snape descended on her with another consuming kiss, while his fingers traced patterns against her knickers. Her legs fell open of their own accord, silently encouraging him. He could feel her moving against his erection, and a wild surge of desire claimed him.

One long finger snuck beneath the elastic against her hip. She moaned. Trailing it down inside the leg hole of her knickers, he came up against her warm curls. Her breathing became more erratic as he pulled the elastic away from her skin, her juices making the fabric slick.

That same fingertip traced along her pussy lips, slipping between them and encountering her hard nub. She cried out and shuddered in his embrace. Knowing how to use his voice for greater effect, he murmured, "Ah, my love, you remember that."

A whimpered affirmative made him smirk. Moving further, he slid down to her entrance, teasing her by circling her wet, heated flesh. Daringly, he dipped his fingertip into her, and she tensed, a strangled gargle emerging from her throat. He could feel the juices pooling against his finger. Nuzzling her ear, he said, "Mmm, do you remember this, too?"

Her hips rocked in response, driving him deeper within her. Groaning, he once again slid one finger into her, fitting his thumb against her clit, rubbing and circling it. She keened, writhing in his lap, grinding on his hand. Mere moments later, when he curled his finger forward, Hermione gave a sort of surprised shriek, convulsing around him in release.

Snape felt his cock pulsing, painfully hard, in response to her abrupt orgasm. Enjoying the ability to play her like an instrument, he fluttered his finger within her, delighting in the moans and shudders it incited. Breathing deeply, Hermione floated down from the height of her passion, amazed at how good his touch could make her feel.

Snape gently withdrew, enjoying how her body clenched, as if trying to keep him inside. Trembling with aftershocks, Hermione stared dazedly at him as he brought his fingers to his lips, sucking them in. Watching him laving her juices from his fingers made her groan, and his eyes flashed wickedly at her.

With a smug smirk, Snape glanced at the time and drawled, "My my, that didn't take long." One eyebrow quirked as a wicked grin spread his lips...lips that were glistening where his fingertips had trailed over them.

Hermione sucked in a quick breath and struggled to rise from his lap. Snape looked at her curiously. Glaring at him, she pointedly looked at the bulge in his lap before hiking up her robes and straddling him in the chair. Deliberately rocking against his erection, she smirked at his sharp hiss.

His smug expression changed to one of warning, but she ground against him, leaning forward to press her breasts to his chest as she murmured in his ear, "Not so fast. I think it's only fair that you get your turn, too."

Snape's eyes closed and a low groan rumbled forth. When she suckled the tender flesh in the hollow behind his ear and rocked on him, he found he hadn't breath left to reprimand her. As if of their own volition, his hands gripped her arse and guided her motions, controlling her speed.

She trailed kisses along his jaw, until she swooped in with a heated kiss, her tongue demanding entrance. Almost devouring each other, Hermione voicing little encouraging moans, Snape's breath came faster, and he felt the tingle beginning in his balls.

Hermione's hands gripped his hair behind his neck, and they rocked faster, Snape thrusting against her from below. When Hermione felt his fingers grip spastically, she voiced a keening cry of triumph, feeling him shuddering beneath her. His fierce roar was partially muffled by her kiss, and his body went nearly rigid in release. As his muscles relaxed, Hermione could feel the hot wetness that was spreading against her knickers through his trousers.

She broke the kiss, laying her head along his throat, listening to his heavy breathing. As his heart rate calmed, she sat up, beaming at him in satisfaction.

Snape gazed at her, incredulous. Shaking his head, he blinked rapidly, trying to form words. She beat him to it.

"That was brilliant!"

His eyes flew wider, and a bark of laughter ambushed him. Still chuckling wryly at her flushed yet beaming countenance, he carefully released her, lightly tapping her legs, indicating she should get up.

His voice low, he said, "Time to move. We've got to get cleaned up and ready for rehearsal still."

Hermione gingerly rose, flushing more at the sight of the wet stain in Snape's lap. She could feel her knickers all slippery against her, and she looked away, nervously patting her hair and squirming. Daring to glance at Snape again, she saw the pink stain on his cheeks and knew he was likely embarrassed. As discreetly as he could, he rose and strode to the bathroom, avoiding her eyes.

Moments later, he emerged, dressed as normal, but his posture bespoke his anxiety at his indiscretion. He quickly crossed to the chair, depositing the styling products on

the table. Clearing his throat awkwardly, he said, "Whenever you're ready."

Hermione nodded, stepping quickly toward the bathroom. "I'll be just a moment." She hurried to clean up as much as she could, and returned to see Snape dragging the brush through his hair. Darting over to him, she snagged the brush from his hand and snapped in reproach, "I'll do it."

Snape held his hands up in surrender. "I was simply trying to help. We're running late, even with Apparating."

Hermione hurried through her task, noting how true his statement was. An awkward tension still hung in the air between them. Hesitant, Hermione said, "Severus?"

"Mm?"

"I meant it when I said that was brilliant. I *really* enjoyed... oh, bugger, I can't think of any prettier way to put it... getting you off too." Snape snorted, but she continued. "Well! It's true! I felt so guilty when you had taken care of me before, and I hadn't been able to do the same for you. It's not fair!"

She gathered his hair into the elastic as he said, "Would it make you feel any better if I told you it was taken care of?"

She blinked, surprised at the jolt of arousal that shot through her at the thought. Faintly, she said, "Really?" Exhaling heavily at the erotic image that flashed in her brain, she murmured, "Actually, it does. Although I would have much preferred to have been there and participated!"

Snape snorted again, and she grinned. The tension in his shoulders had drained away, and when he stood, he was smiling faintly as he faced her.

Lips quirking, he murmured, "You're not the only one, dearest." Hermione laughed, and Snape grinned, albeit a bit sheepishly. Pointing his wand at the mask, he muttered, "Accio mask." Catching it deftly, he gripped her arm and Apparated them to the Great Hall, materializing in the back of the house.

Dumbledore was busy setting the stage for the scene, and the cast was milling about at the foot of the stage. Most of the boys were clustered in a group, whispering about the scene, while most of the girls stood in a separate group, watching the boys with interest and chatting idly. Dumbledore called the boys forward, directing Seamus to descend into the orchestra pit as the marksman, and the others gathered on the stage apron.

Shuffling back down into the house, Dumbledore called, "Everyone else not in this scene, please be seated and stay quiet." There was a swift rustle as everyone took seats and shushed each other.

Snape sidled up to Dumbledore, catching his eye and nodding pointedly at the statue that hung at the centre of the top of the proscenium, his expression querying whether that would be a good place to start. Dumbledore nodded vigorously, and Snape Disapparated.

"All right, Mr. Boot, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Finch-Fletchley, you'll all be heading to different doors at Mr. Creevey's direction. Then, wherever you hear the Phantom's voice, you're to head that way, understood?" The boys nodded. "Excellent. Now, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Longbottom, are you ready?" They, too, nodded, and Dumbledore backed away.

But, before he could cry, "Action!" Colin raised his hand and said, "Sir? Am I to provide my own whistle?"

Dumbledore blinked, then smiled. At a snap of his fingers, a shiny tin whistle appeared, floating at eye level with Colin. Colin quickly snatched it, saying, "Thank you, Headmaster."

Almost immediately after that, Seamus popped up from the pit, sheepishly asking, "Headmaster, where might I find the gun I'm supposed to use?"

Squinting, Dumbledore thought for a moment. "Ah, yes, a Muggle weapon. Of course, I remember. Just a moment." He rummaged in his pocket and withdrew a quill, pointing his wand at it and transfiguring it into a rifle. With a little flourish, he handed it to Seamus. "There. That should do. Although, I do hope you'll manage to keep this in one piece. Do try to not blow it up." He smiled at Seamus's chagrined expression and the sniggers that rippled through the rest of the cast.

"I'll do my best, sir. But, will this fire?"

"It will sound as if it has fired, and a puff of smoke will emerge when you pull the trigger, but there are no actual rounds in it of any kind. It's completely safe."

Seamus tilted his head and flashed a lopsided grin. "If you say so, sir!"

There was more laughter, and Dumbledore stepped back into the house as Seamus ducked out of sight again. "Now then, action!"

At Dumbledore's mark, Terry, Dean, and Justin stood in a line near Colin, and Harry, Ron, and Neville stood off to one side. Colin began his lines, and Seamus climbed back up the ladder Dumbledore had placed in the orchestra pit so that his head was visible as he listened to the proceedings. When Colin finished his part, and Neville spoke, Colin continued gesturing to the other boys, pointing to the doors they should attend. At the end of Harry's line, Colin shoed the other boys off the stage, blowing a short report on his whistle, and they fanned out to their positions.

Harry stepped forward to address Seamus in the pit, and at the end of their exchange, Neville approached Harry, pulling him away from the pit so he and Ron could speak privately with him. Colin stepped forward, announcing his readiness, and blew his whistle. From their positions in the theatre, the other boys slammed doors shut and yelled, "Secure!"

As soon as they were done, Snape cast *Sonorus* and quietly intoned, "I'm here: The Phantom of the Opera."

Down in the house, all the boys began searching for him, their heads whipping about wildly, and Dean, Justin, and Terry all came pelting from their positions toward the stage.

Before they could reach it, Snape Apparated to the very back of the house and repeated the mocking line. Confused, the boys stopped, glancing about before changing direction and running back into the house.

Snape popped from there to the catwalk, then to a dark corner of one of the wings, into the space under the trap door, and finally into Box Five, softly repeating his taunt as the others raced about, trying to find him.

As soon as Snape's voice came from Box Five, Seamus aimed the rifle and fired, and Harry rounded on him furiously. Seamus started to protest, but Snape Apparated to the catwalk above the chandelier and raised his voice to recite, "No 'buts'! For once Monsieur le Vicomte is right... Seal my fate tonight...I hate to have to cut the fun short, but the joke's wearing thin... Let the audience in... Let my opera begin!"

Dumbledore paused the rehearsal for everyone to mark their notes in their scripts, and he contemplated how best to effect the set changes. Shooing everyone offstage for a few minutes, he tried several different sequences, finally deciding on one he thought worked best. Gesturing for everyone to go back to where they had been when the scene had ended, he directed their exits and entrances as he shifted the set.

The scene was set for Don Juan, and most of the cast was onstage, figuring out what stage business they'd all be doing while they did their chorus parts. When the discussion was over, Dumbledore directed everyone to begin their lines, nodding approvingly as everyone managed to fall into a rhythm and recite in unison, even without the music.

Dean directed the others in their assumed tasks of making "Don Juan's room" ready. When the came to the end of the chorus, everyone filed into the wings, except for Dean and Ginny. As Draco emerged from behind the arch onstage, Ginny approached him, and Draco mimed tossing something to her. Pretending to catch it, Ginny

whirled and exited, leaving Dean and Draco by themselves.

Draco evinced a predatory anticipation as he recited his lines, and Dean responded with supposed amusement. Hermione waited in the wing to enter, scowling in reproof of Draco's nastiness. Draco disappeared within the curtains of the bed in the alcove upstage, and Dean affected an air of eager waiting as Hermione recited her lines from in the wing.

When Hermione reached the end of her lines, Dumbledore called for a halt. "We're stopping here for now. Next time, we'll pick up from this point, as Professor Snape will be taking over after this." He smiled as cast members emerged onstage, scribbling their notes in their scripts again. "All right, let's go through again, and I'll try to change the sets without stopping everything this time. Ready?" Murmurs of assent rippled through the group, and everyone took their places for the start of the scenes, including Snape, who Apparated from Box Five back to the statue on the proscenium, ready to flit about again.

The scene progressed slowly, particularly during the shift, but it didn't stop entirely again. When they reached the end a second time, Dumbledore asked everyone to clear the stage again so he could work out a few kinks in his set change.

Students stood in small clumps, quietly going over their lines or blocking with each other, until Dumbledore was ready. He announced, "I think I've figured it out this time." Chuckling, he continued, "Let's go ahead and add the music box for the second part this time." Knowing he would be quite busy with the scene shift, Dumbledore raised his voice and called, "Severus!"

Snape appeared on the apron, politely inquiring, "You called?"

Dumbledore grinned at Snape's abrupt arrival and said, "I did. Since you're not involved in the scene, would you pop down here and man the music box while I do the set change?"

Snape inclined his upper body in a gracious bow, smoothly replying, "Certainly, Headmaster." At Dumbledore's "Excellent," Snape continued, "Anything else I can do to be of service?" Dumbledore shook his head no, and Snape nodded, murmuring, "Very well then," before Disapparating again.

Dumbledore gestured for everyone to get ready, and they began their final run-through of night. Snape finished his line from his vantage point in Box Five, then immediately Apparated to the house, standing near Dumbledore. He watched the dance of set pieces onstage, marvelling at the headmaster's skill, and flipped open the music box for the start of the second half.

While the students sang along with the music well enough, some were rather stilted and wooden in their stage business. But Snape felt sure that they would improve, especially once they had practiced more, and once they had their costumes and props at their disposal. They reached the stopping point again, and Snape shut the music box with a snap.

Cast members emerged from the wings, awaiting Dumbledore's announcements before being dismissed. He beamed up at them.

"I know tonight was a bit more difficult than others, what with the lack of accompaniment and the complex set change, and I appreciate your focus. Next Friday we'll be picking up at Don Juan's appearance to do 'Point of No Return' and the retreat underground." He fished some notes from his pocket, peering at them through his spectacles, and said, "While the chorus does sing in the background as the pursuing mob, not everyone is required to be here for next week's rehearsal. Those of you who are needed are: Professor Snape, Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, Mr. Malfoy, Miss Parkinson, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Longbottom, Professor McGonagall, Mr. Potter, Mr. Boot, Mr. Finnigan, Mr. Creevey, Mr. Finch-Fletchley, and Mr. Thomas. Keep practicing, everyone, and enjoy the rest of your weekend. Good night!"

There was an instant hubbub, as people made their way offstage and up the aisle to leave the theatre. Hermione glanced around, wondering where Snape was hiding. As she strode up the aisle, she saw him appear at the back of the house, nodding to the Slytherins as they greeted him on their way out the door. Snape glanced down the aisle at her before turning and following the Slytherins out.

Hermione felt a little let down that she hadn't had a chance to spend any time with Snape at rehearsal, especially after their pulse-quickening interlude beforehand. She was quiet on the trek up to Gryffindor Tower.

Once in the common room, she sank into a squashy chair, only half-listening to the others talking about rehearsal. Speculation began about how Dumbledore was going to handle the pandemonium after Piangi's death, including the retreat to the Labyrinth Underground and the mob's pursuit.

Ron turned to Hermione to include her in the conversation and noticed her wistful, far-off expression. "You okay?"

Hermione started, blinking. "What? Oh, yes, I'm fine. Why?"

Frowning, he said, "You looked like something was bothering you." His puzzled expression changed to one of comprehension. "I know what's wrong! You're worried about next week's rehearsal," he said sagely.

Perplexed, Hermione retorted, "Worried? About what?"

Grimacing sympathetically, he patted her knee and said, "Having to do 'Point of No Return' with Snape."

White-hot anger flared up at his casual statement, and she had to stop herself before she lashed out at him. Eyes narrowing dangerously in spite of herself, she hissed, "Shut up, Ron."

Jerking back, affronted by her attack, he said, "What? What are you riled at me for?"

Hermione stood stiffly, glaring down her nose at him, very much reminiscent of Snape at his haughtiest, and growled, "Don't talk about things you don't understand." Biting back another venomous comment at the surprised widening of his eyes, she continued, "I'm going to bed."

As she stalked off, Colin muttered, "What's wrong with Hermione?"

Ron shook his head and said, "She must really be worked up about having to do next week's scene with Snape, if she's taking it out on me this bad." He sighed. "Poor thing. Oh well, I can't be too offended. I mean, it's got to be pretty stressful acting opposite him all the time," he continued magnanimously.

Colin nodded, staring thoughtfully at the door through which she had exited. "Yeah, probably so. I'll bet she could use something nice to distract her until this whole production is over."

Ron, blissfully ignorant of the danger of encouraging Colin, nodded vehemently. "No doubt. I feel kinda' guilty, not having spent as much time with her lately, since I'm with Susan so much. But," and he paused to flash a wolfish grin, "some things are higher on my list of priorities right now." He wagged his eyebrows and leered, laughing at Colin's rueful expression.

Colin shook his head, smiling wanly. "I'm sure... Glad you two are having fun. Anyway, it's late. I'm off to bed, too." With that, he stood, waving to everyone as he headed for the stairs to his dormitory, looking as if he was thinking very hard.

Hermione had decided to draw a bath, to give herself time to calm down after Ron's insulting remark. She had been soaking for a while, casting her mind back to more pleasant things to change her mood, and she had remembered how satisfying her stolen moments with Snape had been that night. The same sensations swept through her again, and she slid her hand beneath the water to circle her pulsing clut.

Curling forward, trying to slip a finger inside herself like Snape had, she sighed in frustration that her reach and angle weren't the same, and she couldn't incite the same

surges of heat that he could. Settling for her standard mode of titillation, she circled her clit, rubbing faster and cupping her breast in time with the undulation of her hips.

Her heavy breathing echoed off the tiles, and the bathwater sloshed gently around her, offering a counterpoint to her faint moans. Reaching her peak, she sank bonelessly into the bubbles again, a deep languor almost making her nod off. Relaxed, and no longer angry, she slowly dragged herself from the tub, draining it and drying herself with a soft towel. As the fabric slid over her still-swollen pussy lips, she gasped, enjoying the sparks of heat that shot through her.

Wrapping herself in the towel, she crossed to her dresser, opening a drawer to fetch a nightdress. As she caught a glimpse of her photo of Snape, she paused. Chewing her lip for a moment, she stared at the picture. Then, she glanced at the nightdress in her hand. Looking back and forth between them, she apparently came to a decision, resolutely placing the nightdress back in the drawer.

Cheeks flushed, she strode to her bed, flinging back the covers and sitting on the edge. Glancing furtively around, she doused the lights, then, in a flurry of action, whipped off the towel, tossed it toward the bathroom, dove under the covers, and pulled them up to her neck. She lay there, heart racing and body trembling, nude between her sheets.

Nervously grabbing her wand from her nightstand, she cast a double-strength locking spell on the door, changing her password as well. Then, awake again with the adrenaline that was now coursing through her veins, she looked around the dark room, wondering what to do to get sleepy. The moonlight gave her enough light to see the stack of books and periodicals by her bed. With a sharp intake of breath, she saw the items from Ginny's stash and felt a throb deep in her core.

A delicious, erotic tingle flashed over her as she pulled a book from the stack. Sucking her lower lip between her teeth, she opened it to find a photo-illustrated erotic story. Each photo was accompanied by the snippet of the story that it performed. There was little attempt at a plot, but at the moment, Hermione didn't care.

The wizard in the photographs was tall and lean, and his hair, while brown, was long. The witch was petite and blonde, with curves that were quite likely spell-enhanced. As the story progressed, the witch and wizard demonstrated what was described.

Hermione whispered, "*Wingardium Leviosa*," letting the book float above her, leaving her hands free. With one hand, she turned the pages, and the other crept down her naked skin to find her curls once again slick.

The couple kissed languidly, hands travelling over each other and groping. Eventually, they divested each other of their clothing, covering each newly exposed inch of flesh with licks and kisses. When they were completely nude, the witch began stroking his hardening cock, and the wizard's head fell back. Hermione's pace quickened.

The wizard kissed the witch again, cupping her mound and palming her breast. Her mouth fell open in a silent moan. He drew her down to a bed, where he nestled between her thighs and dragged his tongue along her glistening pussy lips. She shuddered, and her hands tangled in his hair to guide him.

As he licked and sucked, she came, bucking in ecstasy, making Hermione moan involuntarily. When the witch had recovered, she sat up and pushed the wizard back on the bed, wrapping her hand around his cock and stroking. When she bent her head to take it in her mouth, Hermione's eyes went wide, and she gasped shallowly, shivering.

Working her way down his length, the witch licked and suckled, grazing her teeth along the hard flesh, making the man jump and strain under her. Finally, it seemed that the man could take no more, and he sat up, launching himself at the witch, snogging her vehemently. They grappled together, flailing around, almost in a frenzy, until the man spun the witch to face away from him, wrapping his arm around her waist and pushing between her shoulder blades to bend her forward. She dropped to her hands and knees, arching her back.

Hermione's fingers were slipping around in her juices, unable to get purchase, and she panted as she watched the wizard guide his cock into the witch from behind. Their identical expressions of bliss made Hermione groan. Rubbing feverishly, she watched the wizard thrusting into the witch, his muscles rippling under a sheen of sweat. The witch's breasts swayed with each slam.

They moved faster and harder, their coupling raw and animalistic. Eventually, as they both went rigid in orgasm, Hermione snatched the book, flung it away, and rolled out from under her covers, rising to her knees and elbow, head hanging low as she screwed her eyes shut, envisioning her and Snape as that couple, fucking so passionately.

Her body was flushed with heat, and she stroked and rubbed frantically, rocking forward and back on her knees, completely lost in her fantasy. Almost choking on her cry of ecstasy, she convulsed in the most intense orgasm she had ever had by herself, falling forward onto her stomach, exhausted, her hand still trapped under her.

Panting, shuddering, awash in sensation, she was sucked into oblivion by the force of her release. She lay there, spent, naked atop her covers, her hair tangled and covering her face, her fingers still slotted between her pussy lips, fast asleep.

Crookshanks opened one eye at the abrupt cessation of all noise and movement, but closed it again when he was reassured by her steady breathing that she was still alive.

Snape lay in bed, fingers laced behind his head as he stared into the darkness. Most days he could fight off the urge to sneak to Hermione's room to see her. But on the days when they had rehearsal, and they invariably had that precious half hour of time together, that urge strengthened beyond his ability to control it. He knew that he would succumb. But, he also knew that he had to wait until it was late enough that she would be asleep, so he didn't get caught.

He glanced at the time again. He had literally been looking at it every few minutes for almost two hours. Finally, he decided that it was enough. Surging to his feet, he donned his lounge wear and grabbed his wand. Chest tight with anticipation and trepidation, he Disapparated once again.

50- Point of No Return

Chapter 52 of 84

Welcome to the Point of No Return, in which Snape is stunned, Hermione is surprised, Colin is "nice," Ron is reamed, the third years and up are excited, Snape and Hermione are sated, the cast is warned, Draco is nasty, McGonagall is supportive, and Snape is Slytherin to the core. Enjoy your stay at the Point of No Return, and don't forget to tip your waitstaff.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: This chapter clocked in at around 11,500 words. *whew* A lot happens, and we manage to get through several more days. I hope you lot have forgiven me last chapter's cliffie. *wicked grin* As always, thanks to my lovely bona-fide-as-in-PROFESSIONAL-author beta, Ladyofthemasque, and to SnivellusSnape. And undying

gratitude to all you fine folk who read and review and make me feel all warm and fuzzy. *hugs all of you* I hope you enjoying reaching the Point of No Return... :)

Chapter 50- Point of No Return

Snape appeared, hidden behind the armchair, and before he could even take a peek to see if Hermione was asleep, he was assaulted with the scents of sex. Freezing where he was, his brain frantically tried to sort out what his nose detected. Senses straining for more information, he heard nothing, and he could tell that the moonlight would be enough for him to see when he emerged from behind the chair.

Wand out, pulse racing, he edged around the chair, hyper-aware and ready to react to anything. Even so, he wasn't prepared for what he saw.

The moonlight spilled across her prone form, giving her skin a milky glow. Her hair was still hiding her face, and her hand was clearly visible between her splayed thighs.

Snape felt like his lungs had stalled. He couldn't breathe, and his heart was like to hammer right out of his chest. Eyes wide, mouth open in astonishment, he struggled to function, to sort out what he could see. Glancing around, he saw Crookshanks dozing peacefully, and there was no evidence that anyone else had been in the room with her.

Forcing his frozen muscles to move, he crept out from behind the chair, stealthily making his way to the side of her bed. His eyes smarted from not blinking, but he didn't want to miss even a moment of the vision before him. He realized he was holding his breath and concentrated on exhaling slowly before he passed out. It wouldn't do for him to faint and be found there, particularly now!

His faculties began operating again, and he felt his racing pulse pounding lower, as his cock stiffened in response to the pheromones heavy in the air and the delectable sight of her bare body in such an erotic pose. Her breathing was steady, and she hadn't stirred since he had arrived. He stepped closer, and noticed a book lying on the floor by his foot. Carefully lowering to a squat, he picked it up, blinking at the photos that moved in their passionate embrace.

Swallowing back a groan at the throb of his erection, he gently put the book back on the floor, closing it. The closer he got to her, the more he could smell her heady aroma. His mouth watered.

Her head was turned, facing away from his current position, so he sidled around to the other side of the bed, watching her curls quivering across her lips from her breath. Her breast was pressed beneath her, and the curve of it spread out to the side, unhidden by the arm that was bent where she had dropped in exhaustion. His eyes roved over her hungrily. Repeatedly swallowing, he eventually moved back to the foot of the bed, burning eyes drawn to her hand where it lay shadowed between her legs, coated in her spendings.

His knees began to tremble, and he shakily lowered himself to the end of the bed, apprehensively watching her for any sign of waking. Supported on his hands and knees, he bowed lower, inhaling deeply, fighting the urge to bury himself where her hand lay, tamping back the desire to suck her fingers clean.

Gingerly, he crawled alongside her, lying on his side, watching her. His free hand reached out, ghosting above her skin, almost touching, but not. Even so, he could see the goose flesh that followed in his wake.

I could wake her and surprise her now.

Are you mad? She'd lose her mind!

I could wake her gently, and she'd only be surprised for a moment.

And how do you think she'd feel that you snuck into her room, without permission no less, and found her like this? She's big on the whole 'invasion of privacy' thing, remember?

Oh. There is that.

Exactly. No. Better to leave her be now, and figure out something else later. Of course, you shouldn't be here anyway. You know how much temptation this is! If you woke her, and she didn't go mental after all, she'd quite likely tempt you even more. Could you fend her off in this state?

Oh gods...

Indeed. Just go back to your quarters, ol' chap. It's better that way, for many, many reasons.

I will. Eventually...

Oh, for Merlin's sake. You daft sod...

Ignoring the voice of reason, Snape remained where he was, gazing at Hermione, his hand hovering over her skin. Admiring the dip of her back above the swell of her buttocks, he noticed the dimples on either side of her spine, just above the muscles. A wild urge to dip his tongue into those little divots made his cock twitch, and he sucked in a breath.

Several minutes passed, and he inched closer to her on the bed. He had stretched to reach below her arse, feeling the heat that still radiated from her core, and his breathing came faster. His eyes feverishly swept along her bare body, again and again, and he noted that the goose flesh that had appeared under his almost-caresses had spread. Her whole body was covered with them.

He was seriously contemplating covering her from the cold, when she suddenly stirred, apparently awakened by the chill.

The moment her muscles tensed in preparation for movement, Snape reacted in a blind panic. Instantly rolling away from her, he frantically Disapparated, afraid to take the time to stand.

Down in his bedroom, Snape appeared in thin air above his bed, falling unceremoniously onto his mattress when he Apparated. It was pitch black in his room, and he could hear nought but his laboured breathing, panting from the fright. Fortunately, he had fallen halfway on his side, and managed not to land on his still-hard cock.

Far above his dungeon rooms, Hermione shivered, disoriented. Dragging herself awake, she was startled to realize that she was naked, and her cheeks instantly burned when she noted that her fingers were still lodged between her slippery pussy lips. Pushing herself up and rolling to one side, she sheepishly removed her hand from between her legs, furtively wiping her fingers on the sheet.

While her body was working out what had happened, her mind was racing, unable to shake the feeling that she wasn't alone. Shoving her hair out of her face, she glanced around warily. Crookshanks was asleep in a corner. Frowning, she rolled further, to look alongside the far side of her double bed. It was then that she paused, scowling in confusion at the covers under her breasts.

Why does this part feel warm?

Eyeing the length of the bed, she saw that the covers were mussed, even though she hadn't been on that side.

My gods, was I rolling around that much? Oh for Merlin's sake, just how much did I flail about? Or was Crooks up here? How embarrassing! I hope he wasn't here while I

was...

She couldn't even finish the sentence in her mind. Taking a deep breath, she shivered again at the chill and flung herself back over to the other side of the bed, burrowing back under the covers. Teeth starting to chatter as she cocooned herself between the icy sheets, she grabbed her wand and muttered, "Accio nightgown." If she was cold now, she certainly wouldn't want to have to run about starkers in the morning. Besides, what if there was an emergency? It wouldn't do to have to waste time searching for clothing. Depositing the garment on the pillow beside hers, she squirmed, trying to get comfortable, and trying to ignore the slick moisture between her legs.

As she spiralled back down into sleep, her brain fuzzily remembered the almost electric feeling that had spread through her body, in addition to the chill that had woken her. Shivering again, but this time from the ghostly barely-there sensation, she hugged her pillow tighter and blanked her mind, fending off the feeling of a presence near her. Finally, as she fell asleep, the perplexed furrow between her brows smoothed, and she was once again peaceful.

Snape lay on his back, hands gripping the bedspread beneath him as he focused on calming his frenetic pulse.

Bloody hell! She nearly caught you! I told you you should have left!

But I managed to escape before she caught me. No harm done...

No harm? You Apparated into thin air, you imbecile! And you should count yourself lucky that you did appear there, instead of splinching or emerging in the bed itself! Try and explain that one, provided you don't die from suffocation, what with mattress stuffing in your bleeding lungs!

All right! Shut up. You've made your point. But... Did you see her? Absolutely stunning...

I saw her. And you acted like you had been hit with a stunning spell. You're risking too much popping in there like that. She's going to catch you at some point. Just get a hold of yourself, man, and stop taking such chances!

Get a hold of myself... Bugger me... I'll get a hold of myself all right; I doubt I'll be able to sleep until I can rid myself of this damned erection!

Oh for gods'... You would turn it into something like that, wouldn't you? You know what I meant. That's it. I give up. I can't talk to you when you're being unreasonable like this.

Good. Go away. I would much rather be envisioning Hermione anyway.

Snape felt his lips spread in a smile, and he idly waved his wand, stripping his lounge wear from his body. Sucking in a breath at the chill air against his skin, he slid one hand down his belly, lightly caressing his cock. Closing his eyes to concentrate on the delicious image of Hermione naked and wanton, he began squeezing and stroking, snaking his other hand down to cup his balls.

Imagining himself behind her, smoothing his hands over her soft skin, watching her fingers dancing between her legs, savouring the aroma of her arousal, he pumped his cock in his fist, thrusting his hips. He canted his head back, licking his lips as he pictured himself sinking balls deep into her from behind, like the wizard and witch in the book he had picked up off the floor.

His pace increased, and his buttocks flexed, driving his cock into his tight grip. Breath catching, he felt the jolt of pleasure beginning deep inside him, travelling through his core and up and out to force his come over his knuckles, dripping onto his belly. Voicing a deep groan of release, he slowed, fighting the inertia that claimed him. By sheer force of will, he cast a cleansing charm over himself, wearily tugging the covers out from under him and slipping between the sheets. His last coherent thought before sleep took him was, *Beautiful*.

Hermione slept late the next morning. She had been having erotic dreams that she and Snape were together, and even when she woke, she felt less than perfectly rested. Really, as *active* as she had been in her dreams, she felt rather worn out!

It was like trying to move through molasses, dragging herself to consciousness at the insistent knocking on her door. Groggy, she croaked, "Just a minute!" Heaving a sigh that turned into a huge yawn, she fumbled for her nightgown, pulling it on as she sat up. Flinging the covers back, she stumbled toward the door, blearily mumbling the counter spells to those she had cast the night before. Finally unlocking everything, she yanked the door open, only to be jolted thoroughly and most unpleasantly awake.

"Morning, Hermione!" Colin Creevey stood there, smiling brightly at her, a tray in his hands.

Blinking rapidly, feeling as if someone had dashed cold water over her, Hermione stammered, "C-Colin?"

"It's getting late, and I didn't want you to miss breakfast, so I talked to Dobby and got a tray from him for you. I know you've been working so hard on everything, and Ron said you seemed kind of down last night, so I thought you could use a little pick-me-up, you know? It's only fair that people do nice things for you. You deserve them."

Hermione felt venomous anger boiling up within her. Colin's blather had faded into white noise after she had heard Ron's name. Sucking in a breath through clenched teeth, Hermione said, "Ron?"

Colin faltered. "Uh, yeah. Last night you seemed kind of blah, and he said you were worried about the next scene with Snape. He admitted that he's been too wrapped up with Susan to spend time with you, and since Harry and Ginny spend time together as well, I thought maybe you might be feeling a bit lonely or left out. So, I wanted to make sure you knew you were appreciated. And I like doing nice things for you, Hermione. I like it a lot." He trailed off, colouring and ducking his head sheepishly.

Hermione didn't know what to do or say. She was furious, but knew she couldn't vent her anger, lest it lead to dangerous questions. In the silence that followed Colin's explanation, she blankly saw him look down, embarrassed. Then, his gaze travelled back up, roving hungrily over her body. Acutely aware that she was clad only in the nightgown, Hermione swallowed hard at the urge to slam the door closed and don twelve layers of clothing.

The awkward silence stretched on, and Colin nervously ventured to fill it. "Anyway, um, I brought you breakfast. I figured maybe a little breakfast in bed might be nice." He shrugged, a shaky smile gracing his pink face. Swallowing, he added, "Why don't you get comfortable, and I can bring it in and serve it to you?"

Hermione nearly choked. Gripping the door so hard that her fingers went white, she managed a strangled, "No!" At Colin's crestfallen look, she said, "I mean, no thank you. I've spent quite enough time in bed already." She felt her cheeks warming and cursed herself for her untimely embarrassment. "I appreciate the thought, Colin, really, I do, but I think it'd be better for me to just get dressed and go down to the Great Hall."

Colin shifted uneasily from foot to foot. "But, look at the time. It's almost time for breakfast to be over. Why rush, when there's a perfectly good breakfast right here, prepared specifically for you by Dobby?"

Hermione cursed inwardly. Glancing at the clock, she saw that Colin was right. If she tried to make it downstairs, she would barely get there before everything disappeared from the long tables. Grinding her teeth, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "All right. Thank you, Colin. I'd be happy to take the tray..."

He cut her off eagerly. "Shall I just bring it in then?" He stepped forward, invading her personal space, but she didn't budge from the door.

"That won't be necessary." He fell back a pace, disappointed. "Tell you what, why don't I take a few minutes to get presentable, and I'll meet you in the common room, okay?"

Colin ducked his head and shrugged. "Oh. Okay. Sure, that'd be fine."

Inching the door closed, Hermione said, "Perfect. I'll see you out there in a few minutes. Bye." She shut the door firmly on his dejected countenance and locked the door, spinning and leaning heavily against it in resignation. *Bollocks! Why won't he leave me alone?*

Fuming, and resolving to throttle the youngest Weasley male when next she saw him, she charged to the bathroom to get ready to face the day.

Colin was sitting anxiously at a table in the common room, checking that the warming charm on the tray hadn't worn off, when Hermione skulked in. She glanced around furtively, wishing Ginny were around to help her fend off Colin's unwanted advances. Barely acknowledging Colin's beaming expression, she sank into a chair opposite him.

"Here." Colin uncovered eggs, bacon, toast, and fried tomatoes. Tapping his wand on something in his hand, he presented the once-again-normal size pitcher of pumpkin juice. Having poured a glass for her, he said, "I can send for Dobby to get you some tea if you like. I know he'd bring it for you, complete with honey and lemon."

Hermione's eyes widened, and she choked on the toast she had just eaten. Coughing, she waved a hand at him. "No, that's fine. Juice is enough, really." Having said that, she flashed a tight smile as she picked up her glass and gulped to clear her throat.

Brow furrowed in earnest concern, Colin continued, "Are you sure? I mean, you have it with every meal..."

Has he been watching me?

Hermione closed her eyes and grimaced. Taking a deep breath, she said, in a would-be casual voice, "It's no big deal. If it's there, I have some. It's a good thing for one's throat."

Colin's brows rose. "Oh! So it's something good for singers? Maybe I'll try it."

Hermione clenched her teeth. Swallowing hard, she forced herself to have a few bites of eggs and some more toast. Wiping her mouth with a napkin, she pushed back from the table. "Um, thanks, Colin. I'm not very hungry. I appreciate the effort, but you can finish the rest. Listen, I have some work to do. You know, what with N.E.W.T.s and all. I'll see you later." She stood, trying to ignore his expression of crushing disappointment.

"Oh. Okay. I understand. You sure you had enough? You can take this with you if you like. I don't need any."

"I'm fine. Thanks. Tell Dobby it was all fine." She hastily fled toward the doorway. "Um, bye." Waving half-heartedly, she spun and hurried to her room again, leaving Colin gazing after her wistfully.

Once again secluded in her room, Hermione dropped into her desk chair and propped her head in her hands. *I thought he was past pursuing me! Why is he at it again? Bloody hell, this just complicates everything even more...*

Wishing she could go to Snape for solace and access to his ingenious Slytherin mind, she heaved a deep sigh and dug her work out of her book bag. She really hadn't been lying when she had told Colin she had work to do. And, since she had spent so much time sleeping, she needed to get started! Focusing on the assignment, she gratefully put Colin out of her mind.

When she left her room for the next meal that day, Hermione made a beeline for Ginny, gripping her elbow and steering her away from the others, flashing a tight smile and murmuring, "I need to talk to Ginny for a moment. We won't be long."

Ginny, brows high in surprise and curiosity, meekly submitted to Hermione's manhandling and queried, "What's up?"

Hermione darkly gazed over Ginny's shoulder, seeing Colin across the room sneaking glances at her. As her eyes narrowed and her lips thinned, Ginny cast a glance over her shoulder and saw Colin as well. Inhaling sharply in comprehension, Ginny shot a sympathetic look at Hermione and hissed, "Again?"

Hermione nodded grimly, and growled, "I'm going to kill Ron!"

"Ron?" Ginny scowled in confusion. "What'd he do?"

"Apparently, Ron thinks I'm upset about doing 'Point of No Return' with Professor Snape, and he managed to lead Colin to believe that I needed 'nice things' done for me to cheer me up. Colin showed up at my door this morning to serve me 'breakfast in bed'!" Her jaw throbbed as she clenched her teeth in anger.

Ginny's mouth fell open in astonishment. "Bugger all!" Hermione tilted her head and crossed her arms, still seething. Shaking her head, Ginny muttered, "Idiot! Lemme' guess, you want me to run block for you again, until we can somehow manage to make Colin believe that you're not interested?"

Hermione nodded wearily. "Yes. And I swear, I don't care *how* tired I may be from now on, I'm setting my alarm, *sonobody* can get the brilliant idea to bring me breakfast!"

Ginny snorted, then said, "It is unlike you to sleep so late. Are you okay?"

Hermione blinked, flushing. Ducking her head, she murmured, "I'm fine. Just... just a little tired is all. You know, late nights."

Ginny cocked a sceptical eyebrow at her, but merely pursed her lips and said, "Mmm." Glancing at the others where they were waiting with growing impatience, she said, "Ready to go?"

Hermione nodded, and they strode over to the others. Hermione stuck close to Ginny, avoiding Colin's eager eye. The chattering group made its way to the Great Hall, and Hermione gratefully sat beside Ginny, pulling Neville down on her other side.

Colin discreetly sat several seats away, on the other side of the table, still within a reasonable distance to watch Hermione. When Hermione glanced up at the High Table, she saw Snape surreptitiously peering through his hair at her. Unbidden, her previous night's exploits came to mind, and she felt the heat creeping up her cheeks. Curiously, Snape seemed to look a bit uncomfortable, too. She could tell from the set of his shoulders, and the way he handled his utensils. Wondering what was going on, she reached for the teapot, needing the familiar ritual to soothe her unsettled state.

Snape inclined his head and followed her lead. A knot of anxiety loosened in Hermione's gut, and she sighed. Mixing in the honey and lemon, she glanced up again, only to see that, further down the table, Colin was mimicking her actions, and he was preparing a cup of tea just like hers. Righteous indignation flared up, and she froze, staring in disbelief at the younger boy stirring his tea.

Snape saw her abrupt change in demeanour, and he frowned, searching for the source of her ire. Following her glare, he saw Colin, blissfully unaware that he had intruded on their moment of bonding. Anger spreading like poison through his veins, he paused his preparations as well and found himself staring hatefully at the boy, just like Hermione.

Colin happened to look up at Hermione again and he blinked, taken aback by her expression. Blanching a little, he slowed in his stirring, offering a shaky smile at the girl who was staring daggers at him. Attempting to appease her, he lifted his teacup at her, nodding and murmuring "Cheers."

Hermione glared coldly at him, deliberately pushing her teacup away from her and sipping from her pumpkin juice instead. Rebellious rage pulsed in her chest, making it feel tight, and she breathed heavily, fighting off the impulse to cry in frustration.

Colin flushed, cowed by her expression, but he drank his tea nonetheless. Up on the High Table, Snape watched in impotent fury as Hermione pointedly abandoned her teacup. Fingers tightening on the china in an effort to not hex the blasted boy, he saw her shoulders rising and falling quickly, her face going blotchy, and her chin

trembling. *Gods above, if she cries because of him, I swear I will make him regret it!*

Hermione passed a hand over her eyes, then cradled her head in her hands, grappling with her body for control. Finally, she vowed to not look at Colin again, and she swallowed hard, smoothing her hands over her hair and resettling herself in her seat. Stoic, she ate her meal, refusing to turn her gaze from the food. Thus, she missed the unspoken threat that was clear in Snape's black gaze at Colin.

The tea Snape had prepared sat cooling in front of him. The thought of actually drinking it at the moment was thoroughly repugnant to him. Hoping that their private ritual wasn't spoiled for good, he leant back in his chair, right elbow propped on the chair arm and fingers tracing his frowning lips. Brooding, he watched until Hermione finished her meal and left, still stiff. Colin stared after her, and when he drooped dejectedly, Snape's eyes narrowed in malicious triumph.

Rising smoothly and stalking out of the Hall, Snape paused, considering Apparating to her room to comfort her, but his reasonable side clamped down on him so hard that he didn't even allow himself to Apparate to his quarters, and he walked down to the dungeons instead.

It wasn't until the following day that Hermione managed to corner Ron. The Gryffindor team had been practicing, and they had just returned, sweaty and wind-chapped. Hermione had been at a large table in the common room, books and parchment and charts spread all over it. When she saw them all clamber through the portrait hole, she quickly stood and walked over to stand by the doorway to the boys' dormitory. Smiling and nodding in return to the greetings sent her way, she waited until Ron was ambling past her to reach out and grab his arm, like a cobra striking.

Startled, Ron blinked at her. "Wha...? Hermione?"

Hermione was glaring at him, and she firmly steered him to the other corridor and to her room. Baffled, Ron submitted, waiting until she had shoved him into her room and slammed the door behind them to speak.

"What's wrong?"

Hermione pointed imperiously at the armchair and Ron sank into it, bewildered. Crossing her arms and tapping her foot in agitation, Hermione narrowed her eyes at Ron and huffed. Finally, she growled, "I could hex your bollocks off right now..."

Ron jerked back in wary surprise. Perplexed, he said, "What'd I do?"

Hermione planted her hands on her hips and bent toward him, making him pull back into the chair's stuffing. "Colin showed up at my door yesterday morning *to serve me breakfast in bed!*"

Swallowing, Ron grimaced. "What's that got to do with me?" He unconsciously crossed his legs tighter, laying his wrists across his lap in a defensive posture.

Chin jutting forward in anger, Hermione hissed, "*Somebody* seemed to give him the idea that I *was upset* and that he should *do nice things* for me!"

Eyes widening, Ron spread his hands out and protested, "What's wrong with that? You *were* in a bad mood, and there's nothing wrong with doing something nice for someone!"

Hermione spun around, flinging her hands up in frustration and canting her head back to gaze at the ceiling. "But it's Colin!"

She dropped to her bed, falling backwards and draping her arms over her eyes. Ron, concerned and still confused, moved to sit by her, peering down at her covered face. "So?"

Hermione slammed her hands onto the bed at her sides, glaring reproachfully at Ron. "I don't like him the way he likes me, and I've been *trying* to get him to give over already and quit pursuing the matter! You remember that he kissed me on New Year's Eve. I tried to let him down easy then, and even Ginny's been telling him to back off, but now you've gone and stirred things up again, and he's back at it again, only this time it's worse!" She paused, sucking in a breath on the tail of that outburst. Closing her eyes again, she murmured, "I just want him to leave me alone. I like him okay, but I don't want to date him. And he's absolutely maddening, following me around like a puppy!"

Ron swallowed, offering her a sheepish lopsided smile. "Oops. Sorry. I could tell that he liked you. But I didn't know you were so averse to the idea. I mean, you're single, and I thought it might be nice if you were part of a couple too, like me and Susan and Harry and Ginny..." He trailed off, looking away.

Hermione felt a surge of remorse that she had been so harsh on him. He really had just wanted her to be happy. How could he have known that she already *was* part of a couple and that she was happy? Sitting up and resting a hand on his arm, she said, "Thanks, Ron, but... let me find my own partner, okay?" He grimaced and nodded ruefully. Giving him a wan smile, she continued, "Speaking of you and Susan, I guess things are going pretty well, since we hardly see you anymore."

Ron beamed, nodding. "We're great! I'm sorry I've been neglecting you, 'Mione..."

Hermione squeezed his arm. "I'm not trying to guilt you, Ron. I'm happy for you." She smiled more. "Now, let's just agree that I'll handle my own love life from here on out, and you'll *not* encourage Colin, since I'm decidedly *not* interested, deal?"

He nodded, and they shook hands, laughing. On impulse, Hermione hugged him, then she pulled back, nose wrinkling. "Phew! Shower time for you, Weasley-boy."

Ron smirked. "Well, if I remember correctly, I was on my way when I was so abruptly kidnapped."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione stood, tugging Ron to his feet and shoving him toward the door. "Go! Off with you. Get out and bathe before you stink up my room." Ron laughed as he exited. Standing in her doorway, Hermione shook her head in mock-exasperation and sighed loudly. "Honestly! Boys..."

Grinning back at Ron as he spun and offered her a flourishing bow, she shut her door and took a deep, cleansing breath. *There. Hopefully that will help.* After checking on Crookshanks's food and water, she went back to her assignment in the common room, still relieved that Colin was nowhere to be seen.

The week passed slowly. Hermione felt particularly stressed, what with worrying that Colin was still pursuing her and not having a chance to spend any time with Snape. Unfortunately, another student had stayed after class that Wednesday with a legitimate issue, so Hermione hadn't even been able to take a couple of minutes to linger and talk to Snape. The disappointment of that rankled, and the nervous, jittery feeling that she was being watched just compounded her unease.

Friday, Hermione was practically champing at the bit at dinner, squirming in her seat as she awaited Snape's approach. Toying with her potatoes, she looked up, startled, as Harry and Ginny came rushing over to the table, grinning and almost bursting with excitement.

As they tumbled into their seats, Harry breathlessly announced, "Hogsmeade trip next Saturday, Valentine's Day! Dumbledore just posted it on the notice board!"

The excitement and hubbub swept down the long table like wildfire. Smiles and laughter burst forth among the third years and up, and some students flew to their friends at other tables to spread the news.

Hermione watched, bemused, as Ginny beamed impartially around her. "Isn't it just perfect timing, 'Mione? I mean, we get to go to Hogsmeade for the first time since before Christmas, and it's on Valentine's Day! Madam Puddifoot's is going to be *packed*."

Hermione chuckled. "I'm sure Honeydukes will be full too, what with people buying sweets for their sweethearts." She sighed, and Ginny was instantly contrite.

Leaning across the table to pat Hermione's hand consolingly, Ginny whispered, "I'm sorry. It must be hard for you. I didn't mean to shove it in your face."

Hermione shook her head. "It's okay. I'm sure you lot will have a great time. I don't know that I'll go yet. It might just be too much to handle, especially if you-know-who is still following me around."

Pretending confusion, but with a saucy twinkle in her eye, Ginny said, "Who? Voldemort?"

Hermione snorted and favoured Ginny with a glare before laughing. "Oh yeah. Him." The girls giggled, then Harry diverted Ginny's attention by asking her what she wanted to do for Valentine's Day.

As conversations buzzed around her, Hermione cast a glance up at the High Table. Snape was staring off into space, his expression a brown study. Looking warily at Colin, she saw he was involved in an animated conversation with several other boys, and she felt it was safe to have some tea. Ever since his intrusion the previous weekend, Hermione had been loath to attempt to share tea with Snape if Colin was around.

She quickly prepared a cup, repeatedly casting furtive glances at Snape. Finally, he noticed, and she smiled to herself at how hastily he scrambled to join her.

Not long after they had shared a cuppa, she saw him shoot to his feet and briskly stride down toward her. Eagerly, she shoved back from the table and stood, waiting for him to reach her. His eyes were trained on hers as he approached, and she felt a tingle race through her.

"Miss Granger, I take it you have finished your meal?"

"Yes, sir. I'm ready."

"Very well, come along." He jerked his head at her and continued down the aisle. Hermione followed at his heels, relieved to be with him at last. Just outside the Great Hall, he gripped her arm, quirked his lips at her, and Disapparated.

They appeared in his sitting room and instantly embraced.

"Oh, thank the gods... I've missed you so much." Hermione pressed her face against his chest, squeezing hard around his waist.

Snape kissed her hair, murmuring, "And I, you, love. It's been a long week, indeed. You seem more stressed than usual. What's wrong?" He pulled back, eyeing her with solicitous concern.

Hermione heaved a sigh and said, "Just silly boys again. Nothing for you to worry about."

Snape scowled and said, "It's that Creevey boy again, isn't it? I saw you glaring at him last weekend when he so rudely intruded on our tea. Is he still bothering you, Hermione?" The menacing, warning note in his voice made Hermione cringe.

Reaching up and caressing his cheek, she said, "He still likes me, but I'm working on getting rid of him. And I don't mean at the bottom of the lake... Don't do anything to him, Severus, I mean it!"

Snape sulked, pulling away and crossing his arms over his chest. In a sullen voice, he said, "It's a shame I don't have the blasted boy in class, or I'd at least have an excuse to take points or give him detention."

Hermione rolled her eyes and shot him an aggrieved glance. "Just leave it be. I'm working on it." She gestured for him to sit, and collected the hair products. Taking her usual position behind him, she continued, "I doubt it would have even been a problem, had Ron not butted in."

"What did that Weasley do?"

Hermione lightly rapped him on the head as she brushed his hair. "Stop it. He thought I was upset about performing 'Point of No Return' with you, and apparently Colin was around when Ron was saying something about me needing cheering up. Unfortunately, Colin took that as renewed hope. I already gave Ron the what-for. We made a deal that I'd handle my own love life, thank-you-very-much, and he'd stop encouraging Colin, overtly or otherwise."

Snape merely voiced a non-committal grunt.

Slyly, Hermione added, "As if I would be upset at performing *that* scene with you..." She bent down and kissed his neck where she had bared it. Snape shuddered under her touch and turned to peer at her through hooded eyes.

"That scene is tonight. You do realize that from here on out, rehearsal could be problematic, don't you?"

Hermione sighed and nodded ruefully. "I do. It will be awkward enough with everyone's prejudices, but to have to perform like that with you, and not be able to let my true feelings show... It'll be very trying, to say the least."

Snape turned, soberly capturing her hand in his and pinning her with an intense gaze. "It will be. But we'll have to endure it. We can't slip up, Hermione."

She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "I know. Really, I do." Then, she uttered a mirthless laugh and said, "Perhaps I'll just pretend I'm performing with Colin. That'll certainly snuff any *feelings*."

Snape frowned in reproach, tugging away from her. His voice was flat as he said, "Never compare me with that boy."

Hermione gazed at him, caressing his hair in apology. "I don't mean it that way, dear heart. Honest. You should know me better than that by now." With that, she leant forward and kissed him, a tender benison of love. Snape relaxed minutely.

Breaking apart, he turned around again, the injunction for her to finish her task implicit in his posture. "So, what had everyone so worked up this evening? The whole Gryffindor table was nearly out of control."

"Oh! Apparently Dumbledore just posted that next Saturday is a Hogsmeade outing. And, since it's also Valentine's Day, everyone was excited."

Snape snorted. "Indeed. I had already been informed of the outing, but I had no idea such a simple thing would cause such a furore."

Hermione shook her head. "Oh, give over. Didn't you enjoy Hogsmeade trips when you were in school?"

Snape shrugged. "It's nothing to write home about, particularly when one hasn't pocket money at his disposal." He paused, then tacked on, "And Valentine's Day is abominable. Surely you remember how horrid and tacky the Great Hall looked under the charge of that Lockhart idiot." He gave an exaggerated shudder of revulsion.

Hermione laughed. "It did look rather like there had been an explosion of Pepto-Bismol."

"Pepto-what?"

"Pepto-Bismol. It's a Muggle medicine for indigestion and other stomach problems. Didn't you ever encounter it before you came to Hogwarts?" She paused, continuing only after he shook his head. "It's like a bubblegum-pink potion."

Snape looked askance at the prospect. All he said was a dubious, "Indeed."

Hermione giggled, then sobered and said, "Haven't you ever enjoyed Valentine's Day?"

Snape's shoulders twitched, and he said, "Hermione, haven't you caught on by now that my school days didn't afford me much chance of partaking in such frivolous pursuits?"

She made a moue of regret and slipped her arms around him from behind, hugging him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset. I just never saw the draw of Valentine's Day. It all seemed to be such a superficial, commercial attempt at forcing affection."

"You're not the only one to think that. Of course, there's also the thought that those who feel that way are just sour grapes since they don't have a sweetheart and they're lonely." She waited, knowing she had baited him, expecting some sort of outraged response.

Snape twisted in his seat to face her, a faint smile on his lips. Hermione blinked, unsure of what was to come, particularly since he looked almost smug. Holding her breath, she steeled herself.

His voice was low and sensual when he spoke, completely surprising her. "Well, I guess we'll see how I feel about it *this* year, seeing that I *do* have a...what did you say? Sweetheart? No, that's much too childish. I think the term 'lover' is more appropriate."

A throb of heat ambushed her, pulsing deep in her core. Breath catching at the wicked, seductive promise in his tone, she simply stared at him, nodding weakly. His lips spread in a feral grin, and he chuckled, turning back so she could finish with the pomade.

When he felt her finally resume her task...she had been still for a long moment...he politely queried, "Will you be accompanying your friends to Hogsmeade then?"

Hermione, head still swimming from the erotic images that had flooded her mind in response to his remark, struggled to comprehend his question. "What? Oh, I don't know. Maybe. I haven't decided yet."

She secured his hair in the elastic and lightly tapped his shoulders. Snape stood and spun to face her, his expression still amused. He glanced at the time, noting that they had over ten minutes before rehearsal, and stepped closer to her, cupping her elbow. Without warning, he Apparated them to his bedroom, where he immediately wrapped his arms around her and descended on her with a consuming kiss.

Hermione's senses reeled under the onslaught. Gasping, scrabbling to embrace him in return, she moaned into his mouth, tendrils of fire streaking through her, ending in the slick puddle forming in her knickers.

Pulling away from his kiss, she gasped, "Severus! You're not helping matters!"

Snape, nibbling along the cord of her throat, murmured, "What do you mean?"

Closing her eyes at the flashes of sensation brought to life under his clever tongue, she murmured, "Rehearsal tonight will be bad enough without being frustrated. Please, stop..."

His answering purr in her ear was her undoing. "Who said anything about being frustrated?" With that, he picked her up and strode quickly to the bed, depositing her on it. She squeaked at the predatory intent clear in his eyes as he crawled beside her, one deft hand sliding beneath her robes to find the slippery heat between her thighs.

Gripping the bedspread and arching back at his touch, Hermione uttered a ragged, voiceless groan. He covered her mouth with his, probing and caressing with his tongue just as his fingers did further down. He could feel her response building, shameless in its speed.

Growling, he removed his hand, making her whimper in disappointment, but her encouraging keen as he moved urgently to rest between her knees spurred him on. Wanton, she hooked her feet around his narrow hips, pulling him closer, gasping as he ground his erection along her cleft. They were snogging feverishly as he rocked and thrust against her.

It took mere minutes for them to reach their peaks. As she ground her hips under him, panting in her climb to orgasm, he began chanting, "Yes, love, yes, gods, so beautiful, yes, my love, come, yes, now, gods, now, yes, come for me, yes, now, yesss!"

When she moaned, shaking in her release, he thrust faster against her, feeling his cock swelling even more. Only seconds after her climax, he came, his cry of ecstasy strangled in his throat.

Both panting in the wake of their tumultuous affair, they clung tightly to each other, as if trying to meld into one being. Snape pressed a kiss on the trembling pulse point at her throat, and she sighed.

"Yes... Lover... Much more appropriate..." Her whisper was weak, but her certainty was evident. Snape grinned.

Kissing her once more, he pulled back and retorted, his voice a low rumble, "Indeed, seeing as how I love you, Hermione." The wonder and joy in her eyes at his statement made his chest tighten again, and he buried his face in her neck, crushing her to him. Her resulting squeak made him loosen his grip and roll away, cursing the time. "Damn and blast! We've only enough time to clean up and Apparate upstairs." He quickly cast a cleansing charm on himself, gesturing for her to use his bathroom.

Hermione hurried to the bathroom, using the toilet and splashing cold water on her face to cool her flaming cheeks. She didn't know whether to be relieved or apprehensive that he seemed to have got over his embarrassment after the last time they had climaxed together. Vainly, she drew her wet hands over her dishevelled hair, trying to tame it. Heaving a sigh to regain her composure, she emerged from the bathroom to see Snape already there, mask in hand, waiting for her. A quick glance at the time showed her that they were cutting it close, and she gripped his arm without a word.

With a silent nod of approval, Snape Apparated them to the back of the theatre again, falling back a pace or two as Hermione bustled down the aisle to join the others that had just arrived.

Dumbledore was setting the stage for "Don Juan," and Dean was already hovering in the wing, waiting to take his place onstage. Dumbledore turned to Harry, Ron, and Neville and gestured for them to take their places in the Boxes to one side. Pansy lounged in the wing with Draco, and Terry, Colin, and Seamus stood near the apron in a clump, watching the proceedings. McGonagall and Ginny were standing in the other wing, and McGonagall was telling Ginny what she planned to do for her blocking during the scene. Hermione stood patiently behind Dumbledore, waiting for him to finish his tasks.

Finally, as Dumbledore gazed at everything to make sure it was where it should be, Hermione ascended the stage, standing beside the proscenium arch. Dumbledore spun, searching for Snape. He beamed when he saw the Potions Master leaning idly against the apron, his arms propped on the edge and his ankles crossed.

"Severus, you'll need to be behind the bed curtain to start. Of course, our original Don Juan will also be there, another unfortunate victim of the Punjab lasso." He shook his head in mock regret, still smiling. "Now then, are you ready?"

Snape pushed off from the apron, nodding slowly. But, as he approached the headmaster, he spoke, his voice solemn. "I am. But I daresay the rest of the cast may not be."

Brow furrowed, Dumbledore said, "What do you mean?"

Snape cast a dark glance over the waiting students, then tilted his head closer to the older man, wishing his hair were free to cloak his face. "Albus, surely you realize how

delicate a situation the rest of this play is. Miss Granger and I have established a satisfactory working relationship, and I will not take kindly to juvenile outbursts about our performances." He fixed Dumbledore with a steely glare, and the old man nodded sagely.

"I quite understand, Severus. Yes, I see your point. I would be more than happy to remind the students that you and Miss Granger are adults, and you are handling your roles as professionals..."

Snape cut him off. "Actually, sir, I would prefer to be the one to do that." They locked gazes for a long moment, and finally Dumbledore inclined his head in acquiescence. Mirroring him, Snape murmured, "Thank you, Headmaster."

Dumbledore gestured for Snape to take the stage, and Snape Apparated to downstage centre, getting everyone's attention by doing so.

"If I may have everyone's attention..." He paused, gazing about, seeing every eye on him. Hermione was watching him with a perplexed expression. "The headmaster has graciously allowed me to make this announcement. We are about to begin a rather... intense portion of this story." Again, he paused for effect, noting the uncomfortable looks some students exchanged.

Drawing himself up regally, he crossed his arms over his chest and continued, his voice stern. "I am well aware of the varying *opinions* about performing the scenes to come. I want to make perfectly clear that I will *not* allow *anyone* to harass Miss Granger for her dedication to her role. Most of us here are adults, and as such, I expect you to behave as adults." He narrowed his eyes, frowning forebodingly.

"If I find out that anyone has caused our lead actress any distress, he or she will answer *to me*." He couldn't help casting a menacing look at Colin, who was wide-eyed and pale. Glaring about impartially, he inhaled deeply and dropped his hands to his sides. In a very low voice, barely above a whisper, he added, "Have I made myself abundantly clear?"

A ripple of assent washed over the group, but his attention was drawn by one rather loud, "Crystal." He snapped his gaze to the source of the voice and saw Ginny looking at him with obvious approval. Snorting, he looked at Draco and beckoned for him to take his place, walking to the curtained bed.

His movement seemed to break the thrall he had over the cast, and they all moved to their positions, muttering and whispering. Hermione stood in the wing, chin up, attitude lofty, but with a dreadful fluttering in her stomach. Dumbledore stepped forward and cleared his throat.

"Yes, well... Professor Snape makes a good point, and I stand behind his assessment of the situation." With a sharp nod, he continued, "Now then, Dean, if you would begin with your line..."

Dean nodded, and rehearsal began with him saying, "Master?"

From within the curtains of the bed, Snape waved an airy hand to Draco, indicating he should sit down and make himself comfortable until he was seen next, and replied, "Passarino, go away for the trap is set and waits for its prey."

Dean exited, and Hermione entered, gazing about in curiosity as she sat at the table downstage. Snape peeked out from the curtains, waiting until she was seated to slink out and come up behind her to begin his lines.

Hermione picked up an apple from the table, inspecting it and polishing it. Snape crept up behind her and recited, "You have come here in pursuit of your deepest urge, in pursuit of that wish which till now has been silent, silent..." As he hovered at her shoulders, he reached around her to pluck the apple from her grasp and set it back on the table.

As soon as he had begun speaking, Hermione froze, her attitude one of wary apprehension. When his hand came around in front of her to take the apple from her, she watched it with wide eyes, never looking away, and her hand hovered in midair, empty. Thus, when he lifted his hand to grip hers as he continued, "I have brought you that our passions may fuse and merge..." she stared at it in fascination until he stepped to her side and gently pulled her from her seat.

Snape backed away, pulling her away from the table as he said, "In your mind, you've already succumbed to me, dropped all defences, completely succumbed to me...now you are here with me: no second thoughts, you've decided, decided..." Once they were centre stage, he held her hand, her arm still outstretched, and slowly circled behind her, his other hand gesturing and hovering over her head. Hermione stood as if mesmerised, her gaze still on his hand gripping hers.

He was standing right behind her as he said, "Past the point of no return..." He slid his hand along her arm, and she blinked, shaking her head minutely and starting to turn her head to look over her shoulder. His other hand snaked around to grasp her chin and guide her to face front again as he said, "No backward glances: the games we've played till now are at an end..." His right hand had trailed all the way up her right arm to her shoulder, and his left hand had dropped to her left shoulder after releasing her chin, and he wrapped his fingers over the points of her shoulders, continuing, "Past all thought of 'if' or 'when'..."

Hermione lifted her hands to cross in front of her and grasp his hands on her shoulders, eyes closed at his voice in her ear, and Snape said, "No use resisting: abandon thought, and let the dream descend..." He tugged his hands from beneath hers and splayed his fingers over the crown of her head, guiding her to tilt back against his shoulder. His hands dropped to their sides as he began, "What raging fire shall flood the soul? What rich desire unlocks its door?" Surrounding her with his arms, he gripped her hands where they still lay on her shoulders, guiding them down, so her own hands slid down her body until her wrists were crossed at her waist. Then, he reached up to barely caress her throat, bared as it was to his touch with her head on his shoulder.

Abruptly, when he said, "What sweet seduction lies before us..." his left hand reached around and grabbed her right hand, and he pulled away from her enough to tug on her hand, twirling her away until their arms were stretched out between them. Her eyes flew open in surprise, but she followed his lead and pirouetted away, gazing back at him when she stopped at arm's length.

Snape released her hand as he said, "Past the point of no return, the final threshold..." slowly advancing on her as her arm dropped to her side. He was towering over her, body bowed toward her as he continued, "What warm, unspoken secrets will we learn? Beyond the point of no return?" They stared at each other, unmoving while he finished his lines.

Finally, it was Hermione's turn. Snape didn't move, watching her intently as she began, "You have brought me to that moment where words run dry," and Hermione lifted her hand to lightly press her fingers to his lips as she said, "to that moment where speech disappears into silence, silence..." Snape's breath caught, but he remained frozen, eyes glittering at her.

Her hand dropped and she spun away from him as she said, "I have come here, hardly knowing the reason why..." She crossed back to the table, idly tracing her fingers over the wood as she continued, "In my mind I've already imagined our bodies entwining, defenceless and silent..." Her eyes closed and she crossed her arms, sliding her hands up her arms to embrace herself. Pausing to take a deep breath, she went on, "And now I am here with you:" opening her eyes and turning to gaze back at Snape, "no second thoughts," shaking her head slowly, "I've decided, decided..."

She turned to face Snape, slowly crossing back to him as she said, "Past the point of no return...no going back now: our passion play has now, at last, begun..." letting her hands drop to her sides as she walked. Once again, they gazed at each other as she said, "Past all thought of right or wrong...one final question: How long should we two wait before we're one?" She reached forward and grasped his hand, lifting them between them and lacing their fingers together.

Then, before she went on, she glanced sharply up at Snape and whispered, "Dance with me." At her direction, Snape raised her hand and watched her twirl beneath it, her right hand twisting in his left. She twirled toward him, and he lowered their hands so his arm was corraling her and her back was flush against him as she said, "When will the blood begin to race?" When he felt her start to move away, he guided her in her whirl, stepping a pace back and stretching their arms between them as she ended her spin and flung her left arm out dramatically as she said, "The sleeping bud burst into bloom?"

She tugged her hand free from Snape's and darted toward the table again, gesturing with both hands at the candlestick on it as she said, "When will the flames at last

consume us?" She pulled her hands to her body, curling her fingers into fists and dragging them down her chest as she closed her eyes and arched her back, letting her head fall back in sensual abandon. Snape's eyes went wide at the sight, but he maintained his composure. When she finished her line, she straightened again and turned to look at him. Taking deliberate, measured steps toward him, she pinned him with a sultry gaze, nodding faintly in approval when he mirrored her and strode her direction.

They were closing the distance between them as they both recited, "Past the point of no return, the final threshold...the bridge is crossed so stand and watch it burn..." When they met, Snape captured her left hand and wrapped both hands around it as they said, "We've passed the point of no return..." At the end of the final word, he ducked his head and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. Hermione simply stared up at him.

The silence that followed was charged with intensity, and Snape never broke their gaze as he gently slipped one hand from hers and reached into his pocket, saying, "Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime... Lead me, save me from my solitude..." Miming presenting a ring to Hermione, he continued, "Say you want me with you, here, beside you..." She nodded, and he sank to one knee, looking up at her and pretending to slip a ring on her finger as he said, "Anywhere you go let me go too...Christine, that's all I ask of..."

Hermione had lifted her right hand toward Snape's face after he had mimed placing the ring on her finger, looking as if she were going to caress him, but right before he could say "you," she pushed the mask up and over his head, revealing his face.

Snape jerked back, and he glanced about wildly. Shooting to his feet, Hermione's hand still held fast, he tugged her to him and wrapped his arms around her from behind, Disapparating.

Dumbledore called for attention, ready to direct the chaos that was supposed to ensue, but he jumped, startled, as Snape and Hermione appeared right behind him. Casting a reproachful yet appreciative look at his Potions Master, Dumbledore muttered, "Merlin! Don't *do* that, Severus!" At Snape's answering smirk, Dumbledore rolled his eyes and chuckled. "That was quite spectacular, you two." He beamed at them, then his brows drew together and he drawled, "You may let go now, Severus."

Both Snape and Hermione jumped as if stung. Hermione had been leaning back against Snape, still wrapped in his embrace, and neither one had thought to resume their school personas. Hermione flushed awkwardly, nervously handing the mask back to him, and Snape cleared his throat, murmuring a hasty apology to Hermione. Dumbledore snorted at their discomfiture and mildly said, "Why don't you two copy down all that lovely blocking before you forget it, while I get the next part going. I'll show you where to go next when we're ready." He turned his attention back to the stage, and Snape and Hermione exchanged guilty glances, each hurriedly taking out their scripts and scribbling down their movements.

Dumbledore focused back on the rest of the cast, saying, "All right, as soon as Miss Granger removes Professor Snape's mask, you three gentlemen are supposed to come rushing out to apprehend the Phantom." He pointed at Terry, Colin, and Seamus and they nodded. "Once they have disappeared, Miss Weasley, you are to come out and open the bed curtain, where we will all be able to see Mr. Malfoy. Can you scream without hurting your throat?" At Ginny's nod, he continued, "Excellent. Now then, the entire set will rotate, so it will look like we are watching it from behind, and once it's all settled, the rest of you will rush out onto the stage. Miss Parkinson, you obviously approach Mr. Malfoy and begin your lament. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom, you make your way down from the box and stand off to the side for your parts. Mr. Potter, you too will arrive, and Professor McGonagall will attract your attention, leading you to the opposite side of the stage from the managers. Miss Weasley, you follow Professor McGonagall and join her and Mr. Potter while Miss Parkinson approaches Mr. Weasley. You gentlemen will retrieve a stretcher from the wings and will carry Mr. Malfoy offstage." He pointed to Dean and Terry. Then, pointing to Colin and Seamus, he said, "And you two will be bustling around, looking for any way the Phantom could have disappeared."

He cast an attentive gaze over the group. "Everyone ready?" A ripple of assent swept through the cast, and Dumbledore said, "Go back to your places, and we'll begin the shift." People scattered, hastening to their places, eager to continue.

Snape and Hermione stood in the house behind Dumbledore, a properly dignified distance between them, watching the blocking. At Dumbledore's "Now!" everyone moved to their assigned positions: Ginny rushed out and pulled the curtain open, and Draco listed convincingly to one side, feigning death. At Ginny's shriek, he twitched, a faint scowl forming before he relaxed again.

Harry, Ron, and Neville raced down onto the stage while Dumbledore rotated the set. As soon as the set was still, Pansy rushed over to Draco, followed by Terry, Colin, Dean, and Seamus. While she screamed and cried, Ron and Neville moaned their lines to one side. Pansy then attacked Ron, and he looked properly horrified at her histrionics, grabbing her wrists to keep her from pounding him while she wailed. Dean and Terry placed Draco on a stretcher and carried him offstage while Colin and Seamus darted about, peering behind things and examining the stage. McGonagall beckoned to Harry, and he hurried to join her, followed by Ginny.

As soon as McGonagall finished her last line to Harry, Dumbledore cried, "Stop!" Everyone froze, turning wide eyes to him. He was beaming. "No worries, that's just where we end tonight." He chuckled at their relieved expressions. "All right, you know what comes next..."

Sniggers erupted all around and several voices muttered, "Back to the beginning and do it again..."

Dumbledore bowed, his eyes twinkling. "Ah, but don't forget: write down your blocking first."

Everyone shuffled offstage, making notes, and Dumbledore reset the stage. Snape and Hermione parted ways, each taking their places to begin the scene. When he arrived at the bed, Snape looked at Draco and said, "If one is *dead*, one should not *jump* when someone else screams."

Draco flushed, scowling at the censure. "She was just so loud! I wasn't ready for it. Now I know what's coming." Snape cocked an eyebrow at the boy, snorting faintly. Draco fumed, saying nastily, "At least I don't have to get all touchy-feely with Granger. Ugh!"

Snape whipped around, eyes blazing and face white with rage. Draco's eyes flew wide open as Snape advanced on him, looming over him and forcing the boy to shrink back onto the bed. Hissing, Snape spat, "Enough! What have I said about keeping your mouth *shut*, Mr. Malfoy?" Draco swallowed, unable to speak, staring up at Snape in fear. Snape pinned the boy with a deadly gaze, his furious face inches from Draco's now pale one.

Neither of them noticed Dean's voice saying, "Master?" Not even when he repeated it. Finally, at Dumbledore's gesture, Dean opened the bed curtain, and the cast was met with the startling sight of Draco cowering under a livid Snape.

Snape snapped his attention to the movement, taken aback by seeing Dean's bewildered face peering at him and Dumbledore's perplexed expression. Jerking back, he shot one last poisonous look at Draco before rumbling, "I beg your pardon, Headmaster. My apologies for missing my cue."

"What on earth is going on?" Dumbledore stared up at him, confused.

Clearing his throat, Snape continued, "I was merely addressing a discipline issue as Head of House. I assure you," and he pinned Draco with a steely glare, "it won't happen again. Will it, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco looked sullen, but he sat back up and muttered, "No, sir."

Snape turned his attention to Dumbledore and sketched an apologetic bow. "May we begin again, sir?"

Dumbledore eyed him thoughtfully, but said, "Certainly. Mr. Thomas, close the curtain and start again."

This time, when Dean began, Snape responded on cue, and rehearsal marched on. Snape and Hermione smoothed out their blocking and timing, now that they knew what they were planning on doing. Dumbledore rotated the set smoothly, and the chaos went off as directed. Satisfied with the progress, Dumbledore announced, "As usual, this time we'll add the music."

He set the music box and the scene began again. The electric connection between Snape and Hermione became apparent again once they began singing. When they

finished the song, and Snape Disapparated with Hermione, the other cast members had to shake off the thrall of their magnetic interactions in order to proceed with their parts.

While pandemonium reigned onstage, Snape and Hermione appeared in the space under the trap door. They were both breathing heavily with the emotions stirred up by their song, and they locked eyes for one brief moment before lunging at each other and coming together in a searing kiss. Hands framing each other's face, they broke apart and rested their foreheads against each other, breathing deeply in an attempt to regain their composure.

After a moment, Hermione backed up enough to cast a mischievous glance up at him and whispered, "Imagine how much harder it would be if we hadn't..." She trailed off and raised her brows meaningfully, a wicked smile lurking about her lips.

Snape grinned and breathed, "Trust me, it's still hard." The devious gleam in his eye at his intended double meaning made Hermione stifle a gasp and a giggle.

Clapping a hand over her mouth, she glared at him and jerked her head toward the stage above them, where the scene was about to end. Nodding and sighing in regret, Snape tucked her arm through his and Apparated them to a back corner of one of the wings, where they parted to maintain a proper distance again.

Dumbledore snapped the music box closed at the end of the scene, and everyone emerged from their respective places to congregate onstage. Hermione strode forward to join her friends, and Snape hung back behind the group. Draco was pointedly avoiding his gaze.

While Dumbledore was busy moving things onstage, Ron cast a disconcerted look at Hermione and grimaced, saying, "Wow, 'Mione, that was a helluva lot more than I wanted to see."

All at once, Hermione scowled, Neville gestured as if to try to stop Ron from commenting, cringing and smacking a hand over his face as he shook his head at Ron's folly, Snape narrowed his eyes and stepped forward to chastise Ron, and McGonagall, who had been standing not far from her Gryffindors, spun around, snapping, "Mr. Weasley!"

Snape stopped short, and all eyes swung toward her stern countenance. She straightened regally and frowned at Ron. "Were you not paying attention before we began, when Professor Snape announced that harassing Miss Granger is unacceptable behaviour?"

Snape's brows shot to his hairline, and even Hermione goggled at McGonagall jumping to her defence. Ron hung his head sheepishly, and the rest of the Gryffindors shifted their weight nervously, wondering if Ron had just lost them House points.

She sniffed and continued, "Really, Mr. Weasley, a member of your own House and your friend! I'm of a mind to *take* points to *make* a point..."

Snape stepped forward and interrupted, grateful for her unexpected support. "It's quite all right, Minerva. I think you've made your point. A reprimand should be sufficient, I think. Of course, should it happen again..." He trailed off, glaring significantly at Ron, who had the grace to look abashed. The other Gryffindors gaped at Snape, stunned by the uncharacteristic reprieve.

McGonagall pursed her lips and huffed. "Very well then, Severus. We'll let Mr. Weasley off with a warning this time." She crossed her arms and gazed sternly at her charges. "Now, off with you. Go on. And don't let me hear about anyone bothering Miss Granger!" With that final warning, she shoos the Gryffindors offstage, and the other students followed.

When they were out of earshot, Snape approached McGonagall, who was still standing there, looking pensive. "Minerva."

She snapped her gaze to him. "Yes?"

Snape inclined his head and murmured, "I appreciate your support."

McGonagall grimaced and heaved a deep sigh. "Well, you're welcome, but it was more for Miss Granger's benefit than yours."

Snape almost smiled. "I understand. But I appreciate it nonetheless. I'm well aware of the variety of horrid opinions of me, and by now I'm quite inured to them. But Miss Granger should not have to suffer simply because a wretched Sorting Hat relegated her to having to perform opposite me."

McGonagall eyed him intently. Snape waited for whatever was going to surface. "Even I have to admit, Severus, it's rather uncomfortable to watch you two performing. I still can't believe the Ministry thought it was a good idea to assign a play with such erotic tones to a school in which students and faculty are cast together!" She sighed again. "But, Miss Granger is old enough and mature enough to handle the situation capably; I have to just get over it, I know, and do my best to help us win the competition." She shrugged eloquently, and Snape nodded. Then, she narrowed her eyes and turned a calculating look on Snape. "So, dare I say that perhaps you may come around to believing a Gryffindor can be just as worthy as a Slytherin? Might I win our little wager?"

Snape blinked, keeping back just how worthy *he* *did* find a certain bushy-haired Gryffindor, and schooled his expression into one of hauteur. "My dear Minerva, we have months to go before we can try to win the competition, and a Slytherin never concedes before the last possible moment." With that, he smirked and bowed, adding, "Good evening," before he whirled and Disapparated.

McGonagall rolled her eyes and chuckled, shaking her head fondly as she descended the stage and exited the Hall through the concealed staff entrance, waiting until Dumbledore had finished restoring the Hall and they could retire. She spent a moment envying Snape his Apparition ability, as the trek to her quarters involved far too many stairs for her taste sometimes. But, if Albus, with several decades on her, could make it up to *his* office without complaint, then she would do so too. Dumbledore emerged, and they began the climb to their respective quarters in companionable silence.

51- Trepidation and Plans

Chapter 53 of 84

Just what could Dumbledore want to see Snape in private for? Is he doomed? Plus, we're beyond the point of no return, now. And, what surprises are in store for everyone as Valentine's Day draws closer?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Notes: Yay! I got this up before Lumos! :) Muchos smooches to my awesome beta, Ladyofthemasque, as always. This chapter gets us through the next week, and we're getting closer to both Valentine's Day and the infamous kiss. LOL I haven't been able to post much on my LJ either lately as I've been busy and writing when I've had

time available. Hope you enjoy this latest installment! Check out my LJ at <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/> and I hope to see some of you lot at Lumos! :)

Cheers!

Nicole aka Good_Witch

Chapter 51- Trepidation and Plans

Back in his quarters after rehearsal, Snape contemplated visiting Hermione's room later that night. But, after their slip-up in front of Dumbledore, he decided that he had better not push his luck. Now, away from the exciting atmosphere of the rehearsal, he couldn't shake the uneasy roiling of his stomach that Dumbledore was onto them. Afraid he might cave into the urge to visit Hermione again, he resolutely brought the bottle of Dreamless Sleep Draught into his room as he made ready for bed. Once he had slipped between the sheets, he heaved a petulant sigh and downed a dose of the potion, scowling his rebellion until the potion took effect and he fell asleep.

Saturday morning, Snape was almost finished with his breakfast when Dumbledore ambled in, humming as he took his seat next to Snape.

"Good morning, Severus."

"Good morning, Albus."

Dumbledore blithely served up some eggs, saying in a rather off-hand manner, "I say, Severus, would you join me in my office later this morning...oh, I'd say around eleven? I have something I wish to discuss with you."

Snape felt icy dread enveloping his guts, and he struggled to swallow and respond normally. Nodding, he murmured, "Nothing untoward, I hope? I have time right now, if you'd like."

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. I daresay we should speak in private. I doubt you'd want others to have a chance of hearing us."

Snape's chest tightened in anxiety, and he felt cold sweat prickling his skin. "In that case, I'll meet you then." Pushing back from the table abruptly, he said, "I have some work to do." Fighting the rising feeling of blind panic, he vehemently resisted the urge to seek out the comforting sight of Hermione, keeping his eyes trained on the staff entrance as he charged through it, Disapparating as soon as he was out of the Hall.

He arrived in his bedroom, frantically snatching the photo of Hermione from its Concealed spot on his nightstand and gathering all of her letters as well. Stacking them on the copy of Leroux's book, he panted shallowly as he thrust them into a box, sealing it, shrinking it, Concealing it, and then casting Do Not Notice around it. Gripped with desperate worry, he took his Pensieve from his wardrobe and placed it on his bed, dropping unceremoniously beside it in his haste.

His wand trembled slightly as he repeatedly held it to his temple, withdrawing strand after strand of memories. His brow furrowed, and he grimaced after over a quarter of an hour of removals. Finally, he dropped his wand, voicing a pained cry as he ground his palms against his eyes, rubbing back over his temples and gripping his skull as he curled in on himself in pain at the vast nothingness that seemed to swell his brain. Falling back on the bed, his eyes remained screwed shut and he sucked in several deep breaths.

Calm down. You must calm down! You can't show up to this interview with Albus like this. It'll be obvious! Control. You must maintain control. Gods forbid, you won't be able to keep him out if you numb your mind by removing too much too fast. Easy, now. Deep breaths. You don't even know what it's about. It may not be the worst. Just relax and get under control. You can do it. You've done it before; you can do it again. It's been a while, but it's like riding a broom: you always remember once you get back on.

After lying there for several minutes, he gingerly propped himself up on his elbow, once again grimacing as he gripped his head. Hissing as he shoved himself upright, he doggedly resumed his task, but this time he was slower and more methodical, wincing only slightly as each strand broke off and fell into the basin.

When he finally stopped, he heaved to his feet, reeling in exhaustion. Carefully putting the Pensieve in his wardrobe, he dragged to his bathroom cabinet, searching for a headache potion. It took three doses before the echoing, pounding ache in his head subsided. Leaning on the sink and gazing sternly at himself in the mirror, he scowled, pushing away and heading to his office, where he forced himself to read essays in an attempt to fill his mind with the usual drivel before having to meet Dumbledore.

A couple of minutes before eleven, he strode to the fireplace in his quarters and tossed a pinch of Floo powder into the grate, snapping, "Headmaster's office." He stepped into the emerald flames and spun onto Dumbledore's hearth rug, dusting the soot from his robes. At least it wasn't very noticeable on black.

Dumbledore looked up, smiling absently at him. "Ah, good morning, Severus. Thank you for being prompt."

Snape took the seat Dumbledore waved at, saying, "Certainly, Headmaster." He brushed at his robes again before murmuring a casual spell to Vanish the soot.

Politely proffering the silver dish, Dumbledore queried, "Care for a lemon drop?"

Snape grimaced in distaste and eyed the older man askance, retorting, "We've scarcely finished breakfast..."

Dumbledore smirked and nodded, continuing, "Very well then. Tea? I'll be sure to order honey and lemon..."

Snape barely managed to control the speed of his movement as he snapped his gaze to Dumbledore's, noting the maddening twinkle in those light blue eyes. Frowning and blinking in purported confusion, he simply afforded himself a clipped, "I beg your pardon?" Even so, he could once again feel the cold sweat prickling his skin as every muscle stiffened in wariness.

Dumbledore's twinkling smirk intensified as he said, "Isn't that how you take your tea now?" After a pregnant pause, he added, "Just like Miss Granger?"

Snape stared at Dumbledore, unable to immediately respond. His heart pounded so hard that he feared it would be audible, and he struggled to draw breath. It felt like his stomach had dropped out of his body, and he swallowed against the sense of impending doom. Frantically trying to figure out what to say, he gave in to despair, realizing that things would go worse for him if he tried to pretend ignorance. Thus, stoic, he carefully said, "Yes, sir. She is the one who told me about the tonic when we were discussing singing." He shut his lips firmly, unwilling to dig his proverbial grave any deeper.

Dumbledore grinned and chuckled. His tone was facetious as he said, "I say, how *nice* that you two were able to have a normal conversation." Then, he snorted, rebuilding his composure with some effort. He sobered his expression, but his eyes didn't stop their damnable twinkling even as he said, "That's why I called you here, Severus."

Snape choked out a faint, "Oh?" He could feel his scalp crawling, but forced himself to maintain an expression of polite inquiry.

Dumbledore's expression softened into a gentle smile, and he warmly murmured, "I'mso happy to see you finally loosening up, my boy."

Snape blinked, frozen. He was utterly confused, and he was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. His voice sounded almost hollow as he said, "I'm not sure I understand..." A wry voice in his head piped up with, "*Now, that's the understatement of the century!*"

Dumbledore wriggled his fingers on the desktop and quickly rattled off, "I must admit that I was giving in to my meddlesome side..."

Even in his undeniably precarious position in such a baffling situation, Snape couldn't stifle his snort at Dumbledore's unwilling admission.

Dumbledore tossed his head with a slight moue of exasperation and continued, "I so wished that you'd open up and start enjoying life once Riddle was gone. After all, you had survived against such staggering odds, and you deserved a chance to be happy." He tilted his head to one side and pursed his lips. "It may have been slow in coming,

but I see that you've finally allowed yourself to start *living* again. It's all over the school! Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. I daresay you've been enjoying disconcerting everyone lately, if I know you at all, my boy." He raised his eyebrows and cast a shrewd gaze over his spectacles at Snape, who was still staring at him in stony incredulity.

During Dumbledore's speech, Snape's mind had been racing to the conclusion that he wasn't facing his doom after all. The ecstasy of relief flooded through him so violently that he almost felt faint. Sucking in steadying breaths while Dumbledore prated on, he offered up a swift, silent profession of gratitude to whatever gods had spared him this time.

Dumbledore leant forward, lacing his fingers together on the desk. "Must I spell it out for you?" In a sudden shift, he flew back into his seat, ticking off a finger with every point. "One: even after all your railing and complaining, you took the role of the Phantom and made it your own. I knew you *had* to have the skills after so many years of playing a part, but you've astonished even me, Severus. Two: I doubt I could tell you the last time I saw you laugh. And yet, I've seen it more than once in the last few months." He paused to beam at Snape, who was squirming uncomfortably in the armchair.

"Three: what a delightful surprise to see you dressing for the occasion at Christmas! You've never looked better. Four: everyone has remarked on how much you've mellowed lately. And I don't mean just the students; the staff has mentioned it, too. Five: It makes me so happy to see how differently you've been treating young Mr. Potter and his cohorts. To see that you have finally put such grudging bitterness behind you enough to behave so civilly..." He paused and looked down, folding his hands together. When he looked back up, the twinkle was partially drowned in the tears welling up in his eyes.

Snape ducked his head and shifted his weight in the chair, taken aback by the intensity of Dumbledore's reaction to his changed behaviour. He heard a sniffle, and glanced back at the headmaster when he began speaking again.

"Severus, need I go on? I couldn't be prouder of you. I know you were dead set against performing in this production. And the hostility between you and Miss Granger when we started was thick enough to cut with a knife!" He leant forward again, his voice lowering in volume as it increased in intensity. "I told you to work things out like adults, and you did! It's quite obvious that you were telling the truth when you said you two had quite a satisfactory working relationship. I know I kept forcing the issue, *making* you two work together, but it's paid off! Watching the two of you together... I just *know* we're going to win this competition!"

He paused again, gazing at Snape with a rapt expression, and Snape felt compelled to give some sort of response. He ground out a gravelly, "Thank you, sir."

Dumbledore blinked, coming back to himself, and beamed at Snape. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm so pleased that you have allowed yourself to start connecting with others again. I know that it must be terribly difficult for you, but it's made a tremendous difference in your personality. You and Miss Granger may have a professional relationship now, but it's obvious to me that you *can* take the step to make friends." Snape's brow furrowed in alarm, and Dumbledore waved his hand testily. "Yes, yes, I know! Miss Granger is your student. I know what you're going to say. But, Severus, don't you see? I don't necessarily mean that you must make friends with Miss Granger; I'm simply pointing out the fact that now you not only have the *capacity* but you also have the opportunity to make friends! You've begun the progression, now continue along those lines and open yourself up to more new things. You're still young, my boy; it's not too late to meet people and...perhaps...even meet that *special* someone..." He trailed off meaningfully, nodding slowly at Snape.

Snape's eyes widened and he regarded Dumbledore in growing horror. His jaw spasmed as he ground his teeth, and he levelled a dangerous glare at the older man as he growled warningly, "Albus, don't you *dare* meddle in my affairs..."

Dumbledore raised his hands placatingly and nodded. "I'm not! I promise! I'm merely making an observation, a *suggestion* if you will..." He glanced up to see the mutinous expression on his Potions Master's face and sank back in his chair, mildly chastened. With a sheepish grin, he tried to lighten Snape's black mood by saying, "See? I *told* you you wouldn't want to discuss this where anyone else could hear."

Snape rolled his eyes and tossed his head in exasperation, and Dumbledore sighed.

"It's refreshing to see you acting *human* once in a while, Severus. You're not an automaton. For too long, it was the same routine: lessons, grading, and rounds; snark, scowl, and take points; secrets, spying, and deception. You were in a dreadful rut, and it's high time you got out of it. I know how much you enjoyed being feared, but I think you could be on your way to being revered instead." He snorted at Snape's aggrieved expression and continued, "All right, perhaps I shouldn't go that far, but I daresay you're on your way to being respected at least, and not the kind born of abject terror! It's quite obvious that the students are beginning to see you as a person now, and their trust and regard is growing. Why, there's so little awkwardness between you and Miss Granger now, it's clear you two have been building trust as we've worked. It comes through in spectacular fashion when you perform. Incredible effort, Severus. I thank you. And Miss Granger." He placed his hand over his heart and bowed toward Snape, who was not only uncomfortable with so much glowing praise and dips into his personal development but also alerting to the alarm that his connection to Hermione was at least somewhat apparent, if misread.

Snape cleared his throat and shook his hair forward, sinking back into his chair as much as possible. He muttered, "I am merely doing my duty, Headmaster. As are we all. I'm pleased that you are so satisfied with our efforts. And, while I appreciate your concern over my well-being and current path in life, I respectfully request that you leave me to my own affairs, and not interfere. Really, Albus, I don't need your... nudgings." He cocked an eyebrow at Dumbledore, who laughed out loud at Snape's word choice. When the older man simply beamed at him, he scowled in warning and tilted his head meaningfully.

"Oh, all right, all right. I shan't interfere." As Snape relaxed, Dumbledore added, "Unless I see you regressing!" Snape narrowed his eyes and shot a baleful glare at him, which made Dumbledore chuckle.

Heaving a put-upon sigh, Snape drawled, "Knowing you, Albus, that's the best I can hope for." He rolled his eyes and leant forward, preparing to stand. "Now, are you finished baiting me, or must I endure more before I can return to my duties?"

Dumbledore waved an airy hand at him and chuckled again. "Go. You are dismissed. Just keep in mind what I've said."

Snape swallowed thickly in remembered terror and uttered a fervent, "I shall, indeed." He rose, crossing quickly to the hearth and dipping his hand into the pot of Floo powder. "Good day to you, Headmaster."

Dumbledore was once again beaming at him, fingers steepled in front of him as he leant back in his chair. "Good day to you, my boy."

Snape nodded and said, "Potions Master's quarters," stepping into the flames and whirling back into his own sitting room.

The first thing Snape did when he was alone in his quarters again was head straight for his Pensieve. Replacing the memories took much longer than removing them, especially as he paused often to savour them as they replayed. Once he had filled in all the empty spots in his brain, he went to the corner where he had secreted the shrunken box of incriminating evidence and retrieved it, restoring everything to its original condition and placing them back in their respective locations.

By the time he had finished, it was well into lunch, but he still felt so keyed up after his meeting with Dumbledore that he elected to skip it, postponing eating again until a time when he felt more sanguine that his nervous stomach could handle it.

For the rest of the weekend, whenever Snape was at the High Table at the same time as Dumbledore, he suffered through the older man's chuckling nods toward the tea service when Snape and Hermione were both preparing cups with honey and lemon. Snape tried to surreptitiously catch Hermione's eye to indicate that Dumbledore was aware of their shared tonic, but he felt it was too dangerous under the Headmaster's scrutiny. Grateful that he would at least see her Tuesday before rehearsal and could tell her then how close they were to being found out, he called on his patience to see him through until then.

As it was, with his preoccupation with Dumbledore's gibes, Snape didn't notice that Colin was following Hermione's lead, fixing his tea after she had. Apparently, the boy had learnt some caution, as he waited until she was almost done before he mixed his draught to join her, and Hermione, ignoring him as much as possible, missed his

actions on the tails of hers.

Tuesday evening found Snape on his familiar errand of collecting Hermione before rehearsal. As he strode down the aisle by the Gryffindor table, he offered polite, if frosty, nods to those who were on cast and who caught his eye. While Colin avoided looking up at the dark man, Ginny nodded and smiled, murmuring, "Evening, Professor."

Harry, Dean, and Seamus all looked up and nodded warily, but Neville set his teeth and looked straight at Snape, saying, "Good evening, Professor Snape."

Snape blinked in surprise again, wondering at the boy's newfound courage. Nevertheless, he inclined his head and gravely retorted, "Likewise, Mr. Longbottom. Miss Weasley." Pausing behind Hermione, he added, "Miss Granger?"

Hermione broke off her admiring stare at Neville and rose. "I'm ready, sir." As Snape gestured for her to join him, he stepped away, leaving Hermione to flash another approving grin at Neville as she said, "See you at rehearsal!"

Once in the corridor, they linked arms and Snape Apparated them to his sitting room. Stretching up onto her tiptoes, Hermione planted a happy kiss on Snape's lips, beaming at him as she backed away. "Hello, love."

Snape smiled and lifted her hand to drop a kiss on her knuckles as he replied, "Welcome back, dear heart." Chest tightening at the flush of pleasure creeping up Hermione's face and the dilation of her pupils as she gazed tenderly up at him, he gently guided her to turn and head toward the bathroom. "Come, let's get on with it. I have something important to tell you."

Hermione's brows rose as she obediently crossed to the bathroom. Her inquisitive "Oh?" trailed behind her, and her expression was attentive as she emerged.

Snape gazed soberly at her, and she eyed him with trepidation as he began speaking. "Saturday, Dumbledore called me to his office for an interview." Hermione's eyes went wide, and she clutched the brush so tightly her knuckles went white. Snape inhaled deeply and continued, "I thought we were done for..."

Hermione broke in with a breathless, "But we're not?"

Snape tilted his head, chiding her for her interruption, and said, "Not completely." He paused for effect, and she sucked in a fearful breath. "He's noticed the tea." Hermione's eyes closed and she swallowed hard. "He's also noticed that my behaviour has changed, both in general and toward Potter in particular."

In a desperate squeak, Hermione said, "Isn't that a good thing, though? The change in behaviour, I mean..."

Snape blinked and murmured, "Apparently Albus thinks so, but he's also commented on the 'lack of awkwardness' between us." They stared at each other in dismay for a moment before Snape continued, "We're insanely lucky that he hasn't recognized the true connection we have, Hermione. He's urging me to 'make friends' and 'find that special someone.'" Hermione's eyes flew wide and she stifled an incredulous snort.

Snape scowled and said, "I warned him not to meddle in my affairs, but once he gets an idea in his head, he rarely lets it go. No matter; it's clear that we're not as covert as we need to be, and I will easily admit that I was utterly terrified." He shuddered at the memory, and Hermione reached forward, embracing him in comfort.

"I would have been, too. I'm so sorry you went through that. Is that what's had you so preoccupied at meals lately?"

Snape nodded, "Every time we make any tea, he keeps sniggering and casting pointed looks at it." Grimacing in annoyance, he continued, "I told him you were the one to tell me about the tonic when we were discussing singing. He bought it."

Hermione considered for a moment and said, "Well, it wasn't a lie, really. The first time I told you about it was in the Great Hall during that roundtable sing-through. And then later in your classroom, when we were practicing."

Snape snorted and cut a glance at her. "That's a rather Slytherin point to make, my dear. Of course, the best lies always have a grain of truth. How else do you think I've managed all these years? It's really more of a 'selective truth' than anything else."

Hermione shook her head, smirking. "Let's just say that this Gryffindor has had a crash course in Slytherin sneakiness ever since she fell in love with the sneakiest Slytherin of all."

Snape quirked a half-smile at her, then sobered again and clasped her hand, capturing her attention. "Just do your best to keep up the lessons until the school year is over, and then I promise I'll rival the bravest Gryffindor around when I stake my claim to the world."

Hermione's breath hitched, her heart bursting with love at his words. Darting forward again, she cupped his face and kissed him fiercely, tasting the lingering sweetness of their "tonic" on his tongue. After a long moment of fervent snogging, she broke away and shook herself. "I'm sorry. I know we have to get going. Turn around and I'll finish up in a trice."

Snape reluctantly let go of her, spinning in his seat. As she brushed his hair, he rebuilt his composure, idly asking, "So, have you decided whether or not you'll be going to Hogsmeade Saturday?"

Hermione shrugged and sighed. "I guess so. Even though most folks will be paired off and spending the holiday together, it's still a treat to get away from the castle for a bit. I'll probably roam the shops a bit, buy some candy at Honeydukes, sit a spell and have a butterbeer or two at the Three Broomsticks... The usual. I'll probably keep Neville around, just in case."

Snape snorted. "As long as that Creevey boy leaves you alone. But, speaking of Longbottom: he's certainly got bolder lately, hasn't he?"

Hermione grinned. "Ever since you stopped being so horrid, he's realized that people can change, and he's working on getting over being so afraid of you. I think he's coming along brilliantly."

Snape frowned. "I don't know if I like the idea of Longbottom not fearing me anymore. I think I'd rather miss it."

Hermione smacked his shoulder and voiced an exasperated cry. "That's awful! Honestly... I didn't say he's over it yet, but he's getting there. I think it's quite lovely that he's growing up and coming into his own. This production has caused all sorts of unexpected effects. I, for one, am grateful for most of them."

Snape relented and reached up to caress her hand where it was smoothing pomade through his hair. "I am grateful for you, my love."

After a pause, Hermione murmured, "I will admit that I'm disappointed that I can't spend the holiday with my 'lover' like everyone else."

Snape grinned mischievously at the way she said "lover," remembering their tryst before rehearsal last time. As she finished his hair in silence, his mind was roiling with ideas of how to give her her wish without taking any undue risks. Of course, trying to spend time with her was always a risk, just some instances were more so than others.

As much as he wanted a replay of their affair before the previous rehearsal, he was erring on the side of caution after his sobering interview with Dumbledore. So, when his hair was done, he merely pulled Hermione into his lap, holding her close for the several minutes they had left, enjoying the comforting warmth of her body against his.

Both pulling themselves out of the cozy, fuzzy, lull that they had fallen into, with Snape's arms wrapped securely about the trusting figure of Hermione in his lap, they sighed in regret as they Apparated up to the Hall for the run-through.

The full cast was milling about, letting Dumbledore cast the singing spell on them and waiting for him to finish setting the stage. Hermione quickly moved to join her friends,

and Snape hung back, observing everyone. He was surprised to see McGonagall bustling toward him.

Turning his attention to the older witch, he inclined his head and murmured, "Minerva?"

McGonagall nodded briskly and gestured for him to join her farther away from the students. "Severus, I just realized that not all of the students were here last time."

Snape blinked at her, not comprehending the significance of her statement. In a leading tone, he said, "And...?"

McGonagall tossed her head and gazed at him primly. "So, not everyone has had the benefit of your announcement." She pursed her lips at his sudden expression of understanding. "Exactly. Which means someone should apprise them of the situation."

Snape nodded gravely, turning narrowed eyes on the cast, picking out who had been absent. "Indeed." Exhaling sharply through his nose, he turned to McGonagall again and said, "My thanks, Minerva. I hadn't made the connection yet. I shall speak to Albus immediately." Then, with a slight bow, he strode off.

Dumbledore was adjusting set pieces when Snape ascended the stage. He noticed Snape's approach and said, "Severus! Good evening to you."

Snape nodded and retorted, "Good evening. Headmaster, Professor McGonagall has just made a good point..."

Dumbledore turned his attention fully to Snape, brows rising at the formal nature of his speech. "And what would that be?"

"Not all of the students here tonight were present at the last rehearsal, and have therefore not been warned about harassing Miss Granger."

Dumbledore's mouth opened in a small "o," and he nodded slowly. "Oh, yes, very good point. Well then, would you like me to make the announcement, or would you like to do so? Or, we could ask Minerva to do it."

Snape's lips twitched. "I shall make the announcement, sir... by your leave, of course."

Dumbledore smiled. "Certainly. Just a moment." He spun to face the audience and cried, "Everyone, please take a seat for a moment. Professor Snape has something important to announce."

The students who had been at the previous rehearsal exchanged knowing looks, but the others glanced around wonderingly. Dumbledore descended the stage, leaving Snape standing alone on the apron, arms crossed imposingly and glaring down his nose at everyone.

"Those of you who were here last Friday may take this as a reminder, while the rest of you: pay attention!" He paused, waiting for the last bit of noise to cease. He saw Hermione sitting up straight in her seat, chin tilted up in a lofty attitude. Ginny was gazing up at Snape with a faint smile lurking about her lips. Once everyone's eyes were on him, he said, "The rest of this production contains several... intense moments. As I stated before, I will *not* allow *anyone* to harass Miss Granger about performing her role opposite me. The headmaster and Professor McGonagall are behind me on this as well." He paused, casting a glance at Ron, whose ears were bright pink. "Be that as it may, if I find out that anyone has caused our lead actress any distress, he or she will answer to *me*...alone or in addition to any reprimands from either the headmaster or Professor McGonagall." Sweeping his stern gaze over each and every student present, he murmured, "Understood?" Sober nods met his question, and he dropped his hands, one eyebrow cocked. "Very well then. Thank you, Headmaster."

Dumbledore said, "Of course, Severus." Then, clapping his hands, he cried, "Places, everyone! Let's begin with the pre-Don Juan scene and go through to the retreat underground. I'll man the music box as usual."

Students burst from their seats, some of them casting furtive glances at Hermione as they passed her, wondering what they were about to witness after such a threat from Snape.

Once everyone was ready, Dumbledore bellowed, "Action!" Snape flitted about the theatre, his voice echoing under the effect of the *Sonorus* spell, and then popped down into the wing to wait for his cue to join Draco behind the bed curtain.

Once Dean and Draco had finished laughing, Snape Apparated to the bed, taking care to stay out of sight when Draco opened the curtain to enter. The two Slytherins merely exchanged nods as Hermione's voice wafted from the wing.

Snape began "Point of No Return," slinking out to hover behind Hermione. Their movements as they performed were almost as hypnotic as their voices, and those who had not seen them perform previously were stunned by the mature nature of their interactions. Several of the boys were secretly attracted to the sensuality Hermione exuded as she sang, but they would have denied it to their deathbeds.

When Snape's erotic tones changed to the wistful, winsome notes of "All I Ask of You," and he dropped to one knee, many of the girls on cast felt a queer fluttering in their chests, followed by a pang of horror that they had been wooed by their Potions Master's tenderness. They were roused from their introspection when Hermione pushed the mask from Snape's face and he Disapparated, taking her with him.

The run-through hit a snag then, when Dumbledore was rotating the set. It wasn't happening fast enough to fit with the music, and people weren't sure when they were supposed to enter: before or after the set began its turn. Once again, Snape and Hermione had Apparated to the space below the trap door, and they were listening to the activity above them while they exchanged lingering kisses.

When things were worked out, and the rehearsal proceeded again, Hermione pulled Snape's head down so she could murmur in his ear, "We should probably not stay down here too long, or people will wonder."

Snape felt goose flesh spreading over his skin at the tickle of her breath on his ear and he shivered lightly, his grip tightening around her. Nuzzling her ear in return, he breathed, "Good girl. You're right, as much as I regret it being the truth." They sighed and parted, and he nodded to warn her that he was about to Disapparate. Arms linked, they appeared in the wing, witnessing the very end of the chaos before Dumbledore called a halt.

"My apologies, everyone!" Dumbledore raised his hands in acknowledgement of his part in the problem. "I believe I've figured out what to change. So, let's all get back to places and try again." He returned the set to the beginning scene and reset the music box.

The second time through went more smoothly, and Dumbledore was beaming by the end of it. "Wonderful! I think that was good enough for tonight. I won't make you do it again." He chuckled at the ripple of pleased mutterings that swept through the cast. "Now then, we'll have rehearsal Friday night, in which we'll be blocking the Labyrinth Underground and Beyond the Lake. Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Longbottom, and Mr. Finch-Fletchley, you will not be required to attend. You're certainly welcome to join us, if you like. The rest of you will be expected to be here as part of the pursuing mob if nothing else. Of course, I know that the following day is the Hogsmeade trip, and I'm sure you'll all be going, so I hope we won't take too long practicing Friday night." He peered over his spectacles at the smiling group, chuckling at their eager expressions. "At any rate, run along now and get to bed. You have classes tomorrow!" He regarded the students with a mock-stern glare, and they laughed as they filed out of the Hall.

Snape kept an eye on Hermione, watching for anyone bothering her about their performance. His lips thinned when he saw her link arms with Neville as they followed the other Gryffindors up the aisle, but he ruthlessly tamped down the flare of jealousy, particularly when he saw Colin's disappointed expression. His inner voice was acidic as he thought, *Finally, Longbottom is good for something...*

Keeping in mind that Dumbledore might notice if he followed Hermione, Snape heaved a disgruntled sigh and Disapparated.

Thursday morning, Ginny dawdled after Potions class, waiting until everyone else was gone to address Snape. He was pretending to ignore her, hair cloaking his face as he skimmed homework assignments, while she took her time cleaning up. With an air of suppressed excitement, she darted toward his desk and hissed, "What are you going to give Hermione for Valentine's Day?"

Snape flicked a glance at the doorway before rumbling, "We're not dignifying the inanity of that commercial *holiday* by doing anything. Not that it's any of your business." He cocked an eyebrow at her and sniffed.

Ginny was aghast, giggling at him. Her voice was a mere squeak as she retorted, "Not *doing* anything? But...but, it's *Valentine's Day*!"

Snape slammed his quill on the desk, making Ginny jump in dismay. His expression was stormy as he said, "That's enough! I'll thank you to stay *out* of my business."

Ginny nodded hastily, still owl-eyed in shock. She scurried back to her desk and picked up her bag. Averting her eyes, she muttered, "I'm sorry. I'll just go." She sprinted from the room, leaving Snape scowling after her.

After supper that evening, Ginny approached Hermione and said, "Are you going to give him anything for Valentine's Day?" She knew she didn't need to say Snape's name, as there could be only one person she meant.

Hermione gave a wry half-smile and shrugged. "I don't know. I know he thinks it's ridiculous, and he's never enjoyed it. So, I'm sure he'd be disgusted by all the trite, silly things that are popular for the holiday." She sighed. "If I can think of something worthwhile, maybe. Otherwise, it's just another day, really." She noticed Ginny's mournful expression and snorted. "Honestly, Gin, it's okay. I'm not all that fussed. Really."

Ginny frowned at her sceptically. "Hmph. I still think it's awful to ignore it. It's supposed to be a time to celebrate love!" She scowled in righteous indignation, and Hermione laughed.

"Ginny! Couples should celebrate their love *every* day, not just on some arbitrary date!" She patted her friend's arm, saying, "Don't worry about it. You and Harry should have a wonderful day, and I'll be fine. Even if I won't see Severus." She couldn't help but give a tiny sigh of disappointment.

Ginny shook her head in disbelief, but she dropped the subject.

Snape ruminated on Ginny's question. He had already made his position clear, hadn't he? Surely Hermione wouldn't be expecting anything special just because it was Valentine's Day. Even though he felt sure that she wouldn't pay any attention to that ridiculous holiday, he couldn't help but wonder about it, particularly as the week wore on, and the students were getting more and more obsessed with it.

Friday evening, Snape collected Hermione before rehearsal, and, once they were ensconced in their familiar ritual of doing his hair, Snape brought up the subject.

"Hermione..."

"Hmm?"

He cleared his throat. "I know you're going to Hogsmeade tomorrow, and I know it's Valentine's Day..." He trailed off, and Hermione caressed his shoulder.

"What's on your mind, love?"

Snape scowled and said, "We already had the conversation about how I feel about Valentine's Day. But, I suppose that begs the question of how *you* feel about it. Would you like anything?" He felt incredibly awkward, but the idea had been gnawing at him ever since Ginny's horrified reaction to his statement the day before.

Hermione paused, taken aback by the almost desperate quality of his tone. Her thoughts raced for a moment before she stammered, "Well, I...I don't know. I mean, I agree that it's overblown, but I can't help but wish that we *could* spend time doing all the silly little things that others get to do." Snape twisted to face her, and she went on, "I'm not saying I need to be showered with gifts or anything ridiculous like that, but I would so love to be able to spend time with you. I can't help but be envious of others who get to *be* with the one they love."

They gazed pensively at each other for a long moment, and Snape gave a slow nod before spinning back around in his seat. Hermione resumed her task, and Snape rumbled, "I, too, wish we could be together, dear heart, and not just for Valentine's Day." The silence dragged on after his wistful statement, until he finally said, "You do know that I would give you anything you wanted that was in my power to procure, don't you?"

Hermione smiled tenderly, giving the elastic one last tug before slipping her hands over his shoulders and down his chest, embracing him and pressing a kiss behind his ear. His hands snaked up to grip her arms as she hugged him. "I do indeed, my love. You needn't worry."

Snape stood, gathering her in his arms and resting his chin on her head as he murmured, "Thank you." Hermione burrowed against him, listening to his heart beat where she pressed her ear to his chest. Snape stroked her hair gently, his gaze trained on the middle distance, his expression one of deep concentration as his thoughts turned inward.

Eventually, Hermione checked the time and whispered, "Time to go, love."

Snape started from his reverie and Summoned his mask. "Let's go." They disappeared, popping back into existence at the back of the house.

Hermione noted that even though Draco, Ron, Neville, and Justin weren't needed for the rehearsal, they had all shown up anyway, taking seats in the house to watch the proceedings. She and Snape marched down the aisle to the stage, watching Dumbledore moving set pieces as he worked out the shifts from the opera house stage to the labyrinth underground and into the Phantom's lair again.

Once he was done, Dumbledore turned to them and said, "Ready? The boat will be entering from the wing, so you two can just start off there." He searched out McGonagall and Harry and said, "You two will be entering on the sloping piece upstage. I've made sure that there are steps leading up to the top from the back, so you can get up there easily." Then, he gestured to the rest of the cast. "You lot will be the mob, and you'll start by singing from offstage, but then you, too, will come down the slope. As soon as you've all retreated, I'll be shifting the slope offstage and bringing in the Phantom's lair again. Severus, you and Miss Granger will enter from the wing again, in the boat, and the portcullis will descend completely once you're fully in the lair. Is everyone clear on what's going on?" Murmurs of affirmatives rumbled through the cast. Dumbledore beamed. "Excellent. Places!"

Snape and Hermione exchanged a nod and crossed to the boat in the wing. The rest of the cast filed behind the sets, waiting their turns to climb up onto the slope.

At Dumbledore's cry of "Action!" Snape began propelling the boat onstage, reciting, "Down once more to the dungeon of my black despair! Down we plunge to the prison of my mind! Down that path into darkness deep as hell!" Rounding furiously on Hermione, who was cowering in the boat, he brandished his mask and said, "Why, you ask, was I bound and chained in this cold and dismal place? Not for any mortal sin, but the wickedness of my abhorrent face!"

On the tails of his roar, several voices wafted in from offstage, reciting, "Track down this murderer! He must be found!"

Snape whipped around, listening to their approach. He spun back to Hermione and began his lines, once again propelling the boat forward, toward the opposite wing. "Hounded out by everyone! Met with hatred everywhere! No kind word from anyone! No compassion anywhere! Christine, Christine... Why, why...?" His voice trailed off as they moved out of sight into the wing.

Harry and McGonagall appeared on the slope above, reciting their lines, and the cast backstage echoed them. As soon as they finished their exchange, McGonagall retreated back up the slope, and Harry stopped, gazing out into the house in consternation.

"Um, sir?" Harry shaded his eyes against the lights and searched for Dumbledore.

"Yes?"

"Uh, it says that I'm supposed to 'plunge' into the lake." He grimaced. "Just how am I supposed to do that?" He stuffed his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

Dumbledore ascended to the apron. "Oh dear! I forgot to tell you about that. My apologies, Mr. Potter. Right... Do you see where the slope is positioned on the stage right now?" Harry nodded. "Look below you. What do you see?"

Harry peered down and comprehension dawned. "The trap door!"

Dumbledore beamed. "Exactly! Now, all you have to do is drop from the slope into the trap door. There will be mist covering the view of it from the audience, so you needn't worry about that part. Simply cast a Cushioning Charm before you drop, and you'll land safely within the space below. Now, you'll have to remain there until the time when you climb back out to appear at the Phantom's lair. We'll not be getting to that part tonight, so you can simply climb right back out as soon as you've dropped in tonight. So, would you like to try it now?"

Harry grinned rakishly. "You bet!" He whipped out his wand and opened the trap door with a nonverbal spell. Then, he whispered the Cushioning Charm, pointing at the floor within the trap door. Shoving his wand up his sleeve, he sat on the edge of the slope and dangled his legs above the opening. Flashing a mischievous smirk at Dumbledore, he said, "Geronimo!" and pushed off the edge, falling neatly into the open square. A peal of delighted laughter floated up. A bare moment later, Harry's flushed face appeared as he climbed back out. "That was brilliant!"

Laughter echoed through the Hall as the boys in the house and the cast on the slope...who had snuck out to watch the proceedings...reacted to Harry's brash pronouncement.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Well done, Mr. Potter. Now, take your place back on the slope and we'll pick up where we left off. It was simple enough, wasn't it?"

Harry nodded jauntily as he strode behind the slope again. "Piece of cake, sir."

"Excellent. Very well then. Minerva, would you mind doing that last bit again?"

McGonagall repeated her parting line, and Harry executed the drop, blithely clambering back out of the trap door and closing it behind him as the mob appeared above him on the slope to recite their lines. When they were done, and they all retreated again, Dumbledore slid the slope offstage and moved the Phantom's lair on, lowering the portcullis to a high enough point that Snape and Hermione could pass under it.

In a throne at one side of the lair, the dummy made to look like Christine lay haphazardly across the seat. Once the boat slid inside, the portcullis sank completely down to the stage. Snape grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her roughly from the boat, flinging his mask to the floor beside the throne.

Hermione struggled to wrench free from Snape's grasp, but he held firm and backed her against the portcullis. She glared defiantly at him, wide-eyed and full of righteous wrath and disdain as she recited, "Have you gorged yourself at last, in your lust for blood?" Snape let go of her arm, but she pressed forward, in his face, aggressively demanding, "Am I now to be prey to your lust for flesh?"

Snape spun away from her, seething at the accusation, and Hermione reached out, gripping his shoulder and pulling him back to face her. Snape whipped around, grabbing her wrist and forcing her back against the portcullis. He held her wrist against it, above her and to one side, towering over her.

Sliding his hand down her arm and over her shoulder until he circled her throat within his grip, he loomed threateningly, his face inches from hers as he said, "That fate, which condemns me to wallow in blood..." His thumb travelled up over her jaw and across her bottom lip, and he pressed closer to her, almost covering her body with his as he continued, "has also denied me the joys of the flesh..." As he trailed off, he leant down, looking as if he were going to kiss her, and she screwed her eyes shut, turning her face away and cringing. At that, Snape backed up, wounded and grim, practically spitting, "This face, the infection, which poisons our love..."

He released her, turning and stepping away as he said, "This face, which earned a mother's fear and loathing... A mask, my first, unfeeling scrap of clothing..." He spun back, seeing her turned toward the portcullis, hiding her face and gripping the bars in despair. Spurred by the hurt of her reaction, he lunged back to her and yanked her about, forcing her to face him as he roared, "Pity comes too late...turn around and face your fate: An eternity of *this* before your eyes!" He gestured harshly at his face as he finished, holding Hermione's gaze.

In the beat of silence that followed, Hermione raised a hand to his face, and Snape's hand fell. Gently touching him, she said, "This haunted face holds no horror for me now." Snape leant into her touch, eyes half-lidded. She dragged her hand down his face and past his throat to his chest, covering his heart as she said, "It's in your soul..." Then, gazing squarely at him, she lifted her chin in cold defiance and pushed him backwards as she continued, "that the true distortion lies..."

Snape's desperate, almost hopeful expression morphed into one of incredulous hurt, quickly followed by a hardened look of fury and hatred as he stared back at Hermione, utterly still in the wake of her rejection.

There was a moment of deafening silence, crackling with emotion, before everyone was snapped from the thrall by Dumbledore clearing his throat awkwardly and saying, "Yes... well... Why don't you all take a moment to write your blocking and business in your scripts while I reset the stage?"

Onstage, Snape and Hermione were blinking owlishly, taking deep breaths as they came down from the intensity of the short scene. Cutting glances at Dumbledore, they shuffled into the wing, flipping to the correct page in their scripts as they went. Offstage, several cast members were staring at them, completely taken aback by what they had just witnessed.

Mindful of appearances, Snape hastily murmured, "Miss Granger, I trust you were not too shaken by the blocking choices?" He saw all eyes snap to her, awaiting her answer.

Hermione quickly gathered her wits and coolly replied, "Indeed not, sir. I thought they were inspired. It certainly gives the scene its intensity. I assume you approve of my actions in response?"

Snape nodded gravely. "Yes. A nice twist."

Hermione suppressed a smile. "Thank you, sir." She saw the disbelieving frowns around her at Snape's compliment.

Dumbledore's voice rang out. "All right then. Places! From the beginning of the scene again."

People milled about, scattering to their spots. Snape Summoned his mask from the floor by the throne, deftly catching it without looking as he gestured for Hermione to follow him to the boat again. Before they began, Harry darted out and peered into the trapdoor to make sure that the Cushioning Charm was still good. Giving a cheerful thumbs-up to Dumbledore, he raced back around the set to climb onto the sloping piece.

They ran through the scene a second time, and Harry manfully suppressed the grin that wanted to surface when he dropped from the slope. Furtively climbing back out and scuttling offstage while the mob recited their part, Harry cast a searching look over the mob group, now able to appreciate Terry's enjoyment of being "hanged."

When the scene came to an end again, Dumbledore announced, "This time we use the music and everyone sings! Let's go!"

As always happened when the music was added, the excitement level among the cast rose, and everyone upped the ante, focusing on giving their best to their performance. Hermione's clear notes rang through the Hall as she goaded the Phantom. Snape's voice ran the gamut from pained, wistful, and despairing to sensual and suggestive, to furious, hateful, and dangerous. When they finished, they stood glaring at each other for a beat after the music stopped and Dumbledore shut the music box. Finally, they both blinked and relaxed their tense postures, inhaling deeply and swallowing hard as they backed away from each other.

Several pairs of eyes were on them, fascinated by their crackling connection during the scene. But, as they wound down and separated, the interest waned, and people turned to Dumbledore, who was gesturing for everyone to come out and gather on the apron.

"Gather round. You there in the house, come join us. Everyone, come out. Come along..." Once the cast was assembled in a curious group in front of him, he beamed. "Tonight's rehearsal was short because the scene was short. But it's a good thing because I have something special for you." Students exchanged glances and half-smiles. "Tomorrow is the Hogsmeade outing, and it happens to be Valentine's Day as well." He paused, chuckling at the coy looks several girls cast at their paramours, giggling.

Glancing at the teachers, he suppressed a snort at McGonagall's wary expression and Snape's look of horror. "As a token of the appreciation I have for your dedication and hard work, I would like to present everyone with a gift." With that, he flourished his wand, and a table appeared, with a large box and a vase of flowers.

Bowing grandly, he announced, "Ladies first! Professors McGonagall and Trelawney?" Smiling at them, he inclined his head graciously and reached into the vase to present them with a long-stemmed rose each. McGonagall's was crimson with gold edges, in homage to her status as Head of Gryffindor House, and Trelawney's was white with light pink tints deep within the petals. Both women smiled, offering sincere words of thanks as they sniffed appreciatively at the sweet aroma.

"Would the ladies of Hufflepuff join me?" As Hannah and Susan shyly crossed to the table, Dumbledore presented them with carnations, white with yellow and black veins tracing through the petals, and with a yellow and black ribbon tied in a bow around the stem. Once they took the flowers, he reached into the box and offered them a small heart-shaped box of Valentine's chocolates from Honeydukes. Smiling, they thanked him and returned to the group, showing off their gifts.

"May I see the ladies of Slytherin and Ravenclaw?" Luna glided over, followed by Pansy and Millicent. The carnations they received were much like the others, except that they were white with their House colours shot through the petals, and their House ribbons tied around them. They, too, were given the boxes of chocolates.

After they thanked the Headmaster, he said, "And now, the ladies of Gryffindor?" Lavender, Parvati, Ginny, and Hermione strode forward, beaming. Dumbledore twinkled benevolently at them as he distributed the flowers and candy.

Snape watched Hermione flushing prettily and grinning in delight at the unexpected treat. Frowning slightly, he thought, *Look at her. She's so pleased. That's it. I must do something. If such a little thing as a carnation and a bit of chocolate makes her this happy... Especially as she wasn't expecting it. Hmm... A carnation? Wasn't that one of the flowers she said she liked? What were the others? Dammit, man, think! You were supposed to file that away for future reference!*

Dumbledore had now called the boys up to the table, handing out boxes of Chocolate Frogs. Snape was startled from his introspection by Dumbledore calling his name.

"Severus, you're the only one left. Come here and take your gift." Dumbledore was beaming at him as well, and Snape blinked rapidly, shaking himself as he crossed to the table. Gravely, he accepted the gift box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans. "This is a special selection of beans, and each portion is labelled. Rather than take the chance of you suffering as I have at the hands of Bertie Bott, I chose the pre-sorted selection, in which only tasty flavours have been included." He chuckled and Snape inclined his head in thanks.

"That was indeed kind of you, Headmaster. Thank you."

The students were standing about in clumps, sharing sweets and admiring each other's gifts. Snape glanced at Hermione again and saw her blissfully inhaling the aroma of her carnation, eyes closed in pleasure.

What were those damned flowers? They were ones with heavy perfumes... Carnation was one. Not roses. Wait...gardenias! Yes! That was one. I remember the other one was another tropical flower... He concentrated and began going through his encyclopaedic knowledge of plants and their uses, eyes closing as he thought. *Plumeria! That's it!* His eyes flew open in triumphant relief. Lips quirking in a secretive smile as an idea took shape, he turned to Dumbledore and said, "If we are done here, sir, I would like to retire."

Dumbledore nodded and said, "Good night, Severus. Enjoy the beans. And..." He paused and laid a finger alongside his nose, eyes darting around. "If you find any not to your liking, I'd be happy to dispose of them for you."

Snape snorted, shaking his head at the older man's sweet tooth. "Of course, Albus. Thank you again."

Dumbledore winked at him and beamed. "You're quite welcome. Good night!"

Snape swept one more look over the cast, thrilling to his plan to surprise Hermione, and Disapparated. Once he was gone, the rest of the cast soon dispersed, and the Hall was restored. Students all over the castle that night went to bed excitedly anticipating the next day.

Hermione lounged on her bed after rehearsal, twirling the carnation in her fingers and sniffing the fragrance repeatedly. Her thoughts were focused on what to do for Snape for Valentine's Day. Sure, she had told Ginny that it wasn't a big deal, but she still would like to come up with something special to surprise him. Flowers, sweets, and trinkets weren't his style, and she wanted something more personal.

I wish we could be together. If I had the chance, I'd love to take him out to a nice dinner... Of course, we can't do that, what with the whole secrecy thing... Wait. Dinner... That's it! She shot forward in excitement, beaming. *His favourite dinner! I can arrange for that. I'll just have to send him a note to stay in his rooms at dinner time, and I'll have his favourite meal sent to him! It's perfect!*

Bouncing as she scrambled from the bed to her desk, she snatched up some parchment and her Disappearing Ink and scribbled a note to Snape. When she had vanished the writing and sealed the note, she snagged another piece of parchment and wrote out the menu request for Snape's dinner.

I'll send these both out first thing in the morning. Dobby won't know I sent the request; he'll simply think it's from Severus. Oh, I hope it turns out well.

Transfiguring a water glass into a vase, she filled it with water and placed her flower in it, setting it on her desk. Smiling, she indulged in another chocolate, savouring the flavour as it melted on her tongue.

Eagerly anticipating the next day, if only for the novelty of getting out of the castle again, and for her surprise for Snape, Hermione tucked herself in early, knowing that the sooner she went to sleep, the sooner she'd wake up and find it was the next day.

Down in his office, Snape was poring over his catalogues, determining which proprietor he should contact the next day. He knew it would be tricky to be able to acquire what he wanted, particularly with the timing and the holiday, but he made a list of several, in case he had to work his way through them. Fortunately, businesses such as nurseries and flora shops were open on weekends, since plants didn't stop growing two days every week.

Retrieving his Disappearing Ink, he penned a note to Hermione, telling her to get rid of everyone before she returned to her room after dinner, as she could expect a surprise. Smiling in anticipation, he vanished the ink and sealed the scroll, setting his alarm so he could wake in the middle of the night and pop into Hermione's room to leave it for her to find.

Stomach roiling in excitement, Snape lay in bed, the scroll on his nightstand, staring into the darkness as he tried to fall asleep. Eventually, he dozed fitfully, springing awake as his alarm went off in the wee hours of the morning. Hastily donning his lounge wear, he grabbed the scroll and Apparated to Hermione's room, hunkering down behind her armchair.

Pausing long enough to hear her steady breathing, he stood, tiptoeing over to her desk, where he propped the scroll by what looked to be some outgoing mail. Gazing tenderly at her peaceful expression, he fought the desire to crawl beside her and curl up with her. Loath to take the chance of spoiling his surprise, he shut his eyes firmly and Disapparated, sighing regretfully as he slipped back into his own bed. Groggy after the rush of his little excursion, he dropped off to sleep easily, a faint smile on his face.

52- Valentine's Day... of Doom? Part One of Two

Chapter 54 of 84

Valentine's Day arrives, with surprises in store for quite a few people! Some are delightful beyond compare, and others... not so much.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: As usual, life continues rearing its ugly head and keeping me from updating as quickly as I'd like. But, this chapter ended up being so long that I once again had to break it into two parts. elfTLG made this lovely wallpaper of PoH: <http://i5.photobucket.com/albums/y200/elfTLG/ph-of-hog01.jpg>

It's so awesome! :) Thanks again elfTLG!! And, as always, thank you to my wonderful beta Ladyofthemasque (who has finished her Book 3, YAY!!) and to SnivellusSnape for pre-reading and sounding board action. Plus, I can't thank you fabulous readers and reviewers enough for making me a very happy Good_Witch! I appreciate your support more than I can express. *genueflects to all the fine folk out there* Don't forget, you can always keep up with me on my LJ: http://www.livejournal.com/users/pern_dragon/

Cheers! :)

Chapter 52- Valentine's Day... of Doom?

Part One of Two

Hermione awoke early, snapping awake as she remembered everything that the day promised. Smiling and humming to herself, she bathed and dressed, preparing to go to the owlery before breakfast. Finally ready, she crossed to her desk to collect her missives, only to find another scroll atop them. Brow furrowing in perplexity, she picked it up and opened it, blinking as she saw that it was blank.

Where did this come from? This wasn't here when I went to sleep, and it's not mine; they're right here, ready to go. It has to be Disappearing Ink...

Chewing her lip, she tapped the parchment with her wand and whispered, "*Aperio*," watching Snape's familiar scrawl appear. Sucking in a breath that he had somehow sent the note to her while she slept, her eyes raced over the short note.

"Hermione,

When you get back from Hogsmeade this evening, be sure that you are alone upon your return to your room after dinner. I cannot stress this enough. Do not allow anyone to even see your room once dinner is over. This may be cryptic, but it is vitally important.

...O.G."

Eyes widening at the little thrill of anticipation that washed over her, she smirked at his sign-off. "*O.G.*"? *How funny! I wonder if he sent a house-elf up with this.* Then, with a tiny sigh, she vanished the writing again and tucked the scroll in her bureau, snatching up her letters and heading for the door.

The common room was empty as she hastened through it, a fact for which she was grateful, as it meant she didn't have to worry about fending off Colin. Briskly heading to the owlery, she smiled to herself about her plan to send Snape's favourite dinner to his quarters. She sent two school owls off with her notes, one to Dobby in the kitchens, and the "blank" one to Snape. It would likely arrive with the morning post, but she wasn't too worried about it, since the writing was invisible anyway.

With a definite spring in her step, she made her way to the Great Hall for breakfast. A few students were already there, obviously excited about the upcoming trip. As the meal wore on, her friends showed up, laughing and jostling. Hermione couldn't help but wonder if Snape was going to come to breakfast, as it was getting late, and he hadn't arrived yet. Stifling a sigh that she hadn't seen him, she made her tea anyway, gazing about the Hall at the people pairing off for the day.

Seamus, with a very pink face, had ambled over to the Ravenclaw table to ask Luna if she'd like to go to Madam Puddifoot's with him. Luna, smiling serenely, acquiesced, and gestured for Seamus to sit by her until it was time to leave. Ron was already over at the Hufflepuff table, practically attached to Susan. When Dean sniggered at Seamus, Parvati and Lavender berated him again.

In a lofty tone, Parvati said, "Really, Dean, I'm wondering if maybe you're just jealous, and that's why you keep taking the piss."

Dean flashed a grin at Parvati. "I'm not! I'd rather not be tied down. You know, be able to play the field. I like being single if it means I can be free to do what I want."

Lavender and Parvati exchanged darkly amused glances and Lavender said, "But what if what you want to do is snog someone? You can't do that if you're single."

Dean's grin widened into a mischievous smirk. "Oh, really? So, was I making all that up in my head on New Year's Eve?" He cocked an eyebrow at Lavender's tell-tale blush. Parvati snorted at her friend's discomfiture.

Neville, who had been watching the byplay with gentle amusement, interjected, "Being single's not that bad. At least you don't have to worry about disappointing someone special on Valentine's Day. I tell you, it's nice not to have that kind of pressure."

Dean piped up, "You got it, mate. There's always so much pressure to be part of a couple on Valentine's Day. Stress is not fun! And I'd rather have fun." He suddenly lit up. "Oi! I've got an idea: let's all band together today, in defiance of the couples all around us." He paused, laughing. "We'll be the 'singles club,' and not the kind where the point is to meet people to pair off." Beaming at everyone, he tilted his head and said, "So? What d'you reckon? You lot in?"

The other seventh-year Gryffindors exchanged bemused looks and cracked conspiratorial smiles. Slow nods met his challenge.

Neville chuckled and slid down the bench toward Hermione, who was absently swirling her tea, looking pensive. "Hermione?"

Starting up straight, Hermione blinked and said, "Wha...?"

"Dean and the girls had a fun idea. We're all going to band together today as a singles club...and not the kind where the point is to pair off, you know? So, I wanted to see if you wanted to join us." He smiled.

Hermione bit back her retort that she wasn't single, mind racing. *I'm not single, but at least if I join them, there'll be safety in numbers. I hope they haven't invited Colin in, too. And, if we "revel in our singlehood," that should hopefully be enough to keep Colin from approaching me. I'm sorry, Severus, but this façade is for the best!*

Glancing at the others further down the table, she swallowed and said, "That sounds good. Thanks, Neville." She patted his arm and smiled fondly at him.

Beaming, Neville said, "Excellent! We'll gather on the way there. See you later." With that, he slid back down the bench toward the others.

Breakfast was drawing to a close, and the post owls arrived. Hermione watched a school owl winging its way toward the High Table, only to circle a few times before exiting again.

I bet that was the owl with my letter to Severus. I do hope he gets it in time.

Down in his quarters, Snape was doggedly contacting shop after shop, ordering what he could get and arranging for Floo-delivery that day. After several Floo calls, he realized how much of the morning he had already spent in his task, and he ordered a tray of tea and toast to sustain him, as he wouldn't be making it to breakfast at this rate.

He was in the middle of another call when he heard the chime at his door, indicating that he had mail. Straining his neck in his ill-timed attempt to turn to look at his door while his head was firmly entrenched in the Floo, he stifled a curse and shot an aggrieved glance at the shop representative as he mumbled, "I beg your pardon; there's an owl at my door. I'll be but a moment." Ignoring the half-formed protest on the woman's lips, he extricated himself from the Floo and heaved to his feet, barrelling across the room to his door, where the indignant bird was hovering, hooting around the scroll in its beak. As soon as Snape took the mail from it, the owl screeched in rebuke and whirled, arrowing down the dungeon corridor. Calling an acid "Thanks" at the retreating form, Snape rolled his eyes and slammed his door, rushing back to the Floo, where he sank back to his knees and ducked his head back into the connection.

The clerk was glaring at him in pique, drumming her fingers in an irritated staccato, and he offered her an ingratiatingly sheepish smile, saying, "I do beg your pardon. Thank you so much for waiting. Now, I was just about to order all the gardenias and plumerias you have in stock, to be delivered by Floo today, for which I am of course willing to pay whatever fees may be attached to such a rush order." He snorted inwardly at her swift change in demeanour, particularly when she realized how much he was willing to spend.

Eventually, he had the desired amount, and he had arranged for all deliveries to come to him directly. It wouldn't do for the house-elves to possibly gossip about heaps of flowers being sent to his quarters.

Sinking into his chair with a weary sigh...*Really, wizards should look into a more comfortable mode of long-distance contact, as Floo calls can get to be hard on the knees!*...he fished the scroll out of his pocket. Unrolling it, he was surprised to see it was blank, but then a tiny smile quirked his lips as he cast *Aperio* on it, watching Hermione's script taking shape.

"Severus,

Don't come to dinner in the Hall this evening. Wait in your quarters for Dobby. I'll miss seeing you; but please do this for me. Don't ask questions. I promise it'll make sense later.

Yours, Hermione"

Mystified, Snape re-read the short note. He glanced at the time, realizing with a pang of regret that she was well on her way to Hogsmeade by now. *I didn't get to breakfast, you won't be at lunch, and now you want me to miss you at dinner, too? Hmph... It's a good thing I have my plans already, or I'd be rather put out at not being allowed to see you at all.* Eyes flashing at the thought of the evening's surprise, Snape vanished her writing and secreted the scroll with the rest of her letters.

He strode out of his bedroom, realizing he was wandering aimlessly. His stomach kept roiling with the anticipation and worry about surprising Hermione. *Well, I had better stay here for any deliveries. They're all guaranteed to arrive before five.* Briskly stepping through to his office, he collected a stack of assignments to grade, taking them back to his chair by the hearth. Feet propped on the ottoman, stack of papers on the side table, he focused on grading, trying to ignore the dreadful fluttering in his stomach.

That afternoon, parcels began arriving as shop clerks Flooed him to send over his orders. By five, he had a towering stack of boxes beside his dining table. The sweet scents of the flowers exuded from them, stealing through his sitting room.

Glancing anxiously at the time, Snape Apparated to Hermione's room, as usual hunkering down behind her armchair. As he peeked beyond the chair, he saw Crookshanks eyeing him sleepily from her bed. Smiling at the animal, who stretched and purred at him as Snape stood, he murmured, "Good evening, Crookshanks. I shall be right back with a surprise for your mistress." Crookshanks yawned. Snorting, Snape inclined his head at the beast and Disapparated.

Carefully gripping a large armful of boxes, Snape popped back into Hermione's room. After several trips, he had transferred all of the flower parcels, and he set about opening them. From his pocket, he brought out several shrunken potions bottles, which he restored to their original sizes. Hastily tidying her desk and bureau, as well as the tops of her bookcases, he lined the bottles along the surfaces. Muttering, "*Aguamenti*," he half-filled each bottle with water. With exquisite care, he picked the blooms from the boxes, arranging them in the bottles. The cloying fragrance wafted through the room, and Crookshanks meandered over to one of the boxes, sniffing at the petals.

"I wouldn't recommend trying to eat any of that, friend." Snape was busy arranging flowers in a bottle, but he tossed that advice over his shoulder to the cat. Crookshanks sniffed again, then, tail twitching, settled back to simply watch the dark man work. As Snape returned to the bed to collect more flowers, he cast a lopsided grin at Crookshanks and scrubbed him behind the ears. "Good lad." Crookshanks rumbled and flopped to one side, writhing on his back and quite obviously entreating Snape for a tummy-scrub. Snorting, Snape said, "Perhaps when I'm done..."

When he had finished filling the bottles he had brought, he gazed about the room and tugged drawers open a couple of inches, propping more flowers inside them, spilling out. Then, Vanishing the empty boxes, he gathered a large handful of flowers and cast *Diffindo*, watching the petals separating from the stems and falling onto the bed. Scattering the petals over the pillow and bedspread, he tacked up some other stalks along the bedposts, using Temporary Sticking Charms. By then, there were only a couple of handfuls left, and he shrugged, cutting the stems short and casting a Hover Charm on them. They floated in the air, wafting about on the faint air currents.

Crookshanks narrowed his eyes and crouched, watching them. Snape saw the cat's predatory intent and pointed an admonitory finger at the animal, saying, "Don't you dare. I'll not have you attacking Hermione's gifts." They locked eyes, and finally Crookshanks blinked, relaxing from his pouncing posture. Exhaling gustily, Snape said, "Thank you." This time, when Crookshanks flopped over and exposed his belly, Snape chuckled and gave in.

"All right, you maddening beastie. Here. Is that what you wanted?" He stroked the cat from throat to belly, skritch along his ribs and under his chin. Crookshanks's eyes closed and he purred loudly in bliss. Snape allowed a few minutes of sating the animal before he sighed and said, "I have to go. Hermione said I was to wait for Dobby tonight. I can't imagine why. Hopefully, I shall see you later." And, with a final pat, he stood and Disapparated. Crookshanks slowly blinked, still lulled by Snape's caresses, then closed his eyes and dozed off, content to wait until he'd see the man with the delightful fingers again.

Snape arrived in his sitting room to find Dobby anxiously awaiting him. "Sir!" Dobby cried, washing his fingers together. "Oh, it's so good to see you, sir. Dobby didn't want to leave your dinner without knowing where you wanted it."

Snape frowned in confusion. "My dinner?"

Dobby nodded fervently, pointing at the dining table, where a covered tray sat. "Everything should still be hot, sir. There's plenty for Dobby to do in the kitchens, as it's dinner time, sir, but Dobby doesn't shirk his duty. When the request came down this morning, and with Dobby asked for in particular..." The elf paused, chest thrust out with pride and eyes huge and round in awed gratitude. "Such a very important task for Dobby; and is Professor Snape pleased?" He gestured toward the table again, nervously pulling on his ears.

Snape, utterly baffled, crossed to the table and yanked the cover from the tray. Steam billowed up, and when it cleared, his eyes went wide and his breath caught.

There, on the tray, was a platter with a roasted chicken, golden brown with crispy skin sprinkled with savoury seasonings. Beside it, a bowl of fried potatoes and caramelized onions sat next to another bowl of shredded green beans, glistening in butter and pepper. A small plate with fresh rolls and pats of butter was on the other side of the platter.

Snape stared, frozen. Dobby squeaked, "Is it to your liking, sir?"

Fighting the moisture that threatened, prickling under his eyelids, Snape blinked furiously, rasping, "Yes. Yes, it's perfect, Dobby. I'm very pleased, thank you."

Dobby trembled in an excess of relief and happiness. "Thank you, sir. Would you be wanting tea with your dinner, sir?" At Snape's faint nod, Dobby snapped his fingers and set the tea service he had just conjured beside the tray. With a little bow, he said, "There's honey and lemon for Professor Snape. Dobby and all the house-elves know Professor Snape takes his tea with honey and lemon."

Snape gave a little bark of laughter. Smiling faintly, he turned to Dobby. "You do your job well, Dobby. Thank you."

Dobby's eyes rolled back in an agony of rapture. "If Dobby can ever be of service, Professor Snape has only to ask, sir. Thank you for allowing Dobby to serve you."

Snape nodded gently. "Run along back to the kitchens, Dobby. You have fulfilled your task admirably. Good evening."

Dobby trilled, "Good evening, sir!" and popped out of existence.

Snape tugged a chair from the table and sank into it, still staring at the meal before him. *Good gods, she's clever! And so thoughtful. I tell you, ol' chap, it's a damned good thing you did what you did... How low would you feel if you hadn't done anything after all, and she had managed this for you? So sweet... I shall have to thank her most profoundly.* With that, he sampled a bit of the potatoes and beans, closing his eyes as he savoured the tastes that brought back memories. Then, grinning like a child that he didn't need to mind his manners in front of anyone else, he pulled a drumstick off the chicken and tucked in, fingers and lips shining with grease.

The simple enjoyment of the food washed away the nervousness in the pit of his stomach, and he relished the wholesome flavours. Eating more than was his usual wont, he finally sat back, replete, and wiped his greasy fingers and mouth on a napkin, sighing in contentment.

That was absolutely delicious, love. I daresay that you'll be one to spoil me when given half the chance. A delighted grin spread over his face, and he bounced up from the table to wash up, absently Banishing the tray back to the kitchens.

Hermione and the rest of the "singles club" tramped into the Great Hall that evening, with windblown hair and faces stinging with cold. They laughed as they filed in, all linked arm in arm in one long train, tugging and pushing each other as they shuffled down the aisle and flopped onto the long bench. Disentangling themselves from each other, they all reached for the hot drinks set on the table, cupping their chapped hands around the mugs and blowing on the surface of the liquid, sighing in relief as the steam clouded up, warming their frozen noses.

Sagging against the table on his elbows, Dean closed his eyes and sighed, "Ah, much better! Bloody hell, it gets cold after dark!"

Lavender smirked and shot a mischievous glance beyond him at Parvati before reaching up and tucking her cold fingertips beneath his collar against the warm flesh of his neck. Dean yelped and shot up, frantically batting at her hand. Everyone else laughed at his reaction, and he managed to catch Lavender's hands in his, glaring at her.

"That wasn't nice at all!" Indignant, he scowled, still gripping her hands. Then, as she smirked at him, he seemed to suddenly notice how chilly her fingers were. Blinking in concern, he murmured, "Wow, your hands *are* cold." Releasing her fingertips from his tight grasp, he wrapped his hands around one of hers and began rubbing it, chafing it to restore circulation and heat. "This should help..."

Lavender's smirk wilted, and she regarded Dean with round eyes. Taken aback by his solicitude, she stared at him as he ministered to her frigid fingers. Whether or not his actions warmed her hands, they certainly warmed her cheeks, as a blush stole over them.

Parvati elbowed Neville, who in turn tapped Hermione, and they all turned amused eyes on the pair. Leaning past Neville, Parvati whispered, "So much for 'not pairing off,' eh?" The three stifled sniggers and went back to their dinner.

Hermione slowly sipped her soup, enjoying the warmth it sent through her body. Glancing at the High Table, she noted that Snape wasn't there, and she fervently hoped that he had received her message and was enjoying his dinner in his quarters.

Harry and Ginny appeared later, but they were so engrossed with each other that they sat a little ways down the table, by themselves. Seamus was sitting with Luna, and Ron was beside Susan. Parvati and Neville were chatting blithely, and Hermione suddenly felt very alone. Of course, Colin was seated with his mates further down the table, and he had periodically cast faint smiles in her direction, but that way lay danger, and she was not fool enough to encourage him.

Quietly finishing her meal, she cast a long glance around the Hall, seeing couples sitting close together, bodies touching, fingers entwined. Even those who weren't in relationships still had mates to chat with. She could have interrupted Neville and Parvati, but she was loath to butt into their conversation, particularly when she had noticed that Neville was being much more confident and lively. Parvati would likely not have spent such a long time with the old Neville, personally liking boys with more grit and personality, but this new Neville had improved beyond measure, and Hermione didn't want to derail the other girl's appreciation for how Neville had matured.

So, with a wistful sigh, she pushed back from the table, slowly spinning in her seat to rise from the bench. Neville, to his credit, immediately looked up and said, "Leaving already, Hermione?"

Hermione flashed a wan smile. "I'm just tired out from all the excitement today. And, I'm feeling a little run down. I'm just going to settle in early and get some rest. I had a

good time today with the 'singles club.'" She grinned at Parvati and Neville, who chuckled. Dean and Lavender were oblivious to the rest of them, so focused were they on each other in their conversation.

Parvati said, "It was fun, wasn't it. See you later, Hermione. Get some rest."

Neville squeezed her hand and gazed at her earnestly. "You do look a bit worn out. Promise you'll let us know if you need anything?"

Hermione smiled fondly at him, idly thinking how lucky some girl would be to eventually land such a sensitive fellow, and said, "I will. I promise. But, I really just want to rest. So, if anyone asks, just spread the word that I don't want to be disturbed unless it's life and death, okay?" The others nodded, and she chuckled. "Good night."

With a murmured "Good night," Neville released her hand and watched her go, before turning his attention back to Parvati. But, before they resumed their conversation, he said, "Excuse me a moment," leaning past Parvati to poke Dean. As the other boy turned to look at him, Neville said, "Nobody bother Hermione tonight. She's not feeling too well, and she doesn't want to be disturbed."

Dean nodded hastily. "No worries, mate. Sure thing." Glancing at Lavender, who nodded agreement, he nodded sharply at Neville before turning back to his conversation.

Neville flashed a grin at Parvati before lobbing a wadded-up sweets wrapper at Harry and Ginny. Snorting at their bewildered expressions, he called over to them, "Hey, listen up! Hermione's not feeling too well, and she doesn't want to be disturbed, so don't bother her tonight, all right?" They shrugged and nodded.

Neville turned his attention back to Parvati, smiling attentively and saying, "Now, where were we?"

Parvati, impressed with his protective streak, tilted her head and beamed at him. Neville, distracted by how pretty she was with that dazzling smile, didn't notice Colin's thoughtful expression as he had listened to Neville warning the others.

Hermione mounted the stairs to Gryffindor Tower on reluctant feet. She knew there was nothing for it; she couldn't spend the holiday with her love. But, that didn't stop her from being sad about it. It wasn't that she wanted to spend time alone...being alone wasn't really at the top of her list...but she couldn't stomach watching so many other couples enjoying their time together. It was like they were rubbing her nose in it, even though they couldn't possibly be doing that, since they had no idea she was in a relationship. But, envy made her over-sensitive, and she just wanted to get away from the whole atmosphere.

Even the Fat Lady was simpering and blushing at a knight who had entered her frame, and Hermione sighed heavily as she clambered through the portrait hole. The common room wasn't empty, but the students occupying it were spaced away from each other, paired off in dim nooks and corners, murmuring and giggling or snogging. Hermione rolled her eyes and scowled as she hurried past them. Bordering on morose, she dragged to her door and opened it, only to be frozen to the spot in shock.

The thick, sweet aroma of gardenia and plumeria engulfed her like a wet blanket, and her mouth fell open at the veritable bower of blooms that was her room. Struggling to breathe, she forced herself to blink; and, panicking that someone would see, she lurched through the doorway and slammed it shut, falling back against it with shaky knees. Her eyes nearly bugged out of her head as she glanced wildly about, seeing virtually every surface covered with blossoms.

Sweet mother of Merlin! How? Her heart thundered in her chest, and she took a deep trembling breath, trying to assimilate all that was before her. Pushing off from the door, she dazedly staggered through the room, lightly brushing her fingertips over the bottles and flowers, dragging her hands through the loose petals on her bed. A fierce joy spread through her chest, making it tight, and she felt tears welling up.

Sniffing vainly, she sank onto her bed, gathering a purring Crookshanks in her arms and burying her face in his fur. In a choked voice, she said, "It's so beautiful! Like in a story... How in the world did he do it? And he remembered what flowers I like! I love it... I love him! I do, I do, I do..." A delighted laugh bubbled up, and she wiped the tears from her eyes, beaming around at the unexpected Paradise that had been created for her.

Snape kept looking at the time, waiting until dinner was almost over. When there were only a few minutes left, he shot to his feet and Apparated to the Great Hall, quickly gazing over the tables, seeking out a familiar bushy brown head. Eyes narrowing in triumph, he saw that Hermione was not there, and he inhaled sharply, Disapparating again.

Back in his quarters, he strode nervously into the bathroom, making sure he was presentable. Looking at his reflection, he noticed the pale stain of colour on his cheeks. Smoothing a hand through his hair, he swallowed hard and closed his eyes.

Hermione had swept petals aside and snagged Snape's shirt from under her pillow, curling up and burying her face in it. Crookshanks lay half-sprawled over her waist, and she absently stroked his fur, lulled by the vibrations of his purr on her belly.

She was lying there with her eyes closed, touring her memories of time with Snape, when Crookshanks meowed. Giving him a little extra scrub, she otherwise ignored him. So, when he meowed again and squirmed from under her hand to trot down to the end of the bed, she frowned and opened her eyes, wondering what was bothering him. She nearly did a double-take, eyes snapping wide open as she gasped in astonishment.

At the foot of her bed, lounging on his knees, Snape was stroking Crookshanks, smiling shyly at her. Locking eyes with her, he barely intoned, "Surprise."

Hermione clamped a hand over her mouth as she struggled to sit up, tears overflowing her lids like the dizzying joy that overflowed her heart. A faint keening noise was muffled by her hand, and she panted, trying to maintain control of her body, which was tightening and shuddering with rising sobs.

Shaking her head, she dashed the tears from her eyes and sniffed, gulping back a cry before croaking, "Severus?"

Snape straightened swiftly, gliding around to sit on the side of her bed at her feet and reaching forward to wipe the tear tracks on her cheeks. Gently, voice full of the same emotion that was pouring from Hermione, he whispered, "Happy Valentine's Day, my love."

With an incredulous whimper, Hermione launched herself at him, nearly bowling him over as she wrapped herself around him, hugging him tight. His hands smoothed over her back, caressing her hair as he murmured soothing nonsense into her neck.

For several minutes, Hermione shuddered as she spent her sobs on his shoulder. Snape simply held her, unsure of what else to do to help. Fortunately, he had made the right choice. As she calmed, he fished a handkerchief from his pocket and murmured, "Here."

Hermione slowly released him, taking the handkerchief and wiping her face, turning away to blow her nose. Snape stroked her hair again. His worry was plain in his voice when he said, "Hermione?"

No longer soggy, Hermione faced him again, still looking gobsmacked. Shaking her head in wonder, she rasped, "How are you here?"

Snape smiled faintly and said, "I Apparated, of course."

Rolling her eyes at such an answer, she retorted, *How?* You can't Apparate somewhere you've never seen!"

Snape's lids lowered in a smug, secretive expression, and he rumbled, "I am a Slytherin, love; I have my ways." He snorted softly at her dangerous glare, then glanced around the room, querying, "Do you like it?"

Hermione closed her eyes and a laugh burst forth. "Like it? I love it! It's perfect. Stop being so damned smug and tell me: how did you manage all this?"

The joy in her eyes was a balm to his soul. Lips spreading into a pleased grin, he drawled, "I got a little help from a friend."

Hermione's eyes went round. "Ginny knows?"

Snape shook his head and one corner of his mouth quirked higher than the other. "No. I was completely circumspect in gathering the information needed." He cocked a wicked eyebrow at her and added, "You know how the Pensieve works..."

Pieces fell into place, and Hermione sucked in a breath, giggling at him. Her voice was almost a squeak as she said, "You've known ever since *then*? That's been over a month! Why haven't you come here before?" A spark of offended reproof lit her eyes, and Snape bit back a laugh.

Leaning forward to thoroughly kiss her, he eventually pulled back and, lips brushing hers as he spoke, purred, "Who says I haven't?"

Hermione really didn't know if she could handle so many shocks in such quick succession. A flash of heat coursed through her at the thought that Snape had been in her rooms without her knowledge, and she ached to know when he had visited. She lunged at him again, framing his face in her hands and snogging him desperately. At his instantaneous response, she moaned, falling backward onto the bed and pulling him with her.

Snape's ears were roaring with the pulse of his blood as it raced in response to her fervent kisses. Feeling his chest tightening with love...and his trousers tightening with lust...he slid onto the bed, covering her body with his. Finally breaking away from her intoxicating mouth, he nipped along her jaw and down the cord of her neck as she gasped, "You devil! Oh, gods, how I love you..."

Snape instantly pulled up, gazing intently into her eyes as he breathed, "I love you, Hermione. You've given me life. Even with such little thoughtful things as sending me dinner tonight." He paused, eyes bright as he surveyed her in awe. "I wanted to give you whatever you wanted, and if you wanted to be with me, then here I am."

Hermione's lips trembled as she whispered, "But why not before?"

A smouldering smile spread his lips as he retorted, "I thought it might be a nice gesture to save the surprise for something special. Forgive me; I'm rather new at all this. Was that not a good choice?"

Hermione laughed in delight. "It was magnificent! And very romantic, dear heart."

Snape pretended to scoff, but he couldn't keep back the satisfied smile that crept over his lips. He lifted his body from hers and rolled to the side, pulling her to roll toward him and rest her head on his chest. She flung a leg over his, and he wrapped his arm around her, under her head. Snaking her arm across his chest, she squeezed him tight, burrowing against him with a rapturous sigh.

Snape watched the flowers floating above them and smiled. Eventually, he broke the contented silence, asking, "Are you sure you won't be disturbed?"

Hermione nodded. "I told people I was tired and worn out from today, and I didn't want to be bothered unless it was life or death!" Snape's chuckle vibrated under her cheek. "I can't believe you did all this. When did you first come here? How often have you visited? I want to know everything!" She lifted her head and beamed at him, eyes sparkling.

Snape grunted at her chin poking him, and murmured, "Very well then, I'll tell you." Hermione hummed in pleasure and settled back against him.

"Once Dumbledore gave me the ability to Apparate, I immediately thought of sneaking up here. But, like you said, I can't Apparate to a place I haven't seen. So, when Ginny had detention, and she told me why you were so upset about my birthday, I entreated her to let me see the memory of your conversation in the Pensieve. Not only did it show me exactly what was bothering you, it gave me ample time to memorize this location. I first came up here one morning while you were in class, to get a better feel for where everything is. That's when I met Crookshanks."

Hermione twitched. "Was that before or after you asked me about him?"

Lightly, Snape replied, "Before. And, I already knew about you taking my shirt before you confessed." As Hermione reared up again in surprise, Snape quickly added, "You can thank your familiar for that, as well. He's the one who showed it to me."

Hermione cast an affronted glare at Crookshanks, who was placidly watching them, curled up at the foot of the bed. In a low voice, she snapped, "Tattle-tale!"

Snape chuckled, squeezing her shoulder and urging her to lie down again. "I'm just glad he didn't sound the alarm, and that he seems to like me."

Loyally, Hermione hugged him and said, "Of course he does. Kneazles are brilliant judges of character. And, of course, he already knew your scent."

"Indeed." He paused, remembering the other things he had found on his first visit to her room. A knot of uncomfortable anxiety formed in his belly, and he swallowed hard. Knowing that there was no better time to broach the subject, he ventured, "Hermione..."

"Yes?"

Clearing his throat, Snape ground his teeth and rumbled, "I... happened to run across some other... things... that same day."

Hermione frowned in curiosity. "Like what?"

"Well... it was... some...ahem...reading material."

Comprehension dawned, and Hermione was awash in mortification. A startled "Oh!" squeaked from her, and she sucked in a breath. Flushing madly, she shrank away from Snape, wriggling out of his embrace and dashing for the refuge of her bathroom.

Snape sat up, reaching for her, but she was too quick. By the time he had made it to the bathroom door, Hermione had slammed it in his face. Snape sagged against it, grimacing at her reaction and at the fact that he was sure to cock things up since he had no idea how to approach things delicately.

Rolling his head back along the wood, he said, "Hermione, love, I'm sorry. Come out, please?"

Her wail was muffled as she said, "No! It's too embarrassing!"

After a beat, Snape glanced about the room and snorted. Turning to lean his forehead against the door, he said, "Hermione, surely I'm not the only one with a ridiculous sense of déjà vu?" At her silence, he added, "Weren't you the one to rail at me about hiding in the bathroom *not* being a mature way to handle things?"

He jerked off the wood as he heard a click. Backing away, he watched her open the door a crack, peering out at him. He returned her gaze solemnly. After a long moment, she rolled her eyes and huffed, "I hate it when you're right!" With that, she opened the door further, arms crossed petulantly over her chest.

Snape gently drew her to him and enveloped her in his arms. "There's no need to be embarrassed. It's normal. I just... have a question."

She kept her face pressed against his chest as she said, "What?"

Snape's face burned as he ground out, "What if I don't measure up?"

Hermione's head snapped up, and she stared at him with indignant eyes. "How could you *think* that? Even if I read those things, all I think about is *you*!"

The relief and desire that flooded him made him giddy. Gazing at her under hooded lids, he murmured, "Were you thinking about me when you read that erotic book and fell asleep atop your covers, so splendidly, enticingly bared to the night?"

A stab of heat raced through her core and drenched her knickers. Almost dizzy at the thought that he had been there that night, she blinked at him with glazed eyes and whispered, "Gods, yes. I wanted it to be us. All I wanted was you."

Snape slid his hands into her curls at the base of her skull and descended on her with a consuming kiss. Hermione's hands scrabbled over his back as she pressed herself against him, tingling with need. Panting, Snape wrenched himself away from her, resting his forehead on hers as he rasped, "It will be us, by all that is holy, I swear by my wand. I wanted you so much. So delicious... So wanton..."

Hermione rocked against his cock, hard and hot between them. In a sultry whisper, she said, "You can have me. I'm yours. Here. Now."

As she attacked his lips with a greedy kiss, Snape's brain screamed in protest of her words. *You gave your word!*

With a tortured groan, he backed away from Hermione, breathing harshly as he desperately tried to maintain control over his mutinous body. "No! Not now... We can't!"

Still reeling from the heavy emotions crashing over her, Hermione gasped, "Why not? I love you!"

Snape spun and charged to the window, gazing into the night. His shoulders were tight. "I love you most dearly, Hermione, which is why I must keep my word. Please don't ask me to break a vow. I don't want that to be part of who I am."

Chagrined at the effect her impetuous words, Hermione crossed to him and laid a gentle hand on his back. "I'm sorry. I won't be so cavalier again."

Snape stood for a long moment, calming his breathing, letting Hermione's touch soothe him. Eventually, the silence changed, and he spun, gathering her in his arms and resting his chin on her hair. The less-charged silence stretched on until Snape dropped a kiss on the crown of her head and murmured, "Why don't we just get comfortable and relax a bit?"

Hermione nodded, and they turned as one to brush more petals aside so they could stretch out on the bed again. When they were settled, Snape cleared his throat and said, "About this reading material of yours..."

Hermione buried her face against him and groaned, "Do we have to talk about it?"

Snape snorted lightly. "Well, if you feel that you would like to explore such things with me, shouldn't you be able to discuss them, as well?"

Hermione lifted her head enough to scowl at him, cheeks red. In a petulant growl, she said, "Fine. What do you want to discuss?"

Snape cocked a gently admonitory eyebrow at her, and she dropped back against his chest. "Have you been able to find answers to all your questions? Is there anything you've run across that sticks out in your mind? If there are particular things you are interested in, then it would certainly behove me to find out, wouldn't it? The last thing I would want is for you to be dissatisfied with me."

Hermione snorted, once again lifting her head and flashing a wicked grin. Her voice rippled with suppressed laughter as she said, "I daresay it's been pretty obvious how 'satisfied' I've been, Severus."

Snape rolled his eyes and shook his head, lips twitching in self-satisfied amusement. In a sardonic drawl, he retorted, "I am ever at your service..." Hermione burst out laughing, and he smiled at the sound. "In all seriousness, Hermione, you know what I mean."

Hermione sobered, growing pensive. "It's interesting: the sheer volume of information and variety out there. I imagine one could take an entire lifetime exploring all that's available."

In a tone of studied mock-gravity, Snape interjected, "Indeed. Such an awful prospect..."

Hermione grinned again and poked his ribs, eliciting a grunt and a quick tussle in which he captured her hand, eyeing her in explicit warning. Hermione gazed back at him for a long moment, her playful expression melting into a more thoughtful one. "I do have a question."

Snape relaxed his defensive posture and affected polite interest. "Go on."

"How much do you know?"

Snape blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

She quirked her lips in a moue of impatience and repeated, "How much do you know? I mean, what all have you done?"

Incredulous, Snape said, "You want to know about my... sexual experience?"

Hermione's brows rose and she gazed at him primly. "I'd say it's only fair, seeing as how you know I haven't any to speak of!"

Snape blinked again, swallowing hard. When he didn't respond right away, Hermione amended, "All right, I'll make it easier: tell me about your first time. Perhaps I'm making an assumption that I'm the only virgin in the room..."

His male pride stung, Snape frowned at her and retorted, "I'm not a virgin."

Hermione squirmed away enough to lie on her stomach beside him, her chin in her hands as she propped herself up on her elbows. In a matter-of-fact tone, she said, "So... tell me about it!"

Snape cut an acid glance at her before mumbling, "It's not like stuff you've probably read in these books..."

With a sigh, Hermione said, "Severus, *I can* appreciate the difference between idealized scenes in a work of fiction and reality. I already told you I want to know all about you. This included. How old were you?"

Staring at the ceiling, Snape uttered a clipped, "Seventeen."

"All right. And where did it happen?"

"Here."

"At Hogwarts?"

"Well, it bloody well wasn't in your room! It was in a rather private nook off one of the corridors."

Hermione's eyes widened in awed interest. "Why there?"

Snape shifted on the bed, realizing that Hermione's dogged persistence wouldn't let the subject go. Deciding to just give in rather than draw out the process as painfully as possible, he heaved a deep sigh and said, "Fine. It was a Hogsmeade weekend in late spring of my sixth year. Considering I didn't have any money to spend, I saw little point in going, particularly when Potter and his gang would be there and would likely enjoy any opportunity to harass me. I elected to stay at the castle."

Hermione laid a comforting hand on his arm and squeezed.

"A seventh-year girl in my House was not allowed to go. She had been kept behind as a punishment by McGonagall. I was wandering the grounds, enjoying the weather and the chance to roam about unimpeded. Apparently I wasn't the only one who was restless, as I happened across her near the lake. We exchanged pleasantries, and she joined me on my trek back to the castle. We were simply walking along corridor after corridor, taking random turns and staircases as we felt like it, and at one point, we passed a particularly hidden nook. I hadn't even realized it was there, and she pointed it out, grinning and commenting about it being a brilliant spot for a shag."

Hermione's brows shot up, and she bit her lip to keep from interrupting him.

Snape snorted. "Well, as you can imagine, I didn't know how to respond to that, and apparently I flushed, quite uncomfortable at that moment. I was hoping we could just move on and forget about the awkwardness, but she stopped and just stared at me. I didn't know what to make of the calculating look on her face, and out of nowhere, she grabbed my robes, pulled me into the nook, and shoved me against the wall, snogging me."

He paused for a beat at Hermione's gasp. "I was quite stunned, and I had no idea how to respond. I mean," he hastily amended, "I knew how to snog, but I didn't know that I *should*. I barely knew this girl beyond knowing any of my House on sight, and she'd certainly never expressed any interest in me before. But," and he sighed ruefully, "I was a seventeen-year-old boy, and my hormones weren't all too fussed about it."

Hermione coughed in her attempt to stifle the giggle that erupted at his frank admission. Snape rolled his eyes.

"When she started groping me... let's just say that really got my attention. There I was, pressed against a wall by some girl who was quite aggressively accosting me. I had no idea what to do...well, more like what was acceptable for me to do, as I didn't want her to hex me. She grabbed my hand and guided me under her robes."

Hermione's breath caught, and she felt a tingle streak through her.

"She had placed my hand under her skirt, and when I apparently didn't continue quickly enough, she grabbed my hand again and slid it within her knickers. That was the first time I had touched a girl. I thought I was going to pass out right then." He snorted at his youthful folly.

"She used my hand for her pleasure. I wasn't even in control of my own fingers, as she was the one who moved them and positioned them. Needless to say, when she brought herself to orgasm, and I could feel her reaction, it made a... lasting impression."

In a faint croak, Hermione voiced a dazed, "I'd say so."

"As I'm sure you can imagine, I was quite aroused at that point, and she resumed groping me. When she shoved my robes aside and opened my trousers, I don't think I could have stopped her if I had tried. Of course, at the time, I didn't want to stop her anyway." He uttered a short bark of self-deprecatory laughter.

"As soon as she had me untucked, and she touched me, I thought everything would be over. But, somehow, I managed to maintain control. She stroked me for a short while, then dragged me to the floor. I was flat on my back on the stones and she climbed over me, hiking her skirt up and straddling me. I lost my virginity right there on the floor just off the corridor in the middle of a Saturday afternoon with a girl I hardly knew."

There was a pause, and finally he continued, "Considering the circumstances, it shouldn't come as a surprise that it didn't take very long before we were done. But, she kept snogging me afterwards, and she was kind enough to cast all of the needed charms."

Hermione couldn't stop herself and queried, "Charms?"

"Yes. Contraceptive, cleansing... I was in no condition to even think at the moment." He blinked in remembered incredulity. "Not long after we had finished, we had to make ourselves scarce. We heard one of the caretakers coming down the corridor."

"One of the caretakers?"

"Mm-hm. Pringle was getting ready to retire, and he had just brought Filch on. Filch was training, and he hadn't yet learnt all of the shortcuts and secret passages through the castle. Plus, he hadn't yet got Mrs. Norris. I still don't know which one we heard, but as soon as we heard the footsteps echoing, we took off...in opposite directions. I headed back outside, and I think she went straight back to the dungeons."

There was another long pause, as Snape's story was patently done. But, Hermione was pensive, and finally she asked, "So, what happened after that?"

"What do you mean? Nothing. We weren't caught."

"No. I mean, did you see each other again?"

Snape snorted. "Hermione, we weren't 'seeing each other.' We acknowledged each other in passing as usual. Like I said, it was spring, and she had to focus on her N.E.W.T.s before long. Term was over in a couple of months, and she was finished. The next year, I came back for my final year at Hogwarts. Nothing more came of it."

Hermione looked crestfallen. "Oh. That's too bad. So... did she have a name?"

Snape shot her an aggrieved glare. "Of course she had a name. Her name was Maggie Palev. Short for Magda."

"Was she pretty?"

Snape thought for a moment. "She was attractive. Dark hair, dark eyes, olive complexion. Not a beauty queen, but pretty enough. In all honesty, I still can't fathom what she was doing with me. She was far out of my league." He shook his head in puzzlement, then looked at Hermione. His expression softened and he said, "As are you, love. And, I'm still trying to fathom what *you're* doing with me."

Hermione smiled at the warmth that filled his black eyes as he looked at her, and she felt a throb in both her heart and her knickers. Seizing on his words, she murmured, "I'm not doing anything *yet*, but that may soon change..." With that, she crept forward and descended on him with a hungry kiss, enjoying his surprised expression.

please proceed directly to part two

52- Valentine's Day... of Doom? Part Two of Two

Chapter 55 of 84

Valentine's Day arrives, with surprises in store for quite a few people! Some are delightful beyond compare, and others... not so much.

Please see previous chapter for Disclaimer and Author's Note.

part two of two

As her hands snaked over his chest and down his body, Snape uttered a groan, then pulled back, pinning her with a smouldering gaze and saying, "You bloody vixen; if you're going to start something, then you had better make sure your door is locked, and Silenced for good measure."

Brows climbing in acknowledgement of his statement, Hermione dutifully picked up her wand, casting a couple of different locking spells and changing the password to her door. Then, with a wicked glance at Snape, she cast a Silencing Charm as well, flourishing her wrist in a variation of the standard movement.

Snape cocked an eyebrow at her. "What was that? Did you just do what I think you did?"

Hermione assumed a prim air and retorted, "Well, if you *think* I just cast a spell that works both ways, then yes. Not only will we not be heard in the corridor, but we won't be disturbed by anyone trying to knock on my door. And, tomorrow, if anyone asks, I'll just tell them that I felt unwell and did exactly that." She shrugged and flashed a cheeky grin. "I think they can manage without me for one night. Not like I get bothered much anyway."

Snape's eyes lit up with surprised appreciation for her tactic. "Of course, if you like, we could always adjourn back to my room."

Hermione shook her head and said, "No. It's only fair that we get to stay here, too. Besides, I won't mind being able to smell your scent on my sheets later..."

Snape's cock twitched at her words. Heart speeding up as his desire increased, he lowered his lids, eyeing her with predatory intent, and she gasped. His lips spread in a feral grin and he closed the distance between them, purring as he pinned her with a fierce kiss.

Hermione moaned into his mouth, goose flesh erupting all along her body in response to his mouth on hers. They grabbed at each other, limbs entwining, pressing against each other heatedly as they snogged. After several minutes, in which their breath came faster and shallower, Snape wrenched away and flicked his fingers, muttering, "Nox." The lights in the room all guttered out, and Hermione voiced a sultry laugh.

The moonlight was streaming through her window, giving them enough light to see by, and washing them in a cool glow. Revelling in the chance to abandon themselves to desire, they found themselves impatiently tugging at clothing, trying to slide buttons through buttonholes and slip hooks from eyes. Frustrated with the awkward struggling, they separated, sighing in exasperation and grimacing.

Catching Snape's eye, Hermione chuckled, wryly pointing out, "You had a point earlier."

"Which one?"

"About how things I may read about can differ from reality. Clothes always seem to miraculously disappear in stories!" She rolled her eyes and Snape snorted.

Reaching for his wand, he tilted his head and said, "*I am* a wizard, my love. It may not be miraculous, but it can be magical..."

Bursting out laughing, Hermione shook her head and reached toward her feet. "I'll pass this time. But I *am* going to get more comfortable." She started untying the laces on the hiking boots she had worn to Hogsmeade, and Snape surreptitiously toed his boots off, stripping his socks off and stuffing them into the boots. Fortunately, her room was warm enough that he didn't think his feet would get cold.

Hermione cast a sheepish grin at him as she followed his lead, peeling her socks away and furtively shoving them under her bed. Then, standing, she crossed her arms, gripping the hem of her jumper to lift it over her head.

Snape watched her hungrily. She had dressed very much like she had when they had gone to London, and when she removed the jumper, a long-sleeved knit top was revealed. Snape absently shrugged out of his robes, idly pushing them off the foot of the bed onto the floor.

Hermione tossed the jumper toward her hamper and looked back at Snape, pausing to goggle at him in just his shirtsleeves and trousers. Her chest tightened as the intimacy of it hit her. Granted, she had seen him in less, and in more, but never yet had she seen him in what he regularly wore beneath his stark, imposing teaching robes. He had truly revealed himself to her, and she ached with the joy of it.

She gazed at him in wonder, crossing to stand between his knees as he sat on the edge of her bed. Cupping his face, she kissed him, travelling back to nuzzle his ear and murmur, "I love you, Severus. I'm so happy you're here."

Snape's arms tightened convulsively around her and he exhaled heavily before replying, "As am I. I couldn't wish for anything more, my love."

She pulled back and locked eyes with him, and he was stunned by the heat crackling in her gaze. Her voice was low and seductive as she said, "I could..." With that, she eyed him with a determined look and pressed against his shoulders, pushing him back onto the bed. Snape blinked, taken aback by her aggression. He fell back onto his elbows, watching her as she slid her fingers down his chest.

Hermione licked her lips, methodically opening each button on his shirt. When she had reached his waist, she flicked a glance back up at Snape, tugging to untuck his shirttails from his trousers. Snape's stomach muscles contracted and his hips twitched as she resolutely reached for the closures of his trousers, carefully opening them.

Snape's heart pounded and his breathing came short and shallow. The roaring in his ears intensified as Hermione slowly undressed him. His head was spinning; he had never experienced anything quite like the intimacy involved in such an act.

When she had pulled his shirt from within his trousers and opened his trousers at the waist, she slipped her hands beneath the fabric and smoothed up his stomach and chest, sweeping the front panels of his shirt to the sides, baring him. Her eyes burned as they stared intently at the thin line of dark hair that trailed from his navel down beneath his waistband. She could see that he was hard for her, and her body throbbed with want.

Snape's hunger for Hermione mounted, and he sat up, gripping her hands where they lay on his chest. Kissing her fiercely, he placed her hands on his shoulders and then reached down to the hem of her shirt. His fingertips snuck under it and traced lightly along her waist, making her shiver at the ticklish sensations. She twined her fingers in his hair as he leisurely stroked his way up her sides, shoving the fabric up as he went. When he felt her bra under his questing fingers, he slid his thumbs forward, slipping over the swell of her breasts, across her nipples.

Hermione moaned at the sweep of his thumbs over her tight nipples. His hands were warm as they cupped her breasts, gently fondling them through the fabric of her bra. Hermione pressed toward him, and a low growl from Snape sent a jolt of heat through her again. She gasped, and Snape took the opportunity to nuzzle along her jaw toward her neck. Her erratic gasps and sighs fired his ardour, and he gathered her shirt, guiding it over her shoulders. Hermione took the hint and backed away, allowing him to pull it off her.

Her hair tumbled down over her face, dishevelled from removing the knit top, and she reached up to shove it out of her eyes. Snape, his own shirt hanging behind his shoulders and around his upper arms, simply stared at her. Standing there, clad in her jeans and bra, hair tangled, lips full and glistening, eyes dark, gilded by the moonlight...Snape was awed by how beautifully erotic she looked.

His voice was a hoarse rasp as he said, "Good gods, Hermione, you are a vision."

Hermione smiled shyly at the compliment, ducking her head modestly. She bit her lip, then glanced back up at him through her lashes. "Speaking of vision," she murmured, "can I please see you tonight?"

Snape's eyes snapped open wide, and his breath caught. Everything they had done had been in the dark, by touch only. He had seen quite a bit of her the next morning when he had tried to wake her, and he had seen even more when he had snuck up to her room to find her nude atop her covers, but she hadn't seen him. His cock jumped vehemently.

Swallowing hard, he whispered, "I think that could be arranged."

Hermione's chest heaved in response, and her eyelids fluttered. Eyes glittering, she cast a heated gaze at him and breathed, "Join me?" Gesturing at the bed, she tilted her head and climbed onto it. Snape scrambled to turn around and crawl further up, alongside her. They faced each other, on their knees, sitting back on their heels. Hermione shot a faint smile at him and nodded pointedly at their position. "Like in London..."

Snape recognized the similarity and smiled. Hermione reached forward and pushed his shirt completely off, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her breasts against his chest. Snape dipped his head to nip her neck and murmured in her ear, "Only better..." With that, his hands travelled up her back and unhooked her bra.

Hermione moaned, arching her back. Snape's fingers grazed over her shoulder blades, pushing the straps over the points of her shoulders, letting them fall down, along her arms. Even though it was still winter, the heat they created between them boiled their blood and fired their desire, keeping them warm without each successive layer of clothing. Hermione leant back, letting Snape's lips trail down her throat and over her collarbone, his nose nudging her bra away from her breasts until it fell to her elbows, at which point, she pulled free of it and flung it away.

Snape covered her breasts with soft kisses, delighting in the softness of her skin. When he laved one nipple, Hermione cried out, shuddering. She raked her hands through his hair, dragging her nails across his scalp and tightening her fists, holding him there. Not that he really wanted to move anyway...

Snape's cock throbbed painfully, trapped within his trousers. In an attempt to relieve some of the pressure, he guided Hermione to turn and lie back, so he could lie beside her. Once she was comfortably stretched out on her back, he fitted his long frame to one side of her, his mouth still lavishing attention on one nipple as his hand snaked down to unbutton her jeans. Hermione moaned encouragement, reaching down to help him.

Once undone, he tugged and she squirmed, and together they managed to pull her jeans down below her arse. Punctuated by frustrated huffs, Hermione finally struggled out of them and kicked them to the floor. Snape slid one leg along hers to rest between them, enjoying the feel of her squeezing her legs around his and rocking. He could feel her heat through her knickers and his trousers.

They were practically devouring each other, hands roaming, when Hermione broke the kiss and panted, "Your turn." Snape blinked at her, perplexed, and she pointedly reached for his waistband, tugging at it.

Breath catching, Snape closed his eyes briefly, feeling the surge of sensation in his cock. Swallowing hard, he rolled away, lying on his back and furtively reaching for the half-opened fly of his trousers. Hermione propped herself up on one elbow, facing Snape, her breast pressing against his bicep. Snape cast a quick glance at her, and was slightly taken aback by the avid interest in her eyes as they were trained on his groin.

Carefully, he lifted his hips and hooked his thumbs beneath the fabric, easing the trousers down without catching on his erection. Rocking up to a sitting position, he pulled the trousers completely off, flicking them over the end of the bed. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Hermione breathing quickly, her lips parted. She reached up and wrapped her hand around his upper arm, urging him to lie back down. Heart pounding in anxiety, Snape eased back until he was once again lying beside her. Both of them stared fixedly at his boxers, tented so much so that the elastic was pulling away from his hips.

Hermione laid a hand on his belly, rubbing in soothing circles, spiralling out until she dipped beneath the elastic. Snape twitched under her caresses, hyper-sensitive to her touch. Hermione squirmed further down the bed, curling forward to rest her head on his ribs. Reflexively, Snape's hand rose to stroke her hair. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the exquisite sensations of her explorations.

Hermione slipped her hand within his boxers...she was only slightly surprised to see that they were plain white cotton...and wrapped her fingers around his shaft, squeezing gently. Snape's groan simply served to encourage her. Stroking along his length, she pressed his cock toward his belly, bending her wrist to shove the fabric away. Once the glistening head was free of the elastic, she shoved the waistband down further, letting his cock spring forward again, this time with the fabric bunched at the base of his erection.

She paused then, gazing with rapt fascination at him. In a flurry of movement, she cast a whispered *Lumos* at the candle nearest her, spilling faint golden light along his lean form in addition to the milky glow of moonlight. She had learnt his contours by touch, but now she could see the colouration, the springy curls at the base, the flare of the head, the tracing of veins along the length. It looked so awkward. It certainly wasn't a thing of beauty, but it did send sparks through her centre, knowing as she did how much pleasure it could give...to both of them!

Snape, in the meantime, had tensed, his brows drawing together in a worried frown. As soon as she had exposed him, he sucked in a breath and held it, without meaning to. When she ever-so-gently touched him again, that breath exploded out of him in a huge whoosh, and pinpoints of light swam against his closed eyelids. He felt his cock bouncing in response to her feather-light touch, and his stomach muscles contracted, lifting his shoulders off the bed and startling Hermione.

Whipping around to look at him, Hermione's eyes were wide with alarm as she said, "Are you all right?"

Snape collapsed again at the absence of her touch, and he panted, "Yes... I think so..."

Gazing at him with concern, she queried, "Did I hurt you?"

Snape opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. "No. I'm fine. Just..."

He paused so long that Hermione frowned. "Just what?" Wriggling back up the bed to peer into his face, she murmured, "Severus?"

Snape forced himself to look at her, and the solicitous concern in her eyes blanketed him. By sheer force of will, he opened up to her and admitted what he perceived as a weakness. "It's a bit... overwhelming."

To his surprise, Hermione's worried expression melted into a huge smile. She wrapped her arms around him and whispered, "I know. It is. But, it's wonderful. And so worth it. Trust me."

He felt as if he were drowning in the love pouring from her. She had a point. She had been the one experiencing so many new things with him, and he had been the one gentling her through everything. Now, their positions had reversed, and he realized that if she trusted him so completely, he had to extend the same courtesy.

Caressing his chest, Hermione murmured, "Relax, dearest. I merely want to enjoy you as much as I can. There's nothing to worry about."

Snape swallowed again, grinding his teeth. Breathing deeply through his nose, he eyed her solemnly and nodded. Hermione flashed a beatific smile at him and slithered back down his stomach so she could explore again. This time, when she ventured to push at his pants, he reached down to help her. Once they were past his knees, he moved his legs, kicking them away.

Finally, he was lying there, in all his naked glory, for her to enjoy. Hermione sat up, her hair tumbling forward and covering her breasts. Sucking on her lower lip, she looked brazenly at Snape and lifted onto her knees, pushing her knickers past her hips. Snape's eyes flashed as he watched her intently. She sank to one side, wriggling out of her knickers and dropping them over the edge of the bed.

They stared at each other for a long moment, etching the image of the other's nude form in their minds. Snape reached for her, catching her hand in his, and she lifted their hands, pressing his palm to her cheek and leaning into it.

"I love you."

Snape's chest tightened at her impassioned words, and his thumb swept forward over her lips. "I love you, Hermione."

She smiled and laid her other hand on his belly, just below his navel. He gasped and his muscles twitched. She let her gaze travel over him, seeing the smattering of dark hair on his chest thinning to that devastating treasure trail along his belly, circling his navel and continuing down to widen again into a thick triangle framing his cock and balls, then thinning back out on his legs. His cock stood at attention, bobbing erratically as he breathed.

She reverently reached out and wrapped her hand around his shaft again, stroking up and down. Snape groaned again. Leaning forward, she propped herself on her other hand and whispered in his ear, her curls tickling his face, "I want to watch it this time. I want to do to you what we did before, but I want to see you."

His eyes rolled back in his head and he moaned. "Let me touch you."

Hermione pulled back up, gazing at him in confusion. Snape's hand scrabbled between them, sliding along her knee and between her legs until he could cup her mound in his hand. She jerked, gasping in surprise, and her hand squeezed spastically on his cock. A startled, "Oh!" burst from her lips.

Snape gloried in the slick heat that coated her curls under his fingers. He caressed her swollen lips and she stroked his cock in return. A ragged groan was wrenched from his throat, and Hermione renewed her actions with vigour.

Shifting beside him, she spread her knees in invitation, sinking back on her heels as she settled close enough that she could easily stroke him and he could touch her. For every one of Snape's grunts and groans, Hermione voiced a matching whimper and moan.

Hermione was always a quick study, and having learnt something, didn't easily forget it. Thus it was that she remembered how to touch Snape, pumping her fist along his cock, stroking and squeezing in her mission to bring him pleasure. Their breathing and noises came faster and louder, so willing were they to abandon themselves to their bliss.

Snape slipped one long finger along her cleft, delving into her, fluttering within her and thrusting shallowly. Hermione increased the pressure and pace of her stroking, rocking against Snape's hand as she went. Tilting her hips, she ground her clit against Snape's wrist, almost shrieking, "Severus!" in her shock as she suddenly crested her peak, climaxing with a convulsive shudder, drenching his hand even more.

Snape felt her orgasm approaching, and his balls tightened. He knew he was so close. When her cunt clamped down on his finger, and she keened in ecstasy, he let loose a ragged groan, chanting, "Yes, yes, come for me. Gods, yes, Hermione, love, oh gods, yes, now, Hermione, now!" He nearly howled that final "now" as he bucked upward, thrusting into her hand as he came, shooting forth and dripping over her knuckles.

Spiralling down from her orgasm, Hermione heard Snape's litany and snapped her eyes open, her fevered gaze locked on the spectacle that followed her peak. She watched his muscles ripple along his entire body, the cords of his neck standing out, rigid, as his head canted back and he grimaced in divine agony. His hips rocked shamelessly, driving his swelling cock into her hand. Then, with a shudder that washed over him from head to toe and back again, she felt and saw the milky liquid spurting forth, warm and slick as it coated her hand.

Snape's hand was limp under her, and he lay there panting as he came back to reality. Hermione watched him, unblinking, unwilling to move until he told her to. Finally, he swallowed and rasped, "You may let go now." Dutifully, Hermione released him, snatching her hand back quickly. Fascinated, she stared at his cock as it slowly seemed to deflate, coming to rest against his thatch of dark hair.

Her hand was still wet with his come, and she peered at it with interest. Snape forced himself to open his eyes, casting a wary glance at her. She realized he was looking at her and caught his eye. Snape gingerly pulled his hand from between her thighs, and she shivered. His hand was coated with her juices as well. They both kept looking between their hands and each other, until finally Hermione lifted her hand closer to her face, and with a defiant, triumphant look, flicked her tongue out to taste.

Snape groaned, then greedily brought his fingers to his lips, sucking them clean as he watched her with smouldering eyes. She licked delicately at the fluid, pausing thoughtfully as she considered the flavour. Soberly, she locked eyes with him and purred, "Definitely interesting. I bet it would taste better directly from your cock, though."

Snape sucked in a sharp breath, utterly unprepared for such a wanton statement. Before he could reply, they were startled by Crookshanks meowing, pouncing at the floor by her door. His tail was straight up, and he kept jumping and batting at the floor in a predatory fashion.

Annoyed, Hermione hissed, "Crookshanks, hush!" She flashed an aggrieved look at Snape and muttered, "I'm sorry, Severus, I don't know what has got into him. What a way to spoil the mood."

Snape finally propped himself up on his elbows, frowning at the cat's antics. He reached for his wand to cast cleansing charms, quirking a wry, lopsided grin. "Love, after a performance like that, even he..." He glanced back at the animal, trailing off. Brow furrowing in concern, he rolled to the side, leaning forward to get a better look at what Crookshanks was attacking.

His gut turned into a block of ice. It wasn't a bug. Well, not in the literal sense. An inch or two inside the door, a small flesh-coloured blob was visible at the end of a strand that stretched under the door. Body tensing with almost paralytic fear, Snape's eyes went wide, and Hermione said, "Severus?"

Snape slashed his hand toward her in a violent motion to be quiet. Swiftly, quietly, he shot to his feet, shoving his feet into his trousers and yanking them up. He approached the door with his wand at the ready, and Hermione crouched on the bed, bewildered yet terrified at the abject horror on Snape's face. Scrambling for her robe, she shrugged into it and crawled across the bed, peering down at the blob. Dread froze her heart, and she shot an agonized look at Snape, who was plastered along the wall by her door, preparing to fling it open.

They locked eyes, both recognizing the thing that had attracted Crookshanks's attention. It was none other than a Weasley Extendable Ear.

**** *

Hermione wasn't the only one who had been irritated by public displays of affection all day. But, in his case, he was merely irritated that he wasn't participating in said displays with Hermione. He started to wonder about her and Neville, particularly since she had been practically hanging on him for most of the day. It had proved nigh on impossible to separate her from her other seventh-year friends. So, giving up on getting a chance to approach her while in Hogsmeade, he went about his business of buying her a gift, planning to surprise her with it later that evening.

At dinner, he had been trying to catch her eye, wanting to ask her to be his valentine, but she kept looking elsewhere. Finally, as she had left, and Neville had made his announcements to the others that she didn't want to be disturbed, a flare of excitement washed over him, simmering in his belly in anticipation.

Upon crossing through the common room on his way to his dormitory, he had averted his eyes from the passionate embraces of the couples scattered in the corners, cheeks flushing with the desire to be one of those couples, snogging Hermione. Drawing the curtains of his bed, he dug her gift out of his bag of purchases. Remembering her reaction to the mousse at Christmas, he knew she really liked chocolate, and he had bought a deluxe assortment from Honeydukes. Wrapping gold ribbon around the gift box, he tied a bow, slipping the charmed rose he had found at Madam Puddifoot's into the knot. The rose was stasis-charmed, so it was kept at the peak of its beauty. He had purposefully chosen a red rose, hoping she would understand how much he liked her.

His stomach roiled with anxiety as he waited for the evening to wane. He knew she didn't want to be disturbed, but surely she only meant not to bother her with problems. Certainly she would be pleased to be surprised with such a romantic gesture of tender feelings. Still, he worried that she might not answer. And, there was that gnawing fear that perhaps her excuse was really a ruse to spend the evening with Neville. He *had* made a big deal about telling the others to leave her alone...

His brows lowered in a fierce scowl. Ignoring the other boys in the dormitory, he wrenched his curtains open and lunged down his bed toward the trunk at the foot. With a grim, determined air, he rooted around in his trunk until he found the box of gags and other items he had ordered from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. His eyes lit up and a calculating smile spread his lips as he pulled out the long, stretchy, flesh-coloured strand that was one of a pair of Extendable Ears. Coiling it around his fingers, he backed up onto his bed again, re-closing the curtains.

Time seemed to drag on forever as he waited for his fellow sixth-years to go to sleep. Once the lights were all doused, and he heard nought but breathing, he carefully slipped from his bed and tiptoed out of the room, Hermione's gift hidden under his robe.

There were still a few couples in the common room when he passed through. But, they were so involved with each other that they never noticed his presence. He gingerly scampered past them, hurrying down the corridor to Hermione's room. At the end of the corridor, he faced her door. Screwing his courage to the sticking point, he took a deep breath and knocked. He didn't want to startle her, and he didn't want anyone else to possibly hear from within the common room, so he knocked softly at first. When there was no answer, he tried again. Still nothing.

Knocking harder, he said, "Hermione? Are you there? I need to talk to you." After a beat of silence, he tried again. Wondering at the lack of response, he leant forward and laid his ear against the wood. That was when he felt the tingle of magic against his skin.

"The door is charmed! It must be a Silencing Charm. No wonder she hasn't answered. She probably hasn't heard me... I wonder if she's asleep. Or maybe she has someone in there with her...Neville!" He frowned again, spitting the other boy's name. Jealousy rose up within him, and he dropped to the floor on his knees, placing her present in front of him and unwinding the Extendable Ear. Fitting one end in his ear, he fed the other end under her door. Once it passed the edge of the wood, he heard it: harsh breathing and moaning.

Rocking back on his heels, his eyes flew open in astonishment. She was in there with someone! Shaky fingers pushed the other end further in, morbid fascination taking over, making him want to know just who had managed to land such a prize as Hermione.

The sounds of passion rose, and he heard her voice climbing in pitch as she suddenly cried, "Severus!"

It was as if the world had stopped. Completely frozen in shock, he hardly breathed or blinked as his mind reeled with the import of that name. Thus, when an answering voice began chanting her name, howling in ecstasy, he struggled to draw breath, trying to keep from passing out in amazement. He knew that voice. He knew that name. That was *Snape* in there with Hermione, so obviously engaged in lustful activity!

He didn't know what to do. So traumatized was he from the surprise that he couldn't seem to form a coherent thought in his overwhelmed brain. He could barely fathom the words that he heard following the explosive climax from within. Even so, at Hermione's low voice saying the word "cock," his eyes rolled back in his head, and he sucked in a breath, swaying on the spot. His heart was pounding painfully fast, and his head was swimming. He heard Snape's distinctive voice saying something and trailing off, followed by Hermione once again saying "Severus," but he wasn't aware enough of what their exchange could mean as he knelt in the corridor, eavesdropping on their liaison.

Thus it was that he was thoroughly taken by surprise when the door slammed open and a terrifying hiss pronounced, *Petrificus Totalus*!

He felt his body straightening out and going rigid on the floor, and his eyes flew open in time to see Snape, half-dressed and dishevelled, pointing his wand at him from Hermione's doorway. In the background, he saw an equally dishevelled Hermione crouching on the bed, her hands over her mouth to stifle her shriek of, "...Colin!"

In a matter of seconds, Snape had ducked out of the door and dragged Colin into Hermione's room, her package scudding along the floor ahead of him. With the door shut behind them, Snape hastily cast an Imperturbable Charm on it, having learnt that lesson from the current disaster.

Snape's face was paper white, and his eyes were huge with fear and worry. Tears were spilling over Hermione's fingers where they were still covering her mouth. The room was charged with emotion, and one corner of Colin's mind idly wondered if the Full-Body Bind would keep him from losing bladder control in his terror.

Snape stooped to lift the Extendable Ear from the floor, his knuckles white with the ferocity of his grip. His chest was rising and falling rapidly as he panted in shock. Hermione's breathing was erratic as she shuddered with sobs.

Snape and Hermione locked eyes, at a loss for what to do next. Gulping back a wail, Hermione extended a hand toward Snape, who leapt across Colin to enfold her in his arms, stroking her hair and muttering soothing assurances to calm her.

"Shhh. Hermione, love, we'll figure something out. I promise. I don't know what yet, but we'll come up with something. It'll all work out. Shh. It's okay."

Colin wondered if he were somehow trapped in a nightmare. Had he fallen asleep while waiting to leave his dormitory? It was the only explanation that made any sense. He gazed at the floating blossoms near her ceiling in dazed fascination.

Hermione's hands clawed at Snape's back as she wept. Snape continued caressing her hair, but he turned his head enough to cast a murderous look at Colin's petrified form. If he had been able, Colin would have screamed in fear at the doom in Snape's black eyes.

Finally, Hermione's sobs eased enough that her choked words were understandable. "He could... destroy us... Dumbledore... what... do we do... now?"

She pulled away from Snape's chest, peering up at him, only to see him glaring balefully at Colin, his expression promising torture beyond imagination. Taken aback by the merciless threat in her lover's eyes, she cupped his cheek and guided Snape to look at her.

In a faint rasp, she said, "No, Severus. Don't hurt him. You can't. It'll only make things worse."

The menace in his low growl chilled both Hermione and Colin. "Even though he so rightfully deserves it?"

Hermione closed her eyes and rested her forehead on Snape's. "Don't. Just don't. I know how you feel, Severus, but we've seen enough violence to last several lifetimes."

Snape grimaced, his jaw throbbing as he ground his teeth. He exhaled harshly through his nose, muscles tense. On the floor, Colin felt the cold, wet trails of tears as they streaked along his temples. He prayed to any god he could think of to save him from Snape.

Snape seemed to shudder, and he squeezed Hermione so tight she gasped. But, she knew he had regained control of his rage, and she kissed him gratefully. In his head, Colin heard his own voice shrieking in outrage and horror at the sight.

Hermione gently urged Snape to sit with her on the bed. He moved to join her, then abruptly turned away to finish fastening his trousers. Colin's eyes rolled back in his head. Hermione wrapped her robe around herself and tied the sash firmly. Snape slid onto the bed beside her, and they stared down at Colin.

Snape wrapped his arm around Hermione, and she clasped his other hand in hers. Together, they sat, gazing dazedly at the catastrophe that was Colin on the floor in front of them. Snape eventually murmured, "We need to know how much he heard. How long was he out there?"

Hermione nodded quickly. "I suppose we could release him and ask. I don't see his wand, do you?"

Colin nearly choked on the agonized sob trying to rise from his paralyzed throat. She was right! He was completely defenceless.

Snape seemed to consider for a moment, then said, "I could always bind him and then release the spell. It won't matter if he screams; not with that Imperturbable Charm on the door." He tossed his head in frustration and spat, "Dammit! Why didn't we think of that in the first place? Damn those Weasleys and their bloody pranks!"

Hermione shot a reproachful look at Snape. "That's not fair, Severus. Just think how helpful the ink has been for us. It's not their fault that Colin crossed all lines of decency." She turned a fuming glare on Colin.

Snape pursed his lips, seething. "Hermione, there's only one way out of this."

She turned curious eyes on him. "Do we swear him to secrecy like we did with Ginny? I don't know that we can trust him, not with the low tactics he's already displayed."

Colin protested vehemently in his head, wishing he could defend himself and his actions. He just wanted to get closer to her! He did everything because of how much he liked her!

Snape cut a withering glance at Hermione and heaved an exasperated sigh. "Of course we can't trust him! There is no enjoining someone to keep our secret this time. You were ready to take the step with Ginny..."

Hermione's eyes widened in comprehension. "*Obliviate* him!"

Snape's head inclined in a slow nod. "Exactly. But, to do the thing properly, we need to know how much time needs to be erased, and we'll have to figure out something to explain why he's in the corridor outside your door. Unless you can think of some way to reasonably get him elsewhere. But, that's a bit trickier, since that means we might run into others."

Hermione stared into the middle distance, eyes flickering as she thought furiously. "A really good memory charm not only removes the target memory but also allows what amounts to a sort of post-hypnotic suggestion to replace it. We've learnt about *them* in theory, but actual practice is left for those who proceed on to further education toward joining the Ministry. All we've learnt is the basic memory charm, and it only erases about fifteen seconds at the most." She cast a worried look back at Snape. "How do you propose we find out how much we have to erase?"

Snape cocked a brow as if to indicate that was hardly a question worth asking and retorted, "Legilimency, of course."

Hermione rolled her eyes, disgusted that she hadn't thought of that herself and nodded. "Of course." Then, she gazed back at Colin. "Go on, then."

Snape's expression hardened as he rose and stalked over to peer down at the boy. He stood beside Colin's head and stared down at him. After a beat, he gracefully dropped to a squat, pinning Colin with an icy, determined gaze. Colin tried to blink, but he couldn't, and Snape stabbed into his mind with a viciousness that left him reeling under the onslaught.

Images of Hermione flooded his brain, showcasing just how much he had been watching her. The way he followed her and the other seventh-years around, his gift purchases, his anxious wait in his dormitory, the trek to her door, the earth-shattering discovery of Hermione's relationship with Snape through his eavesdropping... all of that flashed by, and Snape's face contorted with fury and hate above him. Withdrawing ruthlessly, Snape shot to his feet and spun, his hands in trembling fists at his sides.

Hermione watched the invasion with a sense of pitying horror. Then, she clamped down on her feeling of pity and steeled herself for the necessity of what they had to do.

Snape's eyes were hard and flinty as he rasped, "He heard everything. We have no choice."

Hermione swallowed against the lump that kept rising to her throat. Snape crossed back to the bed and dropped to his knees in front of her. Gripping her arms, he locked eyes with her, willing her to be strong. "Hermione, love, I know you don't want this, but we have to wipe his memory. And, you *must* convince him, for good, that you want nothing to do with him. I know it hurts you to hurt others, but you *must*. If you don't, then he may continue pursuing you, and we may not get a chance for damage control next time."

Hermione bit her lip to still its trembling and nodded, misery drowning in the tears that insisted on welling up again. Snape reached up and tenderly caressed her cheek, wiping away a tear with his thumb. Then, he snapped his attention back to Colin.

Crossing back to tower over the boy, Snape said, "I will use Legilimency to aid me in Obliviating him, and then we will release him and place him back in the corridor. Once we remove the Imperturbable Charm, you'll be able to hear his knock. I'll hide, and it'll be up to you to get rid of him once and for all." He cast a grim look at Hermione. "Be merciless. There is no room left for pity."

Sniffing, Hermione croaked, "I know."

After a beat, Snape huffed and focused on Colin, about to begin his task, but Hermione gasped, "Wait!"

Scowling balefully, Snape cut a glance at her and growled, "What?"

Gesturing about the room, Hermione hissed, "What about all the flowers? If he sees them, it's going to be even harder to throw him off. How would I explain them?"

Snape's eyes darted around the veritable bower he had created, and he rebelled at having to dispose of it all so quickly. Lip curling, baring his teeth in mutinous, impotent fury, he shot a death-glare at Colin. In a terrifying hiss, he said, "Damn you, boy. I could cheerfully *Crucio* you for ruining my gift."

Hermione's soft, sympathetic-yet-warning, "Severus..." stopped him. Once again exhaling harshly through his nose, teeth grinding, he brandished his wand at the flowers, whirling them into a vortex that disappeared with a "pop."

The sweet scent was all that remained of his surprise. Chest heaving, Snape returned to Colin, invading his mind with Legilimency, pointing his wand at him and muttering, "*Obliviate*," keeping his wand trained on the boy until he had erased enough. Then, while Colin was under the temporary fog that followed a memory charm, he dashed to the door, opening it a crack and peering out. Seeing the corridor empty, he roughly shoved the boy out the door, kicking the box of chocolates after him. Then, with only the tip of his wand still sticking through the door, he released the Full-Body Bind and shut the door with a snap.

Whirling, he pinned Hermione with a meaningful glare and swept past her to her bathroom, pausing only long enough to lift the Imperturbable Charm from her door before shutting her bathroom door between them.

Hermione felt dazed from the roller-coaster of emotions she had already experienced. She sat, rigid with tension, waiting for Colin to knock. Eventually, it came. Wiping her face and sniffing again, she crossed to her door, summoning all of her acting abilities to pull off the most important "role" of her life so far.

She opened the door a crack and peeked out. Colin, still looking a bit woozy, was standing there with the box of chocolates. He blinked at her and said, "Hermione?"

Deciding to be harsh from the start, Hermione frowned at him and said coldly, "What do you want, Colin? It's late, and I *thought* I had made it perfectly clear that I didn't want to be disturbed."

Colin flushed faintly. With an attempt at a winning smile, he said, "Oh, I thought you meant not to bother you with problems. But, I have something for you." He proffered the package, complete with the rose in the ribbon. Ducking his head shyly, he continued, "This is for you. I know you like chocolate. And... and the rose is for you, too." He blinked rapidly as he recited, "Sweets and beauty for someone sweet and beautiful. Will you be my valentine, Hermione?"

Hermione closed her eyes and bowed her head. After a pause, in which she could feel Colin's anxiety growing, she looked back up at him, expression tightly controlled and grim. "No." Colin's hopeful expression crumbled, and he looked as if he had been slapped in the face. Hermione forged on, "I cannot accept your gift, Colin. And I won't be your valentine." Colin's outstretched hands dropped, and his eyes widened.

Hermione opened the door more so she could face him completely. Hands in tight fists at her sides, she drew herself up stiffly and glared at Colin. "Get this through your head once and for all. *Stop* following me. Leave me *alone*. I don't like you, and I'm not *going* to like you. Ever. Keep your chocolates. I don't want them, and I don't want you. I tried to be kind about it before, and I tried to tell you how I felt, but you refused to listen! I'm sorry to have to be so horrid, but you've left me no choice! Find someone *else* to pin your pathetic crush on, and let me be." She paused, breathing heavily with emotion.

Colin looked devastated. He stared at her like a betrayed puppy. In the moment of silence, he pulled the rose from the ribbon and tried once more to give it to Hermione. His voice shook as he said, "Then... w-would you at least keep this... as a token of... how much I like you?"

Hermione's stomach clenched painfully, and she took the rose, twirling it in her fingers. Then, in a move calculated to cause the most pain, she locked eyes with Colin and dropped the rose to the floor, stepping on the bloom and grinding the petals into the stone. Colin let loose a noise reminiscent of a mouse being trod on, and Hermione fought to keep the tears from welling up again.

Completely aghast, Colin stared at Hermione, eyes bright and glassy, face blotchy, and breath ragged. He struggled to swallow. Hermione ground her teeth and uttered a hoarse, "You have your answer, Colin. Go to bed. Don't make me go to McGonagall and tell her *how much* you've been harassing me."

Colin sucked in a breath, sounding like he had been kicked in the gut. Blinking at Hermione like he had never seen her before, he backed away unsteadily. Hermione gripped the door frame, refusing to back down until he was gone. She watched him as he stumbled down the corridor, shoulders bowed and head down. Once he turned the corner into the common room, he ducked back to cast one last look at her, and she pointedly kicked the crushed rose across the corridor into the opposite wall. His eyes fluttered closed, and he shrank back around the corner.

Hermione forced herself to wait, just in case he tried to come back, then, stomach roiling, heart thundering, she backed into her room and slammed the door shut, collapsing to the floor in a heap.

Snape peeked through the bathroom door and saw her crumpled by the door, leaning against it as sobs once again tore from her throat. Casting another Imperturbable Charm at the door as he went, he rushed through her room to her, kneeling and cradling her in his arms.

Snape's murmur was gentle as he said, "You were marvellous, love. I know it was horrid, but you were brilliant. I daresay he'll never bother you again. We're safe now. It's okay. I promise. We'll be fine."

He and Hermione rocked back and forth, Snape stroking her soothingly until she quieted. His chest was wet from her streaming eyes and nose, but he didn't care. When she was once again calm, he guided her to stand and sit on the bed. Handing her a quickly Summoned handkerchief, he sat beside her, peering worriedly at her blank expression.

"I'll be right back, love. Don't move." Snape squeezed her hand and stood, Disapparating. He popped into existence in his bathroom, wrenching open his cabinet and searching for a Calming Draught. Clutching it like a talisman, he Apparated back to Hermione's room.

Hermione hadn't budged. She sat, morosely staring at the floor. Snape urged her to swallow a dose of the Calming Draught, and she submitted without protest. Carefully tugging her to her feet, Snape pulled the covers down the bed, then helped her out of her robe. She was still naked under it, but Snape was far too concerned about her to be distracted by her nudity. He guided her to lie down, frowning again in worry as she almost immediately curled up on her side in a foetal position.

Crookshanks jumped onto the bed, sniffing at her, and she grabbed him, hugging him to her. Snape, grateful that the animal seemed to comfort her, heaved a sigh and doused the remaining lights, shrugging out of his trousers again and crawling into the bed behind Hermione. Fitting himself against her, he drew the covers over them and wrapped her in his embrace, listening to Crookshanks's lulling purr.

There was a long moment of near-silence, then Snape whispered, "I'm so sorry, Hermione. Try to rest, dear heart. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I'll take care of you. I promise I'll be here when you wake up. Just rest. You'll feel better when you wake." He pressed a fervent kiss against her trapezius and murmured, "I love you."

He lay awake for a long while, listening to her breathing finally even out as she dropped off to sleep. Sadness overtook him at the disastrous end to their blissfully-begun liaison, and he fell into a fitful doze, primed to wake at the first sign of Hermione rousing.

53- Aftermath

Chapter 56 of 84

After Colin's devastating discovery, Snape and Hermione try to pick up the pieces. When word spreads of Hermione's rejection of Colin, Gryffindors take sides, and the final blocking rehearsal is chock full of unexpected events. Just how will everyone react to the much-awaited kiss, and how many people will be surprised by kisses that evening?

Author's Note: Thank you to all you wonderful folk who read and review and email me and leave me LJ messages. :) You guys make my day. I know it's been a while waiting for this update, but I had some struggles with it, and as always, RL took up time as well. I hope it manages to meet expectations... *crosses fingers* Muchos smooches to my lovely beta, Ladyofthemasque! Without further ado...

Chapter 53- Aftermath

Several times in the night, Snape woke with a start at Hermione moving or making noises in her sleep. Every time, he held her tight, soothingly caressing her until she quieted again. Finally, after several hours, she woke with a gasp, stiffening in his grasp. Her hand gripped his arm painfully and he snapped to attention, murmuring in her ear.

"Shh... It's all right, love. You're safe. Be calm. I'm here. Shh..."

Hermione struggled to turn in his arms, and he backed away, peering anxiously into her moonlit face. Her eyes were wide and frightened as she rasped, "Severus? What happened? Was it all a nightmare?" Then, she glanced quickly about the room, her brow furrowing as she realized that all the flowers were gone. Lips trembling, she locked eyes with Snape again and said, "Colin was really here, wasn't he? And I was so hateful..." Her face crumpled again and she rolled away from Snape, shuddering.

Again, Snape enveloped her in his arms, his voice low and urgent as he said, "It did happen. I gave you a Calming Draught a few hours ago. Hermione, love, you mustn't punish yourself like this. You did what had to be done."

Her voice was thick with tears as she said, "I can't believe I was so awful to him. I must have hurt him horribly. 'What had to be done'? Is that supposed to make me feel better?" She tossed her head mutinously, her body tense.

Snape pressed his forehead against her shoulder and ground his teeth in shared misery. "Believe me, dear heart, if there's anyone who can truly appreciate what you feel right now, I am he. Welcome to my life..." Bitterness oozed through the sardonic tone of his voice.

Hermione was distracted from her wallowing by trying to puzzle out his comment. Twisting again, she frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

Snape gazed at her, his expression closed and grim. "I know how painful it is to hurt others in the name of 'doing what had to be done.' Tally up how many times I've hurt you alone." He paused to let that sink in, then continued, "Just be glad that you're not likely to have to continue in this vein. This whole incident will probably be the only time you'll have to be so cold. Be grateful."

Her eyes widened as she understood. Staring at him, incredulous, she rebelled at the thought of being grateful for any of the horror she had just experienced. Her mouth opened, but she had no words to retort. Thoughts whirling in a maelstrom in her mind, she blinked, turning away from him again.

They lay there, silent, both absorbed in their own sobering reflections, until the first lightening of dawn approached. Eventually, Hermione squirmed from the bed, hastily donning her robe as she headed for the bathroom. Snape watched her go, uneasy about her extended silence.

Shutting the door firmly behind her, Hermione used the toilet, scrubbing her face with her hands and sighing deeply. Then, she washed her hands and gazed at her haggard reflection. Splashing cold water on her face, she gripped the sink basin and stared into her own eyes. *You need to slow down, girl. Look at what it almost cost you, blithely forging on so recklessly. Think about what it made you do. Do you really want to be that person? Maybe it's time to step back and really examine what you're doing. Time to grow up. You may be an adult, but you know that doesn't mean you're necessarily a grown-up.*

Lips thin in determination, she dried her face and hands and opened the bathroom door. Snape was propped against her headboard, covers pulled up to his waist, watching her with a faint frown. Hermione ducked her head nervously and began collecting her clothing, folding it and smoothing it, neatly putting it away. When she had found all of her clothes, she then picked up Snape's, swallowing hard as she approached him and laid them on the edge of the bed.

Snape's eyes were narrowed, staring at her warily. His heart beat faster as she quietly emerged from the bathroom and started tidying their clothes. A frisson of unease washed over him again, but he was loath to speak, for fear of hearing that which he least wanted to hear.

Finally, Hermione cleared her throat and nodded toward his clothes, her arms folded tightly against her ribs. "That's everything, isn't it?"

Snape reluctantly reached for the pile, seeing his pants, his trousers, and his shirt. His robes were beside them, and she had toed his boots...with his socks still in them...out from under the bed. Clutching the fabric of his shirt in a white-knuckled grip, he murmured, "Hermione. What's going on?" At any other time, he would have been ashamed of the quaver in his voice, but right now there were more important things to worry about.

Hermione looked around awkwardly, unwilling to meet his eyes. Breath sticking in her throat as she tried to speak, she faltered, "I think... it's time for you... to... go back to your quarters. And... I think... maybe we should... slow down a bit..."

Snape's eyes widened, and he sucked in a breath. Paling, he stared at her in astonishment. "What do you mean?" Then, he leant forward, grabbing her hand and squeezing it. Panting shallowly, he whispered, "Hermione, please, don't leave me..."

Hermione finally looked up, and the agony in his eyes tore at her heart. After what she had done to Colin, she couldn't bear seeing that look in Snape's eyes, and she broke down, throwing herself at him, climbing on the bed and wrapping her arms around him as she buried her face in his neck and sobbing, "I'm not! I swear! I love you, Severus..."

Relief crashed over him so powerfully that Snape wavered, and his eyes rolled back as colours flashed before them. He embraced her fervently, willing himself not to pass out. Throat tight, he croaked, "Good gods, Hermione, don't ever scare me like that again."

Hermione held him, gathering her courage to insist on what she knew he would object to. Still pressed against him, she murmured, "I don't want to leave you. I love you. But, I do think we need to slow down. I can't bear anything like this happening again. I never really realized just how precarious our situation was, and I would hate to ruin our lives and reputations by being reckless again. It's only a few months, love. We just have to be patient."

Snape was thunderstruck. *Well! This is certainly a turn of the tables...* Pulling back from her, he peered incredulously into her eyes and said, "I seem to remember saying the same thing months ago, but *someone* paid me no heed."

Hermione ducked her head, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I know I was too impetuous. Can you blame me? Everything has been so new and wonderful, and I hated having to wait!"

Snape lifted her chin on his fingertip and locked eyes with her. Expression solemn, he murmured, "I *know*."

They gazed at each other, silent, each railing against the inevitable but knowing it was the best choice.

After several long moments, Hermione glanced at the brightening sky through her window and her brow creased in anxiety. Snape's lips thinned and he heaved a resentful sigh. A stony scowl on his face, he released Hermione, and she backed away, standing and crossing her arms tightly over her ribs again. Snape reached for his wand and stood quickly, making the practiced flicks that clothed him each morning. Hermione's eyes goggled at the flurry of cloth enrobing him.

Dressed, he gazed down at Hermione, expression stoic and cold. She cast a sorrowful look up at him, hesitantly crossing the short distance to where he stood.

"Severus?" He didn't speak, but simply looked at her. She persisted. "Please don't be angry with me. I hate this idea as much as you do." She was interrupted by a scathing

snort. Closing her eyes in a pained acknowledgement, she continued, "I am sorry..."

When she opened her eyes again, they were bright with unshed tears, and Snape thawed a trifle. Grinding his teeth, he uttered a gruff, "As am I."

Hermione saw him retreating into his usual sour shell, and she reached out, sliding her hands around his waist and pressing her cheek against his black-robed chest. "This doesn't change anything about how I feel, dearest. I love you more than ever. I love you, and *us*, too much to keep taking such risks with our lives and prospective future. We'll still have time together, and it's only a few months until school is over..."

Snape grimaced, fighting the urge to whisk her away and worship her until she consented to continuing their clandestine rendezvous. It was like he had finally had a taste of heaven, and was now being denied it. Like he had finally been freed from the tether that kept him from happiness, only to be bound away from that which made life bearable again.

He returned her embrace stiffly, praying he could maintain control and not prostrate himself at her feet, begging her to reconsider. The wild strength of the emotions she stirred in him frightened him with their intensity, and he grappled with himself, straining to come to terms with such new forces.

Hermione felt the resistance in his body, and she mourned the...hopefully temporary...loss of their intimacy. Terrified of alienating him, and terrified of ruining their lives, she had to make the sacrifice now in the hopes of reaping the greater reward later. With one last squeeze, she backed away, peering up at him again, sniffing back the tears that had dampened his robes.

Snape glanced down at her and felt his chest and throat tighten. Swallowing hard, he murmured through set lips, "Very well. I shall see you in class and, of course, before rehearsal next week." He nodded curtly and smoothed his clothes, running a hand through his hair.

Hermione nodded wistfully, watching him with an aching heart. Before he could Disapparate, she spoke up. "Thank you for all the lovely flowers. They were beautiful. I've never had such a wonderful surprise." She offered a tentative smile, and he inclined his head minutely.

Snape's stomach felt like it was trembling, and he kept swallowing at the lump that kept rising in his throat. In his continued attempt to maintain control, he spoke in a business-like manner. "The rest of the Calming Draught is on the nightstand, should you feel the need for another dose." He paused, and Hermione's wan smile wilted at the reference to the horror they had experienced. Snape felt a pang of remorse for obliterating that smile and cleared his throat. His voice was gravelly as he said, "And thank you for the dinner. I shall never forget it." That brought the smile back, and his gut twisted with longing.

"You're quite welcome. I love you, Severus."

Snape sucked in a breath and held it for a beat, clamping down on the near-frantic desire to throw caution and dignity to the wind and beg her to come with him. Then, closing his eyes, he let out a long exhalation, at the end of which he opened his eyes and whispered, "I love you," whirling and Disapparating before she could react.

He was gone.

A wave of weakness swept over Hermione, and she stumbled to collapse on the bed. Curling up in a foetal position, she felt the wracking sobs rising again, and a high-pitched keening sound emerged from her lips. Struggling to sit up again, she gasped for breath, trying to control the convulsions that gripped her. She grabbed the Calming Draught and managed to swallow some between sobs. As the potion took effect, her body relaxed from its painful paroxysm, and she downed another swallow.

If only he had left me some Dreamless Sleep as well... Oh gods, I wish I could just sleep until school was over! Even as she calmed under the effects of the potion, bitterness welled up. *Bloody hell... You know you've had a great day when you've hurt two men because they have feelings for you.* Burying her face in her pillow, she savagely thought, *Happy Valentine's Day... Yeah, right.*

Snape appeared in his sitting room, his gaze coming to rest on the stack of receipts on his dining table. His stomach gave a lurch, and he hastily retreated into his bedroom, unwilling to be reminded of his carefully prepared gift and its ultimate destruction. In his bedroom, he was assailed by memories of his times with Hermione and he curled forward, arms wrapping around his middle as he grimaced in pain.

Panting shallowly, he felt the constriction in his throat and the burning in his eyes, and he swallowed hard, trying to force the lump back down. He stood there, shaking with the effort of not giving in to the despair and impotent fury that seemed to be eating him alive.

Willing himself to straighten, he staggered to his bathroom, considering following his own advice and taking a potion. But, as he caught sight of his grey face and haunted eyes, he couldn't keep a grip on himself anymore, and the trembling in his guts increased violently.

Dropping to his knees on the hard floor, he surged forward, clutching the porcelain in a white-knuckled grip as the awful trembling rose within him and he was wracked with heaves, retching into the toilet. Coughing and gasping for air, he felt his eyes tearing, wetting his cheeks as they overflowed his lids.

Finally, after several more bouts of exhausting convulsions, he sank back against the wall, shakily wiping his clammy face and streaming nose, gulping in air. Rolling his head back, he closed his eyes, wearily Summoning a glass of water to rinse his mouth.

He hated being sick. He hadn't been sick like this since that night in Godric's Hollow. *Get a hold of yourself! This is hardly comparable: no one has been murdered, you idiot!* Scowling, he dragged himself to his feet, leaning heavily on the sink basin. His movements were brusque and angry as he brushed his teeth to rid himself of the lingering taste, and he glared balefully at his own reflection, noting his red-rimmed, puffy eyes standing out in his ashen face. *It's not like this is the end of the world. He closed his eyes briefly at the flutter of panic in his belly. She's not leaving you. She still loves you. You just have to accept that she's been traumatized by such a disaster. She'll come around eventually. Besides, you said so yourself: it's only a few months till school is over. Just be patient and everything will work out. It has to...*

Rinsing his mouth one last time, he glanced back in the mirror. His whole face drooped with fatigue and sadness. *Just take a damned potion, you daft sod, and get over yourself.*

With that, he opened his cabinet and snagged a bottle of Dreamless Sleep Draught, opening it as he entered his bedroom again. With a deft wave of his wand, he shucked his clothing, and he downed a swig of the potion, sliding into his chilly, lonely bed. It was early morning, and breakfast would begin within a couple of hours, but he had no desire to go to the Great Hall after the previous night's debacle. No reason to rub salt in the wound, after all...

In the darkness, he felt the potion taking effect, and an errant wisp of thought worked its way to the forefront of his mind. *Nope. Still don't like Valentine's Day.*

The next morning, Ginny was late getting up, feeling lazy after a wonderful time with Harry the previous day. Eventually getting herself together, she stretched and yawned, making her way down to the common room, only to see a knot of younger Gryffindors whispering and muttering, all with very hostile expressions. There was an air of tension in the room, and she frowned, wondering what was going on. As she entered, a fourth-year girl whirled around, eyeing her suspiciously. When the girl spun back to the group, Ginny heard a stage whisper saying, "She's her friend. I'll bet she might know what her problem is."

All eyes turned toward her, and the throng parted, letting Dennis Creevey step out of the middle. The boy was still shorter than his peers, which is why Ginny hadn't been able to see him within the circle. His face was set in a scowl, and he marched up to Ginny, glaring up at her.

"All right. What's Hermione's problem, eh? I thought she was supposed to be nice!"

Ginny glanced around in confusion. Blinking at all the resentful glares directed toward her, she peered past the circle of students and saw Colin sitting in the middle of the group, wan and morose. A suspicion struck her, and she narrowed her eyes, staring at Colin while she muttered, "What are you talking about, Dennis?"

Dennis gestured angrily at Colin and said, "Hermione! She was downright *mean* to Colin, and all he did was ask her to be his Valentine!"

Ginny's eyes widened, and she shook her head in disbelief at Colin's folly. Ignoring Dennis, she gazed straight at Colin and said, "I *thought* you were smarter than that, Colin!"

An indignant gasp swept over the group, and Dennis huffed, "Oi! Watch it, Weasley. You're as bad as she is..."

Ginny pushed past Dennis and strode through the mob, glaring down at Colin. Hands on her hips, she hissed, "I *thought* I had made myself plain before! Didn't I tell you to back off? If she had to resort to strong words to get it through your thick skull that she *doesn't like you that way* then it's your fault for keeping after her against all reason!"

Colin's lips trembled, and Ginny backed up, rolling her eyes and throwing her hands heavenward. "I give up." She spun, charging toward the corridor to Hermione's room, then stopped, abruptly swinging around to cast a baleful glare over the group. Pointing a finger at them, she said, "Look, you lot had better clear out and leave Hermione alone. It's none of your business to begin with." She paused to cast a scathing look at Colin before continuing. "And I recommend *believing* me the *first* time." She paused again, arms crossed, waiting for the crowd to disperse. As they exchanged sullen looks and muttered to each other, they finally separated into pairs and singles, either leaving through the portrait hole or heading to their dormitories. Ginny's reputation for prowess with the Bat-Bogey Hex preceded her.

Dennis glared mulishly at Ginny as everyone left, then gripped his older brother's arm and said, "Come on, Colin. Let's get away from these *witches*." The two boys trudged off, and Ginny turned her attention to more important things: Hermione.

Hermione dragged herself to her door at the impatient knocking. "Who is it?" she croaked.

A muffled voice said, "It's Ginny! I need to talk to you."

Flinging the door open, Hermione lurched back to the bed, crawling under her covers again as Ginny stepped in and shut the door behind her. Ginny was eyeing her keenly, and Hermione just lay there, waiting for her to speak.

After a long moment, Ginny finally murmured, "You look like hell."

Hermione grimaced and rolled her eyes, rolling onto her back and yanking the other pillow over her face. "Sod off."

Ginny blinked at the out-of-character rejoinder and crossed to sit on the end of the bed. Frowning in concern, she said, "Is it because of Colin?"

Hermione wrenched the pillow from her face and glared at Ginny, taken aback. In a hiss, she said, "What do you mean?"

Ginny offered a moue of sympathy and said, "Dennis Creevey said you were 'mean' to Colin when he had asked you to be his Valentine. I told him it was his own fault..."

Hermione closed her eyes in pained remembrance and rasped, "It was awful."

Patting her friend's arm, Ginny gently said, "Why don't you tell me what happened."

Hermione struggled to sit up against her headboard, holding her pillow in front of her and staring with haunted eyes into the middle distance as she recounted her tale of woe. Starting with her early retreat, seething with envy of everyone else, to Snape's glorious surprise filling her room with her favourite flowers, to his even better surprise of showing up later...Ginny gasped and goggled at such wonderful gifts...on through their delight in being together, and finally to Crookshanks's discovery of Colin's eavesdropping with an Extendable Ear. At Ginny's expression of horror, Hermione paused, tears welling up again as she went on to explain how she and Snape had to deal with the disaster of Colin's discovery.

She wiped her cheeks and sniffled vainly as she said, "So, I had to be as harsh and hateful as possible, to make sure he finally understood."

Ginny's eyes were limpid with sympathy for everyone involved in the debacle as she murmured soothingly, "You did what had to be done."

Hermione's eyes flashed angrily at Ginny and she retorted, "That's exactly what Severus said! Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Ginny closed her eyes and bowed her head for a moment before continuing, "At least you know you only did it under such dire circumstances. It's not like you're normally cruel. That's a good thing, isn't it?" She gazed at Hermione imploringly, hoping she'd stop beating herself up about it.

Hermione shrugged listlessly, staring at her hands. Ginny latched onto the good parts of the evening, hoping to cheer Hermione up. "So... Wow, I had no idea Snape could be so... romantic! Lucky you, eh?" She cast a bright smile at Hermione. Thus, it was a very confused Ginny who watched her friend shoot a reproachful look at her before dissolving into tears again. Smile melting away in dismay, Ginny faltered, "Um... did I say something wrong?"

Hermione sniffled and wiped her cheeks again. Her voice was almost a wail as she said, "I sent him away. I hurt him, too. And it kills me!"

Eyes goggling in astonishment, Ginny leant forward and hissed, "Sent him away? Did you just *break up with him*?"

Hermione shook her head vehemently, gasping, "No! I love him so much. That's why I had to send him away. After such a close call, I can't take the chance that we get found out. We just have to wait until school is over."

Ginny exhaled on a long note, her eyes closing in relief. Her mind was racing through the ramifications of what had transpired. Just a few months previously, she wouldn't have cared about what happened to Snape, but after seeing how he affected Hermione, and getting to know him as well, she felt sorry for the man who never seemed to get anything nice for all his sacrifices. He wasn't a bad fellow after all, and she rather appreciated his sardonic wit and protective streak. A throb of worry at how he was faring made her bite her lip. At this rate, class Tuesday might be back to being horrid.

Shaking her head to return to the matter at hand, Ginny took a deep breath and said, "Hey, you know I'll stand by you no matter what sort of codswallop Colin may spread around. Don't worry about that, all right?" Hermione closed her eyes and nodded. "And I'll make sure the others understand, too. But, seriously, don't hesitate to go to McGonagall after all, if he keeps acting a prat. That'd take the wind out of his sails."

Wearily, Hermione said, "Thanks, Gin. I think I'm just gonna' try to sleep a bit more. I'll see you lot later."

Ginny patted Hermione's arm and stood. "Sure thing. Try to feel better, 'kay?" She left quietly, and Hermione waved her wand at the door to lock and ward it again, closing her eyes in determination.

Go to sleep. The more you sleep, the less time there is left before term is over.

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Public opinion varied from one extreme to the other regarding Hermione's cold rejection of Colin. Fortunately, Ginny had been her most persuasive self, and the seventh-years and most of the sixth-years were on Hermione's side. Colin found himself in company of mostly younger Gryffindors who felt he had been poorly treated. Still, the

weekend dragged for Hermione, who felt even worse that she hadn't seen Snape in the Great Hall for meals since she had sent him away. Remorse and worry gnawed at her, and she threw herself into her studies for N.E.W.T.s in an effort to keep her mind occupied elsewhere.

Finally, Monday at lunch, Hermione saw Snape taking his seat at the High Table, and a wave of relief and anxiety crashed over her. He glanced at her, but averted his eyes quickly, and her stomach clenched in worry. Rapidly losing her appetite, Hermione shakily reached for the tea service, heart beating in panic as she prepared a cup with honey and lemon. Wrapping her hands around the cup, she cast a desperate glance up at Snape, praying he would join her.

Snape saw Hermione's anxious actions, and he gripped his fork, clenching his other hand into a fist as he fought the hurt and resentment and desire and desperation within him. Swallowing hard, he forced his muscles to relax, one by one, and sucked in a calming breath. Flicking his eyes toward her again, he slowly Summoned the tea service on his table and followed suit in preparing their "tonic."

Hermione wilted in her seat, crumpling forward and resting her forehead against her hands in thanks that Snape wasn't too upset with her to at least maintain their private ritual. Taking a reverent sip, she offered up a trembling smile, hoping he would forgive her for denying them time together.

Snape finished his tea, picking at his food. Even though he hadn't eaten much, he left the Hall fairly early. Hermione watched him go through her lashes, sad that he seemed so closed off again. Hopefully she could mend the breach before the next rehearsal.

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Hermione couldn't help but wonder whether or not everyone would show up for the next rehearsal, even though a few weren't needed. The notice on the board had said, *"Friday February 20: block Raoul's entrance through end. Actors required to attend: Everyone except for Ron, Neville, Draco, and Professor McGonagall."* At least they were almost done with the blocking, and would soon be able to start incorporating costumes and songs and everything from the start all the way through.

She was looking forward to Friday, since she would finally be able to talk with Snape again. He had evidently taken her at her word and was clearly more conscientious about following her strictures than she had been when their positions had been reversed. Even during class on Wednesday, he had remained stoically impassive, and Hermione felt a pang of unease that he didn't seem to regard her any differently than the rest of the class. While it made it easier for her to follow his lead in distancing herself from him, she felt her heart rebelling, desperately missing his love.

Thus, it was a very pensive Hermione who sat at the Gryffindor table Friday at dinner, waiting for Snape to collect her before rehearsal.

Snape, for his part, had wrestled with himself over and over again, beating back the urges to write to her, *ogo* to her, to plead his case. But, some wise part of him told him that he had to do his duty by Hermione as well, and prove that he was capable of acceding to her desires, lest some impulsive act offend her or alienate her, indicating that *his* needs were somehow more important than hers.

His love and need for her hadn't diminished in the slightest, and he knew he would rush to her as soon as the moment was right. In the meantime, he drew on his long experience of patient, dogged, cautious restraint, and he withdrew into his long-perfected Potions Master persona. Still, he no longer exhibited the caustic anger that boiled up at the slightest provocation. His sarcasm and cold, domineering ways still lived, but they were no longer supported by an ill-concealed bitterness and rage. Instead, there was an almost melancholy sort of long-suffering dignity underlying the strict, sour façade.

Had he stopped to ponder the reason behind such a change, he would have realized that the hoped-for reward for his patience and restraint was so different this time around, and the happiness that awaited him at the end of these trials was unlike anything he had ever had any right to expect before...and that made all the difference.

So it was that, with a sober expression nearly bordering on serene, Snape strode down the aisle to Hermione Friday evening.

Nodding in passing at the rest of her friends, he simply murmured, "Miss Granger."

Hermione shot to her feet and tossed a farewell over her shoulder as she followed in the wake of his black robes. Out in the corridor, she kept casting anxious glances up at him, until it dawned on her that they were walking toward the stairs. Taken aback, she frowned and said, "Sir?"

Snape barely looked at her and said, "Yes?"

Stomach fluttering, she said, "Why aren't we Apparating?"

Snape stopped, turning to face her. Gazing into her upturned face, he said, "I did not wish to take liberties, Miss Granger." His expression was consciously neutral, and Hermione felt almost panicked.

Wildly glancing about, she saw that they were alone in the corridor, and, too quietly for any paintings nearby to be able to hear, whispered an agonized query. "Severus?"

Snape's chest tightened, and he closed his eyes at the fear in her voice. Wanting nothing more than to gather her in his arms and never let go, he instead clenched his fists and breathed slowly through his nose, fighting back his emotions. Opening his eyes, he merely extended his arm and murmured, "Very well then. By your leave..."

Hermione gripped his arm vehemently, eyes wide as she nodded. Snape Apparated them to his sitting room, and Hermione released his arm, only to throw herself against him, burying her face in his chest and clutching at his back. Snape's head rolled back and he grimaced at the difficulty with which he pried her off him. Even with the iron grip he maintained on his emotions, a faint flush of colour stained his cheeks, and his eyes grew bright under the torment.

Hermione backed away in confusion at his refusal to return her embrace, fear trickling like ice through her veins. Her voice quavered as she asked, "Severus, what's wrong?"

Snape gently put her away from him and crossed to his bathroom, saying, "Nothing is wrong. We simply must refrain from indulging in these sorts of displays." Returning with the hair products, he continued, "We are to wait until the school year is over, correct?" He placed the items on the side table and took his place for her to begin her task.

Hermione picked up the brush in trembling fingers. "But... surely it can't hurt to be close. We only have such limited time together as it is..."

Snape spun and regarded her with a mixture of longing and reproach. His voice was low as he said, "Have you ever heard of the slippery slope, Hermione?"

She blinked, understanding his point in an instant. Swallowing hard, she attempted to be as cool and controlled as Snape was. Setting her lips, she guided him to turn back around and began brushing his hair. There was a long silence, taut with the effort each was making.

When she finished, she murmured, "Ready." Snape stood and Summoned his mask. They paused and gazed at each other wistfully.

Hermione ducked her head, looking away from the mute devotion in Snape's eyes. If she kept letting herself drown in it, she knew she'd not be able to keep from crumbling and caving in to her consuming love and desire for him. In her desperate need to think about something else, she remembered the quandary they would face at rehearsal. Snapping her gaze back to his, her eyes widened in anxiety as she said, "What are we going to do about tonight?"

Snape frowned. "What *about* tonight?"

"We're finishing the play. The climactic scene. When I kiss you..."

Snape blinked rapidly. Clearing his throat, he said, "Treat it the way it must be treated. It's acting. We're merely doing our duty. Maintain control, and there should be no problem. It's not like everyone doesn't know it's coming."

Hermione chewed her lip. In a whisper, she said, "I'll do my best." She locked eyes with him again and breathed, "I do love you, Severus. And this is so hard."

Snape's face fell, and he raised his eyes to hers, retorting softly, "I know. Trust me." He saw the hopeful gleam in her eyes and relented a fraction. "I love you, Hermione. I'm just following your wishes. We both know it's the right thing."

She nodded again and laid a gentle hand on his arm. "Shall we go, then?"

Snape drew himself up and settled his shoulders. "Indeed." They Disappeared.

When everyone had entered the Hall, Hermione noted that both Ron and Neville had come to the rehearsal, even though they weren't needed. Draco, thankfully, was nowhere to be seen, and McGonagall, too, was apparently taking the night off. Hermione was grateful for the boys' attendance, as they joined Harry and Ginny in staving off Colin's sulky behaviour, giving her moral support.

Dumbledore prepared the stage and the actors for practice and Harry descended into the trap door, while Snape and Hermione took their places onstage.

"All right, everyone... this is the last blocking rehearsal! I want to reiterate how pleased I've been with everyone's hard work thus far. After tonight, we'll be able to move forward in earnest and *really* start performing. So, with that in mind, let's give this practice 100%!" Dumbledore beamed at the cast and set up the music box at the end of his rousing speech.

Snape and Hermione exchanged a look, nodding faintly at each other, before Dumbledore called for Harry to climb out of the trap door to start the scene. As soon as Snape saw Dumbledore gesture, he cocked his head, taking notice of Harry's arrival. His lips spread in a horrible smile as he said, "Wait! I think, my dear, we have a guest!" Then, he turned to Harry, who was gripping the bars of the portcullis and staring at them. Offering a mocking bow, he continued, "Sir, this is indeed an unparalleled delight!" He pressed a hand against his chest and said, "I had rather hoped that you would come. And now my wish comes true...you have truly made my night!"

Hermione, as Christine, remained where she was, frozen, fearing what the Phantom would do. Harry stretched one hand through the bars toward Hermione, reciting, "Free her! Do what you like, only free her! Have you no pity?"

Snape affected boredom, facing away from them and pretending to study his nails. Barely sparing a glance over his shoulder at Hermione, he shrugged toward Harry's impassioned stance as he commented, "Your lover makes a passionate plea."

Hermione broke in, "Please, Raoul, it's useless..."

Harry turned his attention to Snape and gripped the bars again, scowling as he said, "I love her! Does that mean nothing? I love her! Show some compassion..."

At that, Snape's façade of ennui shattered, and he rounded furiously on Harry, charging toward the portcullis and snarling, "The world showed no compassion to me!"

Harry once again looked at Hermione and said, "Christine... Christine..." Then, he faced Snape again and begged, "Let me see her."

Snape gripped a crossbar on the portcullis and bowed with mock-courtesy as he said, "Be my guest, sir." With a minute push, the portcullis rose slowly, and a Punjab lasso lowered into view at the same lazy speed. While Harry waited impatiently for the portcullis to rise far enough for him to scramble under it, Snape went on, "Monsieur, I bid you welcome. Did you think that I would harm her?" Harry dropped to his hands and knees to crawl under the portcullis and Snape lifted his hand without looking, knowing that Dumbledore would guide the rope into his grasp.

His polite tone hardened as he continued, "Why should I make her pay for the sins which *argours*?" Harry was struggling to his feet, and Snape deftly looped the lasso around his neck on the last word, letting go and watching it rise quickly, until Harry grabbed at it in a panic, trying to pull it away from his throat. Snape shot a look at Dumbledore, wondering at the man's apparent disregard for his pet student's composure.

Hermione was taken aback by the flare of real panic in Harry's face and she stepped toward him, saying, "Harry!"

Snape glanced back at the pair, noting that Harry's feet were stretched up on tiptoe, and he barked, "Sir!"

Dumbledore looked up from his script in surprise, his wand dropping a fraction. The rope, too, fell a foot or two, and Harry crumpled forward, pulling the rope from his throat and coughing. Hermione supported him and impatiently struggled to remove the lasso from his neck. Snape stared at the headmaster in shock, astonished that he had been so careless.

Dumbledore realized his mistake at once and immediately began apologizing. Snape noticed that McGonagall wasn't there to intercede on her charge's behalf, so he quickly strode over to Harry and Hermione, authoritatively motioning for Hermione to let go of him, and gesturing for Harry to sit on the stage. "Sit, Potter. Miss Granger, do stop hovering. Let me see." He waved Hermione away, and she retreated a few steps. Students emerged from the wings and from within the house, watching Snape kneel and tilt Harry's head back to examine the mark made by the rope.

Harry was breathing shallowly, clearly spooked. The rope had pressed into his flesh, leaving an angry red line, but the skin was not broken. Rather, the damage was more to the boy's confidence in his elder. Snape's lips thinned and he muttered, "Don't move. I'll be right back." He shot to his feet and Disappeared. A few beats later, he returned, two bottles in his hand. Dropping to his knees again, he fished out a handkerchief and moistened it with the solution in one of the bottles. Nodding peremptorily at Harry, he said, "Back." Harry once again tilted his head back, and Snape bathed the mark with the potion. It disappeared before their eyes. "Enough." Harry tipped his head back to a level and peered at Snape in wonder. Snape pocketed the first bottle and opened the second one. "Here. Swallow." Harry obediently took a swig, relaxing almost instantly as it took effect. Hermione looked more closely at the bottle and recognized at as the same sort of Calming Draught he had given her.

Dumbledore was watching Snape's ministrations anxiously, shaken that he had been so oblivious. Once he had finished his treatment, Snape stood. "No harm done, Potter." He backed away, noting Dumbledore's expression of shame.

Hermione darted back to Harry, crouching and comforting him, seeing him eyeing Snape with an incredulous expression. Her suspicions were confirmed when he whispered, "Bloody hell! And I thought I had more to worry about if Snape were the one to control the damn rope!"

Snape's keen teacher's ears caught the comment, and he stifled a snort. Still, after Dumbledore's oversight, perhaps it would be a better idea for Snape to be the one handling the lasso. He strode over to the headmaster and said, "Sir, why don't you allow me to control the lasso, as you already have so much else to worry about?"

Dumbledore's knitted brow relaxed in relief at the suggestion, and he readily agreed. Harry and Hermione both looked up in surprise. Snape nodded and crossed back to the pair. His voice was low as he said, "Up you go. You needn't worry, Potter. It sha'n't happen again. I shall be in complete control. I trust the potion has had the desired effect?"

Harry nodded, floating serenely in the potion-induced calm, even as his brain grappled with the astounding events that had just transpired. He got to his feet, and Hermione released him. Harry looked Snape straight in the eye and gravely said, "I feel much better. Thank you, sir. And..." He shot a quick glance at the still-chagrined headmaster. "I think I'll be more comfortable with you in charge of my 'hanging.'" He managed to crack a wry half-smile at Snape, whose brows rose in surprise at the boy's admission.

Glancing at Hermione, he saw exultation at their interaction blazing in her eyes, and he inclined his head modestly. His voice pitched low enough that the rest of the cast wouldn't be able to hear him, Snape said, "Well, I *have* had quite a bit of practice at saving your hide, Potter, so this should be quite simple."

Harry's eyes snapped open wide at the apparent gibe, and Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the bark of laughter that erupted. Harry blinked, looking between his friend and the man who had changed so much in the past few months. Never in his wildest dreams would he have thought that Snape would not only be

decent to him, but would go so far as to tease him.

Completely at a loss, all Harry could say was, "Yes, sir."

Snape snorted, then straightened, and in a businesslike tone said, "Now, shall we proceed? Take your position, Potter, and I'll handle the rope."

Harry watched warily as Snape snapped his fingers at the lasso, Summoning it to him without a word. Once he had it in his grasp, Snape looked at Harry expectantly, cocking an eyebrow at him. Harry frowned, approaching him slowly, shying away as Snape made to loop it around his neck. His cringe made Snape pause, and he sighed, calmly saying, "I'm not going to hurt you, Potter. You have my word." Harry peered at him and finally nodded, holding still as Snape secured the lasso around his neck and carefully raised the rope until it pulled taut under Harry's chin. At the look of rising panic in Harry's eyes, Snape repeated, albeit with a note of impatience, "My word, Potter." When the rope was taut, Snape stopped, keeping it at that point, and not raising it higher so Harry would be teetering on tiptoe.

After a beat, in which he looked pointedly at Hermione, who hurried back to her place, Snape nodded toward Dumbledore and resumed his part, ignoring the susurrus of shocked whispers around them as the rest of the cast faded back into the wings and house.

Backing away from Harry toward Hermione, Snape taunted, "Order your fine horses now! Raise up your hand to the level of your eyes! Nothing can save you now...except perhaps Christine..." He spun, towering over Hermione and gripping her wrist. Dragging her away from Harry, he tossed the mannequin from the throne and roughly sat her in it, dropping to his knee beside her and brandishing her hand between them, pointedly drawing attention to the ring he had placed on her finger as he continued, "Start a new life with me... Buy his freedom with your love! Refuse me, and you send your lover to his death!" He flung her hand away and gestured imperiously at Harry. "This is the choice... *This* is the point of no return!"

Hermione stared at him, then looked at Harry before locking eyes with Snape again as she said, "The tears I might have shed for your dark fate grow cold, and turn to tears of hate..."

Snape recoiled from her and scowled fiercely as the three of them began their interweaving parts.

Harry hung there, hands wrapped around the rope as he said, "Christine, forgive me, please forgive me... I did it all for you and all for nothing..."

Hermione stared at nothing as she said, "Farewell, my fallen idol and false friend... One by one I've watched illusions shattered..."

Snape wrenched away from her and crossed his arms as he overlapped her, saying, "Too late for turning back, too late for prayers and useless pity..."

Harry continued, "Say you love him, and my life is over!" while Snape said, "Past all hope of cries for help: no point in fighting..." Then, Harry and Snape were almost in unison as Harry said, "Either way you choose, he has to win..." and Snape said, "For either way you choose, you cannot win!"

Then, Snape was alone as he rounded back toward Hermione and continued, "So do you end your days with me, or do you send him to his grave?" grabbing her hands and pulling her from her seat, shoving her toward Harry on the last word.

Hermione stumbled to Harry and clutched at him as Harry said, "Why make her lie to you, to save me?"

Embracing Harry, Hermione began, "Angel of Music..." while Snape goaded her, saying, "Past the point of no return..." and Harry pleaded, "For pity's sake, Christine, say no!"

Turning an expression of agonized grief to Snape, Hermione went on, "...why this torment?" as Snape was still taunting, "...the final threshold..." and Harry said, "Don't throw your life away for my sake..."

Hermione released Harry and faced Snape in despair, saying, "When will you see reason...?" while Snape gestured harshly at them, saying, "His life is now the prize which you must earn!" and Harry followed with a pitiful, "I fought so hard to free you..."

Hermione took a step toward Snape as she said, "Angel of Music..." and Snape wound down with, "You've passed the point of no return..."

There was a bare moment of electric silence before Hermione said, her voice trembling with emotion, "...you deceived me...I gave my mind blindly..."

Snape stiffened as if he had been slapped, and drew himself up, coldly biting out, "You try my patience...make your choice!"

Hermione stepped toward Snape again, and Harry reached out, in a futile attempt to stop her. Her expression composed into one of calm resolution as she advanced on Snape, saying, "Pitiful creature of darkness... What kind of life have you known...?" As she neared him, he stared at her, unmoving. She stopped very close to him, and he swallowed as she gently laid a hand on his heaving chest, saying, "God give me courage to show you..." She gazed into his eyes and smoothed her hand up his chest and throat to slide behind his neck, saying, "...you are not alone..."

It was the moment of truth. As the word died on her lips, she pulled his face down, stretching up to kiss him full on the lips. Her other hand rose to caress his cheek, holding his face still. Her eyes closed and she poured her soul from her lips to his.

Snape's eyes widened in shock, then closed. His hands splayed out to either side, rigid in astonishment, until he seemed to crumble under the onslaught, and his trembling hands closed around her, embracing her for a moment, seeming to revel in the consummation of his love. Then, his demeanour changed again, and he stiffened once more, pulling away and wrenching her hands from him. His pained grimace as he staggered backwards tore at Hermione's heart.

Stumbling, dazed, Snape made his way toward Harry, who was staring at him in horrified fascination. He snapped his fingers, and the rope fell to the stage, allowing Harry to drop to his knees and struggle out of the loop.

The cast members in the wings faintly recited, "Track down this murderer...he must be found!" and some said, "Who is the monster, this murdering beast?"

Snape looked at Hermione, who hurried over to Harry where he knelt, casting wary looks at Snape, but he simply said, in a flat voice, "Take her...forget me...forget all of this..." He dragged back toward the throne, continuing, "Leave me alone...forget all you've seen..." He grabbed at the back of the throne, flailing at them as he rasped, "Go now...don't let them find you!"

Offstage, the others said, "Hunt out this animal, who runs to ground!" and "Revenge for Piangi! Revenge for Buquet!"

Snape sagged into the throne and persisted, "Take the boat...leave me here...go now, don't wait..." He waved his hand at the portcullis, and it slowly started to rise as he sighed, "Just take her and go...before it's too late..." The offstage voices continued, "Too long he's preyed on us...but now we know: the Phantom of the Opera is there, deep down below..." and "This creature must never go free..."

Harry and Hermione stood, wrapped in each other's embrace, staring incredulously at Snape. The portcullis was high enough that the boat could pass beneath it, and Snape shot a frustrated look at them, gesturing impatiently at the boat and growling, "Go..." When they still didn't move, his composure broke and he lurched to his feet, staggering toward them and roaring, "Go now...go now and leave me!" They scurried off, guiding the boat under the portcullis.

Snape whirled, hands gripped in his hair in agony, and he collapsed onto his knees, curling forward in despair. The music box sat beside the throne, and his mask lay by it. When it started playing, he whipped his head up to look at it, snorting in self-mockery as he looked at the mask. Crawling toward them, he hunkered back on his heels and hesitantly touched the music box, faltering, "Masquerade... Paper faces on parade... Masquerade... Hide your face, so the world will never find you..."

From the other side of the portcullis, Hermione crept back in, and Snape spun, sensing her presence. He gazed longingly up at her as she approached him, hand

outstretched. A spark of hope lit his face and he said, "Christine, I love you..." He lifted his hand to hers, only to feel her firmly place the ring he had given her in his palm. Startled, he withdrew his hand, looking sadly at the ring before casting another pleading look at her. She retreated a step, shaking her head faintly before turning and hastening out.

Snape stared after her for a long moment, then bowed his head in defeat. With a wistful expression, he slipped the ring on his finger and clenched his fist. Behind the portcullis, Harry and Hermione faded away in the boat, Hermione saying, "Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime... Say the word and I will follow you..."

Snape cringed, then waved his hand at the portcullis, bringing it back down as Harry answered, "Share each day with me..."

Heaving to his feet, Snape slumped to the portcullis, gripping the bars as he peered through them after the retreating boat, as Hermione continued, "...each night..." and Harry added, "...each morning..."

Even though his back was to the house, the devastation of spirit was evident in the tension in his frame as he uttered his impassioned finale, "You alone can make my song take flight...it's over now, the music of the night..."

Sagging against the bars, he jerked his head up where the other cast members would be climbing down the portcullis, then reeled back to his throne, where he yanked his cloak from the seat and sank into it, wrapping it around him. Behind the portcullis, cast members entered the stage, walking out to where they would arrive after climbing down the bars. With a concerted effort, they managed to lift the gate enough that Ginny could slither underneath.

While they were struggling with the portcullis, Snape concealed himself within his cloak, waiting to hear Ginny's approach. As she stepped beside the throne, he heard her gasp, giving him the cue to Disapparate as she whipped the cloak off him. The timing was right, and he appeared in the back of the house in time to see the cloak fluttering to the stage at her feet and her kneeling to examine the mask that was left on the seat of the throne. She picked it up and gazed out into the house, holding it up for all to see.

It was over.

There was a pregnant pause, until Ron and Neville began cheering and clapping wildly, even stomping in the excess of their approval. At that, cast members poured onto the stage, beaming and hugging, congratulating each other on getting this far. Dumbledore watched, hands clasped under his chin in an attitude of ultimate satisfaction.

Snape took a deep breath to restore himself after the emotionally charged scene, then he Apparated a little behind the milling throng onstage. As they started to notice his presence, many students turned awed expressions on him, then glanced awkwardly between him and Hermione. Ginny grinned at him and said, "Perfect timing on disappearing, sir! That was brilliant!"

Snape inclined his head and smoothly retorted, "Thank you, Miss Weasley. I appreciated the subtle cue."

Dumbledore clapped his hands for attention, and all eyes turned to him. "That was marvellous, as always. Now, before we get too carried away in celebration, you all need to write that blocking down in your scripts. Also, I want all of the mob members to gather here on the apron, so I can direct you to how you'll all enter the scene on the portcullis." Everyone except Snape, Hermione, and Harry surged forward, scripts in hand and expressions attentive.

Hermione, Snape, and Harry dutifully wrote the blocking in their scripts, Harry finishing first, as he had less to make note of. He glanced between the others, eyes thoughtful and brow furrowed. Eventually, Hermione looked up and saw his expression, murmuring, "What's on your mind, Harry? Are you sure you're okay?"

Harry blinked, turning his attention to her completely. "What? Oh. Yeah, I'm fine. I mean, that was pretty scary, but I feel fine after the potion." He snorted ruefully. "I can't *not* feel fine after that dose, you know?" He frowned again and gazed toward Dumbledore and the rest of the group. "I just never expected Dumbledore to be the one to put me in danger. Quite a nasty shock, I must say..."

Snape kept his eyes down, but he heard everything they said. He knew the disillusion Harry was feeling at his mentor's fallibility, having experienced it himself. It surprised him to feel a pang of empathy for the boy.

Harry huffed reflectively and said, "Speaking of shocks... Are *you* okay?"

Hermione tilted her head to the side in perplexity. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Harry edged closer to her and jerked his head toward Snape, whispering, "You know... after kissing him?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed and her lips pursed in disappointment and anger. In a flat tone, she said, "You're not still on about that, are you?"

Harry's brows rose, and he blinked. Hermione pinned him with a steely gaze, crossing her arms in haughty indignation. Harry cast a helpless glance back at Snape, who was still pretending to be absorbed in his script. "Uh... never mind. Just... forget I said anything."

Voice dripping with disdain, Hermione retorted, "I'll try."

Harry ran a hand through his hair and stuffed his hands in his pockets, eyes darting around uncomfortably. Snape remained where he was, tamping down his anger at Harry's intimation. Suddenly, any empathy he may have felt for the boy was gone. Straightening regally, he merely cast an inscrutable look at the pair, then stalked offstage, waiting for Dumbledore to finish his directions.

The mob members climbed to the catwalks above the stage and learnt how to attach safety lines before they began their climb down the portcullis. Ginny had to practice releasing hers as soon as she reached the stage, so she could crawl under the portcullis. Snape leant against the side wall in the wing, watching the group in silence. Hermione was gazing intently at them as well, clearly giving Harry the cold shoulder.

It hadn't been difficult to play the role of the Phantom during the kiss. With their current situation, and the restraint they were doing their best to achieve, the surprise of her passionate kiss and his journey from shock to joy to denial mirrored their real-life path. If she were to accost him when they were alone, he knew he would have to refuse her in such a fashion. He closed his eyes in frustration. Heaving a sigh, he thought, *At least she won't be traipsing off with someone else, like Christine does. I have something to look forward to, unlike the poor Phantom.*

Finally, the cast was ready, and they began again, this time having the mob members take their positions on the portcullis from above and climbing down. Snape had the Punjab lasso under control, much to Harry's relief. Again, as they reached the end, and Snape hid himself under the cloak, he waited, ears pricked for the sound of Ginny about to snatch the cloak. It took much longer this time, and Snape wondered what was going on. Finally, he heard an exasperated huff from upstage, and Ginny said, "Sorry, everyone. I got stuck." There was a ripple of murmurs, and eventually Ginny said, "There! Okay, I'm ready. Sorry."

Snape finally heard her approaching, and, at her cue, Disapparated. When he rejoined the cast to begin again, this time with the music, he was struck with an idea. Absently handing the ring back to Hermione and placing his mask by the throne, his lips quirked in calculation. Hermione noticed his expression and wondered what he was thinking.

They took their places, and Dumbledore stood by his music box, ready to open it. "Ready?"

Snape cut a glance at the headmaster and held up his hand for a moment, then pulled out his wand and cast his glamour. Hermione gasped in surprise. Snape's black eyes gazed intently through the glamour in challenge. Swallowing, Hermione took a deep breath and nodded. Dumbledore merely hummed thoughtfully, waiting for Snape's cue. With a nod, he pocketed his wand again and dropped his hand, ready to start.

When Harry emerged from the trap door and saw Snape, he blanched, unprepared for the horror of Snape's glamour. Snape saw his recoil and used it to fuel his performance.

The glamour that Flitwick had created was quite thorough. The portion of Snape's face that was usually covered by the mask was disfigured, looking as if the skull beneath the flesh were sunken and deformed. The cheekbone caved in, and the eye socket was ragged and huge. What looked like raw flesh surrounded the eyeball, which was bulging. The temple was lumpy, and the skin was scarred, spreading across the forehead. The cheek and the area just before his ear were sunken and pocked, with angry weals and ropy scars stretching grotesquely across it. Even Snape's high-bridged nose was altered, with the masked side almost non-existent, and the nostril gaping along the length. To complete the image, the flesh under the mask went from raw reds and purples to yellowed scars.

Even Hermione had trouble looking at him, and she loved him!

The addition of the music and Snape's use of the glamour heightened the tension and pathos of the scene as they swept through it for the final time that night. Everyone in the wings and in the house stared in rapt fascination as the intensity grew.

Hermione felt a vague sense of surprise when she realized that tears were trailing down her cheeks during the confrontation, and a portion of her mind was grateful that her throat hadn't tightened and affected her singing. When she approached Snape for the climactic kiss, she gazed at the glamour, gut twisting with revulsion, but that only served to highlight Christine's sacrifice, and Hermione forced herself to see her love behind the horror.

This time, her fingers lifted to trace along the glamour, and she was glad that at least *he felt* normal. Heart full, she pulled him down to kiss him, buoyed along by the surge of music and emotion.

Snape's stunned reaction was far from feigned, as he felt her tongue sliding along his lips, just as they had that first time in his classroom. His startled gasp allowed her entrance, and he nearly groaned as he crushed her to him, savouring her taste. Then, panic rose within him, and he tore her hands from his hair, wrenching away, blinking at her in disbelief. Panting shallowly in fear, icy sweat prickling his skin, he staggered over to Harry, who was staring at him, owl-eyed in consternation.

The music changed, and he heard his voice rasping as he continued, swallowing desperately against his dry throat. Somehow, he managed to get through the rest of the rehearsal, and as soon as Dumbledore shut the music box, he Apparated to a spot right beside the proscenium, expression one of carefully-constructed indifference.

The rest of the cast swarmed out onto the apron, and Dumbledore looked around, seeing Snape leaning against the arch. He blinked and shook his head faintly as he gestured for Snape to join him.

"You may end the glamour at any time, you know," Dumbledore said as Snape approached.

"Of course." Snape quickly dispelled the glamour, noting that Dumbledore's shoulders seemed to relax a fraction as he did so.

"Mercy... Filius certainly did an exceptional job with that one." Dumbledore shook himself faintly, then eyed Snape with an uncomfortable frown. "I say, Severus, would you join me for a moment?" He tilted his head to the side, indicating that they should walk away from the chattering students.

Snape merely nodded, gut clenching in dread. He resisted the urge to glance back at Hermione. If he had, he would have seen several eyes following him and casting disconcerted looks at Hermione.

Hermione saw Dumbledore leading Snape away and felt as if a bucket of ice water had been dashed over her. Mentally berating herself for allowing herself to go so far with the kiss, she feared the worst. Ginny's keen eyes caught the direction of Hermione's gaze and guessed at her friend's anxiety. Surreptitiously scrabbling for Hermione's hand, Ginny squeezed it in a fleeting gesture of comfort.

In the meantime, Ron and Neville had ascended the stage, joining their mates and offering congratulations for a job well done. As they gathered near Hermione, everyone began faltering, unsure of what to say about the staggeringly passionate kiss they had just seen her share with their professor. An awkward silence fell over them, and they glanced about nervously. Hermione did her best to compose herself, steeling herself for their reactions.

Out in the house, far enough away that the cast couldn't hear them, Dumbledore peered at Snape and said, "Are you all right, Severus?"

Snape blinked, brow furrowing as he said, "What do you mean?"

Dumbledore cleared his throat and shifted his weight, obviously unnerved. "My dear boy, if I was unsettled by such a kiss out here in the house, I can only imagine how stunned you might be."

Snape's nostrils flared. Settling his shoulders, he swallowed hard and murmured, "I will admit that I was rather taken aback, sir. Had I but known the lengths to which Miss Granger was prepared to go to exhibit realism onstage, I would have addressed the issue earlier."

Dumbledore seemed to fidget more, stroking his beard in a bemused fashion. In a sheepish tone, he said, "But that's just it: such an extraordinary performance! I know it may make you uncomfortable... but that climactic moment was more overwhelming than I could have ever dreamt. If Miss Granger feels comfortable and safe going to such lengths, I must say that it will likely go a long way toward winning that trophy." His expression was a mixture of entreaty and embarrassment, and Snape's eyes widened in incredulity.

In a strained hiss, Snape said, "Are you saying... what *I think* you're saying? Albus, have you gone mad?"

Dumbledore waved his hands about airily. "No, I've not lost my senses. The intensity was astounding! I can't see how anyone watching that couldn't be carried away on the tide of feeling. *That's* what will make us shine above the rest." He paused, clearing his throat in chagrin. "Is it really that bad?"

Snape stared at him, utterly dumbfounded. His voice cracked as he said, "I can't believe you're encouraging intimacy with a student..."

Dumbledore scowled in pique and slashed the air in irritation. "I'm *not* 'encouraging intimacy with a student.' You're both adults...a fact which we have already addressed at length. And, it's *acting*. It's not like you'll be 'performing' anywhere but within the scene on this stage." He paused, tilting his head and offering a wan smile. "Come now, Severus, can you put up with it, until we win this competition?"

Snape realized his mouth was hanging open and shut it with a snap. Involuntarily, he glanced over his shoulder at the throng of students. His mind was reeling with the shock he had just received. Blinking, he turned dazed eyes back to Dumbledore and swallowed, clearing his throat savagely. Slowly, cautiously, he said, "You are the Director... and the headmaster. If those are your instructions, I shall do as you say. Are you going to speak with Miss Granger?"

Dumbledore peered past Snape at the cast and shook his head. "I don't want to draw attention to it, lest she think her talent and instincts are a problem. The last thing I want to do is inhibit her." He beamed at Snape, patting his arm. "If it becomes an issue, I'll let you explain the situation to her. You two have obviously forged quite a trusting bond. I'm proud of you, Severus."

Snape goggled anew at the older man's praise. A fresh wave of shame that he was deceiving his long-time mentor washed over him, but a tiny prick of hope that perhaps Dumbledore wouldn't object to their true relationship when it became known flared up deep within him.

Back onstage, Ginny tried to break the awkward tension by saying, "You all were amazing. See, Harry, Snape's not such a bad fellow after all. I told you he had changed. It's a good thing he doesn't lose his head in a crisis, or you might have been really hurt."

Harry rubbed absently at his healed throat. "You have a point, but still..."

Planting her hands on her hips, Ginny glared at him warningly and said, "Still what?"

Harry knew better than to respond, and he shoved his hands in his pockets and studied the floor. Ron thought he understood and rubbed the back of his neck, mumbling, "Well, you know, he's the 'Greasy Git.' It's like a train wreck watching him snog Hermione."

Hermione's eyes flashed and her chin lifted in preparation of launching into a harangue. But, Neville spoke before she could. "Hey, wait a minute! Let's be fair... He didn't snog her. *She* snogged *him*." He, too, turned a disconcerted gaze on Hermione, shrugging apologetically.

Lavender edged closer, grimacing, and whispered, "How could you?"

Hermione's lips thinned in anger, and she seemed to radiate righteous indignation. In a glacial tone, she hissed, "It's *called* ACTING, you daft sods!"

Still bitter, even after nearly a week, Colin hung on the edge of the group, scowling. He couldn't help feeling both jealousy and disgust when he had seen Hermione kissing Snape, after she had been so hateful to him. His lips twisted in a nasty sneer as he spat, "I'm bloody well glad you're not going out with me, Hermione, after seeing you sully yourself with that disgusting, slimy, bat."

Jaws dropped and all eyes swung around as one, staring at Colin in stunned disbelief that he had said something so foul. There was a beat of charged silence, while everyone was too shocked to respond immediately, then Ron bellowed, "OI! Watch your mouth, Creevey!"

While Ron reddened, Ginny looked around furiously, "You've gone too far, Colin! Where's McGonagall?"

Everyone stood, frozen, watching the spectacle unfold. Hermione felt hot tears pricking her eyes as she fought to keep from exploding in anger. No one was quite prepared for what happened next.

Neville had taken one look at Hermione's glassy eyes and her reddening face and felt a hot protective rush flash over him. Hermione had been nothing but nice to him, and he knew he had her to thank for his new-found courage. She had been instrumental in helping him grow up, and he loved her like a sister he never had. Yoking some of the recently-discovered confidence, he growled, "Forget McGonagall; where's Snape?"

Spinning and charging downstage to the edge of the apron, Neville called, "Professor Snape!"

Dumbledore had just told Snape he was proud of him, and Snape was trying to think of an appropriate response, when both he and Dumbledore were distracted by Neville's shout.

Turning around, Snape frowned and said, "What is it, Longbottom?"

Neville glanced over his shoulder, and, seeming to gain strength from the sight of Hermione's tears, licked his lips and stood straight. "Professor, Hermione is being harassed, and it's not right!" His outburst galvanized everyone, who had never seen this side of Neville before.

Exchanging a glance, Snape and Dumbledore quickly strode to the stage and ascended. Casting a baleful glare over the group, Snape saw angry glares directed at Colin, who was looking both sullen and scared. Several other students avoided his eyes, quite uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

Making a beeline to the boy, Snape towered over Colin and softly said, "I shall not distress Miss Granger further by asking what vile things came out of your mouth, Mr. Creevey. It is not wise to let your petty envy get the better of you."

Colin's eyes widened. How had Snape known? Unnerved, Colin shrank back from the imposing man even more.

Dumbledore interjected, "Enough, all of you. I will not allow anyone to disparage Miss Granger's performance. Simply put: get used to it." He paused to let that astonishing morsel sink in. Even Hermione jerked, taken aback. Dumbledore's voice was steely and devoid of its usual ripple of good humour.

Hermione dared to shoot a glance at Snape, who was standing stiffly, his arms crossed, gazing down his nose in hauteur. Wondering what had transpired between the two men, she turned her attention back to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore nodded politely to Snape. "Continue."

Snape narrowed his eyes at Colin and snarled, "Detention. Saturday afternoon, with Filch. Report to his office at 1:00 sharp." He paused to glare at everyone impartially. "And if I hear any other reports of harassing Miss Granger, prepare to lose a month of Saturdays. Is that clear?" There was vigorous nodding all around. "Very well then. Headmaster?" He inclined his head to Dumbledore.

"Thank you, Severus. I quite concur with Professor Snape." He peered over his spectacles meaningfully. Several faces flushed guiltily and eyes looked at the floor. Others stood straighter, defying anyone who thought to bother Hermione. "Next Tuesday, we'll run through the Labyrinth Underground to the end, including songs. Until then, good night." He gestured for the students to disperse.

Colin slunk up the aisle, leaving Hermione's supporters to flank her like a retinue. Dumbledore descended, gathering his script and music box and starting the cleanup.

Snape turned to Hermione's group and offered a courteous bow. "Five points to Gryffindor, Mr. Longbottom. Miss Granger is fortunate to have such a loyal friend." While Neville coloured violently, and everyone else stared at Snape in surprise, Snape's lips twitched in a faint amused smile and he Disapparated, leaving them gaping.

Exchanging bewildered looks, they all trooped off the stage and to Gryffindor Tower. No one spoke, too confounded by the events of the evening to form a coherent thought. When they had all climbed through the portrait hole, a sigh of relief escaped them, since Colin was nowhere to be seen.

They stopped, looking at each other awkwardly. Hermione finally took the initiative and squeezed Ginny's hand, nodded to Harry and Ron, and resolutely crossed to Neville, giving him a quick hug. Offering him a wan, grateful smile, she retreated toward the corridor to her room and said, "Good night." With a final nod, she disappeared.

Neville sank onto a footstool, slightly overwhelmed. Ron clapped him on the shoulder and mumbled, "I'm off to bed. Night, all."

Ginny kissed Harry on the cheek and said, "Me, too." Smiling at Neville, she ducked up the stairs to her dorm.

Harry stood there for a moment, then he sighed and said, "You coming to bed, mate?"

Neville nodded faintly. "I'll be there soon. You go on."

"Right then." With that, Harry left.

Neville stared into the fire. He had never earned points for Gryffindor from Professor Snape. It was quite an event for him. At that moment, he felt his old fear for the acerbic Potions Master ebbing away. It was rather an odd feeling, not having that bowel-twisting terror take hold of him anymore. An incredulous smile lit his face in the dancing glow of the fireplace.

He heard a noise and looked up. Ginny had crept back downstairs, peeking to see if anyone else were still about. When she saw the coast was clear, she stole into the common room, hurrying to Neville.

"Hi, Ginny..." Neville's greeting was abruptly cut off by Ginny's vehement embrace.

She hugged him tight for a long moment, then released him and kissed his cheek, cupping his face in her hands and whispering, "You're the best, Neville. Thank you." Then, with a farewell kiss on his forehead, she whirled and dashed off again.

Dazed, Neville touched the spots where Ginny had kissed him, grinning like an idiot. Bolstered by such regard, he got to his feet, his stride almost jaunty as he headed to his dorm. Looks like tonight was the night for surprise kisses!

54- Unfogging the Future

Chapter 57 of 84

Neville keeps getting surprised, but nowhere near as much as McGonagall! It also seems to be the season for Snape to get into rows with Gryffindor women. Under the strain of the new restrictions, Snape and Hermione both start planning for the future without the other's knowledge.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

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Chapter 54- Unfogging the Future

Fortunately, Colin stayed away from the other Gryffindors on cast, as they had all clearly sided with Hermione at the last rehearsal. He didn't even dare to complain in the common room about how exhausted he was after his afternoon detention with Filch. Relieved, Hermione ignored him to the best of her ability, and gratefully accepted the staunch support given to her by her friends.

Saturday, after Colin had been seen trudging off to his detention, Hermione had sidled up to Neville at the lunch table and quietly said, "I never properly thanked you for what you did last night. I want to remedy that now." She had smiled fondly at him and squeezed his arm. "Thank you, Neville. I know it mustn't have been easy to call for Professor Snape like that, and I appreciate it. You just keep surprising us with antics like that, and we'll never know what to expect from you!"

Neville had flushed, smiling sheepishly. "It's all right. Ever since you and I had that talk, I've been trying to grow up and get past my fear. So far, it's working. I think it's helping that he's not so horrid anymore, too."

Hermione had beamed. "It's working brilliantly! And I'm so pleased you've recognized how much Professor Snape has changed, too."

Neville had tossed his head, eyes wide. "Well, he *has* to have changed to have given *me* points!" He had snorted and they both had laughed.

Hermione had squeezed his arm again and leant closer, whispering, "You deserved them, and this..." As she trailed off, she had ducked in and planted a kiss on his cheek before pulling back and grinning gratefully at him as she had stood and left the Hall.

Still stunned by such a salute...even though it had been happening more and more...Neville had flushed again, blinking.

A couple of seats down the table, Parvati had looked over and smirked in amusement. Eyes twinkling with mirth, she had scooted closer and said, "What's the matter, Neville?"

Neville had blinked at her, flustered. "Oh, uh, nothing. Just... I'm not used to girls kissing me out of the blue, that's all."

Parvati had chuckled, tilting her head as she surveyed the boy beside her. Her voice was rich with the ripple of suppressed laughter as she had said, "Hmm, perhaps you just need more practice." Then, as a sort of aside, she had murmured, "Not at the kissing part exactly..."

Neville's eyes had widened again, and he had choked, "What?"

Parvati had flashed a mischievous grin at him and said, "I'm not going to lie: you were pretty adept New Year's Eve."

Neville had gone so red that he was verging on purple. Parvati had decided to take pity on the poor boy and leant closer, whispering in his ear, "You just need more practice at not being surprised when a girl kisses you. You're perfectly fine at the kissing itself. Though, I daresay you wouldn't object to practicing that part as well?"

Neville had opened his mouth to answer, but had no voice. Good gods, what *was* she saying? Could one of the prettiest girls in Hogwarts *really* be telling him, Neville, that he was a good kisser, and that he shouldn't be surprised when a girl kissed him?

Parvati had chuckled again at his gape-mouthed silence. Her voice low and throaty, she had said, "Don't worry, Neville; I'll wager that by the end of term, you won't be so surprised by being kissed any longer." And with that cryptic remark, she had cocked an eyebrow at him, reaching up to shut his mouth with a gentle finger under his chin, and had slid down the bench again, leaving him to stew.

Utterly overwhelmed, Neville had managed to stand, heading back to Gryffindor Tower in a daze. If only he had someone he felt comfortable enough to ask if it was normal that the ear Parvati had whispered in still tingled, and that he could still feel the burn of her fingertip under his chin...

Tuesday evening found Hermione eagerly awaiting Snape collecting her before rehearsal. She sat at the Gryffindor table, sipping her tea and consciously tamping down her anticipation. Snape finished his meal and gravely strode down the aisle toward her. As he passed the other Gryffindors, Colin averted his eyes uncomfortably, but Ginny, and even Harry and Neville, met his glance with respectful nods and murmured greetings. Still somewhat taken aback by the boys' regard, Snape offered a polite nod, returning their greetings with a cordial "Likewise."

Hermione followed him out to the corridor, and they Disapparated to his sitting room again. Hermione looked up and whispered, "I miss you."

Snape closed his eyes for a moment before saying, "I miss you, Hermione." She reached for his hand and gripped it, peering up at him with her heart in her eyes. Snape's chest tightened with the familiar love and longing, and he squeezed her hand quickly before releasing it.

Hermione stepped closer, nearly pressing herself against him, and Snape recoiled. A fleeting grimace of hurt and frustration marred her tender expression before she reached out and grabbed his robes, stopping his retreat. "Don't pull away! Please. I promise I won't go too far. I just... need you, Severus."

Snape swallowed, breathing through his nose. His heart raced in reaction to her proximity, and he struggled to stay calm. In his head, he heard his own voice shrieking that he needed her, too, and he carefully relaxed his posture, allowing himself to step closer to Hermione.

Hermione felt his acquiescence and heaved a grateful sigh, slipping her hands around his waist and pressing her cheek to his chest. Snape rested his hands on her shoulders, eyes closed, until Hermione voiced a fitful whine and said, "Hold me? I love you..."

At that, one hand slid down her back in a loving caress, and the other twined through her hair at the base of her neck, squeezing and rubbing the tense muscles. Bending his head forward, he rested his cheek atop her head, inhaling the scent of her hair and whispering, "I do love you, Hermione."

After a long moment, he pulled back, stroking her hair and pressing a chaste kiss on her forehead. Exchanging a wistful look, neither had to speak before Hermione trudged to the bathroom to retrieve the hair products.

Snape sank into his chair, leaning forward, elbows on his knees and cradling his head in his hands for a moment. Then, sucking in a deep breath, he scrubbed his face and dragged his fingers through his hair, straightening on a long exhalation.

Hermione emerged from the bathroom and stepped behind him, placing the items on the side table. When she began brushing his hair, Snape cleared his throat in a businesslike manner. "Hermione..."

"Mmm?"

"Are you planning on kissing me tonight as intensely as you did last time?"

Hermione paused, taken aback by the question. "Well... um... it wasn't really something I planned. Why?"

Snape's hands seemed to flutter about helplessly as he said, "Clearly it was more than strictly required, and it made for some rather uncomfortable moments, as you well know."

Hermione's brow creased in remembered anxiety and she said, "That reminds me: what did Dumbledore say to you?"

Snape snorted, rolling his eyes. "First, he asked me if I was okay... quite like Potter did with you."

Hermione's fingers tightened on the brush in anger, and she growled, "You heard that, did you?"

"Mmm, yes. No matter." He flicked his fingers, relegating Harry to the realm of the unimportant. "At any rate, when I expressed my surprise at the... degree to which you were willing to go for realism, Dumbledore as much as ordered me to 'put up with it' so we can win the competition!"

Again, Hermione paused, stunned by the lengths to which the headmaster was willing to go in his pursuit of victory. "What a manipulative old man!"

Snape snorted again. His voice was wry as he drawled, "Just now figured that out, did you? I thought you were quicker than that." Hermione shoved his shoulder and he huffed. "Obviously, he's willing to allow it, and he did tell the cast to 'get used to it,' but I'm asking because I don't think you realize just how difficult it is for me to have you accost me like that in our current situation."

Hermione scowled. *But you won't let me kiss you like that otherwise, so that's my only chance.* Biting back that comment, instead she said, "I'm sorry. It just... hit me. I mean, it fits with the role."

Snape screwed his eyes shut and clenched his hands. Doggedly, he persisted, "I understand that. Hermione, I'm appealing to your sense of mercy." He wrenched his head free from her grasp and turned tormented, imploring eyes to her.

Lip pushing forward in petulance, Hermione murmured, "Fine. I'll try. But if Dumbledore liked it, and he wants me to perform that way, who am I to disobey?"

Snape's eyes narrowed and he said, "Oh yes, you're Hermione 'I-Follow-the-Rules-All-the-Time' Granger. Forgive me; I forgot."

Head tilting as she glared at him in pique, Hermione refused to rise to his barb, simply waiting until he turned back around so she could finish his hair. Simmering with resentment, she remained silent until she secured his hair into the elastic, uttering a curt, "Done."

Snape spun to look at her, brow creased in concern. "Hermione, I'm serious. Don't make things harder than they have to be."

She chewed her lip, glaring at the floor. Huffing, she finally said, "I *said* 'fine.' Okay?"

Snape stood, Summoning his mask. Hating the awkward tension between them, he ground his teeth and retorted, "Indeed." He offered his arm to her, and she gripped it, nodding that she was ready to Apparate. Snape nodded in turn, and they Disapparated to the Hall.

The excitement of doing the last blocking run-through filled the Hall. Even McGonagall was smiling as Dumbledore set the stage and cast spells on the cast members. Snape and Hermione separated, Snape heading into the wing, and Hermione waiting on the edge of the apron.

When everything was ready, Dumbledore called for places, and Snape and Hermione mounted the boat in the wing, while Harry and McGonagall climbed the sloping set piece. The scenes progressed, and Harry grinned as he dropped from the slope into the opened trap door, falling on his own Cushioning Charm.

The tension between Snape and Hermione fuelled their performance, and the angst was palpable. Harry emerged from the trap door, cutting through the charged atmosphere. To his credit, he managed not to balk at the rope as Snape looped it around his neck and lifted it.

The scenes seemed to gain momentum as they went on, and they came to the climactic moment. Hermione advanced on Snape, once again slipping her hands up his chest and around his neck. As she gazed into his eyes, she saw the mute appeal and warning. Mutinous resentment flared up, but she pressed a chaste kiss on his lips, keeping a firm grip on herself.

Snape's shoulders sagged in relief at the almost wooden way Hermione kissed him, even as he recognized how poorly it compared to the pathos of the previous rehearsal. Heaving a sigh as he pulled away from her to stagger toward Harry, he tried to invest as much emotion in his performance as before, but even he felt it was lacking fire, and the whole thing after that fell rather flat. The Act wound down, with the mob climbing down the portcullis and Ginny slithering underneath it.

Snape shrouded himself in the cloak, disappointment in himself gnawing at him. He Disapparated to the back of the house when Ginny snatched the cloak, and when it was over, he could see the dismay on Dumbledore's face even from that distance.

There was no applause this time. Everyone exchanged sheepish glances, feeling almost let down by their stars. Whereas before they had all been striving to live up to the standard set by the leads, now they felt cheated by the unprecedented spiral downward from the momentous kiss through the end.

Snape decided to walk down the aisle to rejoin the cast, instead of Apparating, in a vain attempt to stave off the inevitable chagrin at his failure. Glancing at the stage, he saw Hermione worrying her hands uncomfortably as she chewed her lip, staring at the floor. Draco and the other Slytherins were gazing haughtily at her, shaking their

heads in disgust. As Draco saw Snape's movement, he turned to look at Snape, a flicker of disdain rippling over his pale features. He managed to school his expression into his normal cold sneer before his Head of House could take him to task for being disrespectful.

Dumbledore turned to Snape, his expression one of puzzlement and disappointment. His voice low, he queried, "Severus?"

Snape strode over to Dumbledore, head bent forward, wishing his hair was loose to hide his face. In a murmur, he said, "I do apologize, Headmaster. I know that performance left much to be desired. I shall remedy that as we go through it now."

Dumbledore frowned. He glanced back and forth from Snape to Hermione. "I don't understand it. What could make such a difference between last time and now?"

Snape avoided Dumbledore's quizzical gaze. "Perhaps last rehearsal was a fluke."

Dumbledore snorted derisively. "Rubbish. No. There has to be something different." He peered at Snape again, making the younger man want to fidget under his scrutiny. All at once, Dumbledore lit up. "I know! The glamour! You used the glamour last time. That's it, Severus. You must use it again this time. I'm sure that will make all the difference." Beaming confidently at Snape, Dumbledore clapped him on the shoulder and announced to the cast, "All right, everyone back to places. We'll do it once more, and this time with the music!"

Snape slunk onstage and met Hermione at the boat. Everyone else scattered to their places, and Snape shot a dark look at Hermione before casting his glamour. She blinked and shuddered minutely. Seeing that they were out of earshot of any other cast members, Snape murmured, "Obviously, Dumbledore was rather disappointed in the performance. I can't say I blame him. He thinks it's because I didn't have the glamour." He rolled his eyes and favoured Hermione with an aggrieved look.

She glanced about furtively and hissed back, "You *know* why it was horrid! It's a travesty that we were so awkward and stilted. Everyone could feel it. I'm sorry, Severus, but I'm not going to let Dumbledore and everyone down like that. Surely you can handle it." She tilted her head and pinned him with a challenging gaze.

His eyes narrowed, and his jaw throbbed as he clenched his teeth. Pride stung, he straightened stiffly and growled, "Very well then." At that, Dumbledore called for action, and they snapped their attention to the scene.

When they entered the stage, a susurrus of gasps whooshed through the wings and catwalks at Snape's appearance. As they progressed, it became obvious that both Snape and Hermione were rising to the challenge of giving a better performance than they had just done. Other cast members throughout the stage space nodded in satisfaction that their leads were once again "leading" by example.

The tension built as they approached the kiss. Finally, Hermione turned to Snape, tears once again trailing down her cheeks. When she crossed to him, she locked a determined, fiery gaze with his as she practically launched herself against him, hands sliding up to grip his hair. She covered his lips with hers, her tongue demanding entrance, aggressive and powerful.

Snape's eyes snapped open wide in astonishment at her bold move, then drooped closed a bare instant later as his traitorous body exploded with feeling in reaction to the electric connection once again flowing through them. Unbidden, his hands...which had been splayed to either side, rigid in shock...rose to cup her face, holding her still as he responded in kind, devouring her in a blaze of passion.

The music swelled around them, eventually culminating and changing. Snape heard the music as if from a great distance, so loud was the roaring of his blood pounding through his veins. Also faint was the voice of reason that was screaming at him to let go of Hermione and pay attention to what he was doing! Opening his eyes a fraction to gaze heatedly at Hermione, he noted the glazed lust in her eyes, and in his peripheral vision, he saw Harry staring incredulously at them. That jolted him from his fog. Breaking away with a horrified gasp, he felt his pulse race from panic instead of from desire for Hermione. Lurching toward Harry, he severed the rope, flailing about wildly for some semblance of control again.

Hermione, too, was trying to marshal her scattered faculties. What she had meant to merely make a point to Snape had almost teetered over the edge into giving themselves away. Panting shallowly in fear, she followed Snape's lead in forging on with the roles.

The scenes continued, and it was over once again. As soon as the music finished, everyone was startled by McGonagall storming out onto the stage, indignant wrath personified as she brandished her Mme. Giry cane and screeched, "Severus Snape! Where are you? Get back here this instant!" Her brogue was more pronounced in her anger.

Snape remained in the shadows at the back of the house, icy dread prickling his skin and settling like a rock in his stomach. Dumbledore hurried up to the apron and peered up in concern. "What's wrong, Minerva?"

She glared at him in disbelief, mouth falling open. "Wrong? Albus, weren't you paying attention?" By now, the rest of the cast had emerged from the wings, watching the spectacle unfold in fascination. "How *dare* he take advantage of a student like that?"

Ginny, who had been enjoying working so closely with her Head of House, sidled closer to the irate woman and said, "Professor, you weren't here last time. I can imagine how surprised you must be..."

McGonagall turned wide eyes on the girl, staring at her as if she had never seen her before. "Surprised? I had *better* be surprised that a professor of this school, and a Head of House no less, would exhibit such reprehensible behaviour! Albus, what are you going to do about this? Why are you still just standing there?"

Snape swallowed and squared his shoulders, marching down the aisle and feeling as if he were heading to the gallows. McGonagall saw the movement and glared at him, her nostrils flaring as she pointed her cane at him. Abandoning her questions to Dumbledore, she huffed ominously at Snape as he drew closer, sternly demanding, "End that glamour this instant! How *dare* you? What have you to say for yourself, Severus? I *never* would have thought it of *you*."

Snape tried his best to ignore the spark of resentment at her statement as his inner voice sneered, *Wouldn't have thought it of me because no one could possibly ever want me, right? Or no one would ever be willing to subject themselves to my attentions?* Quickly dispelling the glamour, he lifted his chin to regard her regally, "What do you expect me to say, Minerva?"

She narrowed her eyes and jutted her lower jaw forward as she hissed, "Really, Severus! Snogging a *student* like that..."

She was cut off by Neville blurting, "He didn't snog her; *she* snogged *him*." The silence following his unexpected declaration was electric, and all eyes turned toward him. He immediately began to flush, and he mumbled, "Everyone keeps getting it mixed up..."

McGonagall blinked at him in astonishment for a long moment before whirling to face Snape again. Snape pushed away his shock at Neville's unanticipated support, compartmentalizing it to deal with it later when more vitally important events weren't happening.

Everyone turned their attention back to the row between McGonagall and Snape, wondering what would happen next. No one saw Parvati dart up behind Neville, spin him around, and kiss him full on the lips, her eyes dancing with mischief at the shock on Neville's face.

Pulling away, Parvati beamed and winked at Neville, whispering, "Brilliant!" before patting him on the shoulders and spinning him back around. Neville blinked furiously, his face going even redder in his daze. Parvati streaked away from him again and hid behind a set piece, clamping a hand over her mouth to stifle the giggles that threatened to erupt. As she regained her composure, she peeked around the set piece at the confrontation that still held everyone else in its thrall.

Snape regarded McGonagall through narrow slits and growled, "Certainly you read the script before now. Therefore, the scene should not come as a surprise to you! You already made your position clear that no one was to harass Miss Granger...so how dare you presume to chastise *me* for merely doing my part?"

McGonagall's eyes widened and her mouth worked soundlessly as she struggled to draw breath enough to blast Snape as if he were an errant schoolboy. Her voice was shrill as she stammered, "'Merely'... doing your part? Your role as a teacher at this school does not include taking advantage of young girls!"

The staring crowd gasped as one, and Dumbledore murmured warningly, "Minerva..."

Snape had jerked back as if struck, his lips thinning so much that they nearly disappeared. Onstage, Hermione whirled furiously toward her Head of House, hands clenched into trembling fists at her sides.

"He did *not* take advantage of me! *Stop* making such horrible accusations!"

Another gasp swept through the cast as all eyes swung toward Hermione, who was glaring at McGonagall. McGonagall's eyes nearly bugged out of her head in astonished indignation at her charge's demand.

A bare instant after her impassioned declaration, Snape barked, "Miss Granger, hold your tongue!"

Hermione snapped her gaze to Snape, a protest already forming on her lips as Snape slashed his hand through the air and bellowed, "Enough!"

McGonagall, distracted by friendly fire, postured at Hermione and said, "Miss Granger, you will stay *out* of this conversation! I am grievously disappointed that *you*...and Head Girl, no less...would dare to butt in so rudely..."

Hermione straightened, tilting her chin up loftily and retorting, "I beg your pardon, Professor, but as it was *my* person that you so casually accused Professor Snape of taking advantage of, I felt I had the right to intervene with the truth. If Professor Snape and I have managed to accept the stipulations of our roles, I daresay it behoves you to do so as well. Particularly since the headmaster is in agreement with us."

Snape had sucked in a terrified breath when Hermione had launched into her rebuttal, holding it as he feared the worst. But, at her parting shot, that breath exploded out of him, making him almost dizzy as McGonagall whipped around to pin Dumbledore with a steely gaze.

"What *is* she talking about, Albus?" The hand that wasn't gripping her cane settled on her hip, fingers drumming a tattoo as she waited for his answer.

Dumbledore opened his mouth, inhaling to form his response, but Ginny broke in before he could speak. Her voice wry, she said, "I believe your exact words, Headmaster, were 'get used to it.' Isn't that correct, sir?" She slid her eyes to him, one brow cocking upward at his sheepish expression.

McGonagall's hand on her hip slipped off and she lifted it to her forehead, passing it over her eyes as if trying to grasp a confusing concept. Shaking her head, she glared again at Dumbledore, repeating, "Albus?"

Dumbledore stroked his beard, blinking as he calculated his response. The entire cast waited with bated breath. Snape stood frozen, his pulse thundering in his ears. Dumbledore cleared his throat, darting his gaze over the waiting group. As he caught Ginny's eye, she lifted her eyebrows at him expectantly, and he cleared his throat again, shifting his weight and muttering, "Mmm, yes, well... As to your question, Miss Weasley..." He cut a glance at McGonagall's baleful glare and finally said, "You are indeed correct. I believe those *were* my words."

McGonagall's mouth fell open again, and she choked, "Albus Dumbledore, have you taken leave of your senses?"

At that, Dumbledore gathered about him the shreds of his authority and stiffened. The amiable twinkling in his blue eyes vanished, replaced by a steely glint. His voice held a clear warning as he said, "Professor McGonagall, if you'd care to continue this discussion, you may do so at my convenience in my office. As it stands, I believe I have made myself clear on the matter, and therefore feel no need to address it any longer. The rest of the cast has seen fit to accept the requirements of the play, and you should join them. I shall not countenance any further comment on either Professor Snape's or Miss Granger's dedication and performance. And, considering how distressed our lead actors are after such a confrontation, I am ending this rehearsal now. Everyone is to return to their quarters at once, and I shall post the information for the next rehearsal on the notice board." He swept a stern gaze over the group, and the students immediately began dispersing. McGonagall stood staring at Dumbledore in disbelief.

Snape took the opportunity to offer a grateful nod to the headmaster as he murmured, "Good night." Then, turning to the still fuming Transfiguration professor, he hissed, "I do hope you will come to see reason, Minerva. Rest assured that Miss Granger is in no danger with me. I give you my word." He inclined his head in a minute bow and Disapparated, leaving the sputtering woman in his wake.

As she turned to Dumbledore again, he repeated, "In my office, Minerva. You've made quite enough of a spectacle of yourself in front of the students for one night."

Visibly affronted, McGonagall fell back a pace before huffing and narrowing her eyes at Dumbledore. "Very well then. I'll meet you there." With that, she swept away, bustling past the knots of students that were making their way up the aisle.

Still fuming, Hermione avoided her Head of House, frostily gazing away from the irate matriarch. As McGonagall disappeared, the Gryffindors exchanged glances and surged up the aisle and to the Tower. Ginny gripped Hermione's elbow in a comforting squeeze as they mounted the stairs.

Neville kept casting nervous glances at a smirking Parvati, clearly unsure what to make of her advances. It wasn't until everyone was disbanding to head to their respective beds that she sidled up to him and breathed in his ear, "Remember, you've got to stop being surprised!" Chuckling at the pink stain travelling up his cheek at her proximity and words, she winked at him again and followed Lavender to their dorm.

Down in his quarters, Snape mechanically changed into his lounge wear and settled in his armchair, staring unseeingly into the fire. McGonagall's extreme reaction to the kiss only served to highlight how difficult it would be for Hermione and him to go public with their relationship. His vow to McGonagall echoed in his head, and a powerful protective urge welled up, directing his thoughts to the future.

He had to come up with some plan for the end of term. It was clearer than ever that staying on at Hogwarts was out of the question. Roiling emotions surfaced along with that realization. As soon as the year was over, he had to have some place to go, preferably some place to which he could take Hermione, should she need or wish to join him. He swallowed hard at the solution that presented itself.

Spinner's End.

He could go home.

But, was it really home after all this time, and all the bad memories associated with it? Sure, he still had it. Like he had written to Hermione, he hadn't been able to bring himself to sell it. What he hadn't mentioned was that he had long ago contracted with a Muggle estate agent to rent it out and take care of it, with a minimum of bother to him. With this much notice, surely he would be able to vacate the premises in time for him to take up residence.

The thought of returning to Spinner's End made his stomach clench, but he took a deep breath and forced himself to look at it from a new perspective. This was his chance to exorcise the ghosts that lived within its walls. He could change its whole being by bringing happiness and love to it. Firming his resolve to look into the matter right away, he shot to his feet and made a beeline for his wardrobe in his room, pulling open a bottom drawer and rifling through stacks of papers there.

I'll send a letter tomorrow morning. I must see how that account is doing as well. Albus has been after me to take a greater interest in the property, so now I shall do just that.

From within the stacks, he withdrew what looked like a form letter with black typeset on plain white paper. Across the top was a header that read "Graham D. Moore, Estate Agent." Nodding sharply, Snape set that sheet aside and searched through more papers. Finally, he found an account statement and put it with the other sheet. Frowning thoughtfully as he read the papers, he crossed to his bed and stripped off his lounge wear, sliding under the covers.

Placing the sheets on his nightstand, he doused the lights and thought, *If I'm going to leave Hogwarts, I need to figure out what I can do to earn a living. I won't have a teaching salary any longer, nor will I have any income from rent. I'll check the Potions periodicals for any leads on positions, and perhaps it's time to look into what I would need to be able to open my own business. If I can secure a place to live and a decent income, then perhaps people will take me seriously when I make known my intent to be with Hermione and provide for her. I wonder if she's determined what her plans are after finishing Hogwarts. Right now, with her current schoolwork and the play and N.E.W.T.s coming up, I doubt she's had any time to spare to consider her options. Perhaps we can talk about it when she's eased up on her restrictions. I'd love to send her a letter, or go to her, but I dare not. Tread slowly and carefully, ol' chap. Your future depends on it.*

With that sober admonishment, he rolled onto his side and willed himself to sleep.

Hermione secluded herself in her room, resolutely tamping down her ire at her Head of House's extreme reaction to her onstage kiss with Snape. One part of her mind gratefully made note that her friends had once again stood up for her, and she hoped such would be the case when she and Snape went public come summer. She drew a hot bath, hoping it would relax her for sleep, as she was tense from the confrontation at rehearsal.

Slipping into the steaming, frothing water, she relived the searing kiss, once again feeling the surge of arousal spiking through her. A petulant whine sounded in her head, resentful of the restrictions keeping her from enjoying intimacy with Snape again.

Stop it! You know it's for the best, and it's not like you'll have to wait forever. You have other things to think about besides sex with Severus! A sizzling pang swept through her, making her eyes roll back at the thought of consummating their relationship. Gasping at the throbbing in her centre, she grimly thought, *So much for redirection... Oh, for mercy's sake, you know how to take care of business to clear your head. If you're going to be that way, just get on with it!*

Erotic images whirling in her mind, stoking the simmering fire that had sparked to life onstage as she locked lips with Snape, she drained the bath and made ready for bed. As she pulled on her nightgown, she eyed the stash that she had borrowed from Ginny.

The mischievous voice in her head lilted, *You know, you haven't continued with your plan yet...*

Sucking in a breath at the recollection of her idea to dispense with her physical virginity before she and Snape were together, she crawled into bed and pulled a magazine out from the stack, flipping to the article about sex toys, complete with demonstrative photos.

Barely blinking, so rapt was she at the information therein, she perused the variety of toys available, and read the charms developed for "marital aids" with avid interest. Not only could one buy vibrators with the charms built in...for those who weren't all that comfortable with their charms skills...but with the spells given, those who *were* confident in their skills could cast the vibration charms on any object they wished to use.

As she read, silently practicing the charms in her head, one hand snaked down her body to dip within her knickers, teasing the swollen lips slick with her excitement. Turning the pages to see the different toys in use, she gasped at the flash of heat that washed over her the moment she saw a modified Engorgement Charm used on a slender dildo, swelling it until it obviously filled the moaning witch, stretching her flesh as she pumped it in and out of her.

Questing fingers crept further until they circled her opening, smoothing her juices over her skin. One fingertip delved inside, making her hips rock upward in response. Once again, she could feel her hymen against the back of her finger, and the resolution to rid herself of the pesky impediment strengthened.

Glancing away from the fascinating spectacle of the woman fucking herself with the engorged toy, Hermione saw another witch showing how to transfigure a straight object into one with a curve at the tip, then lying back and sliding it into her glistening pussy. As she rocked it into place, a shudder rippled her body and she inhaled sharply, her breasts rising rapidly with her panting. Another tingle shot through Hermione, ending in her cunt, as she recognized that the witch had shaped the toy so it would hit *that spot*... the one that Snape had found inside her that had sent her over the edge so spectacularly.

Her breathing increased as she imagined Snape's fingers once again inside her, caressing her. Slick fingers drew back along her pussy lips, slotting between them to circle her clit. Perspiration beaded on her upper lip, and the magazine dropped to her side as she closed her eyes in pleasure, arching up and cupping her breast through her nightgown.

After such a lead-up, it only took a few moments of effort to reach her peak, moaning on a long quavering note as her body contracted and shuddered in ecstasy. Floating down from her euphoria, she pushed the magazine to the floor, stretching and curling up with her pillows, smiling in satisfaction. The languor that followed her orgasm blanketed her, and she fell asleep with a replete sigh, ready to dream about the man she loved.

Wednesday morning, Snape set the class with an assignment and sat at his desk composing his letter to the estate agent. He studiously avoided Hermione's wistful and curious looks, directing his attention fully to his plans.

The estate agent was a Muggle, and the account Snape had set up with Gringotts was separate from the one into which he deposited his teaching salary. Gringotts had special accounts that dealt with Muggles, performing the currency exchanges and providing believable façades and paperwork to keep them blithely ignorant of the true nature of the accountholders.

Ever since the house had been left to him, Snape had tried to ignore it, hiring this Graham Moore to arrange for renters and take care of all of the issues associated with owning property, such as taxes, utilities, and upkeep. Over the years, Moore had kept the place tenanted with a minimum of bother for Snape, for which Snape was patently grateful enough to never balk at the periodic re-negotiations of Moore's salary. Snape imagined that the man would be loath to part with this contract, as it had paid him for so long, but Snape had no compunctions about ending his contract with the man. His future with Hermione was more important. Still, he'd consider a nice severance bonus, as a thank you for his dedication and service.

Finishing his letter to Moore, Snape then began an inquiry about his Gringotts account. After so many years, he could only assume that a tidy sum had built up, as the rent collected outweighed the amounts paid to Moore and any bills. Hopefully, it would be enough to see him through fixing the house up for his habitation, including having it connected to the Floo network, as well as leaving him several months' worth of cushion to cover his bills until he had his new career path on track...whatever that ended up being.

He was still preoccupied when the period ended, and he accorded Hermione the most fleeting of acknowledgements before disappearing into his office to summon a house-elf to take his letters to the owlery.

Later that day, he read the post on the notice board, *"Friday February 27: run through with sets: Act One. Everyone required to attend."*

Merciful heavens, that should be interesting. It's been weeks since we've practiced anything in Act One. I must revise everything before rehearsal. I shall not be one to forget my parts.

Snape wasn't the only one anxious about the run-through. At dinner Friday night, cast members all over the Great Hall were nervously flipping through scripts and reciting lines with each other, gesturing and nodding as they described their blocking and business.

Hermione, too, was involved in revising with Ginny, Harry, Neville, and Ron...who had reluctantly joined them at the Gryffindor table, thus demonstrating the magnitude of his worry...when Snape glided down the aisle behind Hermione.

As they distractedly came to a stop, looking up as his shadow fell across the table, Hermione jumped and quickly gathered herself for leaving. In the fleeting moment that passed, Snape's keen eyes took in the group's practice, and an unexpected swell of satisfaction formed in his chest. Clearly, *these* cast members took the performance seriously. With dedication and hard work like this, Hogwarts was sure to win the competition. His normally cold expression warmed a trifle, and his black eyes snapped with approval. The Gryffindors gazed blankly up at him, sensing the change, but bewildered by the novelty of it. Thus it was that every chin dropped in astonishment when Snape smoothly said, "The headmaster would be pleased to see you all so intent on your practice. One point to Gryffindor for each of you for your dedication to this production."

Even Hermione stared at him in surprise as she stood. Clearing her throat, she murmured, "Thank you, Professor." A chorus of "thank you"s followed her statement. One corner of Snape's mouth twitched and he nodded, gesturing for Hermione to join him as he strode down the aisle. She scurried after him.

Back at the table, the other four exchanged incredulous glances. Finally, Neville broke the stunned silence and said, "Wow. You think this is the start of a trend?"

Frowning, Ron said, "Trend?"

"Of Snape actually giving points to anyone besides Slytherin."

Ginny looked at their perplexed faces and bit back a smile. Bemused, she merely shrugged and tilted her head to one side, saying, "Could be... At any rate, what say we carry on?"

They nodded and returned to their revising.

In the corridor, Snape offered his arm to Hermione, and they Disapparated. Once in his quarters, Hermione gazed up at him in wonder, a tiny smile hovering on her lips. Cocking one eyebrow, Snape queried, "What?"

The smile widened, and Hermione shook her head as she said, "That was certainly unexpected. Are you *trying* to kill off the Gryffindors by giving them heart attacks?"

Although her words were playful, Snape couldn't help but feel a bit put out. He frowned, pulling stiffly away from her. With a brusque gesture toward the bathroom, he crossed to his chair, sitting with a wounded air. Hermione's brows rose at his reaction, and she hastened to collect the hair products, wondering why he seemed so offended.

When she had taken up her position behind him, she softly said, "Severus?" A guttural grunt answered her. She began brushing his hair, trying again. "Severus, what's wrong?"

She could see his jaw throbbing as he ground his teeth. He was silent for a long moment. Finally, the weight of her expectation goaded him to answer. "I have long heard it said that women were fickle-minded, but I had hoped it was merely sour grapes. Apparently, my hope was in vain."

Brow furrowing in confusion, Hermione said, "What are you talking about?"

Heaving a supremely irritated sigh, Snape ground out, "You wished me to 'be nicer' and to treat your friends well. And yet, when I strive to accede to your wishes within the scope of my position and our situation, you twit me about it. *Pick* an option. Just one. Either let me go on as I am, and don't pester me about it, or let me try to better myself and please you, and show a little *appreciation* for the effort rather than taking the piss!" His voice had increased in intensity and volume until he finished in a blast of anger.

Hermione stopped her ministrations, taken aback by the force of his statement. She instantly realized that her flippant words had hurt him, and she dropped the brush on the side table, rushing around to sit on the ottoman, gripping his hands and clasping them in his lap as she leant toward him earnestly.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you. Honestly! You're right. You're doing everything I asked, and it's perfectly splendid! I was just joking, but I see that it was a bad idea. Forgive me, Severus. I know how stressful things must be for you until the end of the year, and I wish I could make it up to you. You deserve a reward for all the sacrifices and work you do..."

Snape saw the sincere appeal in her eyes and was mollified. As she went on, he gained awareness of her hands caressing his in his lap, and his inner Slytherin latched onto her words with unnerving alacrity. He had been doing his best to distract himself from pining for her, but sometimes the yearning overwhelmed him. He cut her off, lifting her hand to his cheek and pinning her with a consuming gaze. "A reward? You *can* make it up to me, Hermione. Let me see you again," he urged at his most persuasive.

Hermione's eyes widened at the heat that had sprung to life so suddenly in his eyes. The answering flash that swept through her scattered her wits. Staring blankly at him, she shivered as he pressed a warm kiss to her palm, pausing to drag a delicate tongue over her wrist.

Snape watched her immediate response to his touch, and his body tightened with an almost electric charge. Unblinking, he nibbled along her wrist, pushing her sleeve up as he continued, dropping a trail of deliberate kisses along her arm. He slid forward on his seat, pulling her toward him as he went. She stared back at him in a daze, and when he reached the inside of her elbow, he paused to gently bite her flesh, grazing his teeth over the tender skin. She gasped, then sighed, and her eyes closed involuntarily.

Like a snake striking, he saw his opportunity and pounced, surging forward to drop to his knees between his chair and the ottoman, wrapping his other arm around her waist and pulling her close. He rubbed his cheek up her arm and to her neck, where he flicked his tongue at the sensitive spot just under her ear. Draping her arm around his neck, he insinuated himself between her knees, tugging her forward until she was perched on the very edge of the ottoman, her head lolling to one side to allow him easier access to the places that sent tingles of fire racing through her.

Like black ice on a road, Snape had hit the slippery slope.

His burning need for Hermione clouded his judgement. Gripping her around the waist, he viciously shoved the ottoman backward, letting Hermione slide down his body to straddle his lap. His hands travelled down her back to cup her arse, settling her against the erection that strained against his trousers. She was pliable in his arms, submerged under the wave of desire that had hit them like a tsunami. He suckled her earlobe, delighting in her cooing gasps. Moving along her jaw, he captured her mouth in his, probing with his tongue, hers dancing against his.

Neither seemed to notice that he was lowering her to the floor, slipping his arm from beneath her back and resting on his knees, her legs spread around his hips. Her fingers tangled in his hair of their own accord, and she moaned against his lips. His cock was pressed against her mound, and they writhed and rocked, lost in sensual abandon.

Snape pulled away to suckle her earlobe again, breathing, "Tonight. Let me come to you. I need you."

His hot breath on her ear gave her goose flesh, and the fiery ache in her centre begged her to say "yes." But, somewhere in the back of her mind, a faint voice raged, demanding her attention. *He's doing it again! Using intimacy to get his way. He swears he won't break his word to be with you before school is over, and yet he's urging you to scrap your decision to slow down and be more careful! Distracting you with kisses and touches... Is his decision more important than yours? How dare he? So*

manipulative!

The tirade in her head fought a battle with the sensations in her body, until she finally gathered her wits. Sliding her hands from his hair to his shoulders, she pushed against him, turning her head away from his attentions. With a gasp, she said, "Severus!"

Snape jerked back, confused. Her face was flushed with arousal, but her expression was shifting to irritation. When he didn't move back enough, she pushed against him again. He struggled to his knees, sitting up. She scowled up at him, dishevelled. Thinking she was only worried about the time, he coaxed, "We've enough time to Apparate upstairs. Just a few minutes... About tonight...Hermione, love, say yes. Let me show you how much I love you."

Her eyes closed and her mouth twisted in a moue of frustration. Looking back up at him, she inhaled deeply and said, "No."

Snape blinked. It was as if cold water had been dashed over him. Throat tight, he said, "I beg your pardon?"

Hermione struggled backward, sitting up. Swallowing hard, she repeated, "No. I thought we had agreed on this, Severus. You've no right to try to make me go back on my decision. And I *told* you that it wouldn't work to try and use intimacy to get your way!" She watched his eyes widen incredulously, the colour draining from his face.

Snape froze, indignation and frustration welling up. Through set teeth, he hissed, "I am *not* doing that!"

Hermione scuttled further back, huddling against the side of the discarded ottoman and drawing her knees up to wrap an arm around them. "You wouldn't even let me *touch* you last week! I just wanted to be close to you, and you refused me. What was it you said? Something about a 'slippery slope'? You were right, Severus. /was right. And when I was weak, you guided me back on the safe path." She passed a trembling hand over her face, then looked at him with reproach. "And now you try to persuade me to let you come to my room again? You *know* I can't allow that! Good gods, Severus, look at what just happened to us..." She trailed off, gesturing to their wanton position on the floor. When she continued, it was in a strained whisper.

"We nearly blew it in rehearsal last time, as it is. Dearest, the fires are still burning in both of us...you know that. The last thing we need is to fan the flames. Bloody hell, if I let you come to me again, it'd be like throwing petrol on the bonfire! We can't take the risk of what destruction that kind of explosion would cause." Again, she paused, gazing at him in pained entreaty. Her voice shook as she said, "Severus, please..."

Snape had sat, as still as a stone, galvanized by her words. After the cold shock of her refusal had numbed him, a white-hot flash of indignant fury had prickled his skin. But, at her mention of the "slippery slope," he realized with brutal clarity that she was right. Another cold chill...this time of shame...swept over him. His stomach roiled with it, and he found himself unable to meet her eyes any longer.

Sagging back onto his heels, he averted his eyes, shaking his hair forward, glad she hadn't finished slicking it back. Swallowing against the gorge that kept rising in his throat, he fumbled to his feet enough to sit in the chair again. Sinking in on himself, he buried his face in his hands and curled forward, tucking his elbows between his belly and his lap.

Hermione watched him fold in on himself, her heart crying out in shared pain. She knew she had made her point, so she carefully got to her feet, sidling behind him again. His robes were stretched tight across his back, and she could see the tension in his muscles outlined under the fabric.

Sadness blanketed her, making her almost weary. Still, it was with a gentle caress that she touched his back, vainly attempting to soothe him as she said, "Severus, love, please sit up. We haven't much time left, and I must finish your hair."

His body rose as he filled his lungs in order to exhale a deep sigh of self-disgust. Deflating like a bellows, he finally unfurled, sitting back to allow Hermione to finish her task. His eyes closed under a furrowed brow as she began brushing his hair again.

She worked in silence. When she was securing his hair in the elastic, Snape rumbled, "Forgive me, Hermione."

Finished, Hermione leant forward and snaked her arms around him, hugging him tight. "I wish we could throw caution to the wind and be together as much as we like, but we've only a few months left, dear heart. It's hard and exhausting and frustrating and *horrid*, but we can manage; I'm certain of it!" She pressed her cheek on his shoulder and squeezed again. In a soft whisper, she added, "And I forgive you, Severus. I love you."

Snape gripped her forearms, holding her close. Swallowing back the petulant roar of impatience, he instead murmured, "And I, you. Always..."

With a final pat, Snape removed her arms from his person and stood, straightening his robes. With an air of sad resignation, he Summoned his mask and turned to face Hermione.

She gazed up at him wistfully, her love gleaming through the sheen of tears. Stepping from behind the chair, she stretched her hand out to Snape. He took it in a firm grip, and she smiled at him. Closing the distance between them, she lifted her other hand and cupped his cheek, whispering, "It'll be all right. Let's go, love."

Snape inclined his head mutely and placed her hand through the crook of his elbow. With a sharp nod, they Disapparated.

55- Pieces Come Together

Chapter 58 of 84

Run-throughs and sing-throughs and snogs, oh my! Rehearsals progress, and Snape sets the ball rolling on his plans for the future. Neville causes a scene, Dumbledore gets between our couple, Ministry decisions and details come to light, and Hermione heads to the library for sanctuary, not knowing how comforting it could really be.

Standard Disclaiamer goes here.

Author's Note: Many thanks to my lovely beta, ladyofthemasque, and to SnivellusSnape for sounding board action. And, as always, my deepest gratitude to you fine folk who are reading my labour of love, and those of you who have left me reviews or comments on my LJ or sent me emails. You make this all so much more enjoyable. Don't forget to check out my Livejournal for update and progress info, plus random bits of me, at: <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/> Hope everyone has a festive ChristmaHanuKwanzaakkuh Yulestice (or whatever other winter holiday you may celebrate, LOL)!

Cheers!

Chapter 55- Pieces Come Together

The Hall was buzzing with nervous energy. Dumbledore was setting the stage, and cast members stood about in small clumps, furtively muttering through their parts for Act One. Snape had Apparated them to the back of the house, and he remained in the shadows while Hermione cast a wan smile at him and stepped away, heading down the aisle to join the others.

When everyone was assembled and the stage was ready, Dumbledore spread his hands, gazing about expectantly for attention.

"Tonight is a run-through with sets. I do not expect you to sing. This is merely a review of what we've already done, and I am saving the sing-through for later. You needn't worry about the spell this time. What I want you all to do is recite your parts and perform all of your blocking and business. Understood?" Vigorous nodding was seen all around. "Excellent. Now then... places!"

Everyone involved in the opening Auction scene hurried to their places, turning attentive faces to Dumbledore. With a bright smile, he cried, "Action!"

From his vantage point in the back of the house, Snape could only hear some of what was said onstage. Decidedly disgruntled by the events in his quarters, he scowled as he stomped down the aisle to be able to hear better. Dumbledore saw movement in his peripheral vision and turned to smile at Snape. Snape, wanting a reason to vent his unsettled feelings, marched up to the headmaster and hissed, "I had to move closer just to be able to hear everyone. That is unacceptable." His lips thinned in annoyance and he cut a dark glance at the stage.

Dumbledore shook his head faintly and whispered, "It's just a practice, Severus. I'm sure they'll all be loud enough when we do the sing-through and dress rehearsals. Right now, I'm merely concerned that they remember what we've already done."

Straightening haughtily, Snape sniffed and retorted, "That's no reason for them not to put forth effort."

"Give over, Severus; relax! You needn't stress yourself tonight. And you needn't chastise the students either. If they don't rise to the challenge later, then you can reproach them. For now, leave it." He eyed Snape over his half-moon spectacles, and Snape heaved an aggrieved sigh before giving a perfunctory nod and whirling away, Disapparating.

Dumbledore chuckled to himself once Snape was gone. Onstage, Seamus was almost at the end of his speech, and Dumbledore snapped his attention to the chandelier, making ready to assemble it and lift it to its position above them. As the chandelier began its ascent, he deftly moved the sets, transforming the stage into the Hannibal rehearsal.

There were some fumbling and furtive directions between actors as the scene progressed. Some of the ballet girls were more at ease in their blocking than others, and Dumbledore frowned, reflecting that it was certainly a good thing that their slippers would be enchanted to perform the dance movements correctly, as some were clearly not up to the task.

Peeking into his script, he followed along with the speeches as they went on. There were a few pregnant pauses as people struggled to remember their lines. Eventually, Pansy began reciting her song, and Dumbledore pointed his wand at the backdrop, controlling its crash to the stage. He smiled again and nodded in approval when Terry appeared with the Punjab lasso in hand.

Pansy and Draco stalked offstage in a huff, and Hermione stepped forward at McGonagall's urging. Justin gestured for her to begin her song, and she spoke the words in a rhythmic manner. After the first verse, Dumbledore started the set changes to morph the stage into the performance.

Up in one of the Boxes, Snape whipped around at the sound of Harry's approach, Apparating away before the boy could arrive. He popped down to his spot behind the mirror in the dressing room set piece, watching the others bustling in the wings as the sets changed again and the dressing room piece slid onstage.

Ginny and Hermione recited their song in the dressing room, and McGonagall appeared to drag Ginny away. Hermione sat before her dressing table, looking at the note McGonagall had handed her while the ballet group exited and Ron, Neville, Harry, and Millicent entered. They turned and filed back offstage as Harry entered the dressing room, smiling broadly as he and Hermione performed their scene. Dashing out, buoyant with excitement, Harry exited, and Hermione sank back into her chair at her dressing table.

Behind the mirror, Snape drew up and bellowed his lines, not quite singing, but still giving them their due. Hermione responded with wide eyes, and as they continued, Dumbledore cast the spells on the mirror, allowing Snape to be seen, his hand stretching forward to take Hermione's. He pulled her through the mirror as Harry burst through the dressing room door, crying out in distress at their disappearance.

Then began the huge set change. Snape nodded to Hermione in warning before they Apparated to various spots on the morphing set on their descent to the labyrinth underground. Hermione faintly voiced her extravagant vocalizing, dropping the higher notes to an octave below while they practiced. Snape tried to keep his disappointment from showing as he began reciting "Music of the Night."

Even though he wasn't singing, his voice was still mesmerizing as he went through his blocking. Hermione allowed herself to relax into the part again, enjoying the gentleness of Snape's touches. He led her to the covered mirror and tugged the sheet off it, showing her the wax dummy. When it flung its hands forward, Hermione crumpled against Snape, and he swung her up into his arms, tenderly depositing her on the bed as he finished his lines. Lightly caressing her hair away from her forehead, he trailed his fingertips along her cheek as he backed up on the last drawn-out note. Hermione shivered and sighed, forcing herself to keep her eyes closed.

The silence in the Hall was profound when Snape crossed to the organ to start the next scene. Finally, the monkey music box started playing, and Hermione stretched awake. She crossed to Snape, attempting to remove his mask, succeeding on the fourth try. He pulled no punches as he rounded on her, roaring in fury. Just like the first time, Hermione scuttled backward, stumbling to the floor and cringing away from him.

They exchanged miserable looks in the pretence of the scene, finding an outlet for their frustration. In the wing, Ginny swallowed against the lump that formed in her throat at how tortured they both looked. The surge of sympathy for their plight was followed by a pang of relief that she no longer had to worry about her relationship with Harry.

They finished the scene, stalking offstage and passing the group of ballet dancers waiting to enter. The sets changed again, and the girls scurried on, watching Terry as he imitated the Phantom and recited his lines. In the wing, Snape gripped Hermione's arm and nodded pointedly toward the trap door in the centre of the stage. She nodded back, and they Apparated below the stage. They merely gazed at one another, not daring to share a moment of intimacy, before climbing up and appearing onstage, causing the girls to scatter. Snape paused and glared at Terry, watching McGonagall enter before he enveloped Hermione in his embrace and led her offstage in the opposite direction.

Once in the wings, they parted, and Snape quickly strode away, ignoring the students who were standing in the wing, watching. Hermione faced the stage and stared out, ostensibly watching the rehearsal, but if anyone looked carefully, they'd have seen that her eyes were unfocused, and she was chewing her bottom lip in thought.

Parvati had passed Neville as she scampered offstage, and she noted that he was standing by himself, silently going through his lines as he waited for his cue. His eyes were almost closed in concentration, and a mischievous smirk crossed her face as she ducked behind him and glanced around to see if anyone else were watching. No one was paying any attention, so she sidled up to his shoulder, leaning forward to breathe in his ear and get his attention.

Neville jerked in surprise, whirling, wide-eyed, toward her. She grinned and whispered, "Hi," before darting forward to kiss him again. She was really enjoying the jolt of power she felt anytime she surprised him like that; his blushing consternation was quite endearing.

Thus it was that *she* was the one taken off guard when, as she pulled back, about to dash away, Neville's startled expression changed to one of resolution, and his hand

snapped forward, clasping her wrist and preventing her escape. As her eyes went wide and her mouth formed an "o" of astonishment, Neville stepped forward and tugged her toward him at the same time, bringing their bodies in contact. His other hand whipped up to cup the base of her skull, just below her ear, as he murmured, "Let's see how *you* like being surprised!" Dipping his head, he captured her lips in a determined kiss, holding her in place, even though she hadn't tried to get away.

Their intimate tableau was broken when, having shifted the sets to the managers' office for "Notes," Dumbledore wondered where his "Firmin" was, as Neville hadn't come out with the set. Waiting a moment, in case he was on his way out, Dumbledore finally cleared his throat and stepped forward, peering into the wing in search of Neville. The obvious missed cue drew the rest of the cast's attention as well, and everyone started looking around, several of them following Dumbledore's gaze as he noticed Neville and Parvati snogging in the wing.

Several startled gasps whooshed through the Hall, and Dumbledore blinked and cleared his throat. When they didn't immediately separate, he cleared his throat more aggressively, to the accompaniment of astonished titters from other students who were watching with avid interest. At Dumbledore's chiding "Mr. Longbottom!" Neville jerked back with an abashed gulp, and Parvati fell back a pace, one hand fluttering up to cover her mouth as she glanced about dazedly, her cheeks flushing in embarrassment at being caught by the headmaster.

Neville released Parvati, his hands gripping in nervous fists at his sides as he blushed violently. The panic in his eyes gave way to a flash of sheepish pride as several of the other boys let loose a volley of whistles and catcalls, shouting things like, "Go, Neville!"

Both McGonagall and Dumbledore swept the cast with stern, quelling gazes, and Parvati slunk back into the shadows while Neville stood there, his posture a mixture of shame and defiance. Swallowing hard several times, he forced out, "Sorry, Headmaster." Then, taking a deep breath, he surged out onto the stage, taking his place to continue rehearsal. His face was a brilliant scarlet, and he looked to be breathing rapidly with nerves, but he clenched his teeth and squared his shoulders, composing himself with effort.

Blinking, he shot a sheepish glance into the wing, and when he didn't see Parvati any longer, he schooled his expression into one of courteous attention and focused on Dumbledore. "I'm ready any time, sir."

Dumbledore cast an appraising glance over the rest of the cast visible, including McGonagall, who was gazing with disapproval at her charges, and bit back the amused chuckle that wanted to surface in spite of himself. "Very well then. Now that I have your attention..." Neville bowed his head apologetically, and Dumbledore continued, "Proceed."

Neville began reciting his lines, and when Ron burst onto the scene, the redhead was having trouble keeping his amused smirk from surfacing. At Neville's heated glare, Ron attempted to get into character better, and they flowed on to Harry's arrival.

When Pansy flounced onstage, she sneered at all three boys, and all four of them shifted minutely to make sure they were in the correct spots. McGonagall and Ginny entered, and the whole group forged on. Snape had Apparated up to Box Five again, and he magnified his voice to recite the note, watching the blocking below.

As they neared "Prima Donna," everyone was alert to picking up their cues, and the overlapping lines went smoothly. Finally, they came to the lull, and Neville and Ron approached Pansy with winning smiles, launching into full suck-up mode for "Prima Donna."

The six of them wove in and out with their lines, shaky in a few spots when one or two weren't completely sure of their placement and timing. But, they made it through to the end, and Snape's voice rang out again, menacing and foreboding as they struck their final pose. As soon as the scene was over, they all raced offstage, the boys rushing up to their respective Box seats. Snape once again Disapparated, taking up a position on the catwalk above the stage, ready to flit about and cast threatening shadows as had been planned.

The curtained bed slid onstage, and the scene began. As they chanted through the opening lines, and the boys projected their lines from the Boxes, Snape cast *Sonorus* again, preparing for his lines. The bed curtains opened to reveal Pansy and Hermione. Both girls mechanically went through their business and the scene continued.

Snape's voice echoed in the Hall, and Pansy croaked. Snape's laughter was forced, but he tried, watching Dumbledore below as he rocked the chandelier. When Neville and Ron rushed onstage and called for the ballet, Snape concentrated on each position he would take in the catwalks near the lights. He didn't want to burn himself on any of the jumps. Terry, in the meantime, had climbed to his position on the catwalk and had secured the cable about him, waiting for his cue to drop.

Snape popped in and out of existence all over, his shadow looming on the backdrop until Terry saw Dumbledore's nod and stepped off the catwalk for his plunge. The ballet girls shrieked and scattered; and Harry burst onstage to collect Hermione while Neville roared for calm as Seamus, Colin, Dean, and Justin swarmed the stage as policemen and stagehands.

The sets began shifting to the roof of the opera house as Hermione and Harry recited their lines. Snape took his position on the statue before Dumbledore wafted it down onto the stage. While Harry and Hermione performed their tender scene, Snape sulked behind the statue, wallowing in his resentment of the frustrating, precarious position he and Hermione were in. That bitterness came through when he emerged for his part, and his impotent anger at the whole situation boiled out as he roared for vengeance, riding the statue back up to the proscenium as the sets changed back to the stage. Still, he kept a keen eye on the chandelier as Dumbledore sent it crashing toward Hermione, apprehensive in spite of his deep faith in his mentor.

When the chandelier smashed onto the stage, making Hermione cringe away from it, Dumbledore counted a few beats in his head before bellowing, "Done! Everyone come out!"

He deftly returned the chandelier to its hanging position, smiling in satisfaction at the cast members who all emerged from the wings. Parvati was studiously not looking at anyone else, keeping her eyes on Dumbledore, and Neville shot a nervous glance her way. Seeing her tense demeanour, he followed her example and turned his attention to the headmaster, ignoring any smirks sent his way from his mates. Snape Apparated to the stage, hanging behind the rest of the cast.

Dumbledore clasped his hands and smiled. "Clearly, everything wasn't perfect, but it's obvious that you all have been paying attention and practicing. I'm pleased with the overall quality, and I look forward to our next rehearsal, in which we will sing through Act One. I want to know how well you know all of your lines and songs, even without the sets and blocking to jog your memory, so next time, we'll simply be performing vocally. Much like we did with the read-through early on. So, be prepared for that next Tuesday. We're all coming along nicely, and I'm quite certain we'll win the competition yet!" He paused, beaming at them, and many people grinned back.

"Very well then. You know what you missed tonight. I needn't go through it again. Just make sure you don't make the same mistakes again, and keep practicing! Good work, everyone. Now, off with you!" He gestured toward them, shooing them out, and they bustled offstage.

Snape gazed grimly after the retreating students, then Disapparated with a petulant huff. Hermione felt a nagging frustration, but she allowed herself to be distracted by the jovial banter between the Gryffindor boys and Neville. Lavender had dragged Parvati out of the Hall and up toward the Tower before the rest had made it up the aisle.

Harry had one arm draped around Ginny's shoulders, and he grinned delightedly at Neville, who was blushing while he tried to compose his expression into one of nonchalance.

Dean flashed his gleaming smile at his mate and said, "Come on now, what was *all that* about, eh?"

Neville tilted his chin up and took a deep breath. With a flare of defiance, he murmured, "None of your business."

Dean affected offence, and Seamus laughed. Ron smirked, hurrying to join them after having said good night to Susan. His leer was obvious as he hissed, "Aw, don't be like that, Neville! We're just curious." He wagged his eyebrows meaningfully.

Neville narrowed his eyes and jutted his lower jaw forward. Casting an appraising gaze over the rest of his House-mates, he muttered, "A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell."

Hermione's brows shot up and a trill of laughter burst forth. Ginny crowed in delight and pointed at the boys' dismayed expressions. "Good on you, Neville! Take that, you lecherous beasts!"

Neville flushed even more, but his lips quirked in a faint smile at the girls' clear approval. He pushed forward, edging past the group on his way up the stairs.

Ginny and Hermione laughed again, and Ginny continued, "That was brilliant, Neville. / could kiss you for that!"

Neville spun around, pausing a few steps above the rest of them. His eyes sparkled with mischief as he said, "What, you mean, again?" Then, before Harry could react to that gibe, and while Ginny was still staring at him, mouth agape in astonishment at his implication, he flashed a devious grin and whirled, dashing up the stairs at top speed.

The rest of the Gryffindors just stood and stared after him, completely stunned by his behaviour. Eventually exchanging bemused or incredulous looks, they resumed their ascent.

When they arrived in the common room, neither Neville nor Parvati were anywhere to be seen. Without targets for their teasing, everyone headed for bed. Really, rehearsals were getting to be more and more entertaining lately...

Even though Snape knew he wouldn't likely get a response from Graham Moore until the next week, it didn't do anything to mitigate the impatience with which he waited for a letter back. Now that he had picked a course of action, he was raring to get on with it. Finally, Monday morning, an owl approached him at breakfast with an envelope from the estate agent.

His stomach roiled with a mixture of apprehension and anticipation as he made note of the return address. Furtively glancing to the side, checking whether or not Dumbledore had been looking at his receipt of the letter, he tucked it within his robes, anxious to keep his plan a secret for now. It would be awkward indeed if the headmaster caught wind of the fact that his Potions Master would not be returning next year, as it would surely invite questions that Snape did not wish to answer at this time. He hurried through his breakfast, glancing repeatedly at Hermione as he prepared his tea.

Watching her produced a combination of pleasure and pain, but the pain of their separation was not enough to outweigh the pleasure of knowing she loved him, so he kept a discreet watch on her, masking his wistful yearning with a studiously grim façade.

As soon as he finished his tea, he retreated to his quarters to read the missive before his classes. The response was as much as he had expected. Moore had expressed regret that he would be losing such a valued, esteemed client, but he had also been gracious in his final offers for assistance. Seizing on the opportunity at once, Snape wrote back, thanking him for the help, outlining his requirements, and offering him a generous severance in gratitude for many years of dedicated service.

According to Moore, the current tenants had been served with notice of vacating the property by the date specified as soon as Moore had received Snape's request. Now, Moore would be the one spearheading the effort to renovate the house to new specifications, dealing with all the contractors and workmen before Snape took up residence. Of course, Snape would have to be the one to contact the wizarding world equivalents, making sure the building was once again warded correctly, connected to the Floo network, and outfitted with the sort of lab he would need should he continue in his potions work.

He scrawled a list of people and businesses to contact, then hurried to his class. The ball was officially rolling, and there was no turning back now. As exciting as the prospect was, it also brought with it a sense of worry, waiting for something to go wrong. Setting his teeth, he determined to face this new challenge with as much resolution as he had used to deal with his tricky position as a spy for nearly two decades.

Tuesday evening at dinner, Dumbledore had just taken his seat by Snape when Snape stood, preparing to get Hermione as usual. Dumbledore looked up curiously and said, "Where are you going, Severus?"

Snape paused and blinked, slowly explaining, "I'm about to collect Miss Granger before rehearsal, as always."

Dumbledore grimaced and shook his head. "We're just going to be singing tonight...no sets or anything. You needn't worry yourself or Miss Granger with fixing your hair tonight. Relax and enjoy dessert, Severus. There's a lovely lemon pie..." He gestured toward the pie, from which he had already taken a slice, fortunately missing the fleeting ripple of dismay and pain that flashed over Snape's face.

Snape cut a glance at Hermione, who was eyeing him quizzically. Looking back at Dumbledore, still standing awkwardly, Snape kept a firm grip on his mutinous response. Dumbledore peered up at him and motioned for Snape to sit. "Have a seat, my boy. There's no need to rush through your dinner this time." He waited expectantly for Snape to sink back into his chair.

Snape cast a blank look at Hermione as he slowly sat back down. When he was still, Dumbledore started a steady stream of inconsequential chatter, none of which Snape heard, as his ears were roaring with his petulant inner objections. Hermione stared at them, completely taken aback. She glanced at the time, then frowned in confusion as she snapped her gaze back to Snape.

Several minutes crawled by, with Snape sitting like a statue...yet still managing to look harassed...and Hermione fidgeting with anxiety. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore, and she shot to her feet in agitation. Swallowing back her worry, she composed herself and began a determined march toward the dais with the High Table.

Snape saw her approach and stared at her, panic flashing in the dark depths of his eyes. In his mind, he willed her to go back. *Stop! Don't come up here! You'll just draw attention to us...* Hermione saw the anguish in his gaze and tried to offer a soothing glance, but she kept flicking her eyes back to the headmaster as she stepped nearer.

Dumbledore noticed her as she ascended the dais and smiled gently at her, saying, "Good evening, Miss Granger. What can I do for you?"

Hermione nodded politely at the old man and Snape and said, "Good evening, Headmaster, Professor. I couldn't help but notice the time, and I was wondering why Professor Snape hadn't yet come to get me before rehearsal. I wouldn't want us to be late, sir."

Dumbledore chuckled indulgently and said, "Trust our Head Girl and lead actress to be conscientious. Tonight is the sing-through. We'll not be using sets or practicing on the stage at all, so there's no need to worry yourself about fixing Professor Snape's hair. Your concern does you credit, Miss Granger, but you have a reprieve tonight." He twinkled fondly at her over his spectacles, inclining his head in tacit dismissal.

Hermione was astounded. Their before-rehearsal trysts had become such habit, and she looked forward to the unguarded moments alone with Snape so much that to suddenly be deprived of one hit her like a Bludger in the chest. Blinking, she fought to find her voice and act as if the whole thing was of no significance to her. Now she understood why Snape had such an air of a trapped animal about him, and why he had glared at her so hard as she had approached.

Nodding her head faintly, she managed to force out, "I see. Of course, Headmaster. I hadn't realized..." She sucked in a deep breath and said, more briskly, "I beg your pardon for disturbing your meal." Then, flashing a polite smile at them both, she ducked her head and backed away. "Excuse me, professors." Spinning on her heel, she hurried back down to her seat at the Gryffindor table, gazing distractedly at the remains of her dinner on the plate before her.

Snape's hands were clenched so tightly that he could feel the nails digging into his palms. Dumbledore glanced at him and said, "If only all our students could be so punctilious..." Snape didn't answer. Seeing that Snape wasn't eating, Dumbledore once again urged, "Try some of the pie, Severus. It's quite tasty."

Snape started out of his reverie as Dumbledore slid the pie into his field of vision, trying to foist it on him. His lip curled in disgust and he growled, "I don't care to have any

just now."

Dumbledore affected impatience and wheedled, "Not even a little bit, just to join me while I eat?"

Snape cut an acid glance at him and scowled. His voice was flat as he retorted, "I'm not hungry." His eyes unerringly sought out Hermione again.

Dumbledore cast a glance over the Hall, noting that Snape seemed to be looking at Hermione where she sat staring pensively at her plate. Musingly, he said, "I wonder what's on her mind..."

Snape, realizing that Dumbledore was focusing on Hermione, exploded in an attempt to distract the man from that line of thought. "I believe I'll have a cup of tea to join you, Albus. Would you pass me the teapot?"

Dumbledore's gaze jerked away from Hermione, and he flashed a satisfied smile at Snape. "Excellent! Here you go." He handed the pot to Snape, and Snape nodded to the honey pot and dish of lemon wedges, indicating he wanted them, too. Dumbledore reached for them and passed them to Snape as well, beaming as Snape meticulously prepared his tea. "I must try that some time."

Snape peered darkly at him over the rim of his teacup as he blew on the contents to cool it. Waiting until Dumbledore had returned his attention to his meal, Snape snapped a furtive glance at Hermione again. She had noticed his actions and had mixed her own cup as well.

Locking wistful eyes as they sipped, they mourned the loss of their chance to be together that evening.

A few minutes later, Ginny looked up from her conversation with Harry and noticed Hermione still sitting there. Brow furrowing in surprise, she looked between Hermione and Snape and leant closer to Hermione. "Why are you still here?"

Hermione looked at her with a wounded air and mumbled, "Tonight's just a sing-through. Dumbledore said I don't have to do Professor Snape's hair this time."

Ginny's eyebrows rose in comprehension. Grimacing in sympathy, she murmured, "Sorry..."

Hermione sighed and gave a half-hearted shrug. Closing her eyes and pressing her forehead against her hands wrapped around her teacup, she said, in a low fervent voice, "Less than four months. That's all..."

Ginny voiced an understanding croon, gently patting her friend's shoulder. Dinner was almost over, and most of the students had already left. The cast members were lounging at their tables, waiting for rehearsal to begin.

Once the remains of the meal had disappeared, and the last stragglers not on cast had left the Hall, Dumbledore waved for everyone to gather near the High Table. When the long benches were empty, he waved his wand, Vanishing the House tables and Summoning a circle of chairs again. Nodding encouragingly, he gestured for the cast to sit.

Snape and Hermione glanced at each other, watching the others taking seats and making sure they sat opposite each other in the circle. Some students pulled out their scripts, but Dumbledore cleared his throat and said, "Put the scripts away. We've been at this long enough that everyone should know their parts. This practice is a sing-through of Act One...from memory!" He swept a stern glare over the cast. Sheepish nods met his gaze as the students tucked the scripts under their chairs and nervously fidgeted in their seats. Nodding emphatically, Dumbledore went around the circle casting *Suaviloquentia*. When he finished, he stood behind his chair and surveyed the group with an air of suppressed excitement.

All eyes were on him, and he clasped his hands in front of him and beamed. "I have a surprise for you all." People exchanged curious and wary glances, perking up in attention. "This past weekend, I worked with Professor Flitwick, and we prepared tonight's accompaniment..." With a wave of his wand, an orchestral ensemble appeared to one side. A whoosh of surprised gasps swept through the Hall.

The instruments all stood at the ready, as if invisible musicians were awaiting a cue. Beaming, Dumbledore fished a book of music from within his robes, presenting it with a flourish. "I have here the entire musical score for the production, and Professor Flitwick has charmed the instruments to play each part of the score. *And*," he drawled, clearly enjoying the reactions, "with what can only be described as an impressive demonstration of his consummate skill, he has linked each charm for each instrument to be controlled by one caster: Me!" He patted his chest, patently delighted with the task. "I conduct the score, and the entire orchestra plays!"

Pleased and impressed smiles bloomed throughout the group. Snape, too, was impressed, but he couldn't help but notice one flaw in the plan. Clearing his throat, he said, "Headmaster, if I may point out one small problem with that..."

Dumbledore eyed him with a slight frown. "Yes, Severus?"

Smoothing his robes over his knees as he spoke, he said, "How are you to conduct the orchestra...even with such cunningly linked charms...if you are also responsible for all set changes during the production?" When he finished, he cast a mildly apologetic and faintly aggrieved look at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore's frown smoothed and one corner of his mouth quirked up in an almost calculating smirk. His voice was low, as if he were talking to himself, as he said "Leave it to you to discover part of my reasoning for having only a sing-through tonight." Snape's eyes narrowed slightly, and Dumbledore continued in a louder voice. "You are correct, Severus. However, I can set the spell in motion and let it run through to a predetermined stopping point...which is the plan for the performance. But, tonight, I wanted to be in control of the progress, in case we need to stop or go back. Thus, with my full attention devoted to this endeavour, I decided to skip the practice with the sets. We had that already, and we'll be having dress rehearsals soon, so right now, we're going to concentrate on the vocal aspects of the show." Snape inclined his head in acknowledgement of the explanation, and Dumbledore huffed faintly, gazing at Snape with a "why am I surprised?" expression.

In the beat of silence that followed their exchange, the rest of the cast exchanged anticipatory glances, some more excited than others. Then, Dumbledore jerked out of his reverie and clapped his hands. "Excellent! Now, is everyone ready?" At the answering nods and murmurs, he took his seat and opened the score, placing the tip of his wand at the start of the first measure. At his encouraging nod, Seamus began his lines for the Auction.

Some of the cast had their eyes closed, listening intently and focusing on remembering all that was in their scripts. At the first sound of the music, several pairs of eyes snapped over to the ensemble, staring in fascination at the instruments playing themselves.

Although they had all had the music boxes, with the superb quality of the recorded performance, actually hearing a real orchestra playing in real time made the whole thing that much more immediate and affecting.

Even Snape took a long moment to close his eyes and just listen to the performance. A faint smile of satisfaction and approval twitched on his lips, and when he opened his eyes, he saw Hermione gazing at him, an answering smile lighting up her face. Pride and excitement made her eyes sparkle as she joined in the chorus singing during the Hannibal rehearsal scene.

His heart throbbed with overwhelming adoration, and he was momentarily grateful that his part wasn't until later, as it gave him a chance to clear the lump that was constricting his throat.

As the practice continued, several people kept their eyes closed when they sang or said their lines, and it was mildly amusing to watch as some flailed about, still performing their gestures and miming their stage business. Dumbledore was happily following along in the score, guiding his wand over the music, nodding and swaying to the songs.

Everything went smoothly until the "Notes" scene. When Snape finished reciting his note, and the others all reacted to it, somehow, someone missed a cue in the music, throwing the interweaving song off by a beat or two. Dumbledore let loose a faint sigh that plainly said, "It did seem too be going too well," and lifted his wand from the

score, startling the cast as the instruments all came to an abrupt stop.

"Let's go back to the top of this scene, if you please. Well, really, just to the part right after the Phantom's note..." Those in the scene exchanged wry but determined glances, nodding as they thought back to the beginning. Everyone's expressions were of concentration as they started again, and the song continued on through "Prima Donna" smoothly. Relaxing in relief, several smiles flashed around the circle.

After the last forceful note of "Prima Donna," Pansy smirked around the group, preening that she had managed so well. Catching Snape's eye, she sat up straighter and quirked her lips into a self-satisfied smile. Snape inclined his head with an approving air at his charge, and the girl flushed faintly with pleasure at the recognition from her Head of House.

As the music began for the next scene, Snape gloatingly flashed three fingers at Pansy, mouthing, "Three points to Slytherin," as he pointed at her. The resulting smile lit up her face, and Snape smirked as he leant casually back in his chair, noting that McGonagall had seen the interchange and was eyeing him with a mixture of understanding that he would award points to his House and exasperation that he would do so in such a sneaky, secretive way. At his narrow-eyed gaze of challenge, she huffed and rolled her eyes, shaking her head minutely and turning her attention back to the rehearsal.

Focusing once again on the practice, Snape stretched his legs out in front of him, crossing his ankles and leaning back in the chair with his hands clasped over his belly as he closed his eyes. Without the distraction of visuals, he could hear just how good the cast had become. Pride in Hogwarts welled up, and he simply enjoyed what he was hearing.

His smug reflections faded as the rehearsal progressed to "Il Muto." Frowning, he growled his lines, waiting for Pansy to start croaking again. He started to laugh, drawing his legs back, sitting back in his seat, and leaning forward as he rested his elbows on his knees, opening his eyes to peer around the circle.

Hermione gazed solemnly at him through her lashes as she mentally prepared for "All I Ask of You." Snape's voice boomed through the space, even though he hadn't magnified it, and his laughter trailed off as Neville and Ron hastily delivered their lines. Everyone simply gazed around the group as the ballet music continued, awkwardly waiting for the next vocal part. Terry was nodding his head, seeming to count the beats in the music until he jerked his head more forcefully, marking the moment he would be jumping from the catwalk. Ginny watched him, then snapped her attention to Dumbledore, listening for the ominous shift in music as her cue to scream.

Several people jumped, startled by her shriek, and fidgeted in their chairs, antsy now that they had no outlet for their frantic blocking and stage business. Across the circle, Hermione and Harry exchanged glances before launching into their duet.

Snape remained with his elbows on his knees, watching them from under a beetled brow. For the first time in a long time at rehearsal, he felt his hair shake forward, cloaking his face. And, for the first time ever, he felt a stab of irritation that his hair was loose. Usually, he used it as a refuge or a tool, but this time, all it did was serve to remind him of his lost chance to spend time with Hermione. A fleeting wish that his hair was slicked back made him stifle a snort at the incongruity.

His attention was drawn back to Hermione as she sang with Harry, and he ground his teeth, feeling the frustration and betrayal wash over him again. He glared at the floor, awaiting his turn to sing and let loose his ire. He let the anger boil up, so when he began his part, his voice was shaky with suppressed emotion. Slipping past the incredulous shock of Christine's betrayal, he choked out the pained despair. Then, when Hermione and Harry sang again, he whipped his head up, his hair flying back and away from his face, exposing the blazing eyes and intent fury as he roared his threat.

The music swelled, and Snape pinned Hermione with his gaze as he bellowed, "Go!" She tensed, wide-eyed, as the music tumbled down, mirroring the chandelier's descent, and at the moment it would be crashing by her, she shut her eyes and cringed, listening to the final notes of the Act.

Dumbledore lifted his wand from the score and nodded sharply. Gazing around the circle, he flashed a satisfied smile and said, "I say, that was well done!" Relieved sighs and murmurs of agreement swept through the cast as they exchanged pleased glances. "I daresay that was good enough to warrant letting you all go early. We'll be meeting again Friday, when we'll run through Act Two, just like we did with Act One last week." He paused, casting an appraising look over the group as he added, "We have just over a month left before our performance..." All around, ears perked up and eyes zeroed in on the headmaster.

"Albus, has the Ministry finally set a date?" McGonagall leant forward in interest.

Dumbledore nodded. "I received the message today. They apparently did a random draw to determine which school would perform when, and we get to go last. Our performance date is Friday, April 10th. Beauxbatons will be performing that Monday, the 6th, and Durmstrang on Wednesday, the 8th. Oh, and just so you all know, I've decided that the school will have a chance to see our dress rehearsal on Friday, April 3rd, so they may enjoy the fruits of our labours before they leave for holiday."

"That's in a month," croaked Ron, turning slightly green with anxiety. Susan patted his hand comfortingly.

Dumbledore smiled gently at him. "Indeed it is, Mr. Weasley. You needn't worry; I have every faith that this cast will be more than prepared by then. Really, think about it: we've been at this for over four months now. According to what I've learnt about Muggle plays, that's unheard of! Imagine if we had only had four to six weeks to prepare, as is more usual..." He nodded gravely at the wide-eyed stares around him, as shocked whispers and mutters rippled through the students.

Luna surprised everyone by raising her hand in the air. Dumbledore inclined his head politely. "Yes, Miss Lovegood?"

Lowering her hand slowly, she said, "Will we be allowed to see the other school's performances? And will they be allowed to come here to see us? You know, to see what we're up against?"

Dumbledore pursed his lips. "I'm afraid I don't have that answer just yet, but I will look into it. It's a good point."

Realizing that now was a good time for questions, Hermione cleared her throat and raised her hand as well. At Dumbledore's nod, she said, "Our families will be allowed to see the performance, won't they?"

Dumbledore beamed and said, "Of course!"

But Hermione continued, "Will they come to the dress rehearsal the school gets to see, or will they come to the performance the Ministry is judging?"

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "Well now, that's another good point, Miss Granger. I suppose it might be better to invite your families to come see us before the holiday, so it won't interfere with any plans they might make." He fished a quill and a scrap of parchment from his robes and scribbled a note for himself.

Shooting a quick glance at McGonagall, he murmured, "We'll have to look into Floo connections or portkeys for the performance night. I doubt they'd want to spend the day on the Hogwarts Express." McGonagall nodded and Dumbledore scrawled another note. Looking up expectantly, he said, "Any other excellent questions?"

People exchanged curious looks, but nobody spoke up. After a moment, Dumbledore stuffed the scrap back in his pocket and said, "Very well then, you're all dismissed. Enjoy your early reprieve." He chuckled at the smiles wreathing the faces of students as they passed him on their way out of the Hall.

Snape stood, shaking his hair forward and surreptitiously watching Hermione as she joined Ginny on the way out. His need for her pounded through him, and he quickly disappeared, appearing in the shadowed alcove across from the Hall doors, waiting for Hermione to emerge. When the girls stepped into the corridor, he saw Hermione peek back into the Hall, her face falling in disappointment that Snape was nowhere to be seen.

Ginny noted her friend's dejected expression and guided her away from the doorway, murmuring, "You okay?"

Hermione shrugged and sighed. Lifting wistful eyes to Ginny's, she whispered, "I just miss him, you know?" Ginny nodded sympathetically, glancing over Hermione's shoulder at Harry exiting the Hall, with the other Gryffindors at his heels.

Snape remained plastered against the wall in the shadows, straining to hear the girls' quiet exchange. His heart throbbed at Hermione's admission, and an answering jolt flashed over him, missing her immensely.

The group of students paused, Harry joining Ginny and slipping his arm around her, Ron standing with Susan, holding her hand, Seamus shifting his weight nervously as he dared to cup Luna's elbow, and Neville and Parvati casting furtive glances at each other over the others' heads. The Slytherins swept past them, and the other students passed by, chatting amiably. Lavender, Dean, and Colin stopped at the foot of the staircase, looking back at their House-mates, waiting for them to continue up to the Tower.

Harry beamed at Hermione and said, "We've got an early night out, care to enjoy it with some Exploding Snap?"

Hermione gazed at them, making note of the couples and obvious interests displayed. Her stomach roiled with resentment, but she put on a pleasant expression and said, "No thanks. I think I'm going to put my time to good use. There're some things I need to check on in the library. You lot have fun. I'll see you later." Nodding encouragingly at them, she shooped them toward the stairs.

Neville queried, "But, won't it be closing right about now?"

Hermione gave him a wan smile and simply said, "Head Girl privileges."

Everyone nodded faintly, considering what a *privilege* that was, before nodding or waving at her in farewell.

Ginny eyed Hermione keenly, but she merely nodded, following Harry as he tugged her toward the stairs. Ron and Susan meandered toward the front doors, intent on spending some time outside alone before curfew. Luna smiled dreamily at Seamus and said, "I'd like to play. Will we use the set I gave you for Christmas?"

Seamus flushed, but he retorted hastily, "Sure! Come on then." He sucked in a breath and smiled when Luna slipped her hand in his to join him on the way upstairs.

Hermione hung back, sighing. Turning to cast one last look into the Hall, where Dumbledore and McGonagall were talking, she mumbled, "Sod it!" before scowling and listlessly moping up to the library.

Snape stayed frozen, fighting a battle in his head.

She's heading to the library. Go meet her there!

But, she said we're to back off, to take things slowly. No more writing, or visits, or anything that can get us caught!

Bloody hell... it's the library, you imbecile. It will already be closed when she's there, and no one else will be around to see you taking a moment to speak to her. Besides, you are a professor, here. You are allowed to use the library, too.

I know that! I just don't want to upset her.

She's already upset! You heard her. She misses you. Why would she be upset at a chance to see you, since you didn't get your chance earlier?

That would be a logical conclusion, but as we've discovered, women don't always adhere to logic...

Just go on, you bloody berk! Just for a short while...

...

The need is eating you alive, man. You know you'll be completely safe.

...

Don't you want to cheer her up? She looked dreadfully woebegone.

Fine. You win. If she gets angry, I'm sending her after you.

No worries. Just think about how much easier you'll be able to sleep tonight once you've seen her.

I know. All right, enough.

With that, he Apparated to the library, choosing to appear in the Restricted Section, where the chance of anyone seeing him was nil to none. His movements were stealthy as he slipped out into the stacks of the library proper, taking up a hidden vantage point from which to watch for Hermione's arrival. He could see Madam Pince working at the circulation desk near the front.

A few minutes later, Hermione entered, nodding politely to Madam Pince. The older witch merely glared back at the girl, growling that she'd be locking up the library for good in just under an hour. Hermione uttered a grave, "Yes, Madam Pince," as she hurried into the musty shelves.

Glancing over her shoulder repeatedly, she made her way back to a secluded aisle that led to short rows on either side. At the end of one of the rows, she scrambled into the deep-set window. It wasn't meant to be a window seat, but the wall was thick enough and the windowpane set far enough out that there was room for her to curl up on the stone ledge.

Drawing her knees up, she wrapped her arms around them and leant her head against the stone, staring blindly out into the night. Snape had followed her, always one row behind, keeping the stacks between them, until he found her hiding spot. Edging along the adjacent row, he carefully removed some books from the shelf, creating an opening through which he could watch her.

She looked miserable, and Snape's heart went out to her, sharing her pain. For several minutes, he gazed at her, drinking her in, noting how her eyes glinted in the torchlight, and she kept swallowing and sniffing. Finally, she hid her face in her hands and gave in to the sobs that she had been holding back.

Her hands muffled the noise, but Snape didn't want the sounds drawing Madam Pince, so he cast a Silencing Charm at the end of the row. Then, stepping out from behind the shelf, he drew a handkerchief from his pocket and crossed to Hermione.

It was the tingle that gave him away. Even with her face buried in her hands, and hearing nothing but herself, Hermione felt Snape's presence; goose flesh rose on her arms. Whipping her head up, she stared, wide-eyed, at the silent figure of Snape offering her his handkerchief. Her voice was a choked whisper as she said, "Severus? What are you doing here?"

Snape stepped closer, his shadow falling over her. When he gestured with the handkerchief, Hermione took it and wiped her face, sniffing. Snape shot a quick glance down the row before answering, in a low voice, "I miss you. You miss me. I'm miserable. You're miserable. I merely wanted to have a moment alone with you, as we were robbed of our usual opportunity tonight."

Hermione grimaced. Brow creased in worry, she hissed, "What if Madam Pince finds us?"

Snape licked his lips and breathed, "We could disappear for a bit. I could pop right back up here with you..."

Hermione cut him off with a shake of her head. "No. It's too risky."

Snape's face fell, dejected. His expression one of disappointment, he murmured, "I cast a Silencing Charm on the row. Unless she managed to come to this particular area, she won't hear a thing."

"Oh. Well, that's good then." They looked at each other, hungrily, hating the awkward tension between them. Finally, after a pregnant pause, Hermione ventured, "So, how are you?"

Snape snorted violently, tossing his head. "Don't be daft! I'm not here for small talk, Hermione."

Hermione sank in on herself, embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

Snape spun away from her, bracing one hand on the opposite side of the window and leaning against the stones. He writhed in shame for having hurt her feelings. Finally casting her an apologetic look, he rumbled, "I apologize for taking my frustration out on you."

Hermione nodded. After gazing at her for a long moment, Snape shoved away from the wall and sank to his knees beside her, clasping her hands in his. "I needed to see you. To be with you. I can't help but act the lovesick fool with you, because I *am*. I never thought I would be one to behave this way, but you've brought me to so many things I never thought I would experience. Please, Hermione, don't cut me off so completely, even for just a few months."

Hermione saw the anguish in his eyes, pleading with her. Her desperate unhappiness without him drove her to relent. "I suppose it may be safe enough to write... so long as we both are as covert as possible."

At her hesitant admission, an ecstasy of relief washed over Snape's face, closing his eyes and relaxing the pinched frown wrinkling his forehead. He lifted her hands and pressed fervent kisses to her fingers, murmuring, "Yes, my love..."

The feel of his lips on her hands sent a shock of desire through her and she gasped. Snape's eyes snapped up to hers, and he saw the arousal there. Lifting his face from her fingers, he flung a glance over his shoulder. Seeing nothing, he pinned her with a fiery gaze and stretched up to her, rejoicing when he realized she was leaning forward to meet him. His lips sealed hers with a passionate kiss, and Hermione's hands clenched spasmodically in his. Raising one hand to twine in her hair and cup her head, guiding her closer, Snape exhaled on a long note, the agonized tension draining from him as he assuaged his need for her with their kiss.

Hermione voiced a faint, cooing sigh in response. After a long moment, they regretfully separated, seeing the love blazing in each other's eyes. Knowing he had better leave before he succumbed even more, Snape sank back on his heels, letting his hand caress her as it dropped to his side again. Without a word, he stood, extending his hand to take back his handkerchief.

Hermione grimaced as she gave him his handkerchief. Snape pocketed it absently, his gaze burning into her. Knowing he was about to force himself to leave, she looked up at him wistfully, whispering, "I love you."

Snape swallowed hard, then said, "And I, you." Then, with a final nod, he Disapparated, leaving her alone in the window. Drawing in a great, shuddering breath, Hermione rose, composing herself to return to the Tower.

Madam Pince didn't acknowledge her when she left, and Hermione resolutely trekked up several flights of stairs. Upon climbing into the common room, she saw several of her House-mates playing Exploding Snap, chatting and laughing.

She nodded as she passed them, and Harry cried, "Oi, Hermione, did you find what you needed in the library?"

A slow smile spread across her face and she said, "Yes, Harry, I did. Good night."

Ginny recognized that smile and tilted her head to one side in avid curiosity. Hermione's smile turned a trifle smug, and her demeanour expressed a new sense of serenity. With a twinkle in her eye, Hermione merely smiled at Ginny and waved on her way to her room, leaving the redhead to wonder just what had happened to cheer Hermione up so much. She'd definitely be asking her about it later...

56- Trying New Things

Chapter 59 of 84

Snape examines his finances as he starts his venture to reclaim Spinner's End, but he keeps his plan to himself. After the run-through of Act Two, he dives into job-hunting, even though he's never done so before. Hermione pays forward all the help Ginny gave her in working things out with Snape, to Parvati's and Neville's pleasant surprise. Then, Hermione puts her "research" and plan into action.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

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Chapter 56- Trying New Things

Wednesday morning, Snape sat at his desk during potions, finally able to look at Hermione again without the stabbing pain that had been plaguing him since the Valentine's Day catastrophe. The simple moment they had shared in the library the night before had done wonders for soothing the raw wound of their separation. After giving a short lecture, he had set the class to writing an essay, and he had settled at his desk with updated account statements from Gringotts.

Hermione periodically peeked up at Snape as she wrote her essay, comforted by their renewed connection. While she hadn't jumped on the chance to write him just yet, the knowledge that she could eased the tense place in her heart. Hermione Granger wasn't one to do anything by halves, and she had reacted to Colin's discovery in her typical gung-ho fashion. After weeks of torment and anguish, for both her and Snape, she had cautiously admitted that perhaps she could relent a little bit, and they both would benefit from the relief.

The sense of peace that had replaced the agony he had been battling pervaded Snape's being, and his expression as he examined the bank paperwork was nearly serene. The first statement...the one for Spinner's End...showed the summary of all deposits, withdrawals, and interest accrued since the account had been opened so many years before. With two decades of summary, the packet was quite thick. Still, Snape went to the beginning and meticulously read through every action, familiarizing himself with what he had previously ignored. The vague disquiet he felt in his stomach at re-establishing himself at Spinner's End kept surfacing, even though he repeatedly squashed it under a firm resolve to change his entire relationship with the house.

Moore had done a superb job of keeping the house tenanted, with few breaks between contracts. He had also exhibited a frugal and keen sense of money management whenever there had been problems to be addressed. Snape's gratitude and esteem for the savvy Muggle increased. Due to the agent's careful handling, Snape was gratified to note that he had amassed much more in the account than he had predicted. A wave of relief washed through him as he did the calculations and realized that, with prudent spending, he had a sum large enough to keep him afloat for approximately eight months, even with no additional income.

The second statement was his personal account. His salary was regularly deposited, and his monthly periodicals debited directly from it. It was a modest income. Granted, it was lower than what would be expected for one who wasn't already gaining room and board from the school, but it allowed for moderate spending. Snape was not the acquisitive sort...except for books and research materials. Of course, some of the books and materials were bought with the stipend granted the Potions department, and Snape felt a pang of regret that he would not be able to take them with him when he left.

At least he was not like Lockhart, spending everything he made on more clothes and adornments, or like Trelawney, who could likely bury herself in her collection of bangles, necklaces, and scarves. The balance in this account was also comforting, made even more so by the generous amount awarded him by the Ministry.

When the war was over, and Dumbledore had brought to light all of the behind-the-scenes work Snape had done to bring about the defeat of Voldemort, the Ministry had not only awarded him the same distinction that they had given everyone in the Order of the Phoenix for their hard work and dedication, but they had caved to Dumbledore's demands that Snape be monetarily compensated for his long years of spying. Thus, after much browbeating and wrangling, and several favours being called in, Snape was given what was referred to as "hazardous duty pay."

Dumbledore had taken great pleasure in explaining the concept to Ministry officials, touting the Muggles' brilliance in offering such things to their military members. It was with a maddening twinkle and a just-this-side-of-demented grin that Dumbledore had proclaimed Snape to be the General of "Dumbledore's Army," outranked only by himself as the equivalent Field Marshal. After many aggrieved glares and reluctant muttering amongst themselves, the Ministry had agreed to award equivalent hazardous duty pay to Snape in arrears, for all the years since he had joined the Order as a spy.

Thus, it was with a faint smirk that Snape savoured the total in his account, certain that all of the work he planned to have done to the house could be covered by his unexpected windfall. Snagging a sheet of parchment, he began listing all the modifications he wanted done to the building, and made notes of whom he'd have to contact about them.

The class ended with Snape casually assigning homework, and he gathered up his papers to retreat to his office as the students exited. He and Hermione exchanged a fleeting glance of acknowledgement before she spun to hurry out. The wisp of thought, wondering if there'd be a letter included in the homework he had just assigned, wafted through his mind, only to be shoved aside by his drive to begin contacting craftsmen to work on Spinner's End.

Using the short while between his classes, he started a list of specifications for a potions lab, a triumphant smile ghosting over his lips as he made amendments and modifications to the current setup he had at Hogwarts. While he had quite an impressive laboratory at his disposal, there were certain things he had always wished he could change, and having the opportunity to build from the ground up filled him with a joyful sort of satisfaction that he had never experienced before. The buoyant mood lasted through his next class, and the students were secretly relieved that he had lightened up again, after having regressed into his sour persona recently.

His improved demeanour continued through the week, and by Friday, he felt like he could control himself when he collected Hermione before rehearsal. Still, the anticipation of being with her tightened his chest, and he picked at his dinner distractedly.

Dumbledore noticed him shoving his food around on the plate with his fork and said, "Severus, is something bothering you?"

Snape snapped to attention, dropping his fork with a clatter, and cast a wary glance at the headmaster. His tone inviting no further questions, he said, "Just thinking about a project, Albus."

Dumbledore nodded knowingly, thinking about the research Snape had done in years past. "I see. Well, if you need an ear, I happen to have two at your disposal, my boy."

Snape snorted. "I'll keep that in mind." Flicking a quick glance at Hermione, he thought, *I doubt you'd want to hear all that I'm working on, old friend. I just hope you're as accepting when I'll need it most.* He mixed a cup of tea, counting the minutes until he could leave with Hermione.

Hermione waited anxiously at the Gryffindor table. She, too, hadn't eaten much, and was sipping her tea as she gazed about. Her eyes lit upon Neville, who had actually dared to sit by Parvati. The two had walked on eggshells around each other for about a day and a half, then Neville plucked up the nerve to speak to her as he always had, and she had quickly reverted to the old comradeship. But, to Hermione's keen eyes, she could tell that they both harboured interest in the other, but were afraid to delve too quickly into their tentative fancies.

Frowning slightly, Hermione thought that it certainly didn't help matters that Lavender was being rather possessive and snobbish, as if Neville were beneath Parvati's notice. The girl sat on Parvati's other side, repeatedly demanding her attention. Dean was sitting across from the three of them, and he watched the interplay with interest. With Seamus getting more involved with Luna, Dean was at loose ends, and the new outlet for his attention was welcome.

Finally, Snape left the High Table and descended toward Hermione. She, in turn, tidied her place and straightened her robes, brushing crumbs from her lap. Meeting his sombre gaze, she stood and followed him without a word, and no one gave them much notice. They stepped into the corridor, linking arms and nodding as Snape Apparated them to his quarters.

This time, when Hermione leant forward and pressed herself against his chest, slipping her arms around his waist, Snape didn't try to push her away. He simply bent his head to rest his cheek on her hair and clasped her in his embrace. After a long moment, Hermione inhaled deeply and said, "So... no letters for me?"

Snape pulled back, looking down at her. When she lifted her face to look at him, he said, "Are you disappointed?"

Hermione smiled faintly and shrugged. "Maybe a little."

Snape smirked and retorted, "Well, you haven't written me either."

Grimacing, Hermione stepped back. Sheepishly, she said, "I didn't want to seem too clingy."

Snape smiled in surprised delight. Reaching up to caress her cheek, he said, "And I didn't want to drive you away with my need. Besides, I daresay our circumspection is a good thing."

She smiled back, tilting her head into his palm. They gazed tenderly at each other for a moment, then Snape released her, tilting his head toward the bathroom. "At your leisure."

Hermione sighed and crossed to the bathroom while Snape took his seat. Upon her return, she began brushing his hair and said, "So, what have you been up to? You've seemed quite busy in class."

Snape smirked in a gloatingly secretive way, saying, "I was. I am. Just preparing for the end of the year."

When nothing else was forthcoming, Hermione prodded, "Like what?"

Snape snorted at her insistent curiosity. "Nothing for you to worry about. You'll find out in due time. And I'll tell you right now that nothing you do will sway me to divulge anything before I deem the time to be right."

Hermione stuck her tongue out at Snape in petulance. Rolling her eyes sulkily, she retorted, "Fine!" Then, in an airy tone, she added, "I wasn't really all that interested anyway."

Snape's lips twisted in a not-entirely-successful attempt to hold in a bark of laughter. At a retaliatory yank on his hair, he stifled his mirth, reflecting that for all her maturity, she still had some rather childish behaviours as well.

After a silence, in which Hermione's pique was practically ringing, she queried, "Any signs that Dumbledore has caught on to anything?"

Snape's amused smile vanished, and he said, "Nothing in particular... yet." After a beat, he added, "That Creevey boy still leaving you alone?"

Hermione nodded vehemently in relief. "Yes, thank the gods. He's been avoiding most of us on cast. I think that since most of the older students sided with me, he's withdrawn from trying to join in with them. At least I don't have to put up with him mooning or sulking anymore!"

Snape nodded. "Indeed."

There was another silence, and Hermione finished his hair. Stepping around to face him, she gazed down at him wistfully. "All finished. We've got time before we have to be upstairs. Now what?"

Snape clenched his jaw at the welter of ideas that presented themselves to his imagination. Hermione recognized and mirrored his awkwardly uncomfortable expression. Lifting his hand and gesturing for her to sit on his lap, he murmured, "I promise I'll stay calm. It's safe to join me, love."

Eyes shining in gratitude, she took his hand and stepped forward, sinking onto his lap and into his embrace. Laying her head against his shoulder, she picked up her feet and rested them against the armrest, curling trustingly within the confines of his arms. Snape's eyes closed in a combination of pleasure and pain. When he made no move to do anything other than simply hold her, the remaining tension in her body drained away, and she sighed in contentment.

Snape wanted to lift her chin and kiss her, but he knew how quickly things could spiral out of control if he did, so he clamped down on the urge and merely squeezed tighter. The very air about them seemed bittersweet as they sat quietly for a long while. Eventually, as rehearsal drew nearer, Snape squeezed her once more and patted her leg gently.

His voice a bare murmur, he said, "Time to go."

Hermione roused from her languorous state, blinking to bring herself back to reality. She had nearly fallen asleep in his lap, warm and protected in his arms. Carefully moving off him, she took several deep breaths and scrubbed her face in an attempt to be more alert.

Snape stood gingerly, scowling at the shocking tingles that raced through his legs where they were asleep from Hermione sitting on them. As he tested their responsiveness, he looked at Hermione, and his breath caught.

She was gazing up at him with the most beautiful smile he had ever seen. Stunned by the force of the love radiating from her, he blinked. Smiling even more at the gobsmacked expression on his face, Hermione said, "Thank you, Severus. That was lovely."

Confused, Snape retorted, "What was? I didn't do anything."

Tilting her head and beaming at him, she voiced a low chuckle and said, "Exactly. You *didn't* do anything. No pushing the issue; no attempts to change my mind; no ventures down the slippery slope. It was so perfect, just being with you, feeling safe and loved. Thank you."

Snape felt his cheeks warming and ducked his head, abashed. "Oh. Well... you're welcome."

Hermione chuckled again at his discomfiture and slipped her arm through his. "Let's go; shall we?"

Snape nodded, Summoned his mask, and Apparated them to the back of the house. With a parting squeeze, Hermione's beatific expression changed to one of studied indifference as he strode down the aisle to join the cast. Snape paused in the shadows for a moment to gather his wits, for the rapturous smile that had bathed him in its glory had managed to scatter them to the four winds.

Dumbledore was setting the stage for the opening of Act Two, and the rest of the cast was milling about while they waited to begin. This time, most people felt more confident about their roles, since they had practiced Act Two much more recently.

When the set was ready, Dumbledore turned to the group and said, "Just like last week, we're doing a run-through of the entire Act. You needn't worry about singing this time. But, your blocking, business, and timing are important, so pay attention." At the answering nods, he beamed at them and added, "Very well then. Places!" Everyone scrambled for their places, and Dumbledore cried, "Action!"

Neville and Ron began the scene, and the curtain opened to reveal the huge staircase for the Masquerade. Many faces were set with fierce concentration as they worked on not only reciting their parts in the song, but also performing the dance moves. If some people were hesitant in their movements, it wasn't too noticeable, because everyone was ready to help each other, nodding and nudging and pointing to correct spots and guiding them in the blocking.

Snape watched from the house until it was his cue to appear, and he Apparated onto the top of the staircase, fortunately remembering to cast the smoke spell for effect. He half sang/half spoke his lines, bellowing the last one before whirling as he Disapparated, leaving a cloud of more smoke in his wake. He appeared on one of the catwalks above the stage, watching the rapid set changes and the scene between Harry and McGonagall. When the set for the Managers' Office slid on, Snape decided to stay where he was, awaiting his lines in his "note."

Ron was already seated at the desk when Neville stormed in, but they both stood as they read their notes from the Phantom. Pansy and Draco burst in, indignation personified. Then, when Harry and Hermione entered, the posturing began between the two girls. Hermione wasn't particularly looking to "act" so much in this simple run-through, but with the way Pansy was eyeing her and spitting her lines, Hermione's hackles raised instinctively, and she retaliated.

McGonagall and Ginny arrived, with the Phantom's latest note, and everyone spread out to their respective places to react as Snape's voice took over the insults and threats. When his voice faded away, Harry took the fore, outlining his plan. Ron, Neville, and McGonagall crowded around him as they got caught up in the idea, leaving Pansy and Draco to fling pithy remarks from one side while Hermione backed away in confusion and growing horror, ending up beyond Ginny, who looked on in sympathy.

When Hermione broke through their tumult with her lines, Harry left the tight group and crossed to her, comforting her as she recited her fearful lines. The rest watched and waited. After Harry prodded her to proceed with the plan, Hermione wrenched away and ran offstage, leaving Harry to cross down centre, where he roared his challenge to the Phantom, directing it out toward the back of the house.

At the end of his ringing cry, Harry and the rest of the onstage group exited, and the sets changed to the Don Juan rehearsal. The cast entered the set in pairs and small groups, gathering near the piano where Seamus pretended to play. The rehearsal scene began, and when Seamus stepped away from the piano to direct the hubbub, Dumbledore cast the spell for it to play by itself. The group froze, staring fixedly at the piano and reciting their parts as Hermione slowly edged away while the set shifted, taking the group offstage.

Hermione softly recited her lines as the mausoleum slid into view. Snape Apparated behind the set piece, waiting for his cue to climb atop it and lure Hermione closer. At the end of Hermione's solo piece, Snape crept into view, his voice coaxing Hermione toward him. Moments later, Harry appeared to one side, watching them and interjecting his lines.

Finally, as Hermione crossed toward the crypt, Harry shouted his distraction, rushing to Hermione to break the connection between Hermione and Snape. At Harry's interference, Snape snatched the pike that decorated the stones on top of the crypt and aimed a fireball at Harry's feet. The unspoken truce between Snape and Harry was evidenced by the extremely professional manner in which they performed the risky blocking, Snape carefully avoiding singeing Harry with each successive fireball.

As the taunts continued, and Harry stepped closer to Snape, Hermione ran to him and dragged him away, at which Snape snapped up straight, roaring his threat and brandishing the pike as he wordlessly cast *Sollumaren* and Disapparated away, blinding everyone with the blaze of light.

Snape peered out at the shifting sets from his position in the catwalk, watching the boys taking their positions and running through the scene until it was his cue to pop about, echoing his lines throughout the theatre. On the final taunt, Seamus fired the gun, and the scene ended with Snape's foreboding lines. He remained in Box Five, watching the stage being set for "Don Juan Triumphant," and deciding to go ahead and cast the glamour on himself, even though it wasn't strictly required.

The chorus chanted their lines, and Draco recited his part with an air of arrogance. As soon as he disappeared within the curtained bed, Snape Apparated down to meet him. Draco jumped slightly at Snape's sudden appearance, but they merely exchanged nods before Snape responded to Dean's urging.

Hermione entered, and Snape emerged from behind the curtains, slipping up behind her to begin "Point of No Return." They tamped down their ardour through reciting the lines, instead of allowing themselves to be swept up in the singing, but their interactions were still sensual and tender. The ease with which they could touch each other and the intensity in their gazes still astounded many of those who looked on in wonder. Still, as amazed as they were, underneath that was a feeling of pride and respect for their abilities to perform so well and to draw everyone else to their best efforts also.

As the scene came to the climax, when Hermione pushed the mask from Snape's face, revealing the disfigured glamour, several people couldn't hold back their gasps of horror. Then, after a frozen moment that seemed to stretch on forever, Snape broke their tableau and snatched Hermione, Disapparating them both. That was the cue for chaos to ensue, and Ginny's shriek echoed in the Hall.

Dumbledore was quite gratified to see that the hubbub proceeded smoothly, and the actors knew where they needed to be and when they needed to move with the changing sets. The excitement among the cast increased the energy in the space, driving everyone to more determined efforts to perform their blocking and timing perfectly.

After Snape and Hermione had slid on and off in the boat, and the sloping set piece had settled, Harry surreptitiously cast his Cushioning Charm inside the trap door after he and McGonagall had finished their scene. Dropping blithely into the hole in the stage, he peered up at the mob of people following along the slope of the set before turning back and disappearing. Above him on the stage, the sets shifted, and Snape and Hermione entered in the boat again, slipping under the descending portcullis.

Harry couldn't help but wish he could see the hostile, tense encounter between Snape and Hermione, as even by just the sounds of it, it would be quite the sight. At his cue, he climbed up from the trap door, throwing himself against the portcullis toward Hermione. When he looked at Snape during the lead-up to Snape catching him in the Punjab lasso, he couldn't help but stare hard at the man for a second or two longer than expected, making the point that he was offering his trust that Snape would handle the noose carefully. Snape's eyes narrowed, but he thinned his lips and inclined his head a fraction in acknowledgement of the unspoken message.

Harry crawled under the portcullis and stood up, his head neatly slipping within the noose that Snape controlled with finesse. It rose, but stopped at the safe and comfortable distance that reassured Harry of his and Snape's tacit agreement.

Hermione was still reciting her lines instead of singing, but the emotion still came through. When the moment came for her to advance on Snape for the kiss, she locked eyes with him and tilted her chin just enough for Snape to get the message that she was not going to pull punches. It gave him just enough warning to frantically strangle the passion that wanted to instantly explode as she grasped his face and kissed him firmly, not shying away from deepening the kiss for a moment before Snape pulled away.

Even though he had to focus most of his attention on maintaining control and continuing with his part at the appropriate timing, a part of his mind savoured the taste of Hermione's lips and tongue meshed with his once again. Chest tightening with regret that he had to cut the kiss short and forge on in front of the rest of the cast, Snape tore himself away and lurched toward Harry, dropping the rope to the floor and gesturing for Hermione to join him to leave. His bellow echoed in the Hall as he roared for them to go. Dropping to his knees by the music box, he gripped his head in his arms, curling in on himself as he almost whispered his lines. Sensing Hermione behind him, he whirled around, reaching toward her hopefully and sagging once again when she shook her head and mimed giving him the ring back before hurrying away.

Harry and Hermione appeared onstage in the boat, reciting their parts, and Snape surged to his feet and plastered himself against the portcullis, calling his final lines after them and peering up at the people beginning their climb down the portcullis. Whipping away from the gate, he lurched to the throne and sat, covering himself with the cloak as Ginny descended faster than the others and slid under the portcullis to approach the throne. At her warning gasp, Snape Disapparated to Box Five to watch her snatch the cloak away and crouch, holding up the mask while the rest of the mob reached the stage behind her.

After a few beats, during which everyone was listening to the closing notes of music in their heads, Dumbledore closed the curtains with a flourish and began applauding.

"Wonderful! Come out, everyone!" He opened the curtain again and beamed at the smiling group that emerged onto the stage.

Hermione stepped downstage and squinted, looking around, trying to feel for Snape. When she zeroed in on Box Five and relaxed with a satisfied smile, Snape snorted softly and Apparated to the back of the stage. A heartbeat later, Hermione spun, seeking him out. The buzz of their connection still warmed them. Snape strode forward, ending the glamour.

Everyone turned their attention to Dumbledore as he said, "I say, that was better than Act One's run-through..."

Ron's ears were pink, and he was rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, but he felt compelled to point out, "Well, ~~had~~ been a long time since we had done Act One, but we'd just practiced Act Two stuff recently, so it was easier to remember." Several people nodded in agreement, and Susan hugged his arm approvingly.

Chuckling, Dumbledore retorted, "Indeed. Well, I don't much care *why* it went so smoothly; I'm just pleased that it did! And I hope it will continue to do so." He eyed everyone over his spectacles, and they nodded and smiled. "At any rate, Tuesday we will do the sing-through of Act Two, and then we will finally be able to start our dress rehearsals! So, keep practicing your costume spells. I'll want to see everyone perform their spells after the sing-through next week." He smirked at the nervous glances being exchanged. "Good work tonight; now run along and enjoy your weekend. Good night!"

Relieved chatter ushered the cast out of the Hall, and Snape Disapparated, reappearing at the staircases at the end of the corridor. Gazing at the crowd bustling boisterously toward him, he merely satisfied himself with one last look at Hermione before whirling and descending the stairs toward the dungeons.

Hermione watched Snape at the stairs and wished she could follow him down to his quarters. The thought that he would pop up to her room at the slightest indication from her tempted her sorely, but she firmed her resolve and sighed. The Gryffindors began climbing the stairs, and she fell a step behind at the alerting tingle. Glancing around, she checked for observers before peering down into the descending staircase. As she had thought, based on the sensation, Snape was flat against the wall, bathed in shadows, but gazing up at her. Flashing him a dazzling smile again, she faintly lifted, "The Phantom of the opera is there, inside my mind." Then, before anyone could notice her defection, she jogged up the steps to catch up with the group, disappearing from sight.

Snape knew his Slytherins wouldn't be far behind the rest of the cast, so he Apparated to his quarters to avoid meeting them on the stairs. Absently donning his lounge wear and settling in his armchair in front of the fire, Snape picked up the newspapers he had been perusing for possible jobs.

Although Slug and Jiggers Apothecary was not advertising for employees, he still planned to contact them anyway, in the hopes that they would be interested in hiring him

regardless of whether or not they had any open positions. But, just in case, he wanted to see what was available. Of course, it wasn't really a good time to be looking...several months before he would be ready to assume a new job...but since he had never actually job hunted before, he rather thought he might need to get the hang of it.

There were the usual notices for service positions: counter clerks, food servers, salespeople. Then there were the Ministry notices for the more professional positions, the ones that required training beyond O.W.L.s. While he technically had the education needed for several of the positions, he didn't think he wanted to take an entry level job as a quill-pusher, especially not if he were to be in competition with his soon-to-be-ex-students in their quests for independence right out of school.

As he had expected, there was nothing even remotely expressing a need for a Potions Master. Only slightly discouraged, Snape folded the paper and headed for bed, mentally determining what he would write to Messrs. Slug and Jiggers in the morning.

To: Messrs. Slug and Jiggers, Apothecaries, Diagon Alley

From: Severus Snape, Potions Master, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Re: Employment

Dear Sirs,

While we may know of each other in the sense that I have been a long-standing consumer of your goods, I would like to take the opportunity to introduce myself on a more personal level.

I, Severus Snape, am a Potions Master currently employed at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry by Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. I have been the resident Potions Master for nearly eighteen years. As was reported after the war, my position under the headmaster was not only that of a teacher, and, while I have benefited from my tenure at Hogwarts, now that it is no longer necessary for me to be here, I am seeking to broaden my horizons and find employment elsewhere.

As the foremost Apothecaries in Great Britain, I am hoping you might be interested in hiring my services to your business at the end of the school year. Being a Potions Master, I am qualified to perform any duties you may require. As an example of my continued development of my skills, I can tell you that I have been successfully brewing the exceedingly complex Wolfsbane Potion for several years now.

If you have any questions regarding my qualifications, I am at your service to provide anything you may need. I look forward to your reply, and I hope that we may begin a professional relationship soon.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Yours sincerely,

Severus Snape

Snape laid his quill on the desk beside the parchment, staring thoughtfully at the still-glistening ink. Done. It was ready. As soon as he sent the letter by owl, he would have taken another irreversible step toward his longed-for future. Scowling with anxiety, he waved his wand over the page, drying the ink so he could roll the parchment into a scroll. Sealing it, he summoned a house-elf to take it to owlery for him.

"Send it to Slug and Jiggers Apothecary in Diagon Alley."

The house-elf bowed quickly and squeaked a high-pitched, "Yes, sir!" before popping out of existence and leaving Snape to brood over his actions, stomach roiling with nerves.

Well, what's done is done and can't be undone. Stop worrying about it and move on to other things. Where is that list of contractors you compiled? It's high time you contacted them. It wouldn't do to wait too long and miss out on being able to schedule them once the house is empty.

Rifling in a desk drawer for the list, he found it and snagged more parchment to begin his letters to the craftsmen. As he focused on the task at hand, one thought remained, lurking behind the others: *Will my life ever be more than a waiting game?*

Saturday night was quiet in the Gryffindor common room. Ron was visiting Susan, Seamus was supposedly studying with Luna, neither Dean nor Colin were anywhere to be seen, Harry and Ginny were snuggling and talking quietly in a corner, and Hermione, Parvati, and Lavender were sharing a long table and working on homework. Various younger students were scattered about, reading or studying together, but the room had a subdued quality about it.

With a heavy sigh and a flourish, Lavender slammed her book shut and rolled up her parchment. "There! Finally..."

Parvati and Hermione looked up. Her voice tinged with envy, Parvati said, "Finished with your Transfiguration essay already?"

Lavender nodded vehemently, gathering her belongings. "Yes. And I'm *not* going to do any more homework tonight! As a matter of fact, I'm going to go take a well-deserved, hot, relaxing bath." She looked at her dorm-mate. "See you later. Don't stay up too long stressing, 'kay?"

Parvati grimaced and nodded. Lavender stood, scooping up her things and nodding farewell to both girls. Hermione voiced a low, "Bye," watching the other girl hurrying to make good her escape. Looking toward Parvati, she said, "Are you working on Transfiguration?"

Parvati nodded glumly. "I swear, it's like pulling teeth, this assignment. I wish I had drawn a different topic. But," she added, sighing, "I'm over halfway done at least." She peered at Hermione's work. "What are you working on?"

"Arithmancy." She smiled at the other girl's horrified expression. "It's not that bad, really."

Parvati chuckled. "Maybe if you're a swot." Hermione wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out at her House-mate, who laughed. "Deny it, then!" When Hermione glared at her and huffed, Parvati laughed again. "I don't know about you, but I'll be glad when the year is over."

Hermione stilled at the thought, instantly thinking about being with Snape. Soberly, she said, "So will I." Parvati doggedly returned her attention to her work, but Hermione's mind was off and running, thinking about Snape and the things they would be able to do once the year was over. Tingles of heat ambushed her, and she felt her face flushing. Furtively, she cast a glance about the room, hoping no one would notice her reaction. She was surprised to see Neville sitting in an armchair by the fire, a Herbology book on his lap. His cheeks were stained pink, too, and on closer inspection, Hermione saw that his eyes weren't moving, for all they were ostensibly reading the book. A knowing smile quirked her lips.

She carefully gathered her things, preparing them to take to her room. Then, in a casual tone, she leant closer to Parvati and said, "Parvati, has Lavender said anything to you about Neville?"

The other girl's eyes snapped up to Hermione's in surprise. The slightly guilty flush of her dusky cheeks gave Hermione her answer. Still, Parvati hedged, "What do you mean?"

Narrowing her eyes, Hermione murmured, "I've seen the way she looks at him, like he's not worth paying attention to. But you and I know different, don't we?"

Parvati flicked a glance around, seeing Neville seated near the fire, and ducked her head. Hermione looked quickly over at him as well, and just caught him looking away. Smirking, Hermione continued, "Give over... He's a great fellow, and you know it. Besides, everyone saw you two snogging in the wings. If you hadn't liked it, you wouldn't have been deaf to everything else, right?"

Parvati fiddled nervously with her quill. Licking her lips unconsciously, she peeked up at Hermione and muttered, "He did rather manage to surprise me..."

Hermione grinned. Reaching across the table, she covered Parvati's twitchy hands with hers, stilling their movements. The other girl stared at her, owl-eyed. "If you like him, don't let Lavender's prejudices get in your way. You know he's changed for the better. So do I. Most of us have seen it by now. She'll catch on eventually. He likes you. I can tell. *You* can tell. So, why not do something about it? You have the chance to be with someone you enjoy; take it!"

The vehemence in her voice took Parvati by surprise. Fleeting, she wondered why Hermione was so invested in a possible relationship between her and Neville. Who was *she* interested in? It clearly wasn't Colin... Her curious thoughts were diverted when she glanced at Neville again and caught him looking at her. For a beat, they locked eyes, mirroring nervous interest, before Parvati tore her gaze away and looked at Hermione again.

Hermione was staring at her benevolently, but the intensity in her expression was verging on desperate. Managing a wan, shaky smile, Parvati ducked her head sheepishly and shrugged. Hermione squeezed her hands approvingly and released them. Briskly gathering her books, she beamed at Parvati and murmured, "I think I'll finish my work in my room. Have a great rest of the evening!" With a conspiratorial wink, she strode away.

Parvati watched her leave in a daze. As Hermione passed Neville, she blithely said, "Good night, Neville." He looked up quickly, smiling at her and nodding as he returned the greeting. Parvati couldn't see the thumbs-up and wink that Hermione gave the boy, but she saw his surprised expression as he flicked a nervous glance at her.

Hermione disappeared, and Neville stared down at the book in his lap, screwing up his courage. *I'm a Gryffindor! I can be brave...* Swallowing hard, he shut the book firmly and stood, resolutely crossing to the table where Parvati now sat alone.

Parvati could see him approaching in her peripheral vision, but she didn't look up until he said, "Good evening, Parvati. May I join you?" Then, peering up at him through her lashes...she had forgotten he had grown so tall...she nodded. Unable to stifle his relieved sigh, Neville sank down into the chair beside her, smiling tentatively. Parvati returned his smile with a shy one of her own.

Neville's breath caught, and he couldn't stop staring at her lips when she smiled at him. Without realizing he said it aloud, he breathed, "You have such a beautiful smile."

At that, her shy smile widened into a flattered smile of pleasure. Blushing prettily, she whispered, "Thank you. I like yours, too."

Neville beamed in startled delight, and they stared at each other for a long moment. Finally, Neville blinked and said, "Would you like to go for a walk with me?"

Parvati felt a flutter in her belly, and she recalled how much she had enjoyed kissing him. The flash of desire in her eyes made Neville's throat tighten as she slipped her hand in his and murmured, "Yes. I think I would like that."

Swallowing against his tight throat, Neville stood, holding her soft hand and hoping his palm wasn't clammy. With a chivalrous gesture for her to precede him, he guided her to the portrait hole, not quite believing his luck.

Back at the doorway to the corridor to her room, Hermione stifled a cry of triumph as she peeked around the door jamb, watching the pair's interaction. Gladness filling her heart for her dear friend, she saw them leave, then retreated to her room alone.

Locking her door behind her with a wistful sigh, her thoughts once again surged ahead to everything she and Snape would finally be able to do once the year was over. Delicious throbs spread from her centre outward, and she found herself searching for the book with all the toys and spells in it. All at once she felt overpoweringly randy, and when she squeezed her legs together, she could feel the moisture staining her knickers.

Snatching the book from the pile, she scrambled onto her bed, sitting cross-legged and flipping through the pages hurriedly. Periodically, a flash of a picture would catch her eye, and she'd pause to stare hazily at the flexing muscles and writhing bodies. She wasn't aware of how heavily she was breathing, but she vaguely realized that her robes were too hot. Hardly taking her eyes off the erotic pictures, she struggled to remove her robes, tossing them absently on the floor at the foot of her bed.

Licking her lips to re-moisten them, she dragged the book back to her lap, tearing her heated gaze from the images to flip through to the section she wanted. There! She stopped at the pages full of tantalizing toys and spells, sucking in a breath at the throbbing in her core.

That witch certainly looks like she's enjoying that Engorgement Charm... I think that's what I should try. I don't want to hurt myself, and I don't want to tear, just stretch. Slowly. Her eyes raced over the page, reading the instructions on how to cast the spell and exercise control over it. She whipped out her wand and practiced the charm silently, copying the movements detailed in the book. Then, she frowned.

But, she already had a toy to charm. I don't. I know it needs to be thin and smooth... Her gaze flicked quickly at her wand, but she just as quickly shook her head, remembering the caution at the beginning of the section about never using one's wand for direct stimulation. Inadvertent spellcasting could cause harm, and one did not want to end up in St. Mungo's due to a sexual disaster. Hermione briefly wondered if they had a separate ward for those suffering from acute embarrassment as well as whatever problems they may have self-inflicted.

Peering around the room from beneath heavy lids, she considered her options. It was recommended that one only perform one type of spell on any item. If one needed to transfigure something, then adding other charms could be problematic, and vice versa. Since she wanted to try the Engorgement Charm, she needed something serviceable as it was, without having to transfigure it first. Quills were out of the question...

Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the sconces around the room. *Candles.* The sconces held long, thin tapers. A rush of heat washed over her, and a titillating sense of wantonness thrilled her. Chewing her lip, she stared at the dancing flames, blinking at the spots forming in front of her eyes.

A queer fluttering in her belly drove her to stand, casting an Imperturbable Charm on her door as she crossed to one of the sconces. Her voice was a bare whisper as she pointed her wand at the candle and said, "*Nox.*" The flame died out, and she swallowed hard as she carefully plucked the taper from the holder. She jumped in surprise at the fresh candle that appeared in its place after a few seconds. *They must be spelled to replenish!* Blinking, she looked between the one in her hand and the new one in the sconce. Deliberately, she switched candles, putting the old one in the sconce before a new one had a chance to appear.

Glancing furtively about, even though she knew she was alone in her room, she returned to her position on the bed. Laying the candle flat in her open palm, she pointed her wand at it and practiced the charm. She gasped, and her blood pounded through her as she watched it slowly swell, stopping at a thought from her, then resuming at her bidding. She stopped the charm again, looking back at the book for the reversal. Casting it, she watched the candle shrink back to normal.

Carefully, she cast a small Severing Charm to cut the wick from the end. Then, meticulously, she used her thumbnail to shave any rough edges from the tip, smoothing the wax. Feelings of shame warred with excitement as she prepared the innocuous item for such an erotic enterprise.

In a flurry of motion, she drew the curtains on her window, blocking out any moonlight and possibility of view into her room. Then, dousing the lights except for the one on her nightstand, she undressed, chills sending goose flesh over her body. The chills weren't from cold, but from the heady sensations of exploring her sexuality so openly. A

whispered *Wingardium Leviosa* had the book hovering above her bed, and she lay down beneath it, the candle in her sweaty palm.

Turning the pages to another photo-story, she slid her hand over her body, teasing her nipples to stiffness and curving her fingers over the heat emanating from between her thighs. Fingertips slipped along her cleft, tickling her slick lips, as they dipped lower toward her cunt. The candle was clenched in her other hand, and for a moment she was glad that she had done so, as it wouldn't be cold against her flesh.

Burning eyes locked on the image of a long-haired wizard sliding his finger into a moaning witch, she hesitantly trailed the candle tip along her slippery pussy. Spreading her legs for better access, she pressed her finger into her tight cunt. She was fleetingly amazed at how sopping wet she was, but the tingles that raced down her limbs distracted her. Circling her entrance with one glistening fingertip, she guided the candle inside her. A shuddering exhalation followed her action. Carefully pressing it further, she reached up with her other hand and began circling her clit. A moan escaped her as she rocked her head back at the sensations.

Slowly sliding the candle in and out a couple of inches, she swallowed against her parched throat and grabbed her wand. Concentrating as much as she could in the face of the overpowering experience, she cast the Engorgement Charm on the candle, feeling it ever-so-slowly swelling to fill her. Only a few inches were embedded inside her, but her breath caught at the sensual thrill of feeling the makeshift toy enlarging, stretching against her hymen. At the first feel of the tightness, she stopped the charm. Breathing deeply, she took a while to get used to the sensation, then began working it in and out again.

A whimper emerged from her throat, and she felt heat racing through her entire body. Emboldened by the pleasure, she started the charm again. It took only a moment before she felt the sting of the candle stretching her. Hastily stopping again, she swallowed hard, breathing steadily to relax. She tried moving it again, but stopped at the warning sting. Closing her eyes, she started rubbing her clit again, building the pleasure.

As her excitement rose, she opened her eyes again, watching the wizard pumping three fingers into the witch as he laved her clit. The thought of Snape's tongue tasting her so intimately sent a jolt of fire to her core, causing her cunt to squeeze against the invading toy. A ragged groan soured out of her, and she rubbed faster.

The wizard thrust his fingers in and out, deeper and faster, and when he stopped licking in favour of sucking the witch's clit between his lips, her head flew back and she arched, gripping the sheets beside her as she shuddered and convulsed in a shattering orgasm. Hermione panted as she circled her clit, holding the candle inside her spasming cunt. As she felt her orgasm rising, she screwed her eyes shut again, picturing Snape between her legs, filling her so completely and sucking her into delirium. Her peak hit, and instinctively she worked the candle in and out again, paying no heed to the spark of discomfort at being stretched like that, so engulfed in pleasure was she.

Gasping and shuddering, she came down from her crest, aftershocks coursing through her and leaving her deliciously sated and sleepy. Her hands stilled, and she lay there, panting to steady her breathing and listening to her heartbeat thundering in her ears. A sheepish smile graced her dry lips at the thought of what a wanton display she must make, and she lifted her limp fingers from her drenched pussy. Sighing in satisfaction, she started to slip the candle out, but sucked in a breath and stopped at the burning sensation. Ruefully concluding that she had pushed too far too fast, she cast the reversal spell, exhaling in relief when it shrank back to normal, withdrawing with ease.

Quickly casting a cleansing charm, she peeked at the wax, searching for blood, but there was none. Relieved, she plucked the hovering book from the air and placed it on the floor by her bed, dropping the candle beside it. Too lazy to want to get out of bed for her nightgown, she Summoned it from her dresser and shrugged into it as she burrowed under the covers. *Forget about knickers. Don't need 'em. Don't want 'em.*

Making one last pass with her wand to remove the Imperturbable Charm from her door, reopen her curtains to let the moonlight in, and douse the remaining light, she sank into her pillow and snuggled with another pillow around which Snape's shirt was wrapped, smiling at the successful...in several respects...end to her evening. Although her mind teemed with sensual images of Snape, she was too sleepy to stay awake, and she dozed off before Crookshanks had even decided it was safe to join her.

57- Betrayal

Chapter 60 of 84

It's Act Two's sing-through and costume practice afterward, which spurs Snape to a confrontation with his Slytherins and McGonagall. Waiting for a reply from Slug and Jiggers keeps Snape off balance, as does Hermione's relapse into wicked, wanton teasing. Both Snape and Hermione hold fast to their secrets, until an astonishing betrayal sets the stage for both of their secrets to be revealed.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Profound thanks go out to my lovely beta, Ladyofthemasque, as well as SnivellusSnape, Bewarethesmirk, and Horserider, for feedback. We've reached another benchmark in the journey in this chapter, and as usual, I'm all sorts of hands-wringing antsy over it. At any rate, thanks again to all you fine folk for reading and reviewing and all your continued support. *hugs*

Nicole aka Good_Witch :)

Chapter 57- Betrayal

Tuesday evening brought the sing-through for Act Two, and several of the students were nervous about the costume spell practice slated for after the rehearsal. So worried were the seventh-year Gryffindor boys that, every night since the last rehearsal, they had been practicing in their dorm before bed. Unfortunately, Ron and Neville were still having trouble occasionally, which led to their current state of anxiety at dinner Tuesday night.

Susan had come over to the Gryffindor table to lend moral support to Ron, who was muttering his spells under his breath and practicing the wand movements, brow furrowed in concentration. Neville was a few seats over, eyes closed in focus as he mouthed his spells silently. Dean and Seamus were nearby, offering encouragement.

Hermione had run through her spells in the privacy of her room the previous weekend, delighting in the sumptuous gowns and adornments. Of course, she had no trouble with hers, and she was quietly watching her mates stewing over their spells while inwardly mourning the fact that she was not going to be spending time with Snape before rehearsal.

Snape sat at the High Table, quite on the verge of sulking. He hadn't yet heard back from Slug and Jiggers, and he was still yearning for Hermione. Gazing sourly over his charges, he realized that his Slytherins weren't practicing their costume spells, while the Gryffindors were clearly concerned about theirs. Sniffing in irritation, not wanting to give McGonagall *any* opportunity to gloat over her House, he rose and stalked down to the long table, forbidding gaze boring into Draco, Pansy, and Millicent.

Hermione watched Snape striding down the far aisle, wondering what was wrong. Ginny had noticed him as well, and she, too, stared after him curiously.

Draco looked up to see the tall, dark form of his Head of House bearing down on him and felt a flash of surprise and apprehension. Was he in trouble? Snape sure didn't look happy...but then again, he didn't often. Combing his memory for any inkling of what he might have done to warrant a public reprimand, he came up empty, gazing blankly up at the older man.

Pansy and Millicent, seated just beyond Draco, snapped wary attention to Snape, steeling themselves for a blast of his infamous venom.

Snape stopped short, drawing himself up stiffly and peering down his nose at the seated students. "Mr. Malfoy, Miss Parkinson, Miss Bulstrode... Tonight's rehearsal will conclude with a practice of the costume spells for everyone. Clearly, *other* students on cast..." he pointedly slid his eyes toward the Gryffindor table "...are making use of their time in preparation. It gave me cause to wonder why *my* students were not as industriously occupied." As he finished, he crossed his arms imposingly and arched one eyebrow, inclining his head toward the trio, awaiting an answer.

Pansy elbowed Draco, who flicked an irritated glance at her over his shoulder before speaking up. "Sir, we have practiced before. I assure you that we will be able to cast our spells correctly when necessary." His pompous air slid away as a sneer twisted his lips and he shot a disdainful look at the Gryffindor table. "Suffice to say that *Slytherins* have been successful long before now."

Snape's eyes narrowed and he fought back a smirk at the boy's ingrained House loyalty. Tone bored, he retorted, "Be that as it may, Mr. Malfoy, I wish to take no chances on your performance this evening. Thus, I require that you all demonstrate your spells for me this instant."

With a hasty nod, Pansy struggled to her feet, hampered on both sides by Draco and Millicent, who were not as quick on the uptake. Snape inclined his head approvingly and raised his eyebrows, indicating that he was waiting. With a deep breath, Pansy methodically worked through all of her costumes, never missing a beat.

Snape's lips quirked in a satisfied smirk and he nodded approval at the girl, who flushed and smiled, slipping back into her seat.

"Well done, Miss Parkinson. Three points to Slytherin."

"Thank you, Professor Snape." Her expression turned smug as she preened.

Millicent had glanced soberly at Snape for permission to begin, and tentatively cast her spells. Snape averted his eyes quickly at the unappealing sight of her in her ballerina costume, but made note of the fact that she had not made any mistakes. Nodding again, he said, "Good. Three points to Slytherin, Miss Bulstrode."

Millicent nodded her thanks, then spoke up. "Sir, I have been practicing the charm on the ballet slippers, too. I can do all the ballet moves perfectly." At Snape's nod of acknowledgement, the square-jawed girl took her seat beside Pansy, still looking glum but relieved at the same time. Draco stood gracefully, an expression of superiority on his face.

With an air of boredom that clearly gave the impression that casting the spells was hardly worth practicing, Draco whipped through each successive costume, ending with a maddening smirk as he drawled, "Unlike those two..." tilting his head toward Ron and Neville "...*this* pureblood knows what he's doing."

Snape's eyes narrowed again, anger spiking through him at the boy's constant arrogance. As if there was *anything* to the notion of pureblood superiority... Hadn't Riddle's misguided ideals caused enough pain and destruction? Besides, if there was ever an example of how new blood improved the stock, Hermione Granger was it...brilliant, clever, powerful, and the first witch ever in her family. Glaring at the pale boy, Snape rewound back to Millicent's comment about her ballet slippers. Eyes flashing wickedly, startling the girls, who were still paying attention, unlike Draco, Snape murmured, "In that case, Mr. Malfoy, why don't you demonstrate your glamour as well?"

Draco blanched and his face fell. Snape's lips twitched in suppressed triumph. Reluctance saturating his voice, Draco queried, "Here, sir? Now?"

Unmoving, Snape repeated, in a tone of grim finality, "Here. Now."

Draco frowned. Sucking in a breath, he thought for a long moment. Finally, Snape growled dangerously, "One point from Slytherin for wasting my time, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco blinked rapidly and settled his shoulders, attempting the glamour. The result flickered and wavered, causing Draco to eye Snape fearfully. Behind him, the girls held their breath in dismay. Draco ended the glamour, trying again. It was more definitive this time, but he seemed to swell and shrink, looking like a throbbing balloon.

By this time, students all over the Hall were watching, tuned into the spectacle by the rarity of Snape approaching his charges during a meal. Laughter rippled through the space at Draco's attempts. His pale face flushed in humiliation and anger. Darting a glance at the Gryffindor table, he saw Harry and the other boys pointing and laughing.

Determined to get it right, he scowled, trying again. It worked. Of course, that meant that he looked like he was inflating into a rotund caricature of himself. Even the successful attempt invited more sniggers and guffaws. He looked like a cross between Crabbe and Hagrid for size. Pansy, in a valiant attempt to mitigate the ridicule her boyfriend was facing, shot to her feet and cast her glamour, too, also casting one of her costume spells, so she looked like Carlotta, instead of a massive Pansy in Hogwarts robes.

Snape tilted his head to one side at her gesture, pursing his lips. Dropping his arms brusquely, he said, "Enough. Clearly, you do *not* know what you're doing, Mr. Malfoy. Two more points from Slytherin for neglecting your assignment." He swept a disgusted glance over the humiliated boy before turning to Pansy. "Miss Parkinson, two more points to Slytherin for demonstration of such a successful grasp of your glamour. However, I feel compelled to tell you that, while I can understand your motives for demonstrating it unasked, I do think that you could find a target more worthy of your... loyalty." He cut an acid glance back at Draco, who had ended his glamour and was glaring balefully at the still tittering students.

Pansy ducked her head, flushed at the thinly veiled insult, and ended her glamour, sitting quickly. Snape cast an appraising look over the Hall, seeing the laughing faces, and felt a flare of satisfaction for managing to get back at Draco for his ridiculous attitude. Still, there was one more thing he could do...

Snape spun on his heel, looking as if he were going to leave, and Draco flopped back into his seat in a sulk. But, Snape whirled back, closing in on Draco and leaning down behind his ear to murmur, "Oh, and two more points from Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy, for disobeying me. I believe I told you to keep such sentiments to yourself. Need I remind you: keep your mouth shut, else I'll shut it for you." Draco stiffened, and Snape smirked. Continuing in a low voice, he said, "That's five points your arrogance has lost your House. I daresay you should be grateful that your girlfriend has exhibited better sense and skill than you, and has managed to counter your losses. Learn from your mistakes, Mr. Malfoy, before it is too late."

With that parting shot, he spun and glided away, resuming his place at the High Table, waiting for dinner to end and rehearsal to begin. Dumbledore spared a glance at him and said, "Trouble, Severus?"

Flicking his fingers dismissively, Snape retorted, "Nothing I can't handle, Albus, thank you."

Dumbledore grunted in amusement and returned to his custard. Snape's minute satisfaction at having taken Draco down a peg faded as he looked over at Hermione, who sat listlessly at the Gryffindor table, looking nearly as melancholy as he felt. She caught his eye and managed a half-hearted shrug of resignation.

Heaving a discontented sigh, Snape inclined his head and made a cup of tea, lip curling faintly at the fleeting smile it brought to Hermione's face. They both sipped silently as dinner waned.

When the rest of the students had left, and Dumbledore had arranged the circle of chairs for the cast, he Summoned the orchestral accompaniment. Much like the previous week, many in the cast fidgeted as they began the sing-through, feeling constrained without the outlet for movement. Fortunately, also like the previous run-through, there were very few mistakes or miscues, likely because the second Act was so much fresher in their minds. As the practice wore on, a noticeable sense of relaxation emerged within the group, demonstrating the comfort they felt with the material by this point.

Thus, it wasn't until after they finished that the anxiety level palpably rose again. After waxing effusive about the cast's efforts, Dumbledore grinned challengingly at them and said, "Now, Professor McGonagall and I will be reviewing your costume spells before you may leave. Everyone stand up and be ready!"

Students shot to their feet, some more enthusiastically than others. Snape snapped a warning look at his Slytherins, and Draco looked away, sullen, while Pansy and Millicent took deep breaths and nodded acknowledgment of the unspoken caution.

After a brief, whispered consultation, McGonagall and Dumbledore began their tour through the group. In an effort to save time, McGonagall called several of them forth as a group...such as the ballerinas...and had them all cast the same costume spells at the same time. Meanwhile, Dumbledore went to individuals.

Snape and Trelawney stood to one side, watching. Snape saw that Millicent had performed her spells correctly again with McGonagall, and Dumbledore was going over Harry's spells first. He rolled his eyes as he thought, *Of course he'd start with Potter.*

Once McGonagall had finished with the groups of costumes, she began working her way through that portion of the cast one by one. Hermione watched, a faint smile on her face, as first Lavender, then, Parvati, Susan, Hannah, and Luna demonstrated their costumes.

Dumbledore had finished with Harry and had moved on to Ron and Neville. Their expressions were of fierce concentration as they cast their spells, and their relief at their success was comical. When they had finished, Dumbledore turned to Draco, who flicked a swift glance at Snape before performing his spells. At Dumbledore's approval, Draco smirked, chest puffing out in pride. Pansy took her turn, and then Dumbledore asked them to cast their glamours.

Draco's smug expression faltered, but he schooled himself to remain impassive as he faultlessly cast the glamour, Pansy doing the same at his side. Snape nodded, crossing his arms in grim satisfaction. At Dumbledore's urging, they went through their costumes again, so he could see how they adapted to the glamours. Draco's eyes kept turning defiantly toward the rest of the cast, expecting more laughter, but they were too busy with their own spells to worry about him.

Smiling his approval, Dumbledore dismissed Draco and Pansy and turned to look over the group. Seeing Hermione available, he beckoned to her to join him. She hurried over and nodded as she cast her spells.

Snape stared at her, unable to tear his eyes away from the spectacle of her in such a variety of beautiful costumes. Gripping his arms tight against his chest, he didn't realize that he had been holding his breath until it burst out of him. McGonagall had worked her way through those nearest her and turned to look for who else was left. Seeing Snape's gaze trained unblinkingly in one direction, she sought the target and saw Hermione practicing her spells.

Pursing her lips to suppress the gloating smile at her charge's apparent skill, McGonagall crossed to Snape. "Well, Severus, as Albus has already addressed one of our leads, why don't you show me your costumes again?"

Snape blinked and wrenched his attention from Hermione at the first sound of McGonagall's voice. Hoping he didn't look guilty, he grimaced and said, "I do not have the mask at the moment. Besides, you know I can cast my costume spells already."

McGonagall eyed him intently and said, with a determinedly sweet lilt, "Why, Severus, wouldn't you want to set a good example for your students?" The challenge in her face was unmistakable, and Snape knew she would needle him about it for the rest of his days if he didn't comply.

Drawing himself up in frosty superiority, he murmured, "I shall be right back," and Disapparated.

Snatching his mask from the table, Snape Apparated back to the Hall, smirking at the slight jump that betrayed how much he had startled McGonagall with his abrupt departure and return. Donning the mask, he held her gaze as he cast his first costume spell. Then, steeling himself for the ordeal of being completely clad in unrelenting scarlet, he cast the spell for his Red Death costume. Shooting a glance toward Hermione, he saw her beaming at him, having already finished her spells and enjoying watching him.

Finally, he cast his last spell, pulling the hood forward and casting his glamour under his breath before he gripped his mask and pushed it back over his forehead, shoving the hood back with it. The sudden appearance of his disfigured face made McGonagall wince and grimace in horror, which made Snape smirk, twisting the hideous features even more. Pleased that he had managed to make her uncomfortable, Snape sketched a little mocking bow to McGonagall and ended the spells, returning to his normal self.

McGonagall cut him an acid look, wrinkling her nose, but said, "Excellent, as always, Severus."

Snape snorted, understanding that she was calling an end to this particular skirmish, and responded to her peace offering with a drawled, "Well, I did learn from the best."

After a beat of silent astonishment at his rejoinder, McGonagall burst out laughing, noting the wicked gleam in Snape's eyes and the telltale twitch of his lips as he studiously suppressed a grin. Shaking her head fondly, she said, "A *compliment*. From *you*. My, but you *have* changed since you were my student."

She was rather taken aback by the abruptly solemn response as he said, "People change as they grow up," his eyes unfocusing a bit before fleetingly glancing toward Hermione and then back to the middle distance. A beat later, he seemed to come back to himself, his black eyes once again snapping with energy as he briskly said, "I trust that we're done here?"

McGonagall stared thoughtfully at him as she nodded. "Indeed. Good night, Severus." Raking him with one last appraising look, she turned to Trelawney while Dumbledore finished up with the remaining students.

Snape stood there, gazing about at the knots of students buzzing with low conversations. Dumbledore called to the ballerinas to gather and demonstrate their enchanted dancing, and Snape took that as his cue to leave, before he could be drawn into any more confrontations with McGonagall. Heaving a sigh of regret, he cast one last look at Hermione, who was focused on her dance steps, and Disapparated to his quarters.

Wednesday morning, cast members saw a note on the notice board:

"Friday March 13: Dress run-through: Act One

Everyone required to attend."

Hermione smiled in anticipation, not only for the rehearsal itself, but for the chance to meet with Snape beforehand as well. Her insatiable curiosity wanted to know what his "project" was, and she was fully prepared to prod him about it in the hopes that he'd cave and tell her about it. Granted, that made her think about *her* secret "project," and a wanton thrill coursed through her.

Several times in Potions class that morning, Hermione cast heated glances at Snape, making him pulse with flashes of desire, wondering what was causing her heady behaviour. The vehement wish that the school year were over already resounded in his head.

When class was over, she dallied in gathering her things, waiting until the room was empty except for the two of them. Then, pinning Snape with a fiery gaze, she murmured, "I miss you."

Snape glanced warily at the doorway before whispering, "And I, you."

Hermione bit her lip, looking at him calculatingly, then she flashed him a wicked grin. Snape's brows lowered and his eyes narrowed. The expression on her face was far

more Slytherin than should be seen on a Gryffindor, and he eyed her suspiciously.

His misgivings were spot on, as she ducked her head to peer coquettishly up at him through her lashes, trailing the tip of her tongue over her lips with deliberate slowness. Snape's hands clenched on the desktop, and he glared at her dangerously, breathing harshly through his nose at the obviously planned tease.

Smirking delightedly, Hermione tilted her head and lilted, "I do miss you, love... *all* of you." The suggestive note in her voice made his trousers suddenly much tighter. Raking him with a languid once-over, she sucked her lower lip in, closing her eyes and exhaling a low moan as she licked her lips again, opening her eyes to see Snape gazing at her, shock, fierce reprimand, pleasure, lust, and desperate control blazing in his eyes.

She knew it was cruel and tormenting to do it, but ever since she had set her plan into action, she had been on a sexual high, and she couldn't seem to help herself. The slightest thing could send her mind in that direction, and she once again found herself with damp knickers all the time. The erotic bliss she had invoked with her explorations simmered within her, and she couldn't help but want to awaken that same feeling in Snape so that they might revel in it when next they met.

The rational part of her mind chided her that she was flip-flopping again about how she and Snape should behave, and what they should and shouldn't allow themselves to do. But, after she had begun including penetration in her masturbatory fantasies, systematically attempting to rid herself of any physical barrier indicating her technical virginity, she had come to crave it, experimenting with different spells listed in that book, and trying to expand the makeshift toy a little more each time.

It had only been a few days since she had begun, but she had apparently hit her own slippery slope. Before Snape could master himself enough to respond, Hermione snatched up her bag and dashed out of the room, a throaty giggle trailing behind her.

Snape's eyes widened at the sound. *Bloody teasing minx! What in blazes has got into her? That's just plain heartless, and you can be damned sure I'll tell her so Friday evening!* Shifting furtively in his chair, he freed his erection from the pinch of his trousers, breathing deeply and willing it to go away.

Closing his eyes and heaving a long-suffering sigh, he sent a silent plea to the powers that be for time to move faster.

Friday morning, Snape looked up anxiously at the owl arrowing toward him. His patience was wearing thin, waiting to hear back from Slug and Jiggers. Thus, when he retrieved the missive from the owl, a stab of excitement shot through him at the sight of the return address on the envelope. Clutching it like a talisman, he quaffed the rest of his tea and hastily cleared his place, so eager to leave to read their response that he considered Apparating from the High Table. Prudence intervened, and he tried to calm himself, at least outwardly. Dumbledore was eyeing him curiously, and, while there was nothing suspicious about a Potions Master receiving post from an Apothecary, his reactions could certainly draw undue attention.

His tone mild, Dumbledore queried, "Anything important, Severus?"

Snape doggedly wiped his face of expression and coolly replied, "Just something I have been waiting for." Rising from his seat, he added, "Good day to you," briskly striding toward the staff entrance.

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed shrewdly as he watched him go, but he merely uttered a pleasant, "And to you, my dear boy."

Once outside the Hall, Snape Disapparated to his sitting room, ripping the envelope open and pacing in front of the hearth. His eyes sparked with excitement, and his expression was one of eager hope as he began to read.

"To: Severus Snape, Potions Master, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

From: Messrs. Slug and Jiggers, Apothecaries, Diagon Alley

Re: Employment

Dear Sir,

We would first like to thank you for your kind words regarding our practice. Slug and Jiggers puts forth every effort to attain the highest possible standard of quality, and to have that recognized by a Potions Master of your standing is accolade indeed.

Our continued relationship with Hogwarts is a source of pride to both of us, and we would like to also thank you for your loyalty as a customer over the years.

Regarding your skills, it is clear to us that you have the expertise to satisfy the most exacting of employers and customers, and we are duly flattered that you would wish to ally yourself with Slug and Jiggers.

That being said, it is with regret that we must inform you that we will not be able to add you to the Slug and Jiggers staff.

Good luck in your search elsewhere, and thank you again for your interest in Slug and Jiggers Apothecary.

Sincerely,

Messrs. Slug and Jiggers, Apothecaries"

Snape stopped, his eyes racing over the page again, not willing to believe what he had just read. Hot and cold washed over him in turn, and he sank bonelessly into his chair, blank with shock. His stomach clenched painfully, and his cheeks flushed in shame.

He wasn't good enough.

Swallowing against the constriction of his throat, he blinked furiously, trying to breathe steadily, and fighting the hot prickle of moisture beneath his eyelids.

Glancing at the letter again, in the vain hope that it had somehow changed, he ground his teeth, crumpling the parchment into a tight ball before hurling it into the fireplace. Slamming back into the chair, his eyes closed as his brow furrowed and his lips thinned. Sucking in a deep breath through his nose, his hands flew up to rake through his hair, gripping his head as he curled forward, propping his elbows on his knees and exhaling heavily through his mouth. He stared at the floor, dragging in ragged breaths, writhing in humiliation and self-disgust.

Thank Merlin I never told Hermione about this. How dreadfully mortifying it would be to have to tell her I can't even find a new job! Again, he swallowed against the gorge rising from his roiling stomach. *I don't understand! Everything else was so cordial and complimentary; why would they turn me down? What more could they want?*

He remained that way for several long minutes before wrenching himself up and glancing at the time.

Bollocks! The students will be arriving any minute...

Heaving to his feet, he shuffled through his lab and office, pausing at the door to the classroom and leaning against the jamb morosely. He scowled at the students who were entering, wishing that Hermione had class that day, so he could at least have had the comfort of seeing her. But, he'd have to wait until after dinner instead.

Granted, he didn't plan on telling her why he was so upset, but he didn't necessarily think it mattered, as just being with her could ease his soul. Besides, he could always just blame his dispirited state on their situation. Merlin knows it was bad enough to depress anyone.

Snape didn't bother with lunch. He didn't feel like eating anyway. He spent his free time slouching in his chair before the fire, feet propped on the ottoman and fingers steeped pensively against his lips as he stared unseeingly into the flames. In his mind, the unexpected rejection spun round and round, just as his bewildered questions followed it in circles.

When it was dinner time, he went to the Great Hall, not because he was hungry, but because he wanted to be there to collect Hermione as soon as was reasonably expected. Forcing down a few bites, he gave up the attempt and simply brewed his tea, still brooding.

Dumbledore cut a sidelong glance at him and nodded faintly to himself. A flicker of a satisfied smirk went unnoticed by the distracted man beside him. Twirling noodles on his fork, Dumbledore ventured, "Are you all right, Severus?"

Snape huffed in irritation and growled a terse, "Yes."

Undeterred, Dumbledore continued, "Did something go wrong with your project?" He eyed Snape keenly.

Snape twitched and scowled even deeper. Sucking in a measured breath, he bit out, "It's no concern of yours, Albus. Leave me be."

Dumbledore rolled his eyes at Snape's tone and said, "You're not going to let whatever it is affect you in rehearsal, are you?"

Snape grimaced and snapped, "No. I'll be fine."

Dumbledore inclined his head, finally subsiding, but after a beat, he said, "Don't let me forget, Severus: I need to speak with you after rehearsal."

At that, Snape jerked from his wallowing in alarm. Warily looking at the headmaster, who was blithely sucking the ends of noodles into his mouth, Snape uttered a cautious, "Certainly, sir. I'll be sure to remember."

Snape eyed Dumbledore out of the corner of his eye, wondering what he wanted to talk to him about. Dumbledore simply enjoyed his meal, not paying any particular attention to Snape any longer.

After a while, it was late enough that Snape could collect Hermione before rehearsal. When they had exited the Hall, he Apparated them to his quarters, where he surprised Hermione by enveloping her in a tight embrace before she could even greet him.

Taken aback by the intensity of his grip, Hermione just squeezed back, lightly rubbing his back as she waited for him to release her enough to respond more solicitously.

The horrid tension in his gut eased as he held her, her mere presence soothing and calming him. After a long silence, he let go, pulling back to look down into her concerned face.

"Severus? Are you all right?"

Snape exhaled, one corner of his mouth quirking up in a wan smile. "I am now." Gazing at her tenderly, he lifted one hand and stroked her hair, absently tucking it behind her ear.

Hermione stared at him, worried. "What's wrong?"

Sliding his hand down her arm to clasp her hand, Snape shook his head faintly and led her toward the chair. "Things are just... difficult, Hermione. You needn't fret. I'm glad we can be together." He sank into the seat and his face creased into a soft, genuine smile. With a note of mock-sarcasm, he said, "Forgive me for wanting happiness, now that I've finally experienced it."

Hermione blushed, pleased. Her furrowed brow smoothed as she returned his smile. "You had me worried, Severus. Is that really all? You know you can tell me anything, right?"

He rolled his eyes, shooing her toward the bathroom. "Yes, yes. Of course. Go on then. We have a rehearsal to worry about."

Hermione shot a mock-aggrieved look at him as she went to fetch the hair products. As she approached the chair again, she said, "I'm looking forward to it. It should be fascinating to put everything together at last!"

Snape nodded in agreement. "Indeed." As she began brushing his hair, he added, "Dumbledore wants to talk to me after practice tonight. About what...I have no idea."

Hermione frowned. "Did he seem upset?"

Snape snorted. "When has that daft old man ever 'seemed upset'? Really, love, I don't know what to expect, but I refuse to let myself worry as much as I did the last time he wanted to meet with me."

Smoothing pomade, Hermione voiced an inarticulate noise of agreement. After a beat of silence, she ventured, "Might it have anything to do with your 'project'?"

Snape leant forward, out of her grip, and spun to pin her with a fierce gaze. Hermione, pomade-coated hands still hovering in mid-air, stared at him, owl-eyed in surprise.

"What do you mean? What do you know of it?" Snape's voice was harsh as he snapped at her.

Bewildered, Hermione shook her head as she hastily retorted, "Nothing! I don't know anything about anything, honestly! I just know you're cooking something up, and I can't help but wonder what. I didn't know if perhaps Dumbledore might be in on whatever it is, and I was just curious. Really!" She gazed solemnly at him while he scowled.

Pursing his lips, he relaxed, turning to sit back in the chair and allow her to continue her task. In a low voice he said, "I told you not to worry about it."

Hermione resumed smoothing the pomade through his hair and said, "I didn't mean to upset you. I'm just... interested."

Snape snorted. "Trust me; I know."

After a few beats of silence, Hermione continued, "You know I'd love to help you with any sort of project, don't you?" She gathered his hair and secured the elastic around it.

Snape smirked and retorted, "I do. Hermione, I'd like to believe that we have our entire lives to be able to help each other with whatever we may want to do, but right now, I have to do this alone. I promise, you'll eventually find out what I'm on about. I just need to keep it *secret*, if you will, for a while longer."

Her growing petulance at being kept in the dark gave way to a sudden flash of heat as his stress on the word "secret" made her think of ~~her~~ own secret. Sucking in a breath, she bit her lip and swallowed, once again feeling a tingling in her centre. Without a word, she stepped around the chair and stopped in front of him, standing between his knees. He stared up at her, taken aback by the smouldering look on her face.

Before he could react, Hermione ducked down, cupping his face in her hands, and kissed him thoroughly. Snape's surprised grunt was lost against her lips, but his deep moan spurred her to climb onto his lap, straddling him. He nearly choked on his strangled cry as she pressed herself against him and started grinding on his rapidly swelling cock.

First gripping her hips to still her movements, Snape then pulled back, desperately trying to free himself from her devouring kiss. At his struggling, Hermione jerked back, frowning at him through a haze of desire.

Panting shallowly, he rasped, "Slippery... slope..." His expression, while mirroring the lust in Hermione's, also showed the amount of effort he was expending to control himself. When Hermione's eyes merely narrowed more and travelled to focus on his lips again, he said, "Hermione!"

Hermione snapped to attention, blinking. Her ears were filled with the roaring of her own blood racing through her veins, and, as she became aware of her position, she felt the unyielding heat of Snape's erection against her mound. At that, she gasped, flushing in confusion as she realized what she had started.

Struggling from his lap, carefully trying not to hurt him, she buried her burning face in her hands, ashamed at her loss of control. She turned away from him, and from behind her fingers came a muffled, "I'm sorry..."

Snape heaved a deep sigh of relief when she moved away, allowing himself to focus on something other than the delicious stimulation of her body on his. Gingerly standing, he wrapped his hands over the points of her shoulders, standing close to her but not letting his mutinous body touch hers.

"Calm down. It's all right. Hermione, look at me." He urged her to spin to face him. Gently prying her hands from her face, he tilted her chin up and peered at her, confused. Brow furrowing in wonder, he murmured, "Where in blazes did *that* come from?"

Hermione looked even more embarrassed, but she whispered, "It just... hit me. I can't explain it." She averted her eyes in an attempt to keep him from seeing the Slytherin half-truth of that statement. She knew what had hit her; she *could* explain it; she just couldn't explain it to him *here* and *now*.

Eyes narrowing, Snape waited for her to meet his gaze again. He could sense that she was hiding something, but, he didn't dare ask what lest she pry into his secret again. Deciding not to pursue the matter any more for the moment, he let his finger drop from under her chin.

They stood there, awkward tension hanging in the air between them. Snape shifted his weight furtively, willing his erection to flag. Hermione stared at the fire as she worried her hands so much that her knuckles were showing yellow through her skin. When his rapid pulse calmed, Snape stepped away to collect his mask from the table by the door.

He stood there for a beat, then glanced back at Hermione. They still had time before they had to be upstairs, but it didn't seem like much of a good idea to stay in his quarters alone after such a surprising turn of events. Nodding to himself, he looked at Hermione and said, "Why don't we head up the old way? Perhaps a little exercise would settle the body and clear the head..." He lifted his eyebrows in inquiry and Hermione gazed at him, gratitude for his suggestion writ plainly on her face.

"That's a brilliant idea." Smiling tightly at him, she crossed the room to stop by the door. Ducking her head sheepishly, she whispered, "I *am* sorry for accosting you like that. I know it wasn't fair to you. I'll try harder to keep control of myself."

Snape took her hand and squeezed. "I appreciate that." Then, with forced heartiness, he said, "Now, let's move along." He opened the door and gestured for her to precede him.

They strode silently down the corridor, the sound of their footsteps echoing on the stones. Before they reached the stairs, Hermione grabbed for his hand. Looking at her in surprise, Snape paused.

She peered up at him, a half-smile on her face as she barely whispered, "I love you, Severus. Less than four months to go..."

Snape's lips twitched in response, but his eyes softened as he locked eyes with her. Then, flicking a glance along the corridor in both directions, he gazed at her again and murmured, "Indeed, my love."

They resumed their trek to the Great Hall, once again as at peace as they could get with such barriers to their relationship.

Spirits were high among the cast when they all trooped into the transformed Hall. Dumbledore was smiling and humming to himself as he Summoned the orchestra and cast *Suaviloquentia* on people. When the set was ready, he herded everyone onto the stage and watched as they all cast their first costume spells.

"Now, we're going to be accompanied by the instruments this time, and I don't want to stop if we can help it. I'll be handling the set changes, but you need to worry about your costume changes as well. Ready?" He flashed a bright, challenging look at everyone, and was met with nods and grins, some more confident than others. "Excellent! Very well then. Places!" He shuffled offstage into the house, and everyone took their posts for the opening.

The very air seemed to crackle with excitement and focus as everyone put forth their best efforts in this first dress rehearsal. The rhythm that the cast had developed over the previous months in practices continued, humming along as they added this newest bit to their tasks. There were a few stutters and slips, but by the time they all reached the end of the first Act, the euphoria of relief was palpable. Dumbledore, determined that they all get even better, urgently waved for them to all take their opening places again, as they were about to repeat the Act in its entirety.

"Come now, I know you can all make it through without stopping! Places!" Dumbledore bellowed over the buzz of conversations that had begun when the Act had come to an end, making students blink in surprise and then scramble to their spots.

Snape felt so pleased with the success of the dress rehearsal, and with admiring Hermione in her costumes, that he momentarily forgot the apprehension niggling in his mind over Dumbledore's request for a meeting after rehearsal. But, when the second time through came to a rather triumphant end, Snape came crashing back to reality and the sense of worry. Dumbledore announced that the following Friday they'd be dress rehearsing Act Two, and the cast dispersed, faces alight with accomplishment, leaving Snape behind with Dumbledore in the Hall that the older man was making ready to transform back to normal.

Snape watched the rest of the cast leaving, wishing he could go with them so he could watch Hermione for as long as she was visible on her trek upstairs, and wishing he hadn't been detained for a meeting with the headmaster, as he had far too many secrets to keep for such summons to not be nerve-racking.

Dumbledore restored the Hall to its usual state, then airily drew a couple of comfortable chairs from thin air, gesturing for Snape to take one while he sank into the other. Snape sat warily, both feeling cornered by the dread that he had been found out and fighting that feeling with the logic that Dumbledore hadn't intimated that anything was amiss, so worrying so much was futile.

With a flick of his wand, Dumbledore firmly shut the doors to the Hall, and Snape swallowed, his eyes darting between the main escape route and the headmaster.

"I appreciate you remaining behind, Severus."

Snape inclined his head and murmured, "Certainly, Headmaster."

Dumbledore leant back in his seat and steepled his fingers, elbows propped on the arms of the chair. For a long moment...that seemed to scream with tension to Snape...he surveyed his Potions Master over his spectacles. Snape felt a prickle of cold sweat when he noticed that the twinkle had receded from the old man's eyes, leaving them serious and intense.

"I must confess that I am disappointed..."

Snape struggled to breathe normally, straining with all his might to not react to that statement. With supreme effort, he blinked as if in perplexity and said, "About what, sir?"

Dumbledore shook his head minutely, dropping his hands to rest on his lap as he exhaled heavily. His voice was low and cool as he said, "Imagine how I felt upon discovering that you were intent on betraying me." Snape froze, staring impassively at him. Dumbledore's eyes narrowed and he made a moue of distaste. "Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, Severus." Snape merely arched his eyebrows in blank inquiry. At that, Dumbledore leant forward and pinned Snape with a reproaching gaze. "After nearly two decades of friendship and help and service, building a mutually beneficial relationship, you seek to just toss it all away?"

Snape really was frozen in blank perplexity. Once again, he had thought the headmaster had discovered his relationship with Hermione, and once again, he was a-sea with confusion that he had been mistaken. Still, if Dumbledore hadn't caught on to them, what was he referring to?

His voice hard, Dumbledore threw his statement like a grenade. "Slug and Jiggers owed me to inquire about your *employability*."

Like a bucket of water, the cold shock washed over Snape. Struggling to assimilate the true reason why Dumbledore had summoned him, Snape sucked in a breath.

"Albus, the war is over..."

Dumbledore cut him off. "Exactly! And after all that I did for you to help you survive, you would so easily cast me aside? You owe me, Severus. If it weren't for me, you would likely have been dead ages ago."

Snape reared back, as Dumbledore's blunt words hit him like a slap in the face. Flabbergasted, he breathed, "I owe you?"

Dumbledore arched one eyebrow and looked down his nose at Snape. "Don't you?"

Snape's eyes widened in incredulity. "You've had my gratitude and my skills at your disposal for half my life! Isn't it about time that I move on to something other than this?"

Still eyeing him stonily, Dumbledore said, "You were going to keep it from me, weren't you? You would take all that I have cultivated in you for years and just leave? Give yourself to someone else? That is the most ungrateful thing I have ever heard."

Snape stared, unable to respond.

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed and his voice lowered. His words stung Snape like a thousand tiny needles. "I won't allow it. You're mine, Severus. You know I view you like a son; and like any father might say, *I made you*. I want what's best for you, and that is to stay here where I can make sure you aren't making poor choices again or squandering what I've spent so long creating in you."

It was as if Dumbledore had hit Snape with a Full Body-Bind. He sat there, rigid, staring at the older man in disbelief.

"I daresay Slug and Jiggers have contacted you. It seems they weren't hiring anyway, but there certainly wouldn't be any need for another worker if they were to lose all the business from an establishment the size of, say, Hogwarts, now would there?"

Dumbledore cut a searing glance at Snape, his voice betraying his self-satisfaction at such an idea.

Snape couldn't breathe. His chest hurt so much that he felt like it was going to implode. A totally new and completely unexpected kind of heartbreak overwhelmed him...one that he was so blindsided by that he thought he was as close to losing his grip on sanity as he had ever been before.

Dumbledore stared at Snape for a long moment while the younger man reeled under the impact of Dumbledore's revelation. Then, he sat back in his chair, sniffing faintly. "No, my boy, you're better off here. I'm surprised you got such a foolish notion in your head to begin with."

The frigid shards of Snape's shattered heart lacerated his lungs as he tried to breathe again. Almost numb from the intensity of such a bewildering agony, he dazedly tried to get to his feet. Dumbledore watched him, his gaze shuttered. Snape stood, swaying a little on his feet, then silently turned and began walking toward the main doors to the Hall.

He had to get away, but he didn't trust himself to Apparate in his current state. When he was halfway across the Hall, Dumbledore called, "You'll thank me later, Severus, mark my words. You haven't the background to hare off on your own. You need someone to temper and guide you. It's better that you stay here and continue as you are. Trust me."

Snape made it to the doors, then paused and looked back over his shoulder, eyes bright with hurt and grief. Aware that he would never be able to look at his mentor and friend the same way again, he bowed his head in mourning for the loss of what had been the only relationship that had sustained him over the long, difficult years. Without a word, he left.

Hermione had spent some time just chatting with her friends in the common room after they had all returned from rehearsal, but she excused herself as the sight of couples snuggling made her think of Snape and her plans to surprise him. The now-familiar throb in her knickers suggested that she retire and enjoy her own private "practice" some more.

After having locked and warded her door, she took a hot bath, relaxing her body of all but the sexual tension that kept her limbs humming with pent-up energy. Wrapped in a towel, she cast an Imperturbable Charm on her door and snagged an erotic magazine from the stack by her bed, slipping her hand beneath her pillow to retrieve her candle-toy. Any reticence she may have had before had drained away with each successive climb to completion, and the sense that her plan was slowly working to stretch her physical virginity just as she had hoped.

Crawling nude into bed, she settled comfortably against her pillows, absently fondling the candle that she had reshaped with a curve at the tip, as was illustrated in the books for G-spot stimulation. After judicious reading, she had decided that *that* must have been what Snape had touched within her to such explosive effect. Not wanting to worry about multiple spells interacting on the candle, she had simply used warming spells to heat the wax enough to actually mould it with her fingers to a new curve. That way, the Engorgement Charm would still work without interference.

Dimming her room except for the light she needed to see the provocative photos in the magazine, she began her recent nightly ritual before going to sleep.

Snape made it to his quarters by sheer muscle memory, for his mind was so submerged in shock and pain that he was blind to everything he passed as his feet took him unerringly to his own door. Once inside, he found himself unable to sit still, and he roamed aimlessly through his rooms...from his quarters through his lab and to his office and back again...restless energy driving him to keep moving, for every time he tried to rest, the agony welled up in his chest and he had to move again, trying desperately to outpace the anguish of Dumbledore's self-serving, manipulative words.

As his numbed mind eventually started to thaw, he determined that it would have been easier to take if Dumbledore ~~had~~ discovered his relationship with Hermione, instead of being bludgeoned with the revelation of just how low the old man was willing to go in his machinations. The searing pain slowly gave way to rage...the cold, calculating sort that would simmer for ages.

Pacing in his quarters like the caged animal he truly was, he realized that he needed a vent for his anger and betrayal. Over the decades, whenever he needed a place to go, a person to turn to, he had had Albus Dumbledore. Now, that refuge was destroyed, fuelling his rage with resentment. Distractedly, he strode over to his sideboard,

mechanically reaching for the bottle of Firewhisky. A liberal drink should dampen the burn of his agony.

He had poured the drink and had lifted it to his lips when the smell of it roused a startling memory. Sucking in a breath and slamming the glass back down, Snape recoiled from the alcohol as his mind echoed with *Hermione!*

Images of her confession about how she felt about alcohol swarmed his mind, and with them came exquisite relief. *Hermione! How could I have forgotten her like this? She's the only one left I can turn to. I need her, not damned Firewhisky!* He hastily disposed of the drink, shutting the bottle away again. Seized by the intense yearning for Hermione, he spun to look at the time. *Is it really that late already? Surely she's gone to bed by now. I must see her!*

He hastened into his bathroom, lurching toward the mirror and gripping the sink basin as he stared into his own haggard, wild-eyed face.

She's all you have left. Go to her!

But I'm not supposed to do that! She'll be angry!

This is different! You're not going just to tempt her. You need her! She'll realize the difference when you tell her what's happened.

The last thing I need right now is to alienate her, too...

For gods' sakes, she's worried about falling prey to your damned "slippery slope." This isn't about sex!

He screwed his eyes shut, head hanging as he writhed inwardly in indecision. Jerking his head back up, his eyes snapping open, he shot a fiercely determined yet desperate look at his own reflection before nodding sharply and running his hands through his hair, ripping the elastic from it, and exhaling slowly.

The thought sounded like a prayer in his head: *She'll forgive me. She'll understand...*

And with that playing like a mantra in his overtaxed mind, he Disappeared.

58- So Far, and yet, So Close: Part One

Chapter 61 of 84

Snape, in a desperate search for solace after Dumbledore's betrayal, Apparates to Hermione's room, only to find a betrayal of a different sort. How far will Hermione go to save him--and their relationship--and how close can they get in process? ***Please note: this is Part One of Two***

Standard Disclaimer goes here. Don't Sue. It's not nice.

Author's Note: Profound gratitude to my fantastic beta, Ladyofthemasque (whose published works are for sale at your local Barnes and Noble and online!), and to Horserider, Bewarethesmirk, and SnivellusSnape for prereading and feedback. Even more profound gratitude to you loyal readers who kept checking on me, wanting to know that I hadn't abandoned this behemoth. LOL Never! Real Life was just holding my head underwater and laughing. Sounds rather like a Dudley-ish thing to do, don't you think? As always, feel free to check on what's up with me at my Livejournal: <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/> My most humble apologies for the unconscionable delay, and I do hope that the fact that this chapter (in two parts due to its length of over 15000 words) makes up for it. Enjoy!

Chapter 58- So Far, and yet, So Close: Part One of Two

Appearing in Hermione's room, Snape was assailed by an overload of sensory information.

It was dark, save for a faint glow from her nightstand, which was partially blocked by a hovering magazine; even though it was dark, there was a noticeable humid warmth in the room; his ears were filled with the sounds of uneven breathing, punctuated by minute coos and grunts; and his nostrils flared at the thick, musky scent of sweat and sex.

It was enough to send his mind reeling and rivet him to the spot as he blinked furiously, trying to make sense of the overwhelming input.

When his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he stared incredulously at what he could now discern to be Hermione lying atop her rumpled sheet, her covers kicked down into a tangled heap at her feet, legs spread to allow her hands access. Snape's lungs seemed to stall, and he couldn't breathe as he realized what her hands were doing: one was clamped tightly around the end of a milky white object that she was pumping into her, and the other was intently rubbing between her glistening pussy lips. Her breasts were bouncing slightly with each thrust and trembling with every gasping sigh. Her face was hidden behind the floating magazine, which threw a shadow over her raised knees, but the edge of that shadow migrated with each undulation of her hips as she rocked and ground down onto the toy.

What felt like an eternity was in reality barely a couple of seconds, and Snape finally regained control of his faculties, only to freeze in indecision instead of shock.

However, the rasping sound of him desperately sucking in oxygen startled the writhing witch, who also gasped. She batted the magazine away, wrenching the toy from within her body and slamming her knees together as she scrambled to reach the covers to conceal her nudity. The stunned confusion and embarrassment on her face transformed into fear at the sight of Snape staring at her in silence, looking as if he were going through some terrible ordeal. Yanking the covers to her throat, she squirmed back toward her headboard, terrified of what was bound to come from his discovery. They locked eyes across the room.

The constriction in his chest was almost unbearable. The burning agony of Dumbledore's actions returned, this time abetted by the shock and pain of Hermione's wanton secret. Unable to come up with the energy to fight against circumstance again, Snape gave in to the crushing despair that had always threatened to drown him, but which he had fended off through sheer tenacity for so long.

Hermione watched in rising horror as the excruciating tension in Snape's body drained away. Every muscle went slack, and the ensuing blankness of expression, the dearth of any evidence of his personality as he dropped heavily to his knees, listing to one side, sent an icy stab of dread through Hermione's heart.

It was like watching a marionette fall when the puppeteer released the strings. But more frightening than the physical collapse was that the light had extinguished in his eyes. Though there was little illumination in her room to begin with, his eyes no longer reflected it with their usual snapping vigour. Now, they were flat and dull, seeming to suck the very light and warmth from the room, raising goose flesh along her skin.

He was sagging bonelessly against the side of her armchair, head lolling. Muffling a shriek behind a hastily raised hand, Hermione launched herself from the bed, dropping to her knees in front of him and cupping his face, instantly forgetful of her nudity. Tears welled up at the utter blankness she found in his face.

In a choked voice, she said, "Severus? Oh gods, Severus, what's wrong?"

A frisson of hope sang through her at his fleeting frown. It was better than the blankness. Peering into his eyes, she shuddered at the shadows there. Frantic to dispel the darkness, she glanced around for her wand. It was too far to reach without leaving him, so she began rooting through his robes to use his.

Her heart thudded again in relief that he roused enough to try to knock her fingers away. At least that much self-preservation still survived. Determined, she followed his hand to where it clutched his wand protectively in a pocket. Claspng her hand around his, she whispered a spell to light the rest of the candles in her room.

Squinting at the brightness, Snape scowled, and Hermione once again cupped his face, gazing intently into his eyes. The satisfaction she felt when he finally focused on her, instead of glaring unseeingly past her, ebbed at the ineffable sadness that had quenched his vibrant personality.

Snape dully looked at Hermione, noting the tears streaking over her cheeks from eyes that brimmed with worry and love. His abused heart thumped weakly, trying to perk up at the love he saw, but the tidal wave of despair that had only gained in strength since Dumbledore's earth-shaking revelation submerged that spark of hope.

Urgently smoothing his hair back, Hermione searched his face for some clue to what had happened. Lips trembling, she said, "Severus, please, talk to me. I need to know what's wrong, love."

His jaw twitched against her palm and his brow creased at her endearment. Gazing at her with what she could only interpret as reproach, he croaked, "Et tu, Brute?"

Hermione blinked, puzzled by his cryptic rejoinder. Agile mind rapidly extrapolating what he could mean, she tilted her head in inquiry and coaxed, "What do you mean? Severus, who are you talking about? Surely you can't mean /betrayed you!" His eyes slowly closed, and she continued, "Severus! Please! I love you. I didn't do anything, I swear!"

The stubborn part of him that struggled to persevere in the face of adversity strove to escape from the mire of despair, catching her declaration like a lifeline. That faint glimmer of fight forced him to wrest his wand from his pocket, pointing it toward her bed and snarling, "Accio!" The wax toy sailed toward them, dropping harmlessly to the floor at his side.

Hermione cringed in embarrassment and guilt, aware of how much of a shock it must have been for him to witness what had transpired. But a faint, indignant voice piped up in her head, demanding to know why he had shown up at all, especially in light of their purported strictures. Pushing the vague irritation away in favour of more pressing issues, she swallowed hard and forced herself to meet his eye again.

"I can explain everything, honestly. Severus, please listen to me! You're scaring me." Her breath caught on a suppressed sob, and she sniffed, blinking away the tears that clouded her vision.

Snape merely stared at her, withdrawn enough that he didn't even issue a challenging glare. Such apathy chilled her even more, and she shivered. Ducking her head, she spun quickly to reach for her blanket, yanking it from the foot of her bed and wrapping it around herself. At least she felt a little less vulnerable. But, when she looked back at Snape and saw no reaction to the fact that she had been kneeling naked in front of him, she knew things were grave, indeed.

She glanced down at the reconfigured candle, trying to figure out where to begin and what to say. The awkward silence stretched on, making her even more nervous. Finally, she blurted it out as simply as she could.

"I wanted to be able to enjoy the first time we made love, so I decided to... rid myself of my... maidenhead." Her cheeks flushed hotly, and she vainly tried not to falter under his gaze.

Her words seemed to reach Snape from far away, echoing in his skull. His numb mind thawed a trifle, processing her admission. His eyes refocused and his eyebrows twitched, which spurred Hermione to continue.

"I want so much to *be* with you, and we both know I'm a virgin... I read about how a woman's first time can be painful and traumatic, and I didn't want to have to worry about that when we finally got a chance to be together. I know you'd worry, and I'd worry, and it'd be a mess! So, I figured I could... practice."

At that, she cringed in mortification again. Closing her eyes, her voice dropped to a whisper as she said, "I kept reading and imagining, and remembering everything we've shared already, and I couldn't help but get aroused..." She flicked a glance at the magazine where it lay sprawled on the floor by her bed, pages twisted even as the photos performed their erotic acts. Then, her inner Gryffindor reared its head and she turned a sheepishly defiant look on Snape, her cheeks flaming.

"I can't help it! I can't stop thinking about you all the time and I get so turned on that I just *have* to sate the urge! And there's *no* reason for you to be upset about it!"

Snape stared at her, silent. The part of his soul that needed Hermione resurfaced, gasping for air. It was like the first time they had come to an understanding, that day by the notice board, and he had realized she cared for him. Desperate, he did the same thing he had done then.

Hermione gasped when Snape's hands snapped up to frame her face, cradling her head in a fierce grip. His eyes blazed to life with a sudden piercing quality as he breathed, "*Legilimens*."

The breeze in her mind that bespoke his presence buffeted her, surprising her with its unusual roughness. Any finesse he may have possessed for the act had disappeared under the strain of his turmoil. Struggling to relax and open herself to his probing, she felt him rifling through her memories of every evening since she had first decided to implement her plan. The barrage of heated moments ignited her body again, making her blood thrum in her veins with thwarted desire.

Snape's battered heart began a painful recuperation, and the ambitious Slytherin within him roared its defiance of fate's attempts to destroy him, making for the beckoning shore of Hermione's love and desire for him.

Hermione's hands covered Snape's on her face, and her eyes rolled back in reaction as he abruptly pulled out of her mind. Dazed, she blinked rapidly, trying to regain her sense of self. Thus, she was taken aback by his savage kiss, allowing it to utterly possess her.

It took only a fraction of a second for her to respond, then she threw her arms around him, squirming toward him and straddling his legs. Snape's hands slid down over her shoulders and pulled her closer, pressing her half-bared breasts to his chest.

Their kisses were nearly manic at first, hands groping and clawing, as if they were trying to become one. Snape's lips trailed over her jaw and down her throat as she tilted her head back, groaning in relief. He clung to her, burying his face into the curve of her neck as she murmured, "Oh, thank the gods, Severus, you're back. You've come back to me..."

He heaved a great shuddering breath, pressing his stinging eyes against her shoulder. Hermione felt his body trembling beneath her hands, and she caressed his back, crooning comforting nonsense, soothing him.

The ferocity of his grip eventually eased, and she peppered his hair with kisses, stroking his head and back. Sensing that his desolation had lifted, she dared to whisper, "Love, what happened? Surely my ridiculous plan wasn't enough to hurt you this much, was it? I promise I was not betraying you, dearest. I would never do that."

She felt the movement of his head turning from side to side, and his voice was a choked rasp as he said, "Not just you..."

She pulled back, lifting his chin gently and smoothing his hair back from his face. Brow furrowed in concern, she searched his eyes, noting that they were no longer flat and dull, but they were still shadowed with sorrow. "Severus, please talk to me. I can't help you until I know what happened."

Snape gazed at her, marvelling at how truly lucky he was to have found her. The searing pain he had felt at the thought of having lost her as well had dissipated under her tender ministrations, and he realized that he had made the right choice to come to her in his hour of need.

Closing his eyes and frowning, he swallowed hard, saying, "Albus."

Hermione's eyes flew wide in anxiety. "Has he found out about us?"

Snape shook his head. Hermione sighed in relief, then frowned in perplexity. "What did he do?"

Snape pinned her with a glare that simmered with rage and she blanched. "He said I betrayed him, but he's the one who betrayed me and sabotaged my future."

One hand flew to cover her mouth as she gasped. Eyes wide, she whispered, "I don't understand..."

She flailed for balance as he abruptly thrust her from him. He shot awkwardly to his feet, leaving Hermione huddled on the floor gazing up at him in surprise. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, and his scowl deepened as he breathed heavily, containing his wrath. The air around him crackled with energy and he quivered with pent-up emotion before shooting across the room to her window and gripping the frame as he glared balefully into the night.

Hermione, shaken by his reaction, struggled to her feet, adjusting the blanket around her before snagging her nightgown, slipping into it instead. Tentatively crossing to him and laying a hand on his rigid shoulder, she ventured, "Take your time, love. We've got all night. I'm not going anywhere... and neither are you until I know what's wrong."

Snape's head dropped, his hair cloaking his face. After a long silence, during which Hermione gently smoothed her hand over his tense back, he exhaled harshly and murmured, "I want so much to make a place for us, and *he* ruined my chances."

Hermione's breath caught at his confession. A surge of love brought new tears to her eyes. She wanted to speak, but she bit her lip to keep quiet, aware that he wasn't finished.

"I can't stay here, Hermione. You know that..."

She stepped closer and pressed her cheek to his back, murmuring, "I know, dear heart. I know."

Snape took a steadying breath and continued. "I may as well tell you..." He trailed off, and Hermione waited expectantly. "I realized that we needed to have a place to go when school finished, since I fully expect our relationship to cause a scandal. We haven't talked about it, but... I want you to know that I'll do everything in my power to take care of you, of *us*; so if you want to be with me come summer, I'll have a place ready for you."

Hermione pressed a kiss to his back, squeezing him gently. Snape spun, leaning against the sill and gazing down into her upturned face. His expression was earnest and solemn when he said, "I've reclaimed Spinner's End, my... home." He faltered over the word, doubly so since the thought of "home" usually conjured up thoughts of Hogwarts, and in light of the current situation, he felt like his sense of home had been ripped from his grasp.

Hermione could well imagine what it had cost him to be willing to go back to his childhood home, and she clasped his hands firmly, conveying her admiration and gratitude through her touch. Snape's lips trembled and twisted as he forced himself to go on.

"I know I'll need to find a new job, and I owed Slug and Jiggers, hoping they would be willing to hire me on in their Apothecary." His eyes narrowed, white-hot rage boiling up within him, and his nostrils flared as he breathed heavily through his nose, his jaw clenched shut and teeth grinding. Hermione blinked at the daunting transformation.

Each word was practically spit from his lips as he said, "They apparently owed Albus to inquire about my employability, and ~~the~~..." his teeth bared in a fierce snarl "...he *threatened* them to keep them from hiring me!" Hermione's eyes widened in disbelief. "They replied, saying glowing things about my reputation in potions, and yet they turned me down...because that manipulative old man said he'd pull all of Hogwarts' business from them if they took me on!"

Hermione's chin dropped in astonishment. It was so difficult to believe, but it had to be true, or Snape wouldn't be so upset. Righteous indignation welled up, and she hissed, "That selfish, horrible, Machiavellian..." she trailed off, at a loss for words, until she burst out with, "...bearded *bastard*!"

There was a flicker of appreciation in Snape's eyes before they widened in apprehension and he gripped her arms, whispering, "Shhh! Not so loud!"

Hermione shook her head vehemently and hastily reassured him. "I've already cast an Imperturbable Charm. We're safe!"

He frowned, confused. "Why would you have already cast an Imperturbable?"

Hermione blinked, feeling her cheeks flush. Swallowing, she flicked her glance sheepishly at the magazine lying askew on the floor. Snape followed her look and cottoned on, releasing her arms, his brows shooting to his hairline and a startled, "Oh!" breaking the uncomfortable silence.

They stared at each other, the air heavy with awkwardness, until Hermione's face fell, her gaze sliding over to the magazine again as she crossed her arms defensively. Snape watched the flush creeping up her neck and face, and was abruptly overwhelmed with a surge of love at her endearing combination of innocence and maturity. Deeply grateful to her for rescuing him from his collapse and reminding him he had much to live for, he gently prised her hands from beneath her arms, gripping them firmly and lifting them to his lips.

At the feather-light kiss on her knuckles, Hermione lifted her eyes to Snape's, her heart fluttering with joy at the tenderness in his gaze. Snape's eyes closed briefly, and he barely intoned, "Thank you."

Her lips trembled in a smile as she murmured, "Anything for you, love. Always."

In the quiet moment of descending peace after so much upheaval and turmoil, Snape felt his body going weak, and he swallowed, saying, "Let's sit, shall we?"

Hermione nodded and Snape sank onto her bed, twisting to draw his legs up and leaning against the headboard. His head lolled back and his eyes closed, almost weary with emotional strain. Hermione, instead of crawling between his stretched-out legs and curling up with him, climbed further down the bed and settled herself between his feet, sitting cross-legged and tucking her fists within the curve of her legs. She gazed at him solemnly, trying to assess his mental state.

There was a long silence...so long that Hermione began to wonder if Snape had fallen asleep...that was only broken when Snape finally heaved a deep sigh and opened his eyes to find Hermione staring at him.

He gazed at her thoughtfully, then murmured, "I know I shouldn't have come here..."

Hermione interrupted him, saying, "No! It's all right. I'm glad you did." She clasped his calves, thumbs rubbing circles on his trousers.

Snape inclined his head in gratitude and exhaled on a long note. "You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that."

Hermione flashed him a warm smile, squeezing his legs. Snape cast a tilted look at her through his lashes, his lips twitching in response. In an attempt to lead him on to more positive thoughts, Hermione said, "So... now will you tell me your plans?" Her eyes lit up with the eager interest she couldn't hide if she tried.

Snape saw the avid sparkle in her eyes and was ambushed by a rush of delighted affection. His mouth twisted into an amused half-smile and he struggled to contain the bark of surprised laughter that bubbled up. Rolling his eyes and affecting exasperation, he grumbled, "Are you still on about that?"

Hermione bit her lip and shrugged ingenuously, throwing him a coy glance. Her voice was low as she retorted, "I just think it's a splendid idea."

Basking in her warmth, Snape welcomed her evident pleasure at his plan as a balm to his soul. Enjoying her reactions, he fed her bits of information about his designs, finding himself going into greater detail in response to her fascinated queries. Somewhere along the way, he realized that he no longer felt distressed, and he marvelled anew at how comfortable he was with her, and how well she could bring him out of the depths of despair.

While discussing the details of his plans for Spinner's End and his options for when the school year was over, he was suddenly struck with the realization that they were planning the future...*their* future, *together*. The sense of peace and contentment that blanketed him reminded him of how right it had felt when they had shared such simple domesticity as brewing tea. Once again, a fierce joy swelled his heart, and he found himself gazing at Hermione as if she were the utter opposite of a Dementor, pouring happiness into his soul until he felt fit to burst.

A silence fell between them, and Hermione sensed the change in the way Snape was looking at her. The intensity of emotion blazed in his black eyes, causing a rush of heat to wash over her. Like a magnet, her gaze was locked onto his. In the quiet, she could hear their breathing quicken.

Snape watched Hermione's pupils dilate, and a coil of molten desire settled low in his belly. At the sight of the flush slowly creeping up her throat, his mouth went dry, and he swallowed thickly, sucking in a ragged breath through his nose. Finally, he managed to speak. In what could only be described as a purr, he said, "Well, you've learnt of my 'secret project.' I daresay it's only fair for you to tell me of yours."

Hermione's eyelids fluttered as she gasped, letting out a shuddering breath at the jolt his voice sent through her core. She saw his jaw throb as he clenched his teeth in response to her spastic grip on his legs. Her pulse racing, she tore her gaze from his and looked down at the sprawled magazine on the floor. Flicking a glance back at him, she squirmed toward the edge of the bed and leant down, gingerly picking it up and shaking the pages back into place.

Deliberately laying the closed magazine in front of him, between Snape's knees, she once again cast a swift glance at the man who was watching her with a consuming expression. Swallowing hard, she stretched her hand out, inclining her head pointedly at her wand on the nightstand, indicating that Snape should give it to her. He quickly snatched it and handed it over. Attempting indifference, though she could feel her cheeks warming even more, she averted her eyes from his and twisted slightly, pointing her wand at the makeshift toy that still lay by the armchair where it had fallen after Snape had Summoned it.

"*Accio*." The waxy white toy sailed through the air to land in her open palm, and she heard Snape's sharp intake of breath. Still silent, she placed the toy in front of her and dragged the magazine around, flipping through the pages to the beginning of what she had been enjoying.

Her voice was low and throaty as she explained. "I think about you, and what we've done, and I get aroused. So, after relaxing with a long soak, I cast an Imperturbable on my door, get comfortable in bed, and... play."

Snape swallowed hard, holding his breath for a brief moment before exhaling through his nose as he stared at her, rapt, his trousers tightening.

Hermione, looking up at his expression, felt a tingle chase through her, and she thrilled at the raw lust gleaming in his eyes. Emboldened by his reaction, she picked up the toy, lightly dragging her fingers down its length, feeling the sticky spots from her juices still coating it. With a whisper, she pointed her wand at it and cast the reversal spell, shrinking it back down to the normal size, then quickly cast a cleaning charm.

Heat was once again pulsing in her centre, and she could feel the slippery tickle of her arousal squeezing from within her as she squirmed on the bed, keenly aware that she had no knickers on to soak up the wetness. Still focusing her attention on the toy, she continued, "I've been practicing with the Engorgement Charm to enlarge it each time I play, so I don't hurt myself, but still manage to get rid of the impediment of my hymen."

She flicked a glance at him again before dragging her fingertips over the end where she had moulded it into the curved tip. Tilting her head at the stack of other books and magazines, she said, "I saw this shape and thought it was interesting, so I tried it." Her eyes closed briefly at the memory. "I think I figured out what it was that *you* had... touched... that felt so incredible."

She licked her lips in the pause that followed her admission, and Snape startled both of them with the low growl that rumbled up from his chest. Hermione's eyes widened as she snapped her gaze to his, and she felt the energy radiating from his tensed body. Snape's hands were clenched into fists at his sides, crumpling the bedding within them as he fought to control his urge to ravish Hermione.

Through tight lips, Snape said, "What were you looking at?" Hermione's face fell, abashed, and Snape leant forward, his voice low and compelling. "Show me."

Licking her lips again, Hermione inhaled deeply and reached out a trembling hand to turn the magazine back to him. The photos of the wizard and witch engaged in lascivious behaviour commanded their attention.

Snape's heart was pounding, and he could feel his blood pumping through his body, seeming to end in his rapidly swelling cock. Reaching forward, he slowly turned the pages, watching the progression from snogging and groping to removing clothing and caressing nude bodies. Eventually, wet kisses were trailed down over nipples and bellies, and when the couple turned on their sides, the woman stroking the man's cock and sucking on it, and the man burying his face between the woman's splayed thighs, Snape paused, his brain fogging with desire.

Hermione watched his eyes travel from picture to picture as he turned the pages. When he stopped, and his gaze stayed riveted on one photo, she looked down to see what had stalled his progress. The image of the pair in the sixty-nine position sent a flash of goose flesh over her. Sucking her lower lip between her teeth, she waited for Snape's attention, unknowingly caressing the toy in her hands.

Eventually, Snape wrenched his eyes from the magazine and pinned Hermione with a fiery gaze. Raking her with a scorching look, he saw her nipples peaked under the fabric of her nightgown, and her fingers stroking the length of the toy and circling the tip. It was too much to bear; he pushed forward, bending his legs to bracket her, clutching the magazine between them. Hermione gasped, and her lower lip glistened wetly at him, bearing teeth marks. One hand reaching up to tangle in her hair at the base of her skull, he pulled her toward him as he leant forward, drawing her into a passionate kiss.

After barely a few seconds, Hermione whimpered, her hands scrabbling to grip his shoulders as she struggled to rise onto her knees. Snape thrust the magazine to one side and cradled her head in both hands as she moved, determined not to break their connection. Hermione managed to pull her nightgown from under her legs and hike it up as she crept closer, one hand holding the hem and the toy while the other firmly pressed his knee down. He cottoned on and lowered his knees, and Hermione impatiently straddled his legs, nearly bowling him over.

Snape wrapped his arms around her, feeling her settle against his pelvis, her mound grinding down on his erection and enveloping him in damp heat. His groan was muffled by their kiss. Breaking away, panting for control, he ground out, "Hermione, if you want me to leave, tell me now; I'm perilously close to the edge of that slippery slope."

The vehement denial that surged through her at his words made her decision for her. Before hearing why he had done so, she would have been upset that he had violated their rules and come to see her unannounced. But in the wake of all that they had gone through, she didn't want to be alone, and more importantly, didn't want *him* to be alone. Her breath was hot against his ear as she whispered, "Stay. I need you."

The part of him struggling to maintain his self-denial collapsed under the weight of her words. Flashes of all that he had suffered to keep them in check, mixed with his dogged insistence of duty, swirled in his mind. At the thought of his previous resolution to not betray Dumbledore's trust in him, a white-hot blast of fury rose within his chest, choking him, and he ruthlessly flung the promise away. A reckless exhilaration welled up, and he pounced on her with another demanding kiss.

His hands slid down her body, caressing her legs on either side of his hips and sneaking under the bunched hem of her nightgown and up her thighs, curving around her bare hips to cup her arse. She rocked against him, moaning into his mouth. His breathing ragged, he broke the kiss and pressed his forehead against hers, grabbing the magazine where it still lay opened to the page that had arrested his attention. Lifting it to eye level, he pressed against her cheek, turning their faces toward it, and murmured, "Does that interest you?"

The quavering whimper that met his ears gave him her answer. His lips stretched into a predatory grin as he dropped the magazine again, returning his hands to gripping her arse. He delighted in the little mewling cries issuing from her throat as he trailed nibbles over her jaw and ear, suckling on her earlobe as his hands stealthily lifted her nightgown higher.

Hermione felt the cool air against her skin and made an approving noise, wriggling to allow Snape to pull the garment over her head and toss it away. Her hair tumbled into her face, but she didn't care, as Snape had already lowered his lips to her breasts, cupping them as he laved her nipples. Her head rocked back, and her tangled hair fell away from her face, a few strands still sticking to her damp lips. Her hands cupped his head, guiding him, until they slid down his neck and over his shoulders, muzzily realizing that even though she was naked once again, he was still fully clothed...a situation she was determined to rectify.

Snape grinned against her skin as he kissed and licked, feeling her fingers pulling at his clothes. When he didn't stop his ministrations and give Hermione better access to disrobe him, she voiced an inarticulate noise of impatience and pushed him backwards. Using the weight of her body to overbalance him and push him flat on his back, she straddled him. His eyebrows shot up at her aggressive move, and he blinked up at her.

She peered down at him imperiously, lips pursed and one eyebrow arched, resolutely pulling at his clothes. "We've gone over this before: now, let's be fair."

A thrill of delight raced over him, ending in a throb of his cock, and he smirked at her as she went to work stripping him. Teasing her, he made no attempts to assist her, and she scowled at him, huffing. At the wicked sparkle in his eyes, she knew he was being deliberately unhelpful, so she decided to take a different tack.

Bending low so her breasts brushed his chest, she flipped her hair to one side and breathed against his ear, murmuring, "You do realize that the sooner we get your clothes off, the sooner I can taste you..."

Her surprised squeak echoed in the room as he responded in a flash of movement, legs bending and thrusting her further up his body even as his arms wrapped around her and pulled her tight against him. Unbalanced, Hermione couldn't even react before he had rolled them over, pinning her to the bed with his heavier frame.

Her eyes flew open wide, meeting his heated gaze as he pulled up and peered at her between the curtains of his hair. Suddenly, he sat back, her legs still curled around his pelvis, supported by his bent legs as he sank back on his heels. Shaking his hair out of his eyes, he watched her silently, quickly discarding his robes and shirt, leaving him clad only from the waist down. The repeated hitching of her breath as she raptly stared at every bit of revealed skin fired his ardour, and he wasted no time in lifting her legs from around him and squirming back off the end of the bed.

Hermione struggled onto her elbows, watching him as he got to his feet. He toed off his boots and socks, kicking them away impatiently, undoing his trousers at the same time. Her head was swimming, and her breasts were jiggling with the rapid rise and fall of her heaving chest. As he stepped out of the trousers pooled at his feet, he paused, his boxers tented with a moist stain at the tip of his cock.

Taken aback by his sudden stillness, Hermione blinked, wrenching her gaze from his erection to his face. His expression was inscrutable, and she frowned in perplexity. "Go on."

Snape's lips twitched with a ghost of a smirk, and Hermione wondered how his eyes had managed to turn even blacker. His purr of, "Not yet," made Hermione shiver, her eyes closing briefly. A feral grin spread his lips as he bent forward, climbing back onto the bed. A delicious tingle pulsed in her centre at the possessive and predatory look on his face.

Her voice was faint as she managed to say, "Why?"

Snape had crawled over her, and Hermione dropped to her back again, off her elbows. He hovered there, watching her, and she felt the tickle of the sparse hair on his thighs against the backs of hers. His cloth-covered cock was mere millimetres from her pussy, and she could feel the heat radiating from him. He dipped down to nuzzle her ear, suckling her earlobe.

Determined to not let him distract her, she swallowed back her moan and said, "If you don't take them off, how can we... emulate that photo?"

A wicked chuckle rumbled at her throat, where Snape was nibbling. "Not. Yet."

Brow furrowing, Hermione drew breath to argue her point, but it all burst from her in a whoosh as Snape swiftly slid further down her body, caressing one breast and palming the nipple as he sucked the other one into his mouth and circled it with his tongue. Arching into his touch, rational thought abandoned her, and she moaned a long quavering note of bliss.

Riding the high of his reckless exhilaration, Snape focused on one thing: Hermione. The trauma and stress were behind him now, and he had come to a decision. Before the night was through, he would do as he had wanted for several months and taste Hermione's juices from the source. When he had allowed his mind to back away from the horror and fury, his senses had returned. From the moment he had turned his attention to Hermione's wanton activity, he had noticed her scent in the air, still lingering from before his untimely interruption.

He spent several minutes lavishing Hermione's breasts with attention, revelling in the whimpers and coos bubbling from within her. Her arousal increased, and his watchful eyes noted the deepening of the flush expanding over her chest and face. Her heady aroma strengthened as well, and finally, he couldn't resist any longer.

Slithering back more, he trailed wet kisses over her trembling belly, grinning at her spasms and squeals when he tickled. His hands gently caressed her legs, stroking her hips and thighs as his lips paused to press a kiss at her navel. Her breath caught, and he took that moment to lift his eyes to her face, drinking in the sight of her, abandoned to ecstasy.

Lifting his face from her body, he kept his eyes trained on her face as he carefully dropped his cramped legs over the end of the bed, anchoring himself on the balls of his feet, braced shoulder-width on the floor. His cock was sandwiched between the bed and his belly, pulsing against him in time with his racing heartbeat.

At his shifting, Hermione opened glazed eyes and peered down at him. As her mind nervously screamed what he was about to do, she felt dizzy with endorphins, adrenaline, and anticipation. Her body tensed in anxiety; Snape, sensing her disquiet, locked solemn eyes with her and murmured, "It's all right, love. I promised I'd never hurt you."

With those tender words of comfort, Hermione's eyes closed and she let out a deep shuddering breath. Snape pressed gentle kisses to her thighs, licking and nibbling with his lips, slowly travelling closer to his destination.

Finally focusing on his prize, Snape saw her curls, darkened and coated with her juices. Excitement sent a jolt through his gut, and he had to suck in a deep breath to keep himself from diving into the glistening treasure before him. That deep breath filled his head with her musky scent, and the urge to devour her pulsed stronger. Thumbs gently rubbing the sensitive flesh at the join of her thighs to her pelvis, he flicked his eyes repeatedly between her face and her core, dipping lower and bathing her damp curls with his breath.

Hermione's eyes closed and her head canted back. Goose flesh erupted along her body and sparks flashed against her closed eyelids at the feel of Snape's fingers sliding along her cleft, exposing her. His exultant groan vibrated against her skin as his tongue drew a long, savouring swipe between her swollen lips. Her resultant gasp seemed to suck the air from the room, leaving her no choice but to let it explode from her lungs again at the second delicate slide of his tongue.

Snape was drowning. Just like he had fallen over the precipice to drown in the love swirling in her eyes the day he had confessed his own love for her, he was now submerged in the essence of Hermione, blanketing his senses. Drawing his tongue up one side and then the other, he covered each part of her heated flesh and sucked it between his lips, capturing every drop of moisture from every crevice, his expression one of complete beatitude.

Hermione's hands flew distractedly about: gripping the bedding; sailing to cover her mouth in a vain attempt to stifle her moans and gasps; reaching up to grip the headboard; tangling in her hair and pulling; sliding down her throat and over her breasts, cupping them; ghosting over the crown of Snape's head as if hesitant to disturb him...

Nose and chin coated with moisture, Snape's fingers spread her wider, revealing the throbbing centre of her delight. Dipping down, he thrust his tongue as deep into her drenched cunt as he could reach, noting that even he could tell that her hymen was no longer as much in the way as he had previously encountered. The breathless shriek that met his ears at the probing of his tongue made him clasp her thighs tighter, holding her still as he slowly dragged his tongue up to her clit, where he circled around it before covering it with his lips and gently suckling, massaging it with the tip of his tongue at the same time.

It was a good thing he had strengthened his hold, as Hermione bucked and flailed, her back arching as she keened in shocked rapture. Her hands sought out Snape's head, and she latched onto his hair with a fevered grip, keeping him from backing away. Her incoherent cries of encouragement were enough to entice him to stay without the need for physical force. Continuing his carnal assault, Snape called upon decades of self-discipline to maintain the rhythm and pressure, slowly building the force of her eventual reaction.

After the initial sizzling shock of delight, Hermione's body accepted the pleasurable sensations as a new and exciting addition to her growing wealth of experience, and she relaxed into it, enjoying the transport into euphoria. The steady rhythm lulled her into a languorous daze, and she revelled in the continual climb toward the pinnacle of ecstasy.

As the minutes stretched on, Snape's zealous application to his task began to wear on him, unused *this* use of his tongue as he was. The overwhelming fog of lust dissipated enough for him to recognize the fatigue that was creeping up on him... more specifically, in his jaw. Doggedly focusing on his goal, he peered up at Hermione's undulating body and flushed face, listening to her luxurious moans and coos. Willing them to sustain him, he resolutely kept up the pace.

Hermione had come to a plateau of pleasure. Feeling as if she were hovering at the edge of a spectacular plunge into delight, she vaguely sensed that she needed more. Her hands loosened their grip in Snape's hair and began stroking, her nails lightly grazing along his scalp even as she rocked her hips into his mouth. Snape took that as a signal and increased the intensity of his ministrations, earning him a squeal and hum of approval, coupled with a convulsive tug of his hair.

Even with the increased stimulation, it seemed as if Hermione would not crest the plateau. The heated focus of Snape's mind splintered more and more as he became aware of the ache in his jaw, the cramp in his legs and lower back, keeping him balanced over the edge of the bed, and the awkward pinching of his painfully-hard erection between himself and the mattress. Frustration crept up on him, followed by the disappointing thought that he would fail at his attempt to bring Hermione to orgasm, no matter how hard he tried.

In a last-ditch effort, he increased the speed and force of his activity, and Hermione tensed, giving him a fleeting hope, but when she remained at that stage of tension, he mentally wailed in defeat, aware that he just couldn't continue.

His mental wail was followed by a vocal groan, and just as he was about to wrest himself from Hermione's grasp, he was taken aback by the sudden convulsive shudder that had Hermione pressing him harder to her while her legs squeezed around his ears. Her head flew back as a triumphant shriek burst forth, muffled to Snape's ears by her tightly clamped thighs.

Stunned by the sudden explosion, Snape managed to eke out a few last seconds of movement from his exhausted tongue, riding out her climax. When her legs relaxed, falling to either side as her hands slipped bonelessly from his head to flop by her limp limbs, Snape gingerly released her, inching stiffly backward, ducking his head even as he stretched his jaw.

The quiet following her scream of rapture was marred only by her ragged breathing and Snape's hisses of discomfort as he crawled off the end of the bed, carefully trying to ease the strain in his muscles. Staggering a bit, he stepped backward and dropped wearily into her armchair, looking almost as worn out as Hermione did.

Hermione lay on the bed, ears ringing, feeling like she was melting into the mattress. Desperately trying to moisten her parched mouth, she swallowed, eventually prying her eyes open and blinking dazedly. She tried to peer down past her body to see where Snape had gone, but couldn't spot him. So, gathering her strength, she lifted her head enough to notice him sitting in her armchair. Barely able to hold her head up, she gazed at him, incredulous, before croaking, "Holy... mother of... good *gods*..." With that barely coherent statement, her head dropped back to the bed and she sighed deeply again.

Snape, feeling both exhausted and uncomfortable, watched Hermione's weak attempts at movement. Still, he couldn't help but swell a tiny bit in masculine pride at her clearly positive reaction. Gingerly working his jaw, he, too, moistened his mouth and cleared his throat. His voice was low as he said, "Are you all right?"

Hermione's hands lifted above her and her fingers splayed as she uttered an emphatic, "Fucking *brilliant*!" As she finished, her arms slammed down on either side and she thrust herself up onto her elbows, focusing on his lean form. Her sweat was cooling on her body, and she was slowly returning to a normal heart rate. Flashing him a nearly-worshipful lopsided grin, she voiced a dry chuckle. "Unbelievable... How did you know just what to do...what I needed?"

Snape stared at her like a deer in headlights. Blinking, he squirmed and murmured, "What do you mean?"

Hermione hauled herself about and grabbed a pillow, curling on her side and facing Snape, the pillow under her head. Still marvelling at him, she retorted, "*Now* you *really* know the effects of your voice."

Snape's brows shot up in surprise, and a sheepish grimace washed over his face. Awkwardly averting his eyes, he attempted to look nonchalant but failed.

Hermione lay there, staring at him, taking in his dishevelled state: his hair was tangled and stuck out wildly from her pulling and twisting it; his lips were swollen and dark from his extended activity; his chin bore evidence of both her arousal and chafing from her coarse hair; and he filled her armchair with his ungainly sprawl, accentuated by the beacon of his stained, tented pants.

After a moment, it dawned on her that Snape looked decidedly uncomfortable, and her brow furrowed. "Severus... are *you* all right?"

Snape cut a glance at her and lifted one hand to his jaw, massaging the joint as he stretched and worked his jaw again. Licking his lips, he ventured, "I think so."

Hermione's eyes went wide as she understood. A flood of embarrassment sent a flush to her face. "Oh gods..."

Alerted by her tone, Snape's gaze snapped to hers. His brows rose as he realized his mistake. Hastily gathering himself and reaching toward Hermione in reassurance, he said, "Wait! That's not what I meant!"

Hermione was curling up in a foetal position, hiding her face. "I didn't mean to hurt you!"

Snape shoved forward, staggering a step before he dropped to his knees at the foot of her bed, hand outstretched to caress her comfortingly. "Love, listen, it's not like that..." Hermione peeked through the fingers covering her eyes. Snape took a steadying breath and forged on. "You didn't hurt me. *I* did. I mean... Obviously I'm not *used* to that!" He grimaced, snorting half-heartedly as Hermione came out from behind her hands, gazing at him anxiously.

Seeing his rueful half-smile, the humour of his admission struck her and she retorted, "I should think not..." Snape's lips twitched more, and Hermione frowned and said, "So, it wasn't my fault?"

Snape shook his head decidedly, his messy hair swinging against his face. "No. I daresay it's my fault for not being as good as I had hoped."

Eyes widening in indignation, Hermione sputtered, "Not good? Excuse me, but were you *here* a few minutes ago? Mercy, Severus, that was incredible!"

His face twisted until he finally burst, "That was a fluke! I was giving up, and out of nowhere... it worked!"

Squinting in confusion, Hermione voiced an inelegant, "Huh?"

Rolling his eyes and covering his face in defeat, Snape sank back onto the floor, his elbows on his now-raised knees. "I just couldn't keep it up anymore. I had hoped to be able to satisfy you, and it wasn't working! I couldn't help but groan in despair, and *that's* when... well, you know..."

Hermione stared, speechless, for a moment, before falling onto her back again in a fit of giggles. Peals of laughter echoed off the ceiling, and when she opened her eyes to peer at Snape, he was eyeing her with a scowl of wounded vanity.

His voice full of reproach, he muttered, "It's not funny."

Hermione rolled onto her elbows and knees, crawling to the end of the bed where she heaved to her feet and stood directly in front of Snape, gesturing for him to take her hands and stand. The fact that he couldn't help but notice her crotch right in front of him...his eyes kept darting between there and her face...made her smile even more.

"It's *not* funny, per se. But it's just so ridiculous that you can give me one of the best orgasms of my life and still think you're not any good. Add to that the fact that once again we've nearly broken you in our zeal, and I can't help but be amused." She continued to grin down at Snape. "Come on, I'll help you up."

Snape pinned her with an aggrieved gaze, but allowed her to grip his hands and help him rise. As he straightened, his trapped erection brushed against her mound and trailed up her belly, making them both gasp and look down.

When Hermione lifted her gaze to meet Snape's eyes, there was a heated gleam in them. Licking her lips, she murmured, "How about now?"

End Part One. Please Proceed Directly to Part Two

58- So Far, and yet, So Close: Part Two

Chapter 62 of 84

Snape, in a desperate search for solace after Dumbledore's betrayal, Apparates to Hermione's room, only to find a betrayal of a different sort. How far will Hermione go to save him--and their relationship--and how close can they get in process? ***Part Two of Two. Please see Part One first.***

Part Two of Two. Please see Part One for Disclaimer and Author's Note

Snape's breath caught at her words, knowing she was referring to his previous admonition of "not yet." Eyes closing in spite of himself, he felt his cock twitching between them, once again making its uncomfortably rigid presence known. He opened his eyes and met her hungry gaze. Opening his mouth to answer, he found he had no voice. The gleam in Hermione's eyes flickered as one corner of her mouth quirked up in a smouldering smirk.

Stretching up to him, Hermione kissed Snape, gently sliding her tongue over his lips and tasting herself on his flesh. A low moan poured out of her, her hands slipping up his arms and twining around his neck. An answering groan from Snape sent a tingle chasing through her again, reigniting her desire. After a slow, languorous kiss, she began trailing her lips down his throat and chest, caressing his ribs and lightly circling his nipples as she went.

Snape's head canted back, his eyes closing in bliss. His mind whirled with the inevitable bickering between the side of him that wanted nothing more than Hermione's lips wrapped around his erection and the other side that warned that he was breaking every rule imaginable. The flash of lingering, needle-sharp anger blasted the cautious, dutiful side into the ether, and the wave of rampant lust that swept over him had him struggling to not clap his hands on the bushy crown of Hermione's head and shove her down his body to his achingly needy cock. Fighting for control, he carefully stroked her hair, silently willing her to continue lower.

Hermione crouched, then settled on her knees, nibbling and licking along the taut planes of Snape's belly, nuzzling the dark trail of hair that disappeared beneath the distended waistband of his pants. Excitement quivered in her centre, and she backed away, staring straight at the translucent wet cloth covering the tip of his straining erection. As she gazed at it in fascination, it bounced, and she sucked in a breath, filling her head with the rich musky scent of aroused male. Flicking a wary glance up at Snape, she saw him watching her through half-closed eyes. When she reached for his waistband, he tensed, but she held his gaze resolutely as she gingerly peeled the clammy fabric away from him, guiding it down his slim hips and along his legs to pool at his feet.

Freed from its constraints, Snape's cock bobbed in front of Hermione's face, drawing her attention again. Her hands stroked back up his legs, fanning out around his groin to trace the delectable line between his lower abdomen and his hips. His breath hitched at the tickling sensation, but he remained still. He could feel her quickened breaths on his fevered skin, and his own breathing turned to shallow panting.

Hermione stared at him, rapt once again. Just like the first time she had seen him, when he had surprised her on Valentine's Day, the wisp of thought wafted through her mind: *Really, a man's penis is bizarre to look at.* Still, based on previous experience, knowing that she could bring him pleasure made it quite appealing. Watching the shifting of his balls as his cock bounced of its own accord, she inhaled his scent again, feeling slightly dizzy from all the feel-good chemicals running riot in her system. Sighing with satisfaction, she traced her fingertips through the coarse hair framing his package and gently wrapped her hand around the length of his cock, enjoying the juxtaposition of hard-yet-soft.

A guttural groan tore from Snape's throat, and his fingers clenched in Hermione's hair, his eyes closing again. At her tentative squeeze, his hips jerked, thrusting forward into her grip. Her squeak of surprise made him snap his eyes open, looking down to see her, eyes wide and lips glistening where she had licked them. She cast a heated gaze up at him, sliding her hand toward the base of his cock, then leant forward and placed a gentle, open kiss on the head.

It took every ounce of self-discipline Snape had for him not to shove his cock into that soft, moist mouth, spilling himself over her tongue. Instead, a harsh cry burst from him, and he sucked in a ragged breath.

Blinking owlishly up at him, her lips still covering the head of his cock, Hermione dragged the tip of her tongue over the tip, collecting the bead of moisture there, and somehow managing to look demure while doing it. Her eyes drooped closed and she purred decadently. Snape swore.

Backing away, an impish grin spreading her wet lips, Hermione peered up at Snape in triumph. Sucking her lower lip between her teeth and letting it slide back out, she beamed at him before saying, "I was right."

Wrapped in a haze of lust, Snape grunted, "What?"

Leaning forward again, Hermione quirked one eyebrow at him saucily and retorted, in a throaty voice, "It does taste better directly from the source," before dragging her tongue up the underside of his cock and sucking the head in again.

Snape could feel his legs starting to tremble. A fleeting prayer to whatever gods chose to listen that he wouldn't pass out swept through his overwhelmed mind. Her words lit an inferno within him, and he bent forward, gripping her arms to pull her to her feet. An inquisitive squeak answered his actions.

Holding her in front of him, he pressed his forehead against hers and growled, "Careful what you say. What you tasted *then* and what you tasted *now* are entirely different things."

A spike of heat shot through Hermione and she gasped. Exhaling a shuddering breath, she murmured, "*Do* enlighten me, then, on the difference."

A feral growl rumbled from Snape's throat as he pounced on her with a demanding kiss, backing her onto the bed. As they sank to the mattress, Hermione wrenched herself from his grip enough to push and pull at him, manoeuvring him to the centre of the bed on his back. His chest rose and fell noticeably with his shallow panting.

Gently pressing on his calves to get him to spread his legs, she crept between his knees and sat cross-legged, her hands splayed on his thighs as she gazed at his twitching cock, enamoured and intimidated.

Nervously swallowing, she took a deep breath and leant forward, eyeing the deeply flushed head. Flicking an anxious eye at Snape, who was watching her intently, her bravado failed her, and she cleared her throat. There was an awkward moment of silence, then she faltered, "I don't know what to do..."

Snape sucked in a calming breath and offered a soothing, "It's okay. Don't do anything you don't want to do. Really. Why don't you just come join me up here?" He beckoned to her, his expression earnest.

Hermione shook her head vehemently. "No! I *want* to...to taste you..." Her shoulders twitched in a half-kringe/half-shrug. "I'm just afraid of hurting you, or not doing it right..."

Snape's head flopped back and he snorted incredulously at the ceiling, musing, "The brightest witch of her age... Extensive lascivious *research* done already, *including* experiments... Has me completely at her mercy... And she's afraid of *not doing it right!*"

Feeling both aggrieved and pleased, pride both stung and boosted, Hermione rallied her courage. Glaring at Snape, who had tilted his head enough to smirk at her in challenge, she wrapped her hand around his shaft...smirking herself at his quick gasp...and leant forward more, her lips millimetres from the head of his cock.

Her knees pressed against his inner thighs as she nearly bent in half, dipping low enough to drag her tongue up the underside, from the base to the tip. Her hand held him in place, keeping it from throbbing and bouncing away. Snape's hands clamped over his eyes and forehead, his fingers gripping his hair as a loud cry was startled from him.

Encouraged by his reaction, she swirled her tongue over the head, idly considering the cloying taste of the moisture seeping from the tiny slit. *Interesting... Salty, definitely musky...but that's more the scent than the actual taste... And it's got an almost clean flavour, like bleach...* Laving the spongy head, she placed her lips around it, moved her hand back, and pressed forward, letting his cock slide into her mouth as far as she could manage, feeling it pulsing against her tongue and the roof of her mouth.

All of the air in Snape's body hissed out in one explosive burst. Sparks danced behind his closed eyelids, and his hips rocked of their own accord. Waves of hot and cold washed over his body, raising goose flesh. The roaring of his pounding blood in his ears muffled the tell-tale sound of his panting breaths. Dragging his hands from his face, he forced himself to open his eyes and *look* at the sight of Hermione sucking his cock. The fantasy image had surfaced in his mind several times in the past months, along with the imagined sensations when he masturbated. But, as he was quickly realizing, his imagination was nowhere near as good as the real thing.

Hermione slowly bobbed up and down, keeping her lips clamped tightly around his erection, letting her tongue slither along the underside as she went. The convulsive rocking of Snape's hips served as evidence of his enjoyment, and her nerves calmed a bit.

Snape, for his part, knew he wouldn't last long. Swallowing hard and blinking rapidly, trying to focus his mind elsewhere in an attempt to stave off his quickly building release, he once again slid his hands into his hair, gripping hard and pulling. However, the mild jolt of pain did nothing to decrease his arousal; on the contrary, he ruefully acknowledged that he had just discovered a slight kink he had never known he had. Eyes rolling back in defeat, he covered his face with his hands, blocking the erotic vision of his cock disappearing and reappearing between Hermione's lips, feeling the familiar coil of burning tension expanding in his belly, travelling down to his balls.

Hermione was enjoying Snape's reactions, delighting in seeing him come apart in her grasp again. His fleeting grimaces were enough to make her wonder if he were in pain, but she remembered that those expressions were normal for him in such a situation. Flicking her gaze up his body repeatedly, she saw him covering his face again, and she noticed the increased tension in his muscles, making them stand out in relief. Her attention was momentarily drawn to the sensation of his cock pulsing against her tongue, somehow swelling even more. Carefully adjusting her jaw so she wouldn't scrape her teeth against him, she slid upwards, peering up at him.

Snape felt his climax building, and the minute part of his mind that wasn't completely submerged by the exquisite sensations reminded him that he should give Hermione some sort of warning. It would be gauche indeed to explode in her mouth without prior notice.

Hermione watched Snape's hands fly from his face to her hair, gripping her curls, but not pulling or controlling her movement. Unwilling to stop her actions, she continued, curiously eyeing him.

Snape clenched his jaw and licked his lips, sucking in a breath and uttering, "Hermione..."

With an acknowledging swirl of her tongue, Hermione made an inquisitive noise in her throat, and Snape's head canted back, the cords of his neck standing out.

His voice was strained as he said, "Can't... wait..."

At his words, Hermione felt his cock throb firmly, and she tasted a small spurt of liquid. The resulting rush of tingling heat to her centre made her moan in response.

A strangled roar burst from Snape's lips, and his hands dropped to his sides, opening and closing spastically as his orgasm hit with the force of a Bludger. His body curled forward as all of his muscles seized in rhythmic spasms, bucking and shuddering in release.

Novice that she was, Hermione didn't realize that the first spurt was not all of it. Thus, as she blithely kept going, and Snape's climax reached fruition, she wasn't prepared for the comparative flood of liquid that burst forth. Eyes snapping open wide in surprise, she struggled not to choke, and her lips released their tight hold on his cock, letting his come drip down his shaft, emptying from her mouth.

Locked in the fierce grip of his release, Snape couldn't respond right away to her obviously shocked fumbings. His ears were ringing and bands of colours were scrolling across the insides of his closed eyelids. As his body twitched in aftershocks, he vaguely heard Hermione's furtive coughs. After the warmth of her mouth, the night air felt cold against his wet cock, and he could feel the tickle of his come dripping over his balls and into the dark hair framing his groin.

Hermione coughed and swallowed as unobtrusively as she could. She was taken aback by the thick consistency and how much stronger his come tasted in such a direct fashion. The cloying, "clean" scent filled her nose, and his musky taste seemed to sit on the back of her tongue, no matter how much she swallowed. Eyes watering slightly from her near-choking experience, she sniffed to keep her nose from running. Really, all things being equal, this would certainly take some getting used to.

Snape finally returned to cognizance, and he cracked one eye to peer blearily at Hermione. It was obvious that she was disconcerted, and he smothered a rueful smirk. Barely moving his hand, he rasped, "*Accio* wand," and caught it as it arced into his palm. Then, with a weary flick, he Summoned facial tissues, offering some to Hermione as he made to mop up the sticky mess coating his deflating cock.

Trying gamely to look nonchalant, as if this were an everyday occurrence, Hermione took the tissues and turned away to blow her nose and wipe her eyes.

Once he had cleaned up, Snape cast a quick cleansing charm to take care of any lingering residue and Vanished the soggy tissues. Then, heaving a deep sigh, he cast a measuring look at Hermione and murmured, "Feel enlightened yet?"

Hermione blinked, unprepared for his gibe. Then, smiling in amusement, she shoved her anxiety away and held his gaze. "Mmm... I *love* learning."

At her saucy quip, Snape burst out laughing. Snorting as he heaved up onto his elbows, he cocked an eyebrow at her and growled a fond, "Swot."

Pursing her lips and affecting an air of preening superiority, she retorted, "Perhaps this Know-It-All isn't *so* *sufferable* after all, hmm?"

Snape's eyes flashed with a wicked light and he pushed himself to sit up. Lifting her face to his with a finger under her chin, he purred, "There are so many more things I can't wait to teach you, love." Hermione's breath caught and he covered her lips with a tender kiss.

Hermione melted into the kiss, enjoying the gentle exploration of tongues. After a long moment, Snape pulled away and whispered at her ear, "Tasting myself mixed with your luscious mouth is almost as delicious as tasting you."

Hermione's eyes fluttered closed and her head swam with the erotic intimacy of it all. Clutching at his shoulders, she simply said, "Severus..."

Snape backed up, meeting her gaze. "Yes?"

Staring into his fathomless black eyes, she said, "I love you."

The exultant joy in his heart threatened to overwhelm him, and he breathed a fervent, "I love you, Hermione."

Sealing their vows with another kiss, Snape deftly guided her to squirm over his leg and lie beside him, so they could stretch out and relax in the wake of their excited activity. Hermione curled up along his right side, pillowing her head against his chest, wrapping her right arm over his ribs, and flinging her right leg over his. Snape responded by draping his right arm around her shoulders, tucking his left hand under his head, and bending his left knee to ease the stretch of his lower back. Comfortable, they lay there silently, basking in the afterglow.

It didn't take long, however, once the sweat had evaporated from their bodies and their heart rates had slowed, for them to become chilled, and Snape noticed the goose flesh along Hermione's arm where he was idly stroking her. Lifting his head, he peered down at her body and saw that she was covered with the chill bumps. Snatching his wand, he Summoned her discarded blanket from its heap on the floor and covered them, holding her tighter to transfer body heat.

Hermione sighed luxuriously and burrowed closer, smiling. Her voice sleepy, she murmured, "Mmm, feels good."

Snape chuckled. "Being close to you always feels good, love."

At that, Hermione opened her eyes and lifted her head to meet his gaze, beaming. Chin resting on his chest, she said, "You take such good care of me. I can't wait till we can be like this every day."

Snape's eyes closed and he sucked in a breath at the rush of emotion that washed over him. Opening his eyes again, he locked gazes with Hermione and said, his voice fervent, "I promise to take care of you for as long as you wish it." Hermione lifted her hand to caress his face and he caught it, kissing her fingertips.

Hermione whispered, "And I promise to take care of you, Severus. Gods know you deserve it." His eyes clouded, and Hermione knew he had thought of Dumbledore. Unwilling to skirt the issue, knowing he had to purge his anger before it festered, she went on. "He was the only one to take care of you since your mother, wasn't he?"

Snape's face settled into grim lines of cold fury. His eyes hardened, and he released her hand before clenching his hand into a fist. Acid dripping from every word, he said, "Would you believe that he had the gall to say that I needed someone to 'temper and guide' me? Apparently I'm not competent enough to take care of myself!" His eyes narrowed, and his lips spread in a mirthless smile. "Well, Albus, old friend, I'll have someone to take care of me, but it won't be you, and it won't be because I need it," and he locked eyes with Hermione, "it'll be because I *deserve* it."

Hermione returned his fierce gaze with similar resolve. Solemn, she whispered, "Indeed."

Snape shook his head faintly. "I don't think he even realizes what he's done. To him, he's being perfectly reasonable. He doesn't understand what his words meant to me. He'll find out. I've been loyal to him for longer than I've not, but that's all over now."

Hermione rubbed his shoulder soothingly. "Dear heart, he's made a bad choice. He may still learn from his mistake. What do you mean exactly, that you're no longer loyal to him?"

Snape pinned her with a harsh gaze. "I mean that I will no longer put his wants before mine. My loyalties have changed. Albus Dumbledore no longer holds the key to my future. *You* do."

Hermione gasped, comprehending the full implications of his statements. Snape forged on. "What do I care if I make him angry? If he were to decide to fire me, all the better. I'm not going to be here after this year is over anyway. I refuse to bow to anyone any more. *I* am master of my destiny. And *you* are mistress of my heart."

Snape rolled them so Hermione was on her back, and he could prop himself up on his elbow as he talked, the urgency evident in his expression and his voice. Hermione stared up at him, both wary of his reckless attitude and excited by it. Before she could think of a response, Snape continued, "If we didn't have *your* reputation to worry about, I'd fly in the face of his rules and out us right now. Then I'd be free of him, for I daresay that the Ministry wouldn't allow me to continue my position in light of our relationship." His lips twisted at his sardonic understatement.

Hermione felt a stab of worry bordering on panic. "Severus, I know how you must feel, but please don't do anything rash!"

Snape eyed her with an aggrieved air that quickly turned into smug amusement. "Oh, ye of little faith... We've made it this far, and we've learnt important lessons..." He nodded pointedly toward the door, acknowledging her Imperturbable Charm. Then, his smirk turned even more wicked and he leant closer, his breath warming her ear as he spoke. "Besides, considering what we've just done," and he flexed his hips, pressing his stiffening cock against her cleft, "wouldn't that be counted as 'rash,' Miss Kettle? Or would you be Miss Pot, and I Mr. Kettle? Either way, we're both black as soot, love."

Hermione gasped at the sensation of his burgeoning erection against her still-slick curls. The vibration of his purring chuckle against her throat sent a tingle chasing through her once more. Testing his new claims of free will, she swallowed hard and said, "All right then, if you're not going to let him and his strictures hold you back anymore, then how far are you willing to go?" With that, she curled a leg around his hip and pressed him against her rocking pelvis with her heel, grinding his cock against her pussy.

Her challenge caught Snape off guard. His whole body tensed, and he froze with uncertainty. Flashes of heat were pulsing into his cock, swelling it against her mound even as he tried to determine his answer.

That's really the last line to cross, isn't it?

It is. Before now, I knew she wouldn't be ready for it, but now...

Well, if she's ready and willing, then what about you? You said you wouldn't let the old man's edicts stand in your way.

But, that wasn't about his edicts. I didn't vow to wait because of him.

True, but doesn't all this change things a bit?

Everything changes a bit now, but I don't know that taking her virginity right now qualifies as a bit.

Well, at least you know she won't be hurt by it. You saw her practicing. You felt how much she had eliminated the barrier.

I made that promise to myself and to Hermione! How can I be upset by how others treat me if I'm willing to break a promise to myself?

Circumstances change. Surely you're Slytherin enough to recognize how to be flexible...

How? Yes. When? Not this time. The circumstances haven't changed enough for that. I don't want to be the kind of man who breaks a promise when something more enticing comes along. Besides, consummation really is the final line to cross, and I will not succumb to temptation now. Not when I can demonstrate the importance of our relationship by waiting until when our first time together can be a celebration of declaring ourselves to the world.

Indeed... Well, you seem to have figured it all out then. Do what you will.

I shall.

Hermione stilled, watching the internal workings behind Snape's eyes. After a few moments, she saw him focus on her again, eyes blazing.

"No."

Hermione blinked. "No what?"

Snape deliberately reached back and pulled her heel away from his arse, backing away from her inviting heat. "No. I will not go back on my word. That was not made to *him*, but to *us*. Some things should be saved because they are important. Finally being with you will *mean* something."

Hermione, unsure which answer she really wanted to hear, felt tears welling up at the overwhelming feeling of being cherished. While her body thrummed with the desire to be as intimately, physically connected as two people can be, she understood the emotional reasoning behind his declarations, and she agreed with him.

Giddy with the mixture of powerful feelings, she voiced a shaky laugh and said, "I couldn't agree more, but it's also so frustrating, because now that I have *you so close*, I want you even more!"

Snape swooped forward and kissed her soundly, relief at her reaction flooding him. As he dipped closer, his erection slid over her belly, and he sucked in a breath at the excitement it and her admission caused. Pressing his forehead against hers, caressing her cheek, he murmured, "Yes, well, you're not the only one suffering in that fashion, my dear."

Hermione giggled at the decisive throb of his cock against her skin. "Well, you *saw* how I manage to deal with it..."

Snape stiffened, the fleeting memory of how horribly shocked he had been dissolving in the rush of heady emotions that had followed it. His erection pulsed again, apparently oblivious to the fact that it had been sated once already. His baser side growled with the desire to plunge into her once and for all, but he kept a firm grip on himself. Still, that devious voice in his head had an idea, and it suddenly took shape in full, technicolour detail.

Pulling back, Snape grabbed his wand and Summoned Hermione's toy. Hermione's breath caught and her eyes widened in uncertainty. Pushing backwards until he was kneeling between her legs, the blanket pooling behind him at the foot of the bed, he inspected the moulded wax.

His expression was intense as he locked gleaming eyes with hers. In a thoughtful, measured tone, he said, "Just how much of the charm have you managed so far?"

Blinking rapidly, Hermione stammered, "W-what?"

"You said you've been using an Engorgement Charm. How much have you managed so far?" He calmly held her gaze.

Flustered, Hermione said, "I don't know!"

Holding his hand out, palm up, with the toy across it, Snape once again coaxed, "Show me."

Completely taken aback, Hermione stared mutely at him for a long moment before slowly reaching for her wand. Flushing under his unwavering gaze, she whispered the charm, closely watching the toy swell until she knew it had gone on long enough. Abruptly stopping the charm, she put her wand away, loath to meet Snape's eyes again.

Snape, however, was no longer watching her. Fascinated, he was staring at the wax as it grew. A trembling, fluttery sensation swirled in his gut, making his cock bounce in reaction. When she stopped the charm, he closed his hand around the length, mentally measuring it. His thumb traced around the curved tip as he studied it and, almost as if he weren't conscious of it, his other hand floated over to his erection and wrapped around it as well.

Hermione, flicking glances at him and trying to pay attention using her peripheral vision, noticed his other hand moving and snapped her gaze to it. Seeing him gripping both himself and the poor substitute, she sucked her lower lip between her teeth and stared, owl-eyed.

Snape placed the toy on the bed beside his knee and grabbed his wand again, this time closing his eyes and frowning in concentration as he carefully stroked himself. Hermione watched in fascination. After a few moments, Snape opened his eyes and zeroed in on the toy, pointing his wand at it and muttering under his breath.

Hermione's attention was drawn to the toy, which was slowly morphing in response to Snape's spell. It was no longer as smooth, and the curved tip had filled out to a realistic flared head. It took a moment for Hermione to realize what Snape was doing: he had transformed it into a replica of himself!

When he was done, he picked up the toy again, carefully comparing the feel of it in his hand with the feel of his own cock. Then, a triumphant, feral grin spread his lips and he looked at Hermione. Voice oozing with wicked challenge, he said, "Dare to compare?" and offered the toy to her.

Transfixed, Hermione lifted one hand to take the lifelike replica from him. Raising it above her face, she held it in both hands, running her fingers along the veined length, tracing the flared tip, rubbing the spot below the head that she knew drove him wild. Then, sitting up, she flicked a defiant glance at Snape...who was watching her through half-closed lids, smirking...and wrapped her hand around his erection. His sharp inhalation and the involuntary twitch of his muscles gave her courage.

Fondling both him and his wax twin, she decided to rise to his challenge. Lifting the toy between them, she said, "Feels okay so far. But I must be especially careful in my deliberations." With that, she dipped her head and swirled her tongue over the tip, wetting it so she could slide her lips down the length.

Snape's smirk vanished, and his eyes rolled back as he groaned in torment. His eyes snapped open again at her throaty giggle. "Very close, indeed, although the real thing tastes better."

Snape's hands clamped onto her arms, startling her. His eyes were glazed with lust, and she fleetingly wondered if she had pushed him too far. The erotic purr of his voice when he spoke made her shiver.

"If it's *so close*, and you like having *meso close*, and you want me even more... While I cannot cross the lines I, myself, have drawn, I can certainly get *so close* to them." He released one arm and took the toy from her limp fingers. Leaning forward to kiss her, he pressed her backwards again, covering her with his body.

Hermione's head was swimming, and her body sang with jolt after jolt of electricity. When Snape moved to hover over her, she felt his cock brushing against her, and a faint moan bubbled out of her.

Snape trailed the waxy head down her body, teasing her with it. He could feel the moist heat radiating from between her thighs again, and he ached to delve into it. Instead, he contented himself with stroking his cock against her thigh, periodically letting the head brush over her slick curls as she writhed beneath him. Holding himself up with one arm, he traced the toy down her belly, delighting in the shuddering, gasping breaths it incited.

Hermione's heart was racing, and she felt light-headed with need. Desperately reaching for something to hold onto, she tangled her fingers in his hair at the base of his neck, gripping tightly. In her haze of sensation, she barely heard his encouraging groan. She did, however, feel his convulsive thrust along her thigh and the line of moisture it smeared there. The drawing sensation in her core made her moan again, and Snape dropped to his elbow and leant closer to her ear.

"How close is *so close*, Hermione? You tell me."

She felt the toy teasing along her pussy lips even as his cock rubbed against her thigh. Consumed by lust, she rasped, "Please, Severus... gods... if I can't have *you*... I need as *close* as I can get..."

That was all he needed. With her permission, Snape pressed forward, slipping the re-moulded toy between her swollen lips. Gently sliding it along her cleft, he coated it with her juices, teasing her clit before dipping lower and slowly guiding it within her.

Feeling Snape's body atop hers, his hip snug against her thigh, she could easily imagine that it was his cock burying itself in her cunt. At least, at first. Wiggling beneath his insistent pressure, she frowned at the rigidity of it, knowing that the real thing would at least have *some* give to it. Even though she had reached this level of the charm, it hadn't been shaped like a real penis, and the larger flared head was stretching her more than she had expected. Sucking in a sharp breath at the flare of discomfort, she scowled more.

Snape, lost though he was in the moment, was not so insensate that he didn't notice her reactions. Pausing in his pressure, he carefully eased backwards, relieved to see her frown disappearing. Determined not to hurt her, he began to slide back up to circle her clit again, but she voiced a whimper of protest. Hesitant, he trailed back down to her cunt, gently massaging the moist flesh.

She heard him whisper, "I promised not to hurt you."

Shaking her head, she retorted, "I'm fine! Just... slow."

His hair tickled her face as he nodded, and she felt him pressing forward again. Brow furrowing again, she murmured, "Stop. Don't move." The inflexible head remained almost within her. Squirming, rocking her hips, she resolutely found the right angle to ease the stretch. Holding her new position, she breathed, "Now."

Snape pushed again, and the widest area sank inside her, bringing a sigh of relief from her and a grunt of appreciation from him. Snape flexed his hips again, stroking himself on her skin, and pressed forward. The ease with which the toy slipped further in surprised them both after the snag at the beginning. Hermione's approving moan made Snape shudder.

Shifting his position, Snape settled himself between her legs, slotting his cock along the crease of her inner thigh and placing the base of the toy against his pelvis. Wrapping her legs around him, he leant down and kissed her, thrusting, driving the toy into her even as he enjoyed the friction of her flesh around him.

A startled cry burst from her lips, making him stop, even though his body shook with the effort of it. His voice strained, he said, "Hermione?"

Understanding the unspoken question, Hermione breathed deeply, assuring him, "I'm all right. Honestly. It's just... wow."

Easing back, Snape felt the end of the toy leaving contact with his groin, and he insinuated one hand between them to manipulate it back out again. Her sigh was one of mingled relief and disappointment. Squeezing his eyes shut, he pressed his forehead against her neck and forced out, "It's too much. We can stop..."

Hermione cut him off with a hasty, "No! I don't want to stop!" She gripped him tightly in an attempt to prevent him from backing away. In a whisper, she continued, "Please. It is a lot to take in..." She faltered, unnerved by her inadvertent pun, but forged on. "But it's not too much. It's wonderful. I want this. I want you, Severus. This is *so close* to perfect."

His worries assuaged, Snape moved up to kiss her again, murmuring, "Perfect," against her lips. With a new resolve, he resumed his motions, thrusting forward, the toy to one side of his own cock as he pushed it into her. His mouth capturing her squeals and moans, he pressed forward until it was sheathed fully within her, and his balls rested against her arse while his cock was embraced by the silken flesh of her thigh.

Resting like that for a long moment, they allowed her to become accustomed to the feel of being filled. Eventually, Hermione began minute gyrations of her hips, grinding herself onto him and eliciting a ragged groan.

Clenching his teeth, he ground out, "Good gods, woman, what are you trying to do to me?"

Hermione, brow creased in concentration, retorted, "I'm *trying* to find that spot again. *You're* the one who changed the shape I had that worked."

Snape reared back and pinned her with a fiery gaze. "Is *that* what you want? Never let it be said, Hermione, that I didn't give you what you want."

With that, he backed away enough to reach down and slide the toy back out. Hermione's brows rose, and when he plunged back into her, tilting the toy at the right depth, her eyes rolled back and she arched at the explosive delight of him hitting *that spot* again.

Her inarticulate shriek of bliss spurred him on, and he repeated his action, increasing the pace and pressure. His determination to bring her to her peak again forced him to give up contact between his erection and her warm body, but he knew he'd be able to reap the benefits later. Sitting back on his heels and stroking himself with his other hand, he worked the toy back and forth, fucking her with as much abandon as he felt she could handle. By her writhing and shuddering, he could only assume it was working.

Her attention shattered, and she could no longer focus on anything but the exquisite sensations he was wreaking on her body. The feelings built quickly, and she reached her plateau in a few moments. Brought to the torturous edge, she flailed about, stammering, "S-Severus... gods... I need... please... *so close*..."

Her pleas wrenched him away from his self-pleasure, and he reached forward to circle her clit as he purred, "Come for me, Hermione..." He pumped the toy faster as she bucked and keened, pushed over the edge by his touch and voice.

Unwilling to stop, wanting to draw out her climax, Snape continued thrusting, but he stopped fondling her clit so he could once again fist his cock. Pumping furiously, he released the toy when she tried to draw her legs together, clamping her hands down on the wax replica, clearly overwhelmed.

As she gingerly slid the toy from inside her, sighing in relief, Snape stared at her, watching the light glisten on her juices coating the wax. Picturing the white copy of his cock as the real thing, slipping out of her wet heat, a surprised oath burst from him and he jerked, shuddering as his orgasm overtook him.

Hermione, taken aback by his noises, raised her head just in time to see him climax, and she stared raptly at the viscous liquid dribbling over his knuckles. Even after two such fantastic orgasms, she felt a rush of excitement at the sight of Snape stroking himself. The barely coherent thought of *Fuck, that's hot* wafted through her fogged brain.

Panting, Snape's head lolled back, and his eyes closed in exhaustion. Hermione, also worn out, fell back onto the mattress again, trying to calm her own breathing. Peering back down at Snape...who was still kneeling between her legs, body sagging as every muscle went lax...she quickly grabbed her wand and cast a cleansing charm on his sticky cock and hand, dropping the toy onto the floor as she did so.

Snape blearily opened his eyes, blinking at her when he felt her charm drying him. Idly wondering how he was even upright, he saw Hermione smiling wearily up at him. She wriggled up the bed and moved her left leg to join her right leg on his left, struggling up on her elbow to reach for him and guide him to lean forward and lie down. Toppling like a felled tree, he barely managed to twist himself enough to not break his nose on impact.

Giggling in spite of herself, Hermione adjusted the pillow under his head, then poked him enough to force him to roll onto his side. Groaning petulantly, Snape wrenched himself around and lay flat on his back, his hair fanned over his face.

Grinning indulgently, Hermione brushed his hair out of his face and shoved his right arm up so she could burrow against his side again. Toeing the blanket upward, she reached down and drew it up to cover them. Snape lay there, boneless. Still smiling, Hermione doused the lights, noting how peaceful he looked in the pale moonlight.

Snape's brain registered the abrupt darkness, but his body refused to cooperate in doing anything about it. Enjoying the soft warmth of Hermione snuggling against him, he managed a faint croon of contentment, calling upon his last reserves of strength to drag his arm around her. Hermione giggled again, lifting up to press a chaste kiss on his lips before lilting, "I do believe we broke you after all."

If he had had the energy, he would have snorted in derision, but he couldn't even do that. Besides, as his rapidly-fading self acknowledged, he thought she might be right.

59- Of Guilt and Friendship

Chapter 63 of 84

The next morning arrives with a bang (not necessarily *that* kind); Snape and Hermione get clean after getting dirty; Snape snacks alone, only to be interrupted by an irate McGonagall, who is outraged by recent developments between Snape and a certain Gryffindor.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Wow, it feels good to be able to *write* again! :) My classes are over, so I've had more chance to write lately, and I'm so glad... Anyway, the lovely Ladyofthemasque and Horserider have been invaluable with feedback and beta services as usual. And thank you so much to all you fine folk who have reviewed or commented on my LJ or emailed me. It always makes my day to hear from you lot. *luff* Hope you enjoy what's to come... :)

Chapter 59- Of Guilt and Friendship

Hermione woke in the darkness to the uncomfortable pressure of her full bladder. Struggling awake, she felt a spike of unbridled joy at finding herself curled against Snape's long frame as he slept peacefully. Slowly, carefully, she extricated herself from his loose embrace and squirmed off the bed to rush to her bathroom. After using the toilet and washing her hands, she tiptoed, shivering, back to bed, stepping over discarded clothing. A glance at the clock told her it was only a couple of hours before dawn, and she paused to grab her wand before climbing back into bed.

I better lift that Imperturbable, in case anyone comes to my door. I'll put a one-way Silencing Charm on it instead, so no one can hear anything. A faint snore from Snape demonstrated the wisdom of that decision as she cast the spells.

As she gingerly slid into bed again, trying not to disturb Snape, she smiled. He looked exhausted, but so peaceful, his pallor accentuated by the chill moonlight. *I know I should wake him and send him back to his rooms, but I don't want him to leave! I love sleeping with him.* Her smile widened in amusement. *Even if he does snore...*

Burrowing under the covers again, enjoying the veritable furnace created by her lover's body heat, she stretched along his side and lay with her back to him, twisting and reaching over him to grab his opposite arm and pull him over. He responded with a faint snort and sigh, but he did roll onto his side, and Hermione draped his arm around her, hugging it as she backed against his body, spooning. As she wriggled her arse against his pelvis, he mumbled in his sleep and curled forward, pulling her tight against him. Comfortable and warm, Hermione heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction and drifted off to sleep again.

Hours later, Snape woke to the sound of knocking. Frowning in annoyance that someone was disturbing him...and where was all that *light* coming from?...he dragged his brain to coherence, only to become startlingly aware that he was wrapped around soft, warm flesh, and bushy hair was tickling his face as he stirred.

In a blazing flash of panic and realization, memories of the night before cascaded over him, and he froze, alarm bells going off in his head at the insistent sound of knocking on Hermione's door. Quickly covering her mouth with his hand, he leant close to her ear and hissed, "Hermione, wake up! Don't make a sound!"

Hermione, confused and irritated at being woken up, especially with his hand over her face, scowled and struggled to roll over. That was when she, too, heard the noise. Stiffening in shock, her eyes flew open and she rolled to lock eyes with Snape, who was staring at her like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. Nodding once, she waited for Snape to remove his hand so she could respond. Holding his gaze, she said, "I cast a one-way Silencing Charm. They can't hear anything from in here." Relief washed over his taut countenance and she continued, "Hand me my wand and I'll lift it."

Snape whirled to snatch her wand from the nightstand. Giving it to her, he whispered through tight lips, "Should I leave? Hide? What are you going to do?"

Hermione inclined her head at him in reassurance. "Just be quiet. It's okay." With that, she lifted the Silencing Charm and called, "Who is it? What do you want?"

Muffled by the door, they heard Ginny saying, "It's Ginny. Harry and I were wondering if you were going to come to breakfast. It's getting late."

Both Snape and Hermione closed their eyes in palpable relief. As Snape wilted onto the mattress, Hermione slid out from beneath the covers and put on her nightgown, padding to the door. "Is Harry with you?"

"No. He's waiting with Ron in the common room. Why?"

Hermione gestured for Snape to stay calm as she opened her door a crack, blocking the space with her body and peeking out at her friend. Her voice was low as she said, "No. I'm not coming to breakfast. I'm having a lie-in today."

Ginny grimaced at her and said, "You look exhausted! Are you okay?"

Hermione bit her lip and cast her eyes down, struggling to suppress the smug smirk that wanted to surface. Apparently, she wasn't entirely successful, for when she lifted her eyes to Ginny, the redhead was eyeing her with a mixture of suspicion and amazement. "I *am* tired. But I'm fine." She started to flick a glance back at Snape but stopped herself and said, "Really. Not perfect, but *so close* that it hardly matters."

Ginny's eyes widened and her chin dropped. Casting a glance back down the corridor, she breathed, "He's in there, isn't he?" Hermione didn't move or speak, but her dancing eyes gave Ginny her answer. Shaking her head in admiration and envy, she whispered, "You lucky witch!" Then, in a voice loud enough to be heard by *anyone* who may have been in the room, she said, "Fair enough. I'll see you later. Enjoy your *lie-in*." With that, she smirked and shot Hermione a saucy wink before loping back down the corridor.

Hermione shut the door with a sigh of relief, locking and Silencing it again. When she turned to look at Snape, he was watching her with narrowed eyes, his expression a combination of smugness, embarrassment, and anxiety. Hermione averted her eyes and pursed her lips, trying to hide the grin that was attempting to break through. Scurrying back to the bed, she flopped down on the edge, finally peeking at Snape through her lashes and permitting the smile to spread her lips.

Snape was leaning up, propped on one elbow, one knee bent and tenting the covers before they pooled at his waist. His hair was dishevelled, and his face was puffy from sleep. As he watched Hermione in awkward silence, she thought he had never looked more disarming.

Her voice low and shy, she said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to speak for the both of us. If you'd like to go so you can head to breakfast, I understand. I just wanted to get rid of them as quickly as possible."

Snape's brows rose, and he blinked. His antsy reflexes were tensed for flight, worried about keeping their secret, but his brain told him to calm down, as they were quite safe for the moment. Frowning faintly as he thought, he said, "No. I don't want to go to breakfast." His eyes clouded with remembered resentment at the thought of facing Dumbledore, and his rebellious side perked up, even more determined to stay where he was.

Hermione's smile widened, and she chewed her lip for a moment before saying, "Are you still tired? We could go back to sleep." She squirmed closer and caressed his arm just for the joy of touching him. Snape's eyes closed in pleasure and he relaxed his anxious tension.

Opening his eyes and glancing at the time, he murmured, "I'm still a bit tired, but I'd hate to waste our time together just sleeping. I can do that by myself." He quirked a lopsided grin at her and she giggled. Twisting to reach closer, he slipped his fingers into her curls and pulled her toward him to kiss her, but she clamped a hand over her mouth and grimaced. Taken aback, he frowned and backed away.

Through her fingers, she mumbled, "Morning breath. Even I can tell..."

Snape rolled his eyes and fell back on the bed, covering his eyes with his palms and scrubbing his forehead before raking his fingers through his hair and letting his arms fall to either side of his head. Hermione watched him, cheeks flushing uncomfortably. Heaving a deep sigh, he cast an aggrieved look at her and said, "While I hope to eventually impress upon you that, unless you ate sardines and onions in your sleep, I don't *care*, I shall attempt to accommodate your feelings on the subject with a suggestion." He paused to cock an eyebrow at her, commanding her full attention. "Why don't we take the opportunity to freshen up; partake of our morning ablutions?"

Hermione's brows rose in comprehension, and she dropped her hand, nodding vigorously. "Of course!" With a grand gesture, she waved toward the bathroom door, indicating he should go.

With a polite, "Thank you," and a nod, Snape pushed to a sitting position and twisted to swing his feet off the edge of the bed. Flinging the covers back, he stood and crossed to her bathroom, blissfully immodest in his nudity. Hermione watched him go, transfixed by the play of lean muscles under pale skin and dark hair. When he entered the bathroom, he spun, giving her an unobstructed view of his half-hard cock before the door closed between them.

Staring at the door, she finally shook herself from her daze and shot off the bed, a bundle of nervous energy. In an effort to distract herself while he cleaned up, she darted around, picking up his clothes and smoothing them into neat folds or hanging them. Making her bed, she also picked up the discarded magazine and the reshaped toy to hide them away. Cleaning the toy before secreting it under clothes in a drawer, she paused to marvel at it, tingles expanding through her core at the memory of the night before.

She was staring at it when the bathroom door opened, and Snape poked his head out. With a guilty start, she slammed the drawer shut and whirled, eyes wide. Snape squinted at her for a moment, clearly deciding whether to ask what she was on about, but then shook his head minutely before saying, "Well? I've been waiting."

Hermione became aware of the sound of the shower running, and steam wafted through the open door over Snape's head. Perplexed, she said, "'Well,' what?"

Tilting his head to one side and eyeing her impatiently, he said, "Do you want to shower or not? It's ready."

Hermione gasped as she understood. Flustered, she said, "Oh! I thought you were going to go first, then I would..."

Snape's annoyed expression melted into one of smug mischief. A decidedly Slytherin smirk crossed his lips and he drawled, "Why waste time and water? I'll help you get at any places you can't reach..."

Hermione blinked. Swallowing against her suddenly dry throat, she felt her pulse racing. Darting a look back at her door, she cast another locking and Silencing Charm on it, then quickly grabbed the pile of Snape's clothes from the foot of her bed and hid them in her closet. Casting a sheepish look at Snape, who was watching her with a bemused smile, she crossed to the bathroom and meekly entered when he backed out of the way.

Snape gravely inclined his head toward the toilet, waving his hand in a vague gesture as he said, "Shall I leave you...?"

Hermione hastily demurred. "No, thank you. I'm fine." In the awkward pause that followed, she couldn't help but notice that his partial-erection was gone, and while she wondered about it, she also felt a jolt of petulant envy that he was so much more comfortable than she was, and *he* was the one naked!

Snape nodded in response, and, when she made no move to enter the shower, he tilted his head toward it and said, "Shall we?"

Hermione cast a quick glance at the steaming water and then spun, rushing to her sink and rummaging through the mirrored cabinet, leaving Snape to watch her, frowning in perplexity. With a sheepish look, she whirled again, brandishing a toothbrush, which she proffered to him, her own toothbrush and toothpaste clasped tightly in her other hand.

Snape's brows shot up in surprise. Blinking at her, he took the toothbrush and muttered, "I could have Apparated to my bathroom for mine..."

Hermione shrugged exaggeratedly and grimaced. Wagging her hand at the toothbrush, she merely said, "My folks are dentists."

Snape stared at her, nonplussed. Clearly struggling for something to say, he finally managed, "Ah. Yes. Well... thank you."

Hermione, still feeling awkward, edged past him to place her toothbrush and toothpaste on a shelf in the shower. Then, in a flurry of motion, she whipped the nightgown over her head and stepped into the spacious tub, leaving the garment to float into a pile on the floor. Leaning back to peer around the shower curtain, she said, "Well? You coming in or what?"

Snape, standing there...holding the toothbrush and feeling rather silly...shot an acid glance at her for turning the tables on him and stepped in behind her, setting the toothbrush by hers on the shelf. Tugging the curtain closed, he was enveloped in steam, and he watched Hermione duck under the water, letting it sluice over her shoulders and drench her hair.

When she turned around, she wiped the water from her face and cast a half-smile up at him. He shook his head ruefully and blinked against the deflected spray. Jerking her thumb over her shoulder, she stepped forward and to one side, indicating that she would switch places with him. Inclining his head, he stepped under the water as she passed him.

A deep sigh sighed out of him at the soothing feel of the hot spray. Ducking his head, he let the water sheet over his hair, streaming off the ends onto his shoulders and chest. Stretching his arms over his head, he twisted, wetting his body...and nearly jumped out of his skin at the feel of sudsy hands sliding along the planes of his back.

His gasp of surprise had him nearly choking on the unintentionally-inhaled droplets, and he coughed, craning his head as best he could to look over his shoulder at Hermione, who was industriously washing him. She glanced up innocently at his astonished expression.

"You said you'd help me get at the places I can't reach, so I thought I'd return the favour." With that, she flashed an impish grin at him, apparently over her momentary awkwardness.

Snape spun, and she pulled her hands away, dripping suds. He let the water rinse the foam off his back as he eyed her. After a beat, Hermione reached forward again, this time rubbing his chest. Snape caught her hands in his and held them still, eyes narrowed and pinning her with a consuming gaze.

It hadn't occurred to him that simply sharing a shower could be so emotionally charged. But, he had never had a lover bathe him, and the overwhelming feeling of being loved and cosseted stunned him with its intensity. Hermione's grin faded under the blast of heat and love radiating from his eyes.

Snape pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her and caressing her hair as if she were the most precious thing on earth. The suds on his chest felt slippery as she pressed her breasts against him and hugged him tight. Turning her head, she laid her cheek against his chest, closing her eyes in a surfeit of contentment. Snape rested his chin on the crown of her head.

"My love..." His murmur barely carried over the noise of the water, but Hermione heard the rumble of his voice under her ear and sighed.

Her whisper of, "I love you, Severus," made him squeeze her tighter and press a kiss on her head. After a long moment, she pulled away, smiling up at him as she said, "Let's finish, shall we?"

Snape nodded and released her, backing under the water to rinse again. She handed him a bottle of viscous liquid. "It's shower gel. Much nicer than soap. Try it."

Snape squeezed a glob out onto his palm, eyeing the transparent orange goo askance. Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes. Lifting it to his nose, he gave a cautious sniff. *Grapefruit and bergamot. Not bad. Then again, those are among her favourite scents.*

Hermione was rubbing the gel all over her body with a net sponge, but Snape just lathered it between his hands and began smearing it over his skin. At least it wasn't a girly scent... Hermione tilted her head pointedly at the water and Snape quickly switched spots with her, facing away to wash his groin. While she was rinsing, he idly examined the other bottles on the shelf: shampoos, conditioners, crème rinse, moisturizing treatment, more shower gels, bubble bath... He shook his head at the sheer variety of products available.

Hermione spun to see him perusing the shelf. Barely sparing a glance at her, he said, "Which of these do you use for your hair most often?"

Hermione pointed at the bottles. "That shampoo and then that conditioner. The others are for every once in a while. Why?"

Snape reached past her to rinse his hands in a businesslike manner, then poured a dollop of shampoo into his palm. His voice was casual as he said, "I was just wondering which was what your hair usually smelled like. I like it, remember?" With that, he beckoned for her to switch places with him, and as soon as she was free of the spray, he attacked her sodden curls, massaging the shampoo into her hair.

Hermione squeaked in surprise, but it was quickly followed by a moan of delight. Shivering at the sensation, she sighed in approval when she felt the warmth of his body almost pressing against her from behind as he gently scrubbed his fingertips along her scalp. His long, strong fingers worked their own magic, and she felt almost drugged with the pleasure of it.

When it was time to rinse, he clasped her to him and turned them sideways, one hand then reaching up to direct the spray while the other slid through her hair; then he turned them the other direction and repeated the process until the shampoo was completely rinsed out. Snaking one arm out to grab the conditioner, he worked a generous amount from crown to ends, at which point Hermione roused enough from her languorous daze to say, "I need to leave it in for a few minutes. That's when I usually brush my teeth."

Snape rinsed his hands and nodded. "Very well then." As she squeezed toothpaste onto her toothbrush, Snape reached for the one she had given him and held out his hand for the toothpaste when she was done with it. Hermione handed it over, then pointedly turned away from him to brush her teeth. Snape faced the other direction as well while he did the same.

As soon as he was done, spitting out the foam as furtively as he could, he turned around, noting that she was still facing away, but that she was waiting patiently. He tapped her on the shoulder and they edged past each other quickly. Snape grabbed some shampoo and made quick work of rubbing it through his hair while she finished. He saw her reach past him to place her toothbrush back on the shelf and he spun.

She flashed a lopsided smile at him and said, "Rinse that out first." She stepped forward, guiding him under the water again. He vigorously ran his hands through his hair, rinsing quickly and wiping the water from his eyes. Then, he tugged her to him and went through the same procedure he had earlier to rinse the conditioner from her hair. Her warm body snuggled against his and her luxurious moans and coos aroused him, and he felt his cock stiffening against the small of her back.

Her hair was clean, and she felt pampered beyond belief, relaxed and coddled and loved. But when she felt his cock springing to life behind her, all lassitude left her and a surge of erotic energy sang through her body, ending in a tingle in her centre.

Snape felt her sudden tension and slipped his arms around her waist, pulling her tight against him. Bending his head, he murmured in her ear, "You make the most delightful noises. Apparently you've noticed the effect they have on me..."

Hermione closed her eyes and leant back into him with a sigh of pleasure. "Mmm, indeed." She wriggled her hips, grinding onto him as best she could, given their differences in height.

Snape growled, nibbling on her ear and holding her with one arm around her ribs while the other hand snaked down her belly and through her curls, seeking entrance. Hermione's startled cry turned into a moan as his fingers delved between her lips and stroked her clit gently. She could feel Snape's cock pulsing behind her.

Backing out from under the water, Snape leant against the wall, momentarily gasping at the comparative chill of the damp tile on his back. But, once he was secure...feet spread and planted, holding him against the wall...he manipulated Hermione so she could rest against him, supported by his grasp. He inched down the wall until she was

pressed against his groin, his erection nestled against the crease of her arse.

Still nuzzling her ear, he trailed his hand back down her pussy lips, slipping between them to tease her clit and spread the moisture that had nothing to do with the spray from the shower. Hermione's hips rocked forward, seemingly guiding him toward her entrance. His breathing starting to go shallow with desire, Snape travelled further, feeling the heat enveloping his questing finger as he slid slowly into her cunt.

Hermione was falling into a fog of lust, wanting to feel him within her again, but when he reached his goal, she was unexpectedly wrenched from her pleasure by a stinging pain. Opening her eyes and frowning, she squeaked, jerking away from the offending touch. Snape instantly drew back, worried.

"What's wrong?"

Hermione scowled and said, "I don't know. I wasn't expecting that. It just... stung."

Snape buried his face in her hair and sighed in remorse. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you." He carefully lifted his hand and splayed it over her belly again, holding her.

Hermione nervously caressed his hands. Still frowning, she said, "It's not your fault, I'm sure. I honestly had no idea I was sore."

Snape squeezed her briefly and said, "Hermione, I daresay it's my fault after what I did to you last night. I shouldn't have been so... enthusiastic."

Hermione squirmed in his embrace and spun to face him, trying not to be too distracted by his erection slipping over her mound. "Don't blame yourself. I enjoyed that more than I can explain." She cupped his face in her hands and held his gaze. "I wanted that. Bloody hell, Severus, I wanted more! You *know* what I *wanted*, and when you couldn't give me that, you gave me the next best thing. And it *was*. I had no idea I'd be sore like this later. I'm sure I'll be perfectly fine. I just have to... get used to it." With that, a wicked half-grin flickered over her face.

Snape's mournful expression cracked at her naughty implication. Eyes narrowing with devilish intent, his lip curled and one eyebrow climbed toward his hairline. "Indeed? And just how do you propose to 'get used to it'?"

His cock gave a decided throb against her, and she gasped before retorting, "I'll just have to keep practicing." She smirked at his sharp inhalation. Affecting innocence, she said, "Although, I seem to learn more in this subject with a study partner." She lightly trailed a fingertip down his chest, following the thin line of hair over his belly, peeking demurely at him through her lashes.

Snape was struck dumb in amazement at her calculated, coy pretence, then he shook his head slowly as he gazed at her in warning. "As much as I would enjoy assisting you in your *study*, I must once again bow to the importance of being careful, particularly now that *know* what I'm missing and the temptation is therefore that much stronger!"

Hermione made a moue of petulance, then sighed in regretful acknowledgement. Snape leant his head against the wall and closed his eyes in frustration and self-denial. His eyes snapped open when Hermione stretched up to plant a kiss on his lips. Grateful that he could finally kiss her again, he pulled her close and snogged her thoroughly. When they parted, she looked a little dazed.

Snape smirked and stifled a snort of amusement. Heaving another deep sigh of disappointment, he stood up straight, guiding Hermione back under the shower for a final rinse. Hermione blinked owlishly at him as the water streamed over her shoulders. Chewing her lip, she glanced down at his erection and murmured, "But... what about you?"

Snape blinked at her in confusion. "What about me?"

Hermione's gaze darted around and she flushed awkwardly. Ducking her head, she mumbled, "You know. What about *you*?" On the last word, she gestured vaguely toward his groin, and Snape looked down in surprise.

Slightly bewildered, he glanced back up and said, "I told you your noises have that effect on me."

Hermione, frustrated at his obtuseness, scowled and flailed in impatience, letting her hands smack against her thighs as they dropped. "*Obviously*. So, like I said, it begs the question of '*what about you*'?"

Comprehension dawned, and Snape's blank expression crumpled into one of sheepish discomfort, followed by wry amusement. "My dear, nothing need be done about me. Don't you remember our liaison in the alley? It will go away on its own, I promise."

Hermione pursed her lips in a pout and frowned as she switched places with Snape. As he rinsed one last time, she crossed her arms and huffed petulantly, grumbling, "It hardly seems fair."

Snape paused in dragging his hands through his tangled hair and looked at Hermione in astonishment. A beat of silence gave way to his peal of laughter, and Hermione glared at him in pique. Still chuckling, Snape leant forward out of the spray, squeezing the excess water from his hair and wiping his face. His lopsided grin expressed his delight and he said, "Well then, if you're so worried about it, you can make it up to me some other time. Does that sound better?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him with an acid grimace, but she relaxed her stance. Heaving an aggrieved sigh, she dropped her arms and said, "Fine." At Snape's inquiring tilt of the head toward the taps, she nodded. "I'm done." He turned off the water and she opened the curtain to reach for towels.

She turned to hand a towel to Snape and smirked up at him. "I just want to make sure you're not broken after all." With that, she cocked an eyebrow at him in challenge, and Snape snorted.

As much as wanted to scoff at her remark, he knew he wasn't completely successful at hiding the dazed awe he felt at the memory of how their antics the night before had utterly sapped his strength. Thus it was that his riposte lacked his trademark snap. "I assure you that everything is once again in working order...a fact which does not need proving at this moment, thank you very much."

Hermione giggled, hiding her face behind her towel. Lowering it to reveal dancing eyes, she lilted, "If you're hurt, I'd be happy to kiss it and make it better."

Snape's eyes widened at her sauciness. Then, the converse idea hit him like a Bludger. *She* was sore. And *he* could kiss it and make it better... His eyes rolled back and he groaned inwardly at the thought, inhaling sharply through his nose. When he gazed at her again, she was taken aback by the return of the crackling lust in his eyes.

They stared at each other for a long moment, then Snape tore himself back to the present and wrapped the towel around his waist, tucking the end securely. Hermione shrouded herself in her towel and snagged another one to dry her hair. They both pretended not to notice the way Snape's towel tented and rippled with his bobbing erection.

Hermione stepped out of the tub and peeked through her door cautiously before flinging it wide to help disperse the steam. Snape strode past her to grab his wand off the nightstand, quickly casting a drying charm on his hair and body. He looked at the clock and swore under his breath.

"What's wrong?" Hermione was rubbing her hair with the towel.

Snape wrenched her closet door open with more force than was strictly necessary, and she stared at him owl-eyed. Untucking the towel and whipping it off, he spat the spells that clothed him, his discarded garments once again whirling to cover his nudity.

Hermione blinked at the transformation. Snape dropped his towel in the hamper by the bathroom and paused by Hermione in the doorway. His expression was a mixture of frustration, rebellion, petulance, and resignation. "Breakfast is long over. I have to go. I can't remain unreachable for long."

Hermione sighed regretfully, nodding. "I know. You're right." She peered up at him wistfully. "I'm so glad you came to me last night. Being with you has been the best thing that has ever happened to me."

Snape lifted one hand to caress her cheek, cupping it as she leant into his palm. "Thank you for saving me, Hermione."

She launched herself into his arms, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face against his chest. He once again kissed her hair and then rested his cheek on the crown of her head. Her voice was low as she said, "I'll miss you so much. I love you."

Snape squeezed her tighter and murmured, "And I, you, dear heart." He backed away, his love and gratitude shining in his eyes. Then, with a slow nod, he Disapparated, leaving Hermione to reflect on the momentous events of the previous night.

Snape appeared in his bedroom and looked around disconsolately. While the sleep-of-the-dead he had enjoyed and the shower had both worked to refresh him, he felt his return to solitude weighing on him and making him tired again. He stepped to his wardrobe and took out fresh clothing, noting that, while *he* was clean, his clothes were stale and rumpled. With a few flicks of his wand, he changed into the new set of clothes, absently Banishing the worn set to the laundry.

It would be a couple of hours before lunch would begin, and he realized that he was mildly hungry. Well, more thirsty than anything else really, considering how *dehydrated* the previous night had left him. Entering his sitting room, he sank into his armchair and summoned a tea service, complete with honey and lemon, and even a plate of biscuits. *Breakfast of champions...*

As he snacked, he summoned a house-elf and requested a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. The elf returned quickly, bowing as she offered the paper to Snape. With a polite nod and "Thank you," he dismissed the elf and scanned the headlines, gathering his courage to eventually turn to the classifieds section.

He had only been reading for a few minutes when he was startled by a demanding knock on his door. Frowning, he folded the paper and laid it on the tea tray before standing to answer the door. The knocking continued, rapid-fire and insistent. As he approached his door, he heard a voice calling, "Severus! Severus Snape, are you in there? Open up!"

Flinging the door open, he stared blankly at the agitated witch on his threshold.

"Minerva?"

McGonagall stepped forward, forcing Snape to fall back and allow her into his quarters. As he stared at her, bewildered, she grabbed the door from his grasp and slammed it shut. Spinning to face him again, she drew herself up stiffly and sucked in a deep breath, her eyes bulging slightly in her perturbation.

"I went to your office...couldn't find you...when you weren't at breakfast...I couldn't *believe* it when I found out...I never would have expected it...I'm shocked, just *shocked*..."

Snape, feeling as if a bucket of ice water had been poured down the back of his neck, struggled to maintain his façade of perplexity, trying to keep back the dread that his clandestine behaviour had been discovered. Lifting his hands in a calming gesture, he raised his voice over her barely coherent rambling, cutting her off.

"Minerva! Stop! *Do* calm yourself and start making sense..."

McGonagall waved her hands in exasperation. "*Calm* myself? How can I? How can *you* be so calm? Surely you have some feelings on the matter! Well...?"

Snape averted his eyes and crossed to his armchair, frantically trying to come up with something to say to defuse the irate witch's ranting. McGonagall followed him and took the opposite chair, perching tensely on the edge of the seat. Desperately stalling, he picked up his teacup, sipping to moisten his throat. McGonagall fidgeted, then sprang up from her chair toward him, stopping beside him and gripping his shoulder firmly.

Snape hazarded a glance up at her, and was galvanized to see her gazing down at him through a film of tears. Guilt and remorse curdled the tea and biscuits in his gut and he grimaced.

McGonagall squeezed his shoulder and whispered fiercely, "I am absolutely livid!" Snape winced. "As well you must be."

Snape froze, confused. The cold fear coursing through him faltered, and he felt a wild surge of hope that she was *not* talking about him and Hermione. Unwilling to incriminate himself, he merely turned a stony glare on McGonagall.

She released him in favour of yanking a handkerchief from her pocket and turning away to furiously wipe her eyes and nose. Sniffing hugely, she fussed with her handkerchief, twisting it as she said, "I know you don't always come to meals, and I didn't think anything of it until Albus told me." She pinned Snape with a look of blazing indignation as she continued, "He was wrong, Severus. You have *every* right to be angry. I told him so in no uncertain terms."

She spun and paced in front of his hearth, leaving him to watch her, his entire being flooded with relief. Her gestures were wild and excited as she barrelled on.

"He had the sheer *audacity* to act as if *he* were the one offended! I don't blame you *one bit* for not coming to breakfast this morning. If he had behaved in such a high-handed manner with *me*, thinking he could control *my* life, I would have had to avoid the Great Hall myself, lest I do something that would prove inappropriate for a Deputy Headmistress!" Her eyes narrowed on the variety of satisfying images that were parading through her mind. Almost as if to herself, she muttered, "The bloody old goat would certainly make a good *real* goat! He has the beard for it..."

Snape's eyebrow climbed in startled appreciation of her ideas of vengeance. Before he could respond, she focused on him again and continued.

"Albus may be in charge of this school, but he is *not* in charge of running everyone's lives for them! When I think of all that you have sacrificed and endured in the years that you've been under Albus's thumb...and now that the war is over and you're finally free..." She trailed off, shaking her head in disbelief. "I completely understand your desire to make a life for yourself, Severus. I think it's grand that you still have ambitions..."

Snape broke in with a sardonic, "Wouldn't be much of a Slytherin if I didn't, now would I?"

McGonagall drew up stiffly in surprise at his remark. Eyeing him with reproach, she said, "Come now, Severus, I know we're both House Heads, but surely you realize that people are more than their House affiliations."

Snape inclined his head in tacit apology and said, "I do. Although you will never convince me that House loyalty and pride is unimportant. Consider our wager, if you will."

McGonagall blinked rapidly and fell back a pace, then returned to the seat opposite Snape. Sinking slowly into the chair, she said, "I hadn't thought about that for ages..." Frowning, she cast a sidelong glance at him and continued. "That reminds me: in light of what has happened, we may nix the part where Albus is the witness. I daresay we can trust each other as adults to complete the bet between ourselves?"

Snape regarded her solemnly, nodding as he felt the anger and resentment toward Dumbledore bubbling up again.

McGonagall settled back into the chair, relaxing her tense posture. Looking as if she were mentally shifting gears, she took a deep breath and cleared her throat. "Now then, what I wanted to tell you...besides the fact that I am outraged at Albus's flagrant disregard for you as a person...is that I am on your side." She paused and locked

eyes with Snape, emphasizing her declaration. Snape once again inclined his head, this time in acknowledgement.

"I refuse to stand by and let him stand in your way. Now, from what he told me, Slug and Jiggers already declined your inquiry..." She sniffed in disdain, flicking her fingers to indicate her lack of patience with the whole situation. Snape scowled in remembered humiliation, but McGonagall raised her eyebrows haughtily at him and said, "Never mind that, Severus. You *know* it's no reflection on your abilities."

Still, Snape sank in on himself, crossing his arms and shaking his hair forward as he suffered the continued sting of their rejection and Dumbledore's machinations.

McGonagall leant forward and lowered her voice, highlighting the covert sense of her mission. "I want to help you. You deserve to move on and make something for yourself. You're still young, Severus, and, while you have done well here, you *deserve* the chance to do what *you* want with your life. It may have been ages ago, but I at least had the chance to do other things before I came here to teach." Her lips twisted wryly and Snape snorted.

An odd sensation had been stealing through Snape as McGonagall talked. It was similar to the feeling he got when he was with Hermione, only not as intense. Upon consideration, he realized that he was feeling the comforting warmth of friendship.

Through his years as a student, Snape had experienced McGonagall's trademark, somewhat formal mentoring style, which had continued even after he had come on as a teacher himself. As he had learned from her in his profession, they had forged a courteous collegueship. Over the years, that relationship had grown into a friendly rivalry, particularly when Snape became Head of Slytherin. Once the Order had reformed during the war, the bond between Snape and McGonagall had deepened, even though it was largely unacknowledged, as McGonagall had invested more care into Snape as a fellow soldier.

Now, all those motherly tendencies that had periodically surfaced over his tenure at Hogwarts had surged forth to morph into a genuine regard of friendship. And while it was still a novel experience for Snape to have a friend, he recognized the frank offer for what it was and appreciated its true significance. Particularly now that his oldest and best friend had betrayed him in such a traumatizing fashion.

On the tail of such an unexpected sensation, he felt a niggling sense of guilt creeping up on him, plaguing him as he thought about what he was hiding from this witch who was so candidly supporting him. *Sod it! I'm tired of feeling guilty just because I'm trying to be happy for once!* Perhaps it was that guilt which made him respond with more honest grace than was his usual wont.

"I would... appreciate that very much, Minerva." He inhaled deeply, noting the pleased smile that was spreading the older woman's lips. "I'm sure your greater experience will be quite helpful." With that, he inclined his head gratefully, and McGonagall sat up straight, preening.

"Indeed. Well, I do hope you won't let Albus's abominable behaviour affect your performances. You've managed to surprise me several times over...although I could have done *without* that shock you gave me with Miss Granger." She levelled a severe gaze at him over her spectacles.

Snape pursed his lips and shot an aggrieved look at her. His tone was bordering on exasperated as he said, "Minerva, I *told* you, Miss Granger is safe with me!" He locked eyes with her, his guilt and his hidden love for Hermione prodding him to be as sincere as possible. When she didn't immediately ease the severity of her glare, he continued in a low voice, "I *gave* you my word."

McGonagall's lips twitched and her brow furrowed as she wrestled with conflicting emotions. Finally jerking her head irritably, she huffed and flapped her hands as she said, "Very well then. I know. If I am to trust you, I just have to trust you!" She then cut an acid glance at him and drawled through twisted lips, "But you must admit that it was a very disconcerting thing to witness..."

Snape's conscience once again gave him a pang at her willingness to back down and trust him, and he ducked his head sheepishly and muttered, "Well, I'm sure you can imagine how disconcerting it was to *experience* it in front of the entire cast."

As he had hoped, his remark sent McGonagall into a spate of chuckles, diverting her from focusing on the connection he and Hermione had displayed. She smiled fondly at him and ruefully admitted, "Well, I daresay your claim to being shocked is as good as mine."

Chuckling again, she stood, nodding cordially at Snape as he rose as well, barely a beat after her. When she turned to cross to his door, he strode past her and stopped with his hand on the knob, ready to open it for her. She paused and gripped his arm again. "Remember, I'll be keeping my eye out for any prospects that might suit you. And don't worry about Albus. He'll just have to get over the fact that you are not his property." She squeezed his arm again and released him, stepping back and nodding for Snape to open the door.

Snape inclined his head in gratitude and murmured, "Thank you, Minerva. Good day," as he pulled the door open, gesturing courteously for her to step through.

"Good day to you, Severus." She swept over the threshold and Snape shut the door behind her, leaning forward and pressing his forehead against the smooth wood as he digested the significance of her visit along with the roiling guilt in his stomach.

Eventually, he straightened and went back to his chair to finish reading the paper. After perusing the classifieds, he sighed in disappointment that there was nothing listed that was even remotely in his field. Giving himself a good mental shake, he thought, *There's still time yet. And with Minerva looking as well, I'm sure something will come up before too long.*

60- Mirror, Mirror, on the Stage...

Chapter 64 of 84

...Who's the one with righteous rage? An unexpected gathering in the Hall leads to an interesting solution for an important problem, and inter-House support takes some surprising turns, leading to reluctant soul-searching.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

A/N: Well, the Poker Classic officially kicked everyone's collective asses (check out my LJ for a couple of detailed explanations) and kept me from getting this update done until now. (The Classic is over now.) As always, undying gratitude goes out to my wonderful beta, Ladyofthemasque, and to all you faboo readers and reviewers. *hugs all of you* You can give credit (or blame, depending on your viewpoint, LOL) to Ladyofthemasque for the clever chapter title and the continued rhyme in the summary. :) Hope you enjoy the continued journey...

Chapter 60- Mirror, Mirror, on the Stage...

The cast wasn't expecting to have a rehearsal until the next Friday, which is why they were surprised to see a post on the notice board stating *"All cast members: report to the Great Hall Tuesday, March 17, 7:00 p.m. for a cast meeting. Act Two dress run-through will still be Friday, March 20."*

Curious rumblings travelled throughout the castle as everyone tried to come up with some reason for the unexpected meeting. Thus it was that all cast members kept shooting interested glances at Dumbledore where he sat eating at the High Table that evening.

Hermione could see that Snape was coldly stoic at Dumbledore's side, and, oddly enough, McGonagall was still displaying an air of frosty disapproval at Dumbledore's other side. Frowning in perplexity, she peered up at the headmaster, trying to fathom how he could have been so manipulative with Snape and wondering why her Head of House had looked so haughtily indignant for the past several days.

Finally, dinner was over, and Dumbledore gestured for the cast to disperse so he could transform the Hall. Snape and McGonagall swept down from the dais, herding the students ahead of them as they exited the Hall and shut the doors behind them. The students sidled away from them as they assumed nearly identical poses, crossing their arms and standing in front of each door, as if guarding it.

Hermione stood at the edge of her circle of friends, pretending to look elsewhere, but she was really paying attention to them in her peripheral vision and listening hard to McGonagall's muttered asides to Snape.

"I'm not going to lighten up until he apologizes, Severus. I mean it."

Snape inclined his head and shook his hair forward, sliding his gaze over the students as he murmured back. "That's not necessary, Minerva. He made his decision. As have I. There's no need to dwell on it. Move on."

She must be talking about Dumbledore! So that's why she's looked so disdainful lately! Oh, Severus, I'm so glad you have someone else on your side. A surge of warm regard for her strict but kindly Head of House welled up in her chest, making it tight with emotion, and she couldn't stop the pleased smile from spreading her lips.

A few minutes later, the doors opened and everyone trekked back into the transformed theatre space. Puzzled glances were exchanged between many people as they looked at the apron of the stage, on which a parade of large mirrors was placed. Dumbledore stood in front of the stage and waved for everyone to take a seat in the first few rows.

"No need to fret; we're not rehearsing tonight. But I wanted to share something quite exciting with you all." He beamed at them and clasped his hands in front of his ribs.

"I know you've probably been wondering about the other schools' productions and whether or not we would be able to see them." He nodded at Luna. "The answer is in front of you." At that, he made a grand sweeping gesture toward the mirrors that crossed the breadth of the stage without even the slightest break between them, towering to the very height of the proscenium. The cast exchanged puzzled looks and murmured amongst themselves.

Dumbledore strode over to the steps and mounted the stage, his reflection visible to the curious group. "We'll begin with Durmstrang, as they are two hours later than we are." A susurrus of surprise rippled through the cast. Dumbledore turned to the mirror and clearly stated, "Headmaster Bosek."

Dumbledore's reflection wavered and faded, replaced by the image of the new Durmstrang Headmaster. The man was swarthy and looked to be in his thirties, exuding an air of vitality. His white teeth gleamed from beneath his black moustache as he grinned and retorted, "Dumbledore! We haf been waiting for you. My cast is eager to see yours."

Between Hermione and Ginny, Harry gasped, his eyes widening as he went white. Glancing at his chalky complexion, Hermione leant closer and whispered, "Harry? Are you okay?"

Harry swallowed hard, rasping back, "They're two-way mirrors. Sirius gave me one before..." He faltered, and Hermione understood the shock he had received. She pressed his arm in a gesture of comfort, and Harry blinked rapidly, struggling to compose himself again. Onstage, the headmasters continued their conversation.

Dumbledore nodded and chuckled, saying, "I can imagine, Lazlo. Very well. If you would be so kind as to place your cast onstage, I will expand the charm through the rest of the mirrors." Bosek nodded and spun, clapping his hands at his students.

Dumbledore stepped back to the stairs, waving his wand at the mirrors as he descended again. Rapt faces gazed up at the stage, which suddenly displayed the corresponding stage far away in Durmstrang.

Red-robed students filed onto the stage, gazing solemnly out through the mirrors. The placement was such that it almost looked as if they were on the stage at Hogwarts. Hermione clasped her hands and beamed at the perfect solution presented to them. A beat later, a barked command in a language she didn't know had the Durmstrang students shifting to various areas of the stage, showing the extent to which it was visible through the mirror setup.

Bosek marched into view again and spun to face Dumbledore, arms akimbo and a self-satisfied smile on his face. "You can see efranything, yes?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed, Lazlo. Now, shall we try it the other way around?"

Bosek jerked his head sharply and whipped around, snapping another command to his charges, who quickly filed back off the stage. He twisted back and said, "I will end the charm here until we haf placed the mirrors. I will call for you in three minutes. Is enough time, yes?"

"Yes, thank you. In three minutes." With that, Dumbledore waved his wand at the mirrors, and they went back to normal, reflecting the theatre. He turned to the cast and said, "Quickly, all of you, take your places onstage. I need to move the mirrors." Everyone obediently shot up from their seats and scurried up to the stage. Dumbledore pointed his wand at the wall of mirrors and performed a complicated arabesque that had each mirror lifting from the apron, shrinking, and floating out into the audience, where they settled several rows back in the seats, leaning against the seatbacks.

Dumbledore ascended the stage and stood on the apron, awaiting Bosek's initiation of the charm on his end. The cast stood in a ragged line behind him, several of them shifting their weight nervously. From a mirror in the house, they eventually heard, "Headmaster Dumbledore!" As Dumbledore responded to the call, they watched each mirror stop reflecting and change to show the Durmstrang cast, a few visible in each mirror.

Bosek's face was clear in the central mirror, by itself. Once again, his white teeth flashed as he smiled widely. "Efranything works as hoped! Now we will call to Madame Maxime, and you may do so when we haf finished."

Dumbledore sketched a little bow to Bosek and said, "Lazlo, why don't you just have Olympe call us when you all have finished your verifications."

Bosek nodded sharply and grunted an affirmative. "Yes. I will do that. We should not take long." He bowed deeply to Dumbledore and said, "It is good to see you again. We will look forward to seeing your performance."

Dumbledore smiled and retorted, "As shall we. Thank you for accommodating us tonight. I know it is later there. Good night to you and your cast."

"Good night." With that terse response, Bosek snapped his wand up and the mirrors in the audience went back to normal. A low buzz began in the group behind Dumbledore, and he slowly turned to gaze at them in amusement.

"So, I daresay this answers several of your questions, eh?"

Luna lifted her hand. At Dumbledore's nod, she said, "Now we know how we'll see each performance, but we still don't know which performance we'll see, and which

performance they'll see."

Dumbledore inclined his head and said, "It has been decided that we will see each school's performance for the Ministry. As you can see, the mirrors only take up one row, and they will not impede the Ministry's attendance." He folded his hands over his belly and inhaled deeply. "Also, now that we have this arrangement for viewing, we have more options for your families to be able to see the play. The school will come to the dress rehearsal before they leave for Easter holiday, as planned. But, if your families would rather see the final show, and they cannot make it here to do so, we can offer them a small mirror from which they may view it, like our competitors."

Colin startled everyone by bursting out with, "Like closed circuit TV!" He flushed as everyone turned to stare at him, but the other Muggleborns nodded comprehension.

Harry's brows climbed, and he shot a glance at Hermione and muttered, "He's got a point." Hermione nodded thoughtfully.

Ginny ignored the byplay in the face of an exciting thought. Her face betraying her eager interest, she said, "So we can send a mirror to someone far away? How far away?"

Dumbledore smiled gently and said, "Distance is no matter. Romania will seem as close as Hogsmeade." At Ginny's startled blink, he winked at her and she dissolved into a sheepish smile, colouring slightly as she turned to Ron and muttered, "That means Charlie *will* be able to see us, even if he can't take time off!" Ron grinned back and nodded.

Dean piped up and queried, "What if the people you want to be able to see you aren't wizards? I mean, my mum wouldn't be able to activate anything magical..."

Dumbledore turned to the tall boy and said, "I assure you, Mr. Thomas, that if your family cannot come to Hogwarts to see the performance, we will provide them with a personal mirror with which to view it. And, as you can see, as long as the person activating it is a wizard, that's all that's needed. You would be able to open the channel yourself if you so desired."

Dean relaxed and nodded pensively. Hermione waited a fraction of a second to see if anyone else was going to speak, then raised her hand and said, "Have you determined how people will travel here if they want to see the performance? And will it matter which show they want to come to? I know you said that they could come to the dress rehearsal that the school will see, but if they're not doing anything in particular on holiday, can't they come see the Ministry night?"

Dumbledore tried to catch McGonagall's eye, but she was studiously avoiding it with a frosty air of dignity. Finally, Dumbledore cleared his throat and said, "Professor McGonagall." She deigned to turn her attention to him, and he huffed to himself before continuing. "What have you found out on that score?"

McGonagall was drawing herself up primly to respond when they were all distracted by a voice coming from the house.

"Eadmaster Dumbly-dorri!" All eyes turned to the mirror, which, as Dumbledore waved his wand at it, showed the elegant face of Madame Maxime. He beamed at her and expanded his reach to encompass all of the mirrors, showing her cast in the audience seats at the theatre space in Beauxbatons.

"Madame Maxime! How lovely to see you again, Olympe." He bowed to her and she gracefully inclined her head.

"Likewise." She gazed over the assembled Hogwarts cast and her eyes widened. "Professors? You 'ave staff members on your cast?"

Dumbledore cast a quick glance over McGonagall, Snape, and Trelawney, then turned back to Maxime. "Why, yes. You don't?"

Maxime shook her head soberly. "Non. Ze staff decided zat ze pupils are to be ze ones to perform, as zey are ze ones 'oo must learn ze subject. Our cast is large, and many pupils are involved. I 'ope you are ready for a fierce competition, Dumbly-dorr." Her eyes narrowed shrewdly and she smiled in challenge.

Dumbledore laughed aloud and turned to survey his cast. His eyes twinkled brightly as he said, "Well, I daresay / am ready, but the better question is, are *you*?" He cocked an eyebrow at his cast, expecting a response, and everyone stood straighter and puffed their chests out in confidence and pride.

Hermione couldn't help but send a fleeting glance at Snape, who caught her eye, and, as one, they stepped forward from the line, Hermione with her head held high and her chin up, and Snape peering regally down his nose as he stood with crossed arms and spine straight. Snape held his tongue, knowing Hermione would speak for all of them.

Her voice rang out clear and true as she said, "We are quite ready right now, but no doubt we'll be even more so by the time our performance date arrives." Dumbledore raised his eyebrows and smirked at Maxime as Hermione continued. "Rest assured, Madame Maxime, Hogwarts is determined to win. Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will have their work cut out for them."

At her words, every other cast member nodded or murmured agreement, their expressions mimicking the conviction showing on their lead actors' faces. Maxime pursed her lips for a moment and eyed them intently, then cleared her throat and said, "Very well. Shall we switch ze mirrors now?"

Dumbledore beamed at her and said, "I will call for you in three minutes, if that should suffice."

Maxime tossed her head and sniffed. "Zen we will be ready in three minutes." With that, the mirror went blank, followed by the rest on down the row.

Dumbledore chuckled as he waved for the cast to disperse. They raced offstage, exchanging proud looks as they took seats in the house while the mirrors were placed back on the apron and expanded to their original size. Dumbledore then called, "Madame Maxime!"

The mirror flashed with the image of Maxime towering over her charges as they filled the stage in two rows. Lavender gasped and hissed, "They have twice as many people as we do!"

Dean, who was staring at the group in awe, whispered back, "At least."

Dumbledore peered attentively up at Maxime and said, "I trust that everything worked out well with Lazlo?"

Maxime nodded. "Oui. And you?"

"Perfectly. This was indeed a stroke of genius on your part, Olympe." Maxime preened under the flattery.

"Merci beaucoup." She gracefully waved her hand toward her cast and they began filing offstage. "If we are done 'ere, I say it is time to retire."

Dumbledore bowed again and retorted, "Of course. It was kind of you to accommodate us into your schedule tonight. We look forward to seeing your performance."

"Bonsoir." A languid swish of her wand, and the Beauxbatons theatre disappeared, leaving the mirrors to reflect the house once again.

Dumbledore heaved a satisfied sigh and gazed at the cast. "Well, there you have it! Now, before we were interrupted, Professor McGonagall, you were about to tell us what you found out about transporting families here to view the show..." He raised his eyebrows questioningly and inclined his head toward her.

McGonagall said, "I looked into various routes: Portkeys, Floo, Hogwarts Express, Side-along Apparition... I determined that Floo would be the simplest way to get people here, even those who aren't wizards." She nodded at Dean. "I spoke with the Floo Network Authority, and they will work with us to temporarily connect several hearths for the performance nights, both here and elsewhere. If your family has a fireplace that can be connected to the Floo Network, see me outside of rehearsal and provide me with the address, so I may include it in the list of connections we need to have made. If your family does not have a fireplace, then let me know where they are located, and we will find a wizarding fireplace nearby for them to use." She sat back as she finished, folding her hands in her lap.

"Thank you." Dumbledore offered her a faint smile, which she pointedly ignored. Frowning slightly, he flicked a glance over the rest of the cast. "Any other questions?" No one spoke up. "In that case, you are dismissed. Good night!"

Snape cast a calculating glance at the departing Gryffindors and nodded faintly in decision. Without warning, he Disappeared.

Up in Hermione's room, Snape appeared in the bathroom, from which he peeked cautiously out. Quickly stepping to Hermione's desk, he pressed his finger to his lips and looked pointedly at Crookshanks, who eyed him drowsily from the foot of her bed. Snape snatched a quill and some parchment, scribbling a note to Hermione.

"Add this address to McGonagall's list for Floo connections. O.G."

He scrawled his address at Spinner's End, a twisted smirk on his lips, then tucked the note on her pillow, before whirling back and Disappearing to his quarters.

I need to have it connected anyway, so why not avail myself of the opportunity?

**** *

Wednesday morning, Hermione included an invisible letter to Snape with her homework, letting him know that she had indeed found his note, and that she had taken it upon herself to collect addresses from the Gryffindors in order to turn them in to McGonagall. According to her letter, *"It seemed like a Head Girl sort of thing to do."* Snape snorted in amusement at the throwaway comment.

Friday evening, McGonagall leant past Dumbledore to get Snape's attention. "Severus, may I have a word with you? In private?"

Snape's brow furrowed, but he said, "Of course, Minerva. Shall we retire to the staff room?"

She nodded, and together they rose from the High Table. Dumbledore peered after them curiously, but they ignored him. In the staff room, McGonagall brandished a piece of parchment at him and said, "Severus, I recognize your home address from when you were a student. How did it come to be on this list?"

Snape peered at the list and queried, "What list is that?"

"It's the list of addresses we need to connect Floos to for the performance. What's going on? How did Miss Granger come to give me a list with your address on it?"

Snape's lips twisted in a superior smile and he drawled, "I gave it to her, of course."

McGonagall's brows drew together in perplexity, and her eyes narrowed. "Start making sense. Now, Severus."

Snape snorted softly and drew himself up, crossing his arms over his chest. "Miss Granger, as Head Girl, had begun collecting the addresses. I, in my quest to have a life *outside* these walls come the end of the school year, determined it would be only logical to include my home on the list. I'll need to start going there to get it ready for habitation, and I didn't want to have to suffer through the bureaucratic wait if I submitted my request on my own. You already have an in with the Floo Network; why shouldn't I make the best of that?"

McGonagall's brows rose and her mouth fell open a bit in surprise. Snape smirked even more. Blinking, she seemed to deflate and said, "Oh." Snape cocked an eyebrow at her and she grimaced. "Why must you do everything in such a sneaky way, Severus? It gets quite wearing, you know."

Snape snorted faintly again at her testy tone and sketched a little mocking bow. "It's innate, my dear Minerva. Twenty-seven years of being a Slytherin will do that to you."

McGonagall rolled her eyes and scoffed. Flicking the parchment toward him in dismissal, she said, "Oh for Merlin's sake... Promise me one thing, Severus." She eyed him severely.

Affecting polite interest, Snape retorted, "What's that?"

"Promise me that when you finally get out of here, you'll drop the House persona."

A tiny amused smile quirked his lips and his eyes flashed. "I promise you, Minerva, that when I am finished with Hogwarts, you will see a change in me unlike any you may have ever imagined." With that, he tilted his head toward the Hall again. "Shall we return?"

McGonagall sighed and nodded. Tucking the parchment in her robes again, she headed back to her seat, Snape trailing after her. As they sat on either side of Dumbledore, he swivelled his head between them, obviously curious about what they had discussed, but neither paid him the slightest bit of attention. Hermione saw the disgruntled look ripple over his face and felt a flash of righteous satisfaction.

Not long afterward, Snape descended from the High Table to collect Hermione before the run-through of Act Two. At this point, it was almost old hat for the Gryffindor cast members to exchange polite greetings with him as he passed. Hermione sprang to her feet and followed him out of the Hall, tucking her hand in the crook of his elbow when they reached the corridor so they could Disappearate.

In his quarters, they embraced, Snape resting his cheek on the crown of her head and Hermione pressing her face against his chest. After a long moment, Hermione pulled back and said, "Have you spoken to Dumbledore since..."

Snape's peaceful expression clouded and he scowled, backing away from her. "No. Well, nothing except for whatever may be required in my duties. I've managed to avoid being left alone with him."

Hermione sighed as he brusquely strode over to his armchair. As she crossed to the bathroom, she said, "I see that McGonagall is giving him no quarter."

Snape twisted in his seat, staring after her. When she emerged from the bathroom, he frowned at her and said, "What do you mean?"

Hermione smiled gently. "I heard her before the last cast meeting, and it's obvious that she's giving him the cold shoulder. You're not the only one who can put two and two together to get four, love."

Snape relaxed a fraction, sitting back to allow Hermione to begin brushing his hair. His voice was low when he spoke. "The morning I returned from your room, she showed up, nearly ranting. Again, I thought she had discovered our relationship, and I thought we were done for. But, she was furious about what Albus had done. She..." He faltered, and Hermione soothingly caressed his shoulder. "She told me that he was wrong and that she was on my side, and she would do whatever she could to help me find something outside of Hogwarts." He took a deep breath. "I'll admit that I could use the help."

Hermione paused long enough to hug him from behind, heart glad that he had a friend to help him. "That's wonderful. How long before you'll start work on your home?"

Snape heaved a cleansing sigh and said, "As soon as the Floo is connected, I'll be able to have contractors start working. But, I daresay I'll pay it a visit before then, just to see what I'm up against."

Knowing that he was suffering from the lingering unease of returning to Spinner's End, Hermione changed the subject. "So, we're almost through with rehearsals! The performances are quite close. Are you ready?"

Snape smirked. "You said it yourself, love. We're quite ready. I must say, I never thought, when this whole thing began, that I'd actually be looking forward to it!" He snorted.

Hermione chuckled and said, "I can imagine! All I know is that when it's all over, I'll be relieved and sad."

"Why?"

"Because when it's all done, I'll be able to focus on N.E.W.T.s!" She shoved lightly at his shoulder in retaliation for his incredulous snort and hand flapping. "It's true!" She felt him shaking his head and knew he was rolling his eyes. Tugging on his hair as she secured it in the elastic, she went on. "But, I'll be sad because then we won't have these special moments together any more." She smoothed his hair one last time and let her hands drop to his shoulders.

Snape reached up and covered her hands with his, turning to look up at her. She gazed at him wistfully, and he felt the love welling up in his chest. Standing, he drew her out from behind the chair and moulded his palm against her cheek. Her eyes closed as she leant into his caress. Bending down, he placed a tender kiss on her lips, rejoicing as he felt her hands slide up to wrap around his neck.

The kiss wasn't explosive like others had been before. This one was like a cauldron on low heat set to simmer. After a long sensuous moment, they drew apart, eyes glazed and breathing shallow. Snape trailed his thumb over her glistening lips and murmured, "We may not have regularly scheduled meetings like this, but I can always come to you. Whenever you like."

Hermione smiled. Gazing almost apologetically at him, she whispered, "Perhaps."

Snape's eyes narrowed mutinously, just as she had expected. Scowling, he straightened, and Hermione let out a tiny sigh. "Severus, you know that we'll still have to be careful. And I *will* have to focus on my N.E.W.T.s..."

Snape stepped away, eyes smouldering as he sulked. "Good gods, the end of this damned year can't come fast enough!"

Hermione tossed her head in rueful agreement, then squeezed his arm where they were crossed over his chest. Relenting a bit in the face of his sullen countenance, she said, "But I'm sure we can arrange something every once in a while."

The rapid change was almost comical as his resentful expression morphed to one of incredulous hope, then relief, followed by grateful joy. Hermione watched the change, like dawn breaking, and grinned at his hopeful smile. Gazing up at him lovingly, she whispered, "I do so love it when you smile, Severus."

At that, his smile widened, and he rumbled, "How can I help it around you?"

Hermione laughed, and they exchanged a brief kiss again before glancing at the time. Eyes dancing in challenge, she slipped her hand in his and said, "It's almost time. Ready?"

Snape airily Summoned his mask, deftly catching it in mid-air. "Let's go." With a nod, they Disappeared.

The Hall buzzed with anticipation. Dumbledore had Summoned the orchestral accompaniment, and clumps of students were furtively practicing their costume spells, muttering lines, and humming songs. Hermione felt the excitement welling up and she squeezed Snape's hand in farewell as he slipped away from her upon arrival.

Once he was ready, Dumbledore clapped his hands to get everyone's attention and said, "After tonight, we'll be doing full run-throughs every rehearsal. I don't expect to see any mistakes, but if you're going to make any, it had better be tonight." Nervous titters met his announcement. Quickly casting *Suaviloquentia* on people, he waved at the stage for everyone to get ready and take their places. "I'm going to have the music play to take us up to the start of Act Two, so you can get used to the time it takes. We will have intermission for the audience during performances, but I don't know that I'll want to take that time in rehearsals. No matter... Places!"

Set pieces whirled into place, and everyone scrambled to their spots, casting their costume spells for Masquerade. When the dancing began, an aura of triumph seemed to blanket the cast, as everyone showed marked improvement, and the dancing went smoothly. Smiles of delight spread over face after face, buoying their singing as well, until the moment came for Snape to appear as the Phantom.

His arrival was jarring, appropriately so due to the greater contrast with the Masquerade's previous mood. His smokescreen spells added to the heightened drama, and for the first time, he didn't feel conspicuously ridiculous in his bright red costume. He saw that Hermione was actually wearing a ring on a chain around her neck, and he yanked it from her in one brutal tug. Her gasp of startled pain and the way she clamped her hands to her neck gave him pause, but he didn't dare stop to check how much he had hurt her. Clasping the broken trinket in his hand, he Disappeared, casting the smokescreen again as the scene shifted and people fled into the wings.

Fortunately, Harry was involved in the following scene, so he wasn't around when Snape, once again in his regular costume, Apparated to Hermione in the wing, concerned. She was still rubbing her neck, and Snape frowned, hissing, "Let me see. Are you hurt?"

Hermione lowered her hand and whispered, "It stings; that's all. I wasn't ready for it." Snape peered at the red welt around her neck and grimaced.

Grabbing her arm, he said, "Come with me." He Apparated them to where Dumbledore was standing in the house, startling him. As the old man stared at them, taken aback, Snape ripped off his Phantom mask and snapped, "Miss Granger was hurt when I broke the chain she was wearing at the end of the Masquerade. I must take her to heal the abrasion. We sha'n't be long."

Dumbledore nodded faintly, looking at Hermione with concern. "Are you all right, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded, hastily saying, "Just a scratch, sir. I'm sure the potion Professor Snape used on Harry's neck will work just as well for me."

Dumbledore twitched at the reminder of his error handling Harry's noose, and he muttered, "Of course. Go on then."

Snape jerked a nod at him, his expression cold, then Disappeared.

Hermione gasped in surprise when she found herself in Snape's lab. He hurried to his cabinet, laid his mask on a shelf, and retrieved the potion he had used to soothe Harry's abrasions, efficiently dabbing it on Hermione's neck with a handkerchief. She could see his remorse in the tension of his shoulders and the deep crease between his brows. The sting faded as the welt disappeared, and Snape relaxed infinitesimally. Hermione cast a faint smile at him in an attempt to soothe him, but he scowled again.

Locking eyes with her, he said, "I'm so sorry, Hermione. I should have thought. I'm going to fix this chain so it will break more easily next time. I didn't mean to hurt you." His voice rang with sincerity, and he anxiously gripped her hands in his.

Hermione smiled in reassurance and caressed his cheek. "It's all right, dear heart. Really. I'm fine. It was an accident." Snape's eyes closed and his shoulders sagged in relief. When he looked at her again, she added, "I feel much better now, thank you."

Snape exhaled gustily and leant closer to examine her neck again. As his breath swept over her sensitized flesh, Hermione hummed in appreciation and her head tilted, exposing her neck even more. Snape's breath caught at the sound and the obvious surrender. Eyes suddenly blazing with feeling, he dipped his head even further, gently kissing along the line that had so recently been red and angry.

Hermione moaned faintly, and he pulled her against him as his lips trailed along her neck and throat, leaving goose flesh in their wake. Her eyelids fluttered and her head lolled back more as she seemed to melt against him. The answering flash of desire tightened his trousers, and his tongue snaked out to trace a sensuous pattern over her skin.

The residue of the healing potion met his sensitive tastebuds, and he reared back, almost gagging at the vile taste. Hermione pulled back, startled and confused, as he sped to a sink, coughing and spluttering as he spat viciously, trying to rid himself of the disgusting liquid that seemed to coat his tongue. Hermione's hands flew up to cover

her mouth and the spot he had just laved, horrified.

At the sink, Snape turned on the taps full blast, cupping his hands and sucking the cold water from where it pooled within them. Swishing it in his mouth and gargling, he repeated the actions until the potion residue was gone. Finally, released from the paroxysm, he turned sheepishly to see Hermione giggling at him.

Wishing his hair were loose so he could cloak his burning cheeks, he mumbled, "Definitely only an external potion..."

At that, Hermione let loose a hysterical bark of laughter, and Snape scowled, even more embarrassed. Eyes dancing with amusement as she realized what had happened, Hermione drawled, "So much for kissing it and making it better."

Snape blinked at her in astonishment, then snorted rueful agreement. "I daresay it was a good thing, else we get carried away again." Hermione sobered instantly and they sighed deeply. Nodding to her, he dried his face on a towel and crossed back to where she stood, deftly Summoning his mask. "Come on. We don't want to miss any cues." Hermione shook her head and they Apparated back to the same spot where they had spoken to Dumbledore.

Blinking in surprise at their abrupt appearance again, Dumbledore looked expectantly at Hermione. Lifting her chin and moving her hair off her neck, she quickly showed him that the skin was perfectly fine. At his nod, she looked at Snape, who gripped her arm again and Apparated them to the wing.

They had arrived not a moment too soon. The second "Notes" scene was in full swing, and Draco and Pansy were already onstage. Harry was anxiously bouncing on his toes, looking for Hermione. When she and Snape appeared out of nowhere, he jerked back, but quickly grabbed Hermione's hand to escort her onstage for the scene. His fleeting expression told Hermione that she would have some explaining to do, but for the moment, they had their scene to focus on.

When Hermione ran into the wings at the end of the scene, leaving Harry to roar his defiance into the house, she caught a glimpse of Snape climbing onto the back of the crypt set piece, his mask in place again. As soon as the scene shifted, she hurried back out for the "rehearsal." The energy in the piece was obvious, and everyone rose to the occasion in their interactions. The piano began playing stormily by itself, and everyone except Hermione snapped to mesmerized attention and began singing the song, leaving her to sidle away as the set pieces shifted once again.

The transition to the graveyard went smoothly, and Hermione's voice quavered with emotion as she sang "Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again." When she dropped to her knees before the crypt, and Snape appeared, beginning his luring lilt, Hermione gazed up at him edging out from behind the cross, her face rapt. He crept forward, reaching out, and she rose again, leaning toward him as she inched closer.

Harry arrived at the edge of the stage, and when the scene progressed to the point where he physically broke the connection between Hermione and Snape, Snape froze where he was, precariously extended over the edge of the crypt. Then, in a flurry of motion, he pulled up and stepped back, grabbing the pike and aiming carefully at Harry, who had shoved Hermione behind him protectively.

Snape locked eyes with Harry, and the part of his brain that wasn't involved with portraying the Phantom noted that Harry was no longer eyeing him with trepidation or warning. Apparently, since the rehearsal when Snape had been the one to save Harry and heal him with the soothing potions, Harry had fully internalized his newfound trust of Snape. The calm in his green eyes was indicative of that trust, and Snape viciously shoved aside the stunned part of himself in favour of performing his role with careful precision, so as not to shatter that new, fragile connection.

The scene went on, the tension building and culminating with Snape's Blaze of Light Charm. Everyone scattered as the set shifted to the scene of "Don Juan." Snape decided to change the order of where he flitted about, just to keep everyone on their toes, and their bewildered faces whipping around in search of him were genuine.

"Don Juan" began, and Snape contented himself with a curt nod at Draco when he appeared in the curtained bed, quickly casting the glamour on himself. His gut was roiling in anticipation of "Point of No Return" with Hermione, and the excitement of it infused his voice with even more seductive tones as they began their sensual tete-a-tete in song.

After the abrupt jolt back to reality in his lab, Snape kept a firm grip on his feelings for Hermione, refusing to let them overcome him in the scene. Fortunately for him, Hermione seemed to have made a similar decision. Thus it was that their highly emotional interactions were dramatic but not out of control. They even managed to keep their kiss from boiling over.

When Harry and Hermione rushed into the wing, leaving the Phantom's lair, Harry gripped Hermione's arm and hissed, "Where were you earlier?"

Hermione whispered back, "Snape took me to his laboratory," before darting back onstage to give the ring back to Snape. As she exited again, she saw Harry gazing at her with a confused expression.

He grabbed her arm again and leant close to ask, "What? Why?"

They headed toward the boat to continue the scene, and Hermione hurriedly said, "The chain hurt my neck when he broke it."

A flash of comprehension washed over Harry's face, and then they were onstage again, singing their final parts as the boat moved out of sight once more. Snape belted out his last, anguished lines onstage and Harry tugged Hermione further into the wing as he said, "I thought I saw you flinch. Are you okay?" He frowned in concern.

Hermione showed him her healed skin, just as she had to Dumbledore, and nodded. "I'm fine. He used the same potion he used on you."

Nodding in approval, Harry's expression relaxed and he even smiled faintly as he said, "Good. I'm glad you're okay. I was just afraid we'd miss our cue." He rolled his eyes exaggeratedly before shooting her a raffish grin. Then, his grin faded into a gentle smile again. "It's a good thing Snape was here to help again."

Hermione couldn't help it. She blinked in astonishment, her mouth falling open. She stared at him, completely gobsmacked.

Harry's smile widened into an amused smirk. "What? He may be an ornery git, but even I have to admit that he's managed to save us more times than I'd care to count."

Hermione closed her mouth, but still couldn't respond other than to stare at Harry, incredulous.

Harry shot a quick glance around and shoved his hands in his pockets, cheeks colouring. "Look, don't make a fuss, all right? I just... Hey, a man can see something once it's been hammered into his head long enough, eh?"

Struggling for something to say, Hermione forced out a strained, "Of course."

Obviously growing more uncomfortable with his revelation, particularly with the extreme way Hermione was reacting, Harry ducked his head and shrugged, glancing about again as he saw everyone heading for the stage now that Act Two was over. His voice was a low, defensive mutter as he said, "Look, he's not my new best friend or anything, so just give over. It's no big deal."

Marshalling her stunned wits, Hermione shook her head and shrugged. "Right. You're right. No big deal. Exactly." Then, she tilted her head toward the stage inquiringly, and Harry lunged forward, anxious to escape the awkward atmosphere that had resulted from his unexpected declarations. Hermione followed, mind racing with the implications of Harry's new viewpoint.

Unbelievable! But, it's so wonderful, too! If he's already coming around now... Oh, I hope things won't be so awful when Severus and I go public...

Onstage, people were milling about, casting spells to return their robes to normal as Dumbledore Vanished the orchestra and set pieces. He turned to them and smiled. "Good work, everyone. We'll be doing full dress rehearsals from here on out. Be ready next Tuesday." He nodded encouragingly as he shooed the cast offstage, then noticed Snape propped against the proscenium, mask dangling from one finger as he concentrated on something in his palm. Stepping closer to him, Dumbledore queried,

"Severus?"

Snape's head snapped up, his frown of concentration deepening to a scowl of icy disdain. At Dumbledore's inquiring nod, Snape straightened, gripping his hand into a fist and growling, "I'm fixing the chain so it won't injure Miss Granger again." Dumbledore glanced down at Snape's tight fist and saw a metallic glint dangling from within it.

Attempting a return to their warm comradeship, Dumbledore smiled and said, "So conscientious and thoughtful of you, my boy."

Snape's jaw twitched at the endearment and his eyes narrowed. With a swift glance to make sure no students were within earshot, Snape ground out through gritted teeth, "I'm *not* your *boy*."

Dumbledore's smile faltered and he froze as Snape shoved away from the proscenium and thundered past him, shooting a warning glare at a curious McGonagall who had just walked up. Snape stomped about halfway up the aisle in the house before suddenly Disapparating, leaving Dumbledore and McGonagall staring after him in the now empty space.

Dumbledore swallowed and took a deep breath, blinking in bewilderment. McGonagall guessed at what had happened, based on catching Snape's parting comment, and drew herself up primly, crossing her arms.

"I hate to say it, Albus, but I told you so." She gazed at him severely over her spectacles.

Dumbledore frowned and rounded on her. It wasn't often that he lost his composure, but over the decades of close association, McGonagall had been privy to the event enough to not let it faze her. She stared at him coolly as he snarled, "That's enough! Butt out, Minerva!"

McGonagall sniffed and rolled her eyes at Dumbledore's angry countenance. "No." She locked eyes with him again and pursed her lips at his baleful glare. "When will you admit that you did a terrible thing and that you should beg Severus for forgiveness? You usually don't mishandle things, Albus, but when you do...by Merlin!...do you bugger it up royally!"

"I did what I had to do! How could he do that to me?" Dumbledore's eyes were sparking with fury instead of twinkling with merriment, and the transformation was a sobering sight, but McGonagall refused to back down.

Planting her hands on her hips, she leant forward and cried, "How could he *do what* to you? Move on with his life? Make something of himself? Pick up the pieces of his ruined adolescence and step beyond it to try for a chance at happiness? I said it before: how could *you* do that to *him*?"

Dumbledore glared at her, his chest visibly rising and falling as he breathed heavily in anger. In the ringing silence following McGonagall's accusing words, his struggle to form a response was almost audible.

McGonagall closed in on Dumbledore and pinned him with a fierce protective glare. Her voice was low but clear in the vast theatre space. "I've known him as long as you have. We both know what his childhood was like. Betrayed by his father, then his mother, then by his so-called friends and hero. And now, after all these years of sacrifice and servitude and dedication..." she paused, as her voice had climbed in volume, and dropped back to a harsh whisper, "...*you* betray him." She slowly backed away, still holding his gaze.

"He's not going to just forget about it and go back to normal, Albus. You crushed that man's very heart, and it will take much more than a 'Sorry about that, ol' chap. Let's carry on, then, eh?' to get his forgiveness. If you truly care about Severus, as you claim, then you need to take a good look at what's best for him, and *embrace* it. Otherwise, I daresay you've lost 'your boy' forever."

With one last measuring look, she spun and swept off the stage and up the aisle, leaving Dumbledore to smart under the tongue lashing.

If anyone had been watching, they might have wondered at the length of time it took before Dumbledore finally emerged from the Hall. But it was late enough that few people were out of their quarters, being after curfew, so no one noticed the lone figure making his solitary, weary trip upstairs.

61- Progress

Chapter 65 of 84

In which progress is made in rehearsals, in Snape's plans for Spinner's End, and in Snape's friendships, but for one notable exception.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: After all the HP goodness in July, as well as travel and PotO and all sorts of things to make it officially my Month of Squee, I am finally back to normal schedule-wise, and I am SO glad to get this chapter done and up. Muchos smooches to my uber-faboo beta, Ladyofthemasque, as always. And thank you so much to all you fine folk who have graciously taken the time to read my labour of love, and for those of you who have reviewed. You all make me so happy! As always, check out my LJ for update info: <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/> Enjoy! :)

--Nicole aka Good_Witch

Chapter 61- Progress

The rest of the weekend, Dumbledore kept to himself at meals...when he showed up for them, that was. Snape ignored him to the best of his ability, which was quite thorough, particularly as Snape had things on his mind to occupy him. Eventually, Monday at lunch, Snape icily placed his cutlery on his plate and pushed back into his chair, taking a deep breath and turning marginally toward Dumbledore.

"Headmaster."

Dumbledore twitched in surprise at Snape addressing him, and from his other side, McGonagall flicked a curious glance at Snape before pretending to eat, eavesdropping all the while.

Dumbledore hesitated, his lips parting to respond, but he closed them again and cleared his throat before finally saying, "Yes?"

Snape focused on a spot on the table and said, "I would have spoken to you this morning, but you weren't at breakfast."

Dumbledore winced slightly, brow furrowing as he nodded. "What can I do for you?"

"I must leave the castle for a meeting this afternoon, and I don't know how long I'll be. We are to gain *permission* to leave the grounds during term." The disdainful inflection of the word "permission" curled Snape's lip, and his nostrils flared.

Dumbledore's brows rose, and he cast a wavering glance at Snape, who refused to meet his eyes. McGonagall had stilled, her attention zeroed in on their conversation. Dumbledore, looking uncomfortable, attempted a warm tone, but his uncertainty broke through.

"Of course. Whatever you need, my b...", Snape's jaw twitched, "...Severus. Can I... that is... is there... anything I can do to help?"

At that, Snape's eyes snapped to Dumbledore's, the outraged hurt blazing. His voice was a strangled hiss as he ground out, "Help? A bit late for that, isn't it, old *friend*?" He caught sight of McGonagall's sad expression past Dumbledore's pained one. By way of heaping coals of fire, he narrowed his eyes and said, "I'm meeting with my estate agent. With or without your *help*, I'll not be returning next year. I'm taking back Spinner's End, just like you always told me I should. Consider this my notice of resignation. I'll send you an official letter soon."

With that, he pushed back from the table, his chair scraping the stones. Dumbledore jerked back, staring incredulously at Snape. Behind him, McGonagall rubbed furiously at her ear, turning her face toward them with the pretence. Snape shot to his feet, but as he made to pass Dumbledore on his way out, Dumbledore gripped his wrist, making him stop short and glare down at him.

"Wait, Severus. Please. ... Won't you reconsider?"

McGonagall, who had been surreptitiously listening with an air of suppressed hope, sagged in defeat and shaded her eyes with her hand, leaning forward on the table.

Snape gazed stonily down at the old man who was peering winningly up at him. His voice was flat as he said, "I'll be leaving right after my last class. Don't expect me at dinner." Then, wrenching his arm free of Dumbledore's grasp, he abruptly Disapparated, leaving Dumbledore to wilt in his seat, turning back to sigh morosely over his meal.

McGonagall gazed at him in disappointment. "Really, Albus, you could have apologized. Until you do, there's absolutely *no* reason he would ever reconsider."

Dumbledore frowned, sinking into his seat as if the burden on his shoulders pressed him back. Passing a hand over his eyes, he exhaled wearily and said, "Enough, Minerva."

McGonagall's brows shot up, and she pursed her lips, pulling back with an offended air. In a withering tone, she added, "I shall cover for Severus in the event he is needed this evening." Crisply dabbing at her lips before dropping her napkin on the plate, she rose from the table to stalk off in high dudgeon.

As soon as his last class of the day was over, Snape retreated to his quarters to change into the Muggle clothes he had worn to visit Hermione's parents. He would be meeting with Graham Moore and visiting Spinner's End, and he needed to fit in. He had just changed, and was gathering his things, when he heard a knock on his door. Scowling at the interruption, he stomped over and flung the door open, jerking back in surprise to once again see McGonagall on his threshold.

"Minerva?"

She raked him with an approving gaze and smiled primly. "I merely wanted to tell you that I would be happy to cover your duties this evening, should anything come up."

Snape blinked, at a loss for words. Then, as the warmth stole through him, reminding him that she was on his side, willing to be at odds with Dumbledore for his sake, he closed his eyes and inclined his head in gratitude before saying, "Thank you."

McGonagall preened a bit, even as she stepped out of his way to let him leave. With a half-smile, Snape shut his door and offered his arm to her. Eyes widening in pleased confusion, she tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow and regarded him quizzically. Snape shot a furtive glance down the corridor and flashed her a mischievous grin.

"Hold tight." With that warning, he Apparated them to the front doors, his grin turning into a smirk at the convulsive grip of her hand on his arm as she staggered a bit on arrival. She glared at him accusingly and swatted him with her free hand.

"Severus!" Snape cocked an eyebrow at her and she huffed. "There was no need for that."

Snape stepped back as she released his arm, and he bowed low, smirking up at her from between his curtains of dark hair. "Merely being efficient." He straightened, checking the papers in the inside pocket of his trench coat. With an amused snort, he drawled, "I'm late, for a very important date."

McGonagall goggled at him for an instant before bursting into laughter. Pointedly giving him a once-over, taking in the unrelenting black of his attire and hair, she eyed him severely over her spectacles and said, "You're hardly a white rabbit, Severus." They both chuckled, then McGonagall continued, "Good luck with your meeting. Spinner's End will be hooked up to the Floo Network April 3rd."

Snape nodded, once again saying, "Thank you." Then, with another nod, he slipped through the front doors and down the steps.

McGonagall watched him leave, and as soon as he was on the lawn, he looked about him and Disapparated. Straining her eyesight, she peered down the grounds, snorting when she saw the small black figure appearing by the gates. Once he had passed through them, he disappeared again, and McGonagall turned back to the castle with a faint smile and a sigh.

Snape stood in the toilet of the modest office building, waiting to be sure that no one else was around before he Disapparated.

His meeting with Graham Moore had been cordial and satisfactory, and quite educational, and now he was preparing to see Spinner's End for the first time in ages. Unsure of how the area might have changed in his long absence, he cast a Disillusionment Charm over himself and concentrated on the upper bank of the dirty river near his home.

He arrived on the sparse brown grass, steadying himself on the incline as he looked around. Memories assailed him, and he remained still for a long moment, struggling to calm himself enough to trek up to the rows of houses. The black silhouette of the factory chimney stood out in the deepening twilight. Sucking in a deep breath, he crunched up the riverbank and wended his way through the familiar maze of houses to Spinner's End.

He noticed that the neighbourhood had improved since he had left, and many of the homes that had fallen into disrepair had been fixed and tidied. *So, Moore's tales of "urban rehabilitation" were true.* Here and there, clumps of children played in the street or on a doorstep, and cheerful lights glowed from windows framed in neat curtains.

As he neared his home, he slowed. Images of his parents emerging from the door or him hurrying inside to avoid the taunts of other children flashed through his mind. His imagination conjured the Dark Mark over the house, and a shudder washed over him. Closing his eyes and scowling, he swallowed, determined to finish what he had come for.

The curtains were open in the front windows, and he carefully trod over the grass to peek in, trying to make no noise. The interior was as different from his previous home as could be. His eyes widened and he stared mutely at the cozy scene before him.

The only recognizable things were the floors and walls, and even the latter had been papered in a pleasant pattern. The darker, utilitarian look of his memories was washed away by the warm colours and inviting atmosphere of the sitting room. Knick-knacks and plants filled shelves and corners, complementing the comfortable furniture and afghans that picked up the cheerful colours of the prints and photos on the walls.

Through the open doorway, he could see a plump woman with greying hair setting a table for dinner. Her bustling efficiency reminded him of Molly Weasley, and he half-expected to see a brood of children come running in for their meal. But, as he watched, the woman stepped out of sight, toward what he knew was the entry hall. A short moment later, she reappeared, and a correspondingly portly man with a comb-over appeared, sitting opposite her at the table for dinner. He pointed at a folded paper as they ate, and Snape decided that they were the only ones who lived there, as no one else had shown up, and there were no more place settings at the table.

Glancing around, he concentrated and Apparated into the back garden. Hastily stepping out of the expanded flowerbed he had landed in, he crept up to the back door and peeked in. The kitchen was deserted, and, through the doorway, he could see the end of the dining table where the couple sat. Looking up at the next level, he steeled himself and tried the back door. It wasn't locked, and he slowly opened it, eyes darting everywhere in search of witnesses.

As soon as there was room enough, he squeezed in, carefully shutting it. He could hear the couple talking, and he cast a nonverbal Silencing Charm on his boots, so he could sneak about unheard. Tiptoeing out of the kitchen into the corridor, he gazed about, drinking everything in as he listened to the couple's conversation.

"Hugh said he'd have more boxes for me soon. We need to get a move on packing." The man's voice carried out to Snape as he slunk along the wall.

"I know, I know. I just dread it. We've been here for so long, I almost felt as if we'd never leave." The woman's voice was wistful, and Snape dared to peek around the doorjamb at them.

"Well, I've looked at the moving services," and he jabbed again at the paper on the table, "and we need to decide if we're going to hire anyone or not. It'll be a lot of work moving everything out, and we're not as spry as we once were."

The woman stirred her tea absently and said, "I had hoped Robbie would be able to come help, but he can't get time off work. Such a shame that it's all in the middle of the week."

Snape saw a family portrait on the wall, showing a younger version of the couple, their hands resting on the shoulders of a smiling boy. Reassured that "Robbie" was not living here, he continued on to the stairs, hoping that the carpet that hadn't been there when he had lived there would muffle any creaks that the old boards might issue.

The conversation faded as he climbed the stairs, his pulse pounding harder with each step. Echoes of the shouts and wails of his parents fighting roared in his ears, punctuated by his heartbeat. He skulked through the corridor, peeking into the familiar-yet-not-really rooms as he went. Everywhere, the rooms were cheerful and cozy, inviting. Wide-eyed, he stared into them, trying to assimilate what he had known with what he saw before him. With each successive discovery of something pleasant to override his memories, he felt his stomach unclenching, and his jaw relaxed.

Still, when he came to the end of the corridor and looked up at the entrance to the attic, he swallowed hard and took a steadying breath. Without taking the trouble to pull the stairs down, he crouched low and Apparated into the attic room above him, right into the empty space he knew would be at the top of the stairs, lighting his wand.

This space was much like he remembered it. While the boxes and items stored up there were different from those his family had stored, the odour of dust and age once again filled his nostrils. Images flashed in his mind, bringing with them the feeling of hiding from his raging father, or the wistful loneliness of crouching near the vents to catch the thin beams of sunlight to read the old magic books his mother's parents had left her. He could still picture the folding cot he had spirited up there to lie on as he whiled away the tortuously long school holidays, furtively practicing magic, praying that his mother would vouch for him should the Ministry claim he was breaking the Restriction for Underage Sorcery.

For several minutes, he stood there, seeing more in his mind's eye than what lay before him. Finally, he cast one last look about him and extinguished his wand, Apparating back to the floor below. Carefully trekking back down the stairs, he saw that the couple had finished their dinner, and they were sitting in the front room. The television was on, and the man was happily ensconced in his recliner, nodding at the telly as he dozed. On the couch, the woman was humming to herself as she crocheted another afghan.

Snape stood in the doorway, watching, and a pang of remorse struck him that he was going to uproot these people...people who had all but completely transformed the home of his childhood into something charming. A tiny voice in his head, which sounded suspiciously like Hermione, prodded him to at least introduce himself to the people who had been so kind to his property, taking such good care of it for so long.

At that thought, he scowled, but he found himself Disapparating onto the front step anyway. It was dark, and the street was deserted in favour of families spending the evening sharing dinner or children doing schoolwork. With a toss of his head, he smoothed his hair, tugged at the turtleneck jumper, and resettled the trench coat over his shoulders. Then, he reversed the Disillusionment Charm and knocked on the door.

Inside, the man woke with a start and exchanged a puzzled glance with the woman. Grunting, he heaved out of his chair and went to open the door.

Gazing blankly at Snape, the man inquired, "May I help you?"

Snape regarded him soberly, clearing his throat before saying, "I do apologize for disturbing you, but I wished to introduce myself. I am Severus Snape, the owner of this property."

As he spoke, the woman appeared at the doorway to the sitting room, and she let out a crow of recognition. Her husband turned to look at her, puzzled.

She strode forward, smiling in welcome, and said, "Mr. Snape! How nice to meet you after all these years. I wondered about you quite often, seeing as we always met with Mr. Moore about the house." She extended her hand, reaching past her husband, and Snape quickly clasped her hand, feeling awkward.

Turning back to Snape, the man offered his hand as well, and when Snape gripped it, he shook it heartily, breaking into a welcoming smile. "What a surprise, I must say. Come in, please." He stepped back, gesturing for Snape to enter.

Hoping he wasn't flushing guiltily, since he had already entered their home, Snape inclined his head in thanks and crossed the threshold. They ushered him into the sitting room, and the woman fluttered over him.

"Shall I take your coat for you? Why don't you make yourself at home? Here, sit here, dear. Make yourself comfortable. Would you like some tea? Biscuits? You must take some refreshment..."

Snape tried to decline as politely as he could, but then the man jumped in with a counter offer.

"How about some scotch? Warm your blood after the night air. You sure we can't take your coat for you?"

Snape wrapped his trench coat about him even tighter and sat on the couch with a desperate air, protesting all the while.

"Madam, Sir, really, I am quite comfortable. Thank you. You needn't fuss over me." He perched on the edge of the seat stiffly, his posture ramrod straight.

Clucking at him as if to chide him, the woman shook her head and sank onto the couch by Snape. "Oh, I'm so sorry, please allow me to introduce myself. I'm Lucy. This is my husband, Edward." She gestured to the man who had seated himself in the armchair again. Then, she waved her hand at Snape and said, "And *you're* Severus Snape."

Oh, but it's good to finally meet you. You know, dear," and she leant forward and pressed a hand against his forearm, "I've heard all about you from the older families in the neighbourhood."

Snape's eyes widened even as his brows drew together in a frown. The woman saw his expression change and hastened to add, "Oh, no, nothing bad, indeed. We were just curious about who owned the house, since you didn't live here and we hadn't ever met you. Gladys told me about the tragic deaths of the previous owners. I'm so sorry for your loss, dear." She pressed his arm again, her expression sympathetic.

Snape gazed stonily at her, his chest tight. Before the silence stretched on too long, the man spoke up. "We must say, Mr. Snape, we've quite enjoyed this house. We'll be sorry to leave it."

Snape tore his gaze away from the mournful eyes of the woman, mentally shaking himself to regain his composure, as the sincere sympathy extended to him from a complete stranger baffled him. He focused on the man, and said, "That's what I wanted to talk about. I wished to extend my gratitude for the obvious care you have expended on this house. It is in better condition than the last time I left it. I appreciate how well you've taken care of... my home." He gravely inclined his head in thanks.

Both Edward and Lucy beamed at him, and Edward smacked the arm of his chair and said, "Glad to do it! This house has been good to us, so it's only fair that we were good to it."

Snape forced a wan smile, attempting to respond to the couple's hearty cheerfulness. He started when Lucy bounced up and bustled into the kitchen, and Edward watched her go, leaning forward and saying, with a wink, "She's gone to get something to nosh, if I know her."

Snape opened his mouth to protest again, but Edward waved his hand and shook his head vehemently. "No use, lad. She loves her company, Lucy does. Better just to humour her. Besides, her baking is quite good!"

Blinking, Snape shut his mouth again, staring blankly at the door to the kitchen, through which Lucy presently appeared, bearing a tray of cake, biscuits, and cups for tea. "I put the kettle back on, and it shouldn't be but a minute. You simply must try my baking, Mr. Snape; I'm rather proud of my recipes." She smiled at him and he raised his brows in acknowledgement.

In an attempt to regain some control of the situation, he spoke up. "Madam, Sir, please call me Severus."

Lucy pressed her hand to her throat and sat up straight. "Oh merciful heavens, that just doesn't seem right, what with you being the landlord, as it were."

Snape snorted derisively, and the couple blinked at him in surprise. "I have hardly been a landlord, Madam. I am merely the owner of the property, having inherited it. Mr. Moore was the landlord, for which I am grateful, as I haven't the patience for such things."

There was a moment of strained silence, broken by the whistle of the kettle. Lucy jumped up to get it, and Edward said, "Mr. Moore is a fine fellow, he is. He's been helping us find another place."

Snape nodded gravely and said, "Indeed, he is a good man. I am indebted to him for his skills."

Lucy returned, apparently having regained her equilibrium with the domestic chore of making tea, and she smiled again as she poured their cups. "So, Mr....Severus...if it's not too impertinent to ask, what makes you want this house again after all this time?" She handed him a cup, and he stifled the urge to ask for honey and lemon.

The fleeting thought of their tonic, coupled with Lucy's question about his reason to come home, made his lips quirk in a faint smile, and he gazed into the tea as he quietly said, "Not impertinent at all... I am retiring from my current job, and I need to build a place for myself and..." he paused for a moment, picking his words, "...for the woman I love." At that, he looked up to see an indulgent look pass between the couple.

Lucy beamed fondly at him and pressed his arm again, saying, "How wonderful! Why, if there ever was a reason for us to have to move, that's certainly the best one! We do hope you'll be happy here, just as we have been."

Snape found it easier to return the woman's smile this time, and he retorted, "I hope so, too." He sipped his tea and gazed about the room again. "It's definitely a happier place now than it was last I was here."

Lucy made a moue of sympathy again and proffered the plate of cake. "I can imagine, dear. Try a bit of cake."

Snape suppressed a smirk at the persistent belief that women apparently had that tea and snacks fixed everything and took a slice, nibbling a corner and following it with a sip of tea. Inclining his head graciously, he said, "Thank you, Lucy. Quite lovely, indeed."

The couple beamed at him, the woman flushing with pleasure at the compliment, and silence fell. Edward cast a quick glance at the telly, and Snape caught the movement. Taking a polite bite and sip, he decidedly set the teacup down on the tray and brushed imaginary crumbs from his lap.

"I apologize for interrupting your evening, and once again, thank you for your hospitality. I must return to my duties." He stood, waving repressively at the man as he made to rise, but too slow to impede the woman's instant jump to her feet. "Don't get up! I do know where the door is, after all." He smirked and made a little bow. Smoothly stepping past the woman, he paused and said, "I do hope your new home will bring you as much pleasure as this one has. I can't thank you enough for all you've done for me... and for my home."

With another nod, he spun and strode to the front door, the woman in his wake. She held the door open after he exited and called after him, "It was lovely to meet you, Severus, and best wishes to you and your lady!" Snape raised a hand in acknowledgement as he walked, and a beat later, the door closed, leaving him alone on the street.

Furtively glancing about, he made for the shadows along the side of the house at the end of the street, where he cast a Disillusionment Charm over himself again before Apparating back to the clearing beyond the Hogwarts gates. Ending the charm, he entered the grounds and began his trek back to the school, preferring the walk as it gave him a chance to mull over the changes he had seen in his old neighbourhood and home.

A part of him was surprised that he had not only introduced himself to the couple, but he had admitted his plan for him and Hermione. But, he realized that the couple's easy charm and grace reminded him of how he had been welcomed by Hermione's parents, and he had wanted to stake his claim to someone, as it made it all more real. Now, if only the eventual revelation of his plans to Hermione's parents went as well, he would definitely be living a new, charmed life.

Tuesday evening, Snape collected Hermione and took them to his quarters. Upon arrival, he gave her a quick squeeze and kiss and said, "Quickly... I have something important to tell you." Stepping back and tilting his head toward the bathroom, he eyed her with pent-up excitement.

Hermione's brows rose and she nodded, hastening to the bathroom for the hair products. When she took her place behind him at his chair, she said, "What's going on, Severus?"

Snape took a deep breath and licked his lips as she began brushing his hair. "I did it, Hermione. I've been to Spinner's End."

Hermione gasped and dropped the brush, rushing around to clasp his hands in his lap as she perched on the edge of the ottoman, gazing intently at him. "What? When? Are you all right?" She anxiously rubbed her thumbs over his knuckles as she gripped them.

Snape smiled fondly, his love for her welling up and tightening his chest. He twisted his hands around to squeeze hers in return and said, "Yesterday. I'm fine, love. Truly." She exhaled in relief and his smile widened. "Now, why don't you finish your task and I'll tell you about it?" He raised his eyebrows in mock-reprimand and she rolled her

eyes. As she shot up from the ottoman, grimacing at him in pique, he snorted.

When she had picked up the brush and returned her attention to his hair, he continued. "I had a meeting with the estate agent, and then I paid a visit to Spinner's End. I was quite surprised to see that the entire neighbourhood had improved since I had left, and my house was no exception. The back garden had been expanded, and the house itself was in good repair...better than I left it. The couple who lived there had put down carpet and papered the walls, and it hardly looked like the same place! They were quite kind...although I was none too pleased to find out that neighbourhood gossips had been talking about me."

Hermione interrupted him, pausing in her ministrations. "What on earth could they have said? You haven't *been* there in forever!"

Snape voiced a grunt of agreement. "Indeed. Turns out that they had heard the tale of my parents' deaths and that I, the subsequent owner, hadn't been seen since. Apparently, I was the subject of much curiosity for the current tenants."

Hermione began slicking the pomade and huffed. "It's none of their business. Honestly! How rude..."

Snape smirked at her offended tone and waved a dismissive hand. "It's human nature, love. At any rate, Lucy didn't strike me as the malicious busybody type. Like I said, they were quite kind."

"Lucy?"

"Lucy and Edward, the couple who live there. They have a son, Robbie, although he has moved out."

Hermione paused again and leant around Snape's shoulder, eyeing him oddly. "Severus, how do you know all this? What do you mean they were kind?"

Snape smirked again at her suspicious air and said, "I introduced myself to them and they invited me in. I wanted to thank them for how well they had taken care of my home." Hermione's eye widened in astonishment, and her jaw fell. Snape added, "Lucy wondered about me, and she seemed quite sincere in her sympathy for my loss...and in her good wishes for my future with the woman I love."

Snape thought perhaps Hermione's eyes might fall out of her head, since they were widening even more now. She dazedly sidled around him to drop onto the ottoman again, staring at him.

Her voice was almost a whisper as she said, "You told her about *me*?"

Snape suppressed a grin and murmured, "She asked why I wanted the house after so long. I told them I was retiring from my current job and needed to build a place for us."

Tears welled up in Hermione's eyes and her lower lip trembled as she gazed at Snape in adoration. Snape slid forward, his knees framing hers between his chair and the ottoman, and he lifted a hand to mould against her cheek. His eyes locked with hers and he leant closer to murmur, "I do hope I'm not being too presumptuous."

Hermione sucked in a breath and shook her head. She breathed, "Never," before closing the gap and kissing him soundly.

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Snape and Hermione Apparated to the Hall for dress rehearsal, consciously adjusting both appearances and demeanours after their tender intimacy in the dungeons. While everyone prepared their costumes and props on the set, Snape proffered the repaired chain for Hermione to wear in the second act.

"Miss Granger, this should snap much more easily, and not hurt you in the process. Put it on so we may test it."

Hermione clasped the chain around her neck and faced Snape, who flicked a frowning glance at the assembled cast before reaching forward and tugging the chain from her bosom, nodding as it broke easily without leaving a welt on her skin.

Hermione inclined her head in gratitude and said, "Much better, sir. I barely felt a thing. Thank you."

Snape nodded again, casting a muttered *Reparo* at the chain before handing it back to her. As he turned away from her, he spotted Harry a few paces away with Ginny, and he called, "Mr. Potter!"

Harry spun in surprise. "Sir?"

Snape gestured toward Hermione as Harry approached. "Miss Granger's chain has been adjusted to break away easily. Therefore, you must be careful in your interactions during the Masquerade to not break it prematurely."

Harry glanced at Hermione, who was holding the chain up for him, and nodded understanding. "Right. I'll be careful." He watched Snape start to turn away and said to Hermione, his voice wry, "Brings new meaning to Professor Snape saving our necks, eh?"

Snape stopped, taken aback by Harry's play on words, and looked over his shoulder to see Ginny, hand clamped over her mouth to stifle her giggles as her dancing eyes darted between all of them. Hermione and Harry were both grinning, and Snape allowed a small smirk to surface as he twisted and drawled, "Indeed."

Snape's smirk widened at Harry's astonished expression that Snape would joke back. Leaving the trio to stare after him in varying stages of amusement and surprise, Snape swept away.

The rehearsal went on, with various moments feeling somewhat flat and almost rushed. During the intermission, Dumbledore frowned vaguely at the cast, wondering what indefinable element was missing or wrong. Hoping that the second act would be better, he didn't say anything as everyone regrouped in preparation for the Masquerade.

The Masquerade wasn't as smooth as the previous rehearsal, but at least Hermione wasn't hurt by the snapping chain. Eventually, as the second act came to a close, Dumbledore simply stood in the house, gazing up at the stage with a troubled look. Cast members slowly edged out from the wings to huddle in solemn groups as they watched Dumbledore frowning up at them.

Snape Apparated back onto the stage near the proscenium, glancing between the wary cast and their director. He, too, felt the curious apprehension at the night's performance. While he and Hermione had performed as usual, and up to their normal standards, the rest of the cast overall hadn't measured up to previous levels. He knew that was what had Dumbledore so worried.

After a long, heavy pause, Dumbledore waved his hand and uttered a flat, "Sit." Students dropped where they were, exchanging anxious glances, and the professors remained standing.

"I am dreadfully disappointed." There was a susurrus of squirming in response to Dumbledore's quiet statement. Suddenly, several students couldn't meet his eyes. After another pregnant pause, he said, "What happened?"

More squirming, complete with furtive guilty looks, followed his question. Snape saw his Slytherins casting knowing glances at each other, tilting their heads and sighing. Striding closer to the group, he said, "The headmaster has asked a question. Mr. Malfoy, perhaps you have an answer?"

Draco and Pansy gave a guilty start, and Draco scowled before grudgingly saying, "We're just tired." At Snape's warning glare, he tacked on, "Sir."

Pansy gave an apologetic shrug, and was taken aback to see others nodding throughout the group. Ron's ears were turning a spectacular shade of pink, but he spoke up in response to Susan's prodding elbow.

"Malfoy's right, Professor. We've been at this a long time, and it's just kind of wearing, you know? I mean," and he glanced at the encouraging faces around him, from others who were glad to let him be the spokesperson, "we've been rehearsing for months now, and it's not always on a weekend night, and..." He stopped, clearly struggling for the best words. Then, shoulders slumping in defeat, he grimaced and said, "Well, sir, it's just got kind of boring now."

At that, those who had been looking to Ron to state their case gasped, their eyes bulging. He looked around hastily again and lamely tried to make amends. "Not boring exactly, just...we've finally done all there is to do, and we've seen how amazing it's all going to be, and now there's nothing left to look forward to. And the time requirements and the stress...we're just kind of worn out, sir."

All eyes were trained on Dumbledore, waiting for his reaction to Ron's summation. Finally, Dumbledore seemed to relax, and his disappointed gaze softened to one of acceptance.

"Of course. I should have expected this. *Of course* you're all tired. But, we'll be done in less than three weeks." He looked at them in appeal. "We've only three more rehearsals before the performances. And that last one will be the school performance, so we really only have two more of just us. I know it's been long and gruelling, but we're almost there, and if you can bring yourself to perform as I've already seen you do, then we can win that trophy!" His eyes sparkled again and he smiled at them. "Don't give up now. We've got something amazing here, among all of you, and I know you can keep up the good work for just a little bit longer, until Hogwarts wins the competition."

Relieved, the cast seemed to take a brace and sit up straighter. Dumbledore's acknowledgement of not only their hard work but the fact that they quite rightfully felt worn out, followed by his pep talk, was enough to make them feel appreciated and give them new heart. Resolving to do better next time, they nodded gratefully at the headmaster as they stood.

Beaming fondly at the cast, Dumbledore clasped his hands over his belly and said, "Run along now. I know it's a weeknight. Get to bed, all of you, and come back refreshed and rested for Friday's rehearsal."

As they trekked out of the Hall, several students clapped Ron on the back or mumbled their thanks for handling the prickly subject with Dumbledore, glossing over the fact that he had very nearly offended the headmaster.

Snape watched the students leaving and glanced at Dumbledore, wondering if he would try to change Snape's mind again. But the headmaster avoided catching Snape's eye, and Snape Disapparated to his quarters.

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Friday evening before rehearsal, while Hermione was fixing his hair, Snape told her about his search for contractors to work on Spinner's End.

"I really have nothing to go on except the fact that they are listed in the businesses section of the *Prophet's Supplemental*." He sighed, feeling out of his depth. "And I don't know enough about how much things cost to know whether or not they're quoting me something reasonable or if they're going to try to take advantage of me."

Hermione let out a rather unladylike snort. Snape twisted to eye her in surprise.

"Severus, really, you may not be versed in particulars, but can you honestly tell me you're afraid someone will try to take advantage of *you*?" Snape scowled at her and she laughed. "See? That's exactly what I mean! Even people who may not know you and your reputation will definitely respond to your intimidation tactics. You're not quite a wilting flower, you know."

Snape's lips thinned even more and he shrugged forward again with a huff. "You're not helping, Hermione."

Caressing his shoulder, she said, "I'm sorry, love, but I do think you're worrying too much. Besides, why don't you ask Professor McGonagall for assistance? She said she'd help you."

Snape twitched. "I know. I know. I just don't like to have to do that. I've been on my own for so long now..."

Hermione leant forward and wrapped her arms around him, murmuring in his ear, "But you're not alone anymore. You've got me, and you've got friends who want to help you. Learn to deal with it, dearest." Planting a kiss on his cheek, she went back to her task.

Determined to wallow in his inadequacies, Snape said, "Well, I haven't found anything for a job yet either. There's nothing in my field right now."

Hermione sighed and retorted, "Severus, stop it. You'll find something. Term's not even over for another few months anyway. You needn't stress so much about it. Everything will work out, I promise."

A noncommittal grunt was all she got for a response. Knowing when to leave things be, she refrained from further comment.

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The dress rehearsal that night regained its previous energy, thanks to the combined effect of Dumbledore's pep talk Tuesday night and the fact that it was Friday again, with no classes to get up early for the next morning. The relief at the cast's return to quality was nearly palpable in everyone, but particularly in Dumbledore. Thus it was that he beamed at everyone as they took seats in the house after the end of the second act, curiosity piqued at his unusual direction that they remain instead of immediately heading to their dormitories.

"Well done, once again, everyone! I'm so pleased to see you all back on your game. Next Friday, you'll be performing for the school and for any family that may wish to come to the show. Now, that's what I wanted to speak to you about. For those of you whose families will not be able to come for the performance next week, I need to know where to send the mirrors so that they may watch it. And, if you know already that your loved ones may need a mirror to see the performance for the Ministry in two weeks, let me know now and I can make sure arrangements are made." He fished out a roll of parchment and a quill and laid it on the apron of the stage, gesturing for students to come up and fill out their information.

There was a rustle as several students moved up to the stage, and low conversations buzzed in the meantime. Harry craned his neck toward Hermione and said, "Are your folks coming next week?"

With an indulgent smile, Hermione said, "Actually, when I owed them to ask about all this, they stated quite vehemently that they plan to make it to both showings. I've already given Professor McGonagall my address to hook up the Floo."

Harry grinned and nodded before turning back to Ginny as she returned to her seat, having listed Charlie's address on the parchment.

When everyone had listed their information, Dumbledore faced them again and said, "Tuesday evening is our last dress rehearsal before the performance for the school and your families. Let's make it count." He winked at them, chuckling.

"Oh, and I may as well tell you now, as I'll be posting a notice for the school tomorrow: Afternoon classes will be cancelled Friday, so we may have an early dinner before preparing for the performance. But, since your families may be coming to the show, we will have a slightly different set-up in the Hall for dinner. Your families shall arrive that afternoon, and we'll have many small tables so you'll be able to sit with your families instead of having to spread out along the House tables. We'll also be outfitting one

of the nearby classrooms as a lounge for them to use after dinner while we're setting up and getting ready in here."

All eyes were trained on him, absorbing the plans, and he snapped his fingers as he remembered one more thing. "Before I forget again, your families will receive post about what time they may Floo here. They'll be arriving in Professor McGonagall's office...yet another reason to cancel classes. Now, while the Floo is not as time sensitive as a Portkey, it can get a bit cramped if everyone tries to arrive at once. So, if you'd please stress to your families that keeping to the time schedule is quite important and very appreciated, I would be grateful."

With that, he bowed toward the group, then said, "Thank you all for your hard work. Time to run along to bed. Good night!"

Snape slunk away from the throng making its way up the aisle, flicking a glance at McGonagall where she still stood near the stage. She was rolling up the parchment while Dumbledore began restoring the Hall to its normal state. Snape strode up the aisle and leant against the wall by the doors, arms crossed, to wait for McGonagall.

He noticed that McGonagall was not ignoring Dumbledore as she had before, but he could still hear a note of the frosty attitude when she spoke. What surprised Snape was the almost weary tone of Dumbledore's voice when he spoke to her, and the fact that he looked rather melancholy now that the students were gone. Frowning, eyes narrowed as he stared at the older man's altered state, Snape wondered if perhaps Dumbledore was coming to realize just how badly he had hurt him with his high-handed tactics.

McGonagall tucked the parchment in her robes and made as if to assist Dumbledore with the transformations, but he waved her off, insisting that he could finish up and that she should go on. McGonagall raised her eyebrows but held her tongue, merely nodding before she turned up the aisle. After taking a few steps, she paused and looked over her shoulder at Dumbledore, who was working with a marked absence of his usual vigour. Her shoulders sagging a fraction as she sighed, she relented enough to call a polite, "Good night" through the house. Without facing her, Dumbledore said the same, and McGonagall shook her head as she turned to continue up the aisle.

At the back of the house, Snape waited, watching their interaction. When McGonagall reached the back row, he stepped forward and murmured, "Minerva."

McGonagall blinked up at him, starting in surprise. Casting a furtive glance over her shoulder, she kept going, urging Snape to exit with her. He quickly followed, and when they were out in the corridor, McGonagall looked up and paused, saying, "Is everything all right, Severus?"

Snape nodded solemnly, then tilted his head down the corridor, indicating that they should walk. As they strolled down the corridor to the stairways, Snape inhaled deeply and swallowed, clearly steeling himself to speak. Trying to look encouraging, McGonagall simply waited.

Finally, Snape spoke, his voice low. "You said that you were on my side..."

McGonagall nodded decidedly. "I am. Now what's on your mind?"

Cutting a sheepish glance at her, Snape paused, looking uncomfortable. "You know that I've reclaimed Spinner's End." She nodded again in encouragement. "I need to have work done on it to outfit it for my needs, but I don't know of anyone in particular with whom to contract for the work necessary. I know you've much more experience outside this school..." He met her eyes, his eloquent with appeal. "Might you have any recommendations on contractors? I would... appreciate your expertise."

McGonagall stood ramrod straight and beamed at him. "Nothing would please me more than to help you get your affairs in order to move on with your life, Severus. I can certainly give you some recommendations. Just let me make some inquiries myself, and I'll get back to you soon."

Snape exhaled heavily and inclined his head. "Thank you."

McGonagall gripped his forearm warmly, smiling at him fondly. "That wasn't so hard, was it? You needn't make such an event of asking for a favour or assistance, Severus. That's what friends are for, you know."

Before he could respond, they heard a noise down the corridor and turned to see Dumbledore closing the doors to the Great Hall. He saw them at the stairs and paused. They stared at each other for a moment, before Snape responded to McGonagall's prod.

His face stony, still gazing at Dumbledore, Snape murmured, "I thought I knew..."

At his remark, McGonagall looked back at Snape and felt a surge of sympathy. She squeezed his arm again, drawing his attention to her. He whipped his head around to face her again, and she grimaced. In a whisper, she said, "Everyone makes mistakes."

She would have gone on, but the black look he directed at her stopped her in her tracks. Coughing slightly, cheeks colouring awkwardly, she released him.

Snape stiffened and shook his head, his expression one of fleeting frustration when his hair didn't cloak his face as usual. "Good night, Minerva."

McGonagall nodded. "Good night, Severus." She watched him sadly as he stepped past her to descend the stairs to the dungeon. Glancing back down the corridor, she saw that Dumbledore was still standing at the doors to the Great Hall, gazing at Snape's retreating form. Shaking her head, she began the climb to her quarters, hoping that the two men would somehow manage to mend the breach in their friendship before it became irreparable.

62- Home Stretch

Chapter 66 of 84

Colin does something good for once; Snape fits in; Parvati stakes her claim; the school gets ready for the performance; families arrive and stir things up; and enthusiastic parents get to embarrass their children, as usual.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

A/N: Real life once again gobbles up my time to write. *sigh* As always, deepest gratitude to Ladyofthemasque for her mad beta skillz, yo. *snerk* Don't forget that you can check my LJ (<http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/>) for what's up with me and see either how far I've gone with the next chapter or see what's keeping me from writing! LOL Thanks to all you lovely folk who read and review and write and offer support--you make me so happy. *hugs to the awesome readers*

Chapter 62- Home Stretch

Monday morning, students paused as they passed the notice board on their way into the Great Hall for breakfast. Most students were surprised, as the first notice was not

just for the cast members, but for everyone.

Notice to all students: Tuesday evening, dinner will end an hour early, so please plan accordingly.

-A. Dumbledore, Headmaster

Notice to all cast members: Rehearsal will begin an hour earlier than usual Tuesday night. Be on time.

-A. Dumbledore, Director

Curiosity grew as the day wore on, with students wondering at the change of plans. That curiosity peaked Monday evening when McGonagall strode down the aisle along the Gryffindor table, pausing behind Colin Creevey. From her vantage point further down the table, Hermione peered surreptitiously at her Head of House as McGonagall leant down and whispered to Colin, whose eyes went wide at the professor's words. With an air of bewildered excitement, Colin gathered his things and stood, following McGonagall out of the Hall.

Hermione stared pensively after them, trying to deduce what might be going on, but came up empty. Flicking a glance up at Snape, she caught his eye, but he, too, was frowning in puzzlement. Despite her desire to steer clear of Colin as much as possible, she couldn't help but hope that he would be available in the common room that night so she could find out what was happening.

Sure enough, after dinner, when she and her friends all trooped up to the Tower, Colin was ensconced at a table with his camera and several wizarding photography books, including the one he had received at Christmas. His brother and a few others were grouped around him. His face was alight and he was talking rapidly, gesturing and turning pages with fevered intent.

Harry strode over and peered over one of the younger students' heads. "What're you up to?"

Colin looked up and grinned. "We're meeting early tomorrow so we can get photos for what McGonagall called a 'bio board.' And I get to take the pictures!" His chest puffed out with pride and his cheeks took on an even more hectic brilliance. "I'm brushing up on the best way to take portraits of everyone. They'll be developed and posted on a display outside the Hall before the shows."

A buzz of surprised conversation followed his explanation. Parvati piped up, "Are we going to be in costume or in regular robes?"

Colin frowned for a moment, then said, "I hadn't thought of that. I don't know. I guess we'll find out tomorrow night." His frown disappeared and the ecstatic grin came back.

Smiling indulgently at Colin's exuberance, Neville clapped him on the shoulder and said, "I'm sure you'll do a grand job, mate."

As Colin flushed and mumbled a sheepish, "Thanks," Parvati beamed at Neville, sidling away toward a cozy nook of armchairs and a side table. When she caught his eye, she tilted her head toward the chairs and smiled in invitation as she sank into one chair. Neville blinked and flushed, but shot a half-furtive, half-defiant glance around before taking measured steps to join her.

Lavender, who had been flipping through one of Colin's photo books and idly listening to his explanations, looked up to see Neville and Parvati, heads bent toward each other in low conversation. Her eyes narrowed and her lips thinned as she shut the book with a snap. Sucking in a deep breath, she called out a sharp, "Parvati!"

Parvati started and looked up. Neville turned to regard Lavender over his shoulder, his gaze a mixture of ready-to-flame anger and cool disdain.

Lavender scowled and snapped, "Come on, Parvati. Let's go."

Parvati's dusky cheeks darkened, and her eyes kindled with a rebellious light. In a tightly controlled voice, Parvati said, "Not now. I'm busy."

Lavender's brows rose in disbelief. She retorted with a shrill, "Excuse me?"

Neville deigned to turn in his chair, to give Lavender his full attention. "We're having a private conversation, Lavender, and we're not done yet. Please excuse us." He inclined his head in a courteous gesture of both deference and dismissal. Behind him, Parvati smirked in triumph.

Lavender drew back, taken aback by both Neville's firm self-confidence and Parvati's clear preference to be with him instead of her best friend. Mouth open, unable to reply, she stared at them, incredulous.

Her tone a trifle arch, Parvati said, "I'll see you later. Like I said, I'm busy." When Lavender kept staring at them, Parvati exhaled on a note of annoyance and gripped Neville's forearm, drawing his attention again. "Why don't we go for another walk?"

Neville's brows rose, but he nodded and smiled, rising almost instantly. Extending a hand to her, he ushered Parvati to her feet, keeping a hold on her hand once she was standing.

Parvati flicked another glance at the dumbfounded Lavender and added, "I quite enjoyed our last evening stroll." She tilted her head meaningfully and licked her lips, delighting in Neville's sharp intake of breath and the endearing blush that coloured his cheeks.

Manfully controlling his reaction to the knowledge that she was referring to the lingering kisses they had shared in a shadowed alcove off a dim hallway, he swallowed and tightened his grip on her hand, turning to Lavender as he led Parvati toward the portrait hole.

"Good evening to you, Lavender." Her mouth shut with a snap, and she glared at him. That quiescent indignation in his chest flared up at her expression and he rashly added, "Don't wait up," as he guided Parvati in her climb through the hole.

Both girls gasped, but whereas Lavender was gazing at Neville with a scandalized look, Parvati turned back to stare at him with astonished glee, her delighted laughter trailing away as they both disappeared into the corridor.

Tuesday evening, students hurried to finish their dinners before being shooed out early. Snape hastened down from the High Table to collect Hermione only about fifteen minutes before the early rehearsal was scheduled to begin. As soon as they were in the corridor, they Apparated to his quarters and rushed to fix his hair. There was only time for a fleeting embrace and kiss before they Apparated back up to the corridor outside the Great Hall, hurriedly backing out of the way as the rest of the student body poured out of the doorway. When they entered again, they saw that the cast had remained, and they all watched Colin entering with his camera setup.

Dumbledore Vanished the House tables and created a backdrop of sumptuous midnight blue velvet for the photos. Turning to the cast, he fished the original cast list from his robes and said, "Mr. Creevey will be taking portraits of you all for display before the shows. Now, as I call you up, I will tell you which costume to change into, and we will take several shots. After we finish the pictures, we'll have rehearsal. Any questions?"

Several people exchanged glances but shook their heads. Dumbledore nodded and called the first name, leaving the rest of the cast to wait their turns. McGonagall Summoned several of the smaller tables and chairs they had used at the Christmas party, gesturing for the cast to make themselves comfortable.

Neville smiled at his Head of House and thanked her, pulling out a chair and offering it to Parvati with a chivalrous air. She smiled and sat, beaming up at him until he sat by her. Lavender stalked away to another table and dropped into a chair, glaring at the pair. When Parvati scooted her chair closer to Neville's and rested her hand on his

knee, Lavender huffed audibly and jerked back in her seat, arms crossed angrily and foot tapping in agitation. Hermione saw the girl's negative reaction and sidled over to sit by her.

"You look upset, Lavender. Are you okay? Want to talk about it?"

Lavender cut her eyes at Hermione but said, "I can't believe my *best friend* would choose some boy over me!"

Suppressing a sigh at the dramatics, Hermione murmured, "It doesn't have to be a competition. Parvati shouldn't have to choose one over the other, because you're both different things to her. Don't force her to choose, and you won't lose anything." Ignoring the wisp of hope that *her* friends wouldn't force her to choose between them and Snape when the time came, she continued.

"It's not fair to expect her to spend all of her time with you and never develop any other meaningful relationships. You two have been friends for almost seven years. But you've also grown up in that time. Neville's a great fellow, Lavender. You need to recognize that he's no longer the shy, forgetful, bumbling boy we used to know. He's quite a sensitive, loyal, thoughtful young man now, and if Parvati and Neville fancy each other, it shouldn't hurt you." She paused to gauge the effect of her words.

Lavender was still scowling petulantly, refusing to come out of her sulk. Hermione sensed that pushing more would only serve to make Lavender dig in her heels, contrary-wise, so she shrugged and stood, leaving her to stew. As she walked away, she saw Seamus sitting with Luna again, and Dean was sitting at the table near them, but clearly feeling awkward. When he saw Hermione, he lit up at the diversion and shot to his feet, sauntering over, his smile gleaming white against his dark skin.

"Hey, Hermione! Excited about the show finally getting here?"

"Of course. Did you arrange to send a mirror to your mum? Or are they coming here?"

Dean grinned and chuckled. "My folks are coming. But I'm sending a mirror to my grandmother. My mum is pretty chuffed about getting to come here and see all the magical stuff." They both laughed.

"I know what you mean. My parents are going to be here for both shows. And no one else in my family knows I'm a witch, so I didn't have to worry about anything else." She turned to gaze over the cast. "I wonder whose families will be coming."

Dean followed her gaze and saw Lavender staring daggers at an oblivious Neville. Brows rising in surprise, he said, "Hey, what's got Lavender's knickers in a twist?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and muttered, "She's annoyed that Parvati and Neville are hitting it off. Apparently, she thinks Parvati shouldn't throw her best friend over for a boy."

Dean couldn't help but cast a sardonic glance at his best mate where he sat with Luna, and his voice was thick with sarcasm as he said, "I think I might know *bit* about where she's coming from..." Then, he shrugged exaggeratedly and added, "But, I'm over it. Maybe she just needs a little distraction..." With that, he flashed an impish grin at Hermione and swaggered over to Lavender's table, where he spun a chair around and straddled it, flopping down, crossing his arms atop the back, and resting his chin on them.

Hermione stifled a giggle at Lavender's expression of wary bewilderment and meandered over to a seat where she could watch Colin posing people and taking their pictures.

For some shots he used the tripod, and for others he moved around, getting different angles and distances. It was fascinating to see him work, as it suddenly made him appear older and more mature, his self-confidence in his skills shining through his habitual awkwardness and timidity.

Eventually, Dumbledore came to Hermione, and he spent some time having Colin take photos of her in different costumes and in varying poses. When he was finished with her, he called Snape over, his expression appearing, to Hermione's knowing eyes, slightly more strained and artificially cheerful.

For Snape's photos, he not only had Colin take pictures with the pre-set backdrop, but he Summoned a small set piece behind which Snape could hide, having him peer around it and blend with the shadows.

Hermione, who was enjoying the whole process, beamed as she politely suggested, "Professor Dumbledore? Perhaps a photo of the Phantom composing at his organ would be fitting?" At Dumbledore's thoughtful nod, she backed away again, smiling at the striking figure of Snape in costume at the organ.

When he was finished with the individual pictures, having taken some of himself at Dumbledore's direction, Colin piped up, "Sir, if you like, I can take a picture to create a poster to advertise the play. And I could get copies made for everyone involved."

Dumbledore's brows rose at the suggestion, and he smiled. "What a splendid idea, Mr. Creevey! Yes, why don't you do that. What did you have in mind?"

Colin pursed his lips and thought for a moment, his gaze skimming over the assembled cast. His brow furrowed as he spoke, once again seeming older than usual. "Well, sir, the whole story centres about this love triangle of Christine and the Phantom and Raoul, so I think a good poster would include the three of them."

Dumbledore nodded and beckoned the three actors to come forward. Placing them in front of the backdrop, he Summoned one of the candelabras from the Phantom's lair and placed it in the background. Then, gesturing grandly to Colin, he said, "I bow to your experience, Mr. Creevey. Place them as you see fit."

Colin nodded and set his lips in an expression of concentration. Waving his hand, he said, "Hermione, step up front here. Yes, that's right. Okay, Harry, you stand back there, just in front of the candles. Now, you look toward her, and Hermione, you face front." He nodded again as they followed his instructions. "Great. Now, Professor Snape..." He blinked rapidly as he glanced up to see Snape looming near him, shattering his concentration.

Clearing his throat, Colin continued, "Uh, just, um, step up here, by Hermione, please, Professor, sir..." Snape stood behind Hermione to one side and Colin stepped back to survey the scene. "Perfect. Well, almost..." Taking a deep breath and refocusing, he frowned thoughtfully and squinted. Crossing his arms and tilting his head, he grunted to himself.

"Got it. All right, sir, just move closer, please, and, uh, just, um, well, I guess... look possessive." The final phrase was blurted out and Colin flushed as he cringed, waiting for Snape to flay him with venom.

He wasn't the only one astonished when Snape smirked and chuckled darkly, shaking his head. Leaning around Hermione, he said, "Miss Granger, I shall be drawing from some of our blocking during Music of the Night, if you have no objections."

Hermione looked up at him, seeing his eyes glinting with amusement. She nodded politely. "Of course not, Professor." Composing her expression into one of professional indifference, she laughed inwardly as Snape wrapped his right hand around her waist and cupped her left shoulder in his other hand as he pressed his body against hers, leaning her back until her hair was tickling his face.

Colin stared, discomfited, then shook himself and made a concerted effort to return to his professional attitude. "That's great. Uh, Harry, just look this way, and you two face out toward us. Perfect." He stepped back to his camera and peered through the viewfinder, framing his shot. "Okay, just hold that for a moment." He snapped several pictures, moving and changing angles. Then, finally, he straightened and said, "All right, I'm done. You can go. Thank you." Finally turning to Dumbledore, he said, "I'll be able to put the writing on the poster once the picture is developed, and, if you approve, I can make copies of the finished product for everyone."

Dumbledore beamed at him and clapped the boy's shoulder. "Well done, Mr. Creevey; I thank you." Turning to the rest of the cast, he continued, "Very well then, if you would all please step into the corridor, I'll set up the Hall for rehearsal." He made shooing motions and the cast filed out to await his cue to re-enter.

In the corridor, Parvati sidled up to Colin, who was fussing with his equipment, and said quietly, "Say, Colin, I know you said you could make copies of the poster for everyone, but what about the photos that'll be on the display board?" She flicked a furtive glance around and saw Lavender scowling off to one side, and, while Neville was standing near Parvati, he was engaged in conversation with his mates. Flushing prettily, she murmured, "I mean, could you get me a copy of the portraits? Like, of someone not myself?" At that, she glanced again at Neville, and Colin cottoned on.

Smiling hugely, he said, "No worries, Parvati. I can get you a copy of Neville's portrait if you like." He stifled a snigger at her fleeting expression: a mixture of embarrassment and pleasure and triumph.

Trying to maintain a dignified manner, and trying to ignore the heat creeping over her cheeks, Parvati nodded and said, "Thank you. And... no need to spread this everywhere, okay?" She pinned him with a look of appeal and admonition, and he nodded, flashing her a conspiratorial smirk.

"Sure thing, Parvati."

Neville finished laughing at someone's comment and turned to see Colin and Parvati in hushed conversation. Stepping closer to her and tucking her hand in his, he half-smiled and said, "Hey, you two, what's going on?"

Both Parvati and Colin averted their eyes guiltily, giving Neville a pang of unease, and causing him to squeeze Parvati's hand tighter. His easygoing expression faltered, and he looked between them anxiously.

Parvati guessed his worry and said dismissively, "Just talking to Colin about the portraits." Then she flashed him a dazzling smile and squeezed his hand in return. "Come on, Neville; walk with me?" Tugging on his hand, she guided him away from Colin and the disapproving Lavender, stopping several paces down the corridor to lean against the wall in a shadowed alcove, where she drew him in for a stealthy kiss. His sharp gasp made her smile, and she backed away, saying, "I've never enjoyed *walking* with someone as much as I do with you."

Their low giggles trailed down the corridor to the waiting group, where most people ignored them.

Dumbledore called them in for rehearsal, and everyone entered the transformed Hall. As they all prepared for the opening of the first act, the excitement level palpably grew. It was down to the wire; after tonight, they would be performing in front of an audience!

Hermione was standing in the wing, watching people as they flitted about nervously, their eyes taking on the glassy stare of fear. Out loud, but to herself, she said, "They're all getting scared. There's no need for that! Oh, I wish they'd stop worrying."

Snape...who had Apparated up to the fly-rail above her, to be out of the way of the anxiously scrambling cast...heard her comment and remembered how he had been assailed with doubt the first time he had stood on the stage at Her Majesty's Theatre, looking out into the vast audience. Nodding to himself and firming his resolve, he Apparated onto the apron of the stage, down centre, drawing many people's attention.

Dumbledore squinted up at him and frowned from within the enchanted orchestra. "Is something amiss, Severus?"

Snape coolly shook his head and retorted, "Not exactly, Headmaster. I would like to speak to the cast for a moment, if that's acceptable to you."

Blinking in consternation, Dumbledore said, "Certainly, go right ahead."

Snape spun on his heel, blanketing the cast with his gaze. His voice rang through the space as he said, "If I may have your attention..." Every eye focused on him, and silence fell.

"It seems obvious that many of you are feeling quite nervous about performing, now that we're almost to the show nights. I understand the doubt and worry that can shatter the confidence of the best of us." He bit back a smile at the incredulous glances exchanged among students. His voice softened to almost a hypnotic, soothing tone as he continued.

"Come. Step out here, all of you. Stand here on the apron with me. Come along. Don't be shy...not by this point, at any rate." The final phrase came out twisted with sarcasm, which oddly enough served to comfort the students who were used to his snark.

When the cast had joined him on the stage, he turned to face front, gesturing for everyone to follow suit. "Look. Stand here and look out into the audience." The lights were already set for the performance, and everyone squinted against the glare.

After waiting a long moment for the question to form in the air around them, he said softly, "Now, what do you see?"

The silence in the Hall seemed to nearly creak with the gears turning in twenty minds. Eventually, someone spoke up.

His voice tentative, Neville said, "Uh, begging your pardon, sir, but I can't see anything."

Snape's smile was almost a smirk of satisfaction. "Why, Mr. Longbottom, how very astute of you. That is it exactly. You *can't* see anything." He paused to let the significance sink in, slowly spinning to look at the faces full of concentration and confusion.

Spreading his hands to each side, he drawled, "How can an audience be so worrisome, when you can't see them anyway?"

Comprehension broke over frowning countenances, lighting them up with relief. With a crow of delight, Ginny clapped her hands and laughed. "Brilliant! Come on, you lot; there's nothing to worry about. We can't see them, so it's like they're not even there!" She paused to beam at Snape, inclining her head in gratitude. "Thank you, Professor. That helps immensely."

Snape sketched a courtly bow, one corner of his lips quirked up, and caught Hermione's eye as he straightened back up. She was beaming at him fondly, clearly pleased that he had not only remembered her advice, but had chosen to share it with the cast so magnanimously.

The group broke up into smaller clumps, buzzing with bracing conversation, steadying their nerves as they returned to their places. Dumbledore peered up at Snape thoughtfully and said, "My thanks, Severus. That was just what they needed." Snape inclined his head in a stiff nod and Disapparated. With a sigh, Dumbledore returned to the instruments, readying their enchantment.

In the wings, people exchanged glances, their nerves at fever-pitch. The opening music began, and their final rehearsal by themselves was set into motion. The excitement enhanced their performances, showing off what they had truly accomplished over the previous months. Once the familiar routine of song and dialogue and blocking began, their anxiety was sublimated into determination and finesse.

When intermission arrived, the cast seemed to take a deep breath as one, blinking in awe and delight at the synergy that was manifesting itself through them. The euphoria they had induced inside themselves buoyed them into the second act, which virtually throbbed with emotion.

When the last strains of the finale faded, a veritable explosion rang through the Hall as every single cast member let loose with a raucous cheer, dancing and hugging and clapping each other on the back in celebration. Even Snape appeared in the midst of the hubbub, his lips stretched wide in a triumphant smile, nodding and murmuring praise to those who approached him with congratulations and thanks.

Ginny and Hermione both rushed him at the same time, each of them grasping a forearm and squeezing with glee. He eyed them with pleasure, chuckling at their effusive comments. Harry ambled up behind Ginny, also beaming, and shoved his hands in his pockets, glancing around awkwardly as he said, "That trophy is as good as ours, thanks to you, Professor."

Snape blinked at Harry, momentarily robbed of speech. Even though they had managed to call an unspoken truce, for Harry to be so up front with this proverbial olive branch still took him by surprise. Flicking a glance at the two girls still hanging on him, he cleared his throat and retorted, "While I appreciate the sentiment, Mr. Potter, this has clearly been a group effort." Then, pausing to smile at the people surrounding him, smiling at him, all accepting him into that group, he felt his chest tighten and said, "But I do believe you are correct in your assessment. Mr. Filch had better ready a spot in the Trophy Room once this cast performs next week."

The lull that had fallen at Harry's words to Snape, waiting for Snape's response, was broken again by hoots and cheers and applause. Snape glanced down at Hermione, only to see her gazing up at him, radiant in her joy. A swift flash of desire and longing for her swept through him, and he saw the answering gleam in her eyes before he wrenched his gaze away, gently prying himself from the girls' grips.

Dumbledore stood in the house, looking up at the ecstatic group, exceedingly proud...not only of their theatrical accomplishments, but of the way Snape had transformed into someone other than an irascible automaton. Harkening back to the ill-concealed anger and hurt he had seen in the younger man the previous summer, when Voldemort had been defeated and the celebrations pointedly had left him out, Dumbledore's heart swelled with satisfaction to see many of the same people who had excluded Snape almost literally embracing him as one of them. The thought made him happy, but also stung as it prodded the wound of his own estrangement with Snape.

Heaving a deep sigh of remorse and embarrassment, he shook himself from his melancholy thoughts and focused back on the scene at hand, saying, "Amazing! All of you were simply splendid! Now, before I send you on your way for some well-deserved rest, we must set up your curtain call." When several faces stared at him blankly, he clarified, "The order in which you take your bows." Nods and smiles blossomed around him again as he gestured for everyone to split up into the wings.

"Mr. Creevey, Mr. Finnigan, and Mr. Finch-Fletchley, you enter from stage right, and Mr. Thomas and Mr. Boot, you enter from stage left. You five shall meet in the middle and then face front, stepping forward to take your bows as one, then split up again to spread toward the side you came from." The boys followed his directions, and then Dumbledore continued, "Miss Abbott, Miss Brown, and Miss Bones, you three enter from stage right, and Miss Lovegood, Miss Patil, and Miss Bulstrode, you enter from stage left." The girls followed the boys' lead and performed curtsies instead of bows.

"Excellent. Now, Professor Trelawney, you come out from stage left, take your bow, and join the ladies to the left again." Trelawney floated out and gave a deep curtsy, earning an indulgent smile from Dumbledore. "Thank you, Sibyll. Now, Miss Weasley, you enter from stage right, then wait, and Professor McGonagall, you enter from stage left to join her in the middle, and then the two of you will step downstage to take your bows before both going to stage right." Ginny and McGonagall exchanged proud smiles as they met centre stage.

"Now, Mr. Malfoy, you enter from stage right, and Miss Parkinson, you enter from stage left. Mr. Malfoy, once you two meet in the middle, I want you to take Miss Parkinson's hand to escort her downstage, then I would like you to present our diva and allow her to take a bow before the two of you do so together and then move to stage left." Draco nodded gravely. As they emerged onstage, he made a show of following Dumbledore's instructions, his natural swagger and flair for arrogance lending itself to the task.

Dumbledore's lips twitched as he smiled. "Well done, Mr. Malfoy, thank you." Draco gazed about haughtily with a superior smirk. "Mr. Weasley, you shall enter from stage right, and Mr. Longbottom, you from stage left. Meet in the middle, come downstage, and take your bows, then split to either side." Ron and Neville bounded onto the stage, lopsided grins almost matching as they took their bows.

"Wonderful. Now, Mr. Potter, you shall enter from stage right by yourself, then end up on the same side. Miss Granger, you shall enter from stage left and step to the left after your bow." He paused while they did as they were told. "Now, that leaves a small space in the centre for our final cast member." Dumbledore looked up, about to call for Snape, but Snape beat him to it and Apparated into the very spot between Harry and Hermione, startling them all.

Lips quirked in a wicked smirk, Snape gave a courtly bow and straightened, saying, "I believe you were looking for me, Headmaster?" On both sides of him, sniggers and snorts met his mischievous demeanour.

Dumbledore shook his head slightly, then said, "Let's just say your flair for the dramatic has served you well in this case. That will do quite nicely, thank you." Rolling his eyes at Snape's self-satisfied expression, he said, "All right, once you've all taken your bows, you'll all spread across the apron in a line, join hands, and take a bow as one." He waited as they complied. "Perfect. Then, once you've paused a beat in appreciation for the audience's applause, you'll split down the centre and file out into the wings again as I close the curtain."

At his nod, the group broke apart, heading for the wings, but before she could take more than two steps, Hermione gasped in surprise as Snape grasped her from behind and Disapparated with her into the house, his eyes gleaming impishly. Dumbledore spun, seeing them a few rows behind him in the aisle, and narrowed his eyes. After her initial shock, Hermione was trying to suppress giggles at the implication that the Phantom managed to have the last word, spiriting Christine away even after the story was over.

Dumbledore murmured, "Are you all right, Miss Granger?"

Hermione tried vainly to compose herself, but her eyes shone brightly with merriment. "I'm perfectly fine, sir. A bit surprised, but otherwise, I think it's brilliantly funny."

Behind her, Snape crossed his arms and stood with a cocky air. Not wishing to antagonize the man further, Dumbledore conceded. "Very well then, Severus. Have it your way. Just don't frighten Miss Granger."

"Of course not." His chin tilted up in response, and Dumbledore turned back to the rest of the cast now emerging from the wings into the house.

Beaming at them all, Dumbledore clasped his hands and said, "Now, hurry on to get your rest, and don't let anything take this feeling away from you before Friday. Mr. Creevey, I shall meet with you tomorrow after classes about the portraits and posters. Good night!"

The cast broke up, still grinning and bouncing with satisfaction. As people passed Snape standing in the house, several flashed smiles at him, and a few murmured greetings and thanks again. The strange feeling of acceptance blanketed him once more, and he was warmer than was his usual wont as he returned their regards, nodding and replying to each one.

When her mates passed by, Hermione joined them, grinning joyfully as she bade him good night. McGonagall passed Snape and laid a proud hand on his arm as she murmured, "About time you got the recognition you deserve, Severus." Winking and smiling at him, she added, "Oh, and I hope to have some details for you soon. Particularly since you'll have access to the house come Friday."

Snape met her eyes, unable to wipe the pleased smile from his face. Inclining his head in gratitude, he said, "That would be wonderful, Minerva. Thank you."

McGonagall squeezed his arm briefly and strode briskly away, leaving him to gaze after Hermione's retreating form. The rush of longing ambushed him again, tightening both his chest and his trousers, and he Disapparated.

**** *

During Potions class Wednesday, Snape watched Hermione with a mixture of yearning and disgruntlement. He had rashly Apparated to her bathroom the night before, only to have to pop out again when he heard her entering with someone else. He froze long enough to note that it was another female voice...not Ginny's...but disappeared before there was any chance that he could be discovered. The slight scare had been enough to keep him from returning that night, and he took the edge off his desire on his own.

He harboured the hope that they would somehow have an opportunity to meet again soon. Perhaps they could work something out over Easter break...

Both Dumbledore and Colin were absent from dinner that night until they managed to sneak in very close to the end of the meal. Colin bore the look of one exceedingly pleased with himself, his eyes bright and cheeks flushed. He shook his head at all inquiries, determined to shovel as much food into his mouth as possible in the few minutes left before it all disappeared.

When the tables were cleared, the few remaining students at the Gryffindor table followed him curiously out of the Hall, asking him about his meeting with the headmaster to create the poster they had heard about all day. Once they were all in the common room, more people peered at him with interest, eagerly awaiting seeing the rumoured posters.

"I got all the portraits developed, and the poster shots, and the headmaster and I worked out the text to put on the posters. Then, once they were finished, he said we should hurry up to dinner and he would finish making the copies of everything and sending them out. I'm really pleased. They turned out well!" His grin was triumphant as he beamed about the room.

Knowing they just had to wait, the students settled around the common room, working and studying and chatting. Hermione was seated at a large table with several books and scrolls spread in front of her. She had been seized with a frantic desire to work on her preparation for N.E.W.T.s, feeling that she had been rather lax in her study habits lately.

She was roused from her absorption in Arithmantic equations by the excited murmurs rippling through the common room. A house-elf had popped into existence in front of the notice board, carrying a poster larger than himself. Students crowded around the elf as he unfurled the large poster and stuck it on the board, waving his hands at the other notices to move them out of the way.

A susurrus of gasps swept through the group as they took in the images gazing out from the poster. Hermione, staring over her stack of books at the crowd, merely blinked like a deer in headlights at the stunned looks being turned her way. The rumble of anticipation was silenced by the shock of seeing Snape, Hermione, and Harry in their poses.

Feeling almost goaded to investigate, Hermione deliberately rose from her table and crossed to the gape-mouthed crowd. Ignoring the way they shrank from her approach in awe, she pushed through to see the poster. Immersed as she was in the play, she still was stopped in her tracks by the sheer magnificence of the image before her.

It was spectacular.

Across the top, it said, "The British Ministry of Magic and Hogwarts Academy of Witchcraft and Wizardry present *The Phantom of the Opera*." Below that on the left, it continued, "Directed by Albus Dumbledore, Starring Severus Snape, Hermione Granger, With Neville Longbottom, Ronald Weasley, Pansy Parkinson, Ginevra Weasley, Minerva McGonagall, Draco Malfoy, and Harry Potter as Raoul."

Along the bottom edge, it urged, "Abandon your defences and let the magic of the music take over." (A/N...[See it here.](#))

Hermione gazed out of the picture, leaning back trustingly against Snape, who embraced her possessively yet tenderly. Harry stood in the background watching them, an anxious, longing expression on his face. Their demeanours made the page seem to throb with emotion, the entire image fraught with the tension of their relationships.

Hermione swallowed hard, staring at the picture Snape holding her. A rush of yearning made her stomach quaver, and she had to force herself to wrench her gaze away. Glancing around, she saw the students who were not on cast eyeing her with expressions ranging from confusion to disgust to astonishment. Her lips thinned with indignant anger. She should have been prepared for those reactions again. It had happened with the cast, so she should have expected it to happen with the rest of the school.

Lifting her chin regally, she turned to find Colin watching the whole scene, wide-eyed with trepidation. She stepped closer to him and said, "It's wonderful, Colin. You captured the essence of the play beautifully. I look forward to getting my own copy from the headmaster. Thank you." Nodding gravely, she returned to her seat, leaving the rest of the group to mutter and gossip to their hearts' content.

Deliberately keeping her attention on her work, she didn't notice the other cast members rolling their eyes and heaving exasperated sighs at the non-cast students who were making a big deal about Snape embracing Hermione. If she had, she quite likely would have been overcome with gratitude that she had gained some allies, at least where the venue of the play was concerned.

Parvati was across the common room, sitting with Neville, and when some of the other Gryffindors meandered away from the notice board, commenting about how creepy it was to see their professor wrapped around Hermione, she flamed into indignation and spoke up.

"Oh, give over. It's called *acting*, you know. If you can't deal with it, then don't bother coming to the performance. It's really quite romantic and tragic and beautiful, provided you're not so immature that you can't see past the actors to the play." She wrinkled her nose and grimaced in scathing disdain. Hermione had been so understanding and supportive the night before, when Parvati had gone with her to her room in search of a sympathetic ear to talk about Neville and Lavender and the whole tension between them.

Hermione had listened at length to the other girl's worries and hopes, and she had not only comforted her, but had given her advice on how to handle Lavender's jealousy and cement her growing relationship with Neville. It seemed the least she could do was support Hermione in return, and help stave off the hurtful reactions of the student body. Besides, Snape *had* proved himself to be more than just a snarky bastard who lived to terrorize teenagers.

Neville scowled reprovingly at the gossiping students and piped up on the tails of Parvati's comment. "Parvati's right. Just you wait. We're going to win this competition, and you'll all be thanking Professor Snape and Hermione for winning that prize for Hogwarts. It's thanks to them that we're all as good as we are."

The other students just goggled at Neville blankly. Parvati squeezed his thigh and drew his attention. "They'll just have to see it to believe it. Don't waste your breath." Cutting an exasperated glance at them, she squirmed closer to Neville and slipped her arm through his, nestling against his side as she twined fingers with him.

Neville's brows rose at her manoeuvre and he flicked a dismissive glance at the group that was now looking at him with disconcerted expressions. Drawing himself up proudly, he levelled a firm gaze at them and said, "Move along, then, you lot. Can't you tell when you're not wanted?" He ended with a smirk to show he was partly teasing, and the others stifled sniggers as they vacated the premises, leaving the pair to canoodle uninterrupted.

As students passed by the notice board on their way to breakfast, they saw that not only was a copy of the poster that had been tacked up in their common rooms also on the board by the Great Hall, but there was a new notice as well.

Afternoon classes will be cancelled Friday. Dinner will be early again, and all students are invited to come to the final dress rehearsal Friday night, as the performance for the Ministry will be during Easter break. Plan for your holiday accordingly.

-A. Dumbledore, Headmaster

By Friday morning, the whole school was buzzing with anticipation of the performance that evening. Those teachers who still had classes that morning gave up on trying to actually teach, and instead allowed the students to play games, since it was nigh on impossible to focus on anything worthwhile in the face of such a momentous event followed by a holiday.

At lunch, a harried-looking McGonagall could be seen at the High Table going over the schedule of family arrivals with Dumbledore. At any given moment, if one were to look at a cast member, he or she would see expressions ranging from near-maniac excitement and euphoria to green-about-the-gills, sweaty panic. Hermione kept shooting furtive glances up at Snape, envying him his pose of unconcern, even if she knew him well enough by now to pick up on the minute signs that he was anxious as well.

After lunch, Dumbledore opened an unused classroom near the Great Hall and transformed it into a comfortable lounge for the families to use while they waited for dinner and the performance. He then collected Colin and the two of them brought down the portraits of the cast members, carefully placing them on the broad rolling chalkboard. Dumbledore had unearthed. Several students hung about in the corridors, watching, as the "bio board" was prepared.

The poster was placed prominently in the centre, with each cast member's portrait positioned around it, labelled with the actor's name and the characters they would be playing, balancing the whole display. The hubbub grew as more students saw the costumes their schoolmates and professors wore, their character personas lending an air of immediacy to the impending event.

McGonagall sent prefects to gather the cast members whose families were arriving, and throughout the afternoon, more and more people came trickling down the stairs from McGonagall's office toward the lounge. Of course, as they strode down the corridor, they invariably paused at the display to exclaim in delight at the portraits.

Hermione had a joyful reunion with her parents, leading them from McGonagall's office and offering them a tour of the castle before taking them down to the lounge with the other families. On her route through the castle, she laughingly met up with some of her mates doing the same thing.

Dean was heading up a small group of wide-eyed Muggle family members, accompanied, to Hermione's surprise, by Lavender. Lavender was patently enjoying explaining things to the awestruck people, as Dean looked on, beaming fondly. When Hermione and her folks were out of Lavender's range of vision, Hermione cocked her head and furrowed her brow at Dean, plainly asking what he was on about, having Lavender with him, and the boy merely flashed her an impish grin, winking and waggling his eyebrows. Hermione giggled, shaking her head at his ploy, but grateful all the same for the distraction he had provided, keeping Lavender from dogging Parvati and Neville.

By the time they wound down to the main corridor, heading to the lounge, everyone had arrived for the evening, and both the corridor and the lounge room were echoing with excited chatter. When she caught sight of the Weasleys, she couldn't help but smile at the way Mrs. Weasley was alternating between fawning on Ron, Ginny, and Harry, and haranguing Fred and George as they persisted in trying to get some of the other students to test their latest inventions.

Mr. Weasley saw Hermione and her parents and lit up, heading their way, hand outstretched in welcome. He vigorously shook her parents' hands as he said, "So lovely to see you again! Isn't this exciting? But of course, this is all probably old hat to you, isn't it? Ginny mentioned that Hermione was the one to go see the play again and provided Dumbledore with the view of the sets. I'm sure you've been to things like this before, haven't you?" He was cut off by Mrs. Weasley approaching and tugging his grip from Mr. Granger's hand.

"Arthur, do let the man relax!" She turned a cordial smile on them and said, "Nice to see you again." Then, turning to Hermione, she beamed and threw out her arms, crying, "And Hermione! You must be so excited!" Crushing the girl to her ample bosom, Mrs. Weasley continued, "Ginny's written how well you've all been doing, thanks to you. And I must say, your picture is so beautiful!" She released Hermione from her fierce hug and held her at arm's length, gazing fondly at her.

Behind their parents, Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny were making faces at Hermione, mimicking their mother's effusive greeting. Harry hung back, his hand over his mouth to stifle his chuckles. Hermione bit back a laugh and simply smiled, saying, "Thank you Mrs. Weasley. I *am* excited. We all are; I'm sure."

With that, she pointedly looked over the older woman's shoulder at the younger Weasleys, noting that Ron had once again reverted to the stoic chalk-faced expression of a nervous stomach. Fred and George were smirking at him, hands stuffed into the pockets of their dragon leather jackets. Mrs. Weasley rounded on her offspring, scowling in exasperation at their antics. While she launched into a new scolding, Harry edged around the animated family and sidled up to Hermione and her parents.

Offering a lopsided grin, he said, "Afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Welcome to Hogwarts." He shook hands as well, albeit not as exuberantly as Mr. Weasley had.

Mrs. Granger gave Harry a brief hug, smiling as she said, "Thank you, Harry. It's good to see you again, and so interesting to see Hogwarts!"

Mr. Granger gazed around at all the adults in wizard robes and said, "It is sort of overwhelming, but I'm glad we got a chance to see it."

Harry laughed and nodded. "I think I know how you feel. Why don't you find a seat and relax until it's time for dinner?" He turned to Hermione. "Want to find a quieter spot?" Tilting his head toward some tables and chairs in the rear of the room, he rolled his eyes meaningfully at the noisy group still crowding the doorway.

Hermione snorted and nodded. "Yes, let's." As they wended their way through the furniture, Hermione added, "It won't be long till dinner, anyway." She caught her parents' eyes and explained, "We're having dinner early, because we need to transform the Great Hall and prepare for the play. So, you'll wait in here until it's time for the show to start."

"So, everyone will be able to have dinner with the students?" Mrs. Granger looked around appraisingly.

Harry spoke up. "Yeah. We're not going to have the long House tables as usual though. Dumbledore said we'll have the smaller tables like the ones we had at the Christmas party." He cast a glance back at the Weasleys, waving at Ginny when she blew him a kiss. With a sheepish shrug, he said, "I'm planning on sitting with Ginny and the Weasleys. They're the closest thing I have to family now anyhow."

Hermione nodded approval. "No problem, Harry."

Mrs. Granger blinked rapidly, as if suddenly struck by an idea. "So, might Severus be available to join us for dinner again?" She turned an eager face to Hermione, who could only stare back at her mother, dumbfounded. Harry's brows rose in surprise, and he looked between the two women, confused.

Brain working furiously to process the implications of her mother's question, Hermione forced herself to respond. "I don't know, Mum. Sometimes Professor Snape takes his meals in his quarters. I'm not sure if the headmaster will have the High Table or not, since we'll have smaller tables."

Harry squinted in recollection, saying, "That's right; you had Snape over to your house for dinner when he and Hermione went to see the play." Then, with a sceptical grimace, he added, "And you *want* to sit with him again?" Catching Hermione's kindling glare, he shook himself and held his hands up in surrender. "Hey, I know he's changed lately, but that was *before* he mellowed. I just can't imagine enjoying his company back then."

Hermione's hackles relaxed a bit at his concession, but she couldn't help but feel righteous satisfaction...tinged with unease...at her parents' instant protestations. Really, it was her mother's vehement reaction that made Hermione uncomfortable. If she was enamoured of Snape just from the one visit they had made to London, what in blazes would happen once she saw him perform as the Phantom? Would she swoon over him even more, or would she go ballistic over him snogging her daughter so intimately in the play?

Hermione desperately changed the subject to asking about the latest news from her parents' dental practice, nodding attentively as they answered, whiling away the short time until everyone was called for dinner. As they filed out into the corridor, Hermione writhed inwardly over what could happen if Snape came to the Hall for his meal.

The Hall was set up with the multitude of smaller round tables, and the long High Table was gone. The student body as a whole seemed to view this change as a sort of party, and the air was filled with the sounds of cheerful and festive conversation and laughter. Harry nodded and walked off to join the Weasleys at their table, leaving Hermione and her parents to select a table near the doors. Her parents rather felt that it would be a good vantage point from which to watch people enter, as they had never had a chance to be in any location with so many wizards there at once.

Near where the High Table usually stood, Dumbledore and McGonagall sat at a smaller table, deep in discussion. McGonagall was sorting through parchments and pointing things out occasionally, and Dumbledore nodded along, gesturing to the others in the Hall. Eventually, Trelawney floated in from the staff entrance and sat at their table, garnering a courteous nod from both professors before they went back to their conversation.

Hermione sat with her parents, pointing at people throughout the Hall, indicating who her professors were and what they taught, and showing which students were her House-mates and which were from the other Houses, since there was no clear distinction between them this time. She mentioned which students from other Houses were her friends, and offered little anecdotes about each person as she went, enjoying the avid fascination on her parents' faces as they learned more about what her life had been for the past seven years.

They exclaimed in delighted surprise at the way the food appeared on the tables, and Hermione took a moment to recount her S.P.E.W. days, wiser now about the true nature of the house-elves' enjoyment of their service to Hogwarts.

After making their way through their first selections, they noticed Snape entering from the staff entrance. Mrs. Granger jerked back in her seat, beaming as she attempted to wave across the room at him. Hermione pulled her mother's hand back down hastily, leaning forward with scarlet cheeks to hiss at her about how *not* cool that was.

Snape hadn't seen her aborted wave, as he had been scanning the Hall for the professors' seats. Realizing that there were no tables set aside for teachers as usual, he blinked in consternation at the thought of joining other professors where they sat intermixed with students and their families. He saw Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Trelawney at one table, but balked at having to suffer both Trelawney's flakiness and Dumbledore's awkward attempts to get back in Snape's good graces.

While he stood there deliberating, Mrs. Granger scoffed at Hermione's insistence that they leave Snape alone, shaking off her daughter's restraining grip and rising. Eyes wide with panic, Hermione appealed to her father for help, but he just laughed at his womenfolk, grinning in amusement as his wife pulled away from Hermione and bustled across the Hall to Snape.

Hermione could only watch in horror as her mother charged through the wilderness of tables, unwilling to chase after her and cause more of a scene. Glancing around the Hall, she saw a few people noticing her mother's approach, and she fought to remain composed, though she heartily wished that the floor would open and swallow her.

Snape blinked in surprise when he realized that the person crossing the Hall was headed for him, and that person was none other than Hermione's mother. Frozen in bewildered shock, he was rooted to the spot as she closed the gap, arms stretched forward as she beamed at him.

"Severus! It's so lovely to see you again! Won't you join us for dinner?"

She reached him, and it was only through years of drill at required courtesies that he responded to her, taking her hand and inclining his head in greeting. A swift glance around the Hall showed that they were indeed creating a spectacle. Not wishing to give anyone cause to take him to task for lack of politeness, he manufactured a smile and bowed, lifting Mrs. Granger's hand, but stopping short of saluting it with a kiss.

"Mrs. Granger, a pleasure as always." He was interrupted by a tinkling laugh and a scolding expression.

"Now, now, Severus, I thought we were past that. I'm just Di, remember?"

Snape offered a rueful grimace and then said, "My apologies... Dione."

Mrs. Granger pressed her free hand to her mouth and stifled a girlish giggle. "You remembered!"

With a wry twist to his lips, Snape released her hand and straightened, murmuring, "I'm not likely to forget that visit at all."

Mrs. Granger tilted her head and regarded him with a pleased grin. "We're over there." She pointed to the table where her husband and mortified daughter were watching. "You *will* come dine with us, won't you?"

Realizing that to refuse would only create more of a sensation, he graciously inclined his head and said, "Of course." Then, with a nod, he gestured for her to lead the way, but instead, she tucked her hand inside his elbow, smiling up at him. Gut twisting with unease at the intimacy, he merely cleared his throat and stared ahead, guiding them through the Hall to the Grangers' table. He desperately wanted to catch Hermione's eyes, but was also afraid to, knowing he would probably see hers sparking with anger.

When they neared the table, accompanied throughout by the susurrus of whispered speculation about them, he gratefully disengaged Mrs. Granger's hand from his arm, stepping forward to shake hands with Mr. Granger, who had stood as they approached.

"Good to see you again, Severus. We're quite enjoying our first glimpse of Hogwarts, and we're looking forward to the show."

"Indeed. Welcome to Hogwarts, both of you." He flicked a glance at Hermione, where she was still seated, and edged around the table, leaving empty chairs on both sides between the Grangers and himself. When they were all seated again, he focused on serving himself from the platters on the table, even though his gut was roiling nervously. A furtive look toward Hermione told him that she had stopped eating as well, her plate pushed away from her, half-filled.

Mrs. Granger resumed eating, but after a few bites, she piped up, "So, Severus, are you excited about the performance?"

Snape looked up and nodded cautiously. "I don't know that *excited* is the exact term for it, but I am looking forward to getting it over with."

Mrs. Granger made a moue of disbelief and waved her hand airily. "Oh, come now, it can't have been all bad! Certainly you've had *some* fun, eh?"

Snape swallowed forcefully, clamping down on his desire to lock knowing eyes with Hermione. Instead, he cleared his throat and murmured, "Some parts have been... enjoyable, but it *has* been an added stressor...one without which I could gladly have existed."

Hermione uttered a faint snort of agreement as she nodded. Mrs. Granger tilted her head and regarded them with a frown.

"Can you honestly say you won't take part in next year's production? I thought I understood that this competition will be ushering in a new curriculum from here on out..."

Snape's lips pursed for a moment, then he said, "I'll not be here next year, madam. This term marks the end of my tenure at Hogwarts."

Both Mr. and Mrs. Granger stared at him with expressions of surprise. Disconcerted, Mrs. Granger blurted, "But...what will you do?"

Snape thinned his lips in an unconscious gesture of reprimand, managing to make Mrs. Granger flush at her impertinence, but then he replied, "I shall be moving back to my childhood home, and I am exploring various avenues available to me."

Jumping in defensively, Hermione said, "Professor Snape remained in his position here until Voldemort was defeated. Now that Voldemort's gone, Professor Snape can finally do what *he* wants with his life."

An awkward silence fell, and they all returned to picking at their meals. Eventually, Mrs. Granger said, "Well, that's a shame. I'm sure everyone here will be sad to see you go."

At that, Snape lifted his gaze to hers, actually smirking in amusement. "Suffice to say, Dione, that your perceptions of my reputation and regard here are rather coloured by your limited encounters with me. My departure will be lamented by very few of those who will remain here."

Hermione quickly covered her mouth with her napkin, stifling her snort of laughter, vainly attempting to change it into a cough, but her dancing eyes gave her away. Snape slid a narrow-eyed glance at her and chuckled darkly.

Regaining her composure, Hermione turned an apologetic gaze to her mother and said, "I told you when you took our picture, mum, that Professor Snape had quite the reputation here. It's only been since the development of this production this year that Hogwarts has had a chance to see something other than the usual surly Potions Master." With that, she couldn't help but flick an impish smirk at Snape, who gave her a quelling look.

Still, Hermione continued, "You heard Harry earlier. He admitted that before the play, he couldn't imagine wanting to share Professor Snape's company, but he's admitted that," and she turned a meaningful expression on Snape, "you've *mellowed*, sir."

Snape affected an air of disinterest, while inwardly marvelling at the positive change in attitude Harry had come to display. Deep in his soul, he hoped that such a transformation would stand them in good stead when he and Hermione went public. If the Boy-Who-Lived-Twice were on their side, that would likely have quite an effect

on public opinion.

In an effort to calm his nervous stomach, Snape poured himself a cup of tea, suppressing a smile as he reached for the honey and lemon. Hermione noticed and almost instantly copied his movements. At her parents' confused looks, she said, "Good for the throat," and focused back on her teacup as she sipped.

Silence reigned at their table, for even Mrs. Granger felt chastened enough after her last faux pas that she refrained from speaking.

Not long afterward, Dumbledore stood and announced, "Dinner will end in a few minutes. All students and families must vacate the Great Hall. Cast members, you and your guests may retire to the lounge we have set up, and I will call for you when we are ready to prepare for the performance. Everyone, the performance will begin promptly at 7:00, and you must all be in your seats before then. Prefects, I ask for your assistance in assuring that everyone is here before we start." He eyed the prefects, scattered throughout the tables, nodding in satisfaction at their acknowledgements. "After the show, Professor McGonagall and I will be happy to escort our guests in their departures. Thank you." He sat down amid a resurgence of conversation.

Hermione looked at Snape and said, "Sir, are we expected to be ready when the headmaster collects us from the lounge? I mean, should we attend to your hair before then, or wait until the cast has been called into the Hall again?"

Snape blinked. "Excellent question, Miss Granger. I think it would be wise for everyone to be ready for anything once we are in the Hall. Who knows what Dumbledore may have up his sleeve before we let the audience into the house? I daresay we should withdraw once everyone is gathering in the lounge."

Nodding firmly, Hermione said, "Certainly, sir." As platters began disappearing from the tables, Hermione turned to her parents and said, "I have to help Professor Snape prepare for the show. You two just wait in the lounge with the others. I'll see you after the performance."

People began dispersing, and Hermione and Snape stood, the Grangers a beat after them. The Weasleys were passing their table on the way to the door, and Hermione grabbed Ginny's arm.

Wheeling around, brows rising, Ginny queried, "What's up?"

Eyeing her intently, Hermione said, "Gin, could you take my folks with you to the lounge? I can't go right now; Professor Snape and I have to go do his hair."

Ginny glanced up at Snape, who was gazing at her warningly, and plastered a cheerfully accommodating expression on her face. "Sure thing!" She smiled winningly at the Grangers and said, "Come on, you're welcome to join us. Although I make no promises about how much my dad will badger you about Muggle devices."

Everyone laughed, and the Grangers followed Ginny after giving Hermione a quick hug. Snape and Hermione watched them go, then locked eyes. Without a word, Snape offered his arm, Hermione gripped it, and they Disapparated.

63- Showtime!

Chapter 67 of 84

It's the last rehearsal, and the first performance for an audience--of their families, friends, and the rest of the school!
Just how will everyone react to all their hard work... and the surprises in store?

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

A/N- It's been a long time coming again, and I apologize, but RL sure does know how to take over free time. *sigh* BUT, this chappie is a long one, so I hope you enjoy it. Thanks as always to Ladyofthemasque, and thanks again to Horserider! And of course, thank you to all you faithful readers who continue to offer support even though the delays. *hugs you all* :) Now, the show must go on!

Chapter 63- Showtime!

Upon arriving in Snape's quarters, Hermione rolled her eyes and dropped her forehead to his chest with a groan.

"What's wrong? Hermione, are you all right?"

Sagging against him, Hermione sighed and said, "It's my mum again! I swear she's enamoured of you, and that's just so..." She seemed to writhe, trying to come up with the right word. Finally, she sagged against him more and blurted, "...awkward."

Snape gave a faint snort, wrapping his arms around her in comfort. "Try to focus on the bright side: at least they like me, right?"

Pulling back and levelling a grim look at him, she pursed her lips and huffed. Then, stepping out of his embrace toward the bathroom, she cast a foreboding glance over her shoulder and said, "For now." With that, she disappeared into the bathroom, leaving Snape to frown after her in unease.

When she emerged, laden with the hair products, Snape was sitting in his armchair, twisted about, staring at her. "Just what did you mean by that?"

Rolling her eyes a second time, she took up residence behind him and firmly grasped the crown of his head, turning him to face forward again. As she began brushing his hair, she said, "I *mean*, I have no idea what they'll do once they see us kissing in the play. You know how others have reacted! They could get all parental, or worse, my mum could bloody well get jealous!"

Snape was silent, blinking as he absorbed her words. He was at a loss. Never had he been in such an odd situation, and he had no idea what to do. After a long moment, he was startled to hear Hermione muttering vehemently behind him.

"I've seen the way she looks at you. She fluttered around when we were in London, all nervous like a schoolgirl, and she's almost as bad now. Honestly! Just waving at you across the Hall... charging through to accost you like that... in front of everyone! For all I know, she'll just be *more* attracted to you after you perform..." She paused long enough to shudder. "And if my mother starts lusting after you..." Snape felt a particularly violent tug on his hair, but held his tongue. "I will *not* tell her how good a kisser you are!"

At that, Snape was torn between shuddering in sympathy and barking with laughter at Hermione's unexpected declaration. When she had subsided to what sounded like growls, smoothing the pomade through his hair, he eventually dared to say, "So... I'm a good kisser, eh?"

Hermione burst forth with an inarticulate exclamation of indignation, followed closely by her dropping the brush and circling around in front of him, her hands planted on her hips as she glared at him. He kept his expression one of inquiry, but mischief danced in his eyes. Shaking her head at his distracting manoeuvre, she decided to play along with his attempt to lighten the mood. Smirking at him, she lifted, "I'll concede that you have been in the past. But I daresay you'll have to remind me just so I can be sure."

Cracking a grin, Snape reached out and gripped her waist, tugging her into his lap, where he swooped in and snogged her thoroughly. After several minutes, during which his hand had crept up her leg and slid beneath her robes, he pulled back, locking heated eyes with hers.

In a throaty purr, he said, "I've missed you so. Let me come to you. You know we can be careful."

Hermione felt a surge of moisture in her knickers and sucked in a breath. "I-I want to..."

Pressing his advantage by slipping his hand further up her thigh to lightly graze her damp knickers, he urged, "Then say yes. I've behaved; I haven't bothered you. Surely that deserves some sort of reward?" He nipped along the cord of her neck as he spoke, sending chills over her body.

"It'll be easier to be covert once everyone has gone for the holiday. Perhaps you should wait until then." Her breath was becoming more uneven, and she was fighting the desire to squirm off his lap and tear his trousers open.

Grinding his erection against her, he murmured, "Why not have both? Haven't you missed me? Haven't you missed this?" One deft finger delved under the elastic of her knickers, slipping over her damp curls and curling in to slot between her swelling lips. Her ragged gasp as he circled her clit gave him his answer.

Eyes closing despite herself, Hermione was submerged under the intense sensations, all the stronger for having been denied. A low moan issued from her parted lips and she felt her legs opening further in invitation.

Giving in to the rush of lust, and carried along on the momentum of the moment, Snape cradled Hermione in his arms and shot to his feet, staggering to his bedroom, where he all but threw her onto his bed. Her surprised squeak turned into an encouraging moan when he made quick work of opening her robes, shoving her clothing out of the way, and pulling her knickers down her legs.

When he crawled alongside her, his hand sweeping up her thigh to cup her mound, Hermione curled forward, feverishly trying to make her way through his clothes to free his cock. A strangled groan from Snape increased her effort, and she ended up sitting up, shoving him onto his back and imitating his frenzied disrobing of her person.

His eyes were screwed shut as she pulled his erection from his trousers, but they snapped open again at the feel of her tongue swiping the moisture from the tip. A shocked, "Hermione!" made her pause.

Face flushed, eyes bright with lust, lips glistening, she gazed up at him, crouched over with her hand wrapped around the base of his cock. "What?"

The innocence of her query was belied by the positively sinful way she dipped her head and swirled her tongue around the flared tip.

Hands gripping the bedclothes, Snape panted and said, "That wasn't... my intention..."

Lips spreading in a wicked grin, she murmured, "I know, but you just inspired me." Then, she leant forward again and slid as much of his cock into her mouth as she could, keeping her hand wrapped around the lower half. As she slid back up, suckling, she stroked her hand up as well, and Snape's head slammed back onto the bed.

"Holy mother of Merlin... Yes... Just like that... Good gods, love... It's incredible..."

Hermione continued stroking and suckling, enjoying his reactions so much that a fresh surge of wetness trickled between her thighs. The unexpected intensity was enough that it didn't take him long to climax, and this time, when he warned her, she knew that the first spurt wasn't all of it, and she was ready for it.

Snape's drawn-out roar wavered with the convulsions coursing over his body. Hermione pulled back so just her lips were wrapped around the head of his cock, but kept stroking with her hand until the rhythmic pulses of liquid onto her tongue finished, leaving him to collapse back onto the bed, trying desperately to catch his breath.

Neatly slipping her pursed lips off the end, Hermione carefully released his shaft, idly flicking her wand toward his bathroom, wordlessly Summoning a towel. Turning to one side, she discreetly spat into the towel, drying her mouth and hands before dropping it to the floor beside his bed.

Snape lay there, panting, staring incredulously at her. Smug and serene, she smiled at him, then said, "I'm sorry; I interrupted you, didn't I?"

Her teasing smirk and goading comment lit a blaze of challenge in Snape's eyes, and he shoved up onto his elbows, reaching forward to tug Hermione down beside him. When she settled on her back, giggling, Snape rolled onto his knees, tucked himself into his trousers, and crept back down the bed, his hands smoothing along her legs again.

When he reached her drenched curls, he wasted no time in sinking one long finger into her, grinning at her moan and the way she arched her back and closed her eyes. Pressing up, he found the centre of pleasure within her, and she shuddered. Fluttering his finger against that spot, he leant down and traced his tongue between her pussy lips, lightly circling her clit. Her gasp and whimper spurred him to further action, pressing harder and suckling her flesh.

He could tell that she was cresting her peak quickly...which was all to the good, considering their situation...and he suckled firmly, purring against the engorged nub between his lips. Hermione's legs tried to clamp shut, and she curled forward, bucking in her orgasm. Her breathless shriek filled his ears, and the way she chanted his name as she came down from her climax made his chest tight with emotion.

Gently disengaging from her, Snape sucked his finger into his mouth, laving her juices from it. As Hermione blinked dazedly up at him, he grinned. "As fantastic as all that undeniably was, we have a performance for which to prepare, my love."

Nodding weakly, Hermione struggled to rise, scrabbling for her knickers. Before she put them on, she cast a quick cleansing spell on them, drying the fabric for comfort. Hurriedly putting themselves back in order, they exchanged sheepish yet delighted grins, then returned to the sitting room to finish Snape's hair.

A glance at the clock told them that their tumultuous liaison had taken less than fifteen minutes, from snog to satiation. Hermione deftly smoothed his hair where it had been mussed in their lusty romp, finishing the task quickly. While she worked, a faint bemused smile quirked her lips.

Her voice thoughtful, she said, "So, does that qualify as a 'quickie'?" At the tail of her query, she patted Snape's shoulders, indicating that she was done. Snape immediately twisted in the chair to regard her with raised brows.

He stared at her, incredulous. "*What?*"

Stepping around to drop into his lap again, she said, "Well, you know how people talk about having a 'quickie'... So, what we just did: does that qualify?"

Snape blinked. Slowly, he said, "I guess it's all relative." At her inquiring tilt of the head, he continued awkwardly, "I suppose that if one's usual experiences are of a longer duration, that may qualify, but if one is unfortunate enough to encounter only those whose stamina may be lacking, that may be longer than what they are used to." Averting his eyes sheepishly, he cleared his throat and said, "For the record, such rapid conclusions will *not* be my norm, I assure you."

Hermione's brows shot up as she realized he was worried she may have found *him* lacking. Darting forward to plant a reassuring kiss on his lips, she murmured, "Mmm, I look forward to your proof." Then, pulling back and sighing, she said, "But, we didn't dare spend too much time *this* time as it is, since," and she nodded toward the clock, "we are about to be running late for the show."

With that, she stood, tugging Snape up after her. Once again giving herself a quick once-over to make sure she was presentable, she tucked her hand in the crook of his arm, smiling up at him in affection and excitement. Snape gathered his mask and gazed into her upturned face, catching the contagious spark of anticipation. With a nod, they Disapparated.

They appeared in the corridor outside the lounge where the families were waiting just in time to see Professor McGonagall emerging with the cast in tow.

"Ah, Severus, Miss Granger, excellent. Come along now; it's time to prepare for the show." She nodded and gestured for them to follow.

Hermione removed her hand from Snape's arm and obediently inserted herself into the group at McGonagall's heels. Snape waited until they were all out before taking up the rear. Interested faces leant out of the lounge doorway, watching the cast entering the Hall, but no one was daring enough to actually step into the corridor and peek into the Hall through the open door.

Dumbledore was at the orchestra, doublechecking all of the instruments. As she passed him, McGonagall tilted her head toward the set pieces, and he nodded. She then did a quick survey to make sure that everything was as it should be. The students huddled about in nervous groups, muttering and whispering.

Snape hung back in the house as Dumbledore called for everyone who needed the singing spell to line up on the apron of the stage. The array of flushed, pale, and green-tinted faces that met their eyes was alarming to say the least.

"Mr. Weasley, are you all right?" The surprised concern in Dumbledore's voice drew everyone's attention. Susan stood next to him, gripping his hand tightly in an attempt at comfort.

Ron swallowed with difficulty and said, "Just... anxious. That's all, Professor." On both sides of him, others nodded and grimaced in agreement.

Hermione, knowing from past experience in Quidditch how poorly Ron could react to pressure, ascended the stage and said bracingly, "What is there to be nervous about? It's our families and friends out there tonight. They're going to be amazed and impressed no matter what...and we're quite amazing and impressive at this point anyhow, not to put too fine a point on it...so we should just enjoy ourselves!"

She looked at everyone, hoping to see them relaxing, but they all gazed at her with a mixture of incredulity and reproach. A quiver of dismay roiled in her stomach, suddenly afraid that they wouldn't rise to the challenge after all this hard work. The flutter of panic showed in her eyes as she spun, searching for Snape.

"Professor Snape?"

Snape strode down the aisle. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

Her gaze was imploring and her query held a touch of desperation as she said, "What was it exactly that you gave Harry at rehearsal after the rope mishap?"

Dumbledore averted his eyes in chagrin, and even Harry looked elsewhere, pretending he wasn't listening.

"A simple Calming Draught."

Hermione rounded on Harry. "It worked for you, didn't it, Harry? You felt better right away, right?"

Harry blinked, taken aback. "Uh, yeah, it was fine. Felt kind of detached from the world, but nothing bothered me anymore."

Whirling back to Dumbledore, she said, "If people are so worried that it's making them ill, couldn't Professor Snape get them some of that potion?"

Before Dumbledore could respond, Snape climbed onto the apron with the rest of them. His expression was inscrutable as he said, "Miss Granger, if you had listened to Mr. Potter's answer, you would have noted that he felt disconnected from the world. Considering the emotional aspect of performing, one *should* be 'bothered' enough to act accordingly. A Calming Draught would hamper one's acting ability, and that is *not* what is needed tonight."

Hermione's face fell, and her shoulders sagged in defeat. Snape surveyed the cast again, eyes narrowed.

"I must say that I am surprised that so many of you are held captive by nerves. I *thought* that we had covered this *last* time. Don't you remember? You will not be able to see the audience past the glare of the lights. And Miss Granger had a point: our audience tonight will be far from critical in any respect. Therefore, *what* has you so worried? If you feel nervous, *channel* that energy into your performance! This is merely the end of a journey, and an opportunity to get those jitters out before the performance that really counts is upon us."

He paused, watching the wheels turning in their heads as they exchanged thoughtful glances. Some seemed to stiffen their resolve after his words, but a few others were still crumbling.

Veering to take a completely different tack, he snorted in derision and his lip curled as he said, his voice more venomous than it had been in some months, "I knew it. I knew the vaunted 'Gryffindor bravery' was a lie." In the wake of his insult, gasps of shock ricocheted through the cast, and every Gryffindor there glared at him with blazing indignation.

Hermione stared at him, hurt, and Ginny eyed him with shrewd calculation. Harry scowled angrily, while Neville and Parvati clasped hands and straightened stiffly, glaring at Snape in high dudgeon. Ron and Colin, who were the shakiest of the remaining nervous students, went from wan to brick red in an instant, House pride pricking them into reacting.

Colin breathed a faint, "It's not a lie," while agitatedly rubbing his hands on his trousers to dry his clammy palms.

Sucking in a breath and shaking off Susan's grip, Ron resettled his shoulders and said, "We're *not* cowards!" He shoved his jaw out in defiance, holding Snape's disdainful gaze.

Eyes narrowing even more, and one corner of his mouth quirking up, Snape drawled, "Then *prove* it." After a beat of charged silence, he cocked one eyebrow up and smirked, crossing his arms as he watched realization dawning on face after face.

Ginny's brows shot up, and a faint, "Oh!" burst from her lips. Snape cut a glance at the redhead, and she was shaking her head in amazement, a tiny smile on her face. Hermione looked between them, and quickly followed Ginny's conclusion. Relief flooded her as she understood Snape's purposeful manipulation.

But it was Neville who startled the rest of the cast with his crow of, "You!" As they all turned to him, he continued, "You don't really mean that! You just said that to rile us up!"

Snape remained silent, but when accusing glares whipped back to him, he merely slid his gaze over the cast and raised his eyebrows, shrugging nonchalantly and letting his arms fall to his sides.

A chuckle from the wing wafted out over the astonished sighs and mutters. McGonagall stepped out and smirked at Snape. "Thank you, Severus, for reminding us all of whom and what we are. Very clever and cunning of you." Snape sketched a bow and flicked a self-satisfied glance over the students who were still marvelling at him and his tactics. As he backed away, she stood straight and said briskly, "Now, since your momentary lapse of confidence has passed, let's remember everything Professor Snape has so deftly manoeuvred us to see, and give the very best performance we can!"

Decided nods followed her rousing words, and everyone got into their first costumes as they finally accepted *Suaviloquentia* from the headmaster. Once Draco and Pansy had cast their glances as well, Dumbledore said, "Everyone must stay backstage from now on, as I shall be opening the house to the audience. Be quiet, and await my return for the start of the show."

As everyone scurried into the wings, Dumbledore began closing the curtain. Snape, curious about how Dumbledore was going to handle all of the spells for the orchestra and set pieces, Apparated behind him in the house.

"Severus! You should be backstage."

"I shall in a moment. I just wanted to know if you were going to be in the house as usual to effect all of the set changes. It might distract the audience if they can see you doing everything."

Dumbledore smiled. "I shall be right here as usual, but I will not be visible. I wouldn't want to do anything that might take away from the audience's experience of this performance. I know it will be spectacular." The two men looked at each other for a long moment, Dumbledore's smile fading. Finally he said, "That was a clever way to manipulate them into getting past their nerves. Well done."

Snape gazed at him a beat longer, then said coolly, "I learned from the best." With that, he Disapparated backstage again, leaving Dumbledore to bear the sting of that barb.

Backstage, the tension was palpable, but at least people weren't falling apart like earlier. Snape wandered among the cast, pacing like a caged tiger, energy building within him as the opening moment drew closer. Although the cast was already quiet, they went completely silent and still when they heard Dumbledore opening the doors and welcoming the audience into the house. Their tableau was finally broken when Dumbledore himself appeared from the wing, ushered in by the rising buzz of conversation beyond the curtain.

With a flourish, he cast a Silencing Spell on the curtain, turning to face the cast with a huge smile.

"When I start the linked charms for the orchestra, they will run to completion, unless I have to stop them for any untoward reason. We've already done this several times over, so you should be fine. Just pay attention, and above all, *have fun!*"

He fished a pocket watch from within his robes and said, "We'll be starting in about fifteen minutes. I'll be out there, running the show as always, but you won't be able to see me." He didn't see Snape's mouth twisting at his comment. "I must say, everyone out there is eager to see you all. I have also placed mirrors in one of the rows to test them again before next week. Beyond them, your families are seated closest, and the rest of the student body is behind them. I'm so exceedingly proud of you all... But, I must run. Break a leg, everyone!"

With one final grin, he whirled and retreated to the wing, removing the Silencing Spell as he went. The cast exchanged looks, still seemingly rooted to the stage, until Snape stepped forward and murmured, "Places, everyone. Be ready."

Taking deep breaths, they scattered to their opening places, and Snape nodded slowly before Disapparating.

From his vantage point in Box Five, Snape peeked out at the animated audience talking and gazing about at the theatre. When the lights began to dim, a susurrus of shushing and hissed commands to be quiet rippled through the throng. Suddenly, the orchestra began playing, and a whoosh of surprised gasps swept over the audience.

A thrill raced over Snape, like liquid fire in his veins, as what felt like the culmination of his destiny was set into motion. The curtain opened, and the audience went silent just in time to hear the crack of the gavel as the lights onstage came up to reveal the auction scene.

The performance ran smoothly, full of energy and life. Snape noticed the difference between how it felt being onstage and not being able to see the audience and his unusual position of being able to pop about and see both the performance and the audience. His chest swelled with pride at the entranced faces in the house, and he thrilled to the sounds of their gasps, murmurs, and applause. Whenever he was in the wings, he could tell that the rest of the cast had forgotten all anxiety in the joyous high that came with a responsive audience.

When he Apparated under the trap door with Hermione, he couldn't stop himself from enveloping her in a bone-crushing embrace, stealing her breath with a consuming kiss. Struggling for air, Hermione pulled away enough to see the excitement lighting his black eyes, and she beamed back at him, silent, as words were unnecessary.

During Pansy's croaking scene, it delighted the cast to hear the audience's laughter cut short by Snape's malicious chuckles echoing through the space. Scores of wary faces turned up to see the chandelier shaking as Snape crowed, "Behold, she is singing to bring down the chandelier!" Then, when Pansy had rushed off, distraught, and the scene continued, with Snape flitting about and casting menacing shadows, the cast mentally steeled themselves for the audience's reaction to Terry's drop from the catwalks in the noose.

They were not disappointed.

Several shrieks of dismay and startled oaths sounded throughout the house when Terry dropped, swinging like a deadweight from the cable. It was a credit to him that he didn't react to them by changing expression, but it did give Neville something to address when he came out to control the situation. As the sets shifted to the roof, and the music and chaos quieted, the audience's rapt concentration was almost palpable.

Harry and Hermione filled the air with sweetness in their duet, only to be followed by Snape chilling the theatre with his despair. During the faint singing by Harry and Hermione from the wings, after Snape had crumbled onstage under the Phantom's loss, furtive sniffing was audible in the house, proving just how moving his performance was.

Then, as his rage grew, and he rode the statue back up to the proscenium, the sets changed again, placing Hermione on the apron, where, when Snape shouted, "Go!" the chandelier rocked ominously, flashing and tinkling as it came loose and plummeted at her feet. Not only did Hermione cringe and cover her face as it crashed and went dark, but more shrieks of alarm rang out in the house as people ducked and scrambled for their wands, in a vain attempt to protect themselves.

When the theatre was dark, and the music had come to a triumphant end, there was a split second of electric silence before the audience erupted into applause. The applause crescendoed, buoyed along by the cheers and whistles that went with it. As the house lights came up, allowing the audience their intermission, the cast was huddling in ecstatic groups in the wings, beaming, hugging, and clapping each other on the back. Dumbledore suddenly appeared, having reversed his concealment charm, and cast another Silencing Spell on the curtain, muting the conversational buzz from the house.

"Splendid! Everything is perfectly wonderful! I can see the audience's faces, and they're all so moved by your spectacular performances. Well done, and keep it up for Act Two!" Shining eyes and wide smiles answered him. Nodding happily, he said, "Not much longer now until the Entre-Acte begins, so I'll just get back out there..." With that, he lifted the Silencing Spell and disappeared again.

Everyone changed into their Masquerade costumes, some displaying their jittery excitement more than others...bouncing on the balls of their feet, shaking their hands from the wrist, going through the dance steps, pacing, or rolling their heads on their necks and exhaling forcefully as they shook every limb and stretched every joint to release their tension.

The music began, and eventually, the lights dimmed again. Ron and Neville flashed grins and thumbs-up signs at the rest of the cast before heading onstage to start Act Two.

Even from his vantage point on the stage in the midst of the Masquerade scene, Snape heard the audience's collective gasp when he appeared out of thin air, resplendent in the Red Death costume. There was a smattering of applause when he disappeared again, complete with the puff of smoke.

He took up residence again in Box Five as he waited through the second "Notes" scene and Harry's daring plan, followed by the rehearsal for "Don Juan," for Hermione to sing her solo. When she began, his chest tightened in pride and love, and he watched, satisfied, as people in the audience wiped away tears and applied handkerchiefs and tissues to their noses in response to the haunting emotion in her voice. At the end, he Apparated to the crypt, creeping up from behind it and singing in the most gentle, coaxing manner possible.

The scene's tension grew instantly when Harry arrived, and the audience gasped as one when Snape began shooting fireballs from the pike. Then, after Snape's enraged bellow, and blanketing the stage with fire from the pike, he cast *Sollumaren* and Disapparated to the sounds of startled exclamations in the audience.

In the scene that followed, when Snape popped about, voicing his taunts, he could see the audience's heads whipping about, looking for him. The sound of scores of people jumping in surprise at Seamus firing the gun was followed by hushed murmurs.

Finally, they were to the "Don Juan" scene, and Snape felt his gut roiling with anticipation of "Point of No Return." Apparating into the curtained bed, he exchanged pleased glances with Draco, who was smirking in satisfaction at how well the performance was going. Then, at Dean's urging, he slipped out of the bed and sidled up behind Hermione at the table, feeling the charged connection between them.

As he began singing to Hermione, luring her deeper into the sensual decadence of the Point of No Return, he could tell that a silence more profound than had yet governed the theatre had fallen over the audience. That silence swelled with the growing passion between himself and Hermione, and the growing tension in those watching it.

Their movements and intonations were sultry and seductive, and Snape felt tingles chasing through him every time he was in contact with Hermione. As the song ended, he dropped to one knee and fished the ring from his pocket, his voice changing to hopeful and winsome as he began his version of "All I Ask of You."

He was not prepared for the force with which the idea struck him...he, too, wanted the woman he loved to stay with him always. Therefore, shouldn't he, Snape, also be approaching her, Hermione, with a proposal? Wasn't that the way things were usually done?

So stunned was he by the thought that he very nearly froze, autopilot being the only thing keeping him going. Hermione pushed his mask off, and he stared up at her for a beat longer than normal before coming to his senses and shooting to his feet, where he snatched her to him and Disapparated.

As Ginny's scream rang through the theatre, and chaos reigned onstage, Snape and Hermione appeared under it, beneath the trap door. Hermione was gazing at Snape with concern.

"Severus? Are you all right?" Even though the cacophony above them would surely mask any sound, she whispered, mainly from uncertainty.

Snape's mind was reeling, and he stared at her mutely. Ruthlessly shoving his unsettling thoughts further back in his head, he doggedly refocused on the performance, knowing it was more important at the moment. Blinking and shaking his head, he uttered a clipped, "I'm fine," before glancing up and hissing, "Let's go." With that, he Apparated them to the boat, releasing her to sit down as he poled it onstage after McGonagall and Harry disappeared amid the shifting sets.

When they exited into the opposite wing, Hermione squinted up at him, still perplexed at his minute flash of what she could only interpret as nerves. He was intently watching the mist fill the stage before Harry dropped into the trapdoor, and he looked to be back to normal as far as his concentration went, but she *knew* something had happened, and she was going to get to the bottom of it before the Ministry performance.

The sets changed to the Phantom's Lair, and they entered again, Snape roughly manhandling her against the portcullis after her display of defiance. There was a spate of shocked gasps in the audience at the blatant sensuality in the way Snape pressed his body against Hermione's on the portcullis and caressed her before she turned her face away from him.

Then, when Hermione approached him, gently touching his face as she sang, "This haunted face holds no horror for me now," it seemed as if the whole theatre were holding its breath. And, when she continued, sliding her hand to his chest and pushing him back in contempt as she sang, "It's in your *soul* that the true distortion lies," the audience nearly sucked all of the air out of the space as they gasped in shock at her audacity.

It was in the charged moment after that crushing insult that Harry emerged from the trapdoor, causing Snape's expression to morph from icy fury to almost manic, calculating glee. As the scene progressed, and Snape caught Harry in the noose, tugging him to his toes as he taunted him, a few quickly stifled shrieks sounded in the house, giving Snape a jolt of pride in their acting.

They were really riding the momentum now, and the three of them interwove their parts seamlessly, coming to the point where Hermione trailed behind them, singing, "I gave my mind blindly."

In the blazing silence, Snape's voice grated harshly as he retorted, "You try my patience. Make your choice!"

Eyes locked with Snape, Hermione crossed to him, slowly and deliberately, singing, "Pitiful creature of darkness... What kind of life have you known? God give me courage to show you you are not alone..." Laying one hand on his chest, she slid it up behind his neck and pulled his head down toward her. Then, lifting her other hand to his face, she closed in and kissed him.

In the swell of music, Snape's hands splayed to either side in shock, trembling as he finally wrapped her in his embrace and pulled her close, only to jerk in astonishment as she deepened the kiss. He released her as if burned, his hands once again going rigid. Gingerly pulling away, his tense posture gave way to a slump of defeat.

During that blinding succession of reactions, the audience, too, gave voice to their own. When Hermione first kissed Snape, a smattering of shocked cries punctuated the music. Then, when she deepened the kiss, a rush of gasps and choked coughs rippled through the house.

Snape gripped Hermione's hands and removed them from his person, gently putting her away from him. Then, as the music changed, and the pursuing mob began their chorus from the wings, he staggered over to Harry, snapping his fingers to release the noose from its mooring.

Harry dropped to his knees, struggling to remove the noose, and Hermione rushed to him, gazing wonderingly up at Snape as he lurched past them to grip the back of the throne, saying, "Take her...forget me...forget all of this... Leave me alone...forget all you've seen..." Then, he spun on them, gesturing wildly. "Go now...don't let them find you!"

When Harry and Hermione got shakily to their feet, Snape sank into the throne, waving his hand at the portcullis, making it rise. "Take the boat...leave me here...go now, don't wait..." His voice was low with despair as he said, "Just take her and go...before it's too late..." Lifting mournful eyes to them, he saw they were rooted to the spot, staring at him in disbelief.

In a flare of frustration, he flailed at them, growling, "Go..." Then, as they finally broke free of their paralysis, he couldn't contain himself any longer, and he nearly chased them out, flinging himself against the portcullis and wailing, "Go now...go now and leave me!" Once they were out of sight, he stumbled back downstage, his hands gripping his hair as he collapsed to the floor, destroyed.

The music wound down, leaving only the sound of the music box as it began to play. Snape's head whipped up, and he scrabbled toward it, picking up his mask from where it lay beside the music box. On his knees, bowed inward, rocking back and forth, his faint voice was that of a broken man as he sang, "Masquerade... Paper faces on parade... Masquerade... Hide your face, so the world will never find you..."

During his pathetic plaint, Hermione slunk back in, watching with horrified, sad eyes. Snape felt her presence and twisted, his ravaged face lighting up with vain hope. Nearly throwing himself across the stage toward her, he coaxed, "Christine, I love you..."

Hermione, shaking her head, took the ring from her finger and gently pressed it into his hand, her hand quickly rising to cover her trembling lips before turning and hurrying out, leaving Snape there to sag to the stage in rejection. Slipping the ring onto his finger and clenching his fist, he cringed at Harry and Hermione singing as they guided the boat away. In a petulant jerk, he waved at the portcullis, bringing it back down.

Surging to his feet, he dragged himself to the portcullis, falling against it and gripping the bars in agony, the personification of unrequited love. Watching the retreating boat, his impassioned plea rang through the space in defiance of the utter devastation of the Phantom's soul. "You alone can make my song take flight...it's over now, the music of the night..."

The final bars of music crescendoed, and he looked up at the people climbing down the portcullis. Launching himself back to his throne, he snatched up his cloak, covering himself with it as he dropped into the seat. Ginny approached the throne, signalling Snape with the tiny gasp that would be inaudible to anyone else over the music, and Snape Disapparated just as Ginny whipped the cloak from the throne, revealing the empty seat.

Snape peered out from Box Five, watching Ginny holding up the mask, reflecting light throughout the theatre, and he swept a glance over the house, noting the almost dazed looks on people's faces. His chest swelled again with pride, and he swallowed hard, trying to regain his composure before joining the rest of the cast for curtain call.

The last note faded away, and the lights went down, plunging the theatre into darkness. Dumbledore closed the curtain in the stunned silence that roared in every frozen cast member's ears. Finally, a deafening burst of applause exploded in the house, giving the cast impetus to move again, and they all took deep breaths of relief and pride in their accomplishments.

Snape Apparated into the wing, deftly Summoning his mask from the stage before Dumbledore shifted everything out of sight and opened the curtain for their bows.

Bringing up the lights and opening the curtain with a whoosh, Dumbledore reversed his concealment charm, beaming at the cast as they came out and took their bows to the accompaniment of tumultuous applause and cheers.

Several people in the audience had stood when their family member or friend on cast had come out for curtain call, but when Harry jogged out to take his bow, almost the entire audience shot to their feet. Harry's grin looked as if it might split his cheeks as he nodded his thanks. As he retreated to one side, he gestured for Hermione to come out, and a fresh wave of raucous applause swept the house as she appeared.

Hermione was flushed with pleasure at such a positive reaction from the audience, and the clapping, smiling faces swam in front of her as she vainly tried to blink away her tears of joy. Stepping back after her deep curtsy, she couldn't help but chuckle aloud at the audience's cries of surprise when Snape, once again in his Phantom tuxedo and mask, Apparated into the centre space between her and Harry, wordlessly casting the smoke spell as he arrived.

He stepped through the whirling cloud and paused for a moment on the apron, gazing out at the sea of faces staring up at him. Their boisterous applause faltered for a fleeting moment at his dramatic appearance, but, when he so regally strode downstage to survey the audience, every person who hadn't already taken to their feet shot up from their seats, redoubling their efforts to express their appreciation.

For a moment, Snape felt a surreal juxtaposition of his nightmare from over five months before with the current euphoria. The gobsmacked expressions on the majority of faces in the house served to highlight just how novel this experience of being accepted and appreciated was for him. The jeering, mocking faces of his nightmare faded beneath the tide of thunderous clapping.

It truly felt like his deliverance.

Finally emerging from his reverie, he stepped back to join the cast for their final bow. Before they could join hands, Snape caught Hermione's eye and flicked a glance at the now-visible Dumbledore. She blinked in surprise, then nodded. As one, they stepped forward, making the rest of the cast pause in confusion, as they gestured toward their Director, directing the applause toward him. It took only a beat before the rest of the cast caught on and joined in, cheering their headmaster.

Dumbledore's startled look at Snape's initiative swiftly changed to one of both pride and humility, and he bowed deeply, mouthing, "Thank you all," to the cast.

Snape took Hermione's hand, and they backed up into the line, joining hands with the rest of the cast and taking their final bow. Then, as the curtain started to close and the cast began to file into the wings, Snape wrapped his arms around Hermione from behind and Disapparated with her, leaving a spate of shocked gasps in their wake.

Carefully setting her on her feet in Box Five, he pressed his lips to her ear, barely shushing her delighted giggles. She could feel his grin against her skin as they watched the audience looking around frantically, trying to see where they had gone.

The curtain was closed, and the house lights were fully up. Dumbledore spared a glance at the audience, making sure they were all making their way out of the theatre, then slipped behind the curtain to address the cast.

When they saw Dumbledore mounting the stage, Snape and Hermione Apparated to the far back corner of the wing, exchanging proud smiles before charging forward to join the rest of the cast in their exuberance.

Students and staff alike were beaming and laughing, hugging and shaking hands, dashing tears from their eyes as they congratulated each other on the magnificent success of their performance. As Hermione and Snape approached, Hermione was enveloped in a Gryffindor group hug, and McGonagall gripped Snape's arm, dragging him into a fierce embrace.

Sniffling hugely, Ginny extricated herself from the Gryffindor tangle, leading it to break up into smaller clumps. As she and Harry staggered back, they caught sight of McGonagall releasing a sheepishly grinning Snape who was slipping his mask off his de-glamoured face. Ginny let out a celebratory whoop, drawing everyone's attention, and she flashed a beatific grin at Snape, announcing, "Three cheers for our Phantom! Three cheers for Professor Snape!"

Snape froze, the mask dangling from one finger, goose flesh racing over his skin at the unexpected, almost completely foreign sensation *obelonging* that washed over him at Ginny's declaration.

Harry shot a surprised yet approving glance at Ginny before turning a pleased smile on Snape and joining her to lead the cheers. Hermione's voice rang jubilantly in the space as she wiped tears from her cheeks. Neville and Ron, arms around each other's shoulders and their girlfriends' hands in theirs, beamed at each other and joined in, lifting Susan's and Parvati's hands as they punched the air with every yell.

Every face was turned toward Snape as they expressed their appreciation. Snape realized that he was past being able to control his reactions, and was slightly surprised to find that he didn't care. He knew his cheeks were flushed with triumph and gratitude, and his lips spread in a genuine smile that he couldn't have wiped away if he had tried.

McGonagall had released Snape to join in the cheering, her normally prim demeanour fractured by the contagious exhilaration of their performance. Flicking a glance at her, and seeing the warm pride in her eyes, Snape bowed deeply to the cast in thanks.

His usually silky voice was rough with emotion as he said, "My humblest gratitude... I truly could not have become the Phantom without all of you." With that, he cast a meaningful glance at Hermione, then straightened again, sweeping the rest of the cast with a proud gaze. "Well done...everyone."

Harry piped up, "We'll win that trophy yet!" More cheering followed his words, and people resumed their congratulatory conversations, leaving Harry to step toward Snape, a sheepish, lopsided grin on his face. Snape blinked at him, too overwhelmed to deduce what he was on about.

Proffering his hand, Harry tilted his head and cut a glance up at Snape, shoving his other hand into his pocket as he said, "Thanks for everything, Professor." Snape stared at Harry's hand in amazement, momentarily at a loss for words. Mechanically extending his hand to grip Harry's, his gaze travelled up to meet Harry's eyes, noting that they were looking at him with almost shy approval, devoid of any shadow of the hatred of six long years. Harry's voice was low as he said, "And I do mean everything. From all of us." Cocking a wry smirk at him and rubbing his throat with his other hand, he added, "I owe you one."

Snape's hand tightened reflexively on Harry's steady grip. Swallowing hard, he tried to slow the frantic beat of his heart. The noise of the rest of the cast faded to a dull roar, and something deep within him seemed to snap, flooding him with a curious warmth. Blinking several times, he sucked in a cleansing breath and murmured, "No. We're even." Green eyes stared into black for several beats, until they both blinked, finally dropping their hands and falling back, shaking off the intensity of the moment.

Glancing about in bewilderment, Snape met Hermione's eyes, wet with fresh tears at witnessing Harry's initiative. Ginny had flung herself at Harry, hugging him tight and peppering his face with kisses, so ecstatic was she at seeing him and Snape laying aside their differences.

Dumbledore was starting to clear the stage, waving at the cast to leave so he could finish restoring the Hall. "Go on, run along and see your guests before they have to leave us. Professor McGonagall and I will be along to escort them to their Floo or Apparition departures. Hurry, now!"

Laughing with excitement, students bounded down the stairs and up through the house, bursting through the doors as though shot from a cannon. Snape followed them at a slower pace, still trying to assimilate the extraordinary peace that had fallen between himself and Harry.

In the corridor, and in the guests' lounge, groups of family and friends happily drew their charges into their ranks. The hubbub echoed off the stone walls, ebbing noticeably as Snape emerged from the doorway and students caught sight of him, still in his Phantom costume.

The sudden lull gave him pause, and he stared blankly at the crowd of faces goggling at him, his fingers gripping the mask tightly, leaving his knuckles white. Inhaling deeply, he forced himself to move, taking measured strides through the throng, nodding civilly at parents as he passed them. A hushed buzz grew behind him as students and families discussed the play in general, and Snape's stunning performance in particular.

Even those students who were on their way up and down the stairs at the end of the corridor, being herded by prefects, stopped to gaze at him in awe. It was enough to make him consider Disapparating from the spot, but he kept a firm grip on his flight response, determined to behave as if he were used to such scrutiny.

Jaw throbbing as he clenched his teeth at the attention, he stopped short when he was all but accosted by the Grangers.

Mrs. Granger clasped his arm and gazed up at him, still looking rather dazed, and Hermione stepped behind her mother's shoulder, casting a look at Snape that was both warning and understanding. Mr. Granger hung back a pace, refraining from interfering with his wife's manhandling of Snape.

"Severus! What an amazing performance!" She whipped a glance back at Hermione, her eyes wide. "You...Hermione...all of you..."

Snape cut a furtive glance at the many faces watching them with interest and quickly murmured, "Thank you, of course. The cast has worked very hard for a long time to this end. I'm pleased that you enjoyed it."

Sucking in a gasp, she continued, "Enjoyed it? Why, it was...it was...I can't even describe it! And *you*..."

Uncomfortable with being the centre of the scene Mrs. Granger was making, Snape cut in desperately, "Mr. and Mrs. Granger, how are you to return home this evening?"

Mrs. Granger blinked, taken aback by the abrupt change of subject. Looking appealingly at her husband, she said, "Geoff? What are the arrangements?"

Mr. Granger glanced around at the milling crowd, noting that it had thinned of most of the student body now that they had gone back to their dormitories, and checked his watch. "I believe we are scheduled to Floo back to the house from Professor McGonagall's office. I know she was going to be in charge of returning all of us Muggles back home." He flashed a grin and shrugged.

Extrapolating from what was said, Snape ventured, "Then Dumbledore was to escort the wizarding families out to the Apparition point outside the grounds for their return, I suppose." He looked around, seeing the Weasleys grouped near the lounge, fussing around Ron, Ginny, and Harry. Lifting a finger, he said, "Excuse me for one moment..."

Swiftly stepping through the clumps of chattering people, he approached the Weasleys. Stopping at the edge of their group, he said, "I beg your pardon, Arthur..."

Mr. Weasley looked up in surprise, then beamed at Snape. "Well done, Severus! I say, you were all magnificent!"

Snape inclined his head in thanks, but said, "Yes, the cast did quite well indeed, but I needed to ask you..."

Mr. Weasley cut in, "Certainly! What do you need?"

"How are you to return home tonight?"

Mrs. Weasley spoke up before her husband could answer. "Oh, Dumbledore is taking the lot of us down to the gates. I believe the Muggle families are all going to Floo home with Minerva."

Snape sketched a bow and said, "Thank you, Molly. Have a safe trip. Good night." With that, he spun and strode back to the Grangers.

As soon as he reached them, Mrs. Granger grabbed his arm again, gazing up at him, rapt. Snape cleared his throat nervously, catching Hermione's eye and reading the exasperation there. McGonagall and Dumbledore appeared in the corridor, and Snape directed Mrs. Granger's attention their way.

Raising his hands, Dumbledore announced, "Those of you who have arranged to return home by Floo, please go with Professor McGonagall to her office. If you will be Apparating home, please follow me to the gates. You students are welcome to accompany your guests until their departures."

The crowd began splitting up, filing past Snape and the Grangers in either direction. Mrs. Granger made a moue of petulance, then said, "Severus, won't you join us until we have to leave? I simply *must* impress upon you how deeply moved I was by your performance." The hand that wasn't clasped around his arm splayed just under her throat.

Snape flicked a harassed glance at Hermione, who looked ready to bury her face in her hands in mortification. In an effort to get them gone as quickly as possible, Snape suggested, "Miss Granger, your parents have never experienced Apparition, have they?"

Hermione snapped to attention and retorted, "No, of course not. We're not allowed to do magic outside of term."

Brows rising, Snape attempted an ingratiating tone and said, "Well, I doubt Dumbledore and McGonagall will care, seeing as how they have so much to keep up with right now..." Flashing a challenging smile at the Grangers, he said, "Would you like to Apparate home? Miss Granger and I could take you home quite quickly, and it's much cleaner than using the Floo."

Mrs. Granger's eyes lit up, and she released Snape's arm enough to clap her hands like a child in excitement. Beaming at her husband, she said, "Oh, that sounds so interesting! What do you say, Geoff?"

Mr. Granger, seeing how much his wife wanted to try it, grinned indulgently and said, "If it's not too much trouble, Severus. We wouldn't want to tire you after such a demanding performance."

Snape shook his head, frowning in demurral. "No, I'm fine, really. If you like, I can Apparate all of us to the gates, then, once we go through them, Miss Granger and I can Apparate you home."

Mrs. Granger looked torn, and she chewed her bottom lip, making Snape blink and flick a glance at Hermione in recognition of the mannerism. Finally, she threaded her hand through his elbow again and said, "Can't we walk down with the others, and you can take us home once we get to the gates? I'd hate to cut short our time here. It's all

so fascinating." She gazed about, then settled back to staring at him, enraptured.

Snape, writhing inwardly, affected a magnanimous pose and gestured for them to follow the group already out the castle doors. Mr. Granger smiled fondly at Hermione and offered her his arm, and they led Snape and Mrs. Granger out.

Hermione resisted turning around to look back at her mother and Snape. Still, she slowed her pace until she could tell they weren't far behind them. She really didn't want her mother to be *alone* with Snape, hanging all over him, on a moonlit walk through the grounds!

Snape, for his part, kept his eyes trained on the back of Hermione's head, stoically enduring Mrs. Granger's fawning. Once they had exited the castle and begun trekking over the lawn toward the gates, Mrs. Granger had launched into a breathless recital of everything she had found so amazing in the play. While he managed to tune some of it out, especially when she was nattering on about all the things they effected with magic versus technology like the Muggle version, he couldn't ignore the gushing tone she adopted whenever she waxed enthusiastic about him in particular. He was rather glad it was dark, and that the uncomfortable flush on his cheeks couldn't be seen.

Hermione, walking a few paces ahead with her father, was torn between straining to hear her mother's chatter and thinking about how she and Snape would ever be able to come clean about their relationship.

After a while, her father murmured, "You're awful quiet. What's on your mind?"

Hermione looked up, abashed. Pretending carelessness, she said, "Oh, nothing."

Mr. Granger squeezed her arm in his and clucked his tongue. "Now, now, don't lie to your old dad. Something's clearly got your brain burning. So, out with it."

Hermione grimaced sheepishly and sighed. "Just... trying to come down off the rush, that's all."

Nodding sagely, Mr. Granger said, "Ah... you're worried about the performance. You shouldn't be. It was wonderful. But, you should already know that." He turned to catch her eye, then said in a lower voice, "What's got your knickers in a twist? You may not've been home much recently, but I still know when my girl's upset."

Hermione gazed up into her father's face full of love, pride, and concern. Blinking, she said in a small voice, "What did you think of the show?"

Mr. Granger beamed at her and released her arm to wrap his arm around her shoulders, hugging her as they walked. "You were beautiful. I couldn't be prouder of you, Hermione."

Warmed by her father's praise, she felt a bit bolder and said, "Thanks, Dad. But, I mean, you weren't upset by anything? I mean... you heard people. You saw their reactions. I know the rest of the students think I'm some sort of freak..."

Mr. Granger frowned and said, "Freak? Why? You performed brilliantly! I'm *sure* Hogwarts will win that competition."

Hermione tossed her head in a flare of impatience. "It's just... they're all so worked up about Professor Snape." Then, in a tiny voice, she added, "And me."

Mr. Granger sucked in a breath of understanding. "Ah, I get it. The kiss. They're giving you grief about it."

Hermione gazed up at her father imploringly. "And you don't think they should?"

Mr. Granger squeezed her shoulders again and sighed. "You're a grown woman now, Hermione. I realized that when you were home in November. You're almost finished with school. It's a play. You were cast, and you played your part well. *Very* well. While I can see that it may be disconcerting to watch you kissing your professor, I understand that it's acting, and they should, too."

Relief flooded Hermione that at least she didn't have to worry about her father getting all "parental" on her. Ahead of them, she could see Dumbledore leading the other families through the gates. After a few beats, individuals and couples began disappearing, leaving a few student cast members to start their return up the lawn to the castle.

When the Patils had gone, Parvati hung around, waiting for Neville to finish his goodbye to his Gran. The older woman hugged him, beaming proudly as she released him. Hermione saw her beckon to Parvati, who obediently scurried forward. Neville's Gran clasped Parvati's hand and smiled as she spoke to her. Parvati ducked her head, abashed, then cut a glance at Neville, who was also looking sheepish. When the older woman grabbed Neville's hand, too, and placed Parvati's hand in his, Hermione stifled a chuckle, understanding why they looked so uncomfortable. A moment later, Neville's Gran Disapparated, leaving the pair of them to exchange shy smiles as they strolled along the path toward the castle.

Hermione smiled and nodded at them as they passed, and they murmured greetings to her and her father. Then, a couple of beats later, Hermione heard Neville say to Snape, "Well done, Professor. Good night."

At that, she couldn't resist twisting about to see Snape nod courteously at the smiling couple, a faint smile on his lips as he intoned, "Likewise, Mr. Longbottom, Miss Patil. Good evening to you as well."

Hermione's mother was beaming again, at Snape and the students, and Hermione suppressed an exasperated sigh as she faced forward again. They had reached the gates, and Dumbledore was hovering just outside them.

"Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. I thought you were to be Flooing back tonight..." He eyed them with a puzzled expression.

Hermione tilted her head and said, "Professor Snape thought it might be a novel experience to Apparate my parents back home. They've never been taken on a Side-Along Apparition, you know." Hermione smiled winningly at the headmaster, and he inclined his head in understanding.

"Well, that was quite gracious of him, I must say." Hermione caught the strained note underlying his words. "I'm sure it's only right to return the favour of your generosity, setting him and Miss Granger up with the tickets and tour. I do hope you enjoyed the results of their reconnaissance."

Mr. Granger chuckled. "Indeed we did, sir. I believe my wife is still in transports over it." He cocked one eyebrow up as he turned to look back at Snape escorting Mrs. Granger. She was still prating on about the performance, and Snape wore an expression of martyrdom. Hermione bit her lip to stop a smile from surfacing, and she caught Snape's eye, giving him a look of mingled understanding and commiseration.

Snape and Mrs. Granger joined the other three outside the gates, and Dumbledore said, "Good evening, Mrs. Granger. I'm so pleased you enjoyed the play." She drew breath to launch into a gushing appraisal, but he forestalled her with a raised hand. "I do beg your pardon, but as Professor Snape and Miss Granger are here to escort you home, I must return to the castle. There is much to do before next week's Ministry performance."

Mrs. Granger's mouth closed with a snap, and she blinked. "Of course. Thank you so much for allowing us to come and experience Hogwarts. It was wonderful!"

Dumbledore clasped her hand and bowed, then shook Mr. Granger's hand, too. "I trust we shall see you next week as well?"

Mr. Granger nodded. "Count on it! Well, good night, Professor. Good job with the show."

Bowing again, Dumbledore said, "Thank you. Good night." Then, he nodded to Hermione and turned to Snape. "Severus, I'll leave you to lock up and escort Miss Granger safely back to the castle."

Snape nodded gravely and said, "Of course, sir."

Dumbledore began his trek back up the lawn, humming music from the show as he went.

Snape turned to the others. "Miss Granger, do you feel quite secure about taking another on Side-Along Apparition? Or shall I take your parents?"

Hermione straightened confidently. "I'm perfectly sanguine about my skills, Professor. Shall we go now? Do you remember the location?"

Snape nodded. "I suggest we Apparate to just in front of the hearth, so we needn't worry about being seen by Muggles outside. Why don't you and your father go first, and be sure to step away quickly, then I'll follow presently with your mother?"

Hermione nodded sharply. "Certainly, sir." She looked at her father and said, "Okay, Dad, don't let go of me, no matter what." With that, she flashed a challenging grin at his dubious expression.

Flicking a glance at Snape, who was as composed as ever, Mr. Granger took a deep breath and said, "All right. I guess it's time to *really* see how you lot have it. Go on then, Hermione. I'm ready."

Wrapping her arm with his, Hermione twined their fingers and gripped tight, then said, "Now," Disapparating.

Snape and Mrs. Granger were left alone in the chill moonlight. Snape was mentally counting beats in his head, giving them time to arrive and vacate the space, but he was distracted by Mrs. Granger's fingers grazing his cheek. Jerking back as if stung, he stared at her, eyes wide in consternation. Barely managing to not stammer, he said, "Mrs. Granger?"

She gazed up at him and said, "It's Dione. Remember, Severus?"

Snape blinked at her, panic freezing his tongue. Cold sweat prickled his scalp as she leant closer to him confidently.

Her voice was low and breathy as she said, "You were truly spectacular, Severus. I could almost *feel* your passion..."

Snape tried to swallow and nearly choked.

"I can't blame everyone for being so astounded. I mean, just *watching* that kiss...I could almost *feel* it!"

Snape fleetingly wondered if she could hear the frenzied racing of his pulse.

Her eyes narrowed a bit in faux-petulance as she said, "Honestly, I found myself imagining I was Hermione up there! You have that gift, Severus. You drew me into the scene so much that I felt like I was experiencing it myself. But, alas, *she* was the one involved in such an earth-shattering kiss, not me." With that, she sighed and cast a half-coy glance at him.

Snape was staring at her in horror, completely at a loss for how to handle the situation. Without Hermione there to offer adroit guidance in handling her parents, he was bewildered, and terrified to do anything that could alienate or upset them, given that he would soon be staking his claim on their daughter.

After a pregnant pause, during which Mrs. Granger gazed at him as if entranced, Snape struggled to grind out, "We must Apparate now." She nodded slowly, and he said, "Remain calm, and do not let go of my arm." He realized the irony of his statement, considering she had been virtually attached to him like a lamprey since before they had left the Entrance Hall. Looking away, he closed his eyes in an attempt to gather his scattered wits, concentrating on the Granger's fireplace.

A moment later, they appeared on the carpet, Mrs. Granger gripping his arm in a death grip as she staggered, voicing a startled, "O-o-o-oh!"

Mr. Granger sprang forward to support his wife, deftly manoeuvring her to sit on the nearby armchair. His voice was solicitous as he said, "I know. It takes a moment to get over the disorientation. I think perhaps we Muggles aren't quite cut out for such a method of transportation."

Hermione, in the meantime, was staring at Snape in growing alarm. They had taken longer than expected, even accounting for the unanticipated reaction of her father to Apparition, and Snape looked quite harassed and perturbed.

Mrs. Granger was sitting in the chair, blinking and taking deep breaths, trying to regain her equilibrium. Her husband was perched on the chair arm, his arm draped over her shoulders and his hand caressing her soothingly. He glanced up at Snape and grimaced. "I had no idea what that would be like, but I daresay once was enough for me. Thank you for the opportunity, of course."

Snape nodded and faintly replied, "Not at all."

Hermione, concerned about Snape, stepped toward him and gripped his arm. "It's getting late, Professor. We should go. You need to lock the school gates for Professor Dumbledore."

Snape nodded, still looking rather shell-shocked, and said, "You're right, indeed, Miss Granger. I do hope you'll get put to rights quickly, Mrs. Granger. Mr. Granger. I look forward to seeing you next week for the Ministry performance."

Mr. Granger nodded. "We'll be fine. But I daresay we'll be using the Floo for both legs of our trip next time."

Mrs. Granger passed a hand over her face and rubbed her temple. "Definitely... Good night, Hermione, dear, Severus. Run along now. We'll see you next week."

Hermione eagerly followed her mother's order. "Right, Mum. Well, good night. Love you."

"Love you too, dear," chorused her parents. As they spoke, she looked at Snape, who blinked rapidly and nodded, indicating that he would Apparate them back. They disappeared, only to show up in the clearing right outside the gates.

64- Competition

Chapter 68 of 84

Snape and Hermione focus on how to deal with Mrs. Granger's infatuation, Snape focuses on readying Spinner's End, McGonagall focuses on readying Snape's future, and Hogwarts focuses on readying their performance after seeing Beauxbatons' show.

Disclaimer: Nope, not mine, no matter how much I wish they were.

A/N: Again, this chapter was a long time in coming. As always, Real Life kept me busy. I appreciate you lovely folk who review, comment on my LJ, and email me with your continued support. And, as usual, deepest gratitude to my wonderful beta, Ladyofthemasque, and to Horserider, for putting up with my random, out-of-the-blue requests. Don't forget to check out my LJ for update info and my randomness: <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/>

Cheers! :)

Chapter 64- Competition

Hermione immediately rounded on Snape. "Severus! What happened?"

Snape's face twitched, and his mouth worked as if he had tasted something sour. Even in the moonlight, Hermione could tell that he had paled. Gripping his arm, she gazed up at him worriedly.

Finally, he swallowed and said, "Your... your mother..."

Hermione's brows shot up and she leant closer, her voice an urgent hiss. "What about my mother? Severus, please, what happened?"

Snape flicked a wary glance through the gates and toward the castle. He couldn't see any other figures still out walking. Shying away from Hermione's intense stare, he muttered, "Come. Let's go back. I still need to lock the gates." He spun away from her, gesturing for her to precede him through the gates.

Hermione's eyes narrowed, but she stepped through, her arms crossing in pique as she glared at him. Snape busied himself with the charms needed to lock and ward the gates. Then, with a sharp jerk of his head, he set off toward the castle, seeing Hermione stomping along with him to one side.

With a huff, Hermione growled, "What did she do, Severus? Tell me."

Snape's eyes closed and his brow furrowed. His hand waved at her faintly, as if trying to forestall her interrogation. Hermione caught at his hand and stopped, yanking him about. His eyes flew open at her aggressive move, and he scowled at her.

It was no match for her scowl, however, and Snape actually quailed at the crackling anger in her eyes. Blinking more, he flicked a nervous glance at the castle again, almost as if he were searching for someone to rescue him.

Realizing that he would know no peace until she had the details, he heaved a deep sigh, rubbing his forehead with the hand not clamped in her viselike grip.

He kept his hand over his face and averted his eyes, avoiding Hermione's. His voice was so low that Hermione had to strain to hear him. "She... she wouldn't let go of me." Hermione nodded in encouragement even as her eyes narrowed forebodingly. "You had just left, and I was waiting to Disapparate... and she... she touched me... my face..."

Hermione sucked in a breath through her nose, keeping her lips sealed shut until he had finished.

"She said... she could 'feel my passion', and... she imagined *she* was the one onstage... kissing me..."

The breath she had just inhaled burst out of her in a sharp blast. Snape dared to glance at her, but jerked away quickly, disturbed by the contained fury in her eyes.

In the strained silence that followed, Hermione whispered, "So, what did you do?"

Snape cast a wide-eyed gaze of consternation at her and hissed, "I Apparated!" They held each other's stares for a moment. Then Snape added, his voice as close to a wail as Hermione had ever heard it, "I didn't know *what* to do, Hermione!"

Hermione pursed her lips and let go of him, planting her hands on her hips. Her voice was a low hiss as she looked off into the distance and said, "Damn her!"

Snape stood there, miserable in his awkward uncertainty, hating the feeling of repeatedly not being in control of the situations he was in. He watched as Hermione ducked her head, scrubbing her face with both hands and running them through her hair as she heaved a deep sigh. Letting her hands fall to her sides, she wearily said, "I'll talk to her. Or Dad. Or something. I don't know, but I'll get the point across somehow."

Snape nodded mutely. With a quick glance at the castle, Hermione closed the distance between them and gazed tenderly up at him, her head tilted to one side as she lifted her hand to cup his cheek.

Snape's beleaguered mind snapped to attention, juxtaposing the sight of Hermione looking up at him that way with the image of her mother's enamoured gaze. Their heads were tilted the same way, they were nearly the same height, and the sensation of Hermione's hand touching his cheek was a light caress like her mother's had been. Snape's gut clenched violently, and he wrenched away from her, his eyes widening like a spooked colt's. As he backed away, he batted at her hand, making her blink and jerk backward, confused and taken aback.

"Severus? Are you okay?"

The same cold sweat of panic had prickled his scalp at the repeat of the earlier, unsettling sensations, and Snape realized he was breathing shallowly. With effort, he sucked in a deep breath and attempted to calm himself.

Hermione was staring at him, bewildered and concerned. Reaching forward to slip her hand through the crook of his elbow, she murmured soothingly, "It's all right. We can talk about it in my room..."

At that, Snape balked again, once more disengaging from her grasp as he blurted, "About that..."

Hermione's eyes narrowed and she frowned. "About what?"

Closing his eyes to search for the right words, Snape faltered, "I don't think... it would be a good idea... for me to come to your room tonight..."

Hermione inhaled sharply through her nose, and her words were clipped as she said, "What do you mean?"

Snape clenched his fists, struggling to verbalize the feeling of *wrongness* that still pervaded his being. The tense silence dragged on, Hermione watching him intently, her face set with worry.

"I... Tonight would not... It would be better not to," he finished lamely.

"Better how? Don't tell me it's safer, Severus. We've learnt our lessons in discretion. We both know that we were ready to take that chance a few hours ago. What's changed since then?"

Snape very nearly choked on the reply forcing its way past his lips. "Your mother!"

Hermione's eyes went wide, and she paled. Her whisper was shaky as she said, "That's not fair. It's not my fault she's smitten with you. She was like that in London, too!"

Snape sucked in a deep breath and huffed, "She did *not* manhandle me in such a fashion then. I can still feel it..." He closed his eyes and grimaced, shuddering.

Hermione stared at him, her eyes growing bright and glassy. Thinning her lips to still their trembling, she muttered, "So, now what? I don't dare touch you, lest you think of my *mother*? Are you going to let her ruin us?"

Snape's eyes snapped open and he goggled at the tears welling up in her eyes. Taken aback by her question, he hastily shook his head, saying, "No! Of course not! I'm sure this is all temporary; I just need some time to..."

He trailed off, aghast at how shaken she looked. His voice was pleading as he continued, "Hermione, I promise, nothing will ruin us. I just need to be able to shake this off. I think a hot shower and a night of Dreamless Sleep will do the trick. Don't blow this out of proportion, love, please. We'll be together soon, but... not tonight."

Hermione crossed her arms and looked away, sniffing hugely, blinking back the tears that threatened.

Snape looked up toward the castle, knowing he didn't dare comfort her, even if he had been able to bring himself to embrace her at the moment. Straightening to his full height, he said, in his Professor voice, "It's getting late. Would you like to Apparate the rest of the way?"

Hermione shot him a reproachful look, tossing her head morosely. Clearing her throat, she gathered her dignity and retorted, "Whatever is most convenient for you, Professor. I wouldn't want to impose upon your time."

Snape rolled his eyes resignedly at her frosty manner and sighed. "Very well then." Hermione stepped closer and tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. A shudder rippled over Snape, and he twitched away, muttering, "I'll just take your arm this way, shall I?" He avoided Hermione's offended and hurt gaze as he gripped her elbow, nodding sharply and Apparating to the front doors of the castle. As soon as they arrived, he released her, stepping away awkwardly.

Hermione stared at him as he opened the door and waved her through. Snape nodded curtly to her, speaking again in his Professor voice. "Run along then, Miss Granger. Don't dawdle."

Hermione ducked her head and said, "Yes, sir. Good night, Professor." Then, shooting one last wistful look at him, she turned and hurried down the corridor and up the stairs. Snape watched her go.

He stood alone in the Entrance Hall, his whirling thoughts coming to rest again on Mrs. Granger's actions. A wave of cold washed over him, like a bucket of ice water had been dumped on his head, and he realized he was rubbing fiercely at his cheek, as if trying to scrub away her unwelcome touch. Shaking his head and jerking his hand away from his face, he strode determinedly down the corridor, intent on reaching his quarters and his longed-for Dreamless Sleep Draught.

As he neared his rooms, he was jolted from his introspection at the sight of McGonagall leaning against the wall beside his door. Blinking, he queried, "Minerva?"

She pushed away from the stones, tossing her head in relief as she said, "Thank Merlin you're finally here. I was wondering how long you would take to get back to your quarters."

Bewildered, Snape cautiously said, "I just returned from escorting the Grangers to their home."

"I was wondering why they weren't with the rest in my office..."

"Minerva, why are you here?" He eyed her warily, his gut twisting as he realized that if he had simply Apparated to Hermione's room after all, they might have been caught when McGonagall would have come looking for him, asking Hermione when she had seen him last.

McGonagall pursed her lips in a half-smile and said, "Severus, are we going to continue this conversation in the corridor?"

Snape grimaced at her and said acidly, "Fine then." He opened his door and bowed for her to precede him. "After you, madam."

McGonagall wrinkled her nose at him and rolled her eyes as she passed. "I have that information I promised you." She sank into one of the armchairs in front of the hearth and proffered a parchment with a list of names. "These are contractors who have done satisfactory work for several people I know. I wouldn't hesitate to contact any of them. Of course, now that the Floo is connected, you can arrange to meet them there any time. Speaking of, when do you plan to go to the house?" Her eyes shone with benevolent interest.

Snape shifted gears and blinked. "I don't know yet. I hadn't thought much about it, what with the preparations for the show..."

At that, McGonagall beamed at him again and leant forward. "I must say again, Severus, how marvellous you were. I'm so proud of you."

Snape ducked his head and bit back a smile. "Yes, well, everyone did well..."

Her snort startled him. "Oh, for Merlin's sake! You *are* allowed to admit that you practically stole the show." She chuckled at his blank look. "Yes, yes, everyone did well, but it was *you* who led us to excel, and *you* who amazed everyone the most." Her gaze was a mix of fond pride and exasperation.

Snape felt a warmth once again creeping up his face and stealing through his chest at the same time, and he averted his eyes. Unable to stop himself, he muttered, "Be that as it may, I was driven to match Miss Granger's abilities. You should be proud of her."

A short bark of laughter snapped his gaze back up to McGonagall, and she averred, "Oh, *am*, believe me! But I'm considering how *much* of a change was wrought...how long a journey you've travelled to this point. Your success is therefore more remarkable, Severus." With that candid praise, she then quirked her lips and cocked a brow at him. "Do learn to accept a compliment, Severus."

Hermione railed at me for that very same reason. Of course, how was I supposed to learn to take a compliment when I never got any before?

Nodding gracefully in acceptance, he murmured, "Thank you, Minerva." Then, spurred by the warmth of her praise and the knowledge of Hermione's love, he added, "And, for the record... I concede. You win."

McGonagall's brows drew together in a confused frown. "Win what?"

Snape met her eyes unflinchingly and said, "Our wager. I won't even wait until the Ministry performance to admit it. Whether we win or not...although I'm sure we will...I admit that a Gryffindor can be as worthy as a Slytherin." Then, amused by her wide-eyed stare of astonishment, he added, "Not *all* Gryffindors, of course. But Miss Granger has managed to prove herself."

McGonagall gazed at him in silence for a moment, then breathed, "Severus Snape, you *have* changed." He snorted, and she shook her head slowly. "I never would have imagined our wager resulting in you conceding with such good grace. It's almost unsettling. Surliness I was used to!" She shifted in her seat, nodding for emphasis, and Snape found himself smirking.

Regarding her with a mischievous grin, he said, "I do apologize for disconcerting you. Allow me to remedy that right now." With that, he twisted his expression into a menacing scowl, turning his body away from her and snarling, "Get out."

Her surprised blink almost made him crack, but he managed to hold the look long enough for her to cotton on and start chuckling, rolling her eyes as she stood.

"You really are the living end. No wonder you're as good an actor as you are, if you can snap from behaving like a human being to acting like the 'bat of the dungeons' that quickly." Favouring him with an amused glare, she smirked as he flashed her a once-again-mischievous grin, rising to usher her to the door.

Giving her a mocking bow, he gestured for her to precede him to the door, saying, "My my, so many compliments, Minerva. I'll not be able to fit through the corridors; you're swelling my head so much."

She waved a dismissive hand at him and voiced a sceptical grunt. "I'll just leave you to your plans for the break, then."

Dropping the playful tone, Snape said, "Thank you for the list, and for connecting the Floo for me. I appreciate your help."

Smiling in self-satisfaction, McGonagall said, "You're quite welcome. Good night, Severus." She stepped through the door Snape held open for her.

"Good night, Minerva." Snape was about to close the door behind her, but she paused and popped back again, eyeing him with a half-smile.

"Oh, and I've been meaning to tell you...that hairstyle is rather becoming. Then again, perhaps it's because it's nice to see your face since you're no longer scowling all the time." With a saucy wink, she left, finally letting Snape shut the door.

Snape sat in his armchair, his expression a brown study as he pondered the list of adjustments he wanted done to Spinner's End.

I know some things for sure, but as far as anything other than the lab goes, I don't know what to do. I'd hate to choose something that Hermione would hate. No doubt she'd like to have some say in what...gods willing...will be her home. It's all I can offer her, and I want it to be satisfactory to her as well. He idly circled his lips with one finger, trying to determine how best to contact her about it. *I could always just ask her, but that seems a bit presumptuous and precipitate. Besides, I well remember how much she enjoyed being surprised, and I rather think I'd like to surprise her again.* A faint, tender smile crept over his lips, and his finger dropped to prop up his chin as he leant his elbow on the arm of the chair.

Lounging that way, the parchment list forgotten in his other hand, he was startled by the rapid knocking on his door. Brows drawing together, he laid the list on the side table and stood, wondering who would be bothering him in his quarters over the holiday. The school was empty of nearly all students except for the cast. Expression stern, he opened his door.

Surprised yet again, he uttered a startled, "Minerva?" as his brows rose in reaction to her excited attitude.

Beaming at him, virtually quivering with pent-up excitement, she brandished a rolled up magazine under his nose. "Severus, I have something wonderful to show you!"

Wondering what she could possibly have, as she had just given him the list of contractors the night before, Snape backed away, allowing her to enter his quarters for the second time in as many days. She actually gripped his elbow and dragged him toward the dining table, Snape flinging the door shut as he lurched away from it.

Triumphantly dropping into a chair, she gestured for him to do the same as she spread the magazine flat on the table. Snape sat more slowly, frowning when he saw the tabloid's title emblazoned across the front.

His voice scathing, he said, "*The Quibbler?* Minerva, surely..."

He was interrupted by a warning flash in her eyes and a crisp, "Enough! Hold your tongue until I've shown you what I found."

Snape sat back, crossing his arms and looking dubious. McGonagall flipped quickly through several pages, turning at last to the classifieds section. Pointing importantly at the middle of one column, she lifted her head and declared, "There! I would have shown you at breakfast, but you never showed up."

Snape merely nodded. He had stayed up late mulling over the contractors and his list of changes, and when he had finally taken a dose of Dreamless Sleep, he took the full amount, meaning he had slept long and late, missing breakfast altogether. It was worth it, however, as he had woken refreshed and finally free of the lingering taint of Mrs. Granger's manhandling.

"I know you've been keeping a weather eye out for employment in the *Prophet*, but I know as well as you that nothing's been listed yet in your field." Again, Snape nodded, scowling at the reminder. Smiling gently at him, she continued, "But I saw this today, and it's *perfect* for you, Severus. Look!"

Snape pursed his lips and rolled his eyes as he leant forward, reading the small text above her finger.

"Business Opportunity

Are you a dab hand at decocting, distilling, and decanting?

Are you the best brewer and bottler around?

Do you have a passion for potions?

Entrepreneur seeks energetic collaborator for fledgling business.

Your income depends on your ambition.

Contact Fern Campbell c/o The Quibbler"

Blinking in consternation, Snape lifted his gaze to McGonagall. "Energetic collaborator"? Come now, Minerva, I don't quite fit that bill..."

McGonagall huffed in impatience and said, "Read between the lines! A 'fledgling business,' 'entrepreneur,' 'your ambition'...*how* many times have you emphasized your House traits? Need I spell it out for you, oh-paragon-of-Slytherin? *Clearly* this young woman needs guidance and a partner with skills. You not only have rather more skills than anyone has a right to expect in potion-making, your *guidance* amounts to outright manipulation at times!" She tossed her head at his grimace. "This could very well be your chance to build a business without having to do it by yourself. It never hurts to find out more."

Wary of the cautious hope that bubbled up in his chest, he sniffed, "If this is so legitimate, why isn't it advertised in the *Prophet*? This could be some sort of scam or pyramid scheme."

McGonagall glared at him and shook her head pityingly. "Perhaps. But perhaps not. Find out!"

Snape leant back in his chair, pensive. McGonagall smirked, certain that she had made her point well enough that he would contact the advertiser.

"You may keep this copy. I'll see you at lunch, then?" She stood, smiling at him as he rose to cross to the door.

"Perhaps." He opened the door, nodding at her as she stepped through.

"Oh, I daresay you haven't seen the notice board yet, but Monday evening we'll be having dinner early so we can have the Hall transformed for us to watch the Beauxbatons performance. I'm quite looking forward to seeing the other schools, aren't you?"

Snape blinked, wrenching his mind from the ad and trying to follow her train of thought. "Indeed. It will be nice to see how well they do, particularly as we have the advantage of going last."

"Exactly. Very well. Good day to you." She nodded and smiled before sweeping back down the dungeon corridor. Snape shut the door slowly.

Taking a deep breath, he went back to the magazine on the table, staring thoughtfully at it. Finally, he nodded sharply, snatching up the periodical and striding determinedly to his office.

Saturday evening, Hermione was relieved to see Snape at the High Table.

Granted, the Great Hall was quite empty, as very few students beyond those who were on cast had elected to stay over the holiday. She had continued to worry about his reaction to her mother when he hadn't shown up for breakfast or lunch. It certainly hadn't helped that, at breakfast, people were continually eyeing her with solemn, wary expressions. She was very grateful when they all filed out to head down to the Hogsmeade Station to leave for break.

Now, as she surreptitiously peered up at him, she noticed that he seemed pensive, but not disturbed like the night before. Catching his eye, relief washed over her at the minute quirk of his lips into a reassuring half-smile and the way he inclined his head in her direction as he Summoned the tea service. Closing her eyes and exhaling her lingering anxiety, she then took a cleansing breath and smiled, her equilibrium regained.

As several of the remaining Gryffindors got up, talking about enjoying the clear April evening, they asked Hermione if she'd like to join them. Noting that they all amounted to couples in varying stages of attachment, she smiled ruefully and said, "No, thanks. I've got some reading to do." As they rolled their eyes and shook their heads, she grimaced at them and said loftily, "*Some* people plan to get 'O's on their N.E.W.T.s, thank you very much."

In the ensuing laughter, they all left the Hall, Hermione flicking a wistful glance over her shoulder at Snape. He was already walking toward the staff entrance, and Hermione let out a tiny sigh that she hadn't caught his eye again.

Thus it was that she was surprised to enter her room and find her bathroom door almost closed, when she had left it open, and Crookshanks nowhere to be seen. Narrowing her eyes suspiciously, she cast an audible Imperturbable on her door and then crossed to her bathroom, pushing the door open slowly. She couldn't help the smile that crossed her face at the sight of Snape, wand at the ready, perched on the edge of the tub, petting Crookshanks where he sat on the closed toilet lid, purring. Snape lowered his wand and smiled back, immediately standing and closing the distance between them.

He cupped her cheek and bent to kiss her, pulling back and murmuring, "I heard you cast the Imperturbable. Clever girl."

Hermione wrinkled her nose at him and retorted, "I like to think so. But, Severus, what are you doing here?"

Snape nodded for them to exit the bathroom, and they sank onto the edge of her bed. He gazed at her tenderly. "Several things. First, I wanted to apologize for last night. I'm...ah...over it now. I'm sorry you were upset." Hermione shrugged even as she averted her eyes and frowned. Snape lifted his fingers to her chin and guided her to look at him again. "Hermione, I never wish to make you cry in sadness. You know that, don't you?"

Nodding, she whispered, "Yes."

"Good." He leant forward and kissed her again, a gentle benison of love and promise. Sitting back, he inhaled deeply and blinked, marshalling his thoughts. "Second, I needed to talk to you."

Instantly concerned, Hermione said, "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, yes, everything's fine. I may actually have some exciting news, and that's why I needed to talk to you." At her wide-eyed, expectant gaze, he licked his lips and said, "The Floo is connected to Spinner's End now, and I am arranging to meet some contractors there this week." He reached forward and clasped her hands in his. "Hermione, is there any way we can sneak you out of here to come with me?"

Hermione blinked in surprise. It was one thing to pop about in the castle, secreting themselves in one room or another, but to leave the castle altogether... Bewildered, she asked, "Why? I don't know any more than you do about contractors or home improvement."

Snape's gaze faltered, and a faint flush stole over his cheeks. "I just wanted to show you my home... and I value your input."

"Oh." She swallowed. *Here I am telling him to finally let others help him and get involved in his life, and when he asks me to do just that, I balk. Pick one, Hermione! You can't have it both ways!*

Looking down at their hands, she noticed that his grip was tense, and she said, "I'd love to come with you, Severus..." His head whipped up and he gazed at her adoringly. "But it's so risky. How can we manage it?"

Snape swallowed, the beatific grin lighting his face. His voice was low and fervent as he said, "I'll work it out, I promise."

Hermione nodded, smiling shyly, then squeezed his hands, saying, "What else? You said there were several things."

Snape snorted and tossed his head. "Minerva not only provided me with the list of contractors Friday night...which, by the way, meant it was a very good thing I didn't pop up here after all..." Hermione's eyes goggled and she shuddered at the thought of what could have happened. "She descended upon me this morning as well, all but browbeating me into looking into a job prospect."

Hermione gasped, bouncing in excitement. "Oh! What is it?"

Snape quirked his lips and withdrew a folded piece of paper from his pocket. He handed it to Hermione, who opened it eagerly. Her eyes raced over the page, and her brows climbed higher with each line. Staring up at him blankly, she said, "Where did you get this? It wasn't in the *Prophet*; I've been looking."

Ducking his head, Snape sighed and said, "*The Quibbler*."

At that, Hermione's jaw dropped, and she blinked at him, incredulous. Her voice nearly squeaked as she repeated, "*The Quibbler*?"

Snape snorted. "I *know*. Not exactly one of the periodicals I regularly peruse. Matter of fact, I think the last time I saw one was when I read Potter's interview with Rita Skeeter two years ago." He cast a knowing, sidelong glance at her, making *her* duck her head and flush.

Hermione read the ad again, determinedly ignoring his veiled gibe. Her brow furrowed and she murmured, "It *does* seem right up your alley, but it also seems a bit..." She trailed off, searching for the right word.

"Out there? Off-kilter? Dodgy?" Snape supplied.

Hermione grimaced at him. "Not exactly. Maybe a bit... Unusual! Yes, that's it."

Snape snorted and rolled his eyes. "It's an advertisement, Hermione; you needn't be diplomatic."

She favoured him with a glare and said, "Well, have you contacted this 'Fern' person?"

Snape inhaled deeply, his expression once again solemn. "I did."

At that, Hermione beamed at him. "Wonderful! You haven't heard back yet, have you?"

"Not yet. I don't know how quickly *The Quibbler* forwards on such correspondence. At any rate, she may have already found someone."

Hermione waved her hand dismissively. "Even so, she'd be a fool to not entertain other prospects. If she's to be successful, she needs to hire the *best*...which you unequivocally are, dearest." With that, she reached out and caressed his forearm, squeezing as she made her point.

Snape couldn't quite suppress the pleased smile that surfaced. He locked eyes with her, his gaze quickly turning from warm regard to fiery attraction. Hermione felt the change and gasped, owl-eyed in response.

Snape covered her hand with his, leaning forward and pressing a needy kiss to her lips. After several moments of all but devouring her, he pulled back and purred, "It's the holiday now, love. I'm here."

Hermione voiced a breathy moan as he trailed nips back to her ear and down her throat. As one hand came up to cup her breast, she gasped and jumped in surprise. Snape pulled back to cast a puzzled look at her.

"What's wrong?" His voice was low and tinged with worry.

"I just... wasn't expecting to see you so soon. I had planned to do some reading tonight."

Wicked intent flashed over Snape's face and he drawled, "What*kind* of reading?" flicking a suggestive glance at her stack of erotica.

While Hermione's body was responding to his caresses, her mind hadn't caught up. She was still smarting from the previous night's awkwardness about her mother, and she had been all geared up to study, and now that train of thought was getting derailed. She couldn't help the faint expression of impatient frustration that crossed her face.

Her tone verging on exasperated, she retorted, "Not*that* kind. I'm reading for my Arithmancy N.E.W.T."

Snape blinked, frozen. Then, he realized that she really *was* talking about studying instead of spending time with him. Releasing her abruptly, he sat back, eyeing her with a mixture of incredulity and offence.

Back-peddalling, Snape snapped up his cool façade to mask the hurt of her lack of response. Resting on his dignity, he murmured, "I beg your pardon for interrupting. Do forgive my intrusion." He shot to his feet and stepped back, offering a frosty bow before saying, "Good night, Hermione," and Disapparating.

Hermione's mouth opened to say something to stop his hasty departure, but he was gone before the words were even half formed. An uncomfortable knot formed in her stomach as she realized that she must have hurt his feelings.

Bugger all! Studies are not everything, dammit! He came here to involve you in his life, and you pushed him away in favour of revising? What is wrong with you? You better make it up to him...

Reluctantly shoving off her bed to her desk, she heaved a sigh as she sat and pulled out her work.

Well, if you're going to send him packing in high dudgeon, then you better make the most of the time now, so it won't get in the way again. Don't let it get in the way again! At least you'll see him Monday evening for the Beauxbatons performance if he avoids the Great Hall again.

Mentally smacking herself upside the head for her gaffe, she lifted the Imperturbable from her door..*Won't need that now.....* and set to work.

Hermione didn't see Snape again until dinner Monday night, but no one else really saw him much either. He had spent most of his time meeting with Graham Moore, Flooing to Spinner's End, and shopping for the house.

His first trip to the empty house had him stepping out of the hearth into the front room, only to see that the windows were bare, and anyone could have seen his arrival. Instantly casting a concealment charm, he peered out of the windows, relieved to see the street empty. It was then that he realized he had to be careful how he was seen travelling to the house, until he had it secured from prying eyes. That thought sent him Apparating to the building where Graham Moore worked.

Becoming visible in the shadows between two buildings, he crossed to the front doors, only to be brought up short by the fact that it was closed, it being a Sunday. Face falling in defeat, he rummaged through his trench coat pocket to find Moore's card, as the man had also printed his home number on it. Looking around for a telephone box, Snape trekked along the streets, glad that when he found one, it was unoccupied.

Casting a furtive glance around for any witnesses, he surreptitiously pointed his wand at the telephone, connecting the line that way, as he hadn't any Muggle coins. After a few rings, a voice came on the line.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Moore?"

"Yes, can I help you?"

"I hope so. This is Severus Snape speaking. I do apologize for interrupting your weekend."

"No worries! What can I do for you, Mr. Snape?"

"I would like to gain access to the house as soon as possible. I realized that I do not even have a key to my own house anymore."

"Of course! Are you in the area?"

Suppressing a snort, Snape drawled, "I am close enough."

"Well, in that case, why don't I just meet you there right away and we can go ahead and do the walk-through?"

"That would be acceptable. I shall meet you there."

"Excellent. I'll be leaving here in a few minutes, and it shouldn't take but twenty or so to get there. I look forward to seeing you there."

"Indeed. Twenty minutes, then."

"See you soon, Mr. Snape."

Moore hung up, and Snape once again sought out a dark corner to Disapparate. Just as he had done the first time, he concealed himself, then Apparated to the bank of the river. Casting a sharp glance around for anyone else about, he became visible again and walked up to the neighbourhood to meet Moore.

Strolling down the streets, he saw housewives hanging out the washing, children playing in the yards, and men washing their cars and caring for their lawns. It was all very pleasant, and a cautious hope sprang up in his chest that he and Hermione would be happy there. Sinking onto the front step, he waited for Moore to arrive.

Not much later, Moore drove up, beaming good-naturedly at Snape as he crossed to Snape at the front door.

Standing and shaking his hand, Snape reiterated, "I do hope I haven't taken you away from your leisure."

Shaking his head vigorously, Moore demurred. "Not at all. Glad to get this done." Peering around with a puzzled frown, he queried, "Where's your car?"

Snape dropped the other man's hand and turned to the door, muttering, "Took a taxi." Gesturing at the lock, he added, "Shall we?"

Moore nodded, handing Snape the key. "Here you go. All yours."

Snape unlocked the door and stepped inside, striding immediately to the front room. "I shall have to get blinds for these right away. I don't much care for the idea that people can see straight in while no one is here."

Nodding sagely, Moore said, "True, true. Well, let's go through everything, all right?"

Moore had transferred the utilities to Snape's name again now that the tenants were gone, and Snape went on the walk-through with the man to make sure the property was in good enough condition to allow the couple to get their security deposit back.

Of course, with a housekeeper like Lucy, the house was spotless, and even though it seemed echoingly empty without their belongings filling it, Snape could still feel the lingering warmth of their personalities pervading the space. When they were out in the back garden, one of the neighbours popped out as well, nodding amiably over the fence at them. Snape could tell by her bright eyes that she was curious about him...no doubt based on his purported reputation.

He was pleased to note that the kitchen had been updated, including all the time-saving Muggle devices that would come in handy without house-elves to do all the chores. It wouldn't do to use magic too flagrantly in a Muggle neighbourhood.

They completed the walk-through, and when they were back out front, Moore offered Snape a ride, but Snape declined, saying, "I'd like to explore the neighbourhood a bit more, thank you."

When Moore drove off, Snape let himself back into the house, making a mental note to bring a pot of Floo powder over right away. Then, stepping away from the windows, he Disapparated, heading to Diagon Alley to do some shopping...curtains and Floo powder, first thing.

After purchasing blinds enough for the ground floor's windows, Snape returned to the house and put them up, grateful for Permanent Sticking Charms. Monday had involved more of the same, with Snape popping over to Spinner's End and making more notes, as well as stocking the kitchen with basics and sundries. He realized late that afternoon that the Beauxbatons performance was that evening, and he hastened back to his quarters at Hogwarts to get ready for dinner there.

Stepping out of his fireplace, he saw the sealed scroll sitting prominently on the table beside his armchair. *Delivered by a house-elf, I suppose.*

Dropping into the chair, he opened it, his eyes widening at the name of the sender.

Fern Campbell!

His eyes raced across the page, devouring the neatly penned response.

"Dear Mr. Snape,

Thank you for your interest in learning more about my business opportunity. I am not familiar with the Hogwarts School you listed in your references, but I asked around about it and I am duly impressed at your experience in Potion-making. In the interest of full disclosure, allow me to give you a bit of background about myself, so you may decide whether or not you would like to schedule a meeting with me.

I have come to the UK from the United States, where I was born and raised. I did not know I was a witch until well into my teenage years, as my parents were...I thought...what I have since learned are called Muggles. Turns out that my father was a Squib, and my mother was a Muggle. I grew up along the west coast, and my parents were what some people might call 'hippies.' As a child growing up in the seventies with them, I experienced what many might consider to be an unconventional upbringing. My parents lived on communes and home-schooled me. It wasn't until I was a teenager in the early eighties that I found out I was a witch. My father's family had searched for us, hoping that perhaps I might have developed magical ability, and when they found us, my grandmother arranged for me to come live with them for a while to teach me about what I am.

It wasn't until my grandparents died that I learned that the wizarding family line had come from Scotland originally, and the family had an estate here, to which I had become heir upon my grandparents' deaths. So, I am the rather bewildered beneficiary of a sizable amount of money which my grandmother particularly wished to see used to build my own business. Her recommendations included using my botanical knowledge to perhaps cultivate potions ingredients, and I thought, why stop there?

Now you see why I am interested in creating a business...one which I hope will be successful and self-sustaining...and also why I need partners who are well versed in the wizarding world and its eccentricities. I am open to negotiation about the structure and goals of the company, and how lucrative it can be for any who put forth the effort to build it.

I understand that this may all be rather beyond the usual realm of what one divulges in a business atmosphere, but I need everyone to be on the same page from the start in order to make this a success. That being said, I look forward to hearing from you again, and if you would like to meet, please let me know when you are available, as I am free whenever.

Cordially,

Fern Campbell"

Snape stared at the letter, quite taken aback by its unusual nature. *Mercy... after that sort of introduction, I wonder if this woman has more money than sense.*

Shaking his head, he Summoned parchment, a quill, and ink, settling at the dining table to scribble a hasty reply.

"Miss Campbell,

Thank you for your letter. I am interested in meeting with you. If you are available this Thursday, you may meet me at the enclosed address. My Floo will be open, and I will be there most of the day, meeting contractors. Please let me know when to expect you.

Sincerely,

Severus Snape"

Jotting down his Spinner's End address, he sealed the scroll and addressed it, summoning a house-elf. When the elf appeared, he handed the scroll to her and said, "Tandy, please take this to the Owlery for me to be delivered to Fern Campbell. The address is on the letter. I must hurry to dinner before the Beauxbatons performance this evening, and I want this to go out right away."

The elf bobbed a curtsy, nodding vigorously. "Yes, sir, Professor Snape, sir. Tandy will send it right away. Thank you, sir."

"Thank you, Tandy." He inclined his head graciously, and Tandy offered a tremulous smile before bobbing another curtsy and disappearing. At that, Snape rose, Apparating up to the Great Hall.

Dinner was a hurried, excited affair, as the cast was eagerly anticipating the performance afterwards. As soon as the puddings had disappeared from the tables, Dumbledore stood, gesturing for everyone to leave the Hall.

The cast trooped out, hovering in buzzing groups in the corridor as Dumbledore transformed the Hall to the theatre. Snape and McGonagall stood near the doors, their voices low in conversation.

"I haven't seen you much lately, Severus." McGonagall cast a sly glance at him and smirked teasingly.

Snape grimaced at her, but it was quite without rancour. "I've been busy at the house, thank you very much. Met with my agent and got the key, did a bit of shopping, put up some blinds... basic things. I shall be meeting several of the contractors Thursday. I decided to have them all there the same day, so I could get comparison quotes all at once. Perhaps the notion of competition will work in my favour." With that, he quirked one corner of his mouth up, and McGonagall chuckled.

"Not wasting time, are you?" she drawled. Snape shrugged eloquently.

Behind them, the doors opened. Dumbledore beckoned for them all to enter, saying, "Come in, come in! The stage is ready, and we should be connecting to Beauxbatons shortly. Take your seats, please."

Snape and McGonagall led the cast into the theatre, stepping to one side to allow the students to file into the front row of the audience. When the students were seated, Snape and McGonagall strode into the row behind the students, still standing as they waited for Dumbledore to make the connection through the mirrors.

Glancing around furtively and speaking in a low voice, McGonagall queried, "So, have you contacted anyone ~~else~~?" Eyeing him meaningfully, she nodded in encouragement.

Snape rolled his eyes and huffed, but he reluctantly acknowledged her. "Fine! I responded to that ad. I just heard back from the woman today."

McGonagall's eyes had lit up at his response, and she regarded him with visible excitement. "What did you say? What did she say? Are you going to interview with her?"

Ahead of them, Dumbledore was opening the mirror connection, and they dropped to their seats, barely paying attention to the students in front of them as they continued their hushed conversation.

Snape ducked his head, retreating behind his hair, then muttered, "I asked for more information, and I daresay I got more than I expected. Her reply was much more informal than one would think to get when inquiring about a business position. However, I have agreed to meet her in person after all. She shall be coming to the house Thursday as well. I figured it would save time, as I'll be there already and the Floo is connected. Besides, if I'm to set up a potions lab, she, as the business owner, would do well to know what I have available to me."

McGonagall gazed approvingly at him, beaming, her hands clasped just below her chin. "Severus, that's wonderful! I'm so pleased for you. As much as I'll miss you when you've gone, I am so looking forward to seeing you get on with your life. Good for you."

Snape averted his eyes, a flattered flush stealing over his cheeks. Abashed, he murmured, "Yes... well... thank you, Minerva."

McGonagall reached out and patted his arm, smiling fondly at him. They were both startled by an alarmed voice saying, "You're leaving?"

Both teachers turned to see Ginny twisted about in her seat, chin propped on her crossed arms where they were resting on the seat back. Her expression was distressed as she repeated, "I couldn't help but hear you, Professor. Are you leaving us?"

Snape blinked, unprepared for the untimely revelation of his plans. Beside Ginny, Harry twisted around too, his brow furrowed in surprised confusion. Snape stared blankly at McGonagall, who stared right back, her expression clearly stating that it was up to him how to respond.

Turning back to the pair of curious gazes, Snape murmured, "Not right away, Miss Weasley. But I am retiring from Hogwarts at the end of this year."

Ginny's eyes snapped open wide, and she looked at him reproachfully, saying, "But Professor, who will teach me the rest of my N.E.W.T. level Potions? How can you go? We'd miss you!"

Harry goggled at her, torn between his instinctive reaction of wondering how anyone could want to take Snape's class and the disconcerting idea that Hogwarts just wouldn't be the same without Snape in the dungeons. His inner battle was visible on his face, and the mixture was almost comical.

Snape, who was coming to terms with the cat being out of the bag, felt an odd warmth spreading outward from his chest at Ginny's indignant declaration. He gazed at her, taken aback by the fact that she was completely sincere. Swallowing to moisten his dry throat, he said, "Ah...I'm sure the headmaster will appoint a suitable replacement. I'm sure you'll do fine on your exams."

Ginny scowled, her lower lip pushing forward in petulance. "It's not the same! No one else will teach like you do, and I doubt they'd be as much of an expert as you are, sir. It's not fair! Couldn't you wait one more year, until I'm done, too?" Her tone had changed from cross to wheedling, and she gazed at him imploringly.

Snape blinked several times, thrown for a loop by her insistence. A fleeting thought chased through his stunned mind. *I guess I was mistaken when I told the Grangers that no one would miss me when I left.*

In the silence following her plea, Harry squinted at Snape and said, "It's kind of weird to think of Hogwarts without you here, Professor. It'll definitely take some getting used to." He flashed a wry grimace at Snape, rubbing the back of his neck and shrugging.

Despite himself, Snape snorted. Then, catching Ginny's eye, he snorted again at her winning smile of persuasion. Flicking a glance down the row toward Hermione, he

murmured, "Miss Weasley, while I appreciate the sentiment, I shall not change my mind." He inclined his head at her crestfallen expression. "I'm sure you'll be fine with a new teacher. Bright students succeed no matter what."

Ginny blinked owlishly at the oblique compliment, and even McGonagall stared at him in surprise. But before they could reply, Dumbledore's voice rang out.

"Attention, please! We are connected to Beauxbatons, the Ministry is in attendance there, and the show is about to start. Please be quiet and give our competitors the respect they deserve." He sat down amid the furtive hisses and shushes, and then all was quiet.

Through the mirrors, they could hear the muted rustling sounds of the audience at Beauxbatons, even though they couldn't see them. Finally, the show began, and the Hogwarts cast sat, enraptured, gazing up at the performance playing out across their own stage along the mirrors.

The Beauxbatons cast was comprised completely of students, and they made judicious use of glamours to look older. The sheer number of cast members was daunting, at least half again as many as the Hogwarts cast. The sets were quite stunning, and the music was just as good, being orchestral accompaniment like theirs, but the younger actors didn't quite pack as much of a punch as the older teachers on the Hogwarts cast.

Several of the Hogwarts students found themselves frowning in concentration, trying to understand the words to songs, not because they were sung poorly, but simply because the Beauxbatons students had such accents that the Hogwarts group wasn't used to hearing.

If the magical folk at Hogwarts were shocked at how sensual Phantom was, and how blatantly it referred to sex, they were rather taken aback at the stark representation of criminals and whores and the devastation brought about by the illegitimate child of one of the characters. Then again, perhaps they were a bit uptight about some things, as it didn't seem to faze the French cast.

When Act One ended and intermission began, several students could be seen blinking rapidly and shaking their heads as they applauded. Some were rubbing their eyes and smoothing foreheads furrowed from concentration as they watched. Conversations rippled through the group, and the sound of more of the same was audible through the mirrors.

McGonagall pursed her lips and muttered, "I wish we could see the Ministry officials, just to gauge their reactions thus far." Snape nodded thoughtfully. She continued, "I will admit that they are very good, but I still don't think they measure up to us."

Snape snorted and rolled his eyes. "That's your pride talking."

McGonagall drew herself up haughtily and glared at him. "It is not! Granted, I am quite proud of our cast, but I do think...objectively...that we are better. Of course, by we, I mean mainly you and Miss Granger." She inclined her head with a smile, and Snape ducked his head sheepishly.

"Yes, well, I hope the Ministry shares your opinion."

McGonagall chuckled, then stared musingly at the stage. "I daresay they must have cast a first year as the little Cosette. She was quite young. I'm glad our casting was restricted to older students. I rather think it might be too much pressure for a first year."

Snape merely nodded, hoping the intermission would end soon, as he was keen on seeing the rest of their competition. The performance had energy, but it was different from the sort of electric sizzle their cast had. *Perhaps it's simply because of the subject matter. I mean, this is a fairly depressing tale so far. Somehow, I doubt it will have much of a happy ending.* Then, with an inner snort, he continued, *Then again, our play doesn't have a happy ending either...well, at least not for the Phantom. I wonder if Durmstrang's play is sad and tragic as well.* His ruminations were cut short by the lights going down in the mirrors, indicating that the second act was about to begin.

The Hogwarts cast fell silent as they turned their attention to the performance. As the battle scenes swept across the stage, rife with noise and lights and chaos, every person in the Hogwarts Hall leant forward, watching with unblinking eyes, sucked into the drama. Then, with each successive death, more and more people found themselves with glassy eyes, furtively sniffing and rubbing away the moisture, affected by the pathos.

Eventually, when the final scenes allowed for a shred of happiness to spring from the continued tragedies and devastation, several people smiled through their tears, finally sitting back in their seats again and taking deep breaths to relax.

The play ended, and the Hogwarts cast joined in the audible applause, uplifted by a mixture of the engaging performance and the belief that the Hogwarts cast would surpass what they had just witnessed and win the competition. The Beauxbatons cast came out for their curtain call, and when they were about to file off, they were surprised by a Ministry of Magic official ascending the stage with them.

Looking out at the audience, the man said, "On behalf of the Ministry of Magic's Department of International Magical Relations, I would like to offer my most sincere congratulations to Beauxbatons for producing such a marvellous show. The inaugural performance of this Tri-wizard Competition has set the bar quite high, and we all look forward to the next two performances by Durmstrang and Hogwarts. For now, we would like to thank Madame Maxime for her leadership and dedication in this endeavour, and offer congratulations once again to the students who contributed to such a resounding success. The Ministry is in your debt, and your school, family, and friends should all be exceptionally proud of you. Well done." He followed his speech with a flourishing bow, then exited the stage, joining the applause that had begun again.

Taking their bows one last time, the cast filed into the wings, leaving the stage empty. The sounds of the audience at Beauxbatons were still audible to those at Hogwarts, and they, too, broke out into conversations as Dumbledore approached the mirrors to end the connection and dispose of them.

Snape and McGonagall stood, glancing around at the students. Several girls were dabbing at their eyes, sniffing, talking hard about what they liked or didn't like.

Down the row, Ron stretched, his joints popping audibly as he grimaced. Rubbing at his face, he said, "Blimey, that was long."

Susan shot him a reproachful look from where she and Hannah were discussing the tragic beauty of the young people's secret loves. Her tone was scandalized as she said, "Ron!"

Shrugging elaborately, Ron said, "What? I couldn't follow what was going on half the time, their accents were so thick, and people just kept getting older, I guess. I mean, how many years do you figure that play covered? How was I supposed to know when they were and what was going on?"

Dean piped up, "I know it was set in French history and all that, but I don't remember much about what happened when. If it wasn't History of Magic, it was long ago, before I came here." He conveniently left off the fact that even if the events *had* been covered in History of Magic, he wouldn't have remembered it anyway, as he regularly fell asleep or played games with Seamus in the back row during class.

Hermione, further down the same row, where she was standing by Neville and Parvati, frowned and said, "No, the Napoleonic Wars and Lamarque's death decades later had no links to the wizarding world; we've never learnt about them in History of Magic."

Ron cast a baffled look at Hermione and said, "Gee, something that wasn't in *Hogwarts: A History*, and I *still* have no idea what you're talking about."

A ripple of laughter and snorts swept through the listening cast, and Hermione wrinkled her nose at Ron. "I've gone on holiday with my parents in Paris before, and I read a bit about French history..."

From somewhere within the group, an anonymous voice muttered, "You? Reading? Never!"

Hermione glanced around, but no one met her eye, as they were all studiously attempting to keep straight faces after the quiet quip. Huffing and rolling her eyes, she said, "Never mind that. It's just that what Ron said brings up a good point."

Ron blinked at her, his brows rising in surprise, and everyone gazed at her expectantly.

"If you had a hard time following what was going on with their play, perhaps others could say the same about ours." Frowns bloomed on faces all along the rows. Turning a purposeful gaze to the headmaster, Hermione said, "Sir, it never occurred to me until now that we should have programmes. Professor Snape and I had some when we went to London to see the play. If the Beauxbatons cast had made programmes for the audience, we would have been able to see when and where each scene was supposed to be taking place." She paused at the way Dumbledore's face lit up.

"Miss Granger, what a brilliant idea!" He immediately looked at Colin, beaming. "We can use the photo you used for the posters, and put it on the cover." Whipping his gaze back to Hermione, he said, "Miss Granger, do you still have a copy of the programme from London for comparison?"

Hermione blinked. Her voice faltering, she said, "No, sir. I didn't bring it back with me." At Dumbledore's crestfallen expression, she added, "But I can owl my parents and get one before Friday."

"Do that, Miss Granger, please. And Mr. Creevey, I'll need your original photo again." Nodding sharply at the boy, Dumbledore smiled again, bathing the cast in his excited pride. "I do hope you all enjoyed the Beauxbatons performance. It's amazing how well everyone has risen to the challenge. That being said, I still think we will win the competition, and this new programme idea, in addition to the posters and bio board, will set us apart from the other casts."

Everyone exchanged smiles and anticipatory glances. As they shifted and rustled, Dumbledore continued, "Very well then, run along and enjoy the rest of your evening. Wednesday will be a repeat of the same schedule as tonight, so we may watch the Durmstrang performance. Good night!"

Conversations buzzed again as they all exited the Hall in small groups, discussing the performance and the competition. As they spilled out into the corridor, McGonagall turned to Snape and said, "I do hope you'll keep me apprised of your progress, Severus. I look forward to seeing you set up elsewhere."

Snape flicked a glance toward Hermione where she was ascending the stairs, deep in conversation with Ginny, Harry, and several other Gryffindors. "Thank you, Minerva. I hope Thursday goes smoothly myself." With that, he inclined his head graciously and said, "Good night," before Disapparating.

65- Home Sweet Home?

Chapter 69 of 84

Durmstrang raises the bar performance-wise; Hermione sets her parents straight on how to behave after the Ministry performance; the cast gets a holiday after all; Hermione and Snape manage to get Hermione to Spinner's End, where they have several important meetings: with contractors, Fern Campbell, and memories.

Standard Disclaimer goes here.

Author's Note: Deepest gratitude to Ladyofthemasque and Horserider for beta and feedback, and to all you lovely folk who keep reading, reviewing, and contacting me with requests for more. :) Now that term is over, I present you with the next installment of this labour of love, and I hope to get lots more done before Snapefest and Portus, even though work will be crazy for our Poker Classic. *crosses fingers, then uncrosses them, since that makes it hard to type* You lot rock my socks! *hugs and chocolate*

Chapter 65- Home Sweet Home?

Hermione pondered how she could possibly meet Snape to go with him to Spinner's End Thursday. Finally, late that night, after the Beauxbatons performance, she was struck with an idea. Smiling in the darkness, she silently thanked Dumbledore for giving her something to work with.

The next morning, Hermione purposefully strode up to McGonagall at the High Table during breakfast, politely offering greetings to Snape and the other professors who were there before saying, "Professor McGonagall, I have a proposition for you." Beaming winningly at the older woman, she noted Snape's eyes narrowing in curiosity.

McGonagall tilted her head in question and said, "What would that be, Miss Granger?"

Gesturing to the empty seat between McGonagall and Snape, Hermione said, "Professor Dumbledore wanted me to get a programme from my folks, and I said I'd owl them to ask for it. But, since it *is* the holiday, and we..." she waved her hand vaguely at the remaining cast members seated in the Hall, "...can't go home, I was hoping we might be allowed to go to Hogsmeade at least... for a break. I'm sure we could all use a diversion to keep us from getting too nervous about the Ministry performance, so Thursday would be perfect. *And* I could pop in on my parents to collect the programme, as I'm sure they could have one for me by then." She paused and sucked in a deep breath after delivering her speech in a rush.

In the silence that followed, McGonagall blinked rapidly, absorbing Hermione's request. Hermione flicked a furtive glance at Snape, whose eyes had widened again in surprised recognition of her ploy, and saw that his body had tensed in anticipation of McGonagall's response.

McGonagall looked up at Hermione, appraising her bright, eager face and hopeful posture. Feeling a rush of fondness for her Head Girl and prize pupil, she offered a prim smile and said, "Miss Granger, your reasoning is valid, and I would be happy to allow the cast a Hogsmeade outing." Hermione drew breath to gush in gratitude, but was cut off by McGonagall's hand rising between them in a gesture of warning. "Provided, however, that everyone is particularly careful to not overexert or overindulge, as we must all be in top form for Friday evening." She eyed Hermione sternly over her spectacles.

Hermione's eyes went round and she nodded vigorously. "Of course, Professor! I'll make sure everyone understands that *completely*."

McGonagall smiled more warmly and nodded. "Very well then. You may spread the word, and I will post it on the notice boards today."

Grinning broadly, Hermione said, "Thank you, Professor. Thank you so much!" Then, flicking a triumphant glance at Snape as she spun, she bounded down from the dais and back to the Gryffindor table, where she told the others the good news. A ripple of surprise was quickly followed by a crowd of excitement, and the cast members all looked up at McGonagall, beaming their thanks. McGonagall nodded at them in acknowledgement, lips quirked in a pleased smile.

Beside her, Snape stared at his plate, taken aback by Hermione's initiative. *How perfect! She can meet me and we can go to Spinner's End, and no one will be any the wiser...* He shook his head faintly as he thought, *That girl is definitely getting sneakier!*

The early dinner Wednesday evening was even more excited than Monday's, what with Durmstrang's Ministry performance to follow and the next day's Hogsmeade trip.

Hermione was enjoying the cast's appreciation...albeit grudging from the Slytherins...for brainstorming the idea for the outing. Even Dumbledore had sought her out at dinner Tuesday night to praise her for her idea and to thank her once again for planning to retrieve the programme.

Hermione had already sent owls out to her parents, warning them of the impending visit, and to Snape, asking for details on how they could arrange the trip to Spinner's End. It was Snape's idea to have Hermione use the Floo connection at her parents' house to come straight to his after she Apparated there to collect the programme.

Hermione was also looking forward to an opportunity to speak to her parents in private about how her mother should *not* accost Snape Friday night, as she had grievously disconcerted him the previous week. Snape didn't know about that part, but Hermione was determined to protect him and their nascent relationship.

When dinner was over, and Dumbledore shooed everyone out into the corridor, Ginny and Harry approached Hermione, arm in arm.

Grinning, Harry said, "Hey, 'Mione, you want to come to the Three Broomsticks tomorrow with us? I daresay a few butterbeers would go down a treat to quell any butterflies."

Hermione laughed, but shook her head. "No thanks. I'm going to be getting the programme from my folks, and I don't know how long I'll be there." She cast a meaningful glance at Ginny, whose brows rose in curiosity at Hermione's intimation that she could be "unavailable" for a while the next day. "If I manage to get back, I'll find you lot somewhere."

Ginny's eyes gleamed with anticipation of details later, and she quirked a half smile at Hermione, saying, "No worries." Then, she purposefully steered the conversation toward Durmstrang's impending performance and away from Hermione's activities for the next day.

When Dumbledore appeared in the doorway to the Hall, the cast eagerly responded to his summons to enter. Once again, the mirrors were placed along the stage, and the cast could hear the sounds of the audience in Durmstrang's theatre space. It wasn't long before the lights dimmed and music began, and everyone went silent.

It was immediately apparent to the Hogwarts cast that the main actors in the Durmstrang cast possessed no little talent, and, noting that they presented much stiffer competition for them than the Beauxbatons cast had, a frisson of unease swept over them. However, it didn't take long for them to be drawn into the performance, charmed by the quality of "Maria's" singing.

Bursts of laughter rang out at appropriate times, and heads bobbed in accompaniment to the catchy songs. As the first act ended, it was met with enthusiastic applause on both sides of the viewing mirrors. Lights came up for the intermission, and the Hogwarts cast exchanged significant looks, knowing that the Durmstrang cast had just raised the bar.

McGonagall sat pensively in her seat, lips pursed, until she finally said to no one in particular, "Durmstrang covers the same years of education as Hogwarts, doesn't it?"

Before anyone else could respond, Hermione piped up, "Oh yes, they're the same as we are. Viktor told me all about it in fourth year." She paused, flushing awkwardly at the variety of expressions turned her way. Ron and Harry smirked, several others simply looked exasperated at her "know-it-all" ways, and Snape flicked a scowl at her.

Caught up in her own thoughts, McGonagall retorted, "Then where did they get the children for those youngest in the Von Trapp family? They're clearly younger than eleven." Indignation coloured her tone as she added, "This competition is supposed to be among the *schools*, and those children *can't* be students there yet!"

Neville's voice was anxious as he said, "Do you think they're breaking the rules, Professor?"

Before she could answer, Snape cut in, "That is a matter for the Ministry to decide, not us. And, even if they were determined to have broken some rules...although I don't recall seeing any rules to speak of...and were disqualified, that would have no bearing on how well we perform." He paused, glaring haughtily around at the cast. "Headmaster Borek has clearly led his cast to perform quite well, and we must focus on surpassing them, no matter what." He cast another stern glare over them, satisfied at their slow nods of acknowledgement. When he looked at McGonagall, she was frowning, but she shrugged irritably.

"Of course, you're right, Severus, but I'm still curious about who those young children are."

At that, Snape actually smiled mischievously. "Well, if they had provided *programmes*, we could satisfy your curiosity. But, alas, they have not." He punctuated his words with a mock-regretful sigh, and several students chuckled, grinning broadly at each other that *their* show would surpass the others in that respect.

The lights began to dim again, and they all settled down for the second act, some still smirking with self-satisfaction.

The mood of the second act turned more serious, leaving the sprightly tunes of the first act behind. There were fewer laughs, but the audience was rapt, watching intently as the pathos of the budding relationship between the Captain and Maria drew them in. Then, as the tension mounted with the Captain shying away from the expectations of the ascendant Nazi regime, a silence so profound you could hear a pin drop permeated the theatres in both schools.

By the time the play ended, there were muffled sounds of sniffing and damp eyes scattered throughout the audience. As soon as the lights came back up on the cast taking their curtain call, the Hogwarts cast shot to their feet, almost as one, deeply impressed by the Durmstrang performance.

Wild applause and cheers greeted the actress who played Maria as she emerged onstage to join her Captain. Beside Snape, McGonagall clapped fiercely, leaning closer to Snape to murmur through the tumult, "Amazing performance! Why, I think she may even rival our Miss Granger..."

Snape whipped around to pin her with a narrow-eyed scowl. He opened his mouth for a heated retort, but snapped it shut again before he could say anything too suspicious. McGonagall merely flicked a bemused glance at him as she continued her applause. Mastering himself, Snape finally said, "Why, Minerva, I'm surprised to hear you say that. Surely you don't mean we should be worried, do you?"

Brows rising, McGonagall turned a smug smirk on Snape and said, "Nonsense. While that young lady may be quite on par with Miss Granger, no one else in their cast compared to *you*, Severus." She inclined her head toward him fondly, and Snape blinked, taken aback.

Ducking his head, Snape turned his attention back to the Durmstrang cast, who were politely vacating the stage to allow the same Ministry official who had given a speech after the Beauxbatons performance to ascend the stage and give what amounted to a repeat performance. When he left the stage, the cast followed, and conversation erupted in the audience.

Dumbledore set about ending the connection through the mirrors, and the Hogwarts cast slowly exited their seats, discussing the performance. Before anyone could exit the Hall, Hermione paused and announced, "Don't forget, everyone, Professor McGonagall has been gracious enough to allow us to visit Hogsmeade tomorrow, but we must be careful not to overindulge ourselves, since we have to wow the Ministry Friday night!" She nodded in gratitude to McGonagall, and the other students all nodded or gestured to acknowledge both McGonagall's reprieve and Hermione's warning. With that, the cast filed out of the Hall, excited about the next day.

Thursday morning, the cast went to breakfast fairly early, eager to get a head start on their holiday outing. Hermione cast a knowing look at Snape as she followed her mates out of the Hall to the grounds. Snape Apparated to his quarters, gathered his notes for his meetings with Fern Campbell and with contractors, and Flooed to Spinner's End, intent upon being ready for any arrivals, including Hermione.

Once Hermione and the rest of her cast mates were through the gates, Hermione turned to her friends and said, "Look, I'm going to just Apparate home from here. I want to make sure I can get that programme and see my folks. I'll catch up with you later. Have fun in Hogsmeade!" She beamed at them, stepping away and Disapparating before anyone could say much more than "bye."

Certain that no one would be in her room to get in her way, Hermione Apparated into the middle of her floor, between her bed and closet. Carefully peering out into the hallway, she called, "Mum? Dad? It's me. I'm home."

A startled "Hermione?" rang out from downstairs, and she began her descent, only to be met by her parents charging out of the kitchen to goggle up at her.

Smiling at them as she bounded down the stairs, she said, "I'm glad you're home. I wasn't sure if you'd be at work or not."

Her parents exchanged a look and her father said, "Well, when you owed us that you would likely be coming by, we decided to open late. It's a holiday week, so we weren't busy anyway. I just didn't expect you to show up in your room!"

Hermione laughed. "Well, I knew nothing could be in my way, and I didn't have to worry about anyone seeing me either." She reached them and gave them quick hugs of greeting.

As she released her mother, the older woman said, "Well, what did you do when you and Severus came for dinner?"

Hermione frowned, her eyes narrowing at hearing her Snape's name on her mother's lips again. Curtly, she said, "Professor Snape cast a concealment charm before we Apparated here. We hid in the shadows before becoming visible again. Surely you remember us doing that in front of the hearth when we left?"

Her father nodded and her mother uttered an affirming noise. Hermione continued in a cool voice, "I could have done the same thing, but why bother? This was just easier." Then, easing past her parents, she stalked into the kitchen and plopped at the table. As her parents entered, she asked, "Do you have the programme for me? I need to get it back to Professor Dumbledore so he can get the programmes made for the show tomorrow night."

Her father smiled and crossed to the counter by the telephone. Brandishing it at her, he strode over and sank into a seat beside her at the table. "All yours! I drove by the theatre after work and picked one up for you."

Relaxing a trifle, she smiled back and said, "Thanks, Dad. We're doing everything we can to make sure we win!"

Her mother leant against a counter and said, "How were the other schools' performances? What did they do?"

"Beauxbatons did *Les Misérables*, and Durmstrang did *The Sound of Music*. Several of us had a hard time following Beauxbatons' show because of their accents, and they didn't have programmes to help us know what was going on either. But last night..." she paused, her eyes going round in remembered awe, "...the Durmstrang show was amazing! We're really going to have to bring our A game to surpass them."

Her father covered her hand where it clutched the programme and murmured, "You'll all do wonderfully. I'm sure of it!"

Crossing to add her encouragement, her mother patted her shoulder and said, "Your father's right. I doubt anyone could possibly be as good as you are."

Hermione smiled gratefully at their support, but she sighed and said, "I don't know about that. The girl who played Maria was fantastic! I don't think I could have done better. She really stood out."

Her mother piped up, "I'm sure you're just being modest, dear. Besides, Hogwarts doesn't just have you; there's Severus, too!"

Hermione stiffened under her mother's hand, and she scowled again. Both parents drew back, blinking in confusion at her swift change in demeanour. Hermione's voice was sharp as she said, "Mum, stop that!"

Taken aback, her mother backed away, and her father released her hand, sitting back in his chair, looking between the two women, bewildered. Slowly, he said, "Stop what, Hermione?"

Hermione crossed her arms defensively and glowered, pursing her lips. Finally, glancing balefully at her oblivious parents, she growled, "Stop gushing over Professor Snape! It's ridiculous for a grown woman to behave in such a fashion."

Her mother gasped, her hand fluttering to her throat as she goggled at her daughter. At the same time, her father frowned, drawing up sternly as he said, "Apologize to your mother this instant, young lady. You are *not* to talk to your mother like that, do you understand?"

Hermione fumed, her jaw throbbing as she ground her teeth. After a moment of charged silence, her face crumpled and she wailed, "But it's so embarrassing! Have you any idea how *mortified* I was when Professor Snape told me how discomfiting it was to have you hanging all over him and all but throwing yourself at him?"

An inarticulate explosion of denial burst from Mrs. Granger's throat, and she stared at Hermione, aghast. "What? I did no such thing! I was merely expressing my appreciation of his mesmeric performance!" She turned appealing, humiliated eyes to her husband, who was watching her with a sympathetic expression. "Geoff...I wasn't that bad, was I?"

Mr. Granger rose to comfort his shaken wife, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and squeezing. "There, there. I know you didn't mean anything by it, but apparently Professor Snape was overwhelmed by your enthusiasm." He turned back to Hermione and said, his voice low, "What did he say, Hermione?"

Hermione's face was burning, and she couldn't meet her father's eyes as she mumbled, "He said she had been clinging to him and even *touched* him, and he was rather shaken by it all. I wanted to dissolve into the very ground when he told me."

Mrs. Granger squeaked in pained protest. "How could he think I meant anything by it? I'm *married*, for mercy's sake! I was there with my *husband* to see our *daughter*! I was just trying to be supportive!"

Hermione shrugged miserably, staring at the linoleum. Her father continued to soothe her mother, until he eventually went quiet, and the silence swelled awkwardly.

Taking a deep breath, Mr. Granger cleared his throat and said, "Well, he did come off as rather a reserved fellow. I guess he just isn't used to your kind of frankness, dear." He hugged his wife again before returning to his seat by Hermione. "We'll be sure to be more circumspect in our congratulations next time, all right, Hermione?"

Feeling somewhat ashamed of herself as her angry outburst had subsided, Hermione nodded, saying, "Yes. Thanks. I'm sorry I yelled, Mum."

Mrs. Granger, whose face was still pink with embarrassment, crossed her arms as if hugging herself and muttered, "And I'm sorry I embarrassed you with your professor."

Another awkward silence fell, and Hermione stood. "Well, I'd better get going. I'll see you tomorrow night. Thank you for getting me the programme."

Her father rose, patting her arm as she edged past him to leave the kitchen. "No problem. Are you going to Apparate back?" His voice betrayed his deliberate attempt to restore normalcy to their conversation. "I don't know how you handle that, Hermione. It was the strangest, most uncomfortable feeling I've ever experienced. Felt like I was literally put through the wringer!" His joking smile was a bit forced, but Hermione was grateful for his effort.

"I don't know if it's very different for Muggles or not, but you get used to it, particularly as it's so useful." She led them into the living room and stopped in front of the fireplace. "But, I'm not leaving that way this time. Since you're hooked up to the Floo still, I'm going to use that instead." Closing the distance to her father, she gave him a quick hug, then looked at her mother anxiously. When Mrs. Granger opened her arms, Hermione rushed over to hug her too, penitence written on her face. "See you tomorrow night. Thanks again."

Her mother stepped back, her smile tremulous, but she nodded and said, "See you later, dear. Love you."

Hermione reached into her pocket for Floo powder and said, "Love you, too," as she threw it into the hearth. Her parents both gasped as the emerald flames leapt from the cold grate. Stepping in, Hermione said, "Spinner's End," and whirled from view, leaving them to gape at her departure.

Hermione emerged into a tumult of activity; she voiced a startled cry as she ducked away from the group of people crammed into Snape's living room, flattening herself against the wall behind the chaotic crowd.

Somehow, six separate contractors had managed to arrive, with one or two assistants in tow each, at virtually the same time that morning. Snape hadn't even had time to properly greet each group as they arrived, nearly crowding into each other in the Floo and tumbling out to fill his living room. The squabbling that ensued among the group as rivals met and demanded explanations overwhelmed Snape; he had been staring about, stunned to silence by the unexpected turn of events.

Snape, surrounded by contractors, saw the flash of green from the hearth and spun, barely able to hear Hermione's squawk over the others' raised voices.

When he saw Hermione stumbling to one side, crouching away from wildly gesturing hands as she slid along the wall past the arguing mass, he went hot with a flash of frustration and annoyance and drew himself up, sucking in a deep breath.

His stentorian roar for silence echoed in the vacant house, and the cacophony abated into a dazed quiet. The contractors whipped around to stare at their possible client; several went pale and backed away from the barely-contained fury sparking in Snape's eyes. All were frozen in wariness, except Hermione, who had already crept past the group and into the dining room, leaving Snape to deal with the startled workers.

Snape turned in one spot, pinning each person with an icy glare in turn. Then, his voice dangerously low...Hermione recalled how foreboding that voice was from Potions class...he said, "I have brought you here to determine whether or not I wish to avail myself of your services. I assure you, based on witnessing such behaviour, I no longer believe that I should use any of you. What kind of manners were you taught? How could any of you think that this is professional behaviour? If you cannot restrain yourselves and behave in a civilized, professional manner, you are welcome to leave. Now. The Floo is currently clear." He paused, raking them with another chastising glare. No one moved except to shift their weight awkwardly, chastened.

"Very well then. I will deal with each of you momentarily. Excuse me." He stepped toward the dining room, pleased that they parted before him to let him through. Hermione had continued into the kitchen, and was leaning against the counter, her expression one of suppressed amusement and anxiety. As Snape poked his head in and saw her, his expression melted into one of abject relief.

Rolling his eyes at the scene they had just witnessed, he crossed to her and murmured, "What could I have been thinking to think this was a good idea?"

Hermione smiled and said, "Well, at least you don't have to worry about whether or not they're intimidated by you. Poor sods. I thought a couple of them were about to wet their pants when you yelled." She giggled and Snape favoured her with a sour grimace.

"Very funny. Fern Campbell should be arriving later, so I hope to finish with this lot before then. Would you like to accompany me as I meet with them? I already told you I'd value your input." He gazed at her solemnly, his eyes wistful.

Hermione held up a finger and ducked past him, sneaking out where she could observe the crowd. They were all giving each other the hairy eyeball and muttering amongst themselves, so none of them saw her. After a few seconds, Hermione gasped, jerking back and rushing into the kitchen, eyes wide in her white face.

Snape instantly drew her to him, alert for some menace. "What? What's wrong?" He peered about, looking for what could have possibly frightened her.

Hermione hissed, "I can't go out there! I've met some of them! They *know* who I am! We can't risk them seeing me with you, in your house, and asking questions!"

Snape's eyes widened in consternation. "Who? How do you know them?"

"I met some of them after the Final Battle. When celebrations were going on all over the place, several of my classmates had parties, and we were invited. One of the assistants is a cousin of *Seamus Finnigan*! Seamus was quite proud to introduce us to his family, so I'm pretty sure he would recognize me. I can't be seen!"

Snape's brow furrowed in thought. He peered back out at the group, then muttered, "What if you looked different? Can't we change your appearance somehow? You're a woman; surely you know how to do glamours, don't you?"

Hermione tamped back her indignant reaction to his sexist comment in light of their predicament. "I've always been more interested in *important* things, but I can try something, I guess." Heaving a sigh, she swallowed hard and pointed her wand at her hair. Muttering an incantation and describing a pattern with the wand, she closed her eyes and cringed as the spell took effect.

Snape backed away in surprise. Her hair had suddenly darkened to an almost blue-black, as had her eyebrows. It was quite disconcerting, as her skin tone was too fair to match such colouring. Then, before she opened her eyes, she dropped her wand to her face and mumbled something else. Scrunching up her face at the sensation, she opened her eyes cautiously and saw Snape staring at her in fascination. Her eyes were as black as his!

She looked up at him anxiously and said, "Well?"

Snape was at a loss. Not sure of what to say, he simply conjured a mirror and held it out. Hermione hesitated lifting it, and when she looked at her reflection, she hastily clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle her squeak of astonishment.

The blackness of her hair and eyes made her look paler, and she had a hard time believing it was her true reflection. Glancing at Snape, her eyes widened, and she realized she resembled *him*. Swallowing hard again, she said, her voice shaky, "Erm... I think it's passable. Don't you?" Snape nodded slowly. Then, unable to hold it back, she burst forth with, "I look like I'm related to you!"

Snape's snort and her strangled chuckle broke the tension, and she ran a tentative hand over her hair, almost as if afraid the black would come off on her hands. Then, in an attempt to be even more different than her usual look, she twisted her curls into a tight bun, tucking the ends into itself, and making her appearance even more severe.

Snape nodded and said, "Good. Who shall you be?"

Hermione shrugged extravagantly and said, "I don't know; pick something!"

Exhaling sharply through his nose, Snape muttered, "Fine, you'll just be 'Jane.' Leave it at that. No sense in providing more details when it's not necessary. Remember?"

Hermione smirked and tilted her head. "Yes, of course. Slytherin Rule Number One, wasn't it?"

Snape snorted and flashed a relieved and amused grin at her. "Not Number One, but definitely in the top five." Squeezing her arm in gratitude and encouragement, he continued, "Come, let's get this over with."

When they crossed the threshold into the living room again, it was clear that every person there had taken Snape's words to heart, and they were met with politely attentive faces. Hermione furtively eyed Seamus's cousin, but the man betrayed no flicker of recognition. Thus comforted, Hermione just listened as Snape outlined how he would meet with each company's representatives.

Trailing after Snape like his smaller, feminine shadow, Hermione enjoyed hearing both Snape's plans and the contractors' responses. Thankfully, no one really paid much attention to her, save a few who merely asked her name and greeted her cordially before turning their attention back to the potential job. After several trips through the

house, from attic to back garden, plus plans for a basement, Hermione began to let her mind wander beyond the task at hand and into what the place must have been like when Snape was a child there.

After a few hours, Snape had finished his consultations and sent the contractors off with the promise of contacting them when he had made his decision. Once they were gone, Snape's shoulders sagged and he sighed wearily.

Spinning to see Hermione leaning against the doorjamb to the dining room, he smiled and said, "Thank you. As harrowing as that was, it would have been much more bothersome without you here."

Hermione quirked a lopsided grin and said, "Even including the panic?" as she gestured to her altered colouring.

Chuckling, Snape crossed to her and fingered an escaped curl, eyeing its inky shade thoughtfully. "It *is* odd to see you like this." Then, he added, his voice tinged with worry, "It will reverse, won't it? I mean, we have the show tomorrow night."

Hermione straightened, chewing her bottom lip and worrying her hands. "I think so. It's supposed to be temporary. Should I reverse it now? Or wait until after Fern is gone too?"

Snape nodded. "Mmm... perhaps you should wait. Hopefully she'll be here any moment now." He cast an anxious glance at the hearth. In the silence that followed his remark, Hermione's stomach growled audibly. Snape's head whipped around to Hermione, his brows high with amusement at her flushed cheeks.

Defensively, she grumbled, "What? Breakfast was *hours* ago! Aren't *you* hungry?"

Snape chuckled again and gestured for her to follow him into the kitchen. He pulled out a box of water biscuits and a jar of jam, presenting them to her with a flourish before setting them on the counter and getting a spoon from a drawer. Smiling, he said, "It's not much, but it's something until we can get somewhere for some real food."

They took turns spooning strawberry jam onto the biscuits and eating them, Hermione pausing long enough to rummage through the cupboards for a glass. Filling it from the tap, she drank, gazing at Snape over the rim of the glass, feeling a peaceful sort of happiness spreading through her at sharing such a simple repast with him in his re-acquired home.

Snape felt her regard and locked eyes with her. They slowly ate a few more bites before Snape closed the distance between them and drew her into a tender kiss. The flavour of strawberries made their kiss even sweeter, but before it could evolve into something more, they were interrupted by a voice from the living room calling, "Mr. Snape?"

Jerking away, eyes wide in wary anticipation, Snape called back, "Coming!" Running a hand through his hair to smooth it, he tilted his head toward the living room and squeezed Hermione's hand as he tugged her along with him.

They emerged into the living room to see Fern Campbell patiently waiting for them, gazing about at the empty room. Her appearance was quite different from theirs: of average height, she wore an embroidered peasant blouse and a long, full, wrinkled skirt. Her hair was brown with sun streaks, with several tiny beaded braids atop long, wavy locks. The striped head scarf that held her hair away from her face was knotted behind one ear, leaving the long tails to hang down her back, multicoloured fringe at the ends.

Hermione was struck with the impression of a strange combination of Trelawney and Luna, based on the collection of beaded necklaces and bracelets the woman sported and the decided air of dottiness surrounding her like an aura. Blinking several times, as if the strange apparition might change, Hermione flicked a glance at Snape, noticing his bewildered expression. Ready herself to jump into the fray, should Snape not rise to the occasion, she paused when he did.

Fern turned to face them, a smile lighting her face as she crossed the short distance to Snape, her hand outstretched. "Mr. Snape, I'm so pleased to meet you."

Snape shook the proffered hand mechanically, managing to say, "Ms. Campbell, welcome to my home."

Before Snape could release her, she clasped both hands around his hand and made a moue of entreaty. "Oh, please, call me Fern. Ms. Campbell seems so stodgy."

Snape blinked, discomfited, then said, "Fern it is."

She beamed at him again, then looked beyond him to Hermione. Letting go of Snape's hand, she stepped smartly past him to greet Hermione. "Hello. I'm Fern. What's your name?"

Hermione was taken aback by the childlike candour in the older woman's grey eyes, but replied, "Jane. Nice to meet you, Fern."

Fern clasped her hands, her bracelets jingling and clattering, and spun back to encompass them both in her sunny smile. "How lovely. Now, why don't we get to business?" She glanced around, then tilted her head at Snape. "Haven't you any cushions to sit on?"

Snape shook his head. "I have no furniture in the house yet. First I must get the renovations finished, then I can outfit it. I could conjure up some chairs if you like." His voice dropped as he added, "Wizards can do that, you know."

Fern regarded him with wide eyes and said, "Of course, but that would be a bit too much work. I don't mind the floor." With that, she dropped gracefully to sit cross-legged on the carpet, depositing her macramé bag in her lap and peering expectantly up at Snape and Hermione.

They exchanged significant looks, and Hermione decided to defuse Snape's growing irritation and anxiety by saying, "Cushions were certainly a good idea, Fern." Then, pulling bits of lint from her jumper, she transfigured them into large floor cushions, dropping them to the floor in a triangle before sinking onto one. Fern happily clambered onto hers. Snape, face stoic, hesitated for a long moment before he finally lowered himself to the cushion with more grace than Hermione was expecting under the circumstances.

Taking a deep breath, Snape launched into the interview, crisply asking, "Now, Fern, could you tell me a bit more about what it is you're planning for this 'fledgling business' of yours?"

Fern clasped her hands and rested her elbows on her knees, propping her chin on her hands to gaze intently at Snape. "Well, I enjoy cultivating plants, particularly magical ones, and while that sort of business is certainly an option, it's not a particularly feasible one without plenty of land and hands to tend it. So, I thought: why not tailor that cultivation to those items that are especially useful in potions, and then sell them? The only problem there is that I would have had to not only grow the plants, but then create the potions, and I'm not well-practiced at that. *That* is where you come in, Mr. Snape." She smiled at him, the dimple in one cheek suddenly very noticeable and giving her grin an even more lopsided charm.

Snape inclined his head, shifting on the cushion. "Yes, well... What sort of potions were you thinking of brewing?"

At that, her eyes lit up, and she sat up straight again, her hands flopping into her lap. "Oh! I'd love to create a line of cosmetic and health potions...both topical and ingestible...but work to make them as all-natural and environmentally friendly as possible. See, in the Muggle world, most health and beauty items have so many chemicals..." Her animated manner faltered, and she trailed off at the wide-eyed look of horror on Snape's face.

Hermione snapped her attention to Snape as soon as the woman said "cosmetics," knowing what his reaction would be. She held her breath, hoping he would manage to keep his snark under control and not jeopardize this opportunity.

Snape's nostrils flared, and he swallowed hard, his lips thinning. Fern, unsure of what was bothering him, forged on earnestly, "Oh, and I want to help women feel vibrant

and beautiful even though they are busier than ever nowadays. I mean, when women were expected to stay home all the time, they could spend time making their own potions to suit their needs, but in today's world, with the modern woman, they need convenience and quality, since their time is too valuable to spend on what some call frivolous pursuits. But, every woman likes to feel more vital and alluring, strong and feminine, regardless of how demanding their job is, competing in a man's world..."

Snape's expression went stony, and Fern trailed off in uncertainty again. Hermione could sense the indignation bubbling within him and reached out to touch his arm lightly, drawing his attention. When he whipped his gaze to her, she murmured, "Might I have a word with you?" Then, she turned appealingly to Fern and said, "We'll be just a moment." Tightening her grip on his arm, she tugged, eyeing him urgently. He scowled at her but stood, stalking through the dining room into the kitchen.

Hermione shot to her feet and scrambled after him. When he wheeled around on her in the kitchen, she pressed a finger to her lips for him to keep his voice down, then tilted her head at the door to the back garden. With a muted growl, Snape flung the door open and stomped out. Hermione followed more circumspectly, glancing around for any neighbours who might be around. Seeing no one, she furtively cast *Muffliato* around them anyway, just to be safe.

Snape was standing ramrod straight, his arms crossed tightly across his chest, fairly bristling with annoyance.

Her voice low, as if trying to gentle an upset animal, Hermione said, "Severus, please..."

His lip curling, Snape spat, "Please, what? You can't honestly expect me to subject myself to such inane drivel!"

Hermione closed her eyes in a bid for patience and said, in a deliberate voice, "Yes, I can." She opened her eyes to see him glaring at her in offence. "Listen for a moment." Holding his gaze, she saw him bridle, then lift one eyebrow in reluctant acquiescence. "There is nothing *wrong* with the types of potions she's talking about! Not everyone is going to need Wolfsbane, you know." Her sardonic tone made him grimace, sulking. "Besides, she's just starting out. This is your chance to guide her; give her sound advice. Once you can do what *she* wants, you can take the opportunity to show her what *else* you can do, and expand the business!"

"Why not establish the company as one that can deliver quality goods first, even if they're trifles compared with what you're used to, and *then* look to provide specialty potions...the kinds that are rarer to need and therefore harder to find when you do need them. Starting a new business is hard; so why risk your own money to make your own, when you can take this position and not have to shoulder the responsibility for once? Don't dismiss it out of hand because of your pride and arrogance."

At that, Snape drew up, "Arrogance?" bursting from his lips.

Hermione crossed her arms and straightened, brows rising to regard him with an "oh, *please*" expression. They locked eyes for a long moment, until finally Hermione tilted her head and sighed, rolling her eyes, and Snape backed down, scowling petulantly.

Quirking a faint smile, Hermione stepped closer and laid a hand on his forearm. "Come on, Severus, I'm not being insulting. You can be arrogant, and I can be a know-it-all. It's just our natures." Her smile widening, she added, "I still love you, arrogant or not."

Snape blinked, taken aback by her declaration in the midst of his lolling in his wounded vanity. Gazing into her teasing eyes, he finally relaxed, letting go of his frustration. When the buzzing anger dissipated, he actually began to consider her statements.

Well. She's really got a point there. Several, to be quite honest.

Hermione could feel his tension draining and beamed at him in approval. "Come. Let's go back inside and you can tell Fern what you've planned for the laboratory, and see if she needs anything special."

Snape heaved one last sigh of ruffled pride before nodding for Hermione to lead the way.

Fortunately, Fern had regained her equilibrium while they were outside, and she gazed up at them pleasantly, her expression one of polite expectation as they sat down again. "Is there anything else you wish to know, Mr. Snape?"

Snape lifted one finger and said, "Actually, it's more of what *you* need to know. I have plans for a basement laboratory to be built, and I will be selecting the contractors today, to begin work soon. However, I would need to know if the current plans are sufficient for your requirements." He pulled the scroll from his pocket and brandished it.

"Oh! I'd love to see the plans. Although, I'll tell you right now, based on your background, you're clearly the expert on these matters, so I'd be more inclined to trust your judgment."

Hermione caught Snape's eye and flashed him an encouraging and triumphant look that practically screamed, *See? I told you!*

Matters proceeded more smoothly from that point, and Hermione effaced herself as they began to talk work expectations and salary. Because of the delay until the renovations could be done, and the remainder of his current contract at Hogwarts, it was determined that his new employment would begin the first week of July, and Fern would spend the intervening time coming up with the plan of what potions she wanted to have made, how they would be advertised or sold to retailers, and laying up stocks of the necessary ingredients.

For all her appearance of flightiness, Fern proved to be articulate and sharp in the discussions and negotiations, and Hermione could see Snape mellowing and beginning to treat her with more natural respect, like an equal rather than one who was humouring the crazy lady. Her heart lifted at such positive signs, and she took to daydreaming, wondering how the house would be furnished and decorated when all was said and done.

Finally, Fern and Snape concluded their lengthy interview, and Fern left, with several to-do lists to keep her busy. In the lull following her departure, Hermione watched Snape from behind, waiting for him to break the silence. His shoulders were visibly tense again, but he took a deep breath and let it sough out, dropping his shoulders and letting his head hang forward in an attempt to ease the strain. After a long moment, during which he seemed to mentally shift gears, he lifted his head and spun to face Hermione.

His expression went from worn out to a grimace as he looked at her. Eyeing her askance, he said, "All right. Time to get rid of that look. It's disturbing."

Hermione made a face, then laughed. "Gee, thanks. I'd rather not look like I'm *related* to you anyway." Wrinkling her nose and winking at him mischievously, she lifted her wand and closed her eyes, concentrating on the counterspells. Even with her eyes closed, she knew she was successful by Snape's relieved sigh. Carefully opening her eyes again, she looked up to see Snape gazing at her, pleased.

"Much better. There's my bushy-haired Gryffindor." His tone was both tender and playful, and he smirked at her glare of mock-outrage. Closing the distance between them, he cupped her head in his hands and kissed her, picking up where they had left off in the kitchen.

When she pulled away after a long moment, Hermione smiled and said, "I'm so glad I was able to come here. Your home is going to be lovely, dearest."

Pressing his forehead against hers, Snape whispered, "Only if you're in it as well, love." He kissed her again, then lifted his head, looking around and finally tilting his face up, as if gazing through the ceiling to the floors above. His eyes were narrowed in thought as he looked back at Hermione. Sliding one hand down her arm to grasp her hand, he murmured, "Come," leading the way out of the living room into the hallway and up the stairs.

They went past all of the rooms, coming to the end of the hallway where the pull-down stairs to the attic were. Snape stared up at the panel for a moment before pulling them down again.

Hermione had waited in the hallway when Snape had led the contractors to climb halfway up the stairs so he could enumerate the work *he* wanted done to the space. Now,

Snape ascended, then ducked his head and beckoned for Hermione to join him. Hermione followed him into the dusty, shadowy space, nose itching at the musty odours and the sight of dust motes floating lazily in shafts of sunlight through the roof vents.

Snape stood, his arms wrapped around himself, his face a brown study. He didn't meet her questioning eyes as he spoke. "This is where I spent most of my time at home. 'Out of sight, out of mind' meant peace to me when it came to my parents." He snapped his gaze to hers when he felt Hermione lay a comforting hand on his arm. The sympathy and love in her eyes soothed him, and he determined that he would break the painful thrall the attic had over him.

His expression softened, but Hermione couldn't fathom what was behind his eyes in the shadows. "I kept a cot up here then. I wish it were still here now." At Hermione's questioning look, he pulled out his wand and muttered, "*Accio* cushions." After a moment, the cushions Hermione had transfigured for his interview with Fern flew up the stairs and dropped to the attic floor, sending up clouds of dust to dance in the thin beams of light.

Hermione backed away as Snape crouched, arranging the cushions. Then, when he knelt on one and reached for her, she stepped closer to him, allowing his hands to circle her waist. His face peered up at her from just above her belly as he clutched her tighter.

Snape's voice was low and coaxing as he said, "Join me." He paused to nuzzle his face between her breasts, making her gasp in comprehension.

A tingle radiated out from her breasts to her centre, ending in a throb, and she dropped to the cushions with him, her desire mounting to match his. He held her close, his hands roaming down her back and legs, pressing her forward to grind against his growing erection. Their tender kisses quickly evolved into hungry, devouring snogging, their excitement becoming more and more heady.

Snape lowered Hermione to lie on the cushions, shoving her jumper up, scrabbling behind her to unfasten her bra. Hermione's moans and squeals were muted, as she felt like their liaison was secretive and somehow of great import.

It didn't take long for them to wrestle themselves free of constricting clothing, and Hermione struggled to reach him, wanting to feel his cock pulsing in her hand, but he kept manoeuvring away, his hands and lips trailing over her body, tasting her nipples and caressing the slick curls between her thighs.

Her sharp gasp seemed echoing loud when he gripped her knees, spreading her legs, and dipped his head to trace his tongue along her cleft. His answering groan was muffled against her flesh, and he released her knees to slide his hands up her thighs, stroking her pussy lips with his thumbs and opening her further.

Head swimming with the rush of lust and sensation, Hermione tangled her fingers in his hair, holding him there while she shuddered at the feel of his lips and tongue suckling her clit. But when she felt one long finger delve into her, she released his hair in favour of gripping her own, her head canting back and a ragged moan bursting from her throat.

Snape backed away on his knees, sitting back on his heels as he fluttered his finger inside her. Her eyes were screwed shut and her panting breaths made her breasts jiggle. A flare of heat washed over him, ending in his cock, which bounced with the desire to fill her. Remembering his promise to himself and to her, he staved off the urge by wrapping his other hand around his erection, stroking.

Hermione opened her eyes to see Snape watching her intently, a wicked smirk tugging at his lips as he fucked her with one hand while pumping his fist along his hard cock. She shuddered anew when his lips spread wider into a feral grin and he purred, "Come for me, Hermione."

One hand crept down her belly to play with her clit, and Snape hummed approvingly, stroking himself faster. The combination of his finger stroking her G-spot and her own fingers dancing over her clit drove her toward her peak, and Snape settled into a rhythm with both hands.

When he felt her cunt squeezing around his finger, he urged, "Yes, Hermione. Come for me." Her answering writhing and gasping sent a flash of sensation through his cock, and his balls contracted. With a hitching breath, he rasped, "Come with me..."

Hermione peered down her body at him and saw his face contort into the familiar rictus of pleasure; it was the final piece needed to send her over the edge in orgasm.

They both shuddered, Hermione bucking against Snape's hand and Snape convulsing as come bubbled up, dripping over his knuckles. Aftershocks kept them trembling until Snape gingerly withdrew his finger from her, and he flicked his coated hand, murmuring a cleansing spell as he collapsed beside her, sprawling over the edge of the cushions to rest half-on and half-off.

In the silence following their tumultuous encounter, Hermione listened to their breathing slowing. After several moments, Snape cleared his throat, murmuring softly, "Definitely a better memory to override others."

Hermione smiled, chuckling to herself. She wanted to lie there and doze off with him, but she knew he couldn't really be comfortable in his position, and she could tell by the angle of the light beams that the day was waning. She had to get back to Hogsmeade before anyone started to question her long absence. Reaching for his hand, she twined fingers with him, squeezing lightly. He squeezed back, then rolled onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow and gazing down at her.

"You're thinking of leaving. I can feel it."

Hermione made a moue of frustration. "It's getting late, and I should get back to Hogsmeade. I have to give the programme to Dumbledore." His eyes narrowed in pique and she caressed his cheek in apology. "I don't want to leave you. Ever. But we both know it's time for me to return." She smiled when he moved to nip at her fingertips, kissing them before she let her hand drop again.

"Thank you for coming here today. I don't even want to think about how horrid it all would have been without you here." He leant down and kissed her. "And I'm glad you like the house. I hope you like it enough to make it your own."

His body tensed at the end of that statement, and he eyed her with ill-concealed trepidation. Hermione felt her chest and throat tighten with love, and moisture pricked at her eyelids as she said, "If you're here, I like it enough to help make it *ours*, Severus."

Swallowing hard, eyes closing in relief, Snape swooped in to kiss her again, devotion on his lips. Finally, he backed away, sighing regretfully. "You're right. It's getting late. Let's dress, and you can Apparate to Hogsmeade. Unless you prefer to use the Floo to the Three Broomsticks?"

Hermione shook her head as she sat up, gathering her discarded clothing. "I'd rather Apparate. It's much cleaner, and no one need take notice of my arrival and ask awkward questions." Snape nodded in agreement, dressing quickly.

They started to descend the stairs, but Hermione turned back, pointing at the cushions. "Shall I dispose of them or..."

Snape fought to suppress a grin, saying, "No. I rather like them there now."

Blushing in spite of herself, Hermione turned back, smirking as she continued down the stairs.

They went into the kitchen, Snape clearing their snack and Hermione retrieving the programme. When he had finished cleaning the counter, Hermione stepped closer and wrapped him in a tight embrace, pressing her face against his chest. He dropped a kiss on her head and held her.

"I love you, Severus." Her voice was muffled against his clothes.

"And I, you, my love." He gently disengaged from her, lifting her chin with one finger. "Run along now. I'll see you tomorrow for the show." He caressed her hair, then quirked a smile, twirling a curl in his fingers. "And it's a good thing your glamour charms worked *and* reversed correctly."

Hermione snorted. "Indeed." Stepping a few paces away from him, she smiled. "See you tomorrow, dearest." He inclined his head, and she Disapparated, leaving him alone in his kitchen.

Snape heaved a sigh as he crossed back into the living room. Tossing a pinch of Floo powder into the hearth, he said, "Potions Master's quarters, Hogwarts," and stepped into the green flames, spinning out of sight.

66- Bravi, Bravi, Bravissimi...

Chapter 70 of 84

Hermione returns from Spinner's End and preparations for the Ministry performance continue. Finally, the day of reckoning arrives, and the Hogwarts cast pulls out all the stops to give the best performance they can. Will it be good enough? And what unexpected results will such cast unity bring?

Standard Disclaimer goes here. I'm just playing with toys that aren't mine, but I'll treat them well, I promise!

Author's Note: Well, if you've peeked at my LJ at all in the past few months, you saw the posts involving my continued preparation for Snapefest and Portus 2008, in DFW. Well... It. Was. EPIC! LOL I had the best vacation ever, and I'm so happy to have met so many lovely people in the fandom and renewed/strengthened ties with those I already had met. My LJ has links to pics from the con and all that fabulousness. And, it also details my wonky work scheduling and plans for fall term. So, you can see just how Real Life has been treating me as I strive to finish this behemoth. Profound gratitude to Ladyofthemasque and Horserider for their help, as always. And thank you to all you lovely folk who are still sticking around and supporting me writing this fic! *ginormous glomping hugs for everyone* Here we are coming to the goal set up back in chapter one: the Ministry performance. Celebrate with me, won't you? :)

Chapter 66- Bravi, Bravi, Bravissimi...

Hermione Apparated into a side alley near the Three Broomsticks. Peering out into the thoroughfare, she heaved a wistful sigh that her idyll with Snape was over again. There were no Hogwarts students visible on the street, so she ducked into the pub, glancing about. Upon her first cursory examination, she didn't see any of her classmates. Just as she was about to turn around and head back out, she saw movement in a dim corner and she paused, noticing a flash of Gryffindor scarlet. A smile spread her lips as she realized it was Neville and Parvati, seated close together, their heads bent as they paused between lingering kisses to gaze into each other's eyes.

I seethat's progressing rather nicely! She grinned as she exited the pub, glad that she wasn't the only one enjoying the bliss of romance.

Heading to Hogwarts, she passed a few students meandering back, taking their time. Waving back at them, brandishing the programme and beaming in response to their greetings, she quickened her pace, then, realizing she needn't make the trek back, stopped and Disapparated back to the clearing just outside the school gates.

It was there that she startled Ron and Susan where they were leaning against one stone pillar, looking nearly as inseparable as he and Lavender had the year before, although he had clearly improved in technique and skill by now. Blushing hotly at her sheepish apology, they mumbled greetings as she sidled past them and hurried up the slope.

Hermione couldn't help sniggering at the evidence that spring was definitely in the air!

Once inside, Hermione went straight to Dumbledore's office, relieved that the gargoyle's password hadn't been changed without her knowledge since the last time she had gone up.

Dumbledore stood to greet her as she entered. "Miss Granger, how lovely to see you. And you have something for me, yes?"

Hermione grinned and proffered the programme. "Here you are, sir. I'm sure it's all fairly self-explanatory once you read it. I'm very much looking forward to seeing the Ministry representative's faces when they see everything we have that the other schools didn't."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Indeed, Miss Granger. I daresay it's all but a foregone conclusion that we will win the competition—the posters and bio board and programmes are just icing on the cake." Hermione nodded, beaming. "Thank you for your repeated help in this matter, my dear. Now, run along and get some rest before tomorrow's big performance."

Nodding in acquiescence, Hermione retorted, "You too, sir," before ducking back out onto the spiral staircase leading down to the gargoyle.

**** *

That evening, the cast members were waffling back and forth between contented relaxation in the wake of their Hogsmeade holiday and excited anticipation over the next day's performance. It was later that night that a house-elf appeared in each House to distribute the newly-printed programmes to each cast member. Gryffindor's common room was suddenly alive with a hubbub of pleased reactions.

The poster photo was on the cover, and inside, after the listing of the scenes and songs, the cast list began, complete with the photos from the bio board alongside each short blurb about the actors. Following that, there was a declaration of thanks to all who had helped in the venture, including Flitwick and, to Hermione's surprise, the Grangers.

Hermione gazed at Snape's photo, missing him again. Considering that Dumbledore was the one who must have written the blurbs about everyone, she wondered at the information included in his description.

"The Phantom, played by Severus Snape. Professor Snape, long time Potions Master par excellence at Hogwarts, gives his debut performance onstage, making good use of the acting skills honed while working for the Order of the Phoenix inside enemy lines during the war with the Dark Lord. His dedication to the cast and its success has led them to this outstanding performance. Hogwarts will be sad to see him end his tenure at the end of term, and wishes him the best in his future endeavours."

Staring at the words in consternation, Hermione thought, *Is that some sort of subtle way of apologizing for what he did to Severus? Praise him in print and out his resignation with purported wishes of goodwill? Why can't the old man just admit he was wrong and say he's sorry?*

Glancing up at the others admiring the programmes, Hermione quietly sidled away to her room without them noticing. As she prepared for bed, she thought, *Oh, how I wish I could just sit those two down and make them work this out! Stubborn men...*

**** *

Friday seemed to alternately zoom past and creep by, depending on how each cast member was feeling at the moment about the impending performance. Unlike the parents' night dress rehearsal, those coming to the performance were not joining the cast for dinner beforehand, so the Hall was rather empty of people, yet filled with the palpable charge of anticipation from the cast members sitting at the long tables pretending to eat.

Nerves made everyone's stomachs flutter, and while a few managed to eat a little bit, very little food was actually ingested at the early dinner. Perhaps that was all to the good, as it meant there would be less for anyone to possibly take sick from if they got too nervous.

When Dumbledore stood to shoo them out and transform the Hall, they all but bolted, racing past the bio board and into the room set aside for them, which was separate from the lounge the Ministry and other audience members would be using. Judicious peeks into the corridor showed McGonagall escorting Ministry officials to the lounge, and family members who had come to the dress rehearsal making their way to the room again on their own.

At one point, they were startled by Dobby suddenly appearing in the room, his proud smile so wide that it looked as if his head were about to split in half horizontally. Harry strode over to him and said, "Hey, Dobby, what's got you so excited?"

Dobby thrust out his thin chest and said, "Headmaster has given Dobby a very important job! Dobby is to hand out the programmes to everyone as they enter the Great Hall. Dobby gets to help!"

Harry grinned and clapped the elf on the shoulder. "That's great, Dobby. It's very important that all of the Ministry folk see those programmes. Good for you."

Dobby heaved a rapturous sigh and bobbed his head. "Dobby must go make sure everything is ready, Harry Potter, sir." With another jerky bow, he disappeared.

It was when Neville started running through his costume charms again that Snape Apparated into the room, making those nearest him jump in surprise. Nodding at them in acknowledgement, he immediately crossed to Hermione and said, "Miss Granger, it's time to get ready."

Hermione jumped to her feet and briskly retorted, "Yes, sir." Gripping Snape's proffered arm, she flicked a glance of farewell toward her friends as Snape Disapparated.

In Snape's quarters, once she had retrieved the hair products and taken her place behind Snape, Hermione began brushing his hair and said, "So, have you read the programme yet?"

He shook his head. "Why?"

Hermione bit her lip and said, "I thought it was interesting. Perhaps you should read it now, rather than waiting till closer to show time."

Eyes narrowed, Snape turned to look at her, then summoned a house-elf. When the elf appeared, he said, "Bring me a copy of the programme for tonight's performance." The elf bowed and quickly disappeared, only to reappear almost immediately, brandishing the programme. Snape inclined his head graciously. "Thank you." With a nod, the elf disappeared again, leaving Snape to scowl at the item in question.

His tone suspicious, he said, "Just what am I looking for?"

Hermione continued smoothing the pomade. "Read the bios."

Opening to the cast list and the accompanying paragraphs and photos, he read the blurb by his picture. Hermione felt his sharp intake of breath and the sudden tension in his shoulders as he held it for a long moment before letting it burst from him.

Whirling to glare accusingly at Hermione, Snape snarled, "Who wrote this?"

Hermione gazed at him coolly and said, "I'm not certain, but I think it must have been Dumbledore." After a beat, she added, "Perhaps you should ask him."

Snape glared at her balefully. "How dare he write about my private life?"

Hermione sighed and said, "The only thing in there that isn't public knowledge yet is that you're leaving, although some people, my parents and House-mates included, already know that. Look at what he *did* say—all very salutary, and he's even expressing regret that you're leaving. Don't you think this might be his way of apologizing for what he did?"

Snape spun away from her, slamming back into the chair as he stared heatedly at the paragraph. "If we have to *ask*, it's not good enough." At the sound of Hermione's aggrieved sigh, he added, "After what he did, I deserve a *real* apology. Not some subtle-possibly-maybe-that's-what-it's-meant-to-be-attempt. He would have to do something monumental and beyond question to even *try* to regain my trust."

Hermione heard the implacable bite in his voice and gave up. Having come to know him so well by now, she realized that there was no swaying him from his position. *I guess I should just be glad that he and Harry managed a truce, and quit while I'm ahead.*

Not bothering to reply again, she returned to her task of doing his hair. He stewed, and the rest of their time in his quarters was quite silent. Finally, as she finished, she patted his shoulders and said, "Ready."

He shoved to his feet, still scowling. When he turned to look at Hermione, she said, "Severus, you shouldn't be brooding like this. The final performance is upon us, and you need to concentrate on it alone. Worry about Dumbledore later, all right?"

Snape snorted, but inclined his head in a sharp acknowledgement. Proffering his arm, he muttered, "Shall we?" Hermione slipped her hand through the crook of his arm and they Disapparated.

Arriving in the room where the rest of the cast was, they both couldn't help but smirk at the tangible excitement around them. Only a moment after they appeared, Dumbledore poked his head in the door and announced, "Come along, everyone! The guests have arrived, and we must get ready in the theatre." Beaming at them, he retreated, throwing the door open wide for them to pour out after him.

As they passed the guest lounge, they heard the murmur of conversation, which made them exchange nervous glances and quicken their pace. The Hall was already transformed, and they hurried into the wings, rubbing sweaty palms on their robes.

"I shall retrieve our guests momentarily, so keep quiet. It's not long till curtain..." With an encouraging grin, Dumbledore disappeared, leaving the cast to quietly cast their first costume spells, preparing for the opening scene.

Hermione was still standing near Snape when Luna meandered up to him, holding the programme. Thus it was that she heard the girl's dreamy voice murmuring, "Professor Snape, it says here that you'll be leaving us. Is that true?"

Snape, blinking at her, taken aback, cleared his throat before whispering, "Well, yes, it is. Why?"

She made a moue of disappointment and said, "That's just a shame. I was hoping to have you for Advanced Potions next year. I thought that *must* be the year we would finally address the uses of nargles for ingredients. I was rather let down that it wasn't already in our textbook. Ah well, I do hope the headmaster will find another teacher of your calibre, sir." With that, she flashed him a lopsided smile before wandering away. Snape stared after her, completely gobsmacked.

Hermione fought to suppress a giggle at his blank look of surprise, but she was pleased that dear old Luna had served a dual purpose: dredging him from his sulk over the headmaster's revelation and reminding him that he was appreciated and would be missed.

Out in the house, the sound of the audience entering drew everyone's attention. The cast froze, then, after a beat, seemed to take a deep breath as one. After a few moments, Ginny turned to Snape and nodded toward the house, tilting her head and casting a meaningful look at him.

Snape, snorting and nodding, Apparated to Box Five to peek out at the crowd. Ministry officials filled the best seats in the front centre rows, just behind the row of mirrors. Snape could tell that the mirrors weren't activated yet. Gazing out over the audience, he saw the Grangers. Instantly, he drew back, even though he was hidden in the shadows of the Box and there was no way they could see him. An uncomfortable clench in his gut reminded him of the debacle with Mrs. Granger, but then he comforted himself that the issue was resolved, according to Hermione. Taking one last look around, he noticed that Dumbledore was activating the mirror connection, and he could see both Madame Maxime and Headmaster Bolek with their students within the mirrors. He Apparated back into the wing and beckoned for everyone to come closer.

Ginny and Hermione had been waiting for his return, and they led the rush toward him. Waving his wand at the curtain, he cast *Silencio* on it before murmuring, "The mirrors are connected, and the Ministry is there. I saw your parents as well, Miss Granger." He nodded to her, and she nodded back. "It's almost time. The headmaster will be dousing the lights and opening the curtain soon, so get ready."

Every face showed complete attention, and the determined nods and flashed smiles in response to his statement gave him a fleeting tingle of warmth that these people, who had avoided, reviled, and feared him so recently and for so long, were united with him in purpose and spirit. A faint smile quirked his lips as he retreated to Box Five to await his cue.

Dumbledore appeared backstage, gesturing broadly that he was about to begin, beaming at them before disappearing under a concealment charm. A beat later, the curtain opened, and with the crack of the gavel echoing through the theatre, the performance began.

If the excitement about performing had been high the previous week, it was still no match for the fierce exhilaration evidenced in the faces of the cast. The first time they had performed for an audience, they were nervous and unsure of the effectiveness of their acting. But after the resounding success of that show, and knowing what they were up against with the other schools, they knew they had done well, and they were prepared to show it to the Ministry.

From his vantage point in Box Five, Snape could see the attentive faces of the Ministry officials, gazing in wonder at the chandelier as it floated from the stage to hover far above them. Some women were clearly enraptured, their hands clasped at their chins in a beatific attitude. That boded all to the good, as far as he was concerned.

After the scenery dropped and Pansy flounced offstage in a snit, Draco trailed after her, and his contemptuous comment over his shoulder of "Amateurs" set the audience laughing. Snape smirked in satisfaction and Apparated to the wing where Pansy was hanging on Draco's arm, beaming at him as he grinned at the audience's reaction. They caught sight of Snape and froze for a moment, their expressions faltering until they saw Snape's answering grin and nod of approval. Then they beamed at him, and when Snape ducked down to Draco's ear and whispered, "Three points each to Slytherin. Well done," they exchanged a triumphant glance and nodded back, mouthing their thanks.

By then, Hermione was about to sing, and he quickly Apparated back to Box Five to watch her. She was radiant, and his chest tightened with pride and love for the young woman who had crept into his heart. At the end of her song, the audience erupted into stormy applause, and he made note of the Ministry officials' amazed expressions. There was one who stopped clapping long enough to scribble notes on a small scroll, eyes darting between the parchment and the stage, clearly more interested in the performance than in writing. Again, Snape took that as a good sign.

It was almost time for the mirror scene, and he wished he didn't have to leave to perform, so he could stay and watch the audience for the entirety of the play, but he knew he had to go. He Apparated behind the mirror on the stage just as Harry bounded off, listening to the music changing and swelling with his impending arrival. Just like before, what felt like molten fire raced over him, singing through his veins, bolstering the vibrant tones that surfaced and burst forth as he began his song.

Energy flowed through him; when the mirror vanished, so he could reach out and take Hermione's hand through the smoke and light, the charge jolted between them, making their connection sizzle. Their eyes met, and in the darkness of the wing as the set changed, they exchanged smiles of joy and love. By the time they reached the lair, their personal connection had amped up their onstage connection, and they were absolutely riveting. Even the cast members in the wings were once again watching in awe.

Ginny, gazing at the pair and feeling a touch of envy at the intensity of their relationship, wondered if she and Harry, as much as she loved him, would ever have the same kind of fiery, passionate, soul-deep link she could see in Snape and Hermione that was so beautifully expressed during "Music of the Night."

Onstage, the mannequin lunged through the mirror, and Hermione collapsed, falling into Snape's cradling embrace. The solicitous tenderness as he carried her to the boat and gently released her made lumps climb in the throats of several of the watching women.

As the scene changed, the audience burst into applause, sending a triumphant smile to spread every cast member's lips. Then, when Hermione crept over to Snape at the organ and snatched the mask away, those smiles vanished at Snape's roar of fury as he spun around and launched himself after Hermione's retreating form.

The startled tension almost hummed in the house as his rage turned to despair in "Stranger Than You Dreamt It." Real tears sparkled on Hermione's cheeks, making the fear even more immediate to those watching. When Snape and Hermione exited into the wing, they Apparated into the space under the trap door, ready to emerge among Buquet and the dancers. In the dim light, Snape searched her face as he gently wiped the tears away, his touch apologetic. The twinge of remorse eased when he felt her smile and heard her faint whisper, "I'm fine, dearest. You're amazing."

She gazed up at him with a tender smile and nodded encouragingly. He inclined his head in return before opening the trap door and leading her up and offstage, keeping her firmly wrapped in his caped embrace. In the wing, he bent his head to murmur in her ear.

"Would you like to watch the next scene? We could go up to Box Five."

Hermione's eyes widened and lit up like a child's on Christmas morning. Then, she bit her lip, clearly denying herself the treat. Brow furrowing, her eyes darted between his and the stage, dithering.

Snape leant close again and said, "It's a long enough scene that you can watch and I'll have you back in plenty of time for the next one."

Hermione sucked in a breath and held it for a moment in indecision. Then, letting it explode from her, she swallowed and set her lips, whispering, "Yes, let's."

Snape suppressed a grin and firmed his grip, Disapparating. He made sure they were well back from the seats, securely draped in shadows. Onstage, Neville was finishing his first part in "Notes" and Ron burst into the scene. Glancing at Hermione, Snape saw her beaming, her hands clasped in delight as she watched her friends' engaging performance.

Pleased to have been able to offer her this little treat, Snape merely sat back and watched, his eyes travelling between the show and her rapt face. Then, as the scene was about to reach its culmination, he squeezed her arm, getting her attention. She blinked at him, nodding as she prepared herself for the Apparition.

Tucked into a corner of the wing, Snape released Hermione and cast *Sonorus*, saying, "So, it is to be war between us! If these demands are not met, a disaster beyond your imagination will occur!"

The final note in response held perfectly onstage, and Snape ended the spell, smirking in pride when the audience burst into applause once again as the sets shifted for the next scene.

The audience murmured with amusement as the II Muto scene began, but later, when Pansy croaked and Snape let loose with diabolical laughter, the chandelier rocked

and jingled, causing a wave of audible unease in the audience members seated under it. The resulting tension remained even after Pansy left the stage in tears and the ballet began. Snape meticulously flitted about to cast menacing shadows, speeding up with the music. When Terry had secured himself to the cable and dropped from the catwalk like a stone, Snape held his breath for a beat, listening to the shrieks from the house as well as the screams from the ballet girls onstage. Chaos ensued, and Snape Apparated again to Box Five to watch the pandemonium until the scene shifted to the roof for Harry and Hermione to do "All I Ask of You."

Remembering how immersed he had felt in rehearsals when he had actually remained hidden behind the statue during the scene, he crouched down and Apparated to his hiding spot, allowing himself to be drawn into the Phantom's betrayed anguish.

It worked.

By the time Harry and Hermione departed, and Snape emerged from behind the statue, the contrast between the sweetness and light of "All I Ask of You" and Snape's destroyed incredulity sent the audience into a spate of shocked gasps.

Hermione, watching from the wing, had to consciously keep control of herself and the gut-wrenching fear that swept over her as she saw Snape collapsing to the stage like he had in her room after Dumbledore had betrayed him. To see him, limbs loose and voice weak, sagging like a marionette whose strings had been snapped, cut through her like a knife.

Then, when she and Harry sang their portion from the wing, and she watched Snape writhing in despair, wracked with pain and growing rage, she braced herself for the blazing fury that was surfacing as he climbed the statue and rode it to the proscenium while the set changed. Taking her place onstage to the accompaniment of his maniacal laughter, she furtively sucked in a deep breath as the chandelier plummeted toward her in response to Snape's echoing bellow.

More shrieks sounded in the house as the chandelier crashed, plunging the theatre into darkness. A deafening beat of silence ended the tumult of music and shattering crystal, followed by enthusiastic applause as the lights in the house began to rise.

In the wings, the cast exchanged excited glances, grins of triumph on their faces. Snape once again Apparated to Box Five to watch the Ministry officials. The one scribbling notes was writing feverishly, while a few others hovered over him and seemed to be making points to record. Their stunned expressions made Snape smirk in satisfaction, as did the grim expressions on the faces of both Headmaster Bolek and Madame Maxime within the mirrors. The officials clustered about the scribe were flipping through the programmes and gesturing toward the corridor, where the bio board stood by the doors. Emphatic nods and animated gestures gave Snape a thrill that Hogwarts had managed to impress the Ministry already, and they still had the rest of the show to go. Gripping his hands into tight fists to stay outwardly calm, he Apparated back to the wing, where he quickly beckoned to the cast members who were visible nearby.

Hermione, Ginny, Harry, Neville, Parvati, Terry, Luna, and Seamus hurried over to him. Snape's eyes were glowing with exultation as he said, "The Ministry looks overwhelmed indeed, and they're quite excited about the board outside and the programmes." He paused to nod to Hermione, one corner of his lips quirking up smugly as he added, "Oh, and Bolek and Maxime seem rather sullen as well." A faint snort surfaced, and his eyes gleamed now with mischief, making the students goggle at him. "No doubt they've realized they don't stand a chance against what we've brought to the table. Hogwarts *will* win this competition... provided no one messes up in the second act." One eyebrow cocked up in challenge, and the cast blinked at each other, stiffening their resolve.

Harry locked a determined gaze with Snape and nodded slowly. "We'll not let you down, Professor."

Snape twitched, not expecting such a personal response from Harry, even though they had laid down arms. Eyes widening in bewilderment, Snape murmured, "Me? This isn't about me..."

At that, the assembled students voiced snorts of disdain and exchanged wry looks. Ginny favoured Snape with a gaze of mixed exasperation and amusement. Harry crossed his arms and tilted his head to eye Snape with a lopsided smirk. Neville and Parvati chuckled to each other, Parvati hanging on Neville's arm, then Neville cleared his throat.

Affecting nonchalance, Neville peered around and said, "All due respect, Professor, but who else brought us up to this level? We've already told you, sir, we wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. Even the programme says so."

Luna nodded vaguely. "Yes, I read that."

Snape drew back, taken aback by the murmurs of agreement rippling through the group. Catching Hermione's gaze, he saw her eyes dancing with suppressed joy at how the others were giving him so much credit. He stared at them mutely, unable to formulate a response, and they flashed more amused grins at him before they dispersed to spread the news he had brought.

Hermione lingered long enough to flash an impish grin at him, winking at his befuddlement. She followed the others to share the good news, and Snape simply stood there, contrasting cascades of hot and cold washing over him as he tried to come to terms with the growing acceptance he was experiencing. Soon, Dumbledore appeared, gesturing for the cast to get ready, as the music was about to begin for the second act.

Everyone hastened to cast their spells for the Masquerade, and Snape came back to himself with a jolt, following suit and focusing on the performance again.

When the curtain opened, revealing the opulent masquerade set, pleased cries rose from the audience, ushering in the cast's song. Riding on the high of confidence, everyone danced and sang flawlessly, building to Snape's appearance, vivid in crimson, dominating the spectacle as the smoke from his Apparition cleared.

Gasps from the audience whooshed up when Snape yanked the chain from Hermione's neck and disappeared again in a burst of smoke. He resumed his place in Box Five to watch again until his next part. Secreting himself more securely in the shadows, he cast *Sonorus* to recite his portion of the second "Notes" scene.

His throat tightened at the misery in Hermione's voice when she began begging not to be the Phantom's bait. *Ye gods, she's talented.* He marvelled anew, even after she ran offstage and the scene progressed to the Don Juan rehearsal. Watching the rehearsal morph into the set for "Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again," he felt a surge of anticipation, knowing just how magnificent she was in that song.

Her voice blended perfectly with the sorrowful music, and he had to tear his eyes away from her to see the rapt faces in the audience. Pride swelled within him again, and he decided to Apparate to his spot behind the tomb now and just listen, rather than be mesmerized by listening *and* watching and have to drag himself away for his cue.

Hiding behind the tomb, he closed his eyes and let her voice envelop him, creating the need to lure her nearer. Buoyed by that sensation, he climbed atop the tomb to the sound of applause at the end of her song and sang his coaxing lines as gently and winningly as possible. Peering down at Hermione, he locked gazes with her, her eyes wide and enraptured, sending a jolt of power through him as he continued to coax her closer.

Thus it was that when Harry appeared and broke their entranced connection, Snape's flare of irritation lent even more realism to his taunts as he shot fireballs at Harry from the pike. Faintly, he heard more gasps and startled cries in the house, but they were nothing like the shocked oaths and screams that burst forth in reaction to his final outraged roar, complete with the blanket of fire and the blaze of light as he Disapparated.

He peeked out from Box Five as the next scene progressed, seeing the audience shaking off the thrall of the previous scene. Popping about to different spots, he taunted the actors onstage, grinning smugly when the audience jumped in shock at Seamus firing the gun. Then, he refocused, knowing that they were almost to "The Point of No Return."

Apparating within the curtained bed, he spared a nod for Draco before concentrating on Dean's voice giving him his cue. Then, joining Hermione onstage, he let himself go, drowning in the seductive call of "The Point of No Return."

The sensual charge arcing between Snape and Hermione quickened pulses and made mouths go dry throughout the theatre. Breathing became more erratic and shallow

as the power of their sexual energy sucked everyone else into its web. The arousal and passion built until everyone seemed to freeze at the end of their song, as the realization that the Phantom had Christine in his clutches filtered over the rest of those watching.

The contrast was therefore even more striking when Snape launched into his wistful rendition of "All I Ask of You," pressing the ring onto Hermione's finger before she pushed his mask over his head, sending the theatre into a rash of stunned and horrified shrieks at his deformed face. Gripping Hermione in a fierce embrace, he disappeared, leaving the rest of the cast to erupt in chaos.

Under the stage, he couldn't help himself, and he backed Hermione against the wall, kissing her savagely, pressing his growing erection against her belly. She gasped, a faint moan bubbling up with her exhalation. Above them, the scene was ending, and Snape backed away, keeping a tight hold on her arm to Apparate them to the boat for the transition scene.

As he poled the boat across the stage, he noticed Hermione's eyes were glassier than usual as she wrestled with her instant, visceral reaction to his physical domination moments before. It was fortunate that they had time hidden in the wing during the scene with Raoul and Mme. Giry to get a grip on their arousal before emerging onstage again for their tense exchange in the Phantom's lair.

The crackling silence between them when Hermione pushed Snape away singing, "It's in your *soul* that the true distortion lies," weighed heavily on everyone in the house, seeming to loom over them until Harry climbed up from within the trap door and broke their tableau.

Even as Snape pretended accommodation, inviting Harry into the lair, the edge in his voice boded no good for the Phantom's rival. Thus it was that, while the audience was surprised by the Punjab lasso capturing Harry, it somehow managed to help them relax from their anticipatory tension, wondering what horrifying thing the Phantom would do next.

That momentary relaxation didn't last long, as the blending voices of the love triangle built to a fever pitch, culminating in Hermione's pleading voice saying, "I gave my mind blindly."

Another beat of electric silence followed, drawing out the anticipation, in which Snape's harsh growl of, "You try my patience—make your choice!" grated on frayed nerves.

Tears once again shining on her cheeks, Hermione took measured steps across the stage toward Snape, her voice soft with pity as she locked eyes with him, singing, "Pitiful creature of darkness... What kind of life have you known...? God give me courage to show you you are not alone..."

Snape's heart was thundering in his chest as she drew closer. His breathing went shallow and heat washed over him, including suspicious moisture prickling at his eyelids. But before he could do anything about it, Hermione was there, reaching up to guide his lips to hers as she pressed her body along his and kissed him deeply.

The roaring in his ears was made up of his own blood pounding through his veins, astonished gasps in the audience, and the rising swell of music around them. For a fleeting moment, he froze in uncertainty, then all but collapsed into embracing her... only to realize he couldn't take what she was offering. His hands snapped away from her, shaking with effort and devastation as he pulled away from her lingering kiss.

Turning dazed eyes on Harry suspended in the noose, Snape staggered over and snapped his fingers to release it from its mooring. Hermione rushed to Harry's side as he dropped to his knees, and Snape lurched back to the throne, dropping into it in an ungainly sprawl as the rest of the cast sang their parts offstage in pursuit of the Phantom.

Snape's voice was ragged as he shooed Harry and Hermione away, throwing himself against the portcullis as he cried, "Go now and leave me!" Hands gripping the bars, shoulders heaving as he hung his head in an agony of despair, his breathing echoed in the theatre like painful, wracking sobs.

Wrenching himself away from the portcullis, he flung himself downstage again, collapsing with his hands tearing at his hair, cradling his head as he tried to deny what had just happened. When the music box began to play, he whipped around, crawling to it by the throne and picking up the mask lying beside it. Voice brittle and mocking, he rocked back and forth on his knees, in a parody of comfort as he sang.

Hermione crept back onstage, and Snape's head snapped toward her, his hideous face lighting up with hope as he croaked, "Christine, I love you..."

Grimacing, Hermione shook her head and gently put the ring in Snape's hand, curling his fingers around it before whirling and hurrying offstage again, leaving Snape to wilt in rejection. As Harry and Hermione appeared behind the portcullis, poling the boat away, reprising "All I Ask of You," Snape heaved to his feet and stumbled to the bars, plastering himself against them in a perfect image of a broken heart.

His voice filled the theatre with its final, defiant attempt at its former vibrancy, even as his utter devastation tugged every heartstring as he sang, "You alone can make my song take flight—it's over now, the music of the night..."

Glancing up at the descending mob, he threw himself back to the throne, covering himself with the cloak. Ginny crawled under the portcullis and darted to the throne, yanking the cloak away, only to see the seat empty but for the mask. She picked it up, gazing at it in wonder as she reflected the last beam of light around the theatre before all went dark and the music ended.

What sounded like one huge sigh from hundreds of throats swept through the house, ushering in a rising tide of applause.

The lights came back up and the curtain opened for the curtain call. In the house, scores of people were already on their feet, clapping wildly. As the cast streamed out to take their bows, more people stood, cheering. The cast beamed in supreme satisfaction, confident that they had delivered a performance to rival any other.

The applause crescendoed as Harry emerged onstage, only to surge again when Hermione followed. But, the stunned faltering when Snape Apparated to centre stage, immediately followed by a veritable roar of renewed enthusiasm, made every cast member grin even more. Dumbledore had ended his concealment charm and was off to one side in the house, gazing over his charges with pride.

After taking a full-cast bow, Snape and Hermione exchanged a glance and stepped forward to gesture to Dumbledore. The headmaster humbly inclined his head, pressing a hand to his chest in gratitude before gesturing back to the cast.

Before the cast could complete their curtain call, a Ministry official was scurrying up to the stage. The applause abated when he strode to the centre downstage, in front of the cast, to make his announcement.

"Once again, on behalf of the Ministry of Magic's Department of International Magical Relations, I would like to offer my most sincere congratulations to Hogwarts for giving such a spectacular performance. We knew, when Beauxbatons opened the competition with their lovely performance, that we were in for a treat. Durmstrang certainly kept the ball rolling. Now that the final performance is complete, we would like to thank all of you, from each competing school, for exceeding all expectations and proving that wizardkind can indeed compete with Muggles in the field of fine arts. Now that all of our judges have experienced such amazing responses to the challenge set forth in the competition, we shall convene to decide the winner. However, let me reiterate that everyone who participated in these ventures is a winner in our eyes, and you should all be proud of yourselves, as we are all quite proud of you. Now, we shall be announcing the winner—"

He was cut off by a loud cough from another official who was jogging up to join him onstage. The other man nodded apologetically at the curious audience and cast, then leant forward and cupped his hand around his mouth as he whispered urgently in the surprised man's ear. Blinking rapidly, his brows rising, the first official drew back and glanced out at the rest of the judges before nodding slowly at the man who had rushed up to him.

"Very well then... It seems that we shall be announcing the winner much sooner than originally thought. Expect to hear from the Ministry some time tomorrow." His voice betrayed his wonder at such a quick turnaround, but he shook it off and forged ahead in his task. The other man furtively scampered back to his seat as the audience murmured in surprise at the announcement.

Onstage, the cast exchanged excited looks of anticipation. All along the line, they squeezed each other's hands in congratulations as they waited for the Ministry man to

finish so they could take their final bow and disperse.

Clearing his throat, the official went on, "As I was saying, this Tri-wizard competition has turned out better than we could have imagined, and we would like to thank you for your dedication and hard work. Well done, all of you." He spun to bow to the cast, leading the renewed applause as he descended the stage.

With that, the cast bowed once more and then split to file into the wings. Snape stepped closer to Hermione, wrapped one arm around her from behind, and Disapparated. The audience uttered startled cries, turning to gaze about the theatre in search of them.

In Box Five, Snape and Hermione peered out at the Ministry officials, who finally stopped clapping and gathered about the note-taker, talking over each other in excitement, all trying to get him to write their impressions down first. While he waved his hand at them and scribbled feverishly, Snape directed Hermione's gaze to the mirrors, where the other schools were still visible.

Dumbledore approached the mirrors, addressing Bolek and Maxime before making ready to end the connection. Madame Maxime's expression was one of frosty hauteur, and Headmaster Bolek was noticeably scowling. Behind them, their students could be seen either glaring glumly at the now empty stage in a clear sulk or babbling animatedly with their mates, apparently as impressed with the performance as the rest of the audience.

Hermione bit her lips to suppress the euphoric giggle that wanted to escape, seeing the disgruntled looks on several faces. Spinning to beam giddily at Snape, she let loose her delighted chuckle.

Snape locked eyes with her, overcome with love at her infectious smile and candid joy. Rashly, he darted forward and pinned her with a kiss.

Taken aback, Hermione fell backwards, even deeper into the shadows, her hands lifting to cup his face as she responded eagerly after a fleeting moment's hesitation.

Their kiss was long and deep, and they had to consciously drag themselves back to reality when they heard the buzz of conversations fading as the audience left the house. Breaking apart and blinking dazedly at each other, they realized their mistake. Quickly smoothing hair and wiping faces, they straightened their clothes and then Snape Apparated them to the wing.

As soon as they appeared, McGonagall crowed, "*There* you are! Where have you been? We've been waiting for you."

Snape manufactured a smirk and said, "We popped up to Box Five. From there we could see the Ministry's reactions and the mirrors..."

By now, the rest of the cast had surged over, curious. Hermione picked up the end of his statement and continued before he could. "Madame Maxime and Headmaster Bolek both looked rather upset. Some of the students did too, but not all of them." Her grin widened and she shrugged.

Their news seemed to set off a storm of speculation in the group. At least it served to take the focus off why they had been gone so long. Dumbledore finally joined the throng, grinning at everyone as he clapped shoulders or shook hands in warm approval.

"I daresay it's a good sign that they'll be announcing their decision earlier than they had planned. Don't you think?" His eyes twinkled merrily as he surveyed the cast. Laughter rippled through the group. He clasped his hands and squared his shoulders, clearly gearing up for an announcement. All eyes turned to him as he let the suspense draw out.

Finally, taking a deep breath, he chuckled and said, "As a matter of fact, I am so pleased with the outcome already that I think you all deserve a celebration. Therefore, tomorrow evening, I would like to provide you with a cast party, where we shall no doubt be celebrating our win as well as our success."

A rash of surprised exclamations was followed quickly by cheers. Dumbledore chuckled again as the cast jumped up and down and hugged each other in exuberance.

"We shall have a cast party, just like at Christmas, only this time much more informal and relaxed. It will be in the room you occupied tonight before the show. You have all worked so hard and for so long together toward this monumental success, and you deserve one last chance to appreciate each other and celebrate before we all go back to the daily grind of final term."

Colin spoke up. "Thank you, sir. I know I'll be looking forward to it."

Murmurs of agreement followed his statement. "You're quite welcome, indeed. Now, why don't those of you who have guests again run along and see to them. Gather their accolades as well, for you so richly deserve them. And good night!" He inclined his head and beamed at them, hands spreading in a gesture of dismissal.

They began to break into clumps, and Harry, Ginny, Ron, Susan, Neville, and Parvati all turned to Hermione where she was still standing near Snape. The three couples were all joined, either holding hands, or with arms around shoulders or waists, giving Hermione a pang of envy that they could be so careless with their affection.

Ginny tilted her head, peering up at Snape and said, "So, Professor, you'll be joining us tomorrow night, won't you?"

Hermione blinked in surprise at Ginny's query, then turned to look at Snape as well, hoping he'd say yes.

Snape was unprepared for such a question, and his startlement showed in the way his smug smirk melted away and his eyes went round. Brow furrowing as he formulated a response, he was further taken aback when the rest of the Gryffindors facing him all seemed to speak up at once.

Parvati's "Yes, do," blended with Neville's "Can't do without our lead," which overlapped Ron's "'S'only fair," and Harry's "Come on then, Professor."

Heat surged up to tighten his throat and stain his cheeks with a faint flush. Swallowing furtively, he murmured, glancing at Hermione's sparkling eyes, "Wouldn't miss it..."

The smiles of approval and retorts of "Excellent" and "Brilliant" made his lips quirk in a genuine smile, and he nodded as they turned to leave, bidding him good night as they went.

Hermione flashed him a look of adoration before saying, "I'm sure my parents are waiting outside. I know they'd like to see you again, Professor. Would you care to join me?"

Snape blinked, tamping down the flare of unease that he'd be subject to a fawning Mrs. Granger again, then inclined his head courteously and said, "It would be polite to greet them, after all they have done to assist our production. Very well then, Miss Granger, lead the way."

They trekked through the house into the corridor, suppressing smug grins as they passed several Ministry officials still exclaiming over the bio board. Near the doorway to the guest lounge, the Grangers were waiting, leaning casually against the wall as they watched the excited gaggle of witches and wizards.

Their smiles of greeting bathed Hermione and Snape in warmth, and they both stepped forward to envelop their daughter in a congratulatory embrace, nearly eclipsing her from view. Snape paused, afraid he, too, would be accosted.

"You were so lovely, dear," averred Mrs. Granger, hugging Hermione tightly.

Mr. Granger added, "It was even better than last time, which is a difficult feat indeed!" beaming down at his blushing daughter.

Hermione grinned at them as she backed away from their hug, murmuring, "Good enough to win?" Mischief danced in her eyes as they all turned to look at the buzzing Ministry group. All three of them dissolved into laughter, confident in the success of the performance.

As their gazes slid from the officials, they noticed Snape standing quietly to one side. Mr. Granger broke away from his familial embrace and stepped forward, hand

outstretched as he said, "Well done again, Severus. You lot quite surpassed yourselves. Congratulations."

Snape nodded modestly as he gripped the shorter man's hand. "Thank you. We're all fairly pleased with the performance, and I daresay we've given the Ministry something to remember." A smirk quirked Snape's lips and Mr. Granger chuckled as they dropped hands.

Turning to gaze at his wife and daughter, Mr. Granger was taken aback at the way mother clung to daughter, pink-cheeked and timid. Snape, however, rather thought he understood Mrs. Granger's discomfort, and gamely went out on the proverbial limb.

Attempting a pleasant smile, he inclined his head toward her and said, "So good of you to come support Hogwarts again. I'm pleased you enjoyed it... Dione."

Mrs. Granger flushed even more, but rose to the occasion, even though she remained where she was, practically attached to Hermione like a lamprey. "You were all wonderful, like Geoff said, even better than last time. I'm sure you'll win." Nodding graciously at Snape, she then ducked her head and flicked an apprehensive glance at Hermione.

Hermione, feeling guilty about how awkward her mother felt, squeezed her waist in approval and beamed at her, gratitude glowing in her eyes.

Mrs. Granger relaxed, her smile becoming more natural as she returned her daughter's squeeze. Mr. Granger rubbed the back of his neck and glanced between his family and Snape, exhaling a long breath and hoping the uncomfortable moment was over. Clapping his hands together, he brightly said, "Well then, I daresay we should head home, don't you think, dear?"

Mrs. Granger looked up, clearly much more composed, and said, "Of course." Then, grimacing at Hermione, she said, "I don't think we'll have you Apparate us home this time. It's much too hard on us poor Muggle folk."

The Grangers all laughed, and even Snape allowed a small smile to surface, mainly in relief at the impossibility of a repeat performance on Mrs. Granger's part. "In that case, I shall bid you good evening." Offering a short bow, he murmured, "Geoff. Dione. Miss Granger," nodding at them in turn.

Hermione smiled back, her relief evident to his knowing eyes; she took her parents' hands to lead them up to McGonagall's office to Floo home. "Good night, Professor. See you at the party tomorrow."

Snape blinked again at the notion of him socializing at the cast party, then simply voiced a faint snort as he Disapparated to his quarters.

Hermione's keen ears caught that snort, and she smirked as she strode down the corridor, parents in tow. As they climbed the several flights of stairs, she digested how much her mother had taken her complaint to heart. She obviously didn't want to embarrass Hermione or upset her, and she was clearly not a threat to her relationship with Snape—at least, not as a rival.

When they arrived at McGonagall's office, Hermione stopped outside the door and tugged on her mother's hand, gaining her attention. Mrs. Granger eyed her quizzically. "Is something wrong, dear?"

Hermione hoped that her mother's love and regard for her feelings would extend to accepting the news of Snape and her only daughter as a couple. Grateful for what her mother had already displayed tonight, Hermione hugged her and murmured, "Thanks, Mum. About Professor Snape."

Mrs. Granger squirmed awkwardly, still embarrassed by what Hermione had told her, but patted her shoulder and said, "I love you, Hermione." It was all that needed to be said.

Smiling gently at each other as they separated, both women put the incident behind them. Mr. Granger beamed at his womenfolk, arms around their shoulders as he guided them to enter the office.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger exchanged pleasantries with McGonagall while they waited for their turn to use the Floo. Tossing the powder in, Hermione's father stated, "The Granger home." Then, as they stepped into the green flames, both parents called to Hermione, "Good night, dear. Love you!"

Hermione retorted, "Love you too!" before nodding to McGonagall and retreating to Gryffindor Tower, feeling quite peaceful with the world.

67- Of Victory and Triumphs

Chapter 71 of 84

The Ministry announces the winner of the competition, and Snape experiences multiple triumphs--over his past, within himself, and for his future.

Standard Disclaimer goes here. I promise I'll put them back when I'm done playing with them.

Author's Note: It's been a long time coming to get this far, and I offer my sincerest gratitude to all of you who have stuck with me for so long. I appreciate your support more than I can express. As always, Ladyofthemasque is my beta par excellence, helping me whenever I ask, regardless of how buried she may be in her own profitable ventures. "hugs Lotm" I hope the chapters to come won't take as long as this did. We'll see if Real Life will let me get on with it at a better pace now. Of course, don't forget to check out my Livejournal: <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/> to see what's keeping me busy! Hope you all have a Joyous ChristmaHanuKwanzaakkuh Yulestice and a fantastic New Year! :)

Chapter 67- Of Victory and Triumphs

The cast members rose late the next morning, having indulged in a well-deserved rest after such a demanding performance. Thus it was that very few were in the Great Hall at breakfast the next morning to see an eagle owl swoop down to land by Dumbledore's plate. It was bearing a missive from the Ministry, and McGonagall and Snape, on either side of the headmaster, both eyed it with suppressed excitement and trepidation. Dumbledore calmly offered the owl a piece of bacon in thanks before opening the envelope sealed with the Ministry emblem.

Tension grew, with Snape and McGonagall staring at Dumbledore's eyes as they roved across the page, hoping to guess the message from his reaction. When he reached the end and folded it closed again, his face still impassive, McGonagall couldn't stand the suspense any longer and released the breath she had been holding in a sharp burst.

"Well, Albus, what does it say? Who won?"

Dumbledore maddeningly paused to take a sip of his pumpkin juice before shrugging lightly and saying, "I don't know who won, Minerva. It didn't say."

Snape rolled his eyes at the older man's deliberate obtuseness and clenched his teeth, but before he could make an acid remark, McGonagall retorted, "Then *what* did it say? Don't play games with me, you bloody berk!"

Dumbledore's brows rose and he turned to cast a reproving eye at McGonagall, whose cheeks were now scarlet as she glared at him. Snape suppressed an amused snort, not wishing to distract them from their glaring match.

Affecting icy dignity, Dumbledore said, "Name-calling is beneath you, Minerva. Besides, it only said for us to expect a Ministry official to arrive at dinner to announce the winner."

McGonagall cleared her throat and settled in her seat again, managing to look sheepish even though her eyes were still sparking with annoyance. "Thank you for telling us. I shall make sure the Gryffindors know to be at dinner." Peering past Dumbledore, she nodded at Snape and added, "I assume you'll tell your House?"

Snape averted his eyes and ducked his head, still fighting the urge to snigger at McGonagall's outburst. "Of course."

With that, McGonagall folded her napkin over her plate and stood, patently done with her breakfast. Cutting one last aggrieved look at Dumbledore, she said, "Good day," and left. Snape, not particularly thrilled to be left alone with Dumbledore, hastily shot to his feet as well, pretending he hadn't seen Albus as he turned to get Snape's attention. Spinning away from the headmaster, he Disapparated.

Later that morning, the Gryffindors were lounging in the common room when they were surprised to see their Head of House clambering through the portrait hole.

Neville shot straight up in his seat where he had been nestled with Parvati on a low couch. Parvati struggled to right herself after falling into the space Neville had just occupied as he said, "Professor McGonagall! What are you doing here? I mean... Not that you're not welcome... That is... Uh, hi."

McGonagall nodded at Neville, a faint smile quirking her lips at his flaming cheeks and Parvati's sheepish expression. Elsewhere, at tables or on squashy armchairs, other Gryffindors stifled giggles at the pair's embarrassment.

Eyes dancing, Hermione looked up from her table covered with books and parchment and said, "Good morning, Professor."

Smoothing her robes, McGonagall gazed about the room and said, "Good morning. As you lot weren't at breakfast earlier, I have a very important message for you." She paused, making sure every eye was on her, then said, "Professor Dumbledore received a message from the Ministry today stating that a Ministry official will be joining us at dinner tonight, when I assume we will be told who won the competition." She paused again, sniffing haughtily before adding in an undertone, "As if there's any question. Hogwarts was by far the best of the bunch."

The Gryffindors exchanged amused grins. Ron, at the chessboard with Harry and Ginny, piped up, "We'll be sure to be there, and on our best behaviour, of course, Professor." He slanted a gamin grin at her and she smiled back.

"Indeed, Mr. Weasley. Very well then. I shall see you all this evening at dinner, and then we'll all adjourn to the lounge to celebrate our win." Nodding, she spun and climbed back through the portrait hole, leaving them to their anticipation.

That evening, the Great Hall still had the High Table at one end, but the long House tables were disposed of in favour of the large pentagon they had used before. Ron and Seamus were pleased that they could so easily sit with Susan and Luna, and the cast exchanged nods and gestures of greeting as they got settled, all wondering how long it would be before the Ministry would arrive.

Several of the other professors were still seated at the High Table, having remained at school over the holiday to prepare for the final term. McGonagall, Snape, and Trelawney were all there, and they all seemed to be staring at their food more than eating it. After a short while, the cast began to focus on the meal instead of maintaining an attitude of tense anticipation. Everyone had been there for at least half an hour before Dumbledore finally walked in, escorting the Ministry official.

A hush fell over the Hall as they mounted the dais, stopping in front of the High Table and turning to look over those seated at the pentagonal table. Every gaze was trained on them, and Dumbledore took the silence as his opportunity to introduce the man beside him.

"Good evening, everyone. If I may have your attention... Thank you. I would like you to meet Mr. Allery Tilworth, Chief Liaison in the new Department of the Arts, on behalf of the Senior Undersecretary for the Department of International Magic Relations and the Junior Minister for Magic/Muggle Relations."

The man bowed gravely, then cleared his throat. "Thank you, Headmaster. It is my great honour and sincere pleasure to join you this evening..."

Down at the tables, Ron was growling under his breath, interrupting the man's speech. "I don't bloody well care about your *feelings*, you wanker, I want to know *whowon*!" Susan and Hermione, on either side of him, whipped around and swatted his arms, shushing him furiously. Startled by the doubled onslaught, he barely managed to stifle a yelp, rubbing his biceps and glaring at them in mutiny. They turned their attention back to the man, just in time to see him withdraw a very official-looking scroll from his robes.

Breaking the ostentatious Ministry seal on the scroll, the man unrolled the parchment and cleared his throat again. "The Ministry of Magic, in conjunction with..."

This time it was Harry who was muttering, "Please let us win... Please let it be us... Please let it be Hogwarts..." while the official droned on through the litany of important affiliations. Ron was too caught up in the tension to even grumble about the fact that no one was hitting Harry.

"...that the winner of the Inaugural Tri-Wizard Musical Competition is Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry! Congratulations!"

His congratulations were drowned out by the immediate uproar as the student cast members shot to their feet, cheering madly as they jumped up and down, hugging each other and clapping wildly. The teachers at the High Table applauded as well, but McGonagall was as jubilant as the students, and she whooped and waved her hands in the air as she did a sort of victory dance at her place, nearly knocking her chair down. Trelawney was beaming at everyone, declaiming that she had known all along that Hogwarts would win, but she didn't want to spoil the surprise for everyone. And Snape...

He was still seated, but his face and posture were so transformed that he looked positively uplifted. His back was straight, his shoulders were back as his chest pushed forward in pride, and he shook his hair out of his face, content to let his satisfaction and joy practically radiate from his smug smile.

When the initial tumult subsided, the cast turned to see the professors at the High Table gazing joyfully at them. Dashing tears from their eyes, the students looked as if they were about to rush the dais, but the Ministry official shook the scroll slightly and cleared his throat, indicating he wasn't finished.

With great effort, the students contained their excitement, and the man continued. "As was stipulated at the beginning of this endeavour, Hogwarts shall win the 5000 Galleon purse to use in creating the new Fine Arts Department and curriculum, and you will receive your trophy. However, the Ministry has deemed it only fitting that we present it to you with all due ceremony at your Leaving Feast. Once again, we would like to congratulate you on your success, and we look forward to joining you at the end of term to celebrate your triumph again."

He rolled up the scroll and tucked it back within his robes as the students darted forward to drag their professors out from behind the High Table. Delighted laughter rang through the Hall, and the official smiled indulgently at the high-spirited group as he shook Dumbledore's hand.

Trelawney, McGonagall, and Snape were being bodily brought forward, and Harry called to Dumbledore, "Sir! Is the lounge available yet?"

Dumbledore chuckled and waved at them to go on, and the professors were buoyed along the tide of excited teenagers out of the Hall and into the nearby lounge for the cast party.

Lavender and Parvati, with Neville at Parvati's elbow, each gripped one of Trelawney's hands as they led her to the room, chattering breathlessly like magpies. Colin, Dean, Ron, with Susan at his side, and Harry all bracketed McGonagall. Snape's hands were clasped in Hermione's and Ginny's, as they had reached him before the Slytherins had, but Draco, Pansy, and Millicent flanked him much like an honour guard would. The rest of the cast was cavorting and laughing as they went, gambolling like puppies in their enthusiasm.

When they entered the lounge, they were pleased to see it was much less formally decorated than the Christmas party had been. A table set with refreshments was off to one side, an impromptu bar with tall stools wasn't far from it, and comfy chairs and sofas were clumped all over, providing many choices for gathering. There was still cleared space between the table, bar, and lounge area, and when music began playing, it was obvious that it was there for dancing.

Most of the group went straight for the refreshment table, as their appetites had revived with the announcement of their win. Lining up along the edges, there was a general commotion as people reached and stretched and grabbed treats.

Snape, still speechless with the exultant joy that seemed ready to burst from him, stared bemusedly as Ginny dropped his hand long enough to thrust a plate in it, immediately stacking sweets and cakes and biscuits. She paused long enough to sample a bit of sticky chocolate cake, and, mouth full, she rolled her eyes in exaggerated pleasure before swallowing a bit and saying thickly, "Mmm, you know what would be fantastic? Some of that chocolate mousse you two made at Christmas!"

Snape and Hermione locked eyes, surprised. Then, a slow smile spread their lips and their eyes danced with mirth. Ginny, looking up and seeing their identical expressions, swallowed again as her eyes went wide. Without another glance at Ginny, Snape pressed the plate into her hand and offered his arm to Hermione.

"Miss Granger, I'll wager we can get the ingredients in the kitchens now if you'd like to grant Miss Weasley's request."

Hermione smirked and wrapped her hand around his elbow, saying, "I daresay you're correct, sir. I think it's a wonderful idea. Yes, let's."

Stepping as one toward McGonagall on their way out of the lounge, Snape nodded and said, "Miss Granger and I are heading to the kitchens to prepare chocolate mousse for the cast to enjoy. We'll not be very long."

McGonagall, still riding the high of victory, beamed at them and said, "What a lovely idea. I look forward to it."

Exchanging a look, Snape inclined his head, and they Disappeared.

Appearing in the corridor just outside the entrance to the kitchens, they exchanged another look of affection before Snape tickled the pear and led Hermione into the kitchens.

He was about to direct her to an appropriate cooking station, but she interrupted his rising arm and said, "I know. I've been here before."

Blinking at her in surprise, he said, "What? When? Students aren't supposed to be down here."

Beaming playfully up at him as she continued their trek to the stove, she murmured, "Well, I don't exactly have a kitchen in my room, so I crept down here and Dobby helped me find everything I needed to make your mousse." They paused before the counter and stove, and Hermione tilted her head thoughtfully. "Speaking of, which should we make? Your recipe or mine?"

But Snape was not to be distracted from her misbehaviour and frowned at her. Hermione peered up at him in confusion and he said, "Well, well, such a rule breaker you are, Miss Granger."

Hermione's brows shot up and it was a mere moment before she flicked a glance around, and, seeing no house-elves watching, stepped forward to brush a hand over his groin, hidden by his voluminous robes. As his eyes snapped open and he sucked in a startled breath, she murmured, "*Did* we ever decide who was Pot and who was Kettle, Severus?" Gazing up at him with a meaningful look, she backed away and crossed her arms, her point made.

Snape, looking around furtively, was relieved to see that they were being ignored by the house-elves who were busy cleaning up after dinner. Fixing Hermione with a fierce glare of reprimand, he simply growled, "Touché, Miss Granger." Then, clearing his throat, he said more loudly, "Why don't we make both? We'll surely have enough for everyone that way."

Hermione nodded, then turned to gather the utensils she needed. Snape spun, searching for a house-elf to assist them. Remembering which one had helped him at Christmas, he called, "Tandy?"

Across the room they heard a faint squeak, followed almost immediately by the pop of the house-elf appearing in front of them. Offering a deep curtsy, Tandy said, "Yes, Professor Snape, sir? What can Tandy be doing to help?"

Snape said, "Tandy, do you remember everything you brought me at Christmas to make that chocolate mousse?" Tandy nodded vigorously. "Excellent. Can you bring me everything again here? Now?" Again, the elf nodded, and made to immediately disappear, but Snape held out a hand, stopping her. "Wait! Miss Granger will need some things too. Would you assist her as well, please?"

Tandy, eyes wide at the doubled importance of her task, turned her attention to Hermione, who was smiling gently at the elf. Hermione leant down and listed her requirements, and the elf promptly bobbed her head and disappeared. Hermione straightened again and smiled in challenge at Snape.

"I daresay we'll be in each other's way if we both use this stove. Why don't you use the one on the other side?" She pointed to the second stove across from her, it and its corresponding counter and sink backed against the one they were standing at, forming an island.

Snape narrowed his eyes at her obvious attempt at competing with him in such a frivolous task and snorted. "Very well then. We'll see whose they like more." He flicked his head upward, indicating the rest of the cast as he circled around to the other station, eyeing Hermione from across the island.

Tandy appeared, quickly handing over their ingredients, and, with their thanks, disappeared again. Brown eyes locked with black as they stared at each other in challenge, calculating smirks spreading their lips. Then, in unspoken accord, they broke their gaze and went to work in a flurry of activity.

Both of them cast surreptitious glances at the other as they worked, comparing progress and admiring their efficiency. Snape smirked when he saw Hermione sneak a bit of chocolate to savour as she worked, a satisfied smile curving her lips as it melted on her tongue.

Later, when they were both hovering over their stoves, anxiously watching their concoctions, they managed to lock eyes again. Hermione felt the tingle of his gaze washing over her again, and she shivered faintly. Snape froze, a warmth welling up from his belly to his chest at the thought of the two of them in his kitchen, working so companionably together. The desire to have her with him in his home...their home...burned hot.

Finally wrenching away from their connection, they both peered into their pots, checking that all was well. It didn't take much longer for them to complete their dishes and clean up after themselves...Snape knew Hermione well enough to know better than to suggest they leave it for the house-elves.

Pausing to sample both treats, they shared a reminiscent smile before heading back up to the cast party.

When they entered again, music was playing, but no one was dancing. A few people sat apart from the rest, but the majority of the cast was involved in a game that seemed to involve a lot of flailing on the part of one person and even more shrieking and shouting on the part of the rest of the group. Snape and Hermione stared in wonder at the spectacle as they crossed to add their bowls to the array of refreshments.

Eyeing them askance, Snape whispered, "What on earth are they doing?"

Hermione watched for a long moment, then laughed. "Ah! It looks like some sort of charades game, but I see they have a timer and cards involved. I think it's a competition."

They sidled up to the raucous group, curious. Upon further inspection, they could tell that it was boys against girls, and each team member had to pick a card from the stack and, using only gestures, somehow manage to get their team to guess the word. They kept going until the timer ran out, and then got points from each card. A member from the opposing team kept track of whether or not the others guessed right and kept score.

The boys' team included Harry, Ron, Neville, Colin, Seamus, Dean, Terry, and Justin. The girls' team consisted of Ginny, Susan, Parvati, Lavender, Luna, Hannah, Millicent, and McGonagall. Draco and Pansy were off to one side, casting disdainful glances at their House-mate involved in such foolery. Trelawney was at a table, engrossed in the tea leaves in the bottom of her teacup.

As they approached, Ginny looked up and crowed, "Hermione! Come on, you have to join us!"

Seamus piped up, "Oh no you don't! That would make the teams uneven, and that's not fair!"

Ginny scowled at Seamus, then her face bloomed with a huge winning smile. "No problem! Professor Snape can join your team, right, Professor?"

Snape's brows shot up, and he blinked owlishly at the vivacious redhead. Off to the side, Draco and Pansy glared at her, affronted on Snape's behalf. The rest of the boys were taken aback as well, but Ron finally broke the silence by saying, "Well, it would be only fair, seeing as how you lot have Professor McGonagall." He turned to Snape and shrugged. "What do you say, sir?"

Snape blinked again, gazing at the boys' team. In his peripheral vision, he could see Hermione smirking. Taking in the array of faces before him, he was pleasantly surprised to see that most of them were open and welcoming, and the rest were neutral. Even Neville was nodding at him. Feeling a trickle of warmth squirming through him again, he licked his lips and said, "I daresay that would be only fair."

Draco and Pansy gaped at him, astonished at his capitulation, but Millicent smiled up at her Head of House. Really, it was only due to McGonagall's prodding that she had joined in... well, that and the fact that the other Slytherins were always treating her like a fifth wheel. Sometimes it was nice to feel like she fit in. And having Snape join as well...that just made it even more acceptable. Draco and Pansy wouldn't *dare* say anything about it now.

Ginny beamed at Hermione and Snape. "Brilliant! You can go at the end of the queue and see how it works. Come on, it's Terry's turn now."

Hermione joined the group of girls and Snape was gratified to see Justin hauling a chair over for his teacher to sit in. Nodding his thanks, he sat back to watch Terry drawing a card just as Luna turned the hourglass over. As the boys started shouting guesses in response to Terry's frantic movements, the girls kept laughing. Finally, when Dean managed to guess correctly, Terry pointed at him and lunged for the next card. Snape was too bemused by the energetic byplay to actually contribute during Terry's turn, and when Hannah went up to take her turn, Harry leant back and cast a wry eye at Snape.

"Uh, sir, if you're going to be on our team, you *are* allowed to participate, you know." He flashed a smile to indicate he was teasing and nodded before turning his attention to Hannah's actions. Snape bit back a retort and turned to watch the girls' team. Hermione was screaming with the rest of them, her face alight with fun.

When Justin went up next, Snape actually joined in the guessing, garnering approving glances from his teammates and several of their opponents. After several more turns, it was Hermione's. Snape couldn't completely suppress the smile that crept over his face as he watched her flailing and grimacing, cheeks pink and eyes dancing with laughter all the while.

That smile vanished as she took her seat and the rest of the boys spun to look at him and Ron declared, "Right then, it's your turn, Professor."

Snape felt a surge of stage fright, but firmly squashed it, reflecting that they had just *won* a bloody musical theatre competition...charades wouldn't kill him! Swallowing hard, he rose, forcing his legs to calmly take him to the front where he just as calmly reached for a card, nodding coolly to Susan to turn the hourglass.

It was surreal. He focused in on the card and began gesturing, the tumult of male voices rising like a wave around him. Triumph seared through his veins, making him dizzy, when Harry shouted the correct answer. Snatching another card, he continued, brain and body working in tandem to lead his team to victory. After each correct guess, as he grabbed the next card, the boys cheered him on. Finally, just before the last grains of sand fell to the bottom of the hourglass, Dean guessed the last word, and when Susan announced that time was up, the whole group of boys shot to their feet, cheering.

Seamus, fists pumping high in the air, turned to the girls and crowed, "Yeah! That's right! *Seven* points, lassies. Take *that*!" Snape smirked in satisfaction at the realization that he had earned the most points in one turn so far that game, on either team. Heat flooded his cheeks from the frenetic movements, but the warmth of acceptance that continued to fill his being was what he noticed most.

Taking his seat again amidst the applause and encouragement from the boys, Snape wondered if this was what things could have been like if he had taken a different path when he was a student. Quietly grateful that he was at least getting the chance to experience it now, he put away his stand-offish demeanour in favour of enjoying the fun for once.

The queue started again, and after a few turns, Snape leant toward Terry and murmured, "How does one win this game after all?"

The girls were shouting guesses while Terry replied, "We decided before we started to go through the queue three times each. That way everything would be fair and even. You and Hermione came in during the first turn through the queue. When we're through, the team with the most points wins, of course."

Snape nodded, leaning back again. As they continued, he realized that most of the times he guessed something correctly were when someone else would yell a word, which would then set the gesturing teammate to pointing and waving his hands frantically, indicating that they were close. Snape would then offer a related term, which would end up being the right one. Amused at the notion of acting like a human thesaurus, he smirked to himself and thought, *Looks like there are unexpected advantages to being such a bookworm.*

After Hermione's second turn, it was his turn again. He stepped up with more confidence this time, and by the time he had finished six cards, the timer had run out and he realized that he was perspiring from the heat generated by so many people bellowing and his energetic attempts to demonstrate the words on his cards. Running his hands through his hair to push it back, away from his flushed face, he suddenly felt constricted in his layers of robes.

As he returned to his seat, he opened his thick, black teaching robes and shrugged out of them, one hand flicking his wand to send them to hang on a peg near the doorway and the other hand tugging at the collar of his shirt. Irritably tossing his head, flinging his hair out of his face once again, he sank into his chair. He turned his attention to the next girl who was supposed to be up, but found her staring at him in surprise.

Taken aback by her stunned regard, he glanced around only to find that she wasn't the only one eyeing him in wonder. Freezing, he wondered, *What's wrong?* Feeling more heat rising in his cheeks at the scrutiny, his gaze slid over Hermione's and he saw her eyes gleaming with moisture even as she beamed at him.

It was Ron who broke the awkward moment. Rubbing the back of his neck, he cleared his throat and said, "It is a bit hot in here, Professor. I vote we take a quick break for

some cold drinks." The rest of the group blinked and looked at him, tearing their eyes away from Snape. Nodding and murmuring in agreement, several of them got up and crossed to the refreshment table to serve up icy punch.

Hermione remained where she was, and Ginny scooted closer to her, exchanging a knowing look with her before they both gazed at Snape again. Snape eyed them warily, suspicious of their smiles.

Ginny leant forward, resting her arms on the back of a chair before her, and tilted her head with a lopsided grin. "Good to see you getting comfortable, Professor. It's about time."

Snape blinked, realizing why everyone had reacted so strangely. Other than when he was in costume, none of the other students had ever seen him in anything other than his teaching robes. He felt exposed at the epiphany, but when he started to shrink back into his chair and cross his arms, both girls shook their heads, shooting warning looks at him as they tut-tutted.

Sucking in a deep breath, Snape forced himself to affect a pose of nonchalance, willing himself to relax back into simply having a good time. Both girls beamed at him again, and Ginny shot to her feet, saying, "I'll get you some punch, sir...help you cool off."

Ginny bounced over to the refreshment table and Snape and Hermione locked eyes, Hermione looking proud and happy, and Snape looking sheepish but resolute. Their attention was diverted by Ginny's crow of delight.

"Oi! This is *divine*! Whose is this?" Everyone who was crowded around the table looked over at Snape and Hermione, who were staring at Ginny, perplexed. Ginny picked up the bowl of mousse and waved it, her spoon still in her mouth.

Hermione's lips spread in a satisfied smirk and she said, "That's mine. The other one is Professor Snape's, just like at Christmas."

Ginny's eyes widened, and she dropped the bowl with comical haste in her attempt to get the other bowl. As soon as she had served up a spoonful from that one, her eyes fluttered closed and she sighed in decadent rapture.

Snape turned to Hermione, his smirk blooming as hers wilted. Ginny swallowed at length and said, "Wow... I had no idea two things could be different and yet be so delicious." The rest of the students around her sniggered, and Harry wedged himself between her and another body.

"Well then, budge over and share!" He grabbed her spoon and made to dish some mousse up onto his plate, but he was interrupted by McGonagall's loud cough.

"Potter! Use a fresh spoon, if you please." She levelled a prim glare at him and he grimaced in sheepish apology as he reached for a new spoon, allowing an indignant Ginny to swipe her spoon back.

More chuckling accompanied the now mass-sampling of both mousses, and as the students strolled back to their seats, they offered nods and words of approval to both Snape and Hermione about their sweets. Ginny came back, her hands full of cups and a plate balanced on her forearms.

"Here, sir, take one. You too, Hermione. I'd've brought plates too, but I only have two hands." She was backing away when she was stopped by a tap on the shoulder, preventing her from running into the person behind her. Ginny stepped to the side and spun, surprised to see Millicent behind her, balancing three plates herself.

Millicent nodded shyly at her Head of House and mumbled, "She's right. They're both good. Thought you might enjoy some before it all disappears." Then, flushing, she offered a plate to Snape, who took it with an approving nod, and then to Hermione, who blinked at the Slytherin in gratified surprise. The girl then took her seat again, focusing on her own plate.

Hermione said, "Thank you, Millicent." Millicent half-shrugged and ducked her head, only cracking a faint smile when Snape added his thanks.

Ginny sank into her seat again, heaving another luxurious sigh as she popped another spoonful into her mouth. "This is so good... Maybe you should become a chef, Professor...you know, when you leave us to fend for ourselves without you." At that, she cast a sulky glance at him.

Snape was caught off guard by her comment, his mouth full of Hermione's mousse. Unwilling to swallow hastily and deprive himself of fully enjoying the treat, he felt a flicker of relief when Harry spoke up.

"What *are* you going to do when term's over, sir? I mean, it's not every day that someone needs a spy to take down a Dark Lord."

Snape nearly choked on the remains of the mousse still in his throat. Before he could clear his airway to respond, Dean said, "Oh, I dunno...I reckon he'd be pretty smashing as an intelligence agent or in law enforcement." He turned to Snape and flashed his blinding white smile at him. "Of course, you could always join the Muggle ranks and *really* blow them away with your *successful interrogation skills*, you know, what with Legilimency and Veritaserum and all that."

There were several stifled chuckles as Snape cocked an eyebrow at Dean and finally managed to say, "And have the Department of Magical Law Enforcement hunting me down for a trip to Azkaban? No, thank you."

Dean's eyes widened and he grimaced as he realized the magnitude of his proposed breach of wizarding world secrecy. His tone was rueful as he said, "Ah, hadn't thought of that. Never mind!"

Snape snorted while the others sniggered again. He was about to sip some punch when Luna said, "So what will you do, Professor?"

Snape lifted his cup to his lips for a drink, readying a "none of your business" retort, but when he looked over the rim of his cup, he saw everyone watching him with obvious interest and, in some cases, faint concern. Blinking as he lowered his cup, he glanced at McGonagall, who was just as eagerly watching him.

In a leading tone, she said, "Indeed, Severus, you *have* made progress, haven't you?"

Taking a deep breath, fighting his decades-long practice of keeping things to himself, Snape said, "Yes, I have. I met with Miss Campbell yesterday after meeting with several of the contractors you recommended." He nodded in gratitude to her and paused, noting that all eyes were still on him. Clearing his throat, he continued, "I shall be starting my new job after term ends."

Millicent spoke up, blushing as she did so. "Will you still be making potions, sir?"

Snape's lips twitched as he said, "Yes. I'll be working with a new company as its Potions Master."

Ginny's brows rose and she said, "Oh! What company? If I need to buy some potions, I'd definitely feel safe about them if I know you brewed them, Professor."

Snape's expression softened as he ducked his head. "That's very kind of you, Miss Weasley, but it hasn't a name yet."

Ginny slumped in her chair again, crestfallen. "Oh. That's a shame." She sighed and continued in a brighter tone, "But you'll let us know when it does, won't you?"

Snape swallowed his surprise at the chorus of agreements and nods rippling through the group. "Perhaps." With that, he pointedly turned his attention to his refreshments, indicating that the time for sharing was over. The rest followed his lead, finishing their snacks.

Soon after, they returned to the game for the final round. Everyone increased their efforts, as the scores wavered back and forth between the teams. As they neared the end of the queue, the excitement had taken on a more determined note, and Pansy had even dragged Draco closer to watch the competition, torn between rooting for her

friend or her Head of House.

The girls' team was barely ahead when Hermione took her turn, but she knew that she still had to do well to leave a large enough margin that Snape couldn't catch the boys up. By the time the hourglass ran out, she knew it was a matter of just *how* well Snape and the boys would do. It wasn't an easy margin to cover, but it wasn't impossible.

As Snape stepped up for his final turn, the boys all clapped and cheered him on, encouraging him, their smiling faces stiffening his resolve. The hourglass turned over and he grabbed the first card. The tumult of voices was louder than before, and time seemed to both rush and creep by. He wouldn't even spare a glance for the timer, blindly snatching a new card each time he heard the correct guess.

Finally, when the girls shrieked that time was up, he paused, gazing around for the cards he had dropped when his team had shouted the word. Hunkering down, he gathered them up and counted, announcing the total with a flare of triumph as he realized it was enough to win.

The boys went crazy, launching out of their seats and cheering, clapping each other on the back and roughhousing as boys do. That wasn't the unusual part. What was unusual was that Snape was in the thick of it, still hunkered down on one knee, being buffeted by the raucous teenagers around him who were grabbing his hand and pumping it in the air as they bellowed in celebration.

Cheeks flushed with heat from the excitement, Snape's smirk was really more of a grin, and he allowed himself to enjoy the sensation of being drowned in camaraderie, of once again being included. The notion that he truly was getting a chance to live the sort of youth he could have had, had he not squandered it, flitted through his mind, and a surge of warm gratitude welled up, flushing his cheeks even more.

When the boys' wild antics began to subside, and Snape could finally see through the throng to the girls' group, he was pleased to see that most of them were taking the defeat with good grace and congratulating the boys.

McGonagall even grinned at him and cocked an eyebrow as she said, "Well done, Severus." Then, as he stood, she stepped closer, gripping his arm and murmuring through the cacophony, "I must say, you've never looked younger and healthier, my dear. Even when you *were* younger! I think I finally know what you truly would have been like had you not been stuck playing the pawn of two masters. Again I say: well done."

The surge of warmth that accompanied the feeling of friendship she offered made Snape smile faintly, his gratitude glowing in his eyes. His whisper was quiet but sincere. "Thank you, Minerva. For everything."

The group had broken up into smaller clumps again, several of the students slipping onto the empty space to dance. Snape sank back into his chair and watched them, that faint smile staying put.

Hermione gazed at his peaceful expression and felt her chest tighten with love and longing. *Oh, how I wish term were over and we could move directly to Spinner's End.*

The rest of the party wound down with lots of laughing and fun. And for the first time in his life, Snape didn't leave the party early. He laughed at jokes and silly antics, indulged in the decadent refreshments with relish, and even joined in when some of the boys brought in more games, including Exploding Snap and wizard's chess.

If a few people glanced at him in surprise at how much he laughed when the cards exploded in Seamus's face, their startlement didn't last long. And, when he and Ron managed a fast-paced game of chess that resulted in a draw, his genuine compliment at Ron's skill took them aback, but only for a moment.

But, when he tugged his collar open and rolled his sleeves halfway up his forearms, it was a good thing he was immersed in the chess game, so he didn't see the curious peeks at the faded white outline of the Dark Mark. Hermione tamped down a twinge of jealousy at how fascinated some of the girls seemed, eyeing Snape with wonder and new-found appreciation of his approachable demeanour.

They had all been celebrating for hours, and it was quite late, well past curfew. Finally, when McGonagall jerked awake from a doze in a comfy chair, she shook herself and stood, declaring, "All right, you lot! It's well past your bedtimes. I daresay that we've enjoyed this gift quite enough. Gather your things and head to your dormitories."

All around, eyes snapped toward her, blinking at the realization that it was after midnight. The adrenaline rush had sustained them through their celebration, but as they realized how late it was, they felt fatigue dropping over them like a blanket.

Snape leant back from the chess board, where he and Ron were involved in a slower, more deliberate and crafty game than their first one. Glancing around, he was surprised to note that he hadn't even felt the passage of time, nor had he dwelt solely on Hermione. Somehow, he had managed to enjoy himself with her friends, on his own merits. He laced his fingers and stretched his arms forward, his joints popping even as he rolled his head in a circle and yawned.

Rubbing his eyes and raking his fingers through his hair, he frowned at the chessboard. "Mr. Weasley, clearly we'll not be able to finish this game tonight. A pity, really, as I'm pleased to face such a skilled opponent."

Ron grinned and rubbed the back of his neck. "Thank you, Professor. *It is* nice to face someone who can put up a fight." He cast a wry glance at the rest of his mates, some of whom heard him and grimaced at his complaint. Shrugging, he added, "Can't we finish the game later?"

Snape blinked at him, perplexed. "Later? When? How?"

Ron shrugged again, even more elaborately, and said, "I dunno... p'raps we could leave it set up in the library or something, and we could make our moves when we have time, leaving it for each other to check. Would Madam Pince allow that?"

Snape sat back, digesting the fact that Ron Weasley, Gryffindor cohort of his heart's desire and brother to his likeliest friend, Ginny, the best mate of his lately-reconciled former-thorn-in-his-side, was treating him like an equal and expressing a wish to continue association outside of the teacher-student or fellow-cast-member relationship. It was rather unnerving and yet he felt a yearning to agree. Looking into Ron's guileless blue eyes, he nodded slowly and said, "I believe I can convince her. I'll take this board with me in the meantime." He pointed his wand at the board, affixing the pieces to their current positions in stasis.

Ron nodded and stood. "I'll check tomorrow, then." Beckoning to Susan so they could leave together, he smiled at Snape again and said, "Good night, sir. Glad you joined us."

Snape inclined his head and murmured, "Good night," as they departed. He Summoned his robes and levitated the board, glancing about at the leaving students. Hermione was hovering behind Ginny as she and Harry picked up their things. Snape caught her eye and flashed a tender smile. She smiled wistfully back at him. "Good night, Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, Mr. Potter."

They all looked up and grinned affably, returning his greeting. Snape nodded and Disapparated, taking his robes and the chessboard with him.

*** **

When the students on holiday returned, they were pleased to hear that Hogwarts had won the competition. The rest of the student body made a point of congratulating their House-mates, and those that also brought up how odd it was watching Snape and Hermione together onstage were surprised by the cast's almost immediate dismissal of their complaint. After the cast party, everyone on cast had not only got over the awkwardness of seeing their teacher and classmate together in their roles, but they felt a sort of bond with everyone else on cast, including Snape, which led them to defend him against their fellow students. If people still whispered about the whole situation, they did so away from anyone on cast, so as not to incite more of their righteous chastising.

Summer term got down to business, with those in their O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. years cracking the books with grim determination. If the cast members felt rather bereft without

the excitement of the play and their rehearsals, they simply made a point to continue associating with each other when they could. Some people even commented on the fact that Millicent had greeted them in passing, a surprising occurrence from the introverted Slytherin.

Hermione missed the opportunities to spend time with Snape, and, after spending Potions class that week sneaking longing glances at him, decided to take the risk and send him a note.

Friday at breakfast, a post owl dropped to Snape's plate and delivered a small scroll. When Snape began to unroll it and saw that it was blank, he quickly closed it again and looked at Hermione. She was smiling faintly and nodding, indicating that she had sent it. A quirk of his lips was his acknowledgement, and he began mixing a cup of tea, pleased that she joined him again in their ritual.

A few minutes later, another owl swooped in, delivering an envelope to Snape. Brow furrowed in puzzlement, Snape opened it. It was from Fern Campbell. Darting a glance to the side and seeing Dumbledore's curiosity, Snape hastily shoved the envelope into his pocket with the scroll and stood. Deciding to not draw attention to the fact that he could still Apparate, lest Dumbledore end the spell allowing it, he strode off the dais and down the aisle by the Gryffindor table.

Pausing and greeting his former cast mates, he addressed Ron. "Mr. Weasley, I have arranged with Madam Pince to allow our game to reside in the library. It is on a table behind her desk, and she has agreed to keep an eye on it so no one but you or I may touch it. It is there now, and I have made my move. I shall check it again before the library closes tonight, so if you find the time, you may take your turn before then."

Ron's face lit up and he grinned. "Brilliant! I'll see to it this evening, Professor. Thank you."

Snape inclined his head and said, "You're welcome. Good day." He glanced at the rest of the cast at the table again and added, "To you all." His eyes met Hermione's for a brief moment, and she smiled gently before he spun and departed.

In his quarters, Snape debated which letter he should read first. Grimacing, he opened the one from Fern. *This could be important for my future, and I may want to tell Hermione about it in response to her letter, too.*

The letter was short, and the gist of it boiled down to the fact that Fern wanted Snape's help in coming up with a name for their business venture.

"And feel free to come up with more than just a name. I mean, a catch phrase and even some names for potions would be good, too. I know some of the potions already have names, but they can also have titles that indicate they're one of ours, *if you catch my drift.*"

Snape's mind began racing in different directions, delving into his wellspring of potion knowledge to develop Fern's ideas. After a long moment of pondering, he shook himself and turned to Hermione's note. While he read, his lips spread into a tender smile at her loving words, but then, as he got toward the end, he frowned, clearly not liking what he saw.

"And now we come to the part I am loath to say and no doubt you're as loath to read... As much as I want to see you and spend time with you, there are only a few weeks left before N.E.W.T.s, and I must focus on them. I know you think I'm as ready as I'll ever be, but I know there are more things I need to do to prepare. And, since I know we're going to cause a scandal when we go public, I want to make doubly sure that my performance on my exams cannot be questioned!"

I'm sorry, love. I miss you so much. But term will be over in two months, and then we can look ahead to leaving here and being together. Besides, you have so much on your plate right now that I daresay you don't need me to distract you either. Not only do you have classes to prepare for end-of-year exams, but you have a new business to build and a home to rebuild.

This isn't easy for me either, dear heart, but I know it's best for both of us to just buckle down and grind out the rest of term without giving in to a lack of discipline and having you flit up here by night."

Snape huffed a disgruntled sigh, scowling balefully at the parchment, but when he looked around at his dining table littered with plans for Spinner's End's refurbishment and notes for the business plan, his face smoothed into an expression of resignation. *All right. I understand. She's got a fair point. I'll have to send a letter back to let her know the message came through loud and clear.*

He didn't start the reply though, as it was time for him to teach his first class, so he tucked her letter into his pocket after casting *Wingardium* on the writing.

Snape spent the weekend brainstorming ideas for Fern. He had dispatched a note to Hermione that Friday night, agreeing to her period of abstention, and telling her about the latest project dropped into his lap.

"I have some ideas already, but I need to try a variety of things to make sure it's just right. Do you mind if I run them by you for feedback before I send them to Fern? I freely admit that I don't have a feminine perspective on these 'beauty products' Fern wants me to create. Therefore, your input is invaluable to me."

Hermione was therefore unsurprised that he was absent from meals in the Great Hall for most of the weekend. When she did see him, it was clear that his mind was elsewhere, furiously working on his new livelihood.

It wasn't until the following week's Wednesday Advanced Potions class that Hermione really heard from Snape again. He set the class to their task, then strode past her station, covertly placing a sealed envelope by her notes. Hermione quickly tucked it into her bag, curiosity piqued.

It wasn't until she had hurried into the girls' toilet after class and locked herself in a stall that she opened the letter. Her eyes widened at the script inside, as she was used to Snape's spidery scrawl or the Dicta-Quill's uniform printing.

"Vial and Vessel

Quality Quaffs and Topical Tinctures

Concocted for Your Convenience"

Her face lit up with a delighted smile. *Oh, Severus, it's brilliant!*

The rest of the very brief note said, *"Well, what do you think? Too much? Not enough? Does it inspire confidence? Would you want to buy products from a company with this name? Looking forward to your owl, provided you can squeeze one in during your studies. As always... Yours."*

Hermione grimaced at his snide comment about squeezing a response in for him and jotted a quick reply, quite as short as his missive.

"I think it's brilliant. As always. As long as Fern likes it, I think you're off to a grand start. I do hope your plans and preparations are as fruitful as my studying will be. I suppose we'll just have to see, come end of term. Less than two months now, dear heart. Keep up the good work and we'll really have something to look forward to when school is over. With love, forever."

Before heading to dinner that evening, she detoured to the Owlery and sent the letter, all but certain that he would receive it that night. When she finally left the Hall after dinner to return to her revising, she smirked in satisfaction that the owl had no doubt found Snape in his quarters or office since he hadn't come to dinner.

With the slightest wistful sigh, she thought, *Perhaps it's better this way, so we can both focus on what's necessary and not get distracted by each other, even from across the Great Hall.*

Little did she know that, while Snape was certainly immersed in his work, he was still finding himself distracted by Hermione, even when he was alone. Particularly since he read her comment, *"Keep up the good work and we'll really have something to look forward to when school is over."*

Ever since his startling epiphany during the performance when the Phantom was pressing a ring onto Christine's finger, Snape would repeatedly find himself going off on a tangent of doing the same with Hermione, as part of his future. And, as was his wont, the simple and generally accepted option curled his lip with disdain. If he were to take that step, it had to be... exceptional. Uncommon. Singular. Like Hermione and her love for him.

Thus it was that, in his jaunts into both the greater Wizarding community and the Muggle world to furnish Spinner's End, he expanded his target area to include jewellery shops. He had several books that included the associated meanings with different gems and such, and he was slowly working out exactly what he wanted to do. The trick was figuring it out and then *finding* exactly what he wanted.

Of course, he *did* have nearly two months before he could even *think* of taking such a step, so he could always have something made...as this time he surely didn't have the requisite skills to craft something for her instead.

68- Countdown

Chapter 72 of 84

In the wake of winning the competition, Hogwarts dives into preparing for end-of-year exams. Snape, however, dives into preparing a surprise for Hermione--and everyone else. And Hermione *is* surprised--but not by Snape... yet.

Standard disclaimer goes here. I just play with them; JKR created them.

Author's Note: Well, here we are dashing through the end of the school year in this chapter. Finally, we're covering May and into June, when more important things will happen. As far as Real Life goes, my school stuff sucks rocks this term and seems like a huge waste of time and effort. Meh. And work... well, I'm facing losing my job soon (before summer), so I've been dealing with that stress. As always, keep up with my goings-on at my Livejournal: <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/> Deep, profound gratitude goes out to my amazing beta, Ladyofthemasque (who is celebrating her birthday today--Happy Birthday, darlin!). Hope you lot are well, and thanks as always for sticking around. We're MUCH closer to the end now (it's really in sight!). Hope you enjoy our whirlwind tour through May... :)

Cheers!

Nicole

Good_Witch

pern_dragon

Chapter 68- Countdown

The seventh-year students were in full swing of studying feverishly for N.E.W.T.s when May 1st rolled around, bringing with it another notice for the cast members to show up for a meeting that Friday night after dinner. The notice was up at breakfast, and the cast spent the day being distracted from their class work, wondering what on earth they could be needed for again.

After dinner, the other students vacated the Hall, leaving the cast to remain, anxious frowns of perplexity showing the varied amounts of strain they were feeling, particularly the seventh-years, as their exams began in just one short month!

Dumbledore stood at his chair at the High Table and waved his wand, once again Summoning the circle of chairs and Banishing the long tables and benches. The professors joined the students in the circle, but the seating arrangements were very different than the first time they had done so. There was no longer such rigid separation between House members, and students and teachers alike exchanged warm greetings. Hermione was grateful that she was no longer the only one willing to smile at Snape, and was doubly grateful that he now returned friendly greetings in kind.

When everyone was seated, Dumbledore fished another Ministry-sealed scroll from within his robes and flourished it, drawing everyone's attention. The group subsided into expectant silence.

"Welcome, everyone. I have here an exciting message from the Ministry." He paused to grin at them. "Not only will the Ministry be at our Leaving Feast to present our trophy and prize for winning the competition, they have requested that we do a reprise of our performance as a reminder of why we deserved to win." He was interrupted by a combination of pleased gasps and disgruntled groans. Frowning, he gazed around the circle and stopped at one of those who were clearly not enthused about the idea.

"Mr. Weasley, you seem rather put out by the idea. Would you care to tell me why?"

Ron's ears went pink and he seemed to writhe in his seat as he rubbed the back of his neck, saying, "It's just... if we have to perform again, that means we have to rehearse again, and *that* means time away from being able to study!"

McGonagall, both amused and gratified, said, "Mr. Weasley, since when have you been so concerned about studying?"

Ron cast a glance at Susan and straightened in his chair, affecting an air of dignity even as his ears went bright red. "It's N.E.W.T.s, Professor." It was all he said, as if it was all that needed to be said. Both McGonagall and Dumbledore chuckled faintly in understanding, and even Snape gave a soft snort.

Dumbledore was smiling fondly at his charges. "Indeed, Mr. Weasley. Exams begin in exactly one month, so I see how you might be concerned."

Colin, who had it easier, being only in sixth year, asked, "Sir, are we to do the entire play again? Won't that make the Feast take much longer than usual?"

Dumbledore nodded at Colin and said, "Excellent point, Mr. Creevey. Funny you should ask that, as it turns out we are *not* being asked to reprise the whole thing. The Ministry has requested that we choose a few scenes to perform, mainly the songs. But, as we have which ones left to our discretion, I would like to know what *you* think

would be good choices." He gazed around the circle expectantly.

When he was met with blank looks or expressions of consternation, he took a deep breath and said, "May I suggest 'Masquerade' through 'Why So Silent,' as it includes the whole cast?"

Students exchanged glances, nodding and murmuring approval at the idea. Hermione piped up, "That is a good scene, as it not only has the whole cast, it also shows the triangle that is the crux of the story." More nods followed her statement.

Dumbledore gazed about again and said, "Well? Anyone?"

While everyone blinked as they pondered, Millicent lifted her hand tentatively.

"Yes, Miss Bulstrode?"

Millicent glanced at Hermione and Snape, then said, "Well... if, like Hermione said, the Masquerade scene is good for telling the story, then I think Professor Snape should sing 'Music of the Night' because it's the scene that shows just how important Christine is to the Phantom... which is the whole point of the play." She trailed off as she finished, ducking her head and staring at the floor, avoiding the astonished faces turned toward her.

McGonagall, pleased to see the introverted girl speaking up and stepping out from her Slytherin mates' shadows, beamed at Millicent and promptly said, "What a wonderful suggestion, Miss Bulstrode. That's an excellent point."

Millicent dared to peek up at the professor, a faint smile tugging at her lips. When she glanced around the circle and saw not only Snape nodding at her approvingly but several of the other cast members smiling in agreement, she slowly sat up straighter in her seat, cheeks flushed but clearly pleased with herself.

Snape, upon hearing Millicent's reasoning for suggesting 'Music of the Night,' immediately began thinking about how important Hermione was to him, and a spark of an idea flared, sending a sizzle through him and leaving his heart beating faster in excitement.

Dumbledore prodded, "I think one more song or scene should do it. What do you think?"

Snape swallowed and tamped down his reaction, managing to sound perfectly calm and reasonable when he said, "Well, if we are to follow such a logical line of reasoning in choosing scenes, then I daresay 'Point of No Return' is the last scene we should do. Well, up to the part where they disappear, which means it would include that 'All I Ask of You' reprise."

Hermione felt a pang of jealousy at the wide-eyed faces of the girls who were nodding vigorously, but quashed it with the knowledge that she would be the only one to experience such a connection with Snape first-hand, and realizing that the scene was a very compelling one.

Dumbledore clapped his hands on his lap and said, "Done! Excellent. We'll plan for those three scenes, and we'll be sure to schedule rehearsals after exams are done, while you're waiting for your results." He chuckled at the relieved sighs around him. "Very well then, we are adjourned. I'll post a notice later when we'll be having rehearsal. Keep studying, and I'm sure you'll all do well on your exams. Good night!"

The cast shot to their feet, some talking about the new performance and others talking about the assignments they were heading back to work on in their common rooms. Snape, still burning with the idea that had come to him minutes before, strode quickly for the doors, then realized that Dumbledore surely wouldn't end the spell since he'd have to use it for this last performance. Stopping short, his lips spread in a grin as he Disapparated.

Down in his quarters, Snape searched through the stacks of papers on his dining table, murmuring to himself, "That doesn't leave much time..." He irritably shoved pages out of his way as he searched for a particular book, then huffed in exasperation. *Fine! I'll just send Fern what I have for now and get it out of my way!* Gathering several stacks, he ruthlessly patted them into a single stack, then stuffed them into a large envelope. Scrawling Fern's address, he summoned a house-elf.

When the elf arrived, he proffered the package, saying, "Please take this to the Owlery and send it to the address on the front. Thank you." The elf bowed deeply, clutching the envelope to its thin chest, before disappearing again. With a deep sigh, he peered at titles of several of the books spread over his table, finally choosing one and retiring to his chair before the hearth, brow furrowed in concentration as he read.

Sunday morning, Snape was surprised by an owl bearing a fairly thick package for him from Fern. *What on earth could she be sending me now? I just sent her all the ideas I had so far...* Brow furrowed, he set the package aside until he finished breakfast, then hurriedly departed to his quarters to open it.

At his once-again-untidy dining table, he let out a gasp as he opened the package and read the words printed on the pages inside. *Thank the gods I didn't open this up there, or there would really be questions!* The pages were crisp and white, uniform in size, with black ink print and colour pictures...unmoving...scattered throughout.

And they were all about gemstones.

Baffled, Snape pawed through the packaging and found a handwritten note from Fern.

"Severus,

I couldn't help but do a little searching on the internet for you when I found your notes mixed in with potions ideas. I know you must have some wizarding resources about stones and such, but I thought you might like to have more information about gems from the Muggle side too. At any rate, the whole thing caught my fancy when I realized you were clearly looking to make a ring. I must say, I look forward to meeting your intended. Do let me know if I can be of service, even if I have rather stuck my nose in uninvited already.

Cheers!"

Snape's eyes were wide. *What a careless mistake, you daft prat! Just be glad she's new here and quite likely won't know many people to possibly let slip that you're looking for an engagement ring!* He covered his face with his hand and took a deep breath. Determinedly calming his quickened pulse, he crumpled the note in one hand while lifting the pages for perusal.

After a cursory skim through the first dozen or so, he relaxed even more. *At least her meddling is more serendipitous than most. There is definitely some good information here.*

After several days of research and culling details, Snape made a final list and sketch of what he wanted, including the reasons why he picked the stone he had chosen, so he could explain the multi-fold significance later.

He was at Spinner's End Friday afternoon, surveying the progress with the basement lab before the workers left for the day, pondering whether he should return to Hogwarts for dinner or remain there. Over the past several weeks, he had slowly been adding to his home: bits of furniture and kitchen utensils, basic foodstuffs, linens and toilet sundries. While he didn't have major furniture items yet, he could always transfigure something temporarily if he needed it. In truth, if he hadn't needed to be at

Hogwarts so much as Head of Slytherin, he might have stayed the night already. All of the repainting and new flooring was finished, having been done by one team of workers while another began the more in-depth structural excavating for the new basement.

It had been eye-opening when he had begun receiving the bills for the Muggle utilities. Casting a scrutinizing eye at his savings and his projected costs for the refurbishment, Snape reflected on how relieved he was that he had work lined up already.

Crossing through his living room again, Snape noticed that the stack of boxes and crates from Fern had grown again. As soon as the lab was complete, he would transfer those cases of vials and bottles and assorted ingredients downstairs. A faint smile of satisfaction and anticipation quirked his lips as he considered his shiny, new future.

In Wednesday's Advanced Potions Class, in which Snape set the class to beginning the potions they would have to complete for their practical exams, Snape found himself furtively staring at Hermione's hands...particularly her left one, imagining what it might look like bearing his ring. A sort of electric fire raced through his belly and made it tighten and tremble. *Barely more than a month until the Feast. I wonder how she'll react. I'm fairly certain how everyone else will react...*

When class ended, and everyone was putting their things away, Snape watched Hermione, noting that she looked tired. "Miss Granger." She glanced up at him in question and he beckoned. "Come here."

Brow furrowed, Hermione laid her bag on her table and stepped up to his desk. "Yes, Professor?"

Snape narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms, eyeing her. After a long moment, he said, "You have clearly been studying too hard. Your eyes are tired, your skin is pale, and you look worn out." Hermione's eyes widened at his summation, and she blinked in shock when he turned to the rest of the class. "Miss Granger is not the only one who has been overextending. Must I remind you that, to perform your best on your N.E.W.T.s, you cannot be stretched to the breaking point? Yes, study. Revise, of course. Practice if you must. But take time to rest, and eat properly, and give yourself a break, lest you break yourself."

Everyone gazed at him soberly as he cast a stern glare over the assembled class. "This is one lesson that you must learn well. Consider it part of your homework." Startled nods met his words, and he uncrossed his arms, propping his hands on his desk as he stood, brusquely adding, "Off with you."

Hermione nodded and scurried back to grab her bulging bag. The rest of the class vacated hastily, leaving Hermione with Snape. After a quick glance at the doorway, Snape glided down from his desk and stopped to tower over Hermione, murmuring, "Must I check personally that you are resting as instructed?"

Hermione gasped and bit her lip, slanting a cagey look up at him. Her whisper was barely audible as she said, "We both know that if you were to do that, neither of us would end up getting any rest."

Snape averted his eyes at the jolt of arousal that sang through him. Grimacing in sour defeat, he retorted, "No doubt." Backing away, he growled, "Fine. I'll wait. But not for much longer."

Hermione heaved a sigh of regret and said, "I know how you feel. Less than a month 'til exams are over, and I'll get the *rest* I need." She fixed him with a sly look, smirking.

Snape's smirk mirrored hers as he purred, "I'll make sure of that..."

Flashing a smile, Hermione spun and hurried from the room, leaving Snape to gaze after her, gut fluttering again at his plan for the Leaving Feast.

Saturday, Snape surprised himself by going to McGonagall's office after breakfast. The door was open, and she was busy grading when he walked up, pausing on the threshold to knock on the jamb.

Her distracted "Yes?" turned into a surprised "Oh...Severus! What are you doing here?"

Snape hesitated in the doorway, seemingly unwilling to actually enter. McGonagall realized how unwelcoming she must have sounded and shot up from her desk, bustling around it to draw Snape in. Grimacing, she said, "I didn't mean it like that. Here, have a seat. It's just... you've never come to my office before. Is everything all right?"

Snape looked at her concerned expression and glanced at her hand still gripping his. A frisson of worry about her reaction to his relationship with Hermione curbed his instinctively acerbic reaction and he said, "Yes, everything is fine. I was merely hoping you might be willing to look after my House for the day, as I need to take care of some more business for my home, and I could be gone for most of the day and evening."

McGonagall released his hand and clasped hers at her chin, beaming at him. "Of course I will! You can count on me, my dear. You run along and do whatever you need to do, and I'll make sure everything is fine here. I doubt there'll be much to worry over, what with the students all preparing for exams." She patted his forearm and nodded. "Rest easy on this account, Severus. I'm here to help."

Snape inclined his head in gratitude and stood. "You have my thanks, Minerva. Things are progressing apace, and the work is going smoothly. Your recommendations were excellent."

McGonagall rose and returned to her desk. "I couldn't be happier to hear it. Enjoy your day."

Snape flashed a smile and nodded as he left, striding down the corridor before Apparating to his quarters again. Flooding to Spinner's End, he took out his list of wizarding shops and concentrated on Apparating to the first one.

Throughout the day, he visited several jewellery shops, perusing their stock and interviewing their craftsmen. After pausing for a quick lunch, eaten standing up in his kitchen as he jotted notes from his jaunts, he Flooded back to his quarters to change into his Muggle wear.

Concealing himself, he Apparated to the same telephone box he had called Graham Moore from previously. A stealthy glance around told him when it was safe to lift his concealment charm. Using the directory, he made a list of Muggle shops to visit, noting their locations on the map he had purchased for this excursion. For the first time in a long time, Snape used the underground to make his way to each shop.

It was late in the afternoon when he entered one small storefront. The place was quite crowded with displays and counters and seemed more like an antique shop than just a jewellery store. The décor leant toward the mystical, and put Snape in mind of Fern. Incense burned behind a counter, and the walls...what could be seen of them behind shelves and cases...were draped with scarves and punctuated with sculptures. Snape recognized the Celtic imagery from some of the pages Fern had sent him.

As the chime from the bell on the door faded, a woman came out from the back to greet Snape, the beaded curtain she stepped through rattling behind her.

"Welcome. How may I help you today?"

Snape crossed to the large display counter where she stood attentively and said, "I'm looking at rings."

Brightening, she flourished her hand at the display, saying, "Ah! Here we have a lovely selection. Are you looking for anything in particular?"

Snape peered down at the rings and sucked in a sharp breath. Head snapping up to gaze intently at the woman, he pointed and said, his low voice belying his urgency, "That one. I want to see that one."

She opened the back of the case and picked out the ring he indicated. "Yes, a beautiful choice. If you'll look closely, you can see that it's really two rings. The outer ring with the stone contains the inner band that provides the background." Deftly, she separated the two pieces, and Snape's eyes burned with interest.

"Is that silver?"

Shaking her head, she said, "No. It's white gold. Silver is too soft, unable to withstand wear and tear in such detail. Of course, the colour is silver, and it does blend nicely with the yellow gold of the inner part, don't you think?"

Snape carefully took the gold coloured band from her fingers and studied it. The woman continued, "Of course, it is still thick enough that the inside can be engraved, if you like." Snape nodded, proffering the band and shifting his attention to the other part as she traded it with him.

Before she could speak again, Snape asked, "This is a diamond, I presume?"

"Oh, yes, and quite a lovely one indeed. Its cut is really..." She trailed off at his irritated scowl, taken aback.

Snape straightened again, holding the ring out at arm's length and grimacing. Heaving a disappointed sigh, he murmured, "Of course it is..." Huffing again, he brusquely asked, "How much is it?"

Her voice faltering, the woman named the price, and Snape's jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth. Grasping at straws, the woman asked, "Is it out of your price range?"

Snape waved his hand and snorted. "It certainly is, based on the fact that it's not exactly what I want."

"Well, what's wrong with it?" She had a bit of trouble keeping the affronted note out of her voice.

Snape's eyes were roaming over the rest of the rings on display, and he didn't notice her indignation. "I don't want a bloody *diamond*."

Taking note of his restless gaze, the tense set of his jaw, and the deep worry line between his brows, the woman could tell how invested he was in the ring. Realizing that this intense man would likely jump at a chance to get what he wanted, and ensure her a sale, she slowly said, "What if I told you I could change the stone for whatever you liked?"

Snape's eyes widened as he snapped his gaze to hers. The woman blinked under the weight of his stare, but managed not to flinch. Snape's voice was low and earnest as he said, "Can you?"

Taking the ring from his fingers, she put both pieces together and eyed the stone. "Of course. Changing the stone is easy. I'm sure I could find something else worthy of such a quality diamond..." She tilted her head and peered at him with curious eyes. "If you don't mind me asking...what's wrong with a 'bloody diamond' anyway? This is an exquisite specimen."

Snape fixed her with an aggrieved glare and said, "Tell me, what kind of ring is that?"

Shrugging, she said, "It's actually an engagement and wedding ring set. Why?"

"How do you know it's an engagement ring?"

"Well, I was told so when it was brought to me..."

"Fine, but wouldn't you say it's an engagement ring just because you saw a diamond?"

Perplexed, she said, "Well, yes..."

Snape tossed his head and gestured dramatically. "See? That's what everyone thinks. It's so... commonplace."

Verging on offended again, the woman drawled, "*Some* people would rather call it *traditional*."

Snape rolled his eyes and huffed. His voice oozing with annoyance, he said, "Semantics. I don't want something like what *anyone* might get. I want something singular. Unique. Special."

Rolling her eyes right back at him, she retorted, "All right then, what exactly would make this extremely unusual ring *special* enough for you?"

Snape straightened with frosty dignity, gazing down his nose at the woman. After a pause, he said, "I want a garnet. A deep, red garnet. Not pale. Not brown. Not rusty. Not dull. A garnet with fire in its heart and a gleam from within."

The woman wilted from her aggressive pose, blinking at the unexpectedness of hearing what almost sounded like poetry from the taciturn man. The silence stretched on between them, until the woman finally said, "I believe I can find what you're looking for. And, of course, the price would go down."

Snape relaxed a trifle and said, "Do you have the stones on hand, or shall I make an appointment to come back?"

Clearing her throat as she placed the ring back in the display, the woman said, "I have a supplier. I'll make a few selections from which you may make your choice. At that time, once I know which stone you've chosen, I can give you an adjusted price."

Snape inclined his head and said, "I look forward to it. Shall I come back next week?"

Crossing to the till to grab a business card, the woman said, "Yes, that should work out fine, Mr. ...?"

"Snape. And you are...?"

"Moir. Moira Connell. I shall look forward to your arrival next week, Mr. Snape."

Snape reached into the pocket of his trench coat and pulled out a wad of money. Peeling off some notes, he gravely offered them to the woman. "Here. Consider this earnest money. I *will* be back, and I expect that ring to still be here."

Moir. narrowed her eyes at him, but she quickly wrote out a receipt for the amount and gave him a copy of the slip. "It will be. And I'll have the garnets for you, just as I said. Until next week, Mr. Snape. Good evening." She nodded in dismissal, and Snape nodded back.

"Good evening to you." With a final look at the ring in the case, Snape spun and exited the shop. Quickly walking to a nearby alley, he Disapparated in the shadows.

The following Wednesday, Snape stood behind his desk...arms crossed...and surveyed the class, giving them pause as they wondered why he hadn't begun the lesson yet. When the students began exchanging nervous glances, Snape uncrossed his arms and slowly made his way through the room, eyeing each student in turn before making his way back up to his desk.

The curiosity was palpable until he spoke. "Most of you, I daresay, would merit an 'E' on your homework for today." Panicked faces gazed up at him as students racked their brains, trying to remember what they were supposed to have turned in. A tiny, amused smirk quirked his lips. Then, when comprehension dawned on at least one face, his smirk widened and he took his seat with a low chuckle.

Propping his elbow on the arm of his chair and resting his chin in his hand, he remained silent while the furtive whispers of demands for explanations and reminders of his admonition from the previous week rippled through the group. Once everyone had been apprised of his meaning, the room fell quiet again, but the array of accusing, exasperated, relieved, sour, amused, and wary expressions made him stifle another chuckle behind his fingers.

Leaning forward and clasping his hands on his desk, he said, "Most of you look more refreshed this week than last. However, a few of you could still use a bit more rest and taking better care of yourself. I'll not be recording an actual mark for this *assignment*, since your application to it will undoubtedly have effects on your exams anyway." Raking the class with another stern glare, he continued, "Proceed with your potions, and bear in mind what I've said. Follow my instructions, and you'll reap the benefits. Ignore them, and..." The dire warning was left hanging in the air as students began moving to collect their supplies.

Although he repeatedly circled through the class to keep an eye on everyone's progress, he kept finding himself back at Hermione's table, forcing himself to keep moving, even as his gaze fell on her left hand again. Every time he consciously thought about the ring, the excitement simmering in his belly would flare up to a rolling boil.

Less than a month now...

As the final weeks before exams went on, Snape's time was interrupted by calls from Madam Pomfrey for more soothing potions. Every time he took more stores up to the hospital wing, he perused her list of students who had applied for relief. A sense of pride sparked when he realized that none of his Advanced Potions students were on the list.

On his way out from his most recent delivery Saturday afternoon, Madam Pomfrey stopped him.

"Severus, I wanted to thank you for all your help."

Blinking, Snape said, "Of course, Poppy, you know it's part and parcel of my duties."

Madam Pomfrey stepped closer and flashed a wistful smile. "I know. But I want you to know that I really do appreciate all that you've done for Hogwarts." She ducked her head and murmured, "It won't be the same without you here."

Snape stared, ambushed by her declaration. He and Poppy had always had a cordial professional relationship, but it had never warmed like his friendship with McGonagall. Realizing that he had done the mediwitch a disservice in thinking her aloof instead of merely businesslike, Snape felt a pang of humility squirming through him.

"Thank you. I will admit that it will take some getting used to...not being here." She looked up again and he smiled back at her.

"We're all going to be at loose ends when you leave, and we're concerned about you, you know."

Raising one eyebrow, Snape said, "Talking about me behind my back?" He smirked to show he was teasing, and she wrinkled her nose at him.

"You've not been *around* lately to talk about you *in front of* you, so don't play that game with me, young man." She wagged her finger at him just as if he were one of the students. Snape snorted. "Minerva swears you've got plans and you'll be fine, but she won't give us any details." She pursed her lips in a disgruntled pout, making Snape actually chuckle out loud.

Eyes sparkling with amusement, Snape gave her a mock bow and said, "So sorry to have deprived you lot of gossip, my dear." She gave a haughty sniff, and he flashed a wicked grin. "Would it make it any better if I promise to provide all of you with juicy gossip later?" Letting loose a bark of laughter at her narrowed eyes, he backed away. "As it stands now, I have an appointment...with fate, perhaps...and I must leave. I thank you for your concern, Poppy."

This time he offered a real bow, and she waved her hands. "Off with you, impertinence!"

Spinning on his heel, Snape Disapparated, his chuckle ending with his abrupt disappearance. Shaking her head, Madam Pomfrey bustled back to her office to put away the stock Snape had delivered.

Still amused by Madam Pomfrey's clear annoyance with him, Snape changed into his Muggle clothes again and Flooed to Spinner's End, where he concealed himself and Apparated to the alley near the ring shop.

After ensuring that no one could see him, he ended the concealment charm and made his way into the store. Moira Connell was helping another client, but she nodded a greeting to him as he made a beeline for the display with *his* ring.

It was still there, with a little tag attached to it marked, "On hold." Exhaling in relief, Snape waited until Moira was done helping the other customer, hoping no one else would come in to distract them.

The bell chimed notice of the other person's exit, and Moira nodded at Snape, saying, "I've got the garnets in the back. I'll be right out."

Snape's fingers drummed an agitated tattoo on the glass of the display. Moira brought out a shallow box lined with cream velvet and set it on the counter before Snape. Within it, there were nine different garnets of varying shapes, sizes, and hues. Wordlessly handing him a jewellery loupe and tweezers, Moira unshaded a lamp nearby and gestured for him to examine the pieces.

Snape carefully picked up a stone with the tweezers and brought the loupe to his eye, holding the garnet up to the light as he inspected it. He proceeded to do the same with each gem, without comment. Moira sat back and waited for him to say something...anything.

After the first run-through, Snape scowled down at the stones arrayed on the velvet and began separating them. Then, he subjected the smaller group to another round of scrutiny. Eventually, he narrowed his choices down to two, and Moira was impressed at which ones he had picked. The two he was debating were definitely of the higher quality ones she had brought.

Finally, Snape straightened and set down the tools, gravely looking to Moira. "How much would the ring cost with each of these stones?"

Moira picked up each gem in turn and eyed them much as Snape had, then quoted him the respective prices. Snape merely nodded, his expression inscrutable. "May I see the ring again?"

"Certainly." She handed him the ring after removing the tag. Snape compared each stone to the ring itself, placing it on top of the diamond and squinting at it. "Either one would be lovely, Mr. Snape."

Snape nodded vaguely, still absorbed in his examination of the ring and garnets. Finally, he placed the ring on the velvet and set his choice of stone inside it. "That one. I want that one in place of the diamond."

Moira nodded and smiled. "Very well." She crossed to a drawer behind the till and withdrew a tiny envelope, dropping both the ring and the stone into it and sealing it. Writing Snape's name on it and the quoted price, she inquired, "This ring is an 'O.' Is that the size you need, or shall I have it adjusted?"

She looked up to see Snape blinking, clearly taken aback. Feeling a sense of déjà vu from his ordeal in the fabric shop, he muttered, "It's fine."

Clearly not believing him, Moira cast a doubtful grimace at him and said, "You don't know what size you need? Generally, one gets that information before searching for a ring..."

Snape's eyes narrowed and he glared at her. His voice recalled his classroom demeanour as he growled, "I said it's fine. Just change the gem and that's all." Her brows rose at his brusque retort, and she huffed and rolled her eyes as she wrote out the work order. "When can I expect it to be complete?"

Shooting him a trenchant glare, she said, "My pleasure in doing business with you notwithstanding, I'll have this ready next week." Snape's lip curled at her sarcasm.

"How much do you expect me to pay now?" His irritation coloured his voice, much as hers had.

"Half is the standard. Of course, your previous earnest money is taken into account."

Snape once again fished the roll of notes from his trench coat and peeled off more, thrusting them toward the woman imperiously. She sniffed and wrote a copy of the work order and receipt, including the amount still owed and the date he should return.

"I shall see you next Saturday, Miss Connell." He jerked his head in a hasty nod before turning to leave.

Poisonously sweet, Moira retorted, "I do so look forward to it, Mr. Snape," and pasted on a smile.

Snape cut one last aggrieved look at her as he swept out the door, leaving her to roll her eyes again and heave an exasperated sigh, murmuring, "I pity the poor woman he's proposing to..."

Wednesday heralded the last potions class of term, and Snape decided to set an example for his students by calmly reviewing what was to be expected of them when they took their N.E.W.T.s...both the written and the practical portions. He deliberately kept his voice smooth and low, in an attempt at soothing frazzled nerves.

"By now, if you don't know something, you quite likely won't learn it by cramming in the next few days. There will be nothing in your exams that we haven't covered in class. Your practical portions should go smoothly, as you've all done well so far in preparing your potions. Believe me when I say that if I had seen anyone making a mistake thus far, I would have said something." With that, he cocked a sardonic eyebrow at them, and a few had the temerity to giggle nervously at his understatement.

"You all know the point to which your potion must be prepared before you finish it in your exam. Provided you have effectively used your time to date, you should be able to get to that point in class today. Any remaining time you may have may be used for revising your notes and asking questions." Attentive nods followed his words. "Very well then. Proceed."

Again, Snape circulated through the room, watching the students' progress. The general atmosphere was cool and businesslike, but whenever he could sense someone's nervousness rising, he quickly crossed to that person's table, sussing out the sticking point and murmuring, "Stop. Think. Do not panic. Calm down and breathe. Now, what should you remember at this point?"

Invariably, the student would take a shaky breath, then concentrate, eyes closed, until muttering an answer. At Snape's liquid croon of, "Exactly. Carry on," the student would take another steadying breath and continue, bolstered by his subtle support.

At the end of the period, Snape gazed down at the class with a faint smile of pride and challenge. "Keep taking care of yourselves, and do well on your exams. I sha'n't wish you luck, as you have the skill and knowledge needed. Therefore, you don't need such an ephemeral thing as luck." With that, he raised one eyebrow and smirked at them, pleased that most of them managed a weak smile before exiting the classroom.

Hermione dallied in gathering her things, lagging behind the others as they swept to the door. As soon as they were all gone, she whipped around and flashed a smile at Snape, rippling her fingers in a wave. Then, with a furtive peek out the door again, she blew him a kiss and winked before ducking out the door past the early-arriving students for the next class.

Snape retreated into his office for a moment, unable to wipe the grin off his face at the combined feelings of satisfaction that his N.E.W.T. level class would do him proud and the euphoric elation that soon he would have a surprise of the first magnitude for the woman he loved.

Saturday afternoon, Snape once again entered the ring shop, his body thrumming with anticipation of seeing *his* ring. At the sound of the door chime, Moira looked up from cleaning a display case and nodded, immediately turning and disappearing through the beaded curtain. Snape stepped up to the counter and gripped the edge, suppressing the urge to follow her.

Moira returned, bearing a velvet ring box, which she proffered to Snape. Snape snatched the box and opened it, his eyes gleaming with greedy excitement.

When he looked at the ring, the tense set of his shoulders wilted, and his breath souged out of him on a long note of satisfaction. His whisper of "Perfect" was patently not directed to Moira, so she didn't respond. Carefully plucking the ring from the box, Snape held it up to the light and turned it, watching the fiery sparks within the garnet.

The brooding lines of his face smoothed and his eyes were alight with a fierce joy. His whole demeanour changed, and Moira was rather stunned by how different he seemed, with a smile spreading those lips that had been thinned in seriousness before now. Blinking, Moira reflected that perhaps his intended wasn't so bad off after all.

After a long moment, Snape finally refocused on the woman waiting patiently behind the counter. He blinked too, jolted out of his transport of delight, and cleared his throat as he ducked his head and shook his hair around his warming cheeks. Placing the ring back in the box, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the receipt with the amount due listed. He kept his eyes on the notes as he counted them, uncomfortably aware that he had allowed his closely guarded feelings to show.

Regaining his businesslike composure, he handed the money to Moira, saying, "That should cover it. It turned out rather well, I think."

Moira suppressed a smirk at his understatement, considering his intense reaction, and allowed him to rebuild his masculinity. "I'm pleased you think so. Here is your final receipt, Mr. Snape. Thank you for your business. And if you find yourself in need of anything else later, please do think of us."

Snape inclined his head and gravely said, "I shall. Good afternoon, Miss Connell." With a quick bow, he spun and strode out the door, her "Good day to you" blending with the door chime.

Snape hurried to the alley and concealed himself, Apparating to a wizarding shop and hastily ending the charm so he could take the box out of his pocket and gaze at the ring again in the sunlight. Gripping the box tightly in his hand, he entered the new shop and went straight to the aging wizard at his worktable to one side. He had spoken to the craftsman before and had chosen him to be the one to cast the necessary charms on the ring.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Abernathy, I have the ring for you."

The man peered up at Snape and smiled. "Excellent. Why don't you have a seat here and I'll fix it right up for you." He waved at the stool opposite him and Snape sat, offering him the velvet box.

The jeweller opened the box and let out a soft crow of surprise. "What an exquisite piece. And you said you need more than just a sizing charm?"

Snape leant forward and said, "Yes. I need both rings...there are two parts, you see...to be linked in the sizing charm, so that once one part is worn, it will size to fit, and when the other part is placed with the first part, the second part will adjust to the first." He paused, and the older man nodded understanding.

"That's easy enough. Is that all?"

Snape flicked a glance around the shop, leaning closer even though they were alone. "I've read about proposal charms. I want one that will only size the ring to fit *if* the recipient knowingly and fully accepts the proposal. Once done, the ring can only be removed by the woman if she wills it. I know that is more complicated, but I have the Galleons for it." He patted the pocket with his bag of money significantly.

The jeweller's eyes narrowed shrewdly and he murmured, "Those are two separate charms. The theft-deterrent is fairly costly, and the betrothal charm is used less and less. Are you sure you need such a rare enchantment?"

Snape's expression settled into one of grim determination. "I daren't take any chances."

Brows rising in surprise, the older man shook his head and shrugged. "Very well then. If you insist. It will take a couple of days to make sure I remember how to cast the betrothal charm correctly. Are you certain you want all of them? The price increases significantly..."

Cutting him off, Snape snapped, "How much?" When the man named the price, Snape sucked in a quick breath, his jaw throbbing as he clenched his teeth, then nodded sharply. "I can manage."

Sitting back in his work chair, the man studied Snape for a moment, then said, "Half up front is customary."

Snape nodded and fished his moneybag from his pocket, counting out the Galleons and thrusting them at him. The man waved his wand at a tablet by the far counter and a parchment page tore off, floating to Snape with a receipt scrawled on it.

Pocketing the coins, the jeweller said, "Come by Monday afternoon. I should have it ready then."

Snape shot to his feet and said, "I shall see you then. Good afternoon." He nodded at the man and Disapparated, leaving the jeweller to Summon an old charms book.

"Now, I know it's been years since I've even *looked* at a betrothal charm, but I don't think I've lost my touch..."

Monday morning dawned, and all through the castle, anxious students prepared for their exams. The Wizarding Examination Authority administrators arrived bright and early, setting up the rooms for the fifth- and seventh-year students. By lunch time, many students looked harrowed, but by dinner, when the administrators departed, nearly everyone...including the teachers...looked exhausted.

Snape, on the other hand, transformed from weary to uplifted as he finished his meal, realizing that he would have the completed ring in his possession within the hour.

Hermione, commiserating with her mates at the Gryffindor table, noticed the light kindling in Snape's eyes and wondered what could have him so excited. *Perhaps he's just come up with something for Fern. Or maybe the house is nearing completion. I wish I could ask him, but I guess it'll just have to wait.*

She sighed, missing him, as she watched him stand and Disapparate.

Snape Flooded to Spinner's End, and then Apparated to the jewellery shop. His stomach trembled with excitement as he entered, making a beeline to the wizard at his workstation. The urgency in his voice was noticeable as he said, "Good evening, Mr. Abernathy. Is it ready?"

The older man heaved to his feet and crossed to a locked case. Muttering a password to slip past the wards, he withdrew the velvet ring box and showed it to Snape. Snape's whole face lit up, and he seemed to practically vibrate with tension.

"Why don't we settle up and then I'll tell you about the charms." He tilted his head toward the till, and Snape nodded, hurrying toward it while fishing his money bag from his pocket. Snape counted out the Galleons and made to hand them to the man, but the jeweller stopped him. "You've got too much there." He reached out and plucked some money from Snape's hand, setting it on the counter closer to Snape. "There, that'll do."

Snape's brow furrowed in confusion. "But it says here on the receipt..."

Waving his hand irritably, the man cut him off. "I know what it says, lad. I miscalculated. Turns out the betrothal charm wasn't as difficult as I remembered, so it wasn't as much. Besides, I daresay you can find something else to spend those Galleons on, right?"

Snape's eyes widened and his voice was an incredulous rasp as he said, "Are you sure?"

Face creasing in a benevolent smile, the man nodded, putting the reduced amount in the till. "I'm sure! You must have a pretty lass to woo, so hang on to that for later. The ladies now, I'm told they like little fripperies once in a while, so it'll be spent as like as not." He chuckled and set the ring box in front of Snape.

Snape snatched it up and opened it, once again examining it with an air of exultation. Snapping his gaze to the man, he prompted, "And the charms?"

The jeweller brandished a scroll at Snape. "Here are all the details. How to tell if it worked, which charms they are, all that rubbish. There's also a list of the spells I can't give a guarantee against, but they're all pretty rare, so your guarantee is pretty thorough. The sizing charm is linked for both pieces, and it's set to work continuously, so if her ring size changes over time, the ring will adjust."

Snape unrolled the scroll and scanned it quickly. Nodding at each point the man made, he closed the scroll and pocketed it, the ring box still clutched in his hand. "Excellent. Thank you very much, Mr. Abernathy. And thank you for the discount. That was unnecessary, but appreciated." He gave a quick bow.

"You're welcome, lad. Never let it be said that Abner Abernathy ever gouged anyone."

Snape smiled and nodded, making his way to the door. "Indeed."

His hand was on the door when the jeweller said, "So, I can't help but ask, when will you be doing the asking?"

Snape paused, blinking at the older man. Then, his lips spread in a grin of boyish mischief, and his eyes kindled with joy, making the older wizard blink at the drastic change. Suppressed laughter rippled in his voice as he merely said, "Soon." Then, with a low chuckle, he said, "Good evening," and ducked out the door.

The jeweller snorted softly and shook his head. "Well, lad, I wish you luck. 'Tis a lovely thing to see young people so set on marriage." Smiling wistfully, he went back to his workstation.

Snape Flooded back to his quarters and dithered over where to hide the ring. Finally, he stuffed it into the pocket of his trench coat, casting charms to keep it safe and unnoticeable to anyone but him. He ran a hand through his hair, almost too excited and distracted to do anything functional with his time. Then again, as he reflected on the exams awaiting grading, he reminded himself that it was good to be a Potions Master and headed to his stock of potions.

After a liberal dose of both a Calming Draught and a Wit-Sharpening Potion, Snape managed to make it through a few hours of grading before heading to bed and downing a half-dose of Dreamless Sleep Draught. There were still four more days of exams to deal with, and he needed his rest.

Exam week was nearly over when Hermione was interrupted at lunch by McGonagall.

"Miss Granger, could you come with me for a moment?"

Hermione peered up at her Head of House and faltered, "But, Professor, I've my last exam in half an hour. I'm revising..." She pointed at the notes spread across the table and bit her lip anxiously.

"I understand, but this is rather important, and you'll not be late for your exam. I promise." Her voice dropped on the last two words, and Hermione frowned in perplexity.

Reluctantly gathering her notes, Hermione stood. Wondering at the older witch's odd inflection, Hermione asked, "Is anything wrong, Professor?"

McGonagall flashed a tight smile and gestured for Hermione to follow. "I don't think so, dear. Come along."

She led her out of the Great Hall and down the corridor to the same room they had used as the guests' lounge before the performance. Inside, the Wizarding Examination Authority administrators were enjoying their lunch away from the student body. They crossed to a middle-aged witch who nodded animatedly as they approached, dabbing her lips with a napkin and standing.

"Excellent, thank you so much, Professor. Good afternoon, Miss Granger. I'm Audrey Dinsmore, and I was hoping to have a little chat with you before we all have to go back to the last exams." She waved to a chair at her small table, and Hermione sat, casting a wary look at McGonagall. McGonagall stood there, clearly waiting for an invitation to sit as well, but the woman smiled at her and nodded in dismissal. "She won't be late, Professor. Thank you for bringing her. I'm sorry to have interrupted your lunch."

McGonagall eyed the woman in pique for a moment, then turned to Hermione. "I'll be in the Hall if you need me, Miss Granger."

Hermione flashed a "don't leave me!" look at McGonagall but merely said, "Thank you, Professor."

With a haughty sniff, McGonagall swept away, leaving Hermione to gaze uncertainly at the witch smiling beside her.

Leaning forward, the woman said, "It's lovely to meet you, Miss Granger. I've seen how well you're doing on your N.E.W.T.s, and I was lucky enough to have seen your performance. You are indeed a brilliant and talented young woman."

Hermione ducked her head, demurring. "That's very kind, thank you. I've had great teachers and cast mates. I got lucky."

Narrowing her eyes shrewdly, Audrey murmured, "Modest, too. Yes, I think they're quite right..."

Blinking in bewilderment, Hermione said, "Who's right? And about what?"

"I don't just work in the Examination Authority, Miss Granger. I am also part of the restructuring going on at the Ministry."

Still lost, Hermione echoed, "Restructuring?"

"In light of this latest development, what with the Tri-Wizard Musical Competition and the new curriculum to be added across wizarding schools next year, the Ministry is having to create a new department and restructure existing ones to deal with all of these changes. *That's* what I'm here to talk to you about. More like sounding you out about certain ideas, if you will."

Wishing the cryptic woman would just get to the point already, since she had an exam in about fifteen minutes, Hermione clenched her teeth in exasperation and said, "*Which* ideas, Miss Dinsmore? I must say that I'm still baffled by what you're intimating."

Drumming her fingers on the table, Audrey tilted her head and said, "What are your plans after leaving Hogwarts, Miss Granger?"

Hermione blinked, stammering in her attempt to answer, since she immediately thought of Snape but couldn't say anything about it. "I-I, well, it's just, I mean, I-I haven't worked out all the details yet."

Audrey leant closer and murmured, "With your background, Miss Granger, being part of the Golden Trio... That alone could get your foot in the door anywhere. But, with your stellar marks, you've proven you *deserve* to get your foot in wherever you like. The thing is, you may be young, but you've proven yourself to be quite capable and talented in a number of areas. And, with your amazing performance, we think you're just the woman we need to *create* the department the Ministry needs for next year!"

Hermione felt light-headed as the import of the woman's words hit her. *Creating a new Ministry department? Coming up with the new curriculum for schools across the world? Merciful heavens! That's unheard of for a witch just out of Hogwarts!* Dazed, she sucked in a deep breath and tried to marshal her scattered wits.

One corner of her lips quirked in a faint smirk, Audrey said, "I understand that it's all a bit overwhelming right now, and I know you'll need some time to consider whether or not you'll want to even find out more." She flashed a challenging smile. "But will you at least say you'll get back to me later?"

Hermione nodded weakly. "I... I think so."

Audrey chuckled and looked at her watch. "Oh dear, it's nearly time for the last exams. We'd better get going."

Hermione stared at her, incredulous. Unable to stop herself, she said, "You expect me to do well on an exam after you throw *that* at me?" The accusing tone of her voice made the older witch shake her head.

"Oh, don't worry! Like I said, I've seen how you've done so far on your exams, and you could ace them blindfolded with your wand tied behind your back. You did the same with your O.W.L.s, my dear. I know; I checked." She winked at Hermione, standing and gesturing for her to precede her out of the lounge.

Hermione stood, casting an aggrieved look at Audrey before hurrying to her exam. Fortunately, it was a written portion, and she managed to get her spinning thoughts to subside as she focused on the questions before her, writing as fast as she could to answer them completely in the time allowed.

By the time it was over, she felt a huge sense of relief that she was finished, and, for good or ill, her work here was done. As she was leaving the classroom, Audrey came bustling up to her from a different one and thrust a slip of parchment in her hand.

"Here's how to contact me to set up a visit if you'd like more information on our proposal. Enjoy your time off!"

Hermione shoved the parchment into her pocket and wearily trudged up to her room, fully intent on a nap before dinner. *I do so hope we'll have rehearsal soon. I can't wait to tell Severus!*

A/N: To see "the ring," go here: <http://raru.com/images/revcradles/reverse-vanessa1.jpg>

69- Next Step: Adulthood

Chapter 73 of 84

Exams are over, and the future is in sight. Snape and Hermione both take steps in their journey toward independence-- with each other.

JKR owns everything, not me. I just adore it so much I love to play with them. But I'll return them only slightly used.

Author's Note: Dear readers, I hope you haven't fallen victim to a heart attack that I've managed to get this chapter up so quickly after the last one. My muse took me on a whirlwind romp, and this is the result. (Well, that and the fact that I even skipped my class to write instead of wasting time there--I won't do it again, I promise!) Muchos smooches to Ladyofthemasque for mad beta skillz and for being there for me and PoH even in the midst of her holiday and birthday party. *hugs Lotm* And thank you, as always, to you lovely folks who make my day by partaking of this labour of love. Cheers! :)

Chapter 69- Next Step: Adulthood

Hermione got her nap and enjoyed a raucous, late dinner with her mates, celebrating the end of exams. However, when she finally returned to her room after continued silliness and banter in the common room, she decided she deserved a long, hot bath to *really* relax.

No one should need to come get me for anything, but I better leave the door only Silenced one way. She waved her wand at the door, Silencing it from inside out, but allowing noise to come in, just in case anyone knocked. Heaving a deep sigh, she stripped out of her clothes and padded into the bathroom, turning on the taps full blast and adding her favourite scented bubble bath.

When she eased into the near-scalding water, her low hiss turned into a faint moan of satisfaction. Twisting her hair up and flinging it over the end of the tub, she submerged up to her chin and closed her eyes, letting the week's stress melt away, leaving her with a feeling of pleasant lassitude.

The silence pressed in on her, and her own breathing seemed to echo on the tiles. She could faintly hear Crookshanks washing in the other room. It was bliss. There were no demands on her time, no "very important things" to prepare for. With her body almost floating in the scented water, her mind began to relax as well, floating in a serene nothingness until she dozed.

Snape was lounging in his armchair, continuing the internal debate he had been waging since the end of the last exam that afternoon. The same thoughts kept spinning in his head, over and over, on an endless loop.

Exams are over. There's nothing to keep you from going to her.

She just finished her N.E.W.T.s! Give her a moment to rest!

But you've been waiting so long now! And you've behaved as she requested. Surely you deserve a reward... You miss her!

You saw her at dinner. She and her friends were all cutting up. She might not even be in her room if they're all still celebrating.

You've been dithering about this for hours now. Surely they're done and ready for some rest by this time.

All right, say she is in her room. How do you know she doesn't have anyone else in there with her?

Even if she does, they needn't know you've arrived. You can hide, you know.

If you Apparate into her bathroom again, you could arrive right when she's in there! I doubt she'll be happy to see you if you appear while she's using the loo.

You've done it every weekend lately: Conceal yourself and then Apparate! You should be a dab hand at it by now.

But what if she gets angry? Last time you went, she didn't even want you there.

Exams. Are. Over! What could she possibly be doing that is so important that she wouldn't welcome a chance to see you? It's not like you've spent time together lately, what with no rehearsals to use as an excuse.

True... What time is it?

Later than the last time you checked. Funny how time does that whole moving on thing...

Ha ha. Well, it is after curfew now...

Indeed. Your chances of encountering problems continue to dwindle.

Snape shoved to his feet and strode to the bathroom, glaring at himself in the mirror. He was having enough trouble fighting his own mind; perhaps a stern glare might help. He stared into his eyes, seesawing between going and staying.

After several more minutes, he voiced an inarticulate growl and raked his hands through his hair, clasping his hands behind his neck. Taking a deep breath, he exhaled forcefully through his nose and cut a determined glance at himself, nodding. Whipping out his wand, he cast his well-practiced concealment charm on himself, watching his image fade in the mirror. Then, crouching and concentrating, he Apparated to the space behind Hermione's armchair.

Still invisible, he quickly peered around the room, noting that it was empty of any presence except her cat, which was sprawled on her bed, washing. Even though he couldn't be seen, Crookshanks paused and looked his way, clearly sensing that Snape had arrived. Twisting and rising, the animal jumped off the bed and trotted over to Snape, sniffing until he found Snape's dangling fingers and butting his head against them with a rusty yowl.

In the bathroom, Hermione woke with a start, sending the water sloshing as Crookshanks's meow jerked her out of her languorous doze. Blinking and yawning, she noticed that the water had cooled considerably. Still not wanting to leave her watery cocoon, she lifted a dripping hand from the bath and picked up her wand, casting a warming charm on the water.

Snape heard the splashing sounds and realized that Hermione must be in the tub. Grinning, he scrubbed the cat affectionately and ended his concealment charm. When he stood, Crookshanks immediately moved to wind around Snape's ankles, shedding ginger hairs on the black fabric. Rolling his eyes, Snape carefully stepped away from the cat and crossed to the bathroom, leaving the indignant beastie to yowl again.

"Crooks, what's wrong? I'm in here, boy." Hermione's voice came from the other side of the unshut door.

Snape slowly pushed the door open more, and Hermione turned her head toward the floor, expecting to see her familiar butting it open. When she saw a familiar black boot instead, she gasped, her eyes snapping up to see Snape gazing at her with a tentative smile and devouring eyes.

His voice was low and entreating as he said, "I do hope I'm not intruding."

Eyes wide with shock, Hermione struggled to sit up, sliding along the slick porcelain and splashing water onto the floor. Gripping the edge of the tub, she steadied herself, her hair dropping into the suds still capping the water and her breasts floating into view.

"Severus! What are you doing here?"

Snape ducked his head, his eyes darting side to side. "I miss you."

It was simple and honest, and Hermione's heart melted, slowing from its speeding pace of surprise. Her whisper tender, she said, "I miss you, too." They locked eyes again, and Snape's faint smile faded into a heated look as they both realized that she was naked.

Hermione's breath hitched, and her eyelids fluttered as Snape stepped closer, the fire in his eyes taking on a near-predatory look. Never breaking his gaze from hers, he flicked his wand at her bedroom door, casting an Imperturbable Charm. Then, his breathing quickening, he began shedding his clothes, leaving them to puddle at his feet while she watched in a sort of daze.

Heat crept up Hermione's chest and face, and it wasn't from the warmed bathwater. A drawing, clutching sensation in her core made her swallow hard, biting back a whimper as Snape undressed.

Toeing his boots and socks off and shrugging out of his shirt, Snape watched Hermione's pupils dilate, and a surge of power swept over him. Stepping out of his trousers, he paused, seeing her gaze orient on his tented boxers. Kicking the pile of clothes to one side, he lowered himself to his knees, leaning forward to slink across the floor to the tub.

Hermione's hands clenched at the lithe play of his muscles as he crawled, his hair swinging forward and shadowing his face. Putting her in mind of a panther, he reached her, slowly closing in and looming over her as his hands gripped the tub outside of hers.

Lips spread in a feral grin, Snape ghosted his nose along her cheek and ear, nudging her curls out of the way so he could breathe, "Is there room enough in there for me, too?"

Her low, shuddering moan was his answer. Pulling back with a triumphant grin, he felt a sizzle of excitement at the lust sparking in her eyes as she subjected him to a stern glare.

Hermione gripped his wrists and pushed, growling, "Up." Blinking in surprise, Snape struggled to his feet, staring down at Hermione. She peered up the length of his body, then focused on his boxers, which were now damp at the tip of his cock. Reaching up, she slid her fingers under the waistband and tugged, drawing them down his hips and freeing his bobbing erection. Snape groaned.

Shoving the pants down his legs, she tapped his knees, and he stepped out of them. Raking her gaze up and down his body, she reflected on how relieved she was that they were no longer shy about being naked with each other. Licking her lips, she twisted onto her knees, lifting her whole torso out of the water, her wet nipples tightening as they cooled in the air. Flicking a teasing glance at Snape, she leant forward and placed a soft kiss right beside the base of his cock, feeling it bounce in reaction, rubbing along her cheek.

Snape's head rocked back, and he sucked in a steadying breath, wanting to bury his fists in her hair and direct her mouth to envelop his cock. He did nothing of the sort, instead clenching his hands into fists at his sides. His breathing unsteady, he looked down again at her delighted expression and said, "Is that how you answer a simple question?"

Hermione wrinkled her nose at him and backed away, pulling the plug from the drain. "Fine. You can get in. Once the water has drained sufficiently."

Snape nodded, his lids heavy with contained desire. "And in the meantime?"

Hermione smirked again and slanted a wicked look up at him. "Perhaps something to keep you *occupied*?" Snape's lips twitched and she darted forward, wrapping her hand around the base of his cock and laving him from base to tip along the underside.

Snape swore. His legs began trembling, and his head swam. Gods, it had been too long. The sound of the water draining was punctuated by Snape's gasps and sighs as Hermione continued to lick his cock like a popsicle. After what seemed both far too long and not nearly long enough, she released him and sat back, plugging the drain again and gesturing for him to step in.

Snape concentrated on lowering himself into the bath, making sure not to collapse. The water rose around them, but not high enough to slop over the edge. Hermione turned on the taps and added more hot water and bubble bath, as most of her suds had dissolved.

They faced each other, knees drawn up and feet touching. Snape let his eyes close as he exhaled a long sigh of pleasure at the heat enveloping him. His eyes popped open and he choked on a hastily drawn breath when he felt Hermione's toes sliding along his erection. Her giggle earned her a scowl. Hastily plunging his hand into the water, he gripped her ankle, stopping her teasing actions.

Hermione grinned cheekily at him and pulled her foot from his grasp, squirming around to lean back against him. Snape gasped when she wriggled her backside against his cock and balls, deftly wedging herself between his spread knees. Reaching for his hands, she drew them around her and snuggled into his embrace, cooing in satisfaction.

Snape dipped his head and pressed a kiss against her curls, frizzier in the humidity of the bathroom; love and joy surged within him, tightening his chest and throat. Hermione's hands caressed his legs, smoothing through the dark hair. Snape responded by gently trailing his fingers over her belly and sides, every so often slipping around to cup her breasts. His erection was trapped between his belly and her back, pulsing with his heartbeat.

Ducking lower and nudging her head to the side, he kissed her ear, murmuring, "Gods, I've missed you so much. Soon. We can be like this whenever we want soon."

Hermione let out a breathy moan and squirmed against him, sliding her hand over his on her belly. "I've missed this. Being with you. Touching you. You touching me..." Her breath souged out as she deliberately guided his hand lower, over her mound. At Snape's muffled groan, she said, "Touch me, Severus."

Snape needed no more urging. Wrapping one arm under her breasts and holding her close, he snaked his other hand down, through her slippery lips. Nibbling and biting at her neck, he stroked circles around her clit, making her grind her hips and gasp. Delving further, he dipped his finger into her cunt, marvelling that it was even hotter than

the bath, and somehow wetter. His cock throbbed harder, and he wanted nothing more than to lift her up and set her down on it, enveloping himself in her tight heat.

Instead, he continued stroking, rubbing faster and harder as her whimpers and moans grew. Hermione's hand clamped down on his, and she rocked her hips furiously, sloshing the water around them. Her body going rigid with tension, she started babbling, "Severus, gods, yes, oh gods, yes, fuck, yes, please, fuck, oh yes, Severus, fuck, yes!" Head snapping back against his shoulder, she shuddered, holding his hand against her pussy in a death grip. Panting as she came, her keening continued until her body finished its spasms and every muscle relaxed at once, leaving her to wilt limply against Snape. Her hand released his as she breathed deeply in repletion.

Returning to normal pulse and respiration, Hermione gathered her scattered wits and said, "Fuck me, Severus, that felt good."

Snape snorted in amusement and said, "Would that I could, love."

Hermione realized what she had said and giggled. "Mmm, indeed. Soon. Just like you said..." She squirmed forward and turned around, propping herself up on hands and knees, leaning in to kiss him soundly. As Snape leant forward to meet her, she lifted one hand to wrap around his cock and he voiced a groan.

Hermione tilted, "Seems we have a little something that must needs be taken care of."

Snape drew back enough to raise an eyebrow haughtily and growl, "'Little'?"

Hermione laughed aloud and purred, "Hardly." Then, she smirked. "And hard, apparently." Snape snorted again. Hermione reached toward the drain and pulled the plug again. At Snape's quizzical look, she lightly squeezed his cock and murmured, "Trust me."

Snape sucked in a breath and held it for a moment, then released it with a breathy, "Always."

Hermione kissed him as the water drained, until it was low enough to just cover his balls. Replacing the plug, she stood and reached for her shower gel, a smouldering smirk quirking her lips. Snape watched her, his expression both wary and lustful. Dropping to her knees again in the shallow water, she squeezed a large dollop of gel into her palm and set the bottle to one side. Closing her fist and smearing it along her fingers, she leant forward onto the other hand and flashed a wanton grin at Snape before encasing his cock in her slippery, sudsy grip.

Snape's eyelids flew open wide as he cottoned onto her plan, but they fluttered again as his head fell back at the smooth strokes along his erection. His drawn out groan of pleasure echoed off the tiles, making Hermione grin even more.

Pumping her hand from base to tip, she watched his face intently as she jerked him off. His stomach muscles kept tensing and releasing, and his hips rocked of their own accord. Long hisses were interspersed with deep grunts and low groans. Eventually, Snape pried his eyes open to see Hermione's gaze locked on his face. The sizzling connection when their eyes met staggered him with its intimacy, and his balls contracted sharply, forcing a louder moan from his lips.

Hermione felt his cock swell and pulse in her grasp and purred, "Mmm, yes, that's it. I want it. Give it to me, Severus."

Snape gripped the edge of the tub in his fists, eyes rolling back as he came, the creamy liquid mixing with the frothy suds in her hand.

Remembering from previous experience that he would be overly sensitive at this point, Hermione carefully released him, dropping her hand into the water to rinse it.

Snape just lay there, breathing deeply. Swallowing hard, he moistened his dry mouth and rasped, "All yours."

Hermione once again burst out laughing, and Snape grinned, pleased to have made her happy. Lifting his head from the tub edge, he added, "Any time."

Still chuckling, Hermione crawled over him and growled, "I hope so!" Then, closing the distance, she kissed him. While they were snogging languidly, she reached down and began splashing water over his soapy groin. Tentatively touching him, in case he couldn't take it, she backed away and looked in his eyes. "Everything all right?"

Snape's satiated smile made her smirk as he said, "What was the phrase you used before? 'Fucking brilliant' I believe it was?"

Continuing to rinse him, she snorted, shaking her head. "My my, Professor, such language!"

His voice thoughtful, Snape said, "Hmm, I much prefer you washing *that* with soap than washing my mouth out for foul language."

Dissolving into giggles, Hermione finished rinsing him and pulled the plug again. Struggling to her feet, she reached for a towel and wrapped it around herself, then grabbed another one and offered it to Snape.

Gazing up at her, incredulous, he said, "You expect me to *move* after that?"

"If you'd rather get cold and prune, stay there, but I'm already prune and I think the bed might be more comfortable." Cocking one brow at him, she whirled and flounced out of the bathroom, leaving Snape to grumble as he heaved to his feet.

Hermione buffed herself dry and flung the covers back, dropping the towel and climbing into bed. Snape, his expression aggrieved, appeared in the doorway with the towel wrapped around his waist.

Patting the bed, Hermione said, "There's room enough *in here* for you, too."

With a snort, Snape crossed to her and lay down beside her, drawing the covers over them and wriggling into a comfortable position with her curled along his side, pillowing her head on his shoulder and draping her arm and leg over him. Wrapping his arm around her back, he idly traced circles on her smooth, scented skin, his unpinned leg bending to tent the covers.

Hermione's murmur was thick with satisfaction as she said, "As 'fucking brilliant' as all that was, this is just as nice."

Snape chuckled and kissed her forehead. "Quite right, my love." He sucked in a slow, deep breath. "So, what is there to catch up on since we last had any time together?" Hermione hummed in thought and he solicitously asked, "Oh, yes, how were your exams?"

Hermione, being the swot that she was, actually answered him in detail, as opposed to retorting with a superficial, "Fine." Then again, Snape, swot that *he* was, was truly interested, and their discussion lasted for quite a while.

Eventually, Hermione wound down and said, "Oh... I've been prattling on about my worries and such, but haven't asked you a thing! I'm sorry, dear heart." She lifted up to press a penitent kiss on his lips before continuing, "How are things with Fern and the house?"

Anxious to fill her in on all the exciting progress made in both arenas, Snape launched into a virtual monologue, pausing only when Hermione saw fit to interject. Of course, he made no mention of his latest pursuit, as the ring was to be a surprise.

Somewhere along the way, Hermione doused the lights, leaving the moonlight streaming through the window the only illumination in the room. Crookshanks settled into a ball at their feet and dozed.

After a lengthy pause, Snape murmured, "Just two weeks until the Feast and the last performance." His heart thumped in excitement at his plan, and he realized he should do his best to solidify plans for after the Feast, particularly if his hopes panned out.

Taking a steady breath, Snape said, "Hermione..."

When he trailed off, she tilted her head and said, "What is it, love?"

Carefully picking his words, he said, "What... are your plans... for after the Feast is over? I mean, what will you do when you're no longer a student here?"

Her gasp startled him, and when she pushed away from him to prop herself up on one elbow, eyes wide as she looked down at him in the dim light, his gut clenched in alarm.

"I can't believe I forgot to tell you!"

"Tell me what?" Dread coloured his words.

"Today, at lunch! McGonagall took me away for a meeting."

Wary, Snape's brow furrowed. "A meeting? For what? About what?"

Hermione struggled to sit up, the covers shoved down to Snape's waist as she sat cross-legged by his chest, apparently too worked up over the incident to simply lie there.

"I *think* I've been offered a job."

Blinking in confusion, Snape grimaced. "*What?*"

"One of the Examination Authority administrators apparently came to the show, and she said something about the Ministry needing to create a new department to deal with this whole new Fine Arts thing going into effect next school year...you know, the whole reason we had this competition to begin with. She said there's a lot of restructuring going on in the Ministry, and what with my contribution to the war, and my marks, and my performance, my name had come up as a suggestion for heading up the new department."

It all tumbled out in a rush, and Snape's expression went from bewildered to surprised to amazed to calculating to pleased. Sitting up as well, he said, "That's wonderful, Hermione!"

She flashed a worried smile at him. "Granted, I don't have all the details yet, but she gave me her contact information. I just couldn't believe she did that to me *right* before my last exam!" She scowled in remembered annoyance and Snape chuckled.

"Hermione, this is perfect. You can get into something you're uniquely suited for, without having to trudge through all the junior offices and such. Please, promise me you'll contact her right away." He clasped her hands in his and squeezed, his gaze entreating.

Biting her lip, she averted her eyes. "I don't know. I mean, I'm just finishing Hogwarts, and I have no experience with Ministry organizations..."

Snape smirked and drawled, "Dear heart, I've *seen* the timetables and study schedules you've foisted on your mates. If anyone has the talents needed to organize a department and determine what's necessary for a new curriculum based in Muggle Fine Arts, it's *you*."

Hermione cut an acid glance at him and he laughed as she said, "Gee, thanks."

Snape caressed her hair and smiled. "You're the one who said I'm arrogant and you're bossy. Use it to your advantage!"

Huffing, Hermione tossed her head. "Fine! I'll contact her. No harm in that, I suppose. It's not like I'll accept anything right away."

With that, Snape sobered. "No. Indeed you sha'n't. When you meet with her, don't let her...or anyone else from the Ministry...flatter or cajole or coerce you into signing a contract straight off. You'll not only do yourself a service but will prove to them that you're a person worth recruiting if you insist on taking their proposed contract with you to examine it and consider your options. Negotiating is a time-honoured business practice, and you should take the time to do it well."

Hermione gazed at him, nodding in all seriousness. "Fair enough."

Snape leant closer, his voice lowering in his urgency. "However, you don't want to dither too long. You'd likely be best off if you manage to arrange a contract before the end of term. That way, it's all set before you leave here." In his head, he added, *And nothing that may happen can change it.*

Nodding again, she murmured, "I'll owl her tomorrow and set up a meeting." Wrinkling her nose at him, she added, "It's a shame I can't have *you* there with me to help fend them off so I can work on negotiating. I daresay that of all people at a meeting like that, you'd be the last one to be intimidated."

Snape snorted. "Bring it home and we'll work out some way to go over it. I promise."

"Home? You mean here? Or Spinner's End?"

Snape's breath caught. Whispering, he said, "You thought of Spinner's End?"

Hermione ducked her head with a shy smile. "Well, at the idea of bringing something home to go over with you, I did picture us there." After a beat, she murmured, "I hope that's okay."

Snape's chest and throat tightened, and he lurched forward to wrap her in a fierce embrace, his kiss expressing just how okay it was. His hands sliding up to tangle in her hair, he pulled away, trailing kisses along her cheek to her ear, where he breathed, "I love you, Hermione. My home is yours. *Ours*."

Hermione hugged him hard and moaned, "I love you, Severus." Then she moved to kiss him again, tugging him down to lie back down on the bed.

Their impassioned kisses led to fevered groping, and Snape grew hard again. His cock pressed against her hip, thrusting every so often. His hand travelled over her body, teasingly making its way to her mound. When he lightly traced a finger along her cleft, she moaned into his mouth.

Dipping further down, he slipped that finger between her pussy lips and groaned at the slick heat he found. Growling with lust, he delved into her cunt, making her arch and cry out. Nuzzling back to her ear, he murmured, "I love your noises... I love how wet you get... I love how hard you make me..."

He reared back, sliding his finger out of her and lifting his hand to his face. Locking glazed eyes with hers, he sucked his glistening flesh deep into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it and gathering every drop of her juices coating him. A deep hum of pleasure rumbled in his chest, and Hermione gasped at the eroticism of it all.

His purr muffled by the finger still in his mouth, he said, "I love how you taste."

Somehow, that still had the power to make her blush. Gamely trying to own that wantonness, she retorted, "You taste pretty good yourself."

Snape's eyes burned with desire, and he exhaled slowly before saying, "You're welcome to a taste any time you like."

Hermione voiced a sultry giggle, casting him a wicked smirk as she reached to stroke his cock again. Snape gasped and moaned. Licking her lips, she said, "What about now?"

Closing his eyes in an attempt to maintain control of himself, he said, "Perhaps I wasn't done sampling yet."

With that, Hermione pushed him onto his back, releasing his cock in favour of straddling him and holding herself up to gaze down at him, her face shadowed by her hair. Thus it was that Snape couldn't see her expression, but could only hear the ragged note of need in her voice as she said, "I think we *both* deserve a treat."

An inquisitive noise in his throat was his response as she reared up, lifting one knee to move to one side of him. She inched higher, kneeling near his shoulders, and when she paused, Snape could see her biting her lip in uncertainty.

His cock jutted up obscenely, and he watched her gaze flick between his face and his groin. He, too, was distracted by the slick curls so near his face. He could even smell her scent.

That was when it hit him.

Eyes widening in comprehension and eager agreement, he reached over and gripped her hips, pulling her over.

She yelped and fell forward, half across him and angled down his body. Her eyes locked onto his erection bobbing right in front of her, and she froze, still unsure if her spontaneous idea were welcome.

All uncertainty fled when Snape wrapped his hand around her leg and guided her to move her knee. His urgent, "Yes, Hermione," sped her compliance, and she carefully straddled his shoulders, holding her breath as she realized that her legs were spread over him, baring her wet pussy to his face.

Snape sucked in a deep breath, glorying in her heady aroma, then wrapped his arms around her thighs and pulled her down, straining up to drag his tongue along her spread lips.

Her startled squeal quickly turned into a moan of delight as his tongue and lips worked their magic. Head dropping forward, her hair snagged on Snape's twitching cock. Lifting her head again, she felt a surge of lust and repositioned herself so she was supported on both knees and one arm. Gripping the base of his erection in her other hand, she slid her lips over the glistening head and down the shaft of his cock.

Snape's forceful groan of pleasure sent vibrations over her clit where it was covered by his suckling lips. She squealed in turn, making him buck at the sensation on his skin.

Hermione remembered the people in the erotic magazine she had been reading the night Snape had showed up after Dumbledore's betrayal. They had been lying on their sides, but *this* was what she had been watching while she had so brazenly fucked herself with her makeshift dildo. That was the first time she had experienced the wicked skill of Snape's tongue. Head swimming with delicious sensations, she thought, *Fucking brilliant, indeed!*

Snape couldn't get enough of her. Licking and sucking, his fingers holding her open for easier access, his groans of enjoyment were punctuated by surprised grunts as Hermione's mouth found wonderfully sensitive spots. Her bobbing head and stroking hand led him to a rhythm, and he found himself rocking his hips, thrusting into her grip as he circled her clit.

Panting, they began to move faster, their moans and gasps growing in intensity. Snape felt like he was about to shatter apart, delirious with pleasure, and his concentration kept fracturing. Head canting back, he voiced a raspy groan, unable to maintain his focus any longer, and came hard, grasping her thighs in a fierce grip as his body undulated beneath hers.

Hermione wanted to grin in triumph that she had broken him first. It was like a sensual battle of wills, each of them determined to get the other one off. Of course, with her lips stretched around his cock, she couldn't actually smile, but as she felt him spurting onto her tongue, she moaned in satisfaction. She continued to stroke him, drawing out his orgasm until his hands clenched and his body twitched in an effort to stop her ministrations.

Gently releasing him, she dragged her lips up to the tip, opening them and letting his come slide back down his length to pool in his coarse hair. Then...oh, yes, then...she grinned.

Snape's panting breaths tickled over her exposed flesh, cooling the wetness. Her throaty chuckle preceded her taunt. "Surely you're not done with your sampling?" She rocked her hips, drawing lewd attention to his unfinished business.

A ragged growl was her only warning before Snape tightened his grip on her thighs, pulling her down and spreading her legs further as he buried his face in her pussy, his nose teasing her cunt as he worked his lips and tongue on her clit.

Her cry of surprise turned into an ululating keen as he ground against her, his hands scrabbling up to squeeze her arse and guide her onto his mouth.

Hermione dropped to her elbows, her head sagging forward to rest her forehead on his tense abdominal muscles. Her hair cascaded around her, hiding her face and muffling her moans of delight.

Snape dragged his tongue back, angling her hips so he could fuck her with his tongue, making her give a hoarse yell. Desperately writhing and working one arm out from under her, he reached above him, her leg slotted against his armpit, and traced his fingers along her cunt. Hermione shuddered violently, and he held her in place with his other arm. Circling her opening, he angled her hips again to suckle her clit.

Hermione's gasps and cries took on a more fevered pitch as Snape's two fingers delved into her dripping cunt. Setting up a rhythm again, he circled her clit with his tongue, grinding against her and fucking her with his fingers. When she started rocking of her own accord, Snape knew he had won.

Thrusting back onto his fingers and nearly blinded by the searing pleasure of his lips locked around her swollen clit, Hermione's voice rose in a litany of, "Oh...oh...oh...oh...OH...OH...OH...OOOH...OOOOHHH!" Her legs tightened around Snape's head and arm, and her cunt clamped down on his plunging fingers.

Snape revelled in the clutching of her pussy, reminding himself that *soon* he would feel that decadent squeeze on his cock. Her orgasm heralded a freshet of juices, spilling out to coat his hand and face. Groaning, he dragged his tongue over her dampened flesh, glorying in the taste of her ecstasy.

Hermione's cheek was lying on his belly and her legs were trembling in his grasp as she came down from her dizzying climax. Wearily pushing up onto her hands, she listed to one side, collapsing on her back in a sated sprawl.

Snape's hand lightly caressed her leg where it was bent near his shoulder. His face was still damp with her juices, and he lay there beaming at the ceiling in his success.

The silence stretched on, both of them basking in the afterglow, until Hermione heaved a deep sigh and squirmed, turning her body on the bed so she could lie beside Snape facing the same direction. Snape took her cue and inched back up the bed to her pillows, as they had migrated into the middle expanse of mattress in their enthusiastic endeavours. While she was getting situated, he Summoned his wand and cast a quick cleansing charm on the drying, sticky mess matting the hair of his groin.

Struggling to pull the covers back over them, Hermione curled against Snape's side again, like she had when they were talking earlier. Before she sank back onto his shoulder as her pillow, she stretched up to kiss him, tasting herself on his lips.

Snape's hands came up to caress her hair, tenderly cupping her head as they kissed. When they broke apart, he pressed his forehead to hers and whispered, "I've missed you so."

Hermione squeezed his ribs and murmured, "I've missed you. I'm so glad you surprised me tonight. I wish school were over already, so you wouldn't have to leave again."

His fervent, "Indeed," was muffled by her hair as she cuddled into his embrace. Once again thinking about his plan, he said, "You really like it when I surprise you?"

Hermione smiled. "Well, they've all been so lovely so far..."

Snape snorted softly. "Well, I doubt you'll be surprised now when I remind you that I should return to my quarters soon."

Hermione voiced a petulant whine and burrowed against him, scowling. "I know. But I don't want you to!"

His chuckle rueful, he said, "I don't want to either, my love. But we've already spent half the night together. The last thing I want to do is go back to my lonely bed. But it's risky enough taking this time as it is; we shouldn't fall asleep like this."

Huffing in resignation, Hermione said, "You're right. But you feel so good..."

Snape smiled and said, "So do you." Then, his voice dropped to a velvet purr as he added, "Trust me..."

Hermione chuckled and lifted her head to look at him, her smile turning wistful as she echoed his reply from earlier. "Always."

They exchanged a tender kiss before Hermione sat back, letting Snape sit up and perch on the edge of the bed. With a half-hearted wave of his wand, he Summoned his clothing, gathering it in a crumpled wad. Heaving to his feet with a sigh, he propped his bundle against his hip, looking at Hermione curled up on the bed.

His hair was dishevelled, his face still bore tell-tale traces of her juices, and he was blissfully naked, gazing at her with devotion in his eyes. A lump climbed in Hermione's throat at how much he loved her, and she drank in the sight of him, storing it up to sustain her until they could finally be together with no restrictions.

"Good night, Hermione. Remember what I said about meeting that Ministry woman."

Nodding, she said, "I will. Sweet dreams, dearest."

Snape's lips spread in a slow smile and he inclined his head in farewell before he Disapparated, leaving Hermione to burrow back under her covers, yawning as her exhaustion caught up with her.

The next day, Hermione sent an owl to Audrey, requesting a meeting. She wasn't expecting to hear back from her until the following week, which was why she was surprised to get an owl at lunch with a reply. Brows rising, she opened the scroll and read the missive, flicking a glance up at Snape.

Closing the scroll again, Hermione stood and ascended the dais toward the High Table. Snape's brows lowered in wary curiosity, but she merely nodded acknowledgement at him and said, "Good afternoon, Professors," as she approached McGonagall.

McGonagall looked up at her Head Girl with a pleasant expression. "Good afternoon, Miss Granger. What can I do for you?"

Hermione brandished the scroll and said, "I was wondering if I could have permission to leave Hogwarts Monday for a meeting at the Ministry."

Frowning in confusion, McGonagall said, "A meeting? For what?"

Tilting her head meaningfully, Hermione said, "Remember the woman you took me to see? Well, she's asking if I could meet her and some other Ministry representatives Monday to talk about a possible job offer."

Eyes widening in shock, McGonagall said, "A job offer? What kind of job?"

Hermione shrugged, but said, "Something about a new department for the whole Fine Arts in schools thing starting next year. Apparently, since Hogwarts won the competition, and I'm a Muggle-born, I'm a good candidate for it."

McGonagall blinked a few times, processing the news, then she seemed to puff up with pride, beaming at Hermione. Casting a smug glance at Snape, who was pretending only mild interest, she said, "Of course you may go. Make whatever arrangements you need. You may Floo from my office if you like, unless you'd rather Apparate. Would you like an escort?"

Hermione almost didn't manage to stop herself from looking at Snape, and forced herself to close her eyes for a fleeting moment instead. Ducking her head, she searched for the right words. "I do appreciate the offer, Professor, but... don't you think that perhaps... it might come off the wrong way if I brought... well, *you*, I guess...another adult... I mean, *I'm* supposed to be an adult now, so I should probably go alone."

McGonagall pursed her lips in thought, then said, "You're right, Miss Granger. I didn't think of it quite that way. You *are* an adult, and I'm quite sure you can handle yourself." She nodded gravely at Hermione, who smiled back, then grimaced and added, "Just... don't sign anything! Be careful with those Ministry sorts, if you know what I mean."

Hermione grinned, ducking her head again so as not to look at Snape, even though she was *sure* he must be smirking. "I'll be careful. Thank you, Professor. So, I'll get back to you when I know what time I'll be gone."

McGonagall nodded and smiled. "Do that. And well done, *Hermione*." She leant forward and favoured Hermione with a proud smile and a broad wink. Hermione laughed and spun, descending the dais on light feet. McGonagall turned to Snape, leaning closer to him over Dumbledore's empty chair, and said, "I'm sure you heard all that, Severus." Snape turned a noncommittal expression on her. "I think Miss Granger is a wonderful choice! I'm sure she'll be hired; and I think she'll do quite well, don't you?"

Snape inclined his head politely and murmured, "No doubt she will; Miss Granger is a credit to Hogwarts and should therefore be a credit to wizarding Britain."

McGonagall blinked, still taken aback by Snape's lack of acid put-downs. Smiling at *him*, she said, "I don't know that I'll ever get used to you admitting such things."

Snape smirked and drawled, "Well, you won't have to worry about it much longer, Minerva. I plan on being out of here as soon as term is over."

McGonagall's smile faltered. "Oh. So you'll be leaving after the Feast is over? Or will you stay until the students leave the next day?"

Snape fixed his eyes on his plate as his gut clenched with anticipation. "I don't know just yet. I'm getting the house finished up this week, so I can move in right away. I may try and stay until the next day, but I may end up leaving right after the Feast. We'll see."

McGonagall flashed him a wistful smile. "I'm so pleased for you, Severus, but you *will* be missed."

Snape turned solemn eyes on her, his voice low as he said, "I hope you'll still feel that way when I leave." Rising, he said, "Speaking of... I have some more preparations to make at Spinner's End. Would you mind keeping an ear out for my House again?"

Nodding, she waved her hand. "Go on then. I daresay we can muddle on without you for the afternoon."

Inclining his head, he said, "Thank you, Minerva." With a parting nod, he Disapparated.

In his quarters, he changed into his Muggle clothes and Flooed to Spinner's End, where he concealed himself and Apparated to an alley near a shopping district. He was ready to finish furnishing the house, and he wanted to do a scouting mission for pieces he liked. Hopefully, he could make a list and then take Hermione back to see them and get her input before making the final selections.

Hermione sent an owl back to Audrey that afternoon. Later that evening, an owl found her in the common room attempting a game of chess with Ron. He and Snape had continued their game in the library, and Hermione decided that she should learn to play better so she could play with Snape. Quite often, she had gone with Ron to his game with Snape, and he gave explicitly detailed answers on strategy and possible moves and courses of action in response to her queries.

Hermione paused to open the letter, and Ron sat back, lounging as he asked, "Anything interesting?"

Quickly skimming the words, she said, "Just telling me when to be at the Ministry. Looks like I'll be gone Monday."

Ron sat forward again in interest, his lopsided grin showing his pride in his friend's achievements. "Bully for you, 'Mione! That'll be something, eh? Running a whole brand spanking new department all your own?"

Hermione grimaced and demurred, "It's just a meeting, Ron. I don't know anything yet. We'll see what they offer me."

Ron smirked and said, "If they're smart, they'll offer you whatever you want to get you there."

Hermione laughed and rolled her eyes, shaking her head. "I appreciate the support."

He gave a mock bow and they returned to their game. When they were done...Hermione still lost, but Ron *assured* her that she was getting better...Hermione went to McGonagall's office, hoping to catch her before curfew.

McGonagall was there, grading end-of-term exams. "Miss Granger, what can I do for you?"

Waving the letter, Hermione said, "I just wanted to let you know that my meeting is scheduled for Monday morning. Ten o'clock."

McGonagall smiled and nodded. "Excellent. Shall I meet you here before ten?"

Flashing a grateful smile, Hermione nodded. "That would be lovely, thank you."

Her smile warming, McGonagall said, "Anything I can do to help, Hermione, just tell me, and I'll do it. Your future is important, and you deserve the best."

Hermione, feeling a pang of guilt at keeping her relationship with Snape a secret from her Head of House, ducked her head and said, "Thank you, Professor. I'll not keep you any longer. Good night."

"Good night, dear."

Hermione spun and hastened back to Gryffindor Tower to write a note to Snape to tell him the news. Using the disappearing ink again, she sealed the letter and set it on her desk, so she could send it by owl first thing in the morning.

At breakfast, Snape was surprised to see an owl landing by his plate. He recognized the school owl, so the post wasn't from Fern. Hazarding a guess that it was from Hermione, he pocketed it without opening it. Finishing his breakfast quickly, he stepped away from the dais and paused at the staff exit, fishing the letter from his pocket and opening it. Smirking and casting *Aperio* on the blank page, he read Hermione's news, vanishing the ink as soon as he was done. Casting a glance at the Gryffindor table, he saw her with her mates.

Perfect.

He Disapparated, appearing in her empty room and making a beeline for her desk. Scrawling a note with his proposal in her disappearing ink, he cast *Celo* on it and sealed the scroll, propping it on her pillow, sure that she would find it when she came back. Crookshanks meowed at him, jumping onto the bed and rolling on his back, entreating a tummy-scrub. Grinning, Snape patted the animal for a moment, then Disapparated back to his quarters.

Later that day, Hermione returned to her room and saw the scroll. Frowning in confusion, she opened it, then smiled as she cast *Aperio* on it. *He must have been up here.*

Her eyes widened as she read, a delighted smile spreading her lips.

"Hermione,

I got your letter. Excellent news, my love. Now, I have a proposal for you: After your meeting, why don't you use the public Floo at the Ministry to come to Spinner's End? I've been shopping and setting up house, and I'd appreciate your input on some of the more major items. I've already narrowed down the options, but I'd like your opinion for the final choices. Surely McGonagall won't know how long the meeting should last, so we should be able to steal a little time, right? I'll be sure to be at the house from eleven on, as I expect the meeting to take at least an hour. If you're willing to take this chance, don't do anything. Only respond if you're to tell me no. I do hope to see you tomorrow.

Yours, Severus"

Secreting the letter in her drawer with the rest of her correspondence from Snape, Hermione laughed to herself. *I'll just tell McGonagall that I'd like to visit my folks, as it's such an important occasion, and I want to talk things over with them, for guidance. Surely she'll buy it.* Feeling a mixture of exhilaration and anxiety about the coming day, she peeked at the photo of her and Snape tucked in her drawer and thought, *No letter from me tonight, Severus!* Then, with another chuckle, she shoved her sunglasses into her curls...they were the whole reason she had come to her room in the first place...and headed back out to join her friends by the lake.

70- Of Magically Binding Things

Hermione meets with the Ministry about the job offer, then meets with Snape about Spinner's End, and they both meet with her folks about her future. And their future is not the only thing on people's minds as they make their way to one last rehearsal.

Not mine. Just having fun. Enjoy or move along. Don't sue, kthxbye. ;)

Author's Note: Thanks as always to my lovely beta, ladyofthemasque, and to you wonderful readers and reviewers. We're so close to the grand finale I can taste it! LOL Hopefully now that term is ending (on my end), I can get more cracked out soon. Don't forget that you can always keep up with me on my Livejournal: <http://perndragon.livejournal.com/>

Hope you enjoy! :) *hugs and chocolate*

Chapter 70- Of Magically Binding Things

Monday morning, Hermione showed up at McGonagall's office door at 9:50 a.m., dressed in a businesslike skirt and blouse with plain robes. She had decided to bring materials to make notes, and had Transfigured her tattered book bag into a sleeker briefcase. Determined to look more grown-up, she had put on makeup and gathered her hair into a clip at the base of her neck in a vain attempt to keep her wayward curls out of her face.

At her knock, McGonagall opened the door, beaming at her prize pupil. "Miss Granger, good morning."

Nodding as she entered, Hermione retorted, "Good morning, Professor. Thank you again for allowing me to use your Floo."

McGonagall waved her hand dismissively and said, "Think nothing of it, my dear." Then, she paused and smiled fondly, adding, "My, but you do look professional, Hermione."

Ducking her head modestly, Hermione murmured, "Thank you." Then, taking a deep breath and squaring her shoulders, she met the older woman's gaze and boldly offered up her half-truth, practicing her Slytherin wiles. "I don't know how long I'll be gone. I'm not sure how long the meeting itself will last, and, seeing as how this is rather important, I'd like to talk to my parents as well."

McGonagall nodded shrewdly. "Of course! I daresay you'll have plenty to talk about. Granted, you *are* getting somewhat special treatment, so I'll thank you not to bruit it about and make noise about it. Make sure you're back for dinner tonight, and be discreet. If you'd like to Floo here, you may. Or if you'd rather Apparate, just be sure to arrive in time to get up to the Great Hall before dinner is over."

Hermione felt a thrill of excitement at having so much time available to meet Snape, followed immediately by a pang of guilt for deceiving her Head of House. "I appreciate your help, Professor, and I promise I'll be discreet." *Gods know I've had practice enough at that lately...* Gesturing to the hearth, she added, "I'd better go. It's almost time."

McGonagall pointed to the pot of Floo powder on the mantle, and Hermione pinched a bit, throwing it into the grate and stating, "Ministry of Magic." The green flames leapt up and she stepped into them, closing her eyes at the spinning sensation.

She opened them quickly, loath to miss her stop, and carefully stepped out of one of the many hearths lined along the Ministry of Magic's Atrium. Moving out of the way of any possible arrivals to follow, she made quick work of charming the soot off her robes. Crossing to the desk near the lifts at the end of the Atrium, she greeted the wizard there and obediently proffered her wand for registration.

Smiling politely in response to the watchwizard's greeting, she stepped through the golden gates and into a waiting lift, heading up to Level Five, ignoring the lavender memos flapping above her head. Emerging on Level Five, she paused, once again taking a steadying breath and lifting her chin as she crossed to the information desk.

The pretty witch with blonde curls smiled up at Hermione and chirped, "Good morning. My name is Polly. How may I help you?"

"Hello, Polly. I'm Hermione Granger, and I'm here for a meeting with Audrey Dinsmore."

Polly consulted a large chart on her desk and tapped her quill on an entry. "Yes, here you are." Beaming at her again, she stood and leant forward, pointing down a corridor and saying, "She'll be right with you. Just have a seat in room seven there, on the left, and make yourself comfortable. If you'd like some tea or coffee, help yourself. The urns are always kept full." With a cheerful nod, she sank back into her seat, deftly catching a flying memo that had arrowed up to her.

Flashing a grateful smile, Hermione said, "Thank you," and hastened to the room. Feeling rather overwhelmed and isolated in the generously appointed conference room, she took advantage of the tea service, smirking at the lack of honey and lemon, but glad of having something to do to keep busy while she waited.

Barely a couple of minutes later, Audrey entered, beaming and making a beeline for Hermione, hand outstretched. "Miss Granger, I'm so pleased you agreed to meet me. Please, sit. I see you have some tea. Excellent. I could do with a cuppa myself while we wait for the others."

Hermione shook Audrey's hand and echoed, "Others?"

Audrey crossed to the tea service and busied herself with the sugar. "Yes, there are a few departments involved, and we'll have a representative from each of them here today." She turned to see Hermione's apprehensive expression. Waving her hand as she rejoined Hermione at the long table, she continued, "Oh, you needn't worry. They're all lovely people. And we're all quite excited to have you here." She leant forward, eyes twinkling, and said, sotto voice, "You *are* our first choice, you know."

Hermione blinked, her brows rising as a rush of self-confidence filled her. "Really? No, I hadn't realized that." Then, a self-satisfied smile quirked her lips and she lifted her teacup to hide it.

Audrey, however, had seen it, and she laughed. "Indeed. Keep that in mind, Miss Granger. I doubt there's anyone else in the UK who is as uniquely fitted for this new *role* as you are."

Hermione noticed the other woman's play on words and chuckled, relaxing a trifle. Her relaxation didn't last long, as a group of people suddenly entered the room all at once, making her shoot to her feet nervously.

Audrey stood as well, stepping forward to greet each person and introduce them all in turn. Hermione felt rather stiff with formality, but she took refuge in it, allowing the frosty dignity to shield her inner anxiety.

As Audrey introduced, "Mr. Allery Tilworth, Chief Liaison in the new Department of the Arts," Hermione smiled in polite recognition.

"I remember you from Hogwarts. You announced the result of the competition."

Tilworth bowed and smiled. "And such an honour that was for me, Miss Granger." He shook her hand briefly and stepped aside for the next person.

"Mr. Blair Ballantine, Senior Undersecretary for the Department of International Magic Relations." The tall, fair man gripped her hand firmly and nodded before heading to a seat. "Madam Cecille Winchcombe, Junior Minister for Magic/Muggle Relations." A slight woman with wavy grey hair and bright hazel eyes beamed at her as she shook her

hand.

"A pleasure, Miss Granger." She flashed a lopsided smile at Hermione's polite response and moved to the side, leaving the last person to be introduced.

"Mr. Simon Barker, retired personal tutor for esteemed wizarding families throughout Great Britain." The elderly wizard managed to eye Hermione with the chill, measuring look of an aristocrat, even as he took her hand and bowed.

Murmuring a greeting, Hermione narrowed her eyes in suspicion. *"Esteemed wizarding families," eh? No doubt that's just the polite term for "pure-bloods."* When the introductions were complete, they all took their seats at the highly polished table, everyone looking to Audrey to commence with the meeting.

"Welcome, everyone. You all know why we're here. The Ministry is looking to start building the new Fine Arts department as soon as possible, and Miss Granger has been named as a candidate for that position."

"Excuse me, Audrey, but isn't Mr. Tilworth the Chief Liaison in the new Department of the Arts?" Hermione wanted them to know she wasn't so slow as to not have picked up on the man's title.

Tilworth leant forward and said, "Oh, no, well, yes, but not really." He grimaced. "I mean, I *am*, but it was known from the start that it was only a temporary position until the proper candidate was hired. I'm a glorified place holder, Miss Granger." His smile was deprecating and Hermione nodded understanding.

Audrey waited patiently for their exchange to finish, then continued. "This new department will work closely with your departments," and she darted a glance at Ballantine and Winchcombe, "so we want to make sure we know what it will entail from the start." With that, she withdrew a stack of papers and a self-inking quill from her bag, gazing around expectantly.

As if on cue, each person brought out their own papers, and Hermione took out her parchment and quill to make notes of the discussion.

When each person outlined what would be needed to work with his or her department, Hermione realized the magnitude of the position she was being offered. Barker was there to offer points about education and how the new standards might be introduced into schools.

Fascinated by the immense complexity of the endeavour, Hermione forgot her nervousness and jumped right into the discussion, making salient points and neatly vetoing some ideas. While Barker may have had experience with tutoring wizards, she had the experience with the arts in the Muggle world, and she could discern what was lacking in his suggestions.

After an hour and a half of intense deliberations, Hermione noted a slight change in the way the others were talking to her. When they had begun, they had treated her like a student, sometimes seeming as though they were humouring a child. Now, she was gratified to see a spark of respect in their eyes and hear the dismissive tone of voice fading, to be replaced by one of admiration.

When she realized that they were starting to fall into nitpicky details, Hermione sat back and held up her hands. "I beg your pardon." They all went silent, staring at her in perplexity. Hermione smoothed her parchment and swallowed, taking a moment to gather her composure. Settling in her chair, she held each person's gaze in turn and said, "You seem to be moving on in the assumption that I'll be taking this position."

Eyes widened and mouths fell open in surprise at her bald statement. Audrey recovered first, narrowed eyes raking Hermione with another measuring look. Impressed beyond what she had already thought, she smirked and said, "Miss Granger has a point. Clearly we have done our due diligence in apprising her of what the position would require and entail. Now we must be just as clear in what we have to offer."

Hermione affected an air of polite interest, even though her heart was pounding at her brash pronouncement. Audrey fished through her stack of notes and pulled out a list.

"A standard Ministry contract includes your salary as well as all benefits and perquisites that come with your position." Sliding the pages to Hermione, she said, "You can see all of the requirements, expectations, and compensation listed there. Schedule, duties, pay, benefits, bonuses available, holidays, due process in the event of problems with job performance, terminable offences, etc. You'll see that the salary is quite generous, particularly for someone who has no previous Ministry experience." She paused, waiting while Hermione skimmed the pages.

When she finished her perusal, secretly excited at the salary offered and the benefits included, Hermione calmly reached for her briefcase and opened it, putting her notes and the contract inside. As she closed the case, everyone else at the table seemed to erupt in activity at once.

Chairs scraped along the floor and throats were cleared as Audrey burst forth with, "Miss Granger, what are you doing?"

Hermione turned a cool look on the agitated woman and said, "I'm taking it with me for consideration." She gazed about at the rest of the group, one corner of her lips quirked up in amusement. "Surely you didn't expect me to just snatch it up and sign it right here and now?" At their chagrined expressions, she gave a soft snort.

"I read the clause at the bottom that indicates that signing such a contract is magically binding. I daresay it would be precipitate indeed to make such a commitment without due consideration."

She was surprised to see a faint, smug smirk spreading the lips of Simon Barker. He eyed her with new respect, and when she held his gaze and lifted her chin, he nodded in concession.

Audrey struggled to hide her disappointment that she hadn't managed to secure Hermione's agreement immediately. Her superiors were eager to get the ball rolling as quickly as possible, and her skills in persuasion were not to be trifled with. Trying to submit with good grace, she said, "Of course. Take your time. If you have any questions or concerns, you know how to contact me. Of course, if you agree to the contract, simply sign it and send it by owl post. If you like, you could be working here as soon as term is over at Hogwarts. There's much to be done before September 1st."

Hermione nodded, stomach trembling in triumph. Making sure her briefcase was locked, she stood, smiling at the older witches and wizards. "Thank you for your time. It was a pleasure to meet all of you." Belatedly, the others stood, too. "Good day." She nodded as she stepped toward the door.

The men at the table offered half-hearted bows of dismay while the women nodded in farewell. Hermione flashed one last smile at the deflated group before exiting and heading straight for the lift.

Polly, at the desk, chimed, "Have a nice day!"

Hermione murmured, "Likewise," as she shut the grille and heaved a sigh of relief to be away from the high-pressure atmosphere.

Back in the Atrium, she crossed to the departing Floos and smiled to herself. It was nearly noon, and Snape would be waiting for her at the house. Heart filling with happiness, she tossed a pinch of powder into the hearth and said, "Spinner's End."

Wanting to leap joyfully into the emerald flames, Hermione instead maintained decorum and whooshed out of sight.

Snape was making use of his nervous energy, anticipating Hermione's visit, by moving the boxes of bottles and ingredients from the stacks in the living room down into his newly completed potions lab in the magically reinforced basement.

He was nearly to the top of the stairs when he heard Hermione's voice calling, "Severus?" Surging up the last few steps and racing through the kitchen and dining room, he

emerged into his living room, nearly careering into her as she made to enter the dining room in search of him.

Both of them tried to stop their forward motion, but neither was completely successful, and they smacked into each other, losing their balance. Snape wrapped his arms around her in an effort to stop her fall, but found he couldn't stop his own tumble, and they collapsed onto the threshold in a mass of twined limbs.

Hermione's startled "Oh!" was quickly followed by a laugh, even as Snape said, "Are you all right? Did I hurt you?" He struggled to disentangle himself from her, patting her carefully, checking for damage.

Hermione blinked a few times and shook her head but laughed again. "I'm fine, dear heart. Are you okay?"

Snape tossed his head in dismissal. "As long as you're not hurt."

Hermione grabbed his roaming hands and made him look into her face. "I'm *fine*. Not exactly the welcome I was hoping for, but..."

She trailed off, grinning impishly at him, and he relaxed. Finally looking at her, he took in her adult attire and his heart lifted. Smiling back, he leant forward and cupped her cheek, murmuring, "How's this instead?" He closed the distance between them and kissed her soundly.

When they separated, Hermione's eyes were unfocused, and her face was flushed. Her voice shaky, she said, "Yes, that's more like what I wanted."

Snape grinned and stood, pulling her up with him. As soon as she was on her feet, he pressed her against the door jamb and ducked down to thoroughly snog her again, his hands framing her face. Her hands crept up to snake around his neck, then one slipped down and pulled his hips forward, until his body was flush against hers, sandwiching her between him and the doorframe.

His joy at having her there, coupled with the intense pleasure of her body against his, welled up within him, tightening his chest and his trousers. As he ducked his head, trailing nibbling kisses along her jaw to her ear, she gasped, struggling to find her voice.

"Ah...oh...Se-Severus...mm...shouldn't...I mean...don't you...ahhh...wait a minute!" Pushing away, she writhed out from between him and the door jamb, gulping air as she tried to regain her composure. Snape twisted and eyed her in confusion.

Smoothing her hair, she said, "Aren't we supposed to be going out? I mean, you said you wanted to take me to help you finish shopping, right?"

Snape blinked at her, incredulous. Advancing on her, he rumbled, "You'd rather *shop* than..." he paused, searching for the right word, "...*continue*?"

Hermione lifted her chin. "Well, we don't have much time, and I know we won't get a chance like this again, at least not until term is over..."

Snape reached her and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her against him, his erection a noticeable lump against her belly. Eyes hooded, he said pointedly, "And you'd still rather go buy furniture?"

Assailed by a rush of heat as she felt his cock twitch, she faltered, "W-what kind of f-furniture?"

Snape paused his actions, staring down at her in disbelief. Annoyance trickled into his voice as he bit out, "Furniture. Tables, chairs, chests of drawers, beds..."

Hermione interrupted him with a glint in her eye. "*Beds*?"

Snape opened his mouth automatically to retort, but the slow wicked smile spreading Hermione's lips made him pause. Closing his mouth again, he, too, smiled, then purred, "Indeed. Beds."

Hermione tilted her head toward the fireplace and drawled, "Then what are we waiting for?"

Snape smirked and released her, straightening his clothes. Once again, he was wearing his Muggle clothing, and the bulge in his trousers was visible. Clearing his throat, he nodded at her and said, "Lose the robes. We're hitting Muggle stores today." She obediently shrugged out of her robes, revealing her businesslike skirt and blouse. Snape gazed at her appreciatively, but murmured, "If you'll excuse me..." Quickly, he went to the toilet and adjusted, splashing cold water on his face and smoothing his hair, trying to encourage his erection to wilt.

Hermione folded her robes and laid them on one of the remaining boxes in the living room. Crossing into the kitchen, she took a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water from the tap, taking a long swallow before pressing the glass against her temples in an attempt to cool her ardour.

Snape rejoined her just as she was wiping the glass and setting it on the counter. "Ready?"

Hermione took a deep breath and flashed a smile at him in challenge. "As I'll ever be."

He offered her his arm and cast the usual concealment charm before Disapparating.

They appeared between buildings, and he ended the concealment charm, beaming at her as they stepped arm in arm into the sunshine. Merging with the crowds bustling along the street, they entered the first store on his list, where he showed her the items he liked.

The afternoon flew as they went from store to store, Hermione shaking her head at some choices and lighting up in approval at others. They were both getting rather drunk on the heady sensation of being treated as a couple by the salespeople, who had rightly surmised that this May-December pair was indeed a couple by the way they couldn't keep their eyes and hands off each other.

Eventually, they stopped at a café, ordering tea and sandwiches to fill their rumbling stomachs while they discussed which pieces she liked and Snape made notes on his list, striking through several items and circling others.

When they had finished their meal, his left hand and her right clasped across the table, Snape made final notes on his paper and looked up at her. "Now that that's done, tell me about your meeting."

Hermione blinked and took a deep breath, regaling him with the tale of her nervousness and the way the others had changed the way they had treated her as the meeting wore on. When she finished, smirking over their dismay at her departure to consider the offer, Snape nodded approval at her, mirroring her smirk.

"Well done, love. You clearly held your own against all of them. So, you have the contract at the house?"

"Yes, it's in my bag. I really do want to take time to read it slowly and thoroughly before making a decision, but right now, I'll admit that it looks pretty promising."

Snape wadded his napkin and laid it on his plate, pushing back from the table. "Why don't we head back and take a look at it? It's getting late."

Hermione checked the time and voiced a cry of alarm. "Oh, my! I hadn't realized we had been here so long." She rose quickly, biting her lip. "My folks should be closing up shop soon."

Snape frowned at her in confusion. "What about your folks?"

"I told Professor McGonagall that I didn't know how long I'd be, since I wanted to talk to my parents about the job. That way, I could spend this time with you."

Snape's scowl smoothed at her admission, but returned as she continued, "It was a ruse, but then I realized I really *should* talk to them. They may not be wizards, but they do run their own practice, so they can likely give me sound advice. But, there's not enough time for me to talk it over with you *and* go see them before I have to get back to Hogwarts."

Snape, feeling a flash of annoyance that she apparently wanted to shorten their time together to visit her parents, blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"I'll go with you."

There was a charged pause as they locked eyes, Snape's expression as surprised as Hermione's at his suggestion.

After a long moment, Hermione realized that people were starting to stare at them, standing there gazing mutely at each other over the café table as they were. Blinking and clearing her throat, she tilted her head and murmured, "Why don't we continue this outside?"

Snape nodded dumbly and followed her back out onto the pavement. When they had walked far enough away from the café that no one there could still see them, Hermione stopped and spun on Snape, gazing up at him in perplexity.

"Did you just offer to go with me to visit my parents?"

Snape swallowed, trying to look nonchalant. "It...ah...would save time."

Planting her hands on her hips, brows creeping upward, she said, "And *just how* would we explain *your* presence?"

Hastily, Snape retorted, "I am your escort. We'll simply say that we thought it best that you have a professor escort you to such a meeting, and since I was directly involved with the play, I was sent."

Hermione goggled at him, astounded by the way he so blithely manufactured a plausible lie. Awe tingeing her voice, she said, "How do you *do* that?"

Snape drew back, frowning. "Do what?"

"Make things up. Just like *that!*" She snapped her fingers. "And without a blink of an eye!"

Snape ducked his head modestly and drawled, "*Years* of practice."

Hermione shook her head incredulously, then her eyes narrowed and she growled, "You may be a great liar and actor, Severus, but you had better not lie *to me*. Ever."

Snape's eyes snapped to hers, startled by the peevishness in her voice. That was when he realized that her waspish declaration was fuelled by the insecurity lurking in her eyes. Stepping closer to her and holding her gaze, he gripped her hands, tugging them from her hips, and said, "Never. I promised I would never hurt you, and I will never lie to you, Hermione. I love you."

The worry darkening her eyes faded at his sincere words, and she heaved a sigh, relaxing. "I love you, Severus." She collapsed against him, pressing her cheek against his chest and wrapping him in her arms. After a brief hug, she pulled back and said, her voice still coloured with apprehension, "Fine. If you think you can pull it off... Let's go."

Snape's eyes widened at her capitulation. "Quickly. Into the alley. We can go straight to Spinner's End and you can Apparate us to your parents."

Hastening into the alley, they Disapparated. Back in his living room, Hermione dove for the Transfigured briefcase. Clutching it under one arm, she gripped Snape's arm and concentrated on her parents' practice, Apparating into the alley behind the building, near the rear exit.

They appeared, and Hermione led Snape around to the front, glad they were in Muggle clothes, in case there were any patients there. The door chimed as they entered, and the receptionist looked up, breaking into a wide smile at the sight of Hermione.

"Hermione! What a surprise! I haven't seen you in ages!" The motherly woman bustled out from behind the desk and crushed Hermione to her ample bosom with a welcoming embrace.

Hermione, gamely trying to disengage from the woman's arms, said, "It's good to see you again, Lorna. Are my folks with patients right now? I know it's almost closing time."

Lorna backed away, still beaming. "They're just cleaning up. Last patient left about ten minutes ago. Tracy and Devin already took off as well."

Hermione nodded acknowledgement as she crossed to the doorway to search for her parents. "Pity. It would have been nice to see them again as well." She paused and turned to Snape. "Professor, you can follow me. They'll be back here."

Lorna turned her attention to Snape, who had hung back near the front door when the stout woman had come charging out from behind the counter. Snape nodded politely to her as he strode past, pleased to make his escape before she could engage him in conversation.

As soon as Snape had sidled past her into the corridor, Hermione waved to Lorna. "It was good to see you again. We're on a bit of a time crunch, so I can't stay to chat. You understand." She made a moue of regret and ducked away before the effusive woman could respond.

Hustling Snape down the hallway, she peeked into the rooms on either side, but they were empty. At the end of the hall were the toilet and the door to the break room.

"They must be in here." She jerked her head at the break room door and gestured for Snape to open it. He pushed the door inward, and Hermione's parents looked up in surprise.

Geoff Granger said, "Hermione?" at the same time Dione Granger said, "*Severus?*"

Hermione and Snape entered the room, and Hermione said, "Hi, Dad! Hi, Mum! A bit of a shock to see us, I'm sure, but there's nothing wrong; I promise." She darted forward to hug her parents, then guided them to sit at the table, beckoning to Snape to join them.

As he slid into a chair, Snape glibly offered, "Pleasure to see you again, Geoff, Dione. I had the honour of escorting Miss Granger to the Ministry today, and she insisted that we stop here before returning to Hogwarts."

Glancing bewilderedly between them, Geoff said, "The Ministry? For what?"

Hermione patted her father's hand and smiled in reassurance. Plopping her briefcase on the table between them, she said, "I've got some exciting news. And I wanted to talk it over with you as soon as I could."

Pulling the notes and the contract from the case, she launched into a briefer version of her recounting to Snape, flushing with pleasure at the way her parents' faces lit up with pride at her news. She had just finished telling the part about stopping them all in their tracks when the break room door opened and Lorna poked her head in.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I've powered everything down and locked up. Do you need anything else before I go?"

Geoff waved his hand in dismissal and said, "No, thank you, Lorna. That's perfect. We'll see you tomorrow."

"Good evening then. Good to see you again, Hermione." She nodded blithely at them all before ducking through the break room to leave through the rear exit.

When she was gone, three pairs of eyes returned to Hermione, urging her to continue. She gestured toward the contract and began listing the details. Not only did her parents ask for clarifications, Snape offered pointed queries as well. Hermione found it both unsettling and exhilarating to have such an important conversation about her future with three of the most influential people in her life at the same time, particularly since her true connection with Snape was still a secret.

Hermione made more notes based on their questions and comments, and every detail was discussed within an inch of its life. They had been at it for over an hour when, during a lull in the conversation, an audible rumble was heard in the general vicinity of Geoff's stomach. He flushed awkwardly as they all stared at him in amusement.

"Sorry. Usually we're home having dinner by now."

His statement served to remind Hermione of the time, and she and Snape both noticed how late it was at the same moment, exchanging a look of alarm. In a sudden flurry of activity, Snape stood, collecting the scattered papers and handing them to Hermione, who shoved them into her case, shooting to her feet. Startled and bewildered, Geoff and Dione rose as well, glancing between Snape and Hermione.

Grimacing in apology, Hermione said, "I've got to be back soon. I'm not supposed to miss dinner at Hogwarts. I didn't realize how long we were here."

Dione rounded the table to lay a hand on Hermione's arm. "Surely you won't get in trouble. Not with Severus to vouch for you."

Hermione flicked a guilty glance at Snape, who swallowed and suddenly affected great interest in a poster about gingivitis.

"Well, you see... Professor Snape is not my Head of House. And Professor McGonagall was specific about when I should return, so I daren't ignore her instructions, even if school is all but over. She deserves that respect."

Geoff nodded sagely. "You're right, of course." He crossed to Hermione and hugged her. "Hurry along then. We'll see you in a couple of weeks." As soon as he released her, Dione stepped up to hug her as well.

Snape darted a glance at Hermione and noticed her awkward flush. *I wonder if they will see her in a couple of weeks...will she come with me or return to their home?* He blinked to attention as Geoff turned to him, hand outstretched.

"Good to see you again, Severus. You always seem to be taking care of our girl here." The shorter man grinned up at him as they shook hands. "You really made some good points there about that contract. I wouldn't have even thought of some of them. We're glad Hermione has someone besides us that she can count on for sound advice. Thanks again."

Snape's gut twisted with a pang of unease, wondering if they'd still be so grateful about just how he was taking care of Hermione when they found out about their relationship.

"Merely doing my duty." Snape inclined his head to both of Hermione's parents, then stepped toward Hermione and said, "Come along, Miss Granger, I'll Apparate us out of here and get you back to Hogwarts."

Hermione wrapped her hand around his elbow and cast a grateful smile at her folks. "Thank you so much. I'm sorry I don't have more time to stay and talk. I promise I'll owl you once I've heard back from the Ministry." Glancing up at Snape, she added, "I'm ready, sir."

Nodding, Snape said, "Good evening," and Disapparated.

They arrived in his living room again, and Hermione let go of his arm, crossing toward the hearth. "I should Floo right away. If I hurry, I can make it to the Great Hall with about ten minutes left to dinner."

Snape sighed in resignation but nodded. "Don't forget your robes." She snatched them from the box where they lay and he stood back and watched her put them on.

Smoothing the fabric and settling her hair again, Hermione darted to Snape and stretched up to kiss him. It was hurried, but no less sincere. "Today was wonderful, Severus. And I appreciate your help with this contract. If they respond quickly enough to my amendments, I may have a job lined up before end of term!" Grinning in excitement, she caressed his cheek.

Snape's smile was wistful as he said, "Indeed. That would be quite a feat, love. But don't rush anything. Make sure you're satisfied." He paused and she nodded. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Go on. I'll see you later."

Hermione crossed to the hearth and tossed in a pinch of Floo powder. She had put one foot into the flames before she turned and said, "I love you, Severus."

Snape smiled, murmuring, "And I, you, dear heart."

Beaming back at him, Hermione stated, "Hogwarts, Professor McGonagall's office," and whirled out of sight.

Snape watched the green flames sputter out, then sighed again as he grabbed another box and headed back to the basement.

Hermione sped down the corridors and staircases, arriving breathlessly at the Gryffindor table to see her mates lounging and talking, having clearly finished their meals earlier. Their reason for waiting became apparent as Hermione dropped onto the bench and they all rounded on her with eager expressions.

Ron was beside Ginny, who was by Harry, and Neville was across from them, beside the spot Hermione had just taken.

"Well? Did you take it?" Ron's blue eyes were gleaming with interest.

Ginny's "What happened?" blended with Neville's "How'd it go?"

Hermione reached for a roll and buttered it while she told them a highly abridged version of events. When they continued to besiege her with questions, Harry butted in, saying, "Hang on a minute, will you? Let her eat before it's all gone, and we'll have plenty of time to talk later."

Hermione shot Harry a grateful look as she dished up some stew, her mouth full of buttered roll. The others had the grace to look abashed, and they all sprang into action. Neville poured her some pumpkin juice while Ron served up a scoop of pudding and Ginny Summoned a tea service to brew Hermione a cup of tea with honey and lemon. Hermione shot her a sardonic grimace as Ginny winked impishly at her.

Swallowing, Hermione said, "Thanks. All of you. I promise I'll tell you all about it as soon as I'm finished."

They relaxed, using the opportunity to fill her in on what they'd got up to that day, and when the food disappeared, signalling the end of dinner, they all eyed Hermione in anticipation. She stood, picking up her briefcase, and beckoned for them to follow her up to the common room.

Laying her briefcase on a table, Hermione cast an apologetic look at them and said, "I'll be right back. I want to change into something more comfortable."

When she came back, in jeans and a t-shirt, the others were sitting around the table, patently waiting for her to return. Sliding into a chair, she smiled and opened her briefcase, taking out the contract and all the notes she had made from the meeting at the Ministry and at her parents' office.

"You lot may be more familiar with Ministry things, more so than Harry or I would be, growing up in the Muggle world, so let me know if you can think of anything important."

If she was surprised at how interested they were, she shouldn't have been. They were all facing the same thing soon, having to leave Hogwarts and make their way on their own in the world.

By the time they had run out of things to say about the whole job prospect, it was late, and the common room was emptying as people headed to bed. Hermione was ambushed by a yawn, and covered her mouth with a sheepish apology.

Ron smirked and said, "No worries. I daresay you're knackered after such an important day. You should probably get some sleep soon. But I have to say, Hermione, this whole thing seems right up your alley, and I think your alterations are brilliant. If they have any sense, they'll snatch you up right away." He reached out and patted her shoulder in pride.

Hermione blushed and smiled. "Thanks, Ron. I appreciate the support. You're right, though, I *am* beat. I think I'll head to bed and worry about writing a response tomorrow. What else do I have to worry about doing anyway?" She chuckled and they laughed as well, relieved to have free time before having to join the world of adults.

The next morning, Hermione wrote a letter to Audrey, detailing her requested amendments, and sent it off with a school owl. On her way back from the Owlery, she saw her mates heading out to relax by the lake again, and she joined them after very little urging.

Sitting under a tree, enjoying the breeze, Hermione found herself besieged with requests for her opinions on her friends' future prospects. It made her feel flattered, wistful, and excited. Not only were Harry and Ron looking to her for help, just like they had for the previous seven years, but Ginny and Neville, and even Parvati and Susan were joining the discussions.

The days whiled away, and Thursday a notice went up for the cast to meet the following night for a rehearsal of the scenes they would be performing at the Leaving Feast. Hermione smiled in anticipation of being able to spend time with Snape again, and hoped that she might have a response from the Ministry to talk over with him.

Friday morning, Hermione's gut turned to ice when she saw the owl bearing a missive with a Ministry seal arrowing toward her. Staring apprehensively at the bird, her mouth went dry and her voice faded away, making her mates glance up at what had distracted her from their conversation. They, too, fell hushed as the owl landed in front of Hermione's plate, proffering its leg for her to remove the letter.

Ron, eyes round, croaked, "It's from the Ministry."

Ginny, extremely anxious on Hermione's behalf, vented her nervousness by saying, "Well spotted, Captain Obvious."

Hermione shot a quelling look at the girl and took the letter with trembling fingers. The owl flew off, and everyone stared at her, waiting for her to open what could very well contain the start of her future.

Swallowing hard, Hermione opened the letter and quickly scanned it. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open, making the others squirm closer, trying to find out if it was good or bad news.

Sucking in a deep breath and letting it sough out shakily, she lifted shining eyes to her friends and smiled. "They agreed. I'm in, if I want it. I just have to sign the contract and I'm in!"

Jubilant whoops startled everyone else in the Hall as Harry, Ron, and Neville shot to their feet cheering. Ginny launched herself at Hermione, nearly choking her in an enthusiastic hug.

Up at the High Table, Snape and McGonagall both stared at the sudden hubbub in perplexity. Dumbledore, however, was too engrossed in *his* letter from the Ministry to do more than spare it a passing glance.

Casting a glance at Snape, McGonagall managed to catch Snape's eye and tilted her head toward the Gryffindor commotion. Leaning back, behind Dumbledore, she whispered, "Looks like Miss Granger received some good news, wouldn't you say, Severus?"

Snape glanced again at the celebrating group and snorted softly. "I certainly hope so, else they've lost their wits completely." McGonagall chuckled.

Dumbledore finished reading his letter and cast a puzzled look at the Gryffindors, muttering, "How could they have found out? I just got the news..."

Frowning, McGonagall cleared her throat and said, "What news, Albus?"

Dumbledore nodded at his letter and stood, lifting his hands to get the students' attention. As people realized he was waiting, a susurrus of shushing rippled through the Hall, and all eyes turned to the headmaster.

Hermione and her mates managed to look contrite even while still beaming.

"If I may have your attention..." Dumbledore spoke loudly, pausing for a moment to get complete silence. After a few beats, he continued, "I have just received a letter from the Ministry which contains some very exciting news for many of you." At the long tables, students exchanged curious glances.

"As you all know, those of you who took your O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. examinations would usually have to wait until later this summer to get your grades." Nods and vague noises of affirmation swept over the assembled. Dumbledore smiled and said, "Well, due to the fact that the Ministry no longer has to assign so many people and so much time to a fight against a Dark Lord, they have determined that your exams will be finished and you will receive your grades next week like everyone else!"

Fifth- and seventh-years all over the Hall exchanged surprised looks. Somehow, although it hardly seemed possible, Hermione managed to look even more uplifted. Dumbledore merely chuckled at the immediate uproar and sat down, looking supremely satisfied at having thrown that bomb.

Hermione beamed at the other Gryffindors and said, "How wonderful! That means I may actually have my marks back before I'm hired."

Ron cast a scathing look at her and said, "Only if you keep them hanging for a week before signing that contract."

Hermione flushed and said, "That's not what I meant. I wouldn't string them along like that; I'm not that petty." She paused to grimace at Ron, who snorted in return and smirked. "I *meant* that, if they start my contract right away, I could know how I did on my exams before starting work. Our last day of term is the day of the Leaving Feast, so if we get our grades by then, I can start my new job...the next day if I wanted to...without having to wonder!"

Ron piped up, "Only *you* would get excited about starting a job on a *Saturday*, Hermione..."

The rest of them all laughed, including Hermione, but she rolled her eyes and said, "Fine, I'll wait 'til Monday."

Everyone was grinning, congratulating Hermione again as they rose from the table. Hermione rolled the letter up and said, "I'm going straight upstairs to make this official

and then I'm sending it right back to the Ministry." She paused again, eyes bright with accomplishment. "I never would have imagined anything like this." She laughed, the sound delighted and joyful. "Then again, if you had talked to me when I was ten, I would never have imagined any of *this* either!" She gestured at the castle around them, and the others nodded in understanding, still smiling.

Hermione led the way, her mates flanking her like a guard of honour, not realizing that both McGonagall and Snape were watching her from the High Table.

Dumbledore had left to respond to the Ministry about the latest developments in the end of term, and McGonagall turned to Snape, musing, "I wonder what that hullabaloo was all about."

Snape raised his brows in polite interest and said, "Oh? I daresay we'll find out tonight at rehearsal. No doubt those Gryffindors will have trouble keeping it a secret." He cast a sly look at McGonagall, a smirk playing about his lips.

McGonagall shot a grimace at him and made an exasperated noise. But, as she was about to make an acid retort, she saw his ill-concealed smile at teasing her, and she laughed instead. Wagging a finger at him, she said, "Nice try, Severus. I know you're just trying to bait me, for old times' sake. But I'll have you know that Gryffindors can keep secrets just as well as any Slytherin." She nodded decisively.

Snape's smirk faltered, and he quickly looked down at his plate, afraid she'd see his surge of guilt in his eyes. Recovering as quickly as he could, he flashed her a wry smile and murmured, "I believe you," before pushing to his feet. Smoothing his robes, he said, "I'll see you at rehearsal, Minerva. Once again, I'll be spending the day at the house. It's almost habitable." He deliberately affected a light tone, distracting her from the idea of keeping secrets.

"Excellent. I do hope you'll invite me over someday to see this newly-redone home of yours, Severus."

Snape clenched his teeth and muttered, "And I hope that if I did, you'd still be willing to visit," whirling to Disapparate before she could question such a cryptic remark.

That evening, the cast stuck around as dinner finished, smiling as Dumbledore shooed them out of the Hall again to transfigure it into the theatre. It felt almost like a family reunion, with those who didn't regularly see each other exchanging cordial greetings and conversation. The House divisions had almost faded away, with Draco and Pansy holding the last bastion of aloofness, as even Millicent joined the others in catching up.

Hermione extended a pleasant greeting to the haughty Slytherins, reflecting that they were all about to be finished with school, and it was high time they behaved like adults, beyond trifling differences like House affiliation. Of course, the fact that she knew she and Snape would be going public soon afforded her no little amusement, wondering how such narrow-minded people as Draco and Pansy would react to the news.

Smiling to herself at their frosty looks, she thought, *They seem like the odd relatives that everyone would rather avoid, but can't, because they're part of the family after all!*

When the doors opened again, the students trooped in, beaming about in nostalgia. A few moments later, the other professors arrived, and the students greeted them enthusiastically.

Snape nodded in response, smiling as he returned their greetings. Hermione felt a surge of joy at how such a simple change as that could make such a difference. When she compared how they all had treated each other at the beginning of this whole journey with how they interacted now... Her heart lifted at the transformation.

Snape caught her eye and said, "Good evening, Miss Granger. Professor McGonagall and I were wondering about that commotion this morning." It was a bland enough statement, but the question was implicit, and both McGonagall and Snape were gazing at her, waiting for her explanation.

Hermione flushed as she said, "Sorry, Professors, but I got some very exciting news this morning and everyone was happy for me."

McGonagall burst forth with, "You got the job?"

Hermione beamed. "I sent back revisions, and they accepted them. I signed the contract this morning. It's official! I'll be starting as soon as term is over."

McGonagall rushed forward and enveloped Hermione in an embrace. "Congratulations, my dear. You deserve it."

Hermione glanced up at Snape over McGonagall's shoulder and saw him smirking at her, smug on her behalf. Snape said, "That is indeed good news for you, Miss Granger. You should be pleased." It was a rather stark reply, but Snape didn't dare respond too warmly in front of everyone.

Hermione knew he was being careful, and smiled all the same as if he had praised her more bluntly. "Thank you, Professors. I daresay I'll be getting preliminary paperwork all next week, along with my exam marks." She chuckled and stepped away from McGonagall's embrace. "I'm officially hired, but my first day of work isn't until the week after next. I'll get one last weekend after the Leaving Feast, and then it's into the real world with me!"

McGonagall chuckled as well, then said, "Good for you, Hermione. Well done."

Hermione spun, surprised at a voice from behind her that said, "I knew we could expect great things from you, Miss Granger." She stared up into Dumbledore's twinkling eyes. "Congratulations. What a lovely surprise with which to end your sojourn at Hogwarts."

Hermione flushed again, this time with guilt, and she ducked her head, affecting modesty as she murmured, "Thank you, Professor. It's a fact that Hogwarts played a vital role in getting me to this point. I'm glad to have made Hogwarts proud."

Dumbledore smiled more widely and said, "This whole group has made Hogwarts proud. But, we have one more performance to go, so let us prepare anew!" He looked around at the assembled group and said, "Remember, we'll be doing just the three scenes, but with complete sets, music, and costumes. Does everyone remember their costume spells?" Nods and affirmative noises rippled through the cast. "Excellent. I'll just get the stage set up for the first scene, Music of the Night." He glanced at Snape and frowned. "Severus... Your hair?"

Snape and Hermione exchanged a look and Hermione swiftly stepped to his side, gripping his arm. Snape nodded at Dumbledore and said, "We'll be but a moment," before Disapparating.

Appearing in his quarters, Hermione released Snape's arm and made a beeline for the bathroom to retrieve the hair products. As she came out, she said, "Hard to believe that this is almost the last time I'll have to do your hair, isn't it?"

Snape, already seated, merely said, "Well, in the future, you don't *have* to do it..."

Hermione laughed and kissed the crown of his head as she began brushing quickly. "Hmm, I think it should be an even exchange from here on out. I'll still do it if you promise to return the favour."

Snape grunted an affirmative as Hermione chuckled. His lips quirked in a faint smile, pleased that *her* future was magically bound by the contract she had signed, and nothing they might do could alter that. His voice was thick with satisfaction as he said, "By the way, love, you should be proud of yourself for getting such a prestigious position so quickly. I'm glad you got the contract you wanted and it's all set up. Nothing like getting your affairs in order, is there?"

Hermione sighed. "Thank you for your help with those amendments. It *is* a good feeling to know what's coming, to know that I have a future."

Snape reached up and caressed her wrist. "We have a future." His tone brooked no argument, and Hermione squeezed his retreating fingers.

"Indeed, dear heart. Speaking of, how is the house coming? Has the furniture been delivered yet?"

"Yes, everything is set up. I've been getting linens and such, and it's almost complete."

Hermione deftly gathered the slick hair into the elastic and said, "I can't wait to see it! When will you start brewing for Fern?"

"I've begun preliminary steps for several products, doing what preparations I can, provided they're not time-sensitive. She's looking to have stock in shops by mid-July."

Hermione finished smoothing his hair one last time and bent to hug him from behind. "That's wonderful! I know this will turn out well for you, love. *Vial and Vessel* will be a success!" She punctuated that declaration with a kiss on his cheek and released him, letting him stand and take her hand.

Snape smiled at her, wanting to seal their fate right then, but he fought the urge to Summon the ring. He had a plan, and he would stick to it! "Let's go." She gripped his arm and they Disapparated again.

In the Hall, the set was ready for them, and they hurried onstage, taking their places for Snape's song. The rest of the cast sat out in the house, watching, and Snape and Hermione cast their costume spells, nodding to Dumbledore that they were ready.

The lights went out, and the music started as they came back up. Snape launched into his song, realizing that he could simply enjoy it, since the pressure of winning the competition was gone.

When he finished, the lights dimming as the music faded away, everyone in the house burst into applause and cheers. The lights came back up and Snape and Hermione were grinning at the rest of the cast as they exited the stage so that Dumbledore could set it up for the Masquerade.

People were casting their costume spells while they stood in the wings, shooting grins at each other at how fun it all seemed now that they didn't have to worry about competing. They took their places, and when the music began, everyone launched into the dance with gusto. Faces shone with exhilaration, and a note of suppressed laughter tinged the singing until Snape appeared as the Phantom. When the scene ended with Snape Disapparating in a cloud of smoke as the stage was plunged into darkness, the repressed laughter bubbled up in cries of enjoyment. The lights came back up, and some of the cast immediately took to dancing around the stage again amid titters.

Dumbledore clapped his hands for attention and said, "As much as I want you to have fun, we do have another scene to finish." He raised his brows in an expression of admonishment even though his lips were twitching in amusement. The dancing couples whirled one last time, then stopped and gave a flourishing bow while the sets moved behind them.

When the set was ready for Point of No Return, Dumbledore called Snape out onto the stage. "Severus, I do believe we should start this scene from the Don Juan part, rather than just the moment when you enter and sing Point of No Return." Snape nodded acquiescence. "And, how far beyond the song do you think we should go? Should it end where the song ends?"

Snape's eyes snapped open wide in panic and he quickly retorted, "No. Just as with the Masquerade, I think we should continue until the Phantom disappears. All the way through the All I Ask of You part." He held his breath until he saw Dumbledore nodding thoughtfully.

"Very well then. Did everyone hear that?" He looked around for confirmation, then said, "All right. Places!"

Snape Apparated to Box Five, heaving a sigh of relief and trying to calm his racing pulse. *Settle down, you daft prat! You daren't make anyone suspicious now!*

The scene began, and Snape regretted that they weren't continuing through the end, when he would be able to kiss Hermione again. Then, secure in the shadows of the Box, a wicked, smug smirk spread his lips as he thought, *Then again, you won't have to wait much longer, ol' chap.*

He Apparated into the bed alcove with Draco and nodded politely. Shrouding himself in the hood, he joined Hermione onstage to replay their seductive duet once more. When they reached the end, and he sang All I Ask of You, his blazing eyes were locked with Hermione's, and if she wondered at the surprising intensity behind them...nearly glowing with what looked like triumph...she attributed it to his pride in their win.

As soon as she pushed back his mask, he shot to his feet, grabbed her, and Disapparated to Box Five. In the shadows, he cupped her face and pressed her against the wall, kissing her soundly until the lights, which had gone dark at their disappearance, came up again. Then, backing away from her, he grinned and gripped her hand, Apparating them back into the house as everyone crowded onstage again.

Dropping each other's hand, Snape and Hermione strode up the steps onto the stage to join the others. Dumbledore surveyed their beaming faces and chuckled.

"Well, you've not lost anything in the last two months. Well done, indeed. As it stands now, I daresay we needn't meet again until the performance at the Feast." Proud nods and smug smiles met his declaration and he gestured for them to go. "Enjoy the rest of your evening. We'll be doing the performance after the Leaving Feast next Friday evening."

As the students passed Snape on their way out of the transfigured Hall, they smiled and cheerfully bade him good night, to which he responded in kind.

McGonagall stopped beside him as the tide of students swept past, and she beamed proudly after them. "What a year this has been! Who could have imagined such extraordinary events as have happened?" She smiled warmly at Snape and said, "I had got used to rather more dangerous and frightening events over the past several years...what with the war and all...and I must say, this has been quite surprising, but much more acceptable!"

Snape snorted and quirked a wry half-smile at her. His voice was a low murmur as he said, "You're quite right, Minerva. I know I certainly could never have imagined all that has happened to me. But I will admit that I'm more grateful for everything than I originally thought I would be that fateful day last October."

McGonagall patted Snape's arm and beamed again. "As am I. I couldn't be prouder of you, Severus."

Snape gazed soberly at her, quiet for a long moment. McGonagall's smile faded a bit as she stared back at him, wondering at his silence. Finally, Snape merely whispered, "Thank you, Minerva. Good night."

McGonagall blinked and barely had time to sputter "Good night" in return before he had Disapparated. Frowning in perplexity as she made her way to her quarters, she sighed wistfully and muttered to a suit of armour as she passed, "As long as he's been here...and I'm finally getting to feel like I know him...and now he's leaving! I'm happy for him, but... it will take some getting used to, not having him around." The helm gave a creaking nod, and she strode on, lost in her thoughts.

71- Confrontation

Chapter 75 of 84

Dumbledore confronts Snape before the Leaving Feast, and Snape confronts Hermione both before the performance and during it.

Disclaimer: Oh, how I wish Severus Snape was mine... But, alas, earwax.

Author's Note: First off, be warned that, at just under 4500 words, this chapter is shorter than recent chapters. But, it's for a good reason! What's to come should have a chapter (or chapters) all its own. *nods* That being said, *please* don't have apoplexy that it ends where it does. *hides* Deepest gratitude goes out to ladyofthemasque for always taking time to beta my stuff, even when deadlines for her PAID, ORIGINAL work (which you can purchase!) loom, and to ladyinthecloak for responding to my late night pleas for feedback and boosting my confidence when I wibbled. *hugs both lovely ladies* And thank you to all of you who read and review and make me enjoy the hell out of this whole endeavour. *hugs and chocolate to everyone!* :)

Chapter 71- Confrontation

The whole of the following week saw students either beaming in pride and relief at having received good marks on their exams or wallowing in despair at having not done well at all. Rumour had it that there were actually a couple of people who had "T"s on at least one of their exams, but...as no one was really going to furnish *proof* of such a failure...the wide-eyed gossip-mongers could only speculate as to who they were and which exams they had failed so spectacularly.

Early Friday afternoon, Snape was in his quarters separating items that were his personally from those that belonged to the school, packing last minute things before the performance that night. He wanted to have everything ready just in case he had to make a precipitous departure. He was surprised to hear a knock on his door and went to answer it with a frown at being interrupted.

"What is..." he trailed off, brows rising in astonishment to see Dumbledore standing in the corridor.

There was a long moment of awkward silence, until Dumbledore cleared his throat and said, "Good afternoon, Severus. May I come in?"

Snape blinked, eyeing the older man warily. His voice was frosty as he uttered a clipped, "Very well." Dumbledore crossed the threshold and Snape shut the door, watching his employer walk slowly to the dining table, soberly taking in the boxes and packing paper.

"Looks like you haven't much left to pack." He turned to look at Snape, who was still standing by the door.

Snape merely nodded. There was another pregnant pause. Dumbledore began strolling through the room, pausing to drag a finger over an empty bookshelf or run a hand over the mantel. Finally, Snape snapped, "What is it you want, Headmaster?"

Turning mournful eyes on Snape, he sighed. "I was hoping we might have a chat."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "A chat? About what?"

Dumbledore gazed at him for a beat, then said, "Why don't we sit?" He gestured to the two chairs before the hearth.

Snape stood, frozen. His gut was roiling with the lingering fury at how poorly his old mentor had treated him, and his jaw clenched, holding back scores of acid things he could have said in response.

Dumbledore's face fell and he murmured, "Severus... please." He lifted imploring eyes to Snape, and Snape finally tossed his head in resignation.

As the older man sank into one chair, Snape stalked over to his chair and dropped into it, immediately propping his feet on the ottoman and steepling his fingers in his lap.

Dumbledore offered a faint smile and whispered, "Thank you." He gazed at Snape's stony expression, then turned to look at the packing boxes again. Still facing them, he said, "Must you leave?"

Snape's eyes widened in incredulity and he sucked in a shocked breath. Drawing his feet back and slamming them on the floor as he leant forward in righteous indignation, he echoed, "Must I leave? *Must* I? You made that pretty clear, didn't you?"

Dumbledore turned to face the incensed man, his expression wistful. "You don't have to go. Think about how you'll be missed..."

His voice was a snarl as Snape retorted, "Missed? No doubt you'll miss having someone to order about and control, forced to do your bidding." He paused, sucking in a deep breath. "No. I'm not your puppet any longer."

Dumbledore grimaced and shook his head. "Severus, I never thought you were my puppet! On the contrary, I see you like a son. We've been through so much together; do you really want to throw all that away?"

Snape, too, shook his head slightly, amazed. "It was not I who threw our relationship away, *sir*. You really don't get it, do you?" He shoved to his feet, looking down at the older man bitterly. "You keep trying to stop me from leaving, but not *once* have you apologized!"

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed and he testily snapped, "Apologize for what? For caring about you? For trying to guide you? For keeping your arse *alive* for all these years?"

Snape fell back a pace, as if slapped. His voice was hoarse as he rasped, "Alive? What kind of life have I had? I existed to do your bidding, and *risked* that existence repeatedly...on your orders! I deserve a *life*, Albus, and you had no right to sabotage my attempt at building one."

Dumbledore huffed, shifting in his chair in irritation. Glaring up at Snape from under lowered brows, he said, "All right, I'm sorry about Slug and Jiggers."

"Sorry you managed to force me out of here because of it, more like."

At that, Dumbledore shot to his feet, closing in on Snape and grimacing. "Dammit, Severus, I'll *miss* you!" He paused and they glared at each other until Dumbledore

averted his gaze, rolling his eyes and passing a hand over his brow. His eyes were shaded by his hand as he mumbled, "I've grown rather fond of you over the years."

Snape swallowed, the tiny pang of warmth at hearing that admission submerged under the cold disdain for the man's manipulative ways. His whisper was icy as he said, "Until a few months ago, nothing could have pleased me more than to be told I was loved... by you, Albus. But now, it's all just words. Actions speak louder than words, *old friend*, and yours have proven how little you truly love me." He gave a harsh bark of humourless laughter. "The funny thing is, though, that now that you see fit to claim such regard for me, I no longer need it. I have friends now, Albus. *Real* friends who really care for me..."

He was interrupted by Dumbledore bursting forth with, "I am your friend, Severus! I *do* care for you!" His hand dropped and his expression was pained.

Snape locked gazes with him, seeing that the old man's eyes were bright with moisture, not twinkling. A flash of hot shame washed over him at hurting his old friend, but he firmed his resolve and shoved that unwieldy emotion away, behind the simmering anger that was always there whenever Dumbledore was, of late.

After a long moment of charged silence, Snape murmured, "Then prove it."

Dumbledore blinked in dismay. His voice was nearly a wail as he said, "*How?*"

Snape tossed his head, his expression once again stony. "That's up to you to figure out. Platitudes are meaningless."

Dumbledore's head drooped and his shoulders sagged in defeat. Slanting another mournful look up at Snape, he turned to shuffle toward the door. Once there, he paused and spun, saying, "I shall see you at the Feast."

Snape nodded sharply and Dumbledore left, softly shutting the door behind him.

All day long, everyone was in high spirits, bustling around, packing, and discussing plans for the holiday. The seventh-years were alternately more boisterous...having finally finished school...and more subdued...having to finally head out into the real world as adults. Hermione was one of the minority who had her next steps lined up, as most were still in the limbo of waiting to hear back from applications now that their N.E.W.T. marks were in.

That evening, the whole of the castle's inhabitants filed down to the Great Hall for the Leaving Feast, raucous and cheerful. The cast, however, was even more excited than the rest of the student body, as they were looking forward to their final performance.

The food was delicious as always, and when the puddings appeared, Dumbledore stood, drawing every eye.

"Do feel free to continue enjoying your dinners. I merely wish to make a few announcements." He paused, waiting for the buzz of conversation to die out. "Don't forget: when our meal is over, the Ministry will be here for our trophy presentation, after which we will be adjourning to the corridor while I get the Hall ready for the final performance of scenes from the play that made Hogwarts the winner of the inaugural Tri-wizard Musical Competition." He beamed about the Hall at the scattered cast members. "Those of you who will be returning next year will have another chance to partake of the fun of performing, as Fine Arts will be added to the curriculum. And, those programmes will be developed by none other than our very own Miss Hermione Granger!"

Down at the Gryffindor table, Hermione choked on her éclair, Dumbledore's announcement taking her completely by surprise. Ron grinned as he helpfully pounded her on the back while applause rose around them. Her friends were beaming at her, and McGonagall was clapping with fierce pride at the High Table.

Hermione managed to clear her airway and nodded at the applause, waving limply as she tried to smile, even though she knew she was bright red.

Dumbledore continued, "Miss Granger has been chosen to spearhead the new Department of the Arts at the Ministry and will be working closely with the Department of International Magic Relations and the Department of Magic/Muggle Relations to determine what will be taught and how future competitions will be constructed and judged. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Miss Granger for her invaluable help in leading Hogwarts to victory this year and congratulate her on her success." He bowed toward her, and she nodded again, blushing even more.

As the applause faded, Dumbledore went on. "I must thank someone else, however, for going above and beyond the call of duty to lead us to excellence, setting an example to which we all could aspire." He paused, looking down for a moment before saying, "It is no secret that Hogwarts will not be the same without him, as he is retiring from teaching to pursue other prospects." At that, a murmur rippled through the Hall as people caught on to what he was saying.

Snape gripped his spoon tightly, staring hard at Dumbledore from his seat at the headmaster's side.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and said, "As you well know, not only has Hogwarts benefitted from his dedication, but so has the wizarding community. I would therefore like to thank none other than Severus Snape for his tireless work to make this school, and this world, a better place." He turned to Snape and proffered his hand, gazing wistfully down at the stunned Potions Master.

Snape was too shocked by Dumbledore's stunt to notice right away that at least half the student body had not only begun applauding but had got to their feet. Snape glanced from Dumbledore's sad eyes to those cheering him and felt a jolt that brought a lump to his throat as he stood. Eyeing the older man in disbelief, Snape realized he'd have to shake hands with him, lest he invite curiosity about why he wouldn't.

Snape gripped Dumbledore's hand briefly, but when he made to let go, Dumbledore held onto him with surprising strength. Snape's eyes bored into Dumbledore's, and he could tell by the man's faint smile that he thought it was enough to bury the hatchet. *But that hatchet's been buried square in my back, and more pretty words...no matter how public they are...won't undo what you did.*

Snape tugged his hand free and turned to nod graciously to the crowd still applauding, taking note of Dumbledore's disappointed expression as he did so. He lifted his hands and flashed a smile to quell them. When the noise abated, he merely said, "Thank you," and bowed before taking his seat again.

Dumbledore turned back to the students and said, "Very well then. Enjoy the rest of the Feast. The Ministry should be here soon."

Snape, trying to recover from the unexpected attention, shook his hair forward and focused on brewing tea with honey and lemon, hoping that the ritual would soothe him before they had to perform.

Down at the Gryffindor table, Hermione was accepting congratulations from her House-mates who had not already known about her new position. She, too, still felt rather stunned that Dumbledore had made such a production over it, and when she looked up to see Snape with the tea service, she sucked in a breath of recognition, hastening to make a cup of her own.

When Snape took his first sip, he looked over the rim of his cup and saw Hermione almost finished brewing her tea. He smiled, the warmth of the tea travelling down his throat mixing with the warmth of their love suffusing his chest.

Fortunately, the Ministry officials arrived not long after Dumbledore's announcements, ushered in by Filch, wearing his mouldy tailcoat in honour of the occasion. They joined Dumbledore on the dais before the High Table, and one of them opened a large case and withdrew the trophy, placing it on the centre of the long High Table, in front of the headmaster's place. Another official carried a bulging bag which looked very heavy.

A muted buzz swept through the Hall as everyone exchanged furtive murmurs and whispers about the bag, faces alight with curiosity. When everything was situated, Dumbledore clapped once and a hush fell over the assembled.

"I would like you to give a Hogwarts welcome to Mr. Allery Tilworth, who is here on behalf of the Ministry's new Department of the Arts."

As everyone applauded politely, Hermione beamed, whispering to her mates, "He's the one in charge of *my* department for now. A really nice fellow!"

Tilworth nodded graciously, smiling as he surveyed the crowd. When his gaze fell on Hermione, he blinked in recognition and his smile widened. He gave her an extra nod of greeting as she rippled her fingers at him. When the applause died down, he said, "Thank you all for such a lovely welcome. It is my honour to be here tonight to celebrate your success. Before we present your winnings, may I invite the cast that made this all possible to join me up here?" He looked to Dumbledore, who spread his hands and nodded, allowing Tilworth to beckon the cast forward.

Exchanging delighted smiles, the students rose from their tables to join Trelawney, McGonagall, and Snape in a line along either side of the Ministry officials and Dumbledore. The rest of the school clapped politely as they made their way up, stopping when Tilworth clasped his hands and beamed around at them.

"As was dictated at the beginning of this competition, the winner receives a trophy..." and he spun, gesturing for one official to lift the trophy and brandish it, presenting it to the school at large, "...and a prize of 5000 Galleons, for use in building the new curriculum!"

The trophy was bright gold, with an engraved base and a sleek barrel leading up to what looked like two masks side by side. One had eyes and mouth cut out in the shape of a laughing face, and the other in the shape of a crying one. The happy one was enamelled in white, and the sad one in black.

The official set the trophy back on the table and Tilworth gestured at the bag. The other official lifted the heavy bag, opening it enough to show the glint of Galleons within. A brief cheer rose from the students, but subsided quickly at Tilworth's wave.

Gesturing at the trophy, Tilworth added, "These are the traditional masks of comedy and tragedy, harkening back to the plays of Ancient Greece, and a recognized symbol for theatre worldwide." He paused and beamed at the students again. "On behalf of the Ministry of Magic, I would like to congratulate Hogwarts on so brilliantly heralding the dawn of a new era in wizarding education!"

He bowed deeply to the cast on either side of him and then to the student body at large before edging back and gesturing for Dumbledore to take over again.

Dumbledore lifted his hands to quell the cheering, his smile wide. "Thank you, Mr. Tilworth. We are pleased to have been able to participate in such a worthwhile endeavour." He shook hands with each official, then turned to face the Hall again, beaming. "Now, I must ask all of you to vacate the Hall for a short while. I will call for you when it is time to come back in."

A rush of noise punctuated his statement as benches scraped and robes rustled. The cacophony of excited conversations faded as the Hall emptied, leaving the cast to trail after everyone else. The Entrance Hall soon was full of chattering students and staff, the cast staying close to the now closed doors. Snape sidled up to Hermione and said, "Miss Granger, one last time..."

Hermione smirked up at Snape and said, "Of course, Professor." She glanced back at her mates and said, "Back in a bit." They all nodded and smiled at Snape in greeting before he and Hermione Disapparated.

Arriving in Snape's quarters, Hermione voiced a startled cry, gazing about at the bare shelves and remaining boxes. She stood rooted to the spot while Snape retrieved the hair products from the bathroom and sat down.

Eyeing her with concern, Snape said, "Hermione? Are you all right?"

Hermione's eyes had gone glassy and her chin trembled. Blinking rapidly, she looked at Snape and croaked, "It really is all coming to an end. Everything is going to change now, isn't it?"

Snape shot to his feet and rushed to embrace her as the first tear fell from her lashes. Stroking her hair, he said, "Shhh, it's all right. There's nothing to cry about, love."

Hermione sucked in a shuddering breath and forced herself to back out of his arms. Dashing the tears from her eyes, she swallowed and said, "You're right, of course. I don't know why I'm crying. It's silly, really." She sniffed deeply and gestured for them to cross to the chair.

Snape watched her, brow creased with worry, as she took her place behind him and wiped her face. As she gently turned his face forward, he said, "Hermione, are you not looking forward to the future?"

"Oh, no! I am! It's just...it all sort of hit me at once, and I just remembered all the lovely moments here, and... I'm going to miss it."

Snape grunted in agreement. "Are you all packed for tomorrow?"

"Yes. I just have the last few things I'll need for tonight and tomorrow morning out, but they're easy to pack away when I'm done. It looks like you've only got a little bit left here. Have you already moved everything else to Spinner's End?"

"Yes. Other than what you see here, I've only a few important things in my bedroom to move." He paused, a thrill racing through him at the thought of the ring still secreted in the pocket of his trench coat.

Hermione smiled. "I can't wait to see what you've done with the place, now that everything's been delivered. It's so exciting!"

Snape's hand snapped up to stop her ministrations, and he twisted to face her, gazing soberly into her surprised eyes. "Hermione, I need to clear something up." She blinked curiously at him. Licking his lips, he said, "To where will you be going tomorrow when you leave the castle?"

Hermione froze, eyes wide. Swallowing, she took a deep breath and said, "Well, uh... I had originally planned on going home to my parents, but..." She paused, staring into Snape's carefully neutral face. "...when I think of *home* now, I think of you." Her expression melted into a tender smile. "You said Spinner's End was my home...*our home*...if I wanted it."

Snape's stalled heart began beating again and he sucked in a deep breath of relief. Lurching to his feet and turning completely around in the chair, he framed her face in his hands and kissed her, joy on his lips. When he broke away, he pressed his forehead against hers and whispered, "It is. Our home. Our future. My love." He kissed her once more before pulling back and spinning to sit in the chair again.

Hermione beamed as she finished his hair. When she was done, she tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Come, Phantom, we have one final performance to give."

Snape stood and smiled at her. Eyes burning with love and desire, he murmured, "One moment," and disappeared into the bathroom.

Firmly shutting the bathroom door behind him, he dashed into his bedroom and fished the ring from his trench coat pocket, tucking it into the pocket of his robes with an exultant grin. Pausing to glance at his reflection on his way back through the bathroom, he saw the suppressed excitement glowing in his eyes and smirked. *Everything is going to change now, indeed. You have no idea how much.*

Emerging from the bathroom, he found Hermione standing by the open packing box. She looked up immediately as he strode over to her and offered his arm, Summoning his mask. "Shall we, my dear?"

Hermione threaded her arm through his and smiled up at him, saying, "Yes, let's."

They arrived in the corridor to see that the cast had already entered, leaving the rest of the school waiting. Exchanging a sheepish look, they hurried to enter as well,

bustling down the aisle to join the rest of the cast onstage.

Dumbledore nodded at them as they arrived and said, "There you are. Very well then. Everyone take your places backstage while I open the doors. The Ministry officials will be front and centre, and everyone else will fill in around them. Now then, just as we've done so many times over... Places!" The cast melted into the wings, casting their costume spells as they went, and Dumbledore retreated to the doors to let everyone enter.

The curtain was closed in front of the Phantom's Lair, and Snape and Hermione moved to their spots centre stage in front of the boat where Snape would begin his song. While they waited, listening to the noise of the audience taking their seats, Snape slipped his hand into the pocket of his costume trousers, checking that the ring was secure. Exhaling slowly to calm his jolt of excitement, he allowed a tiny smirk to quirk his lips.

Beyond the curtain, they heard the noise ebb, followed by Dumbledore saying, "Thank you all for your attention. We are pleased to present the following scenes to you tonight, in celebration of Hogwarts' win. First will be Music of the Night in the Phantom's Lair, then we have the Masquerade, and finally we will be taken to the Point of No Return." During his pause, they heard a faint rumble of chuckles at his words. "Now, with no further ado, let us listen to the Music of the Night."

Onstage and in the house, lights went out. They heard the curtain opening, and then the lights came up again, ushering in the music. Snape began, "I have brought you to the seat of sweet music's throne..."

Hermione reflected that she would definitely want to introduce Snape to more songs so he might sing for her in private. Considering that she had naught to do but listen and react in the entire scene, she enjoyed it immensely, even when she pretended to faint, as she then had the opportunity to feel Snape's strong arms lifting her and carrying her to the boat before tenderly caressing her hair from her face.

As his final note died away, the lights went out and the curtain closed, and Snape gripped Hermione's hand, deftly pulling her to her feet so they could rush offstage while Dumbledore changed the sets for the Masquerade. In the wing, they both hurriedly changed costumes.

When the set was ready, everyone raced to their places. The music began and the curtain opened again on the opulent staircase and dazzling costumes for the Masquerade. The cast launched into their song and dance with great gusto, clearly enjoying it for all it was worth. Then, when Snape appeared, startling in red and emerging from a cloud of smoke, their collective gasp of horror and shock collapsed the ebullient mood at once, leaving the tension at Snape's menacing approach to weight the very air.

Snape yanked the chain from Hermione's neck and broke into maniacal laughter as he disappeared in another cloud of smoke, leaving the rest of the cast to flee in fright as they were plunged into darkness once again, the curtain swooping closed.

As Dumbledore set the stage for the Point of No Return, Snape was seized with another flash of nervous energy, and he had to swallow hard, taking deep breaths and gripping his hands into fists to still the anticipatory tremors that had overtaken him.

The rest of the cast took their places on the new set, and the curtain opened as the lights came up on this final scene, the music swelling as they sang. Snape changed his costume for the last time, hiding his heated cheeks within the hood before Apparating into the bed alcove by Draco.

Patting his pocket, he emerged onstage to perform the sensual duet with Hermione, his love. A recklessness possessed him, and his caresses and touches were more intimate and sincere than they had ever allowed before, in the name of propriety and secrecy. He could see and feel Hermione's surprise and delight at his abandon, and everything else seemed to fade into unimportance as they came to the end of the duet.

As he began singing, "Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime..." he fished the ring from his pocket and dropped to one knee, gazing up at Hermione. She didn't notice anything different until he reached up and pushed his hood back himself, wordlessly ending his glamour as he continued, "Lead me, save me from my solitude..."

At that, Hermione blinked, confused at his change in business and wondering why he had ended his glamour. She looked down at the ring he was sliding onto her finger and her eyes went wide. *That's not the same ring!*

Snape was still singing, "Say you want me with you, here beside you..." He pushed his mask off, revealing his face, eyes burning as he watched her. "Anywhere you go let me go too..."

All breath left her body at once, leaving her feeling dizzy as an inkling came crashing down on her. She lifted her stunned gaze to Snape's, his expression a mixture of exultation, triumph, apprehension, and determination. Her inkling blossomed into full-fledged realization at the next words out of his mouth.

"*Hermione*, that's all I ask of you."

A ringing silence fell, shock, bewilderment, and disbelief robbing everyone of coherent reaction. Hermione stood, frozen, wide eyes staring desperately into Snape's, searching for an anchor to grasp within her sea of confusion.

The deafening quiet gave way to a susurrus of furtive whispers, and Hermione blinked, reeling back to herself as she heard the noise and felt Snape squeeze her fingers still clasped in his.

Looking back down at the ring, she saw the gleam of fire in the heart of the stone, brought to brilliance under the stage lights. A rush of heat washed over her as the full weight of its significance settled in her numb brain. With it came the prickle of tears and a lump rising in her throat. On the heels of that consciousness, she felt the ring shifting, shrinking to her finger and giving a pleasantly warm, snug sensation.

Snape watched the play of emotion on her face...and the tears welling up...with his heart in his throat. He had been so *sure*, but now... She hadn't *said* anything, and she was about to *cry*... His racing heart skipped a beat and his gut clenched. *What do I do now?* Then he glanced back at the ring he had placed on her finger and saw it *move*. His stuttering heart felt about to burst from his chest in triumph, and relief swept over him, leaving him trembling.

Hermione lifted her gaze back to Snape's and said, "Severus..."

The raw emotion in her voice cleared up any lingering doubt anyone may have had about what exactly was transpiring onstage. The resulting gasp sounded like a hurricane with the magnitude of hundreds of throats reacting at once.

Tears spilled onto her cheeks as Hermione smiled joyfully at Snape, and Snape's expression altered to one so beatific that the majority of the gaping crowd were stunned anew at the transformation.

It was only when their tableau was broken by Snape lifting Hermione's ring-clad hand to his lips for a reverent kiss that the transfixed spectators were able to react, and a tide of voices rose around them.

The sudden tumult snapped the lovers from their connection. Snape shot to his feet, pulling Hermione into a protective embrace as people emerged from the wings and climbed onto the stage from all directions, clamouring for explanations and exclaiming in outrage. Hermione clutched at him, and when her squeak of fear reached his ears, he held tight and Disapparated.

72- Condemnation

Chapter 76 of 84

After Snape's shocking proposal in front of everyone and his abrupt departure with Hermione, we see just what sorts of reactions follow such an unexpected occurrence.

I wish I had managed to come up with these delightful characters and write seven wonderful books about them. But, since I didn't, I'm just playing with them instead, and I'll return them in good condition; I promise! Don't sue, kthxbye.

Author's Note: Extreme gratitude to Ladyofthemasque, Ladyinthecloak, and Horserider for feedback and morale boosting. *hugs and chocolate to those lovely ladies* And, thank you, thank you, thank you to all you fine folk who read and reviewed. I appreciate your continued support! This was originally going to be one chapter, but as it grew and so much happened, I decided to not just split it into two parts of one chapter, but instead split it into two separate chapters. That means that this is a little over 5900 words for this chapter, and the other 5000+ words are included in the new chapter to come next. But, since that one's got so much done already, hopefully it will follow shortly! Hope you lot enjoy this one, and as always, feel free to check my LJ for update info. :)

Chapter 72- Condemnation

Dumbledore stopped short as he crested the steps onto the stage, hands clenching as Snape and Hermione disappeared. His stentorian roar of "Severus Snape!" joined the startled cacophony echoing in the transfigured Hall.

McGonagall hovered at the edge of the proscenium, having emerged from the wing, her face white with shock, eyes bulging behind her square spectacles. Her brogue was so pronounced that her babble was even less coherent than it would have been otherwise. She looked as if she were trying to reach Dumbledore, but had rooted to the spot when the pair had vanished.

Ginny stood frozen in the wing, not far behind her Head of House, her wide eyes full of tears and her hands clasped and pressed against her mouth. Beside her, Harry was pacing in bewildered patterns, his hands alternately flailing and shoving through his now wildly untidy hair. His voice was much higher than normal as he repeated the same things again and again.

"What just happened? Where did he take her? What's going on? What are we supposed to do?"

In the hubbub of people milling about in shock and confusion, Ron came pelting up to them from across the stage, Susan trailing after him. When he skidded to a stop in front of Harry and Ginny, he, too, ran a hand through his hair and gripped the back of his neck, ears bright red.

Harry's hands flew outward dramatically as he rounded on his best mate and demanded, "What the bloody hell just happened?"

Ron shook his head, shoulders rising in an exaggerated shrug. "How should I know?" He looked at his sister, who was still staring blankly ahead with her fingers crammed against her lips. Frowning, he stepped into her line of sight and bent closer, muttering, "Gin? You all right?"

Ginny came back to herself with a gasp, blinking and jerking away. Gazing about frantically, she grimaced and breathed, "I don't *believe* it! What was he thinking?"

Harry paused in his frenetic movements, exchanging a perplexed look with Ron before turning to his girlfriend. "What?"

Ginny's eyes closed and she buried her face in her hands for a moment with a muffled wail. Then, pushing her hair out of her face, she lifted her head and took a deep breath. "I can't believe he proposed to her *here*, in front of everyone! I would have expected him to be more private about it!"

Ron blinked, staring fixedly at her, his face screwed up in an expression of intense concentration. Harry, on the other hand, gazed at her in utter befuddlement, rather as if he had been hit with a Confundus Charm.

His voice low and accusing, Ron said, "You're not surprised like we are." The two redheads locked gazes for a beat, until Ginny heaved a sigh and shook her head. Ron sucked in a stunned breath, eyes widening. "You *knew*? *That's* who she's been mooning over?"

Ginny nodded, eyes pleading with Ron to understand. They were startled from their connection by Harry's sharp, "What? What are you two on about? Knew what?"

Ron straightened, taking a deep breath and grinding his teeth. "Hermione and Snape. He just sodding *proposed* to her! They must have been together for a while, then." He cut a glance at Ginny and barked, "How long?"

Ginny's clasped hands were creeping back up to her mouth again. Her voice was barely audible to the two of them through the ongoing noise when she whispered, "Since November."

Ron's eyes flew open wide again and he reared back. His voice cracked with astonishment. "*That* long?" Both hands rose to rub his eyes, then slid up onto the crown of his head. His eyes darted back and forth, focusing on nothing but his own thoughts as he frowned in concentration again. Clearly he was talking to himself as he muttered, "So *that's* what she was talking about after bolloxing things up with Harry. And why she was so mental about Colin!"

Harry stared at his friend, a grimace of disbelief stretching his lips. "You're saying that Hermione is... is—well—is *with* Snape? As in a couple? Are you daft? That's absurd!"

Ginny turned imploring eyes to Harry and bit her lip before saying quietly, "It's not. I've known since Christmas."

Harry froze, the grimace distorting his features as he blinked rapidly. "You can't be serious..."

Ginny glanced about, seeing the chaos around them, and grabbed both Harry and Ron, dragging them into the shadows of the wing. Susan followed, looking lost. When they were in a corner, away from the rest of the baffled throng, Ginny hissed, "Listen. I know it's a shock, but you've got to understand!"

Harry eyed her warily, but Ron crossed his arms and nodded stiffly, surprising her as he growled, "So tell us. What do we need to understand?"

Ginny's hands worried in front of her as she said, "Hermione loves him. And he loves her! I've seen them together, and it's true. Hand on wand!" She nodded earnestly. "Why do you think they have such an intense connection when they perform? And how *else* would Snape have come to change as much as he has? You've both admitted that he's got so much better over the past few months—that's because of Hermione! I knew they were in love, but I never imagined that he would go public like *this*!"

Ron tossed his head and snorted faintly. His voice was still a low growl as he said, "How can you be sure? What if he's just toying with her?"

Ginny, encouraged by Ron's lack of histrionics, gripped his arm firmly and gazed up into his measuring blue eyes. "She showed me the letters he sent her. That choker she

wore at Christmas? He *made* that for her, based on the one she wore when they went to the play. Carved it himself! And he's talked to me about her. Believe it or not, Ron, I've been his friend as well since January. He's really not bad when you get to know him. He's extremely protective of her—as you saw for yourself when you made that comment about her kissing him! She's been so worried about telling everyone. She doesn't want to lose her friends."

At that, she turned to Harry, who was staring at her like he had never seen her before. But before she could start trying to sway him, Ron spoke up again.

"She has seemed really happy for a while now. I thought she had a secret, what with the way she behaved after the whole Colin thing..." He trailed off, then dropped his hands to his sides and clenched his fists, taking a deep breath. Releasing it in a long sigh and relaxing his hands again, he pinned Ginny with a grave look. "Is she happy? I mean, really? Does he treat her right?"

Ginny's eyes widened with awe as she nodded, exuding reassurance. Her voice was soft but rang with sincerity as she said, "I've never seen her happier, and I doubt I'll ever see anyone more in love than they are. It's... beautiful."

They gazed at each other solemnly for a beat, then Ron nodded decisively. "Good. Then I won't have to hex his bollocks off."

Ginny voiced a hysterical squeak, clapping her hands over her mouth to stifle it, but her eyes spoke volumes of gratitude.

Ron rubbed the back of his neck and shuddered. "Gah, this is going to take some getting used to." He grimaced and shook his head.

Harry goggled at them. "Have you all gone mad? This is *Snape* you're talking about here! Him and Hermione? That's fucking *insane*!" He was gesturing wildly again, and his voice still had an edge of hysteria.

Ginny grabbed at his hands, trying to calm him. "Harry, please, just listen!"

Harry wrenched his hands from her grasp, eyeing her warily. "Listen to what? Snape's gone and stolen our best mate and you're all talking like that's okay! If Dumbledore doesn't hex him, I will!"

Ron rolled his eyes and said, "Harry, just shut up! If you go after Snape, you'll just set Hermione off, and even though he's changed, I reckon he's not so changed that he wouldn't jinx you into bits if you tried to attack him!"

Harry whipped his incredulous gaze to Ron. "I can't believe you. Why aren't you in a right state, too? I thought you cared about Hermione! How can you just stand there when that git's kidnapped our friend?"

Ron scowled fiercely at Harry and bellowed, "He didn't kidnap her, you bugging prat! He *proposed* to her! And if what Ginny's said is true, Hermione's gonna' say 'yes'!"

A beat of electric silence sizzled between them, as blue eyes stared down green. Harry's voice was hoarse and faint when he finally said, "*I'm* the bugging prat? She's with that bastard—"

He was cut off by Ginny's furious, "He's not a bastard! Stop calling him names, Harry James Potter!"

Harry rounded on Ginny. "How can you *say* that?"

Ginny's eyes were still bright with tears as she spat, "Because he's *myfriend*, you wanker!"

Harry jerked back as if slapped. Before he could retort, he was assailed by Ron's voice to one side. "He saved your life, mate. Give the man some credit."

Harry's eyes went even wider, and he blinked rapidly, his mouth working soundlessly.

Ron looked almost weary as he continued, "I thought you two had made peace anyway. Why are you in such a lather?"

Harry's eyes narrowed and he sucked in a breath to growl, "Let me get this straight. You're saying Hermione is in love with *Snape*, and has been since *last year*. They've apparently been carrying on a *relationship* under our very noses for *months*, and *you're* not even bothered?"

Ron tossed his head, blue eyes flashing. "Look, it's not like I'm planning to invite the man to join me for tea and crumpets or anything! I'd rather *not* think about what those two may have got up to all this time—what with the way they were snogging onstage anyway—but this *isn't about me*! It's about Hermione, and I want her to be happy! I promised her I'd support her no matter what after you two broke up, and I plan to stand by her! Snape's not the only one who loves her, you know."

Ginny flung herself at Ron, enveloping him in a grateful hug. "Thank you." Her fervent murmur was muffled against his shoulder, but Harry heard it all the same.

Harry's face twisted as he snapped, "I love Hermione, too! How could she choose *him*?"

Ginny twisted away from her brother to see Harry's resentful expression, and her brown eyes kindled with hurt and anger. "Is that what this is about? You're pissed off because she didn't choose *you*, is that it?"

Harry wasn't so far gone in his fit of temper that he didn't realize his mistake, particularly at the sight of both Weasleys glaring at him. The brotherly protective light was rising in Ron's eyes as he scowled at Harry in warning, and more tears were welling up to cloud Ginny's eyes even as they flashed in anger. His hands rose, palms out in a calming gesture.

"Wait—that's not what I meant!" He back-pedalled hastily as Ginny's hands balled into fists at her sides. "Ginny, I love you. You know that! I love Hermione too, but not like that!"

Ginny's chin was trembling, but she managed to speak. "Well, *Snape* does! So get over yourself, Mr. Chosen One, and *fast*, or the Boy-Who-Lived will end up the Boy-Who-Lived-Without-His-Best-Friend!"

With that last threat, she spun and darted away, leaving Harry to face Ron. Ron gazed frostily at Harry, not even breaking his gaze when Susan crept up to insinuate herself under his arm, pressing against his left side.

Harry was stunned speechless, and all he could do was blink at them.

Susan burrowed into Ron's chest and he looked down at her pale face. Squeezing her shoulders in reassurance, he murmured, "You all right there, Suz?"

Susan tilted her head and gave a weak shrug. "I don't know what to think. I mean, it's all so bizarre!"

Ron heaved a sigh and said, "Too right." Then, he lifted his right hand and chucked her under the chin, raising her face to his. Brow furrowed in concern, he said, "Do me a favour, would you? Don't go adding to the stress Hermione'll have to deal with. Just... just try and reserve judgment, okay? She's gonna' have enough to worry about; she could use some friends to back her."

Susan's worried expression gave way to a look of adoration and she smiled faintly, nodding. Her voice was tinged with admiration as she said, "It's a shame you weren't sorted into Hufflepuff—you're so loyal to your friends." She stretched up and kissed him gently. Ron's ears went pink as he tried to suppress a flattered smile. Hugging him

again, she said, "Do you think she's okay?"

Ron frowned and said, "Who, Hermione? I reckon she's as fine as one could be when ambushed by something like that."

Susan flicked a glance at Harry and said, "Actually, I was worried about Ginny." With that, she turned a scathing look at Harry and glared.

Ron grunted as he, too, cut an acid glance at his friend. "That was a pretty rotten thing to say, mate."

Harry—who was still reeling under the shock of Snape and Hermione's relationship and the knowledge that he had hurt his girlfriend and offended his best mate—gazed at Ron helplessly, looking completely overwhelmed. He looked around and saw the stage filled with milling clumps of audience mixing with the cast, and noticed that Ginny was across the stage, talking earnestly to McGonagall, with Neville and Parvati watching avidly.

His voice was almost a wail as he said, "I didn't mean it like that! Ron, you know I love Ginny. I just can't believe that she knew about Hermione and Snape and didn't say anything about it before!"

Ron snorted and rolled his eyes. "Right, 'cause she surely would have wanted to incite a riot like this in the middle of term!" He waved his hand at the hubbub. "Besides, I doubt anyone would have been willing to look past the Snape we used to know to the bloke he is now. He's nowhere near the nasty git he used to be. He's been nice to *all* of us the past few months, and I reckon Hermione had a lot to do with that!"

Harry pushed his glasses onto his head and rubbed his eyes wearily. When he put them back on, he gazed mournfully over the crowd and croaked, "What am I supposed to do?"

Ron quirked a resigned half-smile at him and said, "Apologize to Ginny, for one. Then shut up and be a good friend to Hermione. Isn't it about time she was happy? It's *her* life, Harry, not yours." He paused, watching Harry struggle with his turbulent feelings. "The girls asked us to give Snape a chance ages ago, and we did. And he's actually been decent and human since then. Besides, after all he did to help you, I think you owe him one."

Harry scowled uncomfortably and muttered, "He said we're even."

Ron grinned and retorted, "See? What self-respecting Slytherin would say that if he could've kept something hanging over your head, eh? I'd say that's proof right there that he deserves a chance. Besides, if they're really in love, that's another good reason to step back." He cast a furtive glance at Susan still wrapped around him and said, "Dumbledore always said love was mysterious and powerful. Who are we to judge?" He squeezed Susan tighter and kissed her temple as she beamed up at him.

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight, grimacing as he watched the excited people swarming all over the stage. Shooting a sulky look at Ron and Susan, he huffed and muttered, "I better go find Ginny." He slunk away, edging between clumps of students.

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While Ginny had been apprising Ron and Harry of the situation, Dumbledore, after his initial roar of frustration, had stomped off to the staff room to try to Floo to Snape's quarters. The flames turned green, but he couldn't get through no matter how many times he tried. Snape had apparently cast a barrier on his hearth, preventing anyone from using the Floo to travel or call. He debated whether to go down to Snape's rooms and try to get through the door, but that would give Snape warning and he could disappear before Dumbledore could get in. Of course, that was supposing they had Apparated into his quarters to begin with. There was no telling where they were.

Thoroughly incensed, the headmaster had stalked back into the Hall, the astonished crowd parting before him like the Red Sea before Moses. For the first time, many students saw why Dumbledore had been reported to be the only wizard the Dark Lord had ever feared. The dangerously livid expression and the magic crackling around him made them quail before him.

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McGonagall had been rooted to the spot where she had halted upon Snape's disappearance with Hermione. People surged onto the stage, into the space previously occupied by the pair, and McGonagall saw Dumbledore whirling to exit through the staff door. She stared, bereft, her stunned babble still rolling off her tongue.

She was alone in a sea of confusion until Ron raced past her, Susan at his heels, and a bug-eyed Trelawney floated up to her in their wake.

Trelawney gripped McGonagall's arm and breathed, "*Can* you believe it? What in the name of all the celestial bodies is going on?"

McGonagall, whose patience with the Divination teacher was notoriously short on a good day, felt as if she just *couldn't* be expected to deal with *her* in the midst of such chaos!

Lips thin and nostrils flaring in annoyance, McGonagall turned to Trelawney and nearly shouted, "Unhand me this instant!" She shook loose of Trelawney, who was clearly taken aback by her behaviour. Her voice oozed icy disdain as she said, "What do you mean, asking *me* such a question? I thought *you*, of all people, should have been unsurprised—surely you should have *seen this coming*?" Her eyes narrowed in a withering look and she tossed her head. "I'm onto you: you merely want an inside scoop on gossip, and you know Severus trusts me—" She faltered, realizing that Snape clearly hadn't trusted her as much as she had thought, and she felt foolish for trusting him as much as she had, also. Regaining her composure, she regally said, "I'm sure Albus will get to the bottom of this. In the meantime, I'll not be giving you any gossip fodder."

She lifted her chin loftily and stormed away, leaving Trelawney to gape after her. When she reached the other side of the stage, where Dumbledore had stood and shouted, she stopped, hoping that he would come back soon. She gazed out over the tumultuous crowd, watching people dart from group to group, fervent conversations buzzing like a swarm of locusts. As the throng onstage shifted, she saw Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Susan in the shadows of the opposite wing.

Are her friends as baffled as the rest of us? Could they have had any inkling?

While she watched, Ginny threw herself at her brother and enveloped him in a hug. A moment later, she had spun to face Harry, who then raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture. The redheaded girl appeared to be shouting at Harry, and then she whirled and sped away, heading straight for McGonagall, buffeting off people like a pinball as she bulled her way through the masses.

She was crying, and she was oblivious to everyone around her, which explained her gasp of shock and startled expression as McGonagall clamped down on her arm to stop her progress.

"Miss Weasley! Are you all right?"

Ginny looked up at her Head of House, noting her white, anxious face. Swallowing hard, she rasped, "I'm fine, Professor."

McGonagall nodded sharply, then her gaze sharpened like a predator's as she leant closer and hissed, "Good, then what can you tell me about what just happened?"

Ginny blinked, caught completely off guard, and she knew her guilt had flashed across her face when McGonagall's eyes narrowed and she tightened her grip, saying, "Out with it, Miss Weasley!"

Ginny realized that they were beyond the point of dissembling, as the truth would out them in any case. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before locking gazes with McGonagall and saying, "Professor Snape just proposed to Hermione."

McGonagall's hand squeezed again, then abruptly released Ginny's arm. Straightening haughtily, she said, "I am well aware of that fact, Miss Weasley. I was referring to what you know about the situation. It is obvious that *you* are not as shocked as the rest of us."

As she was speaking, Neville and Parvati arrived, Neville's face anxious and Parvati's clearly flummoxed. Ginny cut a quick glance at them and instantly decided to answer anyway, in the hopes that she could influence her friends to support Snape and Hermione as well.

Settling her shoulders and steeling herself, she said, "I daresay it was a logical next step in their relationship, Professor."

McGonagall's eyes bugged out again and she hissed, "*What* relationship?"

Ginny pursed her lips for a beat before saying, "They're in love. And have been for months." She flicked another glance at her friends before peering back up at her Head of House.

Neville had jerked back as if slapped, and Parvati's mouth had fallen open. McGonagall was staring at her, shaking her head faintly.

"No. That's not possible. She's his student—" McGonagall blinked as she was cut off by Neville's "—Not anymore."

Neville jerked again, having surprised even himself with his interjection. His cheeks coloured as he gave a sheepish grimace. "Sorry..."

McGonagall looked dazedly back at Ginny and said, "Severus wouldn't... he'd never..."

As she trailed off, Ginny supplied, "Fall in love? Why not? He's just a man, isn't he?" She brought all her persuasive powers to bear as she continued, "Professor, *you've* been helping him build a new life, too. Hermione's just the reason for wanting that life." She laid a hand on her professor's arm. "Clearly he's serious about it if he's asking her to marry him. You've seen how much he's changed over the past several months. That's because of Hermione. They're *happy*. Surely that's a good thing?"

McGonagall blinked and said, her voice weak, "But he's *ateacher*. He wouldn't dare fraternize with a student."

Ginny grimaced and rolled her shoulders as if shrugging out from under a heavy burden. "She's of age! And besides, it's not like he went after her; they were thrown together by this whole play thing! Can you really blame them if they succumbed to the feelings their roles invoked?"

Neville breathed, "Is *that* why they were always so amazing? They weren't acting?" He exchanged a stunned look with Parvati, who nodded slowly back at him in wonder.

Ginny said, "Exactly! You see how great they are together? Yes, all that was *real*. All their acting was reserved for pretending that there *wasn't* such a strong bond between them!"

McGonagall shook her head again, and her voice trembled as she said, "I can't believe it. He lied to me all this time. I thought we were friends, finally, after so many years."

Ginny turned to the older woman and gripped her hands desperately. "Professor! Did you ever ask him if he was in love with Hermione? Of course not! He didn't lie. Not really. He simply kept a secret. That's not the same thing at all! You know perfectly well that he didn't dare confide in you! The only reason I knew anything was that I figured it out and confronted Hermione, and when I realized how sincere and beautiful their feelings were, I agreed to keep their secret. Never in a million years would I have imagined that he would have outed them in such a public fashion."

They gazed silently at each other, Ginny's eyes begging acceptance, and McGonagall's full of hurt and outrage. Then their connection was broken by Harry sidling up and mumbling, "Um, Ginny? Could I talk to you for a moment?"

Ginny stepped back from her impassioned posture, releasing McGonagall's hands and turning narrowed eyes on Harry. McGonagall looked up again and gasped, making everyone whirl to look where she was gazing.

Dumbledore was storming back onto the stage, everyone scattering before him. He strode directly up to McGonagall, who was staring at him, face white. Ginny, Harry, Neville, and Parvati shrank away, disappearing behind their Head of House and out of Dumbledore's line of sight.

Dumbledore's voice shook with suppressed anger as he said, "He's blocked the Floo! Of course, I don't even know if he's *in* his quarters, since he can bloody well Apparate anywhere he wants in this sodding castle!"

Behind McGonagall, the Gryffindors exchanged shocked looks at Dumbledore's speech.

Sucking in a breath through his nose, the headmaster said, "If I go down there and try to get in, no doubt they'll just disappea*again*, and I'll never be able to find them!" He clenched his fists again and growled, "And he doesn't have any portraits down there either, so I can't even send a spy in to see if they're there!"

His words triggered something in Harry, who crept forward and said, "Uh, sir?"

McGonagall spun, and she and Dumbledore glared down at Harry where he nearly cowered before them. The other Gryffindors hastily backed up, leaving him alone to suffer their wrath.

Clearly struggling to control himself, Dumbledore spat, "What, Potter?"

Harry cringed even more, but said, "There's another way to send a spy into his quarters, sir." He paused, then said, "Dobby."

Both professors blinked at him, taken aback by the suggestion. Dumbledore's scowl gave way to a smile, but the smile was somehow even more terrible than the scowl had been. His voice was a low drawl as he said, "Excellent idea, Mr. Potter. But I'll do you one better." His eyes twinkling again, but with malice instead of mirth, he summoned Dobby.

The house-elf appeared amidst the crowd and immediately winced, overwhelmed by the hubbub and the ambient magical energy surrounding him. Bulging eyes finding Dumbledore, Dobby squeaked, "The headmaster called, sir? What can Dobby do to be of service, Headmaster, sir?"

Dumbledore hunkered down to be on Dobby's level and gripped the elf's arm. "Dobby, I wish you to take me with you for Side-Along Apparition. Can you do that?"

Dobby's thin chest puffed forward in pride at the importance of the task. "Certainly, Headmaster! Dobby will take you wherever you like, sir."

Dumbledore shifted his weight to be more comfortable in his crouch and deftly slid his wand from his pocket, holding it ready. Firming his grip on the elf's arm, he murmured, "Dobby, take me to Professor Snape's quarters."

A startled gasp rose from the many throats around them as Dobby nodded sharply and snapped his fingers, both he and Dumbledore disappearing a heartbeat later, leaving the stunned crowd to gape at the empty spot where they had been.

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Snape and Hermione appeared in his quarters in front of the hearth. Snape released Hermione from his embrace, turning toward the fireplace and immediately casting several complex spells. Hermione stood frozen between the two armchairs, watching him silently and trying to regain control of her senses.

As soon as he was satisfied that the Floo was blocked, Snape turned back to Hermione, eyeing her with his heart in his mouth. The ring had shrunk to fit her finger, so she clearly had accepted his proposal, but she hadn't spoken yet, and she still looked shell-shocked.

Gently, he took her hands and said, "Hermione? Are you all right?" Worry tensed his muscles, and his heart beat erratically as he waited for her answer.

Hermione sniffed, blinking. Swallowing hard, she took a shaky breath and lifted tear-filled eyes to Snape's. "Severus?" Her voice was a croak.

Snape urged her to sit in his armchair, and he sank onto the ottoman in front of her, still holding her hands. His right thumb slid up to caress the ring on her finger, and they both looked down at it. Hermione voiced a funny noise that was half-gulp and half-bark of laughter. Snape's head snapped up to look at her again.

Shaking her head and blinking rapidly, Hermione cleared her throat and murmured, "Is this a dream?"

"No. It's as real as we are. Hermione, please, answer me."

Releasing another shaky breath, she said, "I'll be fine, I guess. It's all so... overwhelming." She lifted her left hand from his grasp and gazed at the ring, turning it in the light, watching the gleams and sparks within. Her voice was thick with emotion again as she said, "It's beautiful."

Snape leant forward and said, "It had to be perfect. For you. For us. The band within is separate. It's gold—for you. And the silver around it—well, it's white gold, but it looks silver—that's for me. It protects the inner band. Just like I'll always protect you." He paused to watch her lips spread in an awed smile before continuing, his words spilling out, tumbling over themselves in his haste to get them out. "And the stone... it's a garnet. It's a symbol for love. Passionate love. Unconditional, deep love and devotion.

"It represents loyalty and fidelity. And protection. Crusaders wore them. And they're lucky. Lucky for love, success, and goals. For our future. Garnets used to be the stone of choice for engagements, before diamonds came into fashion. I didn't want a diamond. They're so cold and impersonal. The red suits you, and its fire inside is like the love in my heart, burning for you." He paused again, grimacing sheepishly at the melodramatic nature of what he had just said, even if it was all true. Trying a different tack, one that wasn't quite so dramatic, he went on.

"I even looked up Muggle references, and, although it's ridiculous to pay any attention to astrology, it's funny that the garnet is associated with not only January and Capricorn, but with Virgo as well." He trailed off again, locking eyes with Hermione, who was smiling tenderly at him.

"I couldn't possibly imagine a ring that more completely embodies us." She reached forward and cupped his cheek, caressing his lips with her thumb. Snape kissed her thumb and lifted his hand to press her palm to his lips as well.

"There's more." He brought her hand between them and attempted to tug the ring down her finger. It wouldn't budge. He could spin it around, but it would not slide down the length of her finger. "The spells are working as well."

Hermione tilted her head curiously. "What spells?"

"I had standard sizing spells applied, so it will always adjust comfortably to your finger. But I also had a betrothal charm and an anti-theft charm done."

Hermione frowned in perplexity. "What is a betrothal charm? I've never heard of that."

Snape snorted softly. "The betrothal charm and the anti-theft charm work together. I know I said there was a sizing charm on the rings, but the betrothal charm won't let it work unless the recipient—you—accepts the proposal. And the anti-theft charm keeps anyone from being able to take the ring from you against your will." He paused, a shy smile creeping over his face. "I knew your answer as soon as I saw the ring shrink to fit. It wouldn't have adjusted had you not understood my intent and agreed to it."

Snape once again lifted her hand and reverently kissed the ring, eyeing her with devotion. Hermione beamed.

"Why did you insist on the betrothal charm? Surely you'd believe me when I accepted?"

Snape grinned mischievously at her and said, "You do realize that you still haven't *said* anything? If it weren't for the ring, I'd still not have your answer."

Hermione's eyes widened and her lips parted with a startled gasp. Her hands convulsively gripping his, she leant forward earnestly and said, "Oh, Severus, I'm so sorry! Of course! Nothing could please me more than to share one life with you."

Just as he had used the song to propose, she used its words to accept, and they exchanged a look of recognition for how important the play would always be to them, having led them to each other. On the heels of her answer, they closed the distance between them and sealed their pledge with a kiss.

When they finally broke away, their foreheads pressed against each other, Hermione gazed at the ring again and said, "You have my answer now, but why did you feel the need to use the betrothal charm in the first place?"

Snape's voice was low as he said, "It's *proof*, Hermione. Proof that we may need in the face of all the naysayers."

With that, Hermione jerked back, eyes wide as she gasped. "The school! The Ministry! Oh gods..."

Snape nodded grimly even as he rubbed her hands to soothe her. "You needn't worry about the Ministry, love. Your contract is sound and nothing we've done can break it."

Eyeing him with trepidation, she squeaked, "Are you sure?"

One corner of his mouth quirked in a semblance of a smile and he said, "Yes. I had good reason to hope you would arrange your contract and sign the papers before end of term. You're of age, and technically done with Hogwarts when your last grade came in. By the time we performed, you were no longer a student at this school, merely a guest until tomorrow, provided you chose to wait for the Hogwarts Express to leave in the morning. You could have left as soon as the Feast was over, but of course, we had to perform. One last obligation to this place, as it were."

Hermione gazed at him, eagerly accepting his words. "But what about you? And your job?"

Snape snorted. "Hermione, my job is with Fern now. My tenure here ended with the term. Clearly—" and he gestured around at the bare shelves and remaining boxes "—I'm not worried about this position. I'm already done with it."

"How will we explain to everyone? I can't believe you did that in front of the entire school *and* Ministry officials!" She blinked bewilderedly at him and shook her head.

Snape leant forward again and caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, directing her to look at him. His expression was fierce as he murmured, "I told you long ago that I would rival the bravest Gryffindor around when I staked my claim to the world. I have nothing to hide any longer. I am *proud* to love you, and even prouder that you somehow love me. The world had better get used to the new Severus Snape, because he's not going anywhere."

In the silence after his words, Hermione voiced a muffled hiccupping sob, throwing herself at Snape and enveloping him in a tight embrace, straddling his legs and nearly bowling him over the edge of the ottoman.

That was the sight that greeted them as Dumbledore and Dobby popped into the room by the door.

73- Conciliation

Chapter 77 of 84

What hell breaks loose when Dumbledore (and Dobby) arrive in Snape's quarters to see him and Hermione in a tight embrace? And who comes out better in the resulting explosion?

Not mine. Don't sue. Plzktxbye.

Author's Note: Thanks to Ladyofthemasque, Ladyinthecloak, and Horserider for help and feedback! *offers chocolate to those lovely ladies* And thank you to all you lovely folk who have read and reviewed and left me messages on LJ. *hugs* Much of this was what I had still going on in what would have been last chapter, until I realized that it would work better separated into two chapters. So, here's what comes after that *last* eeevil cliffie. Hope you enjoy! :)

Chapter 73- Conciliation

Their arrival was accompanied by a faint *crack*, and Dobby squeaked in surprise to see Hermione and Snape in such a position. Those sounds were barely enough to give Snape warning. He launched to the side, rolling himself and Hermione to the floor behind the ottoman and reaching for his wand at the same time as Dumbledore's Body-Bind Curse sailed over them.

Snape cast a Shield Charm around them even as he covered Hermione with his body for protection, looking up to see the headmaster crossing from the door, his wand trained on them.

"Albus!" Snape's voice thundered, echoing off the stones. He and Hermione struggled to sit up, and he shoved her behind him as he crouched beside the armchair and ottoman, still maintaining his Shield Charm.

Dumbledore stopped, eyes blazing and chest heaving as he glared at them. Dobby cowered near the door, trembling.

The charged silence broke as Snape hissed, "How dare you barge into my quarters—"

He was cut off by Dumbledore's incensed roar. "How dare *I*? How dare *you*?"

Snape shoved to his feet, Hermione still kneeling and clutching at his clothes behind him. "How dare I *what*, Albus? Grow up? Leave here? Find someone to love? Build a life for myself? Oh, I *dare* all right. I dare quite easily, now that I'm out from under your thumb!"

They glared heatedly at each other for a moment, and Hermione slowly pulled herself up, gripping her wand tightly. When she got to her feet, she saw past the chair to where Dobby was against the wall hiding his head under his hands and felt a rush of righteous anger overtake her shock and fear. Stepping out from behind Snape, she cried, "Dobby! Are you all right?"

Snape flailed with his free hand, trying to push her back behind him, but Dumbledore's infuriated focus was fractured as he flicked the merest glance toward the terrified elf.

It was enough.

Snape dropped his Shield Charm and immediately cast the Disarming Charm at the older man. Dumbledore managed to dodge enough that the spell grazed him, but he retained his grip on his wand. He countered with a Binding Spell even as he tried to regain his balance, the magical ropes slithering through the air toward Snape and Hermione. Snape Banished the ropes before they reached them, but his duel with the Headmaster suddenly ended before it had really begun.

Hermione—outraged that Dumbledore would try to Curse them first and ask questions later, and disgusted that he would use a house-elf to his own ends and not even care about the poor thing's terror—ducked behind the chair and crawled to the other side, her wand angling up from the floor as she shouted, "*Expelliarmus*!"

Dumbledore hadn't thought to contend with what amounted to a sniper attack from his student, and stared helplessly as his wand flew out of his hand and into Hermione's where she was crouched on the floor with the chair for cover. His astonished and outraged cry of "What the bloody blazes? *How* could you *do* that?" echoed off the stones.

As soon as she had his wand, she surged to her feet, her own wand still pointed at him as she emerged from behind the furniture, her face white but for the pink spots of fury burning on her cheeks. "How?" she retorted. "I daresay 'Dumbledore's Army' trained me well."

Snape stepped forward to take Dumbledore's wand from her, but she shot him a warning look, and he desisted.

Dumbledore glared daggers at the girl and said, "Miss Granger, give me my wand this instant."

Tossing her wild hair, which was crackling with all the magical energy that suffused the air around them, she narrowed her eyes. "No."

Hands balling into fists at his sides, Dumbledore said, "Are you bewitched, you foolish little girl? I am your headmaster! Obey me at once!"

Shaking her head, she coolly said, "Forgive me, sir, but I am no longer your student. Nor have I been for the last couple of hours. Therefore, only my natural respect for you as an elder remains as a reason for me to accede to your demands. A respect, I must say, that is unfortunately diminishing more and more every second. As it stands, I find myself with no desire to obey you anymore." She paused, then said, "Dobby, are you all right?"

Dobby peeked through his fingers at the triangle before him, afraid to answer. Dumbledore growled, "He followed my order to bring me here, since I could not get through the Floo." With that, he cut a black glance at Snape. "I couldn't be sure you were here, but I knew I could get anywhere in the castle with a house-elf, just like you could."

Lifting her chin, Hermione said, "Then if you're done *using* him, tell him he's free to go! Can't you see he's terrified?"

Dumbledore gazed at her for a long moment, then said, "Dobby, you may return to the kitchens. You may *not* say anything about what you have witnessed here. And if anyone else tries to send a house-elf in or use one to get here, they are expressly forbidden to do so. No house-elf shall come in these quarters while this whole situation is still going on. Is that clear?"

Dobby shivered to his feet and bowed, his face still in his hands. "Yes, Headmaster, sir. Dobby understands." Then, with another faint *crack*, he disappeared.

Hermione's tense posture softened a trifle, but she didn't lower her wand. Snape stepped closer and rested a hand on her shoulder. "He'll be fine, love."

A loud huff of incredulity drew their attention. Dumbledore was shaking his head as he glared at them. "Love? Are you barking mad? What were you playing at, causing such a scene up there? Are you trying to get yourself thrown in Azkaban?"

Snape jumped on his words like a snake striking. "For what? For proposing marriage to the young woman I love, even if it was in front of the school? I am no longer a professor here, and she is no longer a student! We are both of age, and of sound mind—" He was interrupted by Dumbledore's scoffing snort. Snape's lips curled and he said, "You just don't like the fact that my mind is my own now, and not yours to control. We are in love, Albus, whether you like it or not, and we *will* be together regardless of what the world throws at us!"

Hermione edged closer to him and snaked the hand holding Dumbledore's wand around Snape's waist, leaning against him for support even as she kept her wand trained on their former headmaster.

Dumbledore lifted his hands to his face, shoved his glasses down his nose, and ground his palms against his eyes. Steepling his fingers in front of his lips, he said, "Fine. *Fine*. You've got a lot of explaining to do, Severus. And, since Miss Granger has disarmed me, I am completely unable to do anything but listen. So, why don't we just calm ourselves and you can tell me just what in bloody blazes you think you're *doing*—both of you."

Hermione lifted her face to Snape's and they exchanged a quick look. Then, both gazing back at Dumbledore, they backed toward the chair again, Snape gesturing for the older man to take the chair opposite like he had earlier that evening.

Hermione took the opportunity to change her costume back to her robes and Snape followed suit, but he didn't bother with his hair. Feeling much more normal, Hermione sank into the chair and Snape leant beside it, propping one leg on the arm. Dumbledore lowered himself into the other chair, frowning at the way Hermione's left hand crept onto Snape's thigh, and Snape's left hand snuck across his body to cover hers. She had tucked Dumbledore's wand into the space between the cushion and the chair arm, blocking it with her body. Both Snape and Hermione relaxed their aggressive posture, but they still kept their wands in a tight grip.

Dumbledore sucked in a deep breath in an attempt to curb his anger, then said, "Now, tell me how you came to this ridiculous conclusion that you're 'in love' and that proposing to a student in front of the entire school and Ministry was a good idea."

Snape's eyes narrowed, but then a smirk spread his lips. Voice lilting with mockery, he said, "Why, Albus, really, we have you to thank."

Eyes widening with indignation, Dumbledore shot forward, as if to leap to his feet. His outraged "*What?*" was cut off by his shocked gasp as Snape reacted to the older man's movements with a Binding Spell, shoving him back into the seat and tying his wrists to the chair arms. Snape's wand dangled indolently from his fingers as Dumbledore sputtered with fury.

His voice hoarse with shock, Dumbledore said, "What are you doing? How dare you? Release me this instant!"

Snape affected a yawn of boredom, then darted forward, his black eyes glinting menacingly as he snapped, "Silence! You want an explanation? Fine, you'll get one. But I'll *not* have you bouncing up with righteous indignation every five seconds!" He paused to meet the other man's icy glare with his own. "Besides," and his voice was a low drawl of warning as he leant forward, "I think it's high time you know what it feels like to be trapped. Just like I've felt for *decades*."

Hermione's hand crept up to cover her mouth as she watched the exchange between the two men. Dumbledore stared at Snape, aghast. Snape met his stare, refusing to back down. Finally, Dumbledore fell back against the chair, blinking, his mouth still open in shock at Snape's actions and words.

Snape sat back again, resettling himself and heaving a deep sigh. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes, you. We have you to thank, Albus. *You* were the one to insist that I participate in this whole play endeavour. If I hadn't, someone else would have been cast opposite Hermione, and *I* would never have had the chance to get to know her. Of course, even after I was cast, you forced us to meet alone, several times over, to 'work things out like adults'—if I remember your words correctly. Then you delighted in forcing us into a kind of intimacy no student and teacher should ever share."

Dumbledore stammered, "W-what do you mean?"

Snape's eyes narrowed again. "You *insisted* that she be the one to style my hair for the Phantom. If either of us had ever brought up the idea to brush the other's hair, outside of this play, you would have snapped us off like a twig! When was the last time anyone but yourself ever spent time brushing and styling your hair?" He didn't wait for a response, but barrelled on. "Unless it was a barber or a loved one, I'll wager never!"

Dumbledore merely blinked at him.

Snape's lips curled in distaste as he continued. "Then you sent us off to London together! Are you blind to the implications of a couple seeing a play like that together? You bloody well sent us on a *date*, and *then* you had us stay with the Grangers *away from Hogwarts* in the aftermath of such a thing!"

He paused to shake his head in remembered disbelief, then went on. "Plus, you kept making comments about how well Hermione and I were getting on, about how much she trusted me, and how I should *enjoy* the fact that I had made a *friend*. You teased me about 'loosening up' and becoming more 'mellow.' You may have praised me for the improved way I treated the Gryffindors, but it wasn't *your* influence, it was Hermione's. And yet, all the time you forced the issue, it was always to win the competition. You didn't really care what the ramifications of your pushing were, so long as we won. You damn near *ordered* me to let her kiss me so passionately onstage! You kept trying to meddle in my affairs, even intimating that I should find a 'special someone'..."

He was momentarily distracted from his rant by Hermione's huff of indignation. Glancing at her, he saw her glaring at Dumbledore with revulsion in her eyes. Dumbledore, on the other hand, was still staring at Snape in disbelief.

Taking another deep breath to regain control, Snape continued. "Well, I found that someone. She was under your nose all along. You kept pushing us together again and again. It worked. Being with Hermione through so much has taught me things I never had the chance to learn before. I discovered a reason to *live* now that my dance with death is over. She knows me better than you ever did, old man, because she truly loves me." He paused to look down at her, lifting her ring-clad hand in his to kiss it. "And I love her more than anything in this world. She *is* my world now."

Hermione smiled up at him, eyes bright with tears. Snape released her hand to caress her cheek. Dumbledore cleared his throat and they snapped their gazes to him.

"I-I don't believe it." Dumbledore's voice was raspy and he goggled at them. Both of their beatific expressions dissolved as they bristled at his words.

Snape gripped her hand again and thrust it toward Dumbledore. "Believe it! Do you see this ring? See how it fits? Watch." He tried to pull the ring down her finger. "It won't budge! That's because I had a betrothal charm and anti-theft charm woven in with the sizing charm." Dumbledore's eyes widened and Snape smiled. "That's right. You know what that means. It would never have shrunk to fit had she not accepted my proposal completely."

Dumbledore stared unblinkingly between them. Voice still hoarse, he said, "Just because it shrank to fit doesn't mean the feelings are mutual. Miss Granger may very well be besotted with you, Severus, but that doesn't mean your intentions are true. Who knows how you may have taken a student crush and twisted it to your own ends?"

Snape's jaw clenched at the accusation, but Hermione immediately burst out with, "*Him* twisting things? That's rich, coming from you, sir." Her eyes burned with disgust as she gazed at him in reproach.

Snape laid a hand on hers and said, "A point, my love, but he has one as well." He paused to meet her astonished eyes. "Proof of your feelings is there on your hand for all the world to see, but mine is not so visible." He turned to lock eyes with Dumbledore again. "Very well, Albus. You want more proof? I'll give it to you, but only because I

know it hurts Hermione that you think so poorly of me."

Dumbledore grimaced at him and rumbled, "What proof can you give me?"

Snape leant forward again and pinned him with his intense stare. "The same kind of proof I've given you all my life about where my loyalties lay. Which would you prefer: Legilimency or the Pensieve?"

Both Hermione and Dumbledore gasped. Hermione gripped Snape's arm to get his attention and eyed him with a furrowed brow, her cheeks flushing. "Severus, are you sure you want to do that? Isn't that kind of... you know... personal?"

Snape looked at her, one brow climbing as he said, "I told you, I'm not hiding anything anymore. Besides, it's not much different than what you did with Ginny, is it?"

Dumbledore choked and sputtered, "Miss Weasley? *She* knows about you two? How? When?"

Snape cut a glance at Dumbledore and drawled, "Ginny figured things out at Christmas. Hermione convinced her to keep our secret. What's the matter, Albus, don't like a little girl being cleverer than you?" The older man shot a black glance at Snape and Snape smirked. "All right then, which is it to be?"

Dumbledore glared at him, stone-faced. "Fine, I'll see what you have to show."

Snape cast a reassuring look at Hermione and slid off the arm of the chair to sit on the ottoman, on a level with Dumbledore. "Remember, you wanted proof of how I feel about Hermione. Do you really think you're ready for it?"

Dumbledore tossed his head and sneered. "We'll see if you're telling the truth, Severus." He settled himself in the chair and locked gazes with Snape. "*Legilimens!*"

Snape felt the buffeting caress of Dumbledore entering his mind, roughly sliding over him like a fitful wind. Determined that the other man should have no remaining questions about Snape's feelings, Snape consciously opened up, delving back to the burgeoning emotions that had so beguiled and beset him. He purposefully toured through the development of the mutual attraction between him and Hermione, selectively using Occlumency to blur the portions that no doubt would have mortified Hermione. The joy at Hermione's progressive confessions culminated in his declaration of love in the alley in London, and he held Dumbledore's invading consciousness in an iron grip, forcing him to feel the crashing waves of adoration that pulled Snape into the undertow of love and devotion, drowning him.

Dumbledore, foolishly thinking he would take a rifling peek through Snape's mind to see evidence of him manipulating Hermione, gasped aloud at the imprisoning control Snape exerted on his questing brain, completely stunned at the soul-deep intensity of the love Snape felt for the young woman. Thus it was that he quit resisting when Snape dragged him along again, subjecting him to the pain and bewilderment when Dumbledore betrayed him.

Snape once again held his former mentor in that memory, pressing him against the searing pain of it, like trapping him against a hot stove. Dumbledore struggled again, trying to draw away from the anguish, but Snape persisted a moment more before releasing him in favour of tugging him to the aftermath of that event, once again consciously blurring over Hermione's nudity and skipping the erotic ventures, focusing instead on the comfort she gave him, and the way she embodied a balm to his shattered soul.

Dumbledore limply floated along with Snape as the younger man flashed up scene after scene of domestic bliss and pure happiness and laughter shared with Hermione, ending with the delight and wonder that suffused him as he proposed, eclipsing everything around them when he saw the ring tighten. Knowing full well that Dumbledore was overwhelmed by all that he had felt in Snape's mind, Snape sat back and closed his eyes, averting his face to thoroughly break the connection.

Dumbledore wilted into his seat, eyes dazed as he blinked slowly. Snape twisted sideways on the ottoman, offering another reassuring look at Hermione. She nodded anxiously at him, cheeks still flushed with embarrassment. When they turned to look at Dumbledore, they both jerked in surprise.

The older man suddenly looked it, as if he had aged in just moments, and he drooped in the chair as tears flowed from beneath his half-moon glasses, drowning the righteous anger and leaving only remorse. After a beat of echoing silence, Snape and Hermione were shocked to hear a wracking sob followed by a shuddering indrawn breath and a shamed whisper of, "I'm sorry."

Dumbledore's apology hit Snape like a Bludger in the gut. As much as he had wished for it, as much as he knew he deserved it, as long as he had been waiting for it, he was completely unprepared to get it. Had he been walking, he would have stumbled. As it was, he simply stared as Dumbledore's face fell, averting his streaming eyes to weep into his beard.

Behind Snape, Hermione looked from Dumbledore to her lover, noting the tension in the high set of his shoulders. Aware of how much those two words meant to Snape, she felt a lump rising in her throat as well. The silence stretched on, broken only by Dumbledore's uneven breaths as his wretchedness was purged through his tears.

Hermione was about to reach forward and rest a comforting hand on Snape's back when he suddenly shot to his feet, brandishing his wand. A clipped incantation Vanished the ropes securing Dumbledore to the chair and Snape spun, resting his forehead against his wrist as he leant against the mantel. Dumbledore lifted his hands to hide his face, curling forward and propping his elbows on his knees.

Hermione sat, frozen, unsure of what to do. She pulled Dumbledore's wand from between the cushion and chair arm and held it limply, dithering over whether she should give it back or not.

Dumbledore burrowed in a pocket of his robes and withdrew a handkerchief. He was clearly trying to regain control of himself as he wiped his eyes and blew his nose, his spectacles clamped in one hand. Sniffing hugely, he shoved them back onto his crooked nose and dared a glance at Snape's back where he stood at the hearth. Twisting the fabric in his hands, he rasped, "Severus... please."

Hermione flicked a look at Snape and saw his jaw throbbing as he clenched his teeth. His eyes were screwed shut and his hands gripped into fists. There was a long pause as he struggled, then he shoved back from the mantel and dropped his hands to his sides, sucking in a deep breath through his nose. Swallowing hard, he spun on his heel and met Dumbledore's imploring gaze.

Dumbledore stretched a hand out to Snape and repeated, "Severus... please." He gestured to the ottoman again and Snape sank onto it. Bowing his head, the older man said, "It's my fault. I see that now. I had no idea... no, that's not right. I refused to see what was there in front of me. Minerva tried to tell me, but I wouldn't listen. I was too focused on myself and I ignored how I hurt you. I'm sorry, Severus. I can never forgive myself for the pain I put you through, and I wouldn't be surprised if you can't either."

Hermione's hands crept up to cover her trembling lips, shocked that Dumbledore had admitted his culpability. She wished she could see Snape's face, but all she could see was his back, posture tense once again.

Snape cleared his throat and rumbled, "I take it you believe that I am in earnest about my feelings for Hermione?"

Dumbledore lifted wondering eyes to Snape and shook his head faintly. "I would never have imagined it, but there is no doubt about your sincerity."

Hermione's heart lifted, and her hands hid a tremulous smile. Before her, Snape twisted sideways and cast a glance at her, uttering a clipped, "Good."

Snape shoved to his feet and strode to the dining table, closing the box that was on it. Dumbledore watched him go, then turned to Hermione, a wistful expression on his face. "May I offer my congratulations to you both, Miss Granger?"

Hermione recognized the olive branch for what it was and nodded. "Thank you, Professor." She looked back at his wand in her hands and then cast an awkward glance at Snape. "Severus?" Snape slanted a dark look over his shoulder and she tilted her head at Dumbledore's wand, jiggling it meaningfully. "Well?"

Snape turned and crossed back to her, looking from the wand to its owner and back. His suspicion was obvious. "If we return your wand, do we have your word that you will not use it to continue persecuting us?"

Dumbledore lifted his hands, palms out. "You have my word. I'm sorry for the way I behaved before. But I will need to return upstairs and deal with the repercussions. I would like to have my wand back for that, please."

Hermione's eyes went wide and she met Snape's frown with a worried look. "Repercussions... what do you think will happen, sir?"

Dumbledore heaved a sigh and blinked rapidly. "You two left quite an uproar behind. Gods know what's been going on up there since I left. I would hope that the Ministry officials will be waiting until I return before contacting their colleagues. I'm sure there will be an inquest—"

Snape cut in, growling, "Hermione's grades are perfectly legitimate! I'm sure you saw her N.E.W.T.s already. I wasn't even the one to test her—the Wizarding Examinations Authority did that. She is of age, and is no longer a student here, nor was she when I proposed! Her Ministry contract is binding, regardless of her personal life, provided she doesn't break any laws, so her job is safe. We're not stupid, Albus; we made sure to cover all contingencies. As a matter of fact, we can leave here right away and make the break from Hogwarts even cleaner if you like. Spinner's End is ready for us."

Dumbledore nodded placatingly, but said, "I understand, Severus, but clearly a proposal is not something one does at the beginning of a relationship, so the question stands about how long you've been involved, and just *how* involved you've been." He flicked an uncomfortable glance between them.

Hermione, flushing awkwardly, sat forward and burst forth with, "We haven't... that is... not all the... well, I mean... if you're talking about... you know, consummation, then... we've never..."

Snape whirled on her, glaring as he coloured furiously, hissing, "Hermione! That's none of his business!"

Dumbledore, trying vainly to look as if discussing the sexual liaisons between his staff and students weren't extremely embarrassing, retorted, "On the contrary, Severus. Miss Granger has the right of it. If I am to help calm the furore and keep you out of Azkaban, then the question of the extent of your intimacy is a pertinent one." He lifted his chin and eyed Snape loftily. "Can you honestly, even under the influence of Veritaserum if required, say that you two have not had sex?"

Snape, looking as if he were about to fling hexes at the unarmed man—well, either that or spit nails—cut a guilty glance at Hermione, then bit out, "We have not engaged in intercourse." His lip curled in distaste at sharing such details, but inwardly he reeled in thanks that he had refused to cross that line. While he had mainly done so to keep his word, for himself, he was glad that he could make the distinction if necessary.

Hermione huddled in her chair, face bright red with mortification. It was one thing to share some details with Ginny, and quite another to do so with someone like Dumbledore; the man seemed like everyone's dotty great-uncle! Biting her lower lip, she murmured, "Do you think it will come to that? Veritaserum?"

Snape's arms crossed defensively over his chest, and he scowled at the room in general. Dumbledore shrugged eloquently. "I don't know. Hopefully, I still have enough authority that my testimony will be enough to stave off such a possibility. If we're lucky, they'll leave me to handle it, and it won't come to that."

Dumbledore's words seemed to sink through Snape's seething indignation. Blinking, he turned to the older man and said, "Wait. *Your* authority? Did I hear you correctly? Are you talking about *helping* us?"

He stared incredulously at Dumbledore, his brow furrowed. Hermione's hands rose to clamp over her mouth again, afraid to distract them from what she could sense was an important moment.

Dumbledore rose, his expression once again wistful. Closing the distance between them, he locked gazes with Snape and whispered, "I can only say I'm sorry so much. And a wise man once told me that platitudes are meaningless; actions speak louder than words." He reached out and gripped Snape's arm. "I've told you before that you are like a son to me and that I care for you. You told me to prove it. Family protects those they love, Severus. I'm here to help you. If you'll let me."

He ducked his head in humility, and Snape stared, completely taken aback. A hot flush of shame washed over him, meeting the warmth bubbling up within his chest. Swallowing hard, he floundered, unsure of what to do.

He had always wanted Dumbledore's approval and regard, until the man had hurt him beyond imagining. Then, his anger simmered, always under the surface, demanding an admission of guilt and real remorse. For months, Dumbledore hadn't shown any of what Snape required, so Snape had stoked the fire of his anger, banking it so it wouldn't burn out. And now, Dumbledore had not only given him the apology and remorse he felt he deserved, but he was offering to do what only a man with his standing in the wizarding world could do: Help smooth Snape's path on his journey toward freedom.

Conflicting emotions roiled in his gut, and he felt a flash of panic, not knowing what the best course of action was. Instinctively, he looked to Hermione, appeal evident in his eyes. She gazed at him over her hands covering her mouth, her eyes gleaming with unshed tears. Head tilting to one side, she nodded slowly, silently urging him to accept Dumbledore's offer.

Snape looked back at the older man's averted face, then glanced at his hand gripping Snape's bicep. Reaching across and clamping down on Dumbledore's wrist, he pried the man's hand from his arm. Dumbledore glanced up, startled and dismayed. Snape looked up and locked gazes with him. Without a word, Snape slid his grip down Dumbledore's wrist, slipping it against his palm and clasping hands.

Dawning comprehension and relieved gratitude spread over Dumbledore's face, and his eyes once again filled with tears. Hitching a breath, he tugged on Snape's hand clasped in his, pulling the younger man into an embrace. Dumbledore wrapped his arms around Snape, patting him on the back as he released a shuddering breath, and Snape remained silent, letting his uncharacteristic intimacy speak for him.

Hermione smiled tremulously, wiping her eyes and sniffing back her happy tears.

The tableau lasted for a long, charged moment, then Snape stiffened, trying to draw back out of Dumbledore's embrace. His cheeks were flushed and his expression was one of ill-concealed awkwardness. Dumbledore released him and backed away, smiling weakly.

As if by reflex, Snape stepped back from Dumbledore and turned to Hermione, closing the distance between them quickly as she stood to comfort him, slipping her arms around his waist and pressing her face against his chest. Heaving a sigh of relief, Snape curled one arm around her shoulders and caressed her hair with the other hand, ducking his head to kiss her curls.

Dumbledore backed toward the hearth, watching them with an expression of fascination and incredulity. Now that he had seen and felt all that Snape had showed him, he could recognize the connection between the pair, and he shook his head in wonder at the intensity of it.

Hermione pulled back and lifted her face to Snape. In a low murmur, she said, "So, dear heart, shall we return his wand and let him go fend off the Ministry for us?" She tilted her head and wrinkled her nose. "I can think of some others we need to talk to... and soon."

Snape frowned at her, perplexed at her remark. "Who?"

Hermione cocked one brow and shot him a grimace of anxiety. "My parents."

Snape's eyes snapped open wide, and he sucked in a breath. Swallowing in dismay, he blinked, recognizing her point. Slanting a look back at Dumbledore—who irritated him by managing to look sympathetic and somehow already regaining his characteristic twinkle of amusement—he closed his eyes and thinned his lips, nodding. Gazing back down at her, he said, "May as well."

Hermione stepped back, holding Dumbledore's wand, and looked at him near the fireplace. But, when she started to move toward him to give it back, she stopped, cutting a glance at Snape. Nodding to herself, she proffered it to him instead and said, "Why don't you?"

Snape's brows rose in surprise, and he flicked a look at Dumbledore. Locking eyes again with Hermione, he cottoned on to her meaning. Inclining his head in understanding, he took the wand from her and crossed to Dumbledore.

"Would you rather I just let you out, or would you prefer to leave by Floo? I can unblock it, provided you agree to not try to come back through. I think it would be prudent for us to leave tonight. As soon as we can gather our things, we'll be Flooing to Spinner's End." He held the wand out, handle forward, and Dumbledore took it.

"I'll just leave by the front door, if you please. I wouldn't want anyone else to try to Floo in here before you're ready to leave. I daresay you'll have your hands full... explaining to the Grangers." He inclined his head and peered over his glasses at Snape, lips quirked in a wry smile.

Snape heaved a deep breath, scowling. "Fine." He strode to the door and unlocked it, disarming his wards. "And I daresay you'll have enough to be going on with when you get up there, since all and sundry are doubtless going to be accosting you for information." He rolled his eyes. As Dumbledore joined him at the door, Snape reached for the knob, then paused. Frowning again, he cast a wary glance at Dumbledore and said, "If you would, please tell Minerva that I'll be contacting her soon. I'm sure she's beyond shocked, and I... want her to understand."

Dumbledore nodded sagely. "I'll be certain to pass along the message." He paused and Snape opened the door. "And any messages I have for you will be sent to Spinner's End."

Snape nodded and Dumbledore left, lifting his hand in farewell. Snape shut the door and quickly locked it, resetting his wards. When he turned to face Hermione again, she was already walking toward him.

Flinging herself against him and squeezing tight, she said, "Mercy, that was nerve-wracking!"

Snape snorted and said, "Indeed." He pulled back and lifted her face to his, his expression pleading. "All the more reason we should wait to see your parents, right? Haven't you had enough stress for one evening?"

Hermione grimaced and backed away. "Nice try, love. You do realize that if we wait, someone *else* will get to them first? Do you *really* want to have to deal with not only telling them, but having to pick up the pieces from the resulting explosion if they hear about it from elsewhere first?" She shook her head, face solemn. "No. We have to tell them. And *soon*." Her hands flew up in the air and she looked heavenward as she burst out with, "Gods! Can you just imagine how awful we'd be painted if someone like Rita Skeeter got to them first?"

Snape recoiled. Shuddering, he growled, "All right. Then let's get your things and get out of here. As soon as we have everything safe at Spinner's End, we can go to your parents' house."

She nodded sharply, and they immediately set to gathering his remaining items and setting them by the hearth. Then, they Apparated to her room, where they collected her baggage and Crookshanks. Finally, with everything piled within easy reach, Snape unblocked the Floo and they made several trips between his sitting room and Spinner's End, Hermione taking the time to put Crookshanks's food and water down and set up a litter box before they finished.

Standing in the living room at Spinner's End, Snape blocked the Floo there, to keep out overzealous inquiries. Turning to Hermione, he looked at the time and said, "It's late. Why don't we wait till later? Surely you don't want to disturb your parents now?"

Hermione pinned him with a black look and said, "They're going to be 'disturbed' regardless, Severus! The longer we wait, the worse it may be. Let's just get this over with." Frowning, she crossed her arms and sighed, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

Snape reached up to run a hand through his hair and realized it was still slicked back for the Phantom. Clearing his throat, he said, "I'll be just a moment," and hastened to the toilet. While he removed the elastic and raked his fingers through his hair to separate the gelled tresses, he stared at himself in the mirror. *You never thought to contend with this so soon! How do you propose to approach them now that you've proposed to their daughter? You may not care about what others think about you, but you can't afford to write off these two. They're going to be an integral part of your relationship with Hermione; they're her parents and they love her. You know they liked you before, but can they ever love you as well?*

Gripping the sink basin and bowing his head, he took several deep breaths in an attempt to steady his nerves. Shooting one last apprehensive look at himself, he left the sanctuary of the W.C. to rejoin Hermione in the living room.

She was pacing back and forth, her eyes roaming over the furnishings, but not seeing them. When Snape appeared, she snapped her attention to him and swallowed hard. "Ready?"

Snape crossed to her and caressed her arms in an attempt at comfort. "Where shall we Apparate to: the back garden, or the alley nearby, or inside?"

Hermione chewed her lip and said, "I guess we may as well just Apparate into my room like I did when I went to get the programme. Do you remember what it looks like?"

Snape smirked. "My dear, I will never forget what it looked like with you dressed up in that little girl's room."

Hermione managed a faint answering smile. "All right then. We'll both Apparate, unless you want me to take you?"

"I'll manage. I'll go by the door, and you can go by the vanity table."

Hermione nodded again and they separated. Gazes locked, with matching expressions of trepidation and determination, they both disappeared on the spot.

74- Conversation and Consideration

Chapter 78 of 84

If Snape thought meeting Hermione's parents the first time was a harrowing possibility, how on earth can he prepare for *this* meeting?

Just playing in JKR's sandbox. Making no money. Move along, move along...

Author's Note: I know this update wasn't as fast as the last couple, but I got it done as fast as I could. Thanks to Ladyofthemasque for mad beta skillz, yo. And thank you to all of you for your continued support as we approach the end of this journey. As always, check out my LJ for update info: <http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/> Hope you enjoy! :)

Chapter 74-Conversation and Consideration

They arrived in Hermione's room, both immediately glancing around them, taking in the childish surroundings dimly lit from the streetlamp outside. Hermione crossed to Snape by the door and peered up into his shadowed face. Snape murmured, "Just how do you propose to do this?"

Hermione frowned and whispered, "I don't know. There's really no way to do it gently. Let me find them, and then we'll sit down for a talk." She ducked past him and out the door, stepping to the top of the stairs and listening. "I hear the telly; they must be downstairs." Lifting one finger toward Snape, she called out, "Mum? Dad? Are you home?"

Startled cries rose from the living room downstairs and the thumping of running feet heralded their arrival into the hallway below.

"Hermione? What are you doing here?" Her mother was in a long nightshirt that bore a picture of a scowling duck and the message *Mornings put me in a fowl mood*. The slippers on her feet were clearly very old and worn, with fuzzy yellow duck heads at the toes. Hermione had given them to her as a gift when she was a young child, and her father had given her the nightshirt at the same time.

"Ah! So you decided not to wait until tomorrow to come home!" Her father was clad in a pair of tattered old gym shorts and a thin, faded t-shirt that bore the logo *Virginia is for lovers*, a souvenir from their holiday to the US from where they had brought home the Old Bay seasoning Snape had tasted at the dinner before he and Hermione had gone to the play.

Snape was still inside the doorway of her room, hanging back reluctantly in the shadows. Hermione darted a glance at him and bit her lower lip.

"Actually, that's not exactly correct. I do have something I need to talk to you about. I'm glad you're still up. It's... important." With that, she set one foot on the step below and turned sideways, gazing at Snape and beckoning him forward.

Snape stepped out into the hallway and gravely nodded a greeting at the Grangers. "Good evening, Geoff, Dione. I apologize for the lateness of this intrusion."

If the Grangers had been surprised to see Hermione suddenly pop up in the hallway, it was nothing compared to the shock registering on their faces at the sight of Snape materializing from the darkness of her bedroom doorway.

Dione's hand flew to her mouth, attempting to cover her mortification at being seen in such attire, and Geoff jerked back, frowning in confusion as he said, "Professor Snape? Is everything all right?"

Snape attempted a reassuring smile, but felt like his face would crack. He wasn't altogether sure that it wasn't more of a grimace. "Hermione's fine. Why don't we go downstairs and sit?"

The Grangers exchanged an apprehensive look. Geoff recovered himself and flashed a tight smile. "Of course. Come on down."

Hermione led the way and Snape watched her worrying her hands as she descended. They all trooped into the living room, and there was an awkward moment when both couples started toward the couch, but Dione backed away, saying, "If you'll excuse me, I'll be right back."

She hurried out of the room and raced up the stairs, the door to the master bedroom slamming in her wake. Geoff stood still and Hermione skulked around to the couch, cutting a glance at Snape to follow. They sat, and Geoff retreated to one of the armchairs instead, grabbing the remote as he went.

Turning off the TV, he said, "No need for that to drone on if you have news. As soon as your mother gets back, you can tell us what's so important." He nodded at them, eyeing Snape warily.

Hermione nodded, flicking another glance at Snape to her left before eyeing her father's concerned expression and chewing her lip again. All of them looked toward the doorway at the sound of a door opening and slamming upstairs. Dione's hurried footsteps ended with her arrival in the living room, where she paused on the threshold to resettle her tightly tied bathrobe. Her feet no longer bore stuffed ducks, but instead sported plain socks.

Attempting a dignified demeanour, Dione crossed to a second armchair and sat, tucking her feet under her and smoothing the robe over her knees. Exchanging a look with Geoff, she said, "Sorry about that. Now, what's going on?"

Hermione licked her lips and took a deep breath. Snape noticed that her hands were curled in her lap, and her right hand was covering her left, obscuring view of the ring. "Well, as you know, today was the Leaving Feast, and the Ministry arrived to present Hogwarts with the trophy and prize money." Her parents nodded, still looking puzzled. "After the Feast and the presentation, we were to perform a reprise of some scenes." Dione smiled in appreciation. "We did Music of the Night, Masquerade, and Point of No Return."

She glanced at Snape again, and he inclined his head in encouragement.

Swallowing hard, Hermione said, "Something happened at the performance that we wanted to be the first to tell you about." She paused, then looked at Snape imploringly, reaching over to take his hand. Snape took it gladly, lacing his fingers through hers and gazing down to see the ring sparkling in the lamplight. Hermione squeezed his hand and said, "Mum, Dad, Severus and I are in love, and we're engaged."

Snape cut a glance at her parents in time to see the smile slide off Dione's face, to be replaced by incredulity. Geoff was frowning in confusion, but his lips were thin with burgeoning anger.

Dione was the first to respond. She voiced a shaky laugh, then said, "Mercy, you really had me going there for a second, Hermione." Turning a reproachful eye on Snape, she added, "Honestly, Severus, what on earth brought you to go along with such a ridiculous prank?"

Snape merely turned to face her fully, his expression solemn and his hand shifting to force the ring into more prominent view. Before he could reply, Hermione said, "Mum, it's not a joke. We didn't want you to find out from someone else first. We... uh... caused quite a stir, since Severus surprised me...and everyone else, naturally...by proposing at the end of Point of No Return. We haven't even seen anyone but Dumbledore since then, as we Disapparated away immediately afterwards."

Dione's eyes widened and her face went white. Geoff's face, however, was getting redder by the second and his brows lowered into a deep scowl.

Snape, desperate to make his intentions completely clear, said, "Geoff, Dione... I love Hermione more than anything. Nothing could make me happier than to spend my life with her. I already have a home ready for us, and we've decided that Hermione will be moving in right away. I'm sorry that this is such a shock, but surely you can appreciate how untenable our situation was while school was still in session."

Geoff burst out with, "Appreciate? We're supposed to appreciate that our daughter's *teacher* has taken advantage of her and filled her head with fantasies? How many other students have you manipulated over the years? I can't think of anything more despicable..." He trailed off, lip curling in disgust as he glared at Snape.

Snape's gut clenched, but he held his tongue, afraid of making the situation worse. Hermione, on the other hand, had no such compunctions and shot to her feet, hands in trembling fists at her sides as she hissed, "Stop it! I won't listen to you maligning the man I love! Severus has done no such thing, nor would he! We didn't plan to fall in

love; we even tried to fight it. But we couldn't help it! I was afraid to tell you; I knew you wouldn't understand. But we *are* going to be together, whether you accept us or not."

The silence after her impassioned response was rife with tension. Hermione was breathing heavily, cheeks scarlet as she met her father's glare with her own mutinous one.

Dione's hand had crept to her throat, and her eyes were glassy. Snape rose, his hand gently cupping Hermione's elbow, murmuring, "Hermione, why don't we go. There's nothing to be gained by staying; you wouldn't want to say something you'll regret."

Geoff shot to his feet, his voice rising to match his temper as he shouted, "You think you can just burst in here and claim our daughter and pop right back out again without so much as a by your leave? No, sir, that's not on. You're not going *anywhere* until we get this all sorted out. And don't you even *dare* reach for your wand under my roof...either of you!"

Snape lifted his hand in a placating gesture, his head bowed. Hermione looked about to explode again, but Snape interceded, saying, "All right. If you wish us to stay, we shall. But, I must tell you this..." and he lifted his head to lock gazes with Geoff "...I'll not use my wand, as long as you refrain from attacking us. We did not come here to be abused. We are here in good faith, and I will not abide you haranguing Hermione." His voice, which had begun in a deferential tone, hardened as he finished, and he watched Geoff's eyes widen in outrage at Snape's ultimatum.

Geoff drew breath to retort, but Dione spoke first. "Geoff! Everyone! Sit down! Surely there's an explanation for all this. Let's just sit down and talk things out like reasonable adults." She stared hard at her husband, as if willing him to take his seat. Snape maintained his grip on Hermione's arm, watching both her and her father.

Geoff released a long huffing breath, but sank into his chair again, glaring at his daughter and Snape through narrowed eyes. Hermione glanced back at Snape and he nodded, gently guiding her to sit beside him. They all settled again, Hermione firmly gripping Snape's hand for moral support.

Dione cleared her throat and said, in a forced voice, "All right, let me get this straight. You, Hermione, and you, *Professor* Snape, say you are in love and engaged."

She paused, and Hermione interjected, "Yes. This is the ring Severus gave me tonight." Hermione lifted her hand from Snape's, displaying the glinting stone. "And, just so you know..." and she paused, trying to pull the ring down her finger and demonstrating that it wouldn't move, "...it's charmed so it can't be taken from me without my express wish, and it automatically shrinks to fit me no matter what. Severus had the charms worked into the ring as proof that I have accepted his proposal fully and willingly. Even Dumbledore couldn't doubt my sincerity; that's how the charm works."

Dione blinked rapidly. "Hermione, he's your teacher! How could this happen?" Her voice was a strident wail of disbelief.

Hermione, choosing to focus on her mother and not her glowering father, leant forward and said, "Mum, we were thrown together in the play, and we got to know each other through such intimacy within it. We fell in love! Surely you can imagine how that might happen?" She tilted her head and raised her brows at her mother meaningfully. "You know how besotted *you* were with Severus every time he sang..."

Dione flushed uncomfortably, her hand scrabbling nervously at her throat as she looked away. Even Snape ducked his head, wishing his hair weren't still gelled, so that it would be loose to hide his face.

Geoff growled, "So, what did your headmaster have to say about all this?"

Hermione scowled and said, "Pretty much the same thing you said, but with added hexes."

Dione's eyes flew wide. "*Dumbledore* tried to *hex* you?"

Snape murmured, "Indeed. Hermione was actually the one to subdue him. After that, I was able to convince him of our true feelings."

Geoff barked, "How?"

Snape met the other man's gaze and said, "Legilimency."

In the crackling silence that followed, Dione said, "Wait, what is that?"

Geoff snorted mirthlessly. "Don't you remember, dear? Our darling daughter told us about it before. It amounts to mind reading."

Dione turned puzzled eyes to Snape. "So you read *Dumbledore's* mind?"

"No. He read mine. And I showed him exactly how I felt about Hermione. He felt it...with me...in my mind."

Geoff's lip curled in derision. "Of course, we don't have that ability, being Muggles. So, we're just supposed to take your word for it, eh? We don't get the luxury of 'proof.'"

Snape lifted Hermione's hand and nodded at the ring. "Here's your proof. Beyond that, I'll gladly spend the rest of my life proving to Hermione how much I love her."

Hermione flashed an adoring look at Snape, who brought her knuckles to his lips for a gentle kiss. Dione covered a gasp with a cough, and Geoff huffed through his nose again.

Hermione turned an imploring look on her parents. "Mum, Dad, please... I'm so happy. Can't you be happy for me?"

Her words rang a bell in Snape's memory, and he suddenly zeroed in on her father, frowning in concentration. Geoff noticed and scowled even more.

Dione looked helplessly at her husband and saw him glaring hard at Snape, who was staring at him intently. Geoff growled, "What?"

Snape eyed the irate man thoughtfully and said, "As Hermione and I are here in a show of good faith, telling you the truth as soon as we could, I must say that we would appreciate the same consideration."

Geoff bristled, puffing up as he said, "What are you implying?"

Snape tilted his head and raised his brows, lilting, "I'm not implying anything. I'm telling you not to lie to us."

At that, Geoff sat forward in his chair, incensed. His voice shook with suppressed rage as he said, "I have *never* lied to my daughter!"

Snape jumped on his words like a snake striking. "What about what you said in November? You told her that she was smart enough to know her own heart and that, as long as she was happy with someone she truly loved, you couldn't wish anything more for her. You told her that you could only hope that she would find someone and that they would be as happy as you and Dione are. But, considering your behaviour tonight, you must have been lying then."

Every eye was on Snape. Dione was watching the tense exchange with a faint perplexed expression, Hermione was staring at Snape in stunned recognition, and Geoff was agog, his mouth working soundlessly as he tried to respond.

Finally, Geoff rasped, "How could you know that?"

Snape held the man's shocked gaze and said, "I was there. And I have a very good memory for anything relating to loving Hermione. It's a subject dear to my heart."

The outraged colour flooding Geoff's face drained away, leaving him pale as he remembered that conversation with his daughter.

Clearly still processing this revelation, Geoff repeated, "You were there? Where? I didn't see you there!"

Hermione answered before Snape could. "He was against the wall, concealed. You couldn't have seen him even if you had known he was there. I wasn't sure if he had left or not when you came in."

Geoff's eyes narrowed and he shot an ugly glance at Snape. "You were in my daughter's room while she was in bed? What kind of sick stalker does that?"

Even Dione was staring at Snape, her expression disgusted and affronted. Snape clenched his teeth in a bid for patience, but Hermione blurted heatedly, "I guess that'd be *me*!"

Geoff whipped his gaze to Hermione, and Snape looked at her warningly. Dione said, "What on earth does that mean?"

Hermione's cheeks were flushing even more as she cut a guilty glance at Snape, but she lifted her chin haughtily as she said, "If it's a stalker who goes into someone's room when they're asleep, then *I'm* the stalker. I crept across the hall to Severus after we had gone to bed. We were finally someplace where we could talk about our feelings for each other, and I didn't want to waste the opportunity. The only reason he was in my room the next morning was because he Apparated us there when we heard you coming down the hallway."

Snape closed his eyes at Hermione voicing this damning evidence. Telling her parents that they were in love and engaged was a very different thing than admitting that they had slept together under their very roof.

Dione's mouth opened and her eyes goggled. Geoff drew back in his chair in shock. His voice was a whisper as he said, "What were you doing still there *the next morning*?"

His outraged expression spoke volumes of what he dared not put into words. Unfortunately, his wife had no such qualms. Dione's hand was once again at her throat as she said, her voice shrill, "Hermione Jane Granger! You did *not* engage in sexual relations with your *professor* in this house, did you?"

Snape's head rolled back in mortification, his eyes still closed. He grimaced when he heard Hermione start to speak.

"Not that it's really any of your business: No. As much as I may have tried to convince him otherwise..." Snape choked and flung his face forward into his hands, "...Severus made me realize that having sex would be a bad idea, for many reasons."

The silence following her proclamation was profound. Snape's face was still buried in his hands, and he could hear the shallow breathing of her parents across from them. He hadn't felt this embarrassed in a long time. But, he knew he had to say *something*. Sliding his fingers over his face and onto the crown of his head, he kept staring at his knees as he croaked, "I promise you, on my mother's grave, that I have never...nor would I ever do so...taken advantage of your daughter."

Dione's voice faltered as she retorted, "Your mother's grave?"

Snape merely nodded, his head still cradled in his hands.

Hermione murmured, "Killed by Death Eaters when he was barely out of Hogwarts."

Dione gasped and breathed, "And your father?"

Hermione once again answered for him. "Killed in a factory accident when he was in fifth year." She paused, then added, sardonically, "*You're* the only parents we have to worry about telling."

There was another pregnant pause. Snape realized he was being a coward, hiding his face like this, as if he had something to be ashamed of, and he swallowed hard, firming his resolve to face his accusers. Lifting his head, he smoothed his hands back over his gelled hair and let them drop to his lap. Attempting a dignified demeanour, he looked at Dione and Geoff.

He was only slightly surprised to see Dione staring at him with a mixture of indignation and pity. Her queries about his parents were quite telling in regard to her compassion for his loss. But he was extremely shocked to see Geoff averting his eyes in what looked like shame when Snape tried to meet his gaze.

Snape's voice was low as he said, "Dumbledore, too, questioned the extent of our intimacy. He is satisfied with our response. As mortifying as it is to speak of it to you, I can assure you that we have not consummated our relationship. If questioned thusly under the influence of Veritaserum..."

Dione hissed, "What's that?" and Geoff rumbled, "Truth serum," interrupting Snape's speech.

Snape continued, "...I am fully able to attest to that fact." He kept his head up, even though he couldn't bring himself to meet their eyes, aware that his face was burning. Hermione reached over and gripped his hand in comfort. Snape looked down at the ring and resolved that no matter what happened, he and Hermione would be together.

The silence was even more awkward than before. Finally, Hermione said, "Mum, Dad, we certainly never meant to upset you. I know this is all a shock, but we're in love and happy, and that should be all that matters. I'm sorry you've got such short notice about me not coming home. Granted, I had no idea Severus would be proposing to me tonight, so I knew I'd have to break the news of our relationship to you anyway in order to explain why I wouldn't be staying here. I had thought perhaps to hedge matters and, once school was over and I was at the Ministry, to gradually make our relationship public..." and she flicked a glance that was both exasperated and delighted at Snape, who instantly retorted.

"I told you *and* Dumbledore: I'm tired of hiding! I am not ashamed of loving you, and I'm not about to pretend I don't!" He locked eyes with her, his jaw set in determination.

Dione and Geoff exchanged a glance at his fervent declaration. With the ease of long years of practice, they had a silent conversation. Dione raised her brows and tilted her head at the couple, and Geoff grimaced. Then, she narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, to which Geoff rolled his eyes and huffed. Lips quirking in a faint smile, Dione nodded and sighed, leaving Geoff to cut a petulant glance at his daughter and a grudging one at Snape. Neither Snape nor Hermione noticed the exchange, as they were so engrossed in each other.

Geoff cleared his throat, breaking the lovers from their connection. They shot sheepish yet defiant glances at her parents, and Dione saw Snape caressing Hermione's hand, his fingers rubbing across the ring as if to make certain that it was there.

Hermione faced her parents with an imploring gaze. "Please, please don't be angry. I love you, but I'm in love with Severus. I don't want to have to choose between you. And you already liked him before! So why not now? He's no different; just now he can admit to loving me. You know how protective he is of me; you were there to hear all his cautions when we were going over my Ministry contract. He urged me to sign it before school was over, so it won't make any difference that we're together, since the contract is already magically binding..."

Once again, Snape cut in, murmuring, "I would never have dared to propose had you not been bound in that contract. Do you think I would ever do anything that could jeopardize your future? We learned that lesson well, love."

Hermione and Snape met each other's eyes with a knowing, rueful look, and Dione couldn't help but say, "What do you mean?"

Snape exhaled a long breath of regret and said quietly, "We were discovered. Twice, actually. The first time was by Miss Weasley, and Hermione managed to convince her to keep our secret. She has remained a staunch friend ever since, and we are grateful for her support." Hermione nodded vehemently. "The second time, another student...a boy who was infatuated with Hermione...discovered my presence with Hermione, and we...I...was forced to modify his memory to erase that evidence."

Snape looked up to see both parents gazing at him, appalled. Refusing to look away again, he continued, "I couldn't allow his jealousy to harm Hermione in any way. If I had been sacked, so be it. I already had plans to start a new path. But it was unconscionable that Hermione's reputation and education be destroyed. I'm not proud of it, but I did what had to be done to protect her."

Geoff nodded faintly, surprising Snape.

Feeling as if he might be gaining ground, Snape said, "Hermione is everything to me. She is my life, my future, my happiness. I hadn't thought to have any of those, considering my precarious position as a spy. Even after the war was over, I had nothing to look forward to, until Hermione came into my life. I had a reason to live and build a life for myself. And I have done so, but it's not just for me; it's for us. My home is completely renovated, and I have a position already lined up for employment. Hermione's job is secure, and her marks have already come back, as stellar as expected. From here on out, I can only think of things relating to her. I would not be here if it weren't for her. She's the only one who could have saved my sanity back in March."

At that, he closed his eyes in remembered pain, and Hermione squeezed his hand, her eyes full of sympathy. This time it was Geoff who felt compelled to say, "What happened in March?"

Hermione whispered, "Dumbledore sabotaged Severus's attempt to find a position outside of Hogwarts and treated him like a child. He *deliberately* cut Severus's feet out from under him on his journey to make a life for himself. And he said Severus *owed* him his very life." Her voice surfaced, rough and trembling with disgust and rage. Dione gasped, affected by the tale in spite of herself.

Snape's voice was almost a whisper as he said, "I had no one else. I went to Hermione, and she saved me from my misery and despair. She gave me a reason to live. She *is* my reason." He once again looked up at her parents, who were staring at him awkwardly. "I'm sorry. We didn't come here to burden you with my sad history or our difficulties. We came here to celebrate our love for each other with you, in the hopes that you would celebrate with us."

Another silence fell. Snape let his head droop forward. It was late, and the day had been long and exhausting. He felt utterly drained, and wanted nothing more than to take Hermione *home* and curl up with her for comfort.

Hermione saw how weary Snape looked, read it in the set of his shoulders and the lines around his eyes and mouth. He, who had so recently begun looking younger, was once again looking older, no longer buoyed by his happiness and delighted anticipation of surprising Hermione. The stress of so many revelations and repercussions had taken its toll for the night. It was well past midnight, and Hermione was suddenly struck with fatigue as well, longing to hide away from the world with Snape so they could just *rest* and *be* together.

Caressing Snape's arm tenderly, Hermione murmured, "It's late. We're tired. All of us have a lot to think about. We should go."

Dione and Geoff exchanged another look, and Dione nodded faintly to Hermione. "Right. You've certainly experienced enough excitement for one day." At her words, Hermione cast an involuntary look down at her ring, her face lighting up instantly for a moment before she flicked a glance at her parents and schooled her expression into a more indifferent one. Dione's stomach clenched at the sight.

Snape reached over to envelop Hermione's left hand in both of his, lifting his head to say, "No doubt we can continue this discussion at a later date, when all parties have had time to rest and consider what's most important." He cast a pointed look at her parents and lifted Hermione's hand to once again kiss the ring.

Geoff looked away, wishing they would go already. His chest felt tight, and he didn't yet know what to think about the beatific expression on his daughter's face when she looked at Snape, beaming in response to the man's gentle kiss.

Dione struggled to untuck her feet and smoothed her bathrobe as she stood. Geoff shot to his feet a beat later. Hermione looked at her parents, her radiant smile guttering out to be replaced by an anxious look of trepidation. She nodded to Snape, and they rose as one.

All four of them stood in awkward silence, darting glances at each other. Hermione finally spoke. "I'll call you tomorrow. We can talk more then."

Dione frowned and said, "Call?"

Hermione nodded. "Spinner's End is in a Muggle neighbourhood. We have a regular phone as well as the Floo connection. I plan to get my own computer and internet connection as well. If I'm to be in charge of bringing Muggle arts into the wizarding world, I could certainly use instant access to those Muggle arts."

Dione's brows rose and she nodded. "Of course."

Snape, his voice low and weary, said, "Once we're settled, you're welcome to visit."

Geoff started, blinking his surprise, and Dione flashed him another meaningful look. His tone grudging, he uttered a clipped, "We'll see."

Snape inclined his head in understanding, then turned to Hermione. "Are you ready?"

Hermione looked at her parents, clearly debating whether or not to go hug them, but then her face fell, and she wilted in defeat, murmuring, "Yes."

Snape gathered her to him, wrapping his arms around her and tucking her head under his chin. She slid her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek against his chest. Dione's hand crept up to cover her mouth, and Geoff's hands clenched into fists at his sides. With a whispered, "Good night," Snape and Hermione disappeared.

Appearing back in the living room at Spinner's End, Hermione immediately pulled back and said, "Hurry! We need to go back!"

Snape scowled in confusion and said, "What?"

Hermione gripped his arms and gazed earnestly up at him. "We need to go back! Disillusion us and Apparate back into the living room there! I have to know what they're saying about us!"

Snape's eyes widened in shock at her devious ploy. His inner Slytherin snapped to attention and applauded her ingenuity.

Hermione backed away and reached for her wand. "Fine, if you won't do it..."

Snape grabbed her hand and met her wild gaze. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears, and desperation tensed every muscle in her body. Taking a deep breath, he nodded, pulling her close and casting the concealment charm. As soon as they were invisible, he Apparated them back into the living room, just behind the couch.

It was a good thing he had chosen that spot, as Geoff was pacing around the room, stomping across where they had previously been standing, his fingers laced together and gripping the back of his neck, forcing his head down to glare at the carpet as his elbows pierced the air around his head.

Dione was still rooted to the spot in front of her armchair, her hands clasped at her throat, watching her husband.

They arrived to hear her saying, "...know her! We both saw her face every time she looked at him. It's shocking, yes, but I can't *not* believe them now!"

Geoff's elbows seemed to bat at the air as he shook his head. His face was blocked by his arms, but his voice was raspy as he said, "She's my little girl, Di! How can I just give her up to someone old enough to be... *me*?"

Dione shook her head. "Geoff, that's not fair. Severus is not you. Yes, he may be older than what we might have liked, but it's obvious that he cares about her. I pity anyone who ever threatens her, since they'll have *him* to deal with."

Geoff whirled in front of the couch and collapsed on it, hunkering forward so his elbows rested on his knees, his head bowed between them, muffling his voice. "I can't believe he was there when I was in her room. He was right. Everything I said, he parroted right back at me."

Dione crossed to the couch and sank beside him, rubbing his back in comfort. Geoff released his neck and sat back, letting his hands drop to his sides. Dione kept rubbing his shoulder and arm, saying, "Shhh..."

It was fortunate that she was making such a noise, for it masked Hermione's gasp as her father's face came into view.

He was crying.

Hermione instantly covered her mouth with her hand, and Snape drew her closer, caressing her hair and pressing a kiss to her temple as they watched her father grimace, tears leaking from his screwed shut eyes.

Dione reached up and tenderly wiped his face, drying her fingers on her bathrobe. "Sweetheart, don't. There's no need. Honestly..."

Geoff sniffed hugely, taking a deep breath and trying to regain his composure. He opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling. His voice was a hoarse whisper as he said, "I can't believe they've been together for so long and we had no idea. How many more secrets has she kept from us?"

Dione crooned, "But they came here as soon as they could to tell us. Credit where credit is due, love."

Geoff closed his eyes again. "Where has my little girl gone? I just wanted my sweet, caring daughter back for one more summer before I had to let her go."

Dione continued caressing his arm. "Hermione hasn't been a little girl for a while now, darling. You said so yourself after they visited in November. As for your sweet, caring daughter...she's still there! She obviously cares very much for Severus. And he for her."

Geoff's chin jutted forward in petulance as he said, "Of course she does! You heard what happened to him. That big heart of hers never could keep from opening for a sob story."

Dione gripped his chin and forced him to meet her eyes. She glared at him sternly, her expression reproachful. "That's not fair and you know it. You've always been proud that she learned from us to care for those less fortunate." Geoff averted his eyes, clearly ashamed. She caressed his cheek and continued, "Besides, it wasn't a sob story. It was a tragedy. I saw you. You felt the same way I did. You can't hide your own big heart, love. I know where our girl got it from."

She leant forward and dropped a light kiss on his lips, approval and love in her eyes. Geoff reached out and pulled her down to nestle beside him, his arm around her. After a short silence, he murmured, "I can't even imagine what it must be like to lose your parents so young, and to have no one to turn to for so long. Obviously I can't blame the man for falling for Hermione; I'm surprised she hasn't had admirers lining up for years." Dione chuckled. "With their war and all... the poor bloke certainly has had a rough time of it for a while now, hasn't he?"

Dione squeezed his ribs. "There's the Geoff Granger compassion I remember."

Geoff huffed and kissed her hair. "It's just... so much to take in. I don't know what I think yet. It's too overwhelming tonight."

Dione lifted her head to smile at him. "I agree. So why don't we go to bed and get a good night's sleep, and we can talk about it in the morning. We really should straighten out our own thoughts before Hermione calls."

Geoff nodded. "I'll definitely need a good night's sleep to be able to straighten out the muddle in *my* head."

He heaved a sigh and wiped his face as Dione sat up. She stood and proffered a hand. Geoff took her hand and pulled himself up, reaching forward with his other hand to cup Dione's cheek. She tilted her head into his palm, smiling wistfully. He leant forward and kissed her, resting his forehead against hers for a moment and sliding his arms around her shoulders. She hugged him, and they simply stood that way for a long moment.

Finally, Dione patted his back, slipping her hands around his sides and backing away. "Come on. Let's go to bed." Geoff nodded, and she took his hand to lead him out of the room and upstairs.

Snape kept his arms around Hermione and waited until her parents' footsteps had died away, then Disapparated, taking her home.

75- Consummation

Chapter 79 of 84

Snape and Hermione retire to Spinner's End in the wake of their volatile meeting with her parents. At long last, they're *home*, and the time has come to consummate their relationship.

I just play with JKR's faboo creations. Don't sue, please!

Author's Note: I know it's been a while once again, but things have kept me busy. As always, check out my Livejournal (<http://pern-dragon.livejournal.com/>) to see what's been going on with me. Azkatraz was amazing (my Epic Vacation of Awesomeness!) and I can't wait till next year for Infinitus. Hope you lot can make it to Orlando to play with us! Anyway, the usual mad props to Beta-Git (tm) Ladyofthemasque, and profound gratitude to all of you who read/review/email me... You make me so happy. :) Here we come to the long-awaited *consummation*. Hope you enjoy! *hugs*

Chapter 75- Consummation

They appeared in the living room again, but Hermione didn't release Snape right away. Even after he ended the concealment charm, she stood there, face buried against

Snape's chest and arms tight around his waist. Snape gently brushed his hand over her hair, again and again, until she finally backed away.

Her face was wet from the tears that had silently leaked from beneath her closed lids. Snape copied Dione's actions and tenderly wiped her face, drying his hands on his robes. Hermione looked utterly woebegone, but she was quiet. Snape realized that she was deeply affected, since she seemed beyond speech.

Glancing around, he noticed that the baggage was all still stacked haphazardly around the living room. With a deft flick of his wand, he sent them all flying in a line upstairs to land in their appropriate rooms. Then, another swish toward the kitchen had the kettle popping out of the cupboard to drop onto the stove. A murmured spell or two, and the kettle was heating cocoa for Hermione.

Hermione merely watched the dance of luggage and kitchen utensils through doorways. Her lower lip still trembled. Snape had a mug of cocoa soaring toward them even as he led her to sit on the couch. She sank down listlessly, and he proffered the cocoa.

"Here, love. Have a bit of this. It will help you feel better."

She complied, eyes unfocused and still glassy. When he had made certain that she was drinking, Snape Summoned a mug for himself. The hot beverage was soothing and helped to ease the knot of anxiety in his centre.

In an attempt to rouse her from her morose state, he murmured, "It's not tea, but still acceptable."

She looked at him blankly, and didn't seem to process his meaning until he flashed a faint smirk at the mugs. Then, when she realized his quip, she shook herself, one corner of her mouth quirking in recognition. But her expression clouded again as she said, in a small voice, "I don't remember ever making my dad cry before."

Snape set his mug down on the side table and twisted to face her, one hand caressing her hair and the other cupping her knee. "It'll all work out."

She shook her head and said, "I mean, I thought he might cry in happiness...like at my wedding or something...but I never thought I'd make him cry in sadness."

Snape drew in a deep breath and said, "I daresay that if he were to cry at your wedding, it would be in both happiness and sadness. Sadness that you've grown up. Well, you saw that part tonight. Let's hope that, in time, he will only ever cry in happiness for you."

Hermione took another pensive sip of cocoa. Her eyes closed, and she sighed into the mug, sending steam to bathe her face. When she lowered the mug and opened her eyes again, Snape could see that she had regained some measure of equilibrium. She met his gaze and her expression softened.

"Thank you, Severus. You're right. The cocoa helped." She offered him a watery smile and reached out to caress his cheek. Snape turned his head to kiss at her fingers and she smiled more. "You look tired, love."

Snape snorted. "That would be because I am." He cut a sardonic glance at her and added, "It's been a rather busy day."

Hermione chuckled and wrinkled her nose at his comment. "Well, I think I could use some sleep too."

Snape stood and offered a hand, pulling her up when she clasped it. "Then let's to bed."

He led her up the stairs to the master bedroom, their bags piled neatly against the wall. The large bed dominated the back wall, its carved oak headboard and footboard complemented by the duvet in varied shades of earth tones, from pale sand to deep browns. The carpet under their feet was a warm golden tan, and the walls were a few shades lighter, with darker brown baseboards and door frames. The lamps on the matching nightstands on either side of the bed bore golden-tinged shades, with faint designs picked out in hues of caramel and chocolate. Taken as a whole, it was as successful a blend of both of their preferences as the ring was a mixture of qualities representing each of them. Snape had made sure that their sanctuary would be as comforting as possible, bearing the colours they both liked "to live with" most.

As soon as they entered, though, Hermione stopped dead. Snape turned to look at her, curious about her abrupt stop.

Her eyes were wide, and she was gazing about the room in a sort of dazed wonder. At Snape's concerned expression, she murmured, "It's our room. Really ours."

Snape understood how overwhelming it was, now that it was finally real. His expression softened and he smiled as he closed the distance between them again. "It is. Just as this house is ours, and the furniture is ours, and our *life* is ours."

A faint flush began creeping up Hermione's throat as she stared up at him. Her eyes lit up with the joy of it all, and Snape felt the wild, delirious rush of delighted love suffusing him with warmth. Hermione leant closer, and he obliged her by pinning her with a deep, devoted kiss.

She may have been tired and overwrought, but the fire chasing through her limbs at the fierce happiness of their home together and the freedom to love each other made her suddenly dizzy with awakened need.

The kiss was the catalyst to their second wind. Energy surged forth, arcing between them like electricity. When they broke apart, they were both flushed and breathing heavily. Hermione rasped, "Unpacking can wait. There are more important things to be done now." Snape's breath caught, and he nodded slowly in profound agreement.

Lifting her ring-clad hand to his lips for another gentle kiss, Snape whispered, "Welcome home, Hermione."

Then, lips curling in a faint smile full of promise, he stepped backward, tugging her to the bed. When his legs hit the edge, he sank down, pulling her between his knees and tipping his face up to kiss her again. Deft fingers began easing her clothes off, and when she was left in only her bra and knickers, she pulled her brain from its fog of pleasure and lust and grabbed his hands, snapping her narrowed eyes to his. His brows rose in question at the abrupt move.

"You're not going to pull some stunt and make me wait any longer, are you?" Her voice was husky but a thread of peevishness wormed through.

Snape blinked, not following her train of thought. Eyeing her in confusion, he said, "I'm not sure what you mean."

She released his hands and reached forward to undo his robes as she said, "We've waited all this time, until I was out of school. You're not going to try some noble gesture and say we should wait until we're married now, are you?" She waved her left hand at him, tilting her head at the ring. His eyes widened in comprehension and she repeated, "You're not, right?"

The surge in his groin sent a tingle rushing through him, and his brows lowered again, hooding his eyes with wicked intent. His lips spread in a smirk. His hands swept up to her shoulders, gripping the bra straps and yanking them down her arms in an urgent gesture, trapping her arms along her sides and baring her breasts all at once.

"No."

The deep, sensual purr of his answer sent a jolt to her core, and her nipples tightened in response to the sound and the cooler air. Her expression went from "thank the gods" to bliss as he crushed her to him, dipping his head to capture one nipple, suckling as his hands busied themselves behind her to divest her of her bra. As soon as her arms were free again, she returned her attention to his robes, backing away enough to shove and wrench at the offending garment, scowling her frustration that it wasn't off yet.

Impatient with her manhandling, as it impeded his ability to manhandle *her*, he shot to his feet and squirmed out of his robes, tearing at the placket of his trousers as he stepped out of the pooled fabric. Hermione edged back, eyes hungry as she watched him undress. Snape fell back onto the bed again, lifting his feet to pull off his boots, but he got tangled in the wrinkled pile of robes and kicked, muttering oaths as he fought to get his foot out of the cloth.

Hermione grinned, biting her lip to suppress a giggle at his plight. More interested in getting him naked than in taking the mickey at his predicament, she dropped to her knees and extricated him from the robes, tossing them to one side. Then, she grabbed one boot and pulled while he tugged the other one off. As she threw the boots behind her, he stripped off his socks and began undoing his shirt buttons. Hermione got to her feet and pulled him up, interrupting him so she could take over. Dragging the shirt over his shoulders and down his back, she bent low, eyeing the damp spot at the apex of his tented shorts.

Straightening, she cast a lusty glance at Snape, and he smirked back. They embraced again, kissing deeply, each left only in their underwear. Strong hands snaked down her back and slipped beneath the waistband of her knickers, pushing them down. An appreciative coo was muffled by his lips against hers. She followed his lead and pinched the white cotton between her fingers, tugging gently until his cock sprang free of its confines, bouncing against her belly as he moved his legs to let the shorts drop to his ankles.

Stepping out of them, Snape sank onto the bed again, gaze smouldering as he eased her knickers down her thighs, watching as they peeled away from her mound, already damp with her excitement. Hermione stepped out of the clingy fabric, kicking them to the side to join the rest of the discarded clothing before pinning Snape with a fierce look and shoving forward so he fell back. His cock bobbed toward the ceiling as she straddled his legs and climbed onto the edge of the bed, hovering over him in a predatory fashion.

Her voice was thick with need as she said, "I've been wanting this for so long now..."

Snape sucked in a breath and voiced a guttural groan in agreement, reaching up to grip her waist and direct her to one side. She rolled onto her hip, hooking her foot around his leg and pulling him with her. They were on their sides, but their legs were still hanging half off the bed. Snape writhed to a sitting position, then turned and crawled up the mattress toward the headboard. Hermione followed him a beat later.

They settled fully on the bed, once again entwining themselves and kissing, his cock trapped between them and smearing their bellies with moisture. After several moments of heated snogging and groping, Snape rolled forward, pressing Hermione onto her back. He held himself up on his knees and elbows, his fingers tangling in her hair, her legs loosely wrapped around his hips.

Pulling away to look into her eyes, he spared a fleeting thought of thanks that his hair was still held enough by the remaining pomade to keep it from falling lankly into his face. He wanted no interference to their communion.

Hermione gazed up at him, highly conscious of his erection pulsing and bouncing against her mound. All he had to do was back away, tilt his hips, and he could bury himself within her. Her heart raced at the thought.

After a long moment of searching her eyes for her true feelings, Snape whispered a querying, "Hermione?"

She knew he was just making sure that she was really ready, and she deliberately tightened her legs around him, angling her feet along the backs of his thighs and urging him to close the distance between them. In case her actions weren't confirmation enough, she murmured, "Yes."

Snape's eyes closed and he drew in a deep breath, trying to control the wild urge to plunge in recklessly. Easing back, he rocked his hips, sliding the head of his cock along her slick curls, slipping between her lips as he dipped lower. The blissful damp heat enveloped him as he stopped at her entrance, and he held his breath for a beat until he was certain he was as ready as she was.

Hermione shifted her legs again, taking a deep breath, watching Snape intently. She knew she was trembling in both anticipation and apprehension, but the fervent desire to finally be one with him sent tingles of delight through her at the sensation of his soft-yet-hard length poised to delve deep.

Snape leant down and stopped a hairsbreadth from her lips, sharing her breath, drowning in the dilated pupils of her eyes. Ever so slowly, he pressed forward, driving himself into her. As each centimetre sank in, Hermione's breath hitched more and more, and he felt her body tensing beneath him. Stopping his pursuit, he closed in for a gentle kiss, soothing her and leading her to relax again.

When her breath souged out in a faint moan, he continued his advance. He could feel the tremors in her muscles, and he realized that he was shaking too. The rigid control he was exerting in his attempt to not unduly hurt her, coupled with the deliriously exquisite feel of her clutching heat, had him trembling.

Hermione recognised the difference between the wax replica and the real thing immediately. The real thing was infinitely better. The velvety soft feel of his skin was much more inviting than the hard wax, and although it felt as if steel were under that smooth exterior, his cock still had more give to it than the dildo, hard as he was. However, the one thing that remained the same was the sensation of fullness and the stinging, stretching feeling as the full size of him sank in deep.

Snape continued his inexorable progress, repeatedly drawing her into sensual kisses, until he felt his body come flush against hers, his erection completely encompassed within her. Hermione hissed faintly as the larger base of his cock stretched her even further, adding to the distracting burn. Snape stilled again, waiting for her to get used to the feeling. He lifted his head, backing away so they could see each other clearly.

A small frown marred her brow as she struggled to dispel the irritating sensation, trying instead to focus on the pleasantly full feeling and the vaguely promising jolts from deep within as she flexed her inner muscles in an attempt at accommodation.

Snape's eyes rolled back and he uttered a shocked groan as she clamped down on him, making her brows rise in surprised interest. When he blinked dazedly at her, doggedly persisting in *not* responding to that intimate caress by thrusting savagely, she smirked and did it again, biting her lip to suppress the wicked giggle that wanted to surface as he grimaced and gasped at her clenching.

His voice was a strained rasp as he said, "In the name of all that is decent and holy, Hermione, don't *to* that!"

Mischief coloured her voice as she tilted, "Why not? Don't you like it?"

Snape pinned her with a black warning look and growled, "'Like' is too weak a word..."

She quirked one eyebrow and said, "Then why should I stop?"

He dropped down, his mouth by her ear and his chest on hers as he hissed, "Because I don't know how long I can control myself if you keep it up, and I don't want to hurt you."

Her breath hitched, and the jolt of excitement that raced over her made her squeeze him involuntarily. A low groan burst from him and his hips twitched, grinding him into her.

That set off an explosive sequence of events.

Hermione voiced a startled cry that quickly turned into an approving coo as Snape's thrust rubbed his cock against what she immediately decided was her favourite spot for erotic pleasure.

Snape's reactive movement, pressing deeper and sliding back out of her maddeningly tight cunt, flooded his body and brain with an overwhelming need *to do that again*.

A rumbling groan welled up as his hands gripped her hair and his head dropped to the pillow, his breath hot against her neck as he continued thrusting, each stroke backing out further before plunging back in.

Hermione gasped, taken aback by the suddenness of his onslaught and the warring sensations of "yee-ouch" and "wow." Her hands scrabbled down his back and her nails

dug into his flexing buttock muscles...whether in caution or encouragement, she couldn't quite decide.

The rapturous joy of finally joining with Hermione, of actually *knowing* how glorious her pussy felt wrapped around his cock, fuelled Snape's passion, and his thrusts became wilder and rougher, pistoning faster.

Hermione kept sucking in sharp breaths every time he plunged into her, struggling to focus on the delicious jolts from within and the sizzling tingles every time he ground against her clit and *not* the burning ache at the outer edge of her entrance. If only he could keep stimulating her clit without delving so uncomfortably deep to do so... Realizing that she should be letting herself go, enjoying their consummation, she guiltily tried to shut her brain down from analyzing how their encounter could be better for her.

Snape, on the other hand, was nearly insensate to anything but the extreme pleasure of filling her with his cock as much as his heart was filled with love. He heard her repeated gasps and didn't think they meant anything untoward...but then again, his brain was no longer functioning at a higher level. The feel of her fingers scratching his buttocks led him to believe she was trying to pull him in deeper, and he gladly obliged.

Just as she had done when he had first sunk into her, Hermione tried tightening her muscles in an attempt to assuage the irritating feeling of too-much. A ragged groan burst from Snape's lips and his rhythm faltered, his movements growing more erratic.

Hoarse panting punctuated his speech as he said, "Oh gods... yes... Hermione... gods yes... do it again... ohhhh..yessss..."

Hermione smirked at her apparent influence and squeezed again, a low purring moan welling up from her throat. Snape's hips slammed forward and his head tilted back, eyes screwed shut and mouth open. His body bucked and shuddered, convulsing in time with his roar of ecstasy, and Hermione's eyes widened in wonder at the realization that he was coming...in her...hard.

His head fell forward again, and he flexed his hips a few times, more shallowly each stroke. Hermione felt the slippery warmth of his come as it trickled out around his softening cock, and a rush of feminine power and accomplishment ambushed her. *She* had done that. *She*, her body, had driven him to the peak of sensual pleasure, and she enjoyed the rush.

Snape slowly regained his mental faculties, and with them came the disquieting realization that, while he had just had one of the best orgasms of his life, Hermione had not. Guilt and embarrassment writhed within him, and he hesitantly pulled back, afraid of the resentment he felt sure he would see on Hermione's face. His anxious grimace smoothed into a look of surprise when he saw Hermione grinning at him, her whole attitude beatific.

Hermione noted his bewildered expression and smirked. "What's wrong? Can't a girl revel in her sensual talent?"

Snape's mouth opened, but no sound came out. He cleared his throat and blinked. "Of course. I just... wasn't expecting to find you 'revelling'."

Hermione's grin faded into a furrowed brow of puzzlement. "Why not?"

Snape ground his teeth and muttered, "Considering our venture was not a success for you..."

Hermione actually shook her head in astonishment before retorting, "Not a success? What are you talking about?"

Snape carefully disengaged his flaccid cock from her and rolled to one side. Hermione instinctively squeezed her legs shut at the sensation of liquid trickling along her pussy lips. Snape heaved a deep breath and said, "Clearly, I reached climax. You did not. Therefore: not a successful endeavour. I'm sorry."

Hermione squirmed up onto one arm and twisted to face him, even though he wouldn't meet her eyes. "Severus, you don't understand how amazing that made me feel...even if I didn't have an orgasm. This time. We were finally *together*, and I've never felt as powerful as I did knowing that/ brought you to ecstasy. Truly, I wasn't expecting to be able to climax this way and this time. It's all so overwhelming and important that it's almost too hard to just let go and lose myself to the sensations. Besides, I think it'll take a few more times before I'm quite ready to completely accommodate your... full size without any discomfort."

She wrinkled her nose and quirked her lips into a lopsided, rueful smile. Snape's eyes flew open wide and he tensed, staring at her, aghast.

Curling forward onto his elbows, he said, "I hurt you, didn't I? Ye gods, Hermione, I'm so sorry!"

Hermione caressed his chest, gently pressing him to lie back again. "I'm not hurt, honestly! It stung a little whenever you were all the way in..." She felt herself colouring in a ridiculous vestige of modesty. Setting her teeth to shake off the lingering feeling of embarrassment, she tossed her head and said, "Like I said, it'll just take more practice..." and she flashed a wicked grin at him "...to get me used to it."

The tight knot of guilty tension in Snape's gut loosened a bit at her comment. His expression was mournful and sulky at the same time as he muttered, "I just wanted it to be... perfect... for you."

Hermione laughed and darted in to kiss his pouting lips. "Dear heart, you may think that wasn't perfect, but we're not in a storybook. Life isn't perfect...much. Then again, I'm finally here...with you...madly in love, with our whole future ahead of us... And we have a lovely home and good jobs and family and friends who will support us... eventually. And I've finally been able to get as close as I can to the one person who has given me this perfect life to look forward to." She kissed him again. "You've made me happier than I ever thought possible. That, my love, is perfect."

She saw his partially mollified expression, and laughed again, adding, "Fine! If you feel so awful about it, you can make it up to me." She slid her hand down his belly and traced her fingers through the tangled hair framing his groin. His brows twitched in interest and he eyed her warily. Her voice was low and throaty as she lowered her lips to his ear and said, "Besides, *practice* makes *perfect*."

The import of her words flew directly to his cock, which responded by... doing absolutely nothing. As much as he wanted to "make it up to her" and "practice," his body was decidedly *not* cooperating. Still, it was a matter of pride that he not leave her so unsatisfied. Turning his head, he kissed her, rolling to push her onto her back again.

Hermione gladly welcomed him back, snaking her arms around his neck and spreading her knees so his legs could slip between hers to prop himself over her. She was slightly taken aback when he pulled away and inched down, trailing kisses over her throat and chest, instead of closing the distance between their bodies again.

Snape lavished attention on her breasts, nibbling and suckling, caressing the other when his mouth was busy on one. Finally, he tore himself away from the soft flesh to continue his descent, lightly dragging his chin and nose over her ribs and stomach, smiling at her squeals and jumps in reaction to his tickling. Crawling backwards, he stopped, dropping kisses on her inner thighs.

Hermione realized his intent, and a tingle swept over her, ending with a throb in her cunt. At the involuntary squeeze, she felt the tickle of liquid trailing over her skin toward her arse. Her hands caressed his hair, separating the tresses from their pomaded state. When she felt his warm breath ghosting over her mound, her fingers gripped his hair, urging him lower.

Snape inhaled the scent of their sex...a mixture of her juices, his come, and their sweat. It was intoxicating. Determined that she would not be left wanting, he settled himself on the bed and caressed her leg with one hand as he rested his head on the inside of her other thigh. Her low moan of pleasure assuaged the remaining knot of guilt in his gut. Tracing one finger along her cleft, he dipped down, slipping between her slick lips and opening her to his gaze.

Her curls were dark with her juices, and a thin trail of his come stood out white against the dark, flushed pink of her cunt. He could see that the lower edge was a darker, angry-looking red, and he felt a stab of remorse that he had inadvertently abused her flesh. Resolving to soothe that tender spot, he leant in and gently dragged his tongue

over it, tasting their combined essences again.

Hermione sucked in a shocked breath, her fingers convulsively tightening in his hair and encouraging him to continue. The ululating cry wrenched from her throat by his intimate kisses echoed off the walls, filling her ears with the sound of her own enjoyment.

Snape's tentative tasting progressed into more confident lavng and probing, and Hermione's noises progressed right along with them. When he sucked on her clit and flicked his tongue over it, she shrieked and nearly clamped her legs around his ears. The hand spreading her retreated...leaving his lips firmly fixed around her clit...to slide two fingers inside her, fluttering against that spot deep within.

Hoarse panting and urgent moans spurred Snape on. Suckling in time with the rhythm of his flexing fingers, he hummed in encouragement. Hermione's back arched, and her hands clenched in his hair. An inarticulate scream of ecstasy heralded her coming, and Snape exulted in the feel of her cunt spasming around his fingers, ushering forth a freshet of wetness to coat his chin.

Coming down from her peak, Hermione's breathing was ragged. Snape carefully withdrew from within her, backing away and giving one last, long swipe of his tongue from arse to clit before sucking his fingers clean as he sat up. Hermione lay bonelessly, one arm flung over her eyes as she tried to calm her racing pulse.

Satisfied that she, too, was now satisfied, Snape crawled beside her and sank onto the pillow, his eyelids drooping as all energy left him. Hermione felt him settling beside her and turned her head, her dangling hand still obscuring part of her vision. Snape flashed a weary smile and she did the same.

"I love you, Severus." She lifted her arm and let it fall at her side, gazing contentedly into his face.

Snape peered at her through sleepy, half-lidded eyes and murmured, "I love you, Hermione."

Hermione struggled to sit up to tug the covers from beneath them, yanking them up to their ribs. Snape fidgeted just enough to assist with the task, then scowled at the lamps still lit on their nightstands. An impatient "Accio wand!" had the shaft sailing through the air into his fingers, and he gave a curt flick at the lamps, extinguishing the light. Hermione had curled onto her right side, facing away from Snape, and he shoved his wand under the pillow before scooting closer to fit himself along her body.

Hermione voiced a happy sigh as he spooned behind her, wrapping his left arm around her ribs to snake up between her breasts and rest his hand against her collarbone. Snape shoved her tangled curls above her head on the pillow and settled so that his nose almost touched her neck. Stretching forward that inch or so, he pressed a kiss to her shoulder and hummed a deep croon of contentment before fading into a much-needed and well-deserved sleep.

What felt like only moments later, but was really a few hours, Snape woke up, his exhausted body and mind protesting against *not* being asleep. But, his bladder kept insisting that he pay attention, so he reluctantly dislodged himself from Hermione and edged backward until he could slip out of bed and tiptoe to the bathroom, grumpily thinking, *Should never have had that cocoa...*

After availing himself of the facilities, he padded back into the bedroom, which was starting to brighten as the first hints of dawn lightened the sky beyond the windows. As he approached the bed, he saw that Hermione had not only rolled back into the spot he had so recently occupied, but she had also kicked the covers away, leaving her sprawled form bare. Snape froze, overwhelmed by the sight and all that it entailed.

She was here. With him. For good. And she loved him like he loved her. She was perfect, and she was his.

The surge of love that filled him was accompanied by a surge of desire, and his cock twitched to life, finally recovered from their previous activities. The memories washed over him, still fresh and exciting, and with them came his remembered humiliation.

She may say she didn't care, and that she probably wouldn't have orgasmed anyhow, but I want to bring her to ecstasy as much as she did to me.

Crossing to the bed, he carefully sank onto it, hoping not to wake her. *Well, I want to wake her, just not yet...* Lying alongside her, he studied her face, listening to her slow, even breathing. One leg was stretched out, but the other was bent, her knee fallen to the side, leaving her exposed. Snape gently stroked the curls of her mound, teasing and toying with the coarse hair.

After several moments of the same, without waking her, he dipped further down, his fingertips finding the heat that radiated from between her thighs, delighting him as he felt the slick wetness that still hid there, evidence of their repletion. Lightly, he traced one finger along her cleft, spreading the moisture and caressing her until he dared to press in, slipping between her lips and sliding one finger into her cunt, searching for that spot.

Hermione's breathing faltered, and she held her breath for a moment before gasping and then letting out a long sigh. Her head rolled on the pillow, and her hips flexed, but her eyes remained closed.

Snape grinned, wanting her to wake up to pleasure. Curling his finger and pressing, he sucked in a triumphant breath at the shudder that rippled over her body. She was slowly rousing now, her eyes moving beneath her closed lids, her breathing becoming shallower, and her muscles tensing as she writhed. When her legs closed around his hand, squeezing, her eyelids fluttered open in disoriented surprise. Her gasp of shock turned into a moan of enjoyment when Snape fluttered his finger again, watching her with a wicked grin.

Hermione rocked her hips, and her hands clamped onto Snape's wrist as she fought to clear her head of both sleep and pleasure. Snape leant in from his place along her side and kissed her, pressing the heel of his hand against her clit as he did so, making her squeal against his mouth. His cock was at full attention again, poking her hipbone, and he wanted to make sure that *this* time she would enjoy their coupling as much as he did.

Scooting closer, he pushed forward with his left knee, shoving her left leg up over his. Then, breaking the kiss, he shifted lower, slowly removing his finger and circling her flesh, spreading her slippery juices. Hermione voiced a protesting whine, but it deepened into another moan of appreciation when he stroked her clit. She released his wrist and rubbed her face in an attempt to wake up completely to enjoy everything.

Snape's erection was trapped between them, so he flexed his hips, pulling back so it could bounce free, rubbing against the underside of her thigh as he shifted forward again. He gripped just above the back of her knee and bent her leg skyward, angling himself so that his cock was nestled against her pussy.

Hermione's eyes flew open wide at the feel of him prodding, and she moaned her approval, slotting her right leg between his and reaching down to help guide him into her. He pressed forward, sinking slowly into her cunt, careful to control his depth. The angle they were at meant that, as he delved deeper, he slid over that sensitive spot, making Hermione nearly choke on her hastily drawn breath of delight.

Snape's smirk was smug as he retreated until she exhaled in what almost sounded like relief, then thrust again, rubbing on that spot and making her shriek and shudder again. It was more difficult now, with her leg lying over his hip, to reach down and stroke her clit, but her wild cry of abandon when he did so made it worthwhile.

Hermione was nearly overwhelmed by the power of sensations. With every thrust, Snape's cock passed over her favourite spot, sending jolts of electric pleasure through her body. The almost panicky feeling that she had to pee somehow made it more intense, and when it was coupled with his fingers on her clit, she felt as if she were about to go mad with bliss.

His strokes stayed shallow enough that she didn't experience the sting of stretching too much around the thicker base of his cock, and he kept rubbing inside, sending rhythmic surges of fire sizzling all the way to her toes and fingers. His fingers teasing her clit made a dizzying counterpoint to his cock, and her sex-flooded brain managed to form the thought, *Oh, this is exactly what I need!*

The desire to come grew so strong that Hermione reached down and slid her fingers under his, circling and rubbing at the speed and rhythm she needed, leaving Snape to

groan, gripping her thigh and pistoning faster.

She turned her head to lock gazes with him, the lust in his eyes turning her on even more. His wild thrusting had him panting and grunting, and her gasps and moans as her fingers danced over her clit blended with his deeper voice. Higher pitched squeaks and coos gave evidence that she was climbing toward her peak, and Snape's gaze burned into her when he purred, "Yes, Hermione... come for me... I want to feel it... yesss..."

His litany spurred her on, and suddenly, her orgasm hit her like a Bludger, robbing her of breath as she gasped and keened, convulsing around his cock and clamping down hard, her vision going grey around the edges. Snape's surprised oath turned into a long, wavering groan when her cunt gripped him, sending him over the edge to shudder along with her, his hips flexing as his muscles spasmed in ecstasy.

They trembled and panted, with him still lodged deep inside her, both spiralling down from their peaks, their ears ringing with the echoes of their cries.

Several minutes later, Snape dragged himself from his doze and backed away, separating from Hermione with a deep sigh. Shoving his hand under the pillow, he retrieved his wand and Summoned some tissues, handing some to Hermione as well so they could both mop up. She jerked out of her lethargy at the feel of him nudging her with the proffered tissues and discreetly cleaned up as she rolled away and squirmed back to a good position for sleeping. Snape's head fell back onto the pillow with an exhausted flop; he let the crumpled tissue fall to the floor beside the bed while he stretched and shifted alongside Hermione again.

Silence overtook them, and they both fell asleep, Hermione curled on her side and Snape sprawled on his back. Neither of them was bothered by the steadily brightening light filtering through the curtains.

That light went from a cool blue to a crisp white and then to a warm yellow as the hours wore on. Morning came and went, and it was midday when Snape finally woke again.

Mouth dry from it falling open while he slept on his back and eyes gritty with accumulated sleep, Snape roused fitfully, trying to marshal his wits and determine what had disturbed him. Rubbing his eyes and swallowing thickly, he rolled to the side, shoving himself into a sitting position, his feet splayed on the carpet.

What is that bloody noise?

He spared a glance at Hermione still asleep on the other side of the bed and listened. *There!* It was a knocking sound, several beats followed by a pause, then repeated. Heaving to his feet, he snatched up his wand and shuffled around to the foot of the bed. After a moment of searching through the discarded clothing, he snagged his trousers, stepping into them and hitching them over his hips, buttoning the fly just enough to keep them from falling down. Tucking his wand into a back pocket, he tiptoed out of the bedroom.

The knocking persisted.

Scrubbing his stubbly face and running his hands through his tangled hair, he padded down the stairs to the front door, the noise getting louder with every step.

Who the hell is pounding on my door? We just bloody well got here! Probably some busybody nosy housewife from one of the nearby houses, trying to get a good look at the new neighbours for gossip-fodder. Good thing my wand is behind me. No doubt Hermione would frown on me telling the neighbours to sod off as my first encounter... Fine. I'll be civil, but they'll know exactly how little I care for being dragged from my bed to deal with their curiosity.

With that decided, he paused on the threshold, listening to the continued knocking. *Guess I should be grateful I didn't have that doorbell fixed..* Shaking his head and blinking, taking a steadying breath, he reached for the doorknob with one hand while turning the deadbolt with the other. During the pause following the latest stint of knocking, he flung the door open wide, ready to launch into a frosty, disapproving response to the annoyingly persistent person who clearly *would not go away*.

As the door opened, his haughty expression melted into one of wide-eyed shock, and his free hand scrabbled hastily for his low-hanging trousers, grabbing at the half-open fly and yanking them higher in a desperate bid for modesty. His mouth sagged open, and in the charged beat of silence once the door was thrown wide, his voice emerged as an incredulous croak.

"Minerva?"

76- Combustion

Chapter 80 of 84

Minerva's not the only one invading Snape and Hermione's privacy. What do the Grangers, the Weasleys, and even Dumbeldore have to add to this unexpected turn of events?

Playing in JKR's sandbox. Just having fun.

Author's Note: I know it's been MONTHS since the last chapter, but a helluva lot of stuff has happened in that time (which has been in my LJ, natch) and kept me from being able to get writing done. However, I'm back, with over 11,800 words of PoH to ask for your forgiveness. :) There should only be a few more chapters after this, to wrap things up and tie off loose ends. Thanks as always to Ladyofthemasque for beta and feedback, and to horserider for feedback. And, of course, thank you to everyone who has stuck with me for so long. I hope I don't let you down. With that, here you go...

Chapter 76- Combustion

Minerva McGonagall stood primly on Snape's doorstep, her lips pressed together in a severe thin line. When she saw Snape's dishabille, her eyes widened and her nostrils flared. The awkward beat after Snape's exclamation of surprise saw them both flushing. Their discomfort grew until, in their nervous glancing around, McGonagall noticed the neighbours surreptitiously watching from their front gardens or through their windows.

Keen-eyed housewives, bursting with curiosity about their new-yet-legendary neighbour, had seen the officious-looking witch marching up to Snape's house. And, when she had refused to concede defeat at a lack of response to her first spate of knocking, but continued to knock again and again in an unwavering rhythm, they couldn't *possibly* go back to their chores without seeing the result of such unaccountable stubbornness.

McGonagall cleared her throat and muttered through stiff lips, "Why don't we go inside and cease making a spectacle for prying eyes?" She tilted her head meaningfully toward the woman nearest them, who was ostensibly sweeping her front walk...for the fourth time.

Snape shot a look at the avid spectators and jerked a nod, backing away, his hands still clutching the doorknob and his trousers. McGonagall crossed the threshold with a brisk step and Snape shut the door behind them.

Once inside the entrance hall, they looked at each other again, only to have Snape spin on his heel, shoulders hunched forward as he furtively did up his fly. McGonagall ducked her head and shaded her eyes, clearing her throat.

Snape attempted to regain his composure before he turned around, steeling himself to deal with McGonagall. Taking a deep breath, he spun again, schooling his expression into one of polite inquiry as he said, "Good morning, Minerva. I must say I'm surprised to see you here."

McGonagall cut an acid glance at him, retorting, "I'll wager you are, indeed... And it's *afternoon*. It's nearly two..."

Inclining his head in a gesture of concession, he said, "Good afternoon then. What brings you to my doorstep this fine day?"

Her eyes bugged out as she let out an incredulous huff. "*What* brings me here? *What?* You bloody well know what, Severus. You've got a *lot* of explaining to do!"

She glared at him, her hands on her hips, lips pursed, and breathing harshly through her nose. Snape tried to look dignified even though he was half-dressed and sleep-rumpled. Meeting her gaze, he realized that, while her voice sounded angry, that anger was merely an inadequate mask for the hurt evident in her eyes.

Guilt welled up at the knowledge that he had hurt her with his secrecy. Heaving a deep sigh, he gestured toward the door to the living room and said, his voice low and weary, "Please sit."

McGonagall lifted her chin at a lofty angle and strode into the living room, taking a seat on the couch, her back ramrod straight. Snape followed, but only after pausing to cast a Silencing Charm so his conversation with Minerva...which was sure to become heated at some point...wouldn't disturb Hermione.

Snape sat in an armchair and met McGonagall's steely gaze. Attempting a peace offering, he said, "Welcome to my home. It's much nicer than it used to be, thanks to you."

McGonagall merely huffed, rolling her eyes at his obvious ploy. She eyed him severely and began drumming her fingers in impatience.

Snape wilted, his body bowing forward to rest his elbows on his knees and his hair tumbling about his face. He lifted his head and looked appealingly at McGonagall. "What can I say, Minerva? You know I couldn't have shared with you. I'm sorry you're upset, but I'm not sorry about falling in love with Hermione."

McGonagall grimaced and twitched her shoulders. Brow furrowed, she burst, "That's just it! I don't understand how that could have happened! For mercy's sake, Severus, you were her *teacher*; what on earth were you *thinking*?"

Snape, tired of the repeated slights on his reason and integrity, shot up from his chair and loomed over McGonagall, glowering his frustration as he snapped, *How* that! Don't you think we tried to fight it? It wasn't *intentional*, to be sure. No doubt Albus has filled you in on the whole situation by now; what more do you want from me? I did the best I could..."

His fierce expression crumpled and he whirled toward the hearth, gripping the mantel and bowing his head through his outstretched arms. McGonagall's heart smote her at the sight of his distress.

Clearing her throat, she said, "Albus and, believe it or not, Miss Weasley both emphasized how you and Miss Granger felt about each other. Miss Weasley also tried to defend you, saying you hadn't lied to me, not really, just kept secrets." She sighed deeply and added, "Very shocking secrets."

Snape turned awed eyes to McGonagall and said, "Ginny said that?" His expression melted into a faint smile of gratitude and he murmured, "Hermione was right. Ginny is a true friend."

Stung, McGonagall retorted acerbically, "I thought *I* was your friend, Severus, but now I find that you merely used me."

McGonagall was not prepared for the blazing eyes Snape pinned her with, nor the way his voice rang out as he said, "That's not true. I never used you, Minerva. I never thought to have your friendship, but I am grateful I do...did..." His expression softened again and he continued, "The more you offered me sincere friendship, the guiltier I felt about keeping so much from you."

McGonagall fidgeted in her seat, aware that she was currently getting more honesty from Snape than she apparently ever had.

Snape held her captive with his candid gaze, and said softly, "So which is it, Minerva? *Did* I have your friendship, or *do* I?"

McGonagall's brow furrowed and she squirmed again, cutting a trenchant glare at him before peering uncomfortably around the room. She stopped with a jump and a gasp of shock, her eyes widening as she stared at the object that had so arrested her wandering gaze.

On a table between the two front windows, against the wall, sat the photo of Hermione and Snape in front of the Grangers' fireplace, recently transplanted into the silver and green frame Hermione had given him with her photo at Christmas.

McGonagall shot to her feet and sprang over to the photo, jabbing her finger at it repeatedly. She blinked rapidly as she croaked, "Where did...how...when was...who took...what is this?"

Snape heaved to his feet and crossed to McGonagall, smiling tenderly at the photo. He picked it up with a loving caress and murmured, "This was at the Grangers' the night Albus sent us to see the play. Her mother took the photo in their living room."

"*That* long ago?" But... you two were dressed like this at Christmas."

Snape slanted a droll smirk at her and said, "Where do you think we got the idea?" He chuckled, and then his expression changed to a pleading grimace. "Minerva, we had already fallen for each other by then, but the chance we had...on that trip...to actually *talk* to each other, to get to know one another... By the time we returned to Hogwarts, our hearts were no longer our own, but had completely crossed into each other's safe-keeping."

McGonagall's open mouth closed, but she merely stared at him, taken aback by his poetic declarations. Snape pressed his advantage, gently gripping her arm as he continued.

"We spent all these long months knowing how we felt and what we wanted, and unable to do anything about it...well, publicly..." He faltered a moment, averting his gaze as his cheeks flushed. Then, he took a deep breath and barrelled on.

"Surely I've made my honourable intentions plain, haven't I? As soon as it was viable, I made sure my feelings were beyond question...if not beyond reproach."

There was a pregnant pause as McGonagall digested his words and he held her gaze in earnest. As one, both turned their attention toward the hallway at the sound of footsteps thumping along the hall above and down the stairs, Hermione's voice ringing clearly in the silence.

"Severus! Why didn't you wake me? I know you must have been as tired as I was... I mean, *twice*!" She giggled, then went on. "At any rate, I do hope your supplies are accessible...I need a contraceptive potion after last night..." Her voice rippled with a suggestive lilt, sultry laughter bubbling up as her statement trailed off.

That laughter died abruptly as she bounced into the room to see McGonagall and Snape gaping at her in horror and mortification.

Hermione froze in the doorway, her eyes wide and mouth open in astonishment to see her former Head of House standing in the living room with her half-dressed fiancé. Not that she was faring much better...in a playful nod to their night together at Christmas, she had donned Snape's shirt... and nothing else.

After her initial moment of shock, she gripped the front collar with one hand, holding the loosely buttoned shirt together at her throat, her other hand dropping to tug the panels lower against her thighs, hiding her nudity. Her mouth closed with a snap and her face coloured violently as she choked out a weak, "Minerva! What a surprise!"

Snape, who had visibly paled at Hermione's speech, closed his eyes in pained embarrassment, *his* face flushing as well.

McGonagall, rather overwhelmed by her former prize pupil's blatant reference to sexual congress with Snape, compounded by *Hermione's* state of undress, found herself sinking into the nearest chair, feeling as if she had been hit with a Jelly Legs Jinx.

Hermione turned to Snape, confusion and query plain in her eyes. When he met her gaze, he grimaced in weary resignation, murmuring, "Why don't you take a moment to get more presentable, love? I daresay Minerva will be here when you get back."

Hermione jerked a nod and clutched at the shirt again as she edged backward, thundering up the stairs once she was out of sight.

Snape heaved a sigh as he crossed to the couch and sat. McGonagall glared at him in reproach. Thoroughly discomfited, suffering from a lack of breakfast and caffeine, and resenting the fact that Minerva was there to hear their predicament...and impede his ability to go brew the necessary potion...he cut an acid glance at her and growled, "You needn't look at me like that; how was I supposed to know that would happen? If you didn't want to be privy to our *private* life, you should have bloody well stayed at home!"

To Snape's great surprise, McGonagall burst out laughing, rocking herself on the chair as she waved her hands about, pointing at him. Snape stared at her, torn between being affronted and bemused. When he crossed his arms and raised his brows in an expression of "Any time now, feel free to explain what's so funny," McGonagall sputtered,

"...Oh, now *that's* more like it! *There's* the Severus I know."

Snape's eyes narrowed in confusion and she went on, "Your characteristic snarl...it got lost in all this new-young-lover-Severus! I must say, it's good to know you haven't changed *completely*."

Snape huffed and tossed his head in acknowledgement. McGonagall continued to chuckle, eyeing him with a mixture of exasperation, amusement, and grudging resignation.

After a long beat of silence, McGonagall said, "So, Albus tells me that you two were going to the Grangers' last night..." Her statement ended on an upward note, begging Snape to continue.

Snape nodded, his expression sober. "We did."

"And?"

Snape grimaced. "It will take a while to reconcile everyone to our situation, to say the least."

McGonagall snorted. Pursing her lips again, she squinted at Snape, then murmured, "I'm sure they'll come around like the rest of us."

Snape's eyes snapped open wide, and he gaped at McGonagall in startled hope. "The rest...?"

Tossing her head and waving her hands in an impatient gesture, McGonagall said, "Well, there's Albus, Miss Weasley, and myself." She cut another acid glance at Snape's uplifted expression and said, "You're still not off the hook, young man. You've got a lot to do to make this up to me. But, I daresay you two need all the help you can get."

Snape leant forward, beaming in gratitude. Before he could utter a sound, they were once again distracted by the sound of Hermione hurrying down the stairs. She stopped short in the doorway to the living room, glancing between them in apprehension. She had donned a t-shirt and jeans and attempted to tame her tangled hair. She nodded to McGonagall and crossed quickly to Snape, thrusting his shirt...the one she had just been wearing...at him.

"Here. Your turn."

Snape smiled in rueful gratitude, standing and taking the shirt. "Thank you." He glanced at McGonagall and said, "I'll be right back." Gripping Hermione's hand, he said, "You needn't fear Minerva, dear heart. She's on our side." With a parting beatific grin, he ducked out of the room, leaving Hermione to gaze at McGonagall in disbelief.

"Is it true?" Hermione's whisper was full of hope.

McGonagall sniffed archly, then murmured, "Like I told Severus, you've got quite a lot to do to make this up to me, but I daresay you could use some friends on your side right now."

Hermione's hands flew up to clasp together in front of her throat, and her eyes were bright with gratitude as she darted forward, rasping out an earnest, "Thank you, Professor..."

McGonagall cut her off. "Make the break clean, Hermione. It's Minerva." She reached up and cupped Hermione's hands in hers, patting them and smiling gently. "Albus also told me about the ring. May I?"

Hermione beamed, instantly proffering her left hand, feminine exultation welling up. "Isn't it beautiful?"

McGonagall slid her spectacles down her nose and peered over them at the ring, turning Hermione's hand from side to side. Her thumb twisted it around Hermione's finger, then tried to push it down the length. When it wouldn't move, her brows rose and she said, "So it's true about the charms?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I'd never heard about betrothal charms, but Severus definitely had a brilliant idea when he chose to employ one. The magical world can't argue with its own charms!"

Snape came thumping back into the room, his hair brushed, clad in his shirt and trousers, and evidently having shaved.

"What charms?"

Hermione and McGonagall turned to him, both smiling. Hermione said, "The ring."

McGonagall released Hermione's hand and sat back in her chair. "It's quite beautiful, Severus. I'm impressed."

Hermione crossed to Snape, embracing him and resting her head against his chest as they faced McGonagall. Snape's cheeks bore a faint flush as he mumbled, "Thank you."

Shaking her head, still trying to come to terms with their new relationship, McGonagall patted the arms of the chair and briskly announced, "Well then, since I'm here, why

don't you give me a tour of the new and improved Spinner's End?"

Snape and Hermione exchanged a delighted look and Snape stepped forward, hand outstretched to help her up.

With a lopsided grin, Snape said, "Well, you've seen the entrance hall and the living room..." They all laughed as Snape led them back out to the entrance hall and up the stairs.

After showing off the upper level, they trooped back down to the main floor, going through the dining room and into the kitchen, where they popped into the back garden for a moment. They didn't stay outside long, as hawk-eyed housewives were still eagerly watching Spinner's End. When they came back into the kitchen, Snape paused, his pleasure in announcing his basement lab evident in his voice.

Hermione was as impressed as McGonagall, since Snape had made great strides in getting the place organized with the stores Fern had sent. After Snape had given them a detailed tour, including explanation of all the improvements he had done to the house and his plans for the business, Hermione tried to surreptitiously tug on his sleeve, remembering that she still needed a potion, and it had been hours since they got up.

Snape ducked down as she stretched up to mutter in his ear, but the tell-tale awkward flush on their faces told McGonagall what the secret was. As Snape straightened again, clearing his throat, McGonagall took pity on them and said, "You may as well start brewing that potion, Severus. I'm sure Hermione and I can scrounge something up for a late lunch upstairs. Honestly, it's enough of a shock that you two are engaged; let's not add up the duff to the list."

Snape choked and Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a bark of hysterical laughter at McGonagall's slang.

Snape grunted, "Indeed," at the same time Hermione rasped, "Quite!"

McGonagall chuckled and said, "Give it at least a year before you go adding children to the mix."

At that, Hermione let loose a snort of disgust and shuddered, grunting, "Try never!" Snape, who had been suddenly paralyzed with shock that he and Hermione had never even addressed the issue, blinked in surprise at Hermione's reaction.

McGonagall frowned and said, "What do you mean, 'Never'?" Pinning Snape with an aggrieved glare, she demanded, "Have you been rubbing off on her, Severus?"

Snape, struggling with the duelling waves of shock, dread, and relief, found he had no voice, and merely shook his head, his face pale.

Hermione took one look at Snape and realized that her vehement reaction could be problematic. Wishing that they could have had a chance to discuss their feelings in private, rather than discovering all this in front of McGonagall, she took a deep breath and steeled herself to fend off the older woman's sure-to-be-outraged reaction.

"It's quite simple, Minerva. Severus has nothing to do with me not wanting children. I've never been like other girls in that respect. I honestly don't care for kids. Even just being around them grates on my nerves. I've never liked babies, and the thought of actually giving birth horrifies me. I quickly learned that babysitting was not a good way for me to make pocket money over holidays. So, I'm sure you can understand why I'm so keen on that potion right now." She turned to face Snape again, adding, "Though I'd rather have a longer-lasting option if you'd brew that one later."

Snape, astonished again with every statement, nodded, wildly grateful that he had managed to find a woman who wasn't going to force him to breed against his will just to be able to keep her.

McGonagall stared at Hermione, mouth agape in affronted indignation. Shaking herself to regain her composure, she said, "Well, you're still young. I'm sure you'll change your mind later."

Hermione's brows lowered and her eyes kindled with an angry light. Drawing herself up haughtily, she said, "Minerva, while I appreciate your intentions, please do not intimate that I am a child who does not know my own mind. If Severus does not feel the same way I do, then he and I will discuss it. But I know how I feel, and I would appreciate being treated like the adult I am."

McGonagall's eyes went round. She glanced at Snape, who lifted his hands, palms out, indicating that he knew better than to fight such a battle with Hermione. Internally, he wanted to howl with laughter that Hermione not only felt the same way he did, but she was clearly ready and willing to take on any detractors with the same Gryffindor brashness she had displayed in getting what she wanted in their relationship.

McGonagall, aware that she was a guest...and an uninvited one at that...in their house, and that she had already told them she would be on their side, chose to keep her misgivings to herself. Gathering her dignity, she merely nodded, saying, "Very well then. Why don't we leave Severus to his work, and get everyone something to eat? It's a bit late for lunch, but you haven't eaten yet."

Hermione deflated from her angry posture and nodded. "I know I could use some tea. Severus?"

She glanced at him and he nodded vigorously, ready to let the tense exchange move elsewhere so he could regain his equilibrium working. Hermione inclined her head toward McGonagall and gestured for her to lead the way upstairs.

In the kitchen, Hermione gathered the necessary items to make some sandwiches, and McGonagall set the kettle to heat. Crossing to the dining table, Hermione began to peel some cucumbers the Muggle way, leading McGonagall to ask, "Wouldn't it be faster to use your wand?"

Hermione wrinkled her nose and shrugged. "Probably, but since we're in a Muggle neighbourhood, I'd rather keep to Muggle ways as much as possible for the little things that others may see. It'll be hard enough to fend off curious busybodies since Severus won't be leaving the house to go to work like the majority of husbands here. And, I can use the Floo to get to the Ministry, but I haven't decided yet whether I shall, since it might incite suspicion if I never leave the house, but then I'm not here during the day."

McGonagall blinked in surprise, impressed that Hermione had even considered such things. Having never lived in a Muggle area, she hadn't thought about how differently things had to be done in order to maintain wizarding secrecy.

Hermione sliced the cucumbers and continued, "Then again, if I'm to be a liaison between the magical and Muggle worlds, I may introduce the Ministry to the idea of working from home. I plan to get a computer and Internet connection, as that will no doubt be quite helpful in my research, and I doubt they'd work at the Ministry anyway, what with all the magical energy bolloxing electronics."

McGonagall snorted faintly, somewhat mystified by Hermione's terminology. "From what I understand, it *is* your department, so I daresay you can do what you like."

Hermione flashed a satisfied grin at her former teacher. "Mmm, indeed. My folks are pretty chuffed at the whole thing, too."

Cocking one eyebrow at her, McGonagall drawled, "But not so much at the *other* important news, eh?"

Hermione's smile wilted, and she sagged forward, her expression sad and anxious. "It was... a little horrible. And explosive..." she saw McGonagall's alarmed expression and hurried to say, "...no wands or anything! Just, my dad yelled, and there were some quite nasty accusations bandied about."

Nodding in understanding, McGonagall said, "Give them time, dear. I doubt you two could have done much that would have been more shocking. By the way, I thought you might like to know that some of your friends have been heading quite the fight on your behalf." Hermione lifted wildly curious eyes to meet the older woman's bemused gaze. "There was a lot of buzz during the mass exodus to the Hogwarts Express. It was rather raucous, I must say. But whenever they heard people saying anything negative about you and Severus, they jumped on their case with a vengeance!"

Hermione's grip on the knife tightened in hopeful excitement. "Oh, who? I know Ginny, but who else?"

"Well, I was pleasantly surprised to see Mr. Weasley so firmly on your side. He and Miss Bones were both quite mature about it, actually. And Mr. Longbottom kept jumping to your defence. Miss Patil backed him up, of course. I must say, it's been so lovely to see that boy blossom so well."

Hermione and McGonagall exchanged pleased and proud smiles over Neville's growth. Then McGonagall's brows shot up and she nodded sharply. "Oh, and I mustn't forget: Miss Bulstrode even cracked a scathing retort or two!"

Hermione jerked back, astonished. "Really? How odd..."

McGonagall's pleased smile morphed into a wicked smirk, and she leant forward. "Actually, it was brilliant. Mr. Malfoy was droning on as he always does, and she finally snapped. 'Shut it, Ferret. Professor Snape deserves to be happy after all he's done, and Granger's not half bad, even if she is Muggle-born.' I tell you, I nearly whooped with laughter! I did manage to control myself, as that would have been quite undignified for my rank and position, now wouldn't it."

She leant back again, smoothing her hair and affecting a prim expression, even though her eyes were still dancing with mischief. Hermione smiled in gratitude and wonder.

"Oh, that's so kind of them, all of them. I must remember to thank them. Thank you for telling me. It does help." Hermione paused, returning her attention to the cucumber slices she was now layering on a slice of buttered bread. Keeping her face averted, she swallowed and asked, "So, um, did you see, I mean, did he... what about Harry?"

McGonagall's expression darkened. Patting Hermione's hand comfortingly, she said, "Mr. Potter was... withdrawn. He didn't say anything that I heard." Hermione nodded sadly, and McGonagall continued, her manner brisk, "Which, of course, means he didn't say anything untoward either! Give him some time, dear. You can't expect all of us to just embrace such a shock so quickly. Besides, you know what kind of history he and Severus have. He's got to do a lot to adjust his thinking properly."

Hermione nodded again, finishing several sandwiches and stacking them on a plate. Before she could rise to fetch the kettle and tea, McGonagall gripped her arm, waiting until Hermione met her gaze before saying, "Hermione, he's staying with the Weasleys. He's got both Ron and Ginny to plead your case! I'm sure he'll come around...and sooner rather than later, if Miss Weasley's powers of persuasion are brought to bear."

Hermione cracked a faint smile at McGonagall's attempt to console her. "Thank you. I hope you're right." Then, standing, she shook herself and heaved a cleansing breath. "Now, let's have some lunch. I'll be right back with Severus, hopefully."

Darting into the kitchen, she brought the tea service to the dining table, then disappeared down to the basement.

Snape heard the footsteps on the stairs and looked up, smiling when he saw it was Hermione. Before she could say anything, he said, "Just a moment, love."

Hermione obediently stopped a distance away from Snape's workstation, quietly waiting until he was finished with the precise measurement. When he straightened and stepped back from the cauldron, looking expectantly at her, she said, "I've some sandwiches ready if you're hungry."

Smirking, he said, "I'm *starving*. Not exactly how I had imagined our first day waking up here..."

Hermione chuckled ruefully, nodding. As Snape stepped out from behind the table, she crossed to him and hugged him, squeezing tight. After a beat, she murmured, "Severus?"

"Mmm, yes?"

"We never got around to talking about children. Hell, we had never really talked much about getting married, and here we are engaged! But, anyway, I wanted to talk to you in private..."

Snape nodded to himself, having known this was coming. Pressing a kiss to the crown of her head, he said, "Listen carefully, love. I concur completely with everything you said to Minerva. I have never wanted to be a father. Witness my own experience with mine for reason enough... At any rate, I have never been interested in children. Teaching was bad enough. And you lot supposedly came to us partially-trained!" He snorted. "I can't believe we both feel the same way. I would never have thought to get so lucky! Not that I had ever really entertained the notion that I would survive the war and find my soul mate, mind you. But to not only find the woman who completes me more than I had ever dreamed, but find out I'll not be forced to breed and suffer children just to keep you? It's a bloody miracle, that's what."

Hermione lifted her head and met his frank gaze, her lips spreading in an amused and relieved smile. "Hmm, I like that: I'm a bloody miracle!"

They both laughed, then Snape leant down and kissed her soundly, his delight in her evident.

Backing away, Snape murmured, "You are miraculous, dear heart. And feeding me would be more miraculous still."

Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes, pulling away and tugging his hand to lead him upstairs. Snape cast one last look at the workstation, casting a stasis charm on his work before it sank out of sight.

They emerged into the kitchen to an odd commotion. A twittering blur was darting around, in and out of the kitchen and dining room, and McGonagall was vainly trying to catch it. The open kitchen window served as evidence of how the creature had entered.

Snape and Hermione exchanged a confused glance before surging forward to help.

"Severus, Hermione, oh thank Merlin you're back! I saw this owl at the window, pecking at it, and I let it in. I didn't think you'd want your neighbours noticing it, Hermione. But the blasted thing won't land! Come here, you feathered idiot!"

Hermione grinned as she recognized the bird. "Thank you, Minerva. It's Pigwidgeon! Ron's owl. Pig! Come here. I'm sure you have a message for me, don't you?"

The tiny owl hooted and zoomed over her head before landing on the dining room table. He stuck out his leg with the scroll tied to it, then noticed the sandwiches. Attention completely diverted, he began hopping toward them with predatory intent, but Hermione scooped him up, holding him firm and turning to Snape.

"Severus, would you remove the message for me? Ow! Pig, that's not nice! Fine, I'll give you something, but you're not getting those sandwiches. They're our lunch. And nipping me doesn't make me more inclined to give you a treat, you know." She scowled at him and he hooted softly in apology. Mollified, Hermione set him on the back of a chair and reached for the cucumber peels. "Here. Have these."

Pigwidgeon snatched up a particularly long peel and took off, the green strand dangling beneath him. When he had disappeared out the window again, leaving the three people in a deafening silence, they all looked at each other, shaking their heads at the owl's antics.

"Here. Let's eat." Hermione gestured for them to sit at the dining table and passed the plate of sandwiches around. Snape served up the tea, and soon, they were all eating...Snape and Hermione with rather single-minded intensity.

McGonagall, who had eaten a late breakfast, wasn't nearly as hungry as the new couple. Her gaze kept returning to the scroll beside Hermione's plate. Finally, curiosity getting the better of her, she said, "Aren't you going to open it? It may have tidings of how *others* are reacting."

Hermione grimaced. "True." She met Snape's inquiring gaze and said, "Apparently, Ginny, Ron, Neville, Parvati, and even Millicent Bulstrode have been heard defending us. Harry, on the other hand..."

Snape nodded grimly. "He obviously takes issue with our relationship. Even though we've buried the hatchet."

Hermione shrugged. "I guess. He hasn't said anything, as least as far as Minerva's heard."

McGonagall interjected, "He was silent any time I saw him. But, at least he's not adding to the hullabaloo."

Snape's brows rose, conceding the point, then he inclined his head at the scroll. "Why don't you open it? If it's from Ginny, she may have news on what Molly and Arthur think as well."

Hermione set down the remains of her second sandwich and took a deep breath. Looking at Snape appealingly, she cracked the wax seal and unrolled the parchment. Her eyes darted over the page quickly and she said, "It is from Ginny."

Snape and McGonagall nodded as Hermione's eyes scanned through the whole message, waiting until she finished before urging her to speak.

Hermione closed her eyes for a long moment, clearly regaining some balance as she took several slow, deep breaths. Opening her eyes again, she began reading to them.

"Dear Hermione,

I hope Pig finds you and Snape. I didn't know where you were, but I remember you telling me about Spinner's End before, so I thought it would be a good bet.

I also hope you two are all right. I would never have guessed that he would propose to you like that! But, I'm so glad for you both. You had better have accepted! And I call dibs on bridesmaid!

Boy, if only you could have seen the craziness you left behind... The whole place went up like a Wildfire Whiz-Bang! Dumbledore roared and took off, and when he came back... Let's just say I understand why You-Know-Who feared him! Of course, you know what I'm talking about, I'm sure, since he and Dobby took off right after he came back. But, apparently you guys really do work magic, since he's clearly on your side now. I had to do some fast talking with McGonagall, by the way. But, she seemed to be willing to listen to reason. Neville and Parvati were with me when I was talking to McGonagall, and they apparently took what I said to heart, as they were pretty loud in your defence at school and on the train. Ron, and Susan by extension, are behind you. I was so proud of my big brother when he told Harry off! Speaking of which...

Harry's here, as you well know. He's back to being as sulky as he was when you two broke up. He said some pretty nasty things right after you disappeared, and he's rather on my shite list for now. Until he wises up and apologizes, for everything, he's cut off. Ron's even giving him a pretty cold shoulder, sticking up for both of us.

Mum and Dad were quite shocked at the news. They were almost bouncing with curiosity when they picked us up at King's Cross. Turns out the gossip spread like Fiendfyre when the Ministry folk all left Hogwarts. Mum was so outraged that she nearly lost the power of speech. But when Ron and I told them what had really happened, Dad told her to calm down and leave us be, as what's done is done, and if the Ministry is going to have an inquest, then you two were bound to be put under enough stress as it is and you certainly didn't need others butting their noses into your business! Mum just glared at him and went white. Ron and I crept away before the next explosion occurred.

This morning, Fred and George sent an owl to the Burrow, asking what happened, as the gossip had finally reached their store. I Flooed over after Mum and Dad finished their row, and talked to them in person. Funny enough, as surprised as they were, they almost seemed impressed that you had it in you to keep such a secret for so long! They did put two and two together and figured out what you had wanted that Disappearing Ink for. They're not too fussed, at least. As Fred said, Snape turned out to be a good guy after all, and he obviously has enough brains to satisfy you, so what's all the bother? I'm not sure how public opinion is going to go, but we'll stick up for you. Even if Dad may not approve, he's fair enough that he won't tear you down for following your heart.

I asked him, just now, what he thinks will happen at the Ministry. He said he didn't know, but that he had heard tell of several people being called in over the weekend to deal with things. I'm just glad your contract is safe. Although, I sure don't envy you having to go in there with this kind of hostile atmosphere right now! Are you still planning on starting Monday?

I hope to hear back from you soon. I'm really anxious to know you two are all right. Floo-call or send an owl when you can, please.

Tell Snape I said hello. I'm going to send Pig on with this now, and go browbeat Harry some more. He deserves it, the wanker.

Cheers!

Ginny

p.s. I can't wait to see your ring!"

Hermione paused, looking up to see both Snape and McGonagall bearing identical expressions of amusement and anxiety.

McGonagall turned to Snape and drawled, "Well, there you have it."

Snape tossed his head and blinked. "Indeed."

Silence fell again as he and Hermione returned to their sandwiches, pensive. They all jumped, startled, when the phone rang. Hermione and Snape exchanged puzzled looks as Hermione sprang up to answer it.

"Who on earth could be calling? We've barely been here!" On the heels of that agitated whisper, Hermione answered the phone, warily saying, "Hello?"

Her brows shot up in surprise, and she said, "Yes, it's me. How'd you get this number?" While she listened, she covered the receiver and mouthed, "My parents!"

Snape shot up from his chair, and McGonagall watched them, her gaze darting back and forth.

"No, of course I'm not upset. I was just surprised. I don't even know what the number is, and I hadn't given it to you, so I couldn't imagine how you got it. ... I know. ... We were going to call you. Things just... came up. ... No, we're not trying to avoid you! Mum, honestly, that's just ridiculous. ... Yes, we do want to talk to you. We simply haven't had a chance to call you yet. ... We have company at the moment, actually. ... No, we didn't invite someone over before you! Professor McGonagall showed up this afternoon. ... She wanted to talk to us, of course. ... Yes, Mum, she was in the dark too. We kept everything a secret from everyone...well, except Ginny. I just got an owl from her a few minutes ago. ... I haven't even had a chance to respond yet. I don't know. Maybe I'll call her. ... No, not by phone. By Floo. ... What? The address? Um, hang on..."

Covering the mouthpiece again, Hermione looked at Snape and hissed, "What's the address here?" Snape rattled it off, and Hermione repeated it, nodding her thanks.

"What? ... Well, yes, it's not exactly close by. ... I have no idea how long it would take to drive, Mum. I've never tried it. We Apparate or Floo. ... Yes, we still want you to come over and see the house. ... No, you're not imposing. I was going to call and invite you; I really just haven't had the chance yet. We're still trying to finish eating! ... Yes, I know it's getting near dinner time. Cucumber sandwiches aren't much, Mother, but it's... Fine. ... Well, instead of driving, why don't you Floo over?"

Pausing again, Hermione looked at McGonagall and said, "Have you had the Floo Authority disconnect their fireplace yet?"

McGonagall blinked. "Uh, no. I hadn't thought about it yet. Didn't they disconnect it after the competition?"

Hermione grimaced and hissed, "Who? My folks or the Floo Authority? My parents are Muggles, so they'd have no idea how to disconnect anything." Turning back to the phone, she said, "I don't know if the Floo still works or not. Do you still have Floo powder?" She tilted the phone away and muttered, "They're checking now."

Snape strode into the living room and came back with the pot of Floo powder from their mantel. "Does one of us need to Apparate there with this?"

Hermione held up a finger as she waited for the verdict from the other end of the line. Suddenly nodding and beckoning to Snape, she said, "Okay. No problem. We have some, of course. ... Well, are you ready now? We can come get you."

At that, Snape hurried into the living room to unblock the Floo. McGonagall followed him into the doorway, looking between him at the hearth and Hermione in the doorway to the kitchen. Waving his wand in a complex pattern and intoning the incantation to reverse his previous spell, Snape knelt on the carpet in front of the fireplace. Thus it was that he was nearly bowled over by the flying envelope that zoomed out in a flash of green flames.

His startled cry made Hermione pause, stretching the phone cord as far as it would go as she crossed the dining room, saying, "What is it?"

McGonagall shrugged and gestured at Snape still on the floor. "A letter, I think."

"Hang on, Mum. Severus just unblocked the Floo and a letter came in." Frowning in concern, Hermione watched Snape heave to his feet, opening the envelope and reading the loopy script on the page inside.

His expression was sombre as he met Hermione's worried gaze. "It's from Albus. He says to expect an owl soon from the Ministry. Apparently, they've decided to have a meeting about my alleged misconduct on Monday. He thought I might appreciate a little forewarning. I'm required to attend, of course."

Hermione sucked in a breath, biting her lower lip. Then, she said, "Mum, we'll be there soon with more Floo powder so you can come over. Just don't go anywhere, all right? ... Okay. Fine. See you soon. Bye."

She hurried back into the kitchen to hang up the phone, then dashed past McGonagall into the living room, where she buried her face against Snape's chest as she hugged him.

Snape caressed her hair with his free hand. "It'll all be fine, love. Really."

McGonagall felt her face warm with uncomfortable awareness that she really was intruding on their privacy, especially at such a portentous moment. Sidling past them, she picked up the pot of Floo powder and murmured, "Why don't I go collect your parents, Hermione? Give you two a moment alone."

As one, Snape and Hermione turned to face her, eyes bright with gratitude.

"That's very kind of you, Minerva," Snape said, inclining his head in acknowledgement.

"That would be lovely; thank you." Hermione offered a tremulous smile, still embracing Snape.

"You're quite welcome, indeed." McGonagall flung a pinch of powder into the hearth and said, "Geoff and Dione Grangers' home," sighing with relief when green flames sprang to life. Her murmur of "Excellent" faded away as she stepped into the grate and spun out of sight.

Hermione immediately turned worried eyes to Snape. "You may say everything will be all right, but I'm still scared."

Snape cupped her face in his hands and said, "Don't be. What's the worst that could happen?"

"You could go to Azkaban!"

Snape blinked at the force of her declaration, then shook his head. "I doubt it. I daresay the worst they could do would be to fire me and bar me from teaching again, which they can't do since I've already resigned, and I'm never going to teach again anyway, so what would it matter?"

Hermione just stared at him, her expression unconvinced. "Do you really think Dumbledore will be able to help?"

Snape shrugged and nodded cautiously. "He may not be the one making the decisions, but he has a great deal of influence over almost everyone in the Ministry. Even him just having a blasé attitude about the whole situation may be enough to sway some minds."

Hermione chewed her lower lip and sighed heavily through her nose. "I hope so. I wonder how long before their dratted owl gets here. I hate this suspense!"

Snape snorted and hugged her again. "I'm sure it'll be here soon enough. There's nothing we can do about it, so why worry?"

Hermione uttered an inarticulate noise of incredulity and backed away, rolling her eyes. Favouring him with an aggrieved glare, she said, "Because it's important, that's why. Whenever it is on Monday, even if I'm not required to show up, I'm going to be there."

Snape frowned. "That's not necessary. If they only wish to see me, you needn't be there."

Hermione planted her hands on her hips and glared stubbornly at him. "It's necessary if I say it's necessary! I'm not about to just let you go suffer their accusations alone!"

"I'm sure Albus will be there..."

"And so will I! You said you're not ashamed of us, and neither am I. I will be there to support you whether you want me to or not!"

Her vehement statement seemed to hang in the air, and all eyes flicked between her aggressive stance and Snape's scowl in response as McGonagall and the Grangers stumbled into the living room in front of the pair.

After a moment of charged silence, Dione Granger said, "Support you where, and for what?"

Hermione blinked and shook herself, relaxing from her hostile posture and crossing to her parents as McGonagall furtively placed the pot of Floo powder on the mantel and edged past them toward the dining room.

Hermione stopped short, unsure whether or not her parents would accept a welcoming hug. Shooting an apprehensive look at her mother and then her father, she exhaled in relief when her mother opened her arms, letting Hermione collapse against her mother with a fervent embrace.

When Hermione backed away and stepped toward her father, he cleared his throat and cut a mutinous glance at Snape, but lifted his arms to embrace his daughter. While they were still hugging, Dione repeated, casting a significant look at Snape, "Support you *where*, and *for what*?"

Hermione released her father and turned around, saying, "Dumbledore sent us a message warning us that the Ministry will be having a meeting Monday about Severus. I merely told him that I would be there."

Snape interjected once again, "And I told her that wouldn't be necessary."

"What sort of meeting?" Geoff frowned and flicked another glance at Snape.

Snape sighed and lifted his chin, settling his shoulders. "I don't have the details, as the Ministry's owl hasn't arrived yet, but according to Albus, it's a meeting about my alleged misconduct."

Dione gasped, covering her mouth with one hand. Geoff narrowed his eyes and said, "Why don't you want Hermione there? Ashamed to be seen with her?"

Dione and Hermione gasped, indignant, but it was McGonagall's squawk of shock from the doorway into the dining room that drew everyone's attention. Before Snape or Hermione could form an angry retort, she spoke.

"Rubbish! How could you even *say* that? Mr. Granger, I know you're as surprised as the rest of us, but how could you ever accuse Severus of something so awful?"

Geoff had the grace to look abashed, and Hermione faced McGonagall, a faint smile on her face as she said, "Thank you, Minerva; that'll do."

McGonagall tossed her head with a lofty "Hmph!" and pinned Geoff with a gimlet stare.

Hermione lifted her hands to her face, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. Raking her hands through her hair, she said, "All right. Let's just forget about that for now. When the owl gets here, we can deal with it then." She opened her eyes and flashed a meaningful glare at Snape, then schooled her expression into a more pleasant one, saying, "Mum, Dad, welcome to Spinner's End. Would you like to see the house?"

Snape stepped forward and withdrew his wand. Gesturing at the soot on their clothing, he politely said, "If I may..."

Dione squeaked, "Oh!" After an unsuccessful attempt to pat the dirt away, she, too, collected her manners and said, "Yes, please."

Snape cast a cleansing charm over both of the Grangers, then waved at the rest of the room. "Obviously, this is the living room. Through that door is the dining room, and out there is the entrance hall."

Dione gave her husband a measured look and he huffed, tugging at his shirt. Apparently resolving to be on his best behaviour, Geoff said, "A tour would be lovely."

Hermione let Snape lead the way, just as she had with McGonagall earlier. Snape told them about the renovations, but didn't go into as much detail as he had with McGonagall about his work or all the plans for the new company. When they got to the basement lab, however, she gasped with the realization that she still hadn't taken the potion. Turning wide eyes to Snape, she tilted her head at the cauldron and murmured, "Have you finished it yet?"

Snape grimaced, as it was in stasis, not done. His voice was low in response. "Not yet."

Dione gingerly stepped closer to the workstation, peering into the cauldron and eyeing the rest of the equipment with wonder. "What is it?"

Snape and Hermione exchanged an awkward glance. Snape swallowed hard. In the background they heard McGonagall's soft snort of amusement.

"Didn't you tell me it was something for Fern, Severus?" McGonagall's lips twitched and her eyes glowed with suppressed mirth.

Both Snape and Hermione looked at McGonagall, blinking in astonishment that she would volunteer a lie to the Grangers just to help them out of a sticky spot.

Snape said, "Ye-e-es, of course."

But before anyone else could say anything, McGonagall's lips spread in a wicked smirk and she added, "A contraceptive potion, wasn't it?"

Dione's startled "Oh!" blended with Snape's strangled cough and Hermione's gasp of disbelief. Dione jerked back from the cauldron and hastily backpedalled toward Geoff, her cheeks flushing. Snape felt his face warming in spite of himself, partly in mortification and the rest in resentment that McGonagall would purposefully pull such a stunt on them.

His trenchant glare merely received a cocky smirk, followed by a raise of the eyebrows and a look that plainly said, "Payback."

In a too-bright voice, Hermione said, "Well, now you've seen everything! Why don't we go back upstairs and relax?"

She gestured toward the stairs, and the Grangers were only too happy to depart. Hermione tossed an aggrieved grimace over her shoulder as she followed them.

McGonagall stepped toward the stairs, but Snape blocked her path, glowering fiercely. "I suppose you thought that was funny?"

She pursed her lips and whispered, "That's just a taste of what you put me through, young man. No harm done."

Snape rolled his eyes and growled, "With friends like you..."

McGonagall patted his arm, her smile smug. "No one needs enemies, dear, we simply have them anyway." Then, with another pat, she edged past him and climbed the stairs.

Snape grimaced as he followed her, but when he arrived in the kitchen, his irritation faded at the sight of Hermione standing at the kitchen window, watching an owl fly away into the mellow evening sunlight. She was gripping an envelope, her knuckles white.

"It just arrived?" Snape extended his hand for the letter.

"Yes." Her expression was taut with worry as she watched him open it.

Dione, Geoff, and McGonagall quietly crowded in the doorway from the dining room.

Snape stuffed the letter back in the envelope and said, "Albus was right. I'm required to attend an inquest Monday morning at 10 a.m." He spread his hands and his voice was nonchalant as he leant against the kitchen counter and added, "That's all."

Hermione's eyes narrowed and she muttered, "That's enough, I'd say." Then, heaving a sigh, she said, "There was only the letter for you. Nothing for me. Did yours say anything about me needing to show up?"

Snape shook his head. "I'm the authority figure in all this. If anything, they'll simply assume I took advantage of you... like everyone else has." He dropped his voice to a faint growl as he finished, crossing his arms over his chest and cutting a cynical look at the trio watching from the doorway.

McGonagall grimaced at him, Dione shot him a reproachful look, and Geoff merely glared.

Hermione voiced their thoughts. "Now, Severus, that's not fair..."

Snape tossed his head, his jaw shoved forward in mulish defiance.

There was a heavy, awkward silence, until McGonagall cleared her throat and said, "Well, it's nigh on dinner time, and I daresay you lot have plenty of things to discuss, so why don't I leave you be." She stepped into the kitchen and gripped Hermione's hand. "You won't be the only one there Monday morning. I'll be right there with you."

Hermione flashed a grateful smile and impulsively hugged her former teacher. "Thank you, Minerva."

Crossing to Snape, McGonagall said, "I'm glad we had a chance to talk things over, Severus. I'll see you Monday morning. And don't forget to finish that potion for Fern."

Snape rolled his eyes but briefly returned her embrace. "Fine."

As she passed the Grangers on her way through the doorway, she said, "It was lovely to see you again. I do know things are quite overwhelming right now, but I must say: You've nothing to fear for Hermione. She's completely safe with Severus."

With that parting shot, McGonagall nodded pleasantly to everyone and exited into the living room, her voice saying, "Hogwarts, Professor McGonagall's office," floating back to them.

Dione met Geoff's wary gaze and raised her eyebrows, tilting her head toward the kitchen. Wrinkling his nose and sucking on his teeth, Geoff responded with a sullen nod. They both returned to the doorway, looking at Snape and Hermione at the counters.

"So. What do you say to getting some dinner?" Dione was clearly attempting to ease the tension in the room.

Hermione glanced at Snape and said, "I don't particularly feel hungry...my stomach is in knots...but I know I should eat something more substantial than tea sandwiches."

Snape jerked his chin at the refrigerator. "I don't have much to choose from. I had *planned* for us to go shopping once we had a chance to make a list. I *did* get some things for breakfast... not like we got to eat them."

Hermione couldn't help but snort at his rueful comment. "Well..." and she opened the refrigerator and pulled out eggs, bacon, sausages, butter, and tomatoes, placing them on the counter "...if you don't mind, we can have it for dinner instead." Opening a cupboard, she brought down a loaf of bread, then opened another cupboard to find the frying pans.

Dione took a pan from Hermione and said, "I think that would be fine. Why don't you and I get everything ready, and Severus can finish his work?"

Hermione and Snape exchanged a look and Snape pushed away from the counter, saying, "Yes, I really do need to get that done."

Hermione nodded at him and said, "Indeed. How would you like your eggs, dear?"

Sidling toward the door to the basement, Snape said, "Scrambled is fine. Thank you."

Waving a whisk at him, Hermione said, "We'll holler when it's ready."

With that, Snape hurried down to his lab. Dione briskly collected the remaining plates and tea service from the dining table while Hermione started frying bacon. Geoff, knowing better than to interrupt these women when they were focused on cooking something, ambled back into the living room.

His gaze wandered around the room, assessing the quality of his surroundings. If his daughter was going to be living here, it had better be good enough for her. After a few moments, he, too, was stopped by the framed photo of Snape and Hermione from the night they had gone to the play.

Crossing to the table, he picked up the picture, scrutinizing their expressions. Several beats later, his head drooped forward and his eyes closed. Exhaling slowly, he placed the frame back on the table and shoved his hands in his pockets. Finally, he straightened, opened his eyes, and looked at Hermione's radiant smile in the photo. Nodding, he muttered, "All right. I see it."

Hermione and Dione were busy whisking eggs and slicing tomatoes, frying everything. Geoff crept past them and quietly let himself through the door to the basement. His measured steps alerted Snape to his arrival.

Looking up, Snape blinked in surprise to see Geoff. Confused, he frowned and said, "Is dinner ready?"

Geoff shook his head. "No, it'll be a while yet. I just... wanted to talk to you."

Snape's eyes widened warily. "All right. I do need to keep working, but I'm listening."

Geoff approached the workstation, watching the concoction bubbling. Silence stretched on until it seemed to scream in the air around them. Eventually, Geoff backed away, leaning against another worktop and eyeing Snape intently. "Why Hermione?"

Snape froze for a moment, absorbing the wealth of meaning in such a simple question. Meeting Geoff's gaze, he stated, "I'm in love with her."

Shifting restlessly, Geoff repeated, "Why?"

Snape's lips quirked and he said, "For the same reason you love her: because of who she is." At Geoff's raised brow, he continued, "You and I both know the myriad reasons to love Hermione: her impressive intellect, her fierce protective streak, her deep compassion, her loyalty, her capricious sense of humour and fun, her delightful smile, her integrity, her methodical nature, her enchanting voice, her profound work ethic, her expressive eyes, her capacity to love..." His voice faded and his gaze fell. After a beat, he cleared his throat and locked eyes with Geoff again. "She is as close to perfection as any woman can be, for me."

Geoff stared at Snape, stunned speechless. His chest and throat kept tightening, and he felt damp heat prickling his eyes. Blinking furiously, he swallowed several times to dispel the lump Snape's words had lodged in his throat. "I see."

Returning his focus to the potion, Snape murmured, "I hope so, because I intend to marry your daughter and love her for the rest of our lives."

Geoff coughed again, overwhelmed. "I-I'll go check on dinner."

Snape spared a glance at Geoff's retreating form, smiling faintly to himself. *I certainly hope that settles any doubts.*

Geoff quietly entered the kitchen again, and, seeing progress, took over setting the table from Hermione. "Here, give me those," he said to her as she piled cutlery on the stack of plates. "I'll take care of that."

Hermione blinked, staring in wonder at her father's subdued demeanour. "Thanks, Dad."

Geoff nodded and disappeared into the dining room. Hermione went back to dishing food onto serving plates, casting warming charms on them until everything was ready.

Dione quirked a smile at her and said, "Hmm, convenient, that."

Hermione flashed her a grin, relieved that her mother, at least, seemed to be relaxing into the new dynamic, and was behaving normally. Making several trips to place the food and tea service on the table again, Hermione noticed her father standing by the table between the two front windows in the living room. She could only see his back, but she got the impression that he was sad. Sighing at the difficulty he was having at accepting her relationship with Snape, she returned to the kitchen to see that the food was ready, and her mother was filling a pitcher with water.

"I'll get Severus." Opening the door to the basement, Hermione called, "Severus, dinner's ready!"

"I'll be right there."

She heard the tap running downstairs and assumed he was washing his hands. Heading into the dining room again, she noticed that her parents were both standing, looking at her awkwardly.

Dione said, "Um, where should we sit? We didn't know where you two sat, and we don't want to displace you."

Hermione's brows rose, and she was struck dumb for a moment. "Well, uh... we don't *have* particular seats, as this is all new. So, yeah, wherever is fine."

Geoff and Dione sat beside each other on one side of the table, and Hermione turned to see Snape walking in from the kitchen, still rubbing his hands together to finish drying them. Hermione sank into a chair and smiled at Snape as he sat down on her left.

"Smells wonderful, ladies." He nodded at Hermione and her mother. Hermione beamed more and began passing around the serving dishes.

Everyone filled their plates, and Geoff said, "Wow! It's all still hot."

In unison, Snape and Hermione said, "Warming charms," then whipped around to eye each other in amusement.

Dione snorted and muttered, "Lucky."

Snape turned to face them again and caught Geoff's eye, one corner of his lips quirking higher as he murmured, "In many ways."

Geoff coughed, taken aback, then firmed his glare at Snape and countered, "More than you know." Both men held each other's gaze while the women looked on, puzzled. Then, Geoff inclined his head a fraction to Snape and Snape nodded back, breaking their connection with a faint satisfied smile.

After a brief silence, Geoff said, "Hermione, you said you plan to start your job Monday, and I remember you saying you needed a computer..."

"Yes. I know I'll need to have access to the Internet for my research...at least, if I want to make things easier on myself. I haven't had time to look yet."

"Why don't we go look around together on Monday...after we're finished with whatever will happen at this meeting." He flicked a glance at Snape, who had snapped his astonished gaze to Geoff. Before anyone could respond, he said, "Di, we need to have Lorna call our Monday appointments to reschedule."

Hermione gaped at her father, eyes wide. "You'll come?"

"If you'll tell us how to get there."

Breathing rapidly, fighting the tears that were welling up as much as the gratitude and relief that surged forth, Hermione said, "We'll leave Floo powder with you when you go home tonight, and you can get there by Floo." She glanced at Snape, who looked as dazed as she felt. Turning back to her parents, she rasped, "Thank you."

Snape sat straight in his chair, soberly regarding the Grangers and considering the peace offering of Geoff's gesture. Meeting their gaze frankly, he said, "Yes, thank you. I appreciate the support...we both do." And with that, he turned a tender expression on Hermione and clasped her hand, lifting it and dropping a light kiss on their betrothal ring.

The rest of the evening passed cordially enough. After the leisurely dinner was over, Hermione and her mother cleared the table and Snape returned to the basement to complete the final stage of the potion.

When Dione started running the tap to wash the dishes, Hermione stopped her. With an impish grin, she flourished her wand and cast cleansing charms, leaving the dishes sparkling clean.

Leaning on a counter, Geoff said, "Oh, now *that's* not fair."

Hermione giggled and put the dishes away. "Sorry!"

Her parents shook their heads and snorted. Dione said, "How much longer do you think it'll be before Severus is done?"

Hermione ducked her head and gestured for them to head into the living room. "Not long, I hope."

They trooped into the living room and sat on the couch, but Hermione noticed an envelope on the hearth. Anxiously opening it, she let out a sigh of relief that it wasn't from the Ministry, but instead was another note from Ginny.

"Hey, Hermione.

Just wanted to check in again. Pig came back okay so I know he found you and gave you my letter. I figured since you hadn't called yet, you must have been busy. We're still worried about you, so when you get a chance, please call me.

Ginny"

Dione said, "Anything important, dear?"

"It's just another note from Ginny, Mum. I still haven't had a chance to get back to her."

"Well, why don't you call her?"

Hermione blinked. "Well, uh, that'd be rude; you're still here. And you're company."

Dione chuckled. "We're family, not company. Go ahead and call her before it gets even later. I know we're not the only people who were worried about you."

"Um... all right." Hermione tossed in a pinch of Floo powder and knelt on the hearth, saying, "The Burrow."

The flames glowed green and Hermione stuck her head into the fireplace, closing her eyes at the spinning sensation. When it stopped, she opened her eyes to see the Burrow's cozy kitchen.

"Hello?" Hermione didn't see anyone immediately, so she raised her voice to hopefully carry down the corridor. She was rewarded with the sound of startled voices getting louder and trampling as Ginny, Ron, and Mr. Weasley came bounding in from the sitting room.

"Hermione!" Ginny and Ron cried in unison, skidding to a stop before the hearth and dropping to their knees, eyes wide. Mr. Weasley followed, but dragged a chair away from the table to sit in instead of joining his children on the floor.

"Hi, Ginny, Ron, Mr. Weasley. Sorry it took so long to get back to you, but it's been rather hectic around here."

Mr. Weasley peered over his horn-rimmed glasses and said, "I imagine so."

Ginny's expression was anxious as she said, "Are you both all right?"

Hermione smiled and said, "We're fine. Honestly. Listen, I want to thank you both for sticking up for me..."

Ron scowled and said, "How'd you know?"

Grimacing ruefully, Hermione said, "Professor McGonagall showed up on our doorstep this afternoon, rather unexpectedly. She told me that you two, and Neville and Parvati...and even Millicent...were defending us on the way out of Hogwarts. We appreciate it."

Ron flashed a lopsided half-smile and rubbed the back of his neck. "I gave you my word."

Ginny smiled at her brother, then said, "What's going to happen to Snape? Dad said the Ministry was calling people in for a meeting."

"Yes, Monday at 10 a.m., he's been called to appear at a meeting. Professor McGonagall said she'd come, and my parents and I will be there too."

Mr. Weasley said, "So your parents took it all right?"

Hermione flushed. "Not right away, but they're here now, and we had dinner, and they seem to be accepting things. Um, I heard that Mrs. Weasley was upset. Is she still angry?"

Mr. Weasley coughed, and Ron and Ginny exchanged knowing glances. "She's more...ah...disappointed with Professor Snape than angry with you. I must say, it doesn't look good."

Hermione shook her head and squirmed, then said, "Hang on a tick." Backing into her own living room again, she turned to her parents and said, "I'll be right back. This is hard on the knees..."

Struggling to her feet, she stepped into the Floo and ducked out in the Burrow's kitchen, trying not to tread on Ron or Ginny. Everyone stood, and Ginny launched herself at Hermione, hugging her. When she released her, Ron embraced Hermione as well, just not as fiercely.

Hermione looked at Mr. Weasley and said, "What do you mean by 'it doesn't look good'?"

"Well, the whole thing is shocking, isn't it? You're young; he's twice your age. He's your teacher. He's not had such a great reputation over the years. It looks pretty scandalous."

Hermione nodded soberly at each charge. "I understand. But we have a response for every one of those..."

As she trailed off, she lifted her left hand, and Ginny barely stifled a squeal. Grabbing Hermione's hand, she said, "Merlin's pants! That's gorgeous!"

Mr. Weasley frowned in confusion. "Clearly, that's an engagement ring, but what difference does that make?"

Hermione pursed her lips, then said, "Betrothal charm."

Mr. Weasley's eyes went round, and he reared back, wrenching his glasses off and rubbing them with his robes. "Oh! Well, that *does* make things interesting."

Ron and Ginny stared at their father, perplexed. Ron said, "What? Why?"

"I'll explain later." Slipping his glasses back on, Mr. Weasley said, "Albus knows?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, and Severus used Legilimency to convince him of our true intentions."

Brows rising, impressed, Mr. Weasley said, "Well then, you've got a formidable ally."

"We know." Hermione looked at Ron and Ginny. "So, is Harry still sulking?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and snorted. Ron muttered, "Yeah, the great stonking prat."

Mr. Weasley uttered a chiding noise, but Ron tossed his head. Hermione nodded sadly. "I understand. I wish I had time to try to talk to him right now, but Severus is busy brewing, and my parents are still in our living room, so I really need to get back." Gripping Ginny's hand, she said, "Thanks for everything. I'll let you know what happens Monday."

Ginny stiffened, her expression determined. "You won't need to, 'cause I'll be there, too."

Ron said, "Yeah, me too!"

Beaming fondly at her friends, Hermione said, "Thanks. I'll see you Monday morning, then!"

The three Weasleys chorused their goodbyes as Hermione stepped back into the green flames.

Appearing back in the living room, Hermione found Snape sitting awkwardly in an armchair while her parents waited on the couch. Crossing to Snape, she perched on the chair arm and wrapped her arm around Snape's shoulders. "Finished with the potion?"

Snape nodded. "Where were you?"

"I was at the Burrow, talking to Ginny, Ron, and Mr. Weasley. Harry's still brooding, and Mrs. Weasley is apparently 'disappointed' in you. But, I told them about the ring, and Mr. Weasley was pretty impressed, so that's a point in our favour!"

Snape smirked. "Well, that was rather the point."

Hermione looked at her parents and said, "At any rate, it's been a long day for being such a short day... We're going to leave a pot of Floo powder with you so you can visit more easily, just like today."

Dione gave a tight smile. "Thank you, dear. It certainly beats the drive."

Rising, Hermione took out her wand and said, "Accio empty potion vial." A vial sailed up from the basement and made its way into the living room, where she snatched it out of the air. Pointing her wand at it, she transfigured it into a pot and poured some powder into it.

Dione and Geoff stood, and Snape shot to his feet. They all crossed to the hearth, and Hermione gave the pot to her father. Dione cleared her throat and said, "Thank you for having us over." She met Snape's eyes and said, her voice low, "You have a lovely home."

Snape inclined his head and said, "Thank you. I'm glad you approve. It's Hermione's home as well."

Geoff pinned Snape with a meaningful look and said, "I know." Then, he looked at Hermione and said, "We'll see you Monday morning. Don't forget to let us know how to get there."

Hermione, recognizing that her father had laid down arms, gave him a watery smile and hugged him, saying, "I won't forget. And we'll go shopping afterward, just like you said."

Geoff patted her back and pulled away, then Dione hugged her as well. Before they could throw the powder into the fireplace, Snape extended his hand to Geoff. Geoff gripped it, and Snape said, "Thank you."

Geoff nodded, and when they released each other's hand, Snape turned to Dione. But, instead of shaking his hand, she stepped forward and embraced him, albeit briefly.

Then, the Grangers were stepping into the flames, and Hermione and Snape were saying goodbye, instinctively crowding closer and wrapping their arms around each other's waist as they watched her parents spin out of sight.

77- Cohabitation

Chapter 81 of 84

Snape and Hermione finally get to take that long-awaited shower, and they start getting the hang of living together. The weekend over, they go to the Ministry to face the Wizengamot in Snape's trial. Things seem to be going fairly well, all things considered... or are they?

All recognizable characters and settings are property of the wonderful JKR. I'm just having a bit of fun playing with her toys.

Author's Note: It's been a long time coming again, I know. But, what with graduation and then bureaucratic red tape bullshite followed by my dreams and plans crashing down around me like a meteor shower, writing didn't come easy. This chapter got so long that it was decided that it would be better off as two, so here's the first one. Deep gratitude as always to Ladyofthemasque for beta skills and to SnivellusSnape for feedback. Rest assured, the next chapter should be up soon (as in, NOT months from now). Thanks as always to all you lovely people for reading and reviewing and emailing and keeping up with me via LJ. You rock. A lot. *nods* Enjoy!

Chapter 77- Cohabitation

Snape and Hermione exchanged a weary look, then they both grimaced as they spun, hastening through the dining room and kitchen and down to the lab.

"Mercy, I thought we'd *never* be alone! It's not too late for the potion to work, is it?" Hermione peered anxiously up at Snape.

"No. It's within 24 hours. We've several hours yet." At that, Snape's sober expression melted into a mischievous grin.

Hermione smirked back, but gestured impatiently for the potion just the same. "Yes, well, let me take care of *this* and then we can address more entertaining matters."

Snape obediently poured a dose into a cup and handed it to her. Hermione took it and resolutely knocked it back like a shot. Making a face at the bitter taste, she gasped, coughed, and said, "Does the longer lasting version taste this bad too?"

Snape snorted and said, "It tastes different, but quite likely not much better. I've certainly not tried it."

Hermione chuckled. "I guess not. So, how long does it take to brew the preventive version?"

"Without constant interruption?" They rolled their eyes. "The initial stage takes a couple of hours, but it has to sit for a few days. And once taken, it's good for three months. I can start it tonight, if you like."

Hermione nodded vehemently. "Please! As glad as I am that I have this..." and she tilted her head at the potion "...I'd rather not have to taste this *every time* we..." She trailed off, slanting a wicked glance at Snape, who sucked in a breath at the vivid desire in her eyes.

His voice was raspy as he said, "Understood."

Hermione darted forward and hugged him, laughing in delight. Stretching up, she kissed him soundly, pulling back and wrinkling her nose at Snape's gurgle of protest at the taste of the potion still on her tongue. "Told you!" Smiling fondly at him, she said, "Now, how about you start the new potion for me, and I'll go start putting our things away. And, when you're done here, we can *finally* take a shower!"

Snape snorted and backed out of her embrace. "Indeed. Sounds like an excellent plan, love. Go on; I'll come right up as soon as I'm done."

Hermione bounded toward the stairs, beaming at him. "I can't wait to make this *home*."

Blowing a kiss, she went upstairs, and Snape turned his focus on brewing.

Hermione stopped in the kitchen and opened all the cabinets and drawers, noting where things were located. In her head, she began a list of items she wanted to get to add to their utensils and staples. When she finished in the kitchen, she went through the dining room and into the living room, where she realized that her father must have been looking at the photo of her and Snape before dinner.

Smiling wistfully, she decided that she looked forward to being able to add to the room, making it more personal and less sterile. It was decorated comfortably enough, with nice furniture and colours, but except for that photo, it could have been anybody's living room. Peeking out the front windows, she also realized that they'd have to keep the curtains drawn on a regular basis, so no one could see the fireplace in use to Floo.

Adding to the mental list, she headed upstairs to sort through their baggage and put things where they belonged. Her lips spread in a smile when she entered the...*their*...bedroom. Humming softly to herself, she bent to the task of collecting the remaining clothing they had discarded the night before. Peeking into the bathroom, she saw a hamper in the nearest corner and deposited the clothes in it.

Looking back at the bedroom, she noticed the boxes and trunks stacked against the walls. Using a combination of wand work and plain, old-fashioned drudgery, she sorted clothes, hanging them in the closet or folding them and placing them in the bureau drawers. Personal toiletry items were whisked into the bathroom with a murmured spell

and a smile, as Hermione recalled previous shower escapades that she very much looked forward to redoing.

When she was finished in the bedroom, she visited the other rooms upstairs, noting which one would be the study/office...she paused long enough to scribble her half-formed list...and which would be the guest room, and ended up beneath the entrance to the attic. Flashing another tender smile at her memories, she pulled the stairs down and climbed into the darkened space that still smelt of dust and times gone by. Body half-in and half-out, she lit her wand and gazed down at the cushions she had transfigured, still lying on the floor where she and Snape had loved each other, creating new associations to bury his past.

Her activities had whiled away the hours, and when Snape trekked up from the lab, he wondered at the quiet stillness pervading the house. A busy Hermione should leave a trailing buzz of energy, so Snape climbed the stairs with a puzzled frown, until he saw her half-swallowed by the attic entrance.

With a gentle touch, he slid his hands over her calves, travelling up her legs as he stepped onto the stairs below her.

Hermione jumped, startled from her reverie, and smiled down at Snape. "You're done?"

Snape nodded, backing away to let her descend. "Yes. Now, didn't you say something about a long-awaited shower?"

Hermione hopped off the third step, beaming at him. "Indeed!" Then, slanting an impish glance up at him, she said, "Last one there has to wash the other!"

With a shriek of laughter, she tore off down the hallway, Snape hot on her heels. However, she went straight to the bedroom and into the bathroom from there, only to stop short at seeing Snape leaning against a door, eyeing her with a smug smirk.

Her mouth dropped open and she said, "That's not fair! You Apparated, didn't you?"

Her accusing glare made Snape snort. "I did nothing of the sort. I simply used the closest entrance..." He stepped aside and gestured to the door that led from the bathroom to the hallway. "You may not have noticed it yet, but there are two doors. This one allows others to use the facilities without having to enter our bedroom."

Hermione scowled, pursing her lips in pique. *If I had put the toiletries in here myself, I might have noticed that. That door was always closed when he gave the tour through the house. I thought it was a closet or something...*

Snape's smirk spread into a predatory grin and he said, "So, what was that you said? Last one here has to wash the other? That, my dear, sounds like a prize, not a punishment."

With that, he crossed to her, one hand moving to cup her cheek as he bent to kiss her and the other flicking his wand at the taps to start the water running. Laying his wand on the counter, he brought that hand to join the other as it slid along the base of her skull and up through her hair. Her appreciative noises were muffled by his mouth.

Trailing back to her ear, he murmured, "I daresay bathing each other is hardly a chore. If I recall correctly, we quite enjoyed it before."

Hermione's response was a breathy moan and a burst of activity as she began pulling at his clothes.

Chuckling, Snape backed away and took over, letting her take her own clothes off while he undressed. Steam wafted along the ceiling as they stripped, and Snape crossed to the bath to test the water. A sigh of satisfaction echoed off the tiles and he turned the lever to go from tub to shower spray. Beckoning to Hermione, he stepped in.

Hermione watched him hungrily, gaze roving over his lean body, pausing again and again at his partial erection. A tingle chased through her and she thought, *Thank the gods for that potion...*

She joined him, noting that the tub was smaller than the one she had at Hogwarts. *I wonder if we could enlarge it with magic. Unless we have Muggles over who don't know about the wizarding world, it shouldn't be a problem.*

Snape edged to one side, moving back as she moved forward under the water. Hermione soaked her hair and body, wiping water from her eyes as she turned around. Snape was simply standing there, dripping wet, watching her with an air of expectation.

Blinking, she said, "What?"

With a smirk, he retorted, "I'm just waiting to be bathed, as per your stipulation."

Rolling her eyes and grimacing at him, she reached for the gel and net sponge, sudsing it before stepping forward to wash him. She started out in a perfunctory manner, but the crackling heat in his eyes as he watched her every move, coupled with his blissful sighs, soon changed her ministrations from businesslike to gentle and sensual.

Once his torso and arms were thoroughly foamed, she discarded the sponge in favour of rubbing her hands over his skin. His low rumble of approval made her smile, and she stepped even closer, pressing her body against his and sliding around, her nipples hardening as they dragged over his chest. When she felt his erection bouncing against her belly, her grin widened, and she backed away, slipping her sudsy hands down to his groin and stroking along his cock.

Snape's head rolled back and his eyes closed, a guttural moan bubbling up from his throat. His hands clenched into fists and he fought against thrusting into her grip. Hermione continued squeezing and stroking, watching his expressions of pleasure. She could feel his legs begin to tremble, and she didn't want him to collapse, so she slowly released his cock and guided him to turn around.

Snape had steadied himself with a hand on the wall, wishing the curtain were just as sturdy on the other side. At her direction, he spun in front of her, trying to steady his breathing too as she once again picked up the sponge and washed his back. This time, when she pressed herself against him, he leant back, welcoming the support.

Hermione backed away, quickly rinsing before tugging him back under the spray and ducking around in front of him. His eyes were half-closed, and she grinned at his dazed expression.

Snape saw her triumphant grin and snorted faintly. "Hmm, yes, I definitely won, didn't I?"

Hermione giggled. "So shall I wash myself, then?"

Snape shook his head vehemently. "Indeed not. I claim part of the prize to be not that I *have* to bathe you, but that I *get* to!"

With that, he grabbed the shampoo and closed the distance between them, his hands massaging the suds through her sodden curls as he leant down and kissed her. When her hair was completely coated, he poured the shower gel into his palm and slowly glided over her breasts, circling her nipples before smoothing down her belly and out over her hips. He avoided her mound for the moment, turning her to face away from him so he could continue his slippery caresses over her back, squeezing her arse cheeks as he dipped lower.

Lifting first one hand, then the other, to rinse them, he pulled her against his body, his cock sliding along her soapy back. Then, he reached around and cupped her mound with one hand, eliciting a gasp and a moan. Tracing his fingertips along her cleft, he felt the slickness that wasn't from shower gel, and dipped in, circling her clit.

Suddenly, Hermione wanted nothing more than to be rinsed, so she could drag Snape to bed and climb him like a tree, but his grip was firm, and the delicious sensations he was inciting kept her melted against him.

Snape's cock gave another decided throb, and he spun, taking Hermione with him so he could rinse her hair and body. When all the bubbles were gone, and her hair

squeaked beneath his fingers, he leant back and grabbed the conditioner, massaging it through her hair to the accompaniment of her contented coos. He remembered that she left the conditioner in for a while, so he urged her back to the middle of the tub and turned her back to the wall, pressing her to lean against it. Snaking a hand up, he angled the spray further away from them and dropped to his knees, guiding her to lift one foot and prop it on the tub edge under the curtain.

Hermione, floating along on a blissful cloud, peered down at Snape and gasped at the lascivious intent in his eyes, spreading his lips in a wicked grin. Snape leant forward, his hands sliding along her thighs, then angled himself so his shoulder was under her lifted leg. Dragging his fingers along her slick lips, he spread her open, ducking in and flicking his tongue over her clit.

Hermione nearly choked on her hastily indrawn breath, one hand scrabbling against the tiles and the other tangling in his drenched hair. Her quavering moans echoed in her ears as Snape laved and suckled, periodically surfacing enough to wipe water from his eyes. After a few minutes, he backed away, carefully helping her set her foot back in the tub before shoving to his feet.

Blinking at him, incredulous, Hermione submitted to more of his manhandling as he manoeuvred her under the adjusted spray again, allowing him to rinse the conditioner from her hair. When she was clean, she finally turned to Snape and murmured, "Are you quite done yet? I definitely have other ideas about what we could be doing..."

Snape sucked in a breath and a deep rumble sounded in his throat. Pulling her against him, he lowered his lips to her ear and whispered, "Let me guess, you want me... inside you."

Hermione purred back and breathed, "More than anything."

Snape spun them again, guiding her to stretch her arms forward and support herself against the back wall. Again, he lifted her leg, propping her foot on the tub, sliding his hand up her thigh and caressing her swollen pussy lips. Then, creeping forward, he bent his knees and tilted his hips, dragging his erection along her cleft.

Hermione gasped in comprehension, and her voice was ragged with need as she said, "Yes, Severus..."

Snape pressed forward, delving a couple of inches on the first stroke, a fierce groan pouring from him at the exquisite heat of her around his cock. Hermione keened, shoving backward, urging him deeper.

The fact that he needed to keep his knees bent kept him from thrusting so deeply that Hermione was uncomfortable, and he wrapped one arm around her middle, the other hand splayed against the side wall. Hermione kept one hand on the back wall but dropped the other to play with her clit while Snape plunged into her, bringing her to her tiptoes.

It didn't take long for her to reach her peak when she began touching herself, and she shrieked with pleasure, shuddering in Snape's grasp. His legs were shaking with the strain, but when he felt her squeezing around his cock, he thrust savagely, panting as his orgasm gripped him, leaving him convulsing around Hermione.

In the moment after their climax, Snape staggered back, disengaging from her and collapsing into the tub, breathing heavily. Hermione dropped her foot to the tub and let her knees buckle, sliding down the side wall to crouch in front of Snape, gasping for air. It was then that they realized that the water was no longer hot, but had run cold, having used up all that was in the Muggle hot water heater.

Shivering under the spray, Snape reached out and turned off the taps. A muttered "*Accio* wand" had his wand sailing from the counter to his hand, and he quickly cast a few warming charms over their goose-pimpled skin.

Hermione squirmed around in the cramped space and met Snape's dazed look with her own. "Well. That was unexpected."

Snape nodded slowly. "Very." Then, after a beat, he added, "We need a bigger water heater."

A bark of laughter escaped Hermione, and she added, "And a bigger tub!"

Snape blinked at their awkward positions and nodded again. "I'll look into it." Then, taking a deep breath, he exhaled gustily and said, "Think you can stand?"

Hermione tilted her head in consideration and said, "I think so. Can *you*?"

Snape rolled his eyes and snorted. "I'm about to find out. I've had enough of sitting in cold water." With that, he gripped the edge of the tub, curled his legs under him, and shoved to his feet, bracing his other hand against the wall. After a pause, he shot a faintly surprised look at Hermione and said, "And we have our answer."

Hermione sniggered and followed suit, pushing the curtain open and reaching for a towel. She handed it to Snape, then grabbed another, drying her face before wrapping it around her body. Snape half-heartedly buffed his towel over his hair before giving up and leaning against the wall as he passed it over his torso, ending by slinging it around his waist and casting a drying spell at his tousled locks.

When Hermione entered the bedroom, she saw the potion bottle on the nightstand. Smirking, she crossed to it, flopped on the edge of the bed, and eyed Snape with a mischievous grin. "So, shall I take this *now*, or have you anything else in mind before turning in?"

Snape, still trying to mask the residual trembling in his legs, shot her a quelling look as he rounded the foot of the bed, dropping onto the opposite side. "I'm not 18, Miss Impudence..."

Hermione laughed, pleased to have bested him, and stripped off her towel to shroud her hair in it instead. Snape, in the meantime, had doffed his towel and stretched out on the bed beside her. His relieved sigh of satisfaction was closely followed by a yawn.

Hermione twisted to look at him. "Tired?"

Sighing again, Snape said, "It's been a trying day. We may have slept late today, but the roller coaster of events was rather wearying. Besides, that latest antic made me want to simply curl up behind you and bask, thank you very much."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at his patent compliment. Climbing into bed beside him, she shoved her head-towel back more securely and snuggled along his side, resting her chin on his chest to beam at him.

Snape eyed the towering bundle of terry-cloth above her head warily but immediately wrapped one arm around her shoulders, caressing her.

"Then I daresay I should take my dose of potion and settle in..." She trailed off, and Snape nodded sheepishly in confirmation. Chuckling, she squirmed off him and strode into the bathroom with the potion.

Snape heard her disgusted gurgle followed by the tap running as she filled a cup with water to chase the potion down. Then, unmistakable sounds of her brushing her teeth ensued. When she came back out again, she had discarded the towel, and she crossed to the bed with a tender smile.

Joining Snape again and lying beside him with her head on his bicep and one leg flung over his, she murmured, "I know what you mean about it being a trying day. I don't think I've ever been so mortified in my life! Coming down in just your shirt and finding Minerva of all people sitting there with you..."

Snape snorted, squeezing her in sympathy. "How do you think I felt when I opened the door with my trousers half-off?"

Hermione's head shot up and she stared at him in shock. "*What?*"

Snape rolled his eyes and muttered, "I woke up to the knocking and thought it was just a busybody neighbour, so I pulled on my trousers, but I hadn't buttoned them all the way. I thought the shock might put them off disturbing us...I had no idea it was Minerva!"

Hermione was bug-eyed with surprise, but after a beat, she collapsed into laughter. At Snape's acid look, she said, "Oh, dear heart, surely you can see how funny it all is?"

Her giggles continued, and finally Snape allowed them to crack his disapproving demeanour. One corner of his mouth quirked up and a devilish gleam surfaced in his eyes as he said, "Well, she did laugh after you had gone back up and I told her that if she didn't want to be privy to our private details, she should have bloody well stayed home!"

Snorting, Hermione said, "Indeed!" Then, she settled alongside him again, her laughter fading away. In the silence that followed, she whispered, "I'm kind of glad she came...and my parents...since it means we have more people on our side for Monday."

Snape's amused expression slid off his face, to be replaced by one of trepidation. Although he kept reassuring Hermione, realizing that, in less than 36 hours, he'd be facing the Wizengamot did have him worried. He expected a fine, and didn't *really* think he'd be sent to Azkaban, but what if they fined him more than he could afford? It certainly wouldn't be an auspicious start to their life together if he couldn't support them and lost the very house he had just spent so much on improving!

"I'm more interested in what your plans are for Monday, since you insist on coming to the inquest, and your father has offered to shop with you. Where are you supposed to be Monday, and will you be setting people on their ears if you skive off?"

Hermione huffed and squirmed up enough to douse the lights. "According to the contract and letter I got from Audrey, I will have an office on the same level as International Magical Cooperation offices. They've supposedly cleared out a wing for me to fill with my own staff once I get everything set up." She settled again, cuddling with him in the dark. "And I say that part of getting my new department set up requires me to go get a computer! So, if anyone has a problem with me going to the inquest, they can sod off! And, if they take issue with me going out and about that afternoon, I'll be quite happy to tell them that they have no authority over me and to please keep their noses in their own business!"

Snape snorted at her vehemence. "Well, you certainly don't seem to care about being popular while you're there!"

Hermione shrugged and said, "I've never been popular, so why start now? If they think I'm the best one for this job, then I'll bloody well do it on my terms or not at all."

Snape grinned, squeezing her close and kissing her damp hair. "Mmm, I'm glad you're on my side, my dear."

Chuckling, Hermione hugged him back and said, "Always, love." She was ambushed by a yawn. "Oh! Excuse me. Reckon you're not the only one worn out..."

Sighing in contentment, and in an attempt to rid himself of his building anxiety, Snape murmured, "Sleep, dear heart. And sweet dreams."

Hermione cooed happily and whispered, "I'll dream of us then, since nothing could be sweeter."

Snape rumbled agreement, and they quieted enough to drift off.

Snape woke the next morning, disconcerted enough by his dreams that he didn't immediately open his eyes or stir, taking time instead to review his dreams and compare them with his memories.

His worries had plainly informed his nightmares, and he had seen varying scenarios play out in the Wizengamot in which Hermione was taken from him and he was sentenced to Azkaban...sometimes involving the actual Wizengamot and his colleagues, sometimes involving the Dark Lord and Death Eaters, and sometimes involving his dead parents and Hermione's friends.

It had been almost two decades since he had last been tried by the wizarding authority, and Dumbledore had been his sole saviour then. He had the same ally this time, and Albus was even more formidable and venerated by this point, so that could only be to the good. Plus, he had others on his side this time, which should be even more positive, right? At least this time, he didn't expect the chains in the centre chair to activate. Those were for violent criminals now that the war was over...he quailed inwardly at the memory of those cold links slithering around his wrists.

The haunting sensation made him want to run. Finally opening his eyes, he turned his head to see Hermione asleep beside him, and his panicked pulse slowed.

Glancing about the room, he saw sunlight filtering in past the curtains, and heard nothing untoward in the house this morning. Even though he had dreamt some bothersome things, at least he wasn't waking up to the sound of someone insisting on intruding upon their privacy!

Easing away from Hermione, he carefully got out of bed and crossed to the bathroom. After using the facilities, he peered at his reflection and noticed that his hair was quite lank after not washing the pomade out of it from two days ago. At his recollection of *why* he hadn't got around to washing his hair in the shower the night before, a smug smirk quirked his lips.

Peeking back out at Hermione still asleep, he decided to go ahead and shower again *this* time without delightful distractions!

The sound of the water running filtered out to Hermione, drawing her from her slumber. Lazily opening her eyes, she stretched and yawned, smiling at the twinges in her muscles from their romp in the shower. However, the involuntary clenching in her core made her realize that she had to use the loo. Rolling out of bed, she dithered for a moment, grimacing at the thought of using the toilet while Snape was showering. Then she remembered the W.C. under the stairs. Glancing about for something to wear, she noticed that the sound of the water wasn't helping matters, and she rolled her eyes in disgust.

Who cares if you're wearing anything or not? No one else is here! Get used to being able to run around starkers in your own house...

Giggling at herself, and feeling greatly daring, she dashed down the stairs to the toilet. Sighing in relief, she automatically flushed before gasping in horror that she had done so while Snape was still bathing. Bursting out of the loo, she heard Snape's strangled oath from above. She pelted up the stairs and into the bathroom, crying, "Severus, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to..."

Snape, plastered against the back wall while he waited for the scalding water to return to a reasonable temperature, opened the curtain and glared at Hermione with a mixture of annoyance and rueful amusement. That she was completely naked registered after a moment, turning his expression to one more appreciative.

"Are you all right? I'm so sorry. I know better than to do that, but it just happened out of habit. Did you get burned?"

Snape snorted, tossing his dripping hair out of his face. "Not really. I heard and felt the pressure change and ducked away just as it went straight hot. Fortunately, I remember how the plumbing works." He looked back at the spray as the pressure shifted again, and reached out to test the water temperature. "There. Did you hear it? It's back to normal now."

Blushing with mortification and repentance, Hermione nodded. "Yes. Sorry."

Snape slanted a half-smile at her and said, "No harm done, love. Just another bump on our path to togetherness." She responded with a sheepish smile and he continued, "I won't be much longer. Shall I meet you downstairs for breakfast?"

Hermione nodded again. "I'll start the tea."

Snape closed the curtain again as Hermione crossed to the closet to retrieve her bathrobe before heading down to the kitchen.

They were enjoying a peaceful repast when they heard a commotion at the kitchen window. Jumping up, they saw that it was Pigwidgeon again and hurried to let the owl in. Arriving to the dining table, he knocked over the closed jar of marmalade with the *Prophet* secured around his neck.

Hermione steadied the tiny owl while Snape removed the paper, opening the note tied onto it. While Hermione offered Pig some toast, Snape read the note aloud.

"It's from Ginny..."

Hermione and Professor Snape,

I don't know if you get the paper yet where you are, but I wanted to make sure you knew what was going on. Looks like tomorrow might come off like a zoo after people read today's front-page story. I guess we should look on the bright side: Dempster Wiggleswade is no Rita Skeeter. Sorry things have gone on this way. Take care of yourselves, and we'll see you tomorrow morning.

Cheers,

Ginny"

Snape and Hermione exchanged a dark look and whipped open the paper, staring at the garish headline *Scandal at Hogwarts: Are Your Children Safe from Predator Professors?*

Snape's lip curled in a snarl and Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth as she gasped in horrified indignation.

"Colour me not surprised." Snape's eyes narrowed as he read through the article denouncing him and painting Hermione as a victim, complete with lurid assumptions and righteous condemnation.

Hermione's eyes were bright with unshed tears of shock and anger. When she came to the end of the article, she burst out with, "For Merlin's sake! You'd think I was a bloody infant, the way they go on about me. Clearly, I am *not* a little girl, or a victim, or I wouldn't be leading the Ministry's newest department!"

Snape pulled her to him, soothing her as he flung the offending paper across the table. "We'll make sure the truth comes out, love. I promise."

Pigwidgeon was tottering along the dining table, waiting for instructions. Snape picked up the note and scrawled a simple, "Thanks" on the back, tying it back on the owl and sending him on his way.

Hermione was in her chair again, fuming over the biased piece. Snape dropped to his seat and covered her clenched fist with his hand. "Well, considering what we're likely to encounter if we go to Diagon Alley or any other wizarding establishment, I daresay it would be better to go to a Muggle market for groceries."

Hermione nodded at him with a mournful look, then reverted to her seething scowl. "No doubt." Huffing, she pushed to her feet and said, "Let's get going then. The longer we stay here, the more I want to storm off to set those ignorant wankers straight."

Snape quirked an eyebrow at her vehemence but joined her in her trek upstairs.

They spent the day meandering through various markets and retail stores, picking up not only foodstuffs, but also utensils and decorative items for the house, trying to keep their minds off the coming ordeal. Hermione made note of a few computer places to go back to with her father the next afternoon, but didn't bother with looking just yet.

That evening, being Sunday, Hermione attempted to cook Snape's favourite meal of baked chicken, fried potatoes, and green beans...which was moderately successful. Although her mother had been quite willing to give Hermione instructions on how to cook the meal, the old gas oven in Spinner's End clearly had its own personality, and it would take a bit of trial and error to suss out its quirks.

When Hermione had Flooed to her parents' house and asked for recipes and instructions, she apprised her father of her preliminary reconnaissance and explained how they were to Floo to the Ministry the next morning. After dinner, they were surprised to see a letter shoot out of the Floo, skittering across the living room floor.

Frowning in suspicion, Snape Summoned the letter and kept it floating before him while he examined it. "It's from Fern."

Quickly snatching the hovering missive, he opened it and skimmed it at top speed. Once through, he exhaled in relief and returned to the top, reading aloud to Hermione.

"Dear Severus,

I'm sure you've seen the Prophet today. I must say that I was rather taken aback to see your name besmirched in such a fashion. However, one thing that I learned well in the States is that a man is innocent until proven guilty. That being said, I shall wait patiently until the truth is out, at which point, depending on what happens, we may wish to revisit our agreement.

But, I also want you to know that I really felt good vibes from you when we met...call it a 'sixth sense' if you like...so I have faith that you are being unjustly maligned. In the meantime, I am still expecting your first stock of potions as ordered. Vial and Vessel may be new on the scene, but I'm sure the quality of our products will be high enough that people won't care to delve into who made them.

Oh, and I guess I know now what all that research was for. Looks like it must have been to make the ring you proposed to Hermione Granger with!

I'll be in touch again soon. Best of luck with tomorrow.

Fern"

Hermione blinked several times. In the silence that followed Snape's recital of the letter, they exchanged anxious looks. Finally, Hermione said, "Well, at least she thinks you're a good guy..."

Snape snorted and tossed his head, folding the letter again. "Regardless of whether I'm found guilty or not, society will still look down on me. I've got that whole unsavoury Death Eater history, remember? I told Fern that it would be best to keep my name as secret as possible in relation to *Vial and Vessel*. This just adds another reason why that's a good idea."

Hermione nodded, her expression morose. Trying vainly to keep the tremor out of her voice, she said, "Well, if you have stock to get to Fern, do you need to do any work tonight?"

Snape heaved a disgruntled sigh and said, "I should." He reached over to cover her hand with his and continued, "But I don't want to leave you alone."

Hermione smiled and snorted. "I have plenty to keep myself busy, dear heart. I start my new job tomorrow, remember?"

Snape cast a half-smile at her and patted her hand. "Fair enough. Then let's both get working on our futures, right?"

They stood, and Hermione kissed him before she headed upstairs to the office and he went down to his lab.

Later that night, when they finally crawled into bed together, they found themselves clinging to each other like lifeboats, hoping to stay afloat in the sea of uncertainty before them. Their lovemaking was more about tenderness, comfort, and reassurance than anything else. Hearts heavy with trepidation, they set the alarm and fell asleep wrapped in each other's embrace.

The next morning was rife with tension and futile attempts to ignore said tension. Just as they were finishing breakfast...well, a pretence of breakfast, as neither could eat much...the Floo flashed green and Dumbledore's voice was heard calling, "Severus?"

Snape shot to his feet and sped into the living room to see Dumbledore's head floating in the green flames. "Albus?"

"Good morning, Severus. Are you almost ready?"

Hermione sidled into the room and gripped Snape's arm. "Hello, Professor."

"Ah, Hermione, good morning. I was just asking if Severus was ready to head to the Ministry."

Snape looked down at Hermione and she said, "I just need to get my bag."

As she hastened up the stairs, Dumbledore said in a low voice, "I've already been to the Ministry. There's quite a crowd gathered already, what with that *Prophet* article yesterday." He wrinkled his nose in distaste. "I've also already spoken with Arthur Weasley, and he has agreed to accompany me in escorting you through the mob." He paused again and then coughed delicately. "Are you sure it's a good idea for Hermione to come with you?"

Snape rolled his eyes and snorted, "*You* try and stop her. I'd rather stay unhexed." Dumbledore chuckled and Snape said, "She's determined to show a united front, Albus. Besides, we're not about to hide from the world."

Dumbledore nodded, and Hermione came trotting back downstairs, her new briefcase under her arm as she straightened her work robes. "I'm ready. Are we Flooing straight to the Ministry then?"

"Yes. If you'll wait just a moment, I'll go from here and just wait for you there."

"Thank you, Albus." Snape nodded and Dumbledore flashed them an encouraging smile before disappearing from the flames. Turning to Hermione, Snape said, "He said there was a crowd already gathered. Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

Hermione pinned him with a fierce look and muttered through clenched teeth, "*I'mgoing* with you."

Snape recoiled at her vehemence and murmured, "All right, all right. Let's go, then." He tossed a pinch of powder into the Floo and said, "Ministry of Magic."

Hermione squeezed his hand before they stepped up to the hearth and he looked down at her. Locking eyes with him, she said, "I love you, Severus."

Snape's chest tightened with warmth and he smiled faintly. "I love you, Hermione."

Then, one after another, they stepped into the flames and spun their way to the Ministry.

When they emerged in the Ministry, they saw a sea of bodies milling about, and as soon as one of the crowd saw Snape, a roar went up and the throng pressed toward them ominously. Immediately, Snape and Hermione had their wands up and Shield Charms cast, keeping the mob at bay.

Snape scrambled to push Hermione behind him for protection, but Hermione fought her way to his side, glaring defiantly at the noisy mass of wizards and witches. They looked around vainly, trying to see anyone they knew, and finally they were rewarded with the sight of the crowd parting to allow Dumbledore and Arthur through.

When the two men reached them, they dropped their Shield Charms and let the older men shepherd them through to join the rest of their group. Near the lifts, looking overwhelmed yet determined, stood the Grangers, McGonagall, Ron, Ginny, Molly, Fred, George, Harry, and, to their surprise, Neville, Augusta Longbottom, Parvati, and Millicent Bulstrode.

Pausing by them, Dumbledore said, "Arthur and I must take Severus to the courtroom. You may follow later; I'm sure they'll open it to the public soon."

Snape barely had time to nod at everyone in greeting and thanks before Dumbledore and Arthur gripped one arm each and marched him into a waiting lift. Hermione watched them go with anxious eyes, clutching her briefcase in a white-knuckled grip.

The Grangers stepped behind her and offered supportive arms around her back. Sagging into her parents' comforting embrace, Hermione closed her eyes and heaved a sigh. After a beat, she spun and flashed them a watery smile. "Thanks, Mum, Dad. I daresay I should put in an appearance in my new office before it's time to go down for the inquest."

She stepped past her parents and nodded gratefully to the rest of the group assembled on their side. "I just want to thank you all for coming. Severus and I appreciate you being here."

There was a general murmur in response, and she noticed that Molly was looking extremely agitated, Harry was sullenly staring off to one side, and Millicent was shifting her weight, her arms wrapped around herself as she awkwardly stood apart from the others. Hermione directed an appealing look at Molly, sighed as she tried to catch Harry's eye, and then crossed to Millicent, who looked up at her with a morose expression.

"It's such a pleasant surprise to see you here, Millicent. Severus would be proud and pleased. Thank you." She extended her hand and Millicent gingerly shook it, shrugging even as her cheeks flushed.

"People aren't always what they seem. People change." She ducked her head and hugged herself again, flicking a glance at the others.

Neville, one corner of his mouth quirking up in approval, said, "Well said, Millicent."

Millicent flushed and offered a tight smile, then looked down again as Hermione stepped away.

"I have to go to my office, but I'll be back to join you for the inquest. Not much longer, now." Hermione backed toward the lifts, darkly eyeing the gawking crowd that shuffled and shifted like a many-footed entity. Relieved to be rid of them, she took a lift to the floor of her new department.

As the hour drew nearer, the waiting crowd pushed forward to the lifts, cramming into them in their zeal to get down to the trial. The motley group on Snape's side sidled into a lift of their own and huddled closer as they waited outside the courtroom for the doors to open.

Finally, a Ministry official threw the doors wide, and the mob surged forward. Following close on their heels, Ginny realized that Ron wasn't moving, so she paused and spun to look at him.

"Ron, come on! You don't want to get shut out, do you?"

Ron frowned and waved a hand at her. "Go on. Save me a seat. I'm not going in until Hermione gets here."

Chewing her lip while she dithered, Ginny said, "Fine. But don't be long. I don't know how well we can fend off this rabid horde."

Ron flashed her a lopsided smile. "I'm sure the Weasley clan can manage to hold a seat or two. I'm not sure where Hermione will sit, so grab one for her too."

Ginny nodded and dashed into the courtroom.

Barely a minute remained when Hermione burst out of a lift, pelting toward Ron. "Don't let them shut the doors yet!"

Ron sprinted forward and bodily held the door open until she got through, glaring at the official who was scowling at him, waiting for him to move so he could shut the doors and begin the proceedings. They paused just inside the threshold and peered around, finally seeing Ginny waving frantically at them from a section near the floor. Ron and Hermione jogged down the steps and hurriedly pressed through the row to take their seats between Ginny and the twins.

As soon as she was seated, Hermione looked at the courtroom. Her heart pounded when she saw Snape standing by the single chair in the centre of the floor. His expression was one of calm disdain, but she could tell by the tightness of his muscles and the twitching of his jaw that he was nervous. His eyes kept flicking down to the chains wrapped around the arms of the chair.

The members of the Wizengamot, all bearing the plum robes of their station, were arrayed in one section of the inclined seating. Dumbledore was standing near the Interrogator, and he and the cross-looking man were having an intense whispered conversation. Finally, Dumbledore backed away to stand on the other side of the central chair, and the Interrogator scowled at Snape before banging his gavel.

"Severus Snape, be seated. You have been called here to answer to the charges of inappropriate fraternization with a student, lewd and lascivious behaviour, and breaching the trust given unto you by the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

Snape sat in the chair, limbs coiled as if ready to spring up immediately, but after a moment in which the chains did not move, he relaxed and turned his attention to the Interrogator, who spoke again.

"Let the record show that I, Eustace Ross Conroy, am serving as Interrogator of the accused, one Severus Donovan Snape, who shall be defended by Chief Warlock Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

The Court Scribe further down the row was writing furiously. During the pause after his statement, a murmur rippled over the assembled spectators, and Hermione glanced around at the mass of people. Her gaze stopped on a witch with unnaturally bright red finger waves who was also scribbling intently. *Unbelievable! I get rid of that horrid Skeeter woman only to have Orly Yarly from Witch Weekly's gossip column show up? Who knows how she'll twist all this?*

Her thoughts were interrupted by Conroy's voice, dripping with ill-concealed frustration and ire.

"I have just been informed that the court's planned use of Veritaserum would be of little use, as Mr. Dumbledore has explained that your mastery of Occlumency would render the potion meaningless."

Snape's brow furrowed even as he shot a glance at Dumbledore, who merely nodded serenely at the Interrogator's summation. Then, to everyone's surprise, Dumbledore said, "If it would please the court, I volunteer to submit to Veritaserum, as I, while an accomplished Legilimens, am nowhere near as expert an Occlumens as Mr. Snape. Considering that I shall be assisting in his defence, and I am privy to pertinent details, if the Wizengamot feels that Veritaserum is desirable, I offer to be the subject."

Gasps and shocked mutterings eddied around the assembled court, and Hermione felt Ginny gripping her hand in acknowledgement of the momentous nature of Dumbledore's offer. Up on the front bench, several Wizengamot officials exchanged furtive murmurs, ending with a brusque whispered conference with Conroy, who glared daggers at both Snape and Dumbledore.

Speaking through a jaw tight with suppressed anger, Conroy said, "At this time, that will not be necessary. However, the court reserves the right to take such action if it deems fit."

Dumbledore inclined his head again, smiling pleasantly. Snape remained silent, back straight and chin up, both hands resting on the arms of the chair, watching Conroy and the rest of the Wizengamot. He studiously avoided searching for Hermione, even though their connection buzzed, informing him of where she was seated.

Conroy cleared his throat and began, "Severus Snape, due to your actions during the performance at Hogwarts' Leaving Feast, it has come to the court's attention that you are intimately involved with one of your students. How do you plead?"

Snape levelled a sharp glare at the Interrogator and uttered a clipped, "Not guilty."

A burst of scandalized chatter surged forth at his reply, quickly subdued by a crack of the gavel.

Eyes narrowed, Conroy said, "Did you or did you *not propose marriage* to Miss Hermione Jane Granger Friday night during the performance of 'Point of No Return'?"

Snape smiled with pride. "Yes, I did." Another rumble of shock followed, after which Snape added, a smug smirk quirking his lips, "Which she accepted."

Every spectator, and most of the Wizengamot, turned to look at Hermione, who nearly cringed at the weight of such avid interest. Ginny squeezed her hand again, and Ron leant forward, glaring fiercely around at the gawking crowd.

Conroy barked, "If Miss Granger accepted your proposal, then surely it was not a complete surprise."

Snape chuckled and said, "Oh, I daresay it was surprise enough for everyone, including her."

Volume rising in exasperation, Conroy said, "I meant that you two had clearly been in a relationship of the sort that you felt you could propose!"

At that, Snape's smile disappeared and he looked straight at Conroy, all seriousness as he said, "It was the most logical next step in expressing how much I love her. I am merely fortunate enough that she accepted."

"Which is evidenced by the ring with which Severus proposed to her," added Dumbledore.

Conroy frowned in puzzlement. "What?"

Dumbledore stepped forward and said, "Severus had the ring made with multiple enchantments, including a betrothal charm and an anti-theft charm woven in with the standard sizing spells. The very fact that the ring fits is a testimony to the fact that Miss Granger fully and knowingly accepted all ramifications of his proposal."

Conroy was speechless for a beat, then he burst out with, "You say you love her, and yet you plead not guilty to being intimately involved with her?"

Snape shook his head and lifted a finger. "I said I was not guilty of being intimately involved with a student. Miss Granger is no longer a student, nor was she at the time I proposed. For that matter, I was not a professor at that time either. If one part of a statement is untrue then the whole is untrue."

Conroy pursed his lips and exhaled heavily through his nose, his face reddening. "Very well then, Mr. Snape, if you wish to play this game... When did your relationship with Miss Granger begin?"

"September first, 1991."

Conroy wasn't the only one to squint at Snape in confusion. Dumbledore, twinkling maddeningly, added, "That was the first day of term of Miss Granger's first year at Hogwarts."

Conroy clenched his hands into fists as he bit out, "I meant when did your intimate relationship begin!"

Snape looked at Dumbledore thoughtfully and said, "When was that first meeting you set for us, Albus?"

Dumbledore tapped his lips with his finger and said, "I do believe it was early November, since the casting was at the start of that month."

Snape turned back to Conroy and said, "There you have it."

"What do you mean, 'that first meeting you set for us'?" He looked at Snape and then at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore nodded cheerfully. "Oh, once they had been cast, I knew they needed to form a trusting relationship to be able to work together and perform. So, I set them a meeting to discuss the play and their roles."

Snape piped up, "We really should thank the Ministry for forcing us to perform in this competition. Without it, Miss Granger and I would never have had the chance to get to know each other outside of the classroom."

The hubbub that followed that cheeky pronouncement took several moments to subside.

Conroy looked nearly apoplectic, and his voice sounded strangled as he said, "I see that we shall get no straight answers from you..."

Dumbledore interceded, saying, "On the contrary, ask direct questions and you'll get direct answers." Conroy glared at him, but didn't speak immediately, so Dumbledore continued, "All right then. Seeing that I, as Headmaster of Hogwarts, wish to clear this matter as much as anyone else, and prove that parents have nothing to fear in sending their children to my school, I will demonstrate."

Snape flicked a glance between the purpling Conroy and his puppet-master former mentor, wondering whether he would really benefit from Dumbledore's line of questioning.

"I believe the crux of the outrage boils down to this: Severus Snape, did you have sexual intercourse with Miss Granger when she was your student at Hogwarts?"

Hermione felt a rush of heat speeding up from her gut to her face, leaving her feeling dizzy and faint at the startled gasps and blatant curiosity swelling in the room.

Snape deliberately and clearly said, "No."

Conroy barked, "How can we believe him?"

Dumbledore whirled to pin Conroy with a quelling look and said, "I can verify the truth of that statement, as I asked that very same question during our interview in which Severus allowed me to use Legilimency to understand the situation."

Hermione's throat went dry, and Snape couldn't resist casting a fleeting glance at her as they both realized just how fine a line Dumbledore was treading between truth and deception. Everything he said was technically true, but he hadn't verified *that* statement with Legilimency. It had only come up *after* his trip into Snape's mind. Hermione marvelled at the slipperiness of Dumbledore's ploy...and he was supposed to be a Gryffindor?

Dumbledore added, "I can take that Veritaserum now if you'd like."

Conroy shook his head in frustration. "Fine! Answer me this then: did you engage in carnal activities of any sort with Miss Granger while still employed at Hogwarts?"

Snape snorted, his voice scathing as he retorted, "Of course! And scores of people witnessed it onstage at rehearsals and performances."

Dumbledore jumped in saying, "Oh, yes, I was rather adamant that you two perform that kiss so passionately. But, it was to win the competition, and it was part of your roles..."

Shocked rumblings rippled through the court again. Snape huffed and sat forward in the chair, rolling his eyes. Then, as the noise faded, he spoke.

"I understand the court's concern over the nature of my relationship with Miss Granger. Allow me to state, for the record, that at no time did I ever take advantage of her, nor did my feelings for her affect her academic achievement. The Wizarding Examination Authority can vouch for her stellar accomplishments in her N.E.W.T.s. And, while we did fall in love in the course of performing, we did not consummate that love while beholden to Hogwarts. As soon as possible, I went to great lengths to publicly declare my honourable intentions with a proposal. I have also already resigned from my teaching position, nor would I ever wish to teach in the future. Therefore, I have broken no laws, and no one will have to worry about me teaching their precious darlings ever again. In light of all this, I submit that this inquest should be finished, so that I may return to my home and fiancée, where we can plan the details of our pending nuptials."

The pandemonium that followed his brash declarations lasted longer than any previous furore. In the midst of it, Ginny squeezed Hermione's hand again and leant close to whisper in her ear, "I call dibs on bridesmaid!"

The absurdity of everything crashed down on Hermione at once, and the nervous tension within her broke in a burst of laughter. She quickly squelched it as Conroy hammered the bench with his gavel.

"Mr. Snape, you are far too glib for a man defending his honour."

Dumbledore stopped whatever heated retort was about to spill from Snape's lips with a hand on his shoulder. "As he has stated, he has gone to great lengths...and expense by the look of that ring...to demonstrate his honour. However, even though both parties involved were of legal adult age, and their relationship is clearly one of deep love, they were in Hogwarts at the time, which would logically have led to terminating Severus's employment. Before that could happen, he resigned. Therefore, seeing as how he did not break any written laws, I, too, submit that this inquest be closed."

Conroy shook his head again, pointing at Dumbledore. "Oh, no you don't. He may have resigned and says he has no desire to teach again, but it is our bounden duty to make sure that he cannot do so. It is hereby declared that Severus Snape is banned from working in any establishment that caters to the education or upbringing of minors...for life!"

A smattering of applause followed his words. Snape pushed to his feet. "Then if we're done..."

Conroy cut him off. "We are *not* done! Be quiet!" He pinned Snape with a glare of pure malice and snapped, "Sit *down*, Mr. Snape."

78- Castigation

Chapter 82 of 84

Snape's trial is over, but his trials have just begun. When Spinner's End is overrun with guests, events take a surprising turn. Will anyone be able to help keep Snape out of Azkaban?

Not mine. Just having fun. Please don't sue. Thanks!

Author's Note: We're winding down, folks. I honestly think we're 2-3 chapters away from this story finishing. LOL Yeah, only six years later... Anyway, here's hoping that this latest rush of writing continues and allows me to be able to get it all done before Infinitus! ;) Thanks to Ladyofthemasque, Becky, and all you lovely folk who read and review and make my life happier. *hugs you all*

Chapter 78- Castigation

Snape sank back into the chair, exchanging a wary glance with Dumbledore.

Conroy leant back in his seat and beckoned imperiously at another Wizengamot official. A stack of papers was handed down the row to Conroy, who sneered in disgust at Snape before paging through them. As the minutes ticked on, muted spates of conversation buzzed on all sides, and Snape looked up at Dumbledore, his brow furrowed in apprehension. Dumbledore shook his head minutely, frowning, unsure of what was happening.

Periodically, Conroy would glance up at Snape with a malignant smirk before flipping through more papers, pausing to make notes on a pad to one side. Snape's unease grew, and he looked at Hermione, who locked anxious eyes with him.

Exhaling gustily, Conroy sat back and lifted his face to the court, his expression triumphant. "Mr. Snape, while you purport to have not broken any *written* laws, it is clear that you traversed freely in the grey areas of the written rules. Your behaviour showed flagrant abuse of the unwritten yet completely reasonable expectations for a professor. It is your job to teach, guide, and care for the safety and well-being of your students, not prey on their emotions and use their regard for your personal ends."

Snape leant forward, goaded to reply. "I *did* my job! Ask anyone!"

Conroy narrowed his eyes at Snape again, lips thinned in annoyance. "Hold your tongue, Mr. Snape."

At that, Dumbledore interceded, saying, "I beg your pardon, Interrogator Conroy, but Mr. Snape has a point. The Wizengamot Charter of Rights states that any accused person may call witnesses to his defence. If Mr. Snape wishes to do so, he is within his rights."

Conroy fumed, and another Wizengamot official leant in close to whisper in his ear. Jaw pushing forward in mulish defiance, Conroy huffed and said, "Very well then, Mr. Snape, whom do you wish to call in your defence?"

Snape cast a startled glance at Dumbledore, who said, "You may ask anyone you like who can speak to your competence in protecting the students entrusted to your care."

Snape blinked in dismay. Wide-eyed, he turned to look at Hermione, and was taken aback to see several people seated near her perched on the ends of their seats and gesturing at him.

Hermione glanced around at her cast-mates and felt tears welling up. Ginny, Ron, McGonagall, Neville, Parvati, and Millicent all had their hands in the air, demonstrating their willingness to be called to testify. Even the Grangers had their hands raised.

Behind Snape, Dumbledore twinkled and beamed at them as he leant down and murmured, "Just look how many you have to choose from, Severus."

Snape, overcome with gratitude, cleared his throat and said, "Professor McGonagall," acknowledging that she was his best ally and friend.

McGonagall shot to her feet and marched down to the floor, haughtily gazing over her spectacles at the assembled Wizengamot. Conroy growled, "State your name and give whatever testimony you deem appropriate to this case."

"My name is Minerva Catherine McGonagall, and I am Deputy Headmistress, Head of Gryffindor House, and Transfiguration professor at Hogwarts. I have known Severus Snape since he was a child. Ever since he began teaching at Hogwarts, he has *always* protected the students, both in and out of the classroom." She paused to fling an exasperated glance at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"Severus has been Head of Slytherin House for many years, and, as we all know, spent his adult life spying on Lord Voldemort as a member of the Order of the Phoenix. If that doesn't demonstrate his willingness and ability to sacrifice and work to protect *all* of our society, and not just the students at Hogwarts, then I can't imagine what can!"

There was a rumble of agreement from Snape's supporters, and even the rest of the spectators looked thoughtful.

Conroy gazed at McGonagall for a moment, then said, "Can you honestly say that you have no qualms about the fact that your colleague became intimately involved with a student...in *your* House, no less?"

McGonagall drew herself up with a regal air and primly addressed the entirety of the Wizengamot. "I believe that Severus and Hermione had nothing but the best of intentions after being chosen...and forced, mind you...to perform in the Tri-Wizard Musical Competition. Had they not been thrown together by the Ministry, I stake my very life on the fact that Severus would never have looked twice at *any* student in an inappropriate manner. However, seeing that they did fall in love, and Severus quite honourably made his intentions clear in the very proposal of marriage for which he is being denounced, I support both him and Hermione. They are both conscientious, decent, admirable people, and I am pleased that two people for whom I have such high regard managed to find the sort of love they have found in each other. That is a gift many of us never receive. And they deserve it!"

Hermione's eyes welled with tears again, and she covered her trembling lips with her hand. Snape stared at McGonagall, rapt, until she finished her vehement statement. When she turned to look at him, he stood and took her hand, eyes bright as he murmured, "Thank you, Minerva."

McGonagall smiled fondly at Snape and patted his hand. Her whisper was barely audible as she leant forward and said, "What else are friends for?"

As she swept back to her seat, Conroy growled, "Anyone else?"

Snape looked back at the group and once again noticed the Grangers. Aware that their support was extremely meaningful in regards to his future with Hermione, he inclined his head to them and said, "Geoff and Dione Granger."

The Grangers exchanged a look and stood, hands linked as they strode down to the floor. Dione looked to Geoff and he spoke.

"My name is Geoffrey David Granger, and this is my wife, Dione. Hermione is our daughter. We are not wizards, clearly, so we only know of this world through her. However, we have heard nothing but good things about Severus protecting the students of Hogwarts. Even when the headmaster sent them on assignment to London,

Severus escorted Hermione and kept her safe. As far as our personal knowledge of his efforts, we can vouch for his shrewdness in helping Hermione look at every aspect of her proposed Ministry contract, assisting her in ways we couldn't, since we aren't familiar enough with how things work in the wizarding world."

Dione added, "It may have been quite a shock to learn that Hermione and Severus were engaged, but we accept it...and Severus, as part of our family."

Dione peered up at Geoff and he nodded slowly. "I'm not sure how your legal system works, but I think that, even though the situation is unexpected, Severus is not a criminal." He looked over at Snape and tilted his head. "I guess that's all."

Snape inclined his head and stepped closer to clasp their hands. His voice was gravelly as he said, "That's more than enough. Thank you."

Dione flashed a tight smile as she and Geoff returned to their seats. Snape looked over to see Millicent stubbornly holding her hand in the air. Acknowledging the girl from his House, he said, "Miss Bulstrode?"

Millicent rose and took a deep breath, flicking a glance at the nearby Neville, who flashed an encouraging grin at her. McGonagall nodded in approval as well, and Millicent lifted her chin and marched down beside Snape.

"My name is Millicent Agnes Bulstrode, and Professor Snape was my Head of House the whole time I was at Hogwarts. He was always making sure that the little kids didn't get bullied by the older ones, and knew how to fix damage and heal hexes so we didn't have to report to Madam Pomfrey all the time and get into more trouble whenever there were scuffles in the common room. He may not have been the nicest person, but we Slytherins all knew we could go to him when it counted. So don't you go saying that he didn't do his job of protecting us, 'cause he did." She ended her statement with a jerk of her head for emphasis, then nodded at Snape and hurried back to her seat before Snape could thank her.

Neville was beaming at her and hissed, "Well said again!" Then, he shot to his feet and announced, "My turn, Professor," as he made his way to the floor. Snape was staring at him as if the young man had grown another head, but Augusta Longbottom was smirking with pride at her grandson's initiative.

Smiling cheerfully at Snape and Dumbledore, Neville faced the Wizengamot and said, "I'm Neville Franklin Longbottom, and I was terrified of Professor Snape until very recently." There was a spate of chuckles at his frank admission. "But, Professor Snape not only worked hard at our performance...in addition to his regular Hogwarts duties...he helped the cast get past our stage fright. If it hadn't been for his guidance and leadership, we may not have won the competition...or, at least, several of us would never have managed to work up the courage to perform so well. And, he made sure no one harassed Hermione about her role, even going so far as to punish a student in his own House for insulting her!"

Snape shook his head minutely in wonder at Neville Longbottom, of all the students he had terrorized over the years, coming to his defence. The boy had truly grown up, and didn't deserve Snape's former disdain any longer.

Neville looked back at Hermione and then at Snape. "I don't know what you're going to do about Professor Snape and Hermione getting engaged, but I think that if you had ever *seen* them perform, then you'd understand how special their connection is." He flicked a glance at Parvati and settled his shoulders with dignity. "And I think it's poor form to punish consenting adults for loving. If there's one thing I learned from the war, it's that love is the most powerful force for good in this world." He paused again, noting the poisonous scowl on Conroy's face, and blinked. "But anyway, Professor Snape did his job well, protecting us, or the good side may not have won."

Neville looked at Harry, who was sulking and staring at the wall. Sighing in disappointment, he turned back to Snape and proffered his hand. Snape, almost speechless, gripped the younger man's hand firmly and said, "Thank you."

Neville smiled and said, "No, sir. Thank *you*." Then he trotted back to his seat.

Conroy growled, "If this parade is over..."

Shooting up from his seat, Ron barked, "Oi! It's not over yet. I haven't had my turn!" Glaring at Conroy in indignation, he bounded down to the floor and said, "All right, if you're in such a hurry, I'll make this quick. My name is Ronald Bilius Weasley, and I just want to say what everyone else has been beating around the bush about. Professor Snape saved lots of us...but Harry mainly...loads of times. And even though the war ended, he didn't stop. Even Professor Dumbledore can tell you that it was Professor Snape's quick reflexes that saved Harry's neck...literally...during rehearsals! If he hadn't stopped that noose, Harry could've been really hurt. So grumble all you want about him and Hermione having an 'inappropriate relationship,' but leave off about him 'breaching trust' and not doing his job."

He scowled right back at Conroy, then turned to nod at Snape and Dumbledore before rejoining Hermione in the stands. As he edged past Harry and Ginny, Harry stared up at him, frowning. Ron sat down and Hermione hugged him, Ginny reaching past her to pat him on the back in approval. Harry watched his friends for a moment, then turned his attention to Snape and Dumbledore on the floor.

Snape, chest and throat tight with emotion at the unexpected swell of support, coughed and said, "I daresay that's enough to make a point. Albus, have you anything to add?"

Dumbledore smiled and said, "No, indeed. Everyone else summed it up quite brilliantly, I think."

Conroy sniffed loudly, then said, "Very well then. We shall confer on the remainder of your punishment."

He sat back, gesturing for the officials on either side to lean in. He rifled through the stack of papers in front of him and pointed at his notes as he muttered to the others. They frowned and shook their heads, making notes of their own. After a few more moments of hushed consulting, one ripped the page from Conroy's pad and passed it down the row so the rest of the Wizengamot could see it. There were some nods and murmurs of agreement as well as some huffs and frowns of disagreement. Some even went so far as to scribble their own notes on the page.

Finally, the paper made its way back to Conroy. He scanned the adjustments and snorted, but pushed forward in his seat anyway, saying, "Severus Snape, please rise and face the court."

Snape stood, smoothing his robes and breathing deeply as he waited for Conroy to continue.

"Although testimony has been brought forth claiming that you performed your duties, it is also abundantly clear that you allowed yourself liberties beyond what is deemed acceptable in your position of authority over students. Therefore, it has been decided that you are not entitled to the full compensation for your duties, as you did not fulfil them in a respectable fashion. As per your own words, your inappropriate relationship with Miss Granger began in November. From that month until the end of your teaching contract, which our records show to be through June, you will be fined 90% of your base salary for those eight months, not including any extra stipends or perquisites. This penalty is due to the Wizengamot by the close of business Friday, in full, or you may face other penalties as well."

Snape's eyes went wide and he felt as if all the air had vanished from his lungs. *That much? I don't have that much left! Not after all the bills, and Hermione's ring, and furnishing the house... Where am I going to get that much money by Friday? With my reputation, I doubt I can get a loan from any respectable source. I can't ask for a salary advance, not when Fern is fronting all the money right now anyway, until we can get stock into stores. I can't bear to ask Hermione to pay for my folly with her salary! I guess it's a good thing that we're not married yet, else she'd be responsible for this fine anyway. Merlin, I don't know what to do...*

While he was reeling at the rest of his punishment, Conroy continued, "I just want to remind you, Mr. Snape, that it would be very unwise to attempt to flee jurisdiction." His smirk was pure venom. "We'll be looking for your payment by Friday." He brandished the paper at Dumbledore, who collected it and brought it back to Snape. It detailed the complete amount he was expected to pay. Lifting the gavel with a flourish, Conroy said, "These proceedings are over. You may go," then banged the gavel for emphasis.

The Wizengamot and spectators began to file out of the courtroom, conversations buzzing. Snape and Dumbledore stood motionless in the centre of the floor. Hermione,

grateful that Snape was only fined, watched Snape's stunned expression with growing worry.

Arthur Weasley crossed to Snape and Dumbledore, gesturing for them to precede him toward the stands where Snape's supporters remained. Hermione jumped up and raced down to Snape, hurling herself into his embrace. The Grangers and the rest of the Weasleys followed, Ginny dragging Harry along by one hand. Neville, his grandmother, and Parvati sidled up to one side of the group, and McGonagall herded Millicent to join them as well.

Snape looked up from resting his cheek on Hermione's head and said, "I can't thank you all enough for everything you've done here. Your support means more than I can say. Thank you."

Hermione lifted her head to see Orly Yarly edging closer, patently hoping to hear their conversation so she could use it in her gossip column. Incensed and worn out from the stress of the trial, Hermione backed up in Snape's arms and said, "I already told everyone upstairs that I wouldn't be back in the office today. Not with this happening, and my having to go buy a computer." She felt Snape cringe faintly and wondered why. "But we really do appreciate you all coming."

Orly was just a few steps away, scribbling furiously, and Hermione said, "Why don't we all go back to the house where we can relax ~~away from prying busybodies!~~" She glared at Orly, and everyone turned to see what she was looking at. Voice hard, she said, "You're all welcome to come along. We can Floo to Spinner's End."

Snape didn't particularly want to have his home overrun by Weasleys and more, but he felt the Rita Skeeter vibe coming off the eavesdropping woman and understood Hermione's concern. Gripping Hermione's hand, he stepped toward the door. "Hermione's right. You're all welcome." Tugging more urgently on her hand, he said, "Let's go."

Hermione beckoned for their friends to follow as she and Snape exited the courtroom and made their way to the lifts. When they had all piled into lifts, Hermione watched with no little satisfaction as Orly Yarly scowled in frustration at losing her targets.

Bulling their way through the milling crowd avidly talking about the trial they had just left, they Flooded home, unsure who would follow. Snape excused himself and immediately went to the W.C. to splash water on his face, leaving Hermione to play hostess to those who appeared.

When he felt composed enough to return, he slowly made his way back into the living room, where he saw Arthur and Molly standing near the front table with the picture of him and Hermione, Fred and George flanking the doorway into the dining room, the Grangers sitting on the couch with Hermione, Ron leaning against the arm of the couch beside her, McGonagall in one armchair, Dumbledore in the other, Harry leaning against the wall near the corner, and Ginny glaring at him nearby.

With so many people in the room, he suddenly felt claustrophobic and stopped on the threshold. Hermione looked up and recognized his panic. Immediately standing and crossing to him, she said, "Severus, I was just saying that anyone who hasn't already been here was welcome to take the two-Knut tour. Why don't you show them what you've done with the place and I'll scare up some refreshments."

McGonagall rose and said, "I'll help you with the food, Hermione. I know well enough where things are."

The Grangers stood too, and Dione said, "We can help."

Dumbledore pushed to his feet and said, "I'd love to see your improvements, Severus, especially that lab Minerva raved about."

Fred and George jerked to attention. Exchanging a look, Fred said, "Lab?" and George said, "Can we see it?"

Snape felt Hermione's reassuring grip on his hand and took a deep breath. *These people are on your side. Be gracious and grateful.* Looking about the room, he said, "Follow me."

He backed into the entrance hall, and Hermione stepped through the doorway into the dining room, McGonagall and the Grangers in tow. Dumbledore, Fred, and George stepped out to join him for the tour, leaving Molly, Arthur, Ron, Ginny, and Harry in the living room.

"Well, this is the front door. You've seen the living room. Through there is the dining room and then the kitchen. We'll see them on the way back down to see the lab." He led the way up the stairs.

In the kitchen, Hermione and her mother were rummaging through the refrigerator and pantry, and McGonagall was taking dishes out of the cabinets. Geoff stood out of their way until they had something to give him to do.

In the living room, Molly was staring at the photo, clearly conflicted. Wringing her hands, she turned to the others and said, "I couldn't believe it when I heard. It seemed so preposterous! And I couldn't imagine Severus allowing such a thing to happen..."

Ron and Ginny turned entreating faces on their mother, and Ron said, "But, Mum, you heard him. And you've seen them. What's so hard to understand?"

Ginny added, "Isn't love a good thing, like Neville said?"

Arthur put a comforting arm around her shoulders and said, "Molly-love, who are we to judge? We eloped, ourselves! I'd say it's obvious enough that no one is taking advantage of anyone else here. Hermione may be young, but with the war, these kids have grown up beyond their years. She's safe, she's happy... Her parents accepted it. Who are we to criticize?"

Against the wall, Harry squirmed uncomfortably, unnoticed by the Weasleys. He peered past Molly at the photo, digesting the fact that Hermione was practically radiant beside Snape.

Molly made an impatient gesture and sighed. "I hear what you're saying, Arthur. It's just... difficult."

At that, Ron snorted with rueful laughter, rubbing the back of his neck. "No kidding, Mum. But just look at it this way: isn't it better to be surprised by something like this than by Dark Lords?"

Ginny sniggered and flashed a grin at her brother. Then she sobered and crossed to her mother. "I know you love Hermione like she was one of us, Mum. We do too. And Professor Snape loves her just as much. She doesn't need your protection anymore. She's got him."

Molly washed her hands together again, and Ginny hugged her. Resting her cheek against Ginny's hair, Molly sighed again and said, "I'll try."

Ginny bounced up and kissed her mother on the cheek. "That's good enough, Mum. You're the best."

Molly patted Ginny's back and turned to Arthur. "I just feel so out of place here. Can't we go now?"

Arthur nodded and said, "I'll tell Hermione we're leaving. I should get back to work anyway. Not that anyone will be able to concentrate on doing anything, what with the trial to gossip about..."

He crossed into the dining room, and Ron stepped up to hug his mother as well. "Gin's right; you're top notch."

Molly looked at her children and said, "Will you be coming with us?"

Ginny shook her head. "Not yet. I want to have a chance to catch up with Hermione first."

"Same here." Ron looked up as his father returned. "Say, Dad, is the food ready yet?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and smacked Ron in exasperation. "Honestly, Ron, can't you think about anything other than *food*?"

Ron cringed and backed away, his hands up. "Oi! I was nervous for Hermione earlier and couldn't eat much breakfast. Now that the trial's over, and Snape's not going to Azkaban or anything, I'm hungry!"

Arthur chuckled and shook his head, tucking Molly's hand in the crook of his arm. "I'm sure they'll have something soon. I'll see you all at dinner tonight." Looking at his wife, he said, "I'm going straight back to the Ministry, love."

They crossed to the Floo and Arthur disappeared first, leaving Molly to follow a moment later on her way to the Burrow.

Ginny glanced at Ron again and said, "I'm gonna' see if they need any help in the kitchen." As she crossed to the dining room, she saw the Grangers entering from the other side, laden with trays of sandwiches to place on the table. Pausing, she turned and said, "Food's ready, Ron."

With that, she and Ron went into the dining room, leaving Harry alone in the living room. He pushed away from the wall and peeked around the doorjamb to see the others gathered around the table, plates in hand, eating and chatting. Glancing out of the doorway into the hall, he crossed to the front table and stood gazing down at the picture of Snape and Hermione.

He was standing there, fists shoved in his pockets, when he heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Whirling guiltily, he saw Snape pass through the hall with the twins and Dumbledore behind him. Snape's voice carried through into the living room.

"Ah, I see that we have some refreshments in the dining room. I'd like to show you the rest of the house before we eat."

Fred said, "Please do. I want to see this lab."

Snape led them past the dining room to the entrance into the kitchen, then around and down the stairs into the basement. When they had all reached the bottom, George let out a low whistle.

"Wow. This is really something!" George exchanged an impressed look with his twin, who nodded.

Snape crossed to check on the status of the long-term contraceptive potion he was making, then went to the long marble counter where several different ingredients were in neat piles of varied preparations. "This is where I've been preparing the larger amounts of ingredients for making batches of potions for Fern."

Fred and George frowned in confusion at each other just as Dumbledore said, "Fern? Isn't that the woman with whom you are working to start a new company?"

Snape demurred, saying, "Well, I'm working *for* her, but yes, she's the owner and manager of *Vial and Vessel*. I'm the producer behind the scenes."

George stepped forward, one hand stroking his chin, and said, "*Vial and Vessel*, eh? What sorts of potions will you be making?"

"Well, Fern wants to make the standard health and beauty products," and his lip curled in derision, "but she wants to make them as 'all-natural and environmentally friendly' as possible. Frankly, I'm more interested in showing that our products will be of the utmost consistent quality..."

Fred interjected, "Naturally."

Snape squinted at the twins, who bore identical speculative expressions, and warily said, "Why do you ask?"

George grinned and clapped his hands together, saying, "I'm glad you asked. You see, my lesser half..."

Fred barked, "Oi!"

"...and I realized that if we were to create products that incited headaches and rashes and things like that, it would be a good idea to also sell products that could treat the results of our prank items!"

Dumbledore chuckled behind them, and Fred stepped up beside his brother, elbowing him in the ribs as he said, "We were looking into distributors, but hadn't really got that far, when Ginny told us you were going into business now that you'd left Hogwarts."

George continued, "So, we thought we'd see whether or not the company *you* were with might be interested in stocking product with Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes."

Fred added, "And not just the normal, everyday stuff that you could sell elsewhere as well, but developing things specifically for post-Wheeze 'issues.'"

Snape was momentarily bereft of speech. Never in his wildest imaginings would he have thought that he'd be legitimately propositioned for business by the Weasley twins. Blinking, he faltered, "I-I'd have to talk to Fern, but... But I think the idea has merit."

Fred and George exchanged smug grins, and George said, "Of course. You know where to reach us, right?"

Fred leant forward and said, sotto voice, "Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, 93 Diagon Alley."

Dumbledore sniggered again, and Snape managed a faint smile. Inclining his head, he said, "I'll contact you once I've talked to Fern. I know she's just starting the campaign to get shops to stock us. I'm sure she'll be interested."

As one, Fred and George said, "Excellent," and thrust their right hands out. Snape shook one after the other, then gestured toward the stairs.

"Shall we head back up for some lunch?"

All four men climbed the stairs and joined the others in the dining room. McGonagall had already had a sandwich and some tea, and was just waiting for Dumbledore to return before she left. When they entered from the kitchen, she ducked past them, plucking at Dumbledore's sleeve to get his attention. He spun and stepped back into the kitchen with her.

"I'm sure Severus and Hermione will have plenty to talk about, and no doubt it's wearing to have company right now. Why don't we let them be and go back to Hogwarts? If we leave, perhaps it will spur the others to go too, and give them their privacy back."

Dumbledore looked wistfully at the sandwiches, but nodded. "Good point. Let's say our goodbyes."

They edged into the full dining room again and Dumbledore said, "Thank you for the lovely tour, Severus. Minerva and I have some things to attend to at Hogwarts. We'll leave you to the rest of your day."

Snape rose from the chair he had dropped into and said, "Thank you, Albus, for defending me once again."

Dumbledore smiled and waved his hand airily. "It was the least I could do, dear boy." Snape shot him an aggrieved glance for the endearment, but Dumbledore just chuckled. "Hermione, my dear, good luck with your department. And both of you, keep in touch."

Hermione smiled. "Of course, sir." She gripped his hand as he passed her on the way to the living room.

McGonagall paused by Snape and said, "I expect to be invited to the wedding, you know."

Snape chuckled and submitted to her hug. "Thank you, Minerva."

Smirking at him as she hugged Hermione too, she said, "Anytime, Severus. Just... try not to need it again, all right?"

Everyone laughed as she waved, following Dumbledore to the Floo, where they disappeared back to Hogwarts.

Fred and George were leaning against the wall, mirroring each other with a sandwich in one hand as they discussed which products they wanted *Vial and Vessel* to develop first.

Dione poured Snape some tea, quietly patting his shoulder in comfort as she passed it to him. He looked up, and she offered a faint smile of encouragement. To one side, Geoff and Hermione were discussing where she wanted to go first on their shopping trip, and what features would best suit her needs.

Laying their plates on the table, the twins looked at Snape and Hermione, and Fred said, "Thanks for the nosh, Hermione."

George said, "And thanks for the tour. That's quite an outfit you've got down there."

Smiling, Hermione said, "Thank you for coming today." She reached over and clasped Snape's hand. "We appreciate it."

Snape nodded, then said, "I'll owl you when I know more."

Clapping his hands again, George said, "Jolly good! Come on, Fred, we'd better make sure Verity hasn't let the place burn down in our absence."

Affecting mock-weariness, Fred laid his hand across his forehead and said, "It's so hard to find good help these days."

With parting grins, he and George Disapparated from the spot, leaving the others to laugh at their dramatic departure.

Harry sidled past the group and into the hallway, looking up and down the corridor. He saw the door under the stairs and crossed to it, guiltily remembering the unhappy child-Snape he had seen in Snape's memories during those abortive Occlumency lessons and wondering if the door could lead to something similar to the cupboard under the stairs he had grown up in at the Dursleys'. Hand on the knob, he paused, uncomfortable with the clenching of his gut at the thought that perhaps he and Snape had more in common than he had previously thought. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door...and exhaled in relief to see that it was not a dusty prison, but a simple toilet and sink.

Back in the dining room, on the tails of the laughter at the twins exit, Dione said, "Hermione, dear, shouldn't you and your dad get going if you want to hit all those places to comparison shop first?"

Snape's head snapped up from his absent staring at the table and he looked at Hermione with alarm. Composing himself, he cleared his throat and said, "Your mother is right, however, could I have a word with you before you go?"

Hermione nodded and stood at the same time Snape did, wondering what he was so upset about, and said, "Of course." Nodding at the rest of the group, she said, "Excuse us," and followed Snape into the hallway.

Harry heard movement and turned to see Snape backing into the hallway from the dining room. Flustered, Harry ducked into the W.C. and shut the door quietly behind him. Leaning against the door, heart pounding, he chastised himself for panicking. *What is wrong with you? It's a toilet, for gods' sakes!*

Snape and Hermione stopped in the hallway and glanced back at the others, then Snape drew Hermione further down the hall toward the kitchen entrance. He didn't want the others to hear their conversation.

Hermione peered up at his anxious expression and murmured, "Severus, what's wrong? I can see something's upset you."

Snape's eyes closed as he scowled. Looking down in shame, he said, "Are computers... terribly expensive?"

Hermione jerked back, blinking in surprise. Bewildered, she said, "Well, they're certainly not cheap, but they're not exorbitant. Why?"

Grinding his teeth, eyes closed again, Snape said, "I'm so sorry..."

Mystified, and growing more alarmed at Snape's manner, Hermione gripped his arm and said, "Sorry for what? Severus, you're scaring me. What's wrong?"

Exhaling harshly through his nose, Snape said, "I promised to take care of you, to provide for you, and now I can't, and I..." He stopped suddenly, unable to continue.

Searching his face, Hermione said, "What on earth are you talking about?"

His voice sounding like it was being ripped from his throat, Snape said, "The fine! I don't have enough. I spent so much already, on the house, and... other things." His eyes inexorably flicked to the ring. "And now you need this computer, and I can't afford it. I don't have enough to pay the bloody fine, and I don't know how or where to get it, and if I don't, then they'll probably cart me off to Azkaban, and I won't be able to pay the bills on the house, and I could lose it, and I wouldn't be able to take care of you, and I could lose you too!"

His voice rose in anguish and he raked his fingers through his hair, gripping it and grimacing at the sting on his scalp as well as the pain in his heart.

Hermione gaped at him in horrified understanding. Throwing herself against him and wrapping her arms around his ribs, he hugged him fiercely and said, "Don't! It's all right. It'll all work out. We'll be fine, dearest. Just stop punishing yourself!" Backing away enough to reach up and untangle his hands from his hair and meet his tortured eyes, she said, "As far as this computer thing goes, don't even worry about it. My father already told me that he and Mum decided they would buy it for me as a congratulations for finishing school with top marks and getting such a great job. I wasn't expecting you to pay for it anyway, love! I have my own money...some, anyway, and we'll figure out how to get the rest for the fine... *together*. You're stuck with me, Severus, no matter what. I love you."

The knot of guilt and shame in Snape's gut loosened a little and he tried to take heart from her declaration that things would work out. Aware once again of how much he loved the woman before him, he crushed her to him in a fervent embrace, kissing her hair and murmuring, his voice shaky, "I love you. I'm so sorry to put you through this..."

They were silent for a moment, taking comfort in each other's arms.

In the W.C., Harry was plastered against the door, barely breathing as he listened with all his might to the hushed conversation happening on the other side. Unexpected sympathy tightened his throat, and his cheeks warmed with embarrassment that he was eavesdropping on such a private moment even though he made no move to stop.

Finally, Snape backed away and said, "Your father is waiting. Go; do what you need to do. I'll... think of something."

Hermione stretched up and kissed him. "Don't fret, love. We'll figure it out."

Hand in hand, they returned to the dining room. Harry listened to the footsteps and exhaled, wondering if he could make it back without anyone noticing. Carefully opening the door, he peeked down the hallway. He could hear the voices in the dining room and tiptoed to the doorway, where he then crossed to the far wall of the corridor and crept past it, hurrying to the entrance to the living room. Ducking in, he stepped over to the doorway into the dining room and leant against the doorjamb, hopefully looking as if he had been there the whole time.

Fortunately for him, when Snape and Hermione had left the room, Ron and Ginny had asked questions about computers, and Dione and Geoff were trying to explain them. Plus, as he had been acting quite the sullen brat, no one had been paying much attention to him all day.

Exchanging an amused look with Ginny, Ron said, "Too bad Dad couldn't be here. He'd *love* hearing about all this stuff!"

Ginny giggled and said, "There'll be other times, I'm sure."

The Grangers crossed toward the doorway to the living room, and Harry backed out of it, watching them as they headed to the Floo. Ron and Ginny followed, with Snape behind them.

"Come on, Mum. Dad and I are going to Floo to the house with you, and then we're going to drive out and about."

Ginny sighed and said, "We'd better get going too. I was hoping to get a chance to hang out and catch up, but you've got more important things to do."

Hermione darted over and hugged her friend, smiling. "We'll get together soon; I promise." Then, hugging Ron too, she added, "Thanks again for coming out."

Snape spoke up. "Indeed. It was an unexpected pleasure. I appreciate your help."

Ron beamed and waved his hand. "It was nothing, really. Just helping out a friend."

At that, Ginny frowned and said, "I would have testified, too!" She turned to Snape with a petulant yet accusing look and said, "You just never called on me."

Snape couldn't help but chuckle. Shaking his head, he said, "I doubt the court could have handled *your* testimony, Ginny."

Preening at the unanticipated compliment, she smirked and said, "Hmm, you may have a point," then laughed.

Hermione crossed to Snape and said, "I'll be back tonight." Bouncing up to kiss him, she added, "Don't you have a potion to finish while I'm gone?"

The gleam in her eyes made Snape smile even in the midst of his worry. "I do. Have a good trip."

Flashing a dazzling smile at him, she said, "Love you!" as she rejoined her parents at the hearth.

"Bye, Severus. See you soon." Dione and Geoff waved as they Flooed away, Hermione a step behind them.

When they were gone, Ron and Ginny headed toward the fireplace as well, then looked for Harry. Beckoning for him to follow, Ginny said, "Harry, come on."

Still grappling with the conflicting thoughts and feelings stirred up by his unintentional discoveries, Harry, his hands shoved in his pockets, skulked over to the hearth, flicking a glance at Snape.

"Thanks for lunch." Ron nodded again to Snape as he stepped into the Floo. Snape lifted his hand in farewell. Harry followed without saying a word.

Just before she stepped into the flames, Ginny grinned at Snape and said, "I'm so glad they didn't send you to Azkaban."

Snape's brows rose in agreement and he nodded as the girl spun out of sight. When they were all gone, he heaved a deep sigh and turned to clear up the remains of the sandwiches before heading down to the lab.

Back in the Burrow's crowded kitchen, Harry was waiting for Ginny to show up. Ron had already gone into the living room, and Mrs. Weasley was in the garden. Ginny spun out of the fireplace and stopped short at the sober look on Harry's face.

One hand in his pocket and the other running through his hair, he said, "Uh, can I talk to you for a second?"

Crossing her arms and glaring at him, she retorted, "Are you finished being a colossal prat?"

Harry winced and rubbed the back of his neck, his cheeks flushing. "I deserved that."

Instantly, Ginny dropped her aggressive pose and crossed to him, one hand cupping his elbow. "True, but you're better now, right?"

Harry half-shrugged and looked at her, his expression sheepish. "I'm sorry I upset you. Your mum had it right: it's just difficult." He paused, heaving a deep sigh and moving to lean against the table. Taking off his glasses and scrubbing his face, he said, "It's a good thing for Hermione that they didn't sentence Snape to Azkaban."

Ginny stepped over and leant against the table beside him, her shoulder against his. "No kidding." Turning her head to gaze at his profile, she said, "So, are you gonna apologize to Hermione as well?"

Harry snorted faintly. "Yeah, I better... I guess I'll owl her and ask when she's free. Obviously she wouldn't be there today."

Patting his thigh in encouragement, Ginny said, "I'm sure she'll be happy to hear from you." There was a long moment of silence, then she said, "So, want to get Ron and play some Quidditch?"

Harry frowned in thought and flicked a glance at her. "Actually... I've got some things I need to look into. I'll be back before dinner, all right?"

Ginny's brows rose in query, but he just pushed away from the table and half-smiled in reassurance as she said, "Where are you going?"

"I... don't know that I can say. It's nothing bad; I promise. Just... tell everyone I'll be back for dinner...and that I'm sorry for being such a git. Okay?"

Squinting at him in confusion, Ginny murmured, "All right. See you later."

Harry grinned, ducked closer to her, and kissed her lightly before stepping back and Disapparating.

Baffled, Ginny muttered, "Harry James Potter, what on earth are you up to?" as she went to find Ron.

Unbeknownst to the Weasleys, Harry popped into Ron's room, where he was staying, and rummaged through his trunk. He pulled out his robes and Invisibility Cloak, smiling. Shrugging into the robes, he stuffed the cloak into his pocket and Disapparated again.

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Snape was in his lab, scraping willow bark, when he thought he heard something from above. Pausing and lifting his head toward the basement door, he listened. *There! Was that knocking?* Several faint thumps had happened, and he remained still. *Perhaps it was just something outside.* After a few beats, they happened again, so Snape

put down the willow bark and climbed the stairs.

At the top of the stairs, he paused again, listening. When the knocking resumed, it was louder, and he could tell that it was coming from the front door. Frowning in irritation, he strode through the house and flung open the front door to see...

Nothing.

No one was on his doorstep, nor was anyone even near his house. Eyes narrowing in suspicion, he looked up and down the street and even lifted his gaze above him. No sign of anyone or anything that could have been knocking on his door. Huffing, he backed up, about to slam the door shut when he heard a soft whisper saying, "Professor?"

Snape went still, except for his hand creeping toward his wand in his pocket. Again, he heard, "Professor, it's me, Harry." With that, suddenly a pair of spectacled green eyes appeared in front of him.

Snape's eyes went wide, and he jerked back, hissing, "Potter! Get in here before someone sees you!"

Harry's eyes disappeared, but Snape heard his footsteps coming into the house, and he slammed the door shut, whirling to see Harry emerging from his Invisibility Cloak.

"What the bloody blazes are you *doing*, boy?" Snape glared at Harry, growling, "Why are you even here? Hermione's with her father; but you should already know that!"

Harry wadded up the Cloak and looked away, muttering, "I'm not here to see Hermione. I wanted to talk to you."

Snape threw his hands in the air in defeat and spun, charging into the living room as he said, "I give up! I thought this day couldn't get any worse..." Harry followed to see Snape dropping dramatically into an armchair and gesturing to him. "Well, go on then, Potter. You did nothing but sulk the whole time you were here earlier...didn't say word one! What, were you afraid to say how you really feel in front of everyone else? It's obvious, or you wouldn't have been acting like such a spoilt brat."

Harry scowled back at Snape, stung by the truth of the older man's words. Hands balled into fists at his sides, he glared and barked, "Just shut up, all right? You don't know everything!"

Sneering, Snape retorted, "Don't I? Fine, then, Potter. *Enlighten* me."

Sinking heavily onto the edge of the other armchair's seat, Harry ran his hands through his hair and focused on the floor. "Look, I thought we were good...after the performance. You were nicer; things were better. But *then* you... and Hermione..."

He trailed off, clearly struggling, and Snape growled, "Hermione and *what*, Potter? She loves me, and you can't stand it. Look at you, you can't even say it!"

Harry whipped his angry gaze to meet Snape's and yelled, "Stop antagonizing me! I'm not here to fight!"

Leaning forward in his chair, Snape retorted, "Then *what are you* here for?"

Harry shot to his feet, looking ready to launch himself at Snape as he shouted, "I'm here to try *and help* you, you stonking great git!"

Rearing back and flinging his hands out, Snape cried, "Oh! Here's the childish name-calling..." Then he stopped, pinning Harry with a suspicious glare as the rest of his statement sank in. "What did you say?"

Fuming, Harry bit out, "I *said* I'm here to try to help you. For Hermione."

Eyes narrowed, Snape said, "And just how do you propose to do that?"

To Snape's surprise, Harry averted his eyes, cheeks flushing even more, his expression one of guilt and shame. Walking away until he was behind the couch...almost as if he needed it for cover...he crossed his arms defensively and mumbled, "I heard you and Hermione earlier."

Snape, more disturbed by the boy's demeanour than his words, said, "When? What are you talking about?"

Taking a deep breath, Harry said, "I was in the loo when you and Hermione were in the hallway. I heard what you said."

Snape's eyes widened so much that a ring of white was visible around the black centres. His hands gripped the arms of the chair until the yellow of his knuckles was visible beneath the taut skin. Humiliated and incensed that the boy had eavesdropped on his private shame, Snape's whisper was deadly as he said, "Get out."

Harry flicked a frightened glance at Snape and lifted his hands in a calming gesture. "Just listen..."

"*Get. Out.*"

"But..."

"*Now!*" Snape pushed to his feet, grabbing his wand as he stood.

Harry immediately snatched his wand from his pocket and held his ground, breathing hard as he faced Snape's rage. Desperate to stave off a duel, he blurted, "I can loan you the money!"

Snape's lip curled, baring his teeth as he advanced. Harry cast a Shield Charm, just in case.

"Do you want to take the chance of losing this house, of hurting Hermione?"

Snape stopped, glaring daggers at Harry, his hands clenched into fists.

"I can loan you the money. Honest. No catch. I've already been to Gringotts. I've got enough; you need it. I know you'd pay it back, so what's the problem? Don't you think Hermione's gone through enough? Why can't you just accept my offer and get over it?"

Harry's words filtered through the red haze of Snape's ire and he growled, "Why?"

Swallowing hard, trying to still the racing of his pulse, Harry said, "Look, it's not easy to get over years of hate, okay? But I love Hermione, and if she loves you, then we have to be able to get along, 'cause neither of us is going anywhere."

Snape, unblinking, merely waited for Harry to continue.

"Everyone said it at the trial: you've saved my life time and again. I owe you."

Snape remembered their truce after the performance. Finally starting to let go of his anger, he rumbled, "I told you: we're even."

Harry shook his head. "Nice sentiment, but not true. You've done far more for me than I ever could do for you. Now it's my turn to return the favour." He watched Snape

relaxing from his battle-ready tension and ended the Shield Charm. "We can go to Gringotts and have the goblins draw up a proper loan...it's not charity."

Snape cut a dark glance at the boy and went back to his chair, sinking wearily into it and cradling his head in his hands, his elbows propped on his knees. His voice was low as he said, "Who put you up to this? Ginny?"

Offended, Harry, said, "No! I didn't tell anyone what I heard. No one knows I'm here." He paused and gave a weak chuckle. "So, uh, please don't kill me and use me for potions ingredients, 'kay?"

Snape snorted and drawled, "I'm making potions, not *poisons*, Potter."

Grimacing, Harry said, "Oh, ha ha." He edged around the couch and sat. "I told her I'd be back for dinner, but not where I was going. It-it's none of her business unless you want to tell her."

Snape jerked his head in acknowledgement. Faintly, he said, "You don't even know how much I need."

Harry took a deep, cleansing breath and said, "It doesn't matter. My inheritance has been drawing interest for years. Whatever you need, we can work out a loan. Tell me how much you need, how much you can pay each month, and we'll settle on a decent interest rate and figure out how long it'll take to pay back...which *doesn't matter*. It can take as long as it needs to take." He eyed Snape's still-hanging head and said brightly, "So, do we have a deal? We can make an appointment at Gringotts tomorrow and get the damned Ministry paid off before that jackass Conroy can give you any more grief."

Snape was staring unseeingly at the floor. His gut writhed with mortification and resentment and relief. He didn't want to be indebted to a Potter...*again*...but the boy...young man...was offering up a perfect solution on a silver platter, no strings attached. He'd never be able to find a better loan from anywhere else, and he was adamant that he wouldn't broach Hermione's money for his punishment.

Harry could tell that Snape was struggling with his offer. His newly-awakened sympathy kicked in again and he tried to lighten the mood. "Just say yes and let's move on. I swear I won't hold it over your head or anything." Snape lifted his head to cut an acid glance at Harry. Taking that as an encouraging sign, Harry continued, "I mean, I'm not afraid of you or anything; I'm afraid of *Hermione*."

Snape cocked one eyebrow at Harry's owl-eyed, earnest statement and snorted. "As well you should be."

Harry flashed a lopsided grin and Snape sat back in his chair, looking absolutely wrung out. Rising, he crossed to Snape and said, "So, meet you at Gringotts tomorrow morning?" extending his hand.

Snape eyed the proffered hand for a long moment, but Harry didn't back down. Looking up with a resigned expression, he gripped Harry's hand and shook it once before releasing it and letting his own hand drop back into his lap.

Harry beamed with relief that his idea had worked, and he hadn't ended up hexed to bits. "Brilliant! How's ten sound to you?"

Snape shrugged. "Fine."

Rubbing the back of his neck, Harry exhaled heavily and said, "All right then. I'll see you tomorrow at ten." He sought Snape's eyes and held his gaze. His voice was soft as he said, "You won't regret it."

Snape snorted again and rolled his eyes. "We'll see about that." Shoving to his feet, he said, "I have work to do..."

Smirking, Harry said, "You don't need to show me out. I'll just get out of your way, then."

Harry loped up to the fireplace and tossed in a pinch of Floo powder. Before he could step into the flames, Snape's quiet voice said, "Thank you... Harry."

Harry spun, a pleased smile on his face, and said, "No worries, Professor," as he stepped backward into the Floo and whirled out of sight.

79- Culmination

Chapter 83 of 84

Hermione sets up her offices--at home and at the Ministry--and Snape pays his debt to society--with Harry's help. As time goes on, Snape and Hermione settle into their home and lives together as they plan to make their union official.

Disclaimer: Not mine, no matter how much I wish they were. Just having fun with Jo's toys, and I'll put them back as good as new when I'm done with them.

Author's Note: Deep, profound gratitude to ladyofthemasque for feedback and beta, and to Becky for feedback as well. And thank you once again to all of you who have stuck around through this mammoth effort and have made me so happy with your reviews and emails and comments. We're almost to the end of this journey, and I hope it meets with your satisfaction. After this, we have one last glimpse of our couple. But first... enjoy this offering. I hope. :)

Chapter 79- Culmination

Hermione and her father emerged via Floo into the living room at Spinner's End. Between the two of them, they were laden with boxes and bags. Charming the soot off their clothes, Hermione said, "Just go on up to the office, Dad. I'll meet you in a minute."

Geoff nodded and made as if to take her packages as well, but Hermione grinned and waved her wand, sending them all sailing upstairs in a floating caravan of computer equipment. Snorting and shaking his head fondly, Geoff muttered, "Boy, you wizards have it easy," and followed them up.

Hermione strode through the dining room and kitchen to the basement door. Gingerly opening it wider from its position ajar, she called, "Severus? Are you here?"

A morose "Yes," answered her.

Frowning at his tone, Hermione descended to find Snape sprawled in a chair he had evidently transfigured from the more-useful stool, staring at the floor, stroking a purring Crookshanks who was quite decidedly draped over his lap and chest. Smiling at the image of her cat comforting her fiancé, she said, "I see Crookshanks finally made an

appearance again. I was wondering when he was going to forgive us for uprooting him and bringing him here. Was he hiding down here? Or did you manage to coax him out?"

Snape shook his head, still not looking at her. His voice was faint and yet still conveyed his inner turmoil as he said, "He just showed up. Guess he thought I needed cheering."

At that, Crookshanks looked over his shoulder at her and gave a rumbling "yowp!" Stretching up to butt his smushed face against Snape's chin, he purred even louder before jumping down and casting a meaningful look at Hermione as he passed her. Snape's hands, which had been trailing through the thick ginger fur, dropped listlessly to his lap. Concerned, Hermione crossed to Snape and said, "Are you all right? What's wrong, love?"

Snape's lips curled in a half-hearted sneer and he managed a petulant toss of his head as he spat, "Potter."

Bewildered, Hermione dropped to a crouch in front of him and said, "What~~are~~ you talking about?"

Snape rolled his eyes and lifted his hands to scrub his face, dragging his fingers back through his hair and keeping his face tilted up away from Hermione's searching look. "I can't seem to get away from being indebted to a Potter. First James, for saving me from Lupin, and now Harry, for saving me from Azkaban."

Blinking rapidly, Hermione reached out and pulled Snape's hands back down, her voice stern as she said, "For gods' sakes, Severus, what the bloody hell are you~~talking~~ about?"

Snape heaved a sigh that seemed to come from the very depths of his soul and said, "Harry was here this afternoon. He offered to loan me the money I need to pay the fine and keep me from incurring more punishments. We're to meet at Gringotts tomorrow at ten to draw up the loan with the goblins."

Eyes rolling heavenward in relief, Hermione gripped Snape's hands and said, "But that's wonderful! Why are you so distraught about it?"

Snape favoured her with a withering glare and she blanched. His tone was barely above glacial as he said, "Wonderful? How is it wonderful that *he* is witness to my shame and now has this to hold over me?"

Hermione settled onto her knees in front of him and cupped his cheek in sympathy. "Dear heart, don't look at it that way! You two had made peace after the performance anyway, and Harry is finally accepting our relationship and not acting like a baby. Those are good things! And if he's willing to help us in our time of need, then that's what friends *do*. We look out for each other and help however we can. I've known Harry for seven years, and money really isn't that important to him. He's fortunate enough to be left well-off—what with his inheritance from his parents and from Sirius—and having grown up they way he did, he's not the spendy type. I daresay he's pleased to have a chance to pay you back for all the help you've given him over the years! Frankly, I'm rather proud of him, behaving like a grown-up... and a friend."

Snape stared at her mournfully, weighing her view against his. Truly, everything she had said was exactly how Harry had put it, but it still rankled. Scowling, he growled, "I *hate* being in this position!"

Hermione stood and stepped beside him, leaning down to hug him and drop a kiss on his head. "I know, love, but it's really a brilliant solution to our troubles. And I know we'll get it paid back in no time, so you won't have to suffer too much."

Snape grunted and Hermione hugged him again. Making an effort to pull himself out of his funk, he said, "How was your trip?"

Hermione backed away, beaming. "It was excellent! My dad and I got everything I need, and he's upstairs in the office to help me set it all up. Provided everything works, I'll be up and running by tonight!"

Snape's black mood lifted a bit at the sight of her enthusiasm. Hit once again with the force of his love for her, he pushed to his feet and wrapped his arms around her, kissing her soundly.

Hermione, taken aback as she was by his unexpected gesture, still felt the heady reaction to his lips on hers, and she responded with fervour, wishing her father weren't waiting upstairs, so she could drag Snape away and shag him out of his sulkiness.

Backing away, Snape recognized the desire in her eyes and couldn't help but smile. Pulling her back into his embrace, he tucked her head under his chin and murmured, "Thank the gods for you, my love." Then, after pressing a kiss to the crown of her head, he said, "Why don't we get upstairs before your poor father wonders what happened to you?"

Hermione twinkled up at him and said, "Want to learn how to use the computer?"

Snape blinked in apprehension, but swallowed his anxiety at the challenge in her eyes. "Shouldn't hurt."

Hermione beamed at him again and tugged on his hand to lead him up to the office, Snape brushing vainly at the cat hairs clinging to his clothing. They arrived to see Geoff sitting on the floor amid boxes and strange-looking equipment, with cords and manuals and plastic littering the space in front of him. He looked up at their appearance and nodded.

"Afternoon, Severus. Can you believe that all this will eventually look like the computer at our place?" He snorted and flashed a lopsided smile at Snape's wide eyes.

His tone as dubious as his expression, Snape retorted, "We'll see."

Hermione carefully stepped into the mess and dropped to the floor to join her father. Snape remained in the doorway to observe. Between the two Grangers, in just over an hour, they had the contraption put together, the cords all plugged into various outlets and bundled out of the way behind everything on the desk, and the system powered up and running. Snape was duly impressed by their organization, and he tried his best to follow what they were saying when they talked about things like "hooking up the modem," and "installing software."

Once everything was working, Geoff gathered all the debris into a box and said, "I think that's all of it. I don't know about you two, but I'm famished. I daresay it's dinner time."

Hermione looked up and said, "Indeed. Mum is probably wondering where you are. Thanks for sticking around to help me get this all ready. I'll be explaining the concept of 'telecommuting' to the Ministry. Not like I could take all this and set it up there: the magic banjaxes anything electronic. I think I will require anyone in my department to have home computers and Internet access as well. It's bound to just get bigger from here. Anyway, sorry to work you to death and starve you to boot!" She hugged her father and guided him downstairs. "I'll talk to you soon. Go eat dinner. And thanks again, Dad."

They were at the fireplace, and Geoff tossed a pinch of Floo powder into the grate with an air of one well-practiced, making Hermione smile. "Good night, then. You two get some dinner as well. No doubt you're both the sort to forget to eat with other things to occupy your mind." He chuckled and stepped into the flames. "Bye, dear. Love you!"

Hermione called after him, "Love you!" Turning to see Snape leaning against the doorjamb into the entrance hall, she said, "Are you hungry too?"

Snape lifted one shoulder and said, "I could eat."

Grimacing at his vagueness, Hermione gestured for him to follow her into the kitchen, where she set him to the task of preparing a salad while she made spaghetti and meatballs. They exchanged pleased looks as they once again shared in the cooking, although they were making something other than chocolate mousse this time.

They were seated at the dining table, Hermione regaling Snape with her plans for hiring people to work in her new department and coming to an end of their meal, when an envelope whooshed out of the fireplace in the living room to the accompaniment of green flames.

Snape frowned at Hermione as he rose to collect it. Her expression was anxious, watching his eyes skimming through the missive. Quickly, however, his frown faded, and he shot a reassuring look at her. "It's from Fern."

"Oh! Is everything all right?"

Snape sank into his chair again, nodding. "Yes. She said she read about the trial and was rather pleased to see that her 'sixth sense' about me was not misplaced. There's an updated list of what she wants me to brew, as she's managed to get placements in a few shops already." He paused and blinked in sudden concentration. "I need to talk to her about the Weasley twins' proposal too."

Squinting, Hermione said, "What proposal?"

Snape snapped his gaze to hers. "Oh, you didn't hear them earlier? When I took them for the tour, they were quite impressed with my lab and said they were looking to do business with someone who could brew potions that would be helpful in—ah—counteracting the effects of their Wheeze products."

Hermione's eyes bugged out in astonishment and amusement. Bursting out laughing, she said, "I imagine so! If they hadn't worked out that bruise paste, I don't know how I would have got rid of that black eye from their punching telescope."

Snape rolled his eyes and looked dubious. "I told them I'd talk to Fern, but I don't know whether doing business with them would be such a good idea or not."

Hermione snorted and said, "I'm sure it'd be fine, love. At least they don't want you as a tester!" At Snape's snort, she added, "Why don't you go write to Fern, and I'll clean up here."

Nodding, Snape drained his teacup and stood. "Good idea. Perhaps she should meet the twins herself before she decides anything. Hmm, I daresay we could go by tomorrow afternoon, if she's available..."

Hermione stacked their plates and waved them at him, saying, "Then go write that to her!" Snape grimaced at her and crossed through the door to the hallway, leaving Hermione to shake her head fondly after his retreating form.

After she had finished clearing up, she trekked upstairs to join Snape in the office, where he was at the desk, writing. Caressing his back as she leant over his shoulder, she said, "When you're finished, would you like to join me for a bath?"

Snape sucked in a breath and straightened, jolted from his focus by her invitation. The tingle in his groin answered for him and he said, "Go on. I'll be there shortly."

Dropping a kiss on his neck, Hermione chuckled and disappeared down the hall to start the bath. Snape hurried to finish his letter and bustled downstairs to send it back by Floo, then took the stairs three at a time in his haste to join Hermione.

Although the tub was more cramped than the one in her Head Girl's room, they managed to squeeze in, enjoying the way their bodies touched as they luxuriated in the steaming water. Hands and lips roamed, causing fires to ignite once again, and Hermione moaned in answer when Snape purred in her ear, "Your new potion will be ready to take Wednesday morning."

At that point, all pretence of bathing was given up, and they drained the water, drying quickly and entwining in a heated embrace against the bathroom counter. After a long moment of fevered snogging, Snape said, "Shall we adjourn to somewhere more comfortable?"

Hermione gasped and said, "Yes, but, seeing as we've already broken in the bedroom, the attic, and the bathroom, where shall we go next?"

Snape's brows shot to his hairline in amazement. "Are you serious?"

Hermione's lips spread in a wicked grin and she slanted a glance up at him. "Shall I prove it?"

Snape's cock gave a vehement throb and he backed away. "Wherever you go, love, I'll follow."

Hermione giggled and ducked past him to run down the hallway. She paused at the office and whipped a lascivious glance back at him as she darted into it. Snape rushed down the hall and stopped on the threshold, seeing Hermione perched on the desk, all of her papers, her briefcase, and even the computer pushed out of the way. Her toes were balanced on the arms of the rolling chair in front of her, and she eyed Snape with an expression of pure mischief.

Snape stepped forward, and she lifted one foot to allow him to step in between her spread knees. He leant forward to kiss her, then pulled away and dropped into the chair, smirking at her delightful curls on display before him. "Definitely an assignment I'm eager to begin..."

Hermione's eyes went round and her devious grin faltered as she realized his intent. He leant forward and dragged his tongue along her cleft, eliciting a keen of pleasure from Hermione as her head fell back and her eyes closed. Gripping her thighs, he feasted on her flesh, glorying in her voluptuous noises and in the steadily increasing wetness slicking her skin.

Hermione panted, groaning and squealing at the sensation of Snape tonguing her clit and laving from bottom to top and back again. When he dipped his tongue into her cunt, letting his nose press forward to stimulate her clit, she wanted more. One hand gripped his hair and pulled him away, making him meet her glazed eyes as she rasped, "Severus, I want you."

The answering gleam in his eyes went straight to her core, and he backed up, standing and closing the distance between them, his cock bouncing as he sought her pussy. When he pressed against her entrance, she hissed and moaned, "Yes, gods, Severus, please..."

Bending his knees and tilting his hips, he slowly sank into her, watching her undulate on the desktop, wrapping his hands around her hips and pulling her even closer, her arse barely on the edge. Hermione propped herself up on one elbow, looking down her body at where they joined, the sight of him plunging into her combining with the sensations and sending her ever closer to her peak.

She wrapped her legs around him and reached forward to drag her nails down his chest and belly, making him growl. But, when her fingers trailed over their junction, slipping along her curls, his choked gasp and hissed, "Yesss, Hermione, touch yourself..." sent another fiery jolt through her.

Watching him watching her hand, she slid her fingers through her curls, dipping one finger between her swollen lips and circling her clit. Snape's fervent groan and increased thrusts left her gasping, and she rubbed faster, feeling her pleasure spiking quickly.

Seeing Hermione pleasuring herself while he filled her clutching cunt was almost beyond Snape's imagination. Feeling the coil of heat sparking in his balls, he knew he wouldn't last much longer, and he sank as deep as he could, angling his cock up to stroke along her G-spot as he went. Hermione's head snapped back and a breathless shriek heralded the exquisite rhythmic squeezing of his cock and the gush of juices that evidenced her orgasm. The sight of her, lost to the delight of her climax, her cunt milking his cock, was too much to bear any longer, and Snape slammed into her with a final, shuddering shout, his hair swinging forward to hide his face as he bowed over her, panting, his legs trembling.

After a long moment in which all they could hear was their harsh breathing and their pounding heartbeats, Snape disengaged from Hermione, staggering back to collapse in the office chair. Hermione shoved onto her elbows, her legs dropping to the floor on either side of Snape's knees. They locked eyes, both somewhat overwhelmed by the intensity of their coupling.

Hermione got to her feet, taking a deep breath of repletion. Slanting a wicked grin at Snape, she leant forward and kissed him before saying, "Why don't we retire before we do any damage..."

Her chuckle blended with his wry snort and he heaved to his feet, fingers twining with hers as they lurched and staggered to the bedroom, smirking the whole way. They collapsed onto the bed and squirmed up to their comfortable spots, then Hermione voiced an inarticulate huff of frustration.

Voice faint, Snape said, "What's wrong, love?"

"I just got comfortable and I still need to take that potion. Wednesday can't get here soon enough!"

Snape chuckled as she dragged herself to the bathroom for the needed dose, and when she came back, he said, "Shall I set the alarm?"

Burrowing back under the covers beside him, she said, "Please. I shall stick to the usual nine to five workday unless something comes up. So, eight should be early enough. One thing we definitely have over Muggles is the speed of commute!"

Snape set the alarm and doused the lights as Hermione cuddled against him. "Sounds reasonable. I'll quite likely keep the same hours as you for working in the lab." As they settled, they felt the bed shake, and Snape peered down to see Crookshanks curling up at their feet. "Ah, I daresay he's reconciled to his new home."

Hermione smiled and said, "I'm glad. It's good that all of us are happy to be where we belong."

Snape hugged her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. His voice was low and determined as he said, "Everything will work out. We'll get our happily ever after."

Squeezing him in agreement, Hermione murmured, "We're well on our way. I love you."

Snape whispered, "I love you, Hermione," and silence fell, leaving them to fall asleep in each other's arms.

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The next morning, just before ten, Snape Apparated from Spinner's End to meet Harry in front of Gringotts. As loath as he was to be beholden to the youngest Potter, he knew it was his duty to accept the gesture of friendship and get himself out of the sticky situation he was in with the Ministry. Fortunately, when Harry appeared, he kept an extremely businesslike manner, for which Snape was grateful.

The goblins were also very matter-of-fact, not caring much for wizarding gossip and more interested in obtaining their fee for the transaction. It took less than half an hour to complete the paperwork for the loan and for Snape to procure a document transferring the fine to the Ministry.

When they stepped out into the summer sunshine again, Snape exhaled heavily and shook himself, shedding the experience. Harry sucked in a deep breath and shoved his hands in his pockets before turning to Snape with a satisfied smile.

"So," Harry began, "you gonna' take that straight to the Ministry and get that wanker Conroy off your back?"

Snape cut a sombre glance at Harry and huffed. "May as well."

Beaming, Harry said, "Brilliant! Why don't I come with you? I want to see Hermione if I can."

Scowling, Snape said, "Why?"

Averting his gaze and hunching his shoulders, Harry muttered, "Well, I still owe her an apology too."

Snape's brows rose as he realized that Harry didn't know Hermione had already forgiven him his petulant behaviour when she had heard what he was doing to help them. Recognizing that Harry was apparently serious about acting like a man instead of a spoilt child, he nodded and said, "I daresay we can find her office."

Harry flashed a sheepish and grateful half-smile at Snape and said, "Let's go."

They Apparated into the Ministry Atrium, glad that it wasn't as crowded as it had been the previous day for the trial. Even so, when people caught sight of Snape, they did a double-take, particularly as he was accompanied by the Boy-Who-Lived-Twice. Snape glared at the staring people, and Harry joined him with a lofty look of his own.

Making their way up to the second level, Snape couldn't help but smirk at the way people would start to enter the lift as it stopped on their level, only to jerk in surprise at the occupants and back out, stammering something about taking a different lift instead. After the third occurrence, Harry snorted, drawing Snape's attention. Harry was clearly trying to suppress his amusement at their discomfort, and he turned dancing eyes to Snape.

"Poor things don't know what to do with themselves, do they?" Harry's quivering lips spread into a grin and Snape found himself smirking and chuckling in answer.

"Indeed." It was all he said, but, when the lift stopped again, and another pair of Ministry employees repeated the awkward performance, he couldn't help sneaking a glance at Harry, who met his gaze and burst out laughing. Snape's snorting laughter mixed with Harry's sniggers, and the Ministry wizards stared at them, aghast, as the grille closed again.

Finally, they reached their destination, and both quickly sobered from their unexpected shared amusement. As the grilles opened on Level Two, Snape straightened, smoothing his robes and patting the pocket that contained his payment. Harry flicked a solemn glance at Snape and followed quietly as the older man stepped forward.

They reached a reception desk and Snape cleared his throat to get the elderly witch's attention. She lifted her spectacled, rheumy eyes to him and said, "Ah, Mr. Snape, what can I do for you today?"

Momentarily taken aback that she knew him on sight, Snape inclined his head and said, "I would like to meet with Mr. Eustace Conroy, please."

Brows rising, she murmured, "Already? My, that was fast..." Then, she scrawled a note and sent it flying down the corridor and into an office. Waving her hand at the chairs along the wall on either side, she said, "Have a seat."

Snape blinked and nodded faintly, edging toward the chairs even as his gaze was trained on the doorway into which the memo had flown. Harry sank into a chair beside him. A few minutes later, Conroy came swaggering out of the office, shooting a contemptuous look down the hallway at Snape.

Snape's eyes narrowed, and Harry saw his shoulders draw up in tension. Like a jack-in-the-box, Snape shot to his feet, Harry springing up behind him a beat later. Conroy stepped up to the reception desk and leant against the side as he said, "If you're here to beg for leniency, Mr. Snape, I can assure you—"

He was cut off by Snape's snarl and Harry's outraged squawk of, *Leniency?*

Conroy flicked a dismissive glance at Harry over Snape's shoulder, then blinked as he realized who Harry was. Snape heard Harry drawing breath to launch into a harangue and whipped his hand up in a gesture to stop him. All the air burst out of Harry in a huff of pique, and Snape said, "On the contrary, Mr. Conroy, I have my payment here."

He drew the document from his pocket and snapped it toward Conroy. The other man sneered at Snape as he took the page from him, tossing his head. "If this is some kind of trick—"

Behind Snape, Harry couldn't control himself any longer and shouted, "Sod off, you bleeding prat!"

Stifling the urge to howl with laughter at the young man's epithet, Snape jerked a glance at him and barked, "Harry! That's enough."

Harry scowled, his lower jaw shoved forward in mulish defiance as he glared at Conroy.

"Everything is in order. Or do you doubt the veracity of the Gringotts goblins?" He held Conroy's irate gaze, challenging the man to inspect the document.

Conroy sniffed in disdain and turned his attention to the paper. His scathing expression changed to one of petulant dismay that Snape had already paid his fine in full. He had so been harbouring a hope that the ex-Death Eater would go to Azkaban where he belonged. Cutting a sulky glance at Snape, he said, "Very well then. I'll make sure this gets to the Wizengamot."

He folded the paper and made as if to leave, but he was stopped by Snape's ominous throat-clearing and Harry's indignant "Oi!"

Snape stepped forward, voice low but intense as he said, "I'm sure you understand that I require a signed receipt of this payment, Mr. Conroy. I would hate for it to somehow get *misplaced* on its journey to the Wizengamot and for me to have no proof that I had already paid my debt to the Ministry."

Conroy grimaced at Snape before turning to the receptionist and saying, "Hazel, would you draw up a receipt for Mr. Snape so I can get back to more important things..."

The elderly witch wrote up a receipt, making copies for the Wizengamot files as well as for Conroy and Snape. Snape bowed politely to the woman and pocketed the slip. Once again pinning Conroy with a haughty gaze, he said, "Well, Mr. Conroy, I do hope your 'important things' progress more to your satisfaction than this." With a malicious smile, Snape added, "Good day."

As he turned to leave, flicking a peremptory glance at Harry to follow, Harry piped up with, "Pleasure doing business with you, knobhead!"

Snape heard Conroy's outraged grunt and cut a quick glance back in time to see Harry giving the man a two-fingered salute. Jerking his gaze ahead, suppressing the urge to laugh again, Snape stepped into a lift and spun, keeping his face blank by sheer force of will. Harry, on the other hand, kept glaring at the Ministry man until the grille closed and the lift began to descend.

Managing to keep his voice even, Snape murmured, "I was given to understand that you were attempting to behave in a more dignified, adult fashion, Mr. Potter." He cast a reproachful look at the younger man, only to see Harry grinning at him with a devilish air.

"Yeah, you're right, but sometimes it just *feels* better to give in to childish displays." Snorting, he cocked an eyebrow at Snape and drawled, "Besides, I reckon I didn't say anything you weren't already thinking anyway."

Snape's brows rose and he shook his head in incredulity. Lips twisting as he tried to stop the smirk from surfacing, Snape said, "I admit nothing."

Harry laughed again, and the lift stopped on Level Five, having managed to go straight down to the floor where Hermione's new department was being set up. Snape, warmed in spite of himself by Harry's quite vocal support, inclined his head as the grille opened, gesturing for Harry to exit first.

They strode up to the reception desk where Polly, the cheerful blonde witch Hermione had met when she had come for her interview, beamed at them, managing to cover her surprise at the two infamous men standing before her.

"Good morning! My name is Polly. How may I help you?"

Harry smiled and said, "Where is Hermione Granger's office, please?"

Polly stood, leaning over the desk as she pointed down the corridor. "Just head down there until you reach the third corridor on the right. It's straight back at the end of the hallway."

Harry favoured her with a dazzling smile, making her blink under the weight of his green gaze. "Thank you, Polly."

As he stepped away, Snape edged forward and murmured, "Yes, thank you."

Polly flashed an uncertain smile and nodded as she sank back into her seat. She couldn't help but stare after their retreating forms, coming back to herself with a start as they disappeared around the corner. Muttering to herself, she said, "Get a grip! Severus Snape *and* Harry Potter just show up all at once? You can start beating again any time now, heart!" Still, she smoothed her curls and shuddered, congratulating herself on maintaining her composure at such a surprise. "Just keep an eye out for when they come back, so you can stay professional!"

Hermione was at her office desk, frowning down at a stack of parchment, chewing on the end of a quill, when Harry and Snape entered. Her absent "Yes?" turned into an "Oh!" of surprise and she shot to her feet at once. "Severus? Harry? What are you doing here?"

She ducked out from behind her desk to squeeze Snape's hand in greeting even as she tilted her head at Harry, confused by their presence. Harry suddenly looked abashed, his cheeks flushing as he looked at the floor. Snape, deciding that one good turn deserved another, murmured, "I'll leave you two alone for a moment," and slunk back out into the hallway, crossing almost to the other corridor and affecting great interest in the announcements and posters on the walls.

Hermione watched him go, then turned concerned eyes on Harry, who was leaning against her desk, his hands shoved deep in his pockets and his shoulders almost around his ears. "What's going on?"

Harry flicked an ashamed glance at her and scuffed his toe on the carpet as he mumbled, "I'm here to apologize for being a prat. I-I'm really sorry I acted the way I did... and I hope you can forgive me so we can be friends again."

Hermione's lips trembled and her eyes went glassy as she launched herself at Harry, hugging him with a fierce grip. He patted her back as she said, "I was always your friend, Harry, even though I was certain you didn't want to be mine once you found out about me and Severus." She pulled back and said, after a huge sniffle, "But Severus told me how you helped him—us—and I couldn't be more grateful and proud of you. I know things are a shock, but it means so much to me that you would accept us."

Harry gave a sheepish smile and said, "Ginny and Ron—and hell, everyone else who spoke yesterday—helped me see that if I wanted to be your friend, I should care more about what makes *you* happy. And if Snape is what makes you happy, then so be it." He paused for a moment, then lifted pained eyes to hers. "Just... it was awkward enough watching you two snog in the play, when I thought it was just acting. Please don't snog in front of me anymore—at least, not until you *have* to at the wedding."

Hermione grimaced but laughed, hugging him again. "We'll try to keep ourselves under control, thank you very much." Then, pulling back and releasing him, she said, "If you wanted to talk to me, then why is Severus with you?"

Harry snorted and said, "After we finished at Gringotts, we came straight here so he could get the fine to Conroy." His lips curled in a disgusted sneer. "That arse was so condescending! I took great pleasure in informing him of exactly how much of a prick he was."

Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth and her eyes went round. Darting to the door, she beckoned to Snape, and when he rejoined them, she hissed, "*What* is this Harry says about Conroy?"

Snape cut a wicked smirk at Harry and said, "Ah, yes, Conroy knows now, in no uncertain terms, just what we think of him and his attitude."

Hermione goggled at them, and Harry sniggered. A beat later, Snape chuckled too, leaving Hermione to blink at them in astonishment. Her tone chiding, she said, "Was that really necessary?"

Harry snorted and shrugged airily. "Probably not, but *Merlin*, was it ever *satisfying*."

Snape snorted with more laughter, then sobered and said, "At least it's taken care of now, and we needn't worry about the berk again." Hermione heaved a sigh of relief and twined her fingers with his. Attempting to change the subject, Snape nodded to the stack of papers on her desk and said, "What are all those?"

Hermione huffed and rounded her desk to sit again as she said, frustration evident in her voice, "Resumes. I need to hire my staff, and these are all the resumes of possible candidates. I think they've sent me every single person who has ever sent their resume to the Ministry!"

Harry said, "Well, can't you narrow it down?"

Snape added, "Didn't you say you wanted them to have computers and Internet access to work for you? Wouldn't that narrow your talent pool to those of Muggle or half-blood descent?"

Harry perked up and nodded vehemently. "Yeah, and you'd really be better off sticking with the younger folks, as they'd be more likely to already be familiar with using computers."

Hermione blinked up at them. Rolling her eyes at her own obtuseness, she said, "Thank the gods that you two showed up! Mercy, I don't even want to *think* about how much more time I would have wasted wading through all these." Nodding decidedly, she stacked the papers and smiled at them in appreciation. "I'll get right on that as soon as you've gone."

Snape said, "Then we'll leave you be and not bother you further."

Hermione rose and squeezed his hand again. "You're not a bother. Quite the contrary: you're a lifesaver!"

Harry ducked his head, reminded of his argument of why Snape should accept his loan offer. Running his hand through his untidy hair, he said, "I should be getting back to the Burrow. They don't know where I've gone, and you know Mrs. Weasley worries."

Hermione hugged him quickly and said, "Thanks, Harry. You've helped both of us quite a lot today." Her fond smile made him blush modestly. Then, Hermione flicked a mischievous glance at Snape before turning back to Harry and saying, "I may not have made much progress until you got here with your excellent suggestions, but I *did* make one very important departmental decision first thing this morning..."

Brows rising in curiosity, Harry said, "Oh? What was that?"

Smirking, she retorted, "I instituted a new rule for school productions: faculty is not allowed to perform with the students."

Snape's almost managed to mask his snort of incredulous laughter with a cough, hastily looking away from Harry's disconcerted expression. Hermione giggled as Harry backed toward the door, saying, "On that note, I'm out of here. Cheap shot, Hermione."

He shook his head as he strode down the hallway, snorting at Hermione's continued giggling and waving at her half-hearted, "Sorry!" When he reached the corridor, he flashed a wry smile and waved before stepping out of sight.

Snape pinned Hermione with a stern glare. "Hermione, really..."

Hermione beamed at him, completely unrepentant. "What? I was serious, you know. As happy as I am that things turned out so well for us, it really is a dodgy situation to put people in. So that truly is my first amendment to the curriculum! I just thought it would be fun to poke Harry about it."

Snape shook his head and rolled his eyes, smirking. Hermione grimaced back at him. "Well then, why don't I let you get back to work, and I'm going to meet Fern at the Weasleys' shop this afternoon. I'll see you this evening."

Hermione smiled at him and he gently caressed her cheek. "Good luck with Fern and the twins. And I'm so glad today went well. I was so pleased to see you and Harry getting along."

Snape shrugged faintly. "He wasn't wrong when he said he only voiced the things I was thinking."

Hermione chuckled and said, "Go on, love. I'll see you... at home."

Snape smiled at the almost shy way she said "home." He wanted to kiss her but knew it was unprofessional to do so in her office. Instead, he let his eyes show his devotion as he crossed to the door. Hermione sank into her chair again and returned her attention to the stacks as Snape turned the corner out of sight.

*** **

Two weeks later, Hermione arrived home from work wearing a decidedly disgruntled expression. Snape, who had already set the kettle to heat for their before-dinner cuppa, looked up and queried, "What's wrong, love?"

Hermione flicked her wand to send her briefcase up to the office and flopped onto the couch with an aggrieved huff. Snape stepped around to join her, caressing her hair. Wrinkling her nose in distaste, she said, "It's just the office gossips again. Is it any wonder I want to get my staff hired already so I can work from home and away from that poisonous atmosphere?"

With a resigned sigh, Snape said, "What was it this time?"

Hermione tossed her head and said, "Josie and Gertie were making pointed comments about weddings again, lamenting that June was over now, and brides-to-be had clearly missed their chances."

Snape rolled his eyes at the women's catty behaviour again. When Orly Yarly's report on the trial had spread the word about the betrothal charm on Hermione's ring, the women working on the same floor as Hermione made so bold as to ask when Snape was going to make good on his promise and marry her. No amount of haughty snubbing on Hermione's part seemed to have any effect on their snide remarks.

Now that *Vial and Vessel* had stock in shops, including in Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, and the hubbub surrounding his unexpected relationship with Hermione had died down, Snape was feeling quite satisfied with his lot in life. The stress of setting up her department and hiring her staff, however, was wearing on Hermione, who wouldn't allow anything less than perfection, and the repeated needling by the office busybodies just made things worse.

The kettle was ready, and Snape brought in the tea service, brewing a cup for Hermione as she lay sprawled on the couch, her eyes closed. Once he had given her the cup and she had sat up to sip it, Snape pinned her with a thoughtful gaze and said, "Well, when would you like to get married? Pick a date and we'll set it up."

Hermione nearly spit out her tea, her eyes going wide as she stared back at Snape. "What?"

Snape raised one eyebrow and said, "Let's set a date, and then you can tell those tongue-waggers to shut it once and for all."

Blinking rapidly, Hermione said, "But... how do you just pick a date? I mean, there are so many factors to consider..."

Waving his hand dismissively, Snape said, "Then let's consider them! Hermione, love, I'd marry you tomorrow if it would make things easier for you."

The quiet sincerity of his statement made her pause to cast an adoring look at him. Her throat tightened with a surge of love, and she shifted closer to kiss him, absently setting the teacup on the coffee table. "You're right. Let's consider everything..."

He smiled and kissed her in return, taking her hand to pull her up. "Why don't we talk while we make dinner?"

Hermione nodded happily and said, "I'll make notes."

Snape snorted and drawled, "Of course you will," rolling his eyes fondly as she wrinkled her nose at him.

They crossed into the kitchen where he began taking out the items they needed to make dinner, and she snatched a quill and parchment from a drawer.

"So, what do we need to decide?" Snape was bent over, retrieving vegetables from the refrigerator.

Hermione immediately retorted, "Oh! Well, the date, of course, and time. And where. Who will do the ceremony. What *kind* of ceremony. And who will be in the wedding party. I mean, I already know Ginny is my bridesmaid; she called dibs, remember?" Snape snorted, and Hermione continued, "Who to invite, where to have the reception, what food to serve, what kinds of invitations to get, who to get to take photos, what sort of cake, where to spend our honeymoon—"

Snape nearly sliced his fingertip instead of the pepper he was cutting at her mention of a honeymoon. He missed her next several words as his mind spun in delightful directions and he reflected, *Good thing you've got that longer-lasting potion now...*

When they were finishing their meal, Hermione began scribbling on the list, and Snape said, "What are you adding now?"

Shaking her head, Hermione said, "Nothing else, just possible dates."

"Like what?"

Chewing her bottom lip, she said, "Well, there are a few that I think could be important options, but they all have their own pros and cons."

"Such as?"

Flushing faintly, she said, "Well, there's November 21st—"

Snape surprised her by saying, "The night we went to the play."

Smiling, she said, "Yes! I'm surprised you remembered."

Snape favoured her with a smouldering smile and purred, "That entire occasion is fixed in my memory, my dear."

Ducking her head, she flushed even more and said, "Indeed." Clearing her throat, she continued, "And there's Christmas—for similar reasons." Snape chuckled. "Or your birthday." At that, he grimaced. "What? We could have another reason to celebrate that day. Fine. Or Valentine's Day, to continue on that same reasoning."

"If you're insisting on seminal days in our relationship, you could include that fateful day in March, or either of the performance dates."

"Or the day of the Leaving Feast." They paused to grin at each other.

After a beat, Snape said, "I see what you mean about choices. Of course, there's always seeing whether or not the date we pick can be accommodated at the location we want and how much time we'd have to prepare."

Hermione nodded. "Exactly. And, it's nice to take into consideration the timing for your wedding party and guests if you can. Especially since some people are still subject to the restrictions of the school year."

"True." Snape rose and began clearing the table, Hermione jumping up to join him. They were silent in thought as they cleaned up, until Snape corralled Hermione at the sink, nuzzling her ear from behind and pressing his body against hers as he said, "Now, tell me more about your thoughts on this *honeymoon*..."

Hermione purred as she twisted in his arms, saying, "Right here in the kitchen?"

Snape smirked wickedly and murmured, "We've yet to break in this room..."

Hermione's low, delighted laugh was quickly muffled by his demanding kiss, to be replaced by moans as they proceeded to "break in" the kitchen in the most lascivious way possible. Later, both would sheepishly remember to clean the countertops before preparing another meal on them again. For now, they only had pleasure on their minds.

*** **

One lazy Saturday afternoon in late July, Hermione, who was lying on the couch with her head in Snape's lap as they both were engrossed in their own books, laid her book on her stomach and murmured, "Severus?"

Snape immediately set his book on the arm of the couch and looked down into her searching eyes, stroking her hair. "Yes?"

Licking her lips, she took a deep breath and said, "How about June 20th? It's on a Sunday..."

Snape blinked at her, completely blank for a moment until he figured out what she was referring to. Brows rising, he said, "Oh! For the wedding?"

Hermione nodded. "I thought it would be a nice way to commemorate... us."

Snape smiled fondly at her. "Sounds perfect, love." He curled forward and she lifted her head to meet him for a kiss. Resettling, he said, "Ginny will be out of school by then, as the Leaving Feast would be the day before..."

Again, Hermione nodded. "Exactly. And it gives us almost a year to get everything ready. *And...*" She paused to twinkle at him. "It gives me more holiday time saved up for a proper honeymoon."

Snape matched her wicked grin and chuckled. "Speaking of that—have you any preferences on where we go or what we do?"

Her wicked grin widened and she waggled her eyebrows at him before biting her lip and winking. Her voice was low and sultry as she said, "Oh, I have some *definite* preferences on what we *do*."

Snape laughed and shook his head. "Insatiable, that's what you are."

Beaming smugly at him, she lilted, "Can't blame me, really..."

80- Epilogue

Chapter 84 of 84

As Snape and Hermione settle into their life together, they prepare to make their union official. We see the wedding, plus a little bit after it. The journey is complete.

Disclaimer: I just play with JKR's toys, and make no money off them. All hail JKR!

Author's Note: Well, you lovely readers who have stuck with me for six long years... we've reached the end of this journey. As always, profound gratitude to Ladyofthemasque for beta and cheerleading, and thanks to Becky, Ladyinthecloak/Lady Karelia, and Horserider for boosting my confidence and for feedback. My deepest thanks go out to all you who have supported me in this exhausting adventure, reading, reviewing, emailing, commenting on my LJ, and sending fanart. This has been one of the most rewarding ventures I have ever attempted, and I've made so many wonderful friends in the course of it that I will always cherish my memories of writing this behemoth--even if the fact that I finally finished it is largely put down to sheer pig-headed stubbornness! LOL I do hope that the conclusion of this tale lives up to six years of build-up, and that you enjoy the fate of our couple in this epilogue--which I fervently hope is NOT an Epilogue of Doom (tm). :) Thank you again for reading my labour of love. I love you all.

~Nicole aka Good_Witch aka pern_dragon

Chapter 80- Epilogue

Nine months until the wedding

Hermione's birthday was on a Saturday, and they had opened Spinner's End to their family and friends for a celebration. The back garden now sported a picnic table and benches, and balloons and lanterns were festooned all around. The Grangers, the Weasleys, McGonagall, Dumbledore, Harry, the Longbottoms, the Lovegoods, Fern, Parvati, and Susan were all crowded into the house, spilling out into the back garden and milling about in high spirits. Everyone kept reminding everyone else to keep their wands out of sight in the Muggle neighbourhood, but it became rather a standing joke, so no one took offence.

Snape, stepping away from a conversation with Fern and the twins, looked for Hermione but couldn't find her. That was when he realized that none of the other women were in sight. Striding through the house, he paused at the bottom of the stairs and heard feminine giggles and squeals from upstairs. Wondering what was going on, he trekked on up to see Dione, Minerva, Molly, Ginny, Parvati, Luna, Susan, and even Augusta all crowded into the office, blocking Hermione from view where she sat at the computer.

At his wary, "Hermione?" they all spun around, looking like they had been caught with their hands in the biscuit tin, and Hermione voiced a startled, "Oh!" before shooting up from the chair and blocking the screen.

Snape, bewildered by their sheepish and guilty expressions, said, "What's going on?"

Hermione, flushing hotly, said, "I was just showing them some of the websites that had dresses I liked."

Frowning in confusion, Snape echoed, "Dresses?"

McGonagall cleared her throat delicately and said, "The kind *you're not supposed to see*."

At that, Snape realized what they were talking about, and he backed away, cheeks warming. "Ah, I see."

Ginny instantly retorted, with a saucy grin, "You better not have!"

Snape snorted and kept edging backward. "Indeed. I'll send Fern up; it's not fair for her to miss out on this 'girl stuff.'"

Hermione cried, "Oh, do! We'll be back down in a little while, dear. I promise."

"No worries." He took the stairs two at a time in his haste to be clear of all that concentrated femininity and sent Fern on her way up. Then he retreated to the back garden where he watched the younger fellows throwing darts and talking about Quidditch, eager to restore his masculinity.

*** **

Six months until the wedding

It was just a week before Christmas, and Spinner's End was once again opened up for a holiday party. Snape reflected that he had never expected to have so many people over so often, but, as Hermione enjoyed being social with their close-knit group of friends and family, he endured the sometimes-overwhelming celebrations with a minimum of fuss.

Unlike on Hermione's birthday, the weather was quite cold, which kept the crowd inside, filling the living room, dining room, and kitchen with joyful people. The fire crackling merrily in the hearth, combined with the heat of 20 bodies, pinked everyone's faces and fogged the snowy windows.

Hermione and Snape had discussed their ulterior motives for having the party, as they planned to use it as an opportunity to speak to several people about whether or not they would be willing to be a part of their wedding. One by one, they stealthily drew each person away from the cheery group and posed their questions until they reached the end of their lists.

Finally, as the evening drew to a close, and they were all passing around eggnog or hot chocolate, Hermione joined Snape in front of the hearth where they lifted their cups in a toast.

Snape's velvet voice filled the living room and the dining room as he said, "May we have your attention, please?"

Conversations stopped and all eyes turned their way, several people crowding into the doorways from the dining room and entrance hall.

Hermione continued, "Severus and I have been speaking to you privately, but now that we have our answers, we just wanted to thank you..."

They exchanged a fond look and lifted their drinks high as Snape said, "To Minerva, who has agreed to stand by my side as my witness..." McGonagall sniffed primly, still looking smug as she smoothed her robes, then flashed a flattered smile at Snape.

Hermione smoothly cut in, "And to Ginny, who has agreed to the same for me..." Ginny smirked widely, giving a little mock-curtsey.

Snape took over, "To Ron and Harry, who, as always, will back Hermione up in this adventure, and have agreed to stand with us as well..." Ron's ears promptly reddened, and Susan hugged him while he rubbed the back of his neck. Harry flashed a sheepish grin and ran a hand through his messy hair as he shrugged.

Hermione beamed and said, "To Neville and Fern, who will collaborate to provide floral decorations and bouquets..." Augusta turned a proud look on her grandson, only to see Parvati twining her fingers through his as she whispered approval in his ear. Neville blushed but exchanged an eager look with Fern, who smiled back.

Snape added, "To Fred and George, who are brave...or foolhardy...enough to learn how to use Muggle video cameras as well as still cameras to commemorate the occasion...though I still worry what sorts of shots they might take..."

There was a general burst of laughter at that pronouncement. The twins affected offence, then their outraged expressions changed to identical smirks of mischief as they raised their eyebrows in anticipation.

Hermione continued, "To Molly, who has generously agreed to contribute her formidable talents in cooking to make our wedding cake..." Several "Mmm"s of delight rippled through the group, and Molly preened.

Snape said, "And to Albus, who has graciously agreed to broker an arrangement with the Hogwarts house-elves to provide the food..." Dumbledore twinkled and bowed, and surprised murmurs rippled through the crowd.

Hermione wrinkled her nose a little at that, but went on, "To Luna and Mr. Lovegood, for designing and printing our invitations..." Both Luna and her father nodded serenely, beaming impartially at everyone.

Snape added, "And to Arthur, for agreeing to serve as the officiant at the ceremony, once he completes the Ministry's requirements to do so..." Arthur nodded nervously even as he grinned back at them, and everyone else looked on in pleased surprise.

Hermione smiled at her parents and said, "And to my parents, for being so wonderful and understanding, and for loving Severus *almost* as much as I do..." Another burst of laughter followed her teasing, but the Grangers flushed modestly and smiled back, eyes bright with unshed tears.

Snape paused for a beat, then said, "To all of you, who have expressed true friendship through our trying times and have enriched our lives... Once again, thank you."

As he inclined his head, everyone lifted their cups and cried, "Cheers!"

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Four months until the wedding

Hermione came bustling down from her office with a stack of printed papers, approaching Snape with an air of pent-up excitement. They had just spent the entire Valentine's Day weekend virtually attached to each other, having gone to see Phantom of the Opera again Saturday night and not even dressing all day long Sunday, only taking time out to replenish their flagging energy with food and bathing. While neither had been keen on returning to work Monday, they both secretly knew it was a good thing...if only to let their bodies recover from prolonged debauchery.

It was late Monday evening, and Snape was sprawled on the couch reading a potions magazine when Hermione hovered over him, eyes glowing. Casting a curious glance at the stack of papers, Snape said, "What's got you all worked up?"

Hermione beamed and said, "I know where I want to go on our honeymoon."

Snape sat up at once and said, "Where?"

Hermione thrust the papers at him and said, "The Paris Opera House."

The papers were printouts of online information about the site, and Snape's lips spread in a delighted smirk, favouring Hermione with an appreciative look. "What a lovely idea, dear heart. I daresay we can find a few other things that might be worth seeing in Paris as well..."

At that, Hermione laughed and dropped beside him on the couch. "As much as I'd rather spend our honeymoon *staying in*, I'll make an exception *togo out* for this."

Snape's wicked chuckle was muffled by Hermione's lips as she pushed him back on the couch and pressed her body along his. The stack of papers was forgotten in favour of *much* more interesting things.

*** **

One week before the wedding

Hermione was sitting at the dining room table, talking on the phone.

"So, how early can we get in there to decorate and set up? ... All right. ... And you're ~~sure~~ they'll leave us be like we've asked? ... Honestly, Dad, I'm just afraid we'll have to get Ministry Obliviators out there if they don't give us our privacy. ... If you say so. ... And you're certain that we can spend the whole day before in there? ... Well, I don't want to rush decorating...although, if we *do* have privacy, we can always use magic to make things go faster. ... Yes, Dumbledore has given Ginny leave to help, since the Leaving Feast isn't until that evening. She and Minerva will be there with the rest of us. ... Harry and Ron have sworn blind that they'll be guarding the door to the kitchen so Dobby can Apparate in with the food. ... What? ... Of course I'm excited! How can you even ask that?" She laughed.

"Yes, everything is scheduled and approved; we leave that evening and arrive in Paris. ... Well, since I used all the proper channels, they couldn't do anything ~~but~~ approve my holiday time. Besides, my crew knows what they're doing now, so I don't need to hover over them anymore. ... Hmm? ... Oh! Well, Severus has been working overtime these last few weeks to try to stock up against our absence. He's downstairs right now, up to his elbows in preparations and cauldrons with potions in varying stages of completion. ... Yes, Fern has been nothing but supportive and accommodating. ... Indeed. Of course, I think she's just grateful that Severus managed to not only brew her stock and secure dedicated clients in Fred and George but also sent her a brilliant assistant. ... Well, she had taken him on as a sort of unofficial apprentice, but once she saw how good he was at Herbology, she worked out a contract. ... Mm-hmm, Neville officially began at the start of this month. Augusta couldn't be prouder, really. And Parvati...well, she and Neville have got quite serious these last few weeks. I wonder if it's just the effect of the wedding." She paused in thought, then sighed, a faint smile on her face.

"At least Susan hasn't been smothering Ron, even though they're still going strong. I swear, she's been just the sort of steady, calm anchor he's needed, particularly now that he and Harry have begun Auror training. ... Indeed! Molly can't settle on whether to be proud or worried...what? ... Oh, no, she'll have the cake; don't worry about that. And Arthur claims that he's been practicing the ceremony, for all that we remind him that he can read it and doesn't have to have it memorized." She laughed again, shaking her head as she smiled fondly.

"Everything really is ready. ... I've had the dress for weeks now, and, honestly, not having to worry with alterations and sewing...magic really does make things easier. ... You keep asking if everything is ready, Dad...what's the matter? Are *you* not ready? ... Well, you are the one who'll be walking me down the aisle and giving me away. Think you're ready for that?" She smiled, cheeks blushing as she stared unseeingly at the tabletop.

"Dad, you know that; I've been ready for over a year now. ... As lovely and wonderful as it will be, this is all just a formality. ... Severus and I have been as good as wed from the moment we fell in love. ... Yes, Dad, your little girl is all grown up and happier than she ever thought she could be. You got your wish, even though you don't realize it." Her lips trembled as she smiled, and her eyes went glassy in response to her father's words.

"Thank you, Dad. I love you too. ... All right. We'll see you soon. ... Yes, Saturday morning at your place, and we'll drive over from there. ... And please thank Mr. Campbell again for arranging everything with the golf club; it's absolutely *perfect* for a small wedding like ours. ... I will. Bye. Love you." With that, she crossed into the kitchen to hang up the phone, then descended into the basement.

Snape glanced up. "I could hear your voice up there. Who were you talking to for so long?"

Hermione smiled and said, "My dad. He's anxious about the wedding, and it's just getting worse the closer it gets. Honestly, you'd think *he* was the one getting married!" She chuckled, then added, "And he said to tell you 'hi.'"

Snape nodded in response, his eyes fixed on the potion he was stirring. "My dear, it's much more important than him getting married, his *daughter* is doing so!"

Hermione snorted. "Whatever you say, love. Will you be much longer? Shall I start dinner?"

Snape peered at several other cauldrons and said, "I should be at a good stopping point in about... 40 minutes."

Hermione nodded and climbed the stairs. "Then dinner will be served in 45 minutes!" She ducked back to blow him a kiss and he smiled, watching her disappear.

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Twenty minutes before the wedding

Ginny knocked on the dressing room door and said, "Hermione? Can I come in now?"

Hermione's muffled voice said, "Yes, come on in."

Ginny opened the door just wide enough to enter and flicked a wary glance around, making sure no one could see inside before she shut it with a snap. Turning around, she saw Hermione in front of the floor-length mirror, adjusting her gown while her mother fussed with her hair. At the sound of the door closing, Hermione spun, her skirts swirling around her ankles. Ginny's eyes went wide and she breathed, "'Mione, you look amazing!"

Hermione beamed at her friend and bobbed a curtsy, chuckling. "Do you think Severus will like it?"

Ginny and Dione exchanged exasperated looks and Ginny said, "Hermione, he would think you're beautiful if you wore a burlap sack. This is beyond gorgeous."

Dione added, "I'm sure Severus will be quite satisfied with how you look, dear."

Hermione laughed again and said, "You look lovely yourself, Ginny. I'm sure Harry won't be able to take his eyes off of you."

Ginny crossed her arms and shook her head primly, saying, "No, today is *your* day, and by rights, no one will be able to take their eyes off of *you*...though I *am* glad you think I look nice, as I'd hate to ruin your wedding pictures looking a fright!"

On impulse, Hermione hugged Ginny, unable to stop smiling. "Thank you. Well, I'm ready. Do you have the flowers?"

Dione piped up, "They're right here in this box, dear. Now, shall I go fetch your father and get this show on the road?"

Gathering the delicate bouquet of magically enhanced flowers that Fern and Neville had arranged, Hermione said, "Indeed. As long as everything else is ready..."

Dione crossed the tiny dressing room and edged out the door, saying, "I'll make sure of it."

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Standing in the corridor just outside of the front room that led to the main room, Snape peered through the cracked doors to watch the guests filing through and into the main room where the wedding would take place. Minerva stood beside him, nervously poking at his hair, smoothing strands as he absently waved his hand to swat her away.

"Minerva, that's enough..." He jerked his head to one side and frowned.

Huffing, she retorted, "I'm just trying to make sure it's perfect!"

Snorting and rolling his eyes, he cut an aggrieved glance at her and said, "It's fine; leave off already."

Ron came jogging up the corridor. "Harry's still at the kitchen, but Dobby's all but done. He'll stick around until everything is served, but the rest of the house-elves are gone."

Snape nodded. "Good. Thank you. And has Molly secured the cake?"

Ron flashed a lopsided grin. "I don't think much could get past the protective charms she's got around that thing. She's rather outdone herself, I'd say."

Snape inclined his head and smiled. "I'm sure it's lovely." He peeked through the doors again, noting that the queue of people entering the main room had cleared. Neville was standing at the doorway with the twins, ready to escort anyone else, and the twins both carried cameras: Fred with the video, and George with the still-shot. Arthur bustled up to them and muttered a few words, then hastened to the doorway where Snape was spying.

Snape backed away just in time, as Arthur burst through the doors, quivering with nervous energy. "Ah, Severus, it's nearly time. Is everything ready?"

Minerva said, "We're fine, Arthur. We're just waiting on word from the bride at this point."

Bobbing his head, Arthur said, "Yes, yes, very good. Well then, here comes Harry now. Excellent..."

Harry bounded up to the group, grinning. "Dobby has everything under control in the kitchen, and Dumbledore is about to join the guests. Isn't it almost time?"

Snape nodded, his pulse speeding up in spite of himself. Suddenly, the doors opened again, and Dione poked her head through. "I've just sent Geoff to Hermione. We're all ready if you are."

With that, they all exchanged excited looks, and Arthur said, "Very well then, come along. Dione, you should go take your seat. And remember: there are Muggle guests,

so keep your wands out of sight and try to blend in!"

There was a general murmur of acknowledgement. Dione ducked back out and crossed to Neville at the doors, muttering to the twins, who sidled into the main room, cameras at the ready. Arthur led the way down the side corridor, entering near the front of the room where the decorations were arrayed for the ceremony.

As Arthur took his place in the centre, Snape followed, breathing shallowly and feeling his face pale in anticipation. Behind him, Minerva followed, with Ron and Harry in tow. Snape took his place in front of Arthur, Minerva and Harry stopping a pace or two to the side, and Ron continued on to the other side, where he would stand beside Ginny when she arrived.

A susurrus of whispers rippled through the assembled, and they looked back to see Dione being escorted to her seat by Neville. Then, at a signal from Geoff just outside the door, Luna started the recorded music, and Ginny walked down the aisle, carrying her bouquet but also strewing flower petals on the floor for Hermione to tread on. She reached Ron and stopped, spinning to face the back of the room, and everyone in the audience stood as Hermione and Geoff appeared in the doorway.

A collective gasp and murmurs of appreciation swept through the room, and Snape's lips parted, his eyes widening in astonishment at the dazzling radiance of Hermione beaming at him as she glided down the aisle on her father's arm.

He had no idea what her dress would look like, and he hadn't been prepared for the ~~thought~~ *rightness* that flooded him at her choice. She had eschewed contemporary Muggle bridal gowns in favour of a more mystical flair, and Snape thought she looked as if she had stepped out of a medieval painting.

Her dress was of silver silk, with gold embroidery edging along the neckline, cinching the sleeves high on her upper arms, trimming the edges of the belled sleeves and the full skirt, and girdling her hips to a vee from her waist, which trailed to the hem at the front of her skirt. Within that gold trim, garnet-coloured gems sparkled in the light, echoed in the jewels and crystals nestled in her curls, the dainty combs gently keeping her hair out of her face. Matching earrings and necklace of silver and gold coiled around garnets completed the ensemble, with her bouquet of gold-tipped gardenias, silver-tipped plumerias, and crimson-veined carnations wrapped in silver and gold ribbons adding the finishing touch.

Snape suddenly understood why she insisted on him wearing a darker pewter-coloured version of his opera suit, instead of his preferred black, with a rich red carnation boutonniere. Ginny's gold gown with garnet-hued accents and bouquet served as a warmer counterpoint to the cool beauty of their silver attire. The rest of the wedding party, Minerva included, wore the darker pewter of Snape's suit, with lighter silver accents and crimson flowers.

The effect was such that Snape marvelled at how she had managed to take the ring he had chosen and extended its singular look through their entire wedding party. Nearly overwhelmed with the force of his love for her and the appreciation for her homage, he sucked in a deep breath, swallowing against the lump that insisted on lodging in his throat.

Geoff responded to Arthur, presenting Hermione to Snape and taking his seat by Dione in the front row, but Snape was deaf to Arthur's recitation, all senses focused on his bride before him beaming up into his face. Although they had spent the past year together under one roof, the wonder at what was truly his reality...that she loved him enough to be his wife...nearly overwhelmed him with joy.

One part of Snape chided him for not paying more attention to Arthur's performance, as he was doing quite well, but the rest of Snape's consciousness ignored that reprimand in favour of devouring Hermione with his eyes...and thinking ahead to how much he wanted to devour her later that night.

Hermione's whole being buzzed with the excitement of the event and the connection she still shared with Snape. She looked into his fathomless black eyes and saw the burning love and desire crackling within them. The answering thrill that coursed through her veins made her almost dizzy with rapture and the hunger to become one with him in body as well as soul.

Among the wedding party, although they were trying to focus on Arthur's ceremony, the witnesses kept finding themselves distracted, turning to look in awe at the couple between them, as they felt the magical currents surrounding them like a static-y aura. The charged atmosphere merely served to accentuate the joy of the occasion, reiterating what they had all come to realize: that the relationship between the unlikely couple was one of exceptional beauty and strength.

Arthur paused, looking expectantly at Snape and Hermione, who both promptly realized that they had no idea what he had just said. Turning sheepish eyes on him, they flashed apologetic smiles, and he smirked as he repeated, "It is at this point that the betrothed would like to share with us their own sentiments."

Nodding faintly, Snape locked eyes with Hermione again and began what they had adapted to their purpose, his voice low but full of emotion as he said, "All I want is freedom, a world with no more night... and you, always beside me, to guard me and to guide me..."

Hermione responded, "No more talk of darkness, let daylight calm your fears. I'm here, with you, beside you... those years are far behind you..."

Snape continued, "Then say you love me every waking moment... say the word and I will follow you..."

Hermione said, "Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime... let me lead you from your solitude..."

Snape said, "Say you need me with you, now and always... anywhere you go let me go too..."

Hermione added, "Share each day with me, each night, each morning..."

Then, in unison, they said, "Say you love me and 'I do.' Love me...that's all I ask of you."

The silence following their recitation was profound until the assembled guests shook themselves from their rapt observation and exhaled all at once, sounding as if the room itself had sighed.

Arthur, unable to keep from beaming at the blissful pair before him, said, "Who has the ring?"

McGonagall fished the gold band from her pocket and presented it to Arthur, who lifted it in front of him and said, "This ring serves as the ageless symbol of eternity, with no beginning nor end. It is presented in this union as the tangible reminder that the vows pledged here today shall also have no end."

He dropped the ring to a level with their clasped hands and said, "Severus Donovan Snape, here in the presence of these witnesses to your troth, do you promise to love, honour, and care for Hermione, unwavering in the face of adversity, for as long as you shall live?"

Snape replied, "For as long as there are stars in the heavens, I do."

Arthur looked at Hermione, who, with trembling lips, was gazing adoringly at Snape, and said, "Hermione Jane Granger, here in the presence of these witnesses to your troth, do you promise to love, honour, and care for Severus, unwavering in the face of adversity, for as long as you shall live?"

Hermione tilted her head to one side and said, "For as long as there are hours to count, I do."

Arthur laid the ring in his outstretched palm and said, "Then, as a sign of these vows, Severus, you may place this ring on Hermione's finger."

Snape lifted her left hand and slid the outer ring with the garnet off her ring finger, fitted the gold band within it, and slipped both back on, smiling proudly when he both watched and felt them magically tighten to a snug fit. Then, his eyes flicking up to Hermione's, he brought her hand to his lips, bestowing a reverent kiss on the ring.

Arthur, slightly taken aback by Snape's unscripted gesture, cleared his throat and said, "Well then, ah, having exchanged partnered oaths of devotion, we bear witness to your plight. And, by the authority vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may seal your promise with a kiss."

Snape and Hermione grinned merrily at each other, then she stepped forward into his embrace, her hands lifting to frame his face as he leant down to meet her in a searing, soul-binding kiss. Around them, spurred to action by the intensity of magic crackling around the couple, the wedding party and guests burst into cheers and applause until Snape and Hermione finally separated enough to press their foreheads together, flushed and gasping. They came to their senses with a start, and turned dazed eyes on the assembled revellers.

Behind them, Arthur cried, "May I present to you, Severus and Hermione Snape!"

At that, they exchanged abashed grins and began their trek down the aisle, arm in arm, followed by their wedding party, who were beaming almost as much to rival the bride and groom.

As soon as the wedding party exited into the front room, Fred and George began directing them to pose for pictures, while Dumbledore, Neville, Parvati, Susan, and the Lovegoods bustled about, placing the chairs that had been set up in rows around the tables along both sides of the room. Once they were done, the centre section was open for a dance floor, and the tables were ready for guests to be seated to partake of the food provided by Dobby and his accompanying crew of house-elves. They then made several trips in and out of the kitchen to bring everything in and set up along the long buffet tables on the side wall.

While the guests milled about and the twins kept the wedding party and the Grangers busy with their cameras, Molly and Fern moved the flowers and decorations from the front area where Arthur had performed the ceremony, placing them on the table behind it, setting it up for the wedding party to sit in the place of honour, at the head of the room.

Finally, as the others finished displaying all the food, Molly and Fern rolled out the small table with the cake, setting it in the front corner, between the head table and the buffet. The wedding cake was a sumptuous tiered confection with golden frosting and silver beads draped around, punctuated by crimson flowers. The cake topper was blown glass, twisted and twirled in the form of a circle, within which hung an enamelled Phantom mask.

Molly muttered to Fern, and the other woman spun to scan the room, blocking Molly's actions from view as she took out her wand long enough to release the protective charms shielding the cake from damage.

Soon, the guests were herded into the main room to take seats at the tables, the wedding party hurrying in and standing behind their chairs at the head table. Arthur stationed himself at the doorway, announcing, "Esteemed guests, please welcome Severus and Hermione Snape!"

They entered again, arm in arm, nodding and smiling at the crowd standing and applauding around them. When they took their seats at the head table, everyone else sat as well, and Luna once again started the music for atmosphere.

The celebration continued, with everyone enjoying the food and music, appreciative laughter bubbling up at the way the younger members of the cast changed the music to "Masquerade," demonstrating how well they remembered their choreography from over a year before. Snape, not to be outdone, imperiously stood as the music changed to the ominous sound of the Phantom arriving, and gestured to Luna to start the song again. When she did, he bowed to Hermione, taking her hand and whisking her away from the head table to show that he, too, remembered that which he hadn't even been required to perform.

The others backed away from them as he spun a laughing Hermione across the dance floor, applauding as they came to the end and Snape gave an exaggeratedly haughty bow.

Later, when Hermione tossed her bouquet, there was a mad scrum amongst the younger women, but Parvati emerged from the clutch victorious, brandishing the flowers, a triumphant gleam in her eyes. The boys crowded, turning to tease Neville, whose cheeks had gone pink, but were taken aback to see him watching Parvati with an air of suppressed elation, a faint smirk hovering on his lips. Augusta nodded, beaming benevolently over the younger crowd.

Eventually, the cake was cut, and the decadent layers of chocolate cake were separated by mousse, of both Snape's and Hermione's recipes. The afternoon wore on, and it was evening when Hermione leant close to Snape at the head table and said, "I daresay we've stayed long enough. We should be at liberty to leave any time now."

A tingle of anticipation swept over Snape, ending in his trousers, and he murmured in her ear, "Then let's say our goodbyes and go," nuzzling her curls and purring as he nipped her earlobe.

Her gasp was answer enough, and she shot to her feet, swallowing hard. Snape rose more circumspectly, but the ferocity of his grip on her hand belied his more sedate façade. They first went to the Grangers, where Hermione muttered to her mother, "It's been hours, and we've done everything scheduled, right?"

Dione's brows rose and she said, "The cake was the last thing scheduled, dear. Why?"

Hermione flicked a glance at Snape and attempted a demure expression, but was not entirely successful, from the awkward expressions on her parents' faces. "We're about to head out, then."

Geoff ducked his head and coughed faintly, rubbing the back of his neck as he mumbled, "I'll let everyone know..." and hurried away.

Dione rallied and said, in a quite businesslike manner, "We'll make sure to Floo all the gifts over to Spinner's End, and...yes, dear, we'll look after Crookshanks. And Ginny reassured me earlier that she would pop over periodically to check for post as well. Everything is in good hands."

Hermione hugged her, then backed away and twined fingers with Snape again. "Thanks, Mum. For everything."

Dione smiled fondly and sighed. "It was a lovely wedding, and you both are quite stunning. Congratulations again."

Hermione beamed up at Snape, lifting a hand to smooth a lock of hair behind his ear. In homage to their times together before, his suit, albeit of a different colour, was the same style as the opera coat he had previously worn, and he had pulled his hair back into a ponytail, leaving the shorter strands to fall forward and frame his face, as Hermione had done for him on the night of the play. Snape pinned her with a smouldering look and caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm before releasing it.

Geoff returned, saying, "All right, we're ready to see you off!"

As one, they all turned and crossed to the doorway into the front room, where the guests were all crowded on either side, extending out the front door and down the walkway, where the wedding party led them up to the car chauffeured by Fern. When Snape and Hermione stepped into the pathway, the group around them either tossed flower petals or blew soap bubbles to float around them, speeding them on their way.

Laughing, Hermione dove into the car, shaking petals from her hair, and Snape climbed in beside her. Fern grinned back at them and said, "Once we get to the end of the road, that should be far enough, don't you think?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. The only reason we even have this car is because of the Muggles who are here. If it had all been wizards, we would have just Apparated from there."

Fern winked and said, "All right then, let's go!"

True to her word, she drove them to the end of the road leading away from the golf club, then parked on the shoulder. Snape and Hermione exchanged a mischievous grin before he cast a concealment charm over them and they clambered out of the car, their disembodied farewells making Fern chuckle before they Disapparated.

Five hours after the wedding

They had arrived at Spinner's End, ended the concealment charm, grabbed the luggage they had already packed, and Apparated to the quaint wizarding inn tucked away in

the heart of Paris, where they were met by a genial witch who immediately led them to the bridal suite, tendering her congratulations as she left them to their privacy.

They were in the tiny dining area, and a stunning flower arrangement graced the table, surrounded by candles in crystal holders. Snape sent their bags flying into the luxurious bedroom, then embraced Hermione, purring, "Shall I carry you over the threshold, my dear?"

She smirked up at him and said, "Oh, there's no need for that. I'm *quite* willing to go into the bedroom, so I don't need to be carried in." Snape snorted. "As a matter of fact, if you *wanted* to do that, you'd have to..." and she broke away from him, spinning and hiking up her skirts "*catch* me first!"

Dancing away from his belated grab, she raced across the living room, breathless giggles trailing in her wake as Snape darted after her. As soon as he entered the room, he slammed the door behind him, leaning against it and eyeing her with predatory intent.

Hermione had backed against the edge of the bed, breath shallow at the lascivious promise of his expression. Snape drew his wand with a languid air, casting charms to lock the door and silence the room. Then, he shrugged out of his opera coat and the accompanying waistcoat, tossing them to one side as he watched her eyes widen. When he began undoing the buttons at his cuffs and throat, he heard her faint sigh and saw her pupils dilate. Leaving the rest of the shirt buttoned, he crossed to her, and she shivered under his heated gaze.

Stopping mere millimetres from her, he carefully removed the delicate combs from her hair and laid them on the bed, letting her curls settle into their natural state. Then, he lifted his hands to the clasp of her necklace, opening it and slipping it from her neck. Once he had laid it with the combs, he bent to trace his lips over her bare throat, his hands cupping her shoulders. Her head fell back to give him easier access, and he breathed in her ear, "Turn around."

She spun, and Snape brushed her hair over one shoulder, nuzzling and nipping along the exposed cord of her neck as his fingers traced the edge of her bodice, pausing at the top of the column of tiny buttons that ran the length of her spine. With each button undone, he pressed a kiss to the newly-bared flesh, making Hermione squirm with growing need.

When he reached the end, he smoothed his hands up her back and guided the sleeves down her arms. The gown pooled around her, resting on the bed in front of her knees. Wrapping one arm around her waist, he urged her to step out of the dress, holding it with the other hand until he was free to flick his wand to send it to hang in the wardrobe. Holding her there, he trailed feather-light kisses over her shoulders and neck as he finished unbuttoning his shirt. When he released her to remove his shirt, she heard the rustling and came to her senses with a start.

She started to turn around, but he stopped her, saying, "Not yet."

Remembering his "not yet" in her room at Hogwarts, her eyes closed and she exhaled a long note of anticipation and desire. Snape made quick work of stepping out of his boots, socks, and trousers, adding slow swipes of his tongue to the kisses and nips along her shoulders. When he was clad only in his shorts, he cupped her shoulders and turned her around again, descending on her with an urgent kiss.

Hermione reached for him, sliding her hands over his bare chest and twining her fingers in his hair, tugging it free from the elastic. Her nipples dragged against his torso, and she moaned.

Abandoning her mouth, Snape pressed kisses along her jaw and down her throat, dropping to his knees in front of her to suckle each breast in turn while his fingers sought the closure of the suspender belt. As soon as it sprang free, he hooked his thumbs into the thong riding her hips, pulling it down to join the suspender belt and sliding her stockings down her legs. His nose traced languid designs along her belly and hips as he guided her to step out of her shoes and lingerie. Her gasps and breathy moans served as music to his ears while her hands raked through his hair, sending shivers over his scalp and goose flesh down his body.

When she was completely nude, he pressed her hips back, and she sank onto the edge of the bed. He dropped onto his heels and leant forward, parting her knees with his arms and parting her curls with his thumbs as his tongue delved into the glistening treasure before him. Hermione fell back onto the bed with a keening cry.

Laving from cunt to clitoris and back again, Snape gloried in surrounding himself with essence of Hermione: her taste, her scent, her moans, her warm wetness, the dusky pink of her delectable flesh.

Hermione felt the sizzling shocks coursing through her body and wanted more. Gripping his hair, she tugged him away from his feast, panting, "Enough for now. My turn."

She struggled to sit up, and Snape backed away. She grabbed at his arms, urging him to rise. When he got to his feet, her gaze travelled from his face to his tented, damp boxers, and she slanted a wicked grin at him as she pulled his pants past his knees. He stepped out of them and nearly choked on his hastily indrawn breath when she leant forward and sucked his cock in as deep as she could go in one motion. The hissed string of obscenities pouring from his lips made her want to grin in triumph, but she was too busy bobbing along his length to do so.

Her hands slid around to squeeze his arse while she sucked him, and she could feel the trembling in his muscles as he tried to control his urge to thrust. Finally, she couldn't wait any longer and backed away, peering up at his dazed expression. Her voice was hoarse with desire as she said, "Gods, Severus, I need you..."

She pushed to her feet, pressing herself against him. He pounced on her with a demanding kiss, then said, "I need you, Hermione."

Breaking apart, they scrambled onto the bed, crawling into the centre, where Snape guided Hermione onto her back beneath him, moaning as she wrapped her legs around his waist. Her hand snaked down her body to stroke his cock before he sank into her, and she slid her fingers back, circling her clitoris as he plunged deep.

His hair fell forward, serving as blinders, keeping his gaze locked with Hermione's. With every thrust, she gasped or squealed or moaned, and his grunts and groans answered her. The fervour of their coupling mounted, until Hermione's eyes widened, boring into his as she panted, "Oh gods... Severus... yes... I love you... yes... gods..."

Snape felt her impending orgasm in the squeezing of his cock, and he rasped, "Yes... Hermione... love... yes... I love you..."

Then, as her words dissolved into an ululating cry of ecstasy, he dropped onto his elbows, sealing his devotion with a kiss, his roar of satisfaction muffled by her lips meshed with his.

As their breathing slowed, Snape let his body melt against hers, and Hermione relaxed her legs around his hips, sliding her feet down the backs of his thighs. The fierce kiss that crowned their climax gradually shifted to gentler, worshipful kisses of affection. Snape moved enough so that he rested his hip on the bed instead of crushing her beneath him. After several minutes, Hermione rolled forward until they were on their sides, entwined. She ducked her head as a yawn ambushed her.

Snape, smirking, said, "Have we worn you out already?"

Hermione cut a reproachful glance at him and said, "It's been an eventful day, and I'm just so deliciously sated and comfortable..."

Snape's dark chuckle vibrated against her temple when she nestled against him. "Well, we don't want to sap your energy this early...we've got three weeks of honeymoon ahead of us." She purred and held him closer. "But," he conceded, "today was quite eventful..." He pulled back and sought her gaze. His voice was rough with the force of emotion filling him as he said, "This has been the greatest day of my life, Hermione. You truly are my salvation."

Hermione's eyes misted with happy tears and she whispered, "And you are the best thing that has ever happened to me, Severus. I love you..."

She was interrupted by his murmur as he joined her to say, in unison, "Always."

Four weeks after the wedding

Ginny, Dione, and Molly were seated on the couch, with Hermione leaning over the back, all looking at the photo album in Dione's lap, *propping* and *aahing* at the pictures Hermione had taken during their honeymoon in Paris.

Severus was ensconced in his lab, busy concocting one of the twins' newest products, and Fern and Neville were standing at the far end of the long counter, preparing some exotic magical plants for brewing.

Fern had wanted to learn more about preparing plants for potions ingredients, and, while Snape was clearly the expert, he didn't have enough time to teach her, what with all the stock he had to make to keep up with sales. So, he allowed her and Neville to work in his lab, where Neville could direct her, and Snape could be on hand if they needed his help.

If someone had ever told Snape that he would not only be working in the same potions lab as Neville Longbottom, but recommending him to train someone else, he would have told that person to lay off the hallucinogenic potions.

Neville, for his part, reflected that he would never have imagined not *only* not being terrified of Snape, but also enjoying working with him in a professional setting. But, as he had acknowledged several times over in the past year and a half, his life...no, *he*...had changed quite a bit after being cast in the play. The understanding he and Parvati had come to a few days after the wedding attested to that fact. His newest goal as he worked for Fern was to be able to afford a ring with which to make their understanding official.

He wasn't the only one looking for a ring, either. Back upstairs, after the women had finished looking at all the pictures, they sat around the dining room table with a tray of tea and biscuits while Hermione fired question after question at Ginny and Molly about the distant plans for Ginny and Harry's wedding.

Apparently, after Snape and Hermione had disappeared from the golf club, Harry had pulled Ginny aside and murmured something to the effect of hoping *their* day would be as nice, and they were as good as promised from that moment on. Ginny made sure to let Ron know what she liked so he could pass it on to Harry when he took Ron with him to peruse ring choices.

Of course, as the two young men had recently begun Auror training, Harry and Ginny were going to wait until it was over, so they had almost three years to plan their big day, at least.

Hermione, basking in the bliss of her union with Snape, was ecstatic to come back from three weeks of unabashed splendour and find her dearest friends beginning the same joyous journey she had taken. She knew that, even though he would grumble and pull faces at going to their weddings, Snape would undoubtedly feel the same fond memories of their own celebration, and she resolved to use them as opportunities to renew their own pledge to each other.

Twenty years after the wedding

"Severus, dear, it's time to go!" Hermione checked her appearance one last time in the mirror before she exited the bedroom and strode down the hallway to the office, where Snape was still at the computer, inputting data for *Vial and Vessel* on a spreadsheet.

Snape saved his work and took off his spectacles, tucking them in his shirt pocket as he rose to join her. "All right, let's go."

They bustled down the stairs and Flooed to the headmistress's office. McGonagall looked up and smiled in welcome. "Severus, Hermione, so good to see you! Come on down, the show will be starting in about 30 minutes."

McGonagall led them through the castle to the theatre annex that had been added two years after the inaugural musical competition. As they took their seats, they opened the programmes and nodded fondly at the photos and bios of the students they had come to see: their godchildren, Harry and Ginny's sons, James Sirius and Albus Severus.

Both boys had apparently inherited their parents' knack for performing, as James was playing Bert, and Albus was playing Michael in the Hogwarts production of *Mary Poppins*.

The show was a success, and, after congratulating their godsons on a job well done, Snape and Hermione rejoined McGonagall on the trek back to the headmistress's office. McGonagall said, "I can't believe it's been over 20 years since our first performance here. I say, it was quite the momentous event...for a number of reasons."

She cut a wry glance at Snape and Hermione and they exchanged an amused look, chuckling. Hermione said, "Yes, well, it's hard to remember what Hogwarts was like without the fine arts curriculum. My department has doubled in size several times over these past twenty years, what with all the other fine arts deserving their own experts as well."

McGonagall smiled as they entered her office. "Hogwarts has certainly had to adjust to all the additions and changes, but at least we were prepared for that. Albus made sure of it."

At her statement, all three paused and looked up at the portrait above her desk, where a dozing Albus Dumbledore leant against the frame, snoring lightly.

Snape inclined his head toward the portrait and said, "Well, I'm just glad he managed to get Conroy and the rest of the Ministry to allow me to at least come to the performances. I know I could have used the mirrors, but I'd rather be here in person to support the boys."

McGonagall and Hermione voiced noises of agreement, and Hermione hugged his arm. McGonagall looked at them and said, "I'm certainly pleased to have you here as well. Although, I *am* glad your legendary reputation has faded as the new generation has come along. Particularly in light of what's coming up next year."

She pinned them with a shrewd look, and they frowned in confusion. Hermione said, "Why? What's happening next year?"

McGonagall's eyes suddenly seemed as if they had stolen their twinkle from Dumbledore as she said, "Why, haven't you heard? We're doing *The Phantom of the Opera*."

Snape and Hermione whipped their gazes to each other, eyes wide. Then, identical smiles blooming on their faces, they said, in unison, "We'll be here...definitely."

The End

A/N: Hermione's wedding dress is largely modelled after this one-- <http://www.drclean.co.uk/WeddingDresses/Images/MedeavalSleeves.jpg>