

Marry a Choice

by averygoodun

Hermione's week is going from bad to worse when she's forced to make a choice. My take (and slight parody) of the Marriage Law Challenge.

Prologue: Letters of Portent

Chapter 1 of 15

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Disclaimer: JK owns all the rights and kudos for the characters and settings. I'm just taking them and putting them in extremely uncomfortable positions for a while.

A/N: This challenge was just too tempting, but I'm not adhering to the rules at all. The entire story (except epilogue) takes place before any vows are said. This will get ridiculously angsty pretty quick, but it's all in the name of fun. Please tell me what you think. Thanks go to amsev for betaing. Oh, and the warnings are to be on the safe side. There won't be anything explicit.

Marry a Choice

by Avery G.

Prologue: Letters of Portent

Molly Weasley

The Burrow

Ottery St. Catchpole

Devon

Mrs. Jane Granger

43 Tiddlywinks Drive

Bangleton

Oxfordshire

February 14th, 1998

Dear Jane,

How are you? How's Howard and the practice? Did that potion relieve your symptoms? I find it invaluable, myself. I'm just glad that the code of secrecy doesn't apply to you, else I would have to be sneaky about getting it to you.

I'm afraid that this letter isn't purely social in intent. I have some rather nasty news that may affect Hermione. I don't know if she's told you about this, but this is one of those things that is too important to leave you in ignorant bliss.

The Ministry, the bastion of stupidity that it is, has a bill waiting in the wings that will probably destroy what remains of the wizarding community of Britain if it should become law. We don't know precisely who wrote the bill, but we're pretty sure that it comes from those of little foresight and large empty pockets.

The way they're rationalizing it (in secret meetings with wand oaths keeping word from getting round, bless Albus for having the unimpeachable trust of everyone that he does) is by deeming it necessary to force our society out of its segregationist ways that helped bring about the defeated Lord Voldemort. This proposal, titled The Marriage Bill, is supposedly noble in purpose, if not in effect. It will make it mandatory for purebloods to marry Muggle-borns. The compensation for the purebloods is the freedom of choice of Muggle-borns, and the time to make the decision. Muggle-borns, however, if they are petitioned, their only choice is if they get more than one offer. So far in the creation of the bill, those with mixed heritage, such as a person with one Muggle and one magical parent, are exempt, though for how long I cannot guess.

As if that were not enough, the law also stipulates that the couple must produce two children, to "help recreate the days of Merlin, when magic was revered." Those of us who are opposed to this bill are trying to find ways of alerting the wizarding population without tipping off the Ministry in the process (Hence the privacy charm on this letter. If anyone other than you or Howard tried to open this it would have incinerated itself). If there's enough public outrage, then it won't pass, and with that outrage Dumbledore will be pardoned for his "indiscretion."

The good news in all of this is that your daughter, with her brilliant mind and steadfast determination, is working on ways to battle this bill. She's not been called the cleverest witch of her age for nothing, so hope is not lost.

The bad news is that I forgot to mention one of the more insidious parts of the bill, called the binding clause. In effect, it stipulates that any witch or wizard born in Britain, names collected from the Hogwart's list unless already married or past child rearing age, will be subject to the law. No escaping by moving abroad, or even snapping one's wand and becoming a Muggle.

Albus, Arthur, Minerva and I will not let anything happen to Hermione, Jane. She's been through too much already, and she's dear to all our hearts. I dare say Ron would be making this of little consequence if he were still with us, but... If necessary I know that any of my remaining boys would be willing to help Hermione out. She's our family as well.

Must run now. Arthur promised me a lovely dinner, so I must make myself presentable. Give my love to Howard.

Molly

Jane Granger

43 Tiddlywinks Drive

Bangleton

Oxfordshire

Molly Weasley

The Burrow

Ottery St. Catchpole

Devon

February 15th, 1998

Dear Molly,

Regarding your last letter, thank you for the clarification. Hermione had told me the gist of it already, but you pointed out a few things that she had left out. Oh bother! You and I must get together one of these days just to blow off steam.

Anyway, I too wish Ron were still alive. Hermione has been pining ever since she heard the news. He was such a sweet boy, and we were so happy for the two of them. I know I've told you this a dozen times already, but if you ever need a shoulder to cry on, you are more than welcome here. As for your other boys, they are always welcome here, too, but that is up to Hermione.

On a similar note, Dumbledore wrote me about the situation as well, and has a plan, if it should become necessary. He refuses to tell me what it is, and it seems that Hermione is similarly in the dark. I don't quite know what it is about him that instills such trust, but I do trust him and any plans he has.

I hope your dinner was delightful. Say "hi" to Arthur and family for us.

Jane

Unwelcome News

Chapter 2 of 15

Hermione's week begins, and she is ever so pleased about it.

AN: Thanks to amsev for betaing this fic. I should apologize for putting romance as a sub-genre. This will mostly be an angst fest, and though there will be talk of love, the only romance will be decidedly twisted. So, I hope you enjoy.

Disclaimer: as always, not mine.

Chapter 1: Unwelcome News

Tuesday evening (several weeks later)

Hermione looked at Professor McGonagall's stern face as they headed towards the headmaster's office. She barely kept up with McGonagall's long strides as she observed the older witch. McGonagall's lips were almost nonexistent, so tightly were they compressed, and her eyes were locked in a half open state, as though opening them would send hellfire rushing through the school. Her nostrils were flaring and if there had been any loose strands flowing from her tight bun, Hermione would have been convinced that the Gryffindor lion had taken human form in Professor McGonagall.

"Professor, why -"

"The Headmaster needs to speak with you about the... the..." McGonagall seemed to be on the verge of losing all semblance of control as she spluttered and finally stopped speaking altogether.

"Is this about the yelling match in the great hall this morning, Professor? If it is, Harry and I are -"

"No, it has nothing to do with that," she cut Hermione off crisply. "You will find out soon enough. String mints!" she barked the password to the gargoyle, and it leapt away from the door as if in danger of losing a limb if it dared to dawdle.

They took the spiral staircase up in tense silence, Hermione wondering what she could possibly have done to make her head of house so angry. She hadn't seen McGonagall so incensed since the final battle at Christmastime. As they reached the Headmaster's door they both could hear many voices in heated discussion filtering out to the foyer. Hermione looked up at McGonagall and was startled to see the witch looking down at her with a pitying expression, all anger having evaporated.

"Come on, dear. We'd best get this over with."

And with that cryptic remark, she opened the door and led Hermione through to Dumbledore's office.

Hermione was taken aback at how crowded it was. Some of the faces she recognized, including the Weasley twins, Remus Lupin, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Blaise Zabini, then she noticed that with the exception of herself and Professor McGonagall, there wasn't another female in the office. There were more than a dozen men in the room, but few looked happy to be there.

"Ah, Miss Granger. I'm glad to see you've made it here so quickly." Dumbledore looked as if he was under a great deal of stress at the moment, and seeing as several of the men in his office were openly glaring at him, she guessed that his stress was from the current situation.

"Professor Dumbledore, why am I here?" Hermione greeted him warily.

"My dear, it seems that there have been some developments over at the Ministry."

"Developments, sir?"

Professor Snape, who was trying his best to stand apart from everyone else in the crowded room, snorted. Hermione started; she hadn't seen him lurking behind the door when she came in. She looked over her shoulder and raised her eyebrows in surprise, never having thought he'd do anything so undignified.

"Yes, Miss Granger," Dumbledore continued. "It seems as though the law will be passed in short order. It has also come to our attention that you are a prime target of certain unsavory persons, and therefore we have-" He got no further, as Hermione realized exactly what was going on.

"They're seriously considering passing that law? But it's, it's..."

"Stupid? Idiotic? Puerile?" Snape's scathing tone fixed everyone's attention upon him. Seemingly unaware of the attention, he took a breath, and continued his tirade. "Brainless, imbecilic, obtuse? Insensate, simple-minded, shortsighted?" He began to walk in a small circle his pacing rhythmically emphasizing the words. Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head minutely, as if trying to clear her thoughts. Not pausing at her movement, the professor continued his catalog of insulting adjectives. "Half-witted, doltish, ludicrously asinine, imbecilic, and moronic? Dippy, preposterous, laughable, witless? Illogical, foolish, unintelligent, inane, unthinking and chuckleheaded? Is that what you were trying to express, Miss Granger?" Snape cut in, bitterness evident in his features.

Hermione gaped at him. Her mouth opened and closed as she groped for words, her eyes wide open and staring. Suddenly, feeling as though she must look like a fish to all the observers in the office, she shut her mouth and blinked, "I think you said imbecilic twice, Professor, but yes, that is pretty much what I was thinking." The shock of Snape saying the word 'dippy' derailed her thoughts momentarily, but her anger at the lawmakers was returning quickly. "So what now?" she said, returning her focus to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and answered, "We cannot allow you to be forced into a marriage with someone who wishes you harm, Miss Granger. We know that you are more than capable of taking care of yourself in most cases, but last night they added another clause to the law."

With a sinking feeling, Hermione asked, "What did they do now?"

Snape answered again, his smirk belying his fury. "It seems that in the infinite wisdom of the Ministry, probably due to its low coffers and the patrons who so diligently and dutifully donate, they feel that, quote, 'the *lesser* party of the union shall be stripped of their powers and privileges until such time that the union has produced the desired result, to ensure an expedition of the process.'"

He looked at Hermione pointedly to make sure she understood. Again, she felt compelled to gape, although this time she started spluttering before a coherent thought came to mind.

"And this law is suppose to PASS?" The volume of her voice rose with each word. "They're crazy! The Ministry has gone bloody CRAZY!" this last word uttered in a shriek that made the knickknacks on Dumbledore's desk rattle. She paused for a breath and continued, her tone only slightly less intense, "How do they expect most Muggle-borns to survive in a forced marriage without magic?" She looked wildly at Dumbledore, who looked back at her and nodded gravely.

"We suspect a number of the more reasonable members have been placed under the Imperius Curse, but we have been unable to prove it as yet. Until such proof is gathered, we have the urgent matter of protecting those who will be most immediately affected. Which brings us back to you, my dear."

"Why am I a target? I would think that most wizards have enough sense to not want to try dealing with me."

"Ah," Snape sneered, "but think how many would like to get their hands on you when you are powerless to retaliate. You wouldn't last a week Miss Granger."

Hermione shuddered at the word "hands" knowing full well what she'd go through before she was killed. It made suicide look like a really good option.

"That's the point, isn't it?" she asked, continuing her thought aloud. "This is a great way to rid the wizarding community of their dreaded Mudbloods. Either they'll die by marriage or commit suicide to avoid the humiliation and probable pain."

"I'm afraid that will be the result." Dumbledore agreed. "The binding clause makes fleeing ineffective at best, leaving the Muggle-borns little choice."

Hermione closed her eyes, trying to shut out the situation, but also to stop the tears that refused to stay at bay. Even so, a thin stream was making its way down her cheeks. The room became completely still, as though it were empty. Finally, after a bitter inner struggle for control, Hermione choked out, "Well then, what now?"

Dumbledore sighed, taking off his half moon spectacles to rub his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "After reading the document very carefully, it seems the law applies only to single Muggle-borns and purebloods. If you were to marry before the law takes effect, then you may retain both your powers and rights as a witch. It also negates the compulsion for producing children."

Hermione looked around, everything clicking into place. Her eyes roamed over each face in the room, and privately catalogued those who were there to give up their independence to save her, no matter how unwillingly.

"I don't want to force anyone to marry me against his will. That would be as bad as what the Ministry is doing."

Dumbledore smiled and gestured at the men present, "Those who are here are willing, Miss Granger."

A snort from Snape's section of the room caused Dumbledore to amend: "No one here wants to see you subjected to this law."

Hermione sighed. "Be that as it may, Professor, I need to ask that only those who are truly willing to sacrifice themselves for my sake to stay. I don't want any kind of coercion on your part, sir." Hermione said, expecting the room to clear out in seconds flat. Instead she heard a couple of chuckles.

"You make it sound as though it would be an Unforgivable Curse to be married to you, Hermione," Remus Lupin's welcome voice spoke up.

"Yeah, 'Mione." Fred cut in, "A real sacrifice."

"We're all martyrs at heart, you know." George continued, teasingly. "Merlin knows we didn't suffer enough in the war."

Hermione granted them a small smile before looking down at her feet, chewing on her lower lip. She needed time to think this through, but time was what she was probably short on.

"How soon do I have to make a decision, Professor?" she asked Dumbledore

"We expect the bill to pass in the next month, although it may be sooner than that. I would suggest you have a final decision by the end of the week, at the latest."

The end of the week. That gave her three days. How was she supposed to choose a life partner in three days?

"I would suggest you not aim for marital bliss, Miss Granger." Snape's sneering voice cut through her thoughts. "It seems a highly unlikely ideal for you to achieve in any circumstance, but especially under duress." Hearing him answer her own thoughts startled her enough to loosen her tongue.

"I would think that would be obvious, Professor Snape, if you are among the candidates."

"And what makes you think I am among the candidates, Miss Granger?" Snape shot back, though there seemed to be a slight increase of color in his face.

"You're in this room, aren't you?"

"Yes, but so are Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore. Don't tell me you're foolish enough to consider either of them to be candidates?" He smirked.

"Oh, so you're not eligible because you're either way too old or a woman? You hide your secrets very well, Professor. I never would have guessed," she snarked. "Oh, and no offense, Professor Dumbledore," she added hastily.

"None taken, child. You are quite correct on that count." He seemed to be having a difficult time not smiling at Snape's expense. Others in the room weren't as generous, as snickering could be heard.

Snape was not taking the situation well. "You know very well what I mean, Miss Granger. I am here merely as a counsel, of sorts. As your teacher I am ineligible to be a candidate, even if it were my dearest dream, not my worst nightmare."

"On the contrary, Severus," Dumbledore cut in merrily. "The school by-laws have no objection to a teacher-student relationship if the student is of age and marriage is the end result. You are quite, quite eligible in this situation." The twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes increased exponentially with each degree of Snape's discomfiture.

Hermione didn't know whether to laugh or cry at sight of Snape. His face became, if possible, even paler and his lips disappeared with rage and chagrin, as the situation became clear to him. She decided neither reaction would get her anywhere, so she took a few deep breaths, counted to ten a couple of times, and looked around the room.

"So all of you, with the notable exceptions, are willing to be married to me?" she asked with a bit of disbelief. While she was arguing with Professor Snape, a few of the men had discretely removed themselves clearly scared off by her temper or her tongue, but there were still a fair few left. They all nodded, some more enthusiastically than others. That left her nonplused.

"Er, okay. I guess I need to interview you all individually, then. But first I really need to prepare for the interviews, so I know that it'll be thorough. Are all of you available tomorrow?" They all agreed. Dumbledore volunteered to coordinate and schedule the appointments, and excuse Hermione from her classes the next day.

The only bright spot in that, she thought, was that she wouldn't have to endure Snape's sneers in class.

Interviews

Chapter 3 of 15

Hermione interviews the contenders.

Disclaimer: *Not mine.*

Chapter 2: Interviews

Hermione stayed up half the night perfecting the questionnaire. The questionnaire itself was made up of the mundane first through third date questions: a simple way of gathering some basic information. The more important and revealing part of the survey was the charm woven throughout the questions. It was an old, if esoteric, spell that measured people's personality compatibility. Used by yentas and other matchmakers, it provided simple signs of compatibility, changeable to the magus' preference. Hermione had chosen to charm each questionnaire to turn her potential mate's name one of five colors.

If the ink stayed red, it meant the person would be utterly destructive to her well being and soul. Indigo was slightly better, indicating a corrosive influence that could be overcome, but only with difficulty. Cerulean blue was neutral, neither harmful nor helpful, but most likely not conducive to a satisfying relationship. Green and gold were the two positive colors, with gold indicating the highest potential for life long happiness and fulfillment.

By the time she finished charming the last parchment, Hermione could barely keep her eyes open. Laying the final survey face down on the small stack, she crept into bed, not bothering to change into her nightclothes. Her last thought, before fading off into the land of Nod, was hoping she had cast the spell correctly.

Wednesday

The interviews started off the next day with the wizards Hermione didn't know by sight. Most of them were contenders in Hermione's mind for the first few questions, but soon it became obvious that they all would be very poor choices, although she finished the questionnaire each time to be polite.

By the time she was done interviewing the unknowns, it was lunchtime. She headed down to the Great Hall, wishing that she was in an alternate universe, and would be transported back to her real world in the very near future.

Walking to the Gryffindor table, she sat next to Harry and Ginny, who looked up at her with worried and curious faces.

"What's up, Hermione? Why weren't you in class this morning?" Harry asked, looking at her carefully to determine whether she was ill or not. She never missed classes if she could help it.

"Oh, I was excused for the day," Hermione said, trying not to sound too weary.

"What's going on, Hermione? You seem even more dejected than usual," Ginny asked, her tone light, looking worried.

"It's horrible! They've told you about the law, haven't they?"

"The marriage law? Yeah," Harry said bitterly. "You'd think Voldemort actually won with these Draconian measures being considered. He would be extremely pleased. Hell, I think he'd be laughing his bum off right now if he were alive."

"Yes, I think you're right, Harry. Did you hear about the new clause?" Hermione continued, even though it destroyed her appetite. Her friends needed to be warned, if they hadn't been already.

"Yeah. Last night we were called to Professor Dumbledore's office, and so..." He drew a deep breath and tried to continue, "Well, we, Ginny and I, that is, well..."

"We were married last night!" Ginny said, with a happy glow, as if life couldn't be better. "Dumbledore gave us a few minutes alone to discuss our options, Harry proposed to me, and then Dumbledore married us."

Hermione sat there, suddenly torn by this new development. One part of her was very happy for her friends, but another queasily bitter part made her lose all appetite for lunch. Yet another part was jealous of Harry. Everything was easy for Harry, wasn't it?

As she sat staring at her friends in shock, she vaguely saw Ginny's face cloud up. Harry tentatively asked, "Hermione, is everything all right?"

Hermione, noticing her friends' distress, shook herself. "Yeah, I'm... I'm happy for you guys. I really am. I just wish Ron were here to make me as happy as you two." Harry and Ginny exchanged a look as Hermione wiped away a stray tear. "But since he's not, I have to choose a mate in the next few days from the handful of wizards actually willing to be my husband." She sighed heavily. "Not exactly an easy proposition at any time, but especially not under pressure."

"So that's why Snape was in a good mood last night," Harry said thoughtfully.

It took a moment to process Harry's comment, but when she did, she was still confused. "Last night? When did you see him last night?"

"What? Oh, he was one of our witnesses."

"Why didn't you ask me to witness? Couldn't you have waited a few minutes?" Hermione asked in a hurt tone.

"Oh, Hermione, we tried, but you had warded your door, and well, those wards were scary." Ginny looked like she sincerely regretted Hermione's absence.

"We figured that you probably would hex anyone who dared disturb you with wards like that up, so I didn't try taking them down," Harry continued. "Forgive us?"

Hermione looked at them, saw that they honestly had thought of her, and realized it was probably for the best. She would have been a damper on their joy, if she hadn't hexed them for disturbing her, which she probably would have, if only reflexively.

"Yeah, I forgive you. So Snape was there?"

"Yeah, Snape and McGonagall both witnessed our marriage. Gosh, it's still weird to realize that we're actually married." Ginny looked up at Harry, adoration in her eyes. Harry looked down at her with the same look.

"It's not as if it's an unusual idea though, Gin. We've been discussing it for a couple months."

Hermione was gobsmacked. They'd been discussing marriage for a couple months? Ever since Voldemort's defeat, she guessed, but geez, Ginny was only sixteen. Marriage had been the furthest thing from Hermione's mind at that age, granted that Ron had still been clueless at that point. It wasn't until she was seventeen that they had started dating, and her daydreaming strayed to weddings. But even then, she had had no intentions of getting married for several years. Not until they both had secure jobs and could afford it. Not to mention there still had been a madman to defeat... But then, this law did change everything.

"Harry! Ginny! Why didn't you tell me you guys were so serious!"

"We didn't want to rub your nose in it, Hermione," Harry answered gently. "We knew you were in mourning for Ron, and, well, we didn't want to upset you. We figured we would wait until you had recovered a little."

"That's sweet of you guys, but I would have been happy to know." Harry looked at her sharply. "I would have been! Mostly," she added, with reluctant honesty. She smiled lopsidedly at them in apology. "Well, I'm sorry you felt like you needed to walk on pincushions around me. I am sad, but I'm not made of china. I won't break with the slightest provocation. Honestly!" she exclaimed, in mock huffiness.

"Well, we'll try to remember that you're not a shrinking violet, but you must remember that we didn't want to end up like Malfoy," Harry teased.

Hermione blushed. It hadn't been one of her better moments. Draco, having proved himself a reluctant fighter for the Light, made a quip about Ron's fatal dueling skills in front of her. It had taken Madam Pomfrey the better part of the night to fix him up. Hermione was amazed that she hadn't been expelled for the hexing she aimed at him. The strange thing was that even Snape had been reluctant to punish her, only making halfhearted sneers about expulsion. At the time, she figured it was because he was

actually scared, but now she wondered if he had felt pity, or some other human emotion, for her.

"Well, I hope that Snape wasn't a complete pillock. Why didn't you get Remus to witness instead?"

Confused, Harry blurted, "Remus is around?"

"Yeah, he was part of the crowd when Dumbledore told me about the new clause, as were your brothers and Kingsley. And Snape."

"I wonder why he didn't stick around..." Ginny mused. Suddenly the last name Hermione mentioned made her start in surprise. "Wait a second! You mean that Snape was one of the 'willing' wizards?"

"Not exactly. He was very shocked and upset when Dumbledore told him he was actually eligible to be a candidate. I swear he looked like he wanted to run from the room screaming." Hermione giggled, then frowned. "It's not as if I'm that horrid."

"So you're choosing George, right?" Ginny asked, getting her back on topic.

"Um, well, I don't know, Gin," Hermione replied carefully. "I want to vet everyone out to make sure we'll both be happy for a long time or at least good companions. I'm not sure George and I would make that great of a match, though. Nor Fred." Hermione looked at Ginny warily, then realized Ginny was teasing her.

"No, I think you and either of them would make for a miserable match. I want you for a sister, but I also don't want to lose another brother," she added her smile faltering for a moment. Regaining her exuberant spirit, she added, "I'll just have to adopt you as my sister. Mum already thinks of you as a daughter, so there shouldn't be any problems there." She winked at Hermione.

"I would be honored to be your sister, Gin, but who knows? I'm going to give your brothers an honest shot. It might turn out that one of them is my soul mate, and we'll fall madly in love with each other by the end of the interview." Ginny laughed while Harry smirked.

"So what have you been doing this morning?" Harry asked, suddenly remembering that she still hadn't told them.

"I've been interviewing candidates," she said with a sigh. "I don't know how those blokes got my name, or thought they might be right for me, but honestly! One of them doesn't even believe in equal rights for witches! If it weren't such a serious situation, I would think Dumbledore was full of codswallop for even letting that blinkered prat in." She shook her head in disgust.

"So this afternoon I get to interview the men I already know a little about. Hopefully, it'll be more productive than the morning's interviews."

"Who's left?" Ginny asked, curiously.

"Well, your brothers for starters, Remus, Kingsley, and, here's a surprise, Blaise Zabini!" She smirked at their expressions.

"I didn't think he would be interested in... your type," Harry said carefully, as if unsure of how Hermione would take his comment. He relaxed when she laughed.

"Neither did I. I suspect that Dumbledore is desperate and told all the decent single guys he knows to come meet me whether they're interested or not. Most of the guys I interviewed this morning seemed to be relieved to be dismissed, so I'll wager Blaise is being forced into this. I intend to find out." An evil grin crossed her face at the prospect of interviewing her year's most sexually perplexing male. "I might add a few questions to the test just to dig out some other answers as well." They all laughed.

"So, no Snape on the schedule?" Ginny teased, although Harry frowned at the question.

"Are you kidding? I would probably die of shock if he showed up. I told Dumbledore, and the room in general, that I want no coerced prospects, and I think Dumbledore would have to drag Snape kicking and screaming into a marriage interview with me. I expect neither of us would survive the meeting." She giggled again, remembering the look on Snape's face last night. Then something Harry said earlier sank in.

"Snape was in a good mood last night? Why would the prospect of marrying me put him in a good mood?"

"Oh, I expect it was the fact that you're being forced to marry that put him in a good mood," Harry said, then hurriedly changed the topic. "So do you have any idea who you'll choose?"

"Honestly, if it doesn't go better this afternoon, I am seriously going to consider seppuku. That or seduce some Muggle off the street," she added with a grin.

"If you choose the second option, I would at least go to a library, Hermione," Ginny said with a giggle. "You'd be more likely to meet someone with similar interests."

Hermione smirked. "Yeah, at least the homeless guys who live in the library are clean enough to find classy shelter." Harry shuddered at the thought, and Hermione laughed loudly.

"And what finds you in such good humor, Miss Granger?" Snape's silky voice cut through her laughter. "Have you perhaps achieved the impossible and found marital bliss after such a short search?"

She turned around and saw him in his typical domineering stance, legs slightly apart and arms crossed, glaring at her with a nasty smirk.

"I'm afraid not Professor, but then again, I haven't interviewed you, so there's still hope for me yet." She smirked back at him but was surprised at his reaction. Instead of scowling, he merely cocked an eyebrow and smirked more broadly.

"Careful what you wish for, Miss Granger, else you may receive it." And with that, he stalked off, leaving Hermione once again gaping unattractively. She turned back to her friends to find them looking at her oddly.

"Hermione," Ginny said slowly, "when did you start flirting with Snape?"

"What? I was not flirting, Ginny! I was trying to... I was not flirting! Stop smiling like that!" She had started blushing, but more out of vexation than embarrassment, as Ginny looked at her with a smug expression, while Harry eyed her shrewdly, a small smile playing at his lips.

"Oh, gee look at the time. I have an interview in ten minutes. I'd better go prepare for it. I'll see you berks later." They just grinned more widely at her as she made her excuses and rushed off.

XXX

Hermione sat in the small classroom used for her interviews at a complete loss. Two more candidates were crossed off her list. Although she wasn't surprised at Blaise's dismissal, she was disappointed at having to eliminate the extremely attractive Kingsley Shacklebolt. His name had turned to a rather dark shade of blue, proving their personalities were too disparate. Added to that the fact that he'd seemed disappointed as well, it left her sighing in frustration. If only she had a few years to make some mistakes., Kingsley would have been a fun mistake to make.

She mentally shook herself and started preparing for the next candidate. She couldn't remember who was next but was almost relieved to see George Weasley shyly enter the room a couple minutes later. The fact that he could do anything shyly made Hermione hopeful, even though looking at him reminded her almost painfully of Ron.

"George!" She welcomed him with a friendly embrace. "Thank you for being willing to do this. You are willing, right? No one, not Dumbledore, not your mum, no one's

forcing you to do this, right?"

"Geez, 'Mione, I'm starting to think that you have an inferiority complex or something." He grinned at her, then added in a more serious tone: "You know, I was kinda sorry you fancied Ron and not me." He shrugged as a sadness crossed his face. "Not that I begrudge Ron any happiness he managed to get." She hugged him again, this time a little tighter, as she felt tears spring into her eyes.

"You're sweet, you know that, don't you?" she said as she pulled away.

"Thanks, 'Mione." They then sat down and talked.

As George answered Hermione's questions, it became clear that although they were better suited for each other than she originally suspected, they had only tenuous common ground, most of which revolved around Ron. She finished her questionnaire, and they sat in silence. If they could find something else in common, besides Ron, then they might have a chance.

"I failed your test, didn't I?" George asked, a little downhearted.

Hermione looked at his name, which had changed to a clear blue. She looked up and smiled tiredly. "Actually, so far you're the top contender."

"You needn't sound so shocked, 'Mione. I'm not that different from Ron."

"Oh, George, that's one big problem with you. You remind me so much of Ron. I had started to think of you as a brother, and now here you are willing to be my husband? I don't know if I can separate you from your role as a brother." She tried to explain her muddled thoughts and feelings to him.

"I have one other test. So far, you're the only one to pass the 'written exam,'" she smirked at him, knowing how typical she was being in her approach to this situation. "But, I mean, since we'd be married and have to live with each other for the rest of our natural lives, there's another aspect that needs to be considered." She blushed, not knowing how he was going to react.

"I'm shocked, 'Mione. You know I'm not that sort of boy!" George then grinned at her, throwing aside his mock outrage. "Come 'ere." And so George drew her into a gentle kiss. As soon as their lips touched, however, it was obvious to both of them that it was not going to work out.

"I'm sorry, George," Hermione whispered into his ear, as they switched from kiss to hug.

"So'm I, Hermione." George squeezed her gently, then let her go. "Maybe it's better to be your brother, though." He smiled at her with his usual mischievous grin back in place. "This way I won't get into serious trouble every time I pull a prank on anyone. I doubt you would have taken our pranks as lightly as they're intended, right?"

Hermione smiled back. "No, I doubt I would be able to blithely stand by and watch you make fools of my family and friends. Or at least not very often."

George got up to go, but Hermione held onto his hand. "Thank you, George. This means a lot to me."

"No problem, doll." He cocked his head to the side and waggled his eyebrows. "But now I need to go find my other half and tell him the deal's off. We were going to take turns you know." He grinned even wider as Hermione slapped him, not quite sure whether he was joking.

"Well, it's better that we end it before we start then, 'cause I won't share my husband with anyone."

George laughed and went on his way.

Hermione smiled as he left, but the smile quickly faded. That was two down in one interview. She liked George better than Fred; both boys were like brothers to her, and neither would suffice. But now things were getting desperate. She had a feeling that Remus wouldn't really want to marry her, although he'd do so if necessary, and without complaining, but she really didn't want to take advantage of his good nature. Assuming, of course, that he even showed up. And if he wasn't suitable, then she might have to resort to desperate measures.

However, when he showed up with a small bouquet of wildflowers in his hand and a shy smile on his lips, a few of her worries flew out the window.

"Remus. You came." Hermione smiled at him after kissing both cheeks.

"Of course I came, Hermione." He smiled back and while giving her the bouquet took a moment to admire her physique, though not too lasciviously. It made Hermione feel like she might be attractive for more than just her mind. They settled down and went through the questionnaire leisurely, as if it were a normal conversation. After they finished, Hermione looked down to find Remus' name glowing green, but she grew pensive.

"Oh, Remus, I don't feel right doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Asking some innocent bloke to marry me just so I can keep my equal footing. It just seems wrong."

"What if the bloke doesn't mind being married to a beautiful, intelligent young woman? What if the bloke thinks he's getting a great deal?"

Hermione blushed at being called beautiful. "A great deal?"

"Yes, a great deal. Not only would he get to spend the rest of his life with someone who is truly worthy, but he might even be seen as a hero of sorts by that person. I think the bloke you choose will be lucky indeed."

"You're very sweet Remus, and if everyone were as sweet as you, I wouldn't have a problem."

"Yes, well, if everyone were as sweet as me, then I would have a problem." He grinned at her and winked.

"So, I should warn you that you're the last contender."

"Does that mean I win by default?"

"Win... How do you feel about this, Remus, all joking aside."

Remus sighed. "Honestly, I think it's awful. I think this situation is stealing something precious from you, and although it is better than being bound to the terms of that law, it's still wrong to force you to compromise your dreams and independence like this. You deserve more."

"Thank you, Remus. But how would you feel about being married to me? I don't want you to marry me just to save me. I'm not worth -"

"You most certainly are worth it! Don't you dare think otherwise. Hermione, I don't know how I would feel about being your husband. I have a hard time separating you, the woman beside me, from the fourteen-year-old witch who impressed me as a student. I'm not the type of man who's eager to bed a student, and I still haven't quite reconciled myself to you as a non-student..." He paused for a moment.

"I do know that I would feel guilty. My..." he paused, as if changing gears, "I'm almost twenty years your senior, and I'm a werewolf. Those are two pretty serious marks

against me at this point. You deserve to be with someone closer to your own age, who can discover the world with you through fresh eyes. I don't fit that mark. I might not be a full blown cynic, but I have seen enough of life to jade me."

"If it's just the age thing, then don't even bother feeling guilty. I don't hold with ageism."

Remus laughed, then looked at her smiling.

"No, it isn't just the age thing. In the wizarding community, our age difference would soon become negligible. No, it's more that you deserve better."

"Remus, that is a pitiful argument if you are actually trying to dissuade me from choosing you."

"Oh?"

"If I chose you, then it wouldn't be just because you're the only one left. I would only choose you if I were sure that you would be at least moderately happy in a relationship with me. You deserve better than to be saddled with a young, naïve wife who isn't even out of school yet."

Remus snorted. "Young you may be, Hermione, but naïve, I think, you left behind in the battle fields. Although, I will admit that you may be naïve if you think compatibility on paper equals bliss in life."

"Of course not. I don't expect bliss. I doubt I would have achieved it even if this weren't a desperate situation."

"That sounds familiar." Remus looked thoughtful for a moment, then a frown settled on his brow. "Don't take anything Snape tells you about emotions seriously. He was goading you, plain and simple. If you could take your time then you would be assured of finding bliss. That's why this is a horrible situation for you. It robs you of that chance."

"So you don't think we could be happy together?"

Remus smiled sadly. "I think I could be very happy with you, Hermione. I just would hate to find you not happy with me."

"Remus, I... Um," Hermione was getting flustered. Remus was being so kind and gentle with her; it felt as though she were being thrown a life preserver. However, as he said, compatibility on paper didn't translate to compatibility in life. There was still that pesky physical element.

"Yes?"

"Because this would be a marriage, and such, well, kiss me?"

Remus chuckled, and then leaned in to place a gentle kiss on her lips. His kiss felt so different from George's or even Ron's kisses. His lips were so warm and soft, inviting her in, but not demanding anything. She wanted more, realizing that his kiss was more comforting than anything else she had experienced. The sadness of losing Ron was shoved to the side as she felt a gentle warmth spread through her being, leaving her feeling peaceful and rested. When his tongue politely asked for entrance, she granted the request immediately and was rewarded with an even greater warmth that tingled down her body, leaving her covered in goose flesh. Only when he withdrew a couple minutes later, did she notice that he'd been holding her close to him, caressing her back and neck in an endearing and gentlemanly way.

They both took a few seconds to breathe again and regain their composure. Hermione spoke first.

"Wow."

"Agreed." They realized they were staring at each other and shyly looked away, smiling.

"I think I might have a chance of real happiness with you, Remus."

"I know I could be happy with you, Hermione, though not everything will be as simple as a kiss."

"Oh, I know reality will rear its ugly head at some point, but that was nice enough to make up for many small problems that will no doubt arise."

"Are you choosing me?"

"I still want to think about it a little, but yes, I think so. Choosing you is definitely a fate better than death." Hermione looked at him with a smile but was concerned to see him frowning. "What's up?"

"I am a werewolf, Hermione. You could be condemning yourself to a harsh fate."

"We'll both be careful. I expect Professor Snape will teach me how to make the Wolfsbane Potion, so that won't be a concern, as I'm positive I'll be qualified to brew it. And with that we should be fine."

"It's not just your physical safety I was thinking about. I know you'll be adept at the Wolfsbane Potion. Even Severus has admitted that you're a competent brewer. No, what I'm thinking about is the harsh economic reality of my lycanthropy. I find it very difficult to acquire a job. Rarely does an employer have sympathy for my monthly absences, so I am perennially looking for work. I know you are a capable witch, so I don't doubt you have the wizarding world at your doorstep right now, but being married to me may bring with it a social stigma making it difficult for you to find employment.

"Add to that, if we decide to have children at some point, we'd have to be extra careful to make sure they avoided exposure. And no matter how careful we are, they'll feel the stigma when they come to school even if they're pure.

"Mine's a difficult path emotionally, Hermione. Think carefully before condemning yourself to that path, especially without love."

Hermione was silent for a minute after Remus' speech. She didn't know how to reassure him, or even if she could. He offered her hope in the form of life. She had almost been ready to give up.

"I know that life may be difficult, but I like you a lot, Remus, and I respect you. After that kiss, I have little doubt that I'll learn to love you. I would be hard pressed not to." She smiled at him reassuringly and was met with a tentative smile from him.

"Well, just think about it. I really don't want your life to be a burden. You are much too special." And with that, Remus got up, took her hand, pressed it delicately to his lips, and bid her adieu.

He left Hermione thinking about their encounter. She'd always liked Lupin; she had been extremely disappointed, almost heartbroken, when she thought he'd been helping Sirius back in her third year after figuring out he was a werewolf. She'd always felt slightly guilty about that whole debacle. But now, here she was on the cusp of choosing him as her husband. She didn't know what to think.

Snape

Chapter 4 of 15

Snape makes an appearance.

Disclaimer: *Not mine, never will be (and that applies to all chapters, in case I forget...).*

Chapter 3: Snape

Hermione sighed. She slowly stood up to gather together the parchments from the interviews. As she reached for the first one, she was interrupted by the figure of Snape striding in as if it were his classroom.

"Miss Granger, I have come to see you regarding your absence from my class today."

"I thought Professor Dumbledore had excused me from all my classes, sir. Is there make-up work you wish me to do?"

Snape sneered. "The headmaster sent me to ask you if your day has been productive."

She unconsciously licked her lips as she thought about the last interview's results.

"Yes, the day was very productive. I finally found the answer to Blaise's sexual preferences." She smirked as Snape raised an eyebrow at her. "And with that information, I found out just how attractive I am." She looked down and shuffled the parchments, not wanting Snape to see her glassy eyes.

Blaise had confirmed her suspicions about her "suitors'" motives. Dumbledore was not a force to be trifled with.

"Ah, so you've had quite the day for your ego, I see," Snape said with his characteristic sarcasm. "Lucky you."

Hermione sighed before looking back up. "As for the meetings being productive, well, Remus was very nice about being the remaining contender. I still have to make a decision, but I think I know what my choice is."

Snape looked at her, his face a blank mask. He then sighed, and said, "I'm curious, Miss Granger. What questions you came up with to help you make your decision."

Hermione looked at him suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because I have insatiable curiosity," he said flatly, as he looked at her arrogantly, demanding an answer.

"I'll tell you, but only if you answer the questions." She smiled at him with fake innocence. It was an opportunity she could not pass up, even if she regretted it later in class.

"I'll do no such thing."

"Well, then, your curiosity will remain unsatisfied."

Snape scowled. Hermione smiled.

"Fine. I will answer those questions I deem worthy, with your promise that any and all information I give you goes no further."

Hermione looked at him, surprised that he gave in so easily. "Of course, Professor. I wouldn't think of sharing anyone's answers, let alone yours." She took one of the parchments and sat down, indicating to Snape that he should make himself comfortable.

"Okay, first off, do you want children?"

"That is your first question?"

"Yes. Is something wrong with that?"

"No, I just thought you would cushion such a question with more mundane, less personal ones. But I forgot, you lack Slytherin subtlety, in favor of Gryffindor brashness."

Hermione's hackles were raised. "What is it with you and that stupid rivalry? I mean, yes, the other professors want their Houses to win the House and Quidditch cups, but they don't go around insulting the other Houses. It seems so childish.

"And as for cushioning the question, I am trying to determine whether the person is compatible with me, and as you pointed out, I prefer being bold rather than sly. If the person is affronted by my manner, then it's best to figure that out right away. Besides, it's a crucial question, and there's no point wasting time I haven't got."

Snape stared at her, both eyebrows raised, his lips twitching.

"I see. Next question?"

"You didn't answer the first."

"Eventually. Next question."

"Really? You're open to having kids? I... Huh."

"I have no objection to children, Miss Granger. I object to dunderheads. I am fairly confident that my children will not be dunderheads."

"Children? Plural?" Hermione was gaping again, not believing her ears. This bitter man, the Bat of the Dungeons, the Greasy Git wanted more than just an heir?

"Yes, although I would leave the decision of how many up to my wife. I do not think I'd like to have more than five, though."

"How considerate," Hermione said faintly. She looked down for the next question.

"Um, would you object to my working?"

"I would insist on it."

Hermione cocked her eyebrow at him. "Insist?"

"The reason Dumbledore has set you up with these options is so that you are relatively free, not wasting away, breeding. He seems to think you might be able to make a valuable contribution to our society, and therefore would be highly disappointed if you chose to laze about doing nothing more meaningful than dusting and producing the next generation of wizards."

"You'd insist that I work, so as not to incur Dumbledore's disappointment?"

"Yes. Next question."

Hermione harumphed, but moved on, though she wasn't satisfied.

"Do you squeeze the toothpaste from the end or the middle?"

Snape looked at her, completely thrown off guard. "What does that have to do with anything? That doesn't deserve an answer."

"The reasoning behind this question, sir, is: firstly- to see how a person reacts to unexpected, though trivial events; secondly- to gauge their sense of humor; and thirdly- to see if they are willing to share and compromise on the little things. Usually it is the little things that cause the biggest fights."

"Small events may spark the big fights, Miss Granger, but usually the underlying cause is much bigger than a misshapen tube of toothpaste."

"So you squeeze from the end, then?"

"Mm." Snape's mouth was twitching again, almost as if he wanted to laugh.

She took that for assent. "That's good. Less waste that way. And that brings me to the next question, which is about personal hygiene."

"I will not answer."

"But it's important."

"How?"

"Smell and touch are two extremely sensitive senses. If you don't like how a person smells or feels, then it will be a constant irritant."

"Then you should ask to smell and touch the person, instead of asking about his hygiene."

"Well, I'd agree about the smelling bit, but if a person has oily skin, that can be easily washed off, leaving little to complain about. Besides health is a factor as well. I would hate to find bugs in the bed."

"So you would want to share a bed with your husband?"

"What? Um, yes, probably. Unless he snores or has other disgusting habits."

"Snoring is usually not a matter of habit."

"You know what I meant."

"Mm." Snape looked thoughtful, but he gave no clue as to what his thoughts were.

"Okay, well then, would you have a mistress?"

Snape looked up sharply, obviously taken by surprise. "What kind of question is that?"

"This is a more or less forced marriage. Love probably won't factor in, and, well, if love isn't there, then fulfilling each other's needs adequately would probably be fairly difficult. Having lovers on the side might make life easier." She adopted an innocent tone trying to coax a little truth out of him.

"I would not share my wife."

"But would you want your wife to share *you*?"

Snape looked like there was a bad smell in the room as he wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Fidelity is important."

"Forgive me, Professor, but history has shown that what men consider fidelity is often extremely hypocritical. I would want to know up front whether the person in question held with such views."

"I see. But how is that relevant? If a man holds with such views, he is not likely to admit it to his prospective bride. Only a fool would destroy trust before it has been earned."

"So what is your answer?"

"Do you think me a fool, Miss Granger?"

"No."

"Well, then, that is your answer."

XXX

Three hours and thirty questions later found Hermione losing patience with her Potions professor.

"How can you call this test a failure? You said you'd answer those questions you 'deem worthy,' and you've answered nearly every one. If the questions are worthy, how can the test not be?"

"You will not raise your voice to me, Miss Granger, or do I need to remind you that I am still your professor?"

Hermione glared at Snape, but managed to master herself. "Well then, Professor, sir, will you please educate me on this point and answer my question?"

"I'm disappointed in you, Miss Granger, if you cannot answer such a simple question. But you've pleased me by confirming my suspicions that you are not truly intelligent, just adept at memorizing. Too bad you can't learn how to live life from a book, eh, Miss Granger?"

Hermione's eyes stung, but she refused to let Snape see his words affect her. "If you've finished insulting me in such an adolescent manner, I believe I need to be going, unless you are willing to grace me with your superior knowledge of how to live a full and happy life. That or tell me why you think this test is a failure."

Snape's eyes narrowed at her tone and he stood up to loom menacingly over her. "The test is a failure because, although it might tell you whether you can live with the person in relative harmony, it does not tell you whether you will get what you really want from the relationship. I suspect that lack is due to your inability to figure out what it is you actually want from a man."

"Do you really think me a fool, Professor? I know what I want, and I compiled that information and wrote the test accordingly. I didn't write it based on a few inane quizzes in some trashy magazine!"

"Oh, and what do you want from a relationship?"

"I'm disappointed in you, Professor. If you can't figure out the answer to that simple question when all the information has been provided, then you aren't as clever as you are said to be. I'm shocked."

She nearly fainted when the room rang with his deep laugh. When he stopped laughing, he advanced on her slowly, as if he was stalking her. "Although I provided you with your answer, I believe I can answer your question without your assistance," he purred.

"You desire a man who will be honest with you and be able to withstand your blunt personality without cringing. You want him to challenge you, *stimulate* you, while providing you with an emotional cushion to fall back on. You need a strong man, one who will be nice to you when life throws you down, as it will, and help you get back on your feet.

"You also need a man who will need you in return. Someone who will value the input that you will be always providing, whether asked for or not. You need a man who has enough of a sense of humor to be able to laugh at himself and admit when he's wrong, and make sure you see the humor in your own mistakes."

He was circling her like a vulture, ever closer, and his physical presence, combined with his voice, was making her shiver. He stopped and stood close behind her, and as he spoke in barely a whisper, his breath brushed her ear, making it tingle.

"Your test is a failure, Miss Granger, because I fit most of that description to a tee, and yet I expect that I did not meet with your approval based on the test." He stepped in front of her, and his voice reverted back to his normal sneer. "You failed to take your own superficial nature into consideration." And with that, he turned to leave.

Hermione's shaky voice stopped him before he reached the door when she proclaimed, "Good gods, you're right. You scored even higher than Remus."

Snape turned and looked at Hermione through shuttered eyes.

"Do not mock me, Miss Granger," he said threateningly.

"I'm not, Professor. The test results clearly show you as the most compatible man for me without taking the final test into consideration. I must have forgotten a personality clause somewhere in there. I'll have to look it over tonight and find out where I went wrong." Her eyes scanned the test for clues to her mistake, but kept flicking back to the warm, pale gold of Snape's name, which almost blended into the creamy yellow parchment.

Hermione was so disconcerted by the thought of her test being a failure, that she didn't notice Snape staring at her in consternation until he spoke.

"Final test? I was under the impression that that was the extent of your testing."

"Oh, those who passed the 'written test,' as I've taken to calling it, were subjected to a physical examination."

She smirked at the look of disgusted confusion that overtook his features. It was an unusual sight.

"The exam consists of a kiss," she explained, then laughed as Snape took an involuntary step back with a worried expression on his face, as if the mere thought would give him nightmares.

"I will not kiss you," he stated flatly.

She snorted. "Don't worry, sir. The final test is reserved for only the serious contenders. Since I asked you the questions simply to satisfy your curiosity, and made you answer to satisfy my own, I would not presume to take advantage of your *good nature* and impose a kiss upon you."

Snape scowled. Hermione smiled.

"Well, sir, if that's all you wanted to see me about, then I really should be going. I need to talk to Dumbledore and clear up a few details before I ask Remus if he's really willing to be my husband." Hermione gathered up her parchments and walked out the door with nary a backward glance, leaving Snape standing in an empty classroom with a confused scowl on his face.

Questions and Revelations

Chapter 5 of 15

Hermione tries to sort out all the information she gathered during the interviews, but does she have all the information necessary?

Disclaimer: As if!

Chapter 4: Questions and Revelations

When Hermione arrived at the Great Hall after putting her papers away, she found dinner was already well under way. She made her way over to where Harry and Ginny sat.

"Hey Hermione, how're the interviews going?" Ginny asked as Harry acknowledged her between large bites of food.

"Relatively well." She didn't really want to talk about it, so she tried to change the subject. "What's with him?" she asked, indicating Harry's fervor with the food.

Ginny blushed. "Oh, um, he worked really hard at practice today."

Hermione smirked, but decided not to push the subject, though it would have been fun to see if Ginny's face could match her hair. Instead, she politely allowed Ginny to turn the topic back onto her problem.

"So, did you find a soul mate in George?" Ginny teased good-naturedly.

"Yes, but we decided marriage might hurt our relationship as siblings." She smiled and rolled her eyes at Ginny. "Seriously, though, we decided it's probably better for all concerned if we maintain a more fraternal relationship. It was very sweet of him to be willing to 'save' me like that, though. I hope your mum won't go ballistic that I rejected her son."

Ginny laughed. "No, or at least if she does, we'll all set her right on that count." She giggled a little more, imagining her mum's reaction, but then grew somber.

"So *did* you find anyone suitable?"

"Um, yeah. Remus was really quite acceptable. I have to think it over, of course, seeing as his lycanthropy will make life difficult, but I think we have a really good shot at being happy together." Hermione smiled dreamily as she remembered their kiss.

Harry decided that was a good time to join the conversation, having finished inhaling his food. "So, since you're alive and well, I assume Snape didn't show."

"Funny you should ask. He did show up. He was even almost civil. And the most astonishing part is that he allowed me to question him, but only to satisfy his curiosity, you know." She scowled as she thought about the test results. Could it be that test was flawed, or was Snape perhaps playing with her, trying to bring her down another notch?

"The really funny thing," she added in a voice devoid of humor, "was that he scored higher than Remus did for compatibility."

Ginny started choking on her pumpkin juice, and Harry patted her on the back, that shrewd look back in place.

"I'm not really surprised," he said after Ginny started breathing again.

Hermione nearly sprayed her friends with her juice. "You aren't?"

"No. You're both smart, you both are really fastidious, and you're both perfectionists." Harry shrugged. "Probably if I knew more about him I could come up with more similarities."

Hermione looked slightly ill, but eyed Harry with a calculating expression.

"So are you saying I should pursue a man whom I don't like, and who hasn't shown me an ounce of kindness because we are vaguely similar and he had good test scores?"

"Hell no! I'm just saying I'm not surprised he scored high. No, I think Remus is a much... nicer choice for you."

"I notice you didn't say 'better.'"

Harry looked uncomfortable. "That's not for me to judge."

Hermione pursed her lips and continued looking at Harry sharply. Since when was he accepting of Snape?

"What do you know, Harry? What aren't you telling me? Why this sudden shift in perspective?"

"I'm a married man now," Harry said hopefully. "I was bound to mature at some point?" Seeing her scowl deepen, he sighed and dropped the pretense.

"Look, I can't tell you anything except that I learned a little more about the man after the battle, and it made him a little more acceptable in my mind. He's still a bastard, but now I know there's more to him than just his sadistic tendencies."

Hermione looked at Harry a moment more before shrugging, accepting defeat. "Well, after the interview with him, I'd have to agree, but I still don't like him much."

"Who does?" Ginny added. She then grinned and asked, "So what tidbits of information did you gather on The Git?"

Hermione laughed at her friend. "Do you really think he would answer any question without having me sign an oath of secrecy?" she exaggerated. "That man is nothing if not paranoid!"

"I think that's pretty reasonable though, considering his role in the war, don't you?" Harry defended.

"Oh, I know he had good reason for it, and I suppose it's a hard habit to break. But I swear he thinks everyone is out to get him. I think he's convinced that he's seen as reprehensible and so that's how he acts. He hides behind his greasy hair and snarls if anyone gets too close for fear of them forming any sort of bond. You have to be able to cut ties quickly in his business. He's spent so much time and energy building up this image, but now that it's not needed, he's still stuck in the same frame of mind. Merlin forbid he actually learn how to change!"

Harry and Ginny had both paled as Hermione continued with her diatribe and stared at something three feet above her head. Looking around slowly, she saw the very angry figure of Professor Snape. He glared down and pierced her with his angry eyes. She tensed her shoulders reflexively, waiting for the ax to fall, but he just curled his lip in disdain and walked away.

Hermione, now also quite pale, turned back to face her friends. They all looked at each other, silently wondering why he hadn't lashed out.

XXX

As she made her way to the headmaster's office after dinner, Hermione tried to force her mind away from Snape. She needed to think about how her choice was going to affect Lupin's life. She didn't want to make his life harder than it already was, but at the same time, if she was honest with herself, what other choice did she have? Life otherwise looked too bleak.

She was pretty sure he would bear her presence amicably enough, even if she couldn't get over the feeling that he hadn't been completely honest with her after the official interview. She didn't know why she suspected him of not telling her the whole truth, but she couldn't shake the feeling. If he was lying, it was probably just to be nice, but it really didn't sit well. Would he gloss over the truth in every situation just to make her more comfortable?

He had been decidedly honest about his lycanthropy, though, which was a good sign. At least he would probably be honest when it really mattered.

Her mind drifted back to Snape. He hadn't been kind or comforting, but there was no denying he was honest. If he had actually been a contender, then... What? Hermione's mind flitted through thoughts and emotions associated with Snape - not many were pleasant.

She respected him for his work with the Order, but disliked him for his personality - or was that persona? He challenged her as a student in a way few teachers did, but he used intimidation as his main tool; she found that despicable. He was intelligent but fierce. She had assumed he was literally repulsive because he was unhappy, but what if that were his actual personality? She knew better than to expect a forty-year-old man to change.

But no matter where her thoughts drifted, they all arrived back at the key issue: whether or not he would suit her better than Remus, not only was he not a willing

contender, but he didn't even like her. He made that clear time and time again. Why was she wasting her time and energy thinking about him when he wasn't even a realistic option?

She forcefully shoved him to the back of her mind and confined him there to pace restlessly, promptly ignoring any further pleas for attention. That done, she realized that she had been pacing in front of the stone gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office. It was eyeing her with a smirk that made her wonder whether she had been muttering to herself or not. She sighed, said, "string mints," and stepped onto the moving staircase.

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"Are you sure about this, child?" Dumbledore asked her solemnly.

"As sure as I think I'll ever be." She sighed. "It's not like I have a better option available. Remus is kind, and he'll treat me with respect. He said he'd probably be happy with me, and I expect I will be happy with him." She was somewhat surprised that Dumbledore was reluctant about her choice. She figured he had personally selected all of the men she had interviewed.

"Besides," she continued, "other than Professor Snape, no one else even came close to passing Remus for compatibility on my test. I know we're not soul mates or anything, but at least we're friends."

"Why aren't you considering Professor Snape, then?"

Hermione wanted to believe Dumbledore was joking, but his tone and face were both serious. "Well, besides the fact that I don't really like him, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't like me, he isn't a real option. He made it clear that he took the test out of curiosity and was not interested otherwise."

"Are you sure about that, Hermione? Severus is not always the most forthright of men."

She snickered at the understatement. "Based on all our conversations, I can't come to any other conclusion, sir." She paused to go through all of their interactions over the past twenty-four hours and nodded her head. "Do you, um... has he told you otherwise, sir?"

"No." Dumbledore shook his head slowly, looking at his steepled fingers. "I just want to make sure you've thought every option through. A lifetime commitment to a werewolf, even one as kind and honorable as Remus, is a recipe for a hard life, Hermione." He sighed. "But if you're sure about this, then let us proceed. I suppose we should start planning the wedding now." He observed her over his half-moon glasses as if looking for ideas.

"I suppose so, but I should probably tell Remus that I've made up my mind, sir."

"Yes, that would probably be the best course of action." Dumbledore looked out the window to view the bright moonlit sky. "I suppose we should plan for the wedding to take place on Sunday? Everything could be ready by then."

Hermione nodded silently in agreement lost in her own thoughts. She made her way to the door slowly, reexamining everything, yet again.

"Is there anything else you wish to discuss right now, child?" Dumbledore cut through her thoughts.

Before she could stop herself or ask herself why, she turned around and asked, "Does Professor Snape laugh often?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows in surprise, and his beard twitched. "No, I can't say that he does. I do know that he has a wonderful sense of humor, though. I believe it's one of the few things that has kept him sane all these years." Dumbledore looked at her curiously, silently asking why she asked.

"Right, well, I don't know why I asked, sir, but I do know that it's a shame he doesn't laugh or at least smile more often. He might be more likable if he did." She cringed inwardly at what she had said, and decided it was best to say goodnight before she could embarrass herself further.

What had come over her? Why had she asked about Professor Snape's laughing habits? He had made it abundantly clear that he did not enjoy her company and the thought of marrying her was his "worst nightmare." But then, why had he taken the time to answer her questions, even if he was just trying to satisfy his curiosity? Why was he curious about her thought process at all?

Why was she even thinking about Snape? She had chosen Lupin, and Snape wasn't even an option, end of discussion.

She needed to talk to Remus, tell him of her choice and make their engagement official. She walked briskly toward his quarters, trying to stifle thoughts of Snape.

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Hermione slowed to a stop when she realized she was lost. She had been trying so hard to divert her thoughts from Snape that she hadn't paid attention to where she was going and found herself in a foreign corridor.

She looked around for any signs of familiarity. She found it odd that through seven years of attendance, two of which had prefect patrols and another year almost done with Head Girl duties, that she could still find herself completely lost. Worse still, there weren't any portraits to ask for directions.

Her ears were filled with her heartbeat as she stood still for a moment, trying to catch her breath from her quick pace. She was surprised her heart was knocking so insistently in her head, then realized that the sound she was hearing was more of knuckles on wood sound, rather than pulse in ears.

She quieted herself and listened. In the distance she could hear a low murmur of voices, somewhere in the corridor ahead. She started following the murmurs, hoping that she wasn't following the echoes that the stone corridor produced. After a few steps she noticed that the sound of her footsteps was blocking her ability to hear the faint voices, so she quickly cast a Cushioning Charm on her shoes.

She hurried toward the voices when she distinguished them again, thankful that they appeared to be stationary. She was about to round a corner when one voice stopped her cold.

"You know damn well that she's too good for you!"

It was Snape's voice! She peeked around the corner, but the hall was empty except for a sliver of light slicing through it. The owners of the voices were apparently behind a slightly open door.

She crept forward, wanting to know whom Snape was talking to before making her presence known. She silently wedged her way behind a giggling statue of Wendelin the Weird, which was situated beside the open door. Snape's voice rang out again.

"Of course not! Why would she choose me? But at least I would be able to provide for her and would be far less likely to kill her."

"Physically, maybe," the other voice stated, then lowered to an inaudible growl. She strained to hear, not quite believing what she was hearing.

"...offer her friendship and kindness, which is more than you'd ever do for her."

It was Lupin. Snape was talking to Lupin! But surely they weren't talking about her. The thought of Snape being protective of her was ludicrous.

"Are you planning on encouraging her love?" Snape's voice was quiet, but full of menace.

"Why wouldn't I? She's going to be my wife, after all. I'm hardly going to encourage her to love another."

Hermione froze. They *were* talking about her. Why was Snape talking to Lupin about her? Snape was talking again, but so softly she could only catch his last words: "love her back?"

Lupin growled at Snape. "I did try to discourage her, you know. I've made it very clear that life with me won't be easy."

Snape responded to that in a whispering hiss that was difficult to make out. "Yes... did... left out... another, didn't you? ... thought it inconsequential."

Lupin's answer was a threatening growl. "Hermione doesn't ever need to know, and if you let it slip, like you did about my affliction, your life will be forfeit, Snape."

"I would not dream of hurting her like that, Lupin, but she is a smart girl, and a very curious one at that. She will figure it out eventually, and when she does she will never forgive you for it."

Silence followed Snape's statement. Hermione edged closer, straining to hear what was going on, so was startled when Lupin said clearly, "You lecherous bastard! You *want* her, don't you?" A mocking sneer was evident in Lupin's voice "Why didn't I see it before?"

"Whether or not I do is immaterial as it is you she has chosen. I am here to make sure you honor the girl as she deserves. I want your word that you will not hurt her in any way."

"You don't just want her, you love her! Why haven't you told her? Why are you leaving her to me? If I loved her, there's no way I'd let a chance like this go by!"

"Yes, well, as you so kindly pointed out, I am not nice, so I am bound to hurt her. She does not like me; she does like you. If I did love her, I would hardly force her hand in such a manner. It is her choice, and I will abide by it. She deserves that much respect."

Hermione was so stunned at Snape's sentiment that she didn't hear Lupin's response. All she could hear was the blood rushing to her head. Snape loved her? There had to be another explanation. A sudden outburst from Snape drew her attention back to the conversation.

"I will not have you play games with her mind or heart, Lupin!" His voice then turned into a soft hiss, and she couldn't parse what he was saying.

"Coward!" cried Lupin, eliciting another hiss from Snape.

"You are nothing but a ruddy coward! You leave her to be my responsibility because you're too scared of rejection, and then you have the gall to threaten me if I don't meet YOUR expectations of what a good husband is? I call that cowardice, Snivellus. You're right. You don't deserve her."

"Just make sure you do," Snape spat, then she heard the rustle of his robes. She hurriedly concealed herself just as Snape strode out of the room, robes billowing behind his sour countenance.

Lupin slammed the door, making Hermione jump, and silencing Wendelin. She leaned against the wall trying to digest what she had just overheard.

Snape loved her! That would explain a lot of things. But if he did, why had he been such an arse to her? Why had he done his best to make sure she didn't know? Was it fear of rejection, or was Snape playing one of his Slytherin games, trying to be as subtle as possible? She felt that Lupin was right: if Snape did love her, why wasn't he making the most out of this miserable moment?

She decided she really needed to think things through a little more before talking to Lupin. She got to her feet and slowly walked in the direction she came from, hoping to make it to back to her room that night.

Harry's Tale

Chapter 6 of 15

Harry tells Hermione what he knows, mostly.

Disclaimer: I wish.

Chapter 5: Harry's Tale

When she finally found her way back to the portrait of the Fat Lady, she wearily gave the password, *tbotoo*, and climbed into the common room. Harry and Ginny were just about to retire to their suite for the night, but one look at Hermione and they changed course.

"What's wrong, Hermione?" Harry asked. "You look like you've just failed a NEWT."

Hermione started to scowl, but then realized Harry knew something about Snape. Maybe this was it.

"Harry, I need to talk to you. Do you have a minute?"

Harry looked at Ginny who nodded, eyes alight with curiosity. "Sure. What's up?"

Hermione looked around. "Let's go somewhere more private," she said, and pulled her friends into her room. Once the door was closed she told them everything, starting with her and Snape's tete-a-tete the evening before in Dumbledore's office, finishing with Snape telling Lupin off.

Ginny was dumbfounded at the revelation. Although he was trying to look astonished, Hermione could tell that Harry wasn't at all surprised.

"Harry, I need to know everything that made you change your mind about Snape."

Harry looked at her for a moment before letting out a breath and nodding.

"It all started when Rookwood threw that curse at you after Voldemort fell. Everyone was really scared that you were going to die. Ron was completely devastated as he carried you back to the castle. The way he looked, well, we thought you were already dead.

"Anyway, I was looking for you at the time," Harry said, turning to Ginny. "I had finished looking in the fields, so I hoped to find you in the hospital wing. I had to stop when I rounded the corner to the hospital's entrance because Ron and Snape were blocking the door having an intense row. They both were so angry that neither noticed I was standing there. Ron was yelling at Snape..."

"Just tell me where he is, Snape!"

"Mr. Weasley, I am not going to send you off headlong into a suicide mission! How would that help matters?"

"It'd help me get revenge."

"And I ask again, how will that help anything? Do you really think she would want you to go get yourself killed?"

"Thanks to him we won't find out, now will we? She's going to die, and you're just going to let him escape! He needs to die now!"

Ron turned to leave, but Snape grabbed his arm.

"Weasley, they haven't given up on her yet, and neither should you. What if she doesn't die? What if she makes it through, and then you're not there because of some halfcocked revenge scheme? She... You would willingly cause her to suffer as you are right now?"

Ron stiffened in his grasp.

"What makes you so sure I won't be successful?"

"I know his mindset, Weasley. Right now he is desperate. He doesn't care about living anymore just as long as he is free. He wants to take out as many people as he can before he goes. He is insane, and going after him by yourself is stupid. Wait until--"

"There's no time to wait! Even you admitted he'll probably escape notice and not face consequences. Let me after him so we don't lose the trail."

"Weasley... Ronald, he has an innate ruthlessness which makes him a much stronger wizard than you. You are too noble to kill him before he strikes you down. Do not rush headlong into death because you feel like you can't live without her. Stay here where she needs you, and let me kill the bastard."

"This is my fight, Snape. You've already done your bit. I'm not letting you take my revenge."

"It is not your revenge to take yet, Weasley! She is not dead, and don't you even..."

Snape cut off, like he would regret his words. He scowled in thought, then tried again to convince Ron of his duty.

"Your job now is to be a man and sit by her bedside until she recovers. If you want to do more than that, then help me create potions that may save her. Don't throw away the gift of her love, Weasley."

Ron stopped at that and looked Snape in the eyes.

"I wouldn't be able to face her love if I don't do this, sir. You owe me. Tell me where he is, so I can kill him and be back before she wakes."

"It seems you do not understand the concept of a life debt, Mr. Weasley. I would hardly be repaying you by sending you to your death."

The stare Ron gave him was so stony, I think even Snape was impressed.

"Consider the information to be saving me from an undignified life, Professor. I need to avenge her."

Snape looked at him with a calculating stare, as if sizing him up. Clearly not happy with what he saw, he sighed and divulged Rookwood's location.

"There's a small hut on the northernmost rock of the Seven Stones, off Cape Cornwall. That is where he is most likely hiding. It is heavily warded, and you will need to land by boat. He'll be able to see you from about 50 meters off... Can you not see it is a suicide mission, Ronald? Just let him rot there in his private hell."

Ron just looked at him, then said, "If I don't come back... Will you please look out for her, sir?"

Snape closed his eyes and nodded. When Ron turned to leave Snape's shoulders sank in failure.

"Ron left in a big hurry, and I went after him. First, I tried to convince him that Snape was right, that it was suicide, but he just brushed me off. Then, I tried to tag along, so that he at least wouldn't be facing Rookwood alone. He wouldn't let me because of Ginny. He knew he was going to die and refused to let me go down with him. He finally had to stun me to get me off his tail."

"I came to a little later and realized that I never had found you, love." He paused, looking at Ginny with an apologetic smile. She waved off his guilt, so he turned back to Hermione. "When I arrived at the hospital wing I saw Snape sitting at your bedside looking at you. The pain in his face was... It was horrible."

Harry stopped speaking as Hermione sniffled and wiped away her tears with her sleeve.

"Stupid prat," she said softly, then began to cry.

Ginny went and wrapped her arms around Hermione, rocking her soothingly, while Harry looked on with sympathy. After a little bit, Hermione composed herself and looked at Harry accusingly.

"All you told me about Ron's death before was that he died dueling Rookwood. You didn't tell me that he went and offed himself! Did Snape swear you to secrecy, or were you trying to protect me, Harry?"

Harry let out a big sigh. "No, Snape couldn't care less about me witnessing that fight. I didn't tell you because you were so..." He stopped, trying to find the words. "Hermione, you've been the rock for us. Seeing you so fragile brought out the protective prat in me. I thought it would be better for you to find out later. I thought you might shatter with one more blow."

Hermione looked at him and nodded in understanding. She still felt brittle, but she was much stronger now than she had been at first. She motioned for Harry to continue his tale.

"So anyway, I saw Snape sitting there by your bed, but then I saw you. Gin. You looked peaceful enough, so I found Madam Pomfrey and got all the details on your condition. When I found out you were simply exhausted, I think I nearly collapsed with relief. All I wanted was to be by your side when you woke up.

"When I started falling asleep Madam Pomfrey came over and told me my vigil was silly, seeing as you wouldn't be waking up for at least a week. I must have looked stricken, because she then reassured me that it takes longer to recover from magical exhaustion.

"I was tired, so I decided to take her advice. On my way out I noticed that Snape was still there sitting by you, and now he was holding your hand. He didn't even notice when I sat down on the other side of you until I asked how you were.

"He jumped, and when he looked at me, his expression was so hollow it scared me. He didn't respond except to shrug. At that point Madam Pomfrey came over and shooed me off for the night.

"When I went to the hospital the next day to look after the two of you, Professor Dumbledore met me on the way and told me Ron was missing. He had last been seen in Penzance.

"I asked after you, and Dumbledore just looked grave and shook his head and sighed. I went in to check on you and noticed Snape wasn't there anymore. After making sure you were still sleeping peacefully, I found Madam Pomfrey again to get filled in on your condition," said Harry, as he looked from his wife to his friend.

"She said that you were in dire straits. She had sent Professor Snape off to brew a batch of Phoenix Fire. She said it was your last hope.

"I couldn't stand just sitting there, waiting. You know me; I need to be doing *something*, so I headed down to the dungeons to see if I could help.

"I stuck my head in his office and asked, 'Professor Snape, is there anything I can do to help? Madam Pomfrey told me you're brewing Phoenix Fire for Hermione.'"

He was still for a moment, then nodded and pointed to a pile of ingredients on the table. "Slice the hemlock lengthwise, paper thin, and immediately put a stasis charm on it. Then grind the pile of lacewing to a fine powder."

"He left it at that. No snide remarks, no patronizing, no sneering. It was weird. After about an hour, I was finishing up, and he gave me a rose crystal phial and asked me to collect two tears from Fawkes, and ask for a tail feather.

On my way out, he added, "Ask nicely, Potter. Her life may depend on good will alone."

"Fawkes gave me the tears and feather almost before I asked, as if he was expecting it. Dumbledore probably warned him. Anyway, Snape and I continued working on the potion. He didn't talk to me. He certainly didn't offer any comfort, but he let me be there doing something, instead of sitting in the hospital wing fretting over the two of you.

"It took a week, but finally it was done. We took it up to Madam Pomfrey who gave it to you and told us not to expect results for at least a few hours.

"I don't know why I followed Snape back to the dungeons to wait. But I did, and he let me. He closed the office door behind me, told me to sit, then conjured up two glasses and offered me a drink. I accepted, just to be polite. After two shots he started talking.

"Potter, do you know why this potion is a last resort?" he asked wearily, as if it didn't really matter anyway.

"No sir, but does it have something to do with the hemlock?"

He looked at me as if surprised. "Yes. The phoenix is a symbol of the eternal cycle of life, Potter. Hemlock produces death, which is an essential part of the cycle. 'The potion is used sparingly because it can go either way. It could yield a miraculous recovery in Miss Granger, or it could kill her. Only time will tell.'"

"He looked at me with pity, and, well... Everything that had happened over the past week, from the killing fields to Ron's suicide mission... I just snapped when Snape, of all people, pitied me.

"I yelled at him and threw a few things around, but he just sat there and let me continue. He didn't even move, except to shield himself from the occasional shard. Finally, when I had worn myself out, he looked at me and ordered me to sit."

Harry adopted his best Snape impersonation and quoted from memory: "The only reason I have not protested your abysmal behavior, Potter, is because last week you released me from a bitter servitude. We are now even on that count. However, I feel... compelled... to offer you an apology for other circumstances. I am responsible for very possibly condemning both your friends to death. Your friend, Weasley, is missing because of information I gave him."

Harry dropped the act, along with his shoulders, as he continued. "He sucked in a breath as if expecting me to explode again, but I just nodded.

"He looked at me and blinked. He then released his breath and poured me another drink.

"If Miss Granger dies, you need not forgive me. I will understand."

"Sir," I told him, 'you have done your best to help both of them. If Hermione dies, the fault lies solely with Rookwood.' He just looked at me again as if reassessing me and refilled our glasses yet again.

"We sat there drinking in silence for a couple of hours, then Dumbledore came in, and I stood up. I think Snape was too drunk to stand up, though he did sit straighter. As I was standing, I caught a look of dread on Snape's face.

"Dumbledore did look grim. He told us first about Ron, how his body had been found on a beach somewhere out west, and that Rookwood's body was recovered outside of Cornwall. It was strange that although the news hurt, I just felt numb. I guess it was because I had already given up on Ron surviving. Ron had already given up.

"Then Dumbledore smiled thinly and told us that you were recovering. That made me collapse back into the chair and close my eyes in relief. When I looked around again I saw Snape across the desk from me, his head in his hands, shaking slightly. I'm not sure, but I think he might have been crying.

"I turned to thank Dumbledore, but he had left already. By the time I looked back at Snape, he was sitting up straight with that sneer back in place. I thought that might be a good time to leave, but Snape stopped me.

"Mr. Potter, I do not know, nor do I wish to know, what you think of me based upon my behavior over the last week. I ask that you keep any conclusions you have drawn to yourself."

"I stared at him. He was actually asking me to not say anything. Not demanding. I got the feeling that by killing Voldemort, all bets were off. Snape was being almost decent to me and without any threat from Dumbledore.

"I agreed, of course, and got up to go. When I looked back, he was staring into the fireplace with a melancholy expression on his face."

Harry finished his story and looked at Hermione expectantly. She was nearly breathless with shock and just sat there in a daze.

"Do you think he loves me?" Hermione finally asked, not sure she wanted to believe the story.

"I promised him I wouldn't discuss my conclusions," Harry said with a smirk.

"Of course he loves you!" Ginny exclaimed. "Oh my god, that is one of the most romantic things I have ever heard... Loving you from afar, trying to stop Ron from killing himself to keep you from pain, then calling a truce with his enemy to help make you better? Ah!" Ginny cried, feigning a swoon onto the bed. Both Harry and Hermione laughed.

"Yes, well, we don't know whether it was Ron or me he was doing everything for, though." Hermione said.

"What do you mean?" Ginny looked at Hermione as if she were crazy. "I think both your stories confirm that he's in love with you."

"Maybe he was in love with Ron, not me. He's 'looking out for me' because his love asked him to," she offered, completely deadpan.

She couldn't keep from laughing as a look of puzzlement, and then disgust slowly overtook Ginny's face.

As her giggles subsided, Hermione let out a sigh. "Oh, Ginny, it's really rather sad. It would be terribly romantic if I loved him back, but I don't even like him. He's mean, sarcastic, cruel and judgmental. I won't call him cold hearted anymore, but he sure gives a good impression of it.

"If it turned out that Snape's in love with me, and I chose him it would almost certainly end badly. He'd be in love with me, and there I would be, wondering if I'd ever be able to learn to love him. If I never returned his feelings, it would cut him and he'd grow bitter. Okay, even more bitter. He'd hate and curse me for ever imposing myself on him.

"As it stands, I think I'd be better off with Lupin. He might not love me, or even be capable of loving me, but he is my friend. I'll be going into the relationship knowing that, so I won't be disappointed."

Harry and Ginny both looked dumbly at Hermione before Ginny slowly said, "Are you sure you couldn't learn to love Snape? And are you sure *you* wouldn't become bitterly disappointed in a marriage of convenience with Lupin? If he never learns to love you..."

Hermione frowned. "I don't know. I haven't told Remus yet of my decision, and what with all this new information, I think I need to think it out a bit more."

Harry and Ginny exchanged worried looks.

"Well," Harry said, "If you want to talk about it some more, you know we're here for you, right? And remember, you have until Friday to make your decision. No need to rush it."

Hermione laughed. "It seems ironic for you to tell me to be cautious, Harry. Don't worry, I'm not going to rush into anything."

And with that, she said goodnight, and sent them on their way.

XXX

Hermione tried to sleep after Harry and Ginny left that night, but her mind kept its furious pace going long after she extinguished the lights.

Did Snape love her? Was it possible that everything he had said to her over the past few years, all the names he had called her, and all the harsh criticisms he had offered, were given from love?

She snorted. If anything, if he did love her, then his behavior was certainly well modified to prevent anyone, including her, from figuring out his feelings.

There had to be another explanation for his behavior. It was silly to think that he might have loved Ron, but maybe that life debt had influenced him. After all, he never confirmed that he loved her. He had snaked through that conversation admitting nothing beyond a grudging respect for her.

Even though he had tried his best to keep Ron from going on that foolish mission, he probably blamed himself for Ron's death. That would add potency to any promise made to Ron. Snape's heart might be a craggy rock, but he did have a sense of honour.

That made sense to Hermione. Snape trying to protect her because he loved her was too improbable, whereas Snape protecting her because of an overzealous sense of honour borne from a life debt made perfect sense. He hated Harry, and yet he had saved him several times for the same reason. That was only logical.

With those thoughts supposedly resolved, Hermione finally drifted off into a restless sleep

AN: *So, yeah, the angst-fest has started. You have been warned.*

Realization

Chapter 7 of 15

Hermione investigates the possibilities.

Disclaimer: Yeah, right.

AN: *Thanks to my betas. Any mistakes you see are mine and mine alone.*

Chapter 6: Rationalization

She stood at the altar in her white dress, holding the bouquet with steady hands. Everyone was watching, and she felt good knowing that she looked good. Her hair had been twisted up into an elegant bun, exposing her slim neck, save for a few tendrils that tickled her in the breeze.

In the background she could hear the uncomfortable rustlings of the witnesses. There were so many of them. She knew most of the people in the chapel were more than a little shocked to see her walk up the aisle and she wondered how they would treat her when she returned to her classes. She also wondered how Remus would treat her as his *wife*. Not liking where her thoughts were headed, she gave all her attention to the elderly man before her to take her mind off the doubts creeping in.

"And do you, Hermione, take this man to be your husband and life mate, forever bound with honest hearts to one another until death do you part?" Dumbledore smiled kindly at her, the twinkle in his eye shining of its own accord.

"I do."

"Remus, you may eat your bride."

Hermione turned to see the man she married had been replaced by a snarling wolf with glowing yellow eyes. He advanced slowly, a growl coming from deep within his chest. She realized his growls were forming words.

"I did try to warn you, love. You asked for this." He then crouched and lunged at her heart.

She woke up screaming, covered in sweat.

XXX

Thursday

After splashing her face with cold water, she looked out the window. She could see the beginnings of dawn, which meant that she had only been asleep for a couple of hours. She briefly thought of going back to bed, then looked at her twisted sheets, and the damp patch where her body had been, and shivered, turning back to the peaceful view outside.

That nightmare gave her pause. She knew that living with a werewolf was dangerous; they would have to be constantly vigilant about her safety. The dream seemed to be telling her to be wary of more than just the physical threat, however. She had never given much stock in the use of dreams in divination, but she did believe they could offer insight and guidance in one's life. The fact that Lupin the Werewolf went for her heart, not her exposed throat, seemed very significant. She just didn't understand why.

Her mind was reeling in an unfocused way, keeping her off balance. She swayed as she tried to organize her thoughts, to confine them to her current problem. Eventually her mind quieted down as it kept returning to the center thought, like a whirlpool draining the confusion. *Did Snape love her?*

Why was she so concerned about his feelings for her? Wasn't Lupin a better choice in almost every way than the caustic Potions master? What kind of life would she have if she chose Snape?

If he loved her then it might be all right at first. She couldn't imagine him being romantic in any sense. Bringing her flowers or reading her poetry would not be his way of expressing affection.

How *would* he express himself, though? If he hadn't figured it out already, he would quickly find that her passion was for learning, for being the insufferable know-it-all, though she hated him for that comment. Maybe he would offer her knowledge? Give her some books to read? She could imagine that conversations with him as an equal could be very exciting and stimulating. He was brilliant, no doubt about that. He would challenge her to be her intellectual best and would accept no less. He could offer her the support needed to explore her passion thoroughly.

He could offer his respect.

But that was only if he *did* love her. Even if that were the case, would it be enough? She tried to think of kissing him, and couldn't get past his teeth. Those big, yellow, crooked teeth. Her parents would think she was finally rebelling. She tried again, and found herself giggling. She couldn't wrap her mind around the thought of him as anything other than her teacher.

Yes, she knew that he was a man, but that didn't help her. Granted, she had found some of her teachers to be attractive through the years, but she felt a mild revulsion when she thought of having anything other than a professional relationship with them in reality.

What if he *didn't* love her? What if he just felt honour-bound to protect her, even if that meant marrying her to keep her safe from Lupin and the law? How would he treat her then? Would he continue to treat her as he did, with cold indifference at best, scathing remarks at worst? He surely couldn't help but resent her for interfering in his life, and forcing the responsibility of another person on him. He wasn't a nice person, and she could easily imagine him becoming toxic to anyone he resented. She doubted even he would sink so low as to be physically abusive, but she suspected he would have far more insidious ways of destroying her spirit.

Hermione heaved a rather large sigh. The only thing for it was to ask him. She did not relish the thought of asking Professor Snape, of all people, about his feelings, but she couldn't think of any other way to clarify the situation. Even Dumbledore hadn't known what Snape felt, so she imagined it would be useless to ask anyone other than the snake himself.

She dressed slowly, thinking through the upcoming conversation as much as she could. Although she was certain that he would not physically harm her for asking him a few questions, she had no doubt that he could easily make her life hell at any opportunity thereafter if he so wished. And he would have so many opportunities: his classes, mealtimes, and any gatherings involving teachers and prefects - and head girls.

Maybe it would be better if she just assumed he didn't care at all and live the rest of her life with Remus. The image of the werewolf baring his teeth flashed through her mind, making her shiver. She swallowed hard, took in a fortifying breath, and forced herself to make her way down to the dungeons, a look of grim determination on her face.

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She knocked on the door of Professor Snape's office, half hoping he wasn't in. A grumpy voice called out 'Enter' and caused her to cast that hope aside. She sucked in her breath for courage, and opened the door.

He was sitting at his desk, head bent over a pile of essays that he was marking with a frown. He didn't look up as he said, clearly annoyed, "State your business."

"Er, Professor Snape, sir, I was wondering if I could have a word with you?" Hermione was surprised she had managed to speak with a clear voice, as if she weren't scared at all.

He looked up sharply, obviously surprised, but schooled his expression quickly into his normal sneer.

"Very well, Miss Granger. And what is that word?"

Hermione was taken aback. Was he seriously expecting only one word, or was he actually joking? Either option was daunting. Deciding to take him seriously, if only to play his game, she considered her word choice carefully.

"Love."

She almost laughed at the look on his face. For a single second his eyes became large, revealing nearly all of his dark irises, a look of panic flitting through them as his eyelid twitched. At the same time his mouth relaxed into a sagging position, while his nose flared. The expression disappeared almost before she had time to register it.

"Excuse me?" His voice was hard, no sign of surprise anywhere.

"Love," she said again, a little confidence returning, having seen him so discomfited.

"Do not mock me, Miss Granger," he said in tones usually reserved for Harry. "Explain yourself."

"I wasn't mocking you, sir. I apologize if it came across that way. I just wasn't sure whether you were serious about using only one word or not, so I decided to err on the side of caution. I didn't mean to offend you," she said solicitously, trying to calm him so there might be some chance he'd refrain from hexing her before the conversation was through.

"Very well," he said, slightly mollified. "So what is the meaning behind your word?"

"I, er," she faltered, not knowing where to start anymore. She figured she might as well reveal all, if only for the sake of honesty.

"Last night I went to see Lupin to tell him of my decision, but when I arrived in his corridor I, er, overheard you two talking." She winced at the face he made as his lips contorted into a weird grimace. He was obviously trying to control himself, and she hoped he would wait to explode until after she left.

"And, pray tell, what did you overhear?" His voice was dangerous, but controlled. So far, so good.

"Er, enough to confuse me, sir. I came down here to ask you what feelings, if any, you might have for me."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Why do you wish to know? And are you sure you want to know them? Most people do not want to hear what others honestly think of them, especially if that honesty is coming from the Greasy Bat."

"Greasy Git, sir," she corrected unconsciously. Realizing what she had just said, her first impulse was to apologize profusely, but she quickly figured there was no saving the situation now, so she decided to instead plunge into her stupidity. "Or the Big Bat. Mixing the metaphors like that leads to a much more disgusting insult than you deserve, sir."

"Pray tell," he purred, his voice barely above a whisper, "how much of an insult do I deserve, Miss Granger?"

She swallowed the urge to prostrate herself before him in humble apology. "It would depend on who you spoke to, sir."

"I see. And if I were speaking to you?"

"Then you would be disappointed. I try to refrain from insulting teachers, Professor."

"Even those whom you despise?"

Hermione bit her lip. Had she ever called Umbridge names where Snape could have overheard her? Did it matter? She might as well be completely honest with him, especially if she wanted honesty from him. Assuming, of course, that he didn't throw her out of his office in the next five seconds.

"Well, I must admit that I have indulged in making disparaging remarks about one teacher, but it was well deserved, sir. Besides, I was always respectful when talking to her."

Snape looked at her, his fingers steepled in front of his mouth. After a few moments of observation he said, "Always, Miss Granger?"

"As far as I can remember, sir. However, my mind may have erased any indiscretions from my memory to prevent me from reliving them in my dreams. I would never want to wake up from such a pleasant dream."

He quirked an eyebrow at her, while his mouth twitched. "I believe you aren't being quite honest, Miss Granger. I assume you were speaking of that Umbridge woman, am I correct?" Hermione nodded. "Well, then, it seems your memory may be worse than you know as Sibyl has frequently brought up how you paid her no respect in front of her entire class, repeatedly."

"Oops. I did forget about that." Hermione sighed. "Well, she deserved it also, trying to use fear to manipulate her classes into believing her asinine predictions. It was pathetic."

"I use fear to manipulate my classes as well, or have you not noticed?"

"Yes, well, you do it successfully, sir! It's really quite impressive the way you can control your classes with a simple sneer." Hermione shook her head and chuckled. "Poor Neville."

"So you approve of fear as a control method, as long as it is used successfully?"

Hermione paused. "No, sir, but at least you are competent enough not to inspire hysteria. You always have complete control and so we all, even Neville, know that no real harm will come to us in your class. The worst you will do is humiliate and demean us, which we will probably survive." She paused, pondering. "After much psychotherapy, of course."

Snape snorted at that.. "And you are willing to subject yourself to such humiliation as I can deliver when I answer your question, because you will *probably* survive? Are you sure you are prepared, Miss Granger for the brunt of my personal opinion?"

"Yes sir."

"Why?"

She gulped. She could guess what was coming, so she steeled herself for the onslaught.

"I have insatiable curiosity, sir?" she said uncertainly.

He looked at her, and she thought she could see some sort of internal conflict going on behind his eyes. The rest of his face, however, was completely blank, devoid of any feeling whatsoever.

"And what will you give me if I satisfy your curiosity?"

She thought about it seriously. She figured it would sound pretty arrogant to say, "A shot at being my husband," especially because she didn't know whether he wanted that chance or not. She didn't trust him enough to generously offer whatever he wanted, so she decided to be coy.

"What would you like, sir?"

He looked at her, a thoughtful expression on his features, as if going through all the possibilities. She guessed he was figuring out what he could reasonably ask without being refused, while making it as harsh for her as possible. She could just imagine all the tortures and humiliations he could put her through as her penance for being around him for seven long years. He seemed to confirm her suspicions when he chuckled ominously.

"I will tell you how I *feel* about you, Miss Granger, if you first tell me what you expect to hear, and also what you *want* to hear."

Hermione pursed her lips in disapproval. She knew that he could use this against her very easily, and that her answer would probably influence his answer, so she wouldn't even get the truth. If she asked for his opinion written down first, before she gave her answer then he wouldn't have the chance to alter his answer in response to her answer. However, that request would make him suspicious, and probably alter his answer in yet another way. The worst part was that she knew he knew this was what she would think.

He was playing head games with her. Didn't he say that he wouldn't play games with her? No, he told Lupin he wouldn't tolerate Lupin playing games with her heart or mind. Sneaky bastard. He knew how to leave himself completely protected whilst conversing.

"I will answer the second part, but not the first." She grinned internally. She had no idea what she wanted to hear, and so the easy answer was simply, "I don't know." That would infuriate him, but it would be the truth. He could even give her Veritasum if he desired, for she knew that would still be the answer. She hoped he would accept the bargain.

"I don't agree to that. It's all or nothing, Miss Granger, so it seems you will remain unsatisfied."

Hermione growled in frustration. "Professor, do you understand, or rather, do you even..." A light went on in Hermione's head. He might understand, but quite possibly didn't care that this was her life, her happiness, on the line. He couldn't care if he was content to just play mind games with her at every opportunity. "No, you don't," she said, answering her question for him, not letting him in on the conversation.

She stood up and looked at Snape. He was looking at her with one eyebrow cocked and a smug expression on his face, as if he had finally succeeded in breaking her. Well, she would have none of that. She would not allow herself to suffer such humiliation willingly.

She suddenly realized she was disappointed. She had hoped that he did care. She still wanted his respect, and would have treasured it if he had deigned to bestow it, but it was now obvious that such desires would never be fulfilled. He would never respect her or care for her enough to be nice. She couldn't imagine living with anyone who couldn't show her the respect she deserved.

"Thank you for answering my question, Professor. You've made it abundantly clear that you care just enough to toss me to the wolves. I expect your conversation with Remus was just to get his hackles up because that's what you do, and I must say Professor, you do it very well indeed.

"I now must tell Remus of my decision. Good day, Professor." With that, she stormed out of his office.

She diverted her path from the Great Hall and breakfast when she realized that the tears pricking her eyes were not going to be blinked back, heading instead to her room for a quick cry before class.

The Decision

Chapter 8 of 15

Hermione talks to Crookshanks (and others) about her dilemmas.

Disclaimer: Not mine.

AN: *Sorry for the wait, and sorry for the upcoming wait. *sheepish grin* Thank you all so much for the reviews, by the way. You make me smile hugely. Lots of chocolate to all.*

Chapter 7: The Decision

Hermione was glad it was so early in the day, as no one was around to see her as she sniffled and wiped away errant tears. As it was, she barely made it to her bedroom before she was overcome with wracking sobs. She fell on her bed, trying to calm herself, not knowing why she was in such a state. She didn't even like the bastard.

She was soon cried out, and she curled in on herself for comfort. Crookshanks bounded onto the bed and forced his head under her hand, eliciting a small laugh from Hermione.

"You're really something, Crookshanks, wanting attention while I'm in distress," she said, knowing that it was just as much for her sake as it was for his. He purred contentedly by her side.

"The thing is, Crooks, I don't understand why I'm so upset. Yes, this is a rough situation to be put in, but no worse than battling Voldemort. I mean, at least I can be sure that I'll be alive the day after I get married, even if it isn't to someone I love." She looked down at the purring cat and wondered what she should do.

"That nightmare was horrible. It really was. And it was so vivid. I can still see the light glistening on Lupin's teeth as he lunged at me. I know Remus would never dream of hurting me. He would do his best to keep me from any situation where I might get hurt, so I don't understand what the dream was telling me." She drew a shuddering breath, trying to concentrate. "Is he going to figuratively rip my heart out? And if so, how would he do that if we don't love each other? Kind of hard to play that game without emotion.

"Then again, maybe the dream was telling me that I would fall in love with him, and he would do something to break my heart. I can't see Remus doing anything to hurt me in any way, though, unlike Snape.

"I wouldn't put anything past Snape, considering how he's treated me the last couple of days. He's insulted my intelligence, implied I'm unattractive, and shown a general disdain for my person. He doesn't like me, and that's that." She heaved a large sigh, and looked down at her cat. "Even if he does love me, how can he expect me to return his love if he treats me so shoddily? I just can't see how things would end happily with that man."

Hermione thought back to her last encounter with Snape. He hadn't yelled at her, that was true, even though she was certain he'd been fuming inside. He hadn't even insulted her, in an outright manner. He just implied that she didn't matter at all, that she was a mildly interesting diversion - something to play with before discarding. Maybe her inference was incorrect, and he was simply trying to be playful, but this was too serious a situation for her to play at. He might not think it warranted such high emotion, but her life was on the line, wasn't it?

"Oh, Crookshanks, I don't know what to do. I know that I would love to confront Snape and tell him what a bastard he is for playing with me, but since I would like to continue to learn from him with only a minimum of hassle, I think I'll keep those feelings to myself, for the while.

"If only I hadn't had that dream. Everything would be so simple. I would go talk with Remus, we'd get engaged, married and probably be happy, if romantically stilted, for a long, long time. But no, my subconscious had to send me a warning of some sort. I wouldn't even be thinking of Snape if I hadn't had that dream."

Crookshanks raised his head at that, and looked at her. She looked back, and eventually got the message he seemed to be sending her.

"Okay, fine. I would have eventually wondered 'what if,' but I definitely wouldn't be crying over his damnable attitude." She sighed again. "Oh, for Heaven's sake, why him?"

Another sigh saw her off the bed and she gathered her supplies for the morning. She was glad she would have classes to take her mind off her problems for the rest of the

day.

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She managed to avoid Snape for the rest of the day. He wasn't in the Great Hall when she arrived for breakfast, and thankfully she didn't have Potions that day. Between classes she met with the teachers whose classes she had missed the day before to get her make-up work, except for Potions; she figured that could wait until the next class. All in all, she had avoided him most efficiently.

By the time her final class had finished, she realized that although she was still two weeks ahead in all her classes, the review time she had missed would set her behind for at least two evenings that week, and that was without the crush of her upcoming wedding. She was quickly becoming convinced that not only was The Bill a nefarious plot of the remaining Death Eaters to keep up the pureblood supremacy, but it was also deliberately timed to interfere with her studying schedule, so as to reduce her NEWT scores.

She'd show them. She would still best any and every pureblood score out there, even if it meant she died the day after exams finished. Speaking of dying, she still needed to see Remus and talk about their wedding. She only hoped that he would still agree to marry her after she told him of her nightmare. Hopefully he thought Divination warranted as much attention as she did.

She made her way to the foreign corridor after dropping off her books late that afternoon, but it was still getting on in the evening. The corridor looked much less forbidding than it did at night, as the sinking sun shone through the arrow slits lining the wall, streaking the hallway with warm, white stripes.

Finding the statue of Wendelin, who gave her a wink and another giggle, Hermione stood in front of Remus' door, outlining in her mind what she needed answers to. She didn't want to demand too much from him, for her own selfish reasons, as well as his deserving more respect.

She knocked gently, hoping the door was bewitched to amplify the sound. After a few moments, she raised her fist to knock again, when the door opened revealing an expectant Remus Lupin.

"Hermione! I wasn't... I didn't... I mean, it's nice to see you again." The man was obviously flustered.

"Remus, surely you don't think me capable of just leaving you hanging in suspense? Or were you hoping that?" She narrowed her eyes at him, acting as if she was suddenly suspicious of his intentions.

"I just wasn't expecting you right now. I figured you would take the entire week to decide. Forgive my rudeness?" He flashed her a self-deprecating smile and put his hands on his heart playfully.

She giggled. "Of course you're forgiven. It wouldn't do to start off a lifelong relationship with me fuming at your etiquette, now would it?"

The warmth in Remus' eyes flickered, but his smile stayed in place. "No, it most certainly wouldn't do. But, where are my manners? Please, come in." He opened the door and waved her inside with a sweep of his arm. He graciously led her to the settee.

"So, you've decided, have you?"

"Actually, no, I haven't. I wanted to talk with you about... something." Hermione looked around the room to keep herself from looking down at her hands, which she was clutching nervously. She had to tell him that she'd overheard the conversation. Remus waited patiently for her to begin, curiosity written across his benign face.

"Nice room," she stalled. "What is this place? I've never seen it before."

Remus smiled, relaxing slightly at the neutral topic. "It's called the X wing." He broke off his explanation when Hermione started snickering.

"There isn't a Y-wing, is there?" she asked, in between giggles.

"Not that I know of. Why?" He was looking at her with curiosity.

"I'm sorry, Remus. There's a Muggle movie with X- and Y-wing spaceships in it. I was momentarily distracted..."

Hermione bit back her giggles and invited Remus to continue. "So this X wing, I'm guessing it's because X marks the spot?"

He laughed gently. "Yes, in a manner of speaking; you can't find it without the map being figuratively given to you. It's also because it's unknown, unplotted territory." She looked at him, slightly confused.

"But Hogwarts is already unplotable."

"Yes, but Hogwarts itself is not inviolable. This wing was designed to be a very secure place for visiting officials and dignitaries. Voldemort was not the first, nor will he be the last, wizard to cause a long standing war. Hogwarts has almost always been a safe haven, but no place is completely impenetrable, especially if the enemy is already inside. This wing provides a safe house within the castle walls.

"From what I know, it's been used as both VIP quarters and as a prison ward in the past. All it takes is a slight change in the invocation to change its purpose. Either way it's extremely difficult to locate.

"You can only find this wing if you possess all the keys. First, you have to know that the person resides here, then you have to be known and invited to it by a combination of people, including the resident, and finally, the wards that surround the wing only allow those who seek with good intent through. I think there's more to it than that, but I'm afraid I'm not an expert on the subject."

"So I found this place because I was looking for you, and I've been put on the invitation list?"

"And you're not out to cause me harm, yes."

"Well, it must be nice to know that any guests you have don't wish you ill." He smiled indulgently at her and she smiled back, then sighed. She knew it was time to bring up her reason for visiting.

"I have something to confess," Hermione started. "I was going to talk with you last night, but when I got here, I overheard you and Severus talking."

Remus started, and a hard look came into his face for moment, before being replaced by his usual sympathetic demeanor. "Oh? Did you hear anything good?" he asked jokingly.

"Er, you could say that, I suppose. What I heard made me think that Sev, er, Professor Snape might have feelings for me. I talked with him earlier today and confirmed that's as ridiculous an idea as it sounds. We didn't really get into it, but I suspect he was just playing the overprotective guardian in lieu of Ron."

"If he doesn't love you, why would he bother taking on that role?"

"Because of a life debt and a promise. It doesn't really matter, and I don't think I can explain if you don't know anything more about it." Hermione sighed, wondering how to broach the topic she really wanted to talk about.

"Did Snape say anything to you about what was said?" Lupin asked casually.

"No, nothing at all. However, I also had a nightmare last night, which was why I talked with Professor Snape in the first place. I didn't tell him about it, but the dream scared me enough for me to grasp at straws." Hermione laughed at herself quietly, then described her dream to Remus.

"Do you know why I might have dreamt that? I know you don't love me, and that doesn't bother me too much." She noticed Remus tense up. "I don't think you would ever hurt me, Remus."

He slowly began to speak: "Although you're right in that I'm not in love with you, I do care for you Hermione, and I would never hurt you if I could help it. That said, I should have told you yesterday that I don't think I will ever fall in love with you in a romantic way. That does not mean I don't respect you enough to want to save you from this situation, though." Remus sighed, his shoulders slumping giving him a defeated look.

"I was wrong to withhold information from you yesterday. I'm glad you told me about your eavesdropping, because it gives me a second chance to tell you something you won't like. It really is better that you know everything before you make your decision. I would hate myself later if you made this decision uninformed."

He took a deep breath, steeling himself to reveal unpleasant truths. Hermione wasn't sure she wanted to know what he was so reluctant to relate, but at the same time she knew it would be better to be forewarned. He was still her only viable option.

"I've been having an affair of sorts with a married witch for about fifteen years now." Hermione's jaw dropped at the thought of good, kind Lupin doing anything as wrong as adultery.

"I met her before she was married," Lupin continued, seemingly unaware of Hermione's shock. "I was just out of school and doing a reconnaissance mission for the Order in West Germany. I stayed at an inn her father ran one night and met her at the bar where she was working. She was a couple of years younger than I was, but I fell head over heels in love with her. She was smart, beautiful and so... *innocent*. I stayed at the inn for longer than was really necessary, and I'm sure her father noticed. I don't think he was displeased either, until I told her what I was. She was terrified, and rightfully so. The Wolfsbane potion hadn't been developed yet, so I was still an uncontrolled monster once a month. She probably told one of her parents, because soon after it was made abundantly clear that I was not welcome there anymore.

"I left, but I wrote to her every chance I got. I told her I understood that she would never want to be with me, but that I would love her anyway. After a few weeks, she wrote back. She told me that her father had intercepted all my letters until she had arrived back at school that week. She apologized for her reaction and asked for my forgiveness." Remus shook his head at the thought, as if he still found it hard to believe. "She told me she loved me soon after. We secretly arranged to meet during her holidays, but somehow her father found out. He wrote me a threatening letter, telling me precisely where he'd send me if I ever came within a hundred miles of her." He sighed heavily.

"I didn't listen to him, and neither did she, but somehow he found out. He probably cast a locating charm on her. We did manage to see each other, but only once. I didn't have the nerve to propose right then, especially because I knew it was too dangerous at that point. I couldn't stand the thought of any harm coming to her. I also didn't know what a close eye her father was keeping on her.

"Her next letter informed me that she was engaged. Her father had arranged a marriage for her, to keep her away from me.

"I was bitterly disappointed, but figured it would be for the best. I told her I would always love her, but wished her luck. She got the hint that I wasn't going to rescue her, and capitulated. I didn't get another letter from her.

"Then, a couple years after Voldemort's first fall, I ran into her, literally. I was visiting a friend in Wales, when we collided in the middle of her village square. We ended up in her kitchen, discussing our lives. She told me she wasn't miserable, but that her heart *belonged* to me. Only then did I realize that I had made the biggest mistake in my life. I hadn't known she had pledged herself to me. If I had, I would have rescued her rather than leave her in a loveless marriage."

"I don't understand. Why would it have to be loveless?" Hermione asked.

"She had magically bound her heart to mine. It's an illegal spell that's rarely done without the other person's knowledge, though it doesn't require it. The thing is, it's irrevocable. I had known she loved me, but to pledge her heart to me..." He shook his head in disbelief. "She said she did it after our Christmas meeting, when she was sure that I loved her. She became engaged before she had a chance to tell me, or her father, and decided it was pointless to tell anyone if I wasn't going to fight for her.

"When she first told me, I was mortified. I was ashamed of how I'd just given up on her, though she had come to accept why I had done so. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do. I wouldn't cuckold another man, even if it was for her. She didn't ask anything of me, though. That was what did me in. After some soul searching, I decided to pledge my heart to her in return. It was only fair."

Hermione stared at her former professor, hoping she didn't understand the situation correctly. "So, when you say you'll never fall in love with me..." She faded out, not able to finish.

"It's because I'm in love with another woman, and will be for the rest of my life. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this earlier, Hermione. You deserved to know upfront. That is why choosing me is choosing a very difficult life. I can promise you that I will be faithful, if you ask it, but I can also promise you that no matter how much either of us might wish it otherwise, my heart belongs to her."

Hermione looked at her hands. She could feel her eyes starting to ache with the need to cry, but she didn't really want to reveal to Remus that she was upset. Her mind moved sluggishly from point to point. She just couldn't figure out what was the best course for her to take. A little belatedly she realized Remus was talking again.

"...and if there's a chance he loves you, then do yourself a favor and choose him. A life without hope for love is a bleak life. You deserve more."

Hermione looked up at him with her mind made up. Her face was devoid of emotion, and color. With a look in her eye most people would have called mature, though wiser people would call hopeless, she spoke, her voice clear and firm.

"Thank you for telling me the truth, Remus. I'm sure that was what my nightmare was trying to warn me about.

"I know you're a kind and generous person, and even if it is just a marriage of convenience, I still choose you. I'm sure we can come to some sort of arrangement where we'll both be as happy as we can be, and I know *you*, as opposed to Severus, will treat me decently."

Remus looked at her sadly. "Are you sure Hermione? There's no turning back once the marriage is finalized. What about the other people you interviewed? Kingsley might-

"I'm as sure as I can be, Remus. The other people I interviewed would be as bad, if not worse. At least with you there's a bit of a spark, and we get along personality-wise." She sighed, her calm facade almost breaking for a second. "If I had years to go about this then I would never..." She sighed. "I would make mistakes anyway, and this way I know it's a mistake, but I really believe it's the lesser of all the evils, so to speak."

Remus frowned, but couldn't refute her. "Are you sure Severus wasn't just being coy? He's a slippery man, and I would never recommend him if he hadn't practically declared his love for you last night."

"But he never *did* declare it. Not that I would expect a man like him to, but I would expect him to at least be respectful to me. He hasn't been. You're it, Remus. It's you or some random Muggle I'll pick up in a bar," she said with a wan smile.

"Then it might as well be me. I'm sorry Hermione."

"I'm sorry, too. I hope it will work out." She gave him a sad smile.

Remus suddenly raised his head, as if remembering something important. He got up and offered Hermione his hand. "Well, I suppose you should go announce it to Professor Dumbledore now. I'm sure he'll be relieved to know we've reached a decision."

Hermione got up, gave Remus a quick peck on the cheek, then headed out, only barely registering how agitated he had become.

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Hermione found her way to the headmaster's office easily enough, though she realized belatedly that he was probably still at dinner.

"Mars bars," she muttered to the gargoyle, but it stayed where it was. "Mars bars!" She was pretty sure she remembered the passwords for that week, and today's was definitely supposed to be "Mars bars," yet the statue remained where it was. She went through the retinue of the month's passwords before it occurred to her that the gargoyle might not move aside if Dumbledore wasn't in residence. It certainly would be a smart move to protect his office from intrusion. Fifth year came to mind, and Hermione smirked at the memory of Dolores Umbridge's attempts to enter during Dumbledore's absence. She couldn't help the snicker that escaped.

"And what do you find so amusing now?" a deep voice purred in her ear.

She whirled around to face Snape, who was standing much too close for her comfort. As she backed up a step, she wondered about his expectant expression. What could he possibly want? Then she realized he had asked a question.

"Oh, didn't you know, I found marital bliss." She looked away from him, not wanting to see his trademark sneer. "Or at least, something that will pass for it on Sunday." Her tone was more bitter than she would have liked, but his close presence was bothering her.

He didn't make any response, nor did he move. She set her mouth in a hard line and forced herself to look up at him. He was just standing there, in her personal space, looking down at her with complete indifference. It rankled her nerves even more.

"Professor, I suggest you move a bit. Your stance could be seen as highly inappropriate towards a female student. Threatening, even."

Snape narrowed his eyes at her thinly veiled threat, but moved back a step all the same.

"I guess I should offer you my congratulations, then, Miss Granger. I assume the werewolf is your intended?" He went on before she could nod. "I hope for your sake that your fiancé survives the experiments on his potion completely intact. I would hate to deprive you of any *bliss*."

"Why, thank you for your concern, Professor." Hermione's tone was less than gracious. She then processed his words more carefully. "What experiments are you talking about?"

"Don't you know? Lupin and Dumbledore seem to think that the Wolfsbane potion is not enough, especially if the star pupil of Hogwarts is going to be bedded, my apologies, I meant *wedded* to such a creature." Hermione flushed at his deliberate slip, not sure whether she was angry or embarrassed. "I am working on an outright cure, though I expect it will be a fruitless waste of time and energy. The only good thing about the entire situation is exposing Lupin to potentially embarrassing reactions."

Hermione narrowed her eyes in disgust. "You would be one to kick someone who's already down. I hope you're not planning on poisoning my fiancé, because I know Dumbledore would not be happy with you if you tried to vent your spleen in that manner."

Snape looked at her with something akin to pity. In the kindest, most sincere voice she had ever heard him use, he responded, "And how happy would you be?"

She looked at him for a few agonizing seconds, completely dumbstruck, before pushing past him to run for her room. For some reason she couldn't fathom, his had question cut her heart in two.

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After she had cried herself out, Hermione sat at her desk that evening trying to figure out exactly why she had become upset when Severus had confronted her. She fiddled with her quill over her potions homework, thinking through the encounter.

She had been doing a good job of handling herself in their verbal battle, until he had used the underhanded tactic of concern. How dare he! He had shown again and again that he didn't care about her at all, and then he turned around and pitied her? It was a completely unfair move.

She scolded herself for reacting so childishly to him. She could now think of a dozen cutting remarks that would have been appropriate, but all she was able to think of then was the horror of her automatic answer: "That's one way to get out of this marriage."

She mentally flailed herself again. How could she be so selfish to be ambivalent about Lupin getting hurt? He was a good man! He might not be the best potential mate, but he would be good to her. He would care for her as much as he was able to, and he would allow her as much freedom as she desired. She could probably take a lover, if she ever felt the need, and it wouldn't bother him at all. She grimaced and shuddered slightly, not liking the idea.

Hermione sighed heavily. Something just wasn't sitting right. The man she chose was obviously the best choice for her, and yet both he and Dumbledore were wary of the decision. That couldn't be good, but what was to be done? Snape just wasn't an option.

After Sunday, it would all be over. There wouldn't be anything more to worry about. She would be married to a man whose heart belonged, almost literally, to another. She wiped a tear from her eye with the back of her hand, not wanting to stain her potions homework.

A meow from Crookshanks distracted her into a feeble smile.

"It's not like I ever expected true love or anything, Crooks," she explained to the cat. "So why am I so disappointed?"

Her familiar leapt onto her lap softly, and curled up against her chest. She hugged him to her as if he were the only male who truly knew and loved her. Thinking about it a little, she started crying again. He probably was.

Wiping her eyes carelessly, she put Crookshanks on the floor, then flopped onto her bed and pressed her face to her pillow in a vain attempt at suffocation. The thought of lovers took her mind places she didn't want it to go. The image of Ron leaning in for a tender kiss after they had made love the first time, his face so full of emotion, made her heart ache fiercely. The fact that the image was getting fuzzy forced a shot of guilt to course through her, leaving her even more miserable than before. But no matter how much she hurt, she had to accept the fact that he was gone. He wasn't going to rescue her from this nightmare.

Her body forced her head to turn, and she sucked in fresh air to soothe her aching chest. She sniffled and wiped her cheeks with her hands again. She felt as if she were falling apart from the inside out, and she didn't know how to stop it. Everything good in her world had been torn apart when Ron had died.

"Oh, Ron," she sighed, her voice weighted with despair. She thought about all their time together, the snatches of privacy they had found. He had infuriated her like no other, but he had made her laugh as well. It hurt to realize she was moving on. She didn't think about him every moment of every day now, and it felt like she was betraying him.

"I still love you," she whispered desperately, hoping he could hear her.

As she cried herself to sleep, her thoughts centered on Ron. In her dreams she created a memorial service for him, and let herself mourn him properly. She had been desperately holding on to every memory in hopes of keeping him alive in her mind. That night she finally allowed herself to let him go, hugging him good-bye before he vanished in the mist.

Somewhere deep in the back of her head, her mind cleared, letting her rest deeply for the first time in months.

A Letter of Consequence

Chapter 9 of 15

A new day, a fresh new outlook... What could possibly go wrong?

Disclaimer: Not mine, as always.

Chapter 9: A Letter of Consequence

Friday

Hermione woke the next morning feeling empty, but surprisingly refreshed. For the first time in ages, she felt alive. When she looked in the mirror, however, it was as though she were seeing herself for the first time. She looked awful. Her skin was pale, her cheeks were hollow from not eating properly, and her eyes looked bruised thanks to the dark circles surrounding them. She held an arm up for examination and realized she had probably lost a stone or more in the last few months. Her limbs were nearly skin and bone. For a second, she was hurt that no one had noticed, but soon realized that she always wore robes, and having her own room meant she never undressed around the girls anymore. No one would have had a chance to notice.

Thinking about it a little longer, she realized that her friends *had* been worried about her. She rarely saw any of them look at her without concerned expressions anymore. She wondered if it was because of how she looked, or her behavior. She blushed thinking how irrational she had been of late. She certainly hadn't felt like herself, and more than likely she hadn't been acting it either. It was time to change that. She was ready to face the day and all it had to bring, impending marriage included.

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When she sat down to breakfast at the Gryffindor table, she smiled warmly at her friends, and felt how stiff those little used cheek muscles were. She was rewarded for the effort, though, with the beaming faces of her friends shedding some of their worry.

"You look like you feel better today," Harry said. His smile grew even broader when he noticed her ample serving of breakfast.

"I do feel better today," she responded happily. "I managed to get a good night's sleep last night, and I think it's made a world of difference. I feel like I've finally found myself again." Harry and Ginny smiled at her with relief written all over their faces. She smiled to herself, noting the warm glow that their friendship brought.

Soon the Great Hall was thrumming with life as most students had made their way to breakfast. It was getting to be time to leave for class when Dumbledore stood up and raised his hands for attention. The noise in the Hall dimmed quickly.

"Students, faculty, I have an announcement to make. It seems as though Hogwarts will be hosting a joyous event this weekend. Some of you might remember Remus Lupin, a former professor from four years ago. It is my pleasure to announce that he will be getting married this Sunday afternoon in Hogwarts Chapel, and that any who wish to attend the blessed event are welcome. More details will be posted in your common rooms."

Hermione was thankful he hadn't mentioned who the bride was, as she really didn't want to be the topic of gossip for the next two and a half days. She then furrowed her brows, remembering that she had never gotten the chance to talk with Dumbledore the previous night, and wondered how he knew of the engagement. Her eyes fell on Snape who lifted his glass to her in a silent toast, a bitter smirk on his lips. She scowled as she turned to her friends.

"So, you decided on Remus?" Harry was looking at her carefully.

"Yes." She swallowed. "We decided last night."

"Is that why you're feeling better?" Ginny asked.

"No... Yes... I don't know." Hermione let out a frustrated sigh. "I don't understand why Severus told Professor Dumbledore about my decision."

They looked at her with shocked and curious faces.

"I was looking for Professor Dumbledore last night after meeting with Lupin, but he wasn't in. Severus found me at the gargoyle, and started baiting me, teasing me about experiments Remus is undergoing for his lycanthropy." She decided to edit the last portion of the conversation. She still hadn't come up with an adequate explanation for her reaction to Snape's question, and it was bothering her.

"He said something that bothered me, and I ran away before telling the Headmaster about the engagement."

She didn't miss the shared look between Harry and Ginny.

"What's up?" she asked. They had identical smug looks pasted on their faces.

"*Severus* found you?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, that's what I said... oh." Hermione realized she had been using Snape's first name unconsciously, and had no idea how long she had been doing so. She grimaced and lowered her head to the table.

"How long have I been doing that?" she asked from underneath her hair to no one in particular.

"Doing what?" Harry asked.

"Calling Professor Snape by his first name."

"That's the first time in my hearing. Been getting friendly with him, have you?"

She raised her head enough to shoot Harry a glare, before lowering her head back to the table with a small thump. "The bastard didn't really give me a chance to be anything but antagonistic. I expect that's the best descriptive for any relationship we've got."

"So why are you calling him *Severus*, then?" Harry asked.

Ginny responded before Hermione could get a word in. "Isn't it obvious, Harry? She's been flirting with him since at least yesterday, she gets riled up when talking about his attitude problems, and she's sounding suspiciously bitter about their current antagonism." She paused for effect. "She fancies him."

Both Ginny and Harry started laughing. Hermione looked up with a scowl that became a look of horror upon seeing the subject of their conversation standing behind her friends, an evil smirk on his face. He turned and walked away before her friends had a chance to notice her consternation. She watched him until he exited the hall, then continued to stare at the doors he'd walked through, only half listening to her friends' mirth.

"Oh, pigeon-tits!" she suddenly swore. Potions was her first class that morning.

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She and Harry arrived in the dungeon with only seconds to spare before class started. They immediately went to their shared table, getting their supplies and notes out. No sooner had they started unpacking than Snape strode into the classroom with his usual snarl in place.

"Essays out, now," he barked to the class, causing the Hufflepuffs to flinch. The classroom was filled with rustling as everyone retrieved their assignments. Hermione took her parchment out, and unrolled it for a quick review before handing it to Snape. She noticed with a grimace that it was blotched in several places, thanks to her bout of crying the night before. Unfortunately, there was no time to fix it as Snape descended on their table at that moment.

"Come now, Miss Granger," Snape said over her shoulder in his trademark tone. "Surely you admired your work enough whilst creating it. However, if that is not the case and you feel the need to continue to bask in your own glory, I will be happy to let you keep it, and mark you accordingly." He held out his hand for her scroll to the snickers of the few Slytherins in the class.

She felt her cheeks burning from the unwarranted humiliation, but resisted the urge to throw the essay at him, along with a hex or two. Instead, she handed it over, keeping her eyes down and her lips firmly shut. Still, she couldn't help but notice him intentionally crumple the parchment in his grip.

Hermione could feel Harry swelling with righteous indignation, so she quickly shook her head a fraction, wordlessly asking him to let it go. She didn't want any more attention from Snape that morning. Harry looked at her, then discreetly patted her hand in a gesture of solidarity. She let out her breath in relief that he understood.

They were able to work on their potion in peace for the first hour. When it was time to let it simmer undisturbed, Hermione took out a book on archaic potions, and settled in to do some unhurried spying. Keeping her lashes low, she observed Snape from her desk, making sure she read the book every now and again to keep up appearances. Snape did not allow any time to be wasted in his classroom, and she didn't want to be caught unaware with a pop quiz while watching her teacher critically.

He was sitting at his desk reading the essays he'd collected. He was obviously writing some scathing remarks on the student's work, judging by the devilish look on his face. She wondered whose work was being blasted by his evil wit, and if the student would cry because of it. She was sure that was what he was aiming for: reducing his pupils to tears. She shook her head slightly in disgust.

She was glad she had chosen Remus. Remus was kindhearted, and would never malign anyone for the fun of it. He would treat her with respect, as that was how he approached the world. Snape, on the other hand, would make her life a living hell. She would always have to be on guard for the next verbal attack, and she was sure he would find a way to worm through any defenses she could build. The fact that he could still embarrass her in front of her classmates after seven years of taunting showed what thin skin she had. She wouldn't survive a year with Snape without doing something drastic.

It was actually too bad that Snape was such a nasty person. She rather liked his looks, even though he was nowhere near handsome. She was fascinated with his hands, and had been for a few years. His fingers were long and elegant, and when he gestured or wrote, they moved with such grace. His hair was definitely oily, and she suspected it had nothing to do with cauldron fumes. If she were generous she would guess that he was cursed with greasy hair like she was cursed with bushy hair. If he took the time to deal with it properly it wouldn't be so bad, but she definitely understood him not wanting to waste his time on his hair.

She also liked that he was tall. She had liked that in Ron, as well. It made her feel feminine in a way that was rare for her. She had never been a girly girl, and most of the activities her girlfriends enjoyed bored her to tears. Having a man surround her in a hug, with his chin resting on her head gave her a sense of completeness and the power of feeling safe. Ron had given her that feeling, and she could almost imagine Snape reproducing it, if she could ever trust him.

She looked at his face hiding behind his black curtain and was surprised to find the look of contempt gone, replaced by a look of mild concern. She glanced at the parchment in his hands and was startled to see a wrinkled sheet. It was her essay he was reading. Had she been so out of it lately that she turned in a substandard essay? That would make any of her other teachers look concerned. Then she remembered the tear-stains.

Before she could think of another explanation, Snape looked up at her. Their eyes met, and suddenly Hermione felt as if she was being held hostage. She couldn't move or even breathe as she looked into his black eyes. Unbidden, thoughts and memories flashed by, unorganized, but all centered around her recent breakdown. She was trapped under his gaze, knowing he was seeing everything, and that she was helpless to stop him. She didn't have any training in Occlumency, and the theory she knew wasn't helping her at all. She felt a sense of dread knowing he could ravage her mind for as long as he wanted, and she didn't know enough to stop it. Panic was welling up in her as her body started crying for air, but an instant later she was free and he was looking back down at her essay, his scowl back in place. She let out a shaky breath, and slumped back in her chair feeling completely violated.

Harry nudged her, then gave her a questioning look. She didn't know how to respond, so she shrugged her shoulders slightly. She wanted to talk to Harry, but only when they were in completely Snape-free territory. As it was she had to concentrate on keeping her tears at bay. Fortunately, only a few minutes of class remained.

As the bell rang for the end of class, Hermione quickly gathered her books and was on the verge of escaping when Snape's voice rang out through the classroom.

"Miss Granger, Mr. Potter," he snapped, clearly annoyed, "A word before you leave."

Hermione slumped back into her chair, and put a shaking hand on the desk to steady herself, vaguely aware of the curious and pitying looks her classmates were sending Harry and her. Harry, meanwhile, was watching her closely, eyes flicking to the Potions master every now and again.

Once the room was empty, save for the three of them, Snape flicked the door shut with his wand, and cast a silencing charm on the room. He then stormed toward them, nearly shouting with rage.

"Miss Granger, what the *hell* was that?"

Surprise and outrage forced her to look up at him for the first time since his invasion. He was towering above her, with a temper to match his stance.

She stood up without realizing it, her own anger rising. "I think I'm the one who should be asking that question!" Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Harry looking between her and Snape, trying to figure out what was going on.

"Hermione?" Harry's voice was full of concern.

Feeling herself lose control of her emotions, Hermione turned to face her friend. She wasn't able to keep her voice steady, and her breath hitched. "He... The... That bastard

just raped my mind!"

Before she could blink, Harry had his wand out, and Snape was flying back across the classroom, looking both surprised and outraged. He landed harshly against the blackboard with an "Oomph," and stayed pinned there, three feet above the ground.

Harry advanced on him, his wand held steady, and a murderous look on his face. For one second Hermione was tempted to egg him on, but then common sense kicked in.

"Harry!"

He stopped moving forward, but his attention was still riveted on Snape.

"Explain yourself, Snape." Harry's voice exuded power and authority. The last time Hermione had seen Harry like this was when he had faced Voldemort in the final battle. A chill ran down her spine, and she knew that if she didn't do something she was going to witness Snape's murder. She looked at Snape and knew he was thinking along the same lines.

"I didn't..." Snape's voice cut off, and it looked as though he was having trouble breathing.

"Harry!" Hermione was shouting, her panic level rising. "He's our teacher. Let's take this to Dumbledore." Snape's eyes grew wide at the mention of Dumbledore, or else he was running short of air. Either way, Hermione needed to get Harry out of 'war mode,' and fast.

"Harry, Ginny will never forgive you if you rot away in Azkaban."

That seemed to get through to him, as Snape suddenly slid down the wall into a crumpled heap, though Harry's wand was still aimed at Snape's chest.

"Explain." Harry said again.

Snape sat up rubbing his throat and glared at Harry. Snape's usually smooth voice was ragged as he unwillingly responded: "I did not force my way into Miss Granger's mind."

"I certainly didn't invite you!" Now that Harry was being reasonable, Hermione was able to unleash her anger again. Snape focused his attention on Harry, avoiding Hermione altogether.

"I didn't have any intention..." Snape faltered. "I did not use legilimency."

Harry looked at him with disbelief etched on his face, however, curiosity was starting to overcome Hermione's anger. "What do you mean? How could you have entered without intention?"

Snape finally turned to look at her. His face was a cold mask of indifference, but she got the impression he was holding back bewilderment.

"I do not know, although it may be false to say I didn't have any intention." He stopped, noticing Harry move forward threateningly. "I certainly was as surprised as you to find myself in your thoughts. I did not cast any spells, or even think them."

Harry narrowed his eyes at their teacher. "What were your intentions?"

A detached part of Hermione's mind was amused at the role reversal of Harry and Snape. They both still looked at each other with complete loathing, but now Harry was the one with authority. Harry looked every bit as scary as Snape ever had.

Snape huffed in frustration. "I wanted to know..." He watched Harry's demeanor and sighed, as if bowing to the inevitable. "I was reading Miss Granger's essay and noticed tear stains. I was curious as to the circumstances creating her... emotions." He flicked his eyes over to Hermione again, but returned to the safety of Harry's anger.

"When I looked up from her essay, our eyes met, and the next thing I knew, I was seeing her thoughts. I broke off eye contact as soon as I realized where I was." He turned to look at Hermione steadily, although avoiding her eyes.

"I did not mean to intrude, Miss Granger. I do not know how it happened."

The classroom was silent, awaiting Hermione's response. She looked at Snape, and had the mad urge to unleash all her frustrations and rage on him while he was down. She knew, though, that she really didn't want the consequences of that path. She also knew that he was telling the truth. It had been an accident.

Her voice was icy when she finally replied: "If you ever violate me again, Professor, I will make sure Dumbledore and the governors know about it, accident or not." Snape's curt nod assured her he understood.

She grabbed Harry's bag and shoved it into his arms, forcing him to lower his wand.

"Let's get out of here." She tugged on Harry's arm to get him moving, and was grateful when he acquiesced. As she followed Harry out of the room, Hermione cast a quick backwards glance at Snape, who was still sitting on the floor, and caught him aiming his wand at Harry's back. Not thinking, she stepped into the line of fire, and looked at Snape. Their eyes locked and his aim faltered for a moment, before he lowered his arm and looked away with a scowl. Hermione backed out of the room, making sure she could see Snape until she was safely out of range.

XXX

Neither Hermione nor Harry spoke on their way to the Great Hall for lunch. Both wore identical expressions of controlled fury, which sent many younger students scuttling out of their way. The small detached part of Hermione's brain was wondering if they looked as scary as Snape did when he was on a rampage, but she quickly shifted her thoughts away from the Potions master when her wand began emitting sparks.

When they reached the Great Hall, it was almost comical how the crowds parted to let them through. They reached their table and sat down, only vaguely aware that everyone was watching them.

They angrily served themselves generous portions of lunch, ignoring the curious glances their housemates were giving them. It wasn't until Ginny sat down several minutes later that either said anything.

"What's wrong with you guys?" Ginny whispered, not wanting to be heard. She might as well have yelled the question, because Harry's words weren't missed by anyone present.

"HOW COULD YOU let him off so easily?" Harry roared at Hermione. Hermione turned and glared at her best friend.

"It was an ACCIDENT, Harry, or don't you believe him?" Hermione shot back.

"No, I DON'T believe him. He's lied to us before now, so why wouldn't he try to save his sorry arse now, when we really could hand it to him?"

"You know as well as I do he had to lie those times. He's actually been more honest with us than most."

"I don't believe it. You're DEFENDING HIM after what he did to you?" Harry's food lay abandoned on the table, and he was standing before her, his arms held rigidly at his

side, and his hands bunched into fists. He looked ready to punch anyone who came within reach. In a quiet voice oozing disgust, he said, "You *do* fancy him, don't you? You're a right sicko."

"HARRY JAMES POTTER, YOU TAKE THAT BACK THIS INSTANT!" Hermione was standing with her sparking wand in hand before she knew what she was doing. She was distantly aware of her words ringing in the silence of the Hall. Noticing movement from the staff table, she pocketed her wand without taking her eyes off Harry's angry face. She could feel the onset of tears again, but she was too angry to care.

"How dare you insult me like that? I'm only giving him the benefit of the doubt, which you would do if he were anyone else, and if you think that I could EVER fancy someone who did that to me on purpose, you can... can...." She couldn't get any more out, because midway through her tirade Harry's face softened, and with it her anger vanished. All she could feel now was the sense of irrational shame over what had transpired. Harry, sensing her mood change and vulnerability, quickly pulled her into a bear hug, and rocked her gently, giving her quiet words of comfort.

"Shh, I'm sorry. It'll be okay," he whispered to her. Hermione's legs failed, and Harry helped her back to her seat, never letting go. Ginny came over and started rubbing her back soothingly while she sobbed into Harry's robes. Overhead, Hermione could hear Professor McGonagall asking Ginny what was going on. Ginny murmured something about her brother, and assured her that everything was fine. Hermione was both grateful for Ginny's lie, and upset that she was grateful. Did she really want to protect Snape?

After a few moments, Hermione withdrew from Harry, taking Neville's proffered handkerchief. She was surprised to see Professor McGonagall kneeling before her, looking like a worried mother.

"Are you all right, Miss Granger? Do you need to go to the infirmary?"

Hermione sniffed and shook her head. "I'm just a little stressed, Professor. I'll be better after I eat."

McGonagall did not look convinced, but stood up nonetheless.

"Very well. If that is all that is wrong, then one point from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for causing such a scene." McGonagall gave Hermione another sharp look, then retreated to the head table. Hermione laughed softly at Harry's look of indignation.

"It's okay, Harry. We did deserve it."

"I don't know," Seamus cut in loudly, "I think you should have received points for providing us with mealtime entertainment." Snickering was heard throughout the hall at the comment, and he grinned cheekily at them before returning to his lunch.

Harry and Hermione smirked ruefully at each other, then turned back to their cold food, though neither had any appetite remaining. They picked at their lunch for a while until the hall started clearing out. When the three of them were pretty much alone, Ginny turned to Hermione.

"What did he do to you?" She said in a hushed voice. Hermione knew Ginny had figured out who 'he' was when she had lied to Professor McGonagall, but wasn't sure whether she wanted to talk about it yet.

"He invaded my mind."

Ginny gasped, looking at Harry for confirmation.

"He used Legilimency on you in class?" Ginny sounded outraged, though her voice was still quiet.

"Not according to him," Harry spat.

Before Hermione could say anything, a large barn owl dropped a letter in her soup, distracting her from her friends' hissed conversation as she fetched it out and cast a drying charm on it. Her name was written in a very familiar spidery script that she knew belonged to Snape and no other. She was finding it rather difficult to breathe as she stared at the soup-stained letter in her hand.

Harry and Ginny noticed her hands shaking as she turned the letter round, and stopped their mutterings about 'gits' and 'bats.' They anxiously watched as she took her wand, undid the parchment's magical seal, and read:

Miss Granger,

After reviewing the events of this morning whilst in a more rational frame of mind, I find that I owe you an explanation. It was never my intention to invade your privacy as I did, however, I must confess to being overcome by curiosity as to what could affect you so greatly to produce tears. It is possible that my desire to know produced a subconscious version of the Legilimens spell, and if that is the case, please accept my humblest apologies, both for the invasion and my reaction thereafter.

I have told the Headmaster everything that transpired. He believes that although my theory is feasible, it is unlikely due to how I physically reacted to the transgression (when using Legilimency I have never before felt ensnared as I did this morning when looking in your eyes). He refused to expound on his theory except to say that a 'convergence of energy' might have linked us temporarily.

Whatever the cause, I am sorry for the pains you have suffered.

Sincerely,

Severus Snape

Mutely, Hermione handed the note over to Harry and Ginny, who eagerly scanned the message. When they finished they both were as breathless as she was.

Ginny was the first to recover. "If that's not Snape being romantic, then nothing is."

Harry harrumphed at Ginny's pronouncement, while Hermione quirked an eyebrow but remained silent. Privately, she agreed.

Ginny looked thoughtfully at Hermione, then scanned the nearly empty Great Hall. She started, suddenly realizing that afternoon classes were due to start in five minutes. They all rushed off to their advanced level classes knowing they would be late, but hoping there would be only a minimum of points taken from their group. Fortunately for Harry and Hermione, their class was Transfiguration, and other than taking five points each, McGonagall didn't press the issue.

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At the end of class, Hermione let her thoughts drift back to the letter from Snape. She was so intent that she almost missed McGonagall calling her name.

"Miss Granger." The tall woman was watching her with a steely gaze, as if trying to gauge how to approach the girl.

"Yes, Professor?" She noticed Harry standing in front of McGonagall's desk.

"I wish to discuss the reason behind your altercation in the Great Hall this afternoon."

"I'm sorry professor for the outburst. We..." She trailed off, not wanting to lie to her Head of House, but not knowing how to avoid the embarrassing details.

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by McGonagall. "I received a note from Professor Snape explaining the events of the morning." Hermione cringed and lowered her head, irrational guilt surging through her. McGonagall must have noticed, because her tone was softer when she continued.

"I understand the anger you're feeling towards Professor Snape at the moment. It is never easy to deal with a betrayal of trust, even if it was accidental."

"How can you be sure it was accidental?" Harry asked, his belligerent tone belying his calm demeanor.

"I have known Professor Snape for many years, Mr. Potter, and I consider him a good friend, despite his, shall we say, less pleasant characteristics. I have never known him to intentionally hurt a student in his care."

"He's been teasing and provoking Hermione ever since this bloody law business came up!"

McGonagall's eyebrows went up for a second, and her lips twitched, indicating her surprise, but she covered it well. "Indeed?" she said, in a tone eerily similar to the Potion master's. She looked from Harry to Hermione, who nodded.

"I wouldn't say he's been teasing me, precisely, but in our last few encounters he's definitely been trying to make me lose my temper." She shrugged. "I don't know whether that was what he was trying to do in class, though. He seemed pretty upset about what happened as well."

"Not sorry, though." Harry pointed out, petulantly.

"In the letter he did." Hermione pointed out.

"Only conditionally. *If* that was the case," which is just Snape-speak for him trying to weasel out of any blame."

Professor McGonagall sighed, as if seeking patience, then stopped the argument with a loud *ahem*.

"Mr. Potter, I have known Professor Snape for nearly thirty years now, and I have only once heard of him apologizing outright for any of his behavior, and that was for joining Voldemort. You'll forgive me if I believe myself to be a better judge of Professor Snape's character than you."

"He apologized to *me*!" Harry nearly shouted.

Professor McGonagall looked at him through her square spectacles and raised an eyebrow inquiringly.

"Just after Hermione received the Phoenix Fire, he apologized for killing Ron and maybe Hermione, too."

She looked to Hermione, her gaze carefully shrouded. "Before we condemn Professor Snape, maybe it would be best to gather all the information. Would you tell me your side of the events, Miss Granger?" she said

Hermione sighed, knowing resistance was futile, and replayed her memory of that morning. After she had told McGonagall everything, ending with the letter, she sighed, shaking. The feeling of helplessness was still deeply troubling her. She had helped Harry defeat Voldemort, but was almost literally drowned by a look? The thought was more than a little unsettling. She felt McGonagall's gaze, and looked up.

McGonagall was indeed looking at her, but shrewdly, as if seeing her for the first time. "Hmm," was all she said at first. After a few moments under her steady gaze, Hermione fought the urge to squirm. Finally, McGonagall pursed her lips, and softened her features.

"I think I'll leave you to your decisions." Her tone was a dismissal.

Harry looked at McGonagall, and said rather petulantly, "What? He's just messing with her. If he could apologize to me, why can't he say he's sorry to her?"

She looked at Harry impatiently. "Mr. Potter," she said in an exasperated tone, "will you *never* learn to read between the lines?"

Confused, Harry opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again as Hermione took his arm and led him out of the classroom, saying thanks and good-bye for both of them. They headed for their common room slowly, each mulling their own thoughts.

She was wondering what Dumbledore meant by a 'convergence of energy.' Did it mean that she and Snape were connected in some way that she couldn't see? And why was Snape concerned about a few tear marks? Was he in love with her? He never apologizes... that was what McGonagall implied, anyway. Did McGonagall think Snape was a better choice?

After they'd been seated in front of the cozy fire for a few minutes, she came back to the present and found Harry and Ginny looking at her expectantly.

"What?" Hermione said.

"You looked kind of dazed there for a bit." Ginny smiled kindly. "It looked like you were on the verge of solving a problem or something."

"I suppose I was." Hermione tone was still far away, and she bit her lower lip nervously, trying to decide how to approach the situation.

"What did she mean about your decisions, Hermione?" Harry asked. Hermione looked up at him, and was surprised at the hard look he was giving her, as if he knew the answer but wanted her to deny it.

"She was referring to whom I marry."

"But you've already made your decision, haven't you?" Harry looked like he was getting angry, though Hermione wasn't quite sure why.

"Yes, but it isn't final until... well, until I say 'I do'."

"Dumbledore announced Remus' wedding. If you back out now it will be humiliating for him."

Hermione looked at him shrewdly, compressing her lips in annoyance.

"True, but that's not the real reason you're upset, is it?"

"No, it isn't. I'm angry because I don't understand how you can consider that bastard! Not after today."

"Didn't you hear Professor McGonagall, Harry? She told us that Severus *never* apologizes! What was that letter if not an apology?"

"That doesn't make what he did right, or how he made you feel."

"Yes, but it probably was an accident. I really don't think he did that on purpose."

"How can you know, though? He's nothing if not manipulative, and that's all he's been doing. He could be lying through his teeth about not using Legilimency on you, and

because he's been in your head he knows how to manipulate you. He knows what to say for your heart."

"Harry, looking at everything from an objective standpoint, I can't believe that. Everything points to him caring for me. You were the one who pointed that out to me, for Merlin's sake!"

"Yes, well, that was before he hurt you. That's not love."

"You've hurt me before, and I've hurt you. We still love each other." Ginny pointed out to Harry.

"That's different, and you know it. Neither of us have deliberately violated each other like that."

"But how can you be so sure he did it deliberately?" Hermione countered.

"It's SNAPE for God's sake! He is nothing if not deliberate!"

Hermione closed her eyes and sighed.

"Okay, for the sake of argument, let's say he is just being a manipulative bastard out to ruin my life. The question for you is why he's going to all of the effort? It would be so much easier, and probably more satisfying, to just sit back and watch Remus break my heart. Why would he interfere in that process if he didn't care at all?"

"It's not guaranteed that Remus will break your heart. It seemed like you were fairly happy about the decision at breakfast."

Hermione sighed, realizing she hadn't told her friends about her latest conversation with Remus. She wasn't sure she wanted to, either. She considered what to say carefully.

"Remus has told me not to trust my heart to him. I won't explain why, as that's none of your business, but I am sure it will be a loveless marriage. Snape knows this." She paused to think of a way to explain the situation. "I'm not exactly thrilled with any of my options, you know. Remus is a good guy, but won't love me. Snape is a bastard, but it looks like he does love me. If I go for a Muggle marriage then I might be tossed out of the wizarding world. Even Snape is better than that."

She paused again, noticing Harry's anger had diminished considerably. A crucial point suddenly appeared in her mind. In a small voice, she asked, "Harry, if I chose Severus, would you still be my friend?"

Harry's eyebrows shot up, his jaw dropped, and he gave a sharp laugh.

"Hermione, I will always be your friend, even if you choose Goyle for a husband." He smiled at Hermione for the first time since Potions. "I just don't want you to get hurt, and I really don't trust Snape on that count." For what felt like the hundredth time that week, Hermione felt her eyes filling with tears again. Harry came over to sit by her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder protectively while Ginny knelt down beside her knees and laid her head on Hermione's lap.

They sat there for a few minutes in silence, listening to the quiet buzz of conversation going on around them. Ginny looked up at Hermione with an earnest expression

"I was only teasing before, but do you fancy Snape? I suppose it's the really crucial question."

Hermione sighed, yet again. "I don't know. Before class today I think I did fancy him a little. And then that letter... If he would just show me a little respect then I think I could love him."

"Have you told him that?"

Hermione smiled ruefully. "I haven't had the nerve." She looked at her friends plaintively. "Not a very good Gryffindor, am I?"

Harry laughed at that. "I don't think Godric himself would have been brave enough to face Snape like that."

Hermione smiled, and mulled over her situation a little more. Finally she came to a decision.

"I need to go talk to Remus, although maybe I should talk to Severus first. I'll probably regret it for the rest of my life if I don't clear this up beforehand." She disentangled herself from her friends and got up with a determined grace. "Wish me luck," she said over her shoulder, as she made her way through the portrait hole.

AN: As always, huge thanks go out to my betas, both for their excellent work and for their cheerleading. I really do appreciate it. Also, as you may have noticed, I'm back. Sorry for the delay, but RL does have precedence. And, fortunately, when my computer crashed, it didn't take the C drive, and the rest of the written story, with it (only the D drive was lost). I'll try to update as soon as possible, and hopefully that'll be within the week, but no promises.

As Night Falls

Chapter 10 of 15

Hermione searches for Snape before talking to Lupin. Mild violence and other adult themes.

Disclaimer: The characters have never been mine.

AN: I am **so** sorry about the wait, but believe me, it is way better for it! Belgian chocolate truffles to my betas and brit-picker. Thank you, dolls!

Chapter 10: As Night Falls

Hermione made her way down to the dungeons, figuring she should have the details before talking with Remus. He was under enough stress without being thrown back and forth with her decisions. If Snape couldn't respect her, then the issue became moot.

She started off resolutely enough, but could feel her courage waning with each step down into the dungeons. It seemed as though the increasing chill of the dungeon drained a little more of her willpower with each step until she reached the foot of the stairs, shivering with dread. The short walk from the stair base to Snape's office door was one of the longest in her life. No matter how badly that first conversation had gone, this one could be ten times worse. For this one, she had to give him the advantage of knowledge. She had to reveal her feelings. She shivered again.

Knees shaking, she stood in front of his office door for a minute, trying to regain her composure. She raised her hand to knock and noticed it was blue from the chill. That trivial detail reassured her that her nerves were, in fact, fine; she was shaking from the cold more than anything. She hoped. She would know for sure when she was face to face with him.

None too gently, she knocked on his door, making sure her back was straight and her head was held high. She remained that way for a full minute while waiting for him to open the door before knocking again, slightly harder. After another minute of standing there in the empty corridor, she let her shoulders slump from the anticlimax.

He wasn't in.

Grunting in frustration, she looked into the classroom to see if he was lurking in there, but it was dark and empty. The dungeons were devoid of any sign of life.

Swallowing her relief, she bit her lower lip and debated what to do next. She really didn't want to speak with Remus before clearing the air with Severus, but if Severus wasn't in the dungeons, where might he be? The staff room, of course!

She turned and headed up the stairs with more determination than spirit, hoping she wasn't embarking on a wild goose chase.

Half an hour later, she left the staff room with mixed feelings. On the one hand, Snape wasn't there, meaning she still had to decide whether to give up or not. On the other hand, Snape wasn't there, so she still could give up. Maybe it was a sign, an omen that she shouldn't ignore. She snorted at the thought, figuring it was all a matter of timing, nothing else.

Looking absently around her, she quickly compiled a list of likely Snape hideouts. Besides his private chambers (the bat cave?), there weren't many likely places, and she refused to confront him on his personal ground. Doing so would be foolish at best, dangerous at worst. The only other place she could think of was the library.

Smirking, she thought it would be poetic justice indeed if he were there, as it was the last place she would look. She would talk to Remus after the library, Snape or no Snape. Maybe the library would radiate its hidden knowledge, and she would come up with an idea of what to say...

The library had more students than usual, mostly fifth and seventh years who were starting to think about their upcoming exams. Most of the tables were taken, and as she maneuvered around the aisles, she noticed that even the restricted section's cubbyholes were occupied. Justin and Hannah waved to her from one table, and further down the stacks, Blaise acknowledged her with a nod, but after thirty minutes, she left the library without finding the man she sought.

Sighing in resignation, she made her way out of the library and headed for Remus' quarters. As she walked, she contemplated what she could say.

Remus, we have to talk

No, already that was wrong. She hated when people said that. Not only was it a cliché, but nine times out of ten the people were already involved in a conversation when those words were used, making the phrase redundant. Besides, why would she be visiting Remus if it weren't to talk? She blushed, realizing he was her fiancé, and most engaged couples did not spend their time talking. Ah, well.

Sorry, Remus, I know that the wedding's been announced, but I'm having second thoughts. I now believe that Severus does love me, even though I haven't talked with him to confirm it, but on the off chance that he does, I want to hold off on our engagement, because, you know, being married to a git like him is better than being in a loveless marriage with a werewolf.

No, that would not do either.

Remus, I've been having second thoughts.

Better.

When I chose you, I truly believed that Severus didn't love me, that he was only using me for his own diversion. Today, well, today he...

She paused, stumbling for the right words. Once again she had reached Remus' corridor while lost in thought. She wasn't ready to face him, though. She still hadn't figured out what to say or how to say it. She looked around for inspiration and noticed the walls lined with golden pink stripes from the sun shining through the arrow slits. She walked over and gasped as she looked out on the sun-bathed grounds.

The sky was alive with a majestic sunset, mare's tails streaking fuchsia across the fiery sky. The hills were transformed into living objects almost breathing with the energy of the sun as they glowed, backlit, warm red and orange, while the forest was deep green velvet, tipped in gold. As the sun dipped lower into the horizon, the clouds shook off their silver linings and donned gold for a few glorious seconds.

The sun had almost set when Hermione finally found the right words and turned to knock on Lupin's door. The door clicked open on her first knock, revealing a sliver of the dark room beyond. She opened the door a bit more and entered cautiously.

"Remus? Are you here?" she called out. A feeling of unease was growing in her gut; the room was too dark for her to see anything. She jumped when the door snapped shut and disappeared behind her.

"Hermione?" A strangled voice called out from the corner, barely recognizable as Remus'. "G-g-..." The sound was choked off with a cry of pain. Hermione moved toward the voice automatically before realizing with a start that the moon was full and on the rise. She'd been so overwhelmed by the recent events that she had completely forgotten the moon's phase. A jolt of terror passed through her as she remembered the last time she had seen him transform. Before she could give in to her impulse to run away, however, she remembered the Wolfsbane Potion. Dumbledore wouldn't allow an unsafe werewolf in Hogwarts.

Taking a fortifying breath, she took a step closer to the dark corner. If Snape refused her, she would be witnessing the transformation every month for the rest of their life together, so she might as well get used to the process so she could better help him through it.

Her vision was slowly adjusting to the darkness, and she could finally make out a faint movement of dark on dark in the corner. She started walking in that direction, but stopped cold when she heard a growl. Every hair standing on end, she forced herself to look into the darkness toward her betrothed. Straining to see, she latched onto two dim yellow orbs, which were watching her intently. She shivered involuntarily, not liking the wildness in the gaze, but stood her ground until Lupin stepped forward into the dim light, snarling at her.

Only then did she realize her mistake. Snippets of that conversation with Snape flashed through her mind, and she knew that Remus had taken an experimental potion. He wasn't tame tonight. He was a full-blown monster, and she had become easy prey by walking into his stony lair.

She backed up slowly, never taking her eyes off the animal. She fought every instinct to turn around and run for safety, but a long time ago she had read that when confronted with a wild predator the worst thing a person could do was run away. Running ignited their natural hunting instincts. But then, most wild animals were afraid of humans. A werewolf's main prey was man. She hit the wall, and her incremental retreat stopped.

She wanted to head for the door, but some inner voice told her not to break eye contact with the beast. She chewed on her lower lip unconsciously while trying to

remember where the door was. She started moving to the left when a thought struck her painfully: if she tried to escape, but failed to get the door shut behind her, she would be unleashing a terror onto the school. She couldn't let that happen. It was better that only one immensely stupid person died, rather than dozens of innocents.

Then, she remembered that there was no door to head towards. Remus had said something about this wing being a haven or a prison, and Hermione could now see which one it was for him. She idly wondered whether the door was charmed to disappear at sunset every night or just at the full moon. She then wondered if the door disappeared on both sides or just from the inside.

Swallowing every instinct, she stood still and watched the wolf. Trying to remain calm, she found herself comparing reality to her dream. Reality, she decided, was much, *much* scarier. She whimpered as he walked under a lone candle floating overhead, and she saw the taut muscles flexing and extending under his matted fur. Neither looked away from the other, and even though she had resigned herself to death, she let out an involuntary shriek when he crouched to spring.

Suddenly, the door flew open, distracting both of them. Working on instinct alone, Hermione broke eye contact and sprinted toward the opening before her, hope pushing her forward. She was closer to the door than Lupin was, and maybe the distraction gave her enough of a time advantage.

She felt the energy of the beast behind her as he leapt forward. She was only a few feet from the door when she was enveloped in a swirl of spicy darkness. Before she could even breathe, she was thrown harshly into the hallway. She half stumbled, half fell, and watched as the door to Lupin's quarters was slammed shut by Severus Snape.

Without even glancing at her, he waved his wand at the door, invoking a powerful ward. He stepped back when a blood-curdling howl of frustration escaped the door's protection, then cast a Silencing Charm as well. Panting slightly, he turned around to face Hermione.

"*Stupid girl!*" he yelled. Hermione had never seen him so angry before. His face was devoid of any color, his lips were tight and drawn back, making it seem like he was baring his teeth at her. His arms were rigid at his sides, and his hands were balled into white fists. Green sparks emanated from his wand as he advanced on her in two giant strides.

"What the hell were you doing?" If anything, his voice had gotten louder, and he was now trembling with rage. If she hadn't been in shock already, Hermione would have cried in fear. As it was, she cowered, not bothering to search for her voice.

"I suppose you came down here for an evening tryst with your fiancé, forgetting, in your childish enthusiasm, what phase the moon was in before rushing into his arms. If I hadn't been here to ward the door, or worse, hadn't heard you scream and had warded you in with him, you would be dying a most excruciating death right now! What on earth possessed you to be so stupid, girl?" He stood over her, crossed his arms and glared for half a minute.

Hermione looked up at him.. Her eyes were wide and glassy, and though she tried, she couldn't seem to focus. The detached part of her mind was commenting coolly on the situation, telling her she was in shock, but she was, in fact, still alive. She was only vaguely aware of anything, until Snape extended his hand to her.

As she took his hand, reality came rushing back. She started shaking madly, and her stomach roiled from the excess adrenaline. Stepping back to lean against the wall, she brushed a piece of hair away from her face, noting absently that her cheek was wet. She closed her eyes and concentrated on calming her breathing, forcing herself to slow down, to regain control. Unable, or unwilling, to open her eyes, she instead opened her mouth and spoke.

"I'm sorry, sir." Her voice was barely audible, but words started flowing freely. "I honestly forgot it was the full moon. When I saw him transform, I assumed he had taken the potion and would be safe. By the time I realized that wasn't the case, it was too late. The door was shut, and even if I had reached the door, opening it would have risked releasing him into the school." She stopped, opened her eyes, and looked up at him. He was still very angry. "Thank you, sir. I had given up hope."

"I would have thought you of all people would know better than to make such a childish assumption."

It might have been the shock, it might have been the adrenaline, but whatever it was, something in Hermione snapped, and her temper flared full force.

"Just because I made a mistake does not make me a child!" she yelled. "But then, it's not like I have other things to think about, no. I imagine to you all my concerns are petty and childish, not worth your time of day. However, I'm finding the current events taxing enough to distract me from trivial details like Astronomy."

"Trivial details, indeed! In case you aren't aware, those trivial details are crucial when marrying a werewolf, or was this just a trifling experience to you? Gryffindor bravery will get you killed if you aren't careful, my dear."

"Yes, well, that's why I was here in the first place, you git. I was having second thoughts about this arrangement." She pushed off the wall and advanced on him. "And for heaven's sake, stop impugning Gryffindors all the time! If you had more Gryffindor bravery, I wouldn't be here in the first place."

He sneered at her unattractively and raised an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"Because if you weren't such a bloody coward, I would be marrying YOU!"

Her words echoed down the corridor for a split second before Snape closed the gap between them. Without warning he dove down and possessed her mouth with his, holding her face with his hands, and pressing his body against hers. He forced her up against the wall, refusing to release her mouth until she was pinned between the stone and his body. He then removed his lips from hers and nipped his way down her neck in a way that made Hermione shiver in delight.

His hands released her face and snaked down her body, caressing every curve possessively. When he reached her breast he cupped it with one hand and kneaded it softly, working his way toward her nipple. When he reached it, he played with it teasingly, causing Hermione to close her eyes and groan, reluctantly giving up her indignation for the passion he was inciting. She started kissing him back, unaware of anything beyond his desire. His energy was invading her, and as he reclaimed her mouth, she was so overwhelmed by the sensations that she couldn't think anymore. Her body took control, forcing her to tilt her hips to meet his.

Somewhere, deep inside, she knew it was wrong, but his force was intoxicating, overwhelming all better sense. Her hands found their way around his back, hugging him to her more tightly. When he took his hand away from her breast, she moaned in protest until she felt him snake his way through her robes, touching her bare skin with his bony hands. Any inner protest she had was obscured under the electrical storm of her nerve endings coming to life. She didn't offer any resistance to his deft movements, which quickly left her disrobed.

The air felt cold on her skin when he stopped kissing her and withdrew slightly, causing her nipples to harden before he ducked down and took one in his mouth. The sensation was so intense she yelped and arched her back, forcing the areola further into his mouth.

His hand trailed down her torso so lightly it was almost tickling her. Her skin was so alert to his touch she could feel the tingles all the way to her core well before he reached it with his fingertips. When he did touch her, she jumped, completely unprepared for the jolt of energy it inspired. She had stopped thinking long before, but that jolt reawakened a part of her mind that started screaming at her to stop.

As he explored her, she started whimpering. She didn't want the feeling to end, but she couldn't shake the feeling that it was all wrong somehow. Something wasn't right about the situation, but she was so overwhelmed by the passion raging through them that she couldn't think properly.

"Severus," she panted into his ear, trying to get his attention. He moaned in response and moved up to kiss her, taking her breath away as he ravaged her mouth with his tongue. She felt his hands disappear from her body and fumble with something around her belly. When she felt his flesh against hers, her eyes snapped open in alarm, knowing without a doubt where they were headed. It was then it hit her: Remus. Engagement.

Betrayal.

She wrenched her head to break away from the kiss, but he just continued to kiss her neck and position himself against her.

"Severus, stop," she panted. Her panic level was rising along with a bit of bile. She felt out of control, as helpless as she had that morning. She summoned up all her remaining will and forced her body to become rigid.

It only took a moment before he looked up at her, a question in his dilated eyes.

"Stop," she said softly, hoping he would listen to her plea now that she had his attention.

He withdrew instantaneously, a look of horror pasted on his face. She quickly drew her robe around her, covering her bare torso protectively.

"You were... I... Oh gods," he said, stumbling over his words as he looked at her in dismay.

Hermione took a shuddering breath and released it before she lifted her hand to stop his stuttering.

"Severus, I just... It felt wrong somehow." She continued her explanation, though noting him bristle slightly at the implication. "It felt like I was betraying Remus. I... you... we were moving too fast for me to even think about what we were doing, and what you were doing to me felt so good it overwhelmed my better judgment."

The dismay had receded from his face, replaced by a hard sneer.

"It's easy to be overwhelmed when you're new to an experience." The words were almost kind, but his tone was pure virulence. He was obviously not taking her rejection well. "Did Weasley never give you satisfaction?" He continued, "The werewolf doesn't offer the same thrills when he paws at you?"

Hermione bristled at Snape's tone, yet tried to control herself. She tried to see beyond his bitter words, but failed when he continued to attack.

"And what has the werewolf done lately to deserve your loyalty? I'm the one who saved you tonight from his clutches. Do I not deserve some loyalty?"

Hermione was repulsed by his sentiment and couldn't stop herself expressing it.

"Serving under Voldemort has left you with a really horrid sense of the word loyalty, Professor. Remus deserves my loyalty because he's been kind, honest and respectful to me, which is a hell of a lot more than you've been."

"Ha!" Snape exclaimed, devoid of any humor. "He's been honest with you, has he? Are you naive, girl, or just stupid?"

"He's been *completely* honest with me. No hiding behind masks. No giving half-truths for explanations. No shield of anger to protect himself. He's been open with me in a way that you seem to be incapable of. Unlike you, he's told me how he feels with no expectations or manipulations. Neither of us is exactly happy with this situation, but we at least can discuss it like adults without resorting to mind games or insults."

"Was he honest with you during your little interview or after your eavesdropping experience? There's a difference between giving information out freely and getting it by force."

"He volunteered it! I didn't know it was discussed that night until right now. And that's the good thing about Remus: he gave me the information I needed, freely and of his own will. He didn't barter for power, nor did he willfully omit information that could have seriously hurt me. That alone makes him honorable and worthy of my respect and loyalty!"

A muscle in Snape's eye twitched, but otherwise his face was a cool mask of indifference.

"Yes, the noble Gryffindor is obviously most deserving of your loyalty and affection. That's why you came here with second thoughts?"

"I... you're twisting my words to suit your cause, but it's not going to work. I can't believe I thought for a moment that you might be a better choice than Remus!" She tossed her hands up in the air in a gesture of frustration, ignoring Snape's startle.

"What the hell are you talking about, Miss Granger?"

"Your letter and the fact that a kiss and a grope, no matter how good, is never going to change the fact that you're an utter and complete bastard who delights in making me miserable!"

"What in my letter could possibly have inspired such inanity?"

She laughed bitterly. "Your letter made it seem as though you wanted to make amends. I mistakenly believed you might have my best interests at heart. Ha!"

"I've saved you haven't I? It seems as though I've been doing that quite frequently, doesn't it?" Snape hissed out through gritted teeth.

"All hail the conquering hero, your worshipfulness!" Hermione said in a falsely sweet voice while making a show of a fake bow. "You have my everlasting gratitude, and you'd have my undying love," she dropped all pretense here, "if you weren't such a complete arse!"

He advanced on her, swelling with rage. "I don't care how slighted you feel you are; when speaking to me, you WILL show me the respect I deserve!"

"Oh? And how much respect do you deserve?"

"I am your teacher and as such -" He broke off, interrupted by her harsh laugh.

"I think we stepped way beyond that particular boundary tonight, don't you?" He stopped with a frozen look, though he still radiated anger.

"Do you want to know the really stupid bit?" Hermione continued, taking advantage of Snape's silence. "I was actually trying to find you today to see if you cared to be my husband and savior. I looked everywhere for you to ask one simple question to determine whether I could ever love you. But I see now you weren't worth the time and energy." Her anger had all but disappeared, leaving behind a mixture of resentment and pity.

"Why on Earth...?" Severus asked rhetorically. He had been momentarily stunned out of his sneer.

"I thought I saw the man behind the bitterness and thought you wanted a chance at happiness." She looked at him with sad eyes, trying to penetrate the mask. Softly, she added, "I can't imagine living without love as you do. It must be horrible."

She realized as soon as the words left her mouth that pity was not Severus' favorite emotion. He lunged forward, grabbed her arms and slammed her against the wall with a fierce growl, fury radiating from him.

"I will not be pitied, Miss Granger, most certainly not by a little upstart like you. You don't have any idea what motivates me, or what makes me happy, so don't even try to assume so."

Before that night, Snape's action would have terrified her almost beyond reason, but not any more. She had been through too much. Instead she looked him in the eyes and saw the emotion hiding beneath the anger. She saw the pain of worthlessness and betrayal, and surrounding all, the hurricane of fear. She saw him as a real man for the first time in her life and knew he was a hopeless cause.

He was so wrapped up in his own tortured world that he would always be pushing her away. Even if she could learn to love him, living with him as he was would be untenable for her. Nothing she could do or say would bring him out of his cell, and forcing the issue would only destroy her.

"No, I don't know you or your motivations." she calmly responded. "But you've just proven my point, Severus. Remus deserves my loyalty because he wants it and works to deserve it. He might not be my Romeo, but he at least offers me friendship. He offers me himself, warts and all, without having to lash out. At least he wants to give me his heart, even if he can't."

She continued looking Severus in the eye and watched him process her meaning. She didn't need Legilimency to see the conflict raging in him. Suddenly the conflict stopped, or else he covered it, as his face became a blank mask once again. He released Hermione and stepped back, a grave indifference about him.

"If that is your decision, I wish you luck, *Mrs. Lupin*. You will need it." He turned to go, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm. He looked down at her hand as if it were an insect to be swatted, then at her face, barely concealing his bitterness.

"I never expected a bold statement of love from you. However, you've done nothing to recommend yourself, and I can see now that you aren't likely to change," she said softly, trying for the last time to explain.

Snape just looked at her, and with a trace of a sneer, said, "You assume too much." He then walked off down the hall leaving her alone with her regrets.

Fallout

Chapter 11 of 15

Hermione deals with the aftermath of Friday.

Disclaimer: If Rowling and I traded places for a while, it would be a rather large news story. You would be reading about it all over the place, and not just on fan sites. Since there seems to be a distinct lack of news concerning me, you can rest assured that I am not Rowling, and therefore, do not own the characters herein.

Chapter 11: Fallout

By the time Hermione made her way back to the common room, she was emotionally spent. Her legs were weak and her mind was reeling from all that had occurred that day. Harry and Ginny were playing a not-so-friendly game of wizards chess as she entered through the portrait hole, and greeted her distractedly.

"So, how'd it go?" Harry asked, not really looking at his friend as he was intent on mating Ginny.

Hermione gazed into the fire, trying to find a suitable answer. Finally she sighed. "You know, when I woke up this morning, I actually thought it might be a good day. Silly me, I thought that life might actually be worth living. I thought that I *actually* had a chance to *actually* be happy. I realize now that I was *actually* being intensely stupid and horribly naïve, and that life will, in actuality, never, ever, *ever* get any better, no matter how hard I try, or what decisions I make."

Ginny didn't take her eyes off the board. "It went well, then?" she asked innocently.

Hermione snorted. Her snort grew into a snicker, which became a giggle, which became a belly laugh in no time. She was on the verge of hysterics when she stopped laughing rather abruptly. She found her friends looking at her with bewildered expressions.

"What happened?" Harry asked, completely serious now, and more than a little afraid that his friend had lost her sanity.

"Let's see. This morning Snape unwittingly forced himself on my mind, then writes a letter that could be deemed an apology, which is something he *never* does, just to completely fuck with my head. I decide, for God knows what reason, to go look for him, and what happens? *I can't bloody find him* So, I give up. I decide to go talk to Remus, forgetting, in the chaos that is my mindset, that the moon is full tonight, and that Remus is undergoing experimental potions that make him seriously un-tame."

She paused for breath, noting her friends faces had turned from worried to horrified. "Don't worry, as you can see, I'm still hale and hearty, thanks largely to our dear Potions professor, who, after a few choice words on either side, gave me a rather fierce tongue lashing leading to..." Slightly amused at Harry's expression of horror and disgust, she paused again, before finishing lamely, "An almost bad situation."

"What the hell happened?" Harry had yet to reach a critical anger level, but Hermione hoped to avoid any display of his temper. She was pretty sure she wouldn't be able to deal with it tonight.

"I just told you."

"What did you mean by, 'an almost bad situation'?" Ginny, of course, latched on to the one thing Hermione had really not wanted to go into or even think about.

Hermione covered her face to stifle the scream she felt building in her chest. After rubbing her face vigorously a few times she dropped her hands and looked at her friends.

"Listen, I know that you want answers, but I've had enough. What I need right now, more than anything else, is to go sleep this adrenaline off. I'll discuss it with you in the morning." She stopped Ginny from saying anything with an upraised hand. "I will be screaming shortly if I don't go right now." And with that, she got up and left, leaving her friends completely flummoxed.

She stormed off to her room and warded the door firmly shut. No one, no friends, no werewolves, no Snape, not even the Headmaster, was going to bother her that night.

She undressed, changing into her night clothes as quickly as possible to avoid seeing the bruises developing on her body. Snape had not been gentle in any of his actions that evening. He had literally thrown her across the corridor when he saved her from Lupin, and then had pinned her against the wall - twice. She was sure her back would be marked.

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Saturday

She was rather surprised to find herself waking the next morning to a loud rhythmic thumping. Sleep had been completely unexpected, and she had no memories of dreams or even being sleepy the night before. Slowly gaining consciousness, she groaned as she rolled over, deciding to ignore the person at the door.

"Come on, Hermione!" a muffled voice said, barely audible. "We're taking you down to breakfast whether by choice or by force, so you better be getting ready!"

Hermione snorted. She was pretty sure her friends would not be able to undo her wards. Then again, how long had they been at her door? Given enough time, Harry would be able to crack them, especially if he had Ginny's help. That red-head was better than her twin brothers for getting around obstacles, if she really felt the need.

Groaning again, she muttered that she'd be there in a moment, and got up. Her back objected painfully as she hobbled across the room to the lavatory. She hoped she had some potions in her cabinet to ease the pain; walking down to the Great Hall would be torture without some medicinal help.

Looking into the mirror she gasped. Though her face was looking less peaky than it had in ages, mirror image bruises on her arms caught her attention. She touched the darker one tenderly, noticing how small her hand looked compared to the purple hand print wrapping itself around the curve of her shoulder. Cupping it gently, she noticed it was sore, but looked much worse than it felt. She twisted round to see how her back had fared, but was surprised to see only a slight reddening on her shoulder blades. Her back felt like her arms looked.

Another rapid knock on the door startled her out of her macabre thoughts, and she quickly started her ablutions. She had just finished brushing her teeth and had headed back to her bedroom to dress, when the door burst open and her two friends spilled into the room, headed by Professors McGonagall and Snape, both looking concerned.

Hermione squeaked and covered her chest with her robe, while her Head of House looked both embarrassed and relieved, turning quickly to chivvy everyone out of the room, lest they see too much. Hermione's mortified gaze was on Snape though, who was looking aghast at her exposed arms.

He wrenched his eyes up to meet hers for an agonizing second, his shocked face open for her to read. Emotions filled his normally blank face, fear and self-loathing being the easiest to read. She felt like he was almost pleading with her, asking forgiveness, or understanding, but not expecting it. He broke eye contact first, looking back down at her bruises, his brows contracting with a violent flinch.

"It seems that Miss Granger is just a little slow this morning, not suicidal as you all feared. Now I suggest we leave her room and allow her to finish her preparations," McGonagall said in an icy voice, which was nothing compared to the look she was aiming at her colleague, whose eyes had become glued to Hermione's chest. After making sure everyone had left the room, McGonagall turned and pointed her sharp eyes at Hermione, her mouth tightening when her eyes passed over the bruises.

"Severus came over to discuss last night's adventures with me. I suppose Mrs. Potter interrupted before the tale was finished..." McGonagall mused distractedly, as though to herself. She abruptly brought her eyes up to Hermione's and continued in her normal brisk manner, "It seems as though your friends were concerned about your well-being when they came to fetch you for breakfast and encountered your formidable wards. Combined with their description of your mood last night, they understandably feared the worst," McGonagall explained. "I apologize for our intrusion, though you could have simply put up a do not disturb note, or let us know you were all right vocally, my dear." She looked at Hermione's arms again, and pursed her lips a little more.

"I -" Hermione was cut off in her own defense with a wave of McGonagall's imperious hand. The professor's voice was softer when she continued speaking, ignoring Hermione's interruption.

"I want to see you eat a good breakfast, Hermione, after which the Headmaster expects you in his office to discuss... everything." Her teacher turned around, and Hermione almost missed the next sentence; she wasn't sure she heard right when the Professor said under her breath, "Meanwhile, I am going to have a little *chat* with that pitiful excuse of a man. See if I ever sympathize with him again."

McGonagall closed the door behind her, leaving Hermione feeling a tad on the shaky side. Not only had her wards been broken and her room invaded, but she had been assaulted by the look on Snape's face when he saw the bruises. He was obviously horrified and ashamed.

Nothing's ever simple, she mused. She wanted to label Snape as evil and just be done with him. However, the look he had given her was too raw and vulnerable to ignore completely, though she could always try.

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When she and her friends entered the Great Hall, Hermione was relieved to find it nearly empty. The few students who were there didn't even give them a second glance, to which Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. Last night's adventures weren't common knowledge, yet. She dreaded telling her friends what had happened.

As if on cue, Ginny chose that moment to ask, "So, what happened last night, 'Mione?"

"Have I ever told you how much I loathe that nickname, Ginevra?" Hermione replied, knowing how much Ginny hated her full name.

"You're not getting me off-topic that easily, Hermy," Ginny continued, disregarding her friend's glare. "Judging by how upset you were last night, and Snape's reaction this morning, I know *something* happened."

"How did you get those bruises?" Harry's voice was quiet and unassuming compared to Ginny's, but it caught their attention quickly. Ginny looked from her husband to her friend, her eyes narrowing with judgment.

"What did that bastard do to you?" Ginny's voice was hard. Harry looked at her confused for a second, before a red wave of understanding swept through his face. Before he could speak, though, Hermione held up her hand to still him.

"Harry, don't do anything rash. It's not like he beat me up or anything. You know that I wouldn't stand for that, and that he would have been tossed out of the school before dawn if that were the case." Harry seemed to calm down a bit, but she could tell he was not in a receptive frame of mind. "Look, I'll tell you what happened, but you have to swear that you'll leave Snape alone, at least until the end of term. Hexing a teacher is just such bad form."

Harry smiled reluctantly at her bad joke, and agreed. "That's only if he doesn't lay a hand on you again, mind," he warned. "If he hurts you again..." He didn't need to finish the threat, as they all knew what he was capable of.

"Just remember you have a wife now, Harry. You have a responsibility to not be a stupid prat, landing yourself in Azkaban," Ginny warned in a tone eerily similar to her mother's.

"Ginny, if I want to hex Snape's bollocks off because he's the world's biggest prick to Hermione, then that's my prerogative and the only say you have is where I should hex them to."

Ginny's glare at her husband was fierce, but her angry retort was interrupted by a wistful sigh from Hermione.

"You two are so lucky, you know that, don't you?"

Ginny and Harry were both stunned out of their argument and looked askance at their friend. They set aside their differences with one side glance confirming the other's thoughts: Hermione had gone off the deep end.

"You two love each other so much, and you know it," Hermione continued, ignoring their side glances. "You're safe in your arguments to say what you feel because you know each other and trust each other to not overstep. You know each other's boundaries... I'm envious."

"Yeah, what woman doesn't dream of fighting with her husband?" Ginny said sarcastically.

"Come on, Ginny, you know what I mean. Look at me and Remus. Yes, we're going to have arguments every now and again, but they'll be polite. We both know that if we have a major blow up we'll just be tearing our very fragile relationship apart."

"Yes, but that relationship isn't going to be fragile forever, Hermione. You'll grow together and learn each other's boundaries, like Harry and I did during our friendship."

"But you and Harry had open hearts. Remus... I don't have that option."

Ginny looked at her, a stalled look on her face as she suddenly understood the situation. "Oh no. Don't tell me he's pledged..." she trailed off as Hermione nodded sadly.

Ginny got up and rushed over to hug her friend, knowing now that the situation was hopeless.

"Oh, Hermione! Why are you going through with it then?"

"What other choice do I have, really?"

"What about Snape? I'd wager anything he loves you. You should have seen his reaction when I told McGonagall that we thought you might be hurting yourself. He looked like he was about to be ill he was so green, then suddenly started questioning me really quickly. He was like a man possessed."

"He probably felt guilty. I'm sure he thought he was the one who 'pushed me over the edge.' He's the one who gave me these bruises, Gin." Hermione sighed, but continued quickly seeing Harry's finger his wand. "He didn't mean to, and frankly, that's even scarier. We had a big blowup last night, and things got carried away. I was so high off of the adrenalin that I didn't even have the sense to be scared of him." She told her friends exactly what happened as she remembered, even the appalling truth of how much she had desired him.

"And then he said, 'You assume too much,' and strode off into the night, leaving me completely alone."

To Hermione's surprise, Harry defended Snape.

"Hermione, for a brilliant witch, you certainly can be stupid sometimes."

"What's that supposed to mean, Harry? You're not saying that Snape was actually in the right, are you?"

"Of course not, but don't you see what he was doing first?"

Hermione stared at him, trying to figure out what he was talking about. Ginny cut in.

"He was *showing* you he cared, then you rejected him. Not that that's any excuse, mind."

Hermione's mouth dropped open in horror. "But, I wasn't... it was... Oh *bugger!*" Hermione dropped her head to the table with a thunk. "I told him it felt wrong." She left her head on the table, trying to think everything through.

"Even if we did manage to sort everything out, given that I'm so clueless, he still isn't someone to mess with. He did hurt me."

"Do you think it was intentional? Did he mean to hurt you?"

Hermione laughed bitterly. "How many abusive people actually 'mean it', Ginny? They always have their excuses." She shook her head in disgust. "He lost control, Ginny. If I had acted the wrong way he might have done more than just squeeze my arms and slam me against the wall. He might have lashed out with fists, or worse yet, his wand." They were silent for a bit, lost in thought. Eventually, Hermione added reluctantly, "but seeing his face today when he saw the marks... it was obvious he was disgusted with himself. He really didn't mean it, nor was he aware of how much force he had exerted."

"That's one of the problems, though, isn't it?" Harry said. "Whenever he loses control he wouldn't realize he was hurting you until it was too late, and the damage was done. It only escalates."

Hermione nodded, but Ginny furrowed her brows.

"I just wonder how long it will take before your relationship with Remus sours, though."

"Why is it such a hopeless situation with Remus?" Harry asked, still not clued in.

"If what I gather is true, Remus has magically bound his heart to someone else. It can't be undone. He'll never love Hermione and if she chooses him and falls in love it will always be unrequited." Ginny explained. "The worst thing is that it's the one time when you do die from a broken heart. Even if Remus' beloved died, it would just mean that Hermione would become a widow."

Harry digested the information slowly. Hermione could see him trying to understand what exactly her decision entailed.

"I've never heard of a successful relationship with a bound and non-bound couple. Usually the non-bound person ends up mad or killing their spouse," Ginny continued to Hermione.

"Do you really think I would kill Remus, Ginny? He's my friend. We'll work something out so that we'll both be as happy as we can be."

"You don't understand. There's strong magic behind a bound heart, that's one of the reasons it's illegal. Once invoked, the hearts become one and together they either grow strong, if the love is equal, or kill each other off if it's tainted. In theory, it can be a powerful means for change, because love can't be contained. It radiates off people. And that's why the spell is considered dark magic - love is an attractor. With a bound heart, the love is so strong that you *will* fall in love with Remus, it's just a matter of when."

"Doesn't it have an antidote of some sort, something to protect the unbound person?"

"Nothing's been found yet. How do you kill love without becoming dark?" Ginny continued while Hermione paused to chew on that thought. "It is like other magics though. The stronger the person withstanding it, the longer it takes, but talk about constant vigilance! You'd never be able to let your guard down around Remus."

"What happens when one person binds their heart, but not the other?" Harry asked curiously.

"The bound person dies. It's supposed to be like having your heart drained; it slowly withers away."

"So if Remus hadn't found her and bound himself to her, she would have died," Hermione said more to herself than her friends. She understood now why Remus had said, 'It was only fair.' Obviously their love was equally matched. Something still wasn't adding up, though.

"I've never come across any mention of this before. How do you know about it?" Hermione asked, while trying to think of what was wrong with the explanation.

"Back in the late 19th century one of my great aunts died because she had bound her heart to her lover. Her husband gradually went starkers and killed her, among others. My mum told the story as a cautionary tale to all of us kids. We didn't want to end up like Uncle Jack."

"Who would want to bind themselves in such a manner? I mean, what are the benefits?" Harry asked, rather disgusted.

"It's a grand romantic gesture, Harry. There are some people out there foolish enough to do anything for the sake of 'romance'. But beyond that, if the love is equal, it can be a really wonderful, overwhelming experience. Our magic is tied to our emotional center, and combining it with another's like that makes it possible to be very strong indeed. Also, I heard the sex becomes almost literally divine."

Harry smirked at Ginny and waggled his brows at her. "Oh, so there's no reason at all for us to consider it," he teased. Ginny reached around Hermione and smacked Harry on the arm, scowling.

"What I don't get," Hermione said, ignoring the banter, "is why Remus' beloved's husband hasn't been affected. Shouldn't he be mad, or have tried killing her by now? It's been something like twenty years."

"Maybe he is mad. He might be interned at St. Mungo's like the Longbottoms. That wouldn't release her from her vows."

Harry was rubbing his forehead unconsciously, concentrating hard. He finally sighed and looked at Hermione.

"Don't consign yourself to misery just because Ron is gone. He was a good mate, but I'm sure he was not the only person you'll ever be able to love."

Hermione was floored. "What should I do, then? After last night Professor Snape isn't an option."

"Why not?" Ginny asked.

"He lost control, Ginny! He's always been a bastard to us, he's mean, vindictive and petty. I would be stupid to believe he would change all that just because we got married."

"But if he loves you..." Ginny protested.

Hermione sighed and rubbed her forehead aggressively before looking at her friends. "Did I ever tell you about my Aunt Amy?" she asked, knowing the answer. It was not something she liked talking about. When her friends shook their heads, she resigned herself to continuing.

"Amy wasn't really my aunt, she was my mum's best friend from Uni, but she was like an aunt to me. She was so wonderful - clever and kind and beautiful and vivacious. She heaped affection on all of us, because that's the kind of person she was. Whenever she came over she would bring me a book to borrow. I always got the impression she was invincible. Needless to say, I adored her.

"Anyway, when I was nine, she met a man, *Uncle Richard*," Hermione's voice grew quite bitter upon saying his name, and her nose wrinkled in disgust. "She fell head over heels in love with him and they got married within the year. I met him at the wedding and though he seemed charming enough, there was something I didn't like about him, and I didn't know why. My parents explained the nature of jealousy to me, but it was beyond that. Everyone shrugged it off as an irrational, childish reaction because to everyone else it was obvious how in love they were.

"After she was married, Amy didn't come by for quite a while, which I was told was perfectly normal for a newlywed. Finally, after a few months, she and Dick came by for dinner.

"He still seemed charming and affable, but his jokes all seemed to be based on Amy's faults. I was looking for it, but even my parents caught it. Amy, however, seemed not to notice. She thought he was hilarious.

"The next time Amy came by for afternoon tea, my mum harassed her about it. Amy insisted that *Richard* was just being funny; it was his way of showing affection. My mum rightfully called that poppycock. Amy got really mad and stormed off, not talking to my mum for ages. Amy didn't forgive my mum until I was about to head off here.

"Long story short, it wasn't until last Christmas that Amy admitted that she needed to leave Dick. She was almost unrecognizable from the woman I had grown up with. No longer vivacious at all, she looked spiritually beaten. She'd been convinced that Dick was the right man: that despite his faults he was good and honorable. It had broken her when he'd finally hit her.

"She was smart enough not to tell him she was leaving him when she finally got the nerve to go, but... he came home unexpectedly when she was finishing up packing, and he went into a rage. From what I've been told, he lost all control. She died that night from internal bleeding, he beat her so badly."

Hermione stopped. Harry and Ginny looked at her with sympathy for a moment, before Harry got up the nerve to speak.

"I'm sorry about your aunt, but she loved her husband. Do you think she would have been so vulnerable otherwise?"

Hermione closed her eyes, praying for strength. "The only difference her love made was how fast he managed to break her. I'll admit that it would probably take more than a few years for Snape to get me to that state, but you're the one who pointed out how manipulative Snape is, Harry, how he's been in my mind and might know how to get into my heart. Besides, after all I've been through this week I realize I'm not as strong as I was before the war, emotionally. I don't know how much resistance I would have to his manipulations and put downs."

"But if he loves you..." Ginny repeated.

"I'm pretty sure Dick loved Amy, too, in his perverse way. By all accounts he was devastated when she died. He didn't even offer a defense. He just lost control over his rage."

"But Lupin-"

"Is the best choice I have. Even if Snape hadn't bruised me, I will not marry a man with control and anger issues. The wedding is supposed to be tomorrow. It's been announced, even if most people don't know I'm involved. Besides killing myself, which I will *not* do, there isn't another option, short of bowing to the law."

"What about a random Muggle?"

"I was joking about that. There's the distinct possibility that I would get tossed out of the magical world if I did that, and if I didn't have magic, both my husband and I would be sitting ducks. That's why I'm getting married in the first place - before the law passes."

The three of them were silent, each trying to think of a viable option. After a while Hermione sighed and stood up.

"Professor McGonagall said the Headmaster wanted to see me after breakfast, so I should go. Thanks for listening, guys." She bid them adieu then walked off, hoping she had chosen the better fate.

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When Hermione knocked on Dumbledore's office door, she was called in with a gentle "Enter." Dumbledore greeted her from his desk with a friendly, albeit slightly worried, expression.

"Please, have a seat, Miss Granger." He waved her to a comfy chair, and waited until she was settled before continuing.

"I talked with Remus earlier this morning and he was very concerned about your well-being. I am most relieved to see you are in good health. I also had a quick chat with Severus and Minerva. It seems many people were concerned about you this morning." He paused to look at her over his half moon glasses, but she ducked her head in

shame, wanting to avoid his gaze.

"I'm sorry to have caused trouble, sir. I don't really have any excuse."

"My dear girl! We are all concerned about your well-being, and if that's trouble, we all participate willingly. You are not to blame for the circumstances you find yourself in. If you've been a little more reckless than usual, I think everyone understands that you've been under extraordinary stress lately, and we're all aware of how stress can modify behavior. Just look at Professor Snape. Under normal circumstances I believe he has the most self control of anyone I've ever met, but under extreme stress even *he* can lose that careful control."

"Are you trying to excuse what he did?"

"I am aware that he saved you from Remus last night." His tone was carefully neutral, which made Hermione snort. She could tell he knew the edited version.

"Yes, he did. I'm very grateful to him for that."

"But there is something you cannot forgive him for?"

Hermione sighed and looked up at Dumbledore. He was observing her carefully, as if trying to figure out the best course from her reactions.

"He did several things which would be considered unacceptable, but what I can't forgive him for is violating my trust in him. He lost control twice yesterday, and that scares me more than my experience with Remus did."

Dumbledore looked at her carefully for a minute more, then leaned back in his seat, sighing slowly.

"Yes, the breaking of trust is a most serious offense. One that takes the longest to recover from." He smiled sadly at her. "Irony, really. The only reason he lost control in the first place was because he was so worried about you."

"I don't believe it," Hermione said flatly. "He has been nothing but cold and calculating towards me. He hasn't ever shown an ounce of concern!"

"We all show our emotions differently, Hermione, as you know. Severus may not be a conventionally pleasant person under the best circumstances, let alone under duress, but he snarks because he cares."

Hermione stared at the Headmaster as if he was mad. She could understand the logic, but it held no emotional resonance for her.

"And that excuses his treatment of me?" she said rather shrilly.

"No, my dear. He had no right to lose control, but it is not as if he raised his hand to you."

Acting before thinking, Hermione whipped up her sleeves, revealing the proof of Snape's lack of control. Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up and a flash of rage coursed through his eyes for an instant, though he tempered his face so quickly she almost missed it. He contemplated her bruises for a moment before saying anything.

"At what point did you receive those marks?" His voice was less tender, though Hermione understood he was not angry at her.

"I think it was during our last argument. That was when he grabbed me and..." Hermione trailed off, realizing that she was getting Snape into a load of trouble, but it was too late to stop at that point. Dumbledore looked at her to continue. "He grabbed me and slammed me into the wall," Hermione finished in a resigned tone. Dumbledore's face grew a notch tighter for a moment, then relaxed into a sad frown.

"I see," was all he said.

"Sir, there's no excuse for what he did, but at the same time, I know that he had no intention of hurting me. When he saw the bruises this morning -"

"When was that?" Dumbledore interrupted sharply.

"He was with the rescue squad." Dumbledore gave her a relatively blank stare in answer. "Harry, Ginny, Professors Snape and McGonagall broke into my room this morning thinking I was suicidal. I was just slow getting up. They kind of caught me in a state of undress, which is how Professor Snape saw the bruises." Dumbledore nodded his understanding, looking thoughtful, if annoyed, and waved her to continue.

"Anyway, when Professor Snape saw the bruises he looked mortified. I don't think he had any idea how much strength he was putting into his actions. I don't think it should qualify as an attack on me, sir."

"Conscious attack or not, it was completely inexcusable. However, I will deal with him later. For now I believe we have other topics to discuss."

"Sir, before we move on, may I ask when you talked to the Professors?"

Dumbledore sighed slightly, an unusual rancor about him. "I last spoke with Severus during our breakfast with Remus this morning, but I spoke with Minerva not half an hour ago." Hermione heard the bitter edge in his voice, and was glad she wasn't in Professor McGonagall's place at the moment. She wondered why the Professor didn't tell Dumbledore about the bruises.

"I see," she said faintly.

"I believe the important question now is whether you still wish to proceed with the wedding tomorrow?"

"Er, I don't really see any other choice, sir." Hermione answered. Frowning her brows and biting her lip she added, "Isn't Remus usually pretty worn out by the end of the cycle?"

"Usually, yes. The fortunate result of the current experimental potion is that his transformations aren't nearly as taxing. He will be tired, but not ill."

"Oh, well then, that's good." Hermione was struck by an irrational wave of melancholy thinking about how after tomorrow she would be a married woman.

"My parents won't be able to come, will they?" Hermione's eyes shot open in realization and she clapped her hand over her mouth in horror. After a startled moment, she lowered her hand to speak. "In fact, do they even know about what's going on? Oh my Lord, they're going to be so upset that I haven't told them anything. If I just bring home a husband after term and say, 'Hey, mum and dad, I'm home, and by the way, I had to get married over Easter to avoid a Death Eater plot, and this is my husband. Don't worry, he's a nice guy. I've known him since he was my Professor when I was fourteen!' they will *kill* me, after figuratively and literally drilling Remus to pieces."

Hermione was almost hysterical when she finished her little monologue, but Dumbledore calmly responded before she could think more on her parents' reactions to her accidental silence.

"They already know about the arrangements, Miss Granger. I alerted them myself as soon as I knew. I thought you would be otherwise occupied for the time being." He offered her a smile, along with a lemon sherbet. Accepting the sweet, she calmed down as she digested the news.

"And as for them attending your wedding, those details have already been arranged. They will be arriving at 1:30 this afternoon via portkey." Hermione looked at him in disbelief for a moment as he winked at her, before an enormous grin overtook her face. The difference was astounding to her appearance, and Dumbledore smiled back

beatifically in response.

"Oh, thank you Professor Dumbledore! I have been dreading going through this without my mum here. I know I'm supposed to be grown-up now, but..." a lump in Hermione's throat cut her off as she tried to explain. Dumbledore patted her hand from across the desk, still smiling at her.

"There, there child. Just because you are of age now does not mean you need your mother any less. I still wish I had my mum to talk to every now and again. She always had such sensible advice." Hermione smiled as she wiped her eyes with her robe.

"I am so glad. Thank you," she said, sincerely.

"It was the least I could do, considering the circumstances. I know this isn't an easy decision for you."

"What decision?"

"You've always had options open to you, you just deemed them either inappropriate or unacceptable."

"Frankly, I don't find this option either appropriate or acceptable, but it's better than dying."

Dumbledore smiled at her, a small twinkle in his eye. "Indeed," he said jovially.

They discussed the basic wedding plans for the better part of an hour. When she was about to leave, Dumbledore stopped her.

"Oh, I nearly forgot. Remus would like to speak with you and meet your parents. I suspect he needs to be reassured about your well-being with his own eyes."

Hermione bit her lip again, a feeling of dread creeping up on her. "Of course. I'll let my parents unpack and then we'll go together. I'll be sure not to lose track of the hour this time."

Dumbledore smiled, and wished her a good afternoon.

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Hermione waited almost patiently in the Great Hall for her parents' arrival. She had opened *Runic History of the Ages*, but found herself repeating the same paragraph over and over without having a clue as to what it said. Finally she put the book down and looked at her watch again. 1:20. Ten more minutes.

She started pacing around the tables, counting the stones to keep her mind off of the inevitable meeting. The feeling of dread had been growing substantially all morning. She knew that her parents had to meet Remus at some point, and that they would probably object to his age and condition, but she hadn't really processed the knowledge.

They were going to go ballistic.

They would accept her decision, eventually, as they respected her choices, but they were not going to be happy about it.

"At least it isn't Snape they'll be meeting," she muttered under her breath. She couldn't even imagine how her parents would react to him.

A noise from the other end of the hall made her look up quickly in anticipation. Her bright face quickly darkened when she saw the dark figure coming toward her.

"What do you want, Professor?" she said, barely concealing her dislike. He stopped a few meters away, as if wary of her.

"I want the impossible, Miss Granger," he said sadly. Hermione looked at him more closely and noticed his frown lines were more pronounced than she had ever seen them. His back wasn't quite as straight as usual, and as she scrutinized him, he crossed his arms almost defensively. She had the impression of a man who was defeated, and she didn't like it at all. He was supposed to be the unbendable, unflappable, ever scowling Bat of the Dungeons. He was supposed to be confidence personified, even if overly cruel. To have him stand before her like a chastised school-boy struck down that last illusion of him as anything other than a mere human. She swallowed the lump of disillusion and tried to keep her face neutral.

"That isn't very precise, Professor. I suggest you come up with a more accurate answer if you want to be addressed with any respect at all."

"I have no expectations of respect from you, Miss Granger," he said as his face became hard with the words. She was opening her mouth to make another smart remark when he added, "Nor do I deserve any."

Hermione's open mouth dropped a little further. Snape was apologizing? It wasn't him. It couldn't be. It had to be a polyjuice replica. She was so intent on working out who the impostor could be she almost missed his next words.

"I had no idea I was so harsh last night. I hope that..." he paused, swallowing. "I am grateful you had the presence of mind to stop me before anything more *distasteful* came to pass."

Hermione snapped her mouth shut and frowned at the man before her. "That wasn't the part that pissed me off, you prick! Okay, that's not true, it pisses me off that you could be so disrespectful to Remus as to seduce me like that, but that's almost irrelevant."

She paused for a moment and frowned in thought. "Actually, never mind," she continued. "That's the heart of my problem with you. Disrespect. You demand respect from everyone, and as a teacher you deserve at least a modicum, but your own behavior is not above reproach. You taunt your students, terrifying them into puddles, then gleefully dock points and assign detentions if they happen to show any backbone. You are perfectly nasty to everyone you meet, yet expect them to lie before you in deference to your superiority."

"Last night's snogging session was betraying Remus, *my fiancé*, and the fact that you didn't realize how disrespectful that was, and then spurned my explanation because of your own hurt feelings was completely unacceptable!"

"I wasn't the one betraying Remus, if I remember correctly," he responded angrily, though carefully not moving toward her.

"Exactly my point, Severus!" she yelled. "You become defensive when I tried to explain that I have a code of honor, and cheating on one's fiancé definitely goes against said code!"

Snape went silent and looked away from her angrily. She moved toward him, concentrating on calming herself before she spoke again.

"Imagine if positions were reversed, and I had been kissing Remus while engaged to you." Snape grimaced, visibly trying to choke back his disgust at the thought.

"I wouldn't want to hurt you like that, just as I didn't want to hurt Remus. That you don't seem to understand..." Hermione let out a big sigh, trying to find the right words, but failing at that, she decided to move on.

"And then when you lost control and slammed me against the wall, well, that sealed the deal right there. You just can't do that. You destroyed any trust I had in you." Snape observed her standing out of his reach and set his jaw firmly. She could see shame filling his eyes in understanding. He swallowed again, and cleared his throat before responding.

"You are an insufferable know-it-all, aren't you?" he said almost affectionately. "Two points to Gryffindor for a well met explanation. I understand now, Miss Granger, but remember," his voice growing sterner, "you still owe me a life debt."

Hermione's eyes sparked in anger, which only intensified when she saw he was completely serious, and wasn't going to be denied. "You dare... you incorrigible... vile..." She trailed off, not able to think of words vicious enough to describe him.

"I cannot demand the payment I wish, nor do I deserve it," he said softly, and stepped up to loom over her, "but if you can ever offer me this, I will be *your* debt."

She crossed her arms and glared at him, incensed by his lack of tact. "What?" she spat.

"Try to forgive me." She waited for him to complete the thought before realizing that was the request. He looked down at her and deliberately let his mask down for a moment or two. She saw his pain and humiliation, and his overwhelming sorrow. It nearly broke her heart seeing how vulnerable he was behind all the fear and rage.

She could also see his desire for her, and something deeper and more reverential in spirit. Even in his cold black eyes she could see it might be love. It was a breathtaking show of trust. She stepped back, overwhelmed by his emotion.

Swallowing a sob, she nodded slightly. Snape went still before her, a stunned expression on his face. He leaned in slightly, as if to hear a whisper, disbelief written across his features.

"You will try?" he croaked out, his voice almost unrecognizable with emotion.

"I do," she corrected, earning another stare of disbelief, this one through bright eyes.

"Mind you, I still don't trust you, and if you ever treat me like that again you will face my wrath as well as my fury," she pointed out reasonably. "And after dealing with me you'll have to face Harry." Snape did not scoff as she expected, but merely nodded in acceptance, a whisper of a smile on his lips.

Her feeling of communion was shattered when a discreet cough alerted the two they were not alone. Spinning around, Hermione flushed when she saw her parents standing there, and wondered how much they had witnessed. The wave of relief at seeing the two loving faces quickly shunted the embarrassment to the side, though.

"Mum, Dad! I'm so glad you came!" she cried, running toward them with the enthusiasm of a child. They embraced in a warm reunion, and upon breaking, her dad directed Hermione's attention back to Snape.

"And this is Remus, I assume?"

Hermione flushed again, this time much deeper, before quickly saying, "Er, no, Dad, this is Severus, er, Professor Snape."

"Oh, pleased to meet you," he said, extending his hand to the professor, who shook it politely. Mr. Granger turned back to his daughter plainly confused. "The note we received said you were engaged to a Remus Lupin." he said. Hermione looked back at Snape, who had not reverted to his normal scowl; he had an almost pleasant look on his face, though there was a gleam in his eye she didn't like.

"Oh, I am," she said, and blushed even more deeply. She noticed Snape's face darken slightly before turning her attention back to her dad. "Remus would like to meet you today and introduce himself." Seeing her dad was still a little confused she elaborated, "Professor Snape was just here to offer some points toward solving a tricky problem we've been working on. I think we're now on the same page, though," she said, smiling over at him.

He arched an eyebrow and slowly shook his head in disagreement. His face was back to an almost pleasant demeanor, but there was a calculating look that disturbed Hermione.

"No, Miss Granger, I doubt we will ever be on the same page," he said in much harsher tones than he had used previously. He then smoothed out his voice and added, "I believe you are reading a very different book than I."

He turned to her parents, and said, "Your daughter has always exceeded my high expectations and always will. She is an extremely talented witch, and a beneficent person." He then bowed genteelly, and swept from the room.

"Your professor seems like a nice man," Mrs. Granger commented.

Hermione closed her shocked eyes and willed herself not to laugh.

AN: Before you flame me about Dumbledore using the word 'snarks', I do realize that it is a) not really in character, b) not an appropriate form of the word, and c) not really British, but I claim literary license for this one. My reason? It amuses me.

As much as I would like to promise a speedy update, I can't do that for the next chapter. I promise I'll get it out as soon as is possible, but in the meantime will post a teaser on my livejournal at some point in the near future. Cheers!

Et tu Brute?

Chapter 12 of 15

Hermione's parents meet Remus.

Disclaimer: Rowling puts Harry through extreme psychological and emotional turmoil. Harry's happy in this tale. I've obviously not Rowling.

AN 1: In canon Remus transforms only one night a month, but to suit my story's purpose, I've got him changing for three nights.

Chapter 12: Et Tu Brute?

After her parents had dropped off their bags and freshened up a bit, Hermione took them on a fast tour of Hogwarts as they walked towards Remus' quarters. She knew the questions would come, but still tensed when they started.

"So, darling, how are you coping with all of this?" her mother asked, worriedly.

"I'm coping quite well," Hermione answered blithely before pointing out an alcove to their right. "That tapestry is a magical depiction of the goblin rebellions of the seventeenth century. The stitching changes to follow the leaders of both forces in an endless loop." She paused briefly to let her dad examine the hanging more closely, then continued the tour, quickening her pace slightly.

"And, how is Mr. Lupin dealing with the situation?" her mum continued.

Hermione stopped walking, rounding on her mother. "What do you mean by that, Mum?"

"It must be difficult for him to renounce bachelorhood so suddenly, that's all," her mum said gently while giving her daughter a piercing gaze. "I wasn't insinuating anything bad about you, dear. I imagine any man would be thrilled to be married to you."

"Mum," Hermione hissed, "Please don't talk about this here where anyone could hear us. The students and teachers have been told Remus is getting married, but only a few know who the bride is. I'd prefer it remain that way for as long as possible."

"I'm sorry, dear. I just wanted to find out as much as possible before we met the man. I don't want to embarrass you with a crass comment or other faux pas."

Hermione looked at her parents and finally saw the worry etched on their faces. Closing her eyes and sighing, she nodded, then hurried them along their route, only stopping when they reached the corridor lined with arrow slits.

Gesturing to a stone bench, she paced back and forth, her hands clasped behind her back as she thought of what to say. Finally, she stopped and looked directly at her parents.

"How much do you know about Remus and this situation?" she asked.

"Albus has kept us briefed on the progress of the bill, so we know what it entails. As for Mr. Lupin, Albus told us he used to be your professor a few years ago, but he has worked for the Headmaster in other ways since the late seventies. He didn't tell us, but we inferred from that information that he must be quite a bit older than you," her mum said, pausing.

"Yes," Hermione confirmed. "He's about twenty years older than me. Although it may seem like a huge difference now, in a few years it won't be, and in the Wizarding world it isn't even an issue until the age difference is more than fifty years." Her parents nodded in understanding.

"Albus also mentioned something about Lycanthropy, but we didn't have the time to find information about that. Could you tell us about it, dear?"

Hermione paused. Age was a relative thing and her parents knew that. An incurable, contagious disease making the afflicted little better than a criminal was another thing completely. It didn't help that, without understanding it, Muggle authors had distorted and sensationalized the issue in popular novels.

She took a deep breath. "Lycanthropy is a powerful magic that transforms a witch or wizard into a wolf."

"Oh, so he's an Animagus like you want to be?" her dad asked hopefully.

"No, dad, he's a werewolf."

Hermione had expected many responses, but laughter was not one of them.

"Does he sprout patches of hair all over his face, like in those wolfman movies?" her dad asked, while chuckling.

"No, it's nothing like that. I guess the closest film has come to depicting the truth was *Werewolf in London*, but it's much more tragic and complex than that. These people are forced to undergo torturous physical transformations three nights a month, and if they don't have access to the Wolfsbane potion, they also lose their minds to the monster as well.

"Werewolves only prey on humans, so the law is forever watching and persecuting them, treating them like criminals. If Remus were ever caught biting someone, he would be executed without a trial and put down like a common animal. Their rights as people are almost nonexistent. Not only that, but if any werewolf ever did attack a human, they, well, they'd never be the same again. The monster takes over and eats away at their soul, and the urge to attack...." She stopped herself. "It's just bad."

Her parents had stopped laughing and were now looking at her in abject horror.

"You can't marry him," her mother stated.

"I've little choice in the matter, Mum."

"Yes, you do!" her mum exclaimed. "Being powerless under the law is better than being married to a monster."

"That's your prejudice speaking, Mum. You don't know Remus, so that's not a fair statement. He's never bitten anyone. He's only a monster three nights a month, and the rest of the time he's a very sweet person. As for those three nights, I will learn how to make the Wolfsbane potion, and Professor Snape will continue to experiment toward a cure." Her parents were looking at her as though she had gone mad.

"Listen, why don't we go meet Remus," she continued patiently. "I'm sure he'd be willing to answer all your questions, and you'll see he's not a bad sort."

Her parents reluctantly agreed, but were obviously on edge. Before they had gone many steps, her mum suddenly stopped cold.

"The full moon was last night!"

"Why, so it was. Any reason you bring that up?" Hermione said, not bothering to keep the sarcasm at bay.

"Well, isn't he still dangerous?" she said, a slight hint of hysteria in her voice.

"Not until nightfall, which isn't for a few hours yet. Trust me, he will kick us out well before he starts transforming. He doesn't want to hurt anybody, let alone his in-laws-to-be."

"How can you be sure? We might get caught up in a conversation, and you know how time just flies by when that happens."

"He'll feel it coming on. Thursday evening I was visiting him, and suddenly he got very anxious and politely shoved me out the door. He did it so gracefully that I didn't even know why until later." She decided to leave out how she remembered.

Her parents were slightly reassured by this, although her Dad gave her a baleful stare, presumably for taking such risks with her life. After a few more calm reassurances, Hermione was finally able to coax them down the hallway, and knocked on Remus' door.

"Mr. and Mrs. Granger, a pleasure to meet you at last," said Remus, when he opened the door. "I'm so glad you had the time to come up. Please, come in. Would you like some tea?" he continued, trying to set the Muggles at ease.

The Grangers looked around, saw no evidence of a monster waiting to gobble them up, and relaxed a little, letting common courtesy take over.

"That would be lovely, Mr. Lupin," Jane replied.

"Please, call me Remus," he protested.

"Mm," Jane replied noncommittally, though giving him a slight smile. "This is a very homey room you've got, although it seems a tad small for two people. Is this where you'll be living while Hermione finishes school?"

Hermione eyed her mum warily, as Remus gave her an appraising look.

"Well, I won't be at Hogwarts most of the time," Remus said, while giving Hermione a nervous glance. "Until Hermione leaves school, Albus thinks it best if she basically continues with her normal role. He thinks it may help keep the speculation down. Of course, the school governors don't exactly welcome my presence here, so it's also to keep them happy. The only reason I'm allowed to stay here at all is because this part of the school is nearly impenetrable to mischief." He looked at the Grangers for a moment before adding hesitantly, "You do know about my condition, don't you?"

Harold nodded while Jane continued her information quest.

"Yes, yes, Hermione just told us. Why are you staying here at all if Hermione's to be left by herself? Wouldn't it be easier to keep speculation down if you weren't here?"

Hermione sat down, feeling like a non-entity. She knew her parents had her best interests at heart, but talking about her as if she weren't there rankled. She testily poured herself a cup of weak tea and watched as the discussion progressed.

"Ah, well, you see, the Potions master here, Severus Snape, is currently doing experiments to improve the Wolfsbane potion, hoping to find a cure for Lycanthropy. The official argument is that it would waste too much of his valuable time to leave school grounds every time he needs to consult with me. It doesn't really sound like much of an argument, but Severus can be very persuasive when he needs to be. The governors agreed with a few security provisos."

"And what's the real reason?" Jane asked shrewdly.

"Unofficially, though Severus' time does factor in, it's really to make Hermione's life easier. There's no point in making it any more difficult than it already is."

"Her life will be made easier by marrying a werewolf?" Harold asked in measured tones.

"Dad!" Hermione admonished, hoping he wouldn't continue.

"It's a fair question, dear," her mum said, giving her daughter a quelling look.

"That would depend on who you ask, Mum! It might be fair to ask me that, but it's rude to ask Remus like that."

"Hermione," Remus cut in gently, "it is a fair question, and one they deserve an answer to." Hermione shrugged her acquiescence and settled back into the chair with her tea, trying to quell the peevish expression she knew she was wearing.

Remus studied the benign, middle-aged couple who were sitting politely on the chesterfield, looking for all the world as if they were discussing the weather, not their daughter's fate.

"No, her life will not be made easier by marrying me. It will be exponentially more difficult. I did, however, explain this to her in detail, and she still chose me," he explained in a rather resigned tone.

Hermione felt her parents' attention fall back on her, and she could feel the weight of their disapproval on her conscience. She became defensive.

"And yet, if I don't choose him, life would be even more difficult when a Death Eater petitions me. It was a choice between Remus and probable death. He's a nice guy who has given me hope again. Is that such a bad thing?"

"Sweetheart, it's my right and responsibility as your father to look out for your best interests. Your mother and I have always been proud of what a responsible and thoughtful young lady you've become. We've never had any reason to question your judgment, not even during that war of yours, until now."

"Dad," Hermione started, but was cut off as her dad turned to Remus.

"Remus, you seem like a decent fellow, but I just can't abide my daughter marrying a werewolf. I'm frankly astonished, and more than a little disturbed, that you and everyone else is just allowing Hermione to throw herself into danger like this!"

"I am not throwing myself into danger, dad! If you'd just-" But once again, Hermione was cut off, this time by Remus' response.

"Trust me, Mr. Granger, if the conditions were different, I wouldn't put your daughter in this position either. The problem is that she is too powerful and intelligent and, well, useful, to be locked away to breed, which is what the law will force on her when it passes. I don't want, I mean to say, your daughter is lovely, and I only want the best for her. I know I am not the best, and it tears me up that I seem to be her only option."

"What about Harry?" her mother asked.

Remus looked at Hermione, but seeing that she was too cross to answer, replied, "He just married Ginny. I know he would have offered otherwise."

"Well, there have to be some other boys willing to marry you!" her mother said, turning to her daughter, looking rather offended herself.

"That may be, but there aren't many boys I would want to marry, Mum. I put everyone who was willing through a test of sorts to see if we would be compatible. Only Remus and Professor Snape passed," she snapped.

"Well, what about Professor Snape, then? He seemed like a nice enough fellow!"

Hermione almost choked on her tea, then looked at Remus. They both tried very hard not to laugh at the absurd statement.

"He's not a nice fellow at all. He's a conniving, sadistic bastard whose main joy in life has been tormenting me and my friends for the last seven years," Hermione said, then added, with her mouth twitching, "Also, rumor has it that he's a vampire."

Her parents blanched at that before Remus laughed and disabused them of the notion.

"Severus isn't a vampire, though I can see how the rumor got started. However, he certainly isn't a pleasant fellow, most of the time." Remus turned to Hermione and added, "We chatted a bit this morning, me and Severus. I believe he's figured out that problem that's been bothering you. I wouldn't dismiss his unique solution just because it goes against some previous theories."

Before Hermione had a chance to respond, there was a knock on the door. Remus jumped up to answer, giving Hermione a meaningful glance as he did. Hermione furrowed her brow, trying to figure out how he could know about that conversation. She was wondering when Severus had the chance to talk with him when Remus opened the door.

"Speak of the Devil!" Remus exclaimed. "Severus, do come in. We were just talking about you." He opened the door further and waved the dark man in graciously.

"Lu- Remus," Snape said tersely, offering all the Grangers a polite bow, before turning back to the werewolf. "Dare I ask how I came to be the subject of your conversation?" His face was blank, though his eyes kept darting in Hermione's direction and were glittering strangely.

"We were just discussing Hermione's other options," Remus replied jovially.

Snape raised one eyebrow and looked at Hermione with something akin to amusement on his face. "Indeed?" he said, causing color to rise in her cheeks.

"Yes," she said, holding her head up and looking at him defiantly. "My parents wanted to know why I'm not considering a *nice fellow* like you."

Snape's other eyebrow shot up, joining the first near his hairline. He looked between Hermione and Lupin, then turned his attention to the elder Grangers, his lips twitching traitorously.

"I assure you, Mr. and Mrs. Granger, that your daughter probably has valid reasons to exclude me from her list of suitors, although I am honored you would consider me worthy of her."

"You aren't a vampire, are you?" Mrs. Granger asked forthrightly.

Snape chuckled softly. "No, I am *completely* human, madam, though the rumors and epithets suggest otherwise."

"Then you would be a better option than a werewolf," Harold said, giving Remus an apologetic glance.

Snape looked as if he were trying to hold back a gloating smirk. "Whether or not I am the better option is immaterial, as your daughter has already deemed me unacceptable."

Hermione snorted, causing everyone to look at her.

"What everyone fails to remember is that he was never a willing contender. You snorted at the mere thought on Tuesday."

"When was that?" he asked sharply.

"In Dumbledore's office, when he said that bit about everyone in the room being willing, I distinctly remember a snort coming from your direction."

Snape's smirk went away, replaced by a scowl. "Indeed, I did," he admitted. "However, you may have misinterpreted its meaning."

"Oh, yes, snorts are so open to interpretation," Hermione sneered.

Snape's scowl deepened, and through clenched jaw he said, "It was not directed at you, Miss Granger. The Headmaster's statement was a bald-faced lie, seeing as half of the people in the room were there by honor of life debts owed to Professor Dumbledore, not freedom of choice."

Hermione eyed him shrewdly while trying to remember the night more clearly. She still didn't trust his motives.

Snape turned from Hermione to her parents, and promptly changed the topic. "Although this is a most illuminating conversation, I did not come here for such a friendly chat. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, the Headmaster would like to meet with you whenever you have the time, though now would be especially convenient for him," Snape said smoothly. At the Grangers' questioning looks, he added, "There are documents that need your signatures. We don't want the Ministry claiming the marriage invalid because of a technicality, *do we?*" he said, looking at Hermione.

"I guess we'll have to continue this conversation another time, then," Jane said, looking between Hermione and Remus with a determined air.

Hermione got up to join her parents, but Snape stopped her, adding, "Your attendance is not required, Miss Granger. I'm sure you and your fiancé would appreciate some time to yourselves." Hermione glared at him and watched as he opened the door for her parents.

"If you'll permit me, I would be pleased to escort you to the Headmaster's office," he purred, becoming a courtly gentleman to good effect. Jane blushed slightly as Snape bowed to her while Harold raised an eyebrow in amusement. With a final nod, Snape shut the door, leaving Hermione and Lupin alone in his room.

"Who was that, and what has he done with Professor Snape?" Hermione asked, scowling at the closed door.

"Severus can be quite the gentleman when he chooses to be. Becoming a Death Eater actually taught him the basics of good social graces."

Hermione looked at him as if he were insane. "Oh yes, we should all thank Voldemort for instilling good manners among his minions, teaching them to bow to each other as they passed the victims 'round."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," Remus said with a bite of impatience.

Hermione closed her eyes to regain her fraying patience. "I'm sorry, Remus, it's just that a polite Professor Snape is a frightening thing. He's obviously plotting some nefarious deed."

"Mm," Remus said noncommittally. "He's probably figuring out how to seduce you," he said mildly, looking knowingly at Hermione, who blushed and looked down at her feet, unwilling to meet Remus' censure.

"He told you about last night, then?" she said quietly, not looking up.

"Yes, but he didn't have to. I heard and smelled everything."

"Heard? But I saw Severus cast a Silencing Spell."

"Silencing Spells only work on human hearing, Hermione," Remus said, sounding tired.

"Oh. Right," was all she could say. She sat in her chair feeling very foolish and more than a little cross with herself. She should never have acted so rashly. Her foolishness had cost her and Remus the slight amount of trust they had built since this whole fiasco started. All she could do was sit there awkwardly, trying to think of a way to make it better.

Before she could come up with any plan, Remus said innocently, "So, Severus is a 'nice fellow,' is he?" She looked up at him in amused shock for a moment before a giggle overcame her. Remus quickly joined in with his own chuckle.

"I really should correct that assumption of my parents, or who knows, they might try to set me up with him."

"Would that really be a bad idea?"

"Remus, you heard what went on last night! Do you really think I should marry myself off to a man who can't control himself?"

"Whom are you talking about? Severus or me?" Remus asked.

Hermione opened her mouth, but shut it quickly when she realized what he meant. The question hung in the air for a few moments before Hermione dropped her head into her hands.

"Damned if I do, damned if I don't," she muttered to herself. "Remus, I don't know what to do. He's been such a bastard for the past seven years."

"He at least loves you. I only wish I could."

"If last night was any indication of how he treats his loved ones, then I want no part of his love. He was as scary as you were. Anyway, are you sure he loves me, or does he just want to keep me away from you? He has shown me only the slightest bit of respect, unless you call his constant manipulations a form of respect, and I don't see how anyone can love someone they don't respect."

Remus sighed wearily. "This is what I know, Hermione. After you chose me, he came and told me that if I don't treat you right, he'll cause me grievous bodily harm. Then last night, I smelled his panic well before I heard him rushing in to save you. When he came to meet with me today, I was expecting him to hex me, but instead he damn near *apologized* to me. He almost broke down as he detailed what happened last night. He more or less told me how he feels about you, Hermione, and I'm a lamb if it's not love."

Hermione was silent for a minute, trying to wrap her mind around this new version of Snape.

After a while, she cleared her throat and spoke. "How can I discount seven years of observation, Remus? I've watched him closer than most of you realize, and he's...he's not nice. He's been horrible for my entire school career, delighting in humiliating us. He didn't stop after Voldemort fell, he just decreased the frequency of his attacks. He doesn't respect me, not really, and as a person, I don't really respect him. Mainly, though, I don't trust him. Besides, I like you and always have. Should I really marry someone I don't like or respect?"

"How long are you going to like me, though? And why do you respect me? I expect that neither feeling would last for more than a couple years, and personally, I expect to live at least another thirty."

"I'm far more likely to remain constant in my regard for you than to ever change my mind about Snape."

Remus sighed in exasperation. "Why are you being so stubborn about this? Yes, he despised you for most of the time he's known you, but that's a lot better than him having lusted after you from first sight, don't you think? You're a smart witch; surely you know people can change both their minds and outlooks? Use your head! Everyone can see he's the better choice *except* you."

Hermione stood up, suddenly enraged, her red face shining with fury. "Is that so? I forgot. Everyone knows my mind better than I do. Everyone knows what's best for me. Everyone in the whole fucking school knows me better than I know myself! Come off it, Remus," she yelled, stomping her feet in frustration. "*Don't* insult my intelligence. If you don't want to marry me, *just say so!*"

"Quite frankly, if you're going to act like an irrational child, then maybe we should call it off!"

"*I'm* being irrational? Remus, you're suggesting I marry SNAPE! A man who bloody slammed me against the bloody wall last night because I offered him some bloody sympathy!"

"Sympathy or pity? "

"Does it make a difference? He attacked me over nothing!"

"He said you had forgiven him," he said accusingly.

"I *DID!*" she screamed, then took a deep breath to regain control of her temper. With a voice of forced calm, she continued. "I have forgiven him for all his past misdeeds, but that doesn't mean I'm stupid enough to trust him again, especially not at close quarters."

Remus closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them he nodded his head in understanding. "Fair enough."

"Indeed," she said waspishly. He shot her a pained look.

"Why are you so set on marrying me, though? Surely one of the other men could offer you more happiness?" Remus asked reasonably.

Hermione sat back down, emotionally and physically drained from her outburst. Her voice lacked any emotion as she explained, "I charmed the questionnaire to detect compatibility. The charm said you and Snape were most likely to offer happiness. Kingsley came up as negative and destructive, and while George was neutral, it would feel incestuous to marry him. No others came close to being as compatible as you four."

Remus frowned in thought. "What spell did you use?"

"*Pax Amoris.*"

"And you're sure you cast it correctly?"

Hermione looked at him with a slightly injured air, then shrugged in defeat. "I'm not positive Snape's test was properly cast. It was the last one charmed, and I was very tired by the time I finished, but other than redoing his test completely, there's no way of knowing for sure."

"Why don't you? I'm sure he'd be willing to-"

"Because he is no longer an option, Remus. I. Don't. Trust. Him. He's far too powerful a man and wizard to safely marry without trust and respect on both sides."

She sighed, looking wearily at him. "If you don't want to marry me, then please tell me now so I can contact Kingsley and see if he's still willing. I guess it's possible that if we both work hard at it we wouldn't destroy each other in the end."

"The test said I was better for you than Kingsley?" Remus asked slowly, incredulously.

"The only one with a greater chance for success and happiness was Snape, and as I said, I suspect that parchment was faulty."

Remus studied her carefully. She could see a range of emotions flicker through his tired eyes, from fear to hope to loneliness. It struck her odd that he could be lonely even though he had a lover.

Finally he came to a decision. "I trust your skills," he said with a sharp nod. "Okay, I'll marry you," he said, and offered her a small smile. Relief filled her, as she jumped up

and hugged him.

"Thank you, Remus," she whispered in his ear, then turned her head to peck him on the cheek just as he turned his head to smile at her. They were unprepared when their lips met. Their eyes opened in surprise, but neither backed away. After a few seconds, they both relaxed into the kiss, and she closed her eyes as they explored each other's lips slowly, sensually.

Later, she couldn't remember when or how they had moved to the bedroom. All she could remember was being lost in the fog of his embrace. She felt so safe as his arms enveloped her, pulling her to him securely. She felt his wiry muscles against her softer curves and was too wrapped up in comfort to notice their feet moving. All she cared about was maintaining his kiss and the overwhelming relief it brought.

There was no need for thinking or fear. She felt her mind being covered with a squashy blanket of complacency, but didn't really care. All she wanted was for the kiss to continue, for him to hold her. Just as long as he didn't stop, everything would be all right.

XXX

She woke up with her head resting on his hairy chest. Her mind started whispering that something was wrong; it only took a few seconds before Hermione remembered the day, and more importantly, the moon phase. She quickly looked around for a clock and sighed in relief. There was still a good hour till sunset.

Relaxing back down onto his chest, she gradually let herself think of what she had done and what Remus had done to her. She didn't feel bad about it, but at the same time, she couldn't help feeling as if she'd been bewitched somehow. It had felt as if she was experiencing someone else's desire, not her own. The pleasure he had given her had been real enough, but again, it felt as if she had only been a conduit. It was almost as if he had been making love to someone else through her.

The thought shook her. Of course... He had been. She remembered being surprised and overwhelmed by the intensity of her feelings, and she realized why. She had been feeling his beloved's emotions. The intense joy and love she had experienced throughout- it hadn't been hers.

"Something wrong, my sweet?" Remus said, stroking her arm soothingly.

She sat up and looked at him, forgetting her modesty for a moment.

"Will it be like that every time?" she asked him, frowning.

His smile faded, seeing her expression. "Like what?"

"Like I'm just the go between. Like I'm an outsider in my own body."

He paled slightly, then sat up to look at her, his face serious. "I'm... I don't know."

"Oh, God. I can see now why the unpledged partners go insane. That's worse than Chinese Water Torture."

"Did I hurt you? I thought you were enjoying yourself," he asked, suddenly very worried.

She couldn't help laughing. "Oh, I enjoyed it very much, but not nearly as much as *she* did."

Remus swallowed, then said, "You felt Tara?"

Hermione nodded, wincing at the way he caressed the other woman's name. She wasn't sure whether she liked knowing the name of his beloved now that she knew it.

Remus was watching Hermione, an unidentifiable expression on his face. "I... You should know that I don't... I haven't ever made love with her," he said, eventually.

"But, I thought... I don't understand," Hermione said as she looked at him frowning.

"She and I have been unable to be with each other. At her father's insistence, a fidelity charm was placed on them at her wedding."

Hermione frowned a little more, questions pouring into her mind through every avenue. "So you two have never..."

He shook his head.

"But, I... how can you stand it? And what about her husband? Does he have any idea where his wife's heart is? And does he feel the same way when he and she make... have..."

"He never said anything to her. She didn't know the full ramifications of the spell when she cast it. By the time we met again and she told me what she'd done, he was already half mad. He had no idea what was happening, never having heard of the spell or symptoms. I believe he's a Muggle-born, and as you've probably found out by now, the written information on the spell is sparse."

Hermione looked at her fiancé in horror. Was this really the fate she wanted? "How long? How long did it take for him to go completely insane?"

"Five years."

The newly affianced pair stared at each other silently. After an age, Hermione looked away, biting her lip nervously. She didn't have any idea about what to do. Part of her wanted to call everything off and run away as fast as she could, while another part wanted nothing more than to hold Remus, to let him comfort her. She had enjoyed the comfort he had given so far. She turned her mind away from those thoughts and refrained from touching him.

"Is it addictive?" she asked bleakly.

Remus shook his head and shrugged. "I don't know."

She snickered despite herself as a rogue thought hit her. "Will I go blind?"

Remus looked at her askance, before starting to chuckle himself. "No, I believe that's reserved for those who don't have partners. But I do get hairy palms on a regular basis..." They looked at each other and started laughing, falling against one other for support. When the laughter died, they continued leaning against one another silently.

"I suppose I should go," Hermione said a few minutes later, when she suddenly felt the urge to kiss him.

"Yes, it's getting to be time." Remus swung his legs off the bed, and quickly pulled on his pants. Hermione gathered all her garments from around the room, and dressed quickly, keeping her back to Remus.

Back in the living room, they kept a discreet distance from each other, both lost in their own thoughts. Hermione slowly made her way to the door, trying to work out her feelings. As she opened the door, she faced him again, and looking at his sweet features, she knew she had to protect herself.

"I won't be able to put myself through that too frequently, you know. I don't think I'm a jealous person by nature, but I wouldn't be able to withstand that."

"I know," Remus said, nodding somberly.

She hesitated a moment before adding, "I won't mind if you take someone else to bed, when you need to. Will you object if I take a lover at some point, if I ever feel the need?"

Remus looked at her sadly. "No. Whatever will help keep you sane." He sighed as if exhausted. "I won't stop you, but I do ask you to remember that you are choosing me over Severus. I would be... hurt... if I found you with him after all of this."

"I don't think that will be a problem," she said, wondering why he thought that it would. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow afternoon, then," she continued, putting on a falsely cheery face. "I hope your night goes well. Oh, and just to warn you, my mum and dad will probably come around to talk tomorrow morning."

Remus pecked her on the cheek, and smiled sadly. "Thank you for the warning." He opened the door for her, but stopped her before she left.

His cool gray eyes met her warm brown ones, and he looked at her intently for a few moments. With a neutral voice, and a faint smile, he said, "I hope you don't end up regretting this decision."

She offered him a smile in answer, and inwardly agreed.

AN 2: *Please don't kill me. Not yet, anyway.*

The Last Supper

Chapter 13 of 15

Dinner with the 'rents.

Enter standard disclaimer here:

Chapter 13: The Last Supper

By the time Hermione headed to her parents' room it was close to dinnertime. Hoping they wouldn't be frantic, she decided to freshen up first with a quick shower. She really didn't want to smell of sex when her parents didn't approve of her fiancé. When she entered their room, she was doubly glad she had spared the moment. Instead of her father, a smug looking Professor greeted her with his dulcet tones.

"Miss Granger. We were starting to become concerned. I know how you have a tendency to lose track of the time."

Hermione's surprised expression quickly transformed into a scowl. She decided the best course was to ignore Snape for as long as possible.

"I'm sorry if you've been worried. Remus and I got carried away, but we never lost track of the time," she said as she greeted her parents. Most of that was true, she thought. Unfortunately, Snape seemed to understand which part was true, as he snorted mirthlessly and turned away to glower.

Her father frowned slightly, but refrained from comment. Her mother, on the other hand, was not going to back down so easily.

"Darling, of course we were worried, seeing as we had to leave you alone with a werewolf," she said in a dangerous tone, but then switched tacks, and changed into her hostess smile. "But now is not the time for that, for as you may have noticed, we have company tonight," Jane said cheerily, although Hermione knew the warning was there. Hermione was to be polite, charming, and erudite, and would also refrain from killing the disliked guest until out of her parent's sight. Otherwise, her parents would be displeased.

"Yes, mum," she said as acidly as possible without being overtly hostile. She turned to her professor and decided to play nice, for a while.

"Professor Snape, I'm so pleased you decided to join us for dinner. I've never known you to socialize with students and their parents before. Especially not Gryffindors. I'm honored." Snape quirked an eyebrow at her and she knew he had interpreted her meaning correctly.

"It's not often I have the pleasure of being invited, but your parents graciously extended their invitation. How could a lonely man like me refuse?"

"Mum, dad, I wonder if you know what an honor it is to entertain such an esteemed guest. Professor Snape is a legend among Hogwarts staff, and even the wizarding world," she said while looking Snape in the eye. His polite smile never faded, though, in fact it seemed to broaden a bit.

"Oh I believe we do have an idea," her mum said, letting Hermione know she was aware of the undercurrents in the conversation, even if she didn't know exactly what was being unspoken. "I suspect though, that like all modest men, Severus is uncomfortable by this talk." Jane flashed Snape and Hermione a smile that was a clear warning: *play nice, dears.*

"I apologize if I've embarrassed you, Professor. I just wasn't expecting your company," Hermione said, not letting her guard down.

"Perfectly understandable, Miss Granger. I will respect your wishes if you prefer to dine alone with your parents tonight," he offered almost selflessly.

Hermione was caught and she knew it. It would be inexcusably rude to toss him out now, much as she would like to. She had not only walked into that one, she had helped set it up.

"Don't be silly, Professor. You are most welcome here," she said cheerfully, even though she knew she was out of her depth and surrounded by sharks. At least she could be relatively confident that her parents didn't want to eat her. Judging by the smile Snape gave her, she wasn't certain that held true for him.

"We wouldn't think of having you leave," Jane said, but seemed to take pity on her daughter, as she led Snape away to discuss the marriage bill and its ramifications for wizarding society as a whole. Hermione took the respite to seek out her father, who was sitting at the table, watching the proceedings with a detached interest.

"Dad," she said quietly, looking at him for an explanation. He looked at her and shrugged.

"I know you think we're being difficult, but we just want to protect you, darling. We want to see you survive this ordeal."

Hermione studied her dad, then looked over at her mother and Snape, who were conversing intently. She sighed and turned back to face her dad. "So do I, dad, but he's not the savior you think him to be."

Harold patted her on the hand and whispered conspiratorially, "Then prove that to us, dear." She looked at him quizzically, so he continued. "If you can show us why you think he's worse than a werewolf, then I promise we will stand by your decision. But play fair, darling. You don't want your mother crying foul again."

She smiled at him before sitting back to formulate a plan. This was not going to be an easy evening.

Before Hermione could get very far in her plotting, four plates appeared on the table, signaling dinner was about to be served. Snape politely escorted Jane to the table, then sat down across from Hermione, carefully avoiding catching her eye.

They awkwardly sat at the table, silently waiting for the food to arrive. Just as the silence was becoming uncomfortable, a dish of roast pork appeared in the middle of the table, followed shortly by a bowl of steaming pink applesauce, fresh green beans with coriander, and a platter of blanched vegetables, arranged to resemble a colorful wedding bouquet. Harold raised his eyebrows slightly at the platter, but otherwise seemed unaffected. When Jane caught sight of the vegetables she thought it a perfect invitation to talk about her daughter's upcoming nuptials.

"So, Sweetheart, tell us about the plans for tomorrow."

Hermione looked at her mum, then at Snape, who, oddly, didn't seem to be uncomfortable with the topic. He actually seemed interested. Hermione looked at her mum again and realized it was part of a plan. She didn't know who was behind it, but they were planning to manipulate her somehow.

"Well, I've left most of the details to the headmaster. He seemed to enjoy the planning. I wonder if he's been bored now that Voldemort is gone."

"I expect that rounding up the remaining Death Eaters, and outmanipulating the Ministry on this bill is proving to be a sufficient challenge, Miss Granger. He probably accepted the task of planning only because he wished to relieve you of that burden," Snape said smoothly.

"I see. Everyone is trying so hard to make life easy for me, aren't they?" Hermione responded, trying to keep the bite out of her voice.

"As a matter of fact, yes. Everyone wants the best for you. No one wants to see you miserable, or in pain, or downtrodden."

Hermione huffed slightly, galled at Snape's hypocrisy.

"Is that so, Professor? Then why is everyone forcing me into marriage? We could just wait and see. The bill may never pass and wouldn't it be ironic if that occurred after all of this panic."

"The headmaster has it on good authority that it will pass, and that Lucius Malfoy, among other respected members of the community, is interested in you. Specifically you. Magical contracts are difficult to break, even if the law was immediately repealed. If he applied for you, you would still be bound to accept him unless another offer came in."

"Yes, but if the law was repealed, I might be forced to marry someone against my will, but at least I'd have my powers, and no obligations."

"But only if the law was repealed. Do you want to take that chance, Miss Granger? If the law passes and you are still unwed, the were- Remus would no longer be an option for you. Neither would Kingsley Shacklebolt, for that matter."

Hermione looked away in frustration, trying to keep her temper and her wits.

"Would you still be an option, Severus?" Jane asked.

He hesitantly shook his head no, and pierced Hermione with a longing glare.

"No, I wouldn't be. Even if I were, I expect your daughter would feel more strongly against me if I were to rescue her at the last moment."

Hermione drew in a breath as if she had been slapped. She didn't trust herself to speak in a calm or reasonable manner, so she instead concentrated on her food, sawing violently at a piece of pork to exorcise her anger.

Hermione was so focused on shredding her meat that she was surprised when Snape spoke again, this time in a much softer voice.

"My apologies, Miss Granger. That was completely uncalled for, and inappropriate."

"There's been a lot of that lately from you," she spat at him, unable to hold her tongue. He had the grace to look ashamed of himself, or at least act it.

"Indeed." He didn't look away from her, but stared right back, apologetically.

"What is going on here?" Harold asked, his voice becoming dangerous. He laid his knife and fork down on his plate and looked at the younger pair, his eyes flashing. "There's obviously more to the dynamics between you two than just teacher and student. I see the need for Hermione to marry to avoid the law, but if you've been seducing my daughter, Mr. Snape..." he trailed off, obviously for the lack of polite words. Instead he turned to his daughter.

"Is this why you're dead set against him, Hermione? Has he been taking advantage of you?"

Both she and Snape were mortified at the suggestion and they protested in unison.

"No dad!"

"No sir, I would never take advantage..."

"He's never ..."

"I am a guardian, and..."

"He's only my teacher..."

"I would rather die than hurt your daughter..."

"... and he'd never take advantage of me." Hermione finished weakly, Snape's last words weighing on her mind. A heavy silence descended on the table.

Harold sat back and surveyed the duo critically. Jane opened her mouth to speak, but without even looking at her, Harold raised his hand to cut her off.

"Enough, Jane. Hermione doesn't have time for any more games." He focused his attention on Snape, and his mouth compressed into a firm line.

"Severus, you told us you want Hermione to reconsider her decision, and that you'd like a chance at her hand. After seeing that display, it's obvious you've had a chance already." Harold leaned forward, his eyes intent upon Snape's, and his voice was edging on dangerous as he said, "Forgive my bluntness, but before this goes any further, I want to know why my daughter would rather marry a werewolf than you."

Snape looked at her father who had seemed so mild, and yet now exuded power unusual for a Muggle. He politely dabbed his mouth with his napkin before settling his wrists on the table edge, and started speaking.

"I believe it was my actions last night that confirmed your daughter's opinion of me as an unsuitable husband. I unintentionally hurt her, for which I offer my sincerest apologies."

Hermione nodded agreement, but her dad looked unimpressed.

"Hermione doesn't let one thing scare her off. You're going to have to explain a bit more thoroughly."

Snape swallowed then looked at Hermione for a moment. She had only seen him look that vulnerable once before, when he apologized earlier that day, but all she did was nod him to do as requested. With a reluctant sigh, he started talking, switching his gaze back onto her dad.

"Although Miss Granger is my student, my feelings for her have grown inappropriately ever since young Mr. Weasley placed her care in my hands."

"Why would Ron do that? Didn't he hate you?" Jane interrupted.

"I owed him a life debt. Before he died, we had come to an understanding, and he trusted me to honor any promises made." Hermione saw Snape flick his eyes in her direction, gauging her response. She kept her face neutral.

"A life debt is not something to take lightly, and so, in the months since Mr. Weasley's death, I watched your daughter more closely than I had before. I found myself watching her at mealtimes to see if she ate. In class I found myself paying her more attention than I should... all because she seemed so... so fragile. Inexplicably, I gradually found myself wanting to protect her from harm, not because Weasley asked it of me, but because I wanted to. I found myself wanting to comfort her when I saw her wasting away from grief. It infuriated me that no one else seemed to notice how she was suffering, and I was helpless to do anything about it. I was her hated, reviled teacher, and not even her Head of House. I could only give subtle hints to her friends who were too dense to pick out the concern from the insults. The anger grew until I realized that I wanted more than to simply watch over her: I wanted her in my life, and it mortified me that I felt that way about a student."

He kept talking, but he switched his gaze away from the elder Grangers, directing the story at Hermione. "The day I realized the extent of my feelings was the day the Headmaster informed us of the bill's imminent approval. I was rather upset with myself, and I suppose that was where I made my first mistake. The entire situation was so upsetting and I lashed out at you because you were the root of the problem. I was furious about the bill, but I was even more furious that you were being forced into such an untenable position, and at such a terrible time. It felt utterly wrong for you to have to choose a husband while still mourning. I was loathe to take advantage of the situation, but at the same time, I knew it was my only chance to take care of you as I had promised. I was positive you would think the worst of me," he smiled sardonically, "and I was right, wasn't I?"

He paused to pinch the bridge of his nose. "But it wasn't just that. I was angry that I wouldn't get a sincere chance to court you. I was angry that I wanted a chance at all. I was angry that if I took the opportunity I would have to reveal my inappropriate feelings to you and risk your disgust. But I was mostly angry because you weren't going to get the time to grow up that we both needed. Despite my attraction, eighteen-year-olds are far too young for my taste."

Hermione crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows at that, but otherwise remained impassive, waiting for him to continue.

"Then I made my second mistake. I let my pride outweigh my knowledge. I knew you to be a forthright person who admires *showy* courage. However, after having displaying to a room full of witnesses that I had no interest in you, I felt I would be courting ridicule if I pursued you openly. You gave me more chances than I deserved, but by then I was caught up in catching you by my rules." Snape looked away from her, examining his glass of wine very carefully.

"Then yesterday morning I made my third mistake. I lashed out at you again for having surprised me, even though I knew, logically, that you were not to blame. I believe the only thing I did right during that fiasco was to not corner you alone."

"Why did you ask Harry to stay?" Hermione asked.

"A professional instinct. I knew I had just molested your mind," her parents jumped slightly at that new information, "though not intentionally, and it would have been highly inappropriate for me to be alone with you after such an attack. Harry seemed the logical choice, seeing as he was your friend, but he also knew about the life debt." He sighed, letting his shoulders drop slightly.

"I suppose all of yesterday was a mistake. I should have stayed in my office, although if I had, I imagine we would have just argued, and you would have stormed out again without letting me explain. Maybe I wouldn't have explained even if you hadn't stormed off. I don't know. All I know is that I'm eternally grateful I felt the urge to double check the... that corridor last night. If you never talk to me again, I am still grateful I was there." He looked up at her again, and his eyes burned into hers. She looked away, flushing slightly from the intensity.

"I'm grateful as well," she murmured.

"I suppose the real reason your daughter has rejected me as a suitor is because I have proven myself to be very quick to anger."

"Don't forget you're jealous and disrespectful," Hermione interrupted.

"With a tendency to lash out, both verbally and physically," he finished, trying not to glare at Hermione.

She watched as he looked up to meet her parents' disapproving gazes. "In your daughter's view, Remus is a far more ~~predictable~~ monster."

Her mother looked at Snape, with suspicion lining her features. Slowly, Jane said, "What exactly happened last night? You said you unintentionally hurt her?"

Snape opened his mouth, then closed it again, looking upset. Hermione decided to take pity on him, and wordlessly rolled up her sleeves to reveal his purple hand prints.

"We got into an argument about Remus, and it got out of hand," she explained simply.

Hermione watched as her parents' eyes grew wide, and her mum stifled a gasp behind her hand. Her dad shot an accusing glare over at Snape, but her mum's eyes never moved from her arms. She seemed unduly fascinated by her forearm, until Hermione heard her whisper, "So thin." She then understood it was the weightloss that was disturbing her mum, and she hadn't even seen the bruise yet. When Jane's eyes did creep up to the bruise, she wasn't able to muffle her intake of breath. Hermione could see her mother debating with herself which was worse, the fragility of weightloss, or the purple marks and the violence that inflicted them. She knew the exact moment when her mum remembered Lupin, as it was then her mum closed her eyes, and swallowed thickly.

By the time Hermione looked over to her dad, his initial reaction was gone, but she could see he realized her position. He wasn't angry, but more weary than she had ever seen him. He tore his hopeless eyes away from scrutinizing Snape and broke the tense silence.

"Nary a choice, hey, love?" her dad asked, looking at her with sadly.

Hermione could only nod.

"Well, it breaks my heart that you have to make such a decision, love, but it is your choice," Harold stated with finality.

Jane looked from Harold to Snape to Hermione, and nodded in agreement. "Whoever you choose, dear, we'll always be here for you." She offered a pale smile to her daughter.

Hermione smiled wanly back at her parents, and noticed how tired they looked. They suddenly looked their age plus a decade. She wanted nothing more than to hug them and tell them that she wouldn't let the big bad monsters get her, that she'd be safe, but she couldn't lie to them. The only thing she could do for them at this point was let them rest.

She looked at Severus. "Would you be willing to escort me back to my common room, Professor? I'm feeling rather worn out from this week's adventures." He nodded curtly.

Her parents gave her a worried glance, but she just smiled and gave them each a good night hug. "Don't worry, I'll be safe," she whispered in their ears, before heading to the door. Snape opened the door for her, and as she exited, he paused to turn to her parents.

"If your daughter chose me, I would give my word as a man, and my oath as a wizard, to never harm her again."

Harold shook his head slightly. "That's a promise easily made, Severus. It's far more difficult to keep."

Severus clenched his jaw, but gave a courteous bow before he closed the door gently behind him.

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They walked up three sets of stairs in silence before Hermione said anything.

"You know, your biggest mistake was not respecting me."

Severus stopped short and stared at her, looking genuinely surprised. "Do you think I could fall in... Why would you think that? I do not suffer fools easily, and I wouldn't hesitate to throw them to the wolves. Even that wolf. When in the last week have I been disrespectful?"

She turned away from him, not wanting her battle for control to be on display. When she was sure of her voice, she continued. "The way you've been playing games with me while my life was on the line, well, it seemed petty and... disrespectful." .

"What do you mean when your life was on the line? It is a marriage, not a death sentence."

"I was serious in Dumbledore's office. I will not force anyone into anything. I was also not about to accept a proposal from someone I knew would be a bad match. And so, if that meant bowing to the law and all its consequences, then so be it."

The silence between them seemed to last forever. When he spoke, the emotion in Snape's voice forced her to turn around. "Had I known that you were even *considering* bowing to the situation, I would never have played with you so."

She smiled sadly at him. "But that's what you do. You have the habit of playing with people, then hiding in the shadows when those people get upset. I know better than to expect you of all people to change your habits, or overcome your fears."

"Do you believe me incapable of change?" Snape asked, his face slipping back into its hard mask, covering both surprise and anger.

"No," Hermione shook her head, then looked up into his angry and surprised face, "just unwilling."

His anger deflated a little at that. "And if I could prove myself willing?"

Her smile turned sardonic. "I don't know, because frankly, I don't believe you will. You're too pleased with yourself as you are. I don't think you even understand the need to change."

He was silent, giving no reaction. She turned and started walking again, not sure whether she wanted him to call after her or not. She really didn't know whether she'd give him another chance - whether she could ever trust him again. She wasn't sure she wanted to work that hard. She was so very tired.

He didn't call after her, but suddenly he was at her side again, walking beside her silently. She accepted his taciturnity without interrupting. If he wished for more to be said, he could say it.

They walked the remaining way without a word more spoken. As they got to the portrait of the Fat Lady, he touched her lightly on the arm, stopping her.

"I understand the need to change certain aspects if it will garner your trust and respect," he said softly, stepping toward her. "I understand the need to change if it means I'll never hurt you again," he whispered, running his fingers tenderly along her bruises. "And I'm willing to change if it means you would be in my life." He stooped down and brought his lips to hers in a tender, chaste kiss. Behind her, Hermione could hear the Fat Lady gasp in surprise.

Moving to whisper in her ear, he continued, "But to prove it, therein lies the difficulty."

He withdrew and looked down at her questioningly. She looked up into his sallow face, and somberly said, "Too true." The portrait-hole clicked open and she left Snape to wonder whether she had been responding to his words, or not.

AN: *Firstly, my sincere apologies for the tardiness of updates. I have little to no excuse. Secondly, there's only one chapter left, folks, and that'd be the weddin' day. it is a long chapter, though, to make up for it.*

And third, but most importantly, before I forget (as I shamefully do on a frequent basis) I would like to publicly apologize to my betas for my lack of acknowledgment. I do appreciate your input and thank you so very, very much. And that goes to all the people who've worked on this story, including the wonderful validators. Fudge brownies to you all (with bon-bons on top for you SWI!).

Oh, and I was about to forget to thank YOU, those who've been reading this and reviewing. You make my day supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

Cheers!

Here Comes the Bride...

Hermione's wedding day has come. Who will be her groom?

Chapter 14: Here Comes the Bride...

Sunday

Hermione awoke once again to a rhythmic thumping on her door. Cracking an eye open just enough to tell it was day once more, she moaned into her pillow, then shouted at the door, "Just a moment," before burying herself under the covers. The pounding stopped, and she found herself drifting back into her pleasant dream about sailing through the air on a magic carpet, lazily casting a fishing line out into the clouds every now and again, and feeling the sun warm her from the outside in.

Suddenly, a black and silver fish she had caught earlier started pounding its tail on the carpet really loudly. She turned around and tried to catch it, but it wriggled free and kept up its amazingly loud racket. Thump, thump, thump. Knock, knock, knock. It kept pounding on the door she was flying.

The thumping finally trickled into her subconscious mind as fact, and she woke up, very grumpy.

"JUST ONE BLOODY MINUTE!" she yelled at the door before getting up, glancing at the clock to make sure her anger was justified, throwing on a robe, then storming to the door, which had gone silent once again.

Throwing the door open, she was met by the disapproving glare of her mother and a giggling Ginny Potter.

"You really ought not to swear so lightly, dear. It makes you sound crass," her mother said before sweeping into the room carrying a large tote bag. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and counted to ten. Breathing deeply and feeling a mite calmer, she opened her eyes to the sight of a very amused redhead who was still standing outside the Head Girl's room.

"Everything all right?" Ginny asked innocently as she leaned against the jamb. Hermione growled in response.

"Now, now, dear, it's your wedding day," Ginny responded lightly in a mocking voice. "This should be one of the happiest days of your life, no matter who the groom is. Growling only makes you seem a bad sport."

Hermione, not sure whether to laugh or hex Ginny, decided that since her wand was on her bedside table, she might as well take the jibe as it was meant.

"I'm only trying to get into character, Ginny," she said just as lightly, but regretted her words immediately when her mother gasped behind her.

"Hermione Jane! Don't even *joke* about such a thing!" Hermione raised her shoulders sheepishly, but her expression was defiant as she turned to face her mum.

"What do you suggest I do, then, Mum? I can't just sit down and cry about my fate every time I think about it. I've been crying enough lately. It feels like I've turned into a hosepipe, I've been crying so much. If I choose to laugh about this stupid, horrible life I've made for myself, then that is what I will do!"

Hermione and Mrs. Granger glared at each other for several moments, as Ginny looked between them anxiously. Finally Jane raised her hands in defeat and sat down weakly.

"I'm just terrified about what will happen to you, darling. I can't imagine the position you've been put into..." She shook her head in mystification, then held out her hands for her daughter. Hermione moved forward almost instinctively, and clasped her mum's hands tightly.

"I might be terrified, but I can see that you are an adult now. Your father and I meant it when we said we'll support you in whatever decision you make. We're proud that you have been able to deal with this situation as ably as you have. And even though I can't imagine finding humor in such dark places, I'm glad that you'd rather laugh than cry. It shows a strength of spirit that will get you through the worst of times."

Hermione looked down at her mum and smiled shakily, sniffing back a tear or two.

"I had determined not to cry today, and then you give your speech and make me cry all over again! Thanks a lot, Mum." Hermione joked wetly. Her mum laughed as well, and soon they were hugging each other as if for the last time.

Wiping away her tears, Hermione broke away from the embrace to look for Ginny who was bending over the bed, busy with something Hermione couldn't see. She glanced over at her mum to find Jane looking at her with misty eyes and a wistful smile.

"I brought you a gift, dear," Mrs. Granger said and led Hermione over to the bed.

On the bed lay a gown of gigantic proportions. Hermione mused that it was amazing she hadn't been able to see it around Ginny, as the skirt alone must have used more than twelve metres of tulle, and that was on top of the very full satin underskirt.

Jane tenderly picked the dress up and held it so Hermione could get a better look at the overall design, and it was then Hermione recognized the dress. It was her grandmum's wedding dress, back from the days when meringue was the style. Hermione remembered finding it in the attic when she was little and spending many hours revisiting the dress while daydreaming about her charming prince who would who fall madly in love with her and whisk her away from the terrible tower. They'd get married, and that was always the dress she wore.

Seeing the dress brought the daydreams back forcefully, and she realized that her prince had always looked like Gilderoy Lockhart. She tried to imagine how she would feel if Lockhart with his joined-up writing suddenly appeared to rescue her from the mess and started giggling at the thought.

"Don't you like it?" her mum asked, a bit hurt. Hermione shook her head while trying to subdue the giggles still bubbling out of her.

"No," she gasped, "that's not it." The image of Lockhart carrying her down the tower's steep stairs, him talking all the while about how dashing he was, then having to put her down to catch his breath, popped into her head, and she broke into another wave of giggles, this batch causing her to collapse onto the bed.

Ginny and her mum watched her in confused amusement as she laughed herself silly. When she finally came down, she wiped her eyes again and explained the cause of her amusement. While her mum was mildly amused, Ginny started howling in commiseration, which started Hermione laughing all over again.

"That explains a lot," Ginny said with a giggle. "I never could understand why you of all people were so besotted with him."

"Well, you have to admit that he did present himself in the best light at all times. He seemed pretty handsome then."

"I suppose..." Ginny answered hesitantly. "Though toward the end of the year he was looking pretty haggard. I'm guessing all the rounds gave him no time for his beauty sleep." Hermione looked at Ginny blankly. "Oh, that's right. I guess everything went downhill after you were petrified. I don't really remember much either, but I at least was there most of the time."

Hermione smiled ruefully at the now quiet girl beside her. "Not exactly the best memories to grow up with, are they?" she said, sympathetically.

Ginny looked at her and grinned. "Maybe not, but at least I didn't have the same friendship with Harry to threaten my life every year. I don't have nearly the memories that you do. I've actually enjoyed my time here."

Hermione grinned back. "I've enjoyed every terrifying minute. Okay, maybe 'enjoyed' is too strong a word, but I will cherish every memory from my years here."

Jane looked between the two friends then coughed discreetly to interrupt their moment of reminiscence. "Well, you might want to try the dress on for size. Your grandmother was a fair size larger than you are, and altering it could take a bit."

"That's what magic is for, Mrs. Granger," Ginny said, smiling at the older woman. Hermione sighed and stepped into the unbuttoned garment, laughing when it was done up.

"This is huge! I didn't think Grandma was this big," she said merrily, as Ginny walked around her, assessing the alterations needed.

"She wasn't, dear," her mum replied distractedly, watching in amazement as Ginny waved her wand and seams started taking themselves in. "When did you lose all that weight? You're positively skin and bones!"

"Oh... I've had a rough couple of months, what with the battle and everything. I actually didn't notice until the other morning." Hermione looked at Ginny and her mum shrugging apologetically. "I guess I haven't been dealing well with everything."

As if she were reading Hermione's mind, Jane said into the silence: "I know this probably isn't the most appropriate thing to say right now, but it really isn't fair. You should be waking up happy and anxious and nervous and joyful about walking down the aisle to marry Ron, not shouting curse words at your mother and laughing ruefully about your husband-to-be. I had hoped that being a witch would make a fairy tale ending possible for you, and I'm so sorry it hasn't. But, I hope what you said is true, that you'll cherish every memory. Hopefully, in years to come, you'll be able to cherish today's memories as well."

Hermione looked at her mum, surprised at the reversal. As if in response, her mum added, "But, then, maybe I'm imposing my own hopes and desires on you again?"

"Remus is a decent man, Mum," Hermione said. "If you went and talked with him, a real talk, not one interrupted by paperwork, you might see so for yourself. At least I know about his inner monster."

"Are you saying that to convince me or yourself, dear? I told you that we'll support you in your decision. I wasn't criticizing you."

Hermione opened her mouth to refute the accusation, but found the question valid. Closing her mouth with a snap, she answered with a shrug.

"So it's definitely Remus, then?" Ginny asked while checking her handiwork, slightly amused to be watching the dynamics between the mother and daughter.

Hermione sighed. "I think so. Severus was sweet as he walked me here last night, but that in itself makes me cautious."

"Wait a second. You saw Snape last night?" Ginny asked, confused.

"Yes... Oh, that's right, you and Harry had gone to bed already by the time I got back," Hermione said, then proceeded to tell her friend everything that had happened the day before, from the plea for forgiveness to the disastrous dinner, finishing with his declaration.

"I'm willing to change if it means you would be in my life?" He said that?" Ginny gasped.

Hermione nodded, preparing for the outburst, but it never came. Instead Ginny looked pensive.

"Maybe you're right, Hermione," Ginny said after a bit. "Maybe he is just trying to manipulate his way into your life."

"But?" Hermione asked with an exaggerated sigh and a grin.

Ginny didn't grin back. "But why would he give you such powerful weapons to use against him? I mean, with all he's said and done, you could slay him in front of the school if you wanted. I'm sure he could find a way to slither out of most of the humiliation, but then he'd be setting himself up for an inquiry. If he said he was just toying with you, trying to seduce you for your ultimate humiliation, I expect the board of governors would consider that a violation of trust and sack him. I don't see a way out of the potential embarrassment without destroying his career or reputation."

"And how does this prove his affection and promise true?"

"You're thinking like a Gryffindor, Hermione. He's a Slytherin. Slytherins rarely ever do anything without gaining something for themselves. Their motto might as well be: *Save your own arse first!*"

"But what scares me is what he'd have to gain by marrying me," Hermione pleaded, knowing she was fighting a losing battle.

Her mother was the one who answered. "He'd gain nothing but his heart's desire, darling. What did you have to gain by dating Ron, after all?"

Hermione blushed and looked down. All she had left was one measly rebuttal. "But I don't even like him. How can I marry a man I don't like?"

Her mother smiled sympathetically at her.

"I imagine that if you gave him an honest chance he would prove himself, well, maybe not likable, but at least respectable. I imagine that if you overcame your prejudices, you could find many things to like and maybe even love about him."

Ginny, smirking slightly, struck the final blow. "And don't forget that *tongue lashing* the other night."

Hermione's mother looked at Ginny with raised eyebrows, then back at her daughter inquiringly. Hermione ducked her head to hide her face and the blush suffusing it. A moment went by, then she relaxed her shoulders and raised her head.

"Fine. I'll talk to him, but I still don't think it's a good idea."

"Why?" her mum asked seriously.

"Isn't it obvious? Because of Amy and Richard."

Her mum closed her eyes and leaned back, smiling. "I don't think you need to worry, darling; you have an advantage Amy didn't. You know what's abusive. You also know, or should know, anyway, that if he ever abuses you, loses control or otherwise threatens you, you have family and friends ready to support you. Amy didn't know that."

"Besides which," Ginny added, "He knows that if he messes up, he's going to have to face you, me, Harry and every other Weasley on the face of the planet. And Dumbledore. That's an army against one man. I think he's Slytherin enough to respect those odds, and you."

Hermione smirked at her friend. "Well then, I hope that the Head of Slytherin will have his best interests at heart... Assuming, of course, that he accepts my proposal." With that, Hermione got up and walked to the door. "Right, wish me luck," she said as she left for the dungeons.

The halls were surprisingly empty for a weekend morning, but she imagined that everybody was in the Great Hall enjoying breakfast, or in their beds, as she would like to be, having a nice lie-in.

As she strode forward at a good clip, she thought carefully about how to approach Snape. She couldn't just barge into his office and say, *'Right then, I thought about it and as long as you keep your promise to me and my dad, I'll be your wife.'* He would laugh her out of the school. No, she needed to approach him with a touch more subtlety.

As she was coming down the stairs, she caught sight of Professor Dumbledore ascending them. Words from Snape's letter came to her mind, and she smiled brightly at the aged wizard, thanking the fates that she had run into him.

"Miss Granger. How goes everything this fine morn'?" Dumbledore asked, his twinkle terribly prominent.

"Professor Dumbledore, I was wondering if I could have a word with you concerning Professor Snape?"

"Of course, my dear. Would this classroom be amenable?" he said waving to an unused room next to them.

"Perfect," she said, smiling.

He allowed her to enter the room first, then sat down on the edge of the desk, waiting for her to start. She paced in front of the desk for a couple rounds before gathering the right words.

"In the note Professor Snape sent to me after the incident in class on Friday, he said you mentioned a "convergence of energy." What is that?"

Dumbledore smiled merrily. "I was wondering when you would ask me that. It's rather simple, really. It's a phenomenon that happens when two powerful people are thinking the same thing at the same time and catch each other's eye."

"That's happened tons of times with my friends, but I've never... It's never created a link like that before."

"Ah, well, that's because none of you are Legilimens."

"Which is why he entered my head, but I didn't enter his?"

"Exactly! And, although this is just a theory of mine, I expect the reason you both reacted so forcefully in a physical manner was because only half a connection was made, thereby limiting the phenomenon to play out. I expect that only Professor Snape's strength of mind allowed you two to break the connection at all without it playing out fully."

"I don't understand why it isn't more common. Surely there are quite a few Legilimens around? I would think it would happen all the time."

"Ah, there's the crux of the matter. Well, you see it only occurs at the Vernal Equinox at the beginning of each precessional epoch, so really, even though it was terribly uncomfortable, you were very fortunate to have experienced such a rarity."

Hermione paused, dumbfounded, for a moment before saying, "You're making this up."

"Indubitably," Dumbledore answered cheerfully. Hermione blinked.

"So what's the real explanation for what happened, sir?" she asked, rather annoyed.

"My guess is that Severus' desire to know overwhelmed his control at a subconscious level, and he performed a crude version of the Legilimens Spell on you."

"Just as he guessed," she mused. "But why didn't you tell him he was right? And why did we react to the spell physically?"

Dumbledore's twinkle dimmed as he became quite serious. "I doubt even you would have told Severus he was to blame at that time. He was so miserable and guilt-ridden as it was. Telling him it was actually his fault would have only served to send him over the brink. He doesn't need that right now. When he's in a better place, then I'll tell him." Dumbledore looked at her rather sternly making sure she understood she wasn't to tell him either.

"As for your reactions, I suspect that because the spell was on the subconscious level, he had no control over it. It's very much like the magic young witches and wizards do before they have a wand to channel their energy, only even more powerful since he's usually so very disciplined."

"So he wanted to know why I had cried so much that he was subconsciously willing to pin me down to find out?" Hermione was rather appalled. She had believed it was purely an accident.

Dumbledore sighed, looking old. "Yes, it seems so. But, to Severus' credit, as soon as he realized what he was doing he immediately took control again and stopped."

"But that means he's lost control and harmed me *twice*. How can I trust him if he's prone to losing control around me like that?"

Dumbledore smiled kindly. "I imagine his control issues are stress related, much as your recent behavior has been. However, there will be no reason for you to be concerned about trusting him until he can prove himself worthy of you." Dumbledore smiled as Hermione gasped.

"How did you know? You can't be omniscient, can you?"

His mustache crept up his face a little more as his smile broadened. "I most certainly could be! But in this case, I have my sources."

Hermione stared at him for a moment, then relaxed and rolled her eyes. "The Fat Lady."

"Indeed! You are clever, aren't you?" Hermione bit her lip to prevent the sharp retort she wanted to say, contenting herself with a mild shrug.

"So what should I do?"

"That, my dear, is up to you. Just remember that for all intents and purposes the slip in the classroom was an accident. He may be to blame, but it was not on purpose."

"That doesn't excuse it."

"I did not say that it did. Although I wanted to spare him the burden of guilt, that's not the reason he wasn't punished. The real reason was because you chose not to report it."

Dumbledore got up while Hermione digested that fact. "And now I believe I am needed in the North Tower. It seems that Peeves has taken to using Professor Trelawney's bangles in a most inappropriate manner."

A few minutes after Dumbledore left, Hermione wandered out the door on her way to the dungeons thinking about everything he had brought up. So entrenched in her thoughts, it wasn't until she reached the entrance hall that she noticed the odd swishing noise surrounding her. Looking around, she couldn't see anyone following her and even the ghosts seemed absent. She set off again, and hearing the noise once more, groaned in realization.

She was still wearing the wedding dress.

She clapped her head in frustration then started to laugh at the absurdity of the situation. Here she was, hours away from getting married, dressed in her wedding gown and approaching her cruel teacher, known for lacerating students with his acerbic wit, to ask him if he'd like to be her groom. It wasn't every day that she believed in Divination, but right then she could predict the future, with a sudden flash of insight on how the interview would go.

Her laughter rang through the dungeon stairwell masking all other sounds, so she started in surprise when someone touched her shoulder. She whirled around to find herself facing a concerned Professor McGonagall.

"Are you all right, Miss Granger?" she asked.

Hermione laughed again, ruefully. "I suppose I'm fine, if you discount the absurd path my life has taken." She stifled another giggle, then explained. "I was on my way down to talk to Se- Professor Snape, but it wasn't until I got here that I realized what I was wearing and imagined how he would react to my talking to him about promises and wedded bliss wearing this mess of meringue."

McGonagall's lips twitched, even as she was trying to assume a sympathetic demeanor.

"I'm afraid that, wedding dress or not, talking to Professor Snape is out of the question right now. I just came from his quarters, and it seems he's disappeared. Is there anything I can help you with?"

Hermione started to shake her head, then thought better of it. "Yes, there is. You and Professor Snape are friends, right?"

McGonagall looked Hermione over a moment, then said, "I think this conversation would go well with a cup of tea, don't you?" Hermione smiled and nodded, and they adjourned to the professor's office.

Hermione looked around the office while the professor prepared the tea. As she moved towards a framed photo on the mantel, she caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of her eye. Turning around at once, she scanned the room again, but found only McGonagall smiling at her, as she handed her a cup of tea. Hermione shrugged off the movement as shadows, and gratefully accepted the liquid comfort.

Once they were both comfortably seated and McGonagall had finished stirring her tea, she started talking. "The simple answer is yes, I consider Severus a friend. He's moody, abrupt and, especially during the school year, a right bastard, but he's also very loyal, witty and always honest, though that isn't always a welcome trait. He's actually quite the idealist, for all his cynicism. Sometimes I think that his idealism is the root of all his anger, though his past accounts for a fair share as well." She stopped, sighing. "Am I to gather that you're considering him?" Hermione nodded. McGonagall pursed her lips and took a sip of her tea. "Why are you considering him now?"

Hermione sipped her own tea as she thought. "Well, I suppose it's because he loves me, or at least says he does. And even if he doesn't love me..." She stopped, not wanting to reveal Remus' secret, but McGonagall finished her sentence for her.

"At least he isn't pledged to another? You needn't look so surprised. Remus needs a friendly ear just as often as you and Severus do." McGonagall chuckled lightly at Hermione's astonishment at the thought of Snape needing a friendly ear.

"May I offer my opinion in the matter, as irrelevant as it is?" McGonagall asked.

"Please do!" Hermione answered almost desperately.

"While neither man is going to offer you an easy life, albeit for very different reasons, Severus *does* love you. That doesn't mean you'll get roses and romance from him, as he abhors the very idea of 'buying love,' as he puts it. If you need shows of affection in that manner--"

"Gifts don't matter to me much. I mean, I appreciate them, but really there are better ways of showing affection," Hermione cut in.

"Then that wouldn't be a problem." The professor sighed and took off her spectacles to rub her eyes. "The problem would be that you two speak very different languages. You are a very forthright person, my dear," she said fondly. "Severus is anything but forthright. He will not come out and tell you anything. You will have to listen to what he infers, not what he says."

"And the responsibility for communication lies on my shoulders alone?"

"No, of course not, but if you choose him and have any hope of happiness, then you have to listen before you jump to conclusions. He's never going to give you information in a straightforward way, and it would offend him if you demanded it."

Hermione sighed. "So you think I could be happy with him?"

McGonagall smiled broadly. "Yes, if you work at it. All partnerships are work, and marriage is a particularly difficult partnership. It can be fun, but it is hard work. But you have to go into the relationship with the intent to make it work."

Hermione compressed her lips at the subtle remonstrance. "If I chose him I would of course work at it, but... Why do you like him?"

McGonagall's face relaxed slightly. "Well, besides the soft spot I developed for him when he was my student, I like him because he makes me laugh and has an enormous capacity for caring, though most of the time he shuts that part of himself away. If you chose him, and opened yourself up to him, you would most likely find it worth the risk."

Hermione nibbled on a biscuit and thought carefully. "The other night... he scared me with his outburst and the physical nature of it. I'm terrified that if I choose him I'll be choosing an abusive relationship."

"As well you should be!" McGonagall said, surprising Hermione. "Severus is not a safe person. He cares, yes, but never, ever underestimate him in any way. He is quite volatile; however, I don't think he will ever harm you again," McGonagall added, seeing Hermione's eyes grow wide. "He has too much to lose if he ever threatens you. Not only would he lose any chance at your love, which is probably his biggest motivating factor, but he would also have to face every witch and wizard who cares about you. And seeing as almost every teacher at this school cares... He's not likely to lose control again." McGonagall smiled at Hermione in a motherly way, before adding as an after thought, "Besides which, what he did terrified him as much as it did you."

Hermione laughed. "I'm sorry," she said after noticing McGonagall's disapproving brows. "It's just that I can't picture Professor Snape being terrified of anything. He was Voldemort's spy for heaven's sake!"

McGonagall leaned forward earnestly. "Hermione, Severus is only human. He feels everything you feel; he is just better at hiding it. If you choose him I recommend you remind yourself everyday, every hour if necessary, that he is not Professor Snape, but *Severus*, a mere man and your husband. If you treat him as Professor Snape, you'd be dooming yourself and your husband to misery."

Hermione had stopped laughing. "You're right of course," she said morosely. It suddenly struck her how unfair she'd been. She had only been viewing him as her teacher, a nonentity instead of a real person. His behavior and demeanor hadn't helped, but she hadn't given him a chance, not really.

She leaned her forehead on her hands, trying to think of what she could do with only a few hours left.

"He wasn't in his office?" she asked looking up at McGonagall, who shook her head slowly. Hermione lowered her head again and closed her eyes. "What am I going to do? I finally want to give him a fair chance, but if he isn't around, what can I do?"

"You still have a few hours. If I see him before your nuptials, I'll pass on the message that you want to speak with him," McGonagall said matter-of-factly. "I'm sure he'll

respond quickly."

"But what if you don't see him? I've thrown away a chance at happiness because I was being too pigheaded and prejudiced."

"You haven't thrown away anything. If Severus doesn't appear, Remus will be very good to you. He may not love you, but he respects you and will do his best to make you happy. Besides which, choosing Severus allows you a chance at happiness, it doesn't guarantee it. He is a very difficult man, after all."

Hermione raised her head, and smiled wanly. "I guess I have to go through with getting married?"

"Not at all. You may back out any time you wish. It is only the recommendation of the Headmaster that you get married now instead of waiting till the law is passed."

"So whatever choice I make, it will be my fault, and no one else will be to blame?"

McGonagall smiled kindly. "Oh, I think that Severus and Remus both have their own share of blame in your predicament as it stands now, but mostly, yes."

Hermione chuckled. "Thanks so much. Just what I needed to hear."

Minerva chuckled back. "That's what I'm here for. You're welcome to it at any time." Hermione made a face at Minerva playfully, then sat back and relaxed.

"I suppose I should go finish getting ready now. I expect I look like Miss Havisham with my dirty gown and undone hair."

"You do look a bit unkempt, but who's Miss Haveshum?"

Hermione smiled and got up. "She's a character in a Muggle book. I'll lend it to you sometime, though I expect you'd like the same author's *A Christmas Carol* better. It would make you laugh." Minerva smiled and winked.

XXX

Hermione was lucky not to meet any students on her way back to the Gryffindor common room, though she did get a synchronized double take from the Fat Friar and Nearly-Headless Nick before they floated backwards through the wall. When she arrived at the portrait hole she was flooded with both relief and annoyance, especially as the Fat Lady was looking determinedly innocent.

Hermione didn't make a move to enter the common room, but simply stared at the Fat Lady, while the Fat Lady just raised her eyebrows and craned her head, waiting for the password. After a couple minutes of the charade, the Fat Lady gave up and asked, "Well? Do you want in or not? I can't hang round here all day!"

"You've been talking about me," Hermione stated. She was satisfied to see the Fat Lady's complexion redden, although the Lady herself decided to be self-righteous.

"I consider it my duty to report any deviant behavior, and a professor kissing a student definitely qualifies as deviant!"

"And did you report it only to the Headmaster, or did you discuss it with a few portraits along the way?"

The Fat Lady's face went even redder than before, and a tinge of embarrassment crept into her demeanor.

"I wouldn't stop to gossip along the way when I have to report such an important message! That would be shameful!"

"But it would be criminal not to tell a friend or two on the way back," Hermione fished.

"Exactly. Juicy bits like this doesn't come round... Now see here! I don't watch and tell indiscriminately! I have more character than to be nothing more than a gossip monger!"

"Tootroo," Hermione said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. The portrait clicked open, but the Fat Lady still could be heard protesting her innocence in the matter.

Hermione climbed through the hole, wondering how she could not have noticed the bulky skirt on her first climb through; it felt as if another person was in the hole with her. After finagling her way out of the cramped hole and smoothing her skirt down a bit, she straightened up to find the common room full of students, all of whom were gaping at her in complete silence. Completely frozen with mortification, she could do nothing more than move her eyes from one student to the next and smile hesitantly.

After an interminable silence, a voice from her back said, "*Youare* going to do something with your hair before the wedding, aren't you?" She slowly turned to find Lavender frowning at Hermione's wild mass of hair.

Everyone in the common room burst into laughter, the spell being broken. Hermione laughed weakly along with crowd, but found Lavender was still frowning and with a disturbingly familiar gleam in her eye. Knowing that gleam and the harsh makeovers that followed it, Hermione backed away from Lavender quickly.

"Um, no, I wasn't planning on wearing my hair this way today, but Ginny promised to help me out, and my mum has a real knack with hair as well, so I should probably go get started on it now. See you later!" she finished, then turned and sprinted up the staircase, hitching her skirt up to run faster. She heard the laughter increase at her exit, but felt nothing except relief when she closed her door behind her.

Leaning against the door and breathing hard, she looked around to find her mother and Ginny sitting up on her bed staring at her through green face masks, while they both held a slice of cucumber in each hand.

"So, how did it go?" her mum said through still lips, while Ginny got up to help Hermione out of the filthy dress.

"What did he say?" Ginny asked when Hermione didn't answer immediately.

Hermione held up a finger for patience while she caught her breath. Finally, when she could breathe, thanks in part to being released from the snug bodice, she flopped down onto the chair and huffed, "Nothing. He wasn't there. I had a couple of illuminating chats with Dumbledore and Minerva, but not a word with Snape. Minerva said she'd pass on a message if she saw him, but that's only if she sees him." Hermione sighed heavily. "If only I could have made up my mind faster, or listened less stubbornly to everyone around me, I wouldn't be sitting here hoping that Snape, of all people, shows up before I get married."

Her mother came to stand by her chair, squeezing her shoulders in support. "Darling, you've had very little time to make a monumental decision. You have dealt with it to the best of your ability." Hermione gratefully looked up at her mum's green face and smiled.

"Thanks, mum." She sighed again. "I still wonder whether I should go through with this at all. I have such a hard time imagining anything worse than the predicament I'm in right now, but I know that if the law is passed it will be much worse than being married to someone who'll never love me. I know it, but it's so abstract while this is so very real."

Her mum sighed sympathetically, but stayed silent while Ginny smiled and said, "Well, even if you decide to call the whole thing off, I think you still deserve a bit of pampering, so off with the clothes and into the bath with you!"

Hermione grinned back at her friend and went off to follow her instructions.

XXX

While she soaked in the warm bubbly bath, Hermione let her mind wander through everything she had heard and experienced in the last few days. She still wasn't quite sure what to make of the snarky professor, but she was now pretty sure he was attracted to her. Conversations with him would almost certainly be frustrating, but probably never boring. She knew so little about him, though, and that scared her. She wanted to be fully informed, but at this point all she knew was that he supposedly loved her, he was volatile and moody, and hated being pitied.

Everyone who knew him said that discipline was his main attribute, yet he had lost control twice in one day around her. Maybe that day was an exception, but maybe his friends and colleagues didn't know him as well as they thought. Maybe he was an abusive SOB who would destroy her spirit incrementally, or maybe he was a closet romantic who would do everything in his power to make her happy.

She snorted, blowing a few bubbles into the air. She watched them descend lazily and pondered that last possibility. No matter how much he loved her, he was no Casanova. He would not be nice (in a normal person's sense), he would not be romantic, and he would not be easy. Even if he kept his promise, he would be a very frustrating mate who would probably make her scream in frustration as often as ecstasy.

Closing her eyes, she thought about the two kisses they shared. The first one was hot; there was no denying their chemistry. It was also scary. She'd been completely swept away by his passion, overwhelmed to such a degree that she had almost lost control of all her senses. The scariest thing was how much she wanted to lose herself in his passion. She'd never felt that way before, not even with Ron.

She and Ron had plenty of passion, but neither had overwhelmed the other. They had encouraged and supported their mutual bliss, but never with any sort of force. It was their love that had made their sex so good, their equality.

Snape did not treat her as an equal. He wanted to dominate her.

She thought about that a little more and realized it wasn't true. He enjoyed playing with her, after his fashion, but over the last few days he had talked with her not as a student but as an equal. She'd misread his intentions, but ever since the test, he had treated her as an adult, basically.

Minerva was right: their biggest problem was going to be communication. They might as well be speaking in English and Gobbledygook, their languages were so disparate. She wished there was a book translating Slytherin to Gryffindor, and vice versa. She giggled at the thought.

Unfortunately, there was no such book, and they'd have to learn each other's language the hard way, through trial and error and lots and lots of patience. Knowing Snape, he'd make a game out of it to tease her.

She stopped, suddenly realizing what the teasing was: his way of displaying affection.

Thinking about it that way, she realized that he'd been fairly blatant about his feelings. Shaking her head, she ran through all their conversations over the past few days and saw his affection more clearly than she had before. Groaning at the obviousness of it (and of Ginny's told-you-so's to come), she realized he really did love her. He would do his best (which was pretty darn good) to keep his promise.

But he wasn't her groom.

He didn't even know she was considering giving him another chance. He was probably out bemoaning the fact that his beloved was throwing herself away on a heartless man.

She snickered at the irony, but soon grew somber. If Sn-Severus didn't show up, would she go through with the wedding? Loving Remus would be deadly, and thanks to that spell, she was doomed to fall in love with him. Taking a lover would probably postpone the inevitable, but would she be able to take a lover? It seemed so... wrong.

Maybe her best option was to just cancel the wedding and take her chances with the bill becoming law. Dumbledore could be wrong, couldn't he? Besides, why would she be a target? She was only best friends with The Boy-Who-Vanquished-He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. That wasn't enough to become a target, was it?

She shook her head and got out of the tub, patting herself dry. The only way she'd be safe was if the bill never became law. Judging by the secrecy of the administration, it was almost certain to be enacted very soon. She needed to get married, that was all there was to it.

Donning her robe, she hoped that Severus had come back and was waiting for her in her room. Thinking that might be the case, or that he was on his way up, she hurriedly put her robe on and left the bathroom, looking around her room hopefully, but wasn't surprised when she saw only her mum and Ginny, sitting in front of the vanity and finishing up their make-up.

They both turned to look at her, smiling. "Have you decided what to do, dear?" her mum asked cheerfully.

Hermione nodded her head grimly. "There's nothing for it but to get married. I think I would prefer to marry Severus, but Remus will do."

Her mum's smile faltered for a split second, but she quickly rallied. "Well, there's still time for Severus to get the message. The wedding isn't for another two hours, and since you wizards can get from place to place in an instant, he has lots of time to show up and save the day, doesn't he?"

"I suppose you're right," Hermione conceded hopelessly.

"Ooh, Hermione, what if he's already got the message and has decided to surprise you by replacing Remus at the altar?" Ginny practically squealed.

Hermione laughed and shook her head. "I doubt he'd ever do anything as risky as that. He likes to avoid public humiliation, and seeing as the message wasn't *'will you marry me'*, but more, *'I would like to talk with you before I get married'*, he wouldn't be sure what my intentions are."

"Hmm. You may be right, but it's always a possibility," Ginny said.

"A possibility, but not one I'll stake my hopes on. I don't want to see Remus and burst into tears because it's not Snape standing there," Hermione replied.

"Well, if you've decided that you are definitely getting married today, no matter who the groom is, I propose we get you ready," her mum said, holding out the jar of green facial paste. Hermione smiled and tied her hair back tightly.

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She wouldn't admit it aloud, but as it came closer and closer to the event, her heart sank more and more at Severus' absence. She had really hoped he was just out for a walk around the lake and that he'd had every intention of confronting her before she walked down the aisle. She knew it was silly to hope such uncharacteristic things of Snape, but she did. Now, time was almost up and her hope was running out.

"You look beautiful, darling," her mum whispered in her ear as they looked at her reflection in the floor length mirror she had conjured. Ginny nodded in agreement.

Even Hermione had to admit she looked good, or at least better than average. Her hair had been tamed into a loose chignon that revealed her face while softening it in a feminine way. The skirt, cleaned up by Ginny, was once again a sparkling foamy mass topped by the elegant bodice, which hugged her curves becomingly. Hermione was still debating whether to wear a veil or not, her feminist leanings battling with the desire to hide any tears that might spring out as she walked down the aisle.

She crossed the room to her bed, where a gorgeous lace veil was spread out. It was beautiful, but she still didn't know if she wanted to hide her face away. She was getting married to retain her independence, not to become her husband's property. She sat down next to the innocent piece of cloth and choked back her tears.

Suddenly she felt a pair of arms around her, and she leaned into the embrace, letting herself get one last cry in before she had to face the world with a brave face. Her mum rocked her back and forth gently, dabbing her face every now and again with a handkerchief to prevent the make-up laden tears from dripping onto the gown.

It didn't take long before the tears stopped, and Hermione looked up with a determined mien. "I suppose I need to clean my face and get going. I think I'll forgo the make-up this time round, though. If I cry during the ceremony it would be best if only Remus knows instead of everyone seeing black streaks lining my face," she said.

Ginny smiled and performed the necessary Cleansing Charm for Hermione, leaving her face fresh, if a bit pink. Glancing in the mirror, Hermione decided to wear the veil. She wasn't vain, but she no longer looked her best and didn't want to walk down the aisle feeling so exposed.

She looked at herself, obscured through the lace, and smirked. Maybe the veil was a good option just to be anonymous for as long as possible. Very few people would know who was walking down the aisle.

She turned around to face her friend and mother and shrugged. "Well, I guess it's time for me to meet my groom." They came forward and each hooked an elbow and started their long walk down to the chapel.

The entire way down the castle, from the Gryffindor common room to the door of the chapel, Hermione kept her eye out for Severus. In the Entrance Hall she looked at the castle doors as if willing them to open and reveal the dark-haired wizard, but to no avail. The doors stayed firmly shut, and Severus was nowhere to be found. She knew it was Remus standing inside without being told as they met her dad and Harry at the chapel entrance.

She didn't know quite why or when she had latched onto the idea of Severus as hero, but she knew that she was dreading walking into the chapel to marry Remus. Maybe Severus was just an escape, a fantasy to keep her mind off the reality. Whatever the reason, she paused on shaky legs outside the chapel doors and told Ginny to wait a moment before heading in. Her mum kissed her on the cheek, then handed her over to her dad for support.

"You all right love?" he asked, concerned by her slight wobbliness. She nodded mutely, not trusting her voice.

"Do you want to head in, then? I could always take you out for a stiff drink to buck up your courage, if you need it."

She laughed. He'd always known how to make her laugh when she needed it the most. She lifted her veil and pecked him on the cheek, then smiled at Harry and Ginny.

"Well, I guess you might as well go in and start everything up. No need to keep everyone waiting needlessly."

Harry came and tenderly kissed her on the cheek.

"You know if Ginny weren't around I would be marrying you today, right?"

She winked at Harry. "Yes, I do. But, thankfully, Ginny is around." She sighed as another batch of nerves washed over her. "Remind me again why I'm the one having the public wedding? I would far prefer a quiet ceremony like you two had."

"Because it needs to seem valid to the ministry. Lots of witnesses means it's harder to Obliviate every attendee and get the marriage annulled."

"And that's bad, how?" She laughed nervously. "I know that most people have cold feet going into marriage, but this is ridiculous. I feel like there are blocks of ice surrounding my calves."

Everyone laughed lightly, then Ginny took Harry's arm and smiled at Hermione. "It will all be okay, Hermione. Remus will be a good husband." Her sincere tone was belied by her mournful eyes.

"Of course he will," Hermione replied just as sincerely and wiped a stray tear from her own eye.

Ginny and Harry turned and the chapel doors opened before them of their own accord, closing gently behind them. Hermione turned to her dad.

"Well, this is it. In a few minutes I'll be a married woman, no longer your little girl."

He grinned. "Darling, you will always be my little girl, married woman or not. I just want to be certain, absolutely positive, that this is your final decision. We could still call the whole thing off or wait until that professor of your shows up."

Hermione smiled. "This is not the decision I want to make dad. If it were up to me, I wouldn't be getting married for many, many years, and I certainly wouldn't be marrying Remus..." *Knowing what I do* she added mentally. "But there's no point delaying the inevitable. Severus is not going to show up and save me this time, so we might as well carry on as if this is what I want."

Her dad gave her a queer look of understanding mixed with admiration and fear, kissed her on the forehead and replaced her veil.

"Well, if that's the case, I suppose we shouldn't keep them waiting any longer." Taking her arm he led her to the doors, which opened for them as they had for Harry and Ginny. The music was rhythmic enough to keep them on track as they made their way down the aisle, and Hermione's only betrayal of nerves was the death grip she had on her dad's arm.

Hermione looked up at Remus standing on the dais, and the knot of fear in her stomach contracted tightly, almost throwing her off balance. She wanted to run away, but instead gripped her dad's arm tighter to keep her on course.

Remus looked dashing, if tired, standing in dress robes of deep gray. He smiled at her encouragingly, but she could tell he was as nervous as she was, if not more so. It suddenly occurred to her that he was condemning himself as much as she was. If anything happened to her it would be him dealing with the consequences. He would be under suspicion immediately if she died, even if it weren't a werewolf related death. He was a known werewolf, and therefore guilty of any crime. She reeled at the thought just as they reached the dais.

She was barely aware of her dad prying her hand off his arm and handing her over to Remus, but caught Remus' concerned look as she gripped his arm as fiercely as she had her dad's. As he led her up the last steps to the altar, he asked quietly, "Are you all right, Hermione? Are you sure you want to do this?"

She nodded minutely and forced herself to relax her grip on him. They took their places before Dumbledore and faced the aged wizard. He indicated that she should raise her veil and started to speak.

"Witches, Wizards, and Muggles alike, we are gathered here this day to witness the union of a good man and a kind woman in matrimony. Matrimony is not to be taken lightly, especially for a witch and wizard, for when they say their vows they are placing their hearts and souls in each other's care, and only with death does the responsibility to the other end."

Hermione looked at Dumbledore and mused that this was terribly heavy for a supposedly joyous occasion, but she supposed that since half the student body was here to witness it he needed to impress upon them that marriage was a serious affair.

She almost snorted at the double entendre. Serious *affair* indeed! But Dumbledore was saying something else, so she tuned back in to the ceremony.

"...And so, if anyone knows of any reason for this witch and this wizard not to join their souls together for their mortal lives, please speak now or hold your peace for ever more."

The chapel was silent as Dumbledore let the moment hang in the air, as if mutely begging someone to speak up. Hermione was tempted to object herself, but she resolutely held her tongue. The aged wizard looked around one last time and then back at the couple. Before he could open his mouth, though, the chapel doors banged open and a rich voice called out, "I do!"

Remus, Hermione, and the entire audience turned as one to watch a tall wizard stride up the aisle. Hermione could hear the wave of gasps as row after row recognized the man with the large nose and short greasy hair. He strode up to the dais in an almost cocky manner, smirking at the pleased, albeit shocked, look on Hermione's face. The gasps in the hall became murmurs as the audience recognized the bride.

Hermione took a deep breath and smelled the same spicy scent she had Friday night. At that moment something clicked, and she felt as if she could face the world, and Severus Snape, no matter what was thrown at her.

"Professor?" she asked in a shocked voice, before she could stop herself. "Why ever would you object? I can promise getting married won't affect my grades."

Severus looked at her for a moment, and she thought she saw his lips twitch before his expression became hard and cold. "Well, as long as you can guarantee that, I will withdraw my objection." He turned around and stepped off the altar, heading toward the exit, pausing after a couple feet to turn and say, "Carry on, then," before resuming his purposeful stride toward the doors.

When he had passed three rows of giggling students, Hermione realized she wasn't going to win anything playing by his rules. He would win every time. He would make sure of it.

"Severus, wait!" she cried, not caring about the shock wave that ripped through the students. All her attention was riveted on the man who was striding away as quickly as he came, carrying with him her unrealized hopes of happiness.

It struck her then, fairly forcefully, how totally absurd the situation was. She was marrying a werewolf who was bound to another, while another man who loved her, granted he was a rather nasty man, was walking away without a care in the world thanks to her attempt to play his game.

She couldn't help it: she started laughing.

The shocked whispers in the hall quieted down as everyone turned their attention onto the bride who was quickly dissolving into a giggling puddle of froth. Hermione found she couldn't stand up any longer and collapsed onto her bum as laughter racked her body. Remus, Harry and Ginny surrounded her, worriedly asking if she was all right. She knew she seemed hysterical, but she couldn't stop laughing long enough to assure them she was fine.

Everyone was so intent on Hermione's health that no one in the wedding party noticed the dark figure striding back up the aisle, or the unnatural quiet that descended upon the chapel, until Snape's shadow loomed over the quartet.

"Miss Granger! What is the meaning of this?" he barked, snapping nearly everyone to attention, though Hermione couldn't repress a few more giggles.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, swallowing another set of giggles, but unable to wipe the grin off her face. "But I did tell you I didn't expect any grand gestures of love from you. You've shocked me silly."

His lips twitched again, but his face remained as hard as ever. "Is that all you can say for yourself and your abysmal behavior?" he sneered.

"No," she said simply and smiled as he started scowling.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Severus Snape, will you marry me?"

He blinked. He blinked again. She smiled up at him and waited for his answer, though a sense of dread was growing with each second he stood immobile before her with that look of shock on his face. Finally he seemed to recover slightly, and he drew himself up to his full height.

"Miss Granger, that is a most impertinent question, especially coming from a *student*," he said in scathing tones. Her stomach dropped; her fears were being realized. "You of all people should have researched the subject thoroughly enough to know that it is the man who proposes to the woman, not the other way around!"

Remus gasped, and Snape's eyes shot over to him. A feral smile spread across Snape's face as he advanced on Remus. "Did *you* know that, werewolf, or did you let her instigate this farce?" Remus' shocked look faded into anger, but Snape didn't let him get a word in edgewise. "A man who is worth anything would have picked his intended off the floor, thusly," and he bent down to offer his hand to Hermione, who took it gratefully, "and knelt before her like this," he said matching his motion to his words, "and said, 'Hermione, my world revolves around you. Will you marry me?' Not the other way around, you nitwit."

Hermione would have taken offense at Snape making such a mockery of her wedding had he not been holding her hand tenderly as he got up to face Remus at eye level. Without looking away from Remus, he squeezed her hand gently in question. She answered in kind.

Snape and Remus were squaring off, dislike evident in both their faces. If Snape hadn't been tethered by Hermione's hand, she guessed they would have been circling each other like dogs preparing for a fight. Both were tense and ready, but neither seemed willing to make the first move. Then, before anyone could react, Snape's hand shot out and grabbed Remus by his robes, dragging him forward so that their noses were an inch apart. Snape was radiating menace, while Remus looked startled and slightly alarmed. Snape narrowed his eyes and said in a voice only the wedding party could hear, "The question now is, are you going to be my best man or not, because I refuse to have the Potter brat stand beside me."

Remus let out a small sigh of relief, and nodded slightly before letting his lips tilt upwards. Snape also let his lips twitch slightly before letting Remus go. Remus stepped back and looked at Hermione, who nodded reassuringly. Relaxing a notch more, Remus stepped down to let Severus take his place.

Snape turned disdainfully towards Hermione, who grinned up at him cheekily, then, as one, they turned to face a twinkling Dumbledore who hastily put his lemon sherbets away, cleared his throat, and began.

The End

AN: *You have no idea how tempted I was to make "the rich voice" belong to Kingsley, just to mess with you all. However, I was a good little shipper and stayed the course. There is an epilogue, and possibly a short(ish) sequel, but that's it folks. Thanks for reading!*

Once again, huge kudos go to my lovely betas: amsev, who has been dealing with this from the start, an anonymous beta, Maeby and (not technically, but effectively) Sun, as well as Whitehound who took the time to Britpick for me. I know none of you would have let that sentence get through, and thank you!

*Hugs to all those who reviewed. *group hug* You've made me very happy.*

Epilogue: Letter of Recognition

Chapter 15 of 15

Hermione writes a letter.

Epilogue: Letters of Recognition

Ginevra Potter

The Burrow

Devon

February 14, 2103

Dear Ginny,

How are you doing? It's been so long since I've heard from you. I've been tempted to call by Floo to check up on you, but my knees have been aching something fierce lately. I don't know why, but no spell seems to help. Maybe it's all psychological, and I'm convinced that since I'm ancient (by Muggle standards), I need to be at least a little infirm... I don't know. Anyway, I wanted to touch base with you.

I was wondering if you'd be free for tea sometime this week? I have an afternoon free on Sunday, but for you I would postpone the Minister's visit, (Okay, I would enjoy any excuse to avoid his infuriatingly frequent visits, but I won't say more on that for fear of upsetting you.) so anytime you're available will work for me. Mostly. Well, you know the drill. We'll hash it out somehow.

One of the reasons I want to chat is because I finally went through some of Severus' belongings yesterday, and I came across all the test parchments from those interviews ages ago. Minerva was visiting, and when I showed it to her, she furrowed her brows and asked why I had kept evidence of my faulty spell work. (I still wonder why she adopted some of her dad's more severe mannerisms. She's so sweet otherwise.)

Well, long story short, due to a spell she invented recently, she can examine old charms and spells for inaccuracies and other defects. It seems that my spell work from that night so long ago was flawed. I somehow inverted the Pax Amoris Charm on the parchments. She used another nifty charm she's developed to correct the spell without undoing the original magic.

It was amazing, if disconcerting, watching all the names on the questionnaires change colors, but all of them did, except for George's. I immediately searched out Severus' answers, and his name had turned indigo! Remus' was red while Kingsley's was green!

I clearly remember thinking soon after we got married that it was impossible for him to be a man whose name would turn gold — he was just so difficult and infuriating. It seems I was right after all. Severus was so abominably difficult, and yet once he won my heart... He always managed to make it a game for us to get through the rough patches, which helped.

Gosh, you know all this, so why am I writing it? I guess I just need someone to share with who knows. I miss him so.

I guess my marital *bliss* was Fate's ironic gift. If I had discovered my error early on in the marriage I would have assumed the worst of Severus. I would have held that point against him, no matter what he said. I may never have developed the love I had. I've been wondering if the Pax Amoris was the right spell to cast after all. Severus was obviously not the right choice for a peaceful life. He was exciting, however, and I did love him.

Along with the questionnaires, I also found some of the love letters Snape sent to me early on in our marriage while he was "courting" me. Do you remember that? They are absolutely hilarious in their sarcasm, and yet I remember being touched that he even attempted to woo me. I dare not send any of them by owl, but someday I'll show them to you. Then we can laugh over what young naïve fools we all were, though it does seem wrong to use 'naïve' in conjunction with Severus.

Anyway, I've rambled on long enough. I do wish to have tea or coffee or even a firewhiskey (as long as no students are around) with you soon and catch up on life.

Minnie sends her love, and please give my love to Harry and the family for us both.

Love,

Hermione

XXX

Hermione Granger

Headmaster's Office

Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Scotland

February 19, 2103

Dear Hermione,

I'm so happy to hear from you! I've been swamped over here. Rufus came down with dragon pox a month ago and so we've all been under quarantine until it passes. It seems that once one person gets better another comes down with it. I've been so busy playing nursemaid that I'm ashamed to say I hadn't realized it had been so long!

To answer your question, I don't know when I'll be able to have tea with you, but I promise that as soon as it's safe, I'll Floo you. And if I can schedule a tea date to interfere with one of young Donald's appointments, then I'll happily do so.

You know I'm proud of my grandson for achieving his ambitions, and at such a young age, but I understand perfectly your wanting to skip any number of his visits. He is more pompous than Percy ever was, and I don't understand how he got that way. Merlin help us if we face a threat like Voldemort while he's presiding.

On a different note, I'm glad to hear you've finally started going through Severus' stuff. I know it's hard for you, but at least this way you'll find the tangible reminders for all the good times.

I can't believe you mischarmed the tests! Of all the times for you to get something wrong! It's perfect, don't you think?

I remember you were so livid at Dumbledore when the Ministry rescinded the Law after only two days. (You'd been married for, what, three days at that point?) I think that is the only time anyone had ever seen Dumbledore looking nervous. It's one of my favorite memories.

Oops, I think I hear Harry calling me, so I need to cut this short. He probably wants to know where I hid his Lightningbolt — as if I would tell him. I swear, he's a menace on a broom these days. If they required licenses to ride them, Harry would have been banned ten years ago.

Take care of yourself, Hermy, and give our love to everyone.

Love,

Ginny

AN: The colors on the test were: red, meant the person would be utterly destructive to her well being and soul. Indigo was slightly better, indicating a corrosive influence that could be overcome, but only with difficulty. Cerulean blue (George's) was neutral, neither harmful nor helpful, but most likely not conducive to a satisfying relationship. Green and gold were the two positive colors, with gold indicating the highest potential for life long happiness and fulfillment.

This really is the end for Marry a Choice. There is a sequel called "She Married Her Choice" in the works, however, if you're interested.

Thank you all for reading this, and I hope you enjoyed the ride. Thank you also to my wonderful betas who made this story much better: amsev, maeby, Southern Witch 69, and another who wishes to remain anonymous.