Accommodations

by MarcellaDix

Summary

Hermione is approached by Professor Dumbledore about befriending no other than the dour Potions Master, Professor Snape, as small payback for his efforts during the war. How will she go about it? And how will Snape react? - Starts in the summer before OOTP. Mostly canon-compliant. Will involve violence and sexual content. Mature readers only, please.
Wednesday, July 17th, 1995

It was the middle of July. Hermione had only been staying home with her parents for a little over a week before Professor Dumbledore arrived at her doorstep quite unexpectedly one warm summer evening.

Hermione had just finished clearing the table when the doorbell rang. Her parents had gone out to the terrace behind their house to enjoy a glass of wine together, so it was up to Hermione to open the door. She could not have been more surprised if Merlin himself had stood on her doorstep, so little had she expected the Headmaster to visit her in their home in the suburbs.

When she made no attempt to greet him, so stunned was she on his sudden appearance, the Headmaster wished her a good evening and showed himself to her living room. Once the swirl of his bright purple robes had passed her, Hermione snapped out of her surprise, closed the front door, and followed the wizard.

“Professor Dumbledore,” she said, “what a pleasant surprise. May I offer you something to drink?”

“Thank you, Miss Granger,” the Headmaster answered, “but if you will allow me, I would like to come straight to the reason for my visit.”

Hermione swallowed thickly at his words, not knowing what to expect to come next. Seating herself on the couch and gesturing for Dumbledore to take a seat in the comfortable armchair across from her, she steeled herself for the upcoming talk.

As promised, the Headmaster dove right in. Without much pomp, he told her about the secret society that was the Order of the Phoenix, swore her to secrecy, especially concerning Harry, and promised to send somebody to take her to Order headquarters within the week. Hermione listened carefully, asked all the questions that came to mind, and answered appropriately to all questions he in turn posed to her. When she thought their discussion to have almost finished, Dumbledore raised his voice again.

“One last thing, Miss Granger,” he spoke. “I believe it is safe for me to say that between you, Mr Potter and Mr Weasley, you are by far the most mature.”
Hermione’s chest swelled at the compliment, not unaware of the correctness of it, but not having expected to be acknowledged by the wizard in front of her.

“As it is, I must ask a favour of you,” the Headmaster continued. “It has come to my attention – multiple times over the last years – that Harry harbours a strong dislike for my Potions Master.”

Hermione bit her tongue in order not to interrupt the old wizard by blurting out that Snape entertained a rather strong dislike for Harry as well. It appeared, however, that she did not possess quite the control over her facial expression as she had hoped. Dumbledore picked up on her thoughts.

“I know, I know,” his words were accompanied by a carefree wave of his hand, as if he could brush the reality of her concerns aside, “Severus has not always been very benevolent in his treatment of Harry, but that is to be expected.”

As easily as he had read her expression before, Dumbledore now chose to dismiss the incredulity her face must have shown.

“For reasons I will not disclose to you,” the wizard continued, “I place my complete and utter trust in Severus. I am aware that Harry will continue to antagonize him, as will Mr Weasley, I expect. It is good for Mr Weasley to support Harry in any and every way available, as he will face many hardships this year. I trust that you will do your utmost, as well, to help Harry along.”

Hermione nodded her agreement at that. She certainly did not need the Headmaster to tell her to stand by Harry’s side; he was her best friend, after all, and her loyalty was unwavering.

“You however, Miss Granger,” Hermione perked up at the words, “will need to be the voice of reason. I will not ask you to antagonize the boys, but it is important that you do not doubt the loyalty of Severus Snape to our cause.”

What was that supposed to mean? She was mature enough to oppose her own friends over whether or not to trust their most hated teacher who did nothing but bully them at every opportunity? More so, Ron was allowed to take Harry’s side against Snape but she was not?

Hermione chose to voice her concerns.
“I do not believe I understand, Professor –“

Dumbledore cut her off.

“It is important for you to try and see the good in Professor Snape. I understand that this may be difficult as he is not known for his love of all things Gryffindor” – the understatement of the century, Hermione thought – “but please try to look at the situation from his perspective.

“Severus’s life consists solely of his work as a Hogwarts professor and his love for potions anymore. He is the only Potions Master in the United Kingdom, the closest Master being situated in Belarus. With no one to meet his mastery of the subject and thus no one to converse with at his own level of intellect, that leaves only the staff and the students as possible conversationalists for him.

“The staff members almost all know him as their former student. You may not know it yet, but this is a role hard to escape. With them out of the picture, only his own students are left. None of them, however, even remotely pose a worthy challenge to his intellect, and if one cannot challenge Severus intellectually, there is no basis for a possible friendship.

“I expect the times to come to be very hard on our dear Severus, I’m afraid,” Dumbledore continued, “and I think he will need all the friendships he can get. Of course, there are many Order members who are of an age close to Severus and who could probably hold their own in a discussion with him, but you see, Miss Granger, the distrust runs deep in them, seeing as Professor Snape is a reformed Death Eater. They tend to dismiss the reformation part and see him purely as a follower of Voldemort who escaped the horrible fate of a sentence to Azkaban.”

Hermione had not noticed that her mouth had dropped open, so engaged was she in Dumbledore’s story.

“You however, Miss Granger,” the Headmaster reiterated, “are somewhat apart from your fellow students. You are studious to the point of obsession, possess an intellect far superior to that of your yearmates and even older students, strive to see only the best in people, show a rare strength in your loyalty to those you deem worthy, and treat everyone around you with respect, whether they do you the same favour or not.”

Hermione felt the heat creep into her cheeks which must be blazing in a purple rivalling the colour of the Headmaster’s robes by now.
“As it is, I believe you to be a potential friend to Severus.”

The young witch’s eyes shot open. Even if the Dumbledore was right, Snape would never accept her as anything even approaching an equal, and how could she be a friend to him if he was unwilling to allow her?

The wizard in front of her sensed her doubts and chuckled.

“Yes, you are right as always, Miss Granger,” he agreed with a benevolent smile, “Severus would shut all thoughts of friendship down if you approached him about it. However, I believe it possible that he may take the first step towards you himself. If he does, I would implore you to accommodate him in every way that might make his life easier. It would not do to let Severus take this dark road ahead of him all alone. I’d rather he had a companion in you.”

Still completely flabbergasted at his words, Hermione could vaguely remember nodding her agreement. Her memory ended with the Headmaster leaving in a flurry of purple fabric, leaving her to her thoughts.

---

**Saturday, July 20th, 1995**

Just as the Headmaster had promised, two wizards appeared on the Granger family’s doorstep just a couple of days later. Hermione quickly ushered her former DADA professor Remus Lupin into her home, as well as the dark skinned wizard who introduced himself as Kingsley Shacklebolt. He struck an imposing figure and both Granger women were instantly drawn to him. Hermione’s parents were upset that she wanted to leave already, after having stayed with them for only a fortnight, but let her go with little protestations.

At her request, the wizards accompanied her on a Muggle train, as Hermione was instinctively suspicious of all things airborne, which cause more than a few chuckles from the two men. They drew quite a few looks from other passengers, but secured an empty compartment for the three of them. The ride passed quickly, both wizards interested in Hermione’s schoolwork and more than able to keep a captivating discussion going. They arrived at King’s Cross far sooner than the young witch had anticipated or would have liked.
Remus, who was surprisingly well versed in the machinations of the Muggle world, navigated them through the maze of the London underground, changing tubes a couple of times until they arrived at a district of the city Hermione had never visited before. Evening had fallen by that time, and the wizards led her through many a dark street and mostly hidden alley, keeping to the shadows at all times. They stopped in the middle of a bleak looking square.

The three of them came to stand on an unkempt patch of grass, the men positioned on either side of her as if shielding her from view of anybody who might watch, and Kingsley reached into a hidden pocket on the inside of the right sleeve of his cloak. He withdrew a small scrap of paper and gestured for her to silently read it.

“Focus,” Remus whispered into her ear.

Hermione’s eyes skimmed over the words, the script familiar even though the contents were not. She concentrated on the meaning of the words and gasped when a building appeared in front of her as she read.

_The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London._

---

**Sunday, July 20th – Monday, September 2nd, 1995**

The next couple of weeks passed in a blur. Hermione made a point to always be polite the few times she came upon Professor Snape. If he cared to acknowledge her presence at all, he would look at her as if she was mental. So far he had not made any move towards her.

Harry’s arrival proved to be a highlight amidst the otherwise rather repetitive nature of her holidays. It wasn’t a particularly nice highlight, though, unless one appreciated being screamed at until one broke out into tears. Hermione, on her part, didn’t, although Harry appeared to care little for that. He calmed down over the next few days which were spent cleaning the Black mansion. Together with the Weasley siblings, Hermione and Harry tried to gather as much information on the secret Order meetings as possible, but their venture was met with little success. Even when Sirius willingly imparted some information on them, Molly interrupted him before they could gain any solid knowledge from what he had said.
Even though she had mostly enjoyed her stay at headquarters, Hermione was glad to escape the confines of Grimmauld Place and go and start their fifth year at Hogwarts. She practically bristled with pride at having been made prefect. She felt sorry, though, to leave Harry to search for a compartment on his own while she and Ron made their way to the front of the train where the prefect compartment was situated.

The train ride passed without incident. Hermione was long used to the insults Malfoy and his mates would hurl at her, and was thus unfazed at his and Pansy Parkinson’s attempts to rile her up. Most unexpected was Harry’s confusion upon seeing the horseless carriages, as was meeting the Lovegood girl. Hermione had nothing but respect for anybody from Ravenclaw House, but could not quite comprehend why the Sorting Hat had placed Luna there. Hagrid was suspiciously absent, but Hermione had not much time to ponder this before the new DADA professor, Umbridge, gave her speech at the end of the welcoming feast. Properly disgusted and enraged at the Ministry daring to interfere with school matters, Hermione went to bed that night with a lot on her mind.

The next day brought their first double lesson on Potions with it. They were brewing the Draught of Peace. Intent on showing her support for his subject, Hermione took care to follow Professor Snape’s instructions in minute detail, which was in and of itself nothing she did not usually do anyway, but when he awarded her with not a single comment, Hermione took it as the reluctant compliment that it was. She graced her professor with a tentative smile as she handed in her concocted draught, and was almost looking forward to the twelve inches of homework he had assigned them.

Tuesday, September 3rd – Monday, September 9th, 1995

The next few days passed quickly. Almost every teacher would warn them about the upcoming OWLs and implore them to prepare studiously, beginning now. To make sure the students would not be able to not follow their instructions, they took care to assign them loads of homework.

All this, however, did nothing to faze Hermione who had been almost looking forward to her OWLs. For the first time, she would have the opportunity to prove herself to all the people who looked down on her, due to her birth, appearance, or gender. Of course she had been doing that for the past four years already, scoring best in almost all of their exams and ending up best of their year at the end. This, however, would be the first time she would be able to hold something of actual importance in her hands. The test results were valued highly as evidence to their academic success in the Wizarding world, only surpassed in importance by the NEWTs at the end of their seventh year.
What she would be doing afterwards, Hermione did not know. She had shown adeptness at quite a few of her subjects, and had become successful with the help of furious studying in the others as well. But first, they would have to end the war that was certain to come. After that, she hoped the world to be open for her.

It seemed, however, that the Ministry was loathe to admit that a war was coming, so intent were they on bad-mouthing Harry and Dumbledore to the public and so insistent to deny that Voldemort had come back; it made bile rise in her throat to even think about it. Umbridge was the cherry on top of the cream, so to speak, in the Ministry’s campaign against reason and truth. Harry had tried to keep secret from her the evidence of the torture the horrid woman imposed on him, but Hermione would have none of that. She knew what she did to those who opposed her, hidden under the cloak of detention, and at times she almost lost hope at the thought she was unable to stop her. If the Ministry could torture Hogwarts students right under the nose of the Headmaster, the greatest wizard of their time – she did not want to think of how bad this war was yet to become before it was over.

Trying to keep on top of their homework and away from despair, Hermione threw herself into her studies. Before she knew it, a whole week had passed and she found herself back in the dungeons. The lesson on Thursday had been uneventful and Hermione knew to let Snape take the first step, but she could not help feeling she had failed in befriending him.

This lesson would have to be the one they connected on something other than a teacher-student-level. How she would make him see her as something other than the insufferable know-it-all he often proclaimed her to be, Hermione had no idea.

She had been thinking about how to make herself more approachable for Snape during the summer but had yet to come up with a solution. She had been arguing with herself in circles, always coming back to the same arguments and counterarguments, but unable to reach a conclusion. It would be best to appeal to him on an academic level, she would say. Him being the highly intelligent and intensely educated man that he was, it would be most productive to make him see her own intellect, which hugely surpassed that of her yearmates, and he would find her to be closest to an equal in all the students.

But wasn’t that what she’d been doing since starting at Hogwarts, she would counter. Didn’t she remember that first Potions lesson, when she had attempted to correctly answer all the questions Snape had directed at Harry, but he hadn’t he simply snapped at her to ‘sit down’? She remembered perfectly well being forced to miss this first and very important opportunity to prove herself to the Potions Master, and found that the academic approach in a scholastic setting would only accentuate the fact that she was still very much his student and as such subordinate to him.

But if not by prowess of intellect, how would she prove herself to him, she would ask herself? After all, there was not much one could do to draw attention to oneself in the Potions classroom. One way was to show an eagerness for answering questions, but she had already dismissed that. Another to
shine with perfectly brewed potions, but she already did that, and if anything, it seemed to make him dislike her even more. A third way was to help others, but this Gryffindor selflessness had earned her some venomously hissed warnings to let her classmates fail by themselves.

The fourth and last option would be to raise attention of the negative kind – either by incorrectly preparing ingredients, or by botching up a potion, or by simply breaking one or several school rules. Naturally, none of these options appealed to Hermione. Causing trouble in a Potions classroom could have dire consequences to anyone and everyone present, depending on the severity of the issue. Not only could people get hurt if something dangerous happened, it would also most certainly cost her House points, and Hermione was unwilling to be the cause of that. Maybe Snape would be so vicious as to lay the blame on Harry or Neville; the latter being too gentle to not stress himself into an early grave at even the thought of detention with the feared Potions Master, the former too damaged due to the detention with Umbridge already to not lose his temper and probably get enough detention to have his grandchildren still scrub dirty cauldrons on his behalf.

Pretty much the same went for botching up a potion. Hermione was too reliant on book knowledge in this subject, lacking the natural predisposition for Potions, to know what exactly would happen if she added too much of this or too little of that or stirred too quickly in the wrong direction or turned the fire down too late. No, she would not be the cause of a cauldron blowing up into her and her classmates’ faces. Also, it would result in a bad mark for her, and however much she was intent on following the Headmaster’s request, she would not allow that with the OWLs so close.

That left the sloppy preparation of ingredients. This had much potential to go horribly wrong as well, of course, as Snape was quick to take points. Other than that, there was not much opportunity for escalation. Of course, it would diminish the perfection of her potion and thus reduce the probability to get her an Outstanding, but it would (hopefully) not create a dangerous concoction. Mostly, it would force Snape to speak to her, even if it was in a derogatory manner, but hopefully he would show her how it was done. Thus, he would have to spend a few minutes in conversation or at least interaction with her, even if unwilling.

Was Professor Snape the kind of person who saw graceful humanity in the faults of others? Would he be glad to help, to impart knowledge, on somebody as eager to learn as she? Would he revel in the fact that he was able to educate a young witch, to tickle the potential for perfection out of her?

*Of course not, you stupid girl,* and inner voice eerily close to the subject of her thoughts sneered. *He will rejoice in the opportunity to peck you down a notch or two, seeing as much of an insufferable know-it-all you take care to be at all times.*

Hermione did her best to dismiss the voice and push it out of her mind. When she failed at that, she chose to ignore it, to try and reduce it to a minimum, and concentrated on thinking as loud as she could, “You can do it. Today will be the day.”
Monday, September 2nd – Monday, September 9th, 1995

The girl’s behaviour had changed.

Severus was naturally suspicious of change, especially if it came as unexpected and seemingly inexplicable as this. Even more suspiciously, the change seemed to appear only in the girl’s behaviour towards him. Severus didn’t trust this. Severus didn’t trust her. And most of all, Severus almost didn’t trust his own judgement anymore.

Maybe she had simply decided to grow up? Merlin knew her intellect by far surpassed that of the dunderheads around her, as did her maturity. Not only had she matured in the way other females her age would, no – she had an air about her that betrayed the sorrows she had gone through within the few short years her life spanned so far, the hardships she had faced, the dangers she had experienced. Severus ignored the niggling voice at the back of his mind that tried to convince him that her life very much resembled his own at that age. The thought was a disconcerting one that he was eager to dismiss. He did not want to ponder on the similarities between the two of them.

And what similarities would those be, anyway? Yes, she had few friends. Yes, she had a familial background that did not allow her to easily melt into the masses of students. Yes, she was studious, and powerful, and arrogant. Yes, people made fun of her hair.

But these similarities were too few and too far-fetched to hint at an actual similarity between him, Severus Snape, Potions Master and Slytherin through and through, and her, Hermione Granger, swotty know-it-all and Gryffindor golden girl.

No, Severus surmised, she wasn’t like him at all. And even if she was – which she decidedly wasn’t – it was of no matter to him. He did not care for the foolishness of pubescent students, even those from his own House, nor was he interested in the whims of those insufferable teenagers.

Unless…

Unless, of course, those whims affected him. And her change in behaviour did affect him, only he did not know in what way – yet. He was very much set to get to the ground of this – whatever this was –, and soon.
So far, he had been unable to detect any ill intent, but that did not mean there was none. She had been overly polite towards him during the few times he had the ill fortune to stumble upon her at Grimmauld Place (not that Severus Snape ever did anything even remotely resembling a stumble, it was a mere matter of speech), and during the first week of the new schoolyear, she had taken care to always greet him with a smile while doing her best to please him academically during the lessons.

Of course, Hermione Granger striving to surpass all of her yearmates was nothing new in and of itself. The way she had done so, however, was disconcerting to say the least. It seemed to him that she was not trying to impress Professor Snape, Master of Potions, but rather Severus Snape, the man. It had been a passing thought at first, but one that crossed his mind more often than he cared to admit, and even though he did the best he could to dismiss the notion, it had planted itself into his brain and would not budge, however hard he tried to rid himself of it.

As absorbed as he was in these thoughts, trying to puzzle out her behaviour, the week and following weekend passed quicker than he expected, and before he knew where the time had gone, it was Monday again. Or, more to the point, he had a double lesson of 5th year Potions with Slytherin and Gryffindor.

He greeted them with a few terse words of caution and warnings of impending doom towards all who would defy his instructions, and set them a Strengthening Solution to brew during the remainder of the lesson. When the students hastened to follow his orders, he took his place at the desk in front of the class and watched. His eyes settled on the girl. She showed less haste in her pace than her classmates, but rather acted with efficiency. As it was, she was quicker on her way to the storeroom and back than the surrounding dunderheads. She had all the ingredients set out and her cauldron preheating on a small flame as instructed before Longbottom had even taken out his silver knife from his book bag.

Inwardly shaking his head at the incompetence of the boy, Severus conceded to his inner voice that it was unfair to compare the girl to a complete dunderhead as Longbottom. He had almost articulated an apology – again, inwardly, of course – when he realized that the girl had started to dice her Asphodel roots with less than the absolute perfection he had come to expect from her.

Severus was across the room in the blink of an eye. Looming over her desk, he fixed the girl with a stare that would make a small dragon cower in fear. She, however, looked up at him with an expression of polite interest.

“Sir?” she asked expectantly.

The Potions Master strove to reign in his temper. How dare she act as if she didn’t know what was
“Just what is it, Miss Granger,” Severus questioned, his voice a deadly almost-whisper, so low that the dunderheads left and right of the girl had to visibly strain to listen in on his words, “that you think you are doing?”

Without missing a beat, the girl answered, “Dicing my Asphodel roots, sir.”

Hot anger bubbled inside him, struggling to be let out to wreak its usual havoc.

“Miss Granger,” he continued in the same low voice as before, “dicing Asphodel roots is something I expect my students to do correctly by Hallowe’en in their first year at Hogwarts. What you are doing here, stupid girl, is mauling precious ingredients to the point of impossible recognition. So tell me, Miss Granger,” Severus leaned in to her even more deeply, until his face was only inches away from hers, “have you stuffed your brain so completely with unnecessary knowledge that some more basic abilities went lost in the process, or has this particular Asphodel root insulted your familiar?”

Finally he could see that his words invoked the desired reaction from the girl. Her eyes became glassy with unshed tears at his harsh words, and her bottom lip set into a quiver. She visibly struggled to control her emotions. What surprised him, however, was that she actually managed to do so.

Her eyes closed for a second and her bottom lip disappeared between her now normal sized front teeth to be chewed on. When she released it again, it had taken a darker red, almost cherry, delicious enough for him to desire to bite into it himself.

His breath almost stopped at the thought – where had that come from? – and he had to struggle to compose himself in the split-second it took her to open her eyes once more. When she did, determination showed in them as she met his cold stare with a warmth inappropriate in regards to the harsh words he had bestowed on her only seconds earlier.

“I apologize, Professor, for my lack of proficiency,” the girl said, her voice and stance confident. “Please, sir, if you would be so kind as to demonstrate one last time how to correctly dice these roots?”

Not showing his surprise that she would not only back down and accept his criticism, but asked for his help – her, Little Miss Perfect, asking for a teacher’s help -, Severus shooed her away from the
table and showed her how to hold the knife and how to angle it in order to produce the desired result. (Retrospectively, he was quite taken aback that he so willingly followed her request, rather than scold her some more for her inability, and throwing in another few scathing remarks.) He then stood to the side and watched her try to do the same. When she was unable to mirror his demonstration to the letter, he stepped up until he was towering right behind her and corrected her grip on the hilt as well as the angle of her knife. He led her hand a couple of times until he was certain she would not mess up again.

In the short time necessary to insure her proficiency with the preparation of Asphodel roots, Severus became utterly confused. Standing behind the girl, he could not help breathing in the ensnaring scent of her furious mane. It smelled of slightly burned caramel and of a hazel tree in bloom. The scent reminded him of his few happy summers with Lily, and brought to the surface memories of days spent lounging in the grass in the park just around the corner.

Trying to shove the memories back to the small compartment in his mind where he stored all memories of his youth that brought him nothing but pain now, he concentrated on guiding her hand instead. Even though it admittedly helped to forget her achingly pleasant scent, it did nothing to reign in the lurch he felt at the realization that her hands were diminutive compared to his, her fingers no less agile, but her skin so much softer than his calloused hands would ever be.

It confused him to notice these things. It was nothing he would not expect from young females; soft hands and pleasant smells were, after all, just two of the many details of outer appearances that teenage girls fixated on. What entranced him was the fact that it appeared so natural on her. She did not appear to cream her hands and wash her hair in order to appeal to the dunderheads that were the males her age, but rather for practicality. Her mane was probably more easily tameable when wet, if one could call hair of her calibre tameable, and smooth hands were not only desirable in the handling of delicate potions ingredients, but could produce more effective wandwork as well.

*Speaking of wandwork…*

Severus groaned inwardly and stepped away from the girl as quickly as he could without raising suspicion. He did not care to count the years that had passed since he had been near a woman who could evoke such a reaction from him without even trying. It had obviously been too long, otherwise he would not be so glad of his billowing robes that hid the exact outline of his body as he was now.

Electing to escape her presence, he bellowed, “Ten points from Gryffindor, for inadequacy in the basic abilities of the preparation of ingredients”, and strode to his desk again. He tried to ignore the surge of guilt he felt as she heard her whispered ‘*thank you, sir*’ as he left. After all, why would she thank him for deducting points from her House?

From his vantage point at the front of the dungeons, he scanned the work desks of the other students.
The Potions Master sighed inwardly at what he saw there, and began to make his rounds along the tables to prevent and, if too late for that, punish any fooleries his students would commit.

When he walked along the line of desks in front of hers, he could not help but flick his eyes towards her. She was busy ignoring the numerous requests for help from her friends, and seemed unaware of the blush that had crept from her cheekbones downwards until it vanished underneath the collar of her high-necked, buttoned up blouse.

Severus was surprised at the lack of pleasure he felt at the fact that she was still bothered by his comments several long minutes afterwards. Usually it put him into a joyous mood to see the aftermath of the destructive effect he had on many of his students. To see her discomfiture at his harsh words, however, did nothing to elate him in the usual way. The only pleasure he now took from her sight was the knowledge that he had been the one to cause a rupture in her usually pristine appearance (excluding her wild mane). He wondered what she would look like if he was to install the same passion in her that her furious hair hinted at.

Struggling to get his thoughts back into line, Severus spent the rest of the lesson on auto pilot, mechanically going through the motions of stalking his class and deducting points where possible. All the while he tried to sort his mind into the compartments he usually kept it in, orderly and sorted, and nowhere near any of the physical attributes of the Granger girl and the responses he might elicit from her depending on how he handled her. No, he would not go down that path that led to the certain crossing from the safe setting of a student-teacher-authority into the anarchic chaos of impropriety.

He appeared unable, however, to shake off the thought that he still had to get to the ground of her change in behaviour. He made a decision that he elected to categorize as quick-thinking and cunning worthy of a Slytherin, rather than brash and blunt as only a Gryffindor could be. To his usual dismissal of the class, almost as an afterthought, he added, “Miss Granger, a word.”

He watched her shoo the two pestering dunderheads that circled around her like only lazy parasites around an overly generous host with too large a brain could, as she stuffed the last of her belongings into her book back and made her way towards him. There she stood, only a few feet away from him, her back straight and her eyes looking straight into his.

“Sir?” she questioned, curious.

The Potions Master fixed her with one of his infamous stares, willing her to spill the secret of her behaviour. He purposely stretched the silence between them and took no little pleasure from her increasing fidgeting under his intense gaze. He had schooled his features into a mask devoid of expression but knew from experience that she would be feeling as if she had done something wrong, as all students did sooner or later if they had the dubious fortune of becoming the centre of his
When she had nervously worried and subsequently straightened out the hem of her school skirt (statutory length, unlike the shortened skirts of most of the other girls her age, he noticed), Severus chose to break the silence.

“What is it you want from me, Miss Granger?”

The temperature dropped, both in his voice and his eyes, causing the room to appear even colder than it usually was. He noticed the shiver running through the girl’s body, the skin of her legs breaking out in goose bumps, starting at her ankles and climbing up her smooth calves, transitioning into a tremor barely visible in what he assumed to be a flat stomach behind a straight-tailored blouse that revealed less than the males around her – not him, never him – might have been interested in, resulting in a short trembling of her bottom lip until even her normally furious hair appeared a little subdued. What he had not considered the cold atmosphere to cause was the considerable tightening of her nipples, visible through the thin fabrics of her bra and blouse.

Severus swallowed. The motion seemed thicker to him than it had any reason to be, but he felt secure in the knowledge it would not show outwardly. Certainly the girl would not notice anything as she was far too worried by his words.

“Sir?” she asked again, now hesitant and cautious. “I – I don’t believe I understand –“

“Do you take me for a fool, Miss Granger?” Snape thundered. “Do you honestly believe I would not notice?”

Her voice barely a whisper, her expression now one of confusion, the haunted look of a mouse in the paws of a lion – Severus sneered at the metaphor relating to him as a lion –, she said, “I would never believe you to be a fool, Professor, but I’m afraid I don’t know what you are referring to.”

Severus grew deadly silent. The girl’s eyes darted around the room, looking anywhere but at him, unable to meet his penetrating stare. He took it as a sign of admission of her guilt, but would not be content until he heard her confession. He needed to get to the ground of this.

“Miss Granger,” he articulated, every letter falling from his lips with well-measured malice, “do not lie to me.”
Seeing her on the brink of interrupting him, he cut her off.

“You will listen to me now, and then you will answer. Do you understand?”

She nodded, her expression one of dread, and he continued.

“Do not believe I did not notice everything. I grant you, you were almost subtle which is quite a feat in a Gryffindor and defies the brutish bluntness I usually get from members of your House. A greeting here, a smile there, a ‘thank you’ when I deducted points; never too forward, but doubt not, Miss Granger –” here he leaned forward, until his eyes were at the same level as hers, now transfixed in his gaze, “– that I noticed it all. What you will tell me now is to what end you chose to change your behaviour.”

It was not a question, and they both knew it. He saw her swallow thickly, her eyes still displaying fear but at the same time more than hinting at the rapid workings of her brain as she struggled to compose herself and articulate an answer to his not-a-question.

“I apologize,” she finally began, “for any discomfort my actions may have brought you, Professor.”

Snape snorted at that and she jumped at the derisive sound, but continued with the same stupid bravery he hated, yet in this instance counted on.

“I merely wish to extend to you the courtesy and respect you are due, not only in your position as an esteemed teacher at one of the greatest schools in wizardom and established academic, but also in the light of you being” – she hesitated – “somebody who earned Albus Dumbledore’s complete trust.”

He inwardly grimaced at her less than subtle hint at his Order membership, knowing full well that she was unaware of the extent to which that membership went, including his position of a double agent between the two most powerful magical madmen of their time. His intense observation of her did not waver and prompted her into speaking once more.

“I admire not only your vast intellect, but the magnitude of your power as well. I wish to learn from you, sir. I admit to be at fault for not realizing earlier how much respect we owe you, both for saving our lives multiple times throughout the last few years and for impressing your knowledge upon us. I apologize for that, as well, sir. I believe to have come to a better understanding of how great a wizard you are. I know that I am unable to make amends for the years that we met you with less than respect, but I truly wish to better myself and treat you with all the esteem you are due.”
The girl fell silent once more. Severus fought to contain the rage – mostly at her continued use of ‘we’, as if Potter and Weasley suddenly decided to show him some respect as well – that had bubbled almost to the surface, threatening to spill over and turn the room into a torrid hell. He calmed his voice not to betray the scathing fury boiling inside him. In fact, he calmed it down to such a low tone that the girl had to strain her ears to hear his words.

“I thought you said you did not take me for a fool, Miss Granger,” he hissed.

Before she could open her mouth to spill any more of her preposterous declarations, Severus continued.

“Did you really think I would fall for any of your lies? Believe any of that nonsense you just concocted? No,” he whispered scathingly, seeing her choke on the protestations she had been about to raise, “enough. Not only have you failed to answer my question honestly, but you had the gall to bring up the fact that your little friends owe me their lives over and over again, and that you three being here has forced me into the displeasure of teaching you.”

The girl kept her mouth firmly closed, Severus noted with satisfaction. His admonishments not to interrupt and contradict him seemed to have taken root in the girl’s mind, enabling her to control her tongue and hold her mouth. Nonetheless, he could still see her mentally opening and closing her mouth, miming a stranded fish gasping for air, much as she was caught in her lies and grasping for more convincing arguments.

Severus knew all her stated reasons for her change in behaviour to be wrong. Too often had he seen her give in to her friends complaining about his lessons. Too often had he caught her scowl at the fact that she knew nothing of why Dumbledore trusted him. Too often had she taken the easy way into believing him to be some kind of villain.

It was true; she was the one of the thrice-damned trio to at least try and uphold some modicum of respect towards him, or at least the appearance of such, but he could not believe her to be serious about that. No. The Granger girl was simply too rule-abiding to publicly disrespect him. That did not make her words anymore true, though.

“Detention, Miss Granger. Five days.”

The girl gasped. He knew she never got detention for her own trespasses. Although, Severus was of the opinion that receiving detention for trying to keep the other dunderheads from getting into even
more trouble than they would if left to their own devices was singularly stupid of her and for that alone she deserved any detention she was assigned. The Potions Master knew, of course, that she had never gotten this amount of detention before. To say that it pleased him to no end to be the one to punish her to this extent would be an understatement.

“One week, sir?” she asked, incredulous.

“While I commend your grasp of the simpler aspects of the calculation of times, Miss Granger,” Severus sneered, “you will not receive one week of attention. This is supposed to be a punishment for you, not me, and being forced into your presence for five subsequent evenings is something I do not wish to impose upon myself. While it is true that I could simply hand you over to Mr Filch, I have no desire to do so, either.

“No,” and at this he chuckled darkly, watching the dread return to her eyes with a force, “you will repent for your lies. You will come to my classroom every Monday after dinner for the rest of the month, starting tonight, and additionally this Thursday after dinner. Five evenings of detention will hopefully cure you of the urge to outrageously lie to my face at every opportunity.”

Watching her struggle for both an answer and some much needed air brought no little pleasure to Severus. He would be able to put her into place over the time of her duration; he would see to that.

“Go,” he whispered.

She took only the split of a second to compose herself, failing at that, and fled the dungeon. Seeing her leave, Severus sighed.

Damn the girl and her magnificent behind.
Monday, September 9th, 1995

The boys had raced ahead to lunch, as expected. Usually, Hermione would be bothered by the fact that food was evidently more important to the boys than their female third possibly needing some cheering up after a tête-à-tête with Professor Snape. Today, however, she was quite glad that they had not waited up on her. She did not feel in the mood to talk about what had just conspired.

Hermione was still very much uncertain about what exactly had just happened. She wanted to hit herself on the head for not thinking of the very high possibility that Professor Snape would notice her change in behaviour towards him. After all, when had the man ever not noticed something going on around him?

What she simply could not understand, however, was why he hadn’t believed her. After all, she of all the Gryffindors was the only one likely to reconsider her attitude towards him. And she had indeed been sincere when she had told him that she had found new gratitude and respect for him and had decided to act accordingly. Of course she could not tell him that this wasn’t all – if she told him that the Headmaster had asked her to befriend the dour Potions Master – or rather, accommodate him if he chose to befriend her – he would very probably bite her head off and hex her into pieces so small that none of them would fill even a thimble.

She had certainly not expected that he would snap at her and call her a liar, of all things. Hermione Granger was known for her love of all things factual, and for her to tell a lie would indeed necessitate dire circumstances.

But if she thought about it…

Well, it seemed she had lied to Professor Snape’s face quite a bit over her years at Hogwarts. First, on All Hallows’ Eve in her first year, when she had taken the blame for their fight with a troll, even though Ron had made her cry so that she felt the need to run and hide in the girls’ toilet, and the boys had locked the troll in with her.

In her second year, she had stolen precious potions ingredients from him to brew the Polyjuice Potion. In her third year, he had not been among the very few people who knew about her Time Turner. That had been a secrecy measure dictated by the Ministry and wasn’t in itself a lie, but she had used the Time Turner later that year to help Harry save Buckbeak and Sirius, the latter of whom Professor Snape had expected to be Kissed. Of course, the Potions Master had been wrong about Sirius being the murderer he had been convicted as, but working behind his back to save his
childhood nemesis probably counted as a lie nonetheless. Plus, she had not reported Harry when he
sneaked into Hogsmeade, neither in their third nor their fourth year.

So maybe he hadn’t got to know her as the most trustworthy person. Even though, from his
perspective, he probably suspected the boys being responsible for most of those instances and thus
had no real knowledge of her lying to him. On the other hand, Hermione was known as the brains of
the trio, so it was quite likely that he could make an educated guess and reach the correct conclusion
that she had known and possibly even concocted the plans for these situations.

Hermione’s retrospections came to a halt when she arrived at the Great Hall. She sought out the boys
to sit with them. Lunch was as quiet an affair as it would get at the Gryffindor table. After having
waved off Ron and Harry’s questions about her talk with Professor Snape, she was left mostly to her
own affairs.

Ignoring the boys’ recollections of the Quidditch try-outs the previous Friday, she chose to think
upon how to become the companion Professor Dumbledore had requested for his Potions Master.
The Headmaster himself had said that Professor Snape would react rather unfavourably if she
approached him about the possibility of a friendship between the two of them. No, he would have to
be the one to approach her.

That left the question of how to make herself approachable for the dour Potions Master?

The main problem appeared to be that Professor Snape avoided conversation with her as much as
possible, except the occasional admonishment for being an insufferable know-it-all, as he liked to put
it. Her first goal would thus have to be regular interaction. Her attempt to force him into interaction
with her by preparing her ingredients rather sloppily had worked so far. True, it had resulted in a few
scathing remarks and a loss of House points, but Hermione had done her best to remain polite,
respectful, and amenable to as much as grateful for his help.

Permanent negligence in her brewing, however, was not the road to take, Hermione surmised. It
would probably prompt Professor Snape into interaction with her a couple of times, but failing to
improve despite his help would certainly lessen his opinion of her considerably.

Of course, Hermione remembered, there was a very low possibility that his opinion of her could sink
any lower. After all, he had just assigned her a rather excessive amount of detention, immediately
after having accused her of lying to his face. It would not do to ponder on that, however, she
decided. More important now was finding a way to extend their interaction.

A learning environment seemed advantageous, as their almost civil conversation when Professor
Snape corrected her dicing technique had proven. Hermione sought to break down that scene into its basic elements that led to polite interaction. After some thought, she discerned that apparently she had been inapt enough to demand his tutoring, and promising (she dared not think intelligent as it probably was no attribute Professor Snape would grant her) enough to deserve it.

If she thought on it, detention actually wasn’t the worst outcome of her first attempt to force her professor into interaction with her. At least he hadn’t handed her over to Mr Filch; now that would have been counterproductive. No, this way he had laid the foundation for an environment in which the two of them would repeatedly be alone together. Of course, there was always the high possibility that he would set her to scrubbing cauldrons or some other mindless task that nonetheless would demand her full attention. She hoped for something allowing some kind of conversation instead.

It was of little use to ponder what task Professor Snape would set her for their detention tonight, as she could do little to influence that now. What she could influence, however, was their future interaction. Hermione set to make a plan for the long run.

Having already decided that a learning environment would be most beneficial in making herself approachable for the dour Potions Master, the question remained what to learn? Hermione knew that she was quite decent at Potions, but certainly not a natural as Professor Snape was. Achieving a grasp of the subject similar to his level, however, would demand instinct and intuition, both of which she felt one could not learn if one didn’t possess those traits already, and a request for such tutorship would most certainly be denied her anyway.

So what other subjects remained?

She remembered that Professor Snape had repeatedly applied for the post of DADA teacher, and had subsequently been denied the position every year. Maybe she should ask him to teach her defence? He would certainly be a capable teacher, offering much to be learned from him, and those lessons would be sorely needed if Umbridge continued to refuse them practice. However, Hermione did not know what Professor Snape’s attitude towards the Ministry toad was. Was he as enraged at the Ministry’s interference at Hogwarts as she was? Or did he approve of Umbridge’s methods? Hermione could not be sure.

With the toad as DADA teacher, they certainly would not be learning any effective defence this year. If Hermione was ever involved in a fight, she would very probably lose. Depending on her opponents intent, she would either die or be taken prisoner. Hermione shuddered at the thought. If it came to it, she would likely prefer the first option. Although she was not keen to die in this war, she would rather lose her life than betray the Order. Because what else happened to prisoners of war? The capturing side would attempt to squeeze out any and all secrets the prisoner knew about his own side. If Hermione fell into the hands of Death Eaters, she would be tortured for information about the Order, she was sure of it. And that, she mused, was not something she would be able to withstand for long.
Suddenly, she perked up. The boys saw her abrupt movement, but she waved them off and their conversation on the Quidditch try-outs – or wait, had they progressed to passionate Percy-bashing already? – continued. Hermione’s mind, however, reeled.

*That might be the solution!*

Professor Snape was a reformed Death Eater, the Headmaster had said. It confirmed Harry’s suspicions and everything he had seen and heard between Professor Snape and Headmaster Karkaroff last year. He would know everything there was to know about torture methods, and would be able to teach her how to withstand them. Doing so would constitute at least a small advantage to the Order. Hermione being as close to Harry as she was, and being known to be the brains of their trio, she would be the most likely to be questioned for information should they ever be captured. It would also make Professor Snape see that she was able to think ahead, sensible to prepare for the worst, and willing to endure torture in order to help the Light in this war.

As Hermione still convinced herself that her solution had many benefits and no drawbacks, lunch break came to an end. The trio parted ways in the Entrance Hall, the boys leaving for Divination as Hermione headed towards Ancient Runes. The difficult translations there left her with little to no room to ponder her detention with the Potions Master later that night any more.

After that lesson, the boys had quite a lot to say about Umbridge’s inspection of their Divination class, but they had little time as they had to face the toad herself in their last lesson of the day, Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Hermione allowed herself some cheek, though she preferred to think of it as reasonable objections to Umbridge’s teaching methods. The toad, it seemed, disagreed with the notion that a student – and a Gryffindor Muggle-born at that! – could contribute any input to the DADA lessons that were worth hearing. It felt good to at least partially put the toad in her place, but it also prompted the sprouting of some more Ministry-approved lies and the subsequent loss of her best friend’s rather volatile temper.

Hermione struggled to hold Harry back, but ultimately could only watch as he got himself a week’s worth of detention. When they sat down for dinner, Hermione spent most of the time berating him for being so stupid as to give Umbridge the satisfaction of giving him detention. Completely absorbed in her rant, she barely ate anything. She knew she should go easy on Harry, but even though she hated Umbridge and her methods herself, she couldn’t understand why Harry would fall for her taunting so easily. Had he not learnt to pick his fights?

Harry’s temper soon got the better of him, and he stormed off towards the common room. Hermione and Ron stayed at dinner, to give their best friend some space and time to cool off before he had to
face the toad again that night. When the two of them finally left the Great Hall, Hermione quickly glanced back at the High Table. Professor Snape seemed to have already left.

Certain that the Potions Master would only become less pleasant the longer she left him to wait for her, she said a hasty good-bye to Ron and headed for the dungeons. She was almost across the Entrance Hall, when Ron called her back.

“Where are you going, 'Mione?” he asked, puzzled.

Hermione sighed.

“I have to go to Professor Snape to –“ She hesitated. “…to serve my detention.”

Ron’s mouth fell open.

“You… you… what?! The git gave you detention?” he fumed finally.

“Don’t call him that, Ron, he is very much our professor and we owe him much,” Hermione chided.

Before Ron could voice the vicious retort she could see him shape in his mind, she quickly continued.

“Please don’t tell Harry about this. He is so angry at his own detention already, I don’t want him to have mine in mind as well.”

Ron’s expression changed to weary immediately.

“'Mione,” he whined, “I don’t think it’s clever to lie to Harry right now.”

“And I don’t want you to,” she assured. “It’s not that I would keep it from him. I just don’t want him to worry about this right now. And you know how his temper is at the moment. He would go completely over the brink. Plus, nobody knows about my detention with Professor Snape yet, and I would like it to remain that way for a little while. I promise, if it comes up while we’re talking, I will
tell Harry about it, but I don’t think he needs to know just yet. Alright?”

Ron grumbled a little before agreeing. Hermione told him to not wait up on her should Harry be back before she was, and raced to the Potions classroom. There, she stood in front of the closed door and drew a few rugged breaths. When she had calmed down a little, she took all her bravery and knocked.

Severus spent the rest of the day deep in thought, snapping at every student who dared break his concentration, his face locked into a constant scowl. What had ridden him when he gave the girl detention? He would have to spend even more time with her now, and even worse, the two of them would be alone together.

The Potions Master pondered handing out even more detention to some unsuspecting students, if only to not have to bear the Granger girl’s presence alone, but ultimately decided against it. After all, this was his opportunity to grate the real reason for her peculiar behaviour out of her. This time he would succeed, he was certain of it.

Severus took great care not to watch her at lunch, but his gaze seemed to wander over to the girl of their own volition. It gave him no small amount of satisfaction to see her angrily berate Potter. It irked him to admit even to himself, but she was stunning in her fury. Her hellish mane surrounded her pale face, perfectly framing her expression and drawing attention to her sparking eyes. Her hands flew through the air as she supported her arguments with wild gestures, her cheeks flushed, much as they had been earlier in the dungeons.

Severus had to wrench his gaze away from her before any of the students or – Merlin forbid! – his colleagues noticed him staring at the girl. When he saw Potter storm off – not that he’d been looking in his, and subsequently the girl’s, direction – he decided maybe the foolish boy was not so foolish indeed, and decided to make his own, though endlessly more subtle, exit.

How he ended up in his Potions classroom, he could not remember, but there he was. He also couldn’t remember any students scurrying out of his path on his way down here, so hopefully nobody had noticed his absence of mind. He settled himself in his chair, determined to calmly wait for the girl and fix her with a cold stare the second she entered the dungeon. A few seconds passed and he stood in front of his desk, his eyes trained on the door. Maybe it would be best to pounce on her from the back of the room, he decided, unseen, and strode across the classroom. If he aimed to be unseen, another fine choice might be to appear from the store room. Too small, he decided once therein, and made his way into his office. Then again, why give her even a few seconds reprieve from her well-deserved attention? Again he sat at the desk.
When he was still inwardly assessing the different options and their respective efficiency of instilling fear in the girl – Severus Snape was definitely not fidgeting, as Severus Snape never fidgeted – there was a knock on the door.

With a flick of his wand, the door swung open, silent in its movement until it softly hit the dungeon wall. The quiet sound echoed through the stillness of the dungeon, and he saw the girl visibly flinch. Damned Gryffindors, Snape thought, ever so obvious.

He fixed the girl with a cold stare as planned, though the expression came to his face much on instinct these days, especially with young Gryffindors. She was brave, Severus admitted to himself, holding his gaze almost defiantly, a small near-smile on her face, as if she was trying to show the correct amount of friendliness that would be polite enough but not too excessive as to become inappropriate. Then again, knowing the girl, it was probably mostly stubbornness that kept her lips crooked in a smile that was slowly faltering underneath his intense stare.

How easy it would be, Severus thought, to just slip into her mind and search it for the real reason behind her change in behaviour. The thought had barely crossed his mind when the girl averted her eyes. Had she simply faltered, her stubbornness torn apart by the unrelenting blackness of his eyes? Or could she have guessed at what he had almost attempted – no, not attempted, but evaluated attempting? Knowing the chit, she had probably read through half the Hogwarts library before Christmas her first year at the castle, and had to have come across some reference of Legilimency. If not, she had spent enough of her summer at Grimmauld Place, and there would be more than enough apt descriptions of the blackest of magic in the Black library – not that Legilimency legitimately counted as such, but many Dark curses and most mind magic required constant eye contact, and him being the Darkest of all the staff, she would be cautious around her Potions Master.

After a couple of seconds, when the girl’s eyes still did not meet his, firmly fixed on some very specific spot on the floor, and she made no move to enter the dungeons, Severus realized that in her politeness, her stubbornness reached a whole new level.

He took great care not to audibly sigh as he drawled coldly, “Enter, Miss Granger”.

At least the girl was quick to follow his commands.

When she stood before his desk, still obviously uncertain of what to do next, he spoke again. This time, he wasn’t entirely certain he had kept his exhausted sigh from blending into his voice.

“What do you want, Miss Granger?”
The girl looked taken aback. Really, had she been this oblivious that he had not been satisfied with her answer earlier that day? Had she honestly expected to get away with her lies?

Her eyes met his.

“You assigned me detention, sir,” she replied hesitantly. “I am here to receive my punishment.”

“I have told you, Miss Granger,” Severus said, his voice so cold now it could have stopped cells from moving, “that you should not make the mistake of taking me for a fool.”

“No, sir, I-“

“Should you fail to keep that in mind,” he cut her off, “and be so stupid as to prompt me even once more to repeat this advice to you, no amount of work in your other subjects combined will be able to make up for the number of points I will deduce from your House. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” the girl almost stuttered, defeated, “crystal clear.”

“Now, Miss Granger,” Severus drawled once more, “what is it you want?”

Her eyes had darted away during his admonishment, looking anywhere but at him, but now they met his gaze. He saw fear there, as he had rarely seen in her before. In fact, she was always so passionately stubborn and stubbornly passionate that the only moment that came to mind was the night Lupin had changed right before their eyes. She had been a mere slip of a girl then, a few months shy of fifteen, and facing a grown werewolf, she was probably a little out of her depth.

Other than that – even when she had been petrified by the Basilisk in her second year, she had not looked this fearful. Certainly, her stony face had shown an expression of considerable respect at the danger she was aware she might be facing around every corner.

*But that was just it, wasn’t it, Severus mused, the awareness?*
That a Basilisk was roaming the castle she had discovered mere minutes before stumbling upon him, he surmised. The werewolf, however, was something that had slipped her mind – maybe not too incredible, if one took into account that she had been faced with a mass murderer that night who turned out to be innocent, and a rat that had been sleeping in her best friend’s bed for several years had turned out to have committed the crimes the innocent ex-convict had been convicted for. In the excitement of all that, she had forgotten that in their midst was a grown werewolf who had missed taking his Wolfsbane potion that night, which happened to be the night of the full moon. She might have been the first to realize what was wrong, but they all had been doomed anyway.

He himself had been scared almost out of his mind that night, much as he hated to admit it. Too caught up in his joy at the revenge he would enact as he caught his childhood nemesis, he did not notice the three wands trained on him, in their eagerness to disarm him throwing him across the room until he hit the wall and was met with blackness. When he woke what he assumed to be little over an hour later, it was to the sight of a turning werewolf. Fear hit him like a bucket of cold water, drenching him, drawing him out of his stunned befuddlement. In his mind, he was back in 1977, promising the Headmaster that he would not tell anyone about having been almost killed by a werewolf living among the students.

Thinking of students had brought him back to the present then. He knew he could not hope to save them, but he would be damned if he died a coward. At least in death, he might be granted some semblance of peaceful freedom, though he very much doubted he would ever not be haunted by the memory of the accusing look in two brilliantly green eyes.

He had not died that night, it turned out, and neither had the children. On the other hand, the bastard Black had escaped from his seemingly inevitable Kiss.

Returning from his musing to the present, he realized that the girl still had not answered him.

“Miss Granger,” he almost whispered, so low had his voice become, drenched with the promise of dire consequences should she fail to respond to his satisfaction, “have you suddenly become mute or are you unable to comprehend this very simple question?”

The fear had not left her eyes when she lifted her gaze to his face.

“Professor,” she finally said reluctantly, close to stuttering her way through her response, “I wish to answer your question but I’m afraid that you would not believe me. I do not intend to give you the impression that I take you for a fool, but I fear that my reply would not be to your satisfaction. Thus, I see no way to answer you without stirring your anger once more.”
She fell silent again, and Severus realized that it was his reaction she was so afraid about. That the girl would fear him procured an unpleasant feeling inside him. If he had been, indeed, a fool he might have thought it was shame. Usually, he revelled in the fact that he could instill fear in most students, mainly Hufflepuffs but most Gryffindors as well. This slip of a girl, however, had yet to flinch in fright at him. Maybe that she did so now simply reminded him of his inability to scare her before, and that was what caused the uncomfortable reaction.

Yes, that must be it.

“If you fear my reaction so much, Miss Granger,” Snape drawled, “then maybe you should try to make your reply short and reduce it to the essential point. If your answer satisfies me, I will take it from there. If not – well, there are always cauldrons to be scrubbed, and we can try again next time. After all, this isn’t your only evening of detention with me, is it?”

The girl flinched at the vicious smirk that crossed the Potions Master’s face at this taunt. He could see her knit her brows together in thought, worrying her plump lower lip between her straight, white front teeth. Severus had to wrench his focus away from her mouth in order not to wonder what use one might put it to if so inclined – use that would have the benefit of shutting her up for a while.

She seemed to have come to a conclusion, as her spine straightened and her head lifted to meet his eyes once again.

“I wish to learn from you, sir,” she finally said.

Severus was a little taken aback. Should that be the essence of what she was worried about?

“I believe that is why you are at Hogwarts, Miss Granger,” he replied. “But as you mentioned this desire to learn from me, as you said, earlier today, I believe that is not all you intended to say. I suggest you elaborate, but please spare me with your earlier lies of new-found respect for my person.”

The girl swallowed visibly. Severus was relieved when she took a few seconds to collect her thoughts, rather than throw herself into simply babbling out everything that came to her mind. He had enough of that already.

“I wish to learn how to protect myself and others from harm,” she offered, still hesitant in her answer.
“Miss Granger,” his voice dropped a few degrees more in temperature, “you are aware that this is the *Potions* classroom. Maybe you should go to your *Defence Against the Dark Arts* teacher and ask them about efficient protection.”

The shudder that ran through her was very visible. Severus assumed it was a reaction to the combination of his cold voice, the cold dungeons, and the cold that crawled down almost everybody’s spine when they thought about how the Ministry interfered with Hogwarts by putting a completely incompetent toad into the DADA post.

“Sir,” the girl asked shyly, “with your permission I would like to elaborate my statement.”

It seemed she had rediscovered some of her spine. Giving her a short nod, Severus allowed her to continue.

“I fear that what we learn in Defence Against the Dark Arts here at Hogwarts will not be enough to save us in this war, Professor,” she started, still much uncertainty in her eyes. “While I will do my utmost to learn how to defend myself in combat, I am not confident or rather stupid enough to believe that I will never be subdued by the enemy.”

She shot him a questioning look, as if to see whether his patience had run out. He fixed her with his cold stare, but did not interrupt. She seemed to take it as encouragement, and continued.

“I wish to learn how to protect myself and others, and any information I or they might have, in case I fall into the hands of the enemy. I understand that this is much to ask –“

*Oh no, you don’t even begin to understand, girl,* Severus thought darkly.

“– but I believe that you are the only person who can sufficiently teach me in this, sir.”

The room fell into silence once more. Severus wasn’t entirely certain he had understood correctly what she was saying.

“You wish me to teach you how to withstand torture?”
Too afraid to answer verbally, as much darkness had slipped into his voice, she merely nodded.

“You have no idea what you are asking, Miss Granger,” Snape threatened. “The Dark Lord’s followers indulge in a vast variety of torture methods, and to explore them all, you lack time, stamina, and power. Everybody cracks under torture sooner or later.”

“That’s not true,” the girl whispered, not meeting his eyes.

He knew who she was thinking about. Yes, Frank and Alice Longbottom were an excellent example for brave people who never gave up under torture, but crack they did. The healers working in St Mungo’s Janus Thickey Ward for spell damage could attest to that.

“For obvious reasons,” he said, “we could not test your endurance under torture to the extent of serious damage or death, Miss Granger, and those are the only two options to protect whatever you wish to protect.”

The girl nodded sagely, her face cast downward.

“To help you gain a glimpse at possible understanding of what you are asking, I will name a few aspects of torture to you.” Without batting an eye, he continued. “There is physical torture, obviously. Psychological torture, though many Death Eaters lack the patience and finesse for that. Torture of the mind takes a certain skill set that few attempt to learn, but when they do, they hone it to perfection. And, last but not least,” his eyes skimmed her body before returning to her face once more, “there is sexual torture, preferably employed with young schoolgirls such as you, though not necessarily used exclusively for extracting information.”

Severus paused for effect.

“Most men simply enjoy it.”

Her eyes shot up at this. Yes, he had deliberately not reduced the lust for rape of young girls to Death Eaters only. It could happen anywhere, with anybody, and she needed to be aware of that.

When it became clear to Severus that he had successfully stunned the girl into silence, he dismissed her.
“I suggest you think about your request again, Miss Granger,” he said, a sliver of compassion almost slipping into his voice, but he managed to fight it off at the last second. “If you are still convinced you wish to learn from me,” he scoffed at this, “when you come back for your second detention on Thursday, you may ask again.”

When the girl had left the classroom, Severus realized that he had never once said that he would deny her request.
Monday, September 9th, 1995

As Hermione made her way back to the Gryffindor tower, she pondered Snape’s words. If she had been frightened of being tortured before, she now felt bile rise in her throat when she went through the aspects the Potions Master had named.

Physical torture was all she had been thinking about when she had asked him to teach her. How naïve she’d been to think that would be all she might have to face! Psychological torture she might be able to withstand for a little while, but torture of the mind… Her mind was her most valued asset, she could not imagine the things it would do to her if somebody decided to mess with it, not to mention enter and possibly destroy it. To end up as Neville’s parents had…

And yet, Hermione thought, what was the value of her mind against Harry’s and Ron’s lives, against the preservation of the secrets of the Order? Nothing, she decided, the war could be won without her brains if their loss helped keep others safe.

When she got back to the common room, Harry seemed to have come back from his detention earlier, as neither he nor Ron were in their usual seats. It appeared they had gone to bed already, and Hermione followed their example.

In the safety of her four poster bed, the curtains tightly drawn and warded against escaping light, Hermione listened for a few moments to the calm and steady breathing of her roommates. When she was certain that they were fast asleep, she lit her wand to better stare at the canopy of her bed. That last aspect Snape had mentioned…

Sexual torture.

She might be raped.

Hermione wanted to hit herself that she hadn’t thought about that before. She was certainly old enough to understand that sex could be used to subdue women, but she had not assumed that this might pertain to her as well. Whether that was merely naïve or outright stupid, she did not want to know.
But how did he intend to teach her how to not give in under sexual torture? Surely he didn’t mean to…

She did not come to a conclusion that night. Wild thoughts of possible torture methods tumbling through her brain, she fell asleep. Shortly before the blackness enveloped her, she cast a quick but effective ward to keep her curtains from being opened from the outside.

_Better be safe than sorry._

---

**Tuesday, September 10th, 1995**

The next day flew by. Umbridge inspected two more subjects. Among them was Transfiguration, and morale lifted visibly among the Gryffindors after Professor McGonagall put the toad in her place. When Umbridge mocked Hagrid during Professor Grubbly-Plank’s lesson of Care of Magical Creatures, however, the trio’s mood plummeted.

After dinner, Harry went to his detention with Umbridge again, and Ron asked Seamus for a game of wizarding chess. Left to her own devices, Hermione spread out her books and homework across one of the tables in a corner, but did not find it in herself to focus on her work. Her thoughts kept going back to Professor Snape’s words of the night prior.

Was she brave enough to learn from him? Strong enough? Persistent enough?

It would be of little use to tear herself up over this in general. Better find out where her potential weaknesses lay, and what they would have to work on during their lessons. Mentally going through the list of torture aspects he had given her, she sought to tick them off one by one.

_Torture of the mind_ – yes, that was her greatest fear. But reminding herself of her earlier conviction, Hermione reassured herself that her mind was of little importance compared to the lives of her best friends, the secrets of the Order, and a chance at winning this war. Also, she realized, she was sure of the strength of her mind. Of course, she was untrained in defence of the mind, but surely all she lacked was a little instruction and the right technique? Yes, Hermione decided, the security of her mind was simply a matter of two or three lessons, and that would settle this aspect.
Psychological torture – difficult. Her greatest issue that the Death Eaters could play on was her insecurity. Insecurity in her academic success, insecurity in her magical abilities, insecurity in her friendships. Academia and magic they would be able to take from her, and she would still be thinking of her friends’ lives, she had little doubt. If they were to question her relationship with those friends, however…

No, Hermione decided, she would not falter nor break. Thinking back to her third year, she had managed to keep faith even when Harry and Ron ignored her over a broom and a rat, even forsaking Hagrid in Buckbeak’s trial. And in fourth year, she had unerringly stood by Harry’s side, no matter how hard Ron sought to drive her from their trio due to her affiliation with Viktor. Even now, with Harry close to exploding if somebody near him so much as breathed the wrong way – not completely impossible to understand, but very much over the top – she stood by him. No, even if the Death Eaters managed to fully and utterly destroy her belief in her friendships, they would be unable to shake her convictions that the Light had to win, and she would keep faith in that.

Physical torture – this might be her weakest spot, requiring most of her work with Professor Snape. As a daughter of dentists, Hermione knew she should probably have a larger amount of blood she could see without becoming squeamish, and a higher level of pain she could withstand without resorting to begging for it to stop. As it was, both of those levels were pretty low for her. Not unusual for a girl her age, she assumed, but inconvenient and downright embarrassing for a witch of her calibre. She was resolved to work on that, however, convinced that she could withstand any amount of pain for long enough if only Professor Snape taught her how.

That left only one aspect… Sexual torture. Unwilling to think about how the Potions Master was going to teach her about that, Hermione quickly decided that it was merely a combination of physical and psychological torture, and those had already been ticked off her mental list, so it would be of little use to think on it any further until it came up in her lessons, wouldn’t it?

She came to no further conclusions, but couldn’t wrench her thoughts away from her discussion with Professor Snape. For him to suggest she go to the Ministry toad for help…

But then again, that wasn’t exactly what he had said. He had said to approach her Defence teacher to learn about efficient protection. And yes, this year Dolores Umbridge had been assigned the DADA post, but did that mean she would be her only Defence teacher?

Not necessarily, Hermione mused.

But who to ask?
Dumbledore would have no time for them. Lupin, the only competent DADA teacher they’d ever had, was probably busy for the Order. And even if not, at the most he could sneak into the Shrieking Shack on a couple of weekends and teach them there, but that would not be enough. Sirius would know loads about defence and had the time, and he would probably jump at the chance to spend more time with Harry, but was unable to leave Grimmauld Place as he was still very much a sought criminal, even though innocent.

So what if… Hermione had to collect her thoughts. *What if it wasn’t an adult who taught them?*

Determined to tentatively, but convincingly break the idea to Harry at the next chance, Hermione was finally able to concentrate on her workload.

---

**Wednesday, September 11th, 1995**

Alright, so the talk with Harry had not gone as smoothly as planned. Ron had supported her idea, had caught on to her meaning far faster than Harry had, but it had not been enough. Hermione had maybe not expected Harry exactly to jump at the chance to teach them, but for him to completely lose his temper she had not imagined.

It was well after midnight that she lay in bed, stifling her sobs until they became too heart-wrenching and she cast a silencing charm on her bed curtains. Why couldn’t he see that he was the only one who could teach them, especially due to his experience in defying the Dark Arts time and again? And yes, most of it was pure luck and the help of other and occasionally better witches and wizards, but wasn’t that something to teach them as well? To not feel overly confident and to work with others? To not only protect oneself but to look out for one’s comrades as well?

She sincerely hoped Harry would at least think on her idea. Maybe he simply needed time to come to the same realization as she had, namely that he was the perfect teacher. As long as he had to sit detention with the toad every night, however, that would certainly not come to pass.

---

**Thursday, September 12th, 1995**
Time passed surprisingly quickly, and before she knew it, Hermione had to face her own detention with the Potions Master once more. During their Potions lesson that Thursday, she strived to work with focus, accuracy, and determination, and even though she naturally did not earn any points for Gryffindor, at least she didn’t cause her House to lose any more points. In fact, Professor Snape ignored her as much as possible, which was just the same to her, as it helped her push the thoughts of their impending detention that night from her mind and concentrate on her brewing instead.

She waited for Harry to leave for his detention with Umbridge before she went to the dungeons, but he lingered longer than usual. She had propped an open book against a carafe of pumpkin juice, pretending to read about Advanced Transfiguration, but watched the two boys opposite her with impatience for Harry to finish. Fidgeting in her chair, Hermione chanced glances at the High Table, where she soon saw Professor Snape gather his robes and leave. Unwilling to risk the lie that she would be going to the library, in case Harry decided to grab a book before his detention (not very likely, but she’d rather not take any chances), she worried her lip between her teeth and willed Harry to leave soon. She waved the boys off when they asked her if she wanted to come, gesturing to her open book and not moving from her seat. When the boys finally got up from the table, she watched them leave the Great Hall, Harry’s heart visibly heavy. Hermione counted to ten as calmly as she could, and then rushed to the dungeons.

Her heart was pumping so fast, she feared it might jump out of her chest, and her breathing was ragged. This time, she did not take the time to collect herself before knocking on the door. The deep, calm, cool voice of her professor bid her enter.

She entered the dungeon, her skin immediately breaking into goose bumps at the cold air there. As she shut the door behind herself, she inwardly cursed herself for forgoing her cloak. It was often stifling in the classroom when twenty-plus students were brewing, bent over boiling potions, fires burning under every cauldron. Classes had been over for a few hours, however, and the room had been aired to get rid of the lingering fumes, thus inviting the cold back in.

Professor Snape sat in his chair as usual, a typically bored expression on his face, though Hermione thought she might have seen a short glint of anticipative curiosity in his eye. The moment was gone in the blink of an eye, however, so she was almost certain to have imagined it.

He made no movement to speak, so Hermione broke the silence instead.

“Good evening, professor,” she greeted politely.

The only reaction she received was one arched eyebrow, rising to almost disappear into his hairline.
Guessing the question he was silently posing her, she took all her Gryffindor bravery and answered him.

“I still wish to learn from you how to withstand torture.”

His eyebrow sunk back to its usual position on his face that was now a blank mask. Hermione did not dare to speak, knowing that it would be him who broke the silence this time. Instead, she stood as stock still as she managed, calming her breathing and fighting to not lift her eyes from his, the black pools studying her intently. She struggled not to fidget under her gaze.

Images suddenly flashed before her mind. An ugly vase bursting into tiny shards of glass when she was five and was reprimanded for not brushing her teeth properly, Professor McGonagall’s disappointment when Hermione ‘confessed’ to seeking out the mountain troll, Professor Snape’s indifference when Malfoy had cursed her front teeth, Ron shouting at her for fraternising with the enemy, Harry losing his temper when he first arrived at Grimmauld Place.

How moving, a deep foreign voice mocked inside her head. No, not foreign, she realized, merely not her own.

The Potions Master withdrew from her mind and she gasped as her thoughts became entirely her own once more. The fear that had gripped her at the thought that somebody might mess with her brain was back with a vengeance, but it was interlaced with a curiosity that was never far when she found herself in the face of something to be learned.

Unwittingly, Hermione had stumbled a few steps backwards while her professor plundered her mind, and was now leaned back against a working table. She hung her head back to stare at the ceiling, her eyes slowly tracing the rows of stones there from one wall to the other and back again. Her breathing calmed a little, and she collected her thoughts. When she felt she was back to her old self once more, she lowered her head and looked at the Potions Master.

He looked back with an unreadable expression.

“We will need to work on your Occlumency skills, Miss Granger,” he drawled, but the mocking edge was all but gone from his voice. “Knowing how fond you are of books, I will recommend to you a few titles that will be most helpful for you, lest you read through half the library and end up completely exhausted and still unprepared next Monday.”
Hermione felt giddy at the realization that he would indeed teach her, her heart close to bursting with relief. She pushed the prospect of suffering at her professor’s hand in order to learn how to withstand it to the back of her mind, focusing instead on the fact that the first step had been taken.

Severus almost scoffed at how easy it was to enter the girl’s mind, her eyes wide open, trusting even, although defiant in a way that was entirely her own, staring right into his eyes. Of course, she had been unprepared and untaught, but that would not save her from the Dark Lord’s followers. The memories he’d seen had been innocent mostly, though even glimpses of the Order’s headquarters and seemingly irrelevant information that memory-Potter disclosed in his rants could prove fatal.

There would be much he had yet to teach her. Reluctantly he admitted to himself that he almost looked forward to the challenge. It had been long since a student had proven even remotely adept at Potions, and even though the girl had all of her knowledge from books only, she showed great efficiency in following written instructions. To teach her in the finer arts of mind magic might even approach something of a pleasurable pastime, though Severus would never voice those thoughts aloud, least of all to the girl. He hoped she would not break too easily. He feared that if she did, he might be compelled to feel some pity.

“Eye contact, Miss Granger,” Snape drawled, “facilitates the entrance into an opponent’s mind. While I see no reason to teach you Legilimency, you would do best to avoid eye contact with somebody who intends to extract information from you as much as possible. Of course, a skilled Legilimens will be able to penetrate your mind without even looking at you, but let us simply hope that you will not be brought before the Dark Lord for questioning. Beside me, nobody else will be able to enter your mind without eye contact.”

“And if you are tasked with questioning me, sir?” the girl asked, curious.

Severus scoffed at the innocent expression on her face, not gracing her with an answer.

It took her a while to realize that she would not receive a reply to her question, but when she did, she simply asked another.

“How will you go about this, sir?”
Severus raised a thin black eyebrow at her. He watched as she began to fidget under his stare. When she began to nervously tap the heel of her sensible black shoes in an urgent and utterly annoying rhythm, he broke his silence.

“You will come here for regular lessons. If anybody asks, you are receiving extra tuition.”

His lips spread into a sly grin at her exasperation.

“Merlin knows you rely too much on mere book knowledge, neglecting the finer aspects of the art of brewing. You will come here every Monday after dinner. I expect you to be at your fittest unless I tell you differently. This contains at least eight full hours of sleep on both nights of the weekend, three full meals on Mondays, and no homework or revision planned for the day. I may tell you to dress in a certain way. If you fail to meet my requirements, I will send you away and possibly end these lessons. Have I made myself clear, Miss Granger?”

“Yes, professor,” she breathed.

“Very well,” he assessed.

“Please, sir,” she asked tentatively, “if there is any favour I might provide you in the future, I hope you will feel free to seek me out.”

Severus scoffed inwardly. As if he would ever be truly *free* to do anything he wished.

*Ridiculous Gryffindors,* he thought, *acting as if he was doing this out of the goodness of his heart, without expecting anything in return.* The girl at least was probably well aware that she was asking for the price of her lessons. He wondered how much she was willing to give to practically let him torture her.

“I will reserve the right to one favour yet to be determined at a time of my choosing,” Severus spoke, carefully watching her face.

Her brows knitted together for a second before she fought – and failed – to relax her facial muscles.
“A *carte blanche*, so to say, sir?” she specified.

Severus nodded.

Her expression became even more thoughtful. The girl was obviously doubting how much these lessons were worth to her.

“If I might suggest a counter offer?” she asked, but gave him no time to answer her rhetorical question. “I would suggest a *carte grise*, if you will. I am willing to grant you much free reign in the favour you might ask of me, but I need to set some restrictions.”

Severus slightly tilted his head, the change in his posture so minimal one might have missed it, but the girl’s eyes had not left his face – they were focused on a strand of his hair that fell across his forehead, he noticed, heeding his earlier advice by avoiding his eyes –, and she took his movement for the permission to continue that it was.

“Firstly, I may deny your request if to fulfil it would mean for me to betray my convictions.”

Severus interrupted her there.

“Only convictions pertaining to this war, Miss Granger,” he bartered.

It was her turn to tilt her head. Her wild curls bobbed up and down from the movement, like a million coils ready to unwind at any second, even though they never did.

“What other convictions are there?” she asked in confusion.

Severus merely inclined his head as if in agreement, and the point was settled.

“Secondly, I reserve the right to deny your request if fulfilling it would put me or people close to me in immediate danger of death or permanent damage,” the girl continued.

“‘People close to you’ is a too vague,” Severus countered. “Specify the group of people this will
“My parents,” the girl started without hesitation. “Any other immediate family I might have at the point of time of your request, namely siblings, both full and half, spouse, children. Also, Harry and Ron are included in this condition.”

Severus wanted to scoff at that last sentence, but decided he had been doing too much of that already. He pondered her list of exemptions. Several people he had expected her to name were missing. If she wasn’t to exclude the whole staff of Hogwarts, then at least her Head of House, certainly? And what about that ugly and vicious familiar, dispersing his awfully persistent orange fur wherever he went? He also found some of her wording curious. Would she be willing to kill her step-siblings should she ever have any? And why had she said *spouse* instead of *husband*? Was she maybe a lesbian as some of his more outwardly stupid Slytherins had speculated?

Interestingly, also, was that she had elected to reserve her right to veto such a request that might result in death or permanent damage, rather than outright refuse such requests. It did not quite fully answer Severus’s question of how high a price the girl would be willing to pay, but it certainly gave him more than a hint.

“Lastly,” the girl spoke up once more when he did not make to debate her second condition, “I am allowed to step back from fulfilling a request if doing otherwise would require me to commit murder or serious damage to another creature, be it beast or being.”

Severus inwardly laughed at her wording. *Creature, be it beast or being? What exactly did she expect, that he would send her out to collect Pixie hearts, fresh from their chests?* On second thought, that notion wasn’t too ridiculous after all. Pixie hearts made for many a powerful potion. The same went for Hinkypunk livers and Grindylow fingers, among others.

Taking his lack of reaction for reluctance to accede to her condition, she amended, “Of course you will choose another favour in that case that I would willingly provide for you.”

A self-satisfied grin slowly spread over the Potions Master’s face, his lips becoming thin and thinner to the point of disappearance from his features. It was a fearful sight, he knew; many had fled (or at least tried) in horror at this particular expression on his face. The girl, however much he could see her to be frightened, did not flinch once or make a move to leave the dungeons.

“Agreed,” Severus drawled.
A shiver of fearful anticipation shook the girl’s body for a second but was gone once more in the blink of an eye. Severus, of course, had not missed it.

Deciding that he had probably tortured her enough for one night – not in the sense of actual torture, of course; the girl was simply too easy to rile up –, he dismissed her.

“This will be all for tonight, Miss Granger. I expect you back here on Monday for your detention, and this time,” his voice dropped to a colder tone, “I expect you to be punctual.”

She nodded in a rush, so eager was she to convince him that she would not come short again.

Not once had he left his chair but now he stood, towering over the girl, and even though his desk and then a couple of feet in distance lay between them, she shrank a little at the sudden movement.

“Good night, Miss Granger,” he effectively dismissed her.

A rushed ‘good night, sir’ was all he heard before the heavy dungeon door fell close behind her retreating form.
Thursday, September 12th, 1995

Severus stared at the thick wood of the door that had clicked shut after the girl had left. He had escaped torturing the girl tonight, and was glad for that small reprieve. Contrary to the picture he painted of himself when among the Dark Lord’s followers, he was not keen to cause pain to other people, especially children.

Although, did the girl count as a child anymore?

She had matured far beyond her age, which was even more obvious when one encountered her among her yearmates. More and more noticeable became the fact that she had not matured in mind and attention only, though Severus was unwilling to ponder on that thought.

Too late, he groaned inwardly, as he felt the much familiar stirring he had experienced that first day of the schoolyear, when she had needed help to dice her Asphodel roots. Pictures of her without her robes, shivering in the cold air of the dungeons, her stiff nipples pushing against the fabric of her bra and shapeless blouse, popped up in his mind. Thank Merlin the girl had insisted on conversation, bargaining away an undefined favour like the Gryffindor that she was – although the fact that she had bargained at least showed some trace of the Ravenclaw she should have been Sorted as, and the way she had offered to pay any price for his private tutelage at all was almost resembling of a member of his own House – and had thus quenched any improper thoughts his mind might have come up with, had put a halt to any dark paths it might have gone down…

…at least while she was still in the room. Now that the heavy wood of the thick dungeon door had fallen shut behind her retreating form, however, there was nothing to hinder the lecherous stroll his mind took in the direction of those dark paths, to keep its inappropriate forays at bay.

Resisting the urge to help himself out of the misery that the images of her matured body had put him in, Severus rose quickly, locked the classroom, and strode to his office for grading papers.

Shrugging out of his teaching robes and carefully hanging them over the back of the small sofa in front of the fireplace, he went to sit at his desk. Bent over a stack of parchment rolls, freshly handed in by his fourth years, he was reading over the untidy scrawling of a Ravenclaw boy. It was an assignment on three uses of dragon blood, to be freely chosen from the twelve Dumbledore had discovered and published.
I’ve seen first years do better, he inwardly scoffed, and indeed he had. One particular first year, to be exact, who had still been eager for extra credit from him at the time, willingly turning in an essay on a topic far beyond her understanding. She had learned quickly after that one experience that the dour Potions Master was not a man interested in the academic concoctions of an eleven-year-old Gryffindor girl. She had taken his admonishment – and yes, the word was far too soft for the scathing scolding she had received for her troubles – with more pride than he had expected from any of his students at that age. Her back had remained stiff, her posture tall (if one could say that of a five foot slip of a girl) and her expression unwavering except for a visible moistening of her eyes and a short quiver of her bottom lip. She had thanked him for his time, even though it had taken him less than thirty seconds to tell her exactly what he thought of extra credit, and had left his office with an hauteur he almost admired.

Later that night, when he had tidied his office from his work throughout the day in order to retire to his quarters, he had come across the essay he had discarded in his wrath at the impertinence of the girl who expected extra credit from him. Him! Because he had thought to amuse himself with the certainly uneducated scrawling of the insufferable Gryffindor, looking forward to drenching the paper in red ink with scathing remark after scathing remark, he had settled himself into the high-backed chair of the desk in his private quarters. It was no comfortable piece of furniture, but the longer he had been reading the six foot essay, the more entranced he had become in her exploration of the topic, and he could tear himself away neither from the parchment nor his seat. Her elucidations had been well thought and substantially backed by research from different perspectives, taking into account both Dumbledore’s original findings and ancient sources on dragon behaviourism, back from the times when wizardkind was barely more cultivated than the fire-spewing beasts themselves.

In fact, the essay had been so well-written that Severus wouldn’t have been surprised to hear that it came from a NEWT student. Alas, that it had sprung from mind and quill of an eleven-year-old Gryffindor, and a Muggle-born at that, thus barely versed in the wizarding world, had taken a while to sink in. Even though the witch had not procured any new information in her work, the structure and angle had been so well thought out and unusual, yet surprisingly successful, that he had found it hard to put it away that night. He would never admit it, but as soon as he had gotten over the initial surprise – or, well, not gotten over it, but at least accepted it – he had read it twice more, each time finding yet another remarkable twist on her way to go about the topic.

He still had the essay, safely stowed away in one of the many secret compartments his private desk held. He would take it out from time to time, always reluctant but weirdly drawn by this academic piece of art, and use it as the measuring stick that all assignments that required a similar depth were to be compared against. He secretly granted a point to Gryffindor every time hers came out as the better work, which was more often than he cared to admit.

Well, fuck, Severus thought to himself when he managed to snap out of his musings, so much for not thinking about the girl.

The clock showed a little after ten. Sighing, he decided to let the stack of parchments rest for another night and maybe tackle them in the morning before breakfast. He usually woke long before sunrise,
needing less sleep than most people, and knew that the time would suffice to finish his grading then.

Knowing that it would be of little use to go to bed now, and unwilling to sit in his private chambers and wait for Morpheus to embrace him, he donned his earlier discarded teaching robes once more and decided to roam the castle in search of rule breakers. At this time, shortly past curfew and the schoolyear barely started, there would be quite a few of those to find and deal with.

The air grew warmer the further Severus walked from the dungeons, but was still quite cold as usual for September in Scotland. He patrolled the corridors, one by one, striding in circles through the castle, his path a winding coil reaching from the dungeons to the seventh floor. No niche nor crevice nor tapestry-hidden alcove was spared his thorough search. Sending stragglers to bed left and right, deducting House points as they hurried to their common rooms, he felt quite content with his patrol. A Homenum Revelio even procured two prefects enjoying a late night bath together in the luxurious bathroom on the fifth floor.

By the time he reached the seventh floor, he was quite certain that whichever of his colleagues had patrol duty later that night would be hard pressed to find any stragglers. Satisfied with his work, he almost missed that he had reached the portrait of the Fat Lady who, rather unusual, was wide awake.

“Out to catch stragglers, professor?” she called to him.

He inclined his head in greeting. One never knew when a little politeness towards a painting, especially one guarding a common room, might come in handy.

“Those who are still out and about at this time,” a quick Tempus showed the evening to have progressed to well past eleven-thirty, “are not merely stragglers, Madam, but deliberately disregard the curfew set by school rules. And yes, I am out to catch those.”

The Fat Lady laughed. The sound was eerily similar to a bell with a rather substantial crack in it.

“Let us hope then that you won’t come across any of my protégés,” she chuckled lightly, though her brows were slightly creased. Even among the paintings, the Potions Master’s temper and attitude towards Gryffindors were well-known.

“That depends, Madam,” Severus countered. “Are many of your protégés out and about?”
“Not many, no,” she answered, serious once more, her expression a tad worried even. “Merely one is missing. Simply never returned from dinner, that one.”

A small grin spread over Snape’s face, and he saw a shudder run through the Fat Lady at the sight. Barely taking the time to utter a ‘good-night’, he turned on the spot to roam the corridors once more.

“Happy hunting,” he heard the Fat Lady call after him.

Her plea for him to have mercy on the girl never reached his ears.

Deciding to patrol the seventh floor once more, he came across the steps to the Astronomy tower. Mentally scanning the timetables hung up in the staff room, he ascertained that currently no lesson would be held there. Surely no student would be so bold as to…? Severus then remembered that it was a Gryffindor he had yet to find, and ascended the stairs.

Tallest of the five towers of Hogwarts castle, the Astronomy tower was out of bounds for all students except during lessons. Even then, they were never to enter the tower without supervision from Professor Sinistra, neither to come early nor to leave late. When he exited the door to the stairs on top of the tower, however, he was met with a sight he rather hoped to avoid as much as possible until Monday.

The girl had her back to him, standing on the far side of the tower platform, her body bent, her arms resting on the balustrade, her chin nestled on them. He could barely make out her silhouette, a black shape against the sparse light of the starry, yet equally black sky. The mop of wild curls, however, could not be mistaken for anybody else’s hair.

Although Severus had hoped that maybe he would have the chance to actually design a lesson plan for her studies of torture, he decided to take this opportunity to introduce the girl to the receiving of pain. While he had never been a man to be gripped by bloodlust, he felt lust rush through his blood at the thought of teaching the girl outside the classroom, not only in the aspect of location but also in context.

Get a grip, man, he scolded himself. Even though the girl had apparently recovered her robes and decided to wear them to protect and warm her against the angry winds on the open platform, images of her taut nipples straining against their fabric confinements were still fresh on his mind. When he realized that he was unable to will the lust away, however, he chose to relocate his energy and attention elsewhere.
A short flick of his wand caused the girl to experience the sensation of a large hand spanking her behind once.

The girl emitted a loud gasp, jumping at the pain that had suddenly seared through her shapely behind. Turning around, panic-stricken, to scan the tower for intruders, she visibly calmed as her eyes found the black shape of her Potions Master. He had his wand in hand – the wooden one, obviously, though wood was quite an apt description for his other wand as well at the moment. Once more Severus was grateful for his billowing robes, and inwardly scolded himself for his inappropriate reaction to the girl’s presence.

A wordless spell had the tip of his wand emit a pale light, allowing both of them to see each other without blinding either.

“Sir,” the girl greeted breathlessly.

“Miss Granger,” Severus drawled in answer. “What has you up on the Astronomy tower, which you know to be out of bounds outside lessons, at a time you should be in bed?”

“I knew I would not be finding any sleep if I went to bed now, sir,” she replied, her eyes still steadily set on his when he would have expected her to cast them to the floor, or anywhere but at his face, really, “so as I knew that I would be unable to focus on my studies. So I decided to walk the castle a bit, to tire myself out and sort out my thoughts. As you know, sir, my position as Prefect exempts me from curfew.”

He ignored her last comment. They both knew full well that Prefects were only allowed to leave their common rooms after curfew to perform their rounds of patrol, and those never included the Astronomy tower. This was of no immediate concern to the matter of hand, however, and the Potions Master elected to pose another question instead.

“And of what nature would those thoughts in need of sorting out be, Miss Granger?” Severus decided to press on, well aware of what it was that probably kept her mind from finding the calm to sleep.

“They would be of an extracurricular nature, sir,” the girl merely answered, affirming his guess.

“And you decided that your lack of sleep would warrant the use of the Astronomy tower, Miss Granger?” he asked, his voice mocking, though not as scathing as usual. Had he lost his touch, he
shortly wondered, and went to discard the notion by cutting off the girl’s reply forming on her delicious lips.

“I believe punishment is in order, Miss Granger,” he decided.

Her eyes became wide as saucers at the prospect of losing House points or receiving more detention, possibly even with Filch. But no detention would be assigned to her that night, Severus knew, as he had already told her to see him for what would publically be called extra tuition, and he had no desire to hand her off to the Hogwarts caretaker. Deducting points had a certain appeal, but he knew he would find no real pleasure in it.

What he would find pleasure in, however…

Another gasp escaped the girl’s plump lips once more as with another flick of Severus’s wand, her other lower cheek was graced with a hard slap of an invisible hand. If her eyes had been wide before, they now practicallly filled her face.

“Professor,” she breathed, obviously unbelieving at his actions.

“Miss Granger?”

He cocked an eyebrow, a smirk on his face.

She opened and closed her lips a couple of times, trying to form words although none seemed to come to her mind. Severus watched the movement for a while, amused by her taken aback expression, until he decided to speak once more.

“I believe you are beyond the effects of deducting points, Miss Granger,” he explained in his usual drawl, though a mirthful edge appeared to have crept into his voice. “Contrary to what I said before, you are too academically advanced for any deduction to cause lasting effect to the scales in the House Cup. No,” he chuckled darkly, “it is time for you to feel the effects of your transgressions.”

Conflicting emotions played in the girl’s eyes. Pride at his reluctant compliment warred with shock at the fact that he would assign physical punishment, intermingled with dread at knowing that he was about to carry out said punishment. With great surprise Severus noticed another emotion, flickering at random intervals in between the other three; far less present, but present nonetheless.
Was it…?

No, it could not be.

One might almost mistake it for desire.

Had he actually just suggested…?

No, it could not be, Hermione determined, certain she must have understood the Potions Master wrong. But if he wasn’t about to physically chastise her, than where had those two slaps on her now slightly sore behind come from?

“I suggest you bend over and hold on to the balustrade, Miss Granger,” she heard her professor drawl in his usual bored tone, “it will make this much easier on the both of us.”

She could not take her eyes from his, her feet not obeying his not-quite-a-command. At her hesitation, another slap met her backside. This time, she saw the flick of his wand from the corner of her eye and knew without doubt that the two slaps before had been his doing as well.

She desperately struggled to discern her conflicting emotions. There was pride, loads of it, to be honest, at his comment on her academic advancement. As her brain apparently failed to catch up to the realization that she had just been physically assaulted and would be getting more of that in the very immediate future, Hermione was quite certain that she might have gone into shock.

What she fought to comprehend, however, was why there was moisture collecting in between her thighs.

She had no time to linger on those thoughts, though, as she was magically turned around and bent until she had to grip onto the balustrade in order not to fall head-first into it, or worse, over it. Behind her, she heard a chuckle and wanted to turn around to glare at her professor, but several things kept her from doing so: a stubborn sort of pride, a vehement feeling of embarrassment at the situation, a
flicker of a memory reprimanding her to avoid eye contact, and two more hard slaps in quick succession.

The loudness of magical hand meeting clothed backside was muffled, but multiplied as the sound echoed on top of the Astronomy tower and in the nightly silence surrounding the castle. Hermione was certain that the slaps had to have hurt, but other than a numbing sensation of slight soreness of her behind, there was no lingering pain. She was surprised at that, but only for a moment. The night held many more surprises to come.

Hermione jumped as she felt two hands grip her hips and pull backwards. She didn’t let go of the balustrade, but that appeared to be exactly what the wizard thus manhandling her wanted, as he gave a low hum in appreciative agreement. She was now bent even lower, her back in a straight line that went almost parallel to the floor. One of the two hands came to rest between her shoulder blades, as if to make certain that she would stay down. The other lifted first her black robes, then her plaid skirt over her hips to rest on top of her lower back. Hermione felt the cool night air hit her upper thighs, but the Potions Master was not satisfied yet. A high, short scream escaped her as the hand that had first exposed her legs now slipped into the waistband of her knickers and roughly pulled them down to her knees. Hermione was almost certain that he would spread her legs now to take her by force, remembering *that* aspect of torture he had quite maliciously mentioned a few nights prior, but was proven wrong as she felt the black-clad wizard step back, as if to marvel at his work.

Her breathing was laboured, the surprise at her professor’s actions draining much of her energy. The rugged inhales and shaky exhales resounded loudly in the deadly, anticipative silence of the tower platform. Her brain struggled to conclude what would be next, but she need not have thought on that so much, as Professor Snape spoke.

“You know, Miss Granger,” he said, “there are two different types of Death Eaters, at least where torture is concerned.”

A few steps, usually so silent even in the hollow dungeons, but now loud and demanding in the darkness, pounding in her ears in a matching rhythm to the blood rushing through her body, told her he had moved to her other side.

“Some of us prefer a rather hands-on approach, eager to get their hands dirty,” Professor Snape lectured. “Those would tie you up and get out their knives and whips and other torture instruments to see who of them can paint the prettiest patterns on your skin, red on white.”

A shudder ran through the half-exposed witch at his use of the word ‘*us*’ to describe the Death Eaters. In this moment, she felt very much aware of her naked backside being presented to her sternest teacher, and she wondered whether he was one of those men he had just described, and if yes, what more would be in store for her lower cheeks.
“The others,” the Potions Master continued, “prefer magic, unwilling to touch those they deem beneath them. Although,” he mused, “you will usually be very much beneath them, at least in the physical sense, when you are captured.

“Tonight, Miss Granger,” he paused, and Hermione heard the steps return to her other side, “I will initiate you in one of the multitude of ways in the area of magical torture.”

Hermione involuntarily gave a sigh of relief. No scars would be criss-crossing her white cheeks after tonight, she thought happily.

Professor Snape must have heard her sigh, though, as a dark chuckle behind her made her heart plummet in her chest until it seemed to rest somewhere below her kneecaps.

“I’m afraid it’s a little early to feel relieved, Miss Granger,” he said, “this night is not over yet, and we still have to carry out your punishment, don’t we?”

Another shudder gripped the young witch as another dark chuckle erupted from the wizard behind her. Dark and looming, he made her breath hitch, and the low pitch of his voice caused goose bumps to erupt all over her skin, much of which was visible to him. Had he noticed? Hopefully not.

“My my, Miss Granger,” he destroyed what little hope she had had, “is a little taunting too much for our tender heart? Or,” and at this, his voice dropped another notch or five, “are we actually eager to receive our punishment?”

A blush crept into her face, her skin radiating heat, and she was certain that her lower cheeks would be flushed as well.

They were, apparently.

“You are eager,” Professor Snape breathed. Was that an ounce of surprise she heard in his voice?

“This is most unexpected, and, if I may say so, Miss Granger, highly inappropriate.” The chuckle was back. “Though I must confess, not unwelcome. It might tilt the odds a little towards your favour, that you embrace pain, should you ever be in a position such as this.”
Hermione thought and snorted inwardly, though even in her mind she found it hard to convince herself of her dislike of the current situation. She knew she should be disgusted that Professor Snape saw fit to ogle her naked behind, if that was what he was doing. As her back (and subsequently her backside) was turned to him, she could not watch his actions. All she knew him to do was occasionally pace from her left to her right and back again, or at least that was what the resounding echo of his heavy boots falling on the cold stone floor told her.

His lecture on different kinds of Death Eaters and their approaches to torture, however, told her that he was obviously more than punishing her for her trespassing of the Astronomy tower. He did as he had promised, teaching her about torture and being tortured, and she could only blame herself for giving him both prompt and opportunity to do so this night. After all, he had dismissed her from his office, only to return on Monday, and instead of returning straight to the Gryffindor tower and heading to bed, she had made a detour to calm her thoughts and breathe some clean, silent, undisturbed night air. Of course, little could she have known that a teacher, and her dour Potions Master at that, would be patrolling earlier than usual. But after all, she was not the only one whom sleep might escape; so it really should have been no big surprise that another might search out the Astronomy tower for some peace and quiet.

“Now, for your punishment, Miss Granger,” the Potions Master drawled. “If you would please summarize what mistakes led us to the situation at hand?”

Agreeing to befriending you, Hermione mentally enumerated, going out of my way to show my respect for you, asking for your help in securing the success of the Light in this war?

“Wandering the castle after curfew and trespassing on the Astronomy tower outside lessons and without supervision of a teacher,” Hermione chose to say instead.

Professor Snape, however, was not satisfied with her answer.

“Aren’t we forgetting something, Miss Granger?” he prompted.

Hermione was confused.

“Not to my knowledge, sir, no,” she replied cautiously.

“Well then, Miss Granger,” she could practically hear the smirk on his face, “it appears you are not
Rage gripped Hermione at the quip. Of course she did not like to constantly be called a know-it-all; she merely liked learning new things and strived to grasp as much knowledge as possible, without claiming to know it all, as many chose to label her.

“Enlighten me, if you will, sir,” she pressed out between her teeth, struggling to keep her tongue in check instead of spitting out some more cutting words she would certainly come to regret, rather sooner than later.

“Tz tz tz, Miss Granger,” Professor Snape chastised, “watch your cheek there. Or should I say, cheeks?”

Another chuckle erupted from the otherwise so dour, humourless Potions Master, though the sound did little to encourage Hermione.

“As if he would have let any of the other accounts slide, Hermione snorted inwardly, though with little to no mirth, as hot anger flowed in waves from her brain to run through her veins in ice cold fury. How dare he punish her for being forced to let him expose her lower body?

“I would like to point out, sir,” the words were harder to keep polite, rage seeping into her voice, “that it was you who caused this state of undress, as you call it, with no action of mine to help it.”

“You are most certainly right, Miss Granger,” her professor agreed, “you did not help it. In fact, you did nothing to stop or even try to discourage me from gradually exposing you. One might think you a wanton little minx.”

About to get up from her position, which became less comfortable by the minute, and face him, a loud slap hit her bottom once more, and the soft but insistent pressure of her professor’s hand between her shoulder blades made sure she was unable to rise.

“No, Miss Granger,” Professor Snape’s voice dropped almost to a whisper, “it would not do for
you to try and escape your punishment, now would it? After all, I would have to punish you for that as well.

“Out of the goodness of my heart, however, I will let that slide for now.”

If he was waiting for a word of thanks, none would come. He realized that as well, it seemed, and continued.

“What is left to be determined, Miss Granger, is the number of strikes you will receive for your misdemeanour. Now, how many House points would I have to deduct for your transgressions, what would you say?”

Where her face had once been bright red, it now changed to a sickly white, all colour draining from her skin. Did he mean to spank her as many times as she would lose House points? That would be at least…

“Fifty points, don’t you think, Miss Granger?”

She wanted to vomit but found she could not even concentrate on emptying her stomach, so much did she cling to his each and every word, desperate to find some shred of hope in the darkness surrounding them both.

“A quarter of that should suffice, I should think. Would you agree there, Miss Granger?”

She fought to react as quickly as she could, forcing her head into a nodding motion of agreement.

“Splendid,” the Potions Master drawled. “Now, as you have so graciously taken one or two slaps already, I believe it will be of little harm to spare you the half slap, and round the number down to a beautiful dozen, don’t you think, Miss Granger?”

Had she hoped her number of slaps to be reduced by the number already received, she was sorely mistaken, and would be even more sorely mistaken once he started carrying out his punishment.

“Now, Miss Granger,” Professor Snape chose to take her silence as agreement, “I should like you to
count for me, lest I miscount and have to start again. Will you do that for me?"

About to voice a ‘yes’, Hermione’s lips formed a surprised ‘O’ instead as a sharp gasp escaped them at the first, very unexpected slap. Still struggling to formulate a number, the invisible hand swiftly left two more prints on the soft skin of her behind.

“And here I was, Miss Granger, praising your grasp of basic mathematics, just a few days ago last Monday,” the deep voice behind her drawled. His heavy boots clicked, the sound indicating he had moved to her other side once more. “I believe we must start anew, as much as it pains me,” he chuckled, “to say.”

“You are a monster,” Hermione whimpered, tears of surprise more than actual pain streaking her face, the shock too great to filter her words anymore.

“Let us not forget, Miss Granger,” his voice now dropped to a threatening level, “that it was you who approached me about introducing you to the art of torture, not the other way round. As it is, I am merely granting your request of education, as you like to put it.”

You bastard.

Her lips formed the words, but her breath hitched once more as a sharp smack hit her left cheek, cutting of her voice. It was probably better this way. Instead, Hermione chose to cut this as short as possible.

“One,” she counted.

His feet had begun to pace of their own accord, tracing and retracing the same line forth and back behind her outstretched behind, from her left to her right and back again. The pacing helped him pace his thoughts in turn, racing through his mind quicker than curses in a duel. Most of them were curses, in fact; cursing his method of punishment, cursing his decision of climbing the Astronomy tower, and cursing the girl for coming here in the first place instead of hurrying to bed as he had expected her to.

Being the thrice-damned Gryffindor that she was, however, she had elected to roam the castle and get herself into trouble, rather than seek out the comfort of her warm bed. What had he done to
deserve this?

Nothing, a niggling voice at the back of his mind hissed, you have done nothing to deserve the sight of this beautifully shaped behind in front of you.

And beautiful it was, even Severus could not deny that. Full, plump cheeks, two perfectly symmetric globes, round and ripe and practically begging to be gripped, to be caressed, covered in snowy white skin, soft and unblemished, begging to be taken.

Thus the pacing. It helped reign in thoughts like these, urges to possess the fragile creature so vulnerably exposed in front of him, near enough to be touched, not strong enough to resist him. He could not, would not do it however.

It had not even been a lie when he had asked the girl to count the slaps for him, not really. A great possibility existed that her backside might entrance him so much that he would find himself unable to count properly, or become too immersed in the spanking that it would be impossible for him to stop. The limit of a dozen slaps had been for him as much as for her.

In fact, he barely heard her uttered ‘twelve’, as his brain was filled with snapshots of her reddening cheeks, mentally comparing the picture and revelling with every new imprint of his hand, even though magically induced, gracing her skin, red on white.

His hand had half-executed a thirteenth flick when he stopped his wand mid-movement. He thought to heal her for a moment, but chose to stow his wand in the hidden sheath beneath his left sleeve. Stepping up behind the girl, he held his hand to her behind until they hovered less than half an inch from her skin. He could feel the heat radiating from the redness of her lower cheeks. The sensation reminded him of warming his hands on a bonfire.

He meant to heal her wandlessly, using his hands only – really, he did! – but when he placed his hands on her reddened mounds, he had to hold back a moan. Her skin was even softer than it looked, and the sensation proved too much for his already partially lust-muddled mind. He gripped her cheeks, pulling her further back, and as his hands wandered to her hips to better hold her to him, he pushed his aching hardness into her perfect crevice.

Her body stiffened beneath his as she felt his erection press into her behind. The fact that he was clothed certainly did little to ease the girl’s fear, he was very much aware, even through the desire-induced haze that caused a thick fog to envelop his usually so rational mind.
Fighting to not push himself onto the girl any further, Severus decided to take the (more or less) gracious way out of this situation he now found himself in.

“Are you aware that if I took you now, Miss Granger, nobody would be coming to help you?” he asked, his voice low and as icy as he could make it with all the heat running through his body.

“Yes, sir,” the girl beneath him whispered.

He ground into her – merely for effect, he told himself, as his desire-ridden brain gave a purr of encouragement and demand for more.

“Are you afraid, Miss Granger?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” the girl breathed.

Then –

“Do you fear me?”

“No.”

The girl’s answer took him aback. He had not doubted that she would reply in the positive, yet she hadn’t. He tried to determine whether her answer had come too quickly, but it hadn’t. She hadn’t hesitated more nor less than with her other replies.

“You should,” he muttered under his breath as he released the girl.

With a quick wave of his hand and a few non-verbal spells, her clothing righted itself and her cheeks returned to the same creamy white they had been before, the imprints of his hands disappearing one by one. Severus’s brain – or wherever most of his blood was directed to right now – gave a pang of regret with each imprint that ceased to grace her magnificent globes, then a burst of frustration when her knickers slid up her smooth thighs to cover those soft mounds once more.
Her robes fell down last, like a curtain ending the drama that had played out on the back of her legs tonight.

Slowly, the girl rose to a standing position, her hand still gripping onto the balustrade for support, her body inching away from his and towards the edge of the tower, as if afraid that he might grab onto her once more and finish what he had almost started. Her back emitted low cracks as each joint of her spine resumed its righteous position once more. He had not realized it before, too immersed had he been in the spanking, but her breathing was laboured, and each breath rattled and shook as it filled and escaped her lungs.

The girl did not turn around to face him, but her head turned to the left as she watched him from the corner of her eye without actually meeting his gaze. *Clever girl,* Severus thought with an air that might be described as pride, *even remembering and following my advice after receiving her punishment.* He elected to ignore that niggling voice that told him that she was evading his gaze exactly *because of* his choice of punishment.

“With your permission, sir,” the girl finally broke the uncomfortable silence that had settled over them like a suffocating blanket, “I will go to bed now.”

He hesitated. Could he let her go without a word about what had just transpired?

Severus had to forcibly remind himself that *he* was the Slytherin and *she* the Gryffindor. If one of them had the need to talk about their actions tonight, it would be her, not him. If she wanted to discuss things, she would come to him, to be turned down and sent away just like any other student of her House would be. The sensible thing was to send her running to her common room now.

“Go, Miss Granger,” Severus permitted, “and see to it that you do not dawdle.”

The furious look she shot him was considerably toned down with a generous measure of fear of possible consequences for any impertinence she might allow herself. Instead of retorting to his cutting comment, she nodded in agreement, deference, and in good-bye, and vanished down the tower stairs.

If he had thought before that sleep might evade him for a couple of hours, he now was certain to find none at all tonight.
Hermione descended the Astronomy tower as quickly as she could, taking first two steps at a time, then three, then jumping down the last couple of steps at the end of each landing, as many as or even more than she dared. It would later be a miracle to her how she had not broken or at least sprained an ankle with her foolhardy jumps, but in her panic she cared little for her safety. All she needed was to get back to Gryffindor tower with the greatest haste.

The Fat Lady greeted her, her face graced with a concerned expression, but Hermione cared little for her worried question of where she’d been. Maybe it should have puzzled her that the portrait, usually so annoyed by late-night stragglers, would worry over her whereabouts, but all that was on her mind was jumping under her covers and locking herself in the safety of her bed curtains.

The common room was fortunately empty. As on Monday, Harry must have come back from his detention earlier than she from hers, and Ron had probably taken him to bed, remembering her telling him not to wait up. Hermione was grateful for small things and determined to thank her ginger best friend at the next opportunity for keeping Harry unaware of her night-time activities with Professor Snape.

Hermione changed in a hurry and snuggled into the warm covers of her bed, closing and warding the curtains of her four poster bed against escaping light and sound, and against possible intruders. Only then did she allow herself to take a deep breath and close her eyes for a moment, hoping to calm her racing heart.

*Night-time activities with Professor Snape, indeed,* she snorted inwardly at her earlier thought.

Even though the man had healed her lower cheeks, she could still feel her behind glow with the marks his hand had left. True, it had not been his physical hand that had spanked her bottom again and again. But Hermione had come to know his hands well enough – *not unusual for a student sitting in the same professor’s class several times a week for four years in a row,* she told herself – to know that it had been his own hand, rather than some generic limb, after which the magical slaps had been fashioned.

She rolled onto her belly and reached around with one hand to slide her nightgown upwards until it rested above her hips. Carefully, she laid her hand upon one abused cheek to feel if any residual pain remained. First hesitantly, then thoroughly examining the globe, she ascertained that, in fact, none did. Hermione drew a deep, grateful breath, but did not remove her hand.
She had hated that Professor Snape had so easily overpowered her, manhandling her as if she was little more than a doll, to be done with as one pleased. In a way, she mused, she probably was to him. After all, she was a foot shorter than him, even if she rose to her full height (which wasn’t much) and he slouched (which he never did).

She had also hated that she had been unable to defend herself, though that was probably what Professor Snape had been trying to demonstrate. Against a fully grown man, there was little a girl like her could do.

But that was why she had come to him, was it not?

*No,* a small voice at the back of her mind whispered. *You came to him for help in enduring what he did to you, not escaping it.*

And yet, Hermione thought, he might have at least warned her about what he was going to do to her.

*But he did warn you, stupid girl,* the voice teased. *You knew full well what was about to happen, yet you never once spoke up, or raised your wand against him. No,* the voice now emitted a low, derogating chuckle that reminded her of somebody she was rather desperate to push from her mind right now, *you enjoyed it.* *Even he could see that,* remarked upon it, *and gave you what you so obviously craved.*

“I did *not* crave that,” Hermione spoke into her pillow, loudly and with conviction.

In the bed across from her, Parvati gave a loud snore, and Hermione strengthened the Silencing charm on her bed curtains.

“I didn’t,” she reiterated, her voice now a whisper.

She did not even manage to convince herself.

Truly, she had not *craved* a spanking from her Potions Master, but was that possibly because she had not known yet that it felt so good? After all, the first slaps had been cushioned by the thick wool of her school robes. Those first few slaps had taken her more by surprise than anything, her being too
shocked at the sudden and unexpected sensation to feel anything other than surprise.

Only when he had come closer, speaking to her in those low timbers of his voice that sent shivers up her spine that had little to do with the cold air of a mid-September night, lifting her robes and lowering her knickers, the tips of his long, calloused fingers ghosting across the smooth skin of the back of her thighs…

You know full well that it started earlier, the frustratingly persistent voice at the back of her mind – or was it at the forefront already? – chimed in, little helpfully.

Alright, so maybe the whole idea of being spanked by him had turned her on. But who wouldn’t be, really? His presence alone was more than enough to make her knees weak, and when he started to speak… Even Lavender and Parvati admitted – not to her, no, never to her, but to each other, far too loudly for her not to hear – that his voice was made for fantasies of what they called ‘tall, dark, and handsome’.

Tall and dark Professor Snape might be, Hermione thought, but handsome was not a word one might immediately associate with the dour Potions Master. She pondered on his appearance for a few moments, tracing his features in her mind, assessing them as she went.

His eyes were captivating in their blackness, and so expressive if he wished them to, though artfully devoid of expression at times as well. His cheek bones sat high in his angular face, which gave him an aristocratic air. His mouth, so often contorted into a sneer or a vicious smirk, could probably be beautiful if he only relaxed it for once. Too frequently his lips disappeared into a very thin line of fury, more often directed against members of her House than not, to ascertain that they were not full and luscious. They were, Hermione knew, having covertly watched her professor these past few weeks at every opportunity. His angular jaw accentuated the shape of his face, framed by long black hair that shone almost blue in the right light, and appeared oily though Hermione knew to account that to his exposure to potion fumes all day long. Merlin knew her own mane needed a good wash after their Potions lessons, and those were only one or two hours at a time at most. The professor had little opportunity to escape the fumes, teaching most of the day and brewing for the Infirmary after lessons, so of course his hair would suffer a lot more than his students’.

All in all, Professor Snape certainly could not be said to be a traditionally handsome man, but to Hermione, he was more than that. He was arresting. And that was why she had not run from him earlier, too captivating had his mere presence been, too alluring his low voice, too appealing to her sense of curiosity the idea of being spanked by him.

And yes, that had been the reason for the heat pooling moistly between her thighs. Was she ashamed to have been aroused by her teacher? She most assuredly was. But that did not hinder her from admitting to herself the truth of her reaction to him. It simply meant she would never admit it to
anybody else.

*Not that he would need you to admit to it,* the voice spoke up once more, unwilling to be dismissed, *he would have been hard pressed not to notice. You practically shoved your flushed arse into his face, now, didn’t you?*

“No, I did not,” the pillow once more muffled Hermione’s outward reply to her inner musings. “Nobody forced him to expose my bottom and stare at it like the lecherous old man that he is.”

*Just listen to you,* the voice laughed in a wholly unpleasant way that distinctly reminded Hermione of fingernails scraping over a blackboard, *you can’t even say ‘arse’ out loud in the privacy of your bed! And so easily you dismiss a perfectly young professor as an old lecher. But of course you must, seeing as you elect to behave like a petulant child yourself.*

“I’m not a child,” Hermione whispered into her pillow with little conviction, “I’m not.”

Another dismissive chuckle resounded in her head, but no response came.

A different thought crept up on Hermione, however. No matter how much she herself had enjoyed that spanking – Professor Snape seemed to have enjoyed it as well. Or how else could his hard manhood pressing into the cleft of her bottom cheeks be explained?

It appeared that Hermione indeed was no child anymore, and her Potions professor had noticed that little fact. Nobody else had been with them on the Astronomy tower, and as far as Hermione could tell, he had not been aroused yet when he first chanced upon her on the tower platform, so he *must* have become affected by their interaction – there was no other possible explanation.

But what was it that had caused his arousal? Was it the spanking itself? Did her professor get off on exacting power over defenceless women? No, that couldn’t be right, Hermione thought, or the Headmaster would not have proclaimed him reformed; if overpowering helpless people was his thing, he would still be a common Death Eater, non-reformed, plain and simple.

So what was it? Was it Hermione herself? Somehow that thought didn’t seem right to her, either; after all, nobody had ever shown the slightest interest in her person, much less her outside attributes.

*Don’t you mean your* backside attributes? *the little voice interrupted once more.*
Hermione sighed, not gracing the voice with an answer. The voice saw it as encouragement to carry on with her opinion.

**Viktor.**

“What?” Hermione asked, slightly confused, into her pillow.

_Somebody who showed interest. Viktor._

“Well, yes, alright,” Hermione conceded, “Viktor took me to the ball, but seeing our lack of conversation, one can hardly say that he was interested in me as a person, and much less as a girl.”

_Woman_, the voice persisted.

“Oh, _now_ I am a woman?” Hermione queried, indignant. “A minute ago I was a petulant child.”

_Well, you’ve finally started thinking into the right direction_, the voice explained, little graciously. _And of course Viktor was interested in you as a person, or why else would he have lingered in the library for weeks until he could ask you out? You may not have noticed, but you’re not at your best when you’re in your oversized jumpers, bent over parchment, hair sticking in every direction, and your hands and face smudged with ink. And believe me, as a Seeker, he did notice that._

“Alright, but –”

_And, the voice spoke up, rising in volume until Hermione’s head rang with the sound. The unpleasant sensation made her interrupt her thought. The voice appeared pleased, smug even, and continued._

_And he was interested in you as a woman. Do you think anybody in the Great Hall remained unaffected by your stunning appearance that night? No, the voice chuckled, and the sound carried a generous measure of pride in it, even Karkaroff stared._
“Headmaster Karkaroff,” Hermione chided.

_Death Eater Karkaroff_, the voice countered. _Or rather, soon to be late Death Eater Karkaroff, if rumours can be believed._

Hermione pondered that for a bit. Harry had told her about the conversation he witnessed between Headmaster Karkaroff and Professor Snape. Both wore the Dark Mark, he’d discovered. In fact, Hermione had gained from some overheard conversations between Order members at Grimmauld Place that Karkaroff had fled Durmstrang, apparently trying to outrun Voldemort’s grasp. Nobody, including her, believed him to be able to hide and thus survive for long. That thought almost evoked pity within Hermione, but then she remembered what Harry had told her about the memories in Dumbledore’s Pensieve – Karkaroff’s list of charges that were held against him – and the flicker of emotion died.

And Professor Snape…

_I bet he watched you, too_, the voice chimed in once more, _wrapped in those layers of purple silk, I bet he had a nice view of your arse as you spun and turned in Viktor’s arms as you danced. I bet he remembered that tonight. I bet, in fact, that he tried to recreate that same colour of purple with his spanking, don’t you think?_

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Hermione half-snorted into her pillow, though she was not quite able to convince herself that the voice was actually being ridiculous. What if the Potions Master had watched her at the Yule Ball indeed? What if he did like her behind?

_Oh please_, the voice began to sound annoyed again, _I thought we had established that fact already. I’m certain he did not become so aroused by your magnificent counting abilities – oh wait, didn’t you even fail to count correctly the first time?_

Burying her head under her pillow, Hermione tried to drown the voice at the forefront of her mind. Yes, it had taken her some time to become accustomed to those first few slaps, she admitted, but hadn’t she counted very well after that?

_But for the most important question_, the voice would not be still. _Do you believe that was what Dumbledore meant when he asked you to become Snape’s companion?_

“Headmaster Dumbledore asked me to become Professor Snape’s companion,” Hermione corrected.
“So what?”

Well, the voice drawled, **do you think that was what he meant when he asked you to accommodate Professor Snape?**

Hermione was stunned into silence. So was her brain, apparently, as all thought processes – and there were quite a few of them running in her brain at any time, and especially now – came to a screeching halt. Her breathing stopped as well, and even though she could not be certain as she lacked the necessary brain capacity to check on it, Hermione was pretty sure her heart skipped several beats as well.

“No,” she breathed into the air, her head abruptly withdrawn from underneath her pillow. “No, it cannot be.”

The voice remained silent for once. Where Hermione might have longed for peace and quiet from the nagging thing, she now would have been grateful for some much needed input. As it was, even when her breathing began and became regular again, when her heart resumed its beating, and when her trains of thoughts restarted their steam engines until she was certain there must be smoke coming out of her ears – even then, Hermione did not come to a conclusion whether that was indeed what the Headmaster had meant.

What she did realize, however, was that she would have to meet with Professor Snape regularly from now on, turning herself over to him and submitting to his judgement in their lessons of torture. How she would manage to attend those lessons without her head bursting into sudden flames of embarrassment of what had happened on top the Astronomy tower this night, she did not know.

Oh Merlin, Hermione thought, **how will I ever be able to look him in the eye again?**

She found it easier to meet Professor Snape’s eye again than she had thought, however, as the next morning proved. When she and the boys sat down at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, a missive appeared on Hermione’s plate, clearly sent via the House elves. Curious as to what it had to say, she picked it up and perused the lines, written in the neat, slanted script she had come to know from the scathing remarks that painted her best friends’ Potions essays in copious amount of red ink. This note to her, however, was written in plain black.

*Miss Granger,*
As mentioned yesterday, these are the books I expect you to study in preparation for our lessons. I trust you will not become too sore from sitting down to read them.

SS

Scandalized by his quip towards his punishment from the night before, she shot an angry look at the High Table. Professor Snape, it seemed, had expected that reaction, and looked back at her with an empty expression – no, almost empty, as the left corner of his mouth quirked upwards in what might have become a smirk had he allowed it to.

Still furious at his impertinence, but also a little curious as to which books she would be studying, she turned around the slip of parchment to read the titles. It was a short list, only four books were listed, and after she’d read them thrice, she was sure to have memorized them. No sooner had she ascertained that she indeed knew the four titles by heart, did the missive burst into flames, the flaky ashes left in its wake fluttering downwards and ceasing into nonexistence a split of an inch from her plate.

The boys, she was quick to ascertain, were too busy stuffing their faces with food and bashing Umbridge to notice she had even received a missive in the first place. Returning to her own breakfast, Hermione piled scrambled eggs and some plain toast onto her plate and slowly began to eat, her mind still whirling. How come Professor Snape appeared so unaffected by what had happened that night? Was he simply so good at hiding his true feelings? Or was it she had mistaken his quip and his almost-smirk and they had, in fact, nothing to do with their meeting on the Astronomy tower?

Or maybe, you daft chit, the voice suddenly reappeared, and Hermione groaned in annoyance, maybe he is grown up enough to separate between what you asked him to do, namely teaching you how to accept and endure pain, and your day-to-day dealings with each other. Maybe he is simply mature about this whole thing, which you obviously fail to be. Ever thought about that?

“Oh, just shut up, will you,” Hermione snapped at the voice.

When the boys looked up at her questioningly, Ron’s expression one of bemused curiosity, Harry’s one of barely contained rage, she realized that maybe she should start answering the voice where it nagged at her – in the privacy of her mind.

“Oh excuse me,” Harry said coolly, “I was unaware that my detention with Umbridge was painfully
annoying to you, Hermione. Of course, maybe I should have thought of your feelings about her methods, lest I hurt you.”

His challenging glare betrayed his cold demeanour and polite words, and Hermione knew that he was close to exploding. Nevertheless, she marvelled at his self-control that allowed him to utter those words in the manner he did, emphasizing the pain the evil woman caused him as if it was Hermione’s.

“I apologize, Harry,” Hermione said in what she hoped to be a soothing and apologetic voice, treading carefully as she went, “of course I’m not annoyed at your discussion about your detention with Umbridge.” At least that was what she desperately hoped the two boys had been talking about before she had interrupted them. “I have a lot on my mind right now, and my thoughts were wreaking havoc on my brain, and I simply wanted some quiet from them. I did not realize that I was talking out loud to make them stop before you two looked up.”

The fact that Harry had not yet lost his temper and/or left the table in a black storm cloud of fury spoke in his favour and gave Hermione courage that maybe, just maybe her excuse had been good enough.

Apparently, it hadn’t.

“And just what is it that is occupying your mind so much that you can’t even bring yourself to listen, let alone to care about what the old hag has made me do every night this week? Not even to wait up with Ron until I got back?”

“Oh please, Harry,” she said, throwing her hands up both in desperation and in exasperation, “of course I care! You know I do! I provided you with the Essence of Dittany to help with those wounds, and I,” – here, she dropped her voice, so they would not easily be overheard – “and I suggested a way of learning Defence this year despite being taught by an incompetent, vicious old toad that would rather V- Voldemort ruled Britain than admit her precious Fudge was wrong about you being a liar and a fraud.

“You know,” Hermione carried on, now emboldened, “maybe if you started realizing that we’re your friends in this instead of constantly antagonizing those closest to you, you would notice that you’re not so alone as the Ministry wants to make you believe you are.”

Harry was silent for a few seconds, and that alone made Hermione more afraid of what he was going to say next than ever before, and seeing the number of tirades she had suffered from her best friend, that was saying something.
“Oh, so now I am just one of those brain-washed idiots who believe everything the Ministry has to say, am I?” Harry asked, seething with rage.

“No, Harry, that’s not what I –“

“And you bringing some dishwater to put my hand in and shoving off the responsibility of learning how to defend ourselves against Voldemort to ME once more makes it all okay?”

Harry’s voice was rising to levels easily overheard by half their own table and a good part of the neighbouring tables as well. Hermione was desperate to calm her friend down, and to quiet him.

“No, please, Harry, just listen to me –“

“JUST ANSWER MY BLOODY QUESTION, HERMIONE,” Harry raged. “WHAT THE FUCK IS SO IMPORTANT TO YOU THAT YOU CAN’T EVEN FOLLOW A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR TWO BEST FRIENDS?”

“I’M IN DETENTION WITH PROFESSOR SNAPE, ALRIGHT?” Hermione now shouted back at him.

A collective gasp sounded around them, every eye in the Great Hall now fixed on Harry and Hermione, now both standing. In the background, Hermione noticed Malfoy’s ugly smirk, mirrored seconds later on the faces of his thick minions.

Harry’s face blanched at her declaration.

“You are – what?”

“Yes, Harry,” Hermione admitted, “Professor Snape gave me detention with himself for a couple of Mondays and yesterday night. That’s why I wasn’t in the common room when you got back from Umbridge. I’m sorry, Harry, I really am.”
Chancing a look at Ron, she saw that he was looking at Harry, his eyes not leaving his face, as if waiting for another explosion. Fortunately, it didn’t come.

“You’re in detention with Snape?” Harry reiterated, unbelieving. Her own admonishment to call him ‘Professor Snape’ went unheard by either of the boys, naturally. “Whatever did he give you attention for?”

“Insolence, Potter,” a familiar, though unwelcome voice sounded from behind Hermione.

That the professor was silent in his approach she knew, and it was of no surprise to her that she had not heard him advance. But how Harry had not seen the Potions Master creep up on them, sitting opposite from her as he was and in clear view of the space between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, was beyond her.

“Impudence,” the drawl continued, “impertinence. Take your pick, Potter, I’m sure you are well acquainted with all of them, as your and Miss Granger’s display here clearly demonstrates.”

Hermione’s shoulders sagged. Of course he would come to denigrate her some more in front of her friends and all the school, as the other students were obviously still listening. She knew that this fact did not go unnoticed by her professor. In fact, he probably played on it.

“And Miss Granger, I know that usually your accomplishments incite the need in you to brag about them, but if I may offer you a word of advice?” Without waiting for her answer, he continued. “Detention is conventionally not seen as something worth accomplishing, much less bragging about, however much you might want to shout it to the world – or the Great Hall, in this case – that you landed in detention with me.

“Seeing, however,” the Potions Master carried on, “how rare a feat it is for you to be assigned detention, I understand your confusion that it might be a success, rather than the punishment that it is. In fact, I am willing to help you with that confusion.”

His voice dropped, as did Hermione’s heart at his cold tone and the unpleasant sneer on her professor’s face.

“In order to demonstrate to you, Miss Granger, that detention can be rather unpleasant, contrary to your expectations due to the rarity of which you get assigned any, I would offer to prolong your detention, to be served with Mr Filch, as I have little desire to punish myself with more time in your
presence than absolutely necessary. Would that be to your liking?"

Hermione felt numb. Why would he be so mean to her now? Hadn’t last night been punishment enough? She felt the urge to rub her bum, but suppressed that need. From the flicker in his eyes, however, Professor Snape seemed to have sensed her thought.

Realizing that he – and everybody else in the Great Hall, their eyes still firmly fixed on the spectacle that she and Harry had been making of themselves – was still waiting for an answer, Hermione shook her head.

“No, sir,” she replied in little more than a whisper. As an afterthought, she added, “Thank you.”

He sneered, and took a step closer to her. He now towered over her, and his smooth black eyes were fixed on hers. Remembering his advice from last night, before he had dismissed her for the first time, she averted her gaze and instead stared resolutely at a spot on the floor where a student must earlier have spilled some of his breakfast. Let him watch memories of bacon and jam, she thought.

“Fifteen point from Gryffindor for shouting in the Great Hall, for both of you,” Professor Snape snarled. “And now I suggest you two sit down again – unless, of course, the hard wood is too uncomfortable? I would not wish to cause any imprints on the soft skin of schoolchildren.”

And with another sneer that Hermione more heard than saw, he was gone in a swirl of black robes, leaving her with yet another quip at their meeting on top of the Astronomy tower.

Hermione sat down, letting her head fall into her cupped hands, her elbows resting on top of the table. From the corner of her eye, she saw Ron tug on Harry’s robes until he let himself fall into his seat, as well.

They sat in silence for a few moments, listening to the chatter and clatter rise once more around them, until nobody paid them any heed anymore. Even Ron wasn’t eating, rather watching his two best friends instead. Finally, Hermione broke the silence.

“I’m sorry, Harry – please believe me, I am! I wanted to be there for you more, I really did.”

Harry looked up to meet her gaze.
“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, his voice now thankfully devoid of his previous anger. Merely a trace of hurt was wrought in his words.

“I didn’t want to burden you more, Harry,” Hermione confessed. “I know it was wrong to keep this from you, but this was my fight, not yours, and you had so much on your plate already that I—“

“…felt like you couldn’t come to me with this?”

_Oh sweet Circe, if only Harry didn’t sound so hurt, Hermione thought._

“It’s not that, Harry,” she tried to reason, “please, I know I could trust you with anything. I just didn’t mean to add to all that stress you already have by burdening you with my own, as well. This is my detention, and I need to do this on my own – just like Ron and I can’t really be there for you during your own detention with Umbridge. We can’t help you then, but we try to be there for you afterwards.”

“And you won’t even let me do _that_ for you?” Harry questioned, his anger now creeping back into his voice.

Hermione struggled to backpaddle quickly, but was unwilling to give way in this too easily.

“Not right now, Harry,” she replied cautiously. “Not when you are still sitting your own detention with the toad.”

The boys smirked at her description of Umbridge, apparently shrugging off the tense atmosphere from before. Hermione, however, knew that she couldn’t let the issue rest like this.

“Will you be there for me next Monday, when I come back from my detention?” she asked hesitantly.

A wide grin spread over Harry’s face, mirrored by Ron who seemed exceedingly happy that their fight came to an end.
“Of course I will, Hermione,” Harry exclaimed. “And the Monday after that as well, if you need me.”

If they were being honest with each other now, might as well come out with the whole truth, Hermione thought.

“And the Monday after that…?”

“Merlin’s hairy balls, Hermione,” Ron now chimed in to their conversation, obviously content with the level of civility and friendship they had reached, “how much detention did the greasy git give you?”

Hermione rolled her eyes, though did so with a smile on her face to show them that she was merely friendly-annoyed, not annoyed-annoyed.

“Professor Snape,” she answered, deliberately stressing the title, and it was the boys’ turn to roll their eyes, “assigned me five evenings of detention, two of which I already served this week, Ronald.”

“Merlin’s beard,” it was Harry’s turn to swear, though he at least did so with a little more taste than Ron, “what did you say to the big bat to earn that much detention?”

I merely told him that I respected him and wanted to learn from him, Hermione thought.

Out loud, she said simply, “The truth.”

And laughing, the three of them finished their breakfast in companionable conversation, before heading off together to face their lessons of the day.
Holy fucking Merlin and his thrice-damned balls, Severus thought. How in seven hells had this happened?

He had spanked the girl.

Spanked her.

Her.

The girl.

The girl.

Hermione bloody Granger.

And he had spanked her.

Her.

The girl.

The – oh fuck it, he really had to snap out of this.

But –
Sweet bloody Morgana, what had he done?

Looking back on the last couple of hours, Severus decided to mentally retrace his steps to discover where it all had gone downhill, when he had taken a wrong turn and ended up where he was now – not the top of the Astronomy tower, no, but the sitting room of Hades, tumbler full of dark golden whiskey in his hand – the colour of her eyes, trustingly gazing into his – as if he belonged there, had belonged there all his life.

And maybe he had, Severus thought. More than maybe. In fact, he was quite certain that Fate had always intended him to walk this path that was laughingly called his life, and that the old man repeatedly telling him that he had indeed a choice in what he did with this path was merely entertainment for the audience that must be sitting somewhere, unseen by him, watching and laughing like in one of those ridiculous muggle TV shows that his father had watched whenever he was too drunk to hit his wife and son, which was less often than one might expect, given how most grown men would pass out and silently die in a corner if they were to drink the amount of alcohol his father used to imbibe before noon only.

Gracious Circe, Severus thought, keep me from rambling lest my mind drive me mad.

But it seemed Circe was unwilling to bestow any of her presumed grace on a poor, unworthy Potions Master – Death Eater, his mind supplied – like him, and he was left alone with his usually so rational mind that, just now, didn’t stop sprouting out every ridiculous thought that came to its front, and those thoughts lingering in the recesses of the darkest compartments that he could stow them into as well.

Allowing himself a deep sigh – and how weird was that in and of itself, considering he hadn’t sighed in public for years, even if it was in the middle of the night and he was completely alone, as it was now – Severus decided to leave the tower and return to his chambers, lest he come upon someone willing to meddle in his affairs, and had the capacity to read his thoughts, and one never knew what unexpected time and place the Headmaster might choose to prance upon his unsuspecting victims.

Recasting the muffling charm he usually kept on his heavy boots and taken off for effect only – and what an effect it had been, her cheeks flushed a most delightful shade of pink, both her lower and her facial ones –, the Potions Master quickly descended the long, winding stairs of the Astronomy tower. With a masterful billowing of his robes that appeared even angrier than usual – if billowing could be described in the way of an emotion, which it obviously couldn’t, but hadn’t he chosen his robes for this exact reason, that they were an expression of everything his face would rarely show, or, when his face did scowl and frown and scathe, that his robes would support that expression, and why the hell couldn’t he stop rambling on and on about his robes, after all they were only robes, though, one had to admit, quite expressive in their billowing, even angry, one might say, and if one chose to describe them as angry, then tonight surely that billowing appeared angrier than usual…
With a masterful billowing of his robes, Severus chose the shortest path to his private chambers that he knew, and Occluded heavily in an attempt to keep his mind as empty as possible. The concentration that this feat took from him almost made him run into Mrs Norris, her eyes two bright yellow spots in the darkness of the Castle, far too bright to be attractive, unlike that nice whiskey gold that could be found in –

Torn between the options of controlling where he went and controlling what he thought, Severus wanted to weigh his choices but found that weighing anything was impossible if one didn’t want to think of how one would need two symmetrical scales, and how they were sometimes half-spherical, and speaking of symmetrical spheres, tonight he had seen the most symmetrical globes he could remember, and had weighed them in his hands, so soft and smooth and –

Allowing his mind to ramble, Severus forced as much concentration as he could muster on making his way to the dungeons as quickly as he could.

Once there, safely ensconced in the privacy of his chambers, he locked and warded the door, and sank into his small sofa. A wave of his hand had the flames in the fireplace jump to life, and it took only seconds for the warm glow to reach his skin, though none of its warmth appeared to seep into his bones.

Of course not, Severus snorted inwardly, then, remembering that he was in private, snorted outwardly for good measure. Why should I be able to enjoy something as simple as a fucking fire?

Shaking his head as if he could shake off the misery that was slowly grabbing onto him with every randomly rambled thought of his mind – and thinking of it, when had Severus Snape ever needed to physically shake his head to clear his mind, because wouldn’t that tip either of his masters off to the fact that he felt the need to clear his mind in the first place, and what would he need to clear his mind of anyway if not to Occlude, and if he Occluded, what was he hiding and why, because…

Obviously, shaking his head had not helped.

Deciding to force his mind’s focus onto more important things, he thought back to where his and the girl’s paths had met this Thursday – or rather, that Thursday, as it was well past midnight.
During their Potions class, he had ignored her as much as possible, which was easy, considering there were twenty other juvenile students from warring Houses that tried to blow each other apart at every opportunity that he was careful to nip in the bud.

*And wouldn’t we just love to nip Miss Granger in the butt,* his mind supplied, only to be shut off by a fierce growl that came from deep within the Potions Master’s chest, although *how* exactly that sound came to be would remain a mystery, even to himself.

The girl, Severus had gratefully found, had followed his lead that lesson, drawing no more attention to herself than usually, and even less than that if his observation could be trusted, which was a moot point because it always could. (No Great Sorceress would free him of these ramblings, Severus realized, and decided to let his mind run freely as there was currently no way to reign it in, apparently.) After the lesson, she had left without a word, as had all her little Housemates.

When she came to him – *to her detention,* he corrected, though why he still cared to correct his incorrigible mind (and rightly so, because why would he ever need to correct himself in the first place, seeing as he was always right?) he couldn’t say – he had kept his silence for as long as possible, and she had stupidly – *bravely,* she would probably say, sheepish Gryffindor that she was, calling herself a lion but following their shepherd with the twinkling eyes to the slaughter that this war would be on Potter and his friends – reiterated her request to be tortured – *taught,* but wasn’t it the same thing, particularly in this instance? – by him.

*M Merlin, had a single sentence ever taken that much energy out of him before?*

And then she had bargained away an uncertain favour, setting boundaries he wouldn’t have dared to cross in the first place – or would he? Alright, he probably would, under the right (or wrong, to lead to such extremes) circumstances – but leaving him so many liberties in his demand that he almost worried about how much it would be he would ask of her eventually.

Had he been wrong to agree to her request? Was an uncertain favour that she would *attempt* to provide him worth the countless hours of her company? And even if her company in and of itself was bearable, was it worth willingly entering into an agreement where he would hone the girl’s endurance level of torture? Had he kept himself out of so many revels, so many missions that the Dark Lord had set simply to cause pain and destruction to those of ‘lesser’ blood, only to now cause the pain he had avoided to cause in the past to a slip of a girl, and his own student nonetheless?

He probably had. Been wrong to agree, that is. But even if he hadn’t…

If he hadn’t agreed to her request for his help, would that have kept him from laying a hand on her
on top of the Astronomy tower tonight? And he wasn’t even thinking of the magical imprints of his hand that he had peppered across her milky white skin. Would he have been able to keep his hands away from her arse, skin touching skin, drawing her to him until he was nestled in that perfect crevice between her perfect cheeks, perfectly surrounding him with the perfect heat of her perfect body?

If Hogwarts offered English classes, maybe he would have been able to spare a more extended vocabulary to the perfection that was the girl’s behind, but considering the perfection of said behind, Severus sincerely doubted that.

Damning his lecherous mind, he reminded himself that this was not the point he tried to discern. No, the question was where his path had taken a wrong turn.

Would he have even left his quarters last night if he hadn’t agreed to those private lessons? Yes, Severus thought, her request alone had thrown him off track, and even if she had retracted it, he would have been so fazed by the idea alone to leave the dungeons and take a walk through the Castle.

Would he have gone to the Astronomy tower if he hadn’t spoken to the Fat Lady? Or if he had known it was the girl waiting for him up there? Yes on the first account, he realized. He had not calmed down enough by far at that point not to take the stairs up the highest tower and see for himself whether everything was quiet up there. Yes on the second account as well, he begrudgingly admitted, because he had been in a wild mood that night, and confrontation would have seemed more reasonable than avoidance, if any of his decisions that night could be described as reasonable.

*That night,* Severus scoffed. As if it had been ages ago, not mere hours, that he had discovered the girl on the tower platform and proceeded to punish her.

And what was it again – the reason he had elected to punish her in the first place? It wasn’t any of her misdeeds, certainly. No, Severus had to admit, none of her actual wrongdoings had been the reason for that punishment. That didn’t mean nothing had been wrong, though. No, the girl standing up there, looking as unsuspicious and unsuspecting as she was, her body painting the most delicious curve against the blackness of the cold night – all those had been wrong. So wrong indeed that he had felt the need to punish the wrongness of the whole situation, and since there was only one vessel to soak up all the pain he had to give, the girl had been the one to receive that punishment.

*Try again,* some way out of line thought in his mind popped up. *And this time, try some honesty.*

Alright, so it had made his blood rush in a wholly pleasant way to imagine himself causing her pain.
Not real pain, mind you, and not to severely hurt her, but merely to teach her in the ways pain could be pleasurable.

Where that intention had come from, he could not say, and would not say even if he did know, which he did not. Severus merely knew that his body had reacted to her soft hands and unruly hair a few days ago, and at the images of her taut nipples and plumpness of her behind – both still carefully hid from the cold air and from his view at that point, he knew –, that reaction had resurfaced. Yes, he had acted on lust, throwing all caution and rationale to the wind, because the highest tower of the castle was obviously the best place in Hogwarts to throw anything and everything to the wind.

He had never taken pleasure from exacting pain before, however. Never had punishment appeared pleasant to him, although that was probably because he had always been on the receiving end of it. He had never caused pain to any of his students before, either, and had avoided causing pain to innocents as far as possible, as well.

He still could not discern what it was that had moved him to spank – spank! – the girl tonight. Her, the very picture of innocence and purity – though most pureblood supremacists (all of his so-called friends, one might say) would disagree with him on that account –; now somewhat tainted by his touch, he felt. Yes, he had reasoned with her that the deduction of House points or the assignment of detention would not leave a lasting impression upon her, but those had not been his real reasons, had they? Of course not. And worst of all, she probably knew that as well, thinking him a lecherous old man.

The truth was, however, that pleasure was hard to come by in either of his masters’ service. Few of the Order members would even look at him in as much as a friendly way, and none of them would lower themselves to sleep with him. Not that he would want them to, either. There were few women there, after all. Those that had survived the first war had been old then already, now almost fourteen years in the past, and the rare new female members were – well – the one new female member he knew was a Black by blood, if not by name, and a child by behaviour, if not by age. No, none of them would do.

It wasn’t much better among the Dark Lord’s ranks, either. The one female Death Eater he knew was Bellatrix Lestrange, and that was all that needed to be said on that account. What other women were treated civilly in that closely-knit society were the wives of the male Death Eaters, and those were untouchable for obvious reasons. Any daughters were either too young, or already betrothed, or both. (Mostly both.)

Baring family members, any and all other women that were somehow unfortunate enough to make it into the presence of the Death Eaters alive – barely, on most occasions – were victims, to be used as one saw fit. Severus had never forced himself on a woman in his life. In fact, most of his comrades (he mentally shivered at the word) probably thought him asexual, which was all the same to him. He couldn’t have anybody suspect that he avoided violence for any Light reasons.
Severus still wasn’t any closer to discovering why he had felt the need to spank the girl. It had taken all of his willpower not to spank her physically, using his very own hand, though no willpower of his could keep him from shaping the magic that hit her beautiful behind after his hand, rather than just place obscure slaps on her arse. It had surprised him what large amounts of pleasure he could derive from seeing his imprints on her soft globes, the pattern of red fingers and palms on the white canvas of her skin.

He had not intended to touch them, he truly hadn’t. But he had come close enough to heal her, and if he needed to heal her, then why not use a hands-on approach that was said to be far more effective than some wand-waving from miles away, and a few inches could make a very significant difference, on that point many experts agreed, and healing magic travelled faster and more efficiently and effectively if there were no barriers, not even air, between recipient and donor, and –

*Merlin’s blue balls,* his mind really needed to get a grip on itself. But then again, Severus thought, the paths his mind had taken in those minutes alone with the girl on top of the Astronomy tower were more obscure than anything his usual rationale could come up with, and he was trying to follow those paths, so it was alright for them to be completely confusing – wasn’t it?

*No, it wasn’t,* Severus knew. It wasn’t alright for his mind to lose its rationale. He counted on the clarity of his mind, most precious of his assets, and for it to abandon him in his time of need, and for need to overpower the clarity of his mind – it was unspeakable. Yes, he realized, it was his own uncontrolled lust and the subsequent failure of his mind that had led him down that path, across the finely drawn line that should always separate teacher and student, and had allowed him, prompted him even, to spank the girl.

*Spank her.*

*Her.*

The *girl.*

*The girl.*

Sweet bloody Morgana, what had he *done?*

And what had *she* done? Severus had been so elated to see those goose bumps appear on the
otherwise so smooth skin of her behind, so certain had he been that they were from anticipative excitement. Had he been wrong? Had she not looked forward to their spanking – and theirs it had been, for it would have been a completely different affair had either of them not been the one they were – but had feared it? Had those goose bumps on her innocent flesh not been from the heat he interpreted she must have felt at the thought of being spanked by him, but from the cold of the night and the threat of his body punishing hers?

*Holy Circe, Severus thought, had he assaulted her?*

Frantically thinking back to their encounter, Severus fought to scan their interaction as thoroughly as humanly possible, searching for any word he might have missed, telling him to shove off; any sign he might not have noticed, begging him to stop.

He found none.

But would he have stopped? Or would he have carried on under the pretence of their lessons that had yet to come, not caring for her wish to let her go?

Severus did not know.

However, she had not asked him to stop, as far as he could tell, so it really was a moot point – wasn’t it? But why hadn’t she asked him to stop in the first place?

That question left only very few possible conclusions.

One – she had been too shocked to defend herself.

Two – he had been too caught up in his actions (*your lust*, his mind readily supplied) to notice.

Three – and this was the conclusion he would settle on until proven wrong, simply because it was the most gracious and, if one might say so, pleasurable conclusion of the three – she had indeed enjoyed his attentions very much. His spanking.

He had spanked her.
Spanked her.

Her.

The girl.

The girl.

Sweet bloody Morgana, what had he done?

Well, Severus thought, it did little good to ponder on what he had already done now. It was, after all, very much too late to change any of that. What was left to do now was to decide how to treat the girl from here onwards.

His options were few.

One – he could apologize. Severus almost had the urge to laugh at that thought, but remembered in time that he never laughed (just like he never apologized), and didn’t (just like he wouldn’t).

Two – he could act as if their meeting on top of the Astronomy tower had never happened. That would work well for him, he supposed, but what if the girl decided to confront him about it? It would be hard to play it off as a figment of her imagination, much as he might desire to do so. No, there had to be another way, leaving him with option…

Three – treat it all as a joke, and make her the victim of it all. It was, after all, what he did best in all matters Gryffindor. Also, it was what she had come to know from his behaviour with her Housemates, and she would thus be prepared for it. After all, wasn’t it her struggling to keep Potter back when Severus riled him up enough to explode? And wasn’t it her comforting Longbottom when he was close to fainting from the Potions Master’s scathing remarks? Surely she would be able to cope with this far better than her dunderheaded Housemates.

And with this conviction firmly in his now far more calmed down mind, Severus made his way to his office and sat down to grade the rest of the Ravenclaw essays. The one that had prompted him to leave his chambers earlier that night received a firm T.
Apparently, riling the girl up was even easier than riling up Potter.

As he had promised the girl earlier – well, not exactly promised, as he never promised anything, but he had certainly informed her – he had sent her a list of her reading assignments for the weekend, lest she read halfway through the library, or even – Merlin forbid! – ask Madam Pince for guidance on the subject. True to his decision much earlier that morning, he had included a snarky quip about their meeting.

Apparently, it had been too snarky for the girl.

The enraged look she shot him across the Great Hall almost made him smirk, which she seemed to have caught, he noticed with both unexpected pride and surprised worry. Was it only the girl who was so perceptive, or should he take more care to school his expressions into unreadability? And why did he treat those two options as exclusives?

He had little time to ponder that thought, however, as the dunderheads the girl perceived as her friends grew restless. Weasley seemed to be worried mostly about Potter, though, and rightly so, as Potter was close to jumping up from his seat and shouting at the girl.

Close?

Well, that escalated quickly, Severus thought, as the Potter boy did exactly that.

“JUST ANSWER MY BLOODY QUESTION, HERMIONE,” Potter could easily be heard shouting through the Great Hall. Every student’s head turned, and most of Severus’s colleagues elected to bestow their attention on Potter as well. Severus himself, however, chose that moment to stand from his seat and sweep down the aisle between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, hoping to silence Potter with his mere presence alone.

Apparently, the Potter boy was too caught up in his own drama to even see the Potions Master billowing his way to their spot.

And, obviously, Severus was too late to keep the girl from shouting her distress all over the Great
“I’M IN DETENTION WITH PROFESSOR SNAPE, ALRIGHT?”

Well, Severus thought dryly as the students body (and quite a few teachers, if he was right, which he always was) erupted in a collective gasp, *at least even in anger she remembers to be respectful towards her teachers.*

The thought struck him as odd. It took him a moment to discern why exactly that was, though. Then he remembered.

He had called her a liar for supposedly wanting to treat him with all the respect he was due, to her opinion.

Had he been wrong? Had she indeed merely attempted to be polite – Severus refused to even think the word ‘nice’ – to him? To make up for her many shortcomings in providing him her *all due respect?*

Unwilling to think on even the possibility of him being wrong, Severus lengthened his strides once more and was with the bickering students in time to hear Potter incredulously ask, “Whatever did he give you detention for?”


It gave him no small amount of pleasure to watch the girl turn around and have her face fall at the sight of him. It was, however, a far smaller amount of pleasure than it usually was.

*And when exactly had that changed?*

Making up for his short lag, he pressed on, “Take your pick, Potter, I’m sure you are well acquainted with all of them, as your and Miss Granger’s display here clearly demonstrates.”

The girl’s whole posture sagged even more, starting with her shoulders and not stopping at her plummeting mood. Potter behind her, however, bristled with barely contained rage.
Not giving Potter a chance to explode, Severus continued to mock the girl’s attitude towards her detentions. It seemed that it was easier to get her angry in private, however. While in public, she would fall in on herself, unwilling to submit to even more public humiliation by drawing more attention on herself in a tantrum. Severus stored that knowledge away for future reference, not taking the time to think on occasions when it might be desirable to set her passionate anger on fire when it was just the two of them.

Instead, he offered more detention.

“…prolong your detention, to be served with Mr Filch, as I have little desire to punish myself with more time in your presence than absolutely necessary. Would that be to your liking?”

His mention of the word ‘punish’ seemed to strike a spark, though none bright enough to light her fire. Her eyes shot upwards to meet his, him falling into her whiskey gold while she was close to drowning in his black pools. Her fear of drowning was not strong enough to win out over her memories of last night, however, as it seemed. Her hand inched towards her backside, now unfortunately hidden from his sight as she had turned around to face him.

Her hand had not really moved much – enough for him to see, of course, but no one else had noticed, he was certain – when she snapped out of her thoughts and abandoned the movement. Severus longed to continue on the path her hand had almost gone on, and place his own hand to rub over the skin that had mere hours earlier felt his slaps. When her eyes mirrored a flicker that must have been his, he almost started.

She shook her head, as if in answer to his wish to touch her once more. When she spoke, Severus realized his error in that perception.

“No, sir,” she replied in little more than a whisper. As if in an afterthought, she added, “Thank you.”

Severus sneered. Why did the girl insist to thank him whenever he sought to denigrate her? Did her sheepishness know no limits? Did she not realize that he was not a nice man, to be thanked regularly and, as it seemed, sincerely?

He stepped closer to the girl, towering over her insignificant height. Her eyes swiftly met the floor as she seemed to remember his advice to avoid eye contact. Severus felt the sudden urge to lift her against a wall and keep her there. Luckily, the Gryffindor table was in the middle of the Great Hall, and even if it hadn’t been, the mere fact that there were onlookers around, not to mention their sheer
Only the onlookers? Severus questioned himself. Would it not have mattered what she wished in this instance?

It was of little matter what she would have wished, Severus decided. There was no reason for him to pin the girl to a wall, preferably at a height where her thighs could support her own weight by wrapping around his hips, and her lips – no, eyes! – on a level with his.

No reason at all.

“Fifteen point from Gryffindor for shouting in the Great Hall, for both of you,” Severus snarled, snapping out of that treacherous thought. “And now I suggest you two sit down again – unless, of course, the hard wood is too uncomfortable? I would not wish to cause any imprints on the soft skin of schoolchildren.”

And with that last quip, he saw her turn away from him, hiding her face from him once more but in the same movement exposing her behind to his perusal. Anxious to leave her company, if only to feel a little more like himself again, Severus swept from the Great Hall, his robes billowing behind him with less anger than they had shown that night.

He made his way down to the dungeons. He had an hour left before he would need to sit through his first class of the day, fourth year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. They would get their essays back, but he had finished that marking before breakfast already. No, this hour would be spent for something else.

He had a private tutelage to plan.
The weekend found Hermione in a much better mood than the last couple of days had. For starters, she didn’t have to hide the looming threat of her detention from the boys, and it took a huge weight off her shoulders. After Harry had come back from his own detention with the toad that Friday, he had appeared more relaxed than usual as well. They had stayed in the common room together for a couple of rounds of Exploding Snap before they retreated to their respective dormitories.

Saturday, they spent lounging the morning away – Hermione with a heavy tome for a bit of light reading, seated comfortably in front of the crackling fire, the boys in bed until they got up shortly before noon, both still visibly sleep-tousled, and went to the Great Hall for lunch together. There, Hermione was still shot several looks, ranging from spiteful (the Slytherins, glad that the Gryffindor Princess had gotten what they probably thought had been long coming) to incredulous (the Ravenclaws, still confused that somebody even more studious than most of their seventh years had landed herself in detention), to awed (the Hufflepuffs, who would be unable to stop crying at random intervals for days if they had to sit detention with the Potions Master), to outright proud (the Gryffindors, though mostly the Weasley twins, who congratulated Hermione on finding her spine and showing it to the most feared teacher at Hogwarts).

The trio shrugged all the attention off, focussing on their lunch and newly minted friendship once more – not that it had ever broken, really, but the crack that both Hermione’s secret and her distance from Harry had left had been quite substantial. Even Harry was his usual cheerful self, the one his two best friends had been missing for the last couple of months since the Third Task at the Triwizard Tournament.

After a lengthy lunch, they took a walk across the grounds, leisurely walking along the Black Lake, and catching up in all the bashing (Umbridge, Percy, and Professor Snape, though Ron argued that really, if Hermione was calling Umbridge a toad so freely, then she should at least let him and Harry forego the greasy git’s title) they had missed in the stress of the last two weeks. Hermione was cautious, not going into detail of what had landed her in detention in the first place, and not quite joining in the Snape-bashing either (see, Ron said, it’s easy to skip the ‘professor’ once in a while). She remembered her promise to Headmaster Dumbledore to stand against the boys in matters concerning the person of their Potions Master if necessary, but decided that calling them off for some much needed gossip when they had just reunited their trio was not the way to go.

Instead, after a generous hour of happy frolicking on the castle grounds, she ushered the boys inside to sit down and do their homework in the library. Ron waved them off, telling them to grab a couple of books for him as well and meet him in the common room. It appeared he had met Neville on his way somewhere, as he carried several of the snacks Ron had grabbed from the kitchen. Together, the four of them sat down at one of the corner tables. While Hermione tried to talk the boys into working
now and then in between their snacks, as their History of Magic essay was due first thing Monday morning, she got started on her translation for Ancient Runes as the others were still trying to scrap together a few more inches.

Their evening found a rather amiable chess match between Harry and Ron, mostly due to the fact that Harry lost so quickly that he had no time to become frustrated with his untrusting chess pieces who were constantly arguing with him, followed by a few rounds of Gobstones. As the time got later and later, and the common room slowly emptied out, Hermione thought whether she should talk to Harry about teaching a Defence group once more. She decided against it eventually, choosing to give Harry a few more days of peace in their friendship before she went and stirred things up once more. Perhaps, she thought however, she should test the waters with potential students. After all, Ron and her were not the only ones who would be living in a war soon, no matter that the three of them were far more likely to be caught right in the middle of it than the rest of their yearmates. Yet why limit their group to their yearmates only? Especially the younger students would need protection, and the older ones were more probable to make the conscious decision to fight, or be recruited, as Dumbledore only inducted those of age into the Order.

Her brain was whirring with the possibilities, weighing options against one another, dismissing this one and recomposing the other, while trying to follow and contribute to the conversation with Harry and Ron. When they parted ways at the stairs that night, Hermione raced up to her dorm room, rushing through her nightly ablutions, and warded herself into her four poster bed, curtains firmly drawn, before her mind kicked into overdrive. She had a long night ahead.

---

Sunday, September 15th, 1995

When the boys grabbed their grooms for a few rounds across the Quidditch pitch the next morning and asked her to come with them and watch, she waved them off, excusing herself with the rest of her Ancient Runes homework she had long finished the night before. Grabbing her books and parchment for appearances, she made her way to the library, the short list of book titles Professor Snape had given her firmly in mind.

Discovering that all the four books in question were undeniably stored in the Restricted Section, she faced the librarian’s table with a heavy heart, certain that she would be denied access without a permission slip. It appeared, however, that she need not have feared, as Madam Pince already had said permission slip on hand. As the librarian bristled off for the Restricted Section to get the books – not allowing Hermione to spend any time there, lest she get ideas – Hermione caught a quick glimpse at the note the elder woman had clutched in her hand. She was unable to decipher the narrow script at a distance, but the writing had clearly sprung from the Potions Master’s hand – no, quill, Hermione mentally corrected herself. Merlin knew she had quite a detailed idea of how the professor could
magically mimic the use of his hands. *Hands-on experience, one might say,* the annoying voice in her head chimed unexpectedly, its tone heavy with glee, though it shouldn’t have come as a surprise anymore that it would speak up when least welcome.

It was highly unusual for a teacher to supply a permission slip to tomes from the Restricted Section without even informing the benefitted student beforehand. In fact, at least as far as Hermione knew which was quite far, such a thing was unheard of, but it appeared that even the stern and no-nonsense librarian did not dare question the Potions Master. Or if she had, Hermione allowed herself to inwardly snicker, she had probably *(certainly)* not received any answer.

And so it was that Hermione found herself presented with four books and ushered off as Madam Pince went over to one of the tables to admonish a couple of particularly studious second year Ravenclaws about whatever it was they had done wrong in her eyes. Hermione weighed the books in her hands and was quite surprised. They were far smaller and lighter than she would have expected, knowing from Harry’s tales and from her own very short experience in the Restricted Section in her second year that most books there were large and heavy, rather than like those mere slips that she now held in her hands.

Eager to get on with her work, having already lounged the Saturday away and remembering that Professor Snape had instructed her not to do any school work on Mondays, she made her way through several rows of books, down narrow aisles between crammed shelves that reached to the ceiling, until she reached her favourite sitting place. It was a small alcove facing a narrow window, well hidden in the depths of the library, just behind the section for Magical Theory which was rarely visited by anybody, and as such was little known. In fact, Hermione was quite confident that she was the only student during her time at Hogwarts to have discovered this alcove, and if she wasn’t, then she was the only one to use it.

The alcove wasn’t really fit for any serious work, involving cross-referencing several heavy tomes while scribbling away her notes. No, it contained neither chair nor table; it was merely a slip in the wall. It was well fit for a bit of reading, however, as this corner of the library was little frequented and rarely disturbed, and certainly never, in Hermione’s experience, on a Sunday morning.

As it was, Hermione conjured a small side table to lay down her books on, and seated herself on the ledge of the narrow window, a Cushioning charm providing much in the way of comfort. Inspecting the books, she found two of them to be some sort of journals, containing scribbled notes that appeared to span several months each, though they seemed to have sprung from different hands. Upon skimming through a couple of pages of each of the two journals, Hermione discerned them to be personal notes from mentor and prodigy, apparently two of the first to delve into Mind Magic in any civilized way in the fourteenth century. Before that, Hermione gleaned from one of the other books—a history of Mind Magic, covering the last three and a half thousand years in brief, and the last eight hundred years in more detail, reaching from South East Asian practices to Norwegian cults—Occlumency and Legilimency had been mostly used instinctively, even brutishly one might say.
The fourth book, Hermione discovered to her surprise, was a text on relaxation and meditative techniques. It took her a while to discern why exactly such an apparently innocent book needed to be stored in the Restricted Section. She soon realized, however, that the described techniques had sprung from experiments with Muggles, both cooperatively in the beginning and under force soon thereafter. Hermione was appalled, but forced herself to view it as beyond her powers to change the way the contents of this book had come to be, and tried to treat it as any other scientific manual.

Deciding to read into the history book first, Hermione snuggled into the window and started to read. She withstood her usual need for taking notes, instead trying to keep the most important dates and a general time frame in mind, before she laid the book down and started on the mentor’s journal. Devouring a couple of entries, Hermione realized that maybe she should read the prodigy’s notes in tandem, parallel to the mentor’s experiences. When she reached for the journal, however, she found it gone from her conjured table.

Instead, it was clutched in the old, withered hands of a white-bearded wizard in purple robes.

“A bit of light reading on such a beautiful Sunday, Miss Granger?” the Headmaster inquired.

Relieved that it was only the Headmaster to have discovered her – if ‘only’ was a word to sensibly use in the context with Professor Dumbledore, which it wasn’t – Hermione nodded.

“Yes, Headmaster,” she confirmed.

Maybe if she could avoid her specific topic of study, he would go away.

“Interesting choice of topic you have here, Miss Granger,” Professor Dumbledore dispersed her rather small hope. “I wonder how you came upon these, if they are merely for a little pleasurable reading?”

The twinkling in his eyes might have taken the blow out of the inquiry, but an inquiry it was nonetheless, and there was no way for Hermione not to answer it.

“Professor Snape recommended these to me,” she slowly chose to reply. “He said I might benefit from reading through these books, and was kind enough to provide a permission slip for me.”

If the twinkling had seemed excessive before, it now multiplied in force, until Hermione felt the urge
to look away. *Not too bad an idea,* she thought, as the Headmaster was probably an expert Legilimens.

“So these are for your detention?” he queried. At her shocked look, he chuckled. “Ah, yes, Miss Granger, you were hard to be overheard at breakfast this Friday.”

Hermione felt an embarrassed blush creep into her cheeks before she forced her head into a nodding motion.

“Yes, sir,” she confirmed, though was unwilling to provide any more information than that.

“I take it your endeavour is well under way then, Miss Granger?” Professor Dumbledore pressed on, ever the benevolent grandfather in appearance, though Hermione knew of the power that resided within.

“It is under way, sir,” she corrected, intentionally leaving the ‘well’ out. When there was no reply from the formidable wizard, she further provided, “We are having weekly meetings, sir, and he will be teaching me this and that.”

A short look up into his face confirmed to Hermione that Professor Dumbledore was mulling this information over in his head. After a few moments of almost terse silence, if it wasn’t for the damn twinkling of his eyes, the purple-clad wizard nodded merrily.

“It is always good to be a well-versed in a little of this and that,” he stated. “Though I suggest you keep your studies of *this* a little better under wrap, Miss Granger,” he said, and a wave of his wand had the history book and the manual on relaxation techniques in Nordic Runes, and the handwriting in the two journals became even less indecipherable.

“And remember, Miss Granger,” the Headmaster continued, “that once you progress to studying *that,* this little charm will come in handy.”

And with a flurry of his bright purple robes, he was gone.

Picking up the books, Hermione found that the script that appeared indecipherable from afar was perfectly legible to her, and the Nordic Runes translated themselves into the English that they had originally been before her eyes. She was certain, however, that to everybody else, none of the books
would be readable – unless, of course, they carried the Nygord’s *Runic Alphabet of the North*, second edition, of which there were only around a dozen known copies in existence.

Hermione chuckled to herself. Trust the Headmaster to extract information from her and provide help in the same breath, without outwardly appearing to do either.

Switching back into her studious mode, Hermione took up the two journals, wriggled deeper into the window seat, and continued to read.

It was hours later, when the light had faded to the degree where Hermione needed to cast a Lumos (no fire in the library, not even her little portable blue flames) to be able to read the words before her eyes, that she realized that maybe she should make her way back to the boys. She had obviously missed lunch and even though they knew her to be studious and to easily get lost in her studies, she didn’t need them to get worried and come looking for her.

And so it was that with a heavy heart – for she had not yet read through all the books, having become stuck in the manual for relaxation techniques – she picked up her books and walked back to the common room. Fortunately she had checked the books out from the library the moment she got them, she thought. Morgana help her if Madam Pince had discovered what Professor Dumbledore had done to the books, encrypting them for everybody’s eyes but hers and probably his own. The old harridan would have screamed herself into a fit, Hermione could very well imagine.

When she climbed through the portrait hole, careful to avoid conversation with the Fat Lady who still appeared to want to talk to her about her late entrance on Thursday night, she found the two boys sitting in comfy chairs (not their favourites though, as those were hard to get on a lazy Sunday as this) by the fire, deep in thought over a game of Wizard’s Chess. When Hermione went over to them, however, it was just in time for her to see Harry’s king throw down his crown at the feet of Ron’s castle, which had moved in to set the white pieces check mate. Defeated, Harry sighed and amiably shook Ron’s hand, obviously knowing that he wouldn’t be winning against his ginger best friend anytime soon.

Ron, who had seen Hermione approach, jumped up with an exclaimed “Finally!”, scrambled to tidy up the pieces (though his definition of tidying anything up was far from what Hermione would find acceptable), rushed up to his dorm room, and was back mere seconds later, chess board and pieces stowed away and himself ready for dinner. He was far quicker than she had expected, and when she motioned to her books, half indecipherable and the other half in Nordic Runes – which were just as indecipherable for the boys as the untidy handwriting on the journals –, Harry just laughed and Ron asked her, incredulous, whether she had really spent all her Sunday pouring over *Runes* of all things, and did she actually think anybody would steal books from her, especially ones in *Runes*, really? She
merely shrugged him off and went to safely store the precious works in her school trunk, locking and heavily warding it, before she joined them and they went down for dinner.

As they sat down at their usual place in the Great Hall, Hermione still took care to have her back to the High Table. Harry threw her a questioning look, but it lasted only for a second before he followed Ron’s lead and dug into dinner. Herself, Hermione went for a simple meal of fried potatoes and some grilled vegetables, listening to the boys’ tales of the days with only half an ear. All the while, she mentally went through the chapter on facial muscle relaxation, attempting to strain and relax in turn the muscles of her forehead, ears, and lower face. If those exercises made her look any more or less expressive than usual, the boys did not notice or at least did not call her out on it. From time to time, she would feel a slight burning in the back of her head, a coldness that crept into her mind, and she knew that a certain Potions Master was keeping his watchful eyes on her. Confident (or so she told herself, but knew that it was rather hopeful than confident) that he wouldn’t try and enter her mind from half the Hall away, she dismissed the niggling feeling of being watched and concentrated on her exercises with all the determination she could muster.

Never give him the chance to dismiss her from the lessons she had worked so hard to convince him to give her, simply on the reason of not having come prepared. Not her. Not in this.
Sunday, September 15th, 1995

Severus looked down on the rough draft for his private tutelage of the girl, checking the notes he had scribbled down, for it was little more than that so far, even though he had poured over it all Friday afternoon and most of Saturday as well.

He nodded at his decision to start the girl’s lessons with an intense study in Occlumency. Loathe as he was to admit it out loud, Severus knew very well that the girl’s mind was far advanced in comparison to those of her yearmates. Not only was she academically superior, as she proved time and time again, no; she was mentally mature in a way few people even ten years her senior were. As such, her mind needed to be protected, as it held not only facts, but also a deep understanding of all the information she possessed on the Order, little though that was.

A close second to her need for Occlumency skills was the issue of improving her tolerance for pain. Severus would need to test how much pain the girl could endure, and then push those boundaries as far as he could. In fact, it mattered little how long she could resist the pain, as there would always be more, but it would be important that she could hold her mental shields even while under physical torture for as long as possible.

Severus had also decided to pay little to no attention to teaching her in psychological torture. Coaching her Occlumency skills and pushing her tolerance level for pain would be far more valuable, and very time consuming at that. Also, the girl had withstood four years with him as a teacher, and in all that time had only cracked once – and even Severus had to admit that the unfortunate incident with the rapid growth of her teeth had not been one of his brighter moments, though it had been unavoidable. What had he been to do, defend a Gryffindor who repeatedly outshone his Slytherins, in front of the most influential student of his House? Surely not.

As it was, Severus was quite certain that her psychological stability must be quite high, as she had spent four years with those dunderheads she still insisted to call her friends, and had lived through heaps of mockery from students from all Houses, even her own. Add that to all the lies (or were they?) Skeeter had printed about her only months prior, and it became apparent that the girl was able to shrug off more psychological pressure than one might expect of a teenage girl her age.

That left only one issue he continued to skirt around – if Severus was somebody to do any skirting around issues, which he wasn’t. No, he was simply postponing the topic for a later point of time, when he would feel he had done justice to those two aspects that were of the utmost importance for now. Then, and only then, when the girl was able to hold her mental shields while under significant amounts of pain, then he would progress to sexual torture.
Call it what it is, some inner voice chimed up. Rape.

Severus shuddered inwardly, unwillingly. How did one prepare a teenage girl for the horrors of rape? How could she expect him to instruct her how to withstand sexual torture? Or didn’t she expect him to teach her that at all? Was she in over her head as well, and unwilling to admit it yet? Or was she actually willing to learn, willing to cross boundaries that should never be crossed, to help the Light?

There was simply no way Severus could imagine teaching the girl. Not that. Yes, he had enjoyed spanking her (for where could he allow himself to admit to that, other than in the darkest recesses of his mind?), but that did not mean he would force himself on her, only to prepare her for having Death Eaters force themselves on her as well.

*Other* Death Eaters, that is, lest he forget he still was or at least acted as one himself.

No, there was no way in hell Severus would destroy that one thing that young girls should perceive as magical for the girl, even if it meant she wouldn’t have it destroyed in a far worse way later on. For destroyed it would be, if ever she should be caught; Severus had no doubt about that.

*But were there levels of destruction?*

*Wasn’t destroyed by one the same as destroyed by the other?*

He did not know.

What he could do, however, he thought, was make the girl aware of her body, and of her body’s impression on men. *And where better to do so than in a school filled with teenage boys?*

As he sat down to dinner that night, he saw her come in with Potter and Weasley in tow. It seemed that they had managed to bury the hatchet some time after he had left the Great Hall at lunch two days prior. While the two boys tugged into their meals at once, spraying half-chewed crumbles over half the table as they regaled the girl with tales of their Quidditch prowess, no doubt, she sat perfectly still, baring movements of her silverware over a simple dinner of vegetables. It appeared she had at least started reading the journals he had recommended, and took care to ingest light meals only prior to expected attacks on her mind.
After a few minutes of – no, not watching the girl, but repeatedly scanning the Great Hall, as was his task during meals as a professor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Severus discerned that the girl was not, in fact, sitting perfectly still. No; the wild bush she called her hair was moving slightly. Satisfied, Severus concluded that she was practicing her relaxation techniques. She would be needing those later, he knew, if they were to assist her in the steep learning curve he expected her to climb during their private lessons.

---

**Monday, September 16th, 1995**

This Monday morning, Hermione woke more relaxed than she was used to, having cut short her study session the night prior in favour of sleeping the full eight hours Professor Snape had so strictly instructed. She joined the boys for breakfast as usual and merely shrugged at Harry’s raised eyebrow when he saw her generously heaping eggs and bacon onto her plate, rather than her usual buttered toast and fruit. Hermione was intent on following her professor’s instructions to the letter, even if they went against her habits.

History of Magic found her furiously studying, though the book opened in front of her had nothing to do with the Goblin Wars. Instead, it contained information on the development of Mind Magic over the centuries – it was one of the books Professor Snape had recommended she read. As she had lounged the Saturday away in favour of restoring her friendship with the boys, rather than prepare for her private tuition as she was supposed to, her weekend had fallen short a day, and Sunday had simply not held enough hours for her to go through all the texts Professor Snape had set her. Wistfully she thought back to her Time Turner in third year, but thought better on it. Not only had it helped add to all the stress she had had that year by giving her more time to linger on it; it also wouldn’t do for her to ponder too much on the memory of turning time, lest a skilled Legilimens with a personal vendetta against the innocent ex-convict she had secretly helped escape stumble upon those thoughts.

So, before she could linger on those fateful events well over a year past, Hermione returned to the book in front of her. Professor Binns would never notice her absence of attention, and if Harry and Ron were to notice anything, it would only be the distinct lack of her quill scribbling away detailed notes of the lessons. She could get those just as easily by hitting the library books later, or rather *more* easily even, as it wouldn’t involve the enormous effort it took her in Professor Binns’s lessons to stay awake. And she didn’t need to worry about the boys noticing anything, either, if Ron’s slight snoring and Harry’s gaze that was fixed on the whiteness of the walls without real focus were any indication.
When the lesson ended – ‘Finally,’ the boys said, though for Hermione it was far too soon – the trio made their way down the dungeons. Her head still stuck in the book, Hermione listened to the boys chatter with half an ear, if only to stay on the right track as she trailed behind them, trying to cram as much information into her head as possible.

They took their seats in the usual places; Harry and Ron sitting together as Hermione sat down next to Neville. After Professor Snape had made his entrance, ignoring her completely as per their silent agreement, she trusted Neville enough to not put her into mortal danger by mucking up the potion they were supposed to work on in pairs. So it was that she went through her exercises of muscle relaxation while muttering instructions to Neville who was too surprised that she would let him even touch their cauldron, much less actually brew by himself, to comment on her activities.

When the assigned concoction had to stew for fifteen minutes while one of them needed to stir slowly and steadily, Hermione left that task to her partner while she went on to school her breathing, jumping to techniques described in chapter five of her manual. Closing her eyes and breathing in slowly, she relaxed her ears and forehead until she was certain she spent no muscle activity on her face. Only then did she exhale equally slowly, emptying her lungs of all air. When she felt there was nothing left in her body, she remained in that state, focussing her mind on the pleasant inexistence that was now her air supply, letting the mental image of blankness turn into one of blackness, until she had drawn up an image in her mind of a black so dark it appeared to absorb all colour from her happy memories.

Trying to keep that blackness in mind, Hermione inhaled once more, taking immense care to fill her lungs as slowly as she could, forcing herself to a creeping pace even as her body screamed for oxygen. Keeping her eyes firmly closed, she repeated the exercise.

Severus almost didn’t believe his eyes. When the girl had abstained from practically helping Longbottom next to her, instead choosing to merely instruct him, he had let that slide, leaving it to her judgement how much of the pain that the boy was certain to cause her she could stand. When she actually closed her eyes and left him fully without her attention, however, he fumed.

Was she trying to get herself killed?

There was no other explanation, the girl had to have a death wish. Severus could see that she had progressed to breathing exercises, rather than lingering on the relaxation techniques she had practiced before. With the relaxation, she at least could keep an eye on Longbottom and a thread of thought on the potion’s recipe. Those breathing exercises, however, demanded one’s complete attention, both physically and mentally. Thus, her closed eyes and closed mind – for that was the exact purpose of
that exercise, to learn how to close one’s mind against one’s own thoughts – kept her from seeing the
danger the dunderheaded boy was slowly, but certainly stirring them into.

Yes, stirring, not steering, because stirring was exactly what he was doing. Not in the way instructed,
though – four times clockwise, twice anti-clockwise, pause, once anti-clockwise, and repeat in a
steady four-four time – no, he insisted on drawing out the pause to two beats instead of one, stirring
in a swinging six-eight time (or rather nine-eight time, as it was), making the one stir anti-clockwise
into some up-beat that it was never supposed to be. Unschooled and naïve as he was, the boy
certainly thought no ill of his mistake, if he noticed it as such at all, but Severus knew better.

Severus knew that if the girl inhaled just one more time, right now…

And as her lungs filled to the bursting with the sickly yellow fumes the cauldron in front of her
emitted, the girl fell off her chair.

Severus was by her side in less than the blink of an eye. With no little satisfaction did he notice that
the time it took him to cross the whole room did not suffice for her so-called friends to even shake off
their shock and jump to their feet.

When her eyes blearily blinked open, her concentration forced from her by the heavy blow her fall
had bestowed on her head, Severus relaxed only slightly, and certainly only inwardly.

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger,” he bellowed, “for being inattentive in class and
neglecting the dangerous potion in front of you, causing and resulting in the injury of a student.”

From behind him, Severus could hear his Slytherins snicker gleefully, and it took little imagination to
clearly paint the image of Draco Malfoy’s malicious smirk in his mind. Potter and Weasley puffed up
to the maximum.

“But *she* is the injured student,” Weasley protested. “How can you –“

“Exactly, Mister Weasley,” Severus interrupted the teenager’s rant with as vicious a sneer as he
could command. “All the more reason for your residence know-it-all to pay attention, and yet even
*that* proved obviously too much for her.”

“Shouldn’t we at least send her to the hospital wing, Professor?” Gryffindor’s Patil twin offered, her
“I am certain, Miss Patil,” Severus replied, “that when Miss Granger calculated the risk her inattention would bring with, and found it too little to actually tend to her potion, she fully knew what possible injuries that inattention would cause. As it is, I must assume that she found them innocuous enough that, should she suffer them, she would still be able to attend the rest of her classes.”

The Indian student’s mouth fell open, incredulity painted on her face.

“That is to say, Miss Patil,” Severus pressed on, “that no, I will not send Miss Granger to the hospital wing. If she needs to see Madam Pomfrey, she will need to make her way up there on her own, and only after I have dismissed this class.”

Raising himself up tall – and just when had he stooped in, as to better oversee the girl, and why had he not abandoned that pose when he reprimanded her classmates? – Severus went back to towering over his students. Seeing that their focus was all on the girl on the floor in front of him, who now crawled up into her chair once more (and wasn’t he satisfied to see that none of her friends offered her a hand, afraid of his rebuke?), he called them to attention.

“I see none of you feel the need to attend to their potions anymore,” he scowled, watching them scurry back to their cauldrons. “In that case, you will turn in your concoctions now.”

Stalking back to the front of the class, he turned around only when he was at his desk.

“Right this instant, Potter, Weasley, Longbottom,” he bellowed when he saw that they were now fussing over the girl. “Let us see what grade you brewed up for Little Miss Perfect, Longbottom, shan’t we?”

Hermione did, indeed, benefit from a visit to the hospital wing, as it turned out. After having handed in their concoction with furious glowers on their faces, Harry and Ron took it upon themselves to escort her to Madam Pomfrey, much to Hermione’s protestations that she was fine, which fell on deaf ears as she continuously stumbled. Neville’s profuse apologies accompanied them much of the way until they couldn’t be heard anymore after they had turned a corner on top of the stairs that led away from the Entrance Hall.
They caught many curious looks as most students were going the other way, towards lunch in the
Great Hall. Even more curious were the looks they got from those who knew that they had had
Potions just now, and were wondering how Hermione Granger, bookworm extraordinaire and
known teacher’s pet (though never Professor Snape’s, as everyone knew very well), had gotten hurt
in a subject that should never pose a problem for her.

Harry and Ron pushed through them, and even though Hermione could hear their stomachs rumbling
and growling loudly, they never complained that her injury caused them to miss lunch. She was
touched. When they reached the infirmary, Madam Pomfrey simply asked for what potion they had
been supposed to brew, and upon hearing who it was that had partnered with Hermione, she buzzed
off, only to return mere moments later with a draught that, if inhaled properly, would bind the
residual fumes in her lungs and eject them when she exhaled.

The matron sent the boys off to lunch, who took a last long look at her, making sure she was alright,
and dashed off at her encouraging nod. Then, she had Hermione sit on one of the cots, and bend
over a steaming cauldron of water infused with the healing draught, and had her inhale the steam for
a good five minutes. Then, she had the elves bring a couple of sandwiches, made sure Hermione ate
them, and afterwards checked her over for any lingering symptoms. Ascertaining that she was fine,
Madam Pomfrey sent her on her way.

Ancient Runes found Hermione pouring over her Occlumency books once more, after having
finished the assignment for the lesson ahead of everyone else, of course. When the professor found
that she had brought her own material for further studies – as she perceived the books to be written in
Nordic runes, just like everyone else, thanks to Professor Dumbledore – she had Hermione continue
her work, and sighed in relief at not having to provide any bonus assignments for her top student.

Hermione was quite certain to have gained as intense a grasp on the books Professor Snape had
recommended as she was about to get with no more study time on her hands. As he had forbidden
her to study during Mondays outside of class, there was no way for Hermione to get any more
information into her head. Little though the Ministry toad did in her lessons, and despite Hermione
having proven that she had read through all their assigned book and had indeed understood the
contents, Hermione knew that she would never get away with doing extra-curricular work in
Umbridge’s class.

She met up with the boys in front of the DADA classroom. They, still sleepy from just having
suffered through a particularly boring lesson of Divination, asked her repeatedly if she was okay, just
like Neville did when he joined them. Assuring them that she was indeed alright, they entered the
classroom and mentally prepared for a double period of Hell.

Much to Hermione’s surprise, Harry passed the period quite well, despite the toad’s continued
goading. It seemed that Umbridge’s methods for detention had worked in tempering his temper somewhat, and even though Hermione would never want to see Harry lose his spirit or betray his convictions, she was glad that he appeared now more capable in choosing his battles wisely. Already there were faint white lines visible on the back of his left hand.

Relieved to have survived another bout of what was supposed to be Defence Against the Dark Arts, the trio made their way to dinner. Hermione stuck to a light dinner of vegetables, but ate a generous amount of those and added a small chicken fillet for good measure. She left the boys to their own devices and parted ways with them in the Entrance Hall, though Harry was sure to shoot her a concerned look as Ron was already hastening up the stairs, eager to go relax in the common room. Hermione gave Harry a small smile that she tried to make both courageous and encouraging. It seemed to work, for her best friend looked a little relieved and went off after Ron.

All that was left for Hermione to do was turn on her heel and make the walk down to the dungeons.

Attempting to tense and relax her facial muscles while also trying to set one foot in front of the other in something resembling a walking motion was simply something impossible for her to do, Hermione found, much to her chagrin. Her breathing exercise was out of the question as well, it seemed, for emptying her mind of all thought and at the same time remembering and finding the way to her underground classroom proved equally impossible.

Abandoning her efforts, Hermione simply hastened down the corridors until she came to stand in front of the door that would lead to her private lesson. That it still appeared under the disguise of detention tended to slip her mind these days, with all that was going on around her. Determined to try just once more to banish the Astronomy Tower Incident, as she had come to call it, from her mind, Hermione took a deep, steadying breath and released it slowly, resolved to recall that blackness in her mind.

What she did not expect to happen, was the door opening in front of her, apparently on its own accord.

The ancient hinges of the heavy wooden door squeaking and squealing broke her concentration, and her eyes shot open in surprise. Looking up and down the corridor, she saw no one, and concluded that the magic that had opened the door must have come from within the room. Or was the Castle actually sentient?
“Do come in, Miss Granger,” a voice half called, half drawled from inside the classroom, “the Castle is draughty enough as it is, there is no need to push that unfortunate factor.”

Well, that didn’t actually answer her question to the Castle’s possible sentience, but it didn’t deny it either. Hermione stepped in, and quickly took another step forward in order to not be crushed by the thick door that magically closed itself with a flick of his wand.

“Good evening, Professor Snape,” she greeted, her eyes firmly fixed on a spot of the floor in front of the desk he was sitting behind.

“You were not at lunch today, Miss Granger,” the professor shot back, foregoing any greeting.

_No ‘I didn’t see you’ from him_, Hermione thought to herself. No, the professor would never miss anything, so if he hadn’t seen her at lunch, she couldn’t have been there. Well, he was certainly right on that point.

“I was in the infirmary, sir,” she provided.

“And tell me, Miss Granger,” Professor Snape drawled, and had she looked up into his face, Hermione was certain she would have seen his standard glower much darker than usual, “why would I continue our little agreement, seeing as you failed both your assignment in class and said failure caused you to fail meeting the conditions I set for these… private lessons?”

Hermione blanched, and quite visibly too if the dropping temperature she could feel in her facial skin was any indication. _She had failed her Potions assignment?_ Oh no, she should never have let Neville take over as completely as she had, but at the time it had seemed to her that caring about her school grades was far less important than training for her ability to protect secrets the discovering of which might tilt the favours in the outcome of this war.

_of course secret keeping is more important_, she chided herself, not even needing her inner voice to return for that. _Get a grip, girl, and focus on the relevant aspects here._

There was nothing she could do to improve her grade on today’s assignment anymore, she knew. What she _could_ change, however, was Professor Snape’s mind on dismissing her from his tutelage.

“I did not fail your conditions, sir,” she began to explain. “I got eight full hours of sleep in both these
past nights, and had three full meals today. I did not miss lunch,” she pressed, as she felt he might interrupt her at any moment. “I was not in the Great Hall during lunch break, that is correct, but I did eat lunch. Feel free to check that with Madam Pomfrey, if you wish, because after she had treated me, she had the elves bring up a plate of sandwiches and made personally sure I ate them before releasing me from the infirmary.

“Thus,” she bravely continued, “I do not see how I failed your conditions for these private lessons, sir. I would not wish to disrespect you so, that I would knowingly discard any measures you see fit for this tutelage, professor. Please, I would be honoured if you continued to teach me.”

Severus found himself stunned into momentary silence. There they were again – her professions of the respect she felt for him, the honour it was to be taught under him…

Under him.

Get a grip, man, he scolded himself, and raised his eyes from where they lingered on her shapely calves up to her face.

Not quite knowing how to respond to her words, Severus did the only thing sensible in such a situation.

“Is there nothing more you have to say, Miss Granger?”

Get the girl to speak instead; that was it.

“I apologize for disrupting your lesson today, sir,” she actually went on. Merlin, that worked even better than he had imagined. “I do understand that with my carelessness, I endangered not only Neville and I, but all others present in the classroom. I will not allow such a thing to happen again.”

Severus snorted, and had to catch himself not to do so out loud.
“You will not allow it, Miss Granger?” he drawled dangerously. “Tell me, girl, do I have any say in what will happen in my classroom or not, as well, per any chance, or is it all down to you from now on?”

The girl’s eyes shot up to meet his own; hers wide open in shock that her contrite apology could have gone so wrong, the whites clearly visible around her brown irises; his own a bottomless black, ready to crush her at any moment.

Before he could even form the thought that it might be a good opportunity to delve into her mind, her eyes were fixed on the floor once more. Not that this would keep him from performing Legilimency on the girl. No, what kept him from doing so was the fact that she had apparently dishevelled him to such a degree that the fraction of a second of her inattention had not been enough for him to break into her mind.

He was a spy, for Nimue’s sake, a thrice-damned double agent, and this mere slip of a girl disrupted and, as it seemed, dismantled his reflexes?

Now, that was something he simply could not allow.

Before his anger could unfold to its full magnitude, in all its magnificence, however, the girl spoke again.

“Please, sir, my apologies,” she said. “Of course I will deduct myself in any behaviour you, and you alone, see fit. I would ask one thing, however.”

When he didn’t speak but merely raised his eyebrow in a scathing look that dared her to go on, which she didn’t see, of course, what with her eyes still firmly lowered, she took it as a cue to carry on.

“I understand that it was wrong to practice for our private lessons during your class, professor,” the girl apparently sook to explain. “But I would ask that you neither reward nor deduct House points due to my behaviour in relation to these lessons.”

Severus stood in silence, letting her simmer in her nervousness while pondering her words.

“See to it that I do not have to,” he finally said.
The girl breathed a sigh of relief. They both knew it was no promise that he had made, but it was a tiny concession; as long as she didn’t overstep outside their little tête-à-têtes, he wouldn’t take points.

Unwilling to linger on the matter, Severus decided to start their lesson.

“How far have you gotten with the material I set you, Miss Granger?”

She chewed her lip a little, but her posture changed to one of attention, as if she was giving a report. On another thought, she probably did.

“I have read halfway through the journals, reading them in parallel with each other, sir,” the girl said, “though I am of yet uncertain where they will lead me.”

Severus realized that a little openness on his part might simplify their private sessions somewhat. Not that he wanted to support the girl for her sake, Merlin no, but rather to aid the Light’s war efforts and simultaneously get rid of her presence as soon as possible.

“You will see when we get there. Guidance will be provided at the time it becomes necessary.”

A look of surprise was clearly etched into her face before she schooled her expression into one that was probably supposed to appear neutral. Morgana save me from Gryffindors, Severus thought. They were always the ones to carry their hearts on their sleeves. And yes, he had just promised her his assistance – no, not promised, but informed her that he might assist her when needed. Oh bollocks, he was in deep.

“What about the other books?” Severus prompted when she made no effort to speak again.

His voice shook her from her stupor.

“I am mostly through with the history book, sir. All that is left are the chapters with the in-depth description of Mind Magic these past fifty years,” she elaborated, “though I read thoroughly through the introductory chapters and believe to have a nice grip on the overall development of Mind Magic over time.
“That last book, the one on meditation and relaxation techniques –,” she hesitated for a second, “– I read through the introductory chapter and then worked on the chapters for beginners. I then set to practise some of the exercises. I elected not to read further before I had perfected those.”

Severus gave an almost imperceptible nod at her report and then realized that there was no way she would have noticed it, especially with her eyes on the ground.

“Now tell me, Miss Granger,” he drawled, though it appeared more benevolent to him than usual, “how did your exercise during your Potions class go today? It was one of chapter five, I believe?”

“Yes, sir,” the girl spoke. “I practiced relaxation techniques with facial muscles during the weekend and thought it might be good to delve a little ahead, as I think I mastered those quite well. So I decided to try out one of the breathing techniques. Today’s Potions assignment was a standard one, and I miscalculated how wrong it could go if I left it to Neville’s devices alone, I see that now.

“I think I started out quite nicely. I settled into the breathing pattern and attempted to empty my mind along with my lungs, gradually lengthening the periods of Pure Black.”

Severus did not need to ask what she meant by that. Pure Black was the state of complete emptiness in one’s mind. He was surprised that she had managed to go so far on her first try, assuming she had actually come that far, and in a room full of bubbling cauldrons and babbling teenagers, no less. Most beginners needed weeks to reach anything even remotely resembling a dark grey.

“But then, I… I must have inhaled the fumes from our cauldron. I only remember hitting my head, and when I opened my eyes, you were standing above me and everybody was looking at me.”

Severus chuckled darkly, electing to do so out loud this time.

“Ah, yes, Miss Granger,” he said, “perhaps it was quite unwise to practice emptying your mind in a classroom environment, don’t you think?”

“But sir,” the girl protested immediately, “I only failed because I inhaled poisonous fumes. If I had known that –“
“But how would you?” Severus interrupted. “How would you have known that there was danger with your eyes closed and your mind shut to the world? You would not have noticed a wand pointed at your nose, Miss Granger. And even if you had, with your mind completely empty, how would you have reacted? How would you have processed the danger, called upon your knowledge, and used it to your advantage? How?”

Her mouth opened and closed repeatedly, like a fish in the open, snapping for oxygen. The girl knew he was right, but fought to accept that knowledge.

“Tell me, Miss Granger, what does the manual say in the beginning of chapter five?”

The girl’s perfect recall kicked in, freeing her from her embarrassment, and she recited: “‘Much as with a muscle, full control is needed over one’s mind, and complete awareness thereof, if one is to both use and relax it.’”

Severus almost snorted at her word-for-word quote.

“Now, what do you suppose that means, Miss Granger?”

The girl worried her lip some more before responding.

“I believe it means that in order to empty my mind, I need to be able to concentrate? Like one needs to be able to ball a fist in order to consciously relax one’s hand?”

“Well, that’s a very crude example, Miss Granger,” Severus replied, “and generally wrong.”

Her look of indignity amused him; as if it was a personal affront to her person to tell the girl that she had understood a book wrong. Come to think of it, she probably saw it as such. Her mind was her greatest asset, after all.

“You see, Miss Granger, what the author meant was not to see usage and relaxation of the mind as two separate entities, but rather as two activities that needed to be merged into one. I agree that the phrasing is unfortunate, but what is important here is that even while attempting the Pure Black, one has to pay attention to outward events. Once that skill is fully mastered, one is in no danger of being physically attacked while mentally unaware, nor of being mentally vulnerable while countering any physical assault.
“Now, as you remember I told you, there are few skilled Legilimens among the Dark Lord’s ranks. Fortunately for the Order, there are few skilled Dark supporters, as well, that could be called upon as questioners. As it is, the ultimate goal for these private lessons will be to school you in Occlumency until you are sufficient enough to withstand intrusion under slight pain, and to confuse your own thoughts, what any intruders will see, into worthlessness under considerable pain.”

The girl was listening with rapt attention, he could see. She was still standing in front of his desk, with him little comfortably seated behind it, in his high backed wooden chair.

“What the Headmaster certainly hopes for is for Potter not to fight the fight for as long as possible. I assume he believes that Potter will finish school and can then be hidden away at by the Order.”

The girl shook her head.

“That will never work,” she muttered under her breath, as if unconscious of doing so.

“I find myself agreeing with you on that point, Miss Granger.”

Her look of surprise was almost worth that admittance.

“Things will escalate far before that, I’m afraid,” Severus elaborated. “Events will be set in motion. If not from the ranks of the Dark Lord, then by Potter’s poor temper, certainly.”

“He is restless,” the girl interrupted. “He is under a lot of pressure, and nobody will tell him anything.”

“And rightly so, Miss Granger,” Severus scowled. His gaze darkened. “Potter is an incalculable risk to the Light. He is incontrollable. He is a teenager, for Merlin’s sake, he can’t even control himself. He could not even bring himself to allow you a little personal secret. What do you think he would make of the Order’s secrets?”

The girl looked hurt at his jibe at her fight with Potter in the Great Hall, three days prior.
“I chose to reveal my detention to him, professor,” she defended her so-called best friend. “I chose to tell him. He didn’t do anything.”

“Then why did you tell him, Miss Granger?” Severus pressed on. “Were you afraid to lose him as a friend? And what a poor friend he was, allowing you to reveal such an embarrassment in front of the whole school. Well, what do you think it takes for him to have an Order member reveal secrets to him? Oh, wait – didn’t Black do that already?

“Potter simply has to threaten to break free of the protecting hand that the Order is holding over him, and they will tell him anything he wants to know. The Light cannot afford to lose Potter in some ill-advised, self-assigned mission to save the world that will end with him dead sooner than necessary, and sooner than convenient. He is a teenager, and the Light’s war efforts rest on his shoulders.”

The girl was stunned into silence, it appeared. Incensed as he was, Severus couldn’t help but feel glad that such a thing could happen to her, as well.

“Now, as I said,” Severus sought to recollect himself, “I believe the war will escalate sooner than the Headmaster hopes, and certainly in less than three years’ time. As I see it, it will be wise to teach you Occlumency as intensely as possible, and to build up your tolerance for pain next to that.”

“What about the other aspects you mentioned, professor?” the girl asked.

“Unless you are telling me you are psychologically unstable, I will not endeavour to school your resistance in that aspect,” Severus replied. “Until you are anywhere near sufficient in Occlumency, I will repeatedly draw upon the most embarrassing, hurtful, emotional memories and private thoughts you possess, Miss Granger. By persisting in these lessons, by repeatedly facing your deepest fears, most secret desires, and darkest thoughts, you should achieve psychological stability enough not to crack under the first thing any of the Dark Lord’s followers might throw at you. As I said, there are not many who possess both finesse and patience enough to delve into psychological torture to any significant amount. You should be quite safe on that account.”

“And…” She cleared her perfectly clear throat. “And that last aspect?”

“Miss Granger,” Severus growled, “I will not attempt to teach you anything on that account, and I suggest you never ask me to. I do, however, suggest you become comfortable with the thought of being seen as a sexual being.”
Severus had to close his eyes for a moment, and pinched his nose to hold back the migraine that had started to creep into his head for a few more moments.

“Miss Granger, the Dark Lord’s men will not care about the fact that you are a mere child, or that you are still in school, or that you wear baggy clothing that hides your assets. I suggest that you get used to the idea of being viewed as a woman.”

“How – how do you suggest I do so, professor?”

The girl’s voice was barely audible, so embarrassed she seemed to even ask the question. Severus sighed inwardly. Did she believe he was any more comfortable with this conversation than she was?

“Work on your appearance, Miss Granger,” Severus advised. “Get those dunderheaded chits you live with to help you. Once you see yourself as a woman, you might understand that others see you as such, as well.”

“But won’t that encourage them, sir?”

“Not doing so will not discourage them, Miss Granger,” he replied. “Furthermore, you should shorten your skirts.”

“What?!”

“You heard me correctly. I want you to shorten them by six inches by Hallowe’en. And before you protest, Miss Granger,” Severus halted her, the girl’s mouth already opened, “that is half an inch every Potions lesson. I will check, if necessary. Remember, you agreed to me setting a certain dress code. Now honour that agreement.”

Severus couldn’t help sneering on that last thought. He hesitated, however, before voicing the next.

“I also suggest ridding yourself of any barriers you would not want to forcibly get rid of.”
Before she could formulate a question, her confusion at that last advice clear on her face, he pressed on.

“Now, Occlumency, Miss Granger. Tell me everything you know about its history.”

Hermione was confused about the abrupt change of topic. Sure, he had planned out their private sessions to focus on Mind Magic first and pain as a side topic, and she had interrupted him with questions about those – well – other aspects, but for him to let something drop that fast was foreign to her.

And what had he meant – ridding herself of barriers she did not want to be forcibly rid of? She simply could not understand his intention behind that statement, and in what relation it stood to their earlier conversation.

So, instead of worrying too much about that right that moment, lest he did send her away, after all, she gave a brief summary of what she had learned about Mind Magic.

“The use of Mind Magic was first documented in the sixteenth century B.C.,” she recalled. “Back then, it was rather a method of conversation, used to overcome language barriers by giving visual descriptions of events, but also to converse in secret, without outwardly speaking at all. The intended usage changed over the following centuries, but the method used was mostly the same – the instinctual search for a breach in the barrier surrounding the other party’s mind, and then widening and exploiting that breach.

“It wasn’t until well into the fourteenth century that there was a scientific method put to Mind Magic, searching to refine the magic used and to both reduce the effort needed on the Legilimens’s part as well as the damage suffered on the Occlumens’s part. The intent was still to use Mind Magic as a means of voluntary conversation, mainly as a way to keep communication absolutely secret during the numerous Goblin Wars, never knowing when a goblin’s fine ears would be listening.

“Only about four hundred years later was Legilimency forged to use as a weapon against an opponent’s mind, and the art of Occlumency became one of defence. It is, even today, mostly used as a means to forcibly extract information.”
There was a pause in which none of them spoke. When after a few moments Professor Snape still had not made to speak, Hermione pondered whether she had forgotten something. Had her studying been inefficient? Had she missed something important, something essential? Had she failed her first assignment, to read into something – her, the greatest bookworm of them all?

“Understand, Miss Granger,” the professor finally broke the silence, “that even though there are more refined techniques for Mind Magic nowadays, it is still a subject rarely studied. It is an exceedingly complex and difficult to accomplish branch of magic, and is far rarer than even Animagic.”

“But sir,” Hermione asked, “I looked it up in third year, when Professor McGonagall spoke to us about Animagic, and there are currently only seven Animagi registered at the Ministry.” She elected not to talk about at least three other Animagi she knew to be alive – Rita Skeeter, Peter Pettigrew, and Sirius Black. “Are there really fewer accomplished Mind Mages in Great Britain than that? Fewer than seven?”

“Assuming you mean that as a rhetorical question, rather than calling my knowledge into question, Miss Granger,” Professor Snape shot her a dangerous look, “there is the significant difference between those two branches of magic that Animagi need to register while Mind Mages do not. And as you know, there is always a dark figure with these rare magicks, so it is quite safe to assume that there are unknown Mind Mages out and about.

“Mind Magic is certainly not a skill to be advertised, be one a Legilimens or an Occlumens, or both. Professor Dumbledore, though famous for his excellent grasp of many rare and difficult skills, is only known by few as the expert Mind Mage that he is, in both branches. The Dark Lord is more widely known to be an ingenious Legilimens, and feared as such. Both branches carry the danger with them that, if inefficiently used, expose the fact that one attempted to learn them. As they are mostly used in aggressive or even hostile environment, such exposure rarely ends well, and even more rarely with both parties still alive.”

“You must be an expert Occlumens then, professor,” Hermione concluded, “seeing as you are still very much alive. Either that, or you are high in you-know-who’s favour.”

The professor gave a short snort that sounded much like a bitter laugh to Hermione.

“No one is high in the Dark Lord’s favour for long, Miss Granger,” he replied. “I assume you understand now that you need to train very well very soon in Occlumency for it to be of any use to you?”
“Yes, professor,” Hermione agreed.

“And you understand that it is of the utmost importance for you to keep your skills, be they worth mentioning or not, on that subject – and my own as well – secret? No one can know about you training in this branch of magic. Not your classmates, not any Order members, not even your closest family or friends. And certainly not Potter. Do you understand, Miss Granger?”

Hermione swallowed thickly.

“Yes, sir,” she agreed.

Professor Snape hesitated for a second, it seemed, regarding her with a gaze so intense, Hermione felt he was scanning her to the bone. He probably was.

After a few moments, it was over. It appeared the Potions Master was content with what he found.

“Now, as I meant to say earlier, it is true that there are more refined techniques to Mind Magic nowadays than there were a few centuries ago.”

Hermione nodded to show that she was listening intently, determined not to interrupt her professor again, if in any way avoidable.

“As it is such a difficult art, and hard to accomplish, though, there are a few Legilimens out there that are hardly worth being called such. However, even if they do not know the fine skill of subtly sneaking into an opponent’s mind, that does not mean they cannot brutishly delve into the thoughts of a victim already physically subdued. That, Miss Granger, is what you might be up against.”

Hermione swallowed thickly once more. To have her mind violated was a thought gruesome enough for her. To imagine someone doing so in a brutal way…

“That is not, however, how we will be starting your lessons, Miss Granger. We will begin subtly, so as not to irrevocably damage your mind.”

“‘Not irrevocably’?” Hermione asked, in her exasperation forgetting to insist on her constant
politeness. Her voice softened, however, as she realized that Professor Snape was still very much doing her a favour she had asked for, schooling her in protecting her mind against violent intruders. With that she came to another question.

“Why do you care, sir?”

Why did he care, indeed? Severus wondered.

He wanted to make a scathing remark, to put her in her place for asking such an inappropriate question, for questioning his methods at all, once more. It then occurred to him that the question had been asked without the malice and disdain he would have expected. Not from her, no, not from her, but from another Muggle-born Gryffindor that had once had his attention.

Not that the girl had his attention, mind you.

No, the girl had posed the question with genuine curiosity.

Why do you care?

“In this swamp of uneducated answers of those underachieving dunderheads,” Severus said, “I would rather not lose the one mind that might someday develop into something.”

This was like trying to pay somebody a compliment while also trying very hard not to. In short, this was a bumbling mess of a sentence, but it prompted a smile to form on the girl’s face. A wide, brilliant smile, full with white teeth and laugh lines around the eyes. Merlin, what had he done?

Fortunately, the girl knew better than to thank him, even though it took her a few minutes of obvious struggles to wipe the satisfied, proud smile from her face. Ridiculous, she was, really.

“So, instead of simply brutalizing your mind, Miss Granger,” Severus steered them back to the topic at hand, “I will give you thirty seconds to compose yourself before we will revisit your memories of Thursday last. Your time starts… now.”
It was most amusing for Severus to watch the emotions play on her face. Her content smile from just a moment before transformed into a look of absolute horror that she then tried to school into an expression of neutrality, at which she failed spectacularly. Severus knew very well that telling her his goal for the Legilimency he was going to perform on her was a special kind of cruel. It was like telling somebody *not* to think of a pink elephant.

The Potions Master was, indeed, curious as to what he was about to see in her memories of that night. He had extracted his own and safely stored them in a secret facility full of his more difficult and more dangerous memories. Extracting a memory into a vial or pensieve did not remove it from one’s mind. It merely dulled the recollection and heightened the effort needed to fully remember it. It also hid the signature trail leading to it in one’s mind’s map, effectively making it harder to find for a Legilimens if the defending Occlumens did not want it to be found.

Severus knew that he would have to hide many of his upcoming lessons with the girl, or rather his memories thereof. It would be hard enough to explain why he supported a Muggleborn by giving her extra tuition, more so the only student who achieved better grades than Draco Malfoy in any and every subject, once knowledge of their private meetings got out. Severus did not even want to imagine how the Dark Lord would react if He knew that he was tutoring Harry Potter’s best friend and brainy sidekick in how to withstand the forces of His followers. As it was, Severus was a valuable asset to the Dark Lord, or so He believed, but He was also a very temperamental madman who would kill even His most treasured follower without a second thought.

The girl’s thirty seconds were well over, and with a whispered *‘Legilimens’*, Severus delved into her mind. The twirling thoughts around him appeared to be in black-and-white rather than the vibrant colours he expected from an inexperienced Occlumens – not that the girl could call herself such a Mage at this point –, but it was too dark for him to make out individual thoughts.

Severus was reluctantly impressed. It was rare for anybody to ease into Occlumency the way the girl apparently had, and she had taken to it like a fish to water. It was no hardship for Severus to force the girl’s mind to reveal its true colours, and all its corridors leading down different memory lanes, of course. Still, it was quite a feat to even initially hide something from him.

As that one time before that he had performed Legilimency on her, Severus was struck by the complexity of the girl’s mind. This, more than anything, proved her to be far above her peers in any way. Unwilling to be drawn into some side thought, however, Severus searched for her recollections of their encounter on top of the Astronomy tower, and plunged right in.

He skipped their dialogue leading towards her punishment, and fast-forwarded the spanking itself as best he could – it truly was magnificent watching her soft white globes become peppered with the red imprints of his own hand –, until he stopped to closely examine some of their last interaction.
‘Are you aware that if I took you now, Miss Granger, nobody would be coming to help you?’

Severus watched himself grind into the girl’s body, his throbbing length firmly nestled in the perfect crevice of her smooth mounds. Her soft ‘Yes, sir’ was breathy. His cock twitched even now.

‘Are you afraid, Miss Granger?’

‘Yes, sir.’

And there it came, the moment he needed to know more about.

‘Do you fear me?’

Severus watched her face intently, determined to understand her answer, while also keeping a mental eye on her mind’s response to recollecting that significant moment.

‘No.’

But why didn’t she fear him? What was there not to fear? And how could she be afraid but not fearful? It didn’t make any sense. None of it. The girl didn’t make sense.

Her face in the memory was completely in the dark. The girl had no recollection of how her face had looked that exact moment, so there was no way for him to shed light on it. What he could examine, however, was her mental and emotional response.

There was wariness, a good deal of it. Seven hells, a grown man, a professor, nonetheless, a fellow of the Light, somebody that was supposed to protect her, was posed as if to violate her in the most intimate of ways. And she appeared afraid alright, her body stiff and unyielding, poised to fight tooth and nail once he overstepped one more line – for how many had he already overstepped that night in spanking her? –, that one line that was more important than any other.

But that was merely her body in the memory, an instinctive response, less reasonable than irrational,
really. Not that it wasn’t perfectly reasonable for the girl to be afraid in such a moment.

However, that was not the emotional response he got from her in this very moment, in this instant of him reviewing her memory. What he felt now, what she felt now, was…

_Trust?_

No, it could not be. _Certainly not._ Not after all he had done, not that night. Not now.

Apparently sensing his incredulity, Severus felt a little nudge from the mind he was violating right now, much as he had violated her body that night.

‘Almost violated,’ a whisper seemed to come from the conscience around him, putting emphasis on the first word. The girl’s conscience. More trusting than he ever deserved, and more trusting certainly than was sensible. She even went so far as to provide him with input as he was intruding in her mind, while all she was meant to do was keep him out. It was as if she didn’t even try.

Suddenly overwhelmed with all the implications his experience in her mind brought with it, he extracted himself from her brain. Perhaps he used more haste and thus force to do so, as the girl winced in pain when she came to.

“Why?” Severus asked. He didn’t mean to, but he needed to know. His foray into the girl’s innermost thoughts had not brought the clarity that he had expected.

“I was afraid of being violated,” the girl explained readily, if a little hesitantly in her wording. “I still am, in that matter. But I was never in fear of you, professor.”

“Why not?” Severus pressed.

“I trust you, sir,” she said simply.

“Yes, but why?”
Severus was really desperate by now, desperate to understand what the hell was wrong with this girl.

“I can’t tell you, sir,” she answered, her face scrunched up in what he knew to be her pondering expression. “If I had to guess I would say that it is because I believe you to be a truly good person, a good man, underneath that persona that you have to don like an armour anytime you face the world.”

Severus was truly annoyed at the fact that the girl repeatedly managed to stun him into momentary silence.

“You trust will be the death of you, Miss Granger,” he finally croaked, damning his voice for abandoning him now that he had found it.

“Maybe,” the girl said. The expression on her face now resembled that of a certain fourth year Ravenclaw. “Maybe it will. But before that comes to pass, I trust you to teach me how to take all the relevant information to my grave.”

Severus wanted to laugh in her face, telling her that there were no graves for the bloody pulps that any and all defenders of the Light would be beaten into by the Dark Lord’s followers before they were disposed of.

Severus wanted to cry for all the innocence that had been lost in the First Wizarding War, and all the innocence that would be lost in the Second.

Electing neither of those two options, Severus recollected himself and went to teach the girl how to defend her mind.
Tuesday, September 17th, 1995

On her way back to the Gryffindor common room on the seventh floor, Hermione pondered all that had happened in her private lesson that night. Professor Snape had worked her hard, having her seek out that little bit of Pure Black that she could manage and then delving in to destroy her attempts at Occlumency without much difficulty. It irked Hermione that it had taken him so little effort to tear down what little defences she managed to set up, and that it took her, on the other hand, so much power to build those thin walls around the borders of her mind in the first place.

As it was, Hermione felt drained. Drained of her magical powers that she'd assembled over the last four years of schooling, drained of her vitality that two consecutive nights of much needed sleep had brought her, and drained even of her blood, as her nose had begun to bleed quite excessively the more often Professor Snape plunged into her brain.

Tired as she was, Hermione hastened to her common room and subsequently her bed. In her hurry, she almost ran over her smallest professor.

Professor Flitwick's tall pointed hat hit her in the nose as she grasped the tiny man's upper arm to keep him from toppling over after she had so carelessly hastened past him and almost dragged him to the floor as she brushed his shoulder with her small, yet taller body.

"Miss Granger," the Charms teacher cheerfully greeted her once he had regained his footing with her help, as if it was no unusual occurrence to be run over by a student in the middle of a corridor, in the middle of the night, "what are you doing out and about at this hour?"

Hermione startled. In fact, she was unaware of the time. Each time the Potions Master had delved into her mind, it had felt like hours before he left again, but then again, she knew that time obeyed different laws when reviewing memories than when making them.

"I apologize, Professor," she said, more to excuse her running him over than her walking the halls at this time, "but I was with Professor Snape."

Hermione cringed at her wording. She had been unable to bring herself to actually speak the word 'detention', and that had resulted in this embarrassing sentence. She had not been with Professor Snape, surely. The closest she had been to being with him had been on top of the Astronomy tower last week, and that was not an experience she was keen to repeat anytime soon.

Or was she?

The wizard opposite her did not appear to notice her inner musings, of course.

"Ah, yes," he said as if coming to a big revelation, "your detention with Severus, I see."

Hermione blushed furiously. Really, she thought, she should hit Harry over the head with her biggest tome on Arithmantic equations for making her reveal her detentions with Professor Snape the way she had – shouting out the news in the Great Hall during lunch, for everybody present (which was pretty much everybody in the school) to hear.
"That is right, sir," Hermione bit out between her teeth, struggling for politeness for the tiny professor who had done nothing to deserve her anger that should actually be directed at her raven-haired best friend.

"Well, maybe I should have a word with him," Professor Flitwick continued, "he really shouldn't work you so late into the night. It is hardly conducive to your studies, I assume."

Hermione did her best not to outright snort at her Charms teacher's words. After all, there was no way for him to know that she was not, in fact, in detention with the feared Potions Master, but rather that he was giving her private lessons in defence against the enemy. And as it had been their first real lesson and she had yet much to learn, she would not complain against being worked until late into the night. Nor would it be conducive to her studies with Professor Snape if Professor Flitwick did any such complaining on her account.

"Oh no, sir, please, don't," she hastened to beg, "I don't think Professor Snape would appreciate that at all, and I wouldn't want you to strike up a discussion that has little to no chance for ending in your favour."

"Or in yours, in this case," Professor Flitwick winked. Then, with a sigh, he said, "But I believe you are right, Miss Granger. Severus rarely approves of advice for his classes, as he still sees it as being berated by his teachers. Once a student, always a student, I'm afraid – both in his eyes and ours, much as we endeavour to treat him as the equal that he is."

Hermione was stunned at the professor's frank admission. Of course, it supported what the Headmaster had told her early in the summer, that Professor Snape had no peers even among his colleagues, but to hear it from one of said colleagues himself added a new sense of fact to what had before been merely hearsay for her. Surprised and more than a little taken aback, Hermione did not know how to respond to that.

"But say, Miss Granger," Professor Flitwick saved her from the embarrassment of not knowing an answer, "how many more nights will you be spending with Severus?"

Inwardly, Hermione groaned. If she could help it she wouldn't be spending any nights with Severus, or with anybody else for that matter, and certainly not anytime soon.

"I still have two more Monday evenings of detention to serve with Professor Snape," she replied instead. "As of yet," she added on an afterthought, "after all, he might find some reason or other to extend that to the end of term."

Professor Flitwick nodded, his pointed hat bobbling vigorously with the movement.

"I see," he said. "Well, Miss Granger, if there is no use in talking to Severus, I will be speaking with Minerva instead." At Hermione's confused expression, he elaborated, "Minerva takes care of the teachers' patrol rotas, Miss Granger." Still sensing no understanding in his student's face, he spelled it out for her. "There will certainly be a way to keep some of my colleagues out of Monday patrols," he promised. "I don't think there will be any need to punish you for being out of bed after curfew when a punishment of detention is the reason for that, wouldn't you agree?"

And with a benevolent wink, he was off on his way.

Finally understanding, a warm fuzzy feeling of relief spread through Hermione's chest. She knew that there was little love for Umbridge among the teachers, but to have her Charms professor tell her almost straight out that he and her Head of House would do their best to keep the Ministry toad out of her – Hermione's – hair was more than she would ever have expected. Determined to get
Professor Flitwick some liquorice wands on her next trip to Hogsmeade, Hermione continued her path to the Gryffindor tower without further disturbance.

Harry was still awake when Hermione entered the common room, though very sleepily slouched in his armchair by the dying fire. He perked up, though, at the sound of the portrait closing.

"Hey," he greeted, yawning and stretching his limbs as he shook off as much of the remaining sleepiness as he could manage.

"Hey," Hermione replied in a soft voice. "Where is Ron?"

"Bed," came the short reply. "I sent him off to sleep as he had stayed up for me every night last week," Harry explained. At Hermione's expression he hastened to add, "As did you, when you could."

Hermione merely waved him off, bringing some semblance of control into her facial muscles and working them into a smile. She went over to her best friend and sunk into the armchair next to him with a relieved sigh, closing her eyes in pleasure at the much longed-for comfort.

"What did Snape have you do?" Harry asked when her eyes opened again.

Luckily, Professor Snape had provided her with an answer for that particular question, as Hermione was far too tired to quickly think of one, and a believable one at that, herself.

"*Professor* Snape," she said with much less admonition in her voice than had she been less sleepy, "had me grind kneazle claws into fine powder."

Harry chuckled, but so darkly that it could hardly be called that. The sound wasn't quite what Hermione had expected, and it must have shown on her face, as Harry made to explain.

"Did you ever notice," he said, "that Snape makes Gryffindors process ingredients that belonged to the same animal as their familiars?" At Hermione's incredulous expression, he continued, "It's true! Neville had to gut a barrel of horned toads last year, Ron and I had to pickle rat brains, and now you had to grind kneazle claws. That's too many incidents to be a mere coincidence, don't you think?"

Hermione was more than a little stunned. Now that she thought about it, Harry appeared to be absolutely right. She even remembered the evil little grin that had almost shown on Professor Snape's face (not that the Potions Master *did* evil little grins; he would probably prefer it if she called it a nasty sneer) when he'd told her what to say when asked about the content of their detention that night.

Of course, her actual time with the Potions Master had held no sign of kneazle claws or any other kneazle parts, for that matter. For obvious reasons, though, there was no way she would tell Harry about what had actually happened in her 'detention'. And even if she'd wanted to, she couldn't. Professor Snape had made her take a wand's oath to make certain of that.

Her night had consisted of repeated endeavours into her mind, as the Potions Master pried her most embarrassing bouts of uncontrolled magic from her childhood memories. And thus they had watched vases shatter without falling, mobiles move in the absolute absence of wind, dolls walk about when there was nobody moving them, and dummies return to her mouth after having fallen down without anybody picking them up. And those were merely her early memories.

They had moved on from that. Front doors unlocking when she wanted to play on the lawn, puddles appearing in the driest of summers for her to jump in, TV channels switching when she really had no
desire to watch soccer. Professor Snape had stopped at preschool, smiling nastily as he informed her that he couldn't very well watch all her memories in one night, when there was still so much for her to learn. Then he had told her to clean her face. Hermione had not even noticed that with her strains at attempting Occlumency, her nose had started to bleed.

Almost as if he could read her mind – because really, it felt to Hermione that anybody could right now – Harry spoke up.

"Hermione," he began hesitantly, "why is there dried blood on your nose?"

Hermione cursed inwardly. A Scourgify was not really meant for cleaning sensitive surfaces. It had hurt enough when she'd performed it on her outer facial skin; she had not wanted to experience the pain that would inevitably come with Scourgifying her mucosa. It seemed that some blood was still stuck on the inside of her nose that was visible to her friend.

"Oh, that," she said, aiming for a generous hint of carelessness in her voice, "I had a sudden bout of migraine halfway through the detention, and a particularly nasty one at that. In fact, it was so bad that it made my nose bleed. Professor Snape had me clean every single one of the kneazle claws that I'd accidentally dropped blood on before I could stop the bleed."

"Bastard," Harry pressed out, and ignored Hermione's sharp admonishment. "Did you visit Madam Pomphrey, at least?"

"Of course not," Hermione said. "I would never hear the end of it if I visited the hospital wing twice in one day. Besides, it's not as if both Professor Snape and me combined were unable to heal a little nose bleed."

Harry did not seem convinced, so Hermione chose to redirect the conversation as smoothly as possible. A giant yawn coming up helped her in that, as did the fact that Harry's yawn mirrored hers.

"Now, thanks for waiting up, Harry," Hermione said, truly grateful, "but if you don't mind, I think we should both head to bed now, wouldn't you say?"

Harry nodded vigorously. "Oh yes," he agreed, "it's almost three in the morning, after all."

"It's almost what?" Hermione shrieked, and apologized as she saw Harry wince.

"It's almost three," Harry repeated cautiously. "Didn't you know?"

"No," Hermione replied, biting back the 'obviously not' that had been on the tip of her tongue. Truly, she had spent far too much time in the Potions Master's presence already. "I thought that it must be well past midnight, but I had no idea that it was this late. Oh Harry," she then realized, "I'd never meant to keep you up for so long!"

"Oh, never mind about me," Harry said. "After all, it was you who had to sit detention with the giant bat. Let's get you to bed now, why don't we?"

And with a whispered 'good night', now that she realized what time it was, Hermione parted ways with her best friend at the stairs, made her way up into her dorm room, and fell into bed.

**Wednesday, September 18th, 1995**

The next two school days found Hermione constantly practicing her breathing and muscular relaxation. Of course, she wouldn't do so too much during the lessons, as already she found her notes
lacking, but interwove her study time with regular breaks for her Occlumency practice. Luckily, the boys noticed little, though Harry would shoot her confused and sometimes worried looks when he found her quill still for too long.

Her exercises had a very positive side effect, Hermione soon found. On Tuesday night, she lay in her bed schooling her breathing, lengthening the periods of Pure Black as best she could. She had decided to practice emptying her mind first, and add the constant awareness later on. After she’d managed to envision a blackness so void of light it seemed to suck all colour from her imagination itself, and had held that image for forty-five seconds (her goal for the week, signalled by her wand buzzing), her heart rate had slowed down to a degree that had her whole body calm and relaxed. That and the fact that she had reached her self-set goal until Monday next on Tuesday night already made her content as she’d rarely been. She’d never slept so well in her entire time at Hogwarts.

Wednesday evening, however, had her out to finish her homework assignment set by Professor Snape for their private lessons. He had tasked her with practicing to hold the Pure Black while cutting off her potential air supply. Essentially, she’d need to hold her breath under a condition where it was physically impossible for her to draw breath in the first place. That, and empty her mind at the same time, of course.

Hermione had rarely indulged in the benefits her new position as prefect allowed her, but for tonight, she’d visit the prefect’s bathroom. She had heard Harry’s tales of the niceties provided for prefects, after he’d taken Cedric’s hint and bathed with the egg last schoolyear, but she was astonished when she entered the bathroom.

A pool-sized tub was sunk into the ground, a hundred bejewelled golden taps lined along the rim. Opposite the bath, there was a row of toilet cabins. Not wishing to stare upon those during her bath, Hermione erected a screen, though with the stability and opaqueness of a wall, to separate the two sections of the room. Satisfied with her wand work, she went to explore the giant pool.

Looking up and down the rows of taps that lined the huge tub, Hermione settled for a few that appeared promising. She had chosen well, she found, when the tub filled with slightly green tinged water of a comforting emerald which emitted the gentle smell of sandalwood and pine. Sinking into the water, she sighed as the warm liquid enveloped her body. The velvety feel of the wet heat around her caressed her skin, and caused a very pleasant, tingling sensation behind her navel. Hermione lingered for a minute, simply enjoying the feeling of being held by the water, for that was how the bath felt to her, before she took a few turns around the tub, swimming in long, smooth motions, concentrating on stretching her arms and legs as she fully lay into every movement.

Before long, she settled back into a corner where she could both easily see the makeshift-corridor to the tub room, created by her conjured screen, and was slightly hidden from sight herself. It was highly improbable that a student would manage to break through the wards that she’d erected when she’d first entered the room, but one could never be too careful. There she washed, relieving her body of all the sweat that had collected since her morning shower, and of part of the tension that had been pooling ever since her meeting with the mountain troll in her first year.

When she’d thoroughly washed, she decided it was time to do her homework. Inwardly, she giggled, and repeated the sound out loud when she realized that she was all alone for once. The thought that she’d never expected to do her homework naked in a bathtub was cause for much amusement to her.

After a minute, she calmed down from the humorous notion and concentrated on her breathing. Filling her lungs to the brim with the moist, heavy and pleasantly scented air, she collected her thoughts. Then, as she exhaled gradually, she discarded each and every one of those thoughts from her mind. When there was no more air to be found in her lungs, and her mind had taken on a gentle
anthracite colour, she slowly let herself sink under the water. Her hands held on to the brim of the
tub, both to hold herself down and to be able to easily yet gently lift herself from the water again.
There, ensconced in the velvet liquid, she sought that eerily enjoyable blackness that was supposed
to fill her mind. However, with the pressure from the water around her, she found that she was
unable to reach that certain degree of darkness, that extreme that had come to her surprisingly easily
these past two days.

Confused as she was that the Pure Black would not come, Hermione lost her concentration and her
goal eluded her ever more. Not content to settle with that, she tried to force her mind to dismiss any
thought process, but the effort used on that mission counteracted any possibility she had of
completing it. Her stubbornness held her under water for longer than was sensible, and when her
lungs screamed with a desperation that made the pain from the oxygen loss almost audible in her
throbbing ears, she pulled herself up and drew several much needed breaths in quick succession.
Needing to catch her breath in the first place had made her lose her calm breathing rhythm, of course,
and so it was that Hermione took longer than usually necessary to start all over again, though maybe
her frustration with needing to do so at all had quite a bit to do with that as well.

It took her a few more tries to realize that maybe she would not find her Pure Black that night, or not
under water as she was supposed to do. Giving up with a great deal of reluctance, as giving up was
something she rarely did, Hermione had to admit that her endeavours would not be successful this
night, not in the state her mind was in right now. Thus, she gave thought to what other tasks the
Potions Master had set her.

Get used to the idea of being viewed as a woman.

His exact words.

He wanted her to shorten her skirt by half an inch every Potions lesson. And as well as she knew
him, she could be certain that he'd check that she was following his instructions.

And what more had he said? Ah yes, she remembered, she was to work on her appearance. And to
get Lavender and Parvati to help her with that. He'd never used their names, of course, rather electing
to call them 'those dunderheaded chits she lived with', and really, wasn't he quite right in that
assessment? It wasn't that those two girls weren't nice people, or at least not that she knew them not
to be. No, it was merely that she had nothing in common with them, and – if she allowed herself to
think so – she was quite a way out of their league.

But what they didn't have in common with her was exactly what she needed right now (at least in
Professor Snape's opinion, and she had signed up to trust that opinion) – their interest and expertise
in fashion and the like. They had often asked her whether she might allow them to suggest another
top with that skirt, or whether they might rearrange her scarf around her neck, or whether they might
demonstrate to her what other hairstyle would benefit her features more? She had always declined, of
course, and the more often they asked, the harsher her answer came to be, until one blessed day, they
had eventually stopped asking.

That, of course, was quite the drawback right now.

Hermione did not want to imagine how the two girls might react if she were to approach them now.
Would they sneer and reject her plea, much as she had always rejected their offers? Or would they
go completely over the top in joy to finally be allowed to treat her as the live doll that they'd always
wanted?

Well, Hermione thought, there was no way around it. And as it was, Professor Snape had chosen the
perfect week to set her that particular assignment. It was, after all, her birthday tomorrow. And
Severus strode through the castle. Since Monday night, a particular kind of restlessness had taken hold of him that he simply could not explain nor reason away. He surmised it must have to do with the girl, though how it had come to be nor why the girl should affect him so, he could not say. Had it been her confession that she trusted him to be a good man, deep down? Severus scoffed at the notion. Had it been her surprisingly good grasp of Occlumency, and the revelation that not only was her mind quite impressive for a female her age, but that so was her control of it? Maybe, but why would that cause him restlessness? Shouldn't that calm his nerves, that he would be forced to spend much less time in her presence than formerly expected?

Whatever it was, Severus had felt trapped in his chambers and had elected to get some fresh air both literally in his lungs and figuratively in his mind. When he found himself on top of the Astronomy tower, he realized his mistake. He would not, however, have his feet lead him up those many stairs without at least taking in the view and a few much needed breaths of clean air, he decided, and stayed. When his lungs filled with the precious purity that was the air up here, so did his mind fill with images of their meeting here, almost a week ago. Had so little time passed since then, Severus wondered, but chose not to linger on the memory any longer than necessary. That it came to him was a miracle in and of itself, and a very much unwanted and alarming one, as he had extracted his memory of that night so as not to have anybody – the Dark Lord or the Light one – stumble on it.

That the girl should be able to disrupt his normalcy thus irritated Severus. To nip thoughts of her in the bud, at least for tonight, he descended the many stairs and strode through the corridors of the Castle instead. When he found himself on the fifth floor, he started when a soft sensation indicating wards made his skin tingle.

When he'd first come to Hogwarts, his sensitivity to heavy magic had almost driven him mad those first few weeks, especially that he was apparently the only one to feel it. Over the months, he had become both used and a little desensitized to the wards and spells that surrounded Hogwarts, and he had learned to consciously dismiss his sensitivity to certain enchantments. These wards now, however, were none of those built into the very stones that the Castle consisted of. No, these had been erected by a student, and there was only one that he knew to possess such skill and power. Severus sighed. Much as he longed to escape the girl, she had a certain way of wriggling back into his every waking moment. Damn her.

He could not help but be more than a little impressed at her work on what he now found to be the entrance to the prefect's bathroom. It certainly surpassed the knowledge one might expect of a fifth year student, though that alone should cease to be a surprise to him. No, what he had not expected was the layers that she'd woven, interweaving locking wards with alarm triggers and the like. In fact, if Severus was not mistaken, had the girl actually taken his advice to heart and decided to follow his task of ridding herself of her –?

A quick Homenum revelio proved Severus wrong, and he sighed a breath of relief. Why that was, he could not say. It should matter little to him in what manner the girl decided to lose her virginity, though maybe he was glad to have her above the cliché of schoolgirls having sex in a bathroom. Besides lacking class – though could there be anything less classy than rutting like, well, teenagers, in a broom cabinet? –, it was also quite unhygienic.

Though really, what did he care?

Severus did not know. And if he hated something, it was not knowing the answer to something, anything really.
With a sigh, Severus continued on his way, only now realizing that he'd stopped for longer than he cared to admit. Really, there was little sense in pondering the many questions that surrounded him in relation to the girl, much less the question why there were so many of those questions in the first place. Instead, he reminded himself that there was a nice bottle of Old Ogden's waiting for him in his quarters that would certainly help lift his spirits. The bottle, and a stack of seventh years’ essays.

Severus smirked.

*Nothing better to cheer him up than degrading a couple of students mere months before their final exams.*

---

**Thursday, September 19th, 1995**

The twin squeals of joy that had answered Hermione’s question on the morning of her birthday were enough to make her ears ring. Though she knew that she should feel relief at the fact that Lavender and Parvati were willing to help her out after she'd rejected them for so long, and so callously at times as well, Hermione could not help the feeling of dread at what might expect her creep down her spine.

As it was, she stood in front of her dorm room, more than a little afraid to enter. The girls had whispered among themselves that morning, and had told her to meet them back at their room during lunch break, when they would take the best of care of her before going to Potions together.

Maybe that was what Hermione dreaded the most, she thought – Professor Snape being the first who saw her new look. What if the girls screwed up, making her a dressed up tart? Or maybe even worse – what if she looked pretty for once? Would he pounce on her again, like he had a week ago on top of the Astronomy tower?

But now it was too late for second thoughts. She had already agreed to her roommates' plan, and she'd already told Harry and Ron to have lunch without her. There was no way around it now. She would have to go through with this.

Summoning all her supposed Gryffindor courage, Hermione opened the door –

– and felt her heart skip a beat. The space in the middle of the room was covered in blankets and pillows, and a vanilla scented candles floated around the room, bathing everything in a warm, soft glow. Next to the blankets, there were tablets of hors d'oeuvres and a carafe of pumpkin juice with three golden goblets. A generous measure of guilt riddled Hermione at how wonderful everything looked, contrary to her worst fears.

"Lavender," she softly spoke, "Parvati – thank you, so much. This is amazing."

The girls giggled and waved her off, though they looked more than pleased at the compliment.

"Oh, it's nothing, Hermione," Parvati said.

"Yet," Lavender added, with a conspiratorial wink. "You can thank us after we're done with you."

And with that, Hermione was pulled fully into the room and seated in the middle of the blankets, a goblet of pumpkin juice in one hand and a plate of nibbles close to the other, handing herself over to the girls for the next hour.

When it was over, Hermione owned quite the extensive list of beauty charms, with descriptions of what exactly they were supposed to do, prescriptions of what time of the day or for what occasion to
use them, and notes on how they reacted with other beauty charms, in which order to apply them, and how often to renew them.

The lunch hour had passed in a blur, it almost seemed to Hermione, as she could remember few details of the constant chatter, frequent giggles, and many wand movements that had cocooned her. When the girls helped her rise and Lavender opened one more button on Hermione's blouse – for that was essentially what most boys were after in the end, Parvati explained – they stood her in front of a mirror.

Hermione gasped.

*That was how they expected her to go to Potions, of all classes?*

But there was nothing to help it now. The girls appeared very pleased with the result they had charmed out of the bookish wallflower and dragged her off to the dungeons. On the way down the seven floors, the three of them drew many looks – or at least Hermione told herself that it was the three of them, until Parvati leaned over and whispered, "See them looking? That's all you!"

While the hour of being pampered by the two girls had filled her with a fuzzy warm feeling that could only be described as more girlish than anything Hermione had ever felt before – except maybe pretty much every moment of the Yule Ball she spent in Viktor's presence – the feeling of dread that had predominated this morning now returned in full force. Every step she took towards the dungeons had the heavy lump that had started out in her throat sink lower until it weighed down her stomach so much that Hermione wondered how she managed to move one foot in front of the other.

Eventually, the three girls reached the door to their dungeon classroom.

"Showtime," Lavender stage-whispered, and pushed open the door.

They were among the last to arrive. In fact, they were so late, that Professor Snape was already striding in through the door from his office before they'd made their way to their respective seats. All faces had turned to Hermione's changed appearance, and she felt, more than saw, the Potions Master's gaze follow her classmates'.

"Miss Granger," he thundered, when he had apparently taken in her changed looks.

It seemed that it had been too much to hope that their unspoken agreement to treat each other to as much silence as possible in class might override his shock at her makeover. Reluctantly, Hermione turned around.

"Yes, Professor?" she asked nimbly.

For a moment, it seemed as if the Potions Master might be lost for words, though it was over in the blink of an eye. Hermione was almost certain that she'd been the only one to sense his hesitation.

"What, in Merlin's name, happened to you?"

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter eleven, wherein an unexpected present is gifted.
"Miss Granger," he thundered, when he had apparently taken in her changed looks.

It seemed that it had been too much to hope that their unspoken agreement to treat each other to as much silence as possible in class might override his shock at her makeover. Reluctantly, Hermione turned around.

"Yes, Professor?" she asked nimbly.

For a moment, it seemed as if the Potions Master might be lost for words, though it was over in the blink of an eye. Hermione was almost certain that she'd been the only one to sense his hesitation.

"What, in Merlin's name, happened to you?"

Thursday, September 19th, 1995

Before Hermione knew how to answer his question, Lavender spoke.

"We did, sir," her roommate said. "We gifted her a makeover."

It seemed that Lavender was still so delighted by being allowed to treat Hermione as her own personal doll, she had forgotten that she wasn't supposed to have a spine, much less show it, in Potions class. Professor Snape, as always, was quick to remind her.

"Miss Brown," he seethed, "I do not recall asking for your opinion. Ten points from Gryffindor, and I better not see you open your mouth again today or you will regret it. Now," and he turned to Hermione once more, as the two girls scurried to take their seats, leaving her the only student standing, and dangerously close to their feared professor at that, "Miss Granger." The word was spat out with even more contempt than usual. "I suggest you sit."

Hermione went over to where Harry and Ron were sitting. Ron had dutifully paired up with Neville, unwilling to have Monday's disaster repeat itself and sacrificing his seat next to his best friend for Hermione's birthday. The seat to Harry's right was empty. When Hermione made to sit down there, however, the Potions Master's voice cut through the room.

"Not there, Miss Granger," he bellowed. "The last row should be perfect."

A collective gasp went through the class. Usually, when students attempted to sit in the last row (which was always free as there were too many desks in the classroom), they were reprimanded at once, sent to a seat in the centre of the front row, and their House experienced a severe loss of points. The reason for students trying to sit in the last row was always the same: escape the feared teacher's attention and thus, wrath, and hope for some peace and quiet. The manner in which Professor Snape's command was issued now, however, did nothing to promise Hermione a lot of peace, or any peace for that matter. In fact, she, along with everybody else, was quite certain that sending her to the very back of the room was supposed to be a punishment of some kind; though punishment for what, she did not know.

It appeared Hermione was so stuck in her shock that she did not move fast enough for the professor's
liking, as he spoke again.

"We would not want you to harm another student, now, would we?" his silky voice mocked her.

"No, sir," Hermione was quick to agree, because it seemed the safest route for her to take, but also because she whole-heartedly agreed with him. Her stunt in the last lesson had been stupid, as she'd arrogantly assumed that it was alright for her to completely drop her concentration on the rather basic, though potentially toxic potion she and Neville had been working on.

Harry shot her a worried look, and the expression on Ron's face was downright panicked. Neville looked as if he was about to flagellate himself for getting her into trouble in their previous Potions lesson. Hermione graced the three boys with a smile that was supposed to assure Neville of his innocence, calm Ron, and tell Harry that she was alright. Only a very small part of the tension enveloping her friends visibly dissipated, but there was little more Hermione could do, before readjusting the strap of her book bag over her shoulder and making her way to the back of the room.

"The far corner," Professor Snape provided, and Hermione made her way to the left of the room, rather than to the right where she would be closer to the store room. It seemed she'd guessed correctly as there were no further commands – for the moment, at least.

When with a flick of his wand, Professor Snape had the instructions for today's concoction appear on the blackboard in his neat, though spidery handwriting. As always, Hermione was the fastest to grasp what ingredients she would need, and was out of her seat to collect them from the storeroom. The professor, however, had other plans for her.

"Sit, Miss Granger," he bellowed across the room once more, freezing Hermione in her tracks before turning back and dropping down into her seat once more. Not daring to move, and unwilling to disturb his class (she remembered her promise to treat him with respect, after all, and had come to realize that her constantly raising her hand was quite the disruption to his lessons), she remained silent and seated.

From her new desk, she had a very good view of her classmates trudging to the storeroom and back, and she had more than one opportunity to shake her head in disbelief as some of her peers grabbed the wrong quantities, or the wrong ingredients even. As engrossed as she was in watching her classmates, she almost missed Professor Snape stalking up to her. His hand coming down to the top of her desk right in front of her eyes, however, quickly had her attention.

"Miss Granger," the Potions Master's voice was so silky it almost caressed her name, and Hermione had no desire to see that particular history repeat itself.

Are you quite sure about that?
And back was the niggling voice.

Desperate to shut the voice down before it reclaimed the position at the front of her mind that it was used to occupying, Hermione elected to answer her professor instead.

"That won't be necessary, sir," she said coolly. "As it is, I am well able to count, and as to the number of glamours surrounding me, there are none."

Obviously dissatisfied with her answer, Hermione found the professor's wand pointed at her nose. It drew generous circles around her head and all around her body in a manner that Hermione was inclined to call lazy, though she knew Professor Snape was never one to do anything lazily, even if it was only a matter of drawing circles with his wand.

*You seem to be thinking an awful lot about what he is doing with his wand.*

_No, I'm not,* Hermione shot back in her mind, unwilling to follow the inappropriate paths that the little voice was desperate to lead her down.

"Well, well, well," Professor Snape drawled, "it seems that for once, Miss Know-It-All appears to be correct."

The look Hermione shot him at his assessment would have Harry and Ron cower in fear of her wrath, but had little effect on the dour Potions Master. In fact, his eyes held an expression that Hermione could not name, but that had her avert her eyes within the second she met his.

"Now, Miss Granger," he caught her attention again, though it had never really been lost, "I have prepared a draught that needs stirring. As you have done precious little of that in my last lesson, you will take over that task now, instead of brewing the potion that I set for today. Do you think you will be able to manage that?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione ground out between her teeth.

It wasn't as if she expected special treatment from the Potions Master, and certainly not special to the positive. But she thought that since he'd opened up to her a few times – the Astronomy Tower Incident came to mind, when he'd lost his usually impeccable self-control, or this Monday, when he'd asked her why she trusted him – he might not try quite so hard to rile her up. Alas, she found, maybe it was too easy to rile her up anyway. After all, the boys did it all the time.

Hermione had to giggle inwardly, despite how angry she'd been before at the professor's treatment of her. After all, there was quite some amusement to be gained from comparing the dour thirty-something teacher to some fifteen-year-old boys.

In her humour, Hermione again almost missed that Professor Snape had come back. She was instantly pulled from her thoughts when the cauldron was set down in front of her.

"This one won't stifle or poison you," he explained, "at least not through its gases. I trust you won't be stupid enough to taste it?"

Hermione was quick to shake her head in the negative.

"Very well, Miss Granger," Professor Snape surmised. "Do try not to be distracted from stirring by staring at the draught's colour."

His voice took a tone that, if it were eyes, might have been described as a wink. *Could a voice wink,* Hermione wondered? _Of course it could,* she found, _not that there was anything Professor Snape's*
voice couldn't do.

*Like wet your knickers?* her very own annoying voice in the back of her mind little helpfully supplied.

*Oh, shut it, you,* Hermione tried to drown it out once more. So engrossed was she in her mental banter that she almost missed the professor's next words. *Honestly,* she mentally admonished herself, annoyed with her inattention. This business of becoming distracted and consequently being surprised by Professor Snape's presence every other minute was a nuisance, and a habit that Hermione better get rid of, and *soon.*

"A word of advice," he began. "Keep your eyes open, but don't forget to blink. Make your mind impenetrable, but don't completely blend out your surroundings. Make this draught's colour your aim, but don't concentrate on it specifically. Do you understand?"

"I – I believe so, sir," Hermione said, taken aback that he'd offer her any advice at all.

"Don't 'believe so', Miss Granger," Professor Snape shot back, though without his usual malice. His tone could almost be called benevolent. "Know so."

"Yes, sir."

"Slow clockwise stirs in a steady rhythm of four seconds per circle, Miss Granger," the Potions Master's voice returned to its usual commanding tone that brook no argument. Then, his expression softened ever so slightly. "It's quite cooled down, so there's no danger of burning."

Hermione still needed a moment to collect herself. A glass stirring rod was set down on the table before her, and Professor Snape had already turned away to stalk to the front of the class once more when she remembered to softly call, "Thank you, sir."

His step did not visibly falter, yet Hermione could almost believe that it had. He made no move to answer her in words or perceivably acknowledge her thanks at all, but his head turned to the side ever so marginally, and she caught the movement. To her, it might have been a nod.

Severus wanted to turn around and shake the girl by the shoulders. *Why by Merlin did she always have to thank him when he had done nothing to earn her gratitude?*

*Or maybe he had,* he thought. *When had he ever given her pointers before, really?* Oh yes, he had informed her during her attention that Monday that further help would be provided to her should she need it, so his advice should not have come as a surprise to her, but it seemed she had not truly believed him to follow up on his word, either.

*Oh, well,* he thought, *at least he could still surprise the girl.*

It appeared that she'd taken up stirring, and she'd seemingly understood his task for her to practice her breathing exercises with her eyes wide open. The draught he had her stir was of a deep black colour that was darker than anything he would ever let a student attempt to brew, but it would be turning a gentle pale lilac over time.

Yes, Severus surmised as he checked the time, in fact it should be at a midnight blue right now.

He glanced at the girl. Her gaze was fixed in the direction of the potion, but not on the potion itself. *Clever girl,* he thought, though he would never mutter those words out loud, much less with the appreciative tone that his thought carried. She had apparently understood what he'd been telling her,
or at least found out that the draught changed its colour on her own.

Her stirring appeared steady, as did her breathing. Severus shot a look at her chest. Yes, her ribcage was nicely visible through her now fitted shirt. So was her cleavage, with one more button undone than was strictly allowed by the school dress code, though she was still more covered up than the chits who had dressed her. The new style suited her very well, Severus found, as it showed off her slim figure and allowed an impression of her perfectly symmetrical assets, but she was still more covered up to a degree that did not exactly go against her nature.

It had shaken him to the core, seeing her walk in all done up and mature in looks as well as in mind. Her heels a good inch higher, her skirt half an inch shorter, her shirt a slight deal more see-through, her collar opened for his perusal.

No, Severus reprimanded himself, not his perusal in particular, of course, and much less his specifically. It was neither for him to watch her breasts nor for her to want him to watch them. Yet he had to, professorially speaking, to check her breathing on her otherwise perfectly still body.

As it was, her soft mounds rose in perfect unison, steadily and slowly, before equally slowly returning to their natural position where they rested as the girl's vision turned a Pure shade of Black.

A lock of her hair fell into her face, and her left hand came up to tuck it behind her ear where it belonged without the right faltering in its motion, nor her breathing in its regularity. Severus took the opportunity to peruse her soft curls that had before been a furious mane but had now been turned into silky tresses. For a short moment he wondered how it might feel to sink his hands into her curls, to tug at the short locks that sat at the nape of her neck, to entangle his fingers in her longer strands and follow their length to the tip where his fingers would drag free from her silken hair, only to return to her nape and repeat the motion.

Severus groaned inwardly. His cock had already sprung to attention at the sight of her enhanced beauty entering his classroom, but now it hardened even more at the image of entangling his hands in her hair and holding her head. His thoughts returned to his earlier discussion with the girl, when he'd wanted little more than to shut her up in the most delicious of ways.

He really needed to get some grip.

Luckily – for him, at least, and rather unfortunately for the idiot in question – one of his dunderheads managed to explode his concoction just then.

"Mr Finnigan," Severus bellowed, and strode across the classroom towards the poor bastard's desk.

Hermione was rapidly drawn from her thoughts as Professor Snape's voice cut through the classroom. As indicated by the smoke cloud collecting over his desk, it seemed that Seamus had managed to blow up his cauldron once more.

Seeing that Professor Snape had the situation well – or rather, terribly, as was his wont – in hand, Hermione returned to the draught before her, her right hand still rhythmically stirring. She was surprised to see that it had turned a lovely purple shade.

After Professor Snape's initial words of advice, she had attempted to follow his instructions as best she could, keeping her body's attention on the draught and her mind's attention on her breathing. She had not managed to reach the Pure Black today, what with circular motions and errant curls that demanded at least parts of her attention. What she had reached, though, was a shade of dark silver. In the beginning, it had swirled and twirled, brightly gleaming streaks creating patterns in the darker
colour, but they had gradually faded until she had an even tone of grey that emitted a slight glimmer that betrayed the silvery aspect of that particular shade.

As it was, Hermione thought she could be quite satisfied with herself. The question was whether Professor Snape would agree on that.

Absorbed in her musings, Hermione was surprised when Professor Snape suddenly dismissed the class. Not daring to stop her stirring before he explicitly told her to do so, Hermione remained at her desk.

It seemed to be the right choice.

"Stay after class, Miss Granger," the professor's voice easily carried to the back of the room.

Harry and Ron shot her worried looks once more, but otherwise could do little to stop Professor Snape from keeping her in the dungeons. She waved them off with her left hand, mouthing that she'd see them later, and they left.

When the room had been cleared of everybody but the two of them, Professor Snape magically waved the door shut and strode to her desk. Hermione was certain that he knew her concentration to be broken by now anyway and did not even attempt to clear her mind and steady her breathing once more. She had another class to attend after this, and he would not be able to keep her forever.

"You can stop stirring now, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said after assessing the draught and finding it sufficient. Or at least, that was what Hermione hoped for.

She extracted the stirring rod and held the fragile glass instrument in her hand so that any drops would fall into the cauldron rather than on the table.

"Set it down, Miss Granger," the Potions Master commanded when he saw that she made no move to release the rod from her hand, "the draught will neither eat into the wood of the table nor into the glass itself."

"Should I not clean it, sir?"

A wave of her teacher's hand had the rod clean.

"There, Miss Granger," he said with a hint of annoyance to his voice, though Hermione might have caught a flicker of appreciation at her careful thinking in his eyes, "though it wouldn't have left any spots worse than anything other students have already inflicted on this classroom."

Hermione shot a look at Seamus's desk that still clearly showed the scorch mark of his overheated cauldron. Then her eyes focussed back on the man in front of her, though she was clever enough not to meet his gaze. It would not do to offer him her innermost thoughts on a platter, when he could so easily access them without her facilitating his penetration of her mind.

Speaking of penetrating...

Hermione was quick to cut off whatever sentence her inner voice was about to put into words by breaking the silence between her and the professor.

"Was there anything you needed, professor?" she asked. She could feel the dark look he shot her at what he was certain to find a most impertinent question. "I only ask because I really need to be going to Arithmancy now, sir."
"I'm certain Professor Vector will excuse your tardiness, Miss Granger," Professor Snape replied in an icy tone, "especially today, of all days."

"Excuse me, sir?" Hermione asked, confused.

"In case you forgot, Miss Granger," Professor Snape elaborated, enunciating every syllable very clearly, "I believe it is your birthday today."

"Oh," she said, a little flustered that he would know about that, let alone acknowledge it, "yes, I guess technically it is."

As soon as the words had left her mouth, she found the Potions Master's eyes narrow in suspicion for a second before relaxing to their usual size.

"Elaborate," he commanded. Hermione did not need to ask which part exactly.

"Well, professor, you see," she began, trying to find a way to talk around her slip, "for me, every day throughout the week is first and foremost a school day. Any special occasions that befall such days are a rather minor issue to me, sir."

Even though his face gave nothing away, Hermione was quite certain that she had not convinced him. Damn her, almost giving away her secret about the Time Turner. *Technically*, honestly? She snorted inwardly at her own carelessness. How stupid could she be?

"Not much one for presents then, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape drew her from her thoughts.

Hermione started. Surely he didn't mean to –?

"On the contrary, sir," she answered truthfully, "little as I value the amassing of material goods, I love presents – on the condition that the giver has given them careful thought, which is rather rarely the case among many people. But yes, I confess that I did use this birthday as an excuse to have my roommates gift me the makeover that you suggested; though admittedly," she added on an afterthought, "it did take little persuasion to have them agree to that."

If Severus were a man to allow himself smiles in the presence of students from a House other than Slytherin, he would have smiled then. As it was, he wasn't, and he didn't. Instead, he took the opportunity that her words had granted him to take in her appearance once more, and in full.

His eyes started at her reasonable shoes that had suddenly developed slight heels and were overall slimmer, making her foot appear as delicate as it probably was. His gaze travelled up her calves that had shed the plaid knee-highs and were instead clad in an unobtrusive sheen that spoke of the softest silk stockings that were likely to end in a lace top somewhere underneath her skirt. Her fitted button-up shirt showed off her flat stomach and her small, but pert breasts. Her face, framed by her now silken curls, had been freed of any impurities and featured pink, glossy lips that were begging to be kissed, and eyes that had been discreetly lined with kohl, accentuating their size and the molten chocolate that lay within.

In a word, the girl was stunning.

So why was she looking so insecure?

Yes, few could withstand his concentrated perusal of their person, and that a teenage girl was unable to keep herself from fidgeting was no big surprise. But wasn't the girl aware of how utterly beguiling she looked?
"Sir?" she asked, her self-consciousness as clearly audible in her voice as it was visible on her face. "Do I not meet your approval?"

*Oh fuck,* Severus cursed inwardly, and his cock whole-heartedly agreed to that notion. So willing was she in seeking his approval, it took him more control than usual to not physically demonstrate to her *how much exactly* he approved of her new look.

"You are said to be of above average intellect, Miss Granger," he replied instead, outwardly his usual snarky self, "yet it is obvious that you completely failed to either *notice* or *interpret* the looks every student in this class has been giving you. As it is apparent that you will not get to the answer to your own, let me spell it out for you…"

Severus leaned in to add even more emphasis to his next words. The strong whiff of her new perfume he got threw him a little off track, but only for a second.

"You managed to properly sexualize yourself. *Congratulations.*"

The girl sank back into herself, and more than a little. In fact, she looked utterly destroyed.

"Thank you, sir," she managed to say. And damn the girl for thanking him for every bloody thing, no matter whether it deserved her thanks or not. This certainly didn't.

In his need to end that particular conversation, Severus decided to change the topic.

"How is your homework coming along, Miss Granger?"

"Oh," she said, confused at the quick change in topic. "Yes, well, not so well, sir. I went to the bathroom for practice the other night but didn't even get remotely close to the Pure Black underneath the water. But I will practice more until Monday night, and I'm sure with time I will be able to –"

"Did you breathe, Miss Granger?" Severus interrupted.

"Well, yes, sir," she replied, obviously more than a little confused at the question. "Of course. When I ran out of air, I resurfaced and breathed, though by then I had lost my rhythm and had to start anew. So –"

"That's not what I meant," he cut her off again. "Did you breathe under water?"

The girl looked as if she wanted to laugh out at his question, but the expression died as soon as she saw his inquiring look.

"No, sir," she answered. "I thought you meant for me to hold my breath under water, without being able to breathe. I apologize for the misunderstanding. Had I known that you meant for me to cast a bubble-head charm, I would have –"

"No, Miss Granger, that is not what I meant either."

Shutting her up with his interruption really became a habit that Severus found he could not dislike.

"Gillyweed, then, sir, but –"

"Miss Granger," Severus thundered, effectively shutting her up, "did you or did you not attempt to breathe under water without the explicit use of magic?"

Her forehead was littered in deep furrows as she frowned.
"No, sir."

Severus wanted to laugh at how short she now kept her answer, but didn't, for obvious reasons.

"I suggest you try that the next time you practice."

The girl shuffled her feet, obviously uncomfortable in her failure, before asking her question.

"How do I do that, professor?"

Severus sighed. Once more it was strikingly obvious to him in what many ways Hogwarts failed to educate its students.

"How do you work magic, Miss Granger?"

The girl seemed confused.

"But, professor," she said, "I thought you said to breathe without the explicit use of magic?"

"Answer the question, girl," Severus thundered.

Worrying her lip, the girl pondered his question.

"Well," she began, "one needs two things. For one, a wand. Second, …"

"Wrong, Miss Granger," Severus cut her off, "or can you hand any muggle a wand and suddenly they perform magic?"

She seemed honestly surprised at that, but the notion must have stricken her as reasonable, for she did not disagree with him.

"Do proceed in your answer, Miss Granger," Severus prompted when the girl did not make to resume her reply from before.

"S-second," the girl was quite insecure in her knowledge now, Severus saw, "the correct spell."

"Wrong again," Severus countered. "Or have you never seen somebody perform magic without an incantation?"

"I know about wordless magic, sir," the girl replied, now a little more confident in countering him, "but to my knowledge, the correct spell still needs to be in the wizard's mind to work the desired outcome."

"Have you ever entertained the notion that perhaps your knowledge is not quite as far reaching as you like to make it out to be, Miss Granger?" Severus said.

The girl twitched at the scathing tone of his voice. That would not do, Severus decided, as he needed her to be receptive to his teaching.

"You are correct when talking about unspoken magic, Miss Granger," he attempted to placate the girl. "When working unspoken magic, the words still need to exist, being channelled into the spell by the wizard's – or witch's – concentration. Wordless magic, however, is exactly that – wordless. No prewritten incantation, be it in Ancient Greek or modern Latin, nothing. You will agree with me, Miss Granger, when you think about accidental bouts of magic that magical children issue before coming to Hogwarts. I believe we watched quite a bit of your personal experiences in that area last Monday, now, didn't we?"
The girl blushed as she remembered how he had revisited and dissected all of her, partly embarrassing, early childhood memories of inexplicable things happening around her. Obviously desperate for him to move on from that, she nodded. Severus narrowed his eyes but allowed her the slip where before he would have admonished her for not answering him in words. After all, they were discussing the power of the absence of words at the moment.

"As it is," he continued, "one does in fact need two things to work magic. First, magical blood, as no muggle could ever perform magic, no matter how hard they tried or how many tools they were given to assist them. Secondly, intention.

"You will come to find, Miss Granger, that intention is a powerful thing, the most important thing, one might say, there is to magic. Without intention, it is impossible to perform magic. A wand, a spell, they will get you nowhere if you are not intent on reaching whatever goal you want to reach.

"Nowadays, wizardom is much too dependent on the many tools that facilitate magic. It is true that wands help to channel one's magic more easily than wandless magic does, but one should not allow oneself to be incapacitated without that piece of wood. The same goes for spells; they help envision in the mind what one attempts to achieve, but one should not let oneself be limited in one's goal simply because one does not know the textbook words to achieve it. Now tell me, Miss Granger, what other tools can you think of that magic does not need?"

Hermione's mind whirred. Now that the professor had spelled it out to her, it seemed obvious that wands and words were merely aids, not essentials, for magical people. She thought hard to answer his question.

"Brooms, sir?" she hesitantly suggested. At the professor's curt nod, she beamed, and continued. "And perhaps – crystal balls? For divination?"

Her face must have shown her distaste for the notion of something like divination being possible, for Professor Snape's eyes widened the fraction of an inch, for the fraction of a second. Yes, Hermione thought, quite the surprise to find the school's resident know-it-all not believe in any one subject of study.

"Quite correct on both counts, Miss Granger," came what to her was very high praise. "Now that you are aware of these limitations that those tools have mostly become, I trust you will take care in not allowing their absence to incapacitate you."

Hermione was taken aback. Of course, she would endeavour to learn more about doing wandless and wordless magic, but to actually achieve both all by herself?

"Yes, sir," she replied, "I will do my best to do so, though I would very much appreciate your assistance should I fail to progress in that endeavour."

Professor Snape's eyes fixed onto her face. Though she did not look up to meet his gaze, she could feel his cold stare on her skin, growing ever so hot under his attention.

"You may choose one endeavour that you would otherwise achieve with the help of a tool," the Potions Master spoke, "and I will teach you in that. You may take that as a birthday present."

Surprised, Hermione looked up into his eyes.
birthdays, nor birthday presents for that matter. What the hell had prompted him to offer her one just now?

"Thank you, sir," the girl replied, her honest gratitude painfully obvious in her eyes that were still trained on his, stupid Gryffindor that she was.

Without meaning to – or did he? – Severus slipped into her mind.

The girl's memories surrounded him, in bright, stark colours, as her mind had been thoroughly unguarded. Her numerous thought flurried around him, and he grabbed onto one that seemed to be of earlier that day.

The girl sat in what appeared to be her dorm room, seated on a pile of blankets, surrounded by nibbles and goblets and two yammering chits, one working on her hair, the other going through her drawers.

"Honestly, Hermione," the Patil girl said, "is all underwear you have here white, loose, and made of cotton? Don't you have anything fancier?"

The girl blushed profusely and made to answer, but the Brown girl cut her off, attempting to tame her wild mane into more manageable curls the whole time.

"What fancier did you expect than sensible white cotton knickers, Parvati?" she giggled. "Whitey tighties?"

The Gryffindor half of the Patil twins joined in the giggle for a minute, but without the glee of the other chit. Instead, she took out her wand.

"Now, Hermione," she said, "I want you to watch and listen very carefully here. This won't hold forever, but it will get you through a couple of hours, and then you need to rework it, both on material and colour, alright? Now look –"

Severus's eyes took a second to refocus on the dark, dank dungeon that he and the girl were in, so engrossed had he been in watching her memory. Surprised he found that she had managed to kick him out of her mind. Her eyes, interestingly, were still trained on his, but he could see the granite wall behind them, barring him from re-entering her mind.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger," Severus scathingly remarked, "it appears my tutelage has not completely failed to leave an impression on you. Now, would you mind telling me what colour –"

A blackness of silken quality collected behind her eyes, strewn with neat little cloth-covered buttons. For a moment Severus almost thought it to be the mirrored image of the front of his robes, then understanding dawned on him.

"I see," he said. "Quite the impressive transfigurational work, Miss Granger. Or was this Miss Patil's work?"

"No," the girl spat out from between gritted teeth, her usually so polite façade failing her, "this is all me. Now, if you will excuse me, sir, I really must get going to my next class."

"Certainly, Miss Granger," Severus allowed her to leave. When she had almost made it to the door, he called her back.

"Miss Granger," he got her attention, "do remember to practice your underwater breathing. It would not do to fail on your first homework, now would it?"
"Yes, sir," she said, then added with a mischievously sweet smile, "and thank you again for my birthday present. I will think on it and get back to you. Good day."

And with a flurry of her robes that was almost as impressive as Severus's usual billow, she was gone from the classroom.

Severus sighed.

*How had he gotten himself in so deep?*

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: chapter twelve, wherein hair, hem, and house mice are examined.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, September 21st, 1995

Severus was seething.

While many perceived him to be a man quick to anger, it was rare for the Potions Master to be this enraged at this particular person – himself.

Looking back on the past week, or weeks, as it was, there was much that had gone wrong and little that had gone right. Things that had gone in his directions were probably the fact that the girl was a surprisingly quick study where Occlumency was concerned, and –

Well, that was about it.

Things that had gone quite thoroughly downwards, though…

First, the spanking. Yes, he had enjoyed watching the girl's cheeks warm up and redden under his attentions, and touching them had to be his most erotic experience this whole year. The difficulties that came with it, the self-doubts on his part and the nervousness on the girl's, were a wholly different matter. Did those few minutes of arousal make up for the aftermath? Severus wasn't so sure.

Second, the girl's constant trust. Her gratitude for every sodding thing he did, her sincerity in not being in fear of him, and her respect towards him not only as a teacher but as a person; those things Severus just could not understand, and at most times, they made his skin crawl.

Third, the girl's makeover. Yes, he had tasked her in becoming a woman, both outwardly and practically. Yet why had he been so upset when he'd thought her to be with a boy in the prefects' bathroom? And if the intention behind her makeover was to have her male schoolmates perceive her as a desirable female, why then did he find himself so affected?

And fourth, why in every hell imaginable had the girl chosen to fashion her knickers after his robes? The first pair of underwear she was ever to transfigure, and the first thing that had come to her mind were his robes? Was he such a source of inspiration to her? Surely not, as the only thing Severus was wont to inspire in his students was fear. A secret fantasy? That could not be either, as he was sure he would have stumbled upon such a notion in the girl's head by now. What then? A reason for amusement? Had she transfigured her knickers into a fancy imitation of his robes because she had the guts to take pleasure from secretly mocking him this way, never having expected her dirty little secret to be revealed?

Severus was quite certain he would find no answer to that today. Instead, he went over the changes to her appearance once more in his mind.

It was true, Severus could not push the thought of her silky tresses out of his mind, all the while imagining what it might feel to run his fingers through her soft strands, to wrap her long curls around his hands to control her head and… Nor could he dismiss the image of her glossed pouty lips, already by nature of a luscious cherry red, now coated in a glistening sheen of gloss that simply begged to be kissed away.

No, Severus was really quite beside himself. This wasn't like him at all, to be lusting after a fifteen –
oh well, now sixteen year old girl. And more so, a student at that.

Severus shuddered. He used to take pride in the fact that during his long years of teaching at this respectable and esteemed institution, he had never once found himself inappropriately drawn to one of his students. The sharp moral border that divided student and teacher had always been enough to keep his thoughts in check.

But wasn't the girl explicitly known for crossing borders that had never been crossed before?

As it was, she had torn down that wall of morality and propriety, and with it his precious pride.

And why wouldn't she? Why should he remain unaffected by her innocent curiosity, her pure way of seeing the world, her untouched positivity? After all, those were the traits that had drawn him to Gryffindor Muggle-borns before.

Severus cursed himself internally, verbally, but almost longed for someone to do so magically. Perhaps he could persuade the girl? Maybe that would help rid him of some of the attraction he felt towards her.

He might have to address that issue on Monday.

---

**Monday, September 23rd, 1995**

Hermione was very glad to have a day filled with classes before her, still reeling from the weekend she'd had.

Her birthday had been quite pleasant once she'd managed to resume her school day. The boys had fetched her after her last class and together, they had gone down to the lake, surprising her with a lovely birthday picnic on a multitude of varying cupcakes, cold turkey sandwiches, and fresh fruit. Hermione had thought to herself that it was indeed a lucky day for her to have picnic twice, but hadn't told the boys as she had not wanted them to feel unoriginal, as her picnic with Lavender and Parvati had been so spontaneous and the boys had seemed to have put quite some planning into their surprise.

Fortunately, neither Harry nor Ron had seemed to really have noticed the changes in her appearance. It had come of no surprise to her, either. In Potions, they had been far too stressed out (as usual) to take her in – and why would they, really? – and the soft silkiness had left her curls the minute she stepped out into the wind.

She had not been equally lucky with the other males of the school.

Her roommates took care that Hermione applied the charms they'd taught her every morning, though Hermione had managed to take the makeup application down a notch or two; and so it was that every day she walked through the school, more and more heads turned to peruse the changes in Hermione Granger they'd heard all about from their friends and were unwilling to believe until they'd set eyes on her themselves.

Hermione merely hoped that it would stop once everyone had gotten used to the new sight.

It seemed, however, that this was not the case. When she walked down to breakfast this morning, she could still hear whistles and a few catcalls coming her way. Hermione sighed, equally annoyed and exasperated. Truly, Professor Snape had been right. Before he'd mentioned it, she'd completely failed to notice, as he'd put it, the looks boys left and right had been giving her. Now, though, they were very hard to miss indeed, as bold as some advances had been.
With much joy she'd found that weekend that in the library, she was suddenly approached by a steady flow of willing study partners. With much regret, she'd come to learn that few of them were interested in any amount of actual studying, rather keeping her from it with incessant chatter and 'accidental' touches. Luckily, she'd been able to draw back into the corner where the Headmaster had found her studying the books Professor Snape had recommended, though that day now seemed so long ago, only a week past.

Hermione exhaled a sigh of relief when she reached the Great Hall. Under the careful eyes of their teachers, the wide majority of her schoolmates were cowed enough not to heap their unwanted attention on her. She quickly crossed the long hall and sank into a seat at the Gryffindor table – the far end from the entrance, that was, as she hoped to avoid more encounters with pubescent males.

Shooting a glance at the High Table, she found the Potions Master looking at her as if in accident, which she knew it not to be, and he raised a single eyebrow at her, his face expressionless but the smirk implied.

Hermione scowled.

Trust the man to find some twisted pleasure in the fact that she'd followed his instructions to allow and even facilitate others to sexualize her.

The boys joined her for breakfast soon after, and together, they made their way to the first lesson of the week. History of Magic found Hermione practice her breathing once more, and she was glad to discover that already the Pure Black came much easier to her, and she was able to keep it for longer periods before the absolute absence of colour faded into a grey that permitted thoughts to enter her mind. She merely hoped that it might be enough progress to keep her stern tutor from scolding her too much for failing her homework assignment.

When Severus stalked into the classroom for his second class of the day, he found all the students already seated. A glance in the direction of the Gryffindors, he found Misses Brown and Patil in their usual seats. He allowed himself an inward grin. Yes, this was the way he preferred his class.

To his satisfaction, the girl had found her way to the back of the class once more, sitting at the desk furthest from the store room. It seemed she had interpreted his intention correctly in their last lesson, in that she was to sit away from her classmates so that he might be able to teach her in a way that found little notice among her peers, as well as kept her from endangering them should some of the exercises he set for her go poorly. Little as he liked the dunderheads that he was damned to teaching, Severus would not lack in the profession that had been forced upon him to serve both his masters. It simply would not do.

A flick of Severus's wand had the day's potion scrawled on the board, and a sneered command had the students opening their books to find the required ingredients and brewing instructions. A minute later, they were all scrambling to the store room to collect their ingredients.

While the dunderheads were busy in the little side room, some of the less thoughtful ones walking there several times as they forgot this and got the wrong measure of that, Severus walked to the back of the class. The girl sat at her desk, her body still, her posture rigid. He found her to be breathing.

What a strange thing to remark about a person, Severus mused, that they are breathing. But the girl wasn't merely in- and exhaling, of course. She was exercising.

"Miss Granger," Severus called her to attention. The girl's eyes rose to the blackboard, signalling that she was listening, but allowing her to not meet his eyes. Clever girl, Severus allowed himself to
inwardly compliment her once more.

"Miss Granger," he began anew, and in a voice that was loud enough to be carried throughout the class, should anybody wish to listen in on them, not evoking the impression that what he was saying to the girl might be said in private, "as your actions last week caused and resulted in the injury of a student, you will be banned from brewing in class."

Most students had now settled at their work stations, and even though they'd begun cutting and chopping their ingredients, Severus knew them to be listening with rapt attention. His voice grew louder.

"I have no desire to see you harm a student in this class anymore. All your work during the collective lessons will be theoretical only."

A collective gasp went through the class, though Severus could hear several of his Slytherins snicker gleefully. No surprise there, he thought, and no surprise for everybody to be shocked at his announcement, either. After all, even after years of Finnigan blowing up cauldrons, and Longbottom doing his best to single-handedly kill the whole class by filling the dungeon in a poisonous vapour, he had never banned a student from practically participating in his class – much less one as talented as the girl, even if in following instructions only.

"Instead," Severus carried on, "you will sit Remedial Potions with me personally overseeing your work every Monday night, starting Monday after next, as tonight and next Monday night are still reserved for your detention with me, Miss Granger." He forced a vicious sneer onto his face and turned a little so that the students of his House could see. He had a role to perform, after all. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," came the shy, but ever polite reply.

He turned to the class. As expected, all the students had ceased attending to their ingredients.

"I don't recall telling you to stop working," Severus bellowed through the classroom, the vaulted ceiling amplifying his voice and adding an even more demanding effect that he'd always liked. "Those of you capable of reading might have found that the Boil Treating Potion needs eighty-three minutes of constant attention. There are eighty-four minutes left of today's period. If you wish to turn in your concoction by the end of the lesson, I suggest you get to work this instant."

A flurry of motion ran through the class, students jumping to slice and dice their ingredients, and hurrying to follow the instructions they found in their textbooks.

Satisfied that everybody had their attention where it belonged, Severus turned back to the girl whose gaze was still fixed on the blackboard.

"Miss Granger," he gently called her to his attention once more, scolding himself for allowing himself any kind of gentility when dealing with the girl. Her posture showed no change, but Severus knew her to be listening. "I wish for you to copy down the instructions for brewing a potion I believe you to be well acquainted with from your second year," his voice carried so much meaning, the girl would be incapable to misunderstand which potion exactly he was referring to, "and I want you to continue breathing while you do so."

And leaving her to ponder how exactly she was to do that, Severus stalked to the front of the class to stare down any students that might plan to defy his strict teaching.

Hermione's lungs demanded a desperate pace in their air supply, but she kept her breathing calm and
unchanged. *How could he know about the Polyjuice potion she'd secretly brewed in her second year?*

It was of little matter for now, though, Hermione decided, as her task for this lesson was clear and there was precious little time to complete it. Writing down the recipe would have been an easy feat close to three years ago, when it had been ever present on her mind; but now, Hermione was not so sure she would be able to remember all the ingredients in their correct order, measure, and method of preparation, much less the different time intervals at which she was to add them into the cauldron, the heat at which the vessel would have to be, and the stirring motions and resting periods that were required.

And even if she could remember it all perfectly, there was still the matter of breathing through it all.

Hermione felt she was completely out of her depth in the task the Potions Master had set for her, but at the same time, her chest swelled with pride at the knowledge that in some way he probably thought it possible for her to actually accomplish the feat. A few weeks ago, she would have been adamant in her assessment that Professor Snape would only ever give her extracurricular assignments if she was certain to fail them, but in the past few dealings with him outside their usual classroom setting – even though their meetings were still in the classroom, and he was very much her teacher and she his student – she had come to know him as a man who supported her endeavour to contribute to the upcoming war in seeking his help to brace herself for the very real possibility of being tortured. In fact, in his words of advice in their previous lesson alone he had shown her more care than she had ever seen him bestow on a single student in all her years of attending his class, even towards students of his own House.

Determined not to disappoint his trust in her abilities, Hermione prepared her breathing while reciting the ingredients required for a successful brew of Polyjuice potion in her mind. A pleasant blankness settled over her mental vision though she found that the veil – for that was what her attempt at Occluding felt to her in this moment – allowed portions of her conscious to slip through if she concentrated enough on them.

So concentrate she did. Gradually, the ingredients came to her, and with them their order, measurement, and everything else she needed to know about them and their relation to the potion. All she needed was to lift her hand and –

Hermione wanted to curse herself. So much had she looked forward to completing her assignment, that she had forgotten to prepare her workstation. The table in front of her was empty, and Hermione's concentration broke and her breathing rhythm faltered when her anger at her own thoughtlessness surfaced. Raging inside, she bent to retrieve her ink and quills from her book bag, together with a few scrolls of empty parchment. Placing the ink pot at a position where she would instinctively reach for it, Hermione took the quill in hand and smoothed out a piece of parchment. Then she kept her eyes open but let her focus fall away as her mind dipped once more into the emptiness of Pure Black.

Severus watched as the queue of students waiting to place their vials filled with their regrettable attempts at a useable concoction on his desk shortened, accepting their homework assignments as they dropped off their lesson's work, those finished hurrying to grab their bags and racing off to enjoy their lunch break before the next period. A smirk crossed his face as the two dunderheads usually trailing around the girl watched her, still completely immersed in her assignment, and eventually shrugged, leaving the classroom with only her and him in it.

Severus rose from his desk and walked slowly to the back of the class. He cancelled his usual muffling charm and instead allowed his shoes to give off a satisfying *click-clack* as the hard soles met
the unyielding floor of the classroom, the noise resounding from the vaulted ceiling. He was both proud and disappointed when the sound didn't even make the girl flinch, her hand holding the quill still flitting over the parchment, slower than usual but faster than he would have expected. Probingly, he touched her mind with his, her eyes wide open but hardly seeing as she stared at the parchment steadily filling with her scrawled notes. He was surprised to find that her mind was almost completely darkened. The only light he found seemed like that of a candle burning in an adjoining room, though the sight of the flame was filtered through the milky glass of the door filling the doorway between the two chambers.

Severus was impressed. Even though her mind was not Purely Black, the girl had managed to have her mental source of light dwindle to a degree where it was barely worthy of mention, other than for the fact that it existed. Of course, he had had high expectations of the girl when he'd thought of the task but had not dreamed that she might reach more than the deep anthracite that she'd accomplished when he'd plunged into her mind the previous week, and he'd certainly not thought that she would be able to hold the blankness when he probed into her mind.

Her concentration was almost absolute. Severus wondered, as she did not react to his touch to her mind, would she realize that his fingers were sliding into her hair, slipping through the chestnut tresses that looked silky to the touch, until they were gently tugging at the curls at the nape of her neck?

Before he could lose himself to that thought, and subsequently put the fantasy into action, he decided to break the girl's concentration.

"Miss Granger," he almost bellowed, choosing a demanding tone that had her jumping out of her seat and skin, lest he betray his traitorous thoughts, "the lesson ended five minutes ago. Why have you not yet turned in your assignment?"

"I'm sorry, professor," the girl hastened to apologize, "I did not think to check on the time and got lost –"

"I expect you to do better next time, Miss Granger," Severus scolded her in his most scathing tone of voice that he almost regretted using on her, the one student who had so highly over-achieved against his prior judgement. "I would hate having to fail you on grounds of formality."

"Yes, sir," she complied meekly, her cheeks burning with embarrassment, and she hastened to roll up the scroll of parchment filled in her neat handwriting. Some lines were smeared, Severus could see, as there had probably been no focus to spare on cleanliness in the way of lifting the palm of her hand where it would otherwise collide with newly scribbled words, the ink still fresh and wet. There were few details he could make out as to the content of the paper, as the girl was quick to roll it into a tight scroll, tying it off with a silk bow she quickly conjured with her wand, but what few words he could see appeared accurate. Boomslang skin and lacewing flies he could read before the bow was tied and the scroll held out to him.

Taking the parchment from her, he gave her a nod and she scurried off to join her classmates in their break. Before she could leave the classroom, Severus called her back.

"Miss Granger," he spoke at a normal volume, but his voice carried and as every student, the girl was used to obey his tone. She turned and looked at some point over his shoulder, not meeting his eyes. "What colour today?"

The blush in her cheeks intensified, Severus saw to his pleasure. Rather than tell him off for asking her such a personal question, the girl shot back, "Crimson."
Her eyes flitted to his for a second, and Severus dipped into what was supposed to be the window to the girl's soul. What he found was blankness, her walls impressively stable and unyielding to his perusal of her thoughts. He could not find an image to go with her answer, and before he could attempt to dig deeper, the girl averted her gaze. With a muttered "Good-bye, sir" she was gone, and Severus was left to visions of crimson knickers.

Lunch turned out to be an interesting affair, to say the least. When Hermione plopped down opposite her two best friends, Harry shot her a worried look, as had become his custom whenever she would return from a one-on-one meeting with their feared Potions Master. Hermione graced him with a reassuring smile, just as Ginny fell into the seat next to her.

"Say, Hermione," she began, "whatever managed to change your mind on cleaning up your hair?"

Hermione almost choked on the grilled vegetables that filled her mouth, now her meal of choice for Mondays.

"Excuse me?" she countered. "For your information, my hair has always been clean. It just didn't quite fall into the waves that others might find desirable."

"Oh, believe me, Hermione," Ginny stage-whispered, leaning closer to her with exaggerated secrecy, "you are most desirable now."

Hermione laughed, more than a little nervousness at the younger girls' words seeping into the sound, and at that, Ron eventually looked up.

"Oi, 'Mione," he exclaimed, only now catching up to the girls' conversation, "wherever did all your hair go?"

"Honestly, Ronald," Hermione replied, "I've been wearing my hair this way for half a week now, and you're only just noticing a change today?"

Mumbling something about Quidditch and weekends, Ron turned a bright beet red and his face almost vanished into the beefsteak on the plate in front of him. Hermione shook her head in a benevolent incredulity that could only be found between as close friends as them, and shared a smile with Ginny.

"Really, though," Harry now joined the conversation, "you look amazing, Hermione."

Hermione blushed.

"Thank you, Harry," she answered, honestly pleased at the compliment.

With that being said, the boys soon resumed their conversation on Quidditch, and Ginny left Hermione after a few more exchanged words to sit with her yearmates. After lunch, the trio departed on different ways as Harry and Ron climbed the stairs to their Divination lesson and Hermione went off to Ancient Runes. Together, they later suffered through a double period of Defence Against the Ministry Toad, and spent their dinner bashing Umbridge in every way possible.

Leaving her two best friends to finish their dinner in their own time, Hermione waved a quick goodbye to the boys, shooting them a reassuring smile that she hoped conveyed her certainty that everything would be okay, and off she was to the dungeons.

Severus was still perusing the parchment the girl had handed in when a knock on the door startled
him out of his reverie. A quickly cast Tempus gave proof to what he had already expected—he’d missed dinner.

A flick of his wand had the door swing open to reveal the girl standing behind it. Though she should have been used to him magically opening the door, her eyes widened slightly, and Severus, eager to find something lacking in her progress of mastering Occlumency, dived in.

A wide basin filled with bubbles smelling of the clean air of a green forest filled his vision before the image grew darker. Eyes closed, water enveloped him as he submerged fully into the bath. Where before there had been random spots of light, darkness took over and the colourful mindscape turned to shades of grey. When the grey had turned to a tone of anthracite that was close to merging into black, he drew a breath—

— only to resurface, coughing and spluttering, desperate to get the soapy water out of his lungs. Wiping lengths of wet, curly, brown hair out of his face and water out of his eyes, he heaved several gasps before leaving the perspective of the girl to look upon her. Her nakedness was well hidden underneath the thick bubbles coating the surface of the bath in a generous layer of opaque foam. He wondered for a moment whether the girl had added such a great amount of bubble bath to the water with him in mind, to protect her bareness when he would be scouring her memories later. Before he could find an answer, the girl in the memory grabbed her wand to recast the wards she had erected around the bathroom, now faltering in their strength with her partially water-filled lungs.

"You know, Miss Granger," Severus said in greeting, or rather instead of it, when he exited the girl's mind, "that pool is intended for up to five people of the same sex to enjoy in parallel. Even if you don't wish to invite the female prefects from the other Houses and the Head Girl to join you in your evening bubble bath, you should at least allow access to the showers, so that your seven co-prefects, not to mention Head Boy and Girl and the Quidditch captains, may clean themselves up if they wish to. Heavily warding the bathroom against everybody does not seem very cooperative of you."

The girl, still standing in the hallway, completely baffled, collected her wits at that and entered the classroom, closing the door behind her.

"Good evening, sir," she greeted with emphasis.

Severus ignored her.

"I suggest you do your homework exercises after curfew from now on," he continued as if she had never spoken. "I understand that Potter has his ways and means to stroll about the Castle undetected. Perhaps you might beg his assistance in that aspect."

The girl seemed to grasp that she would get no polite, yet empty phrases from him tonight. Not that he regularly used those, anyway.

"Yes, sir," she complied.

"Now, it seems that you failed in your homework assignment," Severus judged her memory correctly. "And your task from today's lesson was not fully completed, overstepping the time limit anyway, and lacking in tidiness. Let us see if there is at least one thing you can do right, shall we?"

And without waiting for her answer, or acknowledging the wetness that filled the girl's eyes, Severus twirled his wand in a complicated movement and a faint blue line appeared just beneath the bottom border of her skirt. Standing and crossing over to where the girl stood, Severus bent his knees to better examine the distance between line and seam. To his eye, the measure seemed to be correct.
"Very well, Miss Granger," he concluded when he straightened, "it appears that you are capable of hemming your skirt by an inch."

The girl stayed silent. Severus had almost expected her to thank him for his assessment, but was rather grateful that she remained quiet.

"Now, Miss Granger, how about –"

His gratitude at her silence had been too early, it seemed, as her curiosity broke through and she interrupted him.

"What spell was that?" she asked, almost breathless. "Professor," she added, as if in an afterthought.

Severus could feel his lips disappearing into a line so thin the girl would probably be unable to discern whether his face featured a mouth at all. Unfortunately, she saw none of that, as her eyes were firmly fixed to his chest, cleverly avoiding his gaze. Her cheeks, however, blushed with the embarrassment of having interrupted her stern teacher, and her silken curls frizzed a little at the ends as her magic reacted to her emotional tumult. Severus felt himself giving in to the charm that the sight of the embarrassed young witch spread, though entirely unintended on her account, he was sure, for otherwise she would not have been half as charming.

"I am certain that there is an incantation written in some textbook or other to reach the result that I just procured," he replied, "but I used no such thing. This was mere intention on my part."

Emboldened by the fact that he had answered her in the first place, the girl pressed on, "But what intention was that exactly? Did you intend to procure a line at a specific distance from my waist downwards?"

"No," Severus said, "I simply wanted to know where your lower hem was supposed to be according to the current dress code regulations at this esteemed institution."

"Then how," the girl continued, "did the magic know what the current dress code regulation stated? Or is your sense of proportion that perfect that the line appeared at the correct height? How can you be certain that it is the right height at all?"

Severus rolled his eyes in obvious annoyance, though his insides frolicked in joy at the natural curiosity that the girl possessed. Instinctive, inner magic was not something taught these days, and to find a student interested in such things was a rarity.

Instead of answering her straight away, Severus decided to ask a question himself.

"Tell me, Miss Granger," he began, "what subject based on ridiculous wand waving comes least easily to you?"

"Transfiguration," came the girl's instant reply.

"And why is that?"

The girl thought on that for a minute.

"I'm not quite certain, professor," she admitted.

"Guess, then," Severus encouraged generously.

Another few moments passed before she came to a decision.
"I suppose," she said slowly, "that it has to do with the fact that beside the words that we are told to use in a spell, we need a lot of imagination to picture exactly what the result is supposed to look like?"

Severus kept himself from gracing the girl with one of his exceedingly rare, proud smiles. Barely.

"More exactly," he corrected her instead, unwilling to outright tell her that she was on the right track, "one needs to know what the desired outcome is made of, how it works, and why it doesn't fall apart. Animagic, as one of the most advanced forms of transfigurational magic, is so rare because after having discovered through meditation what animal's form a wizard is going to take upon mastering Animagic, he needs to intently and intensively study that animal's physique; what it looks like, where its organs are placed, how it moves, and so forth. If he doesn't, he might place the liver in the wrong spot, or be forever limp and off-balance because he got the tail wrong, or be unable to think correctly because some synapse does not work the way it's supposed to. That is why that brand of magic is so rare. Many wizards and witches who have attempted Animagic have ended up in an incomplete or imperfect form, and either got stuck because they were unable to transform back, or died a pitiful death because their animal did not function correctly.

"The same problems exist on a much smaller scale in what Transfiguration is taught at Hogwarts. Many male students fail at transforming a match into a needle in their first year, simply because they've never bothered to examine a sewing needle up close before. Things become worse in later schoolyears, when lessons progress to inanimate to animate transfiguration. A house mouse to a goblet is easy, because everybody knows what a goblet looks like. But transfiguring a goblet to a house mouse usually ends in tragic deaths for the procured mice, as few students bother to think about how a mouse comes to live in the first place.

"Now," Severus ended his long monologue, "what am I trying to tell you, Miss Granger?"

The girl's bottom lip turned a lovely shade of cherry red as she continued to nervously chew on it, deep in thought. Severus was almost certain he had imagined the little plopping sound that it made as she released it from between her teeth.

"For the mice to die," she eventually replied slowly, still thinking on her answer even as she gave it, "they must have lived first. So intention, as long as it is clear in the magician's mind, can produce results that are physically impossible."

The sentence sounded almost like a question. When Severus made no move to answer, the girl took that as encouragement to continue.

"So, if one can procure life that would usually be impossible under the laws of physics," she mused, "it is quite easy to procure a line at the perfect height stated by school regulation if one is intent enough on doing so, even though the concrete knowledge behind it is lacking."

"What if you were to conjure a ruler, Miss Granger?" Severus pressed, eager to find proof that she really had understood.

"It would measure perfectly," she replied, more confident now that he hadn't proven her wrong yet, "but only while I concentrated on the intention for it to do so. The moment I relied on its calibration, the measurements would mess up completely."

Severus nodded his satisfaction with her answer.

"And why, Miss Granger," he continued, "are glamours inadvisable?"
Her eyes shot up to his for a second at his change in line of questioning. She lowered her gaze once more, and was surprisingly quick to answer.

"They demand constant attention, sir," she spoke, "otherwise they will fade. Subsequently, the more glamours one uses simultaneously, the less concentration one can spare for other things."

"Academically speaking," Severus supplied, "they diminish the caster's capacity for magic. As a rule of thumb, however, one might say that with a great focus on artificially improving one's appearance comes an empty head."

"Is that why you checked me for glamours last week, professor?" the girl asked.

"It is," he confirmed. "When magically changing your appearance, Miss Granger, you would fare well to do so at a physical level. It is less likely to fade with your waning concentration, and should you wish to disguise yourself and were caught, the disguise would have to be detected at the level it was cast first, and then be dismantled. Of course, changes to the genes themselves are highly risky and generally not advisable. But often it is enough to understand how colour seeps into the hair, and hope that you will neither spend enough time in captivity for your natural colour to grow out, nor for your captors to think of casting a growth acceleration charm on your hair. Likewise, it often is more effective to conjure long lasting contact lenses that cover your natural eye colour rather than glamour your irises."

The girl looked confused.

"I didn't think such Muggle means were common knowledge in the wizarding world," she said.

"They aren't," Severus replied. "That is why you would do well to get back to them, especially when fighting against pureblood supremacists who would rather sacrifice their first-born than study anything originated from the Muggle world.

"But for now, Miss Granger," he terminated their current topic of conversation, "let us turn to your progress in Occlumency instead. When you entered the classroom earlier, your concentration was completely off. I suggest we work on that. Where did we stop last week? Ah, yes," a smirk crossed his features, and the girl shivered under the expression that she more guessed from his voice than saw on his face, "your sixth birthday…"

And thus the girl's detention really began.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter thirteen, wherein are encountered failure issues and the first fall of snow.
Monday, September 23rd, 1995

An exercise book filled with scrawled capital letters spelling words that were mostly short enough but some of them surprisingly long for children learning to write was returned to a six-year-old girl's hands. When she opened it to the page of their last exercise, she was visibly incensed – with the teacher or with herself, Severus could not determine – to see that on the page littered with words, there was one spelling mistake near the bottom of the page. One. One pointed out in bright red ink, as well, and as the young girl's face turned red with anger and embarrassment, the correction ink turned black, to match the originally used ink, and all of a sudden, what had been a correction became the original, as if there had never been a mistake in the first place.

"Issues with failure, Miss Granger?" Severus asked, not hiding the smirk that was spread across his face.

"I was six," the girl shot back, her face as darkly blushed as it had been in her memory, "I had been reading on my own for almost two years, writing for one and a half. To placate my frustration with how slow preschool classes progressed, the teacher thought it good exercise for me to try my spelling with longer words, in addition to the usual spelling exercises. My preferred literature at that time did not usually involve words as 'eavesdrop'," Severus was surprised at the generous amount of malice with which she spat out the word, "so how was I to know that there was supposed to be an A in it?"

Severus's heart skipped a beat at the discovery that she was magnificent in her fury. It wasn't as if he hadn't noticed before, but every time he saw her in passion, he could not help but imagine in what other ways he might move her to such emotion. His cock gave a hearty throb at the image that planted itself in his mind, not for the first time. Her shortened skirt, if only by an inch, and silk-clad legs certainly didn't help.

"Obvious failure issues, then," Severus surmised, "as if we'd come to expect anything else from you, Miss Granger."

Him using the plural pronoun incensed her even more. It was evil of him, indicating that other teachers were talking about her in anything less than the high praise he constantly got from his colleagues – well, not from 'Professor' Umbridge, of course, but not only Minerva was a fervent admirer of the girl's academic success – but he could not help himself. The girl looked too desirable in her anger for him to simply stop teasing her.

"My my, Miss Granger," he added as she still struggled to find words to compose an appropriate answer to his taunts, "it seems you blush as bright a crimson as your knickers. Is that why the Sorting Hat put you into Gryffindor?"
She did attempt, and very hard at that, not to raise to his bait, nor to raise her eyes to meet his, but that did not mean that Severus could not see them, even if they were firmly fixed on his chest. In her incensed state, there was a flicker behind the girl's eyes, and Severus could tell that the meagre walls of Occlumency she had worked so relentlessly to build were coming down with a crash. In an instant he was inside her mind.

*Merlin*, he swore as he returned to reality, and the dungeon took longer to take its usual form in front of his eyes as his mind still reeled from what he had seen. His cock throbbed more insistently than ever before in the girl's present. Well, not *ever* before, obviously, as there had been the incident atop the –

Desperate to keep his wits about himself, and knowing that he'd be unable to do so once he allowed his thoughts to wander to the events of that fateful Thursday night meeting where her white cheeks had turned such a lovely shade of red under his attention, he decided to confront the girl on what he had just discovered.

"Lying to me, Miss Granger?" he queried. "I must admit I am impressed that you managed that feat in the first place, not to mention got away with it for a few hours. It seems that some of my teaching has taken root, at least. Though I have to say, Miss Granger…” He paused for a second, enjoying the effect this short break had on the girl. "Slytherin colours?"

The girl, so brightly blushed before, now blanched rapidly.

"That's not –" she stuttered, "that wasn't what I was going for," she explained. "I thought of how winter was going to arrive in Scotland soon, and how delightful the pine trees would look covered in the first fall of snow."

Sweet Nimue, the girl was infuriating in her innocence. *Innocent as the first fall of snow, one might even say*, he mused.

The picture had Severus groan inwardly, though certainly not in delight about a fucking winter landscape. Suddenly it made sense that the trimmings around the forest green silk of her knickers had been white, not silver. He had not been certain about the colour as the girl had transfigured the white cotton in the dim candlelight in the early morning, presumably so as not to wake her roommates, and it had been hard to tell from her memory alone. Now he had her confirmation. Now he knew.

Before he could do anything about the knowledge that she wore forest green silk knickers with white trimmings underneath her shorter-than-regulation-length skirt – *and what would he do, really?* – the girl confronted him.

"Are you going to spend every time we meet on trying to get to the colour of my underwear?" she asked. Under his stare that she was certain to feel, even if her eyes were now trained on the wall behind him, she added a "sir" that was more of a formality than actual politeness.

Severus smirked. It seemed he had managed to truly get to the girl if she was forgetting her usually so impeccable manners already.

"Miss Granger," he sneered – he still had a façade to maintain, after all, "if you believe that me knowing the colour of your current fancy, or your current goal in your transfigurational morning exercises, is worse than anything the Dark Lord's followers will do to you should they get their hands on you, you are sorely mistaken.

"If you will remember, I told you that I would be extracting every memory that caused you to blush – though I must say, you do so excessively and usually unnecessarily – until you were adequately able
to keep me from doing so. Till then, you have no right to question my methods."

He paused.

"That is, unless, of course, you would rather end these private lessons here and now? A single word will suffice, and I will announce that you are a hopeless case, and that I would rather drench my eyes in Bubotuber pus than teach you Remedial Potions, and both you and I would be free of these weekly obligations."

The girl looked up at him in shock. Severus resisted the urge to simply dip into those wide doe eyes, and instead stared back with a coldness that had the girl physically shudder.

"No, sir," she whispered when she finally found her voice again, "please, do continue to teach me. I understand that these things are necessary, and I assure you, I am doing my best to learn quickly."

Severus's harsh gaze must have involuntarily softened, even if only by a fraction, as the girl's whole posture relaxed a fair share, and her eyes returned to their preferred spot on the wall.

"Your written assignment was adequate," Severus admitted, though his voice was the commanding tone he usually preferred for admonishing students who had done something incorrectly. "Even though there were two ingredients missing, as did the last seven brewing steps, your results exceeded my expectations."

The girl looked like a desert flower, set into moist, nourishing toil after months spent in a singeing heat, as in her pride, she bloomed to life under his eyes, and rightly so.

"Your bathing, however," Severus continued, and the girl fell back into herself, though far less than she had been prone to doing before, "is still lacking. That is to say, your grasp on instinctive magic is merely theoretical at the current time. Unfortunately, in my estimation, we lack the time to go into that topic in any relevant depth. Fortunately, though, Occlumency is one of the branches that is mostly used in instinct. For you to work on that means for you to tap into your inner magic, schooling your use of it. The more you advance in Occlumency, the easier it will be for you to perform instinctive, intentional magic later on.

"Besides practicing your breathing and performing your usual exercises in preparation for these lessons, I believe we might add a few minutes of theoretical discussion to these weekly lessons. I want you to prepare notes on what magic the Ministry picks up on in their persecution of underage magic outside schooling environments, and on how best to defend against different ways of performing magic."

"Yes, sir," the girl agreed eagerly, clearly delighted at the prospect of learning more about what was usually summarized under the term 'Old Ways': magicks that were either so ingrained in wizarding culture or so largely forgotten that nobody saw the need in teaching them at school – which was why few wizards and witches who were raised in non-magical environments ever learned about them. And even if, purely by accident, they stumbled upon any such notions, they were hard to explain to their peers; and even if those peers understood what one had discovered, they were rare to know how to explain the discovered phenomena, as there was little theory known to them who had grown up with such things.

That Severus himself had any notion of such magicks was purely due to the fact that a certain prefect had taken an early interest in his penchant for what was considered Dark Magic when he had first started school, and to Abraxas Malfoy's extensive library.

Casting a quick Tempus, Severus discovered that it was almost three. High time for the girl to leave.
Filius would be done with his rounds soon, and it would not do for her to be discovered by anyone other than a friendly and well-meaning colleague.

"Go now, Miss Granger," Severus ended their detention. "You know what to do until next week. Our lessons starting Monday after that will be shorter, as I cannot keep you in 'Remedial Potions'," he did not mime the air quotes, but they were audible in his voice, "for longer than your usual lessons last, so two and a quarter hours will have to suffice. Two and a half, if we add a break in between and work through that. I will, however, endeavour to keep you busy with exercises for you to practice during regular Potions periods."

"What about my brewing, sir?" the girl asked.

A valid point, Severus had to concede, but one he quickly found the answer to.

"There is a rarely used bathroom, I've heard," he replied and had to fight the sudden urge to issue a conspiratorial wink. "Maybe you should seek that out."

The girl stared at him with an open mouth, forgetting for a moment to close both her lips and her mind.

"Also, these are your assigned ingredients, six inches on each due this Thursday. Just because I teach you differently doesn't mean you are exempt from homework, after all. Goodnight, Miss Granger," Severus dismissed her. That seemed to startle the girl out of her perplexed state.

"Goodnight, professor," she greeted, accepted her homework assignment, and with a whirl of her robes, she was gone.

Hurrying back to Gryffindor tower this night, Hermione took greater care when turning corners than the week before, this time looking out for miniature Charms teachers who might topple over if she walked by too quickly. She did, indeed, happen upon Professor Flitwick, and they wished each other a good night in passing.

When she entered the common room, Harry was waiting for her.

"Exhausted?" he asked as Hermione fell onto the couch next to his usual armchair.

"Mm-hmm," Hermione hummed in the affirmative, stretching out on the couch until she was half lying there.

"What did the git have you do this time?"

"Harry," Hermione admonished, remembering her promise to the Headmaster to defend the Potions Master, even against her best friends if need be, "Professor Snape is a respected teacher at a highly esteemed institution. He is one of less than a handful of Potions Masters in Europe and a luminary in his area of expertise. And if his academic prestige is not enough to deserve your respect, then at least keep in mind that he has the trust of the Headmaster and many other adults that you call your friends. If you cannot bring yourself to like him," Harry snorted at that, "that is completely alright. But please," she begged insistently, "for unity's sake if nothing else, do accept him as the honourable man that he is, and treat him with the politeness he is due."

Harry pursed his lips and kept silent, though Hermione understood quite clearly what he thought of her plea when he turned away from her to stare into the flames of the dying fire instead.

Hermione sighed. Even if Harry had not reacted positively to her plight, at least he had not gone
completely over the brink in anger at her words. That, at least, had to count for something, she decided. In time, maybe he would actually listen to what she had to say about the man, not only hear 'Professor Snape', tune out, and wait for her to finish speaking.

"Professor Snape," she said, continuing their conversation for their friendship's sake, "had me brew multiple batches of the Boil Treating Potion that you all did during the lesson today. He said it was needed for the Infirmary."

"Preparing for a pandemic?" Harry joked, most of the tension from Hermione's earlier words dissipated from him.

"I have no clue," Hermione answered.

"Or maybe," Harry carried on, "he was waiting for some of his students to come knocking, and for you to incidentally screw up the potion at that exact time, so that he could give you some more detention for injuring a student?"

Hermione laughed.

"Oh Harry," she said, "I don't think that was it at all. And I don't think he would be that petty."

Harry quirked an eyebrow at that, apparently conveniently forgetting that Hermione had earned her detention before the unfortunate accident with Neville.

"In any case," Hermione concluded, "it was good practice."

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, content in each other's company. Hermione had almost dozed off when Harry rose.

"How about we head to bed, hmm?" he suggested.

Hermione yawned.

"Alright," she agreed. "Good night."

But when Hermione lay in her four poster bed, the curtains drawn and warded, sleep did not come as easily to her as it almost had on the common room sofa. Instead, her mind returned to the homework Professor Snape had set her.

*How to best defend against different ways of performing magic.*

She wondered if Harry had ever thought outside of the box of what they were taught on the theory of magic here at Hogwarts. Then again, Harry was not exactly the type to think about magical theory at all, she guessed, as he had always been a quick actor, attacking and defending on instinct rather than strategy.

Even though Hermione herself had always been one for getting to the bottom of things, understanding how exactly they worked, and taking strength from that knowledge, she knew that for Harry, his approach to magic worked. She also knew that from the way Umbridge was teaching them Defence, they were hard-pressed to gain any useful knowledge theory-wise, much less learn how to effectively defend themselves.

Now, that just would not do. Harry had promised to think about it at least, when she'd first approached him with her idea of him teaching a defence group two weeks ago. Maybe it was time for her to give him a little nudge.
And with that thought in mind, Hermione was too tired to reach the Pure Black of Occlumency, instead falling into the pleasant blankness of a dreamless, restful sleep.

Tuesday, September 24 th , 1995

While with Professor Snape she had been discussing transfiguring or even Conjuring house mice the night before, Tuesday's Transfiguration lesson found most of her classmates still attempting to Vanish them. On Hermione's desk, however, Professor McGonagall set down a kitten.

"Miss Granger," the professor called when the class ended, all the animals successfully, though more than a little regretfully on Hermione's part, Vanished. "I would like you to have lunch with me in my office, if you don't mind."

Hermione shot a glance at the door. Harry and Ron had already left and might be wondering where she was if she didn't turn up at lunch in the Great Hall.

"Oh, don't worry, my dear girl," the older witch correctly interpreted her expression, "Messieurs Potter and Weasley are quite likely to make it through a lunch break without you. Hopefully, they will notice that I am absent from the High Table as well, and will successfully surmise that you are with me. Now, shall we?" she offered, and waved a speechless Hermione through to her office.

"Now, Miss Granger," her House of Head began once Hermione had a cup of tea in hand, a ginger newt on her saucer, and a plate of cold ham and turkey sandwiches nearby, "it will be of no surprise to you if I tell you that you are far beyond your year's usual teaching level."

Hermione beamed at the compliment, but her professor was not finished.

"In fact," Professor McGonagall continued, "in some aspects you are more advanced than many NEWT level students. With your natural curiosity and thirst for knowledge, I assume you will be interested in learning beyond the limits of school curriculae."

Hermione nodded, eager for the elder witch to get to the point.

"As you have recently turned sixteen – and I wish you a belated happy birthday –," Hermione gave a nod and a grateful smile in thanks, "there are things you should be taught that are long out of practice in the wizarding world. I believe that with your moral and mental maturity, and with your advanced grasp of magic, not to mention your age difference to your yearmates," and the meaningful look her Head of House threw her at that confirmed to Hermione that they were not only talking about the fact that she was born at the beginning of the schoolyear, but rather of her advanced aging due to her full schedule during her third year of schooling, "you should be allowed to learn what has not been taught at a state-approved school in centuries.

"Look," Professor McGonagall suddenly interrupted the monologue that had Hermione at the very edge of her chair in her excitement to find out what was going on. She held out a framed picture of what appeared to be a much younger Minerva McGonagall and a handsome man standing beside her. Hermione's Head of House was clad all in a lovely summer dress, and rings glistened on the couple's fingers as they waved into the camera.

"My beloved Dougal," the older witch explained, "taken from me by the Statute of Secrecy and my own pride and ambition." She fell silent for a moment, lovingly tracing the contours of her late partner's face with her index. Eventually, she continued.

"But that was not was I wanted you to see. Look more closely at Dougal's left hand," she instructed.
"What do you see there?"

Hermione leaned in close to thoroughly peruse the indicated part of the picture.

"Is that a Hogwarts sigil ring?" she asked.

Professor McGonagall nodded. "What else?" she pressed.

"It contains a ruby, I think," Hermione said, squinting her eyes a little to see better. "Was he a Gryffindor as well, professor?"

"Oh no," her teacher laughed, "Dougal was a muggle I met during the summer following my graduation." At Hermione's questioning look, she added, "The picture was taken with a Muggle camera. I had the photo developed later. Dougal thought the ring pretty, quartered with the four animals. He never knew what it stood for.

"But what I wanted you to see was the ruby. I had the ring especially commissioned as a late engagement present to my future husband, although –" Her face fell. "Well, I gifted it to him a few days after he asked for my hand in marriage. A day after that, I left him. He tried to hand me the ring back, but I wanted him to keep it. I don't know if he did, but I hope he wore it all his life, though in the end, it didn't make a difference. He died in the prime of his years. I was glad he never asked the engagement ring he had given me back. I couldn't have stood that.

"The stone," she changed the topic and surreptitiously wiped at a tear that had escaped the corner of her eye, "was a special one. Crafting such jewels has become a rarely practiced tradition, and I believe you might benefit from the knowledge how it is done."

"Crafting a jewel?" Hermione asked, moved by the story, but not quite certain she had understood this particular part correctly. "But professor, how is such a thing possible?"

"This book is all you need, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall carried on as if Hermione had never spoken. "It has been banned from the United Kingdom for containing practices that have been categorized as Dark, but I assure you, there is nothing to fear from what you can learn from this book – if you perform the magic correctly, that is."

Hermione blanched a little. 'Safe' Dark magic, but only if successful? To her, that didn't sound very safe at all.

"Concealing a book has become harder with the development of paranoia, and with the situation at Hogwarts being as it is," the older witch did not need to mention Umbridge by name for Hermione to understand what they were talking about, "it is best to simply disguise a book as something else, rather than trying to hide the whole book away. When caught with it, one is under no suspicion for having concealed something in the first place, and if properly disguised, the book will be of no use to the examiner. Do you know how to conceal a book?"

"Yes, professor," Hermione replied. At her stern teacher's raised eyebrow, she elaborated, "Professor Dumbledore showed me."

Hermione's Head of House seemed to be both calmed and worried by that confession.

"I assume it is too much to hope," she asked, though it was barely a question, "that Messieurs Potter and Weasley's company has not rubbed off on you too much, Miss Granger, and that you will tell me why Albus saw sense in teaching a student how to disguise her books?"

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip for a second, blushing profusely in having to keep something
from her esteemed Head of House, but eventually answered, "That is correct, professor."

Professor McGonagall sighed.

"Alright then, Miss Granger," she said, and handed her the book with utmost care. It was wrapped in dark purple velvet. When Hermione cautiously flipped open the wrapping, she startled.

The thick leather-bound tome sported in big gold letters 'Blood Magic for the Uninitiated'.

"Blood Magic," she exclaimed, "but professor –"

"Shush, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall admonished. "I had hoped I would not need to lecture you on and swear you to absolute silence about this?" Hermione shook her head in the negative. "Very well," the older witch said, "then do perform the charm, please."

Hermione did not need to be told twice. Imitating the complex motion she had seen the Headmaster twirl his wand in, she was happy to see that she had procured the same result. 'Blood Magic for the Uninitiated' was now decipherable only for an expert on Ancient Nordic Runes.

"Impressive," the Transfiguration Mistress complimented her, "five points to Gryffindor for that neat little piece of magic, Miss Granger. And now, you should head to your next lesson. It would not do to keep Pomona waiting."

"No, Professor McGonagall," Hermione agreed, wrapping the now encoded book back in its velvet cover and safely stowing it away in her book bag.

"Thank you, professor," she said as she stood, on her way to leave the office in order to make it to Herbology on time.

"Hermione," her Head of House called her back. Startled at the use of her first name, Hermione turned around. "Good luck."

The soft smile playing about the face of her teacher confirmed to Hermione what fierce love her Head of House held for all of her cubs, never mind how rarely she showed it in such a way as she did now. Hermione returned the smile gladly, putting all her gratitude into it.

"Now grab a few sandwiches before you leave, Miss Granger," and back was the stern, but just professor Hermione had come to adore, "you barely ate anything."

"Six bloody inches on each ingredient," Ron moaned, still working on the fourth point on his list of a dozen ingredients commonly used in healing potioneering. The first three he had finished by scrawling bigger and bigger, until the paragraphs had spanned the correct length each.

Dinner had passed and Hermione had successfully motivated ("Bullied, more like it," Ron insisted) her two best friends to tackle their Potions homework in the library. It turned out that Professor Snape had jumbled the ingredients listed on each student's homework assignment, so that they would be unable to simply copy from one of their friends. Although, Hermione wearily noticed, Ron seemed almost motivated enough to go from classmate to classmate until he'd assembled all the theory on all the ingredients on his list, so desperate was he not to do any Potions research himself.

Intent on enforcing her agenda (and cutting off Ron's moaning in the process), Hermione decided to change the topic.

"I was wondering," she began, leaning towards Harry, "whether you'd thought any more about
Defence Against the Dark Arts, Harry."

He didn't look up, intently scribbling away at the paragraph he was currently working on.

"'Course I have," he said grumpily. "Can't forget it, can we, with that hag teaching us –"

Realizing that he did not quite grasp what she was getting at, Hermione quickly specified, "I meant the idea Ron and I had" – that got Ron's attention, judging by the look he shot her, much less imploring than threatening her to drop that particular phrasing – "oh, all right, the idea I had, then – about you teaching us."

Suddenly, Harry seemed even more interested in his issue of Asiatic Anti-Venoms than before. Hermione suppressed a sigh, knowing he would only withdraw from their conversation if she prompted him any more than she already had. Instead, she waited with outward calmness, though inside she was screaming with impatience.

"Well," he eventually offered, drawing out the syllable as if it could keep him from answering indefinitely if he only had the breath to maintain the word, "yeah, I – I've thought about it a bit."  

"And?"

Hermione was certain she had been unable to disguise her eagerness for his answer just then.

"I dunno," Harry said, looking to Ron as if that might buy him time.

Luckily for Hermione, Ron just then suddenly discovered his backbone.

"I thought it was a good idea from the start," he said, and Hermione had to fight to keep herself from rolling her eyes at Ron. Honestly, as if Harry was to out and about drop their friendship merely because Ron agreed with her instead of him for once.

Harry himself appeared very uncomfortable, shifting in his chair.

"You did listen to what I said about a load of it being luck, didn't you?"

"Yes, Harry," Hermione replied with as much gentility as she could muster. "But all the same, there's no point pretending that you're not good at Defence Against the Dark Arts, because you are. You were the only person last year who could throw off the Imperius Curse completely," – and wasn't that something she should mention in her private lessons, Hermione mused – "you can produce a Patronus, you can do all sorts of stuff that full-grown wizards can't, Viktor always said –"

Hermione realized she should not have mentioned her Bulgarian friend when Ron's head snapped around to face her so fast that she was surprised it did not audibly crack at the motion.

"Yeah?" he queried challengingly. "What did Vicky say?"

"Ho ho," Hermione countered, laying all her annoyance with his childish jealousy into the sound. "He said Harry knew how to do stuff even he didn't, and he was in the final year at Durmstrang."

The look of suspicion did not vanish from Ron's face as she'd hoped it would once she attempted to turn the conversation back to Harry's Defence skills.

"You're not still in contact with him, are you?"

Her anger rose and she could feel her face heat up. Ron's pettiness was really too much for her at times. For a moment she wondered what he might say if he knew how close she was with their
"So what if I am?" Hermione turned her attention away from the thought. As hot as her head felt, as cold was her voice. "I can have a pen pal if I –"

"He didn't only want to be your pen pal," said Ron accusingly.

Hermione felt the sudden urge to laugh in his face. Honestly, even at fifteen she'd not been naïve enough to believe that Viktor's wandering hands during the Yule Ball had been due to his interest in her academic successes. Of course he'd wanted to be more than her pen pal, but he had been the perfect gentleman when Hermione had told him that she was not ready for anything more than a nice dance. After that, their friendship had seemed to become stronger, if anything, with the sexual tension dissipating between them, and their penpalship had had the opportunity to blossom.

To have Ron, of all people, tell her now that Viktor had wanted to get to know her in the biblical sense (though it certainly would have been far too much to expect Ron to phrase it this way) when he himself had only noticed her change in appearance after Ginny had sat down in front of him and loudly talked about it to Hermione, was simply too much. Hermione decided that the fight was not worth her breath (she had come to value something as simple as breathing during her time learning under Professor Snape), and ignored him. Instead, she faced Harry once more.

"Well, what do you think?" she prompted. "Will you teach us?"

Harry was visibly relieved that Hermione would not start a fight with Ron, though in all honesty, Hermione thought, if the two of them had fought, it would have been entirely Ron's fault.

"Just you and Ron, yeah?" Harry asked.

"Well," it was Hermione's turn to hope for time that she knew she could not buy, "Well… now, don't fly off the handle again, Harry, please…. But I really think you ought to teach anyone who wants to learn. I mean, we're talking about defending ourselves against V-" she struggled over the name, "Voldemort – oh, don't be pathetic, Ron – it doesn't seem fair if we don't offer the chance to other people."

Harry did not seem convinced as he mulled over her words.

"Yeah," he eventually said, "but I doubt anyone except you two would want to be taught by me. I'm a nutter, remember?"

"Well, I think you might be surprised how many people would be interested in hearing what you've got to say," Hermione answered. "Look," she proposed and leaned further in, seeing that Ron now appeared to be listening to what she had to say as well, "you know the first weekend in October's a Hogsmeade weekend? How would it be if we tell anyone who's interested to meet us in the village and we can talk it over?"

"Why do we have to do it outside school?" Ron asked.

"Because," Hermione fought the desire to lose her temper at him, instead concentrating on her diagram of the Chinese Chomping Cabbage she was copying, "I don't think Umbridge would be very happy if she found out what we were up to."

Seeing that none of the boys were about to contradict her, Hermione shot a look at Harry's scribbled notes. A long held-in sigh escaped her lips as she saw his scrawled diagram of the Saigon Satin Salad. She drew the parchment towards her and with a few quick lines had salvaged as much as had been salvageable. Harry shot her a grateful look as he retrieved the scroll from her care, while Ron's
parchment was slowly inching towards her.

Hermione suppressed another exasperated sigh and turned to help him.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter fourteen, wherein a wand gets lost during a late night bath.
Wednesday, September 25th, 1995

Hermione managed to beg Harry's cloak off him. He had eyed her suspiciously and with more than a little concern in his eyes, but she'd placated him, saying she merely needed it to take a much-needed bath for relaxation. It was no lie, either; she actually needed the cloak to use the prefects' bathroom in peace and quiet after curfew, as Professor Snape had suggested, to practice her Occlumency.

Harry had given in to her plea and granted her the cloak for the night. Hermione wondered how he might react if she were to ask him for it again and again at a weekly interval, but decided to worry about that later.

Slipping into the bathroom late at night, she erected her usual wards and the screen that afforded her an extra wall to shield her from any intruder to break through her security measures. She dropped her bathrobe and discarded her knickers that she'd kept on underneath, placing them with her slippers in just enough distance from the tub that she would not get them wet when leaving the bath.

Naked, she cast one of the spells her roommates had taught her to keep her hair in a bun at the top of her head, intent on keeping her riotous curls away from her face during her exercises. Stepping into the tub, she breathed a sigh of utter contentment as the warm water surrounded her, the plentiful bubbles wafting their gentle pine scent through the bathroom.

Deciding to practice her wandless magic, Hermione waved towards the little bag she had brought with her and to her delight, parchment and quill came flying towards her. Their flight was more than a little bumpy, both items unsteadily making their way through the room, but they arrived safe and dry, and Hermione was proud of herself. Hoping that she wouldn't get the parchment and quill wet, she decided to practice her intentional magic some more, and had the parchment hovering in front and a little above her eyes, the quill poised to start writing.

Hermione rather hoped than knew that she was familiar enough with how ink worked and how it was produced, so when she managed to have the quill write the date on top of the parchment without touching either and without inking, she almost broke out in exclamations of joy. The moment she began to laugh in happiness at her accomplishment, however, the quill began to slip towards the surface of the pool, and she reined in her excitement in order to keep the items away from the water.

Thinking back on everything Professor Snape had told her about how magic worked, Hermione set to her homework.

Severus stalked the castle. He both hated and loved patrol rounds. Hated, because they were one more much-needed way to spend the time during sleepless nights, thus reminding him of the fact that he lost sleep through his wretched insomnia in the first place; loved, because they were one more much-desired way to pounce on rule-breaking students.

The fifth floor corridor, however, afforded him once more with the tingling sensation of foreign wards.

*The girl.*
It was well after midnight and Severus was almost proud that she'd listened to him and was now using the bathroom after curfew, rule-breaking little chit that she was. Putting a hand to the door, Severus could feel the hum of magic that guarded it, the slight vibrations that ran through the wood, warning him to stay away.

Without thinking much about it (and what a feat that was, intently not thinking about what he did for once), Severus dismantled the wards, taking care not to trigger any of the multiple alarms the girl had woven into the layers, and stood inside the bathroom. A screen kept him from seeing the pool that the girl was immersed in. Severus assured himself that she would be sufficiently covered in the bubbles that he'd seen in her memory of the first time she'd practiced here, her nakedness thus shielded from his view.

Walking around the screen, Severus laid eyes on the beautiful vixen that was relaxing in the steamy, bubbly water. Her once-more furious curls were piled on the top of her head in a messy bun, probably to keep them from falling into her eyes, and a parchment and quill were hovering above the water. Shooting a look towards where she'd left her things, Severus saw her wand stick out from a pocket in her bathrobe. A single flick of his hand had it flying towards him.

Twirling the slim piece of wood between his long fingers, Severus spoke.

"Late night bath, Miss Granger?"

Hermione gave a shriek when the dark, silky voice reached her ears. She barely managed to grab the parchment, but the quill had already fallen into the tub. Pulling it out, she regretfully perused the now dripping-wet feather and found it to be useless. She laid it down next to the brim of the bath, then placed the roll of parchment next to it, and turned to face her teacher.

"Good night, professor," she greeted him with icy politeness. "I was unaware that your patrols included personally visiting the students' bathrooms."

"My patrols, Miss Granger," her professor answered, "include making sure I find every single student that is out of bed when they shouldn't be. Thus, I found you."

"I am a prefect, sir," Hermione defended herself. "I have privileges."

"Which is why I found you in the prefects' bathroom after curfew, no doubt, instead of a normal bathroom, intended for more common students. But as much as you view yourself above your peers, Miss Granger, you should not make the mistake of thinking yourself above the rules. Have I made myself clear?"

Hermione was confused.

"No, sir," she replied, "in fact, you haven't made yourself clear. I believe you told me just two days ago to practice my Occlumency in the bathroom after curfew, and now you say just the opposite. Which rule am I to follow?"

"My point, Miss Granger," Professor Snape silkily explained, "is that your extensive wards miss the one to block a Homenum revelio. Were you aware?"

Hermione shook her head in the negative.

"No, sir," she answered. "Please, will you teach it to me?"

"That depends," came the little satisfying reply. "Did you use your time well?"
The girl hung her head. Judging from how dry her hair was, Severus was quite certain that she had not yet begun to practice her breathing under water. It was unlikely that the girl had discovered how to extract the oxygen from the bath water and simultaneously keep her mane from getting wet.

"I have not yet progressed to my breathing exercises, sir," the girl confirmed his assessment. "I did, however, get started on the theoretical questions you set me."

Severus merely raised an eyebrow, prompting her to continue. It appeared that in her nakedness, the girl was unwilling to keep her eyes from meeting his, as she usually did. Behind her suspicious and careful glare, he could see the walls she had built to keep him out. Severus was secretly impressed. It appeared that embarrassment improved the girl's control over warding her mind against outside intrusions.

"I believe," the girl hesitantly, "that at least one of two things needs to be present for underage magic to be detected by the Ministry of Magic. One, the magic comes from outside the underage witch's or wizard's magical core, meaning that either it was performed with the use of a wand or by some foreign source."

Severus nodded. The message that the Potter boy was about to be expelled arrived during a staff meeting in the summer of '92, meaning that he had heard about what happened. The Headmaster had motioned him and Minerva to follow, informed them of how the Ministry was on the brink of sending Potter to trial for his illegal use of magic, and asked the Head of Gryffindor to carry on the meeting without him. Severus had later learned that Potter had, in fact, not been stupid enough to perform magic to levitate a pudding, but rather that an errant house elf had done the deed for him, resulting in the very real Ministry threat that the Headmaster had worked so fast to dispel.

Encouraged by his nod, the girl continued.

"Two, a human is directly involved."

"Why?" Severus asked. "Why specify this?"

The girl worried her plump lower lip between her teeth for a moment, releasing it with a plop, now coloured the very desirable red of a ripe cherry, before answering, "Harry said that in the summer before our third year, he and Fudge only talked about how he inflated his aunt, even though in his rage, he'd managed to have a glass explode a few days earlier. Fudge never mentioned the glass. That is why I believe that this differentiation needs to be made."

"So tell me, Miss Granger," Severus prompted, "to what extent will you be able to practice for 'Remedial Potions' during the holidays at home?"

The girl obviously thought on her answer for a second, but was quick in her reply.

"My relaxation techniques and breathing exercises should be no problem," she said, "as they procure no outward magic. Working on my breathing under water should be alright, as well, as long as I don't do it in the presence of others, which I won't."

Severus smirked evilly at that. No, the girl was probably not one to have others watch her during her baths. He was a little surprised that she had not yet protested against him intruding upon her bath any more forcefully than she had.

"The same goes for writing without ink and without hands, I believe," the girl carried on, bravely ignoring his certainly frightfully looking expression. Severus had no pretty smile, and his smirk was the stuff of nightmares. "As long as nobody sees a hovering quill scrabbling on a hovering roll of
"Not as bad as one might expect from a hex-first-think-later Gryffindor," Severus commented, watching a tick in the girl's jaw twitch at the over-generalization towards her and her House. "Go on, Miss Granger. Can you answer the defence question?"

Had Severus been a lesser man, the glare she shot him might have levelled him to the ground. He was not, though, and thus was hardly moved by her murderous expression that she struggled to morph into a façade of politeness. She failed.

"Considering that intention is the foundation of magic, I would suggest using a Confundus charm against one's opponent."

"And give away to possible spectators that you have an in-depth understanding of magic? I think not," Severus shot her answer down. "Try again, Miss Granger."

The girl gave a sigh that spoke volumes of her barely suppressed rage. The hearty inhale had her chest heave, and Severus fought to visibly check whether his robes properly hid the bulge that tented his trousers as his cock reacted to the sight of a mountain of bubbles rising and sinking back to their original position with the movement of her perfect breasts underneath. Everything was still well hidden, so there was nothing he could actually see of her soft skin that spanned the symmetric mounds that would someday be his downfall, as he suspected. Severus's imagination, however, ran amok, his mind filling with pictures of how else he might make her breasts heave with sighs.

"Start at a lower level, then?" the girl asked, though it appeared the question was more to herself than to him. "Silence them?"

"Better," Severus admitted, "but they still have their wand and are thus very able to tear you to shreds."

"Expelliarmus?"

It was uttered as a question, but between Severus's fingers, the girl's wand gave a slight twitch at the word. Severus was surprised. He'd guessed that the girl was ahead of her peers in more than in intellect, but to have her display her power in such casual a way took him slightly aback. She was probably completely unaware about it, as well.

"Yes, Miss Granger," Severus drawled, "Expelliarmus, indeed. Though if they do not relinquish their hold on their wand, a quick Incendio towards their wand hand will do the trick as well – either they remain stubborn and have their wand burn with their hand, or they will let go of their wand, either letting it fall to the ground or switching to their minor hand, which would at least grant you a small advantage.

"Now, in which order to use these defence mechanisms will depend on your opponent and the surrounding spectators. If you're in a duel with only one opponent and nobody is watching, Confunding and Silencing them in quick succession is a wise move, after which you will be able to either gain possession or dispose of their wand without trouble.

"In a fight where you are outmanned, relieving as many opponents of their wands as possible seems like the right road to take, though you will need to make sure to have and keep the wands outside of their reach, otherwise you are merely wasting your breath.

"Confunding, Miss Granger, will only be clever in a fight that you expect to take some time. In a short fight, stunning them would be better, as a Confundus will disable a person from performing
sensible magic for longer than a Stupefy will knock them out altogether. Do keep in mind, however, that a Confunded opponent is still very much capable of performing magic, if skilled to do so with what further limitations you have imposed on them, though what they do perform will appear without reason. You merely rob them of coherent thought for quite some time, but intent they still possess.

"Do you understand, Miss Granger?"

The girl's eyes had widened as his explanation went on, and Severus suspected her fingers of twitching eagerly under the water, desperate to take notes.

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"Very well, Miss Granger," Severus concluded. "I will leave you to your bath then. It appears your intentional magic works quite well without much practice already, judging from your earlier manner of taking notes. Should your breathing fail you today, however, I trust you not to lose too much sleep over it. I expect you bright and prepared to practice more tomorrow after lunch."

"Yes, professor," the girl agreed dutifully.

"And Miss Granger?" Severus called to her before crossing the corner her erected screen offered. "Do surprise me with another colour tomorrow, will you?"

---

Thursday, September 26th, 1995

It was only the next morning, when she made to transfigure her knickers, that Hermione noticed her wand was gone. She remembered erecting the wards and the screen in the prefects' bathroom the night before, so she must have had it then, but it had not been in the pockets of her bathrobe when she returned to the common room. There had been no need to dismantle the wards, as Professor Snape had torn them down when he entered the room.

And there was the crux of the problem. If it was indeed Professor Snape who had nicked her wand – and who else would it be, really? – Hermione would have to be smart about how to get it back.

Too scared that she might set her knickers on fire if she tried to wandlessly change their colour, Hermione decided on a slightly different fit and cut instead. Satisfied with her magical handiwork, she spent the morning in the library and left lunch early to catch the Potions Master before their lesson of the day began.

Her knock on the door that led to his office was answered almost immediately by the door swinging open. Other than before, Hermione had anticipated the door moving magically this time, and stepped inside when she was called in.

"Good day, professor," she greeted once inside. "I was wondering if I might have my wand back?"

*Very smart, indeed,* the niggling voice in her mind taunted.

"Your wand, Miss Granger?" came his reply. "Have you lost it?"

"It was taken from me last night, sir," Hermione explained, though Professor Snape knew that himself very well, "and I would like it back, so that I can go about my schooling properly equipped."

The Potions Master smirked.
"And here I was, Miss Granger," he drawled, "thinking that we'd talked about how equipment might hinder one's magical progress, rather than aid it."

"I believe, sir," Hermione shot back, "that I demonstrated last night that I am working on furthering my magical abilities without the aid of tools, but that does not mean that I have mastered everything yet. Besides, although I thank you for your confidence in my learning skills," a smirk crept into her facial expression, and a thunderous look answered her, "I think I remember you telling me just last night that it was unwise to reveal to others what might become an advantage over an opponent in the direst of circumstances. Am I not correct, sir?"

At that, Professor Snape rose from where he had previously been seated behind his desk. Hermione was once more reminded of his tall stature and where the thought might once have intimidated her, it now sent a moisture to the apex in her thighs that had been much easier to ignore in her embarrassment and in the warm water the night prior.

Crossing around his heavy desk, the Potions Master came to stand directly in front of her. Hermione remembered how he'd told her not to meet his eyes, but for once was confident enough to do so anyway. He stood so close that her head had to fall back until her neck strained under the posture. Only then was she able to meet his gaze.

His eyes narrowed at her boldness. Her own stayed wide open.

"Miss Granger," he almost hissed, "with the apparent loss of your wand, have you been able to meet my demands?"

Hermione tilted her head to the side, allowing herself a slightly new angle at which to peruse her professor.

"Why, professor," she asked, "I thought you did not need me to put the answer to that into words. As it is, my willingness to answer that question – or rather, lack thereof – has never kept you from getting the information before. Why be so polite about it today?"

Professor Snape's eyes narrowed for a second in anger, before relaxing to an almost normal state. Only if one knew his gaze so well as Hermione now did, even though she had sought to evade it for so long these past weeks, one could see that suspicion had his eyes slightly tense.

"My my, Miss Granger," he drawled, "aren't we a cheeky little thing this morning. And so confident. I wonder – "

All his wondering did little for Severus, as the wall behind the girl's eyes was stable as only brick stubborn like her spirit could be. He should have known, after she had now twice demonstrated great skill in building her Occlumency shields when embarrassed, that slipping into her mind would be no easy feat where her knickers were concerned.

Severus groaned as the combination of slipping into any part of the girl and finding out more about the nature of her knickers formed inappropriate thoughts and pictures in his mind. His cock sprung to attention as he struggled to reign in his imagination, but it was far too late for that. Severus was hard for the girl.

Easy feat or not, the girl would still be unable to keep Severus out of her head if he set his mind on getting in. Why break her spirits, though, he thought – or rather, why break her spirits that way. After all, he had not been amiss in telling her that there would be other ways of getting information out of prisoners of war. It had merely been his decision to teach her in Occlumency first, but maybe it was
time for the nature of his lessons to change.

Stepping slightly to the side, Severus put his hand into the girl's neck and had her bent over his desk in the fraction of a second. The girl gasped, belatedly, one might say, as her robes and skirt (properly shortened, as Severus noticed to his great satisfaction) were flipped over and onto her back, so that her knickers were well on display for him.

Severus experienced a slight shortage of breath himself as he laid eyes on the girl's choice of underwear for the day. The contradiction of the sexy Brazilian cut, so utterly entrancing as it covered barely half of the delicious plumpness that were her globes that it belied the innocent white that was almost as creamy as her skin, had his cock twitch in pleasure. Fascinated as he was by her knickers, he did not dare to even glance at the lace tops of her silk stockings for any length of time, afraid that if he so much as blinked, the miracle that was the girl's magnificent bum would vanish. Unable to stop himself, his hand came to her behind and held one round cheek almost reverently. The smooth fabric caressing his fingertips of thumb and index, in combination with the silken quality of her skin where the rest of his hand rested against her mound, had him suppress a sigh as his other hand mirrored the actions of the first on the other globe. Now standing behind her, Severus had to forcibly keep himself from leaning his crotch into the crevice that he knew would nestle his hardness more perfectly than any woman's backside had ever been able to.

The girl, though no hand in her neck was holding her down anymore, did not move.

He did not know how long they stood like this, her half-lying on his desk, him cupping her lower cheeks as if they were the only thing anchoring him to this world. It was only when he heard the first students entering the classroom next door that Severus managed to free himself from the reverie he had been caught up in.

"I hope you understand, Miss Granger," he spoke so silently it was little more than a whisper, "that with a physically superior opponent, the strength of your mind matters little when they are intent on getting information out of you."

The girl nodded against his desk, turning her head to the side so that she might watch him from the corner of her eye, her reddened cheek – a facial one – ruffling the top few of a stack of student papers Severus had been in the process of grading. Severus was reminded of when they had been in a similar position, so many nights ago, atop the Astronomy tower. She had not looked him in the eye after that, either.

Stepping back, Severus released her. The girl took a moment to collect herself, it seemed, before she rose from his desk, smoothing down her skirt and robes as she stood. When she turned towards him, Severus had her wand in hand, held out to her in a manner that she almost managed to poke her own eye out as she faced him.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Miss Granger," he said.

The girl nodded.

"Thank you, sir," she whispered.

Severus wanted to slap some sense into her that would keep her from thanking him at every single, most inopportune moment she could find.

"Run along now, Miss Granger," he snarled instead. "We would not want you to be late for class, now, would we?"
Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter fifteen, wherein a voice at the back of her mind becomes strangely insistent.
Monday, October 7th, 1995

The past week had gone remarkably well for Hermione, and fast. Professor Snape had worked her to a nosebleed again in their final detention, yes, but in between the lines of his scathing remarks about her lack of talent for the art, Hermione could read the begrudged compliment to how far she had developed her Occlumency skills over the past few meetings.

The Potions Master had not taught her the ward to avoid being detected with *Homenum revelio* after all, declining her repeated request with a hint to how he’d managed to snatch her wand, and if she was so careless with that, why should he care help her in other ways that were lacking in her care? Hermione chose to view that as a challenge, and seeing as her professor did not join her again the following Wednesday night for her bath, she was almost certain that her own attempt at instinctively and intentionally warding the bathroom against such detection spells must have worked.

Hermione was not quite sure how to feel about the fact that Professor Snape had not interrupted her mental and magical exercises in the prefects’ bathroom, nor about the fact that he’d intruded upon her in the first place. Her embarrassment at talking to her professor in such an intimate setting, with her being in such a vulnerable state, had mightily strengthened her mental barriers, but at the same time had prompted a moist rush of heat pooling in her lower belly. At the time, she had been able to dismiss the sensation as a trick the warm water surrounding her played on her senses. When the feeling returned the following day as she was bent over the Potions Master’s desk, his hands stroking her charmed knickers and caressing her exposed behind, she had fought for control over her emotions. She had lost that fight; fascination more than anything winning out over what she now clearly recognized as desire, warring with a strong sense of impropriety and a slight pang of guilt that she felt not the least bit of revulsion.

There had been no time to ponder those feelings, however, as Saturday had been approaching fast, and with it the first Hogsmeade trip of the school year. Hermione had been busy talking to students about their interest in a private practice group for Defence. She had started with yearmates, branching out to friends and friends’ friends, approaching Harry’s teammates and even went so far as to invite Ginny’s current boyfriend’s friends who had happened to listen in on their conversation.

In the end, the whole recruitment had developed into a meeting of almost thirty people in the dingy little pub called the Hog’s Head. Harry’s temper had almost put an early end to the idea as a whole, but in the end, the day had been very successful, leaving only one question – where to meet.

Again, there had been no time to ponder that issue, as this Monday brought with it a whole new collection of drama. First, there was the shock of Educational Degree Number Twenty-four, forbidding all study groups of more than two students if not given expressed permission. Second, Hedwig.

Hermione had been breathing throughout all of their lesson of History of Magic, when an insistent tapping sound filtered through her concentration. Seeing as Harry had noticed nothing, doodling away on his parchment, Hermione felt a short but intense sense of pride at the fact that she’d managed to breathe while listening to her surroundings. When she saw the state Hedwig was in, however, her spirits plummeted.
While Harry was off with the majestic snowy owl, Hermione ran through all the worst case scenarios that might have led to Hedwig's ruffled and obviously hurt state. Ron offered his own suggestions, and together they came to the conclusion that Hedwig and the missive she was carrying must have been searched, seeing as she had missed arriving with the morning post. Harry's recollection of what Professor McGonagall had said to him about communication channels into and out of Hogwarts possibly being watched supported that theory.

Again, there was no time to look deeper into that troubling development, as the trio arrived at the dungeons. Hermione did the best she could to keep Harry from charging at Malfoy and his thugs when they practically waved their Quidditch permission under his nose. What she had not expected, however, was Neville making to attack the Slytherin boys.

Thinking back, Hermione realized that she should have noticed sooner that the insults about magically damaged patients in St Mungo's pertained to Neville's parents. From the many half-sentences she had been able to gather during the summer at Grimmauld Place, Hermione knew Frank and Alice Longbottom to have survived extensive torture under the Cruciatus curse, though at the loss of their minds. That the topic was a highly sensitive one for their son seemed obvious.

Yet, when after this third strike of the day the door to their dungeon classroom opened to reveal a furious Professor Snape, Hermione had the keen sense that his anger was not only directed at the fighting Gryffindors – fighting to keep Neville back from having Malfoy's thugs severely damage him if he laid so much as a finger on the smirking blonde, but none of that mattered to their Potions Master, so much was clear.

What was not immediately clear to Hermione, however, was why else the professor might seem so tense. To the others, it might seem as if the only scathing looks he was shooting towards the Gryffindors were meant for the boys, but Hermione knew that for the fraction of a second, his gaze lingered on her, imploring her to understand, though what it was that was significant enough to meet her eyes directly, she did not understand.

That was, until she entered the classroom a moment later, and shock number four of the day became apparent.

In a remote corner sat the toad. Even in the dimness of the dungeons, her garishly pink outfit was hard to miss, and Hermione wondered for a second if the Ministry witch had cast a charm on herself to addle the other students' perception, and only Hermione's Occlumency practice allowed her a broader awareness.

Guessing from Professor Snape's look that had carried a ton of meaning, Hermione turned her steps towards the boys, where they were sitting and still trying to calm Neville down. It seemed to be the correct path to take, especially seeing as Harry was apparently set on exploding his cauldron today.

Repeatedly, Hermione had to steady his hand, like when he almost used pomegranate juice instead of salamander blood (and why was that even sitting on his work station in the first place, seeing as pomegranate was needed at no stage of brewing the Strengthening Solution?). Harry was simply so gleeeful to see his two most hated teachers fighting each other, that his concentration was decidedly off.

Busy with helping Ron and Neville as well, who took full advantage of her sitting with them for once, rather than in her secluded corner in the back row, Hermione missed the point at which Harry rendered his concoction unsalvageable. Who did not miss this, was – of course – Professor Snape.

Harry spent the next break moaning about how he would have to do another essay for Potions, on top of the usual homework that had been piled on them. Hermione listened with only half an ear,
wondering whether she should go to the dungeons today for her first period of 'Remedial Potions', and if Umbridge had already heard about that and would insist on sitting in on that lesson, as well.

When, an hour later, the boys told her about how Trelawney had apparently been put on probation, Hermione's decision was clear. With Professor Snape being one of the few teachers who would stand up to the Ministry toad, Hermione would not allow herself to be bullied into abandoning her quest.

When the knock on his door reached his ears, Severus merely hoped it would not be the thrice-damned Ministry bitch. Still, just to be on the safe side, he made his way to the door himself, pulling it open with all the intimidating grandeur he could muster. He almost gave a sigh in relief when the heavy wood revealed the girl waiting outside.

"Miss Granger," he acknowledged her presence for once in something that might almost resemble a greeting.

"Good evening, professor," the girl replied politely, though she seemed nervous for some reason. "I was not certain if I should still be coming, considering –"

"There is nothing for you to consider in whether you should uphold any and every appointment of your Remedial Potions course," Severus sneered, though the expression held less malice than usual. "The only thing that could possibly keep you from attending your lessons with me would be a deeply unpleasant and highly contagious malady, in the case of which there is always a way, ranging from physical distance to a bubblehead charm, to keep me from contracting it. Is that clear, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir," came the girl's meek reply, and Severus waved her into the room.

Severus made sure to ward the door to the dungeon classroom in a manner that it would be impossible to open from the outside and no sound would escape from the inside, though he himself was still very much able to hear the comings and goings on the other side of the door. Only once he'd made sure that especially an overly nosy Ministry employee would be unable to forcibly cut a path into the classroom, he turned to face the girl.

"Miss Granger," he began, "since you have proven to be less inept at Occluding while writing, you will progress to more practical tasks from today on." Severus waved towards a work station where a collection of ingredients and different knives was orderly laid out. "That work will demand less concentration of you in the way of calling upon certain memories, but will require you to pay more attention to the physical motions of your body – that is, if you do not wish to lose a few fingers, of course."

The girl swallowed thickly, probably thinking about all the different ways she could mutilate her body if she did not manage to control her hands as well as her mind.

Severus set in for the final blow.

"While you work, try to keep the colour of your knickers for yourself."

And with those parting words, he ushered the girl off to start her work.

As Hermione went over to the work station her professor had prepared for her, her mind was already kicking into overdrive. How to keep the colour of her underwear secret if she was to Occlude and handle sharp knives and expensive ingredients at the same time?
Standing at the work station, she grabbed the note that listed the instructions for which ingredient to cut with which knife in what way. Pretending to read through the list, Hermione struggled to close her mind against outwards intrusions while struggling to find a way to protect her knickers from being seen. When no schoolbook spell came to mind, Hermione realized she would need to get creative.

Mentally, she ran through all the possible ways for the Potions Master to go about discovering her chosen colour of the day. After the incident over a week ago, when he'd physically forced her to bend over his desk to reveal her underwear to him, he had not touched her again. In fact, he had not queried her about the colour of her knickers in all that time. Or had she simply not noticed it when he'd entered her mind to find out for himself?

There was little use in lingering on that particular question now, Hermione decided, but physical violence to get his way was one manner in which Professor Snape might attempt to get to the desired information. No, not desired, of course – after all, why would a respected member of the esteemed Hogwarts staff be interested in a little girl's knickers? No, he was merely teaching her – wasn't he?

Trying to drag her mind away from such dangerous paths, Hermione mustered all her creativity and intention to have an electric charge creep into her robes. That way, the professor would get himself a nice, smarting shock, should he try to manhandle her as he had the last time. His sheer touch, Hermione hoped, would draw her from her concentration on the potions ingredients, so that she might defend herself against his search for information.

Another intentional bout of magic had an immaterial mirror span the underside of her skirt, so that the layer of air at the level of her skirt's seam would reflect what lay underneath, disabling others from seeing anything from her knee upwards. On an afterthought, she added an alarm ward to the mirroring effect, thinking that should anything try to push through the layer of air that held no physical barrier, she would at least be warned.

When no more ways came to mind of how Professor Snape might attempt to get to her knickers, Hermione put down the list of instructions and started dicing. Asphodel roots, she noticed with no little mirth, remembering how the Potions Master had demonstrated how to prepare these at the beginning of the schoolyear, before she closed her mind.

Watching the girl clutch the piece of parchment with his instructions on it in her hands, obviously not reading, as she thought herself into a frenzy until he could almost hear the gears turn in her mind, had Severus close to laughing out loud. What kept him from actually doing so, beside the fact that he never laughed out loud, much less in the presence of a student, and a Gryffindor at that, were the measures to which the girl went in her quest to keep him from perusing her knickers.

With his sensitivity for wards, Severus could literally feel how the girl's robes charged themselves with electricity, and the alarm around the seam of her skirt almost impressed him. Severus felt that there had to be something else there, and uttered a spell that would allow him to view what lay under her skirt. Taken aback when all he could see were the stone tiles of the dungeon floor, Severus was close to doubting his own skill at casting that particular spell, until he realized that the girl had infused the region under her (by now already well shortened) seam with her very own brand of magic, charmed to resemble the surface of a mirror.

Careful not to disturb the layer of air that seemed to hold the ward, unwilling to trigger the alarm that the girl had worked into that, Severus cancelled the spell. Returning to his own perspective, he perused the girl who slowly, yet ever so diligently diced the Asphodel roots he had set before her. It seemed the girl had thought of both obvious ways for him to approach her, disabling him to neither look under her skirt nor to physically overpower her as he had done before. Of course, her little
charms would not keep him from doing either; no, she would merely be warned and thus, aware of his actions.

However, Severus had no intention of calling her attention to his attempts. It would be of little use to her if he demonstrated once more that a grown wizard would be able to overpower her. No, she already knew that. What Severus thus had in mind for tonight's lesson was to demonstrate another way in which the girl might be taken unawares.

The way she had warded herself left only one possible road to take.

A quick trip to his office, unlocking the multitude of traps behind which he had hidden it in his desk, availed Severus with what he had been looking for – his spare wand. It had been registered to a half-blood his comrades [Severus physically recoiled at the word] had killed during one of their raids, now so many years ago. Severus had snatched it from the scene of their crime, unseen by either of his brothers, and kept his possession of it a secret ever since.

Now, however, it had become time to draw it once more.

The wand worked not as well for him as his own, primary wand did, as it had never chosen him as his master. Severus was powerful enough, though, to force his intentions and his magic on the piece of wood, to carry out his will. Unforgiveables were very hard to procure wandlessly, after all.

Pointing the wand at the innocuously working girl, Severus uttered the word.

"Imperio."

Lay down the knife.

Oh no, Hermione thought, the voice was back.

Come now, girl, lay down the knife.

No, she thought, it would not do to stop in her actions. After all, that would probably lead to Professor Snape thinking she disrespected him after all, defying his explicit instructions, and he would reject teaching her ever again.

Go talk to him, then, the voice in her head suggested, but lay down the knife first.

Oh, alright, Hermione gave up. It wasn't as if the voice's command made any more sense than its usual ramblings did, but for once, it was intriguingly convincing, and Hermione made to follow it.

When she stood in front of her teacher's desk, Professor Snape shoved his chair back, leaving ample space between his long legs and the desk.

Walk around the table, the voice insisted. It will be much more comfortable that way.

Hermione hesitated. She saw the professor tilt his head to the side, if only slightly, but enough for her to see, as if questioning her hesitation. Yes, Hermione thought, why did she not simply say what she had come here to say? Though what exactly it was she had come here to say, she did not know.

To disguise her search for words, she followed the voice's command, rounded the desk, and stood between the professor's knees that he had opened for her once she'd started walking.

Turn around now, girl, the voice commanded. Sensing her hesitation, it reiterated, Turn around now.
Fed up with the annoying voice, Hermione did not even try to fight for real this time. Instead, she simply gave in and turned her back to Professor Snape.

**And now bend over.**

What?

*Bend over, the voice insisted, and lift your robes and skirt.*

No.

*Bend over, girl.*

No.

*Do it.*

No!

*Now!*

"No," Hermione shouted, and took a moment to realize she had spoken out loud.

"Excuse me?" queried Professor Snape.

"I –“ Hermione began, but did not know where to go from there. Turning around, she faced her teacher. Realizing how close she stood to him, she scrambled to get away, swiftly walking around the desk until the heavy wooden table created a safe, physical barrier between the two of them.

"I apologize, sir," she said. "I don't know what came over me, coming onto you the way I did."

"Don't you, Miss Granger?" the Potions Master asked. "I thought that would have been obvious."

Hermione started. Could he possibly know of her confused feelings where he was concerned? Could he have sensed the heat that pooled in her body whenever he came close to her?

Of course he could, Hermione admonished herself. After all, Professor Snape was not only a master Mind Mage, but one among the most perceptive people she knew.

"Excuse me, sir?" Hermione opted for the safe road to take.

"I believe that the imposter calling himself Alastor Moody taught you about the Unforgiveable Curses last year. Am I not correct, Miss Granger?"

Suddenly everything clicked into place. It had not been as obvious to her before, as her inner voice usually sounded already much like the Potions Master himself, but now Hermione had to wonder why she hadn't noticed earlier that for once, it imitated the velvet quality to perfection. Even the nonsensical commands and why she could be convinced to follow them made sense now.

"You Imperio'ed me?" she wanted to scream, but held herself back in case anybody was listening in on them, so that her voice turned out as more of an angry whisper that was so loud, it probably seemed staged.

"I would refute any such accusation were you ever to be stupid enough to lay them before anybody, but I will commend you for your strength of will to fight the compulsion as you did, Miss Granger," the professor answered.
Hermione tried to use that strength of will to will away the strong sense of pride that now filled her chest, and to conceal it underneath the very real anger that was still coursing through every fibre of her being. She failed.

"We will work more on that in the future," Professor Snape continued. "The practice will be most effective when you are unaware of such an attack. For now, it would be best if you returned to your earlier task of ingredient preparation."

Hermione nodded in agreement at his dismissal and turned to walk back to the work station. When she was there, knife already in hand, the Potions Master spoke once more.

"And Miss Granger," he called her to attention. "Your mind is an open book right now. And pleased though I am with your transfigurational work – the baby blue paints a rather enticing contrast to your creamy-white skin – I suggest you exercise more care with your Occlumency shields in surprise situations in the future."

Hermione stared at her professor. When her tongue became dry, she realized that her mouth must have fallen open, and closed her lips until they were pressed into a very fine line. Professor Snape graced her with his signature smirk.

"Go on now, Miss Granger," he reiterated. "Those Asphodel roots still need dicing. And do take care with your surroundings. You never know if I might not just decide to find out if that silk feels as soft as it looks."

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter sixteen, wherein a legacy is contemplated and companionship is discussed.
Much as the schoolyear appeared to be progressing at a snail's pace, especially with Umbridge sniffing after every teacher under the deck mantle of her so-called inspections, as much did Hallowe'en surprise Severus as it did every year.

With the fourteen years that had passed since that one fateful night in Godric's Hollow, the pain had dulled a little, but the guilt remained and returned in full force on All Hallows' Eve, year after year. It always took him inhumane amounts of willpower to drag himself through this day of the year, and he cursed every time the date fell on a school day.

That it happened to be a Thursday that met the date this year was just his kind of luck, Severus thought darkly.

The past weeks with the girl had gone quite alright as she was progressing quite nicely in her grasp on Occlumency, as she continuously managed to lengthen her periods of Pure Black, and to intensify the blankness in and the protective borders around her mind while handling tasks in parallel that demanded her concentration. In fact, there was nothing he could actually complain about concerning her progress under his tutelage.

What bothered him were the effects the girl appeared to have on him. Today was the day her skirt would have reached the six-inch-mark of its shortening that Severus himself had demanded the girl perform on the offending piece of clothing, and he had found himself strangely entranced with the gradually increasing length of smooth leg that protruded underneath the shortening seam. The slight sheen visible around her calves had tipped Severus off to the fact that the girl must be wearing silken stockings underneath her skirt, and he had found himself anticipating the moment when her skirt would be short enough to allow him a generous glimpse of what he assumed to be lace tops.

At times like these, Severus longed to curse himself, for missing out on perusing the girl's stockings in more detail when he'd had her bent over his desk, her beautiful bum high in the air and his hands gripped tightly to it. At the time, however, that same bum had held too much of a fascination for him to dare drag his eyes away.

Of course, he thought, he could have easily slipped into the girl's mind to see her put on the stockings in the morning, or – and he had to suppress a groan at the image that his mind eagerly supplied – slide them off in the evening. But for some reason, Severus held back on that course of action. And much as he wished to deny what that reason was, a niggling voice readily reminded him that it was because he secretly yearned to remove the silk from the girl's legs himself.

Much of the same attraction held her now-silken tresses. Large parts of what were now called the girl's Remedial Potions lessons consisted of her performing some arduous task or other, trying to Occlude, while Severus attempted to intimidate her. More often than not was it frustratingly easy to send the girl into nervous jitters, but when he stood behind her, towering over her small figure and letting her feel his hot breath as a frightening breeze in the back of her neck, turning into cold shivers that ran all the way down her spine, Severus found himself intrigued with the curling locks that escaped her messy bun and fell into her neck. It took all of his willpower to not tug at the shorter strands at the nape of her neck, nor to bury his nose in her fragrant locks and breathe in the titillating
scent that constantly emanated from her person.

And what a scent that was! What had before been the sweetness of a blooming hazel tree, tinged with the slight bitterness of slowly burning caramel, had turned into the dark green smell of pine trees waving in the wind, intermingling with a comforting hint of sandalwood, and the olfactory sensation transported him straight back into the bath she had taken in front of him, and to the memory of another day, of her knickers that the girl had said had been inspired by her memories of pine trees covered in the first fall of snow. Her scent haunted his dreams, and when the images that his sleeping mind readily procured would take him to the point at which he pulled the girl close to immerse himself in the pure, clean smell of her, he would wake to a raging hardness that only some more deliciously arousing memories of her could placate into a release that was immediately followed by a wracking guilt that he was unable to find any relief from.

So to face her, today of all days, when he could hardly breathe with the guilt weighing heavily on his chest at having betrayed the woman he had valued above all others, and subsequently face the guilt that he felt at betraying the girl by using her most intimate memories of her dressing every morning in order to allow himself some sliver of momentary physical release, was almost enough to send him back to his private chambers and lock himself in.

Almost.

As it was, he still had to honour the bargain he had struck with both of the madmen that called themselves his masters, and keep up the charade of teacher.

The lunch hour found Severus shoving his meal of mashed potatoes from one corner of his plate to another and back again. The feeling of dread that had settled in his stomach, together with the crushing guilt, had rid him fully of his appetite. He decidedly kept his gaze from the Gryffindor table where the girl would be jesting with the two dunderheads that swarmed around her like moths drawn to the flame, celebrating Hallowe'en as if Potters parents hadn't met their untimely end on this very date.

Potter.

Severus had hated Potter senior from the moment he met him, and his hatred of the name had only grown when sweet Lily Evans had chosen it as her own. The playwright had the truth of it; the lily by any other name did indeed still smell as sweet as she had under her maiden name, but for his dearest childhood friend to take the name of his worst tormenter had left a bitter taste in his mouth.

And now he was teaching said tormenter's spawn, strutting around the Castle as if he owned the place, hungrily feeding on the old man's lies that told him he was special, because his mother had given her life to protect him and because, by some chance, the ancient magic had worked and saved the toddler from the unforgiving green curse, only for the child to live and grow up to be a new tormenter in Severus's life.

Whenever the boy's eyes locked onto his, Severus felt the familiar pang of guilt reminding him that he had condemned and subsequently failed to save the woman that the brat had inherited his green eyes from. To see Lily every time he looked upon Potter was at times more than Severus felt he could take. Much as the boy channelled his father in everything he did, he often was the mirror image of his mother through his eyes alone.

Was that it? Severus wondered. Was this to be Lily's sole legacy – bestowing the haunting green of her eyes upon the boy she had died to protect? Most of her friends were dead, Black gone half insane during his imprisonment, and even though some of her teachers remained to remember her, her memory was as good as lost. When Severus died – for die he eventually would in this war, there
was no doubt about that – there would be no one to carry her legacy.

Except…

Potter.

Little though the boy had known his mother, he still carried the striking resemblance to the formidable witch that Lily Evans had been through his memorable, green eyes. Lily had a living legacy in her son, living through the boy even when her spirit had left this mortal world. And maybe, Severus thought, that would have to be enough.

Noticing that he had stopped in his motions of pushing mashed pieces of potato around his plate, Severus abandoned his cutlery and gripped his goblet of wine instead. Usually he kept disgustingly sober when he had classes, but Hallowe’en was enough of a reason for him to abandon this strict, though self-imposed rule for one day. Lifting the silver cup to his lips, his eyes unwillingly found the Gryffindor table where Potter sat with his friends.

Perhaps, Severus pondered, a living legacy was not to be dismissed so easily. Granted, the boy was a bad example of that, as he channelled too much of James sodding Potter to have people remember his mother by his image, but the idea in general might perhaps hold some merit.

It wasn't that Severus feared death itself. No, his life had been far too miserable so far for him to believe that it might get any better after the war, and his chances of surviving the battles between Light and Dark that were certain to come were slim enough as they were. His being a double agent did little to improve those chances.

No, Severus did not fear death. In fact, he rather looked forward to slipping from this malevolent world that had granted him a rather merciless life. The only thing he might regret was seeing the death of all the potential that his mind held for achieving some kind of greatness.

Truly, Severus was quite proud of his academic success so far. True enough, being the only Potions Master of his level in Western Europe was a lonely business, but his mastery of the subject had gained him some remarkable renown, even crossing the borders of Europe as other Masters from all over the world, be it from South East Asia or the furthest Western hemisphere, wrote to him with queries that only his expertise could answer. To have managed to dominate his field of study at such a young age as he had, was another thing to be wildly proud of.

All those successes, all that potential, would go to waste with Severus's mortal body. There would be no one to remember him as he was now, in all his academic brilliance, and he would be forgotten to the world.

Maybe it was better this way.

The girl sat opposite Potter, laughing. Her back was towards Severus, but when the ginger dunderhead apparently managed to crack another joke, the girl threw her head back, her silken curls dancing with the motion, and Severus could see the joy twinkling in her eyes.

Or maybe, Severus thought, there was a better way.

Perhaps it was time to call in his favour.

October had gone by with a speed that had Hermione reeling when she thought too much about it. The first DA meeting had worked out a lot better than even she could have expected, and the weekly meetings since then had steadily improved. Harry had become more confident with every look Cho
shot him, and with his growing confidence improved the overall mood and motivation of the whole group.

The only drawback that Hermione saw for herself was the fact that with Harry's growing paranoia towards Umbridge, now that they had gained permission to reform the Gryffindor Quidditch team, he became ever more reluctant to hand over his Invisibility Cloak to her once the DA meeting was over. Also, they had covered almost all the theory in their Astronomy lessons that was necessary for the lessons to progress to the practical parts, which would mean that Wednesday nights would be spent stargazing rather than bathing.

In some way, Hermione mused, could Occlumency compare to Astronomy. Both consisted, at a very crudely phrased base, staring into the blackness and trying to find something there. With Astronomy, it was knowledge about the universe. With Occlumency, it was Nothing with a capital N. So basically, she corrected herself, the main similarity between the two disciplines was also their main difference – astronomers were searching for something in the void, while Mind Mages were searching for the void in everything.

Hermione was pulled back into the conversation with the boys over lunch when Ron cracked a joke that had her actually laughing. Most of the time, the boys would talk about Quidditch and she would simply zone out and keep nodding at what she assumed to be socially acceptable intervals, but for once their joy had drawn her in, as well, and she laughed right along with them.

Hallowe'en could not have come at a better time, Hermione judged. With the tension that Umbridge's presence seemed to constantly spread, it was a desperately needed relief, and with the DA meetings going as well as they did, it offered a worthy opportunity for celebration.

Throwing her head back as she laughed, Hermione felt the long familiar sensation of being watched. This particular shiver running down her back told her that it was the Potions Master who had his eyes fixed on her. Really, she thought, by now she should have long become used to the professor watching her, but it caught her unprepared every single time. She wondered how that could be, but found that Professor Snape's gaze was nothing one would easily become used to, as expressive or devoid of emotion as it could be, and ever changing.

The Potions lesson after lunch had her on her toes. After the Ministry toad had finished inspecting Professor Snape's class, Hermione had dutifully gone back to her corner seat in the last row and had proceeded with her tasks that her teacher would set her. Usually, he would have her wait for him for a couple of minutes while he instructed the rest of the class in what they would be doing this period. Only when he was satisfied with the students scurrying into action would he stalk across the room to where Hermione was seated and would explain to her what task she had to complete. He always spoke in a hushed voice that appeared scathing to outsiders, always at a volume that was too low for possibly listening students to understand what exactly he was saying to her. Thus, they managed to keep up the façade of him punishing her, even when the advice he offered her was far more than any Slytherin student had ever received in Hermione's presence.

Today, however, Hermione walked to her desk only to find a cauldron and a note with the required stirring motions that usually the Potions Master would explain to her himself, if only to test her mental barriers as the two of them conversed. Looking up when she heard the door from his office swing open, Hermione watched as Professor Snape entered the class, bellowing instructions, and afterwards letting himself sink into the high-backed wooden chair behind his desk.

Hermione began to stir. Instead of dulling her concentration by seeking out the Pure Black, however, she focussed her gaze on her teacher. Narrowing her eyes, she came to the conclusion that even though he hid it well, as usual, Professor Snape appeared to be almost… skittish. And to have even
some semblance of such an attribute put in any context with the dour and usually so controlled Potions Master deeply worried Hermione.

The period passed without her finding any reason for his changed state. Lingering behind after the class, she shooed the boys on as she pretended to stow away things she had not even needed, as everything required for her task during this lesson had been provided to her. When she eventually was the last student in class, Professor Snape's eyes snapped to hers.

"Still here, Miss Granger?" he sneered.

Hermione did her best to ignore the scathing tone in which the words had been directed at her, and jumped right to the point.

"Is something bothering you today, sir?"

Professor Snape levelled her with a stare that woke the urge in her to hide from his sight, freezing her to the bone with an intensity that had her shudder. Hermione, however, held his gaze with a boldness she did not feel.

"You were not in the bathroom last night," the Potions Master said.

The abrupt change in topic took her aback.

"No, I was not, sir," she answered. "I will no longer be bathing on Wednesdays, as I expect our practical Astronomy lessons to commence soon, and they will be taking place on Wednesday nights."

"What other night will you be using instead, then?"

"I have not decided yet, sir," Hermione answered his strange query.

"Thursdays, then," Professor Snape decided in her stead. "What time?"

Not quite believing her ears, and her mind still struggling to cope with the fact that she was indeed having this particular and highly peculiar conversation with her teacher, Hermione took a moment to speak. When she found that she had regained control over her tongue, along with the ability to use it, she had forgotten the question.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"The question was not difficult enough for our resident know-it-all to deserve a repetition, but after all that I've seen of the inside workings of your mind, Miss Granger, I understand that you often fail to grasp even the easiest of concepts, so listen closely," and at that he leaned in over his desk, still seated but somehow giving the impression that he was towering over her as he so often did during their private lessons. The next words were spat out with a vengeance Hermione had not encountered with him since he'd called her a liar at the beginning of the year. "What time will you be bathing on Thursday nights?"

"I –" Hermione hesitated, swallowed thickly, wet her lips with her tongue, and tried again. "I used to bath around two o'clock in the morning on Wednesdays, so I guess that time would be alright for Thursdays as well."

"We will talk then," Professor Snape said with a curt nod that Hermione only saw because in her confusion at this line of discussion, she'd forgotten to evade his gaze.
Not allowing herself to be dismissed so easily, Hermione asked one more question.

"How did you know, professor?" she queried. "How could you tell that I wasn't in the bathroom last night?"

The sneer that followed her question had her physically shrink back from where she stood in front of his desk.

"No wards," he pressed out from between gritted teeth, obviously discontent with her impudence. "And now hurry along to Arithmancy, Miss Granger. I will not excuse your tardiness to Professor Vector should you be late."

---

**Friday, November 1st, 1995**

Severus paced his office. At the wave of his hand, the Tempus charm showed the time to be well after midnight. Hallowe'en was officially over.

What unnerved him thus that he felt too agitated to sit and mark second year homework was his period of fifth year Gryffindor and Slytherin. He had done his best to avoid the girl, informing her of her task for the lesson by note rather than in person, but as she was wont to do, the girl had obviously been unable to resist the urge to get to the bottom of things and had sought him out after the period had ended.

Severus cursed the fact that with the weeks of closer contact between the two of them, forced upon him by the favour he had granted the girl in instructing her in defending the Light's secrets, she had obviously become more attuned to his emotions, reading the ever so slight cracks in the mask that was his public persona as if they were an open book. Though with studying under him in ways of controlling one's mind and, in order to do so, one's features, she had learned not only to mask but to de-mask as well, it seemed. Severus scoffed at his own stupidity, too brash to be called naiveté. After all, he should have known that when being taught the methods of their master, the student would learn how to dismantle them, too.

That the girl would be brave enough to confront him about his absence of mind, however, had surprised him. He had successfully evaded her question, he assumed, but insufferable know-it-all that she was, the girl would probably ask again. After all, he had informed her that they would talk more tonight.

Another Tempus showed the time to have progressed past one o'clock. Rather than pacing in his office, he thought, Severus might as well stroll the Castle instead.

Severus cursed that line of thought when, as he turned the corner into the desired corridor on the fifth floor, he happened upon a wizard clad in an eggplant-coloured velvet dressing gown with bold silver and gold swirls all over the rich fabric.

"Severus," the Headmaster greeted, "I didn't know you had patrol duty tonight. Has the roster changed?"

Severus forced himself to swallow back the groan that threatened to escape from the depths of his throat.

"Headmaster," he inclined his head in greeting. "I was equally unaware that it was your turn to patrol the Castle tonight."

"Oh, it isn't," the Headmaster countered merrily, as if neither of them was as perfectly aware as they
both were that the other had no official business being there, "I simply find that when faced with a puzzle, it helps clear my mind to take a late night stroll through the Castle. The exercise invigorates the senses, and a change of scenery does wonders to find a different perspective, don't you think?"

"Indeed," Severus replied.

"Besides," the older wizard continued, "there is always something new to learn at Hogwarts. For example, a young witch has heavily warded herself into the prefects' bathroom, just down this corridor. It appears as though Miss Granger has taken to late night baths. Curious, isn't it?"

Not missing a beat, thus possibly betraying the fact that Severus had indeed known, and even advised, the girl to bathe past curfew, he reiterated, "Indeed, Headmaster."

Even in the darkness of the corridor, the older wizard's sparkling eyes were well visible. Severus almost desperately wished they weren't. They did nothing for his peace of mind.

"Peculiar girl, Miss Granger, isn't she?" the Headmaster mused. If he was deterred by Severus's curtness that was even more prominent this night than usual, he did not show it. "So astute in her observations, eager in her learning, loyal in her friendships, and ever so dutifully aiming to please. Do you not think so, Severus?"

Fear crept into his heart, cooling the already cold thing down to a degree at which Severus felt himself hard-pressed to suppress a physical shudder. Had he been too obvious in watching the girl during meals? Had she talked to anybody about their private meetings? Did the Headmaster know?

Unwilling to give anything away, in case the Headmaster was unaware of Severus's peculiar relation to the girl, he kept to his usual answer.

"Indeed, Headmaster."

"I wonder…"

The older man trailed off. Knowing him to be drawn to the dramatic, Severus rose to the bait, entertaining the man with his next question.

"Yes, Headmaster?"

"I wonder," he began anew, "if it might not do some of us a lot of good to see Miss Granger as a person beyond the school setting here at Hogwarts."

Severus felt an icy hand grip his heart and slowly squeeze. His lungs failed to draw air as they usually did, and it took his utmost to maintain the outward appearance as if nothing was amiss.

"How so, Headmaster?"

"Minerva already sees her as something of a niece, though admittedly, she sees many of her wards as her personal cubs. Rarely as I myself find the time to travel to London, I perceive her already as a fixture at number twelve. And I find myself wondering…"

The older wizard's eyes misted over a little as he stared into nothingness while he recollected his thoughts. This time, Severus made no move to prompt him into continuing.

"I wonder if Miss Granger is not mature enough to be a peer to other staff members, as well."

Severus kept his posture rigid, lest he stagger at the unnerving observations the Headmaster had just
revealed to him. His mind reeled, trying to get to the bottom of the older wizard's meaning, but knowing the man, said bottom would quite certainly be a fake one, concealing many more hidden layers to his words.

"Perhaps," Severus cautiously spoke, "it would be best to have this conversation with Poppy and Irma instead."

The Headmaster's gaze refocused on him, and the sparkle dancing in his eyes seemed to scream his mirth at Severus's statement.

"Perhaps," he answered, "though I believe that there are others who might benefit from Miss Granger's company. Seeing as she is lonely herself more often than a young woman of her age and with her mind should be, I am certain she would welcome the companionship of someone mature as well, someone to challenge her intellectually, someone she might learn from. Such a union would prove equally beneficial to either party involved, I should think. Good night, Severus."

And as sudden as he had appeared, the Headmaster breezed around the corner and was gone.

"Good night, Headmaster," Severus found himself greeting thin air.

He stood for a few minutes, still attempting to grasp the straws that the older wizard had thrown in his direction, but they escaped his fingers and he found himself standing empty-handed, no closer to deciphering the Headmaster's meaning.

Even though several yards away at the opposite end of the corridor, it was the signature of the girl's wards stroking his skin and tingling over his body that shook Severus from his reverie. Throwing a look in the direction of the prefects' bathroom that might have almost been called wistful, had anybody been there to witness it, Severus said goodbye to his previous notion of conversing with the girl tonight. Instead, he turned on his heel and made his way down to the dungeons. The Headmaster had already found him in the vicinity of the girl, parted only by a corridor's length and a few wards. There was no use in being found in the same room with her, in as unclad a state as she would be in.

Severus had no way of knowing in what manner the Headmaster was always informed about everything going on in the Castle, merely that he did constantly seem to know, and Severus had little desire to play with fate tonight any more than he already had. The girl would have to wait. After all, they still had Remedial Potions on Mondays.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter seventeen, wherein a bath is shared.
As elated as Hermione had been a few days prior at Hallowe'en lunch, as put down was she now.

After her short talk with the professor, she had been determined to find out what ailed him so that night, when he had scheduled a meeting during her bath time. Shoving all doubts as to the propriety of such a meeting aside – because honestly, there wasn't much she could do about that other than not show up, and Professor Snape would just accuse her of sabotaging his lessons and might even cancel them for good this time –, she had gone to take her bath, raising the usual wards that would keep away unwanted visitors in the middle of the night. When nobody had come to her, even two hours after their set meeting time, she had eventually left the tub, wrapped her by then thoroughly wrinkled skin in her soft bathrobe, and traipsed back to the Gryffindor tower, hidden under Harry's Cloak.

The following day, Professor Snape couldn't be seen at any of the meals. It wasn't as if she'd been looking for him, no; merely when she happened to glance at the High Table, he wasn't there.

All those worries at his snarky mood and his missing during her bath and the meals fell away, however, as the day of the Quidditch match of the term dawned. Harry's good mood from the last fortnight could not even be dispelled by his nerves at the important match against Slytherin, but Ron seemed positively willing to change himself into a puddle of pumpkin juice, eager to be wiped up by a house elf if only it kept him from having to face the pitch.

When Hermione saw the pins that the Slytherin students had hefted to their robes and heard the song swell around the stands, her heart sank deeper than she'd ever experienced it to. Even when the game ended, her soaring mood at the Gryffindor win soon plummeted as the muggle wrestling began between Harry, George and Draco. She was very much relieved that it was her Head of House who carted off the seething Gryffindor boys, feeling safe in the knowledge that the stern witch would show no mercy, but at least fairness in her judgement and subsequent punishment. Even that feeling wasn't supposed to last long, though, either, as a short witch in green robes that swished around her to reveal pink fabric underneath followed them.

That evening in the common room was uncomfortable, to say the least, and from the day she'd had, maybe Hermione should have become suspicious when she thought that Hagrid's return might cheer them all up. His tale of how the giants, depleted as their race was, would rather support Voldemort than Dumbledore was enough to give them all nightmares for a few days to come. Thinking the night could not get any worse, Umbridge proved Hermione to be mistaken, as she turned up at the cottage and almost busted the trio.

When eventually – finally! – the three Gryffindors had made it back to the common room, Hermione went straight to bed, but sleep wouldn't come. Oh well, she thought, when after hours of casting and recasting the charm, the Tempus finally showed the time to be half past five, maybe an early morning bath might help.

It was a little before six when Hermione left her dorm room to traipse down the stairs. She knew
she'd have to wait a few more minutes until curfew was over before she could go to the fifth floor prefects' bathroom, but she'd rather do her waiting in the common room than listening to the two girls softly snoring in the beds beside hers.

What she had not expected, though, was to find a cursing Angelina Johnson standing in front of the fireplace.

"Angelina?" Hermione asked as she descended the last couple of steps and approached the girl. "Are you alright?"

"The hell I am," was her answer. "Not only did I lose the best seeker this team has seen in the last decade at the very least, but I also lost two beaters who have been a constant on this team and a huge help in keeping everybody together and in spirit. And now I can't even pull off this ridiculous charm that George showed me!"

At her last few words, uttered in pure frustrated anger, her wand that she had pointed at herself emitted a flurry of red sparks and she pulled away quickly. Hermione thought it best not to mention that Angelina's bangs appeared a little singed.

"What is it you're attempting to do?" she asked instead. "Maybe I could help."

Angelina sighed.

"Not that I can see how you would know about this one, but I can't see how much more could go wrong at this point either, so what the hell."

Hermione wanted to feel insulted, but seeing as she could only understand the sentiment too well, after the Saturday she'd had, she decided not to let the words get to her. She went closer when the Quidditch team captain beckoned to her.

"See now, this is supposed to be a Disillusioning charm. George showed me how to do it to him, and he also demonstrated that it was possible to do on oneself, but I'd never actually tried that out. It worked when I did it on him, and I don't see what I'm doing wrong now that I'm trying it on myself, because honestly, I'm doing exactly what he did, but it just doesn't –"

"What's your intention with this charm?" Hermione asked, wondering when she'd begun to channel her professor that much.

"Well, to make myself invisible of course, but –"

"To whom? To yourself?"

"Yes, of course," Angelina answered, her face in a frown at the seemingly ridiculous questions. "I mean, invisible to everybody."

"But including you?" When the older girl nodded in confirmation, Hermione explained, "You see, that's the crux of your problem. The Disillusioning charm is meant to keep you from being seen by others, but if you were to lose sight of yourself, you would have done something extremely wrong. You still want to be conscious of yourself, and that includes being aware of yourself with your visual sense. That's why it's worked when you tried to Disillusion George, because he was meant to be invisible to you, but not on yourself. Try on me, if you like, and then change your intention and try again on yourself."

Angelina seemed hesitant to accept advice, especially advice as theoretical as this, from a younger student, but Hermione could see the change in her eyes when the captain decided to throw all caution
to the wind. Knocking Hermione sharply on the head with her wand, Hermione felt a weird sensation like that of a raw egg breaking and spreading its innards over her body. When Angelina smiled, she was sure that the charm must have worked. Seeing the elder girl turn her wand on herself and shifting into invisibility a moment later, Hermione smiled as well.

"Now what do we do, Disillusioned as we are?" she asked. Squinting, she could still make out Angelina's shape where the edges of her body threw ripples into Hermione's perception of their surroundings. Still, it was a nifty little charm and she was determined to learn it.

"Well, I don't know about you," Angelina answered, "but after the day I've had, I thought I might as well start this one with a long good soak."

"Funnily enough," Hermione replied, "I was having that exact same thought when I woke up. But I can wait till you are finished, or I can just use the Gryffindor bathroom instead, so do go ahead."

"Don't be ridiculous," Angelina admonished her. "I don't mind you coming along. Join me?"

Hermione nodded. If the motion was lost on the elder girl, it was not only because they were both Disillusioned, but also because, assertive as she was, she was already halfway to the portrait hole.

The two girls trudged along in silence, walking to the prefects' bathroom together. Inside, Hermione had to remind herself not to erect her usual wards, as outside of curfew, everybody was well within their rights to use the bathroom. Well – everyone with the correct privileges, such as Angelina and her, of course.

Angelina lifted the Disillusion off of both of them and went to fill the tub as Hermione Conjured her usual screen at least, if she couldn't stick to her wards, to keep the two of them from being seen by anybody upon first walking in. Angelina merely arched her eyebrows at that, but the question mark in her expression was drowned in the appreciation that could be found there, and no further comment was needed.

Hermione was still shedding her clothes as she heard Angelina sigh behind her. Quickly disrobing, Hermione slipped into the water herself and had to bite her bottom lip in order to keep herself from mirroring the older girl's sigh. The water's texture was heaven against her skin. It appeared that Angelina liked the same copious amount of bubbles in her bath that she did, but instead of pine, the water wafted a scent of blood orange, tinged with a hearty amount of salt that did wonders for the smell.

The girls sat in silence for a while. Resting against opposite ends of the pool-sized tub, Angelina had her head leaned back against the edge of the bath, her eyes closed. Hermione used the opportunity to muster her. Slanted eyes with long black lashes were perfectly framed by delicately arched eyebrows under a high forehead. Her cheekbones sat high upon a silky-looking expanse of skin, ending in a pointed chin that somehow didn't make her face appear edgy in the slightest. No, relaxed as she currently was, the Quidditch captain appeared to Hermione as the softest person she had ever met. She knew otherwise, of course, but with the dark bow of her lips not shouting commands for once and with her chocolate skin tone not further darkened by her imposing expression, the older girl's face held a beauty that Hermione had rarely encountered.

Fazed as she was by the sight, Hermione did not even notice when that beauty's eyes slowly opened to return the perusal.

"Dear Morgana, Granger," Angelina cursed, though in good humour, "are you quite done staring at me? I have a harp string to pluck."
Hermione was confused. Her eyes shot to the painting of the mermaid who was still fast asleep, the harp in her hand dangling to the side. Somehow she felt that wasn't what the older girl had in mind, exactly. Not knowing what to say to that, she replied, "I didn't know you could play the harp."

To confuse her even more, Angelina giggled.

"Well, maybe that expression isn't clear enough," she said. "Might as well say that I'm about to get lost in the deep end."

Hermione felt the skin of her forehead fold itself into a frown. She was quite certain that the pool was equally deep at all ends. Sure, the centre was a lot deeper than the rest, seeing as a heightened platform for sitting underwater ran around the edges of the tub, but there was no deep end, specifically.

"What does that have to do with music?"

"Oh girl," Angelina sighed. "They call you the brightest witch of your age, but honestly, you seem pretty thick to me right now. Alright, what else might you call it? I meant to polish my pearl. Roll my dough. Air my orchid."

At Hermione's empty expression, the older girl sighed once more. "Honestly? Nothing?" Hermione shook her head no. "Sweet Circe, Granger, I'll spell it out for you then: I'm going to touch myself."

If that had been meant to lift the heavy confusion that had settled over Hermione like an uncomfortable, suffocating blanket, it did not serve its purpose in the least.

"Well, how else would you wash if not by touching yourself?"

The look she received for that was one that seemed torn between laughing her ass off and swallowing her own tongue in incredulity.

"I'll have to spell it out for you, won't I?" the older girl asked, but did not wait for an answer. "Granger, I mean to masturbate. Now. In the bath. If it makes you uncomfortable to stay during that, you should go now, because Merlin knows, once I start, I have no intention of stopping until I've reached and tumbled off the cliff at least thrice."

Hermione hadn't really expected anything, but even less than anything she'd expected that. What a question to have posed to oneself by a person one had rarely had close contact with, or any contact at all, really, if one discounted the few polite greetings during their DA sessions.

"I –," she began, but broke off as her voice faltered. "I don't really know how that would make me feel. I haven't had anybody ask me that before."

"Oh really," Angelina snorted, "I couldn't tell that."

All of a sudden, Hermione felt stupid. She turned to the edge of the tub and made to leave the bath, when Angelina called her back.

"I'm sorry, Granger," she said. "That was rude of me. You're still young, I shouldn't be making fun of you. Stay, please," she added, when Hermione had still made no move to abandon her retreat. Letting herself sink back into the bath from where she'd already lifted herself out halfway, Hermione settled back into her former position, her back rigid.

"Please," the older girl reiterated, "I've never had a girl watch. Not even Katie, even though we talked about – Oh well. Never mind that. You know, I'm beginning to see why George would only
show me how to perform that charm on him, rather than on myself. Bet he never imagined I'd sneak off on my own, without him. With us two being lo- I mean, such good friends, and with Katie and Fred being as close as they are, the next step seems somewhat inevitable – you know, twins and all that. But I've never… Please, would you stay? With me?"

Hermione had never seen Angelina so nervous, jumping from one long sentence to a row of half sentences, and seemingly changing trains of thought halfway through. It unnerved her slightly, to see the usually so composed elder girl show her nerves. Most of all, it lent her a strange sense of comfort.

"Of course," she said before she could convince herself otherwise. "If you want me to stay, I'll – I'll stay."

"Good," Angelina replied, her nerves still showing, "good. Thank you. Just – don't stare, alright? Watching, I can take, I guess, but please don't stare."

Hermione shook her head, signalling her understanding. Whether it was in a yes-I-agree kind of way or rather in a no-I-won't-stare motion, she was unable to say afterwards, but to Angelina, it was all the assurance she needed. Leaning back and closing her eyes once more, Hermione could see her right shoulder moving in a motion that she assumed had the other girl's hand travel to the apex of her thighs.

Hermione's focus was fixed on the elder girl's face. Where before there had been nervous insecurity, there was now a strangely elated kind of determination. Soft waves emanated from her body as her hand supposedly moved under the water, getting bigger as the girl's dark lips parted and a first of a row of sighs escaped. Hermione did not feel her tongue wet her own lips as it darted out from between them, nor did she notice her mouth remaining open after that, as Angelina's mouth formed a big O and all sighs ceased. A moment of silence followed as the captain seemed to gasp for air, her eyes suddenly wide open, and then, her whole body fell slack as she relaxed back into her former position.

Hermione felt a tension fall away from her that she had not even known had crept into her in the first place. Angelina's eyes, remaining open, now settled on her. Hermione blushed, feeling her cheeks light up, under the now sated girl's pleased scrutiny.

"Sweet Nimue, Granger," Angelina said, "that was fast. Seems like you do wonders for my – you know."

Hermione did not quite know how to reply to that. When she pressed out a terse "You're welcome", now somewhat uncomfortable having witnessed what she'd just witnessed, Angelina giggled. Then, her face morphed into a frown once more, though much softer this time.

"And you've never – you know," she asked, "touched yourself?"

Hermione shook her head no.

"Not even late at night? In the privacy of your own bed? Not behind closed curtains, not alone in the bath, never?"

Thinking her head must surely burst into flames soon if her blush did not stop increasing every time Angelina asked her a question, Hermione replied in the negative.

"Why not?"

The question took her aback. Sure, her adventures with the boys (if chasing them through the castle, trying to prevent them from getting themselves killed, could be called that) had left little time for
other things, and studying had always been a top priority, so interest in romance with boys had been
scarce. But to have no interest in her own sexuality suddenly seemed like an inexplicable surprise to
herself, as well.

"I don't know," she hesitantly answered. "I guess I didn't really know how. I mean – I've never done
that, I wouldn't even know where or how to begin, or –"

Angelina laughed, though not in a belittling way. It rather seemed like amusement at the fact that she
could relate to the younger girls worries. Scooting closer, she said, "But that's the excitement of it,
the adventure, isn't it? It's your own body, your own pleasure, and you get to explore it, to own it.
That's the crux of doing it alone first, so that when the time comes of sharing your pleasure with
others, you can show them how to please you, and they will be able to guide you in how to please
them."

Hermione nodded. The older girl's words held sense, but she was not convinced that she could find
the bravery to explore herself, not even in the utmost privacy. It seemed that the Quidditch captain
could sense her hesitation, as she came closer still until she was seated right next to Hermione, facing
her.

"You know," she said, now hesitant herself, "if you don't want to experiment all by yourself, I could
always – well, not always, obviously, as we're not that close, but this, right now, might be a good
moment, I mean, if you wanted to – I've never done this, obviously, but I guess the time will come at
some point, I'm sure, and why not –"

"Angelina?" Hermione gently interrupted the Gryffindor, now reduced to nervous stutters once more
as she'd been before. "Just tell me what it is you mean to say."

"Alright," she replied, then, once more, with determination, "Alright. Hermione," the use of her first
name had the younger girl's full attention, "would you like me to try and get you off? To touch you
and, maybe, with your feedback, get you to orgasm?"

Before her mind could form an opinion, before she could assimilate enough brain power to formulate
a single thought, before she could even begin to process the question she had just been asked and all
the complications that came with it, Hermione felt herself nod.

Angelina shot her a smile, and the brightness in it almost blinded her. Scooting closer yet, the girl
lifted one hand to tuck a loose curl behind Hermione's ear and to cup her face.

"Just – this is a one time thing, alright? We're not going to be best friends afterwards, or fuck
buddies, or anything other than we were before, yes? Nobody can know."

Rather than be hurt at the implication that the older girl might be embarrassed at being seen with her,
or associated with her, or anything along those lines, Hermione felt relieved. Relieved that there
would be nothing to explain to people who had no business knowing of what would be transpiring
here, between two girls who were equally flustered by the previous day's happenings and were
simply looking for some relaxation and stress relief.

Nodding, Hermione rubbed her cheek along the hand cupping it, only for said hand to slide down
her long neck, travel over the expanse of her shoulder, taint downwards along her collar bone, and
to settle around her right breast. Looking down, Hermione noted how beautiful the contrast of the
dark complexion of those fingers was against the creamy white of her own skin. A nipple, suddenly
pebbled, peeked out between Angelina's fingers.

"Close your eyes now, Hermione," the older girl suggested. "Let's make this all about you. Just let
Following her suggestion, Hermione closed her eyes and felt Angelina's girl draw circles under her breast, over her belly button, in the curls at the apex of her thighs. When a finger spread her nether lips and happened to touch the curious nub that sat between them, she gasped.

"Oh, yes," she heard the other girl chuckle benevolently, "there is much you have yet to learn."

What made him skip breakfast, lunch and dinner on Friday, Severus could not tell. Whether he wanted to escape the Headmaster's presence or the girl's, he had no way of knowing, scrambled as his thoughts seemed to be. Quite possibly it was both. For once, he found that he had no real desire to know.

Slytherin's failure against Gryffindor had further diminished his spirits, but the fact that Umbridge had banned Potter for life had his mood soaring – though her ability to do so in an of itself had him uncomfortable all over. 'Educational Decree Number Twenty-five' the witch called it, but Severus did not believe in giving individual names to every droppings of the bullshit the Ministry was heaping upon Hogwarts. What mattered was that the Ministry was going to shit, and was dragging Hogwarts right along with it.

Instead of lingering on those dreaded thoughts, Severus found himself wandering the castle come Sunday morning. After all, Slytherins knew how to throw a party, and when they'd still been used to winning, parties in the prefects' bathroom had been no rare occurrence. To have Potter and the Weasley twins banned from the Gryffindor team certainly did warrant a celebration. They usually made certain to have the house elves clean everything up afterwards, but Severus had no desire to have anybody else stumble upon their inability to do so correctly, in the very improbable case that his students should fail for once.

What he first noticed upon entering the room was the familiar screen that hindered his view of the bath. He was almost around the corner of it, when he heard a sigh. Severus stopped dead in his tracks. Listening intently, the next sigh had him almost certain that it was the girl. It was certainly of a female nature, that much he could tell, and who else would think to erect a screen, much less this particular one?

Severus paused. Was the girl pleasuring herself? Or –

_A Homenum revelio_ confirmed his suspicion. The girl was not alone in the bath. Unable to move, Severus found himself rooted to the spot. Why that was, he could not tell, so he resigned himself to listening. He dared not walk around the screen, lest he be spotted, so perhaps he might be able to discern who the girl's partner was in the bath.

Severus knew that he wanted nothing more than to tear down the screen, tear the delinquent off the girl, tear him to emotional shreds, and tear him a new one, while he was at it. He also wanted to tear apart his records of education here at Hogwarts School, and with them, tear apart his whole future.

What he could not do, however, was tear away his mind from the insistent thought that this was exactly what he himself had told the girl to do.

And what if she wanted to waste her innocence on a fumbling boy in an unhygienic setting? It mattered little to him, _no:_ it meant _nothing_ to him, to whom she opened her thighs.

_Or did it?_

After all, he was well within his rights as a teacher to separate the two, Hogwarts having a strict
policy on sexual relations – if discovered. By themselves, the Heads of Houses made sure that their charges knew how to protect themselves from maladies and early parenthood, and impressed the importance of not being caught upon their students.

To have the girl, of all people, now display herself so wantonly, so publicly – because truly, the Sunday morning before seven o'clock, after a Quidditch match no less, was a highly busy time, and the prefects' bathroom had a whole number of people that might frequent it at any time, so the girl engaging in inappropriate activities, here, now? She might as well have chosen the Ministry cafeteria during Monday lunch break.

Just then, another sigh escaped the girl.

"More," he heard her voice ask, and had no way of convincing himself anymore that it might be any other girl instead of the girl. No, that voice was far too familiar to be misplaced. It was her.

"More?" another voice chuckled, and Severus frowned. It was far too high to be a worthy partner to the girl. Merlin knew no man deserving of her would have that high a voice. After all, he had not missed the effect his very own voice seemed to have on her, how she leaned into the caress of his deep, silky words washing over her skin. To have her give herself to somebody who could not mirror that, struck him deeply, in a wholly uncomfortable way.

"Yes," the girl sighed, "please. More, please."

Listening to this, listening to her, it was suddenly too much for Severus. He found movement in his legs again, and as fast as they could, he willed them to carry him out the door. Once outside the prefects' bathroom, he closed the door as silently as possible. If the girl had gone to this much trouble to rid herself of her innocence, who was he to hinder her now? He simply did not need to bear witness to the act himself.

And turning on his heel, Severus strode away. Somewhere in this castle, there must be somebody worthy of punishment, that much he was sure of. And if not, there was always homework to grade.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: chapter eighteen, wherein a task is failed and a price is named.
Monday, November 4th, 1995

Unsettled as she was by the fact that when she'd gone to Hagrid, he had been resolutely immune to her pleas to change his lesson plans for the upcoming inspection, nothing could prepare her for the weird atmosphere that hit her in the Great Hall at breakfast the following day. It wasn't as if everybody was concerned; no, it was only her that felt the heat course through her body in a wholly unpleasant way when she knew the icy cold stare of her Potions Master fixate on her, but whenever she raised her head to meet his gaze, his eyes would be perusing the other House tables instead, honouring his task in overseeing all the students.

Aware that he would not have to speak with her if he was disinclined to do so during their Potions period, as he had demonstrated rather well the previous lesson, she had low expectations when entering the classroom. Figuring that he'd set her a simple task like stirring or the like as he had the previous week, she was rather taken aback when she read the short, terse note that she found on her desk.

Don't close your eyes. Don't cry out. Don't bleed.

To say that the words unsettled her would have been an enormous understatement. In fact, she was so rattled by her instructions for today's class that she physically jumped when the door from his office flew open, banging against the wall it had been closing, and Professor Snape entered the room. Hermione was still rubbing her leg that she had bumped against the underside of her work station in her surprise, and hard at that, trying to dispel the pain coursing through her thigh and attempting to reign in the tears that had collected in her eyes, threatening to escape, while their teacher was already barking instructions.

Only when she had rid herself of the salty liquid to a degree at which she was quite certain she'd be able to read what instructions he had written on the blackboard, did Hermione dare look up. She gasped as she found his gaze now firmly fixed on her, locking eyes in a manner that had Hermione seemingly physically unable to look away.

And then she felt it.

He was pushing against her mental barriers, trying to bring down the walls that were guarding her mind. It wasn't even as if she'd fortified her mental protections. In fact, the polar opposite was the case. Fazed as she'd been with his behaviour towards her today, and during the end of the previous week, she had let her guard down, so that rather than the brick wall it was supposed to be, there was now merely a fence staking a claim to her own mind, warning intruders off.

It wasn't even remotely enough to keep him out if he was to simply try and slip through. But he wasn't trying to slip through. No, Professor Snape was pushing against the general structure, trying to bring the whole fence down.

Struggling to keep her lips firmly closed as she fought to nip the cries of pain in the bud before they could even begin their way up her now parched throat, she also desperately attempted to fortify her fence, so that it would stand a little more firmly on its own without her having to push back at every point that the professor was trying to push in. Much as that demanded her concentration, Hermione still found the capacity for a little thought, remembering what he'd told her weeks ago.

Even if they do not know the fine skill of subtly sneaking into an opponent's mind, that does not mean
they cannot brutishly delve into the thoughts of a victim already physically subdued.

That was what he'd said about the kind of people that might try to break into her mind. He had also said that he would start more gently (never using that particular word, of course), because he had no interest in 'irrevocably damaging' her mind. It certainly appeared as if he had no such qualms anymore.

For a few moments, Hermione was tempted to cast a Silencing charm on herself. For some reason, however, she was quite certain that merely keeping herself from making any noise was not the goal of this exercise. No, she figured it was about learning to appear unfazed by the effort her opponent spared trying to break into her mind, either making it seem as if she was superior to them, dissuading them by destroying their hopes of ever finding entrance into her inner thoughts, or making it seem as if there was nothing she had to hide in the first place.

With Hagrid's tale about his quest in seeking the giants' allegiance, Hermione was determined to meet her professor's expectations for her learning process. She somehow knew that he had not yet put all his strength behind his mental pushing, and was allowing her some leeway in which to navigate and strategize.

As it was, she swiftly weighed the options set before her, opting for some relaxation techniques. Figuring they might help school her features into a mask of innocent indifference towards the attack on her mind, she began the practices as described in the book Professor Snape had set her to study. As she forced herself to let go of the tension collecting in her forehead, visible in the deep folds her frown had put the skin in, some of the pain pounding away in an unnerving staccato in her skull dissipated as well. She was now ever more aware of the dull thunder that was the Potions Master's strength of will against her own strength of mind.

Satisfied with how far her relaxation techniques had brought her, Hermione was still very much determined to put her knowledge to even better use. As more of her lower facial muscles relaxed, shaking off the tension that had before gripped her cheeks, she felt her jaw become slack as well. For a moment her heart stopped beating as she was afraid that relaxing her jaw meant the pained noises would escape her more easily. Surprisingly, none did, as she found with all the energy that had been invested into tensing her physical muscles gone, she now had more capacities to spend on fortifying her mind.

And fortify her mind she did. Brick by brick, Hermione travelled along the fence staking her territory, slowly building up the wall that had been supposed to surround her mind in the first place. What had before been a thunderous thrusting against the very structure that spanned her thoughts, now receded to a soft pounding that haunted her, but couldn't awaken the same kind of dread that had filled her when the lesson had first started.

It appeared that simple physics applied to mental issues as well. There was no other way that Hermione could explain how the professor's assault had now less impact on her mental barriers. She was certain that he had not lessened the strength spent on attempting to break into her mind, so that left only one possibility: with a broader structure now surrounding her inner sanctum, the power channelled against her barriers was distributed equally over the surface spanning her borders, and with a larger surface diminished the pressure that the utilized power could focus on any one spot.

Hermione wanted to jump up and down in joy at having hindered the professor's mental assault, or pat herself on the back at the very least, but did neither. Instead, she was shocked to find that instead of using the raw force pushing against her fortifications before, there was now a tendril almost caressing her mental barriers. Mentally, Hermione followed the single tendril on the other, inner side of the border, and was horrified when she felt it split into a handful, two handfuls, two dozen, a
hundred more tendrils that crept along the wall she had painstakingly built around her mind. She could practically feel the tendrils knocking against bricks, checking if they were hollow; testing the mortar, seeing if it would loosen and crumble; sniffing at every nook and cranny of her brick wall, and the act alone almost had it come tumbling down.

What saved her, this time, was the end of the lesson. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief when the professor eventually broke eye contact, releasing some of the pressure he had caused against her mind, though she could swear she still felt tendrils probing along her barriers. Whether that sensation was of a phantom nature or whether he was actually still perusing the fortifications around her mind, keeping her on edge, she could not say.

Wondering whether he might think she had done well, building her mental wall even as he was trying to bring it down, Hermione was startled when a spell hit her in the face. She was only just aware enough of the task he'd set her in his note to muffle the pained gasp that had escaped as the Scourgify scraped her mucosa raw, vanishing the blood that had copiously flowed from her nose. She left the classroom along with the boys, her head hung despondently low.

Don't bleed.

She had failed.

*If the girl thought herself mature enough to rid herself of her innocence in order to prepare herself for this war, then she was ready to proceed to some of the more violent aspects that he had mentioned she might expect if caught.*

At least that was how Severus reasoned away his unreasonable onslaught on the girl's mind. The truth was that the previous day's discovery of the girl in company in the prefects' bathroom still was very prominent at the forefront of his mind, and he felt inexplicable, uncontrollable fury at knowing what had transpired there. He had never been physically violent towards women before, though, so why he had assaulted her this way, he could not say. Perhaps because attacking her mentally was no physical violence per se? Severus did not know.

He had somehow managed to keep some of his strength back, though, rather than plowing his way into the inner workings of her brain, but that had been little solace as he Scorgified the shocking amount of blood that had run in rivulets from her delicate nose. He knew that the girl would have a major migraine for the rest of the day, if even it was gone in the morning, which he couldn't be certain about. For a moment he was almost worried. Then he made a decision: If the girl hadn't fully recovered by their next Potions lesson on Thursday, he'd see what he could do to accelerate her recovery. That would have to do.

For tonight, in the girl's Remedial Potions period, as they called it, there would be little use in assaulting her mind any more, weakened as the girl was. In fact, Severus was quite proud of how the girl had managed to stem his attack, keeping him out while fortifying her barriers. Not of her, *never of her*, but rather of his own ability as a mentor. No sixteen-year-old should possess that kind of grasp on Occlumency, and yet she did. For all her natural talent, Severus knew that his teaching had much to do with that, and through all the guilt that somehow coursed through him at having pushed her limits that much today, he felt his chest swell with what he felt was much deserved pride.

If they could not work on her abilities as a Mind Mage, however, Severus would have to think of something else they would be doing that night.

*Perhaps, he thought, they might address that favour.*
When Hermione knocked on the door to the dungeon classroom, entering the room when the door swung open in silent invitation, it was with much trepidation. Professor Snape might have stopped the nosebleed and vanished the red that had spilled all over her mouth and chin, unbeknownst to her as she had mentally battled him, but she had been wracked with a violent headache all day, and was unable to say how she'd made it through her lessons without throwing up once from the severe pain.

To say she held little positive anticipation towards their Remedial Potions lesson, would have been a gross understatement.

"Miss Granger," the Potions Master greeted her as she walked up to his desk, and wasn't that unusual in and of itself? "I noticed you'd fulfilled my demands from when we began these little lessons."

Hermione felt more than a little confused. It was true that he hadn't been his usual self on their Thursday period, but had he actually been beside himself to a degree that he hadn't noticed how she'd hemmed her skirt?

"Yes, sir," she answered dutifully, "a full six inches, as per your demand. Is that to your satisfaction?"

"Miss Granger," he suddenly thundered, his face twisted in a rage that Hermione could not understand, nor could she find the reason for it, "I did not ask for such details. How you rid yourself of your barrier holds little – meaning none at all! – interest to me, and you will refrain from further statements of this nature or you will find yourself scrubbing Mr Filch's shackles for the rest of the school year. Am I understood?"

Hermione swallowed thickly, trying to reign in the tears that were pooling in her eyes from the fright that his unexpected outburst had given her.

"In fact," she pressed out between tight lips, "I must admit that I do not understand, sir. At the beginning of the schoolyear, you demanded that I hem my skirt by a full six inches, half an inch per lesson, and I fulfilled that demand. You may have been too preoccupied to notice last Thursday, but I had my skirt fully shortened by Hallowe'en, as you'd asked. So I don't see how I deserve your ire now, by doing what I did, specifically as you'd asked I do it."

The professor, still sitting in the high-backed, wooden chair behind his desk, leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desk and pinching the bridge of his nose. His head tipped forward, Hermione could not see his face anymore as his hair fell into his eyes. There was no way for her to guess his expression, but if she was forced to guess, it would have been that no good could come from his showing any kind of exhaustion with her.

"Miss Granger," came the accusation – for that was how her name sounded, coming from his lips –, "do not play dumb with me. Were you, or were you not, enjoying another individual's company in the prefects' bathroom yesterday morning? And were you, or were you not, engaged in sexual activities?"

Hermione found herself swallowing thickly once again. Was she in trouble? Had she gotten Angelina in trouble? If he knew that she herself had been there, then surely he knew who had been with her – didn't he?

"Not that I know what business of yours that would be, professor," she spoke with as much respect in her voice as she could muster for this sensitive a topic, "but to answer your questions, yes, I was in the company of a House mate yesterday morning, and she taught me a thing or two about my own sexuality. Nothing else happened. And if I may be so bold," – they both knew she wasn't allowed to be so bold, but once she'd found the courage to be so bold anyway, who was there to stop her? –,
"that still does not explain how I have come to deserve such an outburst, sir."

She?!

Had the girl actually said that a female had taught her understand her own sexuality better?

Sweet Morgana, Severus cursed, if the girl was, in fact, a lesbian, then he really was in trouble.

"Miss Granger," he began for the umpteenth time that night, "do you or do you not remain innocent?"

If the situation allowed even an iota of humour, he might have laughed out loud at the girl's startled expression. As it was, he didn't.

"If you're asking whether I'm still a virgin," she replied, "then yes, professor, I am."

This time, she did not point out how that was none of his business, and Severus found himself wondering for a moment whether that alone carried some kind of significance.

"It is time to advance your training, Miss Granger," he stated.

"I had gathered as much from the exercise this morning," the girl had the gall to answer.

"Yes," Severus agreed, "that would be one aspect of how we will progress in these lessons. However, it is only one of three aspects in which we will be practicing. If you would be so kind as to name the other aspects?"

"Physical torture, sir."

"As announced at the beginning of this little course," Severus sneered at the latter words, "this will be the main way for your captors to press you for information – or merely to entertain themselves. In the upcoming weeks, I will be putting you under growing amounts of pain, and you will withstand it. Most pain will be dealt magically. I will see about physically causing you pain in the future. What else?"

He saw the girl worrying her lip. About both of the remaining aspects, he had forcefully or elaborately stated that he would not be teaching her in those. For her to guess now which statement he would refract was a thankless task.

"Psychological torture?"

If Severus was one to make a wish, he might have wished for the girl not to be wrong in her guess. Alas, there was nothing he could do about it now.

"No," he said, and watched her face fall through the strands of hair that hid his eyes from her view.

"As stated before, I do not believe that the Dark Lord's followers will have the patience to deal with the elaborate art of psychological torture. Most of them are rather lacking in subtlety, and are more likely to plough their way through your pain in order to make you talk, or scream, as they like."

"Then…"

The girl swallowed thickly.

Rarely before had Hermione found herself having to swallow as often as she did this night.
Although, some macabre part of her mind supplied, if they were progressing to that last aspect, she might be swallowing more than was healthy in the near future, depending on how much the professor would feed her. That same part of her mind brought forth the memory of a few minutes earlier, how he'd gone completely over the top with his rage as she'd mentioned six inches, and suddenly she had to fight the urge to double over in laughter.

She managed to reign in her hysteria, but barely.

"Sexual torture?"

As the Potions Master nodded his confirmation, Hermione wanted nothing more than to finally give in to her faucial reflex that couldn't solely be contributed to her migraine anymore, and expel all the food she had managed to keep down so far.

"I will ask you again to rid yourself of lingering barriers that you do not want to be forcibly rid of, Miss Granger, for those would be little inductive to these lessons."

*Rid herself of…?*

Suddenly everything clicked. The pieces fell into place, and Hermione could see the bigger picture that the finished puzzle now formed.

"You asked me to give away my virginity weeks ago?" she found herself giving in to her hysteria now. "And you thought that I did so yesterday morning? Why would you even spy on me in the bathroom at all?"

It mattered little to her that she left out all the 'sirs' and 'professors'. What mattered to her was getting answers.

"Yes, Miss Granger," Professor Snape began, "I did suggest you lose your innocence if you did want to lose it in a way that you had some semblance of control over, rather than lose it to an opponent in this war who would show little consideration for your pain, or your virtue.

"As to my presence in the prefects' bathroom yesterday, I do not need to explain myself to you. I will, however," he said in a raised voice when she made to argue, "be so forthcoming as to explain that I was looking for stragglers from any late-night parties in that bathroom that might not yet have found their way back to their common rooms. Finding merely you and your… companion, I did not assess either you or Miss… Jones, wasn't it? – to be lingering party guests who had fallen asleep in the tub. From the way things sounded, certainly neither of you was asleep. Or was I wrong in my assessment?"

In her astonishment over the fact that Professor Snape had, indeed, given her some information, Hermione almost forgot to answer. First and foremost, this sign of goodwill, for there was no other category Hermione could fit it into, was so staggering for her mind to stomach that she had problems remaining upright.

"No, sir," she eventually answered, "we were merely taking a morning bath."

"From what I overheard and from what you yourself have told me, Miss Granger, that was a little more than a mere morning bath."

Oh, but the girl blushed so beautifully. She certainly was no beauty, not in the conventional way that the Gryffindor Quidditch team captain – and he had been right with that guess as to her companion, it seemed – was, but that did not mean that she wasn't magnificent to Severus. Whether it was
because she was so like his childhood friend in spirit and he had fallen back into old patterns, or whether it was because he'd learned from his mistakes and she was so unlike her in looks, he did not know. He only knew that the girl held a fascination for him that he could not explain nor reason away.

"To be clear, Miss Granger," Severus circled back to the topic of torture, "I will not be forcing myself on you. It will be your decision to elect whether we will continue these little lessons in the new year or not. I will be teaching you in physical pain for the remainder of this year. Should you wish to continue these lessons, the new year will see us progressing to how to integrate sexual relations into other aspects of torture. Those might include experiments with Occlumency under loss of control over your air supply, and teaching you how Unforgiveables will be influenced by simultaneous acts of sex. If you are uncomfortable with that –"

"Will you be sleeping with me?" the girl blurted out.

At last, Severus raised his head from where it had before rested against his hands, elbows on his desk before him. Fixing the girl with his stare, for uncomfortable as he himself was with this topic, and certainly not because he owed her this, or because she deserved it, but merely because he felt that perhaps it was reasonable to look her in the eye as he told her, he said, "There is no way for us to integrate somebody else into these lessons without compromising the secrecy of these little tête-à-têtes, so yes, Miss Granger. If you wish to continue learning under me in the new year, you will be engaging in sexual intercourse with me."

If there was a way to faint while standing upright and staying in that position, and maintaining one's awareness to one's surroundings, Hermione was sure that at the professor's words, she had reached that state.

She felt strangely lightheaded at his announcement, and, surprisingly enough, not in a bad way. In fact, her most prominent emotion at that exact moment was fear – fear that the Potions Master might discover how much moisture was collecting between her thighs at the thought of being bedded by him.

"Yes, professor," she found herself saying. "Yes, I believe that would be agreeable."

If there was a way for him to lose his mind and hear things that were certainly not said instead of what had actually been said, Severus was sure that he had managed to do so.

"Hear me out first, Miss Granger," he found himself saying. "You offered me a price for these lessons, if I may remind you. If – and only if – you decide to carry on with this arrangement in the new year, I will be calling in your debt. If you elect to end our lessons by the end of this year, I will forego my price and never ask that favour of you."

"Anything you ask," the girl eagerly offered. After a thought, she added, "Within reason, of course, as agreed."

*This was it,* Severus thought. The great suspense that the previous weeks had led them to. The moment of truth. The tipping point, at which anything might happen. He might fail, and spectacularly at that, and when he met his end, his only wish would die with him. On the other hand, though, he might actually succeed, and the girl would be his ticket to a better world.

It was the girl's voice that drew him back to the situation at hand.
"Professor Snape?" she asked, almost hesitantly, considering her bravado in promising him a favour of his choice before. *A carte grise,* she had called it. He remembered. "Might I know what favour you would ask of me, sir?"

"From the first day of 1996 until the last day of this war, your only sexual relations will be with me. Any sexual relations outside of this will have to be approved by me, both pertaining as to the person you wish to engage, and as to the kind of sexual endeavours you wish to engage in with them.

"Anything you imbibe throughout that time will have to be approved by me, starting at the amounts of alcohol you consume, reaching from simple pain relief potions against headaches to the potion you take to control your cycle, and stopping at nothing. Any kind of medicine or anything influencing your medicine, will have to go by me. Either you will receive it directly from me, which will usually be the case, or, when that isn't possible, you will see to it that any Healers you deal with, including Madam Pomphrey, can't give you anything before you've asked my permission. None of this is negotiable.

"What do you say, Miss Granger?"
Friday, November 8th, 1995

"I'm scared," Hermione admitted as way of greeting when Professor Snape appeared around the corner of her usual screen.

It was precisely quarter past two o'clock on Thursday night that same week that he'd spelt out the favour he sought from her. Hermione had mulled things over in her head and had come to the same conclusion again and again; that this must have been what Professor Headmaster had meant for her to do when he'd asked her to accommodate the Potions Master. The question was whether she was willing to go this far.

A frighteningly big part of herself was screaming Yes.

"Of what?" Professor Snape asked.

She had Disillusioned herself tonight, as Angelina had shown her, rather than beg the Invisibility Cloak off Harry. Hermione wondered whether Professor Snape been pacing out along the corridor, waiting for her to enter the bathroom, erect her usual wards and her screen, fill the bath, disrobe, and slip into the water, safely hiding her nakedness under a generous layer of bubbles, before he'd entered the bathroom himself. Why else would he have entered at such precise a point of time as he had? Hermione knew that she was probably right. Professor Snape was never one to leave anything to chance, she figured, and it would be simply so him to set exact standards to how he joined her bathing time, just as he did with everything else.

"Of this war," she answered. For a moment she asked herself whether it was wise to leave out her usual 'sirs' and 'professors', but if the professor minded, he did not say so, and if the professor did not say so, he obviously didn't mind.

At his single arched eyebrow, she elaborated, "Hagrid told us of his mission, and about the outcome. I just never… I never imagined that Voldemort would be able to amass followers who have little to hope from his agenda. But I guess history will repeat itself, won't it? And history's repetition does not discriminate between muggle and magical."

The Potions Master just stood there, intently watching her face. What had before unnerved her, now was strangely soothing to her. Some things would never change, she figured, and took comfort from the knowledge that the professor's stare on her was quite certainly one of those things. For a moment, she revelled in the cold shivers that ran up and down her body, feeling icy on her skin but causing a heat in her veins that had little to do with the warm water surrounding her.

"I'm scared that it won't be enough," Hermione continued. "What I've been learning from you, I mean. I'm scared that I won't be strong enough to keep the Order's secrets; that it will be me who will give up essential information and allow the Dark to win."

"You think mighty highly of yourself, Miss Granger, now don't you?" Professor Snape admonished her without malice. In fact, if Hermione had to give a name to the emotion that played around his expressionless eyes, it would be… warmth. Understanding. Empathy, even. Support, maybe. But none of that could be – or could it?

Hermione found herself in a strange mood tonight. If the Potions Master's icy glare could make heat course through her whole body, and if she could take comfort from his scathing gaze, then why not
find empathy in those empty eyes? She wondered whether this came from his proposal, from the price he’d named, that she now found herself in this brave new world where everything he did or said or didn’t do or say felt new and different to her. If that was the reason, she found that she didn’t care. All that mattered was this new light that she saw him in.

"I need a failsafe," she said. "Is there a failsafe, professor?"

She had called him 'professor'.

Of course, Severus thought, he was her professor, so there was nothing wrong with the moniker per se. It was simply that the girl had refrained from the use of any titles in the few sentences they had exchanged this night so far, and that she would use one now took him slightly, strangely aback.

"There is," he answered her question.

"Show me," she demanded.

"In time," he informed her. It would have been too easy to make the sentence a promise, but Severus Snape did not do easy, nor did he do promises.

"Please," she reiterated, "I need a failsafe. I can't be responsible for the outcome of this war. I just can't. Please, professor. Please."

Severus forced himself to a derisive chuckle. The girl did not even flinch, and he knew he must surely have lost his effect on her.

"Don't join the Order, then," he replied. "Don't learn their secrets, and you won't have any to betray."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"You know I can't do that," the girl whispered.

Severus nodded. He knew she couldn't.

"It will take time to teach you," he said. "The failsafe doesn't exactly lend itself well for exercises, and if you get it wrong even once, you could do severe damage to your own mind. Don't you want your mind to be intact for the Light?"

"I do," she said. Then, again, "Teach me, professor."

"It will take time," he reiterated, imploring her to understand.

It seemed the girl did understand.

"How would that work?" she asked. "Would I have to lie with you every time you were in the mood?"

Severus shifted his weight to the other leg. Slightly only, mind you, for he never fully rested his weight on one leg only. There was always almost equal weight on either leg, ready to flee or fight at any time. The motion was almost fully imperceptible, so minimal was it. The girl cocked her head to the side as if she'd seen it, anyway. Severus admonished himself at the ridiculous notion. Surely she was merely curious as to why he had yet to answer her.

"I would not force myself on you, Miss Granger," Severus reminded her. This time, this sentence – it
was almost a promise. "I merely ask that should you be in the mood when I seek you out, you will
not deny me."

The girl nodded as if in agreement, though in reality, Severus had to remind himself, it was probably
only because she was physically mulling the thought over in her mind.

"And would I be allowed to seek you out in turn?" the girl asked.

Severus choked for a moment, almost swallowing his own tongue. None of that was outwardly
visible, of course, but the girl might have noticed that he took longer to answer her than usual.
Hopefully she took it that he was mulling things over, himself, rather than understanding that she'd
rendered him speechless there.

"If you could devise a way to do so discreetly, without traipsing down to the dungeons and knocking
on the door to my private quarters, then I assume that might be possible to arrange."

"It would only be fair, don't you think," the girl insisted. "That was your condition, after all, that any
sexual relations would be with you. And once you awakened my sexuality, it would be hardly kind
to let me starve for your attentions, wouldn't you say?"

Hard-pressed for words once more, Severus took the fraction of a moment to compose himself.
When he spoke, his usual sneer was firmly in place.

"You forget yourself, Miss Granger," he spat, his tone scathing. "First of all, I am not a kind man,
and I owe you nothing. Second, I will not be the one to awaken anything with you. If you will
remember, your task is to rid yourself of your innocence until the end of the year, and only then will
we approach continuing your lessons in any sexual aspects.

"And lastly," here he had to swallow before he found himself able to continue, "I might approve of
other partners for you, so you would not be entirely dependent on me."

"And how probable is that?" the girl shot back. "Knowing as you do the men that I might consider
'engaging in sexual relations with', as you called it, how probable is it that you would allow me to be
with them?"

The girl's body appeared tense, and so did her voice, but she was not even close to becoming the
fierce little lioness that he usually knew her to be when in anger.

*Good, Severus thought, good to know that she is not left completely unfazed by this particular topic.*

Realizing that he had yet to answer her, he merely inclined his head in a way that she might interpret
as she liked. The girl apparently took it for confirmation, which Severus now knew it had been
supposed to signal, and nodded in turn.

"That's what I thought," she muttered.

The room fell silent for a while. The minutes ticked by as Severus watched the girl who was
watching the bubbles surrounding her in turn. He felt a strange kind of contented disappointment at
the fact that the bubbles did not burst. Much as he longed to see the girl naked before him – and yes,
he could now admit to himself, in the deepest recesses of his mind, that he did, in fact, long to see her
– it would not do to have her exposed by bursting bubbles while he was intruding on her bath. While
they might have agreed on a certain time for her to bathe every week, and while the girl was aware
that he might join her – in the room, not in the tub, of course! – at any time, it was still very much a
violation, he felt.
"I know of a way," the girl said. "A way to communicate without immediate personal contact. I have used it with much success already, and I see no reason why it should not work for this as well. I will need to devise a method with which to encrypt our communication, and to decipher it of course, but I have an idea that might work... Just let me get onto this. I will get back to you by the start of next term. Will you – will we see each other before then?"

Trust the girl to bring Phoenix headquarters into this. As if facing the Order wasn't bad enough without trying to keep the Headmaster from delving into his mind and finding his lecherous thoughts about one of the old fool's most highly prized students.

"I have no plans to that effect," Severus answered, perhaps more harshly than he should have, "so no, most probably not."

"Oh," said the girl, and he watched her face fall. "Alright, then. Will you need me to get back to you immediately after I arrive by train on the Sunday before term starts? Or should I stay after Monday's Potions lesson? Or would you rather we talk in private during Remedial Potions? Will I even keep taking Remedial Potions with you, professor? You only set them until the end of this term, if I remember correctly, so –"

"Will you stop talking, you insufferable chit!" Severus thundered when the girl's mouth did not appear as if it would cease moving and popping out questions any time soon. It was with much satisfaction that he watched it fall shut. He wanted to heave a sigh and allow his shoulders to sag in relief at the blessed silence, but, of course, did neither.

"There is little use in planning two months ahead, as much can happen in that amount of time," Severus stated, with perhaps less malice than the girl was used to. "I will notify you of a meeting time and place. Do not approach me in school until then, do you understand, Miss Granger?"

The girl nodded.

When he probed into her mind, he found two things. One, her shields were embarrassingly down. Two, the girl was about to ask him about his strange mood on Hallowe'en, a week ago.

"Now, Miss Granger," he said, perhaps a little too loudly, "how is your underwater breathing going?"

When Hermione went to bed later that morning, she wanted to ponder the question of how to send encrypted messages with a Protean charm, and what to use as a medium. As it was, she was too tired from her repeated attempts at breathing underwater, most of which had ended with her desperately trying to empty her lungs of soapy liquid. Only her last attempt had worked, finally, though the oxygen she had managed to draw from the bath around her had been far too little to last her more than a few seconds. Fortunately, Professor Snape had desisted after that and had allowed her to go to bed. Although – no, 'allowed' was not the correct word in this context. He had ordered her to get some rest, and had left immediately afterwards to give her some privacy to finish her bath.

It was funny, Hermione had thought on her way back to Gryffindor tower, that feeling that had coursed through her as he left. If she'd been forced to put a name to it, it might have been disappointment. Though disappointment at what? That he hadn't further violated her privacy by staying as she left the tub, wet and naked?

Before she could ponder her feelings on that matter, and before she could address the topic of their secure communication, her head fell back and she was asleep before her hair had settled around her pillow.
Lessons that day were largely uneventful, and Hermione was glad for a quiet Friday. The boys were content to spend the evening playing Wizarding chess and gobstones and what not. Hermione begged off another round with the excuse of being tired (which she was) and wanting to go through a few pages of light reading before bed.

Instead of taking out a book once she was alone in her dorm room, however, she sat on the bed, thinking about what objects to use for their communication. Thinking that it would need to be easy to hide, close to the body, and unsuspicious in general, Hermione went to the trunk sitting at the foot of her bed and knelt before it. Opening the lid, she reached inside, eager in her search for some trinkets that were sure to lie around at the bottom. Orderly as she was, there were always some things that she would not readily part with throughout the many months she spent at school, but that were too intimate to have set about in the open in her dorm room.

She started when her fingers hit a heavy, edgy object that she was not aware had been lying in her trunk. Carefully drawing out the item and lifting the thick velvet that it was wrapped in, Hermione recovered the ancient tome that Professor McGonagall had handed her a few weeks ago. At the time, she had only thought to lock and ward it away, precious as the artefact was, but now, she found herself curious as to why her Head of House would think that she would benefit by a book on dark magic.

'Blood Magic for the Uninitiated', she read once more. Flipping it open to a random page, she immediately snapped the tome shut with a loud crack. Drawing a few deep breaths, she sought to come to terms with the fact that she had just seen a very detailed drawing of a couple in a deeply intimate embrace. Why, she thought, why would Professor McGonagall hand her a book on blood and sex magic, for what else could this be?

Climbing onto the bed and drawing the curtains shut around her, Hermione warded the heck out of the fabric surrounding her four poster bed and reopened her Head of House's tome to the introductory chapter.

---

**Monday, November 11th, 1995**

Saturday morning had expected Hermione to rise and shine, but she had failed to manage the latter. It wasn't as if she'd never spent a night studying before, going without sleep the following day, but there had never been a topic for her to study as delicate, as captivating, and as equally alluring and forbidding as this before. Having torn through the chapters with her eyes, hungrily sucking up the contents as if possessed, and mulling over the insinuations of what she'd read for hours, shining was not an action Hermione had found herself able to perform that following morning.

Fortunately for her, the boys had still been sulking over Harry and the twins' Quidditch ban and had noticed little of how she looked or what she did. Realizing with a start that she'd still have to face Professor Snape on Monday, Hermione had spent the remainder of the weekend practicing her Occlumency, which she'd felt shame to admit she'd been rather lacking in these past few weeks.

As it was, Monday found Hermione in a much better condition. Honouring Professor Snape's requirements for their private lessons, she had taken care to get a full eight hours of sleep on the two preceding nights, and ate a hearty breakfast that got her well through her morning lessons. Feeling better prepared than the previous week, Hermione faced their Potions period with the Slytherins.

Taking her usual seat in the back row corner, she found a book and a roll of parchment sitting on her desk. The parchment was void of any instructions, so Hermione waited patiently for the Potions Master to approach her.
"Miss Granger," his silky voice acknowledged her presence when he stalked to the back of the classroom after having left the rest of the class with their assignments for the lesson, "today you will be copying *Asiatic Anti-Venoms* for me, starting at chapter thirteen."

That task appeared rather simple to her, especially in comparison to what she'd been tasked with before. Confused, Hermione dared ask, "Will that be all, professor?"

"Breathe, Miss Granger," he answered. "Ah, and you will need this."

Setting a black feather quill and an ink jar before her, the Potions Master had already turned to go, when Hermione called him back.

"Professor?" she asked softly. "Excuse me, sir, but this jar contains powder, not ink. I'm not sure I understand…?"

She trailed off at the professor's smirk.

"Really, Miss Granger? Don't you, now?" Growing ever more confused, Hermione shook her head in the negative. "Has Potter not told you of his charming encounters with our respected" – the word was spat out with such malice that Hermione was certain she'd never seen directed even at her own person – "High Inquisitor?"

Realization dawned on Hermione, and she had to stifle a gasp.

"The powder is for the colour," Professor Snape continued, now apparently satisfied that she did, indeed, understand. "It will also support the consistency of the – let's call it *ink*, shall we? It would not do, after all, to have your hard work turn to dust as soon as the ink dried on the parchment, now would it?"

Another smirk left her bedazzled. Already in the process of stalking back to the front of the class to supervise her classmates, the Potions Master turned to her once more.

"Oh, and Miss Granger? Do change your choice of colour before you attend your Remedial Potions lesson tonight. You might think your loyalty to your House admirable, but frankly, red silk with gold linings does little for your assets."

If baffled was a person, she would be called Hermione Granger. Too long had he stopped to participate in what to him was probably a game of reading her colour and cloth of knickers from her mind, that Hermione had become lacking in guarding this particular piece of information in her mind.

Another thought crossed her mind.

"Sir?" she asked. "Will I be needing a change of clothes after this or will the quill reduce the area of… will it draw *ink* only from my left hand?"

"I thought about spelling the quill to draw from your left forearm but decided against it, for the pain would be too easily bearable." The professor shot her a look that Hermione knew not how to interpret. "Cleaning charms would be applicable to most fabrics, but in case you're wearing silk and lace, I would suggest you remove your stockings, Miss Granger."

And with that hint, Hermione was left alone at her desk at last. She did as she'd been told, rolling her lace-topped hold-ups down her legs and stowing them in her book bag, before straightening up and closing her eyes in order to concentrate on her breathing. When she had calmed down enough to open her eyes to a vision under the gauzy veil of Pure Black, or near enough the Pure Black anyway, she set onto her task.
Opening 'Asiatic Anti-Venoms' to chapter thirteen, she smoothed out the parchment in front of her, dipped the quill into the powder jar, and set its tip to the top of the scroll.

A hiss escaped her as the quill scratched over the parchment to note down the section header.

And Hermione knew that underneath the desk top, the skin of her left thigh would be knitting together where before there had been written 'Crimson Centella Calcaria' in her own blood.
Monday, November 11th, 1995

Severus had to give credit to the girl where it was due – at least in the security of his own mind, where the girl would never hear about it – for despite all her flinching during her assignment with the blood quill, her mental shields had not slipped even once. Of course, the Blackness surrounding her mind had not been Pure, and he had not attempted to penetrate her mind exactly. He had elected to rather probe at her barriers, testing her shields for weak points, and, finding none, pushing at the mental wall protecting her thoughts in order to heighten the effort it took her to sustain it.

And now he had to give it to the girl that her shields were – for her level, of course, which was still very low – rather flawless.

The same could not be said for the skin of her left upper leg anymore.

Perhaps he should have expected as much, but Severus had not been able to keep himself from flinching – inwardly only, of course – at how long the scroll of parchment was that the girl had handed in at the end of the lesson. Several feet of parchment were filled with her meticulous, tiny handwriting. Part of him was glad that the girl was that motivated to stand some pain if only it meant carrying out the task that had been set to her; another part wanted to mourn and rage at the fact that Dumbledore had managed to draw in yet another innocent teenager into his schemes so completely.

A knock at his door startled Severus from his musings. A swish of his wand had the door to his classroom swing open, allowing the girl to enter, and falling shut once more the moment she had passed over the door step.

"Miss Granger," he greeted her, feeling strangely cordial for once, "take a seat."

Gesturing to her usual work station, he found the girl looking at his chest – as he himself had recommended to her a few months ago, but why would she return to doing so now when she had stopped heeding that advice several weeks back? – as if scared of posing her next question, for what else could one expect to come from her mouth in the presence of a teacher.

"With your permission, professor," the girl began hesitantly, "I'd rather work standing up today."

It took Severus a moment until the girl's words registered with him.

"Come here, Miss Granger," he demanded, and even though she had fought him when he had commanded her to do the same under the Imperius curse, she now followed his order almost without hesitation.

When she came to stand next to his chair, he said, "Turn around and bend over."

Though obviously hesitant to do so, the girl did as she was told without question. Severus was glad, for his next act would have been much harder to accomplish had she fought him before now.

He raised her skirt.

Mind you, Severus raised the garment only until it was folded over itself and rested on top of the
girl's bum, her knickers still safely hidden from his view, but the gasp that the girl emitted clearly demonstrated that she was reminded of their chance meeting atop the Astronomy tower as much as he was.

Before she could open her mouth to protest, Severus spoke.

"You know, Miss Granger, any other student would have begun to scrawl larger letters, widen the margins, or write more slowly before long, had they been set the same task as you."

Although no particular words could be made out anymore, the enflamed red skin of the girl's left thigh showed seemingly random, almost ornamental lines and curves that he knew to be letters.

"I beg to differ, sir," the girl had the guts to say. "Any other student would have done the same as I did, but of a completely different motivation."

"Would they?" Severus asked, rather taken aback by her assessment, but not allowing his surprise to become audible in his voice. "And why is that, Miss Granger?"

"Any other student would have written as meticulously as they could out of fear," she elaborated. "Fear that they would have to repeat the assignment if they failed in your eyes."

"And pray tell, Miss Granger," Severus whispered, his tone soft, and saw the girl shudder under the silky caress of his voice, "how are you different in that aspect?"

"Me, sir," she answered, "I know that there will be more pain for me to come, and I am eager to learn how to withstand it. Holding back is not something that I can expect possible captors to do, so I have no motivation to hold back on hurting me myself. I'd much rather push my boundaries now, where I have some control over the pain that is inflicted upon me, than spare myself some pain only to have a lower pain tolerance than I should have when the time comes that it matters."

If anyone was to accuse him of being impressed at the girl's words, Severus would have denied any such notion, but he could not help that insistent feeling of awe at the girl's maturity. Once more she had proven to him that she had grown far beyond her classmates' level in pretty much everything, showing that she was working hard to be worthy of his efforts in their private lessons.

"Why did you not treat your leg?" Severus asked.

The girl had the audacity to scoff, albeit so quietly that anyone who was not him might have missed the sound.

"I could hardly go to Madam Pomphrey," she explained, "and I had no Essence of Dittany on hand, and no time to brew any. I was sitting in lessons until right before dinner, and came here straight afterwards. Umbridge doesn't care to tell us about Healing Charms, and Professor Flitwick will be teaching those only in his NEWT class, and as much as I've read about them, I know that when done wrong they can do more harm than good, so I dared not cast any on myself."

"What about intention, Miss Granger?" Severus queried softly. "Have I failed to teach you anything about that?"

The girl physically flinched under his accusation, for as soft as his voice had been, the threat was clearly implied. Obviously afraid that he might stop teaching her if she failed to learn, she replied, "Pain and fear of more pain have the unwanted ability to override reason, sir, and I'm afraid they overrode my confidence to channel my intention sufficiently."

Severus allowed himself an audible sigh, choosing to ponder later why the girl's presence brought
him to such actions as showing any emotion, audibly or otherwise.

"Very well, Miss Granger," he said, wandlessly and silently Summoning a vial from his first aid stores, "this is best applied by hand."

And with no other warning, he had spread the Dittany over his right hand and put the appendage to her thigh.

The girl jumped at his touch, then sighed in relief, and Severus found himself glad that the reddened skin returned to its natural creamy white under his ministrations. To have her sigh at the mere touch of his hand, as innocent as any touch from a professor to a student's thigh could be, did unspeakable things to him and called forth a physical reaction that he gladly hid beneath his billowing robes.

"Why, sir?" the girl asked into the silence of the dungeon classroom. "Why is it best to apply Essence of Dittany by hand?"

Severus gave a dark chuckle at the girl's inquisitiveness, and felt her shudder at the sound. He liked to think that her reaction came from pleasure, rather than terror.

"Heating the Essence to body temperature accelerates the healing process," he explained. "Spreading it equally and thoroughly to all areas that need to be healed, including any and all creases that might have developed due to the original infliction of harm, prevents scarring. Both could be accomplished using a fire or drenching the wounded area respectively, but in the interest of saving resources, using one's hand serves best. Furthermore, healing is very much a magic sprung from attention, and the willingness to touch one's patient increases the effectiveness manifold."

They were both silent for a while as Severus repeatedly covered his hand in Dittany, only to spread it over the girl's left thigh.

"Is that why you healed me by touch of hand that night?"

The question came so quietly, even Severus might have missed it had the room not been so silent and had he not been waiting for any sign from her that he should stop attending to her leg. His hand stilled for a heartbeat's moment. He did not need to ask which night she was referring to.

"Yes," he replied, and continued his ministrations. Only when his hand brushed the softest of fabrics did he realize how far up he had wandered.

The girl gasped.

Analysing the sound in his mind, his brain kicking into overdrive, combined with the realization that the fingers that had accidentally brushed against her knickers had come back moist, Severus came to the startling result that her gasp had been one of… Dare he say, **pleasure**?

"Turn around now, Miss Granger," Severus demanded, his voice somewhat hoarse as he struggled to come to terms with what he had just discovered.

The girl followed his demand without a word of defiance, raising herself from where she'd been braced on his desk (her skirt fell back down into place), turning one hundred and eighty degrees, and not looking at him even once. She did not need to look at him, though, for Severus to see, even in the dimly lit dungeon classroom, that her face was beet red.

Severus, intent on not scaring the girl any further lest she stop him from carrying on with healing her leg – for there was nothing right now that he wanted to do less than continue to touch her silken skin – covered his hand in Dittany once more and repeated the process of covering her thigh in it with the
front of her leg.

He was almost finished when he asked, "Lace, Miss Granger?"

The girl jumped once more, and for a moment her eyes (that had turned to watch his hand work on her thigh in what Severus presumed to be helpless curiosity) flicked to his. Her mind that had been so dutifully and meticulously closed to him during their Potions period only hours earlier was now an open book.

"Silver," he stated, reading the colour from her eyes, but what had been meant to be an assertion escaped as a whisper.

"Only silver, sir?" the girl asked, and at the shocked look on her face Severus knew that the teasing note to her voice had taken her as much by surprise as it had him.

"Why don't you let me find out, Miss Granger," Severus suggested, and inwardly revelled at how the girl's eyes became hooded at the rumbling quality of his voice.

His hand travelled ever further up. Where Severus had been dying to see her lace-topped silken hold-ups before, he was now glad that her skin was bare of any fabric.

"Isn't the point of these lessons that I don't, sir?" the girl asked. "Let you find out, that is?"

Still, her eyes did not stray from his, holding his gaze with a desperate curiosity, and Severus felt a sense of mere longing come over him and found that the emotion did not originate from himself. It rolled over him like waves from the tide of feelings that stemmed from the girl's eyes.

"Don't, then," he said, and, after a moment to let his words sink in, lifted her skirt above her hips.

The girl made no move to stop him.

Severus felt all breath escape his lungs, and only when they screamed for air did he remember to inhale.

"These aren't resembling snow-covered pines anymore, Miss Granger, are they?" he breathed.

"No," came her answer, her voice equally breathy and breathless at the same time, "they don't. But you didn't like my own House colours, so I thought…"

She trailed off, but Severus did not need her to say any more. What he needed to do right now was lose himself in the emerald green that was the silken bow at the top centre of the girl's knickers.

---

**Sunday, December 1st, 1995**

Hermione did not know why Angelina had invited her to have another bath together this morning, when the two girls had happened upon one another much in the same manner as they had a few weeks back, though both in a much better mood. Hermione simply decided that she did not need to know why Angelina had invited her to bathe together, so she did not question the Quidditch captain and just said yes.

An hour later – breakfast would be starting at eight, so they still had another hour till then – they were still lounging in the pool-sized tub, each lost in their own thoughts. Hermione had already watched the elder girl get her three orgasms out, each more beautiful to witness than the last, and now they were both resting from the experience.
"How are things with Katie?" Hermione eventually broke the silence.

A smile spread over Angelina's face without her opening her eyes.

"Good," she said. "Great, really. Thanks for letting me practice with you. Katie was quite... satisfied with my skills."

"Glad I could be of service as your personal guinea pig," Hermione countered, and Angelina joined her in laughing.

"How are things yourself?" the elder girl asked after a moment.

Hermione thought back to her Remedial Potions lesson almost three weeks ago to the day. Remembering how hot she'd been for the Potions Master's touch, how turned on by the velvet quality of his voice, how primed by the heat that his healing touch had infused into her thigh, travelling higher right to where her centre had been throbbing with need for more, whatever more was – it still sent her cheeks into a burning blush that lit her whole face like a Christmas tree. Thinking back to that night also reminded her of how his fingers had accidentally (for it had been an accident – hadn't it?) brushed against her knickers, how the faintest of touches at her centre had almost sent her tumbling over the cliff that she had been dangling on, and how embarrassed she was to know that he must certainly have felt the wetness pooling at her core.

Hermione was glad that Angelina had her eyes closed, for she would definitely have questioned why her face was now the colour of a nice Burgundy.

In the nights that had passed since that evening, Hermione had found her hand wandering time and again, when she had warded herself into the safety of her four poster bed, curtains spelled shut. Yet, no matter how intently she tried to call Professor Snape's treatment to the forefront of her mind, she could never quite achieve what feelings Angelina had managed to draw forth from her innermost depths.

"Still practicing," Hermione admitted in answer to the captain's question.

"Don't you worry, Granger," Angelina replied, "you'll get there, and once you've reached that point of no return, you'll find it again and again. It's like riding a broomstick."

Where the blush had been receding from Hermione's cheeks, it now returned in full force.

"I'm not particularly good at riding a broomstick."

Angelina laughed, though the sound was free of ridicule. It was honest amusement over Hermione's confession, not at the girl herself.

"As I said," she repeated, opening her eyes and looking Hermione in the eye, "you'll get there. And once you've gotten the hang of that, you'll probably have to learn how to ride a broomstick pretty soon. Boys love it when you ride their broomstick."

A wink accompanied the elder girl's cheeky words, and another pearly laughter erupted from her full, dark lips when Hermione appeared unable to banish the shocked expression from her features.

Angelina soon began to swim rounds along the edge of the pool, effectively ending the conversation (for now) that had caused so much amusement and embarrassment, and Hermione reclined back into her relaxed position. Simply listening for a while to her Housemate's long, smooth strokes through the water, she made a decision.
"I'm going to have sex soon," she spoke into the room when she felt Angelina brush by, the waves from her swimming motions pushing the water against her own sitting form.

The sounds of her treading water did not stop for a few seconds, until they did. Opening her eyes, Hermione found Angelina's dark orbs watching her intently, sat back in her usual position. A minute of silence followed, interspersed only with the soft waves of water lapping at the tiles, until the elder girl seemed to come to a decision.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay?" Hermione repeated, rather stupidly as she would have found had she not been so astonished by the captain's answer. "Okay?"

"Didn't your mum have The Talk with you?" Angelina asked, one eyebrow raised in a fashion that reminded Hermione uncomfortably of Professor Snape. Uncomfortably, because it merged the attraction towards the Potions Master that had undeniably built inside her with the memory of how the Quidditch captain had stroked her to her first climax, and in combination with his accidental (or was it?) touch during their private lesson, that raised eyebrow sent Hermione almost straight to paradise.

Luckily, Hermione managed to remember where she was, and what question had been posed to her, and thinking about her mum calmed the fire rising inside her right down.

"Of course she did," Hermione said. "I know very well what goes where and how to keep from getting what; both kids and STDs."

"STDs?" Angelina queried.

"Sexually transmittable diseases," Hermione said.

"Muggles get those?" the elder girl asked, obviously shocked and appalled. "I thought those had been eradicated centuries ago!"

It was Hermione's term to be confused.

"Err – what?"

A lively twenty minutes' discussion had both girls sorted out about what muggles could contract and how to cast the charm that would keep witches from getting pregnant or sick, though sexual diseases as muggles knew them had apparently been eradicated quite a while back in the wizarding world.

Glad to have learned something, Hermione returned to the original question.

"How come you're so calm about this?"

"About you having sex soon?" Angelina asked to clarify. At Hermione's nod, she said, "Well, since you've had The Talk with your mum, and now once more with me," she winked, "there's nothing that can go wrong in that way. You're mature enough to catch yourself a boy who will treat you well, so I don't see you needing help in that area either. And what more is there to say? You are old enough to have sex, and mature enough to – well – be mature about it.

"Listen, Granger, you are further along than any of your yearmates, and not just in your studies, so what is there to worry about? I know you're not girly like the other chits in your year, but if you say it's time for you, then I trust your judgement."
"Okay," Hermione said, mulling over the older girl's words in her mind. "Okay, I guess."

Angelina smiled.

"Now, tell me, Granger," she demanded, leaning forwards a little, "who is the lucky guy?"

Hermione sighed, her heart suddenly heavy.

"That," she replied, "is what I have yet to decide."

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter twenty-one, wherein the gifting of a diamond is pondered.
Hermione hissed when she slipped into the water. Though soothing to most of her exhausted body, the soapy liquid sent new pain coursing through the not wholly healed wounds on her back.

In the past weeks, Professor Snape had taken to whipping her. Magically, that is, of course, while probing at her mental shields. For a few lessons, he'd set her more writing assignments with the blood quill, selecting different areas of her body and slipping her Essence of Dittany to heal herself, rather than touch her again. After a week and a half, he had added magical whipping.

Each lesson, he would increase the number of lashes Hermione received. He had started at the plump flesh of her bum, which had already hurt far more than the spanking he had given her what now seemed so long ago. Next came her lower back, where she still had more baby fat than she would have liked, now glad about that for once, and after a while the back of her thighs, making her bite her tongue as she tried not to cry out in pain.

Professor Snape had always handed her the Essence of Dittany to treat her wounds, but ordered her to abstain from doing so for increasing lengths of time. Last week, Monday had seen her keep her wounds until their Remedial Potions lesson began, and on Thursday she'd had to wait until her bath to heal them.

This week, however, was the top of the stack yet. On Monday, she'd received more lashes than ever before, distributed to her bum, lower back, and thighs. Her shields had slipped once, revealing her remembered tears at turning herself halfway into a cat in her second year. Professor Snape had raised a single eyebrow at that, but had decided not to comment on what he'd seen, much to Hermione's relief. That evening, she'd been allowed to heal her thighs and bum, but not her back.

Today, the lashes had spared the still tender marks from where she'd been whipped at the beginning of the week, but the lashes travelled further up to her shoulder blades, where the skin was taut and the whip caused pain such as Hermione had not known before. Before long, the Potions Master had cast a local Silencing charm surrounding her work station, combined with a Notice-Me-Not, and relieved at the small reprieve that her inaudibility allowed her, Hermione had cried to her heart's content. Her shields had revealed the memory of her crying the night of the Yule Ball, after Ron had horribly insulted her. Again, the professor had remained without comment.

"Lean forward, Miss Granger."

The silky voice cut through the silence of her self-pity like a knife. Startled, Hermione sloshed more water over her back, and managed to brush her lower back against the walls of the pool which, though warm and even, sent more pain to her old wounds.

Unwilling to let her professor see the tears that escaped from her eyes at the pain that came from her surprised jumpiness, she did as she was told, letting her hair fall around her face as she leaned forwards, hiding her features.

She sighed in relief, crying even more in her happiness, when a warm cloth settled over the entirety of her back, covering her wounds in fabric wet with soothing and healing essences. She was quite
certain that the cloth was drenched in Dittany to prevent scarring as much as was still possible after leaving the wounds on her lower back unattended for so long, and the healthy whiff of aloe that she caught hinted at a healing potion that was a stronger brew than what most wounds students brought to the infirmary were treated with.

So relaxed was she at the fact that her pains were being taken from her, that she was certain at first that she must imagine the deep baritone that sang unknown syllables to her. A few words she almost thought she recognised from Latin class during her years in primary school, but if the language was indeed Latin, it must be a dialect so old it wasn't taught anymore. Only when her wounds started knitting together where the potion-drenched cloth had not been enough did Hermione realize that it was her Potions Master who chanted healing spells to her.

"Thank you, sir," Hermione whispered when silence had surrounded them for long enough that she was certain his song must be finished. "If I may ask, what was that?"

"Vulnera Sanentur," Professor Snape answered her. "A healing spell that will mend most wounds. And before you ask, insufferable girl, I will not be teaching this to you. I am much too busy drilling some pain resistance into you to teach you fancy songs. Furthermore, healing requires much positive energy, and caught in your opponent's dungeon, being tortured for days, you will have neither positivity nor energy in sufficient supply to work this spell."

Hermione's mouth must have snapped shut audibly, for her professor's previously harsh tones now gave way to a dark chuckle. She fought not to visibly shiver at the sound that sent waves of forbidden pleasure through her whole body.

"Now, Miss Granger," the Potions Master stated from behind her, "let me see your underwater breathing."

Severus had had to keep himself from physically flinching when he'd crossed into the part of the bathroom that contained the pool, coming out from behind the girl's screen, and laying eyes on her half healed, half scarred injuries from his whipping. He'd neglected to look at her wounds before, the incident with her soaked through knickers so softly against his fingers still fresh on his mind, he'd simply been unwilling to repeat the experience anytime soon, out of fear.

Fear at the very real, very high possibility that she might reject him if she felt he touched her in purpose, not accidentally as it had been those weeks previously.

Fear at the fact that he had enjoyed touching her the last time, to a degree at which the usually so deft movements of his hands had become unfocused and uncoordinated, resulting in the accidental brush against her core, barely braced against his touch with the too-thin barrier of her transfigured knickers.

Fear at the thought that he might lose all sanity and control, and give in to his desire for a teenage schoolgirl in his care, both mentally and physically.

Now, however, that he'd seen how much pain he must have inflicted upon her, not only by whipping her during their lessons together but also by forbidding her from healing her wounds for increasing lengths of time, Severus wondered if he might not already have lost all sanity and control. In fact, he had bared himself to the girl, who was bared to him in her nakedness herself, by casting the Vulnera Sanentur over her, opening up to the vulnerability that was his singing voice. Her injuries had not justified the use of such an intense and intimate healing spell, as the cloth drenched in soothing potions had taken care of the largest portion of harm. Remained had only a few of the older wounds, remnants from his whipping three days ago, and they did not warrant such a treatment. However, seeing the naked girl baring her wounded back to him, Severus had felt the inexplicable longing to
care for the girl, for giving something of himself to her – her, who had already taken so much.

And now he had ordered her to immerse herself fully in the water once more. *Back to the usual,* he scoffed inwardly, *and rightly so.* It was safer to stick to what she'd asked him to do – teaching her. At least for the rest of the year, Severus was set on using the breathing break that was *not* sleeping with the girl yet. It would get infinitely harder not to become attracted to her, at least physically, when they would start with the sexual aspects of their lessons, and with his own demands.

He watched the girl take a last few deep breaths before pushing away from the edge of the pool and allowing herself to sink into the water, exhaling as she sank.

*If* they started on that, he reminded himself. After all, the girl could still back out of her half-commitment, and he would accept that. But if she did commit, and fully, Severus would need to maintain an iron grip on his self-discipline and remember that he did not need her for the sex – at least not intrinsically.

Hermione had begun to embrace the blessed veil that was the Pure Black settling around her as she Occluded. Under the professor's watchful eye and unceasing pushing over the past months, she had managed to improve her underwater breathing, so that she could stay immersed in the deep centre of the pool-like tub for minutes at a time. The breakthrough had come when she'd unconsciously, but very intently, drawn oxygen from the air above the surface into the water so that she might breathe more freely there.

As she sat on the ground of the tub, reveling in the feeling of weightlessness that poured into her every nerve, she was glad that her nakedness was once again so thoroughly hidden from Professor Snape. Although she had allowed him to reveal her underwear a few weeks ago, feeling so confident and flirty and just *pure* sexy at the time, she was now back to self-consciousness whenever he was in the same room with her. Baring her back to him earlier had been as much as she was able to take, though there was always a niggling desire inside her begging her to reveal *everything* to him. Thus far, she had been able to shoot that down pretty easily, but was secretly scared of the time that this desire would increase to a degree at which she could not fight it anymore.

*That better be in the next few weeks, or January will be very awkward,* a well-known but rather little-liked voice spoke up.

Hermione sighed, feeling the bubbles of air disturbing the water above her and quickly drawing another deep breath to resupply her lungs' demand for oxygen. Not only had she decidedly *not* missed that niggling voice, but she also had yet to decide on a partner in losing her virginity.

Harry, she had been quick to decide against. Best friend though he was, he felt too much like a brother to her to even consider for any length of time. Ron was next on her list, but was dismissed as well. She did not need a fumbling boy who needed instructions in what went where and would probably brag about the encounter afterwards, considering his need to shine as the youngest of six brothers. Much as she loved him as a friend, she was not ready to face him as a lover yet.

Hermione quickly scanned through the rest of her yearmates, coming to much the same conclusions. From the older years, she did not know many students. The twins had come to mind briefly, but were dismissed almost the moment she thought about them, unwilling to get between their relationships with Katie and Angelina.

Angelina, of course, Hermione had seriously considered for a while, thinking that if all she needed was somebody to break her hymen, the elder girl would probably do that for her if asked, and in a very pleasurable way. However, Hermione wanted not only to receive, but to give in turn, and she
felt yet uncomfortable trying anything with a girl.

In the way of past boyfriends, there were none. Of course, there had been the short dalliance with Viktor, but much as she appreciated their penpalship, or whatever one might want to call it, he was no actual love interest. Also, there was the slight difficulty of how to reach him before the year was over.

Of course, the professor had not demanded she keep her sex life within the magical world. There was always the possibility of chatting up a nice muggle boy during her skiing vacation with her parents in Switzerland. In fact, that option appealed to Hermione very much. Confident that her dormmates had taught her enough about making her appearance appealing, and that, if everything else failed, Angelina could probably give her a few pointers on how to seduce a guy, Hermione supposed that getting a boy into bed with her should not be a problem. Sneaking out from underneath her parents' noses would be more difficult to accomplish, but possible nonetheless. The 'vacation solution' had the added benefit of not having to see him again. After all, she would be having a steady... lover? No, sex partner was probably the better term – come 1996.

Almost intent on utilising that solution, Hermione remembered the book. Specifically, the grimoire on blood magic that her Head of House had recommended. And didn't that book's contents cast a new light on this whole loss-of-virginity-discussion.

'Blood Magic for the Uninitiated' had revealed itself to contain a staggering number of rituals and potions in which to use the blood of a broken hymen. Disgusted by the mere notion at first, Hermione had read on for academia's sake and in the confidence that Professor McGonagall must have thought the tome's contents useful to her. After a while, it had become clear to her that the book did not suggest ways in which to exploit a virgin's coming of age, so to speak, as Hermione had feared at first. The grimoire was rather a collection of manners in which to empower a young witch that had been deflowered.

Split into different chapters, the tome appeared to be a family's collection of virginal blood magic. Handed down from witch to witch, from matriarch to daughter to granddaughter, the book detailed rituals and recipes for every age of witch, age of blood, and manner in which the blood had been spilled. Chapters on marital blood bonds sat next to chapters on how to employ one's loss of virtue to get back at one's rapist, and recipes ranged from draughts mixed right from the fresh blood, to essences brewed on the first-born's first nameday by soaking the wedding bed's sheets for hours, dried blood stain included.

Truly, many of the descriptions had Hermione recoil and shut the grimoire for a few minutes before reading on, that night a few weeks past when she'd first opened it and soaked up its contents. Coming to the realization that her Head of House meant for her to make good use of giving up her own virginity had not exactly helped. Mature as she was in many ways her yearmates would seemingly never be, Hermione was still very much a shy teenage girl, inexperienced in the way of sexuality, her two single encounters with Angelina aside.

As it was, Hermione had decided to honour Professor McGonagall's good intentions and utilize the knowledge that was to gain from the tome. Combined with Professor Snape's task of ridding herself of her hymen, it appeared that the book had been given to her at the best possible time. Many practices described therein she had dismissed at once, of course, as she had little (meaning no) intention to marry anytime soon, much less bring a child into the middle of a war.

One ritual had stood out, however. Upon mulling the paragraph over a couple of times, Hermione had come to the realization that she had, in fact, picked out the exact same practice that her Head of House had used on her ex-fiancé. The idea in itself was rather simple. The witch had to give her
virginity willingly to somebody. The fresh blood would be spelled from the body to form itself into a diamond. Worn in direct touch to the flesh, the diamond would protect the bearer from most harm. It would not spare them from the pain, but it would save their lives in most situations that would usually mean certain death.

That ritual alone did not exactly have sway over Hermione's decision in who to choose as her first sexual partner. A note at the end, however, did. A few hand-scribbled sentences that appeared to have been added at least a century after the original grimoire entrance detailed the efficiency of the 'blood diamond' (Hermione had had to smirk at the term, against her will). Its effect would be most noticeable if the couple were in love, bonded, and the wearer was the same man who had taken the witch's virginity. Each aspect multiplied the effectiveness tenfold.

Hermione knew that she would never reach the thousand times more powerful effect, as she could never combine all three requirements. One of them, however, would be easy – present her sex partner with the diamond.

That meant choosing a partner that was most deserving of such a powerful artefact, and might need it the most.

Of course, Harry came right at the top of that list, as well, but was again dismissed (though with a very heavy heart) for the simple cringeworthiness that would come with sleeping with him. Academically speaking, Hermione was not quite convinced that giving her virginity to somebody she felt was like a brother to her would count as 'willingly', either, and she did not wish for the act to be in vain. Even though there were plenty of practices that she could still use her blood in if this particular ritual should fail; if she didn't want to have to fall back on any of them (and she didn't), it wasn't exactly as if she had more than one attempt to get this right.

And so Hermione told herself that plenty of people, herself included, would be supporting and helping and protecting Harry in all kinds of ways, and so one more magical artefact that would do more damage than good to their (totally platonic) relationship was of no consequence to his safety.

Ron was out of the question for the same reasons as before, and for the same reasons that Harry had been dismissed now. None of her yearmates were in quite the same dire need of protection as her two best friends were, and so they were crossed off Hermione’s mental list as well.

As it was, still breathing the soapy water around her on the ground of the prefects' bathroom's tub, Hermione realized that the time might have come to consider some older men – namely Order members. She had great friendships with some of them, and at least a very respectful relation to most of the others (alright, all of the others, excluding Mundungus Fletcher). That didn't make them any younger though, or her more willing to take them to bed, most likely having to seduce and/or convince them first.

Hermione convinced herself to go through the list of Order members known to her anyway. Anyone above fifty was dismissed at once. Much as she liked members such as Dedalus Diggle, there would simply be too much reluctance on her part to count the act as willingly performed.

Out of the rest, first came Professor Lupin. With his lycanthropy, Hermione was quite certain that he would be useful in very dangerous missions, and would never be so selfish as to deny the Order his help in securing important allies in powerful minorities – namely werewolves. That very selflessness, however, would most likely keep him from accepting Hermione's sacrifice to him, and even if he did agree to participate in the ritual with her – Hermione tried to avoid any direct mention of losing her virginity, even in her own mind – he might end up thinking himself not worthy of the blood diamond, and hand it to somebody else, which would render his participation in the first place as good as worthless.
Next on her mental list was Sirius. Even though she had her differences of opinion with the man and although the two of them could be seen bickering like an old couple more often than not when in the same room together, Hermione saw and appreciated the value that Sirius held as Harry's godfather. As such, he was the closest to a parent her raven-haired best friend still had, and to lose him could tip Harry's mental balance, and with it the scales in winning this war, far to the worse.

Locked in number twelve as Sirius was, and having been imprisoned for a good (or rather, horrible) portion of his life before that, Hermione guessed that he had little opportunity in, well, *better acquainting himself* with any woman – if he did not want to fall back on his cousin Tonks, of course, and considering how much Sirius hated everything that was usually mentioned in connection with the Black family name, Hermione supposed that his stance on incest would be rather vehemently contra.

All in all, considering the fact that he had little access to women who he might consider appropriate for sexual relations, Hermione thought that Sirius might be rather more easily convinced than most other Order members. He would stay on the list for now.

One more member under fifty years of age was Kingsley Shacklebolt. Just thinking about the man and his very attractive appearance sent shivers all over Hermione's body. Considering how little she was acquainted with the auror, she was still very impressed with how he had listened to her ideas and visions, and with the way he had conversed with her – as if she was actually an adult whose opinions were no less valid than his own. Having been called a know-it-all for the bigger part of her life and having often been patronized even by the authority figures in her life who did not mock her for her studiousness, Hermione had been excited to meet a man who actually seemed to legitimately value their interactions. *Perhaps,* she thought, *that was why he was on the list at all.* After all, Hermione knew little about the man, other than that he was an auror, which was of course a dangerous job in and of itself, but told her little of the value which he posed for the Order.

Another shiver moved through Hermione as she decided to keep Kingsley Shacklebolt on the list for now, thinking about how his pleasantly deep voice shook her to the core. And that was when she realized with a start that Auror Shacklebolt was not the only male Order member with an arousing voice.

The surprise that came with her realization tore down Hermione's usually so steady Occlumency shields, and her concentration was gone. Gone as well was the tight grip that she'd had on her magic, and also gone with that grip was her oxygen supply. Having drawn in a lungful of soapy tub water, Hermione pushed herself off the tiled bottom of the pool. Once her head was safely above the surface once more, terrible coughing wracked her whole body, her shoulders shaking as she tried desperately to empty her lungs of the water that she had inhaled.

When her breathing had calmed a little, Hermione set to the task of pushing the drenching wet riot of curls out of her face. Mulling over the thought that her very own professor might be the most important option of who to present with the ritual that would forge her virtue into a magically protecting diamond, Hermione wiped soap out of her eyes. Blinking a few times to ascertain that she could see again, she started when her eyes landed on the Potions Master. It appeared that he had crossed around the tub, coming to stand in his usual place, rather than hovering behind her as he had done earlier in order to heal her injured back.

Their gazes locked.

Too late, Hermione realized that her Occlumency shields had come crumbling down at the bottom of the pool, and that she had failed to re-erect them in the time it had taken her to surface again.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" the Potions Master asked.
Too late, Hermione realized that she had been practically screaming her professor's name over and over in her mind.

"You have my full attention," the wizard in question practically purred. "What is it you wish to tell me?"

Too late, indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter twenty-two, wherein lengths of effect are discussed.
Friday, December 6th, 1995

Their gazes locked.

Too late, Hermione realized that her Occlumency shields had come crumbling down at the bottom of the pool, and she had failed to re-erect them in the time it had taken her to surface again.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" the Potions Master asked.

Too late, Hermione realized that she had been practically screaming her professor's name over and over in her mind.

"You have my full attention," the wizard in question practically purred. "What is it you wish to tell me?"

Too late, indeed.

A million thoughts shot through Hermione's head at once, and from the way Professor Snape's eyes narrowed just in the slightest, she knew that it was impossible to read anything clear from the jumbled mess that her mind had become in her panic. That reminded her to avert her gaze from her professor's face, and she pretended to study the foamy pool surface in her embarrassment.

The embarrassment in itself was no pretense, it was very real judging from the heat that had crept into her face. Studying the bubbles surrounding her own figure was a good pretext for both raising her Occlumency shields and for quickly making up a reason why she had been repeating his name in her mind.

When she felt she had reached a nice balance of a good enough excuse and a short enough reaction time between his question and her answer, she spoke.

"I apologize for letting my Occlumency shields slip, sir," Hermione began, "but it should be of no surprise to you that your name is constantly on my mind."

"Is that so, Miss Granger," Professor Snape replied, his voice dangerously low and his expression unreadable. "Explain."

"Well, sir," she continued, now looking up once more, "my life these past couple of days has evolved thoroughly around your person. Every step I took, every breath I inhaled, every laugh, every single movement, be it sudden or controlled, has made me think of you. My thoughts towards you grew especially intense while undressing in the evenings, sir, when taking off my blouse caused formerly unsurpassed amounts of pain, because ripping the blood-drenched fabric away from the only just closed wounds would rip them open again."

Severus tensed. He felt all his inner organs clench at the accusing words the girl had thrown at him with all the confidence that she felt. Her mind, now more effectively closed to him than before (when, admittedly, it had been wide open), showed him that this was not her real reason for why she
had practically been chanting his name in her mind, but a quick reading told him the truth behind her words nonetheless.

'Reading', of course, was not the proper word for Legilimency. A mind was not a book, not even an open one like he had compared the girl's mind to earlier, to be opened and read at one's leisure. No, as a Legilimens, one would gain impressions of another's mind, images, scenes, sounds, and faint emotions, but there was no transcript of one's thought to be found in the mind, no written archives of every incident and every feeling a person had ever experienced.

A skilled Legilimens, such as Severus, would be able to 'leaf' through another's mind, if one wanted to maintain the more than lacking metaphor. With as much experience as he had in the Magic of the Mind, he had the ability to quickly grasp the concept of the underlying structure of his target's mental organisation, and as such, he was able to understand if a memory was to his benefit or not at the fracture of a second's glance, discarding thoughts or deepening his perusal accordingly as he went. Even more so, Severus could pick up a strand of a thought, figuratively speaking, and if he saw that it might be leading somewhere interesting to him, he would tug on said strand and see what might pop up. There was an art to Legilimency, and Severus was both a connoisseur and a luminary.

The skill could be a menace at times, as well. When others focused so much on a single thought that they were practically screaming it in their mind, Severus could hear it. Much as with the girl who had been entranced by his name for whatever reason, intense thinking was audible to the Mind Mage. Severus avoided Hogsmeade trips for that reason alone, just like he did Quidditch games and other occasions that led to loud thoughts. The weeks leading up to Valentine's Day were torture every year, and Severus already felt a migraine building when the Headmaster only announced that he would have him supervising exams. He had wanted very much to hex Dumbledore when he'd first brought up the topic of the Yule Ball the previous year.

And now he knew that the girl's excuse was not the real reason for why she'd been repeating his name over and over in her mind, but he also knew her pain had been very real and that she had likely been cursing his name every second of the past week, but her well-kept Occlumency shields had prevented him from hearing her.

Rationally, of course, Severus knew that keeping the girl in pain for several days in a row was necessary training, for none of the Dark Lord's followers would whip her for ninety minutes, heal her immediately afterwards, and allow her half a week's rest from the scare before hauling her out again. That was simply not how torture was done. The girl, he was well aware, knew that, too, but that had not lessened the pain for her. Sometimes Severus tended to forget – voluntarily and very much intently, if he had to admit it – that the girl had grown up in a sheltered, loving environment where money was not an issue and excessive drinking and violence towards weaker family members had not been part of her everyday life. As it was, the girl was not used to pain, and the thankless task to teach her had fallen to him. So teach her, he would.

The professor's eyes did not widen, nor did his breathing change, nor did he shift in his posture, but Hermione felt that her words had hit their mark nonetheless.

"I see," he eventually said, and the emotion in his voice was indiscernible.

"Do you, sir?" Hermione pressed, now crossing into dangerous territory.

Of all the things she might have expected the Potions Master to do, he chuckled. It was a deep, dark, rumbling chuckle that felt to Hermione as if it enveloped her in molten, bittersweet chocolate. She kept her gaze fixed on his, and when his eyes widened just the fraction of an inch, she knew that he had seen the pleasure that had poured through her body at the sound of his voice.
"Yes, Miss Granger," he replied, "I believe I do. I also believe that this will be enough for tonight. Do practice keeping your shields in check even in surprise situation. Others might not allow you a moment to collect your thoughts when your Occlumency slips."

Hermione barely managed to accept the task with a polite 'yes, sir' before her professor was out the door.

"Well," she said loudly to herself, "that went surprisingly well."

The mermaid in the stained glass window giggled.

When Hermione made it to her bed that night, once more undetected thanks to the Disillusioning Charm, she knew that she would not be getting any sleep. Too distressing were the implications of what might happen – or what had to happen, rather – before the year was out.

Adding Professor Snape to the list of men who might be the best choice in her first sexual partner, and to the top of the list at that, had thrown all her meticulous planning out the window. Since the top three on her list – her professor was followed by Sirius, because he was important to Harry and probably easy to seduce, with Kingsley Shacklebolt bringing up the rear, if only for his mere, pure sex appeal – would all be most likely found at Number Twelve, Hermione had one major issue: convincing her parents to allow her to skip out on their skiing vacation in Switzerland and have her stay at Headquarters instead.

Of course, the chances of finding Professor Snape at Grimmauld Place were rather low, considering he hated Sirius more than anything and was a little-liked character himself, even though the Weasley parents tried to welcome him with open arms. Mutual disdain was no good basis for a visit at Headquarters during the holidays. After all, he had said himself that he had no plans pertaining to a stop in London during Christmas break.

There was no way, however, that Hermione might be able to stay at Hogwarts. Much as her parents knew that she would be sitting her most important exams up to date the following summer, they would never allow her to spend the holidays locked into the school library, as they knew she would. Mind you, getting them to let her stay in London would not be much easier, but easier nonetheless.

Also, if anything (and everything) went wrong with Professor Snape and he did not agree to participate in the necessary act for the ritual, the only other male Order members at Hogwarts would be Professor Dumbledore and Hagrid, neither of whom were an agreeable, much less a desirable, option.

No, Hermione would need to be at Grimmauld Place. With the best of luck, she might be able to chance upon the professor there, and if Eros or whatever deity smiled upon them, she might even manage to convince him to join her in bed. In case those two very big Ifs failed, there would still be Sirius, and alcohol and the general Christmas joy should put him well into the mood to bed her. And in the relatively low possibility that Plan B should fail as well, there was always Kingsley, who would probably help her if she reasonably explained to him why she needed his participation.

Now, the question was of how to approach her parents about this. Confident that this last remaining problem would pose no problem any longer in no time at all, once Hermione set her mind to it, she finally gave in to her body's exhaustion and fell promptly asleep.

**Thursday, December 19 th , 1995**

When Hermione awoke that morning, it was to the insistent tapping at her elbow by a house elf.
"Oh, hello," Hermione greeted the small creature with a smile, once her brain had shaken off its sleepiness and she was better able to focus, "and who might you be?"

"I is called Tinky, miss," the elf whispered, and even in the hushed tone, Hermione almost flinched at how high the elf girl's voice was, "I has a message for you."

And suddenly, there was a note in her hand and the elf in her room was gone.

Looking around to the others beds confirmed Hermione's suspicion; the two other girls were still fast asleep.

Unfolding the little note, Hermione deciphered her Head of House's unmistakeable handwriting, asking her to come to her office at once. A quick Tempus showed the time to be just before six. Just enough time to splash some water in her face, throw on the first clothes she could find, and head out through the portrait hole at the full hour, when curfew was past.

A few minutes later, her knock at Professor McGonagall's office door was met with the invitation to come in. Ushering her to a seat, the professor threw up a whole number of charms and wards at the door Hermione had just closed behind herself, and to her surprise, at the fireplace as well.

"Arthur Weasley was attacked last night," Professor McGonagall said without preamble once they could be sure nobody would be listening.

"What?" Hermione almost shrieked in her shock, making the elder woman flinch at the high note. "What happened? Is he alright? Do his children know? Is there anything I can do?"

"Miss Granger," her outburst of questions was firmly stopped in its tracks, "kindly allow me to finish, please. Mr Weasley has been brought into St Mungo's and will be staying there for a few days. His condition was highly critical a few hours back, but by now he has recovered to a degree at which there is no doubt as to whether he will live."

Hermione drew in a deep, ragged breath. The way her Head of House phrased it, it seemed that the Weasley patriarch's injuries had been much more severe than she would have imagined.

"The Weasley children and Mr Potter have left Hogwarts immediately following the attack, so as to avoid unnecessary attention and discussion," Professor McGonagall continued. "They have been excused from their lessons for the last two days of term and will be residing in London. With tensions running high, might I suggest you join them for the holidays?"

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. She had yet to bring up the topic with her parents, much to her embarrassment, as she had found neither the right words nor the right time to approach them about Christmas break.

"I will, professor, thank you," Hermione answered. "If I might ask, would it be possible that you write a short missive that it would be best if I stayed at Hogwarts? We had a vacation planned, and to cancel now, at the last minute, might be easier to achieve if I had something to back me up."

"Hogwarts?" Professor McGonagall asked, astonished. "Miss Granger, surely you would not ask me to lie to your parents?"

"I wouldn't, professor," Hermione replied. "I merely ask that you state how helpful it would be to stay at the castle over the holidays, considering that OWLs will be soon. Make it sound like every student's parents received the info. I will do the lying myself."

Professor McGonagall's lips disappeared into a very fine line, and the tightness in her eyes showed a
remarkable likeness to the tabby she could change into. Without a word in agreement, obviously still torn about helping a student lie, even if it was for that student's own security, the elder woman sat down at her desk. Her quill flitted over a piece of paper once, twice, three times, before the short note was signed with a flourish and thrust out towards Hermione's patiently waiting person.

"Thank you, professor," Hermione said. The witch in question merely nodded.

"Miss Granger," the professor called her back when Hermione was almost out the door, "have you been studying the extracurricular reading I recommended?"

"I have, professor," Hermione said, blushing profusely.

"Do remember, Miss Granger," her Head of House continued, "that you are still under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery."

Hermione nodded, not quite certain where her professor was going with this.

"I will love welcoming your children to Hogwarts, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall impressed, "though I will be well able to be patient and wait for longer than only twelve years. I will not presume to know your plans for the holidays, but if I might recommend a visit with Madam Pomfrey?"

Hermione's eyes widened, and she was certain her expression might look quite comical.

"Of course, professor," she answered. "Thank you."

And with that, she exited the office and was on her way.

Penning a letter to her parents took far less time than Hermione had feared, with Professor McGonagall's note increasing her confidence and strengthening her plight with her parents. Why, after two weeks of decisiveness in telling them that she wanted to stay in London, she wished to ask them to let her off their skiing vacation would be complicated enough, whether she asked for Hogwarts or London. The note her Head of House had penned for her would encourage them to give in to Hermione's plea.

Why she had not simply asked Professor McGonagall to write her a different message, brought her to reason number two: neither Hermione nor her professor could hardly reason with them that London was a safe place for her, as letters were heavily monitored and such information could not be trusted to be delivered via owl.

Hoping for a positive reply, Hermione went about her school day as she normally would.

Breakfast had been strange, sitting with Neville and Dean, none of whom knew why Harry and Ron had vanished over night and who were asking Hermione all kinds of questions, none of which she could answer – either for lack of information or because she wasn't allowed to give anything away.

The same might have happened during lunch break, if Hermione hadn't skipped off that. Instead of joining her remaining Gryffindor yearmates in the Great Hall, she made her way to the Infirmary instead. Her hopes for a quiet hospital wing were answered when the only person there was the one she wanted to talk to.

"Miss Granger," Madam Pomfrey greeted her briskly, in her usual manner, "what can I do for you today?"
Suddenly, her reason for being here made Hermione inexplicably nervous. Or maybe the reason for her nervousness was not too difficult to explain, considering that she was a sexually shy teenage girl asking for contraceptives.

"I –" Hermione stuttered, but told herself to just get through with it. She was almost an adult, after all, and should be able to be mature about this. "I was wondering if you had any advice for me in the way of contraceptives."

"Perhaps we should have this talk in my office, Miss Granger," came the short reply, and without waiting for an answer, the school nurse led the way.

Hermione gratefully fell into the offered seat, not sure this was a topic she could manage to discuss standing up, while Madam Pomfrey took her usual measures to ensure healer-patient-confidentiality.

"Now, Miss Granger," the nurse began, "I assume your choice of time in asking this question means that you know the Contraceptive Charm but would like to take additional measures over the school break?" At Hermione's nod, she demanded, "Demonstrate."

An intricate little wave of Hermione's wand over her abdomen produced a pleasant sunshine yellow glow, and the elder witch nodded once in approval.

"There are three standard Contraceptive Potions," Madam Pomfrey explained without further preamble, "with differing lengths of effect. For students who have never taken the Potion before, I recommend the Three Month Potion."

"That is the shortest time span?" Hermione asked, and received a short nod in reply. "May I ask what the longest possible time span is?"

A frown edging creases into her stern forehead, Madam Pomfrey answered, "There is the Twelve Month Potion, but that I would only prescribe against my recommendation."

"But you would prescribe it nonetheless?" Hermione urged.

The frown on the nurse's face deepened.

"Miss Granger," she said, "I understand the wish to ensure a childless continuation of your education, but really, there is no reason to jump to the strongest Potion right away. Try the Three Month Potion first, and if there are no side effects during that period, we can see if your body is up to the more potent solution."

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. The school nurse's words sounded very reasonable, but there was the slight issue with her private lessons. If she wished to continue being taught by Professor Snape in how to withstand torture – which she definitely did – there was that little demand that she not take any medicine that has not been approved of by the man. And Hermione had little wish to discuss her contraceptive measures with the Potions Master. So the only solution she now saw was postponing such an embarrassing topic for as long as possible, and that meant getting the longest possible Potion from Madam Pomfrey right now.

"Of all the known side effects," Hermione asked, "are there any you can't cure?" The school nurse shook her head no. "And in case my body shows formerly unknown side effects, is there a way to instantly cancel the Potion's effect?" This time, the reply was in the positive. "Then please, Ma'am," Hermione pressed on, "I should very much like to take the One Year Potion."

Madam Pomfrey emitted a deep sigh in resignation and asked, "Are there any more questions, Miss Granger?"
Hermione thought for a moment.

"Are there any substances I should avoid that might render the Potion ineffective?"

The school nurse nodded in approval at the smart question.

"I would advise not to overindulge in pain relief potions," she recommended. "They may not counteract the Potion, but they will cause unpleasant side effects, such as cramps and irregular bleeding if taken in abundance. That aside, there should be no issues with most usual home remedies and common healing draughts.

"Now, Miss Granger, if there aren't any more questions, I would ask you to undress so that I might examine you, and if everything is fine, I will send you off with your One Year Potion."

Hermione almost didn't make it to Potions on time, as she had not calculated time for a medical examination. The school nurse had offered to have her come back later, but as Hermione would be sitting in Professor Snape's class next, she had elected to rather take the risk of running late than having to answer unwanted questions later, if she came back to the Infirmary with Morgana knows what kinds of injuries.

It turned out that her decision had been the right choice.

"Today, Miss Granger," the professor began when he strode to her work station at the back of the room, after her classmates had already started on their assignments for the day, "you will be defending your information under the threat of exsanguination."

A flick of his wand had her robe off and the right sleeve of her fitted white blouse rolled up to her upper arm. With the speed of a viper preying on a mouse, he had her hand gripped in his, straightening her right arm by pulling at her wrist, and a silver knife saw her bleeding from the inside of her elbow. Profusely.

"Occlude, Miss Granger," Professor Snape demanded, "lie, misconstrue the facts to lead me to a conclusion other than the truth, but don't let me know the correct answer."

Hermione swallowed thickly and tore her eyes away from the gushes of blood running from her arm.

"And if I may ask, sir," she managed with all the politeness she could offer, "what is the question?"

"Who will you be sleeping with over Christmas break?"

His black eyes bore into hers. In her shock, which the Potions Master had probably counted on, an image of the man himself came up in her mind, but Hermione managed to twist it into the memory of him cutting her arm open just a minute ago.

A smirk graced Professor Snape's face, if that smirk could even be considered to be named in any context with grace. Hermione spared it no glance. She knew that her only hope now was to drown in the blackness of his eyes, and pray for Purity.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter twenty-three, wherein the appeal of impeccable grammar is
discussed.
Thursday, December 19th, 1995

"Who will you be sleeping with over Christmas break?"

The professor had not missed a heartbeat's moment before delving into her mind. She felt him rummaging around even now. It was far easier to keep a potential intruder out of her mind than throwing one out after they'd already made their way inside.

In her haste to distract the Potions Master, Hermione threw up pictures of her parents skiing, and tried to concentrate on her longing to be with them, trying to disguise it as a desire to go on the skiing trip to Switzerland over Christmas.

The professor chuckled at her poor attempt. Hermione could practically feel the derision pouring off his presence inside her head, just as she could feel the blood pouring from her arm.

"Miss Granger," Professor Snape's voice reached her ear as if having been forced through a thick liquid. "Do me the courtesy of trying harder than that."

Inside her mind, he drew forth a couple of memories of Ron laughing at her explanations of skiing, as if to prove her wrong. Knowing the man, that was probably his sole intention. Followed by a memory of her shock at hearing the news about Arthur Weasley – too easy to find as her discussion with Professor McGonagall that morning was still fresh on her mind – the manner was settled.

Very well, Hermione thought to herself, not even putting the thought into actual words in order to make it harder for her opponent to notice her resolve.

She thought of Harry. Harry holding her as she cried, Harry hugging her in triumph after his first Quidditch match, Harry visiting her in the hospital wing when she was still coughing up balls of fur, Harry dancing with another girl in his arms at the Yule Ball. The last one was coupled with her upset during the ball at something Ron had said to her, though she tried not to concentrate on the actual words, but rather on the feeling itself.

It wasn't enough.

Instead of following the mental slide show offered up to him, the professor made his way deeper into her mind, grabbing hold of an image of Ron insulting her over drinks, and digging up her real, sibling-like emotions towards Harry.

"Please," he said, and this time Hermione felt his voice reverberate in her head, knowing he had spoken the words mentally rather than aloud as before, "if you wish to lie to me, Miss Granger, do use memories I haven't seen yet."

Steeling her resolve once more, Hermione knew that she needed to get him out. Out, no matter the cost.

She thought of Angelina.

First came images of herself bathing alone. Enjoying the water, immersing herself in the thick, foamy
liquid, resting her head against the tiled edge of the pool. Then, the feeling of soft fingers against her face, cupping her cheek, travelling over her collarbone further downwards. When they reached her breasts, Hermione mentally opened her eyes, showing Professor Snape not only her emotions during the act, but the sight she'd marvelled at during that moment – agile black fingers against her ivory skin.

Carefully splitting her focus, so as not to alert the Potions Master to her divided attention, Hermione probed around in her mind. She had to mask a very strong emotion of pride when she found that her professor had stopped rummaging around in memories she wasn't focused on herself. It meant that she had his full attention.

The rest was relatively easy. Hermione drew up the walls around her mind, leaving only a small crack through which to expel the intruder later. Fortifying her mental barriers, she looked back on which part of the memory with Angelina was currently playing. It turned out Professor Snape was just watching her beg for more – fingers, frequency, depth, anything – and he seemed completely riveted. All that was left to do for her was to surround his presence inside her mind from three sides, cornering him in a way that his only direction to flee would lead directly to the crack in her Occlumency shields.

Hermione waited for the perfect moment. The memory playing was nearing the point of her very first orgasm. Just before Professor Snape could witness her tip her head back and emit a loud wail in her pleasure, Hermione gave him a firm shove. Distracted as he'd been, it took him a moment to realize that he was out; out of the memory, out of her mind. The part of her attention that was focused on the professor's face saw him blinking once, twice, three times in confusion before his own awareness was back to its usual two hundred percent, but the time had been enough for Hermione to close the gap that she had expelled him through.

She smiled sweetly up into the professor's face.

"Anything else I can do for you?" she asked, unable to fully hide the grin.

His anger was palpable, but when he spoke, his voice was calm.

"Oh yes, Miss Granger," he answered. "Do keep up your charade for another forty minutes, will you?"

Casting a Tempus, he smirked darkly at her. He turned on the spot and strode back to the front of the classroom so as not to draw unwanted attention to his long presence at her work station. Hermione barely noticed the motion. For that, she was far too dumb-struck by the truth of his words, shown in the glowing numerals lighting the air right in front of her eyes.

Time, it seemed, was not on her side.

Severus wanted to hit something, severely. How he had allowed the girl to mislead him so, he could not tell. After all, he had seen through her first pretence quite quickly, though it had admittedly been a poor choice of lie on her part, knowing as he did that Dumbledore would not like to have her traipsing around on the continent when the danger was so imminent here. Potter needed her, and Weasley did too, emotionally inept dunderheads that they were, so there was no way the Headmaster would allow her to stay away from them for too long, much less so over the holidays that apparently still meant something to people other than Severus himself.

Her next attempt had been better. Showing him images of Potter who she knew he hated, and combining them with positive emotions that any common man might become jealous over, had been
clever indeed. Her mistake lay in drawing up her emotions after the Yule Ball, which he knew to have been caused by the youngest Weasley boy. After all, he had seen that particular scene already when the girl had broken into tears while he had been magically whipping her back to shreds.

What had come after that had been pure brilliance, loathe though he was to admit it. The girl was aware how sore of a topic her sexual encounter in the prefects' bathroom had been to Severus, judging from the way he'd confronted (alright – and attacked) her the following day. Coupled with the fact that any common, any lesser man, might revel in the sight of a young girl falling apart under her climax right before his eyes, having been brought to the brink by another female no less, and not only seeing the act but actually feeling all her emotions through the experience, it had been a clever calculation on her part that another man might fall for and into the trap. That his own inattention had allowed the girl to kick him out of her mind, irked Severus immensely, and he would probably be chewing and worrying over that fact if time was not running out fast, and if he didn't intend to come behind her secret before the lesson was over.

Fortunately, his stroll to the front of the classroom had helped clear Severus's mind. Turning around, he quickly scanned the crowd but found no immediate source of danger. Having both Potter and Weasley out of the classroom for once made teaching this class infinitely easier.

His focus returned to the girl. A brief examination of her still profusely bleeding arm showed that the wound was deep enough to drain her for a while, yet her bodily functions worked well enough to sustain the blood flow. The whiteness of her skin, he judged, might well be from nausea at the blood loss, rather than from the blood loss itself, though the latter probably had some part to play as well. All in all, the girl was in remarkably good health considering the amounts of crimson leaving her body.

Her shields were intact, as well. That meant that her mental capacities had not been too strongly affected by the blood loss. That was good, Severus thought to himself, very good indeed. Even though the pain was relatively inexistent, at least in relation to other forms of torture that he had been inflicting on the girl these past weeks, many victims were so worried over their blood leaving their bodies that their Occlumency skills failed them. The girl, however, was once more the exception to the rule.

Not satisfied to simply probe at her shields today, Severus broke right through. He saw the girl wince at the impact, grabbing her head with her right arm, but letting it drop back down just a moment later, as if the appendage was too weak to lift for any amount of time. She did not repeat the action with her other arm, which Severus thought was strange, but he chalked it up to the fact that the girl was intent on furthering her training.

Once inside, all he saw was darkness. That was, until the darkness was split into a smile, then roaring laughter, exposing rows of perfect, white teeth. With some shock, Severus realized that the face laughing at him was that of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

He took a moment to wonder what it was with the girl and her strange obsession with black people. Did she even notice? Did she just happen to run into attractive dark-skinned people who might be interested in her themselves? Would he need to expect her with – or worse: underneath – Blaise Zabini next?

The memories shown to him ranged from their first meeting at her parents' house this summer to long discussions of both academic and leisurely nature at headquarters. Underneath it all, however, Severus knew that this was a mere distraction. It must be, surely?

And then he found it. The truth. The object of her attraction, the goal for her Christmas holidays.
Revealing his presence in the Shrieking Shack. Protecting them from the raging werewolf underneath the full moon. Telling her what he could and what he knew she and her friends might expect from the upcoming war.

Severus wanted to hurl something.

*Why did it always have to be Sirius Black?*

When the professor's anger became palpable, Hermione knew she had reached her first milestone. She had successfully lied to the man who was amongst the men most skilled to detect a lie.

Kingsley, she knew, had taken Professor Snape aback, and his lack of focus at the mere struggle of coming to terms with the thought of her liking an older man was enough for her to go in for the kill. She had played on the hope that his disbelief would send him rummaging further in her mind, and she had readily supplied the images of the man second on her list.

To be honest, it wasn't a lie per se, showing Professor Snape that she wanted to sleep with Harry's godfather. After all, Sirius was the number two on her List Of Men Worthy To Sacrifice Her Virginity For And With. Only, he wasn't the dream solution in her best case scenario. He was merely a Plan B, while the professor would be the jackpot, barely reachable as he was.

And yet, it wasn't exactly as if Hermione could outright confront him with her hopes of having him accompany her in the blood ritual. Declaring her intentions to him before she got a chance of doing so in an environment where they could put them immediately into action would destroy her chances with him forever. Or at least until the start of next term, and that was long enough to be considered too long.

No, Hermione had needed to show him false information, with only large enough a grain of truth to them to make him believe in her almost-lie. And now she needed to cut off his spring of information, lest the professor delve deeper into her mind to find out more.

Concentrating even more intensely on the steady stream of blood that she had been keeping up by simple intention of maintaining her heart's beat – and there was magic in intention, Hermione knew – she doubled her efforts. When a blackness darker than any she'd ever been able to reach surrounded her, Hermione knew she had done it.

That was her last thought before the blood loss made her faint.

It took Severus several moments to snap out of the rage that stole his usually so impeccable focus, and to subsequently realize that the girl wasn't standing at her work station anymore. In fact, he couldn't see her from where he stood.

Striding across the room to her assigned desk, he was shocked to see the girl's lifeless body lie in a crimson puddle of her own blood. A rather substantial puddle, if he might say so, that explained the complete loss of colour in the girl's skin.

*What in all seven hells had happened to make her lose consciousness?* She had been so... alive, for a lack of a better word, so vibrant just a minute earlier. Her mental shields had been impeccable, considering her inexperience in Mind Magic, and her blood flow had been steady.

Erecting a few Notice-Me-Not-Charm-induced wards around the girl's work station, Severus knelt beside her still form. He shot down the cynicism rising inside of him that wanted to comment on the fact that the girl had finally brought him, the great Potions Master, to his knees. Unwanted cynicism
provided by his brain was his own, cursed form of hysteria, Severus knew, and he had no intention of becoming hysterical now.

He quickly scanned the girl for injuries she might have sustained from her fall. Luckily, the skin of her head seemed to be intact, and even though there was no way to rule out a possible concussion, such was of little consequence for now. He first would have to stem her blood loss and regenerate the blood that was now surrounding her.

Layering a local Silencing charm into the wards surrounding the pair of them, Severus was satisfied that they had enough privacy for him to properly heal her. A quick Accio had several vials of Blood Replenishing Potion flying towards him, and he poured the first into the girl's mouth, shoving his robes that he'd hastened to take off under her head and massaging her throat to encourage her to swallow the potion down.

Then, he set the other two vials to the side and chanted the Vulnra Sanentur to her for the second time that month. With the potion working on her blood supply, there would be enough to start pouring out of the open wound soon, so the first time he sang the incantation would stem her blood flow. With that threat out of the way, Severus poured another vial down her throat, and began singing again.

The longer his voice carried the words of the spell, the more residue was cleared from around her wound, and he could see the skin knitting together. Not satisfied with the results, as her skin colour was nowhere near her usual tone yet and the wound was too raw to be considered healed, Severus chanted the Vulnra Sanentur a third time, all the while massaging the third vial of Blood Replenisher down her throat.

"Third time's the charm," Severus murmured to himself; it was something that Lily had used to say when they were children, back when magic was still magical to her.

Severus applied some of the Dittany (he never went without it these days) to the crook of the girl's arm to prevent scarring. Considering her association with and loyalty to Potter, Nimue knew the girl would carry enough scars before the war was out—assuming she survived for long enough to see her battle wounds scar over. He did not wish to be the cause to any of them.

A Rennervate aimed at her chest had the girl wake from her slumber. She blinked her eyes once, but left them firmly closed upon seeing Severus crouched above her lying form.

Watching her perfect breasts rise and fall a couple of times, Severus could tell the girl was heavily Occluding. A tingle trailing along her skin until it covered the entirety of her body informed him of the threat that touching anything made of metal to her body posed now. He could not make out exactly what would happen if he attempted to nick her skin once more to resume her earlier task, but he could tell that the results would not be pleasant to the one carrying the knife.

Of course, he could always Imperio the girl and have her cut herself—to a million tiny pieces, if he wished—but there was no necessity for that now. There was a more pressing issue.

"Miss Granger," Severus called the girl to attention, "why did you faint?"

The girl had the audacity to laugh. Perhaps hysteria was setting in for her, Severus thought.

"Oh, I don't know, sir," she managed to say between fits of giggles, "I assume it must have been from the severe blood loss, but it could have been the embarrassment of you finding the answer to your question. Which might be more probable?"
"Miss Granger," Severus warned her, his voice taking on a scathing tone that would make a lesser person shrink away in fear, "I would suggest you watch your tone with me."

"Why, sir?" the girl asked, still as giddy as before. "So that you won't bleed me out again?"

Severus was taken aback. There had been no baser motives in nicking her arm. The sole purpose of that practice had been for the girl to exercise her Occlumency under the most extreme of circumstances. Considering the possibility that the girl might have no wish to continue their lessons in the following year, he had assumed that she would be interested in learning as much as possible before their weekly meetings necessarily came to an end.

Well, that, and he wanted to know who she might take to bed, but there was no sense in informing the girl of that. No, better stick with the other reason.

The moment he opened his mouth to tell her so, however, the girl cut him off.

"So, did I do well?" she asked. Severus was too taken aback to answer her, the question making seemingly no sense to him. "I fought you off for as long as I could, and when you had your answer, I ended your inquiry."

"You did what?"

Severus cursed his own inability to keep the incredulity out of his voice.

"I shut off our connection, professor," the girl elaborated. "Rather than allowing you to rummage further in my mind, when I'd already given too much away, I kept my heart pumping until enough blood had left my veins for me to faint, thus keeping you from going to look for more information.

"So, I want to know whether I did well, professor," she reiterated. "Would I have bled out if you had not saved me in time? Would any Death Eater have possessed both the abilities and the supplies, not to mention the clarity of mind, to heal me the way you did? To keep me alive? And even if they had, don't you think I reacted well to being woken up? I protected my body and my mind, even though I'd just lived through something shocking. That's what you said to me before, isn't it; that I needed to guard my mind better in moments of surprise?"

"You accelerated your blood loss, Miss Granger?" Severus asked. "You?"

"That's what I just said, sir," the girl said, becoming annoyed. "Now, did I do well?"

"Did you –?" Severus had to swallow, both the generous amount of saliva that had collected in his mouth and the bubbling rage that threatened to boil over, before continuing. "If your task had been to exsanguinate yourself, Miss Granger, then yes, you would have done well. If your task had been to bring yourself to the brink of death, closer than any student in my classroom has ever come, then yes, you would have done well. But none of that was your assignment. In fact, your only task for this lesson was not to let me know the answer to my question. So tell me, Miss Granger," and at that he came dangerously close to her face, "how were any of your actions conducive to your task?"

The girl smiled, pushing herself off the floor to come to a sitting position. Severus grimaced – inwardly – at the amount of blood that had drenched her white button-up shirt.

"You have an answer to the question you posed to me at the beginning of the lesson, sir," she replied, "but I don't believe for a second that no more questions would have popped up – sooner or later – at that answer. In fear that my blood loss would disable me from maintaining my Occlumency shields, I put all the concentration I could spare to draining my body dry of blood while Occluding as well as I could under the circumstances. And when you were momentarily distracted by having
reached an answer to your original question, I used that short inattention to finish myself off.

"Had I not chosen this way of action, I would have given far more away than what I already have, and where would be the sense in that? If I was under threat of torture and my attackers had already extracted, say, the identity of the leadership of the Order from me, should I have relaxed and assumed that they would be content with that and have no desire to learn more? Should I have waited until they decided to extract the names of all the members I know from me? Or wouldn't it have been sensible, wise even, in the greater picture, to off myself in order to keep more information safe, to take other secrets to the grave?"

Severus stared at the girl. Of course she was right, but if he found a way around it, he would never tell her so.

"Take off your shirt," he said instead.

The girl looked at him in shock, disbelief allowing her smile to be wiped only halfway off her face.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"You heard me, Miss Granger," Severus replied. "Take off your blouse and hand it to me. It's completely drenched in blood, anyway, so there is no use in wearing it anymore, and a Scourgify wouldn't even come close to cleaning it, not to mention getting it white again."

"Then why, professor," the girl asked slowly, "would I give it to you?"

"Because, Miss Granger," he answered in the same slow voice, mimicking her, "the house elves assigned to my quarters know how to handle blood-drenched clothing and will clean it for you."

The girl's head tipped slightly to the side, as if in question to his announcement, before her eyes went wide and her whole posture stiffened in understanding at his words.

"Yes, professor," she replied meekly, and started on opening the buttons.

"Your brassiere as well, Miss Granger," Severus added. "I assume the back of that will be bloody as well."

"Is that truly necessary, sir?" she dared question him.

"Are you attached to that particular item?" Severus asked back.

The girl sighed, and handed him her shirt that she had by now opened completely and pulled away from her body. Severus had to keep himself from mirroring her sigh, though his would not have stemmed from resignation, as hers had, but rather from the fascination that her lace-clad breasts posed to him.

"Professor?" the girl asked, for once unusually shy. "I don't have any change of clothes with me, and my robes are too open to conceal the fact that I'm not wearing anything underneath."

Severus tore his gaze away from her beautiful mounds, hoping that she had not caught him ogling her, black lace with pale pink roses embroidered along the edge and all.

"Of course," he said, hoping to bridge the moment he needed to think on the question he had not thought of before. "Here."

It was a quick solution, and an easy one, if he didn't think too much on the fact that she would be
wearing something of his against her soft, naked skin. A swift flick of his wand had his shirt spelled from underneath his frock coat, and he handed it to her, holding it slightly lower up to her than would be necessary to keep her breasts from his view. Still, he did his best to keep his eyes on her face as she handed him her bra and gratefully took the shirt from him.

When she held it in her hand, she hesitated.

"Sir –"

"What is it, Miss Granger," Severus snarled, annoyed that she wouldn't simply accept the item, "is the cut not to your liking? I thought that with your experience in transfiguring cloth, you would be able to adjust everything to your pleasure."

"I apologize, professor," the girl said tentatively, "but that's not what I was going to say."

Severus looked at her in surprise, hiding the emotion behind a single, questioningly raised eyebrow.

"I wanted to ask if it was safe for me to stand up without being ogled by the whole class."

Oh, Severus thought.

"Why would you wish to stand up, Miss Granger?"

"For one, sir," she replied, "my legs are falling asleep in this position, and I'd like to relax them. Far more important, though, I'd rather make sure I don't get your shirt bloody by dressing where the hem might fall into the blood."

Oh, indeed.

"Yes, Miss Granger," he answered her original question curtly. "There are wards around your work station that will convince others not to look in this direction."

With a few mumbled words of gratitude, the girl rose to a standing position, and Severus nearly fainted at the motion. Where he had been able to keep his eyes on the girl's face, her standing up made her breasts pass his face in the most joyous manner. There was a great difference in seeing them in the girl's memory, looking down to them from her perspective and seeing another's fingers against them, and seeing them for himself, in the flesh, so to say. The sight made him instantly harden, and Severus cursed that he had used his robes, their billow usually protecting him from such embarrassment, to cushion the girl's head, getting them bloody in the process.

The girl already made to put on his shirt, when he called for her to wait. Confused, she stopped in her motions and looked to him for answers as to why he had stalled her. A snap of Severus's fingers had one of his personal elves, assigned to him as Head of House Slytherin, appear.

The girl almost tumbled over in surprise as the elf plopped into existence at her side, but the creature paid her little intention, instead turning to Severus for commands.

"I wish for you to clean my robes, and Miss Granger's shirt and brassiere. I would appreciate it if you could take her clothes back to Miss Granger's room until tomorrow morning before breakfast. And is there something quick you can do about her skirt, right now?"

The elf tipped his head in question, and Severus elaborated, "Finished before the end of the lesson. That should give you seven minutes. Take it with you, if you must."

And with another snapping of fingers, this time on the elf's part, the little creature was gone, as were
Severus's robes and the girl's shirt, bra, and skirt.

Severus rose to stand behind her, now shivering without the warmth of her skirt protecting her thighs from the cold dungeon classroom. Her back was to him, and she still held his shirt in her hands.

"Allow me to help you, Miss Granger," Severus drawled silkily into her ear, and the girl gave no resistance when he took his shirt from her hands.

Drawing his wand along several strands of her hair that held most of the blood, now halfway dried, he carefully siphoned away any trace of red he could find. For her back, Severus Conjured a soft cloth and wet it with a nonverbal Aguamenti, wiping the blood off her skin as best he could. If he took longer to clean her back than was expected, the girl did not complain.

When he could not draw out the action of stroking her back with a cloth any longer, Severus set to dressing her. Holding his shirt open for the girl, he waited until she had slipped her arms inside before he pulled the item up to her shoulders. It was long enough to hide her knickers from him, but he knew what they looked like, having seen them when he'd got up from the floor just a minute earlier – more black lace to match her bra, so sheer he could clearly make out the perfect form of her globes.

Reaching around her form, Severus began buttoning the shirt from the bottom upwards. The girl soon began to mirror his actions, starting at the top button going downwards. When their hands met in the middle, she jumped. Severus put his hands on the girl's hips to steady her.

"Relax now, Miss Granger," he said. "I won't be injuring you any more today."

His body was calling out to hers, and Severus found it increasingly hard to deny himself.

"You know," he whispered into her ear, "I'd never imagined I'd be seeing Little Miss Perfect standing in my classroom, clad only in knickers and my shirt."

The girl shivered, and this time, Severus wasn't quite sure it was entirely out of pleasure.

"Not only, professor," she countered, and Severus felt a chill travel down his spine that he wasn't quite sure was entirely unpleasant. "I am also wearing shoes and stockings."

"Oh, these, you mean?" he asked, teasing the lace tops as he stepped closer to her, revelling in the sensation of her soft, though cold, skin against his fingers that seemed entirely too hot. "Miss Granger," he chuckled, "don't think for a moment that I could have ignored these on my way up."

"Oh," she said, as his fingers caressed the skin just above her stockings, then "oh" once more when Severus stepped into her, pressing his hardness into the crease of her bum.

"Indeed," he drawled into her ear, feeling the girl tremble against him as the velvet of his voice stroked her body.

Suddenly, the girl's skirt appeared on her desk.

"It appears our seven minutes are up," Severus whispered, unwilling to let the girl go.

"So it seems, professor," she agreed, yet made no move to escape his grasp. "If I may ask, sir," she began tentatively, and Severus had to chuckle once more, "are all your personal elves so... taciturn?"

"They are," he replied. Sensing her discontent at the curt answer, he elaborated, "I could not stand
their subpar grammar, nor could I find the time to teach them properly, so they learned to communicate nonverbally with me as far as possible."

"Their grammar?" the girl echoed, disbelief colouring her voice.

"Yes, Miss Granger, their grammar," Severus affirmed. "I have little patience for habits, including manner of speech, that do not meet my standards, and while I do not disregard the intelligence nor the magical powers and abilities of house elves, I find their speaking, both in voice and in grammar, to be unappealing."

"And –" the girl began, stopped, swallowed, and started anew. "And is my… grammar… appealing to you, sir?"

Severus drew the girl even closer, sliding his arms from where they’d been perched on her hips around her waist until he was hugging her from behind, his warmth seeping into her cold skin through the thin shirt that did little to protect her from the cold in the dungeon nor to warm her still recovering body after her near-exsanguination.

"I would have thought that obvious by now."

The girl sighed in contentment and leaned back into Severus's tall body. The bell chose that exact moment to ring. Severus stepped back, unwilling to let her go yet yielding to his teaching schedule. He watched her for a moment as she put on her skirt, tightening his shirt's fit to cling to her curves, yet leaving the length as it was, electing to rather tug the ends into her skirt. When she dressed in her school robes, he parted from her, striding to the front of the classroom and admonishing students left and right to hand in their poor attempts at a potion this instant.

The girl was the last to leave. Severus pressed another vial of Blood Replenishing Potion into her hand as she reached his desk.

"Take this before you go to bed tonight, Miss Granger," he advised her. "Don't drink it earlier than that. Too much at once and your body won't be able to infuse the new blood with enough oxygen, which could lead to severe problems. Have a healthy dinner, and drink a lot."

"Thank you, professor," the girl answered, looking actually grateful. "Not only for this, and for healing me earlier, but for teaching me this whole term. Without your Remedial Potions lessons, I don't think I would be confident enough to face the times to come."

"A lack of confidence would not have deterred you though, Miss Granger, now would it?"

The girl gave one of her bell-like laughs, making Severus's spirits soar. She nodded in confirmation, then hesitated for a moment.

"Have a merry Christmas, sir," she eventually said.

That had his mood instantly darken. Knowing her plans for Christmas break, he could hardly be merry when he knew she'd be soiling herself with the mutt.

"I'm not a sentimental man, Miss Granger," he cut off her cheerful mood, his voice scathing. "And even if I was, I wouldn't return the sentiment, as I see no pleasure in associating oneself with dogs. Now get out of my classroom, before I dock points for failing and severely misinterpreting your assignment earlier. Go!"

And as he watched the girl flee, Severus wondered whether her words of gratitude had been meant to be her way of saying goodbye to their lessons, dismissing him from continuing to serve in the
favour she had asked of him. Would she make him stick to the promise of not demanding the price she had offered him? And even if she did return to him – could he actually force himself to take up the sloppy seconds of his greatest nemesis?

---

**Friday, December 20th, 1995**

Four o’clock had long passed when Hermione finally accepted that the professor would not be coming tonight. Wrinkled and upset, she left the tub and Disillusioned herself, traipsing back to her common room to dress for the last day of term, and to pack for London.

---

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter twenty-four, wherein unexpected affections are shared and prostitution is discussed.
Friday, December 20th, 1995

When Hermione got onto the Knight Bus after a surprisingly long last day of term, she was relieved to see a familiar face at the back of the top floor. The wizard rose to his knees. Hermione made to offer him her hand in a shake, but he laughed, took her gently by the shoulders instead, and pressed an almost-kiss to both her cheeks in greeting. He then offered her a seat before sitting down himself opposite her, the spindly little table between them.

"I was merely told that somebody would be accompanying me to London," Hermione said. "I'm surprised it was you."

"Disappointed?"

"Not at all," she denied the question that had been posed with a genuine smile, one that was mirrored on her own face. "It's just that I thought your daytime job might be more important than escorting me halfway across Great Britain."

"More important, maybe, though that's strongly debatable, I'd say," he answered, his white teeth gleaming as neither of them seemed able to stop smiling. Hermione wondered shortly how it came that they were so at ease with one another, but decided to simply enjoy his company while she had the chance. "More pleasant, definitely not," he continued vehemently, though a wink accompanied his words. "There is nothing I'd rather do today than escort a lovely young witch like you across the country."

Hermione blushed, and her companion chuckled.

"Now, tell me, Hermione," Kingsley said, "how was your term?"

When Hermione reached the door to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, on shaky legs, she decided that if she never had to ride on the Knight Bus again, it would be too soon.

Before she could open the door to enter, Kingsley halted her.

"This is where I take my leave, Hermione," he said. When he chuckled benevolently at her involuntary pout, Hermione wondered for a moment whether all it took was an attractive man to make her forget everything Professor Snape had taught her about masking her inner thoughts and emotions. "Much as I'd like to continue our conversation, I will need to return to my daytime job, as you called it. Can't be accompanying charming young witches all day for a living, I'm afraid."
"Well, that's just too bad," Hermione countered. "On a semi-regular basis, I am told to be quite a handful of work. Pity nobody will pay for handling that work, though."

Kingsley threw his head back and roared in laughter.

"Take care, princess," he said. Hermione was more than a little taken aback at the sudden use of a pet name, and even more so at the choice of name.

"Will we meet again before the next term?" she couldn't help but blurt out what she'd been wondering.

"I believe we will," Kingsley answered, a warm smile still gracing his lips. "I should be around sometime around New Year's, I believe. We'll see. Stay safe, alright?"

"Alright," Hermione replied automatically, quite breathless as the tall dark wizard pulled her close once more and brushed his lips against her cheeks before placing a kiss on her forehead.

"Don't worry, princess," Kingsley murmured against her forehead, "we'll take a cup of kindness yet."

He stepped back and graced her with a last smile, before turning and Disapparating on the spot.

Hermione stood on the doorstep of number twelve for a while, revelling in the cool air against the hot spot where Kingsley's lips had been placed against her forehead. Only when the first snowflake melted on the tip of her nose did she notice that it had begun to snow. In fact, her hair was pelted in snowflakes, and would be a mess to disentangle later. She did not quite trust her wandless magic where her hair was concerned.

Gently pushing the front door into the lock once inside, so that Mrs Black wouldn't hear and start another one of her many tedious tirades, Hermione didn't notice the lord of the house sneak up behind her. Only when she felt the distinct flutter of a charm being cast over her did she wonder if something might not be about to happen, only to be hugged around the waist from behind and twirled around a couple of circles.

She squealed in shock and then delight, noticing that she must have been Silencio'd, because no sound escaped her mouth. When the twirling finally stopped and she was set down, she turned around and threw her arms around Sirius.

"Hey there, kitten," he greeted her, a little surprised, it seemed, by her warm hug. "How have you been?"

Gesturing to her lips, she waited until a chuckling Sirius had lifted the Silencio from her, before answering, "Thank you, I'm very well. How are the others?"

Sirius's face instantly darkened.

"The Weasley kids are surprisingly fine," he supplied. "Harry though…"

No more words were needed. Hermione nodded in understanding. Harry would be the one to shut himself off from the others if he felt something might even be remotely his fault.

"Do you know where –?"

"Upstairs," Sirius answered. "He grabbed a bucket of rats earlier, so I assume he'd be in Buckbeak's room."
"Thanks," she said and climbed the stairs.

She met Mrs Weasley who was just on her way down.

"Oh, Hermione, dear," the Weasley matriarch greeted her warmly, drawing her into a motherly hug that turned out a little awkward, standing on different steps as they were. "I didn't know you had already arrived. Go on, I just lit a fire in the boys' bedroom. Sandwiches will be right up, as well, you must be starving, poor girl; you're far too skinny, I tell you. I'll let Ron and Ginny know that you're here, they'll want to see you."

"Thanks, Mrs Weasley," Hermione replied, and continued on her way.

The door to the late Orion Black's study was shut. Hermione found it amusing that Sirius had dubbed the elaborate chamber 'Buckbeak's room' after stuffing the hippogriff in here and encouraging him to destroy anything he saw.

A few sharp knocks on the door should even wake a sulking Harry from his reverie, Hermione thought, and proceeded to rap her knuckles against the unyielding wood.

"I know you're in there," she called through the door. "Will you please come out? I want to talk to you."

"What are you doing here?" a surprised Harry almost shouted the question at her the moment he pulled the door open. In the background, Hermione could see Buckbeak going for any bits of rat that might still be lying around. "I thought you were skiing with your mum and dad."

And thus, Hermione found herself explaining about how skiing wasn't exactly her thing, and would he please not tell Ron, all the while guiding him downstairs to the second floor, Harry following her placidly.

That was, until she opened the door and he saw Ginny and Ron waiting for them within.

"I came on the Knight Bus," Hermione supplied, trying to disperse the tension that had immediately crept into the room. "Professor McGonagall told me what had happened first thing yesterday morning, but I had to wait for term to end before setting off."

Opening and taking off her jacket, Hermione hung the item onto a hook next to the door, closing it behind Harry, before he could run away.

"Umbridge is already livid that you lot," she vaguely gestured at the three others, "disappeared right under her nose, even though Professor Dumbledore told her Mr Weasley was in St Mungo's, and he'd given you all permission to visit. So…"

Crossing over the room, Hermione let herself fall down next to Ginny, who sat with Ron on his bed. Ginny immediately took her friend's hand in hers and started drawing shapes into Hermione's palm with her fingers.

"How're you feeling?" she asked. In that moment, she realized that the shapes traced onto the skin of her palm were letters, and it took all she had to concentrate on deciphering them and putting them together, while also maintaining the conversation with Harry.

"Fine," came his terse answer, and Hermione saw Harry's whole body tense up.

"Oh, don't lie, Harry," she cut his charade off, more than a little impatient that if he didn't want to face his emotions, he could at least make more of an effort to hide them better than that. "Ron and
Ginny say you've been hiding from everyone since you got back from St Mungo's."

They had said no such thing, but it appeared that Order members who frequented London knew everything, and Kingsley had been supplying groceries for Molly, and the matriarch must have told him about the children, or at least he had known enough to fill in a few of Hermione's blanks while they had suffered the ride on the Knight Bus together.

Fortunately, neither Ron nor Ginny seemed about to contradict her, so she must have summed the issue up quite nicely.

"They do, do they?" Harry shot back. Ron, who had never been good at confronting Harry, found a sudden interest in his own feet, but Ginny wouldn't take any of that.

"Well, you have!" she countered. "And you won't look at any of us!"

"It's you lot who won't look at me!" came the accusatory answer.

For some reason, Hermione found the issue highly amusing. Perhaps it was the fact that she'd known Harry for too long for her to give in to his emotional fits. Perhaps it was because with her suffering under Professor Snape's teaching, there was little that her best friend might throw at her that could faze her now. Perhaps it was because she was in an extremely pleasant, almost giddy mood, following her enjoyable ride with Kingsley – more for the fact that Kingsley had accompanied her than for the ride itself – and Sirius's warm welcome towards her. Why she thought it a good idea to tease Harry further, Hermione could not say, but she couldn't quite resist the temptation either.

"Maybe," she suggested, "you're taking it in turns to look and keep missing each other."

"Very funny," Harry snapped at her, and turned away.

That was the end of the rope for Hermione. Yes, things were difficult for Harry, but he could at least try to act like the adult he was constantly insisting others treat him like. This was about the Weasley kids who'd just almost lost their father, not about his pity party and childish whims.

"Oh, stop feeling all misunderstood," she bit out, perhaps a little more sharply than necessary. A few sharp taps against her palm told her that the inaudible spelling bee Ginny had been playing with her was over. Realizing what the letters combined to, Hermione took a leap of faith, hoping she was right. "Look, the others have told me what you overheard last night on the Extendable Ears –"

Before she could continue, Harry interrupted her once more, and what followed was half a discussion, half a shouting match between Harry and Ginny. It seemed she had understood correctly what Ginny had inaudibly been telling her. Unwilling to get caught up in the emotions running high between the two of them, Hermione went back to her pleasant memories of the bus ride with the handsome Auror.

She had been surprised when he'd stated that he enjoyed her company, and to Hermione, it had seemed as if he might even take as much pleasure in their friendly banter and academic discussions as she did. To revel in the company of the attractive and attentive wizard had positively boosted her self-confidence, and she felt that even if she might have to fall back on Kingsley as her first… suitor, then that might not be the worst that could happen to her. In fact, she liked to think that the experience might actually be quite pleasurable for both of them.

Of course, Sirius sweeping her off her feet – quite literally – had come almost as unexpected. She contributed it to the fact that he was probably overjoyed to have so many people in his home over Christmas, but for him to show that much exuberance towards her, of all people, was highly unusual.
Hermione wondered whether there was some hidden meaning in the fact that Number Two and Number Three on her list of the worthiest candidates had suddenly become much more open towards her. *Could the professor have said anything to them?* No, Hermione did not think so. Perhaps she was just… *growing up*, and apparently not in a way that was entirely unpleasing to the eye.

"That dream I had about your dad and the snake, though –"

That caught Hermione's attention, and she was back in the conversation.

"Harry," she said, "you've had these dreams before. You had flashes of what Voldemort," Ron whimpered in the background, "was up to last year."

"This was different," Harry countered. "I was inside that snake. It was like I *was* the snake…. What if Voldemort somehow transported me to London –?"

Hermione had enough. Those ridiculous notions of his were getting out of hand here.

"One day," she said, and her exasperation audibly seeped into her voice, "you'll read *Hogwarts, A History*, and perhaps that will remind you that you can't Apparate or Disapparate inside Hogwarts. Even Voldemort couldn't just make you fly out of your dormitory, Harry."

"You didn't leave your bed, mate," Ron chose this moment to chime up, which Hermione was immensely glad for. "I saw you thrashing around in your sleep about a minute before we could wake you up…"

Hermione watched Harry pace the length of the room, obviously deep in thought. Well, she supposed if books were not enough proof to him that he hadn't been magically transported to London and back without realizing it, then perhaps Ron's intervention might help.

Apparently, it did. When Harry turned back towards them, he seemed relieved and much happier than before. If she didn't know it better, Hermione might even have expected him to break out in song any second now, to join Sirius in the hallway in "God Rest Ye Merry, Hippogriffs".

---

**Tuesday, December 24 th, 1995**

The following days passed in a much more joyous mood than Harry must have been in before. Sirius animated them to decorate every single room, which was much more fun than scrubbing them clean.

On Christmas Eve, Harry, Ron and Sirius were decorating the biggest Christmas tree Hermione had ever seen outside of Hogwarts. They had erected the festive green monstrosity in front of the Black family tree, obscuring the whole thing, including the scorch marks and unloved relatives.

Hermione sat on a couch in the background, watching her boys – she affectionately included Sirius in that – decorate the huge tree. To anyone watching her, it might have seemed as if she was completely lost in the contents of the book spread out across her thighs, but in all actuality, she was scrutinizing every bauble and ornament hung onto the tree, flinching every time they were attached in an irregular way – so, naturally, every time anyone hung something up.

Alright, apparently not *everyone* watching her thought her immersed in her book. Sirius, she saw, was smiling into her direction every now and then, catching her eye and smirking as if sensing her displeasure.

When Molly brought them sandwiches and suggested they take them to the boys' bedroom to eat, Hermione begged off, gesturing vaguely towards the tome in her lap. Before leaving the room, Sirius
Hermione leaned down to her and whispered into her ear, "Leave Harry's, alright?"

Hermione nodded at him, breathing in the exceptionally masculine scent of him, and another smirk graced his lips before he chased after Harry and Ron.

Listening for a minute whether they were truly gone, Hermione put her book to the side, carefully closing the pages around her bookmark, and went to the tree. Truly, never leave decorative tasks to men, she thought to herself, as she took ornament after bauble after ornament and rearranged them around the tree. Her memory served her well in leaving Harry's items where he'd hung them, and she spared most of Sirius's as well. She told herself that her only reason for wanting to please him this way was merely because it was his first real Christmas in a very long while, but she couldn't quite manage to convince herself of that.

When she was satisfied with the result, knowing she couldn't do any better without moving at least a couple of ornaments Harry had placed on the tree, Hermione decided to allow the boys some boy-time, for Harry to catch up with his godfather and for Ron to feel included. Instead of joining them in their room on the second floor, she headed down the stairs instead, intent on making herself a cup of tea.

Taking extra care to be as silent as possible in the area around the Entrance Hall, Hermione took those few steps with caution, tiptoeing downwards. What she had not expected was running into somebody. Somebody, she noticed, clad in the blackest of robes.

"Professor Snape," she exclaimed, surprised, yet keeping her voice down to a whisper. "I didn't know you were here."

"As it should be, Miss Granger," he answered smoothly, glaring at her for some reason. "I do not make a habit of announcing my intents to people who have no business knowing about my business."

"Of course, sir," she replied automatically. "What are you doing here?"

He merely continued to glare at her, and Hermione wanted to curse herself for asking such a stupid question after having been told that he would not divulge that information easily.

To her great surprise, however, the professor spoke.

"I updated Mrs Weasley on the medication for her husband," he explained.

"You are --" Hermione caught herself, though not quite in time. The Potions Master scowled. "Of course it is you who is brewing the antidote, sir, there could be no one better than you, I would say."

"And for once, Miss Granger, you would be right," the professor answered, still scowling, "though any skilled potioneer could brew the antidote. I am the one developing it."

Hermione's mind reeled. Naturally, Voldemort wouldn't own some common snake, it had to be one whose poison had no known antidote.

"You are digressing, Miss Granger," Professor Snape drawled. "Was there something you wished to discuss or do you simply make a habit of running people over and, to make matters worse, further stalling them in their business by asking impertinent questions?"

"I --"

Hermione knew not what to say. He was here, actually here, where she had almost given up hope on
meeting him. She had imagined this moment plenty of times, yet now that it was here… How to broach the topic she needed his cooperation on, she had not the slightest idea.

"Perhaps we should take this particular conversation somewhere more private, sir?" Hermione suggested, and without waiting for a reply, she presumptuously led the way upstairs.

On the first floor was a little used room, right next to the one she shared with Ginny. It was often offered to Order members who did not have a steady room at Grimmauld Place yet wished to stay for a night or two. Luckily, these past few days had not seen any overnight visitors, and Hermione had seen fit to prepare the room for the encounter expected of her to happen, no matter which man would accompany her.

Opening the door, she led the professor inside. Once he saw the bed in the room, looking freshly made, he inhaled sharply.

"Miss Granger," he said acidly, "I have no time for such nonsense. I believe I made myself very clear when I told you that I will merely demand my price if, and only if, you decide to continue our lessons in the upcoming year. I do not need, nor do I wish, your payment now."

Hermione fought the tears that threatened to fill her eyes at his harsh words, and steeled both her Occlumency shields and her resolve.

"Professor Snape," she began formally, "I would much appreciate it if you never mentioned your demands in combination with any form of the word payment ever again. I am not some object that you can put a price tag on, nor am I a whore who can be paid to made use of. I am a human being, and I expect to be treated as such."

"Do you not intend to whore yourself out to me in exchange for knowledge, Miss Granger?" the Potions Master whispered, his voice scathing.

"Prostitution is illegal at Hogwarts," Hermione shot back. "How would you like to be a criminal, sir?"

To her horror, the professor laughed, yet there was no mirth in the sound.

"Make no mistake, Miss Granger," he said, "I already am one. Not even counting the innumerable offenses committed under the Dark Lord – and the Light one, if I might say so – I have already put you under the Imperius Curse and plan to put you under the Cruciatus, as well, should you elect to continue learning under me. So tell me, what does it matter if I encourage a female student to prostitute herself for my sake?"

Why he was being so honest with the girl, Severus could not say. All he knew was that with being led here, to an opulent bed, in a room where he was completely alone with the young witch, his control seemed to have gone right out the window.

"Besides," he continued, his tone even more derisive than before, "what else would you call a woman who gives herself to dogs?"

The girl went deathly pale at his latest accusation. The insult seemed to have hit her right where it hurt, and Severus fought to push down the feelings of guilt that threatened to overwhelm him at her distraught sight.

"I didn't," she denied his assumption, "I didn't –"
Yet Severus wasn't listening. Something distracted him, something distinctly tingling, some sensation stroking very lightly against the ends of his nerves.

"What is this?" he asked into the room, not really addressing the girl who was the only one who could answer him. "What is this magic?"

It took Hermione a moment to gather her thoughts which had scattered at the professor's scathing insult. He knew that Sirius was the Potions Master's childhood nemesis, had felt it ever since she'd first seen the two of them together in the same room, back in the Shrieking Shack at the end of her third year. *Yet for him to lash out at her so…*

In fact, she almost missed his question. Luckily, he repeated it over and over, as if assuming that if he only asked often enough, the room would answer him.

"What is this magic?"

'This magic', Hermione knew, was a bed sheet underneath the usual sheets, carefully embroidered with protective runes. She had sat on her dorm bed at night for two weeks, taking an hour or two every night, and had painstakingly placed needle and thread so that the fabric would later show a pentagram, infused with ancient runes protecting her virtue and the receiver of the resulting stone.

"It's runic wards, professor," she explained. "For protection."

"Fearing for your virtue, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape laughed, though the sound was as derisive as they came. "Doesn't Black have that now?"

"No, sir," Hermione replied. At the shocked look on her professor's face, she reiterated, "Sirius doesn't have it. I still have it."

"You mean -" he asked, but broke off. "Why -"

"Why did I show you his face?" Hermione offered. "Well, you asked me not to tell you the truth, which was in my own interests, as well, so I showed you one version of the truth that I hoped would never come to be, knowing it would make you angry enough to believe the lie."

"What is it to be now, Miss Granger," the professor questioned, "a lie or a version of the truth? There is a significant difference between the two."

"It is both, professor," Hermione sought to explain. "Sirius was my fall-back plan, in case my first choice was not available or not agreeable to the idea. In that way, what I showed you was a version of the truth, yet I hoped for it to become a lie when my first choice agreed to bed me."

"And who might that be, Miss Granger," the professor queried, "your first choice?"

Hermione worried her lower lip for a moment, until Professor Snape stepped forwards and pulled the offending lip from between her teeth, looking as if he might chastise her for making him wait. He remained there, his thumb still pressing on her lower lip and Hermione kissed the digit before answering him.

"Isn't that obvious, professor?" she asked, her lips brushing against the thumb still resting against them as she spoke. "It's you."

Chapter End Notes
Coming up: Chapter twenty-five, wherein promises, presents, and propriety are pondered.
Tuesday, December 24th, 1995

"And who might that be, Miss Granger," the professor queried, "your first choice?"

Hermione worried her lower lip for a moment, until Professor Snape stepped forwards and pulled the offending lip from between her teeth, looking as if he might chastise her for making him wait. He remained there, his thumb still pressing on her lower lip and Hermione kissed the digit before answering him.

"Isn't that obvious, professor?" she asked, her lips brushing against the thumb still resting against them as she spoke. "It's you."

This Tuesday had started out as any other Tuesday might, if only different by the fact that it was one free of lessons, because it was the holidays. Severus had enjoyed the silence, the freedom to remain in his own quarters and not face any students nor colleagues, and had set onto something he rarely had the time for—research.

Of course, this research wasn't quite of his own choice, but rather at the command of the Headmaster who had requested a quick remedy for the injuries of one Arthur Weasley, curtesy of Nagini. As it happened, however, Severus had long taken an interest of his own in possible measures that might be taken against the venom of the Dark Lord's familiar, for He was quick to anger and equally swift in carrying out His punishment, and Severus was only waiting for the moment at which said punishment might be carried out by the huge snake at the justice's feet.

Fortunately, the research took his mind off of the annual Christmas meal for friends of the Malfoy family at their manor, for which he had a standing, if unofficial, invitation, and, to top things off, an official invitation in thick silver paper sitting atop his desk. There was no polite way around attending, but Severus would be damned if he let that fact ruin any of his free days, and so he had delved into his research.

It wasn't until late in the afternoon that he experienced a break-through that was worth being called such a thing. Why exactly it was that he hadn't thought to add Essence of Dittany before, which he was nowadays prone to carrying on his body wherever he went, he did not know. Yet when he added a few drops of Dittany to the potion he was working on, it seemed to be the necessary ingredient to heal inner organs which had been affected by the venom.

In the firm knowledge that the Headmaster would want the victim's wife to know of any developments immediately, Severus exhaled a deep sigh and made his way over the school grounds, Disapparating the moment he stepped over the Hogwarts boundaries.

Entering number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Severus was glad to see that nobody was in sight. A localized Homemum revelio revealed the kitchen to contain only one person. Confident that the only one to spend any time in the kitchen alone, while the children were in the house, would be Mrs Weasley, he descended the stairs into the basement to finish the task he'd come here for.

A few minutes later, Severus would curse himself for his inattention. Too glad had he been that he'd
escaped the firm grasp of the Weasley matriarch (he believed they called them *hugs*, and shuddered at the notion), and that he'd managed to talk his way out of a dinner invitation, both for the current and the following Christmas day; all he'd wanted was to leave headquarters as swiftly as possible, lest he stumble upon anyone.

That, in his haste, he would stumble upon the girl, of all people, he had not expected.

Yet there they were, the two of them, and after haphazardly revealing to her his reason for coming to London, he'd even allowed the girl to lead him to a bedroom. Of course, that the room for their *private conversation* would turn out to contain a luxurious, freshly prepared bed, he had not known beforehand, yet now Severus had to wonder whether he should have known. Her nervousness, her fidgeting, her slightly trembling voice...

He had reacted as any man trapped by a woman in a lavish bedroom might – he had lashed out at her, called her horrible names, and accused her of lying with criminals. No, *criminals* had not been the word he'd used, of course. He'd said –

And then, she had revealed a couple of things to him. For one, and most importantly, that she was still a virgin. His mind had reeled at that statement alone. *Did that mean she had no intention of following his demand in ridding herself of her innocence, subsequently meaning that she had no intention of further attending his private lessons in the new year, which in turn did subsequently mean that she had no intention of acquiescing to his demands of lying with him?*

And all of those thoughts came crumbling down when the girl had revealed something further to him, and that revelation had shaken him to the core. She meant for him to be the one, the *first*, to bed her. *Him.* It had to be a joke, surely? There was no way a stunning, powerful, independent young witch like her would choose somebody like him to desecrate her.

And yet – something was still nagging at his mind, distracting him even from his own disbelief –

"Protective runes?" Severus asked.

"Yes, professor," the girl affirmed. Noticing that his thumb was still resting against her lips, Severus quickly withdrew his arm from her body.

"Why, Miss Granger?" he sneered. "If you've decided to give yourself willingly, what would you need protection for?"

Rather than be insulted, the girl actually smiled.

"I have been told that there is power in a virgin's blood," she answered, "and these runes make sure to protect that blood from ill intent."

"If you expect me to violently rob you of your blood, Miss Granger," Severus queried with no less malice than before, "why offer yourself to me at all? Why even allow yourself to be alone with me?"

The girl's audacity to widen her smile, though with less confidence in her eyes than her lips sought to pretend, had Severus's blood boiling in anger.

"The blood will not lose all of its power the moment it leaves my body, nor the moment I lose my virginity. It will retain much of its power, and whoever carries the blood, carries the power. These runes pose, indeed, some protection against robbery of the blood, even later on, so that anybody I might freely give the blood to will be supported in maintaining his ownership of it."

Severus ignored the fact that the girl had said 'his ownership' instead of 'their ownership', thus
defining the sex of the one she might gift her blood to. Or perhaps, he justified his gross ignorance of this little distinction, he was simply too incensed to have noticed it in the first place.

"If all you need is somebody to help extract the blood, Miss Granger," Severus's sneer was firmly in place and his voice was scathing, "then why not ask the mutt for assistance? Why trouble me?"

"I don't want Sirius," the girl stated simply.

The 'not as much as I want you' was left hanging in the air, unspoken, yet heavy on Severus's soul.

Silence hung between them for a while, with words unspoken filling the room with a tension that was almost palpable. Strike the 'almost,' Hermione thought to herself, the air is so thick that I have trouble breathing.

When it became obvious that he would not speak, Hermione broke the silence instead.

"Will you have me, professor?"

That snapped him out of his reverie.

"I am your teacher, Miss Granger," he spat at her, as if offended at the thought of bedding her.

"And yet, you have no qualms in whoring me out to yourself, professor," Hermione shot back, reminding him of their conversation of earlier. "And here we are, in the least school-like environment we're going to find ourselves in anytime soon, so what better place than to begin this – whatever it is you want from me."

"I want nothing from you, Miss Granger," came the immediate reply.

"You promised to allow me to want something from you, though, professor," Hermione pressed on. "Don't you remember?"

As if that was a conversation he would be able to forget anytime soon, Severus scoffed inwardly. The memory was burned into his mind, the girl sitting in the tub, wholly naked, he assumed, and asking him in that strange voice whether she might be allowed to seek him out if the need gripped her.

"If you will remember, Miss Granger," he countered, "that conversation pertained only to any relations from the year 1996 until the end of the war, and was bound to the condition that you find a discrete way to communicate."

"What way is more discrete than in a safe house in the middle of Muggle London, sir," the girl pressed on, "when everybody is busy doing something else, hidden away in a room rarely used?"

Severus had no words to that.

"And in fact, this has everything to do with your conditions for our continued lessons in the new year," she continued, "as it was your condition that I shed my innocence beforehand, and I have yet been unable to find any suitable… suitors."

That prompted him into speaking once more.

"Have you, though?" he asked. "I had thought that Black was your choice."
"A choice I'd rather not have to make, sir, so please, don't force me to," the girl replied. "Sirius is an agreeable alternative should you reject me, professor, but suitable is not a word I would use to describe him in this particular context."

"Why me?" Severus asked, but it had been too quiet for the girl to hear.

"Please, professor," she begged again, "because it's Christmas?"

Severus scoffed.

"I don't do Christmas, Miss Granger."

"If not for yourself, sir," she tried anew, "then as a present for me?"

"I don't do presents, either," Severus insisted.

"Not for just anybody, you don't, professor," the girl countered, "but for me, you do."

Severus's eyes widened. He remembered gifting her a favour for her birthday. Her sight then had blown him away, pushing him off-kilter, and making him make an ill-advised promise to the girl.

Her sight now, of course, did little to persuade him. She was clad in long, fluffy pants to shield her slender legs from the cold, and a shapeless jumper. Her hair was a mess, not the controlled corkscrew curls he'd become used to over the past three months, and was piled in an equally messy bun atop her head.

In a word, the girl was radiant as ever. Her reasoning was sensible, her logic air-tight. This was no school setting, and tonight could be the most innocent of their meetings of this nature. He had a chance to make it right for her, and yet –

A clock sounded the hour in an adjacent room. A quick Tempus confirmed Severus's fear – he was very nearly late to the Malfoy Christmas Dinner.

Opening his mouth to make his excuses to the girl, for once electing the polite way out rather than just leaving her standing there, he fixed his eyes on hers and found hers staring wide back at him. The expression was one so hopeful, so innocent, that he found the words to finish his earlier abandoned thought.

He had a chance to make it right for her, Severus knew, and yet he had no experience with virgins.

"Miss Granger," he began, but was cut off.

"Please, sir," the girl pleaded with him. Stepping forward, she crossed the few inches that had separated them before and put her hands flat against his chest. Severus was certain she must feel the erratic beating of his heart thrumming a staccato against her fingers.

"Please," she whispered once more, and Severus was lost.

Severus was lost to the present and transported back to the first Malfoy Christmas Dinner he had ever attended. It had been lavish, like everything he had come to expect from the Malfoy family, and a grand affair. Everybody who was anybody had been attending, even some of the minor Pureblood families, those stemmed from lesser sons and younger daughters of the Sacred Twenty-eight, who had been forced to take on a lesser name if they wanted to have their own family.

Lucius had left school by the time Severus was first invited to one of these Christmas dinners, but
many weeks had been spent together at Malfoy Manor during the summers. Severus had learned the ways of the aristocracy, as Abraxas had been fond to teach him, and had revelled in the magnitude of the Malfoy library. This Christmas, shortly before Severus would be turning fifteen, he appeared to have been deemed groomed enough for polite society.

Never had Severus felt more out of place than at this first Malfoy Christmas Dinner, he remembered. Around him had been the crème de la crème of wizarding society, and even those with lesser names were still worlds above him in social standing. And yet, he had been introduced to powerful and influential wizards left and right, Abraxas showing him around the room, until Lucius had excused the two of them.

He had drawn Severus into an adjacent parlour, where a governess was watching over a group of young girls, none older than twenty, Severus guessed, who were not allowed to mingle with adults and men.

"Choose one," Lucius had whispered into his ear, although loud enough for the girls and their governess to hear. He had laughed at the shocked look on Severus's face, nudged him in the ribs, and inclined his head towards the girls.

"Why?" Severus had asked, and Lucius had become impatient.

"Fine," he had said, "I'll do it for you then. Still into redheads?"

When Severus had merely blushed, Lucius had sauntered over to a young girl with auburn curls, had offered his hand, and dragged her out of the room when she'd accepted it. The governess had huffed at an embarrassed Severus, still standing in the room, now alone with a group of women, and he had hastened to follow his older friend.

Lucius had crossed back into the ballroom where everybody else was chatting and drinking – dinner had not even begun yet, this was the gathering before the table would be set – and was climbing the elaborate stairs to the first floor. Glancing behind him to see if Severus was following, the blonde man let his eyes scan the guests in the ballroom, and eventually focused on one of them. Severus followed Lucius's gaze just in time to see a middle-aged man nod at the Malfoy heir, before the three of them had reached the first floor.

Lucius had led them, Severus and the redheaded girl, along a few corridors, around a couple of corners, before opening the double doors to a lavish bedroom and leading the girl inside.

"Make yourself comfortable on the bed, my dear," he had said, before ushering Severus inside and warding the door against any escaping sounds.

Severus did not walk far from the door. In fact, he stood so close to his only exit that he felt the crease the doorframe made in his robes. His eyes sought to avoid looking at the girl, but he could not help noticing how beautiful she was. She must be about his own age, about Lily's age, and he knew that Lucius had selected her for that sole reason. What he had selected her for, he dared not think, though he believed that he knew that as well.

"What is your name, Miss Carlyle?" Lucius asked the slightly trembling girl just then. As the Malfoy heir, it was expected of him to know the guests attending the Christmas dinner. He had no doubt recognized her father who had seen his daughter climb the stairs at the arm of his host's son.

"Vanyssa, my lord," she answered quietly.

"And just how old might you be?"
"Sixteen, my lord."

"Beauxbatons or home-schooled?"

"Beauxbatons, my lord."

"I wonder," Lucius said, all the while stalking closer to the bed at a deliberately slow pace, "if those blue school robes go as well with your beautiful cornflower eyes as I imagine."

She had no answer to that.

Lucius mustered her intently. Severus watched on, his breath coming shorter than usual.

"Do you know why you are here, Vanyssa Carlyse?" Lucius eventually asked.

"I believe so, my lord," she whispered. A single tear ran down her rosy cheek, smearing the powder.

"Why don't you tell my friend Severus here," Lucius suggested, waving in his younger friend's direction, "why you are here."

"I am here because my father wishes for me to please you, my lord," she breathed, her gaze never leaving where it was fixed on her hands, wrung in her lap.

"Severus is no lord, my dear," Lucius laughed, "and your father wishes far more from you than to simply please me, though that is, of course, part of your task. Do you know," he now turned towards Severus, "why some men bring their daughters to these parties and some don't?"

"I – no," Severus stammered, and despite the acoustical similarity, Lucius understood his reply to signal his lack of knowledge.

"Some of the lesser Houses, like the Carlyles," he began to explain, "have high hopes of marrying into the Sacred Twenty-Eight. Young Vanyssa here is such a hope to her father. Her task this evening is to spread her legs for me, and leave this house with a Malfoy bastard in her belly. A bastard her father hopes my father will legitimize by marrying the girl to me, making the result of her lost virginity the next heir to one of the greatest Houses of wizarding England. You are a virgin, are you not?" Lucius asked, as if in an afterthought, and before the girl could answer, there was a golden glow surrounding her shivering form on the bed, brought about by a flick of Lucius's wand.

"You are," he said, obviously satisfied. "Now, Vanyssa, let me explain the task I have for you tonight. After I am done with you – because we would not want to disappoint your father by sending you back still virginal, now, would we? –, you will accommodate my friend here. You see, he is on the brink of crossing into manhood, and you will be the one to lead him there. Isn't this exciting?"

"Yes, my lord," Vanyssa replied automatically, though the fear was screaming in her expression so loudly that Severus flinched when her eyes eventually landed on his.

"Marvellous," Lucius grinned, and motioned for Severus to come closer.

"Get over here now, Severus, I wouldn't want you to miss a thing."

And Severus didn't miss a thing. Much as he wanted to close his eyes to the horror of a young girl getting defiled against her will, much as he wanted to spew all over the rich, expensive carpet covering the lavish guest room at the thought that a man would whore his daughter out on the small hope of becoming part of a powerful, more prestigious family, he stayed where he was, his eyes wide open. For deep inside, he was still a teenage boy on the brink of becoming a man, and he was
excited to learn what all the fuss was about, and eager not to embarrass himself in front of Lucius who he knew would later be watching him in turn.

And so he watched on as Lucius demonstrated the Divesto spell, pulled a trembling and now openly, though silently crying Vanyssa closer to the edge of the bed, rested one of her feet against his shoulder and shoved the other downwards, so that Severus could see how he penetrated her, and studied every plunge of Lucius's cock into her centre.

When Lucius tensed and then pulled out, Severus knew it was his turn. As his friend had not undressed, other than open and slightly lower his dress pants, Severus did the same. He took his position between Vanyssa's thighs and entered her as Lucius had done. Immediately upon bottoming out inside her, Severus felt that he wouldn't last long. Occlumency, which he'd been studying for a few months already, helped keep his rising orgasm in check, but it wasn't long before her tight wetness proved simply too much for him. In that moment, it didn't matter to him that the girl beneath him was openly crying, her makeup smeared with streaks of liquid salt, or that her wetness came only from her own blood and his friend's seed; Severus felt pleasure as he'd never felt before. When his orgasm came over him like a storm, he was too surprised and too caught up in the sensation to pull out, and he ended up adding his own release to Lucius's.

When Vanyssa realized that, she began to sob loudly, cursing Severus for what he'd done, defiling her in such a way. Lucius's next words silenced her right up.

"Don't worry, Miss Carlysle," he said, all young lord of the manor now, "no bastard will be growing in your belly. No Snape, and no Malfoy, either."

A swish of his wand had all evidence that the past hour had ever happened vanish from her body. A few more flicks righted Severus's and Lucius's own clothing, and they were out the door. Before shutting the double doors behind him, Lucius leaned back into the room.

"There is a mirror and water in the adjoining bathroom, Miss Carlysle," he offered. "We wouldn't want anybody to see you like that, now, would we?"

"Please," Hermione said once more, and the professor's gaze sharpened, as if he was coming back from a memory of a time long gone by.

"No, Miss Granger," he simply replied.

"Please, sir," she pleaded, "please, let me –"

"No, Miss Granger," he reiterated, louder this time. "You are not prepared for what I have to offer you, and –"

"Then help me, professor," she begged. "Help me prepare, show me how, please, professor, I –"

"Stop it," he whispered, yet the quietness of his words had an impact on Hermione as if he'd screamed at her.

She stopped.

She watched on, anticipation and nerves whipping her heart to take on an erratic rhythm that Hermione was certain her chest might explode, as Professor Snape took a number of calm, deep breaths.

"Remove your clothes from the waist down, Miss Granger," he eventually spoke into the silence,
"and sit on the desk over there."

Hermione merely looked at him, completely bedazzled.

"But sir," she began to say, "surely the bed would be –"

"You asked me to help you prepare, Miss Granger," he cut her off. "So kindly allow me to do as you asked."

The girl nodded and, without any further ado, removed her pants and knickers. Severus had to stifle a gasp as he saw the emerald green silk with the white borders.

*Innocent as a pine covered in the first fall of snow,* he thought to himself, and felt even more uncomfortable and inadequate than before. There had never been another virgin for him, not after accepting Lucius's sloppy seconds that Christmas so shortly before his sixteenth birthday. It had simply been unthinkable for Severus to touch something, *someone,* who had previously been untouched. He had tortured countless people, of course, innocents most of them, since joining the Dark Lord's ranks, but he had never defiled a virgin, or forced himself on anybody, virginal or not, since Vanyssa Carlyle.

Lucius had later told him that Abraxas wouldn't let him marry Narcissa Black before his twenty-first birthday, so that he could have his fair share of girls. Severus had been abhorred to find out that his older, much respected friend abused the privilege that came with his family's name to violate quite the number of girls, most of them virgins, leaving them with much worse prospects for a good marriage than they had had before lying with him.

It didn't take long for Severus to find out, either, that Lucius had actually held back that Christmas, though he knew that it had been more for his own, Severus's, sake than for Vanyssa's. Lucius's taste and preferred kinks were rather advanced for someone as young as Severus, and he had not wanted to scare his friend with chains and whips and all the other *toys* that could be found in the Malfoy dungeons.

With the girl standing before him in her shapeless jumper and green silk knickers, Severus vowed never to allow Lucius Malfoy to possess her.

Hermione forced herself to remain calm and keep her back straight underneath Professor Snape's blazing gaze travelling over her body. She had only taken off her pants so far, but already his eyes were devouring her.

A certain sense of confidence made her chest swell with pride formerly unknown, pride at making an accomplished man like the one standing before her desire her. More so, making him lose his cool by letting his mask slip and showing her with his eyes, knowingly or not, that he desired her.

Suddenly her shyness returned, though, when she remembered that she still needed to remove her knickers and stockings. From the waist down, he'd said, and from the waist down would need to be done. After all, how else would they accomplish what they were here to do?

It unsettled Hermione more than a little that the Potions Master had insisted on using the desk for whatever he had in mind. It would not do for the ritual to be in vain. Of course, there were other ways to utilize her blood if they did it anywhere other than within the runic cycle underneath the bed sheets, but Hermione would not allow things to come to that. If the professor did not agree to the bed, Hermione would insist he leave.
But before that happened, she decided to trust him. *He had agreed to prepare her, now, hadn't he?* Whatever those preparations might entail, Hermione would go with where he led her.

That didn't mean that she was going to undress while facing him, though. She took a few steps towards the desk, if only to create some distance between the pair of them while she still could – Circe knew that distance would need to vanish into inexistence later on – and bent over to remove her knickers.

Somewhere behind her, she heard a groan. Hermione started, almost falling over in her precarious position, bent over with her knickers around her ankles as she was, but managed to regain her balance and stood straight once more. For a moment she thought that the only one to emit that noise could have been Professor Snape. But then again, the professor would never get so carried away as to utter anything of such nature, much less a groan, so she must surely have imagined it.

Distracted by the noise, or non-noise, whatever which it had been, Hermione hopped onto the desk. Keeping her legs firmly closed, and glad for the long hem of the jumper hiding her assets from the professor's view, she sat there. After a moment of silence, she realized that her stockings were still on. She had failed in his assignment to undress.

"Oh," she exclaimed, now far more embarrassed at her inattention than she might have been had she been sitting with her thighs wide open in front of the Potions Master's eyes, "I'm sorry, professor, I forgot –"

She had already set to the task of removing her stockings, grabbing the lace top of one and pulling it down her thighs, when a single word stopped her.

"No," he commanded.

Severus did not know where the rumbling quality to his voice had come from, but if he'd been forced to guess, he might have assumed that it was from the tightness suddenly settling in his chest, similar and yet wholly different to the tightness suddenly apparent in his trousers. Watching the girl bend over and pushing her shapely bum upwards and into his general direction had been difficult enough, but seeing her actually pull down the fabric covering her cheeks…

He had never had a preference before, but now that he saw her lips peeking through the gap in her thighs, pink surrounded by fluff, Severus realized that there was nothing he loved more than the colour of rose petals in the midst of the softest chestnut curls.

Severus had not managed to shake himself from his reverie – until, that was, the girl apologized for her inattention and made to remove her stockings.

"No," he had begged, and he had meant it.

They were of the sheerest silk, and that must be why he had not noticed them earlier – that, or the fact that he had been unable to tear his gaze away from the emerald silk with white trimmings covering her womanly mound.

He walked closer to her, stood directly before her, and asked, "Allow me to do that for you, Miss Granger, why don't you?"

"Yes," the girl breathed, and Severus was satisfied.

Instead of rolling the girl's stockings down her legs, however, he merely grabbed the chair standing in front of the desk and took it with him a few steps back. Looking bereft, the girl simply stared at
him in confusion.

"Later," he explained, and the smile that was unwittingly tugging at the right corner of his mouth made the single word almost a promise.

"For now, Miss Granger," Severus stated, "I want you to show me what Miss Johnson has taught you."

What Angelina had taught her? But –

"I can't, professor," Hermione confessed, her voice so small it was barely audible. "I never – I could never quite –"

"Try," Professor Snape demanded.

And so Hermione slowly lifted her right hand towards her centre, inching lower and lower, until she could feel the coarse curls against her fingertips. The professor never once lifted his gaze from her body, though she more felt than saw the heat originating from his eyes and sending red hot waves of excitement through her veins.

Attempting not to give anything away, nothing visual at least, Hermione pressed her hand between her thighs, spreading her legs only far enough in order to squeeze her hand in between them. She cursed herself for not knowing any kind of spell to soften her knuckles, so that they might be further compressed and so that she might not need to open her legs quite as far. There was nothing to help it, though, and so Hermione pushed herself further.

Her searching fingers stumbled over her little nub of nerves more by accident than as a result of successful and systematic searching, with her other nerves wracked as they were. Opting for a soft circling motion, Hermione caressed that little nub, forcing herself to relax.

The thought that relaxation was not to be reached by force, however, never appeared to her, and so she pressed onwards, not realizing that there was nowhere further to go in the way she was approaching the path Professor Snape had demanded she take for him. Eventually, her rubbing seemed to have some effect, but there was no way she could actually reach her climax. Not that she'd ever managed to do that by herself anyway, of course, but there was no chance of accomplishing that here, now, with him watching as intensely as he did.

Hermione wanted to cry.

Severus saw the girl struggle. First, she struggled to fit her hand in between her closely shut thighs. Then, she struggled to create any motion against her core. And now, she struggled to find some grip, any grip, with her legs dangling over the edge of the desk she was sitting on.

Severus had not intended to join in on the foreplay. After all, the girl's sight appeared to be enough these days to get him immediately ready for action, and this was supposed to be all about the girl. However, it now seemed to him that she had been correct when she'd told him that she couldn't reach an orgasm all by herself. Perhaps he might need to help her.

He would be damned, however, if he laid a hand on her before she was thoroughly prepared to receive him. There was no way, after all, that he could be sure he would be able to refrain from progressing things at an unreasonable pace, once he touched her.

She did need his help, though, if they were going to progress things at all tonight. Now that he had
already thrown caution to the wind and had decided to miss the annual Malfoy Christmas dinner, without notifying his hosts in any way, he would finish what he’d come here – no, what he’d stayed here for.

And yet, Severus thought, how to help the girl without laying a finger on her?

And suddenly, there it was. A solution to this peculiar problem. With her intense reactions to his voice previously, perhaps it would be enough to coach her through this.

First, however, he would need to do something about her legs.

Severus stood up, abruptly enough, it seemed, to surprise the girl, if her gasp was any indication. Dragging the chair closer to where she sat perched on the edge of the desk, Severus sat down in front of the girl. Carefully, he took her left foot into his hand. His eyes never left hers, which were in turn fixed on his, as he lifted the appendage and set it gently down onto his right knee.

His own legs were spread in the way only a man could without appearing indecent, so the movement had the girl's thighs part for quite a bit more than she might have liked. She never seemed to notice, though, so riveted did she appear by the sight his face posed to her. What it was exactly that she thought she was seeing there, Severus did not know, nor did he ask. For the moment, he was glad that she did not object as he stabilized her other leg, as well, and thus offered her room to move her hand a bit more.

When he was done, he removed his hands from her person, leaned back, and, without allowing his gaze to ever leave her eyes, said, "Proceed, Miss Granger."

A shiver ran through her whole body, sending pleasant sensations into every fibre of her being, at the professor's softly spoken command. The velvet of his voice caressed places she had never known could be reached, much less so by mere words, and her wand hand set into motion once more, seemingly of its own volition.

Professor Snape, however, never once looked down. Hermione dared not close her eyes, lest he use the moment to look at her intimacy, even though deep inside she knew she need not fear. Not in this very moment, at least.

Suddenly, her hand's motions did wonders to her, for her, and Hermione felt herself climbing the ladder towards her impending orgasm. Where her legs had before been struggling to find purchase, they were now safely perched on the professor's knees, her toes curling into the soft fabric of his trousers as her calves tensed and braced themselves against the flooding wave that was sure to come. Whether it was the memory of his velvet voice, or whether it might have been the fact that he was watching her, yet not looking where she did not want him to look, she could not say, nor did she care. The only thing, everything, there was to care about was falling apart under his watchful eye.

There was just something missing, some little thing she could not quite name –

Severus saw that it was time. Her toes were digging into his legs just above his knees, her breath came in ragged gasps, her eyes were practically begging for release, but she could not find the words to utter what she needed.

Severus, on the other hand, could.

"Come for me, Miss Granger," he rumbled.
And she came.

Hermione had only just enough time to think that this was nothing like what it had been like with Angelina, before the wave hit her. Overwhelmed her. Drowned her.

Stars burst before her eyes as the ocean of pleasure was pulling her under, suppressing her air supply, robbing her of oxygen, and she was gasping for breath, gasping for air, gasping for more, and there was more, and more, and more, and –

And suddenly it was over.

The room around her took its sweet time to stop spinning, but she could make out Professor Snape quite clearly anyway. When it had been exactly that she'd closed her eyes, Hermione could not remember, but here they were again, brown orbs openly staring into black.

"How –?" she asked, unable to put her question into words. "I've never –"

Again, she stopped speaking. Professor Snape, however, seemed to understand her without words.

"It's often better when not done alone," he suggested.

"But I – you – we – you didn't touch me, professor," Hermione countered, not understanding.

"It was enough," he stated, as if things were that simple.

Yet then again, maybe they were. Maybe it was as simple as not being alone in a room, maybe it was enough to be together, even if not... together in the biblical sense. Hermione did not quite grasp the concept, but decided that maybe something wondrous as that magical experience right now was better not dissected or the miracle would disappear into thin air.

"Now, Miss Granger," the Potions Master broke through her reverie, "I believe you should be quite prepared. Have you changed your mind yet? You could still go to Black, if that was what you wanted."

"No, professor," Hermione was quick to assure him, and she thought that the slight change in his eyes might have been relief. "I am quite happy where I am."

"Is that so, Miss Granger," he drawled, though the professor's voice now had a pleasant tilt to it. "And here I was thinking you might wish to adjourn to the bed."

"I do, professor," Hermione hastened to agree. "I merely meant that I am happy here – with you."

There was no time to explore the expression that now graced the Potions Master's face, for before she could begin to ponder, he had grabbed her by the waist, turned around, and thrown her – carefully – onto the middle of the bed.

"Now then, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said, and a flick of his wand had the lock click into place – Hermione shuddered to think that they had forgotten to lock the door before –, "let us begin."

Chapter End Notes
Coming up: Chapter twenty-six, wherein a tetrahedron is crafted.
Tuesday, December 24th, 1995

The girl squeaked in surprise as she was thrown onto the bed, and Severus was quick to add several charms to the now locked door that would sound-proof the room, hindering any noise from escaping to the outside or to adjoining rooms as well as to floors above or below their bed chamber.

Another flick of his wand had the room temperature rise to a more moderate level that wouldn't have the girl's skin erupt into goose bumps as soon as it was exposed to his eyes. If the girl's skin was to be pebbled with goose bumps, Severus wanted to be the one to cause them.

Looking down at the young woman lying in the middle of the bed, he was part saddened, part glad to see that she'd closed her legs again, rather than elect to remain as he'd thrown her, as her thighs had fallen open in that process. He hadn't spared the sight a glance then, instead locking and warding the room they were in, lest somebody stumble upon them in a precarious position. Come to think of it, of course, every position they could ever be found in alone together, just the two of them, would be precarious or, even if it wasn't, at least would be perceived as such.

The fact that Severus was glad not to have seen the girl's core yet – he had kept his eyes fixed on hers when she'd pleased herself on the desk earlier – was because he wanted to explore her, their first time together, and her first time ever. He wanted to open up her body, discover her soft spots, and watch her blossom under his attentions before deflowering her.

Of course, for that, the girl would need to be unwrapped first, gift that she was to him, much though she had insisted that this was his gift to her. Well, either way, she was to be thoroughly enjoyed – either for giving herself to him, or because he was giving himself to her. Severus knew that he didn't deserve the girl, not in any way, but he'd demanded to have her and she'd agreed to be his, wondrous as that fact was.

Carefully, he removed his outer robes. The girl seemed to be riveted by the sight, for her eyes never left his body. Severus noticed that because his gaze never wavered from her, either. Folding the robes, Severus crossed over to the chair and carefully hung them over the back. His frock coat was next, until he was left standing in his shirt – black, this time, to celebrate the holidays – and dress trousers.

A few steps had him back beside the bed, and he sat down on the edge of it, knowing he needed to get closer to the girl eventually. She looked up, as if unsure of what to do next, then sat up, coming to kneel next to him when his index finger beckoned her to do so.

"Miss Granger," Severus began, insecure about what he would be saying next, but not letting the girl know so. "If it gave you some comfort, that is, if you feel this might facilitate this for you, I might consider consenting to letting you call me by my given name."

If he was already surprised to hear himself utter the words, this offer of goodwill, then the girl was shocked beyond measure. Her eyes went wide until her whole face seemed to consist of round brown orbs and soft black lashes, and her lips parted until they formed a graceful 'O' – or as graceful as a mouth opened in shock could be.
"I –" she hesitated, swallowed, started anew, "I appreciate the gesture, professor, but I think I'd be more comfortable – that is, of course, unless you'd prefer I call you – well, and the same goes for you, if you want to call me 'Hermione', but really, I'm just –"

"Miss Granger," Severus thundered softly, and the resulting rumble had the girl involuntarily shudder in what he identified as pleasure, "a straight-forward answer, if you will."

"Of course, professor," the girl replied, and blushed most prettily. "I would rather continue addressing you with the respect due to a man of your position, sir. That is, unless you mind, and would rather I call you by your given name, in which case I will, of course, yield to your wishes. In turn, I would like for you to address me as you please, sir."

"Unless I call you a whore, Miss Granger?"

His single eyebrow, having wandered almost into his hairline, had the girl obviously confused as to whether his inquiry was sincere or perhaps might have been a rare and, in fact, formerly unexperienced joke.

"With all due respect, professor," the girl answered, and Severus had a feeling that even though she might actually mean to respect him, the following words would not sound like she did, "if that is what gets you going, then yes, you may even call me a whore."

Severus wasn't quite certain how appropriate it was to laugh out loud at her statement. Perhaps he should rather be angry with her, at the insult to his person. Then again, he never laughed, so the first option was out of the question, and a raging fit might be unconducive to the pleasure he meant to bestow on the girl, so perhaps this situation called for a middle way.

"If you still need to question whether I'm 'going', Miss Granger," Severus countered, now allowing some of the sexually-loaded amusement to play in his eyes, "perhaps I will need to impress the signals onto you some more."

For the split of a second, her eyes flicked to his nether regions, and even though the black fabric made a valiant effort to disguise his arousal, the girl's eyes widened remarkably.

"Perhaps I might even need to teach you some respect, Miss Granger," Severus continued, "starting with how to appropriately address your teacher. Though if you wish to keep me going, I would advise you not to call me 'professor' right now, in this kind of setting."

"Yes… sir?" the girl answered, though her address was posed as a question.

Severus nodded in confirmation, and a smile spread over her face in her delight to have settled the issue.

The smile gave way to an expression of sincere fascination when Severus grabbed the hem of her jumper and slowly, oh so slowly, lifted it over her head. One of her curls that had escaped the confinements of the messy bun atop the girl's head got snuck in the process, and what followed was an awkward struggle in which both he and the girl sought to free her hair from whatever it had gotten snuck in, and in the process completely destroyed what was supposed to be a sensual atmosphere.

Her top underneath was removed more easily, and then Severus found himself confronted with more emerald silk. His right index finger traced the white lining around the cups, stroking the tops of her soft mounds along the way. The girl's eyes were fixated on where his finger caressed her skin, only returning to his, shyly, when he reached around her form to open the clasp that allowed him to pull the confinement away from her beautiful breasts.
Severus needed a moment, and several deep breaths, to cope with the perfection that was the girl's breasts. Round and almost symmetrical, ivory dusted with pink rose buds that sat perched atop the mounds, pebbled not from the cool temperature but rather from his heated gaze. Instead of reaching forwards, cupping them in his bare hands, weighing them and caressing them, Severus looked the girl straight in the eye.

"Open your hair," he demanded, and she relented.

Her locks fell free and heavily down, tumbling down her back in a riot that was just so much her, it very nearly took Severus's breath away. The wildness surrounding her head in a furious halo painted a stark contrast to her inherent innocence, and Severus found himself hesitant to destroy what she had so willingly offered up to him.

He had no right to touch those perfect breasts, Severus realized once more, and this time, the thought almost paralyzed him. In fact, he must have frozen in so obvious a way that even the girl noticed.

"Sir?" she asked, confused. "Is this not to your liking after all? I can put my hair back up, if it pleases you —"

"Lie back, Miss Granger," Severus ignored her question.

Not questioning his request, the girl complied readily, stretching out on the bed as he'd demanded. Severus now edged closer to her and put his hand onto the breast closest to him, feeling defiant towards his own insecurities.

He revelled in the softness of her skin. His thumb quested over her pebbled nipple once, twice, and at the third time, the girl gasped softly. Incidentally, or perhaps even purposely, her legs fell slightly open at her gasp, and Severus took it as his cue, judging her body ready to receive him.

Lifting one leg over his shoulder, Severus knelt at her core. The lace top of her silk stocking was all askew from when she'd attempted to remove the item before he'd asked her to stop. There was no stopping Severus now. He traced the edge of where her stocking was crumpled against her skin, watching the almost naked girl beneath him shiver in pure pleasure at his touch.

Drawing the lace away from where it rested snugly against her thigh, Severus rolled the stocking upwards and off her leg. As soon as he got the fabric in a comfortable closeness to his face, his lips followed his fingers rolling the stocking off, ghosting the hints of kisses where he gradually exposed her skin.

Once he reached her toes, Severus flicked the stocking somewhere over his shoulder, not caring where it came to land. Fixing the girl with a stare that dared her to remove her foot from where it was rested on his shoulder, Severus turned his attention to her other leg.

He began in the bow of her foot. His fingers traced a line from there, resulting in a soft giggle from the ticklish girl, going over the inside of her lower leg upwards to the sensitive skin on the inside of her thigh. The sheer fabric of her stocking kept him from touching his fingertips directly to her skin, of course, but Severus delighted – as much as a man like him ever delighted in anything – in the feeling of the silk against his digits.

He only stopped when he reached the lace top of that stocking, lifting his hand away from her leg. The girl turned her eyes to his face, the confusion apparent in them, but Severus only shook his head.

"This stays on, Miss Granger," he growled, and his words had her whole body erupt in goose bumps.
The immense feeling of success and accomplishment coursing through Severus at the sight had him harden beyond anything he’d ever experienced before. There was nothing keeping him anymore; he had to free himself from the tight confinement of his trousers, and bury himself in the even tighter confinement of the girl's depth.

Opening the buttons on his dress trousers, Severus watched the girl bite her lower lip in her nervousness. That lip turned a deep cherry under her worrying, and even more so when his manhood sprang free. Leaning forward, over her, Severus once more used his thumb to pull her lip free from her teeth. He had not calculated, however, that the motion would bring his hardness in contact with her wetness.

The girl gasped as his cock grazed against her core, brushing over the nub that sat between her nether lips, making her twitch in pleasure at being touched there. Severus took a deep breath when he realized that the tip of his erection was resting against the apex of her thighs, partially hidden in the softest of curls he had ever felt in such a region.

His thumb still sat on the girl's lower lip. That was, until she drew the digit into her mouth to suck on the tip of it.

"Miss Granger," Severus growled, "if you keep that up, this will be over far sooner than I would need to make this remotely pleasant for you."

"Sir," the girl countered cheekily, strangely emboldened, it seemed, by her own vulnerability in lying naked beneath her professor, "if you don't move now, I might combust in suspense."

"As you wish," Severus simply said.

He sat back again, kneeling between her thighs. He readjusted the leg perched atop his shoulder, and stroked along the other one lying next to him on the bed. His hand caressed her thigh from the knee upwards until he reached her pink lips, nestled in another halo of chestnut curls. His thumb ghosted over her pubes, feeling how coarse they were in comparison to the rest of her, yet how soft in comparison to any other woman he'd ever bedded.

Electing not to linger for too long, Severus touched her wetness to discover that she was a long time ready for him. Positioning his cock at her opening, he pulled her lips slightly open, and pushed inside.

Full.

That was the only word that came to her mind in this moment. Hermione felt full.

Though perhaps, her brain elaborated, it wasn't the fullness that riveted her, but rather the sensation of being filled.

Under the professor's attentions, Hermione had felt like she would be melting into a puddle very soon if something didn't happen. Yet now that something had actually happened, with the Potions Master sliding inside her, she merely struggled to grasp the concept of something so big fitting into something so tight.

Of course, rationally thinking, Professor Snape was by no means a giant in that department. In fact, he was surprisingly average, though the surprise in that probably stemmed only from the knowledge that he was so rarely average in anything he did or was. Rationally thinking, Hermione knew that she was no tighter than the average virgin, either, but to experience the combination of the two facts for the first time, his mediocrity stretching her own mediocrity, Hermione was lost for words other than
Other than most Muggle romance novels would lead one to believe, there was no big revelation in feeling a man inside of her for the first time. There was merely a slight pang of discomfort as he broke through the barrier he had demanded she rid herself of, and a tingle as the runic wards surrounding them went into effect, sensing the spilling of her virgin blood.

After that, everything went quite fast. Hermione was still pondering how the sight of her own foot next to Professor Snape's face was supposed to make her feel, and coming to terms with the sensation of him moving inside her, when he tensed and she knew their act to be over.

The Potions Master remained perched above her for a moment, before falling back onto his heels, pulling out in the process. His raven hair fell into his face, hiding his eyes from her gaze, as he looked down to tug himself away. A second after that, he was off of the bed and inside his frock coat and robes once more.

"Next time will be better, Miss Granger," he said, and even though Hermione was almost sure that it might be an apology for the fact that she had not orgasmed herself, she was not quite certain that it wasn't also a quip as to how little she had participated in the act.

"As you say, sir," she merely answered. "I will strive to be more... sufficient, next time."

A nod was all the reply she received, and he was gone from the room, leaving Hermione back alone with her thoughts.

When the resounding crack of Apparition carried him away, Severus wanted to free himself of any and all thought. Suffice to say, he failed at that. Instead, he stalked up the walk from the gates to the castle, and locked himself away in his private chambers. That included not only warding the doors, but also barring the windows against owls and the fireplace against Floo calls.

Only then, when he was confident that nobody would disturb him, did Severus allow himself to breathe freely. His first deep inhale, however, seemed to get stuck in his throat as he remembered how he'd embarrassed himself with the girl just a few minutes earlier.

It hadn't been his intention to disregard her own needs and to leave her bereft of an orgasm of her own as he had. He had been fully set on caring for her, as well, bestowing on her the best possible first time a young woman like her could expect. After all, she'd come to him, put her trust in him to be a capable and 'suitable', as she'd said, first partner, and he had intended to not only live up to her expectations, but to broaden her horizon to a whole new level of climaxing.

Of course, that had been before the protective runes around them caught on to the spilling of her blood. With his sensibility to strong magic, the subsequent tingle had made his whole skin crawl in an inexplicable, indescribable way that caused waves of pleasure to roll over him and draw him under. He had tried to hold on to his senses, to keep his wits about him, but there had been nothing he could do to stop his orgasm from pulling him in and away.

Severus had experienced a whole new kind of horror then. To fail in his self-set goal of bringing the girl to climax while wrapped around his hardness, by climaxing himself no less, had shaken him to the core. Why it was that this had emotionally shattered him so, when the act in and of itself had been quite the success – no tears, and no unnecessary amounts of blood; you could call that a success for a first time, in Severus's opinion – he could not explain.

And yes, he had come inside her, as he'd always intended. Something was nagging at the back of his
brain, some notion that something about the act should disturb him, but he could not get a grasp on
the thought. Perhaps it was because he’d violated her in a way that he hadn’t planned on violating her
in until the new year, spilling himself inside her without her permission. But then again, the girl was
smart, and if she hadn’t wanted to be filled with his seed, then she would have said so beforehand,
wouldn’t she?

The clock chimed. Two hours since the Malfoy Christmas dinner had started. Severus could not
understand where the time had gone; had he caressed the girl for so long before eventually sinking
into her, or had he sat here, in his chambers, pondering for hours what could not be changed now?

He did not know, nor did he particularly care.

His fireplace glowed green for a few seconds before turning back to the miserable grey that only an
unlit fireplace in the midst of winter could display. Severus had no interest in joining the Malfoys on
their estate now, and they would need to deal with that without Severus explaining himself.

A thought occurred to him.

A snap of his fingers had one of his personal elves appear. On the brink of his mind, Severus noticed
that it was the same elf who had cleaned the girl’s clothes when she’d been bleeding out on the
dungeon classroom floor not even a week earlier.

"Please ward my chambers in a way that no external elf can enter them," he requested.

A nod and an intense look of concentration were his reply, before a powerful wave rolled over
Severus. He felt the Elvish magic spread out to every nook and cranny of his chambers, creeping into
the bricks of the walls and soaking through the very air. The sensation gave him no such thrill as the
girl’s runic wards had done earlier, and he was glad for that, but they caused a strong sense of calm to
seep through him, allowing him to relax for the first time since – well, since ever, he felt.

With a nod of his own that almost let some of his gratitude shine through, Severus dismissed the elf.
A crack later, he was alone.

A few hundred miles further south, Hermione had taken a couple of minutes for herself. She’d been
content to lie on the bed for a little while longer, trying to discern if anything felt different to her.

Nothing really did.

Yes, she was a woman now, but the thought alone almost made her scoff out loud, before she
realized that no one was there to hear her, and she actually scoffed out loud. There was nothing
changed about herself, other than perhaps that she realized she was apparently desirable to at least
one man, in the right setting. That was a revelation to her, although it should not have come as a
surprise. After all, how often had the professor pressed his erection into her from behind these past
months?

In hindsight, this evening had been a long time coming. Hermione remembered how intimate, how
close they’d been atop the Astronomy tower that one night in September, and how they’d had
intimate run-ins again and again over the following weeks. He’d watched her bathe, for Morgana’s
sake, had cared for her naked back – twice! – and had helped her dress not even a week ago. Couple
that with the number of times he had touched her thighs, healing her, or just teasing her, and you had
a history that was all but screaming for this night, their act together, to happen.

And here she was now, a woman in the traditional sense, though the act alone had not made her feel
like one. No, what had made her feel like a woman, mature and desirable, had been the fire in his
black eyes, darker than she'd ever seen them as he trailed kisses along her leg.

Hermione looked downwards, and had to giggle. Her left leg was still clad in the silk stocking, while her right one was naked, the rolled up fabric certainly somewhere in the room. That a single stocking could apparently arouse a man so, and a man like the Potions Master at that, had surprised her. Her breasts had seemed like an equal distraction to him, though he had not lingered long there. It seemed the professor was all for legs.

Hermione sighed. She needed to get up soon, there was nothing for it; if she was missing for much longer, the boys might come looking for her. Or rather, Harry and Ron would probably have forgotten all about her, as long as there was food and entertainment, but Ginny would notice and Sirius might actually search for her. And if he did not find her in the drawing room with the Christmas tree, and if he noticed that this door was warded shut – well, Hermione did not know what conclusions he might draw from that, but they sure as hell wouldn't be in her favour.

Drawing a deep breath, Hermione exhaled slowly, whispering the ancient incantation she had learned by heart from the book. As the words came spilling from her lips, she felt a tugging deep inside of her. Not only did the magic she was evoking draw the rest of the blood from her ripped hymen from inside her core, but it bound the magic she had possessed as an innocent to that blood. The runic circle she was lying inside of began to glow, making it appear as if she was trapped inside, when Hermione knew that it was a benevolent barrier meant to protect her. The circle drew closer, growing smaller and tighter, until it formed a single bright spot that eventually vanished, leaving behind a dark jewel.

Finally sitting up, Hermione reverently took the gem into her hand. Holding it up to her eye and against the light from one of the torches either she or the professor must have lit earlier, she saw that it wasn’t black as she’d thought earlier. In fact, it shone a deep blood red, as if glowing from within, that was only visible in the back light.

*What a wondrous little thing,* Hermione mused. The blood diamond was tetrahedral in shape, a triangular pyramid, combining the strong magical numbers of four (sides) and three (edges to a side). She did not know what this meant, if the shape had a particular significance, but it must have, surely, or it would not be different depending on who worked the magic – would it?

Hermione remembered very distinctly that Professor McGonagall had created a diamond in a traditional princess cut. That was, of course, if she hadn't had it shaped like this, cutting the original stone into a more traditional piece. However, deep in her heart, Hermione just knew that a stone like this could not easily be cut, nor would her Head of House in any way diminish the jewel she had given to the love of her life.

To hold this precious gem in her hands, this blood diamond, created by the devotion she had to the cause of the Light and by the sexual attraction she certainly held towards the Potions Master, Hermione felt like she could burst from the rare power coursing through her.

All that was left now was the question how to present it to her professor, and how to convince him to accept this gift.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter twenty-seven, wherein the floral diet of carnivores is doubted.
Wednesday, December 25th, 1995

Christmas morning found Hermione slightly sad not to be with her parents, but her mood brightened when she joined Ginny in opening their respective presents, and they both could laugh over the abhorrent perfume she had received from Ron. Harry had done better, gifting her the New Theory of Numerology that she’d been intending to buy for ages, but it was just so difficult to come by, and expensive at that.

From Ginny, Hermione received a journal that displayed new beauty charms every week; something she would have scoffed at earlier, but was now grateful for, considering that the professor had demanded she behave a little more like a girl, enhancing her womanly assets.

Before they went down to the kitchen, Hermione grabbed the patchwork quilt she had crafted for Kreacher. The boys, of course, mocked her for that one, but she placed it in the elf’s den anyway. They were still kneeling in front of the whole in the wall that Kreacher called his home, when Sirius came in, and a discussion over the elf’s whereabouts ensued.

After that, the boys and Ginny set out to help Mrs Weasley prepare lunch, and Sirius asked Hermione to help him in the pantry. Once inside, he asked her to pull out some of the vegetables stored in the cupboard there, and cornered her once she turned her back on him.

"I must say I'm disappointed, kitten," he drawled into her ear in a voice that made her spine crawl in the most delicious way. "I thought you had better taste than that."

"Than what?" Hermione asked. "You didn't even see the quilt, and knowing Kreacher, he'll probably reject it, meaning burn it, anyway. Or did you mean the tree? I swear, I didn't move any of Harry's ornaments around, I just –"

"Are you just playing naïve or are you simply still that innocent?" Sirius chuckled behind her, his hands coming to rest on either side of her as he leaned against the shelves in front of them. "You think I don't notice that your aura has changed?"

"My what?" Hermione almost shrieked, and Sirius shushed her down.

"Your aura, kitten," he reiterated. "You're not shining that bright white gold anymore. It's more of a burnished copper right now, and if you were beautiful to look at earlier, you are truly stunning now."

"What do the colours signify, Sirius?" Hermione asked tentatively, almost certain of what the answer would be.

"Who was it?" Sirius asked, ignoring her question and yet answering her and confirming her suspicion. "Please tell me it wasn't Ron, surely you have more style than that. The twins? Nah, come to think of it, they rarely do anything without the other in on the fun, and somehow I doubt that you'd go for a menage à trois for your first time.

"That only leaves Harry, then," Sirius surmised, thankfully coming to the completely wrong conclusion, "and much as I love my godson, kitten, I would have thought you might choose a real man for such an important job. Besides, believe me, kitten," and he came even closer at that;
Hermione could feel his lips against her ear as he spoke, "if you decide against ginger, you may find raven to your liking, but really, even raven can't suitably compare to real black, and I'm Black personified."

"Pure Black?" Hermione joked quietly, though she realized a second too late that the joke would either be lost on Sirius, or it would give away her training.

Fortunately for her, it was the former, although it took the man behind her completely aback.

"Sure," he said, surprise colouring the short laugh he emitted, ",if that is your thing, I can play the Pureblood aristocrat for you, milady. You know, you kneeling there in the kitchen, just a minute ago… I'd do pretty much everything to tap some of that."

"It's really not," Hermione hastened to deny the notion, "I was just – I don't know why I said that."

"Oh, it's alright, kitten," Sirius was quick to reassure her, "I'm up for most kinks you can come up with, and for plenty that you would never even dare to imagine."

Hermione could practically feel the cheeky wink, but chose to ignore it.

"Tell me, Sirius," she asked, and he hummed in agreement, grinding into her from behind, making her feel his approval, "who is able to see my aura?"

"Oh, just about everybody looking for it," he replied as if that was no big issue. "Many people just don't care, but Purebloods are raised to go looking for that, especially in young women, to judge whether they are 'suitable for marriage' – you know, meaning virginal, untouched. Us Order members, many of us feel it helps judge the character of a person, to find out if they can be safely approached or not."

"Many of you?" Hermione asked for clarification, hoping for Sirius to dispel her fears.

"Oh yes," he did the complete opposite, "at least all of the core members. So be prepared for some strange looks later," he joked, "and maybe for a talk with Molly, though with everything that's going on with Arthur and now Percy, perhaps you might get out of that easily."

"With the full moon drawing close, though…" Sirius took a moment to continue his thought. "Best keep your distance from Remus for a while. Not that he's a danger to you," he hurried to clarify, "but simply to make things easier for him. To have a young female so close to him come into adulthood, that can't be easy for the wolf, so close to the transformation."

Hermione shuddered at the thought that she might make things harder for her poor former professor, and behind her, Sirius groaned at the movement against him.

"But if there's someone you shouldn't keep your distance from, kitten," he added, grabbing her hips to keep her in place, "it's me. I'm up for anything if you find yourself feeling lonely at night, kitten. Or at any time of the day, really."

Grinding into her once more, Sirius sighed, then released his grip on her hips, and left the pantry, muttering something about a cold shower.

Hermione needed a moment to collect her wits and rebuild them into some semblance of reason. Sirius had just confirmed to her what she'd only suspected before: that he'd be quick to rise to the challenge of bedding her if confronted with the opportunity. All that was left was for her to decide if she wanted that now.
Come to think of it, why not? Honestly, though, why the hell not? After all, Professor Snape had demanded she stick to only him as her sexual partner only after the new year had begun, and that was still almost a week away. One precious week in which Hermione was free to experiment, to get out of her shell, to collect all the experience and all the dopamine she possibly could. Because really, Hermione thought, her first time with Professor Snape had been quite pleasant overall, but that surely couldn't have been yet what all the fuss was about?

That was decided then, she concluded, and felt a giddiness rise inside her that could not be sensibly explained. If she wanted to leave the cupboard, though – and a damper was put on her mood at the thought –, she would need to face all the adults who would realize upon first looking at her that she was a virgin no longer.

Hermione allowed her chest to heave with a generous sigh and then, feeling as put together as she could possibly be after the discussions she had just had – both the talk with Sirius and the struggle with herself –, she left the pantry to face the world.

Christmas lunch was a happy affair, though a strange experience to Hermione. Mrs Weasley was so busy with cooking and fussing, and trying to keep it together over Percy sending back his Weasley sweater, that Hermione was spared 'the Talk' from the Weasley matriarch – for today, at least.

Moody merely sent her a cursory glance, scanning her whole body, and, upon finding no signs of injuries, Hermione suspected, turned to join in on the discussion going on around him. Bill seemed to notice as well, but other than his gaze lingering on her for a second longer than on everybody else during his general scan of the room when he entered the kitchen, he gave no outward signs that anything was different.

Sirius kept shooting Hermione glances, winking at her when nobody noticed or when he could get away with it somehow, and making her feel appreciated overall. The sensation of his intense attention, even from the other end of the lunch table, caused a heat to course through Hermione's newly awakened body that she could now identify as lust, and she was looking forward to catching him alone later. When she shot him a shy, yet encouraging smile, his own grin broadened to a degree that Hermione almost feared his face might split in two over his joy. That only made her smile all the more herself, and she felt light and merry like she rarely had before.

The only person worrying her right now was Professor Lupin. He shot her glances now and again, but his weren't cheeky like Sirius's were. If Hermione had been forced to put a label to them, she might have called them... hungry. Predatory. Eager for the hunt.

Sirius sat beside his friend, and for that, Hermione was grateful, knowing that he would calm Lupin down, if necessary. With this seating order, however, there was no way the werewolf could have missed the silent communication between the two of them, and at some point, he even made to stand up. Fixing Hermione with a stare that dared her to run and make him hunt her down – a look so foreign on her former professor's face that Hermione felt cold dread grip her heart, warring with the confident sense of defiant pride at being desired in this way, dangerous though it was – the werewolf moved to leave his seat. If it hadn't been for the strong grip Sirius instantly established and maintained on his friend's upper leg, forcibly keeping him down and seated where he was, Hermione did not know what Professor Lupin might have done to her, with her.

Things didn't get much better when they went out to St Mungo's after lunch, either. Sirius couldn't accompany them, for obvious reasons, so Hermione was without his protection against Lupin. She needn't have worried as much, though, she discovered. The fresh air seemed to do wonders for the clarity of the werewolf's mind, and the public did its own to keep him from any steps outside the line, even in the tight confinement of the magically enlarged car. Hermione kept close to Moody and the
Weasleys, just to be safe, and that helped, as well.

Once at St Mungo's, the Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione quickly left the company of the Weasley parents, hurrying after the older Weasley siblings on the way to the tea room. That they happened upon Gilderoy Lockhart, of all people, surprised them so much that they allowed the Healer to lead them into the closed ward. And then, they met Neville's family.

When Mrs Longbottom disclosed to the four of them that her son and his wife had been tortured into insanity by Bellatrix Lestrange, Hermione offered the appropriate reaction of shock, mirroring Ginny's expression. She had known about it since the summer, of course, combining the snippets of conversation she had caught to the realization that something of this nature had happened to the Aurors Longbottom. It came as no big surprise to her that Harry had been aware of this; Morgana knew Dumbledore trusted him with a lot of information regardless of his youth and, at times, emotional instability.

That meeting, of course, drew everybody's spirits down. Hermione was just glad when they were able to escape the Spell Damage Ward, and soon it was time to get back to Grimmauld Place. At that, her mood improved substantially, though she took care not to let everyone notice.

The rest of Christmas Day was a rather joyous affair. After dinner, everyone sat together in front of the Christmas tree, telling stories and enjoying each other's presence. When everybody made to go to bed, Hermione told Ginny to go without her, pretending that she wanted to read for a bit in the library.

Shooting Sirius a glance that he answered with a wink, understanding her feint, she went to the Black library, knowing he'd be following her later. Strolling through the aisles, Hermione received the shock of her life when she crossed around a row of shelves and found Remus Lupin standing right in front of her.

"Professor," she exclaimed in her surprise, pressing her hand to her heart to help calm its racing staccato, "I didn't see you there."

"I am known to be quite stealthy," the former professor replied. His eyes flitted to her chest and Hermione got the distinct feeling that he revelled in the panicked beating of her heart. "Have you found yet what you desire?"

His voice had taken on a teasing lilt that did little to soften the predatory smile gracing his face, and Hermione found herself scared and yet intrigued at the same time.

"Not quite yet," she answered, electing to view his question as if pertaining to a book, which it most obviously did not.

"Care for some help looking?" Lupin offered, and, without waiting for a reply, stalked closer to her. Close as he'd been before, it only took him a couple of steps until he was directly, immediately in front of her.

"Moony," a voice suddenly called from the other end of the aisle, the one closer to the door. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief; at the same moment, Remus groaned in frustration.

With a few long strides, Sirius was at Hermione's side in mere seconds. Glad for the reinforcement, for she would have yielded to the werewolf had she been left in alone in his presence for much longer – be it voluntarily or not –, Hermione inched closer to Sirius's reassuring presence. Noticing her movement, Sirius put an arm around her shoulders.
"Let's get you to bed, kitten, what do you think?" Sirius suggested, offering her a way out of Lupin's grasp and, if she interpreted his offer correctly, into his own arms.

"Yeah," Hermione readily agreed, "I find myself quite tired all of a sudden. Good night, Professor Lupin."

And with that, they were out of the room.

Climbing the stairs, Hermione was glad to see that she'd been correct in assuming Sirius meant to take her to his room.

"I thought you wanted me to get into bed?" Hermione teased.

"And I fully intend to do so," Sirius countered, winking at her cheekily, "I just never said whose bed I'd be getting you into."

When they were in front of his door, Sirius halted all of a sudden.

"Hermione," he called her attention, and by the fact that he'd used her name, rather than calling her 'kitten' as he usually did, Hermione knew something serious was coming; no pun intended.

"Hermione, that was really dangerous down there."

Hermione was surprised.

"But it was only Professor Lupin," she exclaimed, "surely he wouldn't do anything to hurt me?"

"You're right in assuming that Professor Lupin would never hurt you," Sirius agreed. "But that man down there, that was Moony. And he only sees a freshly plucked flower in you, and he'd eat you in a heartbeat."

"Wolves don't eat flowers, Sirius," Hermione joked, trying to dispel the tension, "they are carnivores, didn't you know?"

"Yes, I know, kitten," he answered, his expression still very much sincere, "and believe me, his desires right now are nothing if not carnal. Do not play with a werewolf so close to the full moon, Hermione, do you hear me? Don't you remember anything I told you this morning?"

Hermione looked down, embarrassed that she had failed to listen to the man who was just looking out for her, and nodded.

"I'm sorry, Sirius," she whispered, talking to her feet.

A single finger drew her face upwards by the chin until she looked into his eyes again.

"It's alright, kitten," he said, a smile once again gracing his face. "I was there to get you out in time, wasn't I, and you can make it up to me now. How does that sound?"

Hermione mirrored his smile.

"Sounds marvellous," she replied, and they were through his door.

---

**Thursday, December 26th, 1995**

When Hermione woke the next morning, it was to an arm snug around her waist and to a soreness between her thighs. A smile spread over her lips as she remembered the last night.
Sirius had been everything Professor Snape had not. He'd been wild and passionate, and he'd been all over her the moment they were through the door. His lips had been on hers in a heartbeat, only leaving them again when they both needed to get up for air. He had commanded her to undress then, but where the Potions Master's command had been clinical, Sirius's had been filled with desire.

While she'd taken off her clothes, one item at a time, Sirius's eyes had burned every patch of skin she revealed, his lips whispering warding and silencing charms to keep the noises in and the intruders out. He'd stopped her when she'd made to remove her knickers. Throwing her onto the bed in a sensual manner, not practical as the professor had been, he had been over her within the fraction of a second, closing his teeth over the seam of her knickers and drawing them down her legs.

On his way back up, every inch of her skin had been peppered with kisses – not whispered hints of kisses like Professor Snape's, but rather open-mouthed and wet. Sirius had used his tongue there and then on her legs, and even more once he'd reached the apex of her thighs. Only a few minutes later, Hermione had been screaming his name as she reached the first of many climaxes that night.

Sirius had been gentler after that, bestowing his attention and his kisses on her breasts next. Only when she'd begged him for release and for friction, had he relented and entered her. She had long been drenched by then, yet he'd taken his sweet time sliding into her. When he'd bottomed out inside her, he'd looked into her eyes with a tenderness that took her breath away. With him leaning closely over her body, his elbows propped up on either side of her, Sirius had been close to Hermione in a way no man had ever been. Hitching her legs up and around his hips, Sirius had settled into a rocking movement, with shallow thrusts at a punishing pace, if only punishing for its slowness. Only when Hermione had come, which had been a complete surprise to her, as her orgasm had crept up on her on steady feet, had he consented to a faster rhythm, rocking her world.

With a little help from his deft fingers, his hand wedged between their bodies, Hermione had come once more, with Sirius only moments behind her, and he had spilled his seed inside of her. After that, she had been truly tired out, the three orgasms having worked her body to a pleasant sleepiness.

Sirius would not let her go that easily, though. His swift fingers had begged her to come once more under their nubile attentions, and Hermione had relented, giving in to her fourth and final climax of the night. By then, it had been early morning, and the both of them had fallen almost straight asleep. Halfway into Morpheus's realm, Hermione had felt a decidedly male arm wrap around her waist and draw her close.

Upon waking up a few hours later, while it was still early in the morning, Hermione smiled, realizing that neither of them could have moved much throughout the night, as they were in exactly the same position they had fallen asleep in mere hours before.

And already, she felt something rather substantial poke her in the crease of her bum.

With Hermione wriggling around a little, Sirius roused, and, noticing her movements, was fully awake in an instant.

"Stop that right now, kitten," he growled, his voice still sleepy, "if you don't want to start something you're not prepared for."

"Does that feel like I'm not prepared for this?" Hermione asked, wriggling around and lifting her leg in a way that Sirius's hard shaft met the wetness between her thighs.

"Well, in that case, a very good morning to you, kitten," Sirius drawled into her ear, and she could practically hear the half-satisfied, half-anticipative smile on his face, "are you ready for your breakfast? I'm sure I have some cream for your sweet kitty here somewhere."
He slid inside her, and their combined sighs sounded as if they were synchronized.

"Sweet Circe, kitten," Sirius groaned between slow pumps into her core, "where have you been all my life?"

"Not born, half of it," Hermione sighed back, "the other half, jailbait."

"If I'd had any of this before, kitten," came the reply, "I'd have been too happy for the Dementors to have any effect on me. If I died right now, it would be happy."

"If you died right now, it would be a huge pity," Hermione countered. "You promised this kitten some cream, if I remember correctly."

A chuckle was the only answer she got, for after that, Sirius concentrated all his attention on their combined pleasure. Together, they came a generous while later, both sated and content.

"Now, kitten," Sirius eventually said, after they'd both cuddled together for a while, neither of them willing to move, "you'd better get back to your room and change, or there will be hell to pay later if Ginny or Molly notice you're still wearing the same clothes from yesterday."

Hermione sighed and turned around to meet his face.

"I guess you're right," she admitted, her frustration audible in her voice. "This was awesome, though."

"It was," Sirius agreed, kissing her once more with a smile on his face, "but you still have to go now."

"Alright, alright," Hermione countered, "I'm going."

Collecting her clothes, she dressed quickly. Her hand on the door knob, she turned back once more.

"Thank you, Sirius," she said with a heavy heart, "I'll never forget this night."

"Me neither, kitten," Sirius replied, though Hermione failed to put a name to the expression now on his face.

Before she could ask, or say any more, he had turned around in the bed, his back now to the door. Assuming he meant to catch some more sleep, as neither of them had had much of that this night, and since it was still early in the morning, Hermione allowed him his privacy. She couldn't help the slight pang of hurt at his casual dismissal, though.

The rest of the day was spent with Harry and the Weasley children. Or at least, that was how the day started out and how Hermione thought it might continue. Soon after lunch, however, did they split up. The Weasleys kept together and, respecting their privacy, Harry and Hermione kept their distance. It wasn't long before Harry sought out his godfather and the two of them locked themselves in with Buckbeak. Hermione, being who she was, decided not to be upset at being left alone like that and elected to instead enjoy her new-found solitude in the Black family library.

Curling up on one of the ostentatious leather sofas in front of the luxurious fireplace, Hermione immersed herself in one of the older and subsequently rarer tomes on Arithmancy. It appeared that time had flown by, though Hermione felt like no time had passed at all, before someone fell into the seat next to her.
"Hiding yourself away, kitten?"

Hermione forced herself to ignore the hurt she had felt when he'd practically dismissed her from his room earlier that day, and smiled sweetly at Sirius.

"Not at all," she replied. "I'm merely enjoying the fact that everybody seems to enjoy somebody else's company above my own, and that is quite alright."

Sirius looked taken aback at her casual statement, but gave no reply to that. Perhaps he had none.

"You missed dinner," he said instead.

"I'm not hungry."

They sat in silence for a little while. Hermione had already turned back to the volume on her lap, when Sirius stated, all of a sudden:

"It wasn't Harry."

Hermione grinned.

"I never said it was," she countered. "That was your own conclusion and I never contradicted you."

"But it was none of the boys."

"No," Hermione agreed readily, "none of the boys."

"Bill?"

Hermione merely threw her head back in laughter and returned to her chapter.

"Not Bill, then," Sirius mused to himself.

Turning to face him, Hermione asked, "How come you're so interested, anyway?"

Sirius Black was no man to blush, but his expression showed that this would have been the occasion to do so.

"I'm just wondering who I need to compare to," he admitted.

"Why?" Hermione shot back. "I thought you were quite satisfied before you threw me out of your room, and I told you that I enjoyed our night as well, so what does that matter to you now?"

"What?" Sirius asked, clearly shocked.

"I asked, what does that matter to you now?"

"No no," he shook his head, "before that."

"I enjoyed our night," Hermione repeated, blushing.

"Oh, believe me, kitten," Sirius smiled, though he appeared worried still, "it was hard to miss that, with you sighing my name and clawing at my back like that. I still have the marks to show for it. But that's not what I meant."

His face was now the epitome of his first name.
"You said I threw you out of my room?"

"Well," Hermione worried her lip between her teeth, "that's what you did. You told me to get out before anybody saw me, and turned your back on me before I even got to the door. And it's alright, really," she hastened to assure him when his expression darkened visibly, "it's okay, I can cope with that, I mean, we never said that this would ever happen again; it was just – I guess, I was just a little surprised, that's all. I'm all over it now, don't worry. I'll be mature about all of this."

"But –" Sirius stocked, then began anew. "But I never threw you out! You were going and said you'd never forget about our night together, as if it was already so firmly fixed in the past for you that it would, nor could, happen ever again. I thought you were dumping me, for lack of a better word!"

"You thought that?" Hermione asked, now shocked herself. "Why would I do that? We're not even together in the first place! And I loved our night together, why would I wish to never experience a repeat performance?"

"Well, I'm glad you think so, kitten," Sirius smiled, and the mood palpably lifted. "Because I feel the same way. And believe me, I enjoy you being mature about things, preferably with your legs wrapped around my hips and your sweet little kitty wrapped around my –"

"Sirius!" Hermione exclaimed, cutting him off, embarrassed in the most pleasant way, and yet inexplicably aroused at his crass words.

He leaned over, closed the book in her lap and put it on the small side-table next to the couch, and was already drawing her to lie under him, when Hermione stopped him with a hand gently put against his chest.

"Sirius," Hermione whispered, for his face was so close to hers that anything louder must have felt like a scream to him, "Sirius, we still need to be mature about this. I'd like to know what I'm getting into here. Please."

Sirius scrunched up his face, obviously disliking the direction their evening was taken.

"Listen, Sirius," Hermione took the discussion in hand, "I'm enjoying our time together, but I'm not looking for some kind of... emotional commitment, if you know what I mean. I'm not looking to go official with you, or to chain you down as my boyfriend. I just... I enjoy exploring things with you, learning about... things... and if it's alright, I'd like to keep it like that – simple."

Suddenly, a smile broke out over Sirius's face again.

"I like that, kitten," he said, relieved. "I can do simple. And I can do you," he whispered, leaning closer again and trailing kisses along the shell of her ear.

Heat was already pooling low in Hermione's belly, and she knew that he'd have her ready to receive him in no time.

"How about," Sirius suggested, "we take this up to my room, huh? Then I can show you all the things a good, nice boyfriend," he grunted into her with every word, "would never dare to do to a fierce little lioness like you. Sound good?"

Hermione scrambling to get out from underneath him in her haste to follow his suggestion was all the answer he needed, apparently. He chuckled into her ear once more, before releasing her and watching her hurry to the door.
Almost out into the corridor, Hermione looked back to see if Sirius was actually following her or if that had simply been his own, singularly excruciating way of teasing her. She found the man appreciating her backside with a thorough, longing glance.

"Oh, don't worry, kitten," Sirius assured her when he realized she was perusing him. "I'm coming. In fact, I'll be coming very soon, I think, and so will you. I'm just taking the time to admire your beautiful bum," he explained, swaggering over to her. "And I think," he leaned close to her ear once more, "I know exactly which way I'll take you first."

Hermione knew in that moment that no foreplay would be necessary tonight. She was ready to melt into a puddle of delirious goo under Sirius's attentions right there and then.

"Now go on, little lioness," Sirius shooed her out the door, "I wish to see that sweet arse of yours sway up the stairs. You know, to give me a little taste, before I feast on you."

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter twenty-eight, wherein a fairytale metaphor is utilized.


**XXVIII**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#).

**Sunday, December 29th, 1995**

The next few days found Hermione exploring her own sexuality in more ways than she’d ever believed possible. Sirius taught her a great many things. She came apart under his generous attention time and again, in the most earth-shattering manner, only to be put back together by him and subsequently shattered anew.

While the years in Azkaban might have impeded him in the way of stamina, Sirius did not allow that to diminish his sense of caring for the young woman who had come to him for help. She’d asked to learn with him, and teach her he did. He taught her that it was possible to cook an early morning omelette, long before even Molly was up and about in the kitchen, while his fingers were coaxing her to a beautiful climax, and that some of the emptier shelves in the library were just made for her to sit on while he was feasting on her nectar. The pantry, it turned out, was the perfect place for plenty of stolen kisses and heated fumbling, and late one night, he even took her against the Black family tree, shagging her against the branch where Malfoy and Black merged together last.

This night, it seemed, it was high time for another lesson.

Hermione was lying in her own bed, listening to Ginny’s breathing evening out and wondering how long it would be before it was safe for her to leave their room and steal her way upstairs to Sirius’s bed, when the door opened.

The hinges made no sound, yet the beam of light falling into the room from the torches on the corridor immediately caught Hermione’s attention. Wondering whether the boys were playing a trick on them, or whether Harry and Ron simply wanted to talk some more, she was half-surprised, half-relieved when she found the man-shaped shadow creeping into the girls’ room to be somebody else.

"Sirius," she admonished him in a whisper, careful not to wake the girl sleeping in the bed beside hers, "what are you doing here?"

"I missed you," he replied, approaching her bed and shedding his morning robe as he drew nearer. Hermione was thrilled to see that except for a pair of long silken pyjama pants, he was naked underneath. "Didn't you miss me?"

"Sirius," Hermione said when he made to crawl underneath the covers, "you only just saw me. The shower, remember?"

"Oh kitten," he chuckled, turning her around so that he could spoon her from behind, "I won't be forgetting that anytime soon."

Hermione blushed as she remembered how he'd taken her against the shower wall, pounding into her until she came apart around him, and teaching her that it was possible to leave the shower feeling far dirtier than when one had entered it.

"Then what are you doing here, now?" she repeated her earlier question.

"I'm seeing you," Sirius replied, his hands trailing down her thighs, looking for the hem of her nightgown.
"It's dark," Hermione deadpanned.

"I'm seeing to you, then," he corrected himself, "to your needs – and mine."

He found what he'd been looking for and drew the hem up and over her hips.

"Now, shush, kitten," he whispered hotly into her ear, "you don't want to wake Ginny, do you?"

Hermione was shocked.

"Use a Silencing charm, Sirius," she whispered back, "please, just do something to give us some privacy."

"Tsk tsk tsk," Sirius admonished her, fumbling underneath the sheets until his pyjama pants were down far enough, "don't get all upset on me, kitten. The only wand I thought to bring with me is this one," he lifted her upper leg and his hardness slipped between her thighs, brushing against her core and finding her wet for him, "so shush now, and let me work my magic on you."

"Sirius," Hermione begged, still keeping her voice to a whisper, yet struggling to remain silent as the tip of his cock moved in the most delicious small circles against the bundle of nerves between her lips, "please."

"Oh no, kitten," came the reply, "there's only two ways we can do this. Option one, we don't, and I leave this instant. Option two," and he moved against her once more, causing her to grab the pillow to try and stifle her gasp, "you will need to keep very, very quiet."

It seemed that Sirius had learned that option one would never be any kind of acceptable option to Hermione, for he took only a second's time before sinking into her from behind.

"See now," he whispered, his breath hot against her ear, "that's what I thought."

He started out at a slow pace, but soon his thrusts quickened and so did Hermione's breathing, until she was panting in time with his pounding, and equally harshly as well. There was no way she would be able to remain quiet for much longer if he kept that up, and Sirius understood that.

"Alright, kitten," he breathed into her ear, and Hermione felt a certain sense of pride at the realization that he was panting as well, "change of plans."

And before she could react to his words in any way, Sirius's palm was over her mouth, muffling her squeak in surprise as he shifted so that he came to lie underneath her, Hermione's back on his chest. Her head fell back, coming to rest next to his, her neck bent over his shoulder. With her ear so close to his mouth, she could practically feel him panting. A sense of pride filled her, knowing that she could arouse him so, and her own arousal was increased tenfold from the sensation of his hot breath caressing her ear.

Buckling his knees to support his thrusts, Sirius snaked a hand between her thighs to play with her little button of pleasure, his strong forearm thus lying halfway across her stomach further stabilizing her on top of him. The fingers of his other hand were still keeping her mouth firmly shut.

"Not long now, kitten," he panted, and he would turn out to be right about that. A minute or two later, Hermione was shattered by a toe-curling climax, brought about by the fierce pounding of his cock into her, and by the delicious circling of his nubile fingers around her clit.

Sirius was not far behind her, and she revelled in the feeling of him coming inside her when he did. Carefully, Sirius rolled the two of them to the side, until they were in the exact same position they
had started out in. He didn't leave the warm tightness of her just yet, and they cuddled together for a while.

"So," Sirius eventually whispered, and he sounded as if the upcoming topic would be a serious one, "tell me, kitten…"

He doodled circles and patterns onto the skin of her upper leg with his fingers as he spoke, as if that might make the discussion any easier.

"…will there be any little Blacks running about the house in September?"

Hermione physically moved away from him, feeling a pang of loss as he slipped from her centre. She knew, however, that it would be better if she faced him.

"You're thinking to ask me that now?" she whispered, louder than before.

"Well," Sirius stalled, "I just wanted to tell you that… well, that is, in case you forgot or something…"

"Of course I didn't forget!" Hermione shot him down, incensed that he would think her so thoughtless.

"Oh," he replied. What little she could make out of his face in the surrounding darkness appeared disappointed. "Alright, then. Well, I merely wanted to say that in case something happened… I wouldn't mind."

"You wouldn't –" Hermione got louder, but Sirius hushed her down.

"I would love to have children," Sirius admitted, and his confession took all the wind out of Hermione's sails.

"Don't you think that's something to discuss with the potential mother before coming inside of her multiple times a day, several days in a row?" Hermione asked.

"You're probably right," Sirius agreed, suddenly sounding bashful.

"Strike the 'probably'," Hermione said, "I am right about that, period. But no worries," she continued, "I took the Potion before coming here, to number twelve, and it will last for a year, so nothing's about to happen in that department."

"Okay," Sirius replied, somewhat sadly. "I guess it's too much to hope for someone like me, a hunted ex-convict, to think that a lovely young woman like you might carry my child. Merlin, it's still a miracle to me that you would even consent to lying with me at all, not to mention repeatedly for so long."

"Sirius," Hermione asked tentatively, "what's wrong? I've never heard you speak like that. You're usually so confident, and now –"

She trailed off, not certain where she was going with this, and what name to put to the number of emotions Sirius was displaying all of a sudden. It was true; she'd never seen him so sad, so disappointed, so shy, so… dare she say, bereft?

"It's nothing," Sirius answered. "I merely thought that – you know, my family is so fucking up, maybe if I added some new blood, someone sane, someone normal and yet as extraordinary as you are – that maybe, there was some way to save the family name, to have a new generation, with you,
that would grow up to be kind, reasonable, open-minded…”

He did not continue.

"I won't say I'm sorry for not having your children, Sirius," Hermione asserted rather sternly, "because I'm not. I'm too young to give up my education, my prospects, everything I've dreamed of, to carry and to raise the children of a man I do not love. Not romantically, I mean," she corrected herself, "not more than the very dear friend you've become to me.

"I do, however," she continued, "very much hope that you will find the perfect woman for you, to have your children, to raise them in your image – or better yet, in hers –," Hermione winked at that, hoping to dispel some of the far too heavy tension between them, "and to give you all that you've dreamed of for your family. Merlin knows you deserve that."

Sirius did not reply to that, and he did not need to. Hermione saw all that she needed to know in his eyes, shining bright even in the darkness. Turning around, Hermione pressed her back to his chest again, allowing him to draw her close to his body, thus giving him the privacy to hide his tears.

When she woke later in the night, her hair still slightly wet where he'd rested his face against her curls, the spot behind her was empty. She was alone in her bed.

---

Monday, December 30th, 1995

The next morning found Sirius in a much better mood as he appeared to be back to his usual self-confident self when he grabbed Hermione by the waist just as she was walking down the stairs, carrying her a few steps and setting her down only when they'd reached the next landing.

"Sirius," Hermione admonished him with a smile on her face, her cheeks flushed from the surprise, "don't do that ever again! To shock me so when I'm on the stairs –"

"That's why I caught you, kitten," Sirius countered, his smile accompanied by a cheeky wink.

"You didn't catch me," Hermione shot back, "you grabbed me, and –"

She didn't get any further. The two of them had been on their way to the kitchen – or Hermione had been, at the very least, and Sirius had followed her – to grab a cup of tea. It was quite early for the last Monday morning of the year, so Hermione had expected to find some peace and quiet in the kitchen, not thinking anybody except the two of them awake yet. For that same reason, she had carried on the very familiar banter with Sirius, not worrying that anybody might be in the room they were just entering.

As she was pushing the kitchen door open with her hips, walking backwards to look Sirius in the face while bantering with him as she was, his face fell, and Hermione turned around to see what had shocked him so. While even with a surprised expression, Sirius's face retained the smile painted widely across his features, Hermione accomplished no such thing. In fact, had she been able to formulate any coherent thought, she might have realized that she must look ridiculous, her mouth fallen agape as it had.

Albus Dumbledore stood in the kitchen.

His brightly turquoise robes with eggplant-coloured trimmings were the first thing Hermione registered, as the colours clashed so heavily with the bleak room the Headmaster was standing in. That Molly Weasley and Kingsley Shacklebolt were there as well, took her a moment longer to become aware of.
"Professor Dumbledore," she found her tongue again, greeting politely. "Mrs Weasley, Auror Shacklebolt."

Kingsley tilted his head to the side, only in the slightest, but Hermione had become so used to reading what little hints Professor Snape allowed in his outward appearance that she noticed the motion anyway. Shooting him a shy little smile, she hoped that he understood why she was being overly correct today, with the Headmaster present. Then again, she didn't quite understand herself.

Sirius had no such qualms.

"Albus," he greeted him, excessively happy, "and Kings. Pleasure to see you."

"Sirius," the Headmaster returned the greeting, "Miss Granger."

Lingering on her form a little longer, Professor Dumbledore's eyes suddenly twinkled in abandon.

"I take it that your assignment proved to be a success, Miss Granger?"

Hermione wanted to groan at the Headmaster's audacity to speak of her task surrounding the Potions Master in front of other people. Why he thought – and correctly at that – that Professor Snape had been the one to take her virginity, when she had just been caught bantering with Sirius in far too familiar a way, was beyond her. Yet for that simple reason, that they were around other people, she didn't groan aloud. What she did do, however, was Occlude until she felt that she couldn't even read her own thoughts anymore.

"Success might be too bold a term, professor," she replied, and it felt to her as if she had to force the words through a thick cloud inside her mind. Her Occlumency efforts appeared to be effective.

"Progress, perhaps."

"Progress, then," the Headmaster nodded his agreement, "that is very satisfactory."

"What assignment, 'Mione?" Sirius asked, bold as ever.

"A… pet project, of sorts," Hermione evaded his answer.

Sirius didn't appear satisfied, but to her great relief did not push the issue any further. Kingsley's eyes lingered on her for a moment too long, Hermione felt, before shooting to Sirius, then back to her, and his expression told her that Kingsley must have reached some kind of conclusion. Hermione hoped that it was the wrong one, and that it might be favourable to her.

"Anyway," Mrs Weasley now entered the conversation, dispelling some of the strange tension that had settled over the small crowd, "will you stay for breakfast, Albus? I can have the tea ready in just a minute, and Hermione, would you be so kind as to get the eggs? Sirius, there should still be bacon in –"

"Thank you, Molly," Professor Dumbledore interrupted the eager witch, "but we really must be going now. Kingsley?"

And with a wave of his hand, the Headmaster had ushered Kingsley out of the kitchen. When passing her, the Auror had shot Hermione another meaningful look. She was almost certain that it had carried his intention to speak to her soon, though whether that was a promise or a threat, she could not tell. She simply hoped that it meant she might see him again before the holidays were over.

---

Tuesday, December 31st, 1995
The morning of New Year's Eve 1995 dawned like any other December morning in London would – dark, dank, and cloudy. Hermione had stayed in Sirius's bed for once, hoping that Ginny would think her roommate had risen early upon waking up alone, and was now lying next to the man she had spent a number of fabulous nights and an even larger number of fabulous stints with.

There was something she needed to do. These past days, she had always held off, but the topic must not be avoided any longer.

"Sirius," she whispered once he'd opened his eyes and shot her a sleepy smile. "Sirius, there is something I need to tell you."

"Perfect, kitten," he replied with a cheeky smile, and was over her in a second. His legs were between hers, forcing her thighs open, and they readily parted for him. Stark naked as they both were, his hard tip was nudging her entrance in a matter of seconds.

"You know I love it when you talk to me."

And with that, he sank into her. Groaning at the wetness that greeted him, he settled into a rhythm that had them both gasping for breath soon. Although they both tried to hold back to lengthen their combined pleasure, it was over too soon for their taste. Sirius came to the sound of his name tumbling repeatedly over Hermione's lips, and she followed him soon after, his thumb eliciting the most delicious sensations where it was rubbing circles around and over her clit.

When they had both calmed down from their high, Sirius rolled off of Hermione again, coming to lie next to her with a self-satisfied grin on his face.

"Now, kitten," he announced, "now that your little kitty is fed, perhaps it's time that the lions get breakfast as well, don't you think? Don't know how you're feeling, but I, at least, need a cup of coffee to get over my disappointment at the lack of expletives from your mouth just now."

He winked at her, showing he wasn't serious, and with that, he was off the bed and in his pants.

"Take your time getting up, of course," he said. "Nobody else on this floor, so at least you have the bathroom to yourself."

Once the door closed behind the admiringly muscled back of one Sirius Black, Hermione exhaled a deep sigh. Intent on getting him to talk to her before midnight, she got up, collected her clothes and, once dressed, descended the stairs, hoping that Ginny would have gotten up already so that she might change her outfit before going to breakfast.

As it happened, that opportunity presented itself later that day.

"Sirius?" Hermione called out to him when he came descending down the stairs. She had been looking for him and on her way up to Buckbeak's room when she happened upon him. "May I talk to you for a moment? Perhaps in the library?"

The door was open, and the room was perfect to talk. People rarely came in here.

"I was just on my way to Harry," Sirius explained, then smiled. "But hey, he can wait for – say, twenty minutes? I promise I'll make them seem like an hour to you."

He grabbed Hermione's offered hand and raised his eyebrows in surprise when she led him to the sofa in front of the grand fireplace.
"On the couch?" he asked. "I was thinking you might like to go to our usual corner," a wink and a lick of his lips showed her exactly what he'd had in mind for her, "but if you like it kinky, you little minx, then sure, we can do it where anybody walking in might see us."

The bulge in his trousers showed that he was, indeed, 'up' for that kind of naughtiness, but Hermione was having none of it.

"Please, Sirius," she said, gently extracting his hands from where they'd slipped under her skirt, "I really wanted to talk."

"Talk, then, kitten," Sirius replied, not yet deterred from what he'd planned for the half-empty bookshelf in the back of the library, "I can listen while putting my own tongue to work."

He had almost delved down to her crotch, when she grabbed him by the shoulders to hold him back.

"For fuck's sake, Sirius Black," Hermione cursed, and groaned when she saw his satisfied grin at hearing her use expletives in his presence, "please, just listen to me for once, alright?"

His face turned serious at that, and he sat up straight. His thumb was still resting on her knee where Hermione had it bent to face him on the couch, drawing lazy circles on her skin.

"Alright, Hermione," he answered, "I'm all ear."

"Listen, I --" she broke off, then tried again. "This isn't easy for me, but I -- I will have to pull a Cinderella on you tonight."

"Okay," Sirius nodded eagerly, "sounds kinky." After a moment, he tilted his head to one side in question. "What's a Cinderella?"

"It's a princess," a deep voice suddenly supplied from the depths of the library. "She leaves her prince at midnight, disappearing from the ball with the full intention of never being found by him."

"Why would she do such a thing?" Sirius snorted. "Sounds like a dick move to me."

"Perhaps you should ask her that," Remus said, coming out from between the aisles and inclining his head to point towards Hermione.

"Kitten?" Sirius asked, now a worried expression on his face. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Sirius," Hermione tried to assure him, but her expression would not obey even her best intentions, "it's just that I can't continue this" -- she waved between them to indicate their relationship -- "anymore. Not after this year has ended."

"What is this?" Sirius queried, his features half-sad, half-angered, "some twisted kind of new year's resolution? Was this just a game to you?"

"I thought we had agreed," Hermione said, though her voice sounded like she was begging him, "this was fun, but it couldn't go on forever."

"Who is he?" Sirius growled.

Hermione leaned back from him, now fear slowly creeping into her heart.

"What?"

"The other man," he explained, "the one you're leaving me for; who is he?"
"Well, if you ask me," Remus chimed in, ignoring Hermione's glare in his direction that told him loudly that she wasn't asking him, "it must be the one who had her first. Or perhaps, of course," he went on, looking pensive, "little Miss Hermione Granger has grown into a woman who jumps from one man to the other, leaving desperate creatures left and right in her wake."

Hermione was appalled that he might even suggest such a thing, yet glad when Sirius shook his head no at the implication his best friend was making.

"Alright then," Remus said lightly, as if he hadn't just insulted Hermione, "I'll leave you two to it."

"Why would he even say such a thing?" Hermione asked once he was gone. "Sirius, you know I would never –"

"I know, kitten," Sirius tried to calm her, though the hurt at her leaving him was still visible in his features. "This moon's transformation was hard on him, I think, and the wolf is still present. Even though the sexual pressure is gone, the hurt at being rejected is still there, and Moony transforms that hurt into aggression. I'm sorry he insulted you that way."

His thumb resumed its rubbing motion on her knee for a minute, before Sirius pulled away.

"It's him, isn't it?"

"Him?" Hermione echoed, then shook her head. "No, of course not. I love Remus, but I didn't –"

"Not Remus," Sirius shook his head, "I'm not talking about him."

"Who, then?" Hermione asked, scared he might have actually found out.

"It all makes sense now," Sirius pondered, increasing Hermione's agitation. "He rarely comes here outside of official Order meetings, and if he should have come by during these past days, then on Dumbledore's orders, and probably only to talk to Molly. Did you meet per chance, did you, and you decided to just do it? Or did you agree to meet here, to do the deed?"

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked, feeling as if she wasn't even a part of the conversation anymore. That assumption appeared to be right when Sirius continued without addressing her confusion.

"I guess some women might find him handsome," he went on, "tall, dark, and – Holy fucking Merlin," Sirius suddenly exclaimed, "you told me! You fucking told me, and I didn't even realize. Pure Black, that's what you said, wasn't it? And I – I mean, we went to school together, he was a few years above me, a little awkward then, but I guess he must have grown into his looks… Pure Black, Circe, you said, and still I didn't –"

"Sirius?" Hermione cautiously probed when he suddenly fell silent. She was already fearing the worst. How would he react, the man who had been so kind to her, so loving with her, when he realized that his childhood nemesis had been her first? She did not want to find out.

"Sirius?"

"And he was here," he continued, surprising Hermione. "Yesterday, he was in the kitchen, in my fucking kitchen, and I never even –"

"What?" Hermione almost shouted. "Who are you talking about?"

"It's Kingsley, isn't it?" Sirius asked. "Your secret lover, your first. It's Kingsley Shacklebolt."
"Sirius," Hermione tried to placate him, struggling not to allow the relieved smile to spread over her face, so glad was she for Sirius to have come to the wrong assumption, "does it really matter? I can't continue our... affair any longer, and that should be enough, shouldn't it? And no, it's not some kind of twisted new year's resolution as you feared. I just – I just can't, okay?"

"Okay," Sirius replied in an empty voice. "As you wish."

"I'm sorry," Hermione impressed, "I really am."

Silence fell around them. When the minutes dragged on, Hermione couldn't stand it any longer, sitting there, just staring into empty air. She made to get up, but just in that moment, Sirius spoke.

"Midnight, huh?" he asked. At her confused expression, he elaborated, "That's what Remus said about that princess."

"Yes," Hermione confirmed, "midnight."

"Well, if that's the case," Sirius said, a determined grin spreading over his face, "then let me make this a New Year's Eve you'll never forget."

And with that, he pulled a squealing Hermione towards him by the hips, until she came to lie underneath him, and showed her how delicious things could be under the real danger of anybody walking in on them at any time.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter twenty-nine, wherein godfather and godchild take a trip to town.
Thursday, January 2nd, 1996

The new year of 1996 had begun as it should, at least in the opinion of one very insistent Marauder – with Sirius Black's name tumbling from Hermione Granger's lips as he spilled himself inside her.

Having bugged Remus for the details of the fairy tale of Cinderella, Sirius had come to Hermione later that night with the full intention of spending the countdown towards the new year inside her. As he had said, Cinderella had only transformed back to the common girl everybody knew her as at the twelfth stroke of midnight, meaning he had a few precious seconds of 1996 to spend with her. His reasoning outsmarting her own for once, Hermione had acquiesced, and had accommodated his wish.

Nobody, except maybe Remus, had suspected anything, when Hermione had begged off to the toilet and Sirius had claimed to go and fetch some more liquor a couple of minutes before midnight. Of course, the Weasleys and Harry had chided Hermione for 'missing the stroke of midnight', but Hermione could not bring herself to regret having chosen the strokes of one Sirius Black instead, to be enjoyed inside his late father's second study – because who could be content with only one? – where there was an ancient grandfather clock to chime the full hour.

After that, things had gone back to normal, or as normal as they could, regarding the circumstances. Sirius had taken only a day to warm up to Hermione again, outwardly at least, giving the impression that nothing had changed between the two of them – or rather, that nothing had been changed between the two of them in the first place that might have changed back to how things had been before, well, 'nothing' had changed.

All that was left for Hermione to do now was to ponder a couple of questions that she had put off for far too long. Dipping underneath the full bath tub she was enjoying, she breathed through the soapy liquid around her, the Occlumency exercise helping her concentrate. She needed a way to give the blood diamond to Professor Snape, for him to carry against his skin so that the protection might work on him, and she needed a way to secretly communicate with him if she wanted to be able to call on him when the need struck her.

When realization gripped her, Hermione had to come up for air. She cursed herself for allowing the surprise at her own stroke of genius to break her concentration, but busied herself with emptying her lungs of water and soap first. Eventually relaxing back against the edge of the tub, Hermione went through the details of her idea again and found that it fit all the necessary requirements.

Before, she had always seen the two questions as separate from one another. That was mainly for the reason that one issue had come to her far earlier than the other had. After all, she had begun to ponder how to secretly converse with the Potions Master just a few days after he had named his price, at the very beginning of November. The question of the blood diamond hadn't arisen until December, when she'd decided on the ritual.

Now, however, Hermione saw that the two issues could easily be merged into one problem. Breaking the questions down into their essentials, both could be answered the same way: an object was needed that was easy to hide, so either small or unsuspicious enough, when carried on one's body at all times. And the answer to both was a watch. More specifically, Hermione's grandfather's
The watch had become a tradition in her family, albeit a rather short-lived one up until now. It had been part of her grandmother's dowry when she had married Hermione's grandfather. He had worn it until their first and only child had been born, Hermione's mother, who had then received the watch to give to her own husband upon their marriage. When Hermione had been born, her father had put the watch into a safe deposit box, to be given to Hermione when she was to be married herself.

Hermione was well aware that her relationship with the professor was nothing like the marriage her parents led, or like the one her grandparents had shared. Then again, she had promised him her sexual fidelity, to be broken only with partners he had approved of beforehand. And as many marriages might become over the years, their arrangement would be difficult from the start.

Of course, Hermione had no intention of getting impregnated by the dour Potions Master, or anybody for that matter, until the war was over. But then again, she could always ask for the watch back after the war was won, seeing as Professor Snape would not be needing the diamond's protection then anymore. She only hoped that he was not sentimental, or possessive, or simply spiteful enough to deny her the watch back. That required him accepting the watch in the first place, naturally, but Hermione hoped against her better knowledge that this would not pose a problem.

Checking the facts again, a watch was perfect. It was worn against the skin and was not so out of place that it would seem suspicious. In fact, Hermione knew that it was a wizarding tradition to gift a watch for a wizard's seventeenth birthday, so they were at least worn in the wizarding world just as they were in the muggle world. She trusted Professor Snape to be able to sufficiently lie about why in the world he had elected to begin wearing a watch, so Hermione decided not to worry about that herself.

The question was how to incorporate the blood diamond into the watch, and how to secretly communicate via the item. The latter was relatively easy; all that was needed was a variation of the Protean charm. Of course, how to charm the watch so that any messages would show up in an encryption that was safe enough not to be decrypted by just anybody, yet still easy to decipher for the professor was a wholly different question, one that might require some research.

The watch being a mechanical one, created before battery-driven watches had emerged on the market, Hermione also needed to find a way to move its innards in a manner that the watch would still function, but that the blood diamond could be incorporated, so that it rested against the bearer's skin.

One problem down, two new issues come up, Hermione thought to herself, and, sighing, left the tub. These questions were to be addressed in the Black library.

Monday, January 6th, 1996

A few days later, Hermione was spending another day ensconced in the library, when a knock on the door frame made her look up.

"Kingsley," she greeted the handsome Auror standing in the entrance, "a happy new year to you!"

"And to you, princess," he answered in his usual deep voice, sending shivers across Hermione's spine all the way down to her toes. Crossing the room until he stood behind the couch she was sitting on, he leaned down to her, cupping her face with one hand that slid back into the curls at the nape of her neck, increasing her pleasant shivers by a factor that escaped Hermione's grasp of numerology, and tilted her head so that he could place a warm kiss onto her forehead.
When he chuckled benevolently, Hermione opened her eyes, coming to the realization that she must have closed them at some point in time, and wondered when that might have been and how much time had passed since then. The gentle, gentleman-like kiss had surprised her, when perhaps it shouldn't have, yet she had completely lost all grasp on her surroundings when she'd become lost in the sensation of his lips against her skin, innocuous as the gesture had been.

"I'm only stopping by," Kingsley spoke when it became clear that Hermione was still a little lost for words. "I'm going into town to run a few errands for Molly today and wanted to ask if I could get you anything."

"What did the others ask for?" Hermione asked to buy herself some time to get her thoughts in order.

"What others?"

Kingsley winked at her and Hermione felt her cheeks light up like a Christmas tree, a warmth creeping into her face that she had often experienced with Sirius, though in a completely different part of her body. That he had come to only her to ask what she might need, moved Hermione in a way that was somewhat foreign, yet entirely enjoyable for her.

"In fact," Hermione began, wondering if it was wise to abuse his offer this intensely right away, "I would like to ask you for a favour."

"Anything," Kingsley promised right away.


"If it's in my power," Kingsley replied, and another wink told her that there wasn't much that was not in his power, "I'll grant you any favour you could ask."

"Are you going into Muggle London?" Hermione asked.

"As a matter of fact, I am," he confirmed, now slightly apprehensive. There was no use in stalling any longer, Hermione knew, and plunged right in.

"Might I come?"

"Hermione," Kingsley began, drawing out her name, and that he'd used her name in the first place was sign enough for the girl in question to shut him off.

"I need to retrieve something," she elaborated, "something only I can get to, and I need to get something done."

"Done?"

"It's rather private," Hermione explained, blushing even further at the implications behind that statement, "and I need it soon, so it can't wait."

Kingsley studied her for a few moments longer, then came to a decision.

"Do you have the money for all of that?"

"I will," Hermione answered, "when we've checked our first stop. I need to get something from my safe deposit box at a bank, and there should be cash in there as well."

"I would have to speak with Molly about this," Kingsley stated, "seeing as you're practically under
"Please don't," Hermione begged. "You know what she would say, and it wouldn't be favourable towards me. Ask Professor Dumbledore instead, please? It's for my assignment," she added as a last thought, knowing that if Kingsley relayed that message to the Headmaster, his answer would most probably be yes.

"For your assignment," Kingsley echoed, sceptical. He eyed her for a minute, then acquiesced. "Alright," he stated, "but if the Headmaster is busy, we might need to wait for his answer for a while."

"I'm sure we'll find a way to pass the time," Hermione asserted with a smile on her face. "I promise I'll make it worth your time."

"Will you now, princess," Kingsley muttered, and the way her pet name fell from his lips had Hermione shudder all over again.

Still having her fixed firmly under his darkened gaze, Kingsley spoke the words "Expecto Patronum", and a magnificent silver lynx erupted from his wand in a blaze of light.

"Miss Hermione Granger wishes to accompany me into Muggle London," Kingsley spoke to the patiently waiting animal. "I would ask your permission to take her."

Hermione cursed the shiver that wracked her whole body at his second sentence, the implication of its ambiguity sending the heat that had been in her face before now down to her core. Kingsley looked at her quizzically, but the darkness of his eyes told her that he knew exactly what he'd just said and was simply searching her face for her reaction to his words.

Just when Kingsley's gaze softened slightly, apparently satisfied with what he'd found in Hermione's eyes, a tiny golden feather fell between the two of them. Kingsley grinned.

"It seems your request was granted, princess," he said. "Anything you need to grab before we go?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Hermione replied, panicked that she hadn't thought about it before now. "Will you wait here? I'll need a couple of minutes, but I'll be right back."

"Take your time, princess," Kingsley assured her. "This is my day off, and it's just gotten a lot better than I'd imagined it might."

His radiant smile sent a weakness to her knees that made descending the stairs a little difficult, but Hermione managed anyway. Searching her trunk for the key to her safe deposit box that she luckily never travelled without, and for the little velvet back containing the blood diamond, she was back with Kingsley in no time.

"Okay," she said, "I'm ready."

Kingsley looked her up and down. Hermione felt that her face was still glowing, both from running the stairs down and up again, and from the Auror's attention.

"Alright, then," Kingsley eventually said, "let's grab your coat and off we go."

Once they had stood on the front porch together, Kingsley had drawn Hermione close, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. Knowing what would be coming, Hermione braced herself, but nothing could have prepared her for the actual feeling of being squeezed through a tube far too thin for the
two of them. Having arrived at their destination – a dingy, narrow alley –, Kingsley led her to a long-closed shop front. There, he spelled clean a small area on the window and bade her lean her forehead against the cold glass. Hermione's breathing exercises helped quell her rise of nausea, as did the slow, languid circles Kingsley's broad hands were rubbing over her back.

After a few moments, Hermione felt alright again, and together the two of them made off into central London.

Kingsley kept her close. Chivalrous as the gesture was, and Hermione couldn't help feeling flattered, she knew that his offering his arm to her was more for her security than for any other reason. Still, there was no way for her to keep the pleasant warmth spreading through her whole body, from the inside out, at being in public on the arm of such a handsome man. That he kept Hermione on his left arm made perfect sense. Not only did he tend to Disapparate by turning clockwise, so the motion would force Hermione into spinning with him much faster as she was on the outer end of the radius to the circle he would be turning in; Kingsley would also need his right arm in a wand duel.

They reached the bank where Hermione's safe deposit box was stored far quicker than she might have liked. The clerk ushered the two of them to the back, where they were led to a room to open the box safely. He hesitated when he saw that Kingsley made no move to leave Hermione's side.

"If you wish for me to ensure your privacy, ma'am," he offered, "I will gladly offer your companion a cup of tea while he waits for you to return."

Hermione looked from the clerk to Kingsley and back.

"Oh no," she laughed, "that is alright, thank you very much. Unless, of course," she now addressed Kingsley, suddenly realizing that he might rather have a cup of tea than accompany her, "you would prefer that?"

"I would rather not leave you out of my eyes, princess, if you don't mind," Kingsley said seriously, though there sat the hint of a smile in the corner of his mouth.

"I would like for you to be here," Hermione confessed.

The clerk looked between the two of them, his moving head looking as if he was following a tennis match.

"Please, ma'am," he tried again, "I can always call security if this man is bothering you."

"This man," Hermione improvised, drawing herself up to her full height which was, admittedly, regrettably short, "is my uncle, so I would ask you not to presume too much, Mr… Johnson," she read his nametag and had to blush immediately, being carried back to much more pleasurable memories in the company of the delightful Miss Johnson.

The clerk's eyes narrowed, clearly not believing the lie. Hermione realized that it was relatively incredible for her to have a black uncle. If there was a way for Kingsley to be her relative, then only by law, and if they were merely in-laws, then why would she insist on having him with her when opening her safe deposit box?

"I'm her godfather, actually," Kingsley offered, and something seemed to click behind the clerk's eyes, now far less suspicious. "Hermione asked me to accompany her today, as we are choosing a birthday present for her father, my best mate. Is there a problem with that, sir?"

His deep, soothing voice could have calmed a raging sand storm. As it was, the clerk was putty in Kingsley's hands.
"No problem, sir, none at all," he was quick to assure. "Take your time, ma'am."

Thanking the eager clerk once again, Hermione entered the room. Placing the safe deposit box onto the table in the middle of the room, she heard the key being turned in the lock behind her. A moment later, Kingsley was at her side.

"You have a lot to learn, princess," he chuckled, and Hermione jumped when she realized how close he was. "Your uncle, really. Somebody ought to teach you how to lie better."

Hermione blushed. After all, that was exactly what Professor Snape was attempting to do.

Instead of engaging in that particular conversation with him, Hermione asked Kingsley, "Could you check the room for CCTV, please? There shouldn't be any cameras, but I want to be sure."

Kingsley didn't move except burrow his hands deep inside his robes. A minute later, he stated, "All clear."

"Intentional magic?" Hermione asked, wishing an explanation on how he'd checked the room so quickly and without moving.

"Indeed," Kingsley confirmed her guess, and it took all of Hermione's willpower not to give in to the shudder that longed to shake her whole body.

Kingsley's voice and choice of reply had sent her back to the last Potions class before the Christmas holidays, when Professor Snape had been standing so closely behind her, his hardness pressing into the crevice of her bum, arousing her so. That Kingsley was in a similar situation with her now, in a room where nobody could see them, her standing in front of a table and him closely behind her, overwhelmed Hermione.

She stepped around the table until it was between her and Kingsley, drew the box towards her, and unlocked the lid. Carefully opening the box, she found what she'd been looking for right away.

The watch in itself was not valuable enough to warrant storing it in a safe deposit box. Of course, it had been a very expensive item once upon a time, as all mechanical watches had been back then, but its highest value today lay in sentiment only.

Taking the item out, opening the back, and placing the watch on the table, facing down, Hermione raised her head to look Kingsley in the eye.

"May I ask for a rather outrageous favour, Kingsley?" she asked hesitantly.

The man in question sighed.

"Ask away, princess," he replied. "If it is in my power, I will give it to you."

Hermione worried her lower lip for a moment or two, then spoke.

"I need to use your wand."

Kingsley gaped at her for a few seconds, before he seemed to find his voice again.

"Prove me wrong, princess," he eventually began, "but if I've heard you right, you just asked me to use my wand, and no matter how I twist and turn the meaning of that question, the result is either highly forward or highly intrusive, and I'm not sure which option to go with."

"Please, Kingsley," Hermione almost begged, "my wandless magic isn't good enough for this, and I
can hardly use my own wand, now can I? Please, this is really important to me."

"Well," Kingsley sighed, and the breathiness of that one syllable almost took Hermione's breath away, "my answer is no, I will not let you use my wand. But," he raised his voice, cutting off whatever protest or begging Hermione had wanted to interrupt him with, "I will allow you the use of my hand. Do it right, and your intention will flow right through my fingers into the wand, and it will be as if you used your own magic."

"Can it go wrong?" Hermione asked. It would not do, after all, to destroy what they had come here for.

"Either it works, or nothing happens," Kingsley assured her. "Even if you botch it up, there will be no negative effect other than a minute of your life spent in vain, but then again, we will spend that minute together, and certainly there must be some merit in that?"

He winked at her, and there was no question as to whether Hermione might decline. She didn't.

Kingsley crossed around the table and came to stand behind her. Hermione heard him draw his wand, and suddenly her back was pressed into his chest and his right arm came sneaking around her.

"Put your hand on mine, princess," he instructed her.

Hermione did as she was bid. Kingsley's skin was warm beneath her fingers, far warmer than her own. Somehow, touching his hand seemed far more intimate to Hermione than the couple of kisses he had pressed to her forehead; as if there was an emotional basis for the contact in addition to the sexual attraction. That was, of course, assuming Kingsley felt attracted to her, of which Hermione wasn't in the least bit certain.

Kingsley's strong fingers maintained a light grip on the length of wood between them. Hermione rested her fingers on top of his. Her digits were far shorter than his, and again Hermione had opportunity to revel in the contrast of ebony and ivory.

"Now try and focus on what you're attempting to do, not how," Kingsley murmured into her ear. "Feel the power flow through you, channel it into the wand, and work your magic."

They were both perfectly still for a few moments. Hermione could not say whether it was fifteen minutes or fifteen seconds, but their breaths were in sync, facilitating her concentration. When she felt ready, Hermione led the wand in the movements the tomes of the Black library had suggested to her. She was barely aware of Kingsley's fingers lying between hers and the slim piece of wood, so intent was she on getting this to work. Her eyes fixed on her grandfather's watch, Hermione had to force herself to keep concentrating, rather than celebrating early, when the inner machinery of the watch moved further to the outside, twisting and stretching in a way that in the middle, there was a triangle left.

Only when every little part had come to rest again, did Hermione allow herself a whoop of joy, reluctantly letting go of Kingsley's hand in the process.

"Thank you, Kingsley, thank you," she said, turning her head until she could look him in the eye, "without you, I could never have done that."

"Without my wand," he corrected her, an easy smile on his face telling her that he wasn't serious, "witches only seem to want me for my wand."

"I'm sure that's not true," Hermione countered seriously. "You are an Auror, Kingsley. That is a prestigious and well-paid job. I'm sure they want you for your position and money, as well."
Her wink was no use against the tickling attack Kingsley bestowed upon her at her cheeky words. Only when she begged him to cease, and thirty more seconds had passed in which Hermione felt like she was suffocating to death from her intense laughter, did he back off.

Catching her breath, Hermione almost didn't catch his next words.

"You've changed since we last spoke, princess," Kingsley said out of the blue.

"Have I?" Hermione asked, playing innocent.

"Yes, you have," Kingsley confirmed. After a pause, he added, "Black seemed very happy last time I saw him."

"Oh, you know how he is," Hermione tried to play things off, "he likes having people around him."

Kingsley hummed. Hermione failed to discern whether it was in agreement or in scepticism.

"People," Kingsley echoed, "sure."

Another moment of silence passed. Then:

"It wasn't him, though."

Hermione looked up at the Auror.

"No," she agreed, "it wasn't him. Funnily enough, he suspected you."

"Somehow, I can't imagine he found that funny at all."

"I didn't say it was funny for him. He caused quite the scene, actually. Luckily, Remus was there – well, if you would find it lucky when a man you trusted intervenes by insulting you, making your quasi-boyfriend apologize on said man's behalf, thus calming the situation down a little."

"I wouldn't call that lucky," Kingsley said, his brow furrowed.

"Oh yeah? Neither would I," Hermione confessed, her voice small.

Without another word, Kingsley drew her into his arms, enveloping her in his body heat and his calming presence, both factors warming Hermione in an utterly relaxing way that seemed to suck all the negative emotions out of her that had crept into her head and heart during their conversation.

"Why did you argue about me at all?" Kingsley finally asked. The rumbling of his voice went straight through Hermione as the vibrations of his torso travelled over onto her own body. "How did I come up in discussion?"

Hermione swallowed thickly.

"I – I ended things between us, just a few days ago, and he suspected that I was going back to my first… partner. He thought that might have been you."

"And are you?"

Hermione dared not lift her head from where it was rested against Kingsley's chest. She was not quite certain what he was asking her – was she going back to her first partner or was she coming to him?
"Am I what?"

Kingsley sighed. He seemed to be doing a lot of that today, Hermione thought, but then again, she probably brought him to so much trouble that it was simply necessary for him to take a deep breath now and again.

"Is the watch for him?"

"Sirius? No."

"I take it you don't want to talk about it, princess, but please," Kingsley said, "if that is the case, then just tell me you don't want to have this conversation. Do me the courtesy not to play dumb with me."

The way he emphasized the last word, Hermione felt that Kingsley valued their friendship – for they did seem to have become fast friends over their past few interactions – almost as much as she did.

"I'm sorry, Kingsley," she said. "It's not exactly that I don't want to talk about it. It's just that there's not much that I can say."

"He's older and you can't elaborate beyond that. It's new and unconventional, and neither of you wants to make it public."

Those weren't questions, and they both knew it.

Hermione sighed, giving Kingsley the confirmation he hadn't been asking for.

Taking a step back and thus leaving his embrace, Hermione said, "To the jeweller's next?"

"Wow, you're taking things fast, aren't you?" Kingsley joked, and the mood considerably lightened. "Come on now, princess, let's get out of here."

After having locked the safe deposit box and having handed it back to the clerk who offered them tea once more (which they declined), the two of them were back out on the streets of London. Walking leisurely down the road, they went looking for a jeweller. They skipped a few of the large brand stores, as Hermione wanted to go to a craftsman, not simply a vendor. They eventually found a small shop tucked into the corner of a side alley, and went inside.

Once inside, an elderly man greeted them. Kingsley went to look at some of the displays, giving Hermione some privacy to converse with who she assumed to be the shop owner.

"Good morning, miss," the man greeted her with a toothy smile, "welcome to Manderly & Sons. How may I help you today?"

"Good morning," Hermione returned his friendly welcome, "I was looking to set a stone into this watch. Here…"

Her reason for going to a muggle jeweller, rather than just implementing the stone by magic as she had changed the innards of the watch, was that she had no idea how the blood diamond would react to external magic. Setting the gem by hand, she assumed, was the safer choice.

Hermione carefully pulled the watch from where she had lovingly stored it in her pocket, opening the back to show the jeweller the inside.

"Well, blow me away, miss," the old man exclaimed in an almost reverent whisper, "this is something I've never seen before, and I've seen quite the number of curiosities in my lifetime. This,
however, all the cogs and wheels in a circle around a perfect triangle… No, this is craftsmanship as I've never seen before. And you wish to set a stone in there? In the back? That's rather unusual."

"Unusual, yes," Hermione agreed, "but possible? I wish for the stone to rest against the skin of the one wearing the watch, so the back lid of the watch would need to accommodate that. Just the point of the stone, mind you, but it needs to be in skin contact at all times."

The jeweller took the watch carefully in hand. Turning it this way and that, he pondered Hermione's requirements.

"Yes, miss," he finally judged, "that should be perfectly possible. Of course, it would be better if the person in question were to come here, so that I could adjust the band…" At Hermione's vehement shake of the head in the negative, he amended, "…but of course, that is not necessary at all. As for the stone - do you have something in particular in mind?"

"As a matter of fact," Hermione said, pulling out the tiny velvet bag, "I do…"

And with that, she set the bag onto the counter between herself and the shop owner, loosened the draw string, and pulled out the blood diamond.

It was a sight magnificent to behold. Tiny in size, no higher than Hermione's little finger was slim, it held a wondrous kind of magic both in beauty and in power. Apparently that magic was palpable for muggles, as well.

"Holy Christ, miss," the man exclaimed once more, "this is –"

Kingsley had crossed the shop in the split of a second.

"Will you excuse me and my goddaughter for a moment, good sir?" he asked politely, yet with an air so assertive that the jeweller could do nothing but agree.

Once the old man had disappeared into the back of the shop, Kingsley turned to Hermione.

"This is no common stone," he said, and his expression meant business. "Hermione, princess, this is not a jewel to give away lightly."

"You think I don't know that?" Hermione shot back, confused that he would even know of what nature the blood diamond was, and even more confused that he would interfere with her decision. "Do you think I'm handing this to just anybody? That this was a spur of the moment decision?"

"Of course not," Kingsley conceded. "I simply wish for you to understand that this is a huge gift, even grander than what you gave to procure this in the first place."

"How do you even know about this?" she asked.

Kingsley sighed, then took her right hand in his left. Lifting their hands until Hermione could comfortably see them, he turned his over so that she might peruse his fingers. Hermione looked at him quizzically, until Kingsley whispered the counterspell to the disillusionment he had laid over his ring finger.

A slim gold band appeared, and Hermione gasped at the implications. *Was he married? Engaged at the very least? And not available to her in any case, she who had no intention and even less opportunity, not to speak of permission, of ever availing herself of the Auror in the first place?*

The emotions must have been obvious on her face, as Kingsley turned and twisted the ring until the
stone that had formerly been hidden under his fingers in the palm of his hand now rested on top. It was a small diamond, so black that it was almost completely opaque.

Hermione looked up into his face, feeling the question burning in her eyes.

"It was my mother's," Kingsley said quietly. "Not as pure as yours, of course, but sprung from similar magic. She burned the sheets of her wedding bed on my seventeenth birthday, when I'd crossed into the realm of adulthood. The ashes were compressed into this diamond. I've kept it on me ever since."

"Why −" Hermione began to ask, but realized that the question was far too personal.

"Why didn't she give it to my father?" Kingsley understood her query anyway. "Theirs was an arranged marriage, and she was a powerful witch in her own right, as was my father a powerful wizard. She had no desire to hand her husband any more power, simple as that. He didn't ask for it either, the way they both told me. They made the decision to harvest her virginal magic anyway, gifting it to their first child to make it into adulthood."

Kingsley looked down to where her hand was clasped in his, studying the ring as if he was seeing it for the first time.

"I was the youngest of four siblings. My two elder brothers died while they were still young; I never met either of them. My sister was abducted and killed when she was sixteen. After that, only I was left. I will never forget the look on my mother's face when she and her father handed me the diamond. They left for the continent soon after that. I've never seen them again."

Hermione couldn't help it; her eyes were filled with tears. When Kingsley raised his gaze to her face again, he smiled sadly and cupped her cheeks in his hands, letting her hand go in the motion. His thumbs wiped unshed tears from underneath her eyes, before he drew her close and pressed his lips to her forehead. They stood like that for a while, stuck in the kiss that took Hermione's sorrow at the Auror's past away.

"Are you certain in your decision, princess?" Kingsley eventually asked. Whether seconds had passed or hours, Hermione could not tell, nor did she particularly care. He pulled back from where he'd whispered the words against her forehead, now looking her in the eye with a searching gaze.

"I am, Kingsley," Hermione answered him honestly, "I really am."

"I feel like I might need a cup of tea after this, after all," he sighed.

"Perhaps we should make on more stop at the bank?" she jested. "I would assume that if you ask him nicely, Mr Johnson will be so accommodating as to offer you a double espresso, as well."

"Oh, I don't know, princess," Kingsley smirked back at her, "I believe that would only work if you were the one to ask him. Play into his saviour's complex, young man saving young girl from mean old black guy."

"I have no desire to play into anything with that man," Hermione asserted. "And I don't think you're old, Kingsley."

"But mean?"

"Only when you start tickling me out of the blue."
Kingsley laughed, a deep, booming sound that had Hermione's heart swell in happiness. It also brought the shop owner back to the front, who looked at them, silently asking for permission to join the conversation.

"Very well, then," Kingsley said, "if you're sure, princess, then let's get this done with."

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter thirty, wherein an uncomfortable discussion is interrupted by a complete cure.
Monday, January 6th, 1996

When they got back to Grimmauld Place, Kingsley managed to pry Hermione out of Molly's hands who had been keen on setting the young woman to work right away, to stow away the groceries and other goods Kingsley (and Hermione, but they weren't about to tell Molly that) had brought. Agreeing to see him to the door, Hermione left the kitchen together with the Auror, promising to be back later to help Molly.

Alone in the foyer, Kingsley drew Hermione close, so that they might speak quietly, without disturbing Walburga Black.

"Be careful, princess," Kingsley begged of her. "Innocent magic is a powerful and precious thing, and you should make sure that he values your gift, whoever he is."

"I will," Hermione promised. She chewed on her lower lip for a few moments, mulling over whether she should ask the question that had been burning inside her for quite a while now. "But, say, Kingsley," she eventually asked hesitantly, "why do you call me princess?"

"Yeah, pray tell, Kingsley," a voice sounded from the background. Sirius spoke quietly, but the tenor of his voice carried well through the foyer from the stairs where he stood, watching the pair of them, without waking his mother's portrait. "Why do you call her that?"

Kingsley sighed.

"Listen, Sirius," he began, "I have no quarrel with you, so please, might I have a private conversation with Hermione here?"

"A conversation, you say," Sirius scoffed. "That's not what I would call your private business with that little witch. And if you'll kindly remember, I am the lord of this house, so anything you have to say to her, you might as well say in my presence."

"Princess?" Kingsley asked.

"If you don't mind, neither do I," Hermione replied to his unvoiced question. Her following words were dripping with sarcasm. "If the 'lord of the house' insists on infringing on his guests' privacy, then I welcome him to do so."

The Auror held her gaze for a moment, the warm look in his eyes conveying a comforting heat into Hermione's body. Then he looked up to fix Sirius under his stare, who stood behind Hermione.
"To address your assumptions about my private business with Miss Granger," he said, "I will have you know that nothing untoward happened between us – something you are unable to truthfully say of yourself. And quite frankly, I find it insulting that you think me so tasteless as to come here for one night, and one night only, shag the with, and be done with her, allowing her to seek out the arms of another man. Do you honestly think I have that little class?"

Looking down to Hermione once more, his gaze softened and his eyes darkened, until Hermione felt as if she was falling upwards into the shining blackness of his large pupils.

"Don't you know a witch as formidable as her is to be cherished?" Kingsley asked, still addressing Sirius, but speaking as if his words were intended for Hermione's ears alone. "If I had her for me, I would never dare to enter her that first night. I would kiss her body all over, taste her skin, explore her until I knew every secret her figure held. I would attend to her with my eyes and voice and lips and fingers and tongue until she was hanging on the edge of the cliff of climax, holding on for dear life. I would pry her fingers off, one by one, until she fell off, fell into orgasmic bliss, and I would be there to catch her, only to make her fall all over again.

"I would cherish her until she forgot her own name, until the only name she could remember ever having known was mine, until she was begging for a break and begging for more at the same time. And when the night was over, I would care for her, pamper her, nourish her, strengthen her body and her spirits, so that she might be prepared for the following night, when I would intensify my attentions even more."

Hermione's toes were curled in so delicious a way that it almost hurt. She was riveted by the sight of Kingsley's eyes that conveyed even more promise than his words already did, and she cursed the calendar for showing a year of date that forbid her from having him.

He wasn't quite finished, though.

"I would have her suffer pleasure of the likes she's never known before. And only when I knew she could stand what I had to give her, only then would I claim her as mine. And once she agreed to be mine, in the most precious way a witch can agree to be, I would never let her go. Never."

Her trembling must have been obvious, for Kingsley drew Hermione close to him, wrapping his strong arms around her slim form and rubbing circles into her back. Her front was to his, the Auror's body heat seeping into her smaller body, and Hermione had to tilt her head further back to hold his gaze.

"You ask why I call you princess," Kingsley now spoke directly to her, and Hermione found herself teetering on the brink in anticipation. "The truth is, Hermione Granger, that I would make you my queen if I could. But I can't, and so I'll stick to the next best thing. I'll treat you like the princess that you are, and if the time should ever be right and we're still who we are today, I'll be there, waiting for you."

Another kiss was pressed to her forehead, and it carried so much promise that Hermione found herself falling into an emotion that dared her to call it by its name.

A moment later, Kingsley Shacklebolt was out the door, and Hermione felt alone as she rarely had before.

---

**Saturday, January 11th, 1996**

The holidays had been blissfully bleak as only the Christmas holidays ever were. Amidst the world
celebrating the alleged birthday of an alleged messiah, Severus had holed himself away in his dungeon realm, enjoying the silence and solitude that came with his job. Research had been a large part of his daily pastimes during these past weeks. Another part had been thanking Merlin, Morgana, and whatever grand sorcerer would listen to him for the existence of the Fidelius Charm.

The Fidelius Charm was meant to ensure that a location was kept secret, magically binding the fidelity – for wizards had never been particularly inventive when it came to naming charms – of everybody aware of the location, excepting the Secret Bearer. Most people understood the charm to work in a way to prevent people from speaking the location out loud. Of course, that was true, but far more important was that it kept them from disclosing the location at all – including mentally, via Mind Magic.

That fact had saved Severus when it had come to explaining why exactly he had skipped out on the annual Malfoy Christmas Dinner. He had been unable to avoid meeting Lucius for long, but when they had, Severus could simply say that he'd been at Order headquarters on Dumbledore's business, thus waiving the necessity to explain himself any further. For it had not been Lucius who had interrogated him: on New Year's Eve, the Dark Lord himself had posed those questions.

How exactly he had managed to suffer through the Dark Lord's questioning – meaning Legilimency scan – without disclosing any parts of his interactions with the girl, Severus could not say later. But he had survived, without any kind of punishment that was worth mentioning, and had lived to see the dawn of the new year.

1996.

Everything would change now.

"Harry dear, could you come down to the kitchen? Professor Snape would like a word with you."

Molly Weasley sticking her head into the room had Hermione and Ginny look up, wondering what the professor was doing here and why he would want to talk to Harry, when he usually did his best to avoid doing just that. Hermione especially tried her best to think of a reason that might have brought the Potions Master to Order headquarters, when he had explicitly told her that he did not expect to come here during the holidays at all. The boys, however, were still deeply immersed in their game of wizarding chess.

"Squash him – *squash him*, he's only a pawn, you idiot – sorry, Mrs Weasley," Harry had to ask, and Hermione wondered if boys were really that incapable of listening while thinking, "what did you say?"

"Professor Snape, dear," Mrs Weasley repeated. "In the kitchen. He'd like a word."

In her effort to determine why the professor was here, in London, at all, while still trying to follow the conversation that was slowly ensuing, Hermione lost her grip on Crookshanks, and the beast – that thought could not have been any fonder in Hermione's mind – jumped onto the chess board, making the pieces run for their lives in terror.

"Snape?" Harry echoed, if a little dumbly.

Hermione was quick to correct him, even if only by mouthing the words. Yes, Dumbledore had told her last summer that she was to stand against Harry where it came to showing Professor Snape some respect, but that did not mean that she was eager to spoil the Christmas holidays for herself – for let's face it, who else would take the blame if Harry was to boil over, over an issue as the correct form of
address for a little liked teacher? – and so she kept correcting him silently.

Hermione was surprised, to say the least, to hear her mouthed words spoken aloud at the same time.

"Professor Snape, dear," Mrs Weasley admonished Harry, and Hermione felt her chest swell with a sense of affirmation. "Now come on, quickly, he says he can't stay long."

And the Weasley matriarch was gone from the room.

"What's he want with you?" Ron asked the question that Hermione would have loved to know the answer to, though she would have asked the Potions Master himself, rather than Harry, who obviously knew nothing about the professor's visit.

"You haven't done anything, have you?"

"No!" Harry vehemently denied the notion, and was gone from the room a few seconds later.

Hermione was proud of her best friend for facing the professor instantly, instead of unnecessarily prolonging his visit by stalling their conversation. Looking at Ron and Ginny, Hermione immediately recognized the looks on their faces as the mirror image of her own expression: they were dying to know what Professor Snape would want from Harry.

"Er –"

Eloquent as always, Severus snorted inwardly at the Potter boy's witty interruption. At least it spared him from more immediate confrontation with the mutt.

Severus had not been amused at all when the Headmaster had disclosed his plan to him to have Severus teach the brat Occlumency. Not only did it bring him into direct interaction with the boy for whom he had little hope of ever teaching about the Magic of the Mind. It also cut short the time he might avail for the girl, both for teaching and for… other things.

"Sit down, Potter," Severus snarled.

His mood had not improved when he had come to Grimmauld Place. Hoping to find the kitchen empty, other than for Molly Weasley, he had been severely disappointed to find Black there. When the mutt could not pry the reason for his coming to headquarters from Severus, he had contented himself with a heated staring contest. If it hadn't been Sirius Black, of all people, the attempt would have actually been quite amusing to Severus. After all, not many people, not even grown men, often braved a staring contest with him, and even fewer came out of it unscathed.

There had been little of interest in Black's mind, Severus had found. That was unless one found passionate worry and protectiveness towards a teenage wizard whom he had barely known for a year – discounting the years as a toddler, before Potter and Lily had been murdered by a maniac – to be of any particular interest. Severus, for his part, didn't.

"You know," Black now chimed in on the conversation, leaned back in his chair, and staring at the ceiling – so much for meeting Severus's eyes, he scoffed –, "I think I'd prefer it if you didn't give orders here, Snape. It's my house, you see."

Severus had to keep himself from sighing. If the mutt wanted to make things more difficult for himself, then so be it.

"I was supposed to see you alone, Potter," Severus began, not gracing the other man with an answer,
"but Black –"

"I'm his godfather."

If it hadn't been apparent before that Black disliked being kept out of things, even if it were only a conversation, it surely was obvious now.

"I am here on Dumbledore's orders," Severus countered, putting emphasis on the Headmaster's name, which held some weight with this bunch of Gryffindors, "but by all means stay, Black." At this point, Severus was grinning evilly, giving in to his inner hatred that begged to be allowed to come out and play. "I know you like to feel... involved."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

There it was, Severus thought, and had to keep himself from grinning. Riling the man up had always been far too easy. One might have expected him to gain some self-control after twelve years of Azkaban, but apparently two years in freedom – meaning, on the run – had destroyed what little of that might have existed before.

"Merely that I am sure you must feel – ah –," Severus acted as if searching for the correct word, when he knew exactly how to hit Sirius Black, and hit him hard, "frustrated by the fact that you can do nothing useful for the Order."

He couldn't help but grin when the mutt's face took an unhealthy colour, the shade of red certainly uncommon for a human face.

"The Headmaster has sent me to tell you, Potter," Severus continued, for now he came to the crux of his visit, "that it is his wish for you to study Occlumency this term."

"Study what?"

Why exactly Severus had expected the boy to know what Occlumency was, he could not say. It seemed that the girl might have moved his level of expectation to a rather higher level than it had been before starting their private lessons, and he had become used to somebody using their head before speaking and actually valuing magic beyond the necessary homework readings.

"Occlumency, Potter," Severus reiterated sharply, thinking how to dumb this down so that a dunderhead like the Potter boy might understand. "The magical defense of the mind against external penetration. An obscure branch of magic, but a highly useful one."

"Why do I have to study Occlu – thing?" Potter queried.

That the boy would dare question Severus was already preposterous in and of itself, but for him to question an issue that Severus had absolutely no interest in was even more insulting.

"Because the Headmaster thinks it a good idea," Severus replied, his voice scathing. "You will receive private lessons once a week, but you will not tell anybody what you are doing, least of all Dolores Umbridge. You understand?"

"Yes," the boy answered, and Severus wanted to discipline him for foregoing the appropriate form of address. The only thing keeping him from that was his wish to get out of the Black family manor as quickly as possible, subsequently avoiding any talk that might unnecessarily prolong his stay at Grimmauld Place.

Well, that, and the fact that every time he thought about correcting somebody's form of address
towards him brought up images of the girl asking how to properly address him while his cock was driving into her.

"Who's going to be teaching me?"

_Could a single teenage boy truly be so stupid_, Severus wondered. If Potter was to take lessons with somebody else, would the Headmaster have sent him, Severus, of all people? Did the boy think Severus had nothing better to do with his time? With the last Saturday of the Christmas holidays, so preciously free of students and teaching?

"I am," Severus stated, and suddenly Black was back in on the conversation.

"Why can't Dumbledore teach Harry?" he asked, obviously incensed. "Why you?"

"I suppose," Severus bit out, "because it is a headmaster's privilege to delegate less enjoyable tasks. I assure you I did not beg for the job."

Turning to the boy, Severus continued speaking to Potter: "I will expect you at six o'clock on Monday evening, Potter. My office. If anybody asks, you are taking Remedial Potions." A smile spread over his face, and most certainly a nasty one. "Nobody who has seen you in my classes could deny you need them."

The boy seemed as if he wanted to react to that. After all, Severus had even assigned Remedial Potions to the Granger girl, and she was the best student in their Potions class. Severus, on his part, was eager to get out of number twelve, and was prepared to cut Potter's unvoiced objection off before the boy could vocalize it. Black, however, was faster.

"Wait a moment," the mutt said, calling Severus's attention.

"I am in rather a hurry, Black…" Severus said, hoping to nip whatever Black wanted to talk about in the bud. "Unlike you, I do not have unlimited leisure time…"

"I'll get to the point, then," Black agreed, leaving his seat to stand up. To Severus's chagrin, the other man was towering over him. "If I hear you're using these Occlumency lessons to give Harry a hard time," the mutt challenged, "you'll have me to answer to."

"How touching," Severus mocked the man. "But surely you have noticed that Potter is very like his father?"

"Yes, I have," the mutt readily agreed, and Severus felt a triumphant smile tug at the corners of his mouth, while also feeling slightly sick that a single man could show as much pride for something not of his own doing. He set out for the shot, aimed, and pulled the trigger with his next words.

"Well then," Severus carefully spoke, "you'll know he's so arrogant that criticism simply bounces off him."

At that, the mutt's wand was out. Severus had to keep himself from chuckling at the poor self-constraint Black was showing, and got to his own feet as well. His hands were buried deep in his robes, one grasping his wand, prepared to defend whenever the raving dog opposite him was going to attack.

"Sirius!"

Severus wanted to laugh as he saw Potter poor attempt to hold Black back. After all, Black was a grown man, tall, and strong in his rage. Potter was none of those things.
"I've warned you, Snivellus," the mutt threatened, "I don't care if Dumbledore thinks you've reformed, I know better –"

"Oh, but why don't you tell him so?" Severus interrupted. Where Black had been talking louder and louder, Severus himself got more and more quiet. "Or are you afraid he might not take the advice of a man who has been hiding inside his mother's house for six months very seriously?"

"Tell me," Black countered, but Severus knew that there was nothing the mutt could throw at him that might hurt him in any way, "how is Lucius Malfoy these days? I expect he's delighted his lapdog's working at Hogwarts, isn't he?"

"Speaking of dogs," it was Severus's turn to strike back, "did you know that Lucius Malfoy recognized you last time you risked a little jaunt outside? Clever idea, Black, getting yourself seen on a safe station platform… gave you a cast-iron excuse not to leave your hidey-hole in future, didn't it?"

Black raised his wand. Severus was actually looking forward to a duel, should it come to that. That would put Black even further in his place.

"NO!" Potter tried to intervene. "Sirius, don't –"

The boy's words fell on deaf ears. The mutt was out for blood, Severus could see, and intent on getting what he wanted.

"Are you calling me a coward?" Black asked.

"Why, yes," Severus eagerly confirmed, "I suppose I am."

A little impressed at the boy's resilience, Severus watched in amusement as Potter was still struggling to keep Black from starting any actual fight that involved more than insults.

"Harry – get – out – of – it!"

It wouldn't be long until the mutt would overpower his precious godson, and Severus was ready for that, ready to defend, ready to offend, ready to show the other man what he, Severus, was truly made of.

It never came to that, though. Even if the Potter boy had been unable to hold Black back, somebody else could. The door opened.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny had been upstairs in the twins' bedroom, hoping for them to kick Bill out so that the three of them might ask for some Extendable Ears. Bill was still staying at Grimmauld Place to be close to his family while their patriarch was in hospital, healing from his wounds after the attack from Voldemort's familiar. As an Order member, Hermione and the others knew he would never condone them spying on what might potentially be Order business.

Before they got to that, though, Mrs Weasley came bursting through the door.

"Oh, good to have you all in one space, boys, Ginny," she almost shouted into the room.

Her excitement was visible, and Hermione couldn't help but mirror the smile that was splitting the elder witch's face in two. She did not know what might have made her so happy, but the fact remained that after the horrible Christmas Mrs Weasley had had, Hermione was simply glad to see her smile again. In that moment, it did not matter that she herself had been left out of the crowd the
Weasley matriarch had obviously been searching for.

"Come downstairs," she ordered, "and quickly! There is somebody here to see you."

Ron and Ginny seemed a little apprehensive. It was perhaps understandable, since the last time their mother had come into a room and announced somebody had come to see one of the teenagers, that someone had been Professor Snape. On the bright side, there was no one worse that might have come to Grimmauld Place for them, and Hermione tried to convey that thought in her encouraging smile towards the two youngest Weasley siblings when Bill was ushering them down the stairs.

The Weasley children took off running, jumping down the last few steps when they saw who had come. Hermione smiled at their excitement, forgiving them instantly for pushing her to the side in their hurry to get down to the foyer. It wasn't every day that your father returned home after a near-deathly attack, after all.

What followed were words of love, eager hugs all around, and constant repeated assurances that the Weasley patriarch was, in fact, completely cured. With those words, they made their way down to the kitchen, and burst inside.

"Cured!" Mr Weasley announced his presence. "Completely cured!"

Only then, when the whole Weasley clan and Hermione had stumbled into the kitchen, did they take in the scene before them. Sirius and Professor Snape were standing face to face, the expressions on their faces murderous, if a weird mixture of slight boredom and hidden eagerness on the professor's face (although Hermione was quite certain that she was the only one to notice the latter), and their wands raised, ready for the fight.

"Merlin's beard," Mr Weasley exclaimed, "what's going on here?"

At that, the professor dropped his fighting stance, and shot Harry a last look.

"Six o'clock Monday evening, Potter," he scowled, and was out the door.

Sirius was not quite so quick to return to his usual stance, taking his time to return his wand to a non-threatening position. Hermione wanted to know what was going on, but she also realized that this might be her only opportunity to talk to the professor before the new term started.

"But what's been going on?" Mr Weasley pressed, his expression still disbelieving.

"Nothing, Arthur," Sirius tried to assure him. "Just a friendly little chat between two old school friends… So…" Hermione could see him forcing a smile onto his usually ever-smiling face, "you're cured? That's great news, really great…"

Hermione had no wish to follow the rest of the conversation, if Sirius was only turning it onto Mr Weasley. Harry would certainly tell them about his discussion with Professor Snape later. For now, she needed to get to the Potions Master before he was gone.

Severus had almost made it out the front door, when he felt somebody sneaking up behind him. Whirling around, they found themselves confronted with the tip of his wand pressing into the bridge of their nose, right between their eyes.

"What?" Severus snapped at her. "What is it you want this time, Miss Granger?"
When the girl made no move to open her mouth – at least not in order to speak, otherwise it was hanging open quite unattractively, although Severus couldn't help the niggle at the back of his mind that told him that the girl's mouth might be put to good use hanging open this way, attractive or not – he snarled, turned, and was almost out the front door.

Almost.

"I –" the girl began, hesitated, began anew. "I – I just – sir, can we speak, please?"

"If your definition of speaking will consist of speaking only this time, Miss Granger," Severus shot back, "speaking, and speaking only, then yes, we could speak. You have five minutes."

"Perhaps," the girl suggested, "perhaps somewhere more private would be appropriate?"

Severus graced her with the most scathing look he could muster, one that would have sent her running for her life, if the girl hadn't already turned around without waiting for his reply – he would need to train that habit out of her, Severus noted – and climbed the stairs.

Following the girl, Severus was about to chastise the girl for leading him to the same room they had been in last time, when she turned into a room a door from the bedroom he had first taken her.

This chamber turned out to be a bedroom, as well, though this one actually appeared to have people live in it. Judging from the familiarity with which the witch was moving about the room, Severus suspected that it was the space she shared with the Weasley girl.

Rummaging around in her trunk, the girl pulled a small satchel out. Severus felt his skin tingle from the wards put on it. That the girl should have erected those all by herself, without a wand, seemed rather improbable. Then again, so was her aptitude with Occlumency, and Severus had experienced that for himself.

"I had a little help with this," the girl confessed. "The outer few layers are mine, and will only come down to my magical signature –," a few seconds passed in which the girl dismantled those few wards, her face scrunch up in an expression of obvious concentration, "– but the rest should be easy enough for you to take down yourself. I must admit, those are beyond my level, but I assume you would be familiar enough with Auror level spells."

Severus raised a single eyebrow when the girl handed the satchel over to him, but accepted the satchel without vocalizing his questions.

"Yes, professor," the girl gave the information up easily, "Kingsley helped me. He knows what's inside, but he doesn't know who it's for and who was partial in creating it."

"And pray tell, Miss Granger," Severus asked, making the silkiness of his voice threatening enough to expect an honest answer from the girl, Occlumency skills or no, "what is inside?"

"Open it, sir." When he didn't react in any way, simply continued to stare at her, the girl added, "it's a Christmas presents, of sorts."

"A Christmas present," Severus echoed, mocking, "and here I was, believing we had already settled the issue of Christmas presents."

"Well," the girl held the syllable for a moment, as if that could buy her time, "I received my Christmas present from you, sir, but I had no opportunity yet to gift you something in return."

Severus felt his eyebrows rise to heights formerly unknown to them. She had not gifted him
anything? What about that precious gem that lay beneath her legs, untouched by anyone but him? Had that meant nothing to her?

Having no clue as to how right he was about that precious gem, Severus simply announced, "I told you before, Miss Granger, and I will tell you again: I do not do Christmas presents."

"How about a belated birthday present then, professor?"

Severus had to swallow at the girl's audacity.

"And how would you come to know about my birthday, Miss Granger?" he asked, the threat in his voice no longer silky. There would be no caress in the danger that the girl was bravely, if rather stupidly, traipsing into.

"Professor McGonagall told me."

"You asked your Head of House for my date of birth?"

Severus had a way of getting quieter and quieter, until people who were facing his wrath had to strain their ears to hear what exact danger they were in. This was one of those instances.

"Of course," the girl replied, seemingly unfazed by the fury blazing in the Potions Master's eyes.

"Of course?" Severus echoed hollowly. "Are you trying to get us exposed, Miss Granger?"

'Before things have properly started,' he wanted to add, but contented himself with only thinking those words.

The girl seemed to come to herself, and to the realization that she might have misspoken.

"Oh no, sir," she hastened to assure him, "no, I did no such thing! Of course I would not want you to be exposed."

Severus noted how she only spoke about him, as if the girl had no sense of self-preservation. Then again, to be such close friends with the Boy Who Lived To Get His Friends In Mortal Danger, one probably needed to rid oneself of one's sense of self-preservation beforehand.

"I asked her years ago," the girl elaborated, "back in my first year, when I was still eager to please every one of my teachers. I asked her about every member of the staff, even down to Mr Filch. I just – I just wanted to please, back then."

"Like with unnecessary essays on the Twelve Uses of Dragon Blood?" Severus asked before his mind had any chance to filter the words.

The girl's eyes went wide in surprise at his question, rhetorical or not.

"You still remember that?"

Severus scoffed.

"I still have that," he muttered, though the words must have been inaudible for the girl, for there was no further reaction from her.

"Now, what is this?" he demanded to know of the girl, holding up the little satchel she had handed him, dismantling the wards surrounding it with ease. No, Auror level spells were no hindrance for the practiced double agent.
"Open it, sir," the girl breathed.

Upending the satchel so that its contents would fall into his other hand, Severus beheld the heavy item within.

"It's a watch," he stated.

The absence of emotion in his voice must have made the girl uneasy, for she countered, "Not just any watch, professor."

"A muggle watch, then," Severus assessed, taking a closer look. Turning it over, he noticed the hole in the back, "and a faulty one as well, I see."

"Not faulty," the girl denied, "merely customized to unusual demands. Open the back, if you will, sir."

Opening the back lid, Severus found the mechanic innards of the watch moved into a ring clinging to the inside edges of the watch. In the middle sat a black gemstone, tetrahedral in shape, one corner pointing towards him.

The magic was palpable.

"And what is this?" Severus asked, though the question was directed at nobody in particular. If his voice sounded slightly breathy, there was no way around that, and Severus had no mental capacity free to think on that, for his mind was set onto the energetic pulsing of the precious stone.

"It is a blood diamond," the girl's voice penetrated the haze around Severus's mind, bringing him back to the present. "I created it the night we – the night you – when you last came to headquarters, sir."

"And what am I to do with his, Miss Granger?"

"Wear it," the girl pressed. "Wear it, sir, at all times and in direct contact to your skin, and its magic will protect you."

"Protect me," Severus echoed, his voice sounding as hollow as his mind felt, "protect me how?"

"Innocent magic is rather powerful, sir," the girl explained, as if that fact needed explaining. "Compressed as it is in this blood diamond that you helped me create, it will absorb most destructive magic directed at you. Well, there are no exact records on that," she admitted, "but it appears that the blood diamond will keep you from dying in many instances when the magic you were targeted with would be enough to kill you. It won't save you pain and it won't help your healing, but it will keep you alive, if only it touches your skin when you're hit."

Severus had no words to that. Never had anybody seen fit to gift him such a precious token, such a powerful and invaluable one. He knew not what to say.

"And there's more," the girl added.

"More?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "I put a Protean charm on the clock-face. The numbers will change to ancient Nordic runes when I contact you," she elaborated, "decrypting themselves for your eyes only, but indecipherable to anyone else. The watch will heat slightly, so you can't miss the message, and the runes will change back to the usual numbers after seven seconds."
Severus was taken aback. The Protean charm was NEWT level charms, and even then, only few students were capable of casting it correctly. To tweak the charm to include an encryption was beyond impressive, especially for a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl, and a muggle-born one at that.

"Why?" he croaked, not knowing what else to say.

"Why?" the girl repeated, slight disbelief in her eyes, though her respect for him seemed to hold a more obvious expression of it back. "You told me to find a way to anonymously and safely communicate with you, sir. This is it."

Ah yes, Severus remembered. The girl wished to call on him when she was in need. The idea in and of itself sent a heat to his loins that cut through the haze around his mind, arousing him to a degree that he once more had to thank his billowing robes for the cover they lent him. Much as he wanted to possess the girl once more, this was neither the time nor the place to do so. Certainly not the place. He was no old lecher who took pleasure in shagging young girls in their childhood beds, in a room they shared with an even younger female friend. Come to think on it, he was no old lecher who took pleasure in shagging young girls, period. The girl was no longer a girl anymore, but had progressed into a woman long ago. Severus himself had seen to that.

"And how will you know when I reject you?" Severus asked, his tone scathing once more.

The girl recoiled from the malice in his eyes.

"I have a matching locket," the girl offered.

Her hand went into the V-neck of her shirt, and Severus forced his eyes not to bulge at the casual gesture. The girl pulled a locket from her décolleté and opened it to reveal the clock-face that lay within.

"It is keyed to your watch," she explained, "charmed the same way, to only display ancient Nordic runes, and to change back to numerals after seven seconds. You just need to answer in the usual way of connected Protean objects, and I will know."

Silence fell between them for a few moments. Deciding there was nothing more to be said, Severus let the watch fall back into the satchel and warded it heavily.

"Please, sir," the girl called to him softly, "will you keep it? Wear it?"

Severus scowled.

"We will see, Miss Granger," he replied without truly answering. "Good evening, Miss Granger."

Her muttered 'Good evening, sir' was almost too far away to hear, as Severus hurriedly left the room, descended the stairs, and was finally out of Grimmauld Place and subsequently out of the girl's presence.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter thirty-one, wherein no familiar form of address is offered, but eggplant is tossed about.
Saturday, January 11th, 1996

That same night when Hermione had all but forced the blood diamond upon the professor, not knowing whether he might ever even wear it, dinner had a little surprise for her. Sitting next to Harry, Ron seated on his other side, her raven-haired best friend told the two of them under his breath about his upcoming lessons with Professor Snape. He explained the matter of the lessons in so careless and derogatory a manner that Hermione had to force her rising anger down.

"Dumbledore wants to stop you having those dreams about Voldemort," she said, instead of once more admonishing the boys for not ever reading. "Well, you won't be sorry not to have them any more, will you?"

It appeared that Ron was not quite of the same opinion.

"Extra lessons with Snape?" he exclaimed, his voice surprisingly loud for all his whispering. "I'd rather have the nightmares!"

A hard stare from Hermione silenced the ginger boy as soon as he noticed it. Realizing that she'd been having extra lessons with the Potions Master all term, he gulped, and returned to his dinner. Harry, not having anything more to say that was important enough to him to brave more of Hermione's wrath, did the same.

Even if she hadn't been so cross with the boys, dinner would still have been highly uncomfortable. With Mr Weasley back, there should have been more than enough reason for celebration, but even the twins' jokes couldn't lift the general mood. Although, that wasn't quite correct. The mood was light enough; it was simply Sirius who carried an air of discontent around him that hung over the crowded dinner table like a black cloud.

Ever since Hermione had ended things between the two of them, Sirius had been moodier than Moody, retreating into himself, spending more and more time with Buckbeak rather than Harry, and giving in to a sullenness that was so unlike the Sirius as they knew him. Hermione was aware that Harry thought it was his fault, that Sirius was upset about the fact that they'd be leaving for Hogwarts soon, but Hermione knew better. There was no snowball's chance in hell, though, that she'd tell Harry the real reason why his godfather was withdrawing from their presence this much.

Rather than focusing on Sirius and his brooding, Hermione thought about Harry's upcoming lessons instead. Why hadn't Professor Snape told her that he'd be teaching Harry Occlumency in the next term? Alright, she had pretty much waltzed all over him in the discussion she'd thrown on the Potions Master, but could he not at least have informed her that their usual evening slot would be
given to her best friend now?

Hoping that all would be explained soon, or at least that he'd offer her another time for their private lessons, Hermione returned to a far more important, far more pressing matter: how to shield her experiences with Sirius within her memories?

---

**Sunday, January 12th, 1996**

Breathing slowly through her nose, Hermione drew oxygen from the water around her, clouding her mind until it was as opaque as the water around her. She had added an ostentatious amount of bubble bath into the tub, so that her breathing would be further impaired. The goal was to continue breathing normally, no matter how difficult, while Occluding as heavily as possible.

It worked, too – that is, until she was yanked rather unceremoniously from the water.

"Hermione," an upset Remus almost shouted into her face, "Hermione, are you alright?"

Snapping her eyes open, Hermione wanted to curse herself. She had lost all her focus, and with it, a large section of her Occlumency walls had slipped. A thin fence was all that was left to defend her mind now, but hey, she thought to herself, *that was more than she had managed previously.* To be fair, though, she had never been surprised quite in such a manner, either.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she hastened to assure her raging ex-professor who was towering over her. He was still gripping her shoulders, Hermione noticed, and realized that his strong fingers would be leaving bruises on her tender skin. Her gaze travelling to his hands, Hermione noticed something else.

Remus Lupin stood before her…

…fully naked.

"Er –" Hermione hesitated. "Professor Lupin… Maybe… Don't you think, now, that maybe –"

Remus followed her gaze.

"Holy Merlin," he exclaimed in a whisper so forceful, his strong breath cooled Hermione's heated features right down.

Scrambling for a towel, finally releasing his strong hold on Hermione's shoulders, Lupin wrapped his middle in the soft fabric, hiding his rather large manhood from his former student's eyes.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he hastened to apologize, "I'm sorry, I didn't think anyone would be here at this hour, so I just wanted to take a quick shower, and the door wasn't locked, so I came in, and when I drew the curtain back and saw you lying there, so still, I panicked, and – and – I'm sorry, Hermione," he reiterated, seemingly run out of words for the moment.

"It's quite alright, professor," Hermione assured him. "I usually ward my bathrooms instead of locking them, so I guess I left the lock open out of habit. What can I say? My wandless magic isn't remotely strong enough to erect my usual wards, and who would walk in on me at this hour, really?"

Remus shot her a half-embarrassed, half-apologetic grin.

"What were you doing under water for so long anyway?" he asked her.
Breathing, Hermione thought. Occluding.

"Relaxing," she said out loud. "I wanted to have some quietude for myself for once."

"Because the house isn't quiet enough at this early hour?"

Professor Lupin was just too perceptive for her. Of course, that didn't excuse her bad lie, but it had been worth a shot, hadn't it?

Now, there was nothing for it. She'd have to fake her way through this.

"Exactly," Hermione confirmed. "Now, allow me to leave the bath, professor, then you will have the bathroom all to yourself in a minute."

"Oh," Remus backpaddled, "oh, no, Hermione, that's quite alright. I'll leave you to it. Sirius's bathroom will be unoccupied at this hour, so there's no need to use this particular shower. See you."

And with that, he grabbed his clothes and was gone from the bathroom.

Hermione didn't go back to her breathing exercises, though. Suspicious of her former teacher's suspicion, she decided to leave the tub as she had said she would. Her toes and fingertips were all crinkled already, anyway.

While towelling off (after having locked the door to the bathroom – Hermione wasn't one to take the same chances more than once, after all), an unbidden and surprisingly humorous thought came to her.

Much as she was a stickler for proper addresses and the like, she realized that this moment, standing naked before her with his mighty manhood in full view, would have been the perfect opportunity for Professor Lupin to offer her to call him by his given name.

Students had been streaming into the Castle all afternoon. Severus did not know how it came that he felt the exact moment when the girl stepped over the borders and onto Hogwarts grounds.

Perhaps because now, that he had shared something deeply intimate and unique with the girl, he was so attuned to her that he noticed wherever she went?

Or perhaps, a more sober reasoning in his head suggested, because the girl is overly fond of overstepping all kinds of borders, and you have the same knack of knowing when she does as you have with the Potter boy.

Merlin, Severus thought at that notion, I have turned into a human Mrs Norris.

The question now was, what to do with that knowledge? Should he call the girl to him tonight, to test whether she was honestly willing to submit to his demands? To him?

But she would demand to know why he hadn't told her about Potter's lessons. By now, Severus was certain that the boy must have blabbed to his friends about his upcoming Occlumency studies. Mighty Morgana, Severus had been furious when the Headmaster had informed him that he was to teach the brat come the new term. Dumbledore had not even asked, no, for once electing not to choose the polite way. The Headmaster had simply stated that Severus was to instruct his golden boy in the ways of defensive Mind Magic, and that had been that.

There was no way around it, however; Severus would have to teach Potter, period. How to make
time for the girl, though? With his new commitment to bettering Potter's ineptitude, Severus's Monday evenings were planned out. To offer Remedial Potions for more than one student at a time, and both of them Gryffindors at that, would be highly suspicious and would certainly draw the attention of one so-called High Inquisitor, not to mention the Dark Lord.

No, much as Severus hated to admit (and much as he hated to hate that), he would need to cancel his lessons with the girl outside of classes. Of course, he would still be able to train her during their usual Potions periods every week, but would that be enough? And what's more, those evening lessons of 'Remedial Potions' had been supposed to feature some other, also extracurricular, activities. What was to come of that?

Never being one to shy away from a challenge, but also wise enough not to seek open confrontation by calling the girl to him this night, Severus decided to wait for their next encounter: the first Potions lesson of the new term.

---

**Monday, January 13th, 1996**

Hermione had pondered whether to contact the professor via Protean charm last night, but had ultimately decided against it. After all, he had firmly instructed her to wait for him to contact her, as long ago as that instruction may have been.

And so, she had sat with her friends at dinner the night before, surreptitiously watching the High Table for any sign on the Potions Master's face as to what their immediate future would bring. He had not graced her with a single glance, however, and his eyes, sweeping over the House tables in their search for troublemakers, had been unreadable as ever.

Her morning classes had done nothing to calm Hermione's agitated anticipation down, and so she was almost bouncing in excitement as to what their next lesson would bring as she walked down to the dungeon classroom.

Sitting in her usual back corner, she patiently waited for instructions. When the assignment for the day wrote itself onto the blackboard at a flick of the Potions Master's wand, and all her classmates went to collect the necessary ingredients, Hermione sat still instead, electing to begin the lesson as she had become used to.

*That*, it turned out, had been the wrong thing to do.

"Miss Granger," the professor's voice violently thundered through the dungeon, "we are all aware that you believe yourself above your peers, but that does not make you exempt from class assignments. Am I understood?"

Hermione, having jumped from her seat in shock, found herself under the scrutiny of her classmates. The Slytherins wore expressions of glee and open hatred. The Gryffindors' faces showed a range of emotions, beginning at sympathy, going to ambivalence, reaching even to outright scorn at what they must believe to be her arrogance.

Jumping into motion, quick as she was, Hermione had begun chopping and dicing and juicing and peeling her ingredients long before the last of her classmates had even collected theirs. Setting her selected cauldron to a low flame, she began tossing in the necessary bits and pieces, not stopping in her motions once – not even when the professor came to stand behind her.

"Eggplant," he stated matter-of-factly, "does compliment your skin quite nicely, Miss Granger, though I must say, it is rather an unusual colour to express anger. Or will you make it your habit to
toss your knickers at me when you feel you are being treated unjustly?"

Hermione blushed furiously.

"I believe I might have noticed if I had been tossing my knickers at you, sir," she seethed through her teeth.

"Physically, yes," Professor Snape assessed. "Mentally, I should have hoped you would notice that, but judging from your reply just now, you probably haven't. Circe, Miss Granger, with how angry you are at the moment, I should think you would care whether you are concentrated on your knickers or not, as they might burst into flames from your fury any moment now."

That had Hermione's attention. With her concentration on what the professor might try to extract from her mind while she was busy with her brewing – meaning: vulnerable –, she might have focused too much on what he wasn't supposed to see, rather than focusing on things he had no interest in and thus spamming her mind with irrelevant and unhelpful data.

They fell silent for a while. Eventually, the professor left his position behind her and stalked his usual rounds through the classroom. Admonishing students left and right, he returned to Hermione's work station after a couple of minutes.

"There will be no pain for you today, Miss Granger," he stated in a low voice that had her insides twist in pleasure. "Unless, that is of course, you make a mistake in your brewing, as this is a potentially volatile potion. Other than that, I want you to Occlude. Rather than building a full-brick wall today, you will work on bringing memories forward that might distract me, mislead me, lie to me, without me realizing it. All the while, you will also be brewing today's potion, to be handed in at the end of the lesson."

"May I ask what you will be looking for, sir?" Hermione queried.

"You may not," the professor replied. "After all, not every opponent will cause a scene in which they tell you their plans for world domination, or for extracting information from a muggle-born witch. More often than not will you find yourself at the hands of a mediocre Mind Mage who is still clever enough to search for and extract their desired information without ever revealing to you what it is they are looking for."

"I see," Hermione said.

Her face must still have conveyed her distinct feeling of having been treated unfairly, as the professor had guessed quite correctly, for he said, "Fear not that your Occlumency studies might have a negative effect on your grades, because they will, whether you fear it or not. Keep in mind, however, Miss Granger, that your week-to-week grades will be of little importance once you have mastered your OWLs and later on your NEWTs. As long as you keep your brewing skills up, these lessons will not have any lasting negative repercussions on you. Or do you care so little about Occlumency that you will decline my offer of further teaching you?"

"No, sir," Hermione replied. "I still very much want to learn."

The impact of that simple sentence, Hermione thus binding herself to the demands the professor had stated, did not weight her down as heavily as she had thought it might. In fact, it appeared to her as if nothing had tangibly changed. It probably hadn't… so far.

"Learn, then, Miss Granger," Professor Snape demanded. "Learn as much as you can, and you might just have a chance."
When the Potions Master walked away from her desk without another word, Hermione returned to her brewing. Now that he already knew the colour of her knickers without her noticing that he had even looked into that, there was little for her to lose if she were to broadcast that little nugget of information some more.

Grinning to herself, Hermione had her mental walls shine in a more brilliant eggplant colour than before.

*Yes,* she though, *that will do nicely.*

"Shut the door behind you, Potter."

The idiot boy had crept into the room as if Severus wouldn't notice him, as if his knocking hadn't gotten Severus's full attention, as if his full attention hadn't been on the anticipation of that self-same knocking anyway.

Severus stood over the Headmaster's Pensieve, his back to the door. While he was extracting some of his memories one at a time into the shallow stone basin, that did not make him in any way less attentive towards his surroundings.

As to why he was extracting his memories in the first place, that was a difficult matter. Little though he expected Potter to manage to properly defend his mind during their first lesson together, much less manage to fight back and thus turn the Mind Magic onto Severus himself; it was always better to be safe, rather than sorry, if one didn't want certain memories to be revealed. Especially with Potter, one never knew when the boy would find his way around borders that he had a knack for crossing at the most inopportune of times.

Those memories that he wished to remain hidden were mostly of the girl. Of course, Severus had *many* incriminating memories that he did not wish for Potter to see, but he thought that the Dark Lord was sensitive enough a topic for him to be accustomed to guarding those portions of his mind against a teenage boy, unskilled in the arts of the mind.

Sensitive though the memories of the girl were, they could not compare to those concerning the Dark Lord in any way. Their sensitivity lay in the fact that they were personal, intimate, in a way that made Severus vulnerable, and that made him hate himself for that. Either way, those memories were better left to his mind, and his mind alone. There was no need to have Potter stumble upon those in accident.

Turning around to face the room, Severus found that the boy was taking his sweet time in closing the door. He scoffed inwardly. As if that could buy him time.

Pointing at the chair opposite his desk, Severus waited for the boy to face him.

"Well, Potter," Severus drawled when the boy eventually braved the dungeon office, "you know why you are here. The headmaster has asked me to teach you Occlumency. I can only hope that you prove more adept at it than Potions."

*Little hope though there was of that,* his mind readily supplied, and Severus couldn't help but agree.

"Right."

Eyes narrowing at the boy's insolence, Severus thought for the fraction of a second of how to punish him. Those thoughts brought about more memories of the girl, however. Pale and hollow as they were, now that they were temporarily resting inside the Headmaster's Pensieve, they still brought a
heat to Severus's loins that was entirely unwelcome at this point of time.

"This may not be an ordinary class, Potter," Severus elected to direct his scathing voice at the offender, "but I am still your teacher and you will therefore call me 'sir' or 'professor' at all times."

"Yes… sir," came the boy's response, hardly less insolent than before. Although the words might have displayed some politeness, his voice did nothing to mirror that.

If he was to get through these lessons quickly, though, Severus would need to let that slide for the moment. After all, more insolence was certain to come, so there was little sense in stalling the lesson to address that now. For a moment, Severus cursed the boy's low marks in Potions. There was little room for him to drop them any lower, after all, with Potter's abysmal performance during lessons.

"Now, Occlumency," Severus began, hoping to get through this night as swiftly as possible. "As I told you back in your dear godfather's kitchen," – at this, his voice was practically dripping with sarcasm – "this branch of magic seals the mind against magical intrusion and influence."

"And why does Professor Dumbledore think I need it, sir?" the boy asked, meeting Severus's eyes as if there was nothing to fear from them.

For a moment, Severus was reminded of the girl. She had kept eye contact as much as possible, as well – in the beginning, at least. What was an act of respect with her, however, was a sign of outright defiance with Potter. It was of little consequence, Severus thought. The boy would learn quickly enough that defiant eye contact was not his friend here.

"Surely even you could have worked that out by now, Potter? The Dark Lord is highly skilled at Legilimency –"

"What's that? Sir?"

The boy rudely interrupting him aside, Severus wanted to throttle Potter, and throttle Dumbledore for saddling him with the idiot student. At least, the girl had come to him of her own motivation, and had displayed some knowledge of the more obscure branches of magic. At least, he thought, the boy's lack thereof was proof of the girl keeping said knowledge (and the mere fact that she possessed it) to herself.

But then again, another thought popped up, it might just prove how resistant the Potter brat is to any kind of learning.

Pressing on through his disappointment that he would actually need to start at the very roots with this particular student, Severus began, "It is the ability to extract feelings and memories from another person's mind –"

Again he was interrupted.

"He can read minds?"

Fear showed in the boy's features. His expression made two things very clear: for one, he was far too much a Gryffindor, if even hiding as potentially embarrassing an emotion as fear was beyond his abilities. Secondly, he had no subtlety, not as the girl had, and Severus would not beat around the bush with that.

"You have no subtlety, Potter," he stated in no uncertain terms. "You do not understand fine distinctions. It is one of the shortcomings that make you such a lamentable potion-maker."
Pausing for a moment, Severus waited for the boy to interrupt him. Whether to expect more insolence or perhaps some actual thinking and retreating his stupid assumption about the nature of Legilimency, he could not say – well, he *could*, but that would not really help things, nor bring any kind of change in his recent thoughts, now, would it? – but he had not expected the boy to actually remain silent and hear him out.

Then again, there was a slightly changed air of defiance around the Potter boy now. It seemed as if he was bracing himself against the Potions Master revelling in the insult towards his student. Then again, maybe Severus *was* revelling. Slightly. But at least that went to show that Potter could display some kind of self-constraint, meagre though it might be.

Besides, the boy would need to learn that being proven wrong was not a bad thing. Powerfully though the girl had hated the experience in the beginning, and had obviously resented Severus pointing out a number of her mistakes to her, be they in theoretical thinking or in practical exercise, she had always accepted his corrections, for they went to help and better her. She had understood that. Potter, however, was a far way away from that understanding.

"Only Muggles talk of 'mind reading'," Severus elaborated when it became clear that Potter wasn't about to grasp that concept by himself. "The mind is not a book, to be opened at will and examined at leisure. Thoughts are not etched on the inside of skulls, to be perused by any invader. The mind is a complex and many-layered thing, Potter… or at least, most minds are…"

Alright, Severus admitted in the quietness of his own mind. Perhaps he *did* enjoy taunting and insulting the boy wherever possible.

"It is true, however," he continued, not even trying to suppress the smirk that had spread over his face, "that those who have mastered Legilimency are able, under certain conditions, to delve into the minds of their victims and to interpret their findings correctly. The Dark Lord, for instance, almost always knows when somebody is lying to him. Only those skilled at Occlumency are able to shut down those feelings and memories that contradict the lie, and so utter falsehoods in his presence without detection."

Severus noticed that the boy was still stubborn in his definition of Legilimency being 'mind reading'. He could practically see Potter voicing another stupidity before the brat even opened his mouth.

"So he could know what we're thinking right now? Sir?"

Severus didn't know whether to go into a fit of rage at both Potter and the Headmaster, or to begin laughing at how ridiculous this whole situation was, or to cry at having to face a student so desperately resistant to learning.

"The Dark Lord is at a considerable distance," Severus fought to keep his composure, "and the walls and grounds of Hogwarts are guarded by many ancient spells and charms to ensure the bodily and mental safety of those who dwell within them. Time and space matter in magic, Potter," he impressed, even though that should have become clear to the boy in his first year of Hogwarts schooling. "Eye contact is often essential to Legilimency."

"Well then," Potter continued, still keeping his eyes trained on Severus's, because listening had apparently never been his thing anyway, "why do I have to learn Occlumency?"

Sometimes, Severus found his ability to perform wandless magic to be torturous. This moment was one of those times. He kept his hands away from the pocket where his wand was held, but that did not mean that his lack of wand in hand would keep the Potions Master from hexing Potter for his insolence.
Trapping the boy under his watchful gaze, Severus traced his upper lip with a single finger. A single finger would have been enough to curse the boy. By keeping it fixed to his own face, Severus hoped to prevent exactly that event from happening. Dumbledore would never forgive him if he dared damage his star pupil.

"The usual rules do not seem to apply with you, Potter," Severus supplied. "The curse that failed to kill you seems to have forged some kind of connection between you and the Dark Lord. The evidence suggests that at times, when your mind is most relaxed and vulnerable – when you are asleep, for instance – you are sharing the Dark Lord's thoughts and emotions. The Headmaster thinks it inadvisable for this to continue. He wishes me to teach you how to close your mind to the Dark Lord."

For a few blessed seconds, it seemed as if the boy would leave things at that. Severus was almost about to continue with the lesson as he had planned it, when –

"But why does Professor Dumbledore want to stop it? I don't like it much, but it's been useful, hasn't it? I mean… I saw that snake attack Mr Weasley and if I hadn't, Professor Dumbledore wouldn't have been able to save him, would he? Sir?"

Keeping the digit at his mouth, Severus continued tracing the line along his own upper lip. The urge to punish the boy was growing. This lesson was definitely different from any evening he had ever spent with the girl. Whenever she had any urges of his grow in her presence, it was rarely the need to punish her.

"It appears," Severus began, speaking slowly so that Potter would be able to follow his explanation, and choosing his words very deliberately indeed, "that the Dark Lord has been unaware of the connection between you and himself until very recently. Up till now it seems that you have been experiencing his emotions and sharing his thoughts without his being any the wiser. However, the vision you had shortly before Christmas –"

"The one with the snake and Mr Weasley?"

Severus was unwilling to take the boy's interruptions any longer. If the Potions Master was willing to trudge through the mud that these lessons imposed upon his usually oh-so-shiny life – and yes, he did mentally scoff mightily at that –, the Potter boy would need to do the same.

"Do not interrupt me, Potter," Severus commanded sharply. "As I was saying… the vision you had shortly before Christmas represented such a powerful incursion upon the Dark Lord's thoughts –"

There was just no hope for it.

"I saw inside the snake's head," the boy exclaimed, "not his!"

"I thought I just told you not to interrupt me, Potter?" Severus scathed.

It appeared as though his words would remain without effect. The boy sat on the very edge of his chair, perched as if those couple of inches would bring him further towards the answers he so obviously craved.

"How come I saw through the snake's eyes if it's Voldemort's thoughts I'm sharing?"

Severus hissed, inhaling sharply. Dumbledore knew not to use the Dark Lord's self-chosen name in his Potions Master's presence, for it could have dire consequences, should the Dark Lord be listening. In fact, the Headmaster had even used it to reign in Severus, forcing him into compliance by threatening the use of that name that might alert the Dark Lord to any discussions pertaining to his
person going on around one of his followers who bore the Mark.

That the boy was uneducated in this aspect was no surprise to Severus, but shocked him either way.

"Do not say the Dark Lord's name!" Severus spat, as if that could save him now.

A few moments passed between them. The silence Severus had been hoping for earlier was unpleasant, to say the least. As it should be. Potter deeply disliked that kind of silence, it seemed, for he was the one to break it.

"Professor Dumbledore says his name," the brat stated.

Although the boy's voice had been quiet, its message had cracked through Severus like his whip had done to the backsides of the girl's soft thighs. After all, the implication of cowardice was clear.

"Dumbledore," Severus countered, equally quietly, "is an extremely powerful wizard. While he may feel secure enough to use the name… the rest of us…"

"I just wanted to know," the boy began anew after a moment's pause, seemingly forcing his voice into some semblance of politeness, "why –"

"You seem to have visited the snake's mind," Severus couldn't help but snarl, nor did he take any particular care to reign in his fury, "because that was where the Dark Lord was at that particular moment. He was possessing the snake at the time and so you dreamed you were inside it too…"

"And Vol – he – realized I was there?"

"It seems so," Severus assessed, his voice as cold as his temper had no hope of being at this moment. At least the boy had remembered not to use the Dark Lord's name this time.

"How do you know?" Potter pressed on. "Is this just Professor Dumbledore guessing, or – ?"

Enough, Severus thought. Enough.

"I told you," he scathed at the insolent brat, fed up with all the liberties the brat took so freely, as if they were his for the taking, "to call me 'sir'."

"Yes, sir," Potter agreed, though Severus knew it was only a formality, and his next words went to prove that, impatient as the boy was, "but how do you know – ?"

"It is enough that we know," Severus cut him off. "The important point," he tried to lead the discussion back to the subject at hand, "is that the Dark Lord is now aware that you are gaining access to his thoughts and feelings. He has also deduced that the process is likely to work in reverse; that is to say, he has realized that he might be able to access your thoughts and feelings in return –"

"And he might try and make me do things?" Severus found that it left him rather unconcerned that the boy might have to experience that exact same scenario. "Sir?" Potter added, as if in an afterthought.

Then again, Severus thought, the Potter boy stumbling into some hare-brained misled act of heroism would most likely end in more messy business for him, Severus, and would quite probably carry some repercussions in his favour with the Dark Lord, some of which might have his nerve endings twitching painfully for hours after the punishment.

"He might," Severus replied, his voice cold. "Which brings us back to Occlumency."
Extracting three more memories from his mind, one after the other, Severus added the last few strands of thought about Occlumency lessons taught to the girl into the Headmaster's pensieve. Storing the stone basin carefully onto a nearby, yet out-of-the-way shelf, he turned back to face Potter once more. The boy stared at the wand that Severus was now holding at the ready.

"Stand up," Severus demanded, "and take out your wand, Potter."

Once the boy was standing, Severus issued the instructions that would be the guidelines for this session.

"You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me," he explained, "or defend yourself in any other way you can think of."

The boy gulped visibly.

"And what are you going to do?" he asked.

This time, Severus controlled the smirk that was about to show on his face. The boy would fear him well enough after his first taste of intrusive Mind Magic, after all. Scaring Potter now would only make him less responsive to Severus's teaching.

"I am about to attempt to break into your mind," Severus replied, keeping his voice as soft as he could with the boy present. "We are going to see how well you resist. I have been told that you have already shown aptitude at resisting the Imperius Curse… You will find that similar powers are needed for this… Brace yourself, now… Legilimens!"

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter thirty-two, wherein a bath is interrupted to discuss gold.
Monday, January 13th, 1996

The sky outside was darkening to a black that felt almost as oppressive as the constant, feverish scratching of quills all around them. Hermione was sitting with Ron in the library, surrounded by plenty of other fifth years. Most of them were working on their most recent bout of excessive homework, heaped upon them by the Ministry toad herself.

"How did it go?" Hermione asked in a whisper when out of the corner of her eye, she saw Harry fall into the chair opposite them.

Looking up, she felt her features contort into an expression of the severest concern as she mustered her raven-haired best friend's face. His skin was so pale, the whiteness of it appeared almost luminescent in the light of the candles, and his scar was more prominent than usual. He appeared in pain, as well; the mean kind that seemed to spear one's nerve endings one by one. Harry looked as if he was about to collapse in his chair at any moment now. The sight of him scared Hermione in a way she had rarely been scared before – not even when watching his most reckless Quidditch moves.

"Are you all right, Harry?" she queried.

"Yeah..." came the little satisfying reply, "fine... I dunno."

The boys only cared about their own wellbeing when it would get them out of homework, Hermione knew, at which point they would moan and whine so excessively that she had pondered at times to offer them a way out of their misery by just offing them, so irritating would they be. That at other times they would completely disregard their health, Hermione knew from watching Quidditch. With Harry banned from Quidditch for the year, though, and with heaps of homework waiting for him, the fact that he was impatient enough not to care about his frightful state had her worried to no end.

"Listen..." Harry began, "I've just realized something..."

Hermione blanched slightly, though not as excessively as Harry looked, when he told her and Ron about what he'd come to realize during his Occlumency lesson with the Potions Master.

"So..." Ron began, "so, are you saying... that the weapon – the thing You-Know-Who's after – is in the Ministry of Magic?"

"In the Department of Mysteries," Harry whispered back, "it's got to be. I saw that door when your dad took me down to the courtrooms for my hearing and it's definitely the same one he was guarding when the snake bit him."
Understanding suddenly gripped Hermione as all the pieces fell into place, forming the perfect picture that had been hidden beneath the puzzle.

"Of course," she exclaimed breathily, allowing herself a relieved sigh at her revelation.

"Of course what?" Ron shot back, his impatience clearly showing.

"Ron," Hermione began, hoping that Harry would follow her thought process as well, "think about it… Sturgis Podmore was trying to get through a door at the Ministry of Magic… It must have been that one, it's too much of a coincidence!"

"How come Sturgis was trying to break in when he's on our side?" Ron countered.

"Well," Hermione stalled, then admitted, "I don't know. That is a bit odd…"

"So," Harry said, turning to Ron, "what's in the Department of Mysteries? Has your dad ever mentioned anything about it?"

"I know they call the people who work in there 'Unspeakables'," Ron offered, his face in a frown. "Because no one really seems to know what they do in there… Weird place to have a weapon…"

Hermione struggled not to let her impatience with the two of them show. They were just too slow at times.

"It's not weird at all," she exclaimed, "it makes perfect sense. It will be something top secret that the Ministry has been developing, I expect…"

Shooting a glance at her friend sitting opposite her, who was rubbing his forehead with an intensity that, had the skin there been fabric, might have ironed it, she asked, "Harry, are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah…" he shrugged her off, lowering his hands, "fine… I just feel a bit… I don't like Occlumency much…"

Hermione fought back a sigh. She would have given anything to be able to learn under the Potions Master tonight. Her Occlumency was progressing at a nice pace for a beginner, she assumed, but there was still so much to learn, it was difficult for her to not resent Harry for stealing 'her' time slot with the professor. Still, there was little use in telling him that.

"I expect anyone would feel shaky if they'd had their mind attacked over and over again," she offered.

Silently, she was thinking back to how the professor had worked her to so intense a nose bleed that she'd needed a Blood Replenishing Potion afterwards, how he'd tested her walls while under intense pain from his whipping, how he'd taught her how to Occlude under the threat of exsanguination. Harry seemed physically fine, other than the paleness, and yet he seemed to be taking this single, first Occlumency lesson much harder than she ever had any of her many lessons. Was this to do with the fact that in this instance, he liked to complain more than she ever would? After all, he never had anything good to say about Professor Snape anyway, so perhaps this was one more way of displaying that habit?

"Look," Hermione suggested, "let's get back to the common room, we'll be a bit more comfortable there…"

It wasn't. Hermione couldn't have known that, of course, but the Weasley twins were showing off
their newest bit of merchandise. While she was still pondering the magnitude and manner of the magic behind their Headless Hats, Harry begged off his homework and turned in for the night. Hermione soon sent Ron to look after him. Neither of the boys returned to the common room that night.

Severus sat for hours in his dark office, staring at the watch the girl had forced onto him. *Gifted him for his birthday*, he scoffed. As if that day deserved any recognition.

He was pondering whether to contact her. After all, she had provided him with a discreet and supposedly safe means of communication, so why wasn't he using it to call her to his bed?

The only reason he was even thinking about contacting her, he knew, was the disturbing first Occlumency lesson with the Potter boy. The brat had given him insolence at every turn, had disobeyed him as he'd seen fit, had been lack in his attempts at Occlumency, and had turned the whole lesson into a Q&A for his thirst for information that he had no business knowing.

At first, of course, Severus had taken some sick kind of enjoyment from watching the boy fail, again and again. As bleak as his own childhood had been, he had somewhat taken comfort in the knowledge that Potter hadn't had it as easy as the father who he was imitating by strutting about the Castle in the exact same way James *look-at-me* Potter had.

Yes, watching the boy being chased up a tree by a dog, and being jealous at a red bicycle, had soothed Severus's hurt sense of pride at being constantly interrupted by the brat. *Twisted as that was*, Severus didn't bother to deny that to himself. Even watching Granger, her face fluffy with soft, thick, black fur as she had turned herself halfway into a cat, had given him some enjoyment out of the otherwise miserable evening.

What had disturbed him so, however, had been Potters expression of triumph when he'd discovered that the Dark Lord was trying to get into the Department of Mysteries. This fact was no news to the inner Order members, but that Potter now knew as well, and that he felt so victorious over that knowledge, was very dangerous indeed. If Dumbledore didn't watch the boy well, Merlin knew what the brat might get into his head to do. Or worse – what the Dark Lord might get into the boy's head for him to do.

No, Severus decided with regretful finality, he wouldn't be calling the girl to him via the device she had fashioned, not anytime soon. Perhaps he wouldn't be calling her to him at all, for a while. Perhaps he would force *her* to take the first step, would wait for *her* to be so starved – sexually – that she would seek him out, offer herself up to him as she had done before, and only *then* would he take her.

Thinking about how things had ended between them before, Severus felt the physical urge to blush, but cooled the skin of his cheeks right back down, not allowing a hint of colour to creep into his face. Yes, he had finished early, but it wasn't as if the girl hadn't had any orgasm at all. After all, she'd partaken in some very pleasurable foreplay, judging from her outside reactions and her wonder at the climax that had ripped through her. All in all, his embarrassment didn't count severely enough to discount the whole experience as a failure – *or did it?*

Either way, he thought, the girl would need to come to him. *And if she didn't*… There were always ways to help things along. She had given him some taste of that medicine when she had teased him with images of her eggplant-coloured knickers during their lesson earlier in the day. But she would soon need to see that two could play that game – not in the exact same way, of course, as he wouldn't be taunting her with memories of his own transfigured underwear – but there were many options open to him in which ways to make the girl more… *pliable* to him. After all, she couldn't
escape him in their lessons.

Friday, January 17th, 1996

Hermione was breathing. Warm, soapy liquid surrounded her whole body as she forced her body to remain floating near the bottom of the prefects' bath. Watching the green swirls of bubble bath painting patterns into the water around her, she felt her mind enveloping itself in blackness.

Putting all conscious thought away for a while to reach that pleasant state of Pure Black had been harder than usual. This week's events bore heavily on her soul, those ten escaped Death Eaters never far from her mind. Of course, she was safe at Hogwarts, she supposed, but it wasn't really herself that she was worrying about. Aside from Harry or Sirius possibly doing something stupid, and Neville emotionally turning in on himself, and the whole populace of Britain, both wizarding and muggle, in danger of those ten lunatics, Hermione especially worried about Professor Snape. Those nine wizards and the mad witch in their midst escaping Azkaban would keep his company in the future, she knew, and she didn't like it in the least.

Perhaps that was why he had put off setting her to more difficult tasks during Potions this week? While by no means an easy feat for a beginner such as her, brewing while Occluding wasn't exactly too demanding, either. There had been no pain, no mental puzzles, no other kinds of disturbances for her. If he'd had her sit next to Harry and Ron and Neville again, now, that would have proven difficult, but he hadn't. He just—hadn't.

And so Hermione had taken it upon herself to accomplish harder tasks. That was why she was Occluding, under water, with her eyes wide open, while magically having her body float near the tiled bottom of the pool. Four aspects to concentrate on at the same time should be a nice training exercise.

In fact, one of those aspects became harder and harder to do. Her breathing stocking, Hermione found that she had unexpected difficulty in drawing oxygen from the water around her. Her floating became wobbly, and she closed her eyes against the water around her, so as to better concentrate on her Occlumency shields.

There was nothing she could do, though. Something was wrong, she knew, when it became clear that there was no more oxygen to be gained from the liquid surrounding her. Forcing her panic down, Hermione decided to hold what was left of her breath for as long as she could, her mental walls strong and steady around her mind, and slowly allowed herself to float to the surface. Determined not to let herself be shocked by whatever she was certain to find above the surface, she further steeled her resolve and emerged.

Standing opposite from her at the edge of the pool stood Professor Snape, his wand directed at the pool's surface. Seeing her emerge, his wand hand dropped to his side, and Hermione was almost sure that she felt the barrier he had erected above the water disappear.

"Attempting to drown me now, professor?" she asked. After all, with Professor Snape not being one much for greetings, why would she need to go to such niceties?

"Seeing as I am hardly able to drown you out in class, Miss Granger," he replied, "it seemed sensible to attempt a new approach."

He was being unfair, and they both knew it. Hermione had long stopped to constantly raise her hand in class, giving answers and hints nobody had asked for. He was simply trying to rattle her, and even though he was definitely succeeding at that, Hermione was determined not to let it show.
"And again, you are unsuccessful, sir," she countered, her smile sweet, but her voice biting. "How utterly frustrating that must be for you. Will you need a hand in alleviating your frustration?"

Severus smirked, and openly. He had to grant it to the girl, she was good. He felt a strange surge of pride at knowing that his teaching had played a great part in her development. Just a few months ago, she would never have dared that amount of cheek, especially not combined with that sexual innuendo, and she certainly wouldn't have managed either with a straight face and firm mental walls.

What she had obviously forgotten, however, was the fact that two could play this game.

"Hardly," he replied, putting explicit emphasis on the first syllable, and his smirk grew even wider as the girl's eyes flicked to his middle for the fraction of a second. "Besides, considering that your hand can barely manage to alleviate your own tension, Miss Granger, I certainly wouldn't call for your expertise in such things. Tell me," and here he paused for a moment, "how frustrated are you getting yourself these days, now that your little playmate can't be allowed to play with you anymore? Your bath times must get lonely, surely."

"Surely," the girl echoed his last word, but began a completely different sentence with it, "my 'little playmate' can be allowed to play with me. It is simply that I haven't asked your permission, so far, and you haven't denied it yet."

Swimming to the edge of the pool, the girl lifted herself out of the water. There was little grace in the motion, as she had some difficulty heaving herself upon the tiled edge of the pool, and when she made to stand she wobbled dangerously on the brink for a few precarious seconds. When she was fully standing, straight and proud and so utterly shameless, Severus failed to call something more graceful to mind than the girl's naked, soapy, dripping wet body in that exact moment.

"Besides," the girl continued, although the words seemed to force themselves through thick cotton in order to reach his ears, "why would I need Angelina for that, now? Why would I need to call on my playmate when I can have a… mentor?"

She was walking closer to him, and Severus had to admire her composure. Nudging at her mental barriers, they were firm, but thin, and he could catch glimpses of her insecurities behind that splendid façade she upheld so determinedly.

When she came to stand in front of him, she was so close that her nipples were brushing his robes, he could see. Those little buds were pebbled from the relatively cold air in the bathroom, and from her nerves, as well, Severus suspected. When he had decided to fire up the sexual tension around the girl, he had never, never expected for her to do the same. Was she already desperate enough to come to him? Or was she simply playing with him? And, either way, could Severus allow himself to give in to her advances at this point in time?

"A mentor, you say, Miss Granger?" Severus asked, buying himself some time. "And what would it be that you wished to learn about?"

Her confidence faltered at that, he could see.

"I thought –," she began, paused for a second, and began anew. "I thought that you would be teaching me more about Occlumency in… special situations, sir."

"Special," Severus echoed her, teasing the girl. "And you would like for me to make you feel special, Miss Granger, wouldn't you, now?"
Lounging in the warm water, Hermione had been unable to help being reminded of a similar scenario, where she had been forced from Occluding in the soapy liquid by a professor. Of course, the tub at Grimmauld Place had been far smaller than the giant pool in the prefects' bathroom, and Professor Snape hadn't laid a finger on her (as opposed to Professor Lupin physically yanking her from the water), but still Hermione had been forced to wonder whether she might be offered to call the professor by his first name.

Then again, back at headquarters, that question concerning Professor Lupin had only come to her mind because the man had been stark naked, his powerful wand bobbing happily away, well in her line of sight. This night, she was the only one naked, not the Potions Master. Besides, would she even feel comfortable if she were allowed, even supposed, to call him by his given name?

Severus.

Her mind had been quick to supply the name that made her shudder. No, Hermione had decided, they had agreed on last names and proper titles – except that she wasn't to call him 'professor' when they were engaging in amorous activities –, and that was good and right. It lent her some sense of security, the polite form of address forming a safety net between them to keep unnecessary emotions from interfering.

Still pondering that evading the Potions Master's first name kept her safely in her comfort zone, her next action had made her step right out of that zone.

Hermione honestly had no clue why she had acted the way she had, rising naked out of the water and coming to stand before the professor in nothing but water and suds. The only reason that she could think about was that maybe her actions with Sirius and her conversations with Kingsley had made her bold and somewhat confident.

While she was still wondering how she had manoeuvred herself into this particular position, her position changed.

Or rather, her position was changed, to be exact.

In a fluid movement, the professor had both her hands gripped in one of his, turning them both around until she was pressed against the cold tiles of the bathroom wall, her wrists held as far above her head as they would comfortably go. The professor's other hand, she noticed, was tracing the chain of the medallion that was hanging around her neck.

"A formidable piece of charm work, Miss Granger, I must admit," the Potions Master said as his finger lingered in the valley between her breasts next to the pendant. Hermione was certain that he actually meant the encrypted Protean charm, but then again, the professor was one more ambiguity at every turn, when he was feeling like it. With how hard he usually tried not to compliment anyone, this might have been a rare occasion where he was offering her a kind word. "I would just love to know how you came to think about it. Won't you let me know?"

As he breathed the last sentence into her ear, Hermione felt a strong nudging at her mental barriers. Understanding dawned upon her as she realized that he was about to explore her mind. Shutting away her memories of charming the coins for the DA, and her recollection of Professor Dumbledore disguising her books in the library so long ago now, she reinforced her Occlumency shields and braced herself for everything the Potions Master might use to attack her mind.

When his single digit that had before been tracing the medallion between her breasts trailed a path down her naked belly, however, Hermione came to realize that this particular move of his was not one she had thought to anticipate.
The girl's whole body blushed a deep crimson colour under his attentions, and Severus hadn't even begun to really focus them on her. When his index finger slipped between her legs and subsequently her nether lips, his other hand still fixing both of her wrists above her head, he found her wet. It was a wetness that went beyond the lingering water from her bath. It was one that proved her readiness to receive him.

*My,* Severus thought, *how easy the girl was to turn on.* For some reason, though, he assumed that she wasn't simply wanton for anyone's attention. No, he suspected that this particular effect was one only he had on her.

If Severus hadn't been the superb Legilimens that he was, it would have been difficult for him to focus his mental attention on bringing down the girl's shields while his fingers were attempting to bring an orgasm down on her. How he managed to free the mental capacity for admiring the girl's resolve and her strong walls, he could not think to understand.

With her pleasure rising, the girl's shields were falling, falling, falling. Even though she managed to maintain a slim, yet steady barrier around her mind, it was no hindrance for Severus as he simply forced his way through. Her resulting wince at the pain that the intrusion must certainly have caused her head, Severus alleviated by renewed efforts against the little nub between her legs. Searching through her mind, all he found were memories of her sexual experiences.

First came images of her own fingers between her legs, helped along by her toes digging into Severus's thighs. They were followed by the contrast of ebony against ivory skin, something that apparently held endless fascination for the girl. Next he was faced with full dark lips on a beautiful face, the Quidditch captain smiling beguilingly at her. Those lips came closer to utter stumbled half-sentences into the girl's ear, asking to both cause and experience her pleasure. In her recollections, the girl's eyes closed for a while, and all Severus saw was the colourful darkness that played behind her lids. A pair of lips pressed against her forehead, warm and comforting, and lingered in a familiar kiss. The girl sighed. When her mental eyes opened again, they looked into the smiling face of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

A climax hit the girl in the very same instant in which realization hit Severus. Extracting his hands from her body and his mind from hers, he felt some twisted pleasure in watching the girl wince at the pain that came with forcefully extricating one's presence from behind another person's Occlumency walls.

"Is that how things are now, Miss Granger?" Severus snarled at the girl. "Breaking your contracts before even beginning to fulfil your own end of them?"

"And what about you, professor?" the girl had the audacity to shoot back. "Will you forever be accusing me of sleeping with men other than you, only to be proven wrong?"

Severus had to physically swallow, so surprised was he at the girl's statement.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked, scoffing at her accusation.

"You never even looked at me!" the girl cried.

"And why would I do that, Miss Granger?" Severus questioned, somewhat relieved at the ridiculousness of that last assertion. "Why would I look at you any more than I would at any other student?"

"You wouldn't," the girl replied forcefully, "but then again, why would you make unfounded
accusations against me, assuming I'd been giving my body away, any more than you would against any other student?"

Taken aback by her logic, Severus needed half a second to gather his thoughts. Before he could reply, however, the girl pressed on.

"I never knew," she continued. "I never knew that there was such a thing as a magical aura broadcasting my virginal status. But you, sir," – dear Nimue, now the girl was pointing her finger at him in her glorious, self-righteous anger – "you should have known. You should have seen, seen me for what I was – innocent of all that you attempted to incriminate me with."

Severus hated the girl in this moment, probably more than he had ever hated her before, for the simple reason that she was right. He should have seen, should have noticed how bright and pure her aura was, had remained, untainted, until –

"I saw," he admitted. "I saw your aura. Had been seeing it for years. All children's auras are bright when they come to Hogwarts, but their light diminishes over the years as they grow up and become knowledgeable, experienced, spoil. All auras grow dimmer over time. Only…"

Taking the girl in, her whole body still wet from a mixture of water and sweat, bubbles from her bath still clinging to her skin in patches here and there, her breasts rising and falling, whether from her climactic exertions or from her rage, Severus did not know – taking her in, he realized that the light from the burning sconces could not illuminate her as brightly as she seemed in this moment. She was shining from the inside, the burnished copper of her aura being coloured a warm golden by the fires lighting the room, and Severus failed to call anything to mind that had ever been so beautiful to him, so entrancing, so unique, nor did he find himself able to name any substance that was more precious or even remotely priceless as the gold that the girl emanated.

"Only yours, Miss Granger, didn't. You outshone them all. Blinding, that's what you were. Wizarding folk learn to look for auras, but also to overlook them, because it's too tiring to stare at shiny people all the time. But yours – yours I could not overlook. It… you… wouldn't be overlooked."

The girl had fallen silent at his speech, her expression curious, almost consoling, her eyes searching for the truth Severus was so freely giving her. Why he was opening up to her, and why now of all times, Severus could not say. And still, he found himself continuing.

"With how bright you'd always remained over the years that passed, I had assumed that even something as radical, as incisive as losing your virginity would not taint your innocence, and that your aura would continue to shine as brightly as it had before. I – I didn't want to look anymore, and I never thought I'd gain any knowledge from looking anyway."

A few slow seconds – or were they decades? – passed in heavy silence.

"But even afterwards," the girl countered, far more softly than before, "you never looked, not even afterwards."

"And what would I have seen?" Severus lashed out. "What would I have seen, Miss Granger, other than the defiled school girl under my care? Your light that had always shone so brightly, diminished by my actions?"

"It was my choice," the girl insisted. "My choice, and I chose you, sir. You. And now, I'm –"

The girl didn't continue, maybe because she didn't know how to, but it was no matter. Severus filled
the void left by her unfinished sentence.

"Golden."

Their eyes had been trained on one another this whole time, but at this moment, their gazes seemed to truly connect. *Had her eyes always sparkled this much,* Severus wondered, and chided himself at the sappiness of that thought. Eyes did not sparkle in the dimness of the bathroom.

His gaze fixed onto the patterns that were drawn onto the girl's skin by the reflections of moonlight and burning sconces on the surface of the pool.

"It makes no difference, though, Miss Granger," Severus asserted, speaking to the mirthful play of light on her chest. "Morgana knows how many men you've already slept with this year, cooped up at headquarters as you were. If Shacklebolt was one of them, I do not care. You broke your end of the contract, so why would I uphold mine?"

"I didn't –" the girl exclaimed, then broke off with a frustrated groan. "You know what?" she began anew, "it doesn't really matter, I suppose. Go ahead and be spiteful and jealous, I don't even care to care anymore. I'd beg for your assistance in preparing me for this war if I thought there was any use in doing so, but I know that I might as well speak to the door knob and find it less stubborn than you, sir. I'll do my best teaching myself, if I have to, and that will need to be enough. It probably won't, but if I can't persuade you to see reason, then there's nothing I can do.

"Remember just one thing before you cast me out, professor: *You didn't even want me,*" the girl exclaimed, emphasising every word very carefully, her expression one of hurt. "You didn't want to touch me, and after you had lowered yourself to bedding me, you left as soon as you could. You can't blame me for wanting more than that."

"More?" Severus almost shouted. "Go ahead, Miss Granger. Leave the Castle, and you will get more. Nine more strapping wizards out there to give you more. Is that what you want?"

"What?" the girl asked, aghast. "No, of course not. You are twisting everything I say. There is no use in talking to you right now, sir."

"Talking," Severus scoffed, and the girl looked as if he had slapped her. "*Talking* isn't what you seemed to have in mind just now."

The girl paled to an extent that Severus might have worried about her possibly fainting, if he had cared even an iota about her wellbeing. Right now, he didn't.

"Your contract demands my consent," she said, her voice shaky. "You can't just –"

"Can't I, Miss Granger?" Severus interrupted her. The silk of his voice was threatening. "Do you honestly want to test me?"

"Just –" the girl stuttered, "just – let me go, sir, please, just let me –"

"Go, then," Severus snarled.

Without a backwards glance, the girl had wordlessly Summoned her wand, Disillusioned herself, and left the room.

Severus let her go.
Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter thirty-three, wherein a pain is being tended to.
XXXIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday, January 17th, 1996

Hurrying back to the common room naked in January in Scotland was not a very good idea, Hermione found, as she was fleeing the prefects' bathroom. With her Disillusioning charm the only thing to shield her against the winter cold – so, essentially, with nothing to shield her –, she did all she could to reach Gryffindor tower, and fast.

Once she lay in her lush bed, the curtains drawn and warded and several Warming charms slowly defrosting her toes, Hermione waited for the tears to come. None did. The abject terror at this recent conversation with the professor was still too strong.

It wasn't the fact that he'd hinted at wishing to rape her that had her in fits, although that certainly hadn't helped. After all, she was aware that at some point he would be introducing force and pain into their sexual relations, was partly counting on it, even. Of course, being raped in a bathroom after just having been brought to a fantastic orgasm by one's would-be rapist wasn't what she had expected of such an encounter, if it ever was to happen, but then again, rape wasn't really a thing that girls like her – young, good familial background, and healthy friendships – ever expected.

No, it wasn't that. It wasn't even the distinct threat of gang rape if she were to ever leave the school grounds, what with ten Death Eaters roaming about the United Kingdom.

No.

It was the fact that he'd told her to go.

Granted, Hermione had asked to leave, to be let go, but now she couldn't be sure whether his command for her to go had been his acceptance of that wish, or if it had been more. Had he dismissed her from their contract – their lessons? Might he even have thought that that had been her wish – not to leave the bathroom, but to be released from their agreement? Had he granted her that wish, even if she had not wished it?

Hermione did not know the answers to those questions, and not knowing them scared her. She had been dead serious in telling the professor that she'd be continuing with self-studies in Occlumency if he refused to teach her, and she was still set on that path, but she desperately hoped that this path wasn't the only one open to her. She knew she wouldn't get even remotely as far as she would if the professor was to accompany her.

Hermione scoffed. Look how the tide has turned, she thought to herself. Here she was, hoping for the professor to accompany her, when the only reason for her to ever have approached the Potions Master in any way was that Professor Dumbledore had asked her to accompany him. She was supposed to be a companion to Professor Snape, to accommodate him in any way he might need, and she had – what? Failed?

There were few things Hermione Granger took worse than failure. In fact, she might fail (there it was again, that cursed word) to name even one.

That was until she remembered the date.
More terror filled her, and suddenly Hermione knew one thing that would hit her worse than failure.

*She was late.*

---

**Thursday, January 23rd, 1996**

Severus didn't know what their talk a week back had been supposed to mean. Had the girl quit? She wasn't one to quit. Had he thrown her out, ending their agreement?

To put it simply, Severus did not know. And yet, not knowing complicated things quite a bit.

He had not performed Legilimency on the girl all week. He had not nudged at her barriers, had not even reached out to her to see if she had even cared to erect her shields. He feared that if she were to feel him, she might think he meant to continue with their lessons, with their agreement, and Severus did not know if he wanted that.

*Get a grip, man,* he told himself. *Of course you want that.*

The girl was, after all, everything a man like him could hope to have. She would provide for him. Her young, nubile, soft, luscious, tight body would give him pleasure as he had rarely known before. And if everything went right, her body would provide him with a legacy, as well, a life to be lived long after Severus himself had died.

But what if she had stopped Occluding? What if all that she'd said about continuing with her studies, be it with or without his help, was nothing but empty words?

The girl wasn't one for empty words, though, he recalled. And even if she was, Severus did not need to be honourable. He could still hold her to their agreement, even if she did not want to study under him anymore. He could still demand the price that she had offered him, albeit unknowingly, for the lessons she had already received.

Yes, he could do that, Severus thought, a feeling of warmth spreading around his heart.

Reaching into the breast pocket of the frock coat beneath his robes, Severus withdrew the watch—now heated and warm to the touch from the message coming through—the girl had gifted him. Why he kept it there, of all places, was easy to answer: it was a pocket he rarely used as it was rather inconvenient and difficult to unsuspiciously pull things out of. Why he kept it on his person at all was a more difficult question that he had no desire to ponder at this moment.

His eyes perused the watch. Just in time, as well, as he could only just make out the runes before they shifted back into the numbers they usually were.

*May I come?*

*Sweet Circe,* Severus thought, his loud intake of breath surprising him almost as much as the girl's words had, *what kinds of kinks is this girl into? Asking my permission for climax?*

Still pondering that notion and wondering how to respond, the numbers shifted again.

*Please, sir,* the runes spelled before changing, this time into new runes, *may I come down to your office?*

His mood plummeted as if it had been soaring before, which it decidedly had *not* been, but it made no difference; Severus felt severe disappointment. *His office,* he scoffed. The girl surely wasn't one to
get up to any shenanigans in as sacred a space as she perceived a teacher's office to be.

_I need you._

Or wasn't she?

Concentrating, Severus answered without drawing his wand, although his other wand was more than ready to be drawn.

Smirking, he magically forced the numbers around the clock on her locket into runes, trying his damnedest not to have his concentration break by the realization that the pendant would be resting between her beautiful breasts.

_Come, Miss Granger._

Hermione was in pain. During Potions earlier in the day, she had been beyond glad that she had not even felt the slightest nudging of the professor's mind against hers, for that would have brought her mental walls crumbling right down.

The last weekend had been spent worrying beyond any amount of worrying Hermione had ever done before. This was no Basilisk, petrifying students of less desirable blood left and right. This wasn't a presumed mass murderer, out for Harry's blood. This was no international competition that was likely to get her best friend killed.

This had been her period, _late_. She had never been particularly regular in her cycle, and fluctuations were a constant source of stress for her, as she spent a few days every month worrying about whether she might start bleeding in the middle of the day or not.

None of that could compare to the terror she had felt upon the realization that her period was late after having spent a large number of times with Sirius Black buried between her legs…

…and one time with the professor, as well.

All weekend, Hermione had been pondering whether to go to Madam Pomphrey or not, to ask whether the Contraceptive potion might have _not_ worked somehow, but she just hadn't been able to bring herself to actually do it. Too afraid was she of what the matron's answer might be. Too afraid of the consequences that would follow.

And so she had fretted, and worried, and aged a hundred years from all the stress, all week. Until today. Today, she had almost doubled over in pain at the strength of her period setting in.

Of course, with the magnitude of pain the likes of which she had never experienced before, this might as well be a miscarriage, but Hermione would not allow herself to think like that. Far worse than carrying an unexpected child would certainly be losing it, and she did not want to travel down that road.

In all honesty, though, Hermione was so distracted by the pain that it was a wonder her potion had not exploded in the cauldron in front of her during the lesson. Pain coming from inside oneself, she had had the opportunity to discover, was far worse than anything the professor had bestowed upon her thus far. _This must be what the Cruciatus curse felt like. No wonder Neville's parents had gone insane._

It was proof of how the pain meddled with her brain, that she didn't stop to think how callous, how heartless, how outright disrespectful, how horrid this thought was. Further proof came in Hermione
reaching for her locket.

*May I come?* she had the runes on its counterpart spell. A minute passed, then another, and she became impatient. *Please, sir, she insisted, may I come down to your office?*

Another cramp wracked her body, and Hermione couldn't take it any longer. She needed help with the pain, and now.

*I need you.*

Dragging herself out of bed, she forced her trainers onto her feet, determined to reach the professor even if he did not wish to be reached. She would not go to Madam Pomphrey with this if she could help it. After all, Hermione had agreed to only imbibe medicine the Potions Master had approved of, had preferably handed her himself, and she intended to stick to that agreement as long as she couldn't be certain that he had called it off. This night would give her an answer, she supposed.

She was just summoning her strength to head for the door and down the many, many stairs into the dungeons, when the locket warmed against her breasts.

*Come, Miss Granger.*

*Yes,* she thought, almost triumphant in the relief that coursed through her at his acceptance, *yes, professor, I'm coming.*

The door to his office fell open right after two and a half knocks against the wood. It swung into his office, the girl hanging off the knocker, holding on as if her life depended on it. For a second, she held herself there. Then she let go, falling down to the floor and landing with a soft thud. Other than that, she made no sound.

Severus was cautious, keeping his distance for a moment before he could determine what was wrong with the girl. This was not what he'd been expecting when she had asked to see him in his office. Anything but this, really.

An inhuman moan swelled in the air in the general direction of the girl, leaving no doubt as to whether it stemmed from her. Severus was at her side in a heartbeat.

"*Hurts,*" the girl breathed. "*Bleeding… hurts…*"

Severus had dealt with his fair share of melodramatic girls, a chore that came naturally with his position as Head of House. Although most Slytherins handled their monthly cycles with a graceful air of classy distaste and with greatest discretion, there were always some who sought to exploit their menses by begging pain potions off of him. Those potions, they would sell in time to whoever needed them, fellow students who didn't wish to go to the infirmary for some reason or other. There was always some reason why a Slytherin wanted to avoid drawing attention to their pain, be it the fact that they were in pain at all, or be it the manner in which they had acquired that pain in the first place.

This, Severus quickly assessed, was no mere melodramatic display. He had seen the girl experience pain, and she had always taken it with gritted teeth, a straight spine, and with a stubborn determination to maintain the barriers around her mind. He had never seen her break down like this before, and that was saying something.

Severus thought quickly and came to a decision. She would need to see his private quarters at some point, so why not now?
Levitating her over to the couch in his personal sitting room, he gently set her body down onto the soft stuffing. She seemed to sink right into the furniture, her small, pain-wrecked form disappearing between the large cushions that Severus allowed himself. A vial of the more potent pain potion from his private stores came flying when he Summoned it, and the girl drank deeply and gratefully, swallowing everything he gave her. Severus did not allow himself to think about what else she might swallow down dutifully, maybe even passionately. This was not an appropriate time to entertain such thoughts. The girl needed him.

Whimpering, the girl's firm grip on her lower abdomen became slack, but her arms remained rested against the location of her pain, and her body did not relax into a more comfortable position, instead remaining curled into itself as it was.

Severus sighed.

This called for a stronger method of remedy.

Hermione felt as if she was flying. Perhaps she was. The potion she had received from the professor had probably been strong enough to make her believe that she was, she supposed. She did not know, nor did she care. All that mattered was the sensation of flying, and the knowledge that the pain had receded a bit.

There was a rush of cold, then warmth suddenly enveloped her, and she was sinking into a cushion that held her in a marvellous position in the warm water. Opening her eyes, Hermione realized that she was reclining in a bathtub. *Naked.* The professor was standing above her, his wand in hand. So she *had* been flying.

Leaning her head back against the soft porcelain of the tub — *he must have cast a Cushioning charm,* some abstract train of thought informed her in the back of her mind — she looked up to her professor.

"Thank you," she said softly, sincerity colouring her voice with gratitude.

The professor mustered her.

"Are you feeling better, Miss Granger?"

"Some," Hermione replied. "I can manage with the pain now. This is what I usually go through."

"The other pain," the Potions Master asked, "those cramps from earlier, those are not usual for you?"

"No," she agreed, "those are not at all normal for me. I've never experienced anything like those. If that is what women are supposed to go through, and worse, for hours on end, then I don't think I'll ever want children."

The girl uttered the thought so casually, so carelessly, that it took a second or two to register with Severus. Once she realized what she had said, he paled. With his natural pallor, fortunately, it wasn't obvious — not that the girl would have noticed in her current state of mind, anyway.

That she didn't want children was of no consequence to Severus. He was not beyond taking what he wanted, or giving, in this case, and exploiting her agreement to what he wanted, even if she had not really understood that at that point in time.

What worried him was the thought that she might have *been* pregnant. *Was the girl miscarrying in his bathtub just now?* Going through everything he knew on the topic, Severus came to the result
that no, she wasn't.

Good, he thought. Good. Even if whatever child she would have been carrying might not have been his, he would have hated to have more blood on his hands. After all, if he had looked into her mind or had paid more notice to her body, he should have known if the girl had been pregnant.

But she hadn't been, so thank Merlin for that little mercy.

Still, there was a pretty young woman lying naked in his bathtub. Surely there would be some way to gain some pleasure from that situation?

Severus took off his robes, folding them carefully and placing them on the floor, as far from the tub as the floor reached in his tiny bathroom. Unbuttoning his frock coat, he took that off, as well, exchanging it for the towel on the latter's hook. Folding the towel, Severus knelt on it, next to the tub. The girl stared at him with wide eyes.

"What are you doing, professor?" she asked.

Severus did not know if she was addressing him by his academic title out of shock, or if it was done deliberately, after he had told her not to call him 'professor' when they were together, so as to deter him. Either way, he wasn't easily deterred. He would not seduce the girl into his bed, would not press her in any way to sleep with him this night. If she offered, that was good and well, but it wasn't his goal just now.

Just now, he wanted to take his pleasure by granting hers. There was nothing just as good to alleviate pain as a little death, as the French called it.

"You're in pain, Miss Granger," Severus stated. "I'm tending to you. Will you let me?"

Folding his right shirt sleeve upwards until his arm was naked to above his elbow, he fixed the girl with a stare as smouldering as he could manage. He seemed to do well, if the girl's melting deeper into the bathtub was any indication.

"But it's gross down there," she said.

Maybe he wasn't doing too well after all.

"In case you haven't noticed yet, Miss Granger," Severus intoned, "sexual interactions are gross in general. Exchanging bodily fluids, becoming all covered in sweat, there's nothing in there that could not be aptly described as 'gross'. Do you think a little blood deters me?"

"No," the girl whispered. "Not you."

"Then explain to me, Miss Granger," Severus carried on, his voice unusually soft and almost caring, "why you should allow it to deter you."

The girl sniffed.

"I can't," she said.

Whether she meant to say that she was unable to explain herself, or whether she was once more objecting to Severus pleasuring her during her period, he did not know. It was of no consequence, either. He wanted to pleasure the girl, so pleasure her he would.

"Please, Miss Granger," Severus implored, and the girl's eyes went wide at the rarely-heard word,
"won't you let me tend to you?"

He saw the change of mind in the girl's expression before she could even manage to open her mouth.

"Yes," she breathed. "Yes, sir, please."

Her legs fell open.

Well, Severus thought to himself as his right hand delved into the warm water, between the girl's naked thighs, *if this is no proper invitation, then I don't know what is.*

He set to work.

---

**Monday, January 27th, 1996**

After that late Thursday night in the professor's private quarters, Hermione had sworn to herself never to return there, at least not under conditions such as that night. The professor had been the perfect gentleman, coaxing her core to a gentle orgasm, allowing her time to calm down and finish her bath (alright: *his* bath) in peace, dress, and leave the bathroom in a dignified manner. He had escorted her back to his office, offered her another vial of his private pain potion for any more pains that might occur in the night, and told her to contact him in the usual way if she needed anything else.

The way he had said 'the usual way' had Hermione's skin crawl all over, though not in a completely unpleasant manner. It may be that their way of communication was rather unusual, and neither of them had made any use of it – at least not between these two people, Hermione amended in her case, ignoring her secret interactions with the DA – before that Thursday night, but the professor's choice of words indicated that he had every intention of making further use of it.

Hermione had been very determined in her vow to herself not to return to the professor's private quarters out of the same need as that late Thursday night. Naturally, Friday night had her in Professor Snape's bathtub again, and his fingers inside her core.

Much as she hoped for the pain to recede over the next few days, it did nothing of the sort, and Hermione worried if this was her life now: days suckling at the vial the professor would hand her in the middle of the night, evenings spent soaking in the warm water in his tub, climbing to and resting from the orgasm he would bestow upon her, and more of the same the following day, and the one after that, and the one after *that*.

It wasn't until Monday's Potions lesson that Hermione realized that perhaps a secret climax every night in the privacy of the professor's quarters wasn't the worst way of reaching an orgasm. There were certainly worse settings, as Professor Snape was about to demonstrate.

Doubled over in pain, Hermione stood bowed over her worktable, chopping and slicing the ingredients for whatever potion they were supposed to brew. She was only following instructions at this point, her brain unable to process more than one line at a time, and thus the name of this lesson's project had escaped her mind, as had the name of the ingredient she was processing at this moment. She was going through the motions, but there was no intent behind them other than making it to the end of the lesson, to the end of the day, to the end of the pain, somehow or other.

"Are you already out of today's vial, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape quietly asked her.

Hermione had not even noticed that the Potions Master had come to stand behind her. Now that he was, it took her a moment to realize that perhaps he might expect an answer to his question. Another
few seconds passed until she could remember his question, then process what he was asking to know, and forming the words to answer him.

"No," she replied eventually, "still more than half left. Don't want to become dependent."

"Good girl," the professor praised her, but Hermione was too far gone to preen at the rare compliment. It was all she could do to remain standing and force her body through the mechanics of chopping.

Her knife nicked the tip of her left middle finger. Cursing, Hermione looked down to see the blood welling from the digit. Perusing her desk, she saw that she's only been cutting livers of a toad. Purified as they were before being handed to students, she had nothing to fear from that. The wound would knit together soonish, and no blood had spilled onto the chopped ingredients yet. Good. Next on the list was –

Before Hermione could squint her eyes to make out what was written on the blackboard, she felt her left hand being drawn away from her body. Turning her head, she found the Potions Master himself inspecting her wound.

"It isn't deep," he stated, "but maybe someone should just…"

He trailed off, so unlike himself, as he cast a Healing, then a Cleansing charm in quick succession. Breathing a kiss against her fingertip, he released Hermione's hand again. It remained hovering in the air, too fazed was she by that last action to remember to allow her appendage to obey gravity.

"You are right, Miss Granger, that too much of this draught will make you dependent upon it," the professor said. His voice was soft, so as not to attract attention or to allow others to make out what he was saying, and yet it seemed to pierce Hermione to the very core of her being.

"There is some other remedy, however, that has seemed to work well on you in the past. Be very quiet, now, while I treat your pain."

With that, the professor disappeared from Hermione's sight, if only because he came to stand so closely behind her that there was no way for her to twist her neck in order to see him. Resigning, she checked the temperature of the cauldron, tossed in the chopped livers, and began stirring; once clockwise, four times counter-clockwise, twice clockwise, breathe; once clockwise, four times counter-clockwise, twice –

The professor's hand found the hem of her skirt in so self-assured a way that Hermione wildly wondered for a moment how often his hand had crept up the skirts of unsuspecting school girls. That was unfair to Professor Snape, of course, and she knew it, but she forgot that knowledge as soon as his knowing fingers teased the skin just above the lace tops of her stockings.

"Lace," the professor approvingly growled into her ear, "a wise choice, Miss Granger."

And upwards his fingers wandered, tracing an idle, yet certain path along the back of her thighs, until they brushed against the roundness of her bottom cheeks.

"Open up, Miss Granger," Professor Snape whispered, his breath tangibly stirring the curls that had escaped her messy bun to rest around her ears. Hermione shivered, but not of coldness, and complied with the professor's demand. Bent as she was over her workstation, widening her stance a bit spread her thighs nicely, and allowed the Potions Master generous access to her goods.

A miniscule, but distinct lessening of pressure in her core told Hermione that the professor had Vanished her soaked tampon. A brush of air had her know that he'd yanked her knickers to the side.
His fingers traced her outer lips, stroking the sturdy curls that framed them, before parting her and seeking out the little nub that provided her pleasure. With a certainty that stemmed from many successive nights spent exploring her folds, Professor Snape went for that little nub and began to stroke and caress it as if there was no tomorrow. Only when he felt that she was wet enough, the tampon having soaked up all her bodily juices and leaving her inner walls rather dry earlier, did he ease one long digit into her core.

Hermione sighed, the beauty of the moment providing her with momentary relief from the pain. Professor Snape took that sigh as his cue to add another finger. He settled into a gentle thrusting motion, his fingers stoking her fire in a soothing rhythm. Hermione felt herself climbing the well-treaded road to climax, but knew deep inside that this wasn't enough.

Just at that moment, the professor took a step closer to her. Hermione felt his robes fall around her bum, stretched out towards her teacher as it was, and the substantial bulge that his manhood caused in his trousers brushed against her. While his right hand was still busily moving inside her core, his left snaked its way around her belly to the apex of her thighs. It sought out and found her clit almost instantly and set to work rubbing circles in the same rhythm at which its partner was thrusting into her.

The combination was enough to drive anybody wild, but these past few days had primed Hermione for the professor's attentions. Her body knew by now that whatever Professor Snape was doing to her would soothe her pains, and it trusted him to know what he was doing. It made falling into the climactic abyss so much easier.

And fall she did. No sound escaped her lips, as Hermione was still weakened by living in constant pain for the past ninety-six hours, but her walls tightened around the professor's delicious fingers as she came to a silent, but infinitely satisfying orgasm.

The professor stood for a while, waiting for her spasms to recede. When they had, he gently, cautiously withdrew his fingers, cleansing them with a quick charm. Merlin knew a Potions Master had enough of those charms at his disposal, needing to efficiently clean organic waste every other minute, it seemed. Next he readjusted her knickers, then – nothing.

"Thank you," Hermione breathed gratefully once her brain was capable of coherent thought again. First pain, then pleasure, had taken a lot out of her.

"Miss Granger," the professor acknowledged.

"Is there anything I can –"

"No," he cut her off. "You are too weakened at the moment to do anything. I will simply stand here for a short while, Miss Granger, and we can talk once you are better."

He stepped even further into her, until his bulge rested directly against her bum. Reaching behind her and nestling for a bit, Hermione removed the heavy fabric of her school skirt from between their bodies. Now, the professor fit even better into the crevice of her behind.

The Potions Master emitted a tiny sigh, ever so soft and barely audible, but Hermione knew what to listen for. For a while, they stood in contented silence.

Then –

"Simple white cotton, Miss Granger?"

Hermione had not known that she still had enough energy left for a little chuckle to escape her lips.
"Oh, shut it, sir," she uttered, no malice in her words, but laughter, and just enough of it to assure the professor that she meant no disrespect. "With how addled my mind has been lately, I would most certainly have set them on fire if I tried to transfigure them, and I couldn't very well ask Lavender or Parvati to do it for me."

Another minute passed while the professor was stroking the plain fabric of her underwear. For them, it was a strangely domestic moment, Hermione assessed. A part of her mind idly wondered how it came that no one had interrupted them yet by blowing up a cauldron or something of the like, but she found that she couldn't be arsed to care. All that mattered was her steady chopping and the contentedness that she found in the man pressing his raging hardness into her bum.

"If you like, I'll let you choose your favourite fabric and colour, sir," Hermione offered after a while. Hearing a dark chuckle behind her, she amended, "Just don't make it something like unicorn-blood-coloured Acromantula silk, will you?"

"Tsk tsk tsk," the professor chided her quietly, "always thinking the worst of me, Miss Granger."

"I seem to know you too well, sir," Hermione replied. "You'll always make me strive for the best results, no matter how far they seem out of my reach. But I'm being honest here – please make it your actual favourite colour and fabric, will you, sir?"

A moment of silence followed that grew ever so heavier with anticipation with every second that passed.

"I liked your first attempt, Miss Granger," the professor eventually said. "Just make sure you don't ask Miss Patil for her help, nor for her opinion, this time. I'd prefer to see your own work, and to be the only one to see it. Can you do that?"

He knew very well that she could, and Hermione pressed her behind further into his middle to answer in the positive. A groan escaped from his lips, then a resigned sigh followed, and Professor Snape withdrew from the warm crevice Hermione's body provided for him. Smoothing her skirt back down over her bum, Hermione distinctly felt a sense of loss at having the professor gone. Only her resolve to perform the transfiguration after the Potions Master's wishes helped her out of that negativity.

*Black satin and cloth-covered buttons it is, sir,* Hermione thought, smiling to herself as she set to counting Newt eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter thirty-four, wherein expectations are exceeded and Minerva might be commended.
"Will you forever be taunting me with your silken knickers, Miss Granger?"

Hermione smiled. Her eyes were still closed from just having resurfaced from the pool. For a moment she wondered whether this was the only reason that the professor had forced her from her bath by cutting off her oxygen supply once more, wanting to ask about her knickers. She knew, however, that he would either tell her or not, so there was no use in wondering about his reasons.

"Have you been gaining any other information from my mind lately, professor?" she asked instead.

Hermione had been delighted when she had felt the brush of the Potions Master's mind against hers for the first time in what felt like forever, earlier in the day during their Thursday Potions lesson. She had been Occluding already, now able to better focus on her mental shields since her period had finally ended, and had thus been prepared against the attempt at an invasion. As soon as she'd realized that he’d be trying to steal her thoughts, she had flooded him with what he knew he desired, but didn't want to see at that point in time – images of her first pair of transfigured knickers, black silk with little cloth-covered buttons down the front.

"Lately?" he asked, and they both knew that she was talking about dinner, when the professor had nudged at her barriers once more and had received impressions of the back of those self-same knickers, lowered to lay bare a mere hint of her cleft. "No information that was desirable to me, no."

"Nothing desirable to be found in my mind?" Hermione repeated, feigning hurt. "You wound me, professor."

"I haven't wounded you in a while now, Miss Granger," the professor responded, and Hermione shuddered just thinking of the pain his magic whip had graced her with. "And to be fair," which they both knew he generally wasn't, "I don't believe you can conjure any thought in your mind quite as desirable as the very real experience of you climbing out of the bath to come play with me."

He paused, as if to give her time to answer, but Hermione had the impression that he was simply allowing her time to melt under the heated stare he was fixing her under, his eyes even blacker than usual. When she had sufficiently succumbed to the pleasure his eyes were promising her, a wetness pooling between her legs that had nothing to do with the soapy water surrounding her, he spoke again.

"Will you come out to play with me tonight, Miss Granger?"

The smile that had been fixed onto Hermione's face fell. The last time she had come out to play with the professor, he had threatened rape upon her and had essentially thrown her out of the bathroom. He had also confessed to thinking her beyond pure and had fingered her to a mind-blowing orgasm, of course, but Hermione wasn't about to risk subjecting herself to more threats, simply to gain a few minutes of pleasure.

There was also that little matter that the professor had wrought as good as a promise of sex from her, the next time she was able to participate fully. Hermione wasn't sure that she wanted to fulfil said promise in the prefects' bathroom.
"I don't believe I will, professor," she said, her voice almost apologetic. "But if I asked to see you for a private lesson this weekend… would you object to that?"

"What," the professor intoned, "if I wasn't in the mood for teaching you this weekend?"

Hermione sighed.

"What," she countered, "if I was very eager to learn from you?"

The Potions Master's eyes narrowed at the question.

"Learn what exactly, Miss Granger?"

Hermione chuckled in what she hoped to be a seductive, alluring manner.

"Oh, sir," she smiled, her voice so soft it was barely above a whisper, "there is so much I still have to learn, and you know me…" This time it was her setting a trap for him to fall into. "I am a very willing student."

The professor swallowed a few times. The mere fact that Hermione was able to notice that told her heaps about how affected he was by her suggestion.

"Assuming I was in the mood, Miss Granger –" he began, but Hermione cut him off.

"For teaching?" she amended.

"Yes," he drawled, "for teaching. If I was in the mood, you would do best to be at the ready to learn," he impressed before Hermione could chime in, "after curfew. Can you do that?"

"I believe I can, sir," Hermione confirmed. "Anything I need to bring for my studies?"

"I believe I set the terms for your studies quite clearly, Miss Granger, did I not?"

Hermione's smile widened considerably, and she wondered if she looked as much like the kneazle that got the canary as she felt she did.

"Oh, yes, sir," she confirmed. "Quite clearly, indeed."

With a nod, the professor billowed out the door. Hermione sat reclined against the walls of the tub for a while, smiling to herself about the peculiar banter they had exchanged. Eventually, she sighed. No need to sit idle.

Taking a deep breath, she submerged herself in the water.

---

**Saturday, January 31 st , 1996**

Hermione had almost been certain that the professor wouldn't call upon her the prior night, but had held herself at the ready anyway. Of course, she had been right, and the Potions Master had apparently insisted upon some form of self-constraint as her locket had remained at body temperature all night, warmed by the heat her beating heart infused into the pendant resting between her breasts.

Either the professor's self-restraint did not go as far as she had believed he would force it to go, or he had decided to contact her at a certain point of time, for this Saturday night, the locket warmed exactly at half past nine – just thirty minutes after curfew.
The message held only one word.

_Come._

Hermione smirked.

Come, she would.

Severus was not a patient man. He was very well capable of giving the impression of patience, but the girl was in for quite the speech if she was going to spend another single minute on her way to him.

He was counting down the seconds, landing at eight seconds left, when a knock sounded at his door. A glance to the clock showed the time to be precisely quarter to ten. Severus almost smirked—almost. Punctuality was a trait he could usually respect, but not when he was feeling impatient.

A flick of his hand had the door to his office swing open. Nobody was visible beyond the threshold, but he felt a familiar body pass through his wards that he recognized to be the girl from the few times she had come to his rooms to bathe her pain away.

Wordlessly, Severus led the way to his private quarters, stopping in the sitting room to readjust the wards at the gateway to and from his office. No need to have anybody disturb the two of them this night. Not even the Headmaster had direct access to his private quarters unless he called for the old man. Severus had no intention of calling anybody's name tonight, except perhaps the girl's, if she should prove to be a very, _very_ adept student.

"Lift the disillusionment, Miss Granger," Severus demanded.

And lift the charm, she did.

As the girl's shape fluttered into visibility, the air shimmering around her form as she seemed to materialize in his sitting room, Severus's breath stocked for a moment. She had taken his instructions very, _very_ seriously.

"Good evening, sir," the girl greeted him, her stance confident, but her voice rather timid. "I dressed to your exact specifications. Is this outfit up to your expectations?"

_No_, Severus thought, but found himself unable to voice the single syllable. The girl's outfit exceeded his expectations by miles.

Before him stood a young beauty, her body naked safe for the black silk knickers.

Knickers, he found, that lacked something rather substantial.

"Where are the buttons, Miss Granger?" Severus asked, now able to find his voice again in the motivation to find fault with something.

That was, until the girl turned around.

Down her bum, where the enticing cleft of her buttocks lay beneath the thin fabric of her knickers, trailed a line of miniscule cloth-covered buttons. They stopped maybe two inches before they were to disappear between her legs. Severus counted every one of them, but was too entranced by the sight to remember the number. It was high, he knew. Higher than he'd thought possible.

The girl threw her hair over her shoulder to face him while her back remained to him. Severus
noticed the motion from the corner of his eye, while his sight was still trained on her
Transfigurational skills.

"There they are, sir," the girl whispered needlessly, although the breathiness in her voice sent another
wave of longing to Severus's already too hard cock.

"Indeed," Severus drawled, and watched as goose bumps erupted all over the girl's bare skin.

The girl turned back around. Now that his mind had slowly caught up to the image of those neat little
buttons travelling down her bum, Severus's eyes managed to take in the beautiful sight of the girl's
breasts. Oh, how he had missed them.

Crossing over to the couch, Severus sat down in the very middle, not even trying to hide the tent in
his trousers. Looking up, he fixed the girl under his stare.

"Come here, Miss Granger," he demanded.

The girl made to sit down next to him, but Severus was having none of that. Grabbing her by the
waist, he pulled her down into his lap, her back resting against his front. Tiny as she was, he could
watch over her shoulder as her breasts, now illuminated by the crackling fire, rose and fell under her
laboured breath.

"Why are you breathing so hard, Miss Granger?" Severus asked, his thumbs rubbing soothing circles
into the skin of her waist. "Are you nervous?"

"Yes," she replied, the word little more than an exhalation of air.

Severus chuckled, but this time, the sound held none of its usual malice.

"Don't be," he said.

His hands wandered further up her torso, coming up to cup her mounds. They were warm and
smooth and soft, and Severus allowed himself a moment to revel in their perfection. He smirked
contentedly when the girl's nipples pebbled beneath his touch.

"Eager, as you said," Severus assessed approvingly. "Now bend forward, Miss Granger. Let me see
those buttons again."

Severus helped her slowly lower her upper body forward, until the buttons came into view. He bade
the girl rest her hands against the coffee table so that he might have both of his hands free, and she
readily complied. Tracing the trail of buttons, Severus realized that they weren't simply decorative in
nature.

Popping one through its hole, Severus watched the fabric part that it had formerly been holding
together. He sighed, almost inaudibly.

"If you weren't a Gryffindor, Miss Granger," he spoke, "and if this situation wasn't as inappropriate
as it is, I might commend Minerva on your superb skills in Transfiguration."

The compliment seemed to make miles of nerves fall off the girl, and she palpably relaxed beneath
his touch. Her whispered Thank You was accompanied by another few buttons released from their
holes.

When they were all separated from their holes, Severus parted the silken fabric. Tracing the cleft of
her bottom cheeks with a single digit, he revelled in the shiver that ran down the girl's spine.
"Stand up, Miss Granger," Severus asked, "I want to see you."

The girl complied with his wish, climbing off of his lap and standing between his legs that he readily parted for her. The fabric of her knickers fell almost all the way down her legs. With Severus's assistance, the girl stepped out of them, now fully naked before his sight.

Taking her right hand in his left, Severus turned her to face him. Her features showed the nerves that had returned, although she certainly had no reason to be self-conscious about anything. While not a natural beauty, the girl was stunningly magnificent in her own right, and her body had all the curves a man like Severus longed for. If she was to be nervous about anything, then it was the fact that she looked good enough to eat. Then again, the obvious hunger in Severus's eyes might be the main reason for her nervousness, he supposed.

Still maintaining the hold on her hand, Severus pulled the girl into his lap again until she was straddling him. Her hot mound was rubbing against the bulge in his pants. Severus couldn't help grabbing the girl's hips to hold her still as he bucked against her seam. Afraid that he'd handled her too roughly, and embarrassed about his momentary loss of control, he turned his strong grip to a soft stroking of her tender skin, caressing her smooth roundness, as his right hand travelled to slip between her parted thighs.

As he began to rub circles around her clit, Severus realized that this position wasn't the best for foreplay if he wanted to last for a while. While tending to the girl, the motions of his hand had it rubbing against his own raging hardness, as well, and that did nothing to improve his self-control.

Fortunately, the girl's nerves did not make her immune to his skilled fingers, and she was soon panting on top of him. Her head was thrown back, so that Severus had ample opportunity to appreciate the beautiful curve of her throat, but did nothing of the sort. Too entranced was he by her soft sighs, her muted mewls, her hips rolling against the hand that pleasured the flower that lay between them, and the sight of her breasts, bouncing slightly from her exertions.

When he felt that she was dripping wet, Severus could not hold back any longer. It was tempting to have the girl come from his hand's ministrations alone once more, but the temptation to feel her clench around his length was greater by far. In a surprisingly graceful move that had the girl squeal in shock, he gripped her lower back and stood with her, only to plop her down onto the couch and to come to lie on top of her. His hips between her thighs, Severus was propped up on his hands, so as not to squash her beneath his body weight. The expression behind the girl's eyes, gazing up at him, was unreadable for once.

With a start, he realized that she was Occluding, and rather heavily at that.

"What are you trying to hide from me, Miss Granger?" Severus asked. There was no accusation in his voice, a fact that surprised the Potions Master himself. For once, he was simply curious.

The girl remained silent. He was about to admonish her, press her for answers, when he felt her hands travel up his thighs. Looking down, Severus found that they were making their way up towards his fly and zipper. He watched her fingers with great interest, his former question momentarily forgotten, and was pleasantly surprised when he found them eager enough to open his trousers.

He smirked when they withdrew for the fraction of a second upon the discovery that he wasn't wearing any pants underneath.

"We appear to complement one another quite nicely tonight, sir," the girl noted. Severus merely quirked an eyebrow at her in silent encouragement to keep talking. "I show up in nothing but my
knickers while you are going commando. Together we make a fine pair."

A tentative smile had crept into the girl's face, one that made Severus ignore her last comment. Him, making any kind of pair with anyone, was of course a ridiculous notion, but he elected to allow the girl her ideas for this one night, if only because they lifted her nervousness a bit.

Freeing himself from his trousers, Severus followed the girl's appreciative glance towards his manhood. Eager and weeping tears of anticipation, it stood ready for action.

Positioning himself at her entrance, Severus thought to voice one last question.

"Are you consenting to this, Miss Granger? Of your own free will?"

Severus knew he need not ask. The girl had come to his quarters and was more than wet enough to receive him. For some reason, he still felt that it was the right thing to do. Perhaps it was the fact that he had threatened rape upon her, just a few weeks ago? Perhaps, he thought, but did not want to think too hard on that.

"Yes," the girl breathed, and Severus sank into her.

_Tight, tight, tight, tight, tight_, was all he could think at first. He kept sinking and sinking deeper into the girl, her vice-like grip growing even tighter the deeper he went, until he was balls-deep inside of her. Her legs came to wrap around his waist, her ankles locking, so as to give herself some more comfort. Rationally aware that perhaps he should give the girl a moment to adjust, Severus couldn't help withdrawing an inch or two and slamming back in.

The girl gasped.

Curious, Severus looked up to her face. He had not even realized that his gaze had been fixed upon the point between her thighs where he was immersed inside her, the two of them connected in the most delicious way, until he sought to find the reason for her gasp. Guilt was about to convince him that it was from the hurt he had caused her by moving too fast. Her expression was telling a different story, though.

The girl was actually smiling slightly, though she seemed so immersed in the sensations Severus was causing inside of her that she was unaware of that smile. Her eyes were big and fixed on his, her expression open, yet she seemed so honest in her lust that Severus felt that it would be bad form to perform Legilimency on her now.

Instead he sought to enhance her pleasure. Withdrawing almost all the way from her core, he slowly sunk back in, his eyes staring deep into hers without slipping behind the thin barrier she managed to maintain around her mind. _Circe_, Severus realized, _this was far better than anything he might have hoped for when he'd wrought this bargain from the girl, back in autumn._

Not wanting to miss a single thing – not a single ripple of her walls around him, not a single tightening of her core, not a soft moan, not a sigh, _nothing_ – Severus stuck to the slow rhythm that he’d started out with. Pulling out until only his tip rested inside her wet heat, he inhaled, before sinking all the way into the girl on his exhale. So intent was he on maintaining that steady movement that he was rather surprised when the girl spoke up.

"Faster," she sighed.

The girl seemed almost as shocked as Severus at the fact that she had spoken, not to mention the demand she had uttered. Almost bashfully, she averted her eyes for a second, before looking straight back up into his.
"Please, sir," she begged, "can we go a little faster, please?"

Severus merely smiled at her, for once not caring about the frightful sight he must be offering to the woman underneath him, and picked up his pace. The girl's moans urged him on, growing louder as he grow faster, and he did not stay at the quicker rhythm the girl had asked for. Instead, he found himself increasing the pace more and more, until he was only slamming into her, thrusting into her for all he was worth.

The girl, fortunately, did not seem to mind that in the least. If anything, she was outright jubilant about the tough pounding he was giving her, and he saw nothing wrong with that. If the girl liked it rough, rough was what she would get.

What had started out as gentle thrusting, so sweet it might have been called 'love making' if there had been any tender emotions involved, had quickly turned into desperate rutting. Severus felt the urge to come growing, but he would not embarrass himself as he had the last time – her first time.

His hand snaked its way in between their two bodies, finding her clit and tweaking it slightly. The girl's hips bucked up against him, and it was all Severus could do not to come instantly. Rubbing eager circles around and over her little nub of pleasure, the girl's moans increased below him until she grew silent all of a sudden. Severus was almost afraid that his frantic pace might have broken her, when her walls suddenly contracted around him, squeezing him and milking him, as the girl emitted a long, mewling moan.

Not wanting to be left behind, and unable to control himself any longer, Severus found himself slamming into the girl with abandon, needing to reach that same height her climax had brought her to, and succeeding. With a groan, he spilled himself deep inside of the girl, her tight walls still clenching and pulsing around him as he filled her with his seed.

Stilling for a minute, Severus revelled in the last of the girl's contractions around his softening member. When they stopped fully, he withdrew, his chest swelling with a proud sense of accomplishment as he saw the girl's thighs slick with his come.

Tugging himself away into his trousers, Severus stood up to pour himself a firewhiskey. He was just turning to offer another one to the girl, when he saw her in the motion of Vanishing all existence of their coupling.

He was over and at her side in a heartbeat, holding her hand still, clutching her thumb to her palm so that any flow of wandless magic was blocked.

"Don't," he growled.

The girl shrank away from him in fear.

"I meant no offense, sir," she pleaded, and Severus's features softened slightly when he realized what a sight he must offer to her. "I only wanted to keep from spilling on your furniture."

"Don't," Severus repeated, kinder than before, although not kind enough to be called 'kind'. He did not do 'kind'. "If I minded you spilling on my furniture, I would have prevented that from happening. As it is, Miss Granger," and his voice seemed to drop an octave, waking the girl's lust anew after scaring her a minute ago, "there is plenty of more furniture I would like you to spill on. Will you assist me in that quest? After all, the night is still young."

He saw the girl weighing his words, mulling over his offer of continued sexual interaction in his quarters, this night. Severus did not fear for one second that he himself might not be up to the task. If
they took their time – and Severus knew the girl's body well enough by now to spend ample of time
simply pleasuring her – he would well be able to entertain her once or twice more this night. The girl
was all he needed to make his blood rise and his manhood swell in eagerness.

In fact, it was swelling again now.

*Sweet Nimue, I must be starved for wanton flesh beneath me*, Severus thought.

"If you're sure you don't mind, sir?" the girl replied hesitantly. "After all, the night is still young…"

Severus grinned. Finishing his firewhiskey with three large gulps, he felt the heat of the alcohol cheer
on the heat of lust in his blood. Together, they made a very fine combination that had him ready for
the girl in an instant.

"Are you cold, Miss Granger?" Severus asked. "The armchair by the fireplace is a particularly fine
piece of furniture if you want to heat things up a little."

---

**Sunday, February 1st, 1996**

Hermione had not known that one month without sex could leave her so starved for cock, but then
again, January was one of the longer months. She had been thoroughly satisfied, the professor's
fingers not having left her for long periods without being pleasured by them since term had started,
but they simply did not make up for the feeling of being thoroughly connected with somebody.

Their passionate bout of wild shagging on the couch had left Hermione thoroughly exhausted, but
the professor's suggestion of a few next rounds had her body primed for more action at once.

Although Sirius had encouraged her to ride him a few times, it was not a position Hermione felt
particularly confident in. Luckily for her, that actually worked in her favour. With how unskilled she
appeared to the professor, Hermione assumed that his suspicions of her having indulged in sex
partners other than him were diminishing by the minute.

He had assisted her off the couch where she had planned on relaxing from their furious act for a
while, had led her over to the armchair by the fire, and had helped her climb onto his lap. Hermione
had tried to stall their next coupling for a few precious minutes – her pussy was begging for a short
break – but the professor had been having none of that. Gripping her chin between two gentle
fingers, he had pressed her to lock eyes with him, and, without even needing to perform Legilimency
on her, he had seen her reluctance in her expression. Wordlessly Summoning a small vial, he had
coated one long digit in a soothing paste that he had continued to rub around her entrance and into
her core. The relief had been instant, and after that, Hermione had been more than eager to go
another round.

She had struggled with successfully mounting the professor, but he had held himself in one hand, the
other steadying her hip, as she had gripped onto his shoulders and had manoeuvred herself onto his
hard cock. Sinking down, the professor had mirrored her sigh. The fact that she had been able to
make the stoic Potions Master lose control enough to utter any sign of pleasure in her presence, had
been a huge turn-on for Hermione. Her professor had welcomed her ensuing enthusiasm in the
lesson of riding him.

Now, everything was upside down in Hermione's world. Part of that was due to the earth-shattering
orgasm that the professor's skilled fingers had elicited from her, just before her shaking on top of him
had been too much for the Potions Master and he had spilled himself inside her once more. Part of
that might also have been from the fact that she was lying on her back on the professor's private desk,
her head hanging over the edge while he was pounding into her on the other side.

Hermione was close. They had been going at it for hours, and it must surely be long past midnight by now. Two orgasms while clenched around Professor Snape's cock had taken a lot out of her, and the two that had followed by his fingers alone, while he had been recuperating in order to be able to perform another round, had done their best to prime her for more pleasure, making her sensitive to any motions against her core.

The professor had closed her legs tightly, holding them straight, both of them perched on one shoulder. With every thrust, Hermione's legs moved just slightly, but enough to make her nether lips rub against one another, and in a way that stimulated her clit. It was ridiculous that such a position should bring her to orgasm, but Hermione was close. Close.

So close was she, in fact, that the world was growing dimmer around the edges of her vision. Mighty Morgana, Hermione thought, the professor will never want me again if I pass out from his attentions.

Her worries were unfounded, however, as her vision grew brighter again. Curiously enough, though, everything she saw took on a rich green tint. That seemed funny to Hermione, as she had been absent-mindedly staring into the fire before, too absorbed in the pleasure Professor Snape was offering her to really focus on anything, and that fire was decidedly not green.

The flames returned to their natural orange flickering after a few seconds, but not before a tall, dark shadow had stepped out of them. Something in Hermione screamed that perhaps she should cover herself, should cover her professor, should shield them from the embarrassment and scorn and all the actually bad and actually relevant consequences that would hinder Professor Snape from continuing in his role as double agent for the Order. The desperation of that scream did not really register with her, however, as she came in just that moment, instead screaming her pleasure as she pulsed around the Potions Master's hard length.

This time, it seemed, she had not managed to pull him over the cliff with her. As she lay in post-orgasmic bliss, her body shaking as it was being shagged over the table, Hermione noticed that Professor Snape was still pumping away at her. She wondered what might have kept him from climaxing with her this time.

"Severus," she heard a familiar voice greet her professor. "Am I interrupting something?"

Alright, Hermione thought, there was a perfectly valid reason for the Potions Master not to have come with her.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter thirty-five, wherein having a bite is discussed.
"Severus," she heard a familiar voice greet her professor. "Am I interrupting something?"

---

Sunday, February 1st, 1996

"Lucius," Severus acknowledged the presence of who had once been his friend, "what a… surprise."

Inwardly, Severus cursed himself for his negligence. There had been a reason, after all, that he had asked a house elf to block his Floo on Christmas, after he had come back from the girl's bed in London. Lucius was used to one of his elven servants commandeering his Floo travel for him. Much as a muggle boss would have a secretary dial up his calls, so would Lucius turn to a house elf to connect his own fireplace to that of the person he was visiting. That had the benefit of the house elf being indirectly tasked with creating that connection should anything block the travel – like Severus's wards that prevented people from entering his private quarters uninvited. Another house elf's magic could successfully block his fireplace to other elven magic, but his personal wards couldn't.

Severus had felt the wards come down, but the thirty seconds in between that feeling and Lucius's arrival had not been enough to react in any way, so he'd just kept doing what he'd been doing – which, incidentally, had been the girl –, hoping to appear casual.

Lucius cocked his head to the side ever so slightly, the reprimand in his following question obvious to any Slytherin.

"A pleasant one, I'm sure?" he queried.

Severus smirked, and the sight was nothing Lucius would be envied for.

"I am already quite pleased," Severus asserted with the hint of a nod towards the girl who was lying under him on his private desk, with him still pounding into her young, tight body. "Quite pleased, in fact. I simply could not say if your presence heightened that pleasure."

Lucius's face now mirrored his smirk, though the expression turned out much prettier than his own.

"And what is it, exactly, that you're doing, Severus," Lucius asked, "to cause you such pleasure?"

Severus wanted to hit the man over the head, preferably with something hard and dull – or not so dull – for asking him to spell out his excuse for having the girl naked and willing on his desk. Why did he need to explain himself? One should think that Lucius would approve of the Head of House Slytherin taking advantage of a young Gryffindor student of less desirable blood, in their mindset.

"I am supervising Miss Granger's detention," Severus replied smoothly, never once faltering in his rhythmic thrusts into the girl.

"Ah, yes," Lucius sighed, the extended S-sound sending tiny cold shivers up and down Severus's spine, "you have always taken great pleasure in your detentions, my friend."

Severus was well aware that one small inquiry with his son would alert Lucius to the fact that the girl had not been assigned any detention with the Potions Master (at least not publically and when did
Severus ever dole out detention other than publically?), but he worried little about that. After all, Lucius had not been asking for facts but for a cover story, firm in the knowledge that any excuse brought up by a fellow Slytherin would be a fanciful fib at best and an outright lie at worst.

Looking down at the girl on the desk, her body shaking with the powerful thrusts Severus was delivering, he nudged at her mental barriers. To his surprise, he found them firmly in place.

Most other people would lose their concentration when in fear, bringing their own Occlumency shields crashing down in dangerous situations. The girl, however, outright bloomed in her frightened state. Her mind was in a complete shutdown. Search as he might, Severus was unable to find even the slightest nook or cranny that he might exploit to force his way into her mind. Her fortifications were smoother than her skin, and allowed no entrance. Of course, brute force would have him inside her mind, if he wanted. But the amount of Legilimenter power necessary for such a breach was considerable, and certainly above Lucius's skill level as a Mind Mage. For the moment, the girl was safe.

Severus had never been more attracted to her.

That the girl was an unpredictable beauty in her fury, Severus knew already. Too often had her firm stance on some topic of disagreement or other aroused him. Never before had he been filled with such an intense feeling of pride, however, and certainly not with pride of the girl. The emotion was an aphrodisiac the likes of which he hadn't experienced before. If his pounding had been fierce earlier, Severus did not know how to describe the frantic pace at which he drove himself into her now, his lust renewed.

Turning his gaze back to Lucius, Severus questioned, "What brings me the pleasure of your surprise visit, Lucius?"

Lucius, Severus saw, had followed his earlier glance at the girl, and the blond wizard's eyes were still fixed on Severus's student. The Potions Master found that he did not like that fact in the least.

"It seems to me," Lucius noted, "that your pleasure lies firmly in the hands of Miss Granger, at the moment. Or rather," he paused for effect, "perhaps not in her hands, exactly."

The girl's eyes shot from Lucius to Severus, back to Lucius, then finally settling on Severus. Her expression showed fear, uncertainty, and a distinct note of pleading, he noted. Whether she was pleading for a way out or for a way through, Severus did not know. With her mind firmly shut to all outward intrusions, he had no way of silently communicating with the girl. He simply hoped she would follow his lead.

"I merely came to offer you a glass of 1789 Odgen's Finest," Lucius explained. "The company my wife is currently keeping at the Manor makes for a less than desirable choice in drinking companions. I would not dare bring out the good firewhiskey with those current guests. Merlin knows they would not stop at one glass."

Their conversation, stilted as it was, halted for a moment. They both watched the girl as she writhed underneath Severus's steady rhythm. How he managed to maintain his erection, Severus could not consciously explain. Perhaps the girl's wiles had him so firmly entrapped that even his comrade's unwelcome intrusion, nor his casual mention of the escaped Death Eaters residing in his home, could not put a stop to his lust.

"Although I must admit," Lucius continued after a while of listening to the girl's soft mewls and moans, "being the first to make an offer of sharing is bad form in a proper guest. I should have allowed you as the welcoming host to offer me something first. I would like to make up for that now.
Please, Severus, what do you have on offer to make me feel your benevolent reception of my visit? Perhaps a share in your current source of pleasure?

Severus found that he needed to forcefully quell the fierce growl that was crawling its way up his throat, from deep inside Morgana knew where. His possessiveness had always been a prominent trait of his, but that it would endanger his relationship with the Malfoy patriarch by showing its ugly head now, in this particular instance, was foreign to him. Usually his instincts kept each other in check. His sense of ownership of the girl overriding his sense of duty to the Light and his strong sense of survival in his role as a double agent, was unsettling, to say the least.

"I was unaware of your qualifications that make you fit to supervise a Hogwarts student's detention, I must say, Lucius," Severus replied as smoothly as he could – faultlessly, that was. "You will understand that I would rather not put the precious education – including punishment, of course – of any student in my care at any risk. As a concerned parent, I am sure you approve, my friend."

"Of course," Lucius echoed, his smirk growing ever wider. "Would you rather I have the caretaker fetched to assist you in your arduous task of supervision? That way you would be free to share that glass of Odgen's Finest with me I came to offer you."

Hermione had done her best to remain calm and collected in the face of this shocking development. Clenching down on her fear and panic with a firm grip, she thought she had delivered an admirable act in appearing appropriately unfazed by being caught in flagrante delicto with her Potions teacher, by the father of her worst school nemesis, and a known Death Eater, no less.

What Hermione could not help, however, was the shudder that wracked her whole body at the mention of Mr Filch.

"You see, Severus," Mr Malfoy jumped at the window of opportunity Hermione's obvious display of disgust had opened for him, "even Miss Granger would agree that my education is preferable to the caretaker's methods – wouldn't you, Miss Granger?"

Coherent thought had been difficult for the past couple of hours now for Hermione, considering the amounts of pleasure the professor was bestowing upon her. A few minutes ago, his attentions had renewed, and now Hermione struggled even more than before to form any kind of response that did not solely consist of lustful sounds.

"Yes," she managed to press out between two powerful thrusts.

"That insolence should be worthy of another night of detention, don't you think, Severus?" he suggested.

Through the thick haze of lust surrounding her, Hermione realized that, if she were coherent, she would be shell-shocked. Things became even worse, she found, when the professor turned to address her.

"Be polite, Miss Granger," he admonished her seriously, "or I will need to dole out a more severe punishment that will not be to your liking at all."

Even though the situation was absurd – the Potions Master standing tall above her, his raging hardness pounding a fierce staccato into her heated core, criticising her manner of conduct –, Hermione knew not to doubt the sincerity behind his threat.
Looking up at Mr Malfoy was no small feat, with her head hanging over the edge of the professor's desk as it was. Somehow, she managed anyway.

"I apologize, sir," she offered. "Yes, Mr Malfoy, you are correct in assuming that I would prefer being educated by you rather than punished by Mr Filch."

Mr Malfoy stared at her for a long few seconds. The image of him was shaky, with Hermione's body still being worked by the professor, but she could practically feel the coldness of his gaze. Eventually, he turned to Professor Snape.

"I have always said that Hogwarts should introduce lessons in etiquette for students of less… formal upbringing."

Hermione swallowed the reply that almost slipped from the tip of her tongue. This was not the time nor the place to start a fight with a well-respected and especially well-off member of society like Mr Malfoy – least of all when the wizard in question was a high-ranking Death Eater and his opinion of Professor Snape and his ability to properly conduct himself among hostile territory, as the Dark must perceive Hogwarts to be, held so much importance.

So Hermione held her mouth firmly shut and her tongue in check. What she had not expected, however, was the professor coming to Mr Malfoy's aide.

"Miss Granger," he thundered, and Hermione's mind struggled to come to terms with the fact that he was still bestowing so much pleasure on her body, while wreaking havoc with her emotions, "would you care to correct yourself? This is your last chance. Do not try me."

Hermione opened and closed her mouth a few times but failed to come up with a reply that would leave both her and the professor in a positive light. Seeing as no proper response was forthcoming, she settled on remaining polite, even while fighting the wizards' assessment of her character.

"With all due respect, sir, Mr Malfoy," she pressed out with a huge effort at concentrating, Professor Snape's attentions still causing her a great deal of distraction, "I fail to see how my pedigree would impediment my level of politeness."

Mr Malfoy snorted at that, and Hermione envied him for his ability to make even that derisive sound appear graceful.

"Of course you do, Miss Granger," he replied smoothly, though there was a sharp edge of malice underneath the pleasant voice, "seeing as you fail to even have any kind of pedigree."

He turned to the professor.

"I know I offered to educate Miss Granger earlier," he said, "but I had not quite expected this level of ineptitude. As such, I must turn to you to teach her."

Even though Hermione had feared Mr Malfoy's presence earlier, that fear did not compare to the dread that travelled icily down her spine at the harsh look the professor gave her.

"As head of his Sacred House," he began, "it is custom to address 'Mr Malfoy', as you called him, as 'Lord'."

"Truly," Mr Malfoy offered, "I don't have any high expectations of you, Miss Granger, all things considered." He perused her as if she was dirty, and made her feel the knowledge that her blood disgusted him, while at the same time devouring her naked body with his eyes. Only now did it occur to Hermione that perhaps she should have thought at some point during their conversation to
cover her nakedness. Now, of course, that was a rather moot point.

"Any variation of address will do," the silver-haired wizard continued. "Call me 'my lord', if you will, or 'Lord Malfoy', or 'Lord Governor', even – see, Severus, there is my qualification to supervise Miss Granger's detentions."

Hermione could not help the snort at that last suggestion of address. The finishing comment did not properly register with her, so amused was she by the fact that Mr Malfoy thought to title himself governor. Even the sharp pain from a particularly vicious thrust from the Potions Master could not stop her running tongue now.

"If I remember correctly, Lord Malfoy," she intoned, "you haven't been a Hogwarts school governor for a few years now. It was 1993, was it not, that you were… released from the Board? And am I right to assume that the botched case a year later did not exactly help in your resuming your duties?"

If she had thought his stare as icy before, it now turned glacial.

"A case," he replied, "that you lost, if I may remind you, Miss Granger."

Even the glacial coldness emanating from Mr Malfoy's eyes could not stop the triumphant grin from spreading over Hermione's face.

"Did I?" she asked, her voice displaying a note of curiosity, though her grin was devious. "Did I lose that one, really… my lord?"

Severus did not understand the battle that was going on between Lucius and the girl. Of course, he knew that Lucius had won the case over Buckbeak's injuring his son in front of the Wizengamot, and that the hippogriff had escaped its punishment by fleeing the day of his impending execution. What he did not understand was the girl's obvious glee at that. Was it simply her friendship with Hagrid that had her so triumphant over this doubtful success? Or was there more behind that knowing smile that he did not know… yet?

Much as he hated not knowing things, he could not hate the girl for playing Lucius with information Severus himself did not possess. How could he hate her, when her confidence, her bravado, her gall had him so entranced? First the firmness of her mental barriers in the face of a first very real threat, now this sassy cheek that the girl allowed herself with Lucius Malfoy, of all people – it was a huge turn-on for him.

Severus had not been holding back in his pounding ever since Lucius had entered his private quarters. The conversation had distracted him enough not to come yet. But now there was no stopping him. Severus let go of all constraint he might ever have possessed when it came to bedding the girl, and poured into her like a man obsessed. It did not take him long. Her wet tightness, combined with her strength of mind and character, was too much for him to last any more. A few harsh thrusts, and he spilled himself deep inside her core for the third time this night.

Withdrawing from the girl and tucking himself away in his pants, Severus remained standing where he was, the girl's legs still securely resting on his shoulder. He looked at her for a few more seconds and, seeing that she was alright and wasn't going to complain about him climaxing without her, turned to Lucius. It appeared that the wizard had been amusedly waiting to get his full attention once more.

"I am aware that Potions is a rather practical subject, of course" the man began, "but have you ever thought about introducing oral examinations into your lesson plans? Young Miss Granger here
would certainly benefit from some oral education. In fact,” and here Lucius perused the girl briefly before returning his gaze to Severus. "I would most graciously offer myself as a teacher, to begin her education right now."

Severus did not say anything, electing to wait his comrade out, for he knew that there would be more.

"As a matter of fact, I am a well-practiced instructor, having taught quite the number of young ladies in the arts of proper oral conduct around my person. But you knew that already, didn’t you, Severus?"

Lucius's proclivity for pureblood, high-born virgins aside, he had been known as a genius at sweet-talking himself into young ladies' mouths, at the most opportune or inopportune of times. Abraxas Malfoy, or so Severus had heard, had supported that ability, merely cautioning Lucius to only ever have those witches open their hearts and mouths to him whose husbands or fathers he was able to outduel, should it come to that.

Assessing his situation, Severus found himself in a dilemma. He had to desire, nor the intention to ever share the girl with anyone, least of all with Lucius Malfoy. After all, had he not sworn, albeit silently, never to allow this particular wizard to lay a finger on her?

Then again, there were far bigger things at stake here. A Death Eater would never refuse a fellow Death Eater their share in a lowly mudblood, and certainly such a request would never be refused coming from the Dark Lord's current host. Severus knew that his cover needed to be protected at all costs – even if it cost him the girl; the only thing Severus had hoped only ever to have for himself, and himself alone.

"Go ahead," Severus nonchalantly offered, gesturing to the girl who was stock-still on the table, her gaze flicking from one wizard to the other and back, as if following an especially exciting Quidditch match. "Just take care," he amended, "not to damage her too much."

"Me?" Lucius asked with an air of surprise, though a devious smile played around his lips. "Damage a lovely girl like Miss Granger here?"

"I am aware that you take giving instructions very seriously," Severus continued as if his friend had never spoken, "as I know you to be a zealous teacher. Simply remember that Miss Granger likes to take her mouth rather full at times, so the task will fall to you to take care not to choke her."

"Don't worry, Severus," Lucius promised, "I will be careful not to damage your toy… too badly. If nothing else, I know how to muffle protests."

"The girl has some bite in her, Lucius," Severus cautioned further, bargaining for the girl's safety in as unsuspicious a manner as he could. "She will not easily be muffled, and she tends to bite off more than she can swallow, but bite off she will."

"Well then," the other wizard surmised, "I will simply need to train that habit out of her, won't I?"

Severus followed Lucius's gaze who was once more perusing the girl. Her eyes, Severus found, were trained solely on his own. She had been strangely silent through this bargaining act. So silent, in fact, that Severus began to wonder whether the girl might not be about to bail.

Nudging her mental barriers again, he found them to be standing very firmly still. This time, instead of shutting herself completely off of her surroundings, the girl sent a slight nudge back. It was almost intangible, so timid was the response she gave his reaching out, but from the impression of her nudge...
resonated a reassuring conviction that calmed Severus's racing heart. Knowing that she was aware of the dangerous game they were playing put at least some of his worries to rest. The girl was not going to give up her professor's cover, he knew, and would be supporting him by submitting to his wishes – meaning, she would be submitting to Lucius Malfoy.

For a moment, Severus's insecurities came rushing back with ferocious force: what if the girl was actually revelling in Lucius's attentions? Did she prefer the wealthy, handsome, established wizard over him, Severus? Wasn't she in all actuality glad that she was being handed over to his comrade?

Then rationality returned, and banished all those horrendous thoughts. The look of terrified shock and panicked fear that Severus had noticed on the girl's face when she first realized just who it was who had disturbed them, had spoken volumes about her feelings. The girl might be improving at Occlumency, but she was still very much a Gryffindor, and wore her emotions on her sleeve most of the time. The chance of her desiring Lucius Malfoy over her Potions professor was about as high as the probability that Severus would be teaching his NEWT course in a Hawaii shirt.

Lucius still hadn't moved an inch, apparently waiting for something to happen before he approached the girl, though what that might be, Severus did not know.

"Tell me, Severus," Lucius said, and Severus realized that the price for continuing with this horrid night was an answer to a question he would have no desire answering, "why did you do that?"

"What exactly is it that you're asking my reasons for doing, Lucius?"

"Spilling yourself inside Miss Granger," the wizard elaborated, "and then not Vanishing all trace of yourself from her."

Severus smiled darkly. There was no way that he would be telling Lucius his real reasons for that – that the girl was more likely to get pregnant with his child if she only held his seed long enough inside of her, preferably with her legs up in the air as they were now. A more satisfying answer (and one that wasn't likely to get either of them killed or, at the very least, get the girl gutted) would have to be devised.

"She hates it," Severus supplied. "Miss Granger will yield to my cock willingly enough, knowing the pleasures it can give her – and to be honest, she often likes it rough, which serves me only too well. But to have me defile her, befouling her with my seed… that she deplores. You should have seen her earlier. It was all I could do to mangle the wand from her eager fingers before she could clean herself up."

Lucius grinned at that.

"I understand your need for leaving an imprint, a memory for Miss Granger to take to her own bed," he said. "But don't you worry that she might carry some half-blood spawn of yours? That she might bring subpar life into our world?"

Severus chuckled emptily, though to Lucius it would have appeared dark. The girl's eyes were wide. Surely she now understood that Severus was bargaining for the security of her internal organs here.

"I am a Potions Master," Severus stated, as if that was answer enough, and really, it should be, but he offered more – just to be on the safe side. "Do you think I would allow my seed anywhere near Miss Granger if she was in danger of contracting a brat?"

Lucius seemed to relax at that, and strangely enough, so did the girl. It was true, Severus supposed, that they had never really talked about the chance of her getting pregnant. It had served him well, he
knew, not needing to explain his real demand of her. Then again, if the girl had been sleeping around on him during the holidays, shouldn't he be worried about the lack of her concerns for the matter of motherhood?

"Now, would you like to set Miss Granger up for her lesson with you?"

Lucius grinned, and the expression unsettled Severus even more than he'd already been unsettled.

"Yes, Severus," his friend agreed, "I believe I would like that, indeed. Although Miss Granger's current position has plenty of merit, I do think she might benefit from a lesson in submission to go with her oral training. Wouldn't you agree?"

Severus simply nodded, agreeing to Lucius's demand to have the girl kneeling before him, and slowly let the girl's legs slide down his from his shoulder, setting them down so they hang over the edge of his desk. Offering her a hand, he helped her sit up, then hop off the desk and stand.

Only, standing appeared to be a problem, as the girl tumbled straight into his person.

The night had progressed at a rapid pace. Hours of the professor pleasuring her, either with his wickedly talented fingers or with his raging hard cock, had gone by in a heartbeat. It must have been well past midnight, though, when he helped her onto his desk, and even more time had passed since then. Hermione estimated the current time to be at early Sunday morning, so curfew would be over soonish. It would be better if she was back in bed by then, though, rather than be caught traversing the castle from the dungeons back to her tower dorm room.

She had never felt as invigorated as she did under the professor's powerful attentions, and even though her lust had toned down to zero the moment she recognized Lucius Malfoy as the one intruding upon them, her adrenaline levels had gone right up, keeping her excited and, most of all, awake.

Now that the professor had helped her up from the desk, though, all the blood that had been pooling in her head earlier was given the opportunity to rush downwards into her legs, and rush it did. The combination of the blood loss in her head and the sudden influx of blood circulation in her legs did her in. Her legs suddenly felt as if Hermione was standing in a hill of fire ants, and they gave out underneath her body. Her head didn't fare much better, as her vision blurred and her sense of orientation failed to help her differentiate between up and down.

When she found herself falling into a body, her subconscious telling her that it must be the professor, she held on for dear life, afraid of embarrassing herself even more in front of Mr Malfoy by tumbling to the ground. And there they stood, in an awkward embrace that had Hermione clutching the professor's robes around his waist while he was holding her shoulders as if that would keep her upright now.

It occurred to Hermione that this might be the most intimate physical connection they had ever shared outside of sex.

Of course, their awkward non-embrace was over as soon as it had begun. The professor held her at arm's length to see if she was able to stand by herself, and released his hold on her the moment he was assured that she wouldn't topple over.

With the blood gone from her head, Hermione felt inexplicably sleepy all of a sudden. Her eyes drooped and even though she had regained her step, remaining upright became harder and harder to do.
When a huge yawn tore its way out of her tired body, the professor turned to Lucius.

"Much as Miss Granger is a usually eager student, it appears that after her rather exhausting detention, she won't be very receptive towards your teachings tonight, Lucius."

"It would appear so," Mr Malfoy agreed, "although that has never kept me from taking on a student before."

"By all means, proceed as you see fit," the professor said, gesturing vaguely towards Hermione's tired form, now shaking slightly in the coldness of the room, naked as she was, "but don't go complaining on me when her tiredness makes her jaw go slack on you, trapping your wand between her teeth."

The blonde wizard shuddered at that and came to a decision.

"Very well then," he acceded. "But I will be expecting Miss Granger to be serving another detention for her insolence. Wouldn't you agree, Severus?"

The professor looked at her, and Hermione thought for a moment to detect a grain of resignation there. Enraged as he had always been at the mere implication that she might have been engaging other men, it appeared that the Potions Master was equally reluctant to share her with one of his friends.

"Of course," the professor confirmed. Turning to Hermione, he said, "Be back at my office at the same time next week, Miss Granger. And dress properly next time, as you would for any lesson. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione meekly replied.

"Good. You are dismissed."

Hermione's mumbled 'Good night, sir, my lord' went unnoticed by either man, as the professor asked, "How about that Old Odgen's now, Lucius?"

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter thirty-six, wherein gratitude is offered in a store room.
XXXVI

Sunday, February 1st, 1996

Feeling disorientated, tired, and emotionally exhausted could not make Hermione repeat the same
mistake she had made the last time she was forced to walk the long distance back to her common
room in the middle of a winter night, stark naked. This time, she knew to cast a Heating charm, and
to keep it whirling around her Disillusioned form as she sneaked her way up to Gryffindor tower.

A long night full of fabulous sex – surprisingly so, considering how awkward their first time together
had been – with the professor had deteriorated into a surprise visit from Mr – no, from Lord Malfoy,
and she had almost been forced into servicing him with her mouth, a feat that even Sirius had never
once demanded of her. When he had been 'up' for it, the Black heir had always chosen her quim over
her mouth, a fact that Hermione had been glad for at the time. Now, she had to wonder if it might not
have been in her favour to gain at least some experience in doing… that… with a man who desired
her and admired her and would do nothing to hurt her.

But she had gratefully opted to go with Sirius's wishes, something she now regretted as it was falling
to Lucius Malfoy, of all people, to take up the task of rectifying that mistake.

Hermione was aware that she should be worried, panicked, even, at the thought of what would be
expected of her the following weekend. But she was simply so knackered after this rollercoaster of
emotions that the night had been for her, that she felt a certain numbness that negated any worry that
might otherwise have crept into her graceless heart. Worry would need to come later, she decided.
First, she needed the blessed comfort of her bed and a few hours' sleep.

Monday, February 2nd, 1996

The morning lessons had been largely uneventful, although Hermione felt saddened that they had
become so used to the madness of Umbridge's lessons that, if they were not madder than usual, she
would describe them as 'uneventful'. Her body and mind still had not caught up to the shock of
Lucius Malfoy barging in on them mid-action and demanding that Hermione please him orally.

The catching-up did happen, however, the second Professor Snape billowed into the dungeon
classroom. Hermione realized that Lord Malfoy need not necessarily be the first man she welcomed
into her mouth. Perhaps she could convince the professor to have that honour.

After picking up the necessary ingredients for the day's potion from the store room with the other
students, Hermione settled into her usual back row corner seat and waited. Of course, she did not sit
idle, but started on her brew. Mentally broadcasting impressions of her memorable night with the
Potions Master had him by her side the moment he had made sure that no student was about to blow
up the classroom anytime soon.

"Miss Granger," he drawled into her ear, having come to stand so closely behind her that he did not
even need to lean in to do so, "is there something you wish to tell me about your weekend activities
that I do not yet know of myself?"

Hermione smiled.
"Oh yes, professor," she said. "I wished to thank you for the educating night, and for all that you did for me."

"All that I did for you, Miss Granger?" the professor queried. "Do you mean all five that I did for you?"

"Yes, those," Hermione agreed readily, blushing at the mention of the number of orgasms that he had drawn from her, "and for your quick thinking, and the protection that came out of it."

"My 'quick thinking'," Severus repeated hollowly. "I fancy myself a quick thinker in general, Miss Granger, so I see not what nobility lay in that attribute for you this weekend. As for the protection, I have no idea what you are talking about."

The girl had the audacity to widen her smile.

"Of course you don't, professor," she replied, agreeing to his unspoken request not to mention how he had talked her inner organs and her general well-being out of the severe danger they had been in from Lucius. "But either way, I am grateful, and I would like to show you how grateful."

The innuendo was clearly audible in her voice, and for a moment Severus had to wonder what kind of deviant he had created by bedding the girl. A second later, he decided that in this instant, he didn't even want to care. All he wanted to do was use that deviance, and to satisfy himself on whatever the girl was about to offer.

"Is that why you are projecting your perspective of your… detention for everyone who might be looking for it?"

Severus accompanied the question by grabbing the girl's hips and pulling them backwards into his groin. He sighed, inwardly, when his raging bulge that had hardened the second the girl began her mental assault nestled into her bum. He had not hesitated to erect the usual wards and charms that would keep the students from turning their heads to see where the Potions Master had gone, and they wouldn't hear or see anything, even if they strained their ears to listen or did happen to turn around and look.

"Well, I had to get your attention somehow, sir, didn't I?"

He appreciated that the girl fell seamlessly into the agreed-upon form of address for their meetings of this nature. As long as she did not call him 'professor', Severus might be able to forget for a while that he was her teacher, she his student, and that he was molesting her in the middle of his classroom, during class, no less.

"You have it now, Miss Granger," Severus spoke directly into her ear, and he stiffened even more at the pleasured shudder that ran through the girl as his breath stroked the side of her face. "What exactly did you have in mind to show your gratitude?"

At that, the girl swallowed. Wondering why she would choose to become nervous now, of all times, Severus decided to alleviate her nerves – and promptly slipped his hand into the band of her skirt, diving into the front of her knickers and cupping her soft mound.

Sighing and leaning back into his taller body, the girl enjoyed his ministrations for a while, the soft stroking of his hand, his fingers parting her folds, and his slick digits teasing her nub. Eventually, she spoke.

"I wish to thank you… orally," she pressed out.
Severus's hand stilled. He was not sure what reaction was expected from him at that statement. As a man, it was probably perfectly understandable how his cock twitched and how his blood rushed into his lower regions to accompany the longing for the wet cavern of the girl's mouth. A sliver of rationality remained, however, and it cautioned him against agreeing to any sexual acts that the girl was likely only suggesting out of fear.

"Please, sir," the girl continued, even more nervous at his lack of reaction than at spelling out her initial offer, "please, I wish to please you that way, if you'll allow it."

Severus swallowed thickly and decided to take the high road.

"What makes you say that, Miss Granger?" he asked, not unkindly. "Are you only offering because you are afraid of the Lord Governor?"

The girl did not even flinch at the preposterous title Lucius still assumed for himself. It was true, the man was so deep in so many pockets of the current governors that it made little difference whether he himself carried that title or not, he might as well style himself one. Still, that the girl did not speak up against the moniker now, worried Severus.

"No," she said, too quickly. That, she seemed to notice herself, for she amended, "Yes, it is true that I am afraid of my next detention, sir, but this is not the sole reason for my offer. I promised that all my sexual relations would be with you, and you alone. It pains me that you must give me to another, but I understand your reasons. If I have to please the Lord Governor, though, I would rather he doesn't get something I then can never give to you – that first experience."

Severus was taken aback. Time and time again did the girl surprise him by offering him aspects of her innocence. His heart, resting behind the watch that contained the most precious gift a woman could offer to a man, grew heavy in the knowledge that he did not deserve her naïve kindness in the least.

Of course, that would not stop him from taking her up on that offer.

"Choosing the lesser of two evils, Miss Granger?" he asked, masking how moved he was by her innocence, so freely given. "Well, it would be impolite of me to reject such a generous offer. Let Lucius have my sloppy seconds, if he so desires. I will assume that you are certain in your conviction to demonstrate your gratitude to me in this way?"

The girl merely nodded, still facing away from him.

"Very well," Severus said, stepping away from her body, "then we should not delay any longer."

A few twirls of his wand had the protective wards around them fall.

"I have always said that your knowledge of Potions is far too theoretical in nature, rather than practical, Miss Granger," he sneered, loud enough to gain the class's attention, "but I had hoped that what little intellect you possess might enable you to differentiate between armadillo bile and anteater bile. Yet what do we have here?"

With a wave of his hand, the contents of the girl's cauldron were Vanished.

"As I am a benevolent teacher," – his Slytherins snickered at this, as he had known they would – "I will not see this grave mistake of yours as a serious attempt to blow this whole room to shreds, along with everyone in it. Instead, I understand it as the thinly veiled criticism of my store room organization that you most certainly meant it to be.
"Well," Severus drawled, and his voice got dangerously low at the syllable, "if you believe you can
do better, Miss Granger, go ahead and implement what organizational system you think best. You
have the rest of the lesson for your task – and detention on Saturday night."

The Gryffindors gasped, Potter looked ready to murder him, and Draco had a very self-satisfied grin
on his face, as if he had singularly caused the girl to land in detention. Severus wondered shortly
whether Lucius had talked to the boy about what he had witnessed in the Head of House’s private
quarters this weekend. He decided that even Lucius was aware of how big a mouth his son had, and
would not go telling him things about Severus that might potentially harm his standing as Head.

Hanging her head, the girl made her way to the store room. Getting the class under control was no
easy feat, as it never was after some especially unfair punishment of a Gryffindor student.
Fortunately, the students were well used to the Potions Master's quick temper and did not act up for
longer than a minute, and even then only while his back was turned.

When they were calm and concentrated on their cauldrons as much as they ever were, Severus
sauntered over to the store room. Another few wards, unsuspiciously erected, had anyone who might
approach the door lose their desire of actually opening it. Slipping into the tiny room, Severus found
the girl bent at the waist, her bum to him.

Groaning, he stepped into the girl. She almost fell over, but he gripped her hips and held her tightly
to his groin, rubbing his hardness against her behind a few times before releasing her. Staggering a
little, the girl raised herself to stand straight.

"You startled me, sir," she accused him.

Severus could see that she had already begun shuffling containers about.

"Do you actually think that you could devise a better system than I, Miss Granger?" he queried.

"I do not, sir," the girl replied. "I do believe that there is a better system than the one currently in
place, but it would need an organized mind to understand it, and that is why you elected not to
implement it for the students' store room. I assume that your personal stores are organized
differently?"

Severus merely inclined his head, ever so slightly, but the girl had her answer.

"Of course, sir, you leave me no choice but to reorder the ingredients in here, so that the others may
think that I actually did something, rather than sit idle."

"You are wrong, Miss Granger," Severus said, "if you believe only for a second that after your
generous promise of a demonstration of your gratitude, I would let you 'sit idle' in here. Why do you
think I assigned you here?"

Understanding dawned on the girl's face, lighting up her whole expression, and her mouth fell open
in a beautiful ‘O’. Remembering how often he had wondered what it might be like to shut the girl up,
to fill her dumbstruck mouth when it had subconsciously opened, Severus revelled in the fact that he
would find out any minute now.

"Oh," the girl said. "Oh, right now, sir?"

Severus chuckled.

"Did you have anything better planned, Miss Granger?"
"Well," the girl replied, "actually, I was just about to reorder –"

"None of that now," Severus asserted. "You have bigger things to attend to."

Calm now, Hermione admonished herself, desperately trying to slow her racing heart. This is what you wanted, remember?

Remembering that little fact, that the professor was not forcing her to do anything she herself had not suggested she perform on him in the first place, became harder and harder to do as the professor parted his robes, opened a couple of the lower buttons on his frock coat, zipped down his fly, and took out his hard cock.

Hermione felt her eyes go wide. She had never really seen the professor's manhood before, and the sight was equally beautiful and frightening to her. To think that this would have fit into her tight opening was unfathomable for her, and to fit him into her mouth now seemed a daunting task.

Lord Malfoy's demand came to her mind, and she followed it for the professor. Kneeling in front of the man, Hermione looked up at him. To her surprise, he reached out to her. Cupping her face, the professor traced her lower lip, plucking at it with his thumb. Opening her mouth, Hermione kept her eyes trained on Professor Snape's as he guided his hardness into her mouth.

Wet, wet, wet, wet, wet, echoed through Severus's mind as the girl's mouth engulfed the tip of his cock. Merlin, did she even know how arousing it was to have her gaze locked with his own as he was inching into her? He thought not, but then again, the girl had always known things she had no business knowing, so perhaps this was just one instance of this.

He failed to follow that thought as the girl sucked experimentally. Her tongue pressed ever so slightly into the underside of his spongy head, trapping the tip of his cock against the roof of her mouth as her cheeks went concave with her applied suction. Her lips looked even plumper than usual, wrapped around his hardness as they were, and Severus groaned at the sight and feel of her first tentative blowjob.

Everything after that went by in a haze. Later, he would remember shoving himself deeper into the girl's mouth, how she had gagged as he hit the back of her throat, and how she had set to pleasuring him. Her technique was sloppy, rather than refined, but Severus did not expect anything else, nor was 'sloppy' a bad thing, exactly, when it came to receiving head.

He was certain that Lucius would teach her finesse, but that was not what Severus desired right now. What he received was far more precious – he got to experience her innocence, her curiosity, her sense for adventure and experiments. He got to enjoy the girl in all her naturalness, all her unsophistication, and for once that was a good thing, a fabulous thing. Without technique to guide her, with only instincts telling her what to do and how to please him, the experience had a rawness to it that had Severus come far quicker than he usually would.

The girl spluttered and coughed, trying desperately to empty her lungs of his ejaculate while simultaneously swallowing down everything he had to give her. The whole affair was messy, but Severus found himself unable to call it 'not pretty'. There was an attraction to seeing his seed on the girl's face that allowed his cock to harden again, almost instantly.

Helping the girl up from where she was kneeling on the floor, Severus bade her turn around. Placing her hands against a shelf that she could comfortable brace herself against, he spread her legs. A whispered spell had her knickers in his trouser pocket.
"They will turn back to their natural colour and shape in a few hours, sir," the girl explained without being asked.

"In that case," Severus replied, "I suppose you will have to come to me to collect them. Or better yet, to recast the charm. But that is a discussion for another time, wouldn't you agree, Miss Granger?"

Whether her moaned 'yes' was the agreement to his rhetorical question, or whether it was her consent to what they were about to do, or whether it was an expression of her triumph at the sensation of Severus's cock penetrating her once more, he could not say, nor did he particularly care. His manhood split open her nether lips, sinking deep into her core, and finally bottoming out.

"I believe you will need to fail in your reorganization of my store room, Miss Granger," he drawled into her ear as he withdrew his cock until only the tip remained nestled inside her cunt. "After all, I have just devised a far better way for you to spend the rest of this lesson. Any complaints?"

"None," the girl panted, "except – could you move, maybe, sir? This teasing drives me mad."

Severus did not reply – not verbally, at least. All the answer the girl got was his cock, driving into her with abandon, in and out, until they were both satisfied.

"Sir?" the girl asked after they had finished, pulling down her skirt from where Severus had pushed it up. "May I have my knickers back now?"

Severus watched where the girl's hands smoothed over the fabric of her skirt, stroking her own bum in the process.

"No," he simply replied.

Too exhausted to argue, or knowing that no discussion would help her in this case, the girl did not deign his refusal fit for an answer. Instead she pulled out her wand and made to clean herself. Severus gripped her hand as he had in his private quarters, blocking her from Vanishing every trace of him from her body.

"Don't," he commanded, and the girl looked up at him in confusion. Severus's gaze softened ever so slightly as he explained, "I may have twisted the facts a little for Lucius on Saturday night, but I have been truthful about one thing: I like to have you bearing my imprint on you all day."

The girl's mouth fell open, but no retort was forthcoming.

"It's not a punishment, contrary to what I said then," Severus elaborated, "but rather part of the experience of having intercourse. I cannot control your actions throughout the day, but I would prefer it if you heeded my wishes in this case. Do not Vanish the results of our coupling from you until tomorrow morning, Miss Granger."

"If you really don't want me to clean up," the girl asked hesitantly, "then why don't you make it part of our agreement? Why not a task for my lessons with you?"

Severus hesitated for just a moment.

"I could," he said. "But I would rather you do me this favour than force this on you. A cleaning spell should take so little magic out of you that you should be able to perform it, wandlessly and non-verbally, even when hurt and exhausted. As it is, it would be ridiculous to make it part of your training to live under this condition – spoiled."
The girl nodded. Whether she was accepting his reasoning or his plea, Severus could not say, but for
the moment, she put her wand away, and that was answer enough.

After the professor had left the store room, satisfied with having come twice – once in her mouth,
and once inside her core – he had tasked her with Occluding some more, while practicing her
wandless magic by continuing with the reorganisation of the ingredients. Hermione did not even
notice the passing of time, so concentrated was she on balancing the containers of potentially volatile
and often rather expensive ingredients, that she jumped in surprise when the door to the store room
was magically pulled open.

"Still not done, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape queried with a malicious grin on his face. Hermione
could see the students behind him watching the exchange. "It appears your system is really not
superior to mine."

A flick of his wand had the containers zooming back to where he had put them before Hermione had
begun the tedious task of reordering them.

"You will sort back any unused ingredients that your classmates have left on their worktables.
Everybody else, turn in your concoctions now."

Her head held low, Hermione began to sort through the remainders of potions ingredients that were
left on the tables, scattered around cauldrons. What was unprocessed and lay far enough away from
other ingredients not to have interacted with them, she sorted back into their respective containers in
the store room, now back to the professor's original system. She was working so diligently that she
was surprised as the half-empty vial of armadillo bile that she was about to carry back shot out of her
hand.

Turning around, she found the professor magically sending all uncontaminated ingredients to their
stores. Other than the two of them, the classroom was empty.

"Miss Granger, a word," the professor demanded.

Hermione quickly packed her bag and slung it over her shoulder, then walked to the front of the
class. The professor sat in the high-backed chair behind his desk.

"Come here," he said, beckoning her to him.

Hermione followed his request without a second thought.

The professor turned her around so that her backside was to him, and motioned for her to lean onto
the desk. She did not question him, not even when she felt his hands travel up the inside of her legs.

"Your skirt," he said quietly, "is short enough for my seed to become visible if you stand for too
long."

Blushing profusely, Hermione started when the Potions Master's fingers began scooping his ejaculate
up, pushing it up her inner thighs, and even back into her core. Hermione fidgeted a little at the
foreign feeling, but did not even try to escape his ministrations.

"There," he eventually assessed when he was done, "better now. Nobody needs to know where you
get your satisfaction from. It is enough that you know that you are mine."

Hermione drew in a shaky breath.
"Am I, sir?" she asked. "Yours?"

"Are you not?" he returned, and that was that.

There was nothing she could say to counter him.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter thirty-seven, wherein a painting is being dreaded.
Thursday, February 5th, 1996

Today's task was not an easy one, not that Hermione had expected anything less of the professor. The concentration necessary to juggle several knives and other tools for ingredient preparation, plus the stirring rod, not to mention doing so wandlessly— it would have been a Herculean task in itself, but Hermione had to brew magically and wandlessly while Occluding.

"Please, sir," she had asked when the professor had set her this impossible task, "what about any adverse reactions that some ingredients might have to being directly exposed to magical interference?"

The professor had merely stared her down some more, in this way that he had of doing so.

"We have been over this, Miss Granger, if I am correct," and they both had known that he was. "Intent, above all else, will determine the outcome of the magic you are casting. If you will your magic not to interact with the ingredients' properties, then it will not do so."

And thus it had come that Hermione was feeling her brain burn through from the high-wired concentration she needed to keep up if she was disinclined, as she was, to blow herself up, and the whole class with her. It was all she could do to maintain a sliver of a wall surrounding her mind as the professor was trying to break through while patrolling the classroom.

Things relaxed a little when all the ingredients had finally been added into the cauldron and all that was left to do was stir. Of course, intricate and exact stirring movements were not much easier than attempting not to chop your own fingers off with magic knives, but at least Hermione didn't need to multitask anymore… too much.

Enough mental capacity freed to fortify her mental barriers, Hermione was so intent on strengthening her Occlumency shields that she noticed barely anything of her surroundings. As it was, she almost jumped into her cauldron in fright when the Potions Master suddenly appeared at her side.

"Where is your quill, Miss Granger?" he asked without much (or any) preamble.

"It's in my book bag, sir," Hermione replied, trying not to let her confusion show.

"Retrieve it for me, if you will."

Letting the cauldron out of her sight was a huge risk, Hermione knew. Magically performing a task was far easier when you could actually watch what you were doing. That was a big part of the reason why the professor had not yet broken into her mind during the lesson, she thought. With Hermione's eyes trained on her potionering tools, Professor Snape had not been able to gain the perfect angle for a brute force attack on her mind.

Bending down now to search for her quill amidst all the books that were crammed inside her bag, while continuing both to stir and to Occlude, proved almost too much for her mind, but she managed somehow. Rushing to a standing position again after getting ahold of her quill, Hermione felt her blood singing through her body, but the stirring continued and her mind was still protected.

Professor Snape took the quill from her hand. Twirling the feather between his fingers and perusing the beautifully worked tip, he was not even looking at her when he said, "Open your blouse, Miss Granger."
It took her a moment to have the words register in her brain, as it refused to accept their meaning for what her ears had heard.

"Excuse me?" she spluttered eventually.

"You heard me," came the dry reply.

"Why?"

The word was equally confusion, worry, and indignation. Of course, considering all that had happened in the dungeon classroom between the two of them – her bleeding determinedly to her death, him fingering her to orgasm, the two of them engaging in sexual acts in the store room – opening her blouse was a rather small demand, really. Nevertheless, Hermione refused to just follow the Potions Master's every command, simply because he wished it so.

"Because," the professor returned, "you are generally paying attention whenever a teacher is talking to you."

Again, Hermione needed a few moments until she realized what question the professor had answered. His reply did not fit the question she had meant to ask, namely why did he see fit for her to open her blouse. His reply was meant for the question she had put into words – why had she heard him?

*Leave it to the professor to twist her every word around,* Hermione thought.

"Now follow my request."

Hermione was too mentally exhausted to point out that technically speaking, there had never been a request, only a command. Instead of talking back, she just ignored him.

She started when his fingers gripped her wrist, raising her arm and stretching it a little to the side. Feeling the air ripple against her fingertips, Hermione became aware of the wards surrounding them. None of her classmates would see or hear what she and the professor were doing back here. In fact, the wards went so far that none of them would even think to turn around and look.

"Opening buttons will help school your mental separation of physical and magical tasks," the professor explained, much to Hermione's surprise, when she still had not begun to open her blouse. "As of now, you are still focussing on the aspect of stirring that is the motion. You need to train your ability to concentrate on multiple motoric tasks at once, and some of them perhaps executed in different ways – one wandlessly with magic, one manually with your fingers."

Not wasting another moment, Hermione's fingers deftly began to pop the buttons of her blouse out of their holes. The steady circles of her stirring rod faltered slightly, becoming shaky, but the rod's motion was never fully interrupted.

"Good girl," the professor complimented her, and Hermione had to temper down her preening before she lost all concentration.

That became even harder to do when the professor's hand came up to cup her cheek. His thumb went to caress her bottom lip, lingering there for a moment. It reminded them both of their last Potions lesson together, when her lips had been wrapped around his cock. It also brought back memories of how she had kissed Professor Snape's thumb a moment before he took her virginity.

The professor's hand did not remain on her face for long. Sliding down the curve of her neck, it trailed lightly over her collarbone…
...before turning her around and forcefully yanking her blouse down her arms. The fabric came to rest midway down her upper arms, effectively trapping her arms behind her back.

When the girl turned back around, slowly, so as not to provoke another action of his like this one just now, Severus marvelled at his work. With the girl's arms secured behind her back, her spine straightened, thus pushing her breasts out towards him beautifully. Her blouse, now off her shoulders, was opened far enough to reveal the girl's front completely.

Bringing the quill up to his lips, Severus whispered a spell over the feathery length of it, the words of which were too quiet for the girl to hear.

"Stand very still now, Miss Granger," he bade her.

She was already concentrating on her cauldron and on managing the stirring rod, Severus could see, electing to fulfil her task rather than fight against the fabric holding her arms back. Whether she heard him or not, Severus did not know, but was happy to find out.

Deliberately tracing the tip of the quill's plume over the girl's stomach, Severus was fascinated to see goose bumps break out all over the soft plane of her belly. The girl's lips twisted into a smile and allowed a soft giggle to slip through before her mask of indifferent determination fell back into place. Severus had to smile despite himself. It had been a long time since he had tickled anyone, and he revelled in the fact that he was still able to perform such an innocuous act, and that he had somebody as innocent as the girl, for him to tickle.

He was not done, though - far from it.

Setting the plume back to the girl's skin, Severus began in earnest.

Maintaining her shields and the steady stirring motion became harder and harder to do, Hermione found, the longer Professor Snape traced the quill over her stomach. She did not dare to look down, lest the fact that he was using a feather on her very sensitive, very ticklish skin became real enough for her to break out in laughter and lose all concentration that she had worked so hard to build up.

That determination not to look failed, however, when Hermione felt something warm trickle down her belly.

Lowering her gaze, she saw red.

Red.

Blood red.

Severus watched the emotions in the girl's eyes change from forcibly reigned in amusement to open shock. She had been unaware that his almost-silent charm had strengthened and sharpened the quill's feather to a deadly, cutting edge.

And cut, he did.

Severus was painting the girl's skin in her own blood. It was difficult, doing what he did, because levelling the cuts to a fineness that they would not slash her stomach open to expel her entrails was a subtle art. Far more subtle, even, was painting with the quill as he did. The wounds being so miniscule, they did not immediately leak blood, so Severus was essentially drawing blindly. Keeping
the bigger picture in his mind and following it to the end, was by no means an easy task.

The cuts were so fine that they did not register as wounds at first, he knew. They were so cleanly
drawn, and so softly inflicted, that the girl had not even felt them in the first place. Only when the
sensation of warm life force running down her stomach in tiny rivulets registered with her, had she
been made aware of the fact that she was bleeding.

And bleed, she did.

Hermione had not quite gotten over the brightness of this particular shade of red, when she began to
seriously worry over the sheer amount of that colour. It had all started out as a ticklish feeling that
had then turned out to be very fine, very soft, very clean cuts. So clean were they, in fact, that the
wounds failed to knit themselves back together, thus substantially stalling the healing process.
Hermione knew that coagulation would be slow to set in, and that natural healing was impaired by
the nature of those wounds.

She did not even realize that she was becoming dizzy, until the crimson redness began to fill her
whole perception.

Dizziness aside (and wouldn't it be wonderful if things worked as easily as that?), the wounds now
began to hurt. Hurt. Awareness, as if happened so often, had brought with it the pain that lay behind
those plentiful, artfully inflicted, miniature wounds. And still, the professor continued to draw
patterns onto her skin, slashing her open with every movement of her own quill, leaving the skin red
and tender.

Hermione forcibly withdrew her gaze from the sight that was her bleeding stomach. The dizziness
receded somewhat, and she helped force it back into inexistence by focussing her mind on two tasks:
stirring, and Occluding.

She would not fail in this one.

"What colour is this supposed to be?" the professor asked loudly when Hermione handed in her vial
of potion at the end of the lesson. "I was asking for a clear turquoise, not mud drenched in food
colouring."

Wandlessly chopping and slicing and juicing the ingredients had not procured quite the standard of
results Professor Snape was used from her, Hermione knew, nor had the increasingly irregular and
unsteady stirring helped matters any. As it was, the results that could be found in her cauldron by the
time the professor had been done painting wounds onto her unmarred body, were subpar.

To be fair, they were still above the skill level of all of her classmates - even Malfoy's concoction
was only barely blue, so the opaque brown-blue colour Hermione had managed was actually the best
result in class today - but when was the professor ever fair to her, least of all publically, in front of the
other students, and Slytherins at that.

He had stemmed the blood flow from her wounds with a simple spell, and cleaned the leaked blood
from her skin, having a house elf take care of her skirt as he had the last term, just before Christmas,
when he'd bled her. Instead of healing her cuts or even granting her some Blood Replenishing
Potion, the professor had left her wounds fresh and open, merely blocking the flow so that her blouse
would not bleed through. Another charm had the fabric of her blouse repel blood, so that in case
anything ripped, cancelling the spell that kept the blood inside her body, it would not be easily visible
to others.
"Do not heal yourself, Miss Granger," the professor had commanded. "I will personally deal with them later tonight."

And as she was leaving the classroom, her head lowered in shame at being called out for her subpar results in front of the whole class, despite still coming out on top of the others, Hermione cursed the professor. It appeared that he felt the constant need to leave an imprint on her at all times – on Monday, it had been his seed, this time she was leaving with his wounds. She felt that imprint very acutely. Every action that resulted in any movement of any kind on her sensitive stomach, including her every breath and her every step, hurt.

Hermione hurt, and the professor was the only one who could soothe that pain.

She was looking forward to her nightly bath.

Friday, February 6th, 1996

It was a quarter past two when the water surrounding Hermione's floating form lit up.

Immersing herself in the prefects' pool had been harder than usual tonight, the soap doing little to soothe her still open wounds, but Hermione had pushed herself to do so anyway. Now she was Occluding as usual, at the ground of the tiled tub, and watching the swirls of green bubble bath in the water around her.

She had been prepared for the professor's entry tonight, drawing more oxygen than usual into the water in preparation for his cutting off her air supply. *If only they had read more books on magical theory,* she pondered for a moment, *then Harry might have gone into the Black Lake without worrying about his gillyweed-induced gills receding into nothingness.* Then again, she thought to herself, Harry was not the most disciplined of students, and for him to study magical focus and intent to such an extent that he might be able to breathe underwater for an hour or more was highly unlikely, not to mention him continuing to do so when faced with unknown water creatures and angry merpeople.

As it was, Hermione's breathing was fine and secure, and she found the time and peace of mind to wonder at the light that shone through the surface of the pool. It appeared that the professor had lit the sconces lining the walls which she herself had neglected to do - for the reason of being harder to find, and because she knew the bathroom so well by now that she could navigate it in the dark without issue.

Hermione wondered for a while whether or not it might be prudent to abandon her Occlumency practice right away rather than having the Potions Master wait until she ran out of oxygen. But that course of action would mean that Professor Snape could heal her wounds, and Hermione was aware that this would be counterproductive to strengthening her ability to withstand pain for longer periods of time.

Mulling that question over for long enough, answered it for her. She had not noticed how much time had passed, but the moment had come at which breathing became well-near impossible, and she knew she had to get out.

Pushing herself off of the ground of the bathtub, Hermione allowed her body to float upwards until her head and shoulders broke through the surface. As expected, the professor had been waiting for her.

"Good evening, sir," she greeted politely.
"Miss Granger," came the reply, that in itself surprising her. "I see that your proclivity for copious amounts of bathing essence has not receded in the face of recent developments."

Hermione tried so very hard not to smile at his not-a-question.

"I found no reason to cut back on my rare indulgences," she returned, "considering that pain is never far from pleasure - so why not the other way around?"

Severus eyes lit up at this, he knew, but was unable to do anything against it. The girl in all probability thought that they were still talking about how well her wounds fared in soapy water, but her answer had spurred on a completely different line of thought in his mind. Did she really, as she had just said, believe that pleasure could be gained from pain? If that was the case, perhaps her time with Lucius, and with himself as their private lessons progressed towards more violent measures of education, would not be too hard on her.

"Will you come out and play tonight, Miss Granger?" he asked, changing the subject.

The girl visibly swallowed.

"What game would you suggest, sir?" she hesitantly queried.

Severus smiled, and the sight wasn't pretty.

"Perhaps not a game as much as a form of entertainment," he replied and found the girl relaxing a bit at that. Continuing to crush her hopes at some mild sex play, he elaborated, "There is a canvas I have not quite finished with. Would you like to watch me paint, Miss Granger?"

He watched as all blood left the girl's face. For her own interest, he hoped that it wasn't settling in her stomach. Merlin knew it wouldn't last long there.

_Painting._

Hermione had been rather adept at this pastime, when she was younger. She could not for the life of her remember why she had abandoned that hobby growing up, but she vaguely assumed that it had something to do with her growing interest in the written word, rather than colourful pictures. Either way, painting had never been something she dreaded.

Until now.

She had hoped that he would be healing her when he joined her in the bathroom, as he had done after her whipping. Thinking back to his phrasing of the lesson earlier that day, she realized that the professor had merely said that he'd 'deal with them' this night, meaning her wounds. It appeared to her now that he might have no intention of healing them, electing to further them instead.

Plastering a shaky smile upon her face, she said, "Of course, sir," and swam to the ladder that would lead her out of the pool.

That ladder, incidentally, was directly in front of the professor, granting him a top notch view of her naked, glistening wet body as she left the bath. His eyes, which had been the deepest black before, darkened at the sight, and she blushed under his scrutiny. The red in her cheeks could not solely be contributed to her nerves under the professor's intense gaze, though - they stemmed equally from her pride at catching his attention in such a manner.
"Do you have all the tools you need, sir, or will I need to fetch my quill for you again?" Hermione cheekily queried.

The Potions Master's eyes narrowed at her gall, as they were both well aware that her book bag was safely stowed in her dorm room, several floors away.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he smoothly, silkily returned, "but no, I will not require your quill tonight. I have everything I need."

And with that, he pulled out a beautiful black raven's plume. Hermione marvelled at the blue shine to the dark colour, yet dreaded the fascinating danger that lay behind the pretty sight.

"What I require of you," the professor continued as all the sconces went out around them, drenching the room in a black so dark and dense that Hermione almost wanted to cut through it with a knife, "is a little light. You will not need your wand for that, no fancy words, nor, in fact, your hands -," at which they were bound by invisible restraints behind her back, though everything was invisible in this darkness surrounding them, really, "- all you will need, Miss Granger, is a little concentration and perhaps some intent. After all, it is in your best interests that I do not spoil this piece of art, isn't it?"

Hermione breathed in a gasp as she realized how close the professor had come. His steps had been muffled and she had not noticed his approach. Now that his robes softly brushed against her legs, she could not ignore his closeness any longer.

Pinching her eyes shut, Hermione concentrated, hard. When she heard the professor sigh exaggeratedly, she knew she had accomplished at least a small part of her task.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "much better. Although in this tiny flame, it will be a wonder if I can stick to the larger picture. Then again, it is your body, Miss Granger, is it not? Who am I to judge what you let me do with it. I'll just plunge right in..."

And so it began. With warm tears leaking down her weeping stomach, Hermione desperately tried to light the sconces lining the walls, and keep them lit. Ignoring the constant drip-drip-drip of her blood upon the wet bathroom floor, she focused her concentration as best she could.

It would be a long night.
Saturday, February 7th, 1996

Dinner had been cut short for Hermione when she had made to leave for her detention. When the boys had questioned her about her early departure, she had been forced to remind them of the very publically announced night of detention for her. She had also used the opportunity to explain to Harry and Ron that they should not wait up for her as she expected this particular detention to be an all-nighter. She did not want the boys lingering in the common room only to find her sneaking back early the next morning.

They had been upset – with Professor Snape, this time, not with her – about her need to attend a detention for that long, but had reluctantly agreed that there was nothing to be done about that. With Umbridge roaming the castle, a simple case of unfair detention was nothing to trouble the headmaster with, and Hermione was glad that the boys agreed with her on that.

And so it came that, at precisely half past six, Hermione knocked three times against the heavy wood of Professor Snape's office door.

"Let me see your wounds," he demanded without preamble after he had magically closed the door behind her and warded it to his usual standards.

Slowly unbuttoning her blouse from the bottom upwards, Hermione left a few buttons closed between her breasts and only parted the fabric enough to reveal her stomach. The professor appeared so satisfied that Hermione couldn't help but follow his gaze.

Up until now, she had studiously avoided looking at the cuts. Awareness brought with it more pain, and so she had attempted to ignore her wounds to the best of her abilities. That had not helped with the hurt in her every step, in her every breath, but it had stemmed the pain a little during the times in which she simply lay in her bed, Occluding.

Startlingly enough, the picture that the professor had 'painted' was beautiful. She had not known that he possessed such skill, although with how meticulous he was in everything else, it really should not have surprised her to find that he was an adept painter, as well, if he put his mind to it.

Over her stomach spanned a delicate and detailed picture of lavender plants.

The cuts were so miniscule that they hardly showed, and most of the picture was made up of the different shades of red that her inflamed skin had turned to. The colour was all off for a sketch of lavender, of course, but somehow it fit.

The professor, it would turn out, disagreed.

"Beautiful," he assessed his own work, for Hermione did not think he would dream of bestowing a compliment upon the flat expanse of her stomach, "but the colour isn't right. The pale lavender is doing nothing for your lack of tan, Miss Granger."

They were both aware that her skin right now was nowhere near pale, nor was the sketch anywhere near a purple colour, much less that fine distinction that was so memorably lavender, but it mattered little. If the professor said that lavender was not for her, then it wasn't.

"I will need to find something more fitting to your tone of skin. Perhaps the Crimson Centella calcaria would be better suited. I believe you are familiar with that particular plant."
Familiar, oh yes. After all, Hermione had spent one and a half hours copying the chapter on that particular plant from 'Asiatic Anti-Venoms', thus cutting the words into her upper leg.

She didn't even bother to respond to that.

"Come, Miss Granger," the professor eventually said when it became clear that the matter of colour would not get a conversation out of her.

Together they went into his private quarters, stopping in the sitting room as they had before, while the professor further warded the entrance to and from his office.

"Why don't you undress so that I may heal you," he suggested, turning back to her.

Hermione scrambled to hide her surprise at the tender offer, and at the manner in which he had uttered the sentence. It astounded her how unusually free of hostility that sentence was. Where before she had been mainly passive tonight, that small sign of kindness stirred her into action.

Under the professor's smouldering gaze, Hermione undressed. At first it was only her blouse that fell away from her shoulders, dropping unceremoniously to the ground. Her bra soon followed, as the professor made no sign for her to stop, and the wounds did reach up high on her front.

Still, no command to stop undressing was issued, and so Hermione continued to let items of clothing fall from her body. Her skirt was next, followed by her knickers, a stormy-bluish shade of grey tonight. Only when she had stepped out of her shoes, did the professor think to halt her.

"Stop," he demanded, his voice barely above a whisper, when Hermione made to dislodge the stockings from her legs.

Hermione was strongly reminded of another time when he had requested that her stockings remain on, that one time, that first time, that now seemed such a long time ago.

Acquiescing to his request, she stilled.

"Since you were so relaxed about combining pain with pleasure last Thursday," he began, "I thought that we might combine pleasure with pleasure tonight."

Hermione was thoroughly confused. Combine pleasure with pleasure?

"It will not do for me to get aroused with Lord Malfoy present, as he would expect that I relieve that arousal with you, in front of him. I have already proven to him that I am not beyond taking you under his eyes, but I would rather avoid that as much as possible. Of course, it won't always be doable, and rather more often than not will you need to make yourself available to me with Lord Malfoy in the room, but for tonight, I am counting on a different outcome. Is that agreeable to you?"

Hermione hastened to agree, vigorously nodding her head when words were not quick enough to come to mind, so surprised was she by this turn in conversation.

"As it is, it might be better to wear myself out as much as possible before he arrives. And that is where double the pleasure comes into play."

Walking over to his desk, the professor casually opened his slacks that Hermione now found to be failing at hiding the hard bulge that had formed behind the fabric. As he sat down in the high-backed chair, his finger crooking was all the demand Hermione needed to follow him.

With his help, she climbed onto his lap, straddling him. The professor gave her a hand in raising
herself up far enough for him to slide into her tight channel. Sinking down onto his hard length, Hermione's moan drowned out the quiet sigh that escaped from the Potions Master's lips.

"Now lean back and brace yourself against my desk, Miss Granger," the professor commanded before Hermione could so much as think to begin moving on him. "I need your stomach as straight as possible if I am to heal it."

And finally things clicked into place for Hermione. He was giving her the pleasure of healing the multitude of wounds on her sore stomach, and she returned the pleasure by riding him. Well, grateful as she was for his expertise and especially his approval in healing her, who was she to deny him his own pleasure?

A content smile on her face that only hinted at the satisfaction that was to come for both of them, Hermione raised her hips and started to move.

After Severus had come with a slight shudder, and the girl with a wail that her lips, shutting closed in surprise at the sound coming out of her own mouth, could barely cut off, they remained seated where they were. Her stomach had long been healed, but Severus had had little desire to cut off her pleasurable venture into despoiling his desk chair.

Watching the girl come down from her high, as her eyes slowly opened after having been closed in her languor, helped remind Severus why exactly he had originally ordered her here.

"May I –"

The girl hesitated. He both hated and looked forward to her hesitation. Either something extremely insulting might come out of her mouth, or some very inappropriate request that he would be only too glad to grant her.

"May I clean you, sir?" she eventually dared ask. "With my mouth, I mean?"

Fortunately, it was the latter option of the two tonight.

"If you must," Severus drawled, but the embarrassed kind of excitement in the girl's eyes made him wonder if she hadn't noticed his joy at the question.

She was both hesitant and gentle, and the innocent air with which she took to licking his cock clean of their combined juices held an entrancing allure. The act endeared the girl to him in the way of already wanting to fuck her again.

"What if I cannot satisfy the Lord Governor this way?"

If he hadn't watched her mouth so very ardently, Severus might have missed that the girl had even spoken. Noticing the movement of her lips that had nothing to do with the kisses she was bestowing upon his quickly hardening manhood, he realized that perhaps words had come out of her mouth, and he tried his damnedest to remember what she might have said. Luckily, his mind was trained to splitting its focus many-a-ways, and had saved up her question, repeating it now so that Severus might become fully aware of its meaning.

"The Gryffindor princess, Miss Know-It-All herself, doubting her ability in something?" Severus scoffed. "Please, Miss Granger, do get a grip on yourself. With the proper instruction, anything should be possible for you, certainly?"

He made it a question, as if this statement was something the girl would say of herself, not as if he
himself had the fullest confidence in her learning and adapting skills.

"I am afraid of the Lord Governor's way of instructing me, sir," she quietly confessed, her voice smaller than he had ever heard her.

Reaching down to cup her face in a way that never failed to remind him of that first, almost innocuous blowjob she had given him these days, Severus replied, "Who said anything about the Lord Governor being the one to teach you?"

And so his instructions began to rain down on the girl. At times, she seemed to struggle a little in following his commands, but all in all she did very well. Apply more pressure with your tongue underneath the head, Miss Granger; lick the underside more liberally, Miss Granger; lightly, very lightly use your teeth to graze along the length, Miss Granger; Miss Granger, don't forget to maintain constant suction; and – his personal favourite – suck my balls, Miss Granger.

She was more adept at swallowing his ejaculate this time and did not end up with his come all over her face. Some of it dribbled down her chin, as she had been a little slow to swallow, but she casually used her fingers to scoop it up and into her mouth, licking the digits clean after she was done. Severus had to look away for a moment, for he did not trust his face to remain impassive at her actions.

"This is all and well," the girl spoke again, still kneeling between his legs, as if the last few minutes in which she had vigorously blown his cock had not happened, and as if she had not just cleaned her own face of his come after swallowing the lot, "but what if the Lord Governor won't be satisfied by my mouth, no matter what I do?"

"Lord Malfoy will not have you in that way, Miss Granger," Severus dismissed the fears he himself carried as well, although he would never admit that to the girl. "His fear of accidentally impregnating you is far too great."

"But he knows that you are a great Potions Master, sir," she insisted. "What if he demands the same means of contraceptive that you yourself are using?"

Severus was unsure for a moment. Was the girl merely carrying on the lie he himself had spun for Lucius, not falling out of character even when it was just the two of them? Or had she actually believed him when he had implied that he was using some form of contraceptive in order to avoid getting her with child?

He hoped that the latter option was the case, for that would work in his favour. If the girl was convinced that Severus was taking on the task of preventing her falling pregnant, she would not think the need to resort to measures of contraception herself.

"Lord Malfoy will not have you."

Hermione was somewhat touched by the possessiveness in the professor's voice as he impressed his desire never to allow the Lord Governor to take her. It also added to the relief that had coursed through her at the fact that Professor Snape did not contradict her assumption that he was utilizing some method of contraception. She was glad to be doubly protected if both of them were seeing to this issue, and she was glad not to have been wrong in her action of asking for the long-time-working dose of the Contraceptive Potion.

No matter how relieved she was with the issue of an unwanted pregnancy being settled, or how moved by the professor's possessiveness towards her, she could not quite shake the fear of Lord...
Malføy owning her in another way. In a way Lavender and Parvati had talked about in hushed whispers that she now wished she had never overheard.

"What if," she asked, her voice carrying her fear quite audibly, "what if the Lord Governor demands to have me in a way that even you have not had me yet?"

To say that he was shocked that the girl would bring up such advanced sexual procedures, would have been a gross understatement. Of course, her question was, unfortunately, a very valid one, and Severus counted himself lucky that at least he had not had to be the one to bring it up.

"That might indeed happen," he agreed quietly.

He watched as the girl visibly braced herself.

"And what then?" she asked. "Does an untouched orifice count as innocence, even if it is not protected by a barrier? Is it possible for the Lord Governor to gain power from that? Over me?"

"Only a very small amount of power," Severus answered, "and only if he were to draw blood on his entrance."

The girl swallowed thickly, that much he could see.

"Can we be sure that the Lord Governor will not seek to exploit that power?" she asked further. "Especially if he might have noticed how you protected me from him last weekend?"

"It was not protection that he saw," Severus corrected her, "it was possessiveness, a very Slytherin trait. I do not share my toys, nor does Lord Malføy share his, much as he likes stealing and occasionally breaking the toys of his comrades."

Perhaps talking about how much Lucius enjoyed breaking his playthings had not been the best course of action, Severus had to admit to himself, as the girl's eyes filled with salty water that she somehow managed not to spill.

"The fact that you do not share, combined with the fact that I must be what he would probably label a worthless toy," the girl carried on as if Severus had not been talking about the man who was coming tonight to use her mouth for his own pleasure, and about that man's proclivity to damage the women he used, "might that not be all the more incentive for him to b-break me?"

He had to give it to the girl, if only inwardly, of course; she was brave. Stupidly so, as every Gryffindor was stupid in their bravery, but still, she was braver than most of the lot.

"I agree, Miss Granger," Severus said. "I suggest using a strengthening spell on your skin. He can only gain power from your innocence if the blood he draws comes from a naturally caused wound, without blades or magic involved. The penetration will hurt more when the skin involved is magically strengthened, being less flexible and diminishing its ability to stretch that way, but if I cast it strong enough, there is no possibility that any of your blood might be drawn. You would be safe."

He did not need to add that the girl's safety would lie in the aspect of Lucius not gaining any power from her innocence only, and that she would still be subject to the pain he would doubtlessly inflict upon her. Severus could simply take the girl that way first, of course, but there was not enough time. He did not wish to hurt her, and preparation would take too long. Besides, he was almost certain that the matter was too delicate for the girl not to give away her lack of experience in that aspect. Inexperience with her mouth, she might be able to fake, and convincingly so, but her bum was a wholly different matter altogether.
"I agree."

The girl's breath brushed against Severus's manhood that had somehow, miraculously, managed to rise itself from its post-orgasmic languor. How it was possible for his cock to be ready for more action after having spent itself twice in quick succession already, Severus did not know, but he was glad that it was happening now and not later, with Lucius present. He knew that it was far more pleasant for him to get hard from the sight of the girl kneeling between his own legs, rather than watching her kneel between Lucius's.

"Shall we adjourn to the sofa, Miss Granger?" he asked, but did not wait for her to reply. Grasping her offered hand in his much stronger one, he pulled her up and with him towards the couch. The girl was intent on making her way to the seating, but Severus was having none of that. Instead, he directed her to sit on the backrest, her front to him, her legs hanging over the back, and bent her backwards. The girl appeared uncomfortable with how close her shoulders came to resting on the seating, and with how high in the air her bum was. Her back was bent at an angle that must be awfully uncomfortable, as well, as she raised her legs into the air. Severus caught them before she could slide fully onto the seating.

"Have I told you yet, Miss Granger," Severus spoke, "that we will soon begin to introduce pain into this part of your teaching?"

The girl's eyes widened, almost comically so, and he continued to explain.

"We will start first by exploring how pain may perhaps even be a little pleasurable. But you've been aware of that fact for a few months now, haven't you, Miss Granger?"

Thinking back five months, they both knew he was talking about that interesting incident atop the Astronomy tower. To remember now how he had fretted about having spanked the girl, and magically at that, Severus wanted to laugh at himself in retrospect. Little had he known at the time that only a few months later, he would be taking the girl's virginity, thus beginning a highly inappropriate, definitely forbidden, and surprisingly satisfying liaison with the girl. His cock twitched thinking just how satisfying exactly these past few weeks with her had been, especially since Saturday last.

He was inside her before she could give any kind of witty retort.

"I will not set a limit today, Miss Granger," Severus said as he slowly pushed further into her tight core, until he bottomed out. "But I want you to count anyway. Count for me, Miss Granger," he hissed, beginning that beautiful rhythm that seemed so natural when she was the one he was sharing it with.

His hand made impact with the girl's full right cheek.

She gasped.

"One."
Hello, hello, my dearest readers, and welcome back to 'Accommodations'! First off, I profusely apologize for this long hiatus. It was completely unexpected and unwanted, but I had a couple of things in my life to deal with (breakup / moving / thesis writing / facing the very real risk that I might be out of a job after graduation, even though I'd been so certain my company would be keeping me on / job application writing / finding out that my flatmate doesn't actually have permission to rent out his room to me and thus facing the very real risk of being kicked out of here, just a short time after having moved in / job interviewing / dealing with my boss for a few more weeks who appears to hate me for finding a new job even though he was the one to kick me out of the company in the first place / the usual stuff that single women might fret over). I've been rather high-strung and occasionally been quick to anger, so I apologize to those of you who might have suffered because of that. And of course, I am immensely grateful to all of you for being as patient as you all have been! Thank you, thank you, so much!

Now, during these coming few weeks until the end of September, I will try and get as much writing time in as possible, because the job I will be starting afterwards might not allow for much time or for the peace of mind to sit down and write. I will do my utmost to keep 'Accommodations' from dying, I will promise you that. I cannot promise you, however, that another hiatus won't be coming up at some point.

Alright, then. I will not be warning you against upcoming triggers, because you know that this story contains violence and sex, so yeah. I expect you to be prepared for any unpleasantness in the future - as much as one can be prepared, anyway.

This chapter is a huge one. In fact, it's the longest chapter in the history of 'Accommodations'. My sincere thanks go out to Timelady92 for giving this beast a once-over to check for plot holes. If any of you still find any plot holes or are left with any questions, please do let me know! I will do my best to fix any plot holes (and I do so love it when you find them, I truly do!) and to answer your questions to the best of my abilities.

And finally, here we go! Do let me know your thoughts, if you will. Your feedback makes me happy.

Enjoy!

Marcella xxx
end of it, Hermione was not only incapable of telling up from down, but also unable to say how many slaps her abused but happy bum had taken.

The professor had been right, of course, in implying that pain was a rather nice complement to the pleasure he saw fit to bestow upon her. Every beautiful imprint that his hands - his actual, physical hands, this time - had left upon her skin had added to the stunning picture the professor had been painting. The end result was an intense red that was outright glowing in the heat it both emitted and instilled. The slight, but ever increasing sting of pain that came with every slap had contrasted the pangs of pleasure that accompanied the professor's thrusts into her willing core. Highly sensitized as she had already been, the sensory overload had been too much for her, and she had clamped around the Potions Master's raging hardness once more. He, never one to be left behind, had been quick to follow, releasing his essence into her scorching centre.

And thus it was that they were resting together from their vigorous bout of 'detention'. Hermione still lay upside down over the sofa's backrest while the professor was standing above her, holding her legs as he withdrew, tucking himself away. Bidding her lock her legs behind his neck for a moment, he rested his hands against her sore bottom cheeks. A warmth spread through her tender flesh that had nothing to do with the heat his spanking had caused, and Hermione felt instantly better, the sensation merely slightly tinged with the pang of disappointment that came with having the Potions Master's work on her body disappear.

"This numbing charm I applied will dull the pain," the professor explained. "However, it is important for the Lord Governor to see the traces I have made upon your body, so that he will come to his own conclusions. As it is, I cannot afford to completely heal your behind, nor to clean you."

It went unspoken between them that he had no desire to clean his essence from her body either way; they were both well aware of that fact, after all. Implied as well was his reluctance to diminish the reddish glow that her globes now emitted, and Hermione struggled to hide her relief that his imprint upon her skin was not to disappear into thin air without as much as a by-your-leave.

Aiding her in righting herself into an upright position and patiently waiting for her to settle while the blood left her head to rightfully distribute itself to other parts of her body, the professor helped Hermione off the couch. At his command, Hermione set to dressing herself in her school uniform once more, and started when the knickers she had just been in the process of picking up flew from her hands. Turning around, she saw them disappear into the professor's coat pocket.

"Sir?" she queried, afraid she might have done something wrong.

"You will not be needing these anymore for the remainder of tonight's detention, Miss Granger," the Potions Master simply stated. "The same goes for your robes." At her astonished expression and her prolonged hesitation, he added, almost impatiently, "You may proceed."

Flitting into action, Hermione quickly drew her skirt up her legs, stepped into her discarded shoes, latched her bra behind her back, and pushed her arms into her blouse. In the process of buttoning up, she turned around to face Professor Snape once more.

"Now, while we wait for the Lord Governor to join us," he said, eyes travelling up the length of skin visible through the curtain of her open blouse, but gradually disappearing with every button that she eased through its respective hole, "I suggest you make certain that your shields are intact. We would not wish to show the Lord Governor more than we must, now do we, Miss Granger?"

It was all Hermione could do to hold onto the walls that never stopped surrounding her mind these days before she felt the professor's Legilimentic force slam against them.
There was no use in a full-on brute force attack against the girl's mind tonight, Severus knew. He did not assault her in order to prove that he could break in, as they both knew he did, thus tiring the girl out and leaving her vulnerable to whoever might try and Legilimize their way into her mind later. No, this was an exercise in attention. As it was, Severus applied broad pressure on the girl's mind from all sides, circling around her walls and testing them for a way in, for any nook or cranny he might exploit. He was proud to say that there were none, or at least none obvious enough for somebody as little skilled as Lucius to use and break into her mental inner sanctum. And even if Lucius should succeed in that, Severus was sufficiently certain that the girl was capable enough in Occlumency to mislead Lucius, if he were to ever make his way into the her mind, against all odds.

Thus, Severus maintained the pressure upon the girl's mental shields, simply to keep her on her toes and to maybe train her resilience and endurance this way. He made her skip about the room, fulfilling mundane tasks and rolling them back to set things to rights before Lucius arrived. Severus himself was sitting in an armchair by the fire, and the girl was just bringing him a few fingers of Odgen's, when the flames flared a venomously bright green and an imposing figure in ornate black robes and the whitest of platinum blond hair stepped through.

"Lucius," he greeted the man far more cordially than he felt, "welcome. Miss Granger was just bringing me a drink."

"Yes, I can see that," the regrettably handsome aristocrat drawled, shamelessly ogling the girl's backside. She did provide a fine sight for him, indeed, at this moment, as she was in the process of handing Severus his heavy crystal tumbler. Bending down, rather than just reaching out to him, she offered up the glass. Severus could just imagine her skirt riding up, granting Lucius, who was standing behind the girl, a full view of her knickerless bottom, still reddened from the imprints his hands had left upon her glorious globes. He could see the pureblood's pupils dilate as he fixed his eyes upon the girl's asset, so graciously displayed for his perusal.

"Would you like some, as well?" Severus offered.

"Oh, yes, old friend," Lucius drawled, "I believe I would like some of that, indeed."

A pause crept in between, heavy with the elder wizard's innuendo, them as the girl righted herself and looked at Lucius, silently waiting for his drink order.

"What are you having, Severus?" Lucius asked, ignoring the girl even though his eyes never left her figure. "To drink, I mean?"

"I am having a glass of the 1789 Odgen's that you were so generous to provide last week," Severus replied, fighting the urge to glare daggers at the presumptuous aristocrat, electing to go for a coldly polite mask of Slytherin hospitality instead.

Lucius, having accepted the offer of a glass of the precious bottle of rare firewhiskey he had left at Severus's quarters for safekeeping the previous week, settled himself in the armchair opposite his friend, his eyes following the girl as she busied herself with getting his drink. When she walked over to him, she bent down, much as she had done for Severus, to offer him the heavy tumbler. Severus knew from experience that her angle would grant Lucius ample opportunity to gain more than the hint of a glance at her cleavage. Generously more than a hint, at that.

"It is a great pleasure, I assure you, Miss Granger," Lucius drewled, "to be having you tonight."

His voice was soaked in unnecessary innuendo, as if the girl wasn't all too well aware of what would be expected of her on this fateful night. To top things off, the self-styled school governor held out his hand to the girl. Severus was once more glad to have prepared the girl for all eventualities, as she
now gratefully knew to drop into a curtsy in order to kiss the Malfoy sigil ring that graced Lucius's right index finger. Taking his hand in her much smaller one, she held it as her lips pressed against the cool metal. Before she could get up again, however, a strong tug on her hand had her go sprawling to the floor, coming to land hard on her knees.

Only a small wince escaped the girl's lips, and Severus knew that even that small utterance of pain was for Lucius's benefit only. The girl had long learned to keep the outward acknowledgement of pains such as this one to herself, but it would not do to disappoint the pureblood who was only all too keen on causing the girl every discomfort. As it was, her knees would certainly be bruised.

Severus had to violently fight the urge to hex Lucius into the next millennium for making the girl kneel between his legs. As far as he was concerned, she had no business being there, and Lucius had no right to force her into that position. But alas, there was little he could do but watch and hope for the best.

In hindsight, Hermione knew that she should have been smart enough to expect such an unexpected move as the Lord Governor's pulling her to her knees between his legs. She admonished herself for her lack of foresight and was determined not to be surprised by him like this any further.

That determination flew out the window, however, as the Lord Governor did something even more preposterous by gently pushing her head to rest against one of his thighs. The soft fabric of his slacks caressed Hermione's right cheek, as did the Lord Governor's hand caress the left one, stroking the taut, young skin of her face tenderly, almost lovingly, with one hand while his other held the firewhiskey Hermione had handed him. Taking a sip every once in a while, his right hand continued to pet Hermione's cheek. He watched her for a minute or so as if making sure that she succumbed to his caresses, yielding to the position into which he had forced her, before his eyes returned to her professor. His hand would not stop in its gentle ministrations to her cheek, though, and Hermione felt strangely comforted by that. Rationally she was well aware, of course, that even this tender position was a highly dangerous one for her to find herself in with a known Death Eater and pureblood supremacist. The thought alone that she might find any sort of comfort in this was highly disconcerting, but there was nothing she could do against that fact.

She had become used to post-coital cuddles with Sirius while at Grimmauld Place, of course. He had been ever reluctant to cease touching her body, even if it was simply something as innocent as a hug, or his thigh brushing hers underneath the dinner table, or his fingers stroking her hand as he walked by her in the corridor while others were watching. But this, this position with Lord Malfoy stroking her face, appeared almost like - dare she say it? - pre-coital affection? The notion alone was unfathomable to her, and the sensation of actually experiencing it was even more so.

"I must say," she was pulled from her inner musings by the Lord Governor's voice, "I am surprised to see that physical punishment has not completely been banished from these sacred halls. I am glad."

"Well," the professor replied in his usual drawl, "there are some measures that seem to resonate better with Miss Granger than others. It was simply an issue of finding the one method that would properly... sink in."

Hermione fought the shudder at the emphasis the professor had put on those last few words, as if the innuendo would not have been obvious enough without his highlighting that particular phrase.

"And tell me, Severus," the Lord Governor queried further, "would you say that Miss Granger has learned proper oral conduct yet?"

At this question, his slate grey eyes met hers, his amusement clearly visible behind the cruel tilt of his
lips, even though his eyes portrayed a curious mixture of cold interest and warm affection. Hermione's heart dropped a little at the realization that even though she might have learned to read the professor's unreadable expression to some extent, coming to understand another Slytherin's facial clues would be a whole new study in and of itself.

"Miss Granger practically begged me to instruct her after last weekend," the professor said, and Hermione could hear the degrading smirk in his voice, "so that she would not disappoint you upon your... inspection of her detention tonight."

"On her knees?" the Lord Governor asked.

"Begged or learned?"

"Both," Lord Malfoy clarified.

"Both," came the amused confirmation, and for a moment the professor's cold chuckle was joined by the man who was still busy stroking Hermione's cheek.

"I told Miss Granger, however," the Potions Master continued, "that true learning can only be gained from the best of instructors."

The Lord Governor's eyes returned to Hermione, fixing her gaze with his as if daring her to look away.

"And are you prepared, Miss Granger?" he asked. "Are you prepared to learn from the best?"

Hermione found that her voice was nowhere to be found, having disappeared somewhere under her nervousness, and was forced to nod her reply instead. Her cheek rubbed against the soft wool of the Lord Governor's trousers, and she watched in trepidation as he set his tumbler onto a side table, her eyes unable to help their curiosity. If he minded that she unlocked their gazes, he did not say so. His right hand never left her face, still stroking her tenderly, while his now empty left hand came to his crotch. Giving himself a squeeze through the fabric of his slacks, Hermione saw the outline of his already hardened cock, and swallowed thickly, as if that would cover the widening of her eyes. It did not, as the Lord Governor's self-satisfied chuckle proved.

Unable to drag her eyes away from where his hand worked on undoing the buttons of his trousers, Hermione knelt as if frozen and watched as the Lord Governor freed his cock from its fabric confinements. He indulged her, it appeared, as he tended to his length with the same measured strokes that he used to caress her cheek with the other hand. His eyes never left Hermione's face as she could feel his gaze upon her features, even though her own never left his cock.

"The first step to proper oral conduct," the Lord Governor began, "is gauging an impression of how to approach one's vis-à-vis - one's object of desire, I might also say. Careful measure needs to be taken in how... extensive one's greeting needs to be, and how deeply felt."

The innuendo behind his words left no doubt as to what Lord Malfoy was referring to: his size was rather impressive in comparison to what Hermione had come to know this far, and to perform a 'proper oral greeting' would go hand in hand with extensive use of her mouth which would be filled to and beyond capacity. While not surpassing the professor's own manhood in girth, the Lord Governor was certainly better off in length, and Hermione would have her hands - or rather, her mouth - full if she was to deal with him, which she most certainly was. Deeply felt, indeed, she thought.

"Much of the... conversation will end up needing to be played by ear, Miss Granger," he continued.
"Of course, from someone as inexperienced and uninformed as you, nobody will be expecting an opera, so to say, but that doesn't mean that any slacking will be excused. There is no way one can go wrong, however, with a proper kiss."

At that, the Lord Governor's hand that had up until now been caressing her cheek slid to the nape of her neck, his fingers entwining with her locks. Exerting surprisingly gentle, but nonetheless insistent pressure, he pulled her to his cock and made her place a chaste kiss - if any such kiss could be called chaste, she thought - to the tip. Hermione's eyes flicked up to meet his gaze, and she found that Lord Malfoy's eyes were darkened with lust and something more - something that was yet to be defined, but that did not exactly settle her nerves in any way.

"After that," the Lord Governor said, "what is most important is showing eagerness to please, and displaying an ability for quick learning."

Holding his gaze for a moment longer, Hermione opened her lips and sunk down onto his cock. As her mouth engulfed the top few inches of his length, Lord Malfoy allowed a pleased sigh to escape from his own lips. His right hand remained in her hair, but applied no pressure as he elected to let Hermione take matters into her own hands, or mouth, as it was. He picked up his tumbler from where he had deposited it in order to open his slacks, and resumed sipping on the expensive alcohol as he enjoyed her ministrations.

Hermione set to applying much of what the professor had told her to try. Maintaining suction while bobbing her head up and down the Lord Governor's cock seemed to earn his approval, if his quiet sighs were anything to go by. Feeling the Potions Master's gaze upon her back, Hermione was well aware that her performance was as much for his benefit as it was for Lord Malfoy's. After all, Professor Snape's handling of her person would most probably be based upon her ability to service the Lord Governor to his full satisfaction.

Calling the elder Malfoy 'Lord Governor' inside her head helped Hermione maintain the polite facade that would be demanded of her when dealing with the man. It would not do to slip up, regardless of how much it pained her to use the title that Lord Malfoy wrongly styled himself with. To distract herself from that depressing thought, Hermione returned her focus full force to the job at hand. Using her tongue liberally on the underside, both for licking the length of Lord Malfoy's manhood as well as for applying pressure at that spot just underneath the head that the professor had pointed out to her, Hermione drew another few moans from the man above her. The Lord Governor was truly lost to her charms, however, when she put her teeth to it. Grazing along his shaft ever so lightly, Hermione was rewarded with a drawn-out groan and a tightening of the hand in her hair.

After that, however, things went a little pear-shaped for her.

Severus hated Lucius with all of his insubstantial, blackened heart. Jealousy ate away at his already raw nerves as he was forced to watch the girl, his girl, pleasure the man who called himself his brother. Yes, Severus hated his friend with a vengeance, hated that he had to allow the girl to suck Lucius's cock, hated how aroused he himself became from watching their performance. He remembered all too well how the girl's lips felt, firm and yet infinitely soft, as they were wrapped around his cock. Her ministrations had her delicious little bum bopping up and down as she moved her head up and down Lucius's length, ever up and down, and Severus had to stifle a groan at the memory of how her bottom cheeks would wobble when he took her from behind as he had in the store room just a few days ago, or even more recently, when he had spanked her supple flesh while buried deep inside her tight sheath.

Yes, Severus hated how hard he got at those memories. The hate made his blood burn in his veins,
and he was ready to strangle Lucius, pull the girl off of him, and fuck all trace of the entitled aristocrat from her body.

Holding on with all his might to every tiny bit of restraint he could muster, Severus was almost topped over the edge when Lucius raised his gaze to meet his. The pureblood's eyes shot down to Severus's groin for just a second before flicking back to his eyes. Lucius fucking smirked. Severus now cursed the fact that he had abandoned his robes earlier, electing to sit only in his coat, which opened enough to show off the substantial bulge that had risen in his slacks.

"Much as I appreciate your ardour, Miss Granger," Lucius drawled to the girl without dropping his gaze from Severus's, "I'm afraid we will need to accelerate these proceedings a little. You see, our dear Severus here is eager for your attention once more, as there is more of your... detention that he needs to see to. And if you've thought that what you've had to deal with so far was hard - well, let's just say that Severus might yet teach you a thing or two about hardness."

Severus saw the other man's grip on the girl's head tighten, his fingers now tense where they grabbed her by her hair, just before he encouraged - that is, forced - the girl to take more of his shaft into her mouth. The girl coughed and gagged in objection, the pitiable sounds she made both arousing Severus and voicing her doubts that Lucius would fit, but the wizard proceeded to prove her wrong by stuffing his whole length down her throat. Lucius's eyes took on a gleam that told Severus exactly how much he enjoyed the girl's distress, but luckily for her, that gleam also signalled the nearness of the end to her suffering.

A few more thrusts into her abused throat and the elder Malfoy was finished, spewing half his load into her mouth and half all over her face. Chuckling through the pleasant exhaustion that came with climax, Lucius took the girl's chin between two fingers and turned her face towards the fire. The girl's back was still towards Severus, but he could see that her face was covered in long streaks of the other man's ejaculate.

"I'm afraid you've got something on your face there, Miss Granger," Lucius chuckled. "Better clean up before Severus sees, so that you may go to him all pristine and prepared to service him, don't you think?"

As if Lucius didn't turn the girl so that his 'friend' could see the evidence of his abuse, Severus snorted, hiding his rage under a layer of desperate humour.

"Yes, my Lord," was all that could be heard before Lucius's fingers, having scooped a few of the trails he had left upon the girl's face, wandered into her mouth, cutting off any further response as he 'helped' the girl clean her face.

Hermione, merely glad to have survived the ordeal that the Lord Governor's cock deep down her throat had been, almost choked on the fingers that now sought their way into her mouth. Dutifully licking them clean of the now cold seed he had spurted onto her face, she swallowed down her disgust along with every trace of his essence. She readily complied when Lord Malfoy drew her head towards his cock once more, now softening after his violent release, to clean that off as well.

Afterwards, he pushed her against his thigh once more, resuming the disturbingly tender stroking of her cheek. The gesture, no matter how unsettling, still offered some strange sense of comfort to Hermione. Even though the young witch had recently been violated by the man now tending to her - both by being forced to service him in the first place, and by the manner in which he had then forced himself on her even further -, she could not pull away from his caresses, nor did she find herself wanting to. A war between opposing emotions was raging inside of her. She was freaked out by the touch of the known enemy, the Death Eater, her abuser; but at the same time, the tenderness he
bestowed upon her was more than the professor was willing or even able to offer her, and it made her feel weirdly at peace to know that a man who she had been intimate with could show her this kind of physical kindness, both before and afterwards.

Of course, that thought sent a pang of guilt through her, piercing her guts. The professor had shown her kindness earlier, as well, gently healing the abused skin of her stomach. Many times he had healed her in the most tender of manners. A voice in the back of her mind insisted, however, that he had been the one to hurt her in the first place, in every single one of those instances, as well.

"Go now, Miss Granger," the Lord Governor's voice jerked her from the strange lull his touch had eased her into, despite the pain in her throat, "go tend to Severus now. He may dispute the fact that he needs you to do so, but I guarantee you, he is very eager for your services."

Rising from her seat between Lord Malfoy's legs, Hermione ignored the protest of her knees as she straightened her legs into a standing position once more. She moved, albeit a little jerkily from having knelt in the same position for so long, over to where the professor was seated opposite the Lord Governor. There she halted, hesitant, uncertain of how to proceed.

"Go right ahead," Lord Malfoy's voice encouraged her once more, "strip for him, and you will see that your professor's wand is all ready and posed for some more... education."

Hermione began, same as she had earlier that same evening, by unbuttoning her blouse from the bottom upwards. Allowing the fabric to fall from her shoulders, her bra soon followed in its wake. The small heap of clothes was joined by her skirt before Hermione stepped out of her shoes. The professor's eyes were fixed on hers, taking everything in, Hermione knew, but giving nothing away in turn.

Instinctively, Hermione felt that the Potions Master, who had been a fervent defender (or as fervent as he ever did defend anything in her presence) of her wearing her stockings during their carnal interactions, would not object to her removing them this time. He would not give away any of his desires, no matter how seemingly irrelevant, in front of Lord Malfoy, and Hermione would not do him the disservice of simply leaving her stockings on, thus taking the choice from him and tipping the Lord Governor off to the professor's proclivities.

Turning her back to him, although it made her face the blond Slytherin in the other armchair once more, she widened her stance a little before bending over and making to remove her stockings. Rolling them down her smooth, slender legs one by one, she swayed her hips ever so slightly, so that the professor might enjoy the view of the pinkness of her nether lips, dusted with chestnut curls, peeking out through the gap between her thighs.

Having stepped out of the second stocking, Hermione turned back to the professor once more. Uncertain of whether Professor Snape would wish for her to kneel as she had done for the Lord Governor and for the professor himself earlier that same evening, she found that the seating of his armchair was too low for her to tend to him while standing. She was not that flexible, and even if she was, she feared that losing her balance while her teeth were anywhere near the Potions Master's manhood would be considered very, very bad form, indeed.

Thus she knelt, shielding the professor's groin from the Lord Governor's view. Looking up to Professor Snape, she found his eyes fixed on hers as she hesitantly made to open his trousers. Feeling the slightest nudge against her mind, she almost broke out into a relieved smile, but reigned in the urge before her facial features could run away from her. Instead, she simply nudged back against his mind in return, and released his hardened manhood from its cloth prison.

True, Lord Malfoy's cock may be longer that the professor's, but Hermione found that she preferred
the Potions Master's wand by far. She felt it had more character, in a way. Of course, that might have stemmed from the fact that she was more intimately familiar with the professor's tool and infinitely more inclined to be of service to him rather than be handed off to his Death Eater crony, but it was of no matter to her. The professor's cock was beautiful, and she was prepared to worship it to his full satisfaction.

Remembering one thing that the professor had advised her to do which she had not done for the Lord Governor, Hermione stifled a conspiratorial grin that threatened to escape the iron-clad control she had over her face. Grabbing Professor Snape's length, she gave the shaft a few proper strokes before bending it out of the way and lowering her face to his privates. Keeping her gaze locked on the professor's, who was thankfully reclined far enough back that she could maintain the angle, she saw the Potions Master's pupils dilate ever so slightly as she first licked his balls, then sucked them into her mouth one by one, giving them a thorough and very wet treatment that also served in giving her poor abused throat a break.

*Suck my balls, Miss Granger, indeed,* she mused.

Severus could not tell if he was breathing more loudly than he should, but the girl's grin around her mouth that was currently very full of his balls told him that perhaps he was. He did not dare glance at Lucius to see if he had noticed that little fact as well, but Severus dared assume that he hadn't. Yes, Lucius was as perceptive as the next Slytherin, but he had not accomplished any vigilance near Severus's level. After all, the patriarch of the richest House of the Sacred Twenty-Eight had not needed to live and operate amongst the opposing side in this ongoing war for half his life, so his subterfuge, even though it may come naturally to Lucius, was not as honed as Severus's. All in all, a little intense breathing would not give his pleasure away, his proclivities, his weakness for the girl.

Severus was not, of course, weak for the girl, exactly. It was simply that he had taught her well in how to please and please him, and she had been an ardent student, quick to learn and eager to apply her newly gained knowledge and hone her unpractised skills. Her innocence and the generosity with which she offered that innocence to him had made her a precious treasure that he was loath to part with or share in. He had always been a possessive man, but the girl and her innocence were something he found himself more reluctant to share than anything he had ever owned before.

And Nimuë be blessed, the girl knew that and indulged him as much as she could. She had offered her inexperienced mouth to him, for him to break in, as it were, to teach her, to show her. She had asked him for hints, not Lucius, and had practiced them on his cock. And now she was nibbling and licking and sucking his balls with unknown abandon, having preserved that particular technique for his manhood alone, rather than show it off to Lucius when she'd been forced to service him. That fact alone made him want to blow his load all over the hand that was still tending to his cock with long, firm, measured strokes, so that she might clean her hand off by sucking his essence from her fingers, one by one.

*Merlin,* Severus had not known that he might become even more aroused by thinking of what the girl might do to him while the girl was already tending to him. There was nothing and no one that could stop him now from finishing this right this instant.

"Seeing as you have already partaken in the *more pleasurable* of services that Miss Granger so graciously offers," Lucius broke through his excitement, effectively stalling Severus's impending climax, "I will be so bold as to assume that you are willing to share those services with an old friend, wouldn't you agree?"

Jerked out of the reverie that the girl's clever tongue had sucked him into, Severus turned his gaze
upon the Slytherin in the armchair opposite his. It did not fail his notice that Lucius had his own cock in hand, pleasuring himself to the image of the girl's mouth working on Severus's privates.

"You would not mind if I were to take *my* joy from those pleasures as well, now, would you?" Lucius continued in that entitled drawl of his that came with the arrogance of old money and a golden crib.

"I have no objections whatsoever," Severus forced himself to lie with an indulgent smile on his lips that were willing to bite Lucius's head off for suggesting such a preposterous notion, "as long as you will make use of this salve."

Digging into a pocket on the inner side of his sleeve, Severus withdrew a vial and held it up so that Lucius might see it. He did his best to ignore the fact that he had been prepared for the very scenario that he had promised the girl would never come to pass.

"This will drown every swimmer that braves it, making even your strong seed incapable of penetrating Miss Granger's womb. You would not want Miss Granger to... *catch something*, I'm sure," Severus sneered. "Just let me finish this real quick, and I'll have it sent over to you."

Clutching the vial of salve in his hand, he returned his gaze to the girl, still busy tending to his balls that were slowly turning blue.

"Give your best now, Miss Granger," he advised her. "Apply everything you've learnt so far."

Lucius preened under the notion that the girl's experience of choking on his cock would be what tipped Severus off the cliff, all due to his abuse of her, but the girl's tentative, but knowing smile up at Severus around her mouth full of balls told the younger wizard that she knew better. She knew that everything she'd learned on how to please the dour Potions Master had come from the man himself.

It did not take Severus long to climax. Lucius fortunately held his mouth, and Severus was able to shut his mind to the fact that the self-styled school governor was stroking his length to the sight of the girl's glorious blowjob. Noticing how his balls drew upwards, the girl was quick to capture the tip of Severus's cock into her mouth. Giving his shaft a few more eager jerks, she swallowed everything that Severus had to offer her. It wasn't much, considering that he'd blown his load three times already that evening, but blow his load once more he did.

Not allowing himself to revel in the girl's soothing licks to his manhood that was quickly relaxing from the raging hardness it had been mere seconds before, he bade her rise to her feet. Pressing the vial into her hands, he reluctantly, but firmly sent her back to Lucius.

"My Lord," the girl said, offering the vial to Lucius, but he was having none of that.

"With your clever young hands, Miss Granger," he stated, "I am certain that you are far better suited to coat the necessary parts than I am, wouldn't you say?"

"I would not know, my Lord," the girl attempted to talk her way out of the handjob, but there was no use.

"Well, I would know, so get right to it, girl," he almost lost his patience. His temper was soothed, most fortunately, by the girl's tentative handling of his cock. The salve lubricated the paths her hand travelled along his shaft, rubbing the head ever so thoroughly on every upwards movement in order to fully coat it in the salve. Lucius smirked at Severus as the girl was once more kneeling between his knees, her eyes focused on the task at hand - most literally, this time - as if to say, *look what I've*
made the girl do'.

When he got bored, he shooed her hands away and demanded she stand up.

"Turn around to face Severus, Miss Granger," he commanded. Liberally coating himself in a second layer of the salve, obviously not wanting to go to any risk, no matter what he had said to the girl before, Lucius continued, "Your professor will want to see how proficient you have become in this particular discipline, am I not right, Severus?"

Without waiting for a reply, Lucius stoppered the vial, set it down next to his by now long empty tumbler, and drew the girl backwards by the hips. Supporting her descent, he placed the tip of his manhood against her centre. The girl threw Severus one last, half-desperate, half-accusing look, as if to remind him of his vow that Lucius would not have her. It mattered little what he had vowed, though, Severus knew, other than the fact that he had made a vow in the full knowledge that he might not be able to fulfil it.

One strong tug had her seated on Lucius's lap, his cock fully sheathed inside the tightness of her cunt.

Leading her hips in a rocking movement, Lucius quickly taught the girl to ride him in reverse. The girl, ever the swift student, took to the motion within a dozen repeats, and was encouraged to continue as she did. Lucius's left arm snaked around her upper body, his hand trailing its way upwards between the girl's breasts, to push two fingers into her mouth and have her suck them, all the while pinning her body to Lucius's, effectively blocking any escape she might have been pondering. The other wandered to her lower curls. Spreading her legs open to rest on the outside of his own thighs, Lucius went to tease the small bud of nerves that sat between her now opened nether lips. The glint of the heavy sigil ring so close to the girl's centre seemed to tease Severus mercilessly, mocking him for the fact that it was a Malfoy's hand that was bringing her pleasure, wanted or not, and that it was a Malfoy's cock that was driving into a cunt that had only ever been meant for Severus, that had only ever known Severus.

He may have accused her of many things, but deep down Severus Snape knew that Hermione Granger was not a girl to sleep around on anyone, nor was she a witch who broke her promises or went back on understandings that had been found. He was certain that, up until a few minutes ago, the only cock she had ever known had been his own. That knowledge had been sacred to him, even though he may have thrown desperate accusations at the girl in order to dispel his own desperate need of her, and to have that sacrilege destroyed now by Lucius Malfoy, of all people, was an abhorrence to him.

There was nothing to be done, though. His cover needed to be protected at all costs, he knew, and the girl agreed. Her reluctance alone to be handed over to Lucius was precious to him, and her resignation to do so anyway, for him, for Severus, soothed his own ache in parting with her, sharing the treasure that was her innocence, that was her enthusiasm, that was her. It was all he had been able to do to brew the salve that would kill off Lucius's seed, leaving her receptive to his own seed alone.

"Has Severus ever instructed you in how to solve a problem that can't be solved the usual way, Miss Granger?" Lucius's question drew the Potions Master out of his musings. "Have you ever been taught how to properly use a backdoor?"

The girl's panic was clearly visible in her eyes, although the rest of her face betrayed nothing. A flick of Severus's fingers took care of that fear for her. In the relaxation of the miniscule laugh lines around her eyes Severus could see that she had felt the skin around her puckered entrance become taut. The girl felt safe in the knowledge that he had cast the earlier agreed upon Strengthening charm on her
skin. She was safe from any power that Lucius might search to extract from her body, but there was nothing Severus could do to save her from the violence he might seek to exact upon her body in turn.

"I -," the girl began after Lucius had withdrawn his fingers from her mouth, hesitated as if concentrating on the constant movement of her hips upon Lucius's lap, then began anew, "I have not received any such instructions as of yet, my Lord."

"Well," Lucius drawled, obviously pleased with her reply, "it would be a pity for a mind as bright as yours, Miss Granger, not to have exhausted all the possible... approaches to a problem - wouldn't you agree?"

"And to think that Miss Granger is such a sucker for instructions," Severus supplied, knowing that, as there was no way out of what Lucius was about to do to the girl, he might as well outwardly pretend to support it.

"Would you like for me to educate you on that particular technique, Miss Granger?" Lucius offered.

"My Lord," the girl replied, neither accepting nor declining that 'offer', as neither response was necessary, and all three people in the room knew it.

"Perhaps," Severus suggested, "this might not be the best position for Miss Granger's first lesson?"

Lucius seemed to perk up at that, even more so than he had been before, if such a thing was even possible.

"You are only too correct in that assumption, Severus," he agreed. "As Miss Granger's instructor, I will of course need to see the exact moment that... understanding begins to dawn in her eyes, to know when my lesson has properly... sunk in."

_Sweet Circe, Severus thought, will there be a time when this particular pun will stop being amusing to the man?_

"Of course, now that Miss Granger is just getting the hang of this technique right here, there would be no sense in abandoning the lesson halfway through," Lucius said, and focused his attention on the girl's clit.

It was not enough, though, Severus could see. The girl was beyond reluctant to let loose in Lucius's presence and would not be climaxing anytime soon if he did not help things along a little.

Nudging the girl's mind with his own once more, her eyes flicked to his, and he fixed them under his stare, demanding her full attention. Once certain that he had it, he clearly intoned, "Come, Miss Granger."

And come, she did.

The professor's command sent Hermione back to Christmas, back to their encounter on the small table in the room next to hers, where she'd sat, her legs spread wide and toes curling into the professor's thighs as his words pushed her over the edge that her fingers were too inexperienced to bring her to. And while she rode the wave of pleasure the Potions Master had once more sent rolling over her, she could almost imagine that the hardness seated deep inside her centre was his, and that the fingers digging into her soft flesh belonged to him, and that they were alone in the room, just the two of them.

But then a hand reached for hers, and she had come to know those hands so well that she knew
instantly, even half-immersed in her post-orgasmic haze as she still was, that they were the professor's. She allowed them to pull her to a standing position, only flinching ever so slightly as the manhood that she had been riding, still rock-hard, slipped from her folds. Grateful as Hermione was that at least the Lord Governor had not sullied her core with his ejaculate, she knew that her night was far from over, and that Lord Malfoy was far from done with her and his use of her body.

"Where do you want her?" the professor asked without preamble.

"Judging from last week," the Lord Governor's unique drawl answered, "your desk appears to be the perfect height for this sort of undertaking."

"The desk it is then," Professor Snape agreed. "Miss Granger?"

In the full knowledge that his unspoken request to accompany him to the desk was a mere formality, to project the politeness that the Lord Governor insisted upon so ardently, if only to humiliate her and the fact that she had absolutely no choice in what happened to her in these quarters, Hermione followed the slight tug on her hand to walk over to the desk that she herself had been perched on only hours earlier, when she'd languidly ridden the professor, leaning back against the smooth wood as his skilled hands worked their magic upon the shredded skin of her stomach, while some other appendage of his worked its magic a little lower, but no less effectively.

Of course, Hermione knew that there was always a choice. Her choice in this case, however, was between compliance, and risking to blow the professor's cover. It was between mellowly following whatever was demanded of her, and exposing herself to being physically or magically forced to follow them. And so she chose to do what she could to protect the Potions Master, and to protect herself from more harm than necessary.

"The same position as last week will do," the Lord Governor's words drew Hermione from her musings.

She accepted the professor's help in climbing upon the desk, even though it was not needed. That is, the help in itself was not needed; after all, the desk was not so high that Hermione would not have managed to climb it all by herself. What was needed, though, was the trusted touch of the man who had become so much more to her than simply the Potions Master of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He had become her mentor, her protector, her private tutor, her first.

Hermione's first.

His touch had awakened so much inside her, more than even Angelina had managed to coax from her body, and to feel his calloused, familiar hands upon her hips as they hoisted her up to sit on the desk as if she weighed nothing, gave her a sense of comfort that lent her the strength needed to fight her very acute desire to bolt from the room, never to be seen again - at least not by the Lord Governor.

The man in question stepped in to take the position the professor had just vacated. Lord Malfoy hoisted her legs up, making Hermione fall backwards until her upper body lay down on the desk and she was forced to look up to the man who would rob her body of its last bit of innocence. Folding her legs so that her knees pressed against the outsides of her boobs, the Lord Governor spread her thighs and tilted her hips upwards for easy access. Some sort of spell made her inside writhe as they cleaned themselves, preparing for the blond wizard's entrance. Hermione felt the rigidity of his manhood bouncing against her lower cheeks as her bum was raised by her folded position to come into perfect alignment with the pureblood's cock.

Just as Lord Malfoy was about to push into her, the professor's voice cut through the tense silence,
heavy with their respective panting - the Lord Governor's in excited, gleeful anticipation; Hermione's in helpless desperation to keep her cool.

"Would you like to apply more salve, Lucius?" the Potions Master offered. "After all, there is no use in taking the risk of leakage. One never knows which close-by orifices any leaked liquids might be entering."

Hermione could have kissed the man, if she thought that he would ever allow such a thing, ever. She would be eternally grateful for the professor's offer, and was ready to cry in relief when the Lord Governor accepted. She was well aware that a liberal coat of salve upon Lord Malfoy's manhood would slicken him up, thus easing his entrance into her body that was even tighter than usual with the Strengthening charm the professor had thankfully applied.

"Look at me," the commanding, icy voice penetrated Hermione's happiness in these dire circumstances. "Look at me, Miss Granger. I want to see that my lesson properly registers in that pretty little head of yours, lest your impenetrable helmet of hair impediment my teachings and I have to repeat myself. You would not want that - would you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione shook her head 'no', but when she raised her eyes, they would not fix upon the Lord Governor's glacial gaze. Instead they found and held the calm, still blackness of the professor's stare, and found comfort in it. The Potions Master was standing just behind the Lord Governor, as if unwilling to miss anything that was about to happen, even if it was to protect her as much as he could, should the need arise, and not to revel in the pain and humiliation Lord Malfoy was intent on bestowing upon her. As it was, the Lord Governor did not even notice that she did not look at him, exactly. The angle allowed Hermione to hold Professor Snape's gaze while giving the impression of looking at the man poised to penetrate her.

And penetrate her, he did.

"Watch this, Severus," Lucius said, and pushed.

The girl's face allowed for a small pang of discomfort, even though Severus knew that things must be even more painful to her than just that. Lucius, it appeared, was not satisfied with what the girl's expression showed, and pushed harder. Clever as she was, loath though Severus was to admit it, the girl caught on quickly, and her face distorted into a pained grimace.

Looking at her face and watching the emotions play upon it was strangely difficult for Severus. He had spent years standing by as strangers - mostly innocents - were being taunted, tortured, raped, killed in his presence, and he had schooled both his face as well as his soul to remain largely unfazed, departmentalizing what he saw, and reminding himself of the importance of - well, not of himself, exactly, but of his position, which was unique, in this war.

But now...

Either it was the fact that he had been out of training for more than a decade while the Dark Lord was banished into all but inexistence in the forests of Albania, or -

But the idea in and of itself was preposterous. He would not be brought to his knees, he would not forget his training, he would not lose the mask he had spent so much to perfect, just for some girl he was fucking.

Still, it was easier to watch the pained expression on the girl's face than the point where Lucius's body was vanishing into hers, claiming something that he had no right to claim, something that
belonged to Severus. He wanted to curse himself for not taking precautions against this happening. Why had he waited for the girl to bring up the issue of alternative ways of copulating? Severus should have known that Lucius would exploit every last bit of the girl's body, so why had he, Severus, not made certain to have been there first? Because now he was forced to watch, or give the impression of watching, as Lucius pressed his way into the tightness that was the girl's virgin ass.

"Look at that face," Lucius panted when he was fully seated inside the girl. "Don't you just want to pound into that?"

It was beyond easy for Severus to hide the surprise at Lucius's crudeness, but a surprise it was nonetheless. The pureblood aristocrat was usually the picture of refinement. To hear him speaking so crassly now was highly unusual. Even upon those rare occasions at which he participated in the rape orgies that were the Dark Lord's revels, he held an air of aloofness about him that few could mirror.

Looking down at the girl, Severus could somewhat understand Lucius's loss of composure. Her mouth was opened in a wide 'O' that was more than inviting to a man standing above her naked form. Her breasts bouncing with every thrust that Lucius delivered into her body, combined with how taut her skin was stretched around her penetrator's cock - and yes, now Severus forced himself to spare at least a glance at the point where the two of them were merged together - painted a picture that Severus very much wanted to 'pound into', as his friend had so eloquently suggested.

But it was not for him to do the pounding. That was Lucius's privilege for once. For now. And pound, he did. Lucius worked the girl's body to the fullest degree, bouncing her about the desk until Severus feared that she would be black and blue.

The girl took it all, and admirably well composed at that. Her shields remained strong and her face continued to show the same amount of discomfort, even though Severus knew that she must feel more pain than she allowed her features to portray. In that moment, the girl's simple kind of prettiness turned into beauty in Severus's eyes, her bravery, determination, and loyalty adding to her outward attractiveness until she was the most exquisite creature Severus had ever laid eyes upon.

To talk about loyalty while the girl who had promised to be his was bounced about by a rigid cock stuck in her behind was a first for Severus, and for a moment he was surprised that there were still firsts for him to experience. But the moment passed in the blink of an eye as he remembered that the girl was nothing if not unusual, and that this might not be the last of firsts he might experience with her. Her loyalty existed not in spite of her connection with Lucius Malfoy, but because of it, and to know that he had been the one, albeit unwillingly, to force her into her current situation, and that he was the reason why she endured it as admiringly as she did, made it all the more precious to him.

"Merlin, Severus," Lucius exclaimed, panting from his exertions yet never ceasing in his ardour, "this is too tight. Too fucking tight. Fuck, I have to possess this, possess her, possess -"

He fell silent for a few precious seconds, but he was not finished, it seemed.

"Oh, Miss Granger won't let anyone come anywhere near her arse anytime soon after I'm done with her, now, will you, Miss Granger?" he continued, now erratic in his thrusting.

The girl did not reply, nor could she, it appeared; too busy was she with holding onto the table in order to reduce the bouncing she was being subjected to. Circe, Severus thought, if Lucius kept at it like this, he would have to check the girl for a concussion later.

"But if you're always this tight, Miss Granger," Lucius panted in what was probably supposed to be a conspiratorial manner, "I don't think I will ever truly be done with you."
And at that, Lucius appeared to be finished, fortunately. Pulling out of the girl's tight bottom, he aimed in the general direction of her upper body. Considering that he had come once before this night, all over the girl's face, the amount of ejaculate Lucius was spewing now was impressive. The first spurts went the furthest, hitting the girl's chin and dribbling down to pool in the hollow of her throat. The rest covered her breasts and stomach, dripping into her navel, and some even came to land in the surprisingly smooth curls between her legs.

Lucius, still milking the last of his seed from his now softening cock, turned his head to address Severus.

"Thank you for tonight's entertainment," he said. "The Odgen's was particularly fine, especially when enjoyed in combination with the other pleasures you provided so generously."

Severus inclined his head in reply, not trusting himself to speak. It seemed to be enough. Or maybe too much.

"In fact, this evening was so pleasant," the pureblood aristocrat continued, "that I might need to come back for a repeat performance."

"Anytime," Severus smoothly offered, forcing down his homicidal inclinations for now. "As long as the Odgen's of this quality keeps flowing, you will always be welcome."

Lucius was so bold as to wink at hearing that remark. _As if the expensive liquor was worth buying the girl's attentions for a few hours - not that her attention would ever truly be Lucius's, but the wizard did not need to know that._

"Just let me know in advance when your presence at Hogwarts might be expected," Severus added, "so that I may make the necessary arrangements."

"Of course," Lucius replied, imperiously holding out his hand to be kissed.

The girl hastily scrambled from her position on the table to come kneeling on the floor in front of Lucius once more. Pressing her lips against the heavy sigil ring, her chin accidentally bumped against the fingers of the proffered hand - a chin that was still dripping with the wizard's ejaculate. Wasting no time, Lucius bunched her hair in his other hand, making the girl wince in pain as the strands were pulled taut and strained against their hold on her skull, and pushed his contaminated fingers into the girl's mouth. After she had dutifully sucked and licked the digits clean, Lucius wiped them dry on the fistful of hair he was still holding, and continued to use the same fistful of hair to clean his cock, leaving small traces of white in the girl's riotous, chestnut curls. Tucking himself away and straightening his robes, Lucius bid Severus a curt goodbye and was gone in a swirl of green flames.

Hermione was knackered, to say the least. So knackered was she that she did not even attempt to pick herself up from her kneeling position on the hard, cold stone floor next to the professor's desk. Luckily, she did not need to, as that task was taken from her.

Feeling herself being lifted in strong arms, her first thought went to the Potions Master's black robes that would certainly be spoilt, considering that the Lord Governor had done his utmost to coat Hermione in his seed as broadly as possible.

"Sir," she began to protest weakly, "you don't need to - please don't - I don't want to spill -"

But Professor Snape was having none of that.

"Shut up, Miss Granger," he commanded, not unkindly. "Let's get you cleaned up first."
Another coldness hit her feet when the professor next helped her stand, but it was not rough and uneven as the stone floor of his dungeon quarters, but smooth. Porcelain, Hermione dully noted. He had put her in his bathtub.

Next, a stream of pleasantly warm water hit her as the professor doused her off. When he appeared satisfied that the worst of the Lord Governor's traces had been cleaned from her body, he set to fill the bath, helping Hermione lie down and drench herself in the heavenly liquid as he poured her favoured amount of bubble bath - exceedingly too much, that is - into the tub.

"Few would have braved even attempting what you have accomplished today, Miss Granger," the professor spoke, so softly that Hermione could not be quite certain that she had not simply imagined it. "Even fewer would have fared as well as you did. You can be proud of yourself."

He had not said that he himself was proud of her, but he did not need to. Hermione preened under his high praise, and knew to hear what he could not bring himself to say. To her, his words were enough, meaning lent to them by what he left unspoken.

Through the haze of exhaustion that now robbed her body of all energy, Hermione thought to notice that the professor was taking off his coat and folding back the sleeve of his right arm to above the elbow. The gesture was so familiar to her from the horrid week not too long ago when her period had wracked her body with a formerly unknown intensity, that she was not surprised when the professor's skilled fingers dipped into the water and in between her thighs. Wincing slightly as he hit her sore folds, she sighed in relief when whispered Healing charms soothed the pains in her orifices.

Hermione soon gave herself over to the pleasures the Potions Master elicited in her body, mentally watching the ripples he caused turn into waves until they pulled her under and she drowned for just a moment, dying the glorious little death for him, just once more. She was partly surprised that her body could take another orgasm after the night she had had, but part of her had always known that her reactions were so primed for the professor's actions that she could not deny him anymore. There lay beauty in that knowledge, and Hermione felt comforted by it.

"Good girl," the professor may or may not have muttered. Hermione could not be sure. Her world had turned to a million shades of grey, interspersed with the occasional bright point of utter blackness when her eyes happened upon the Potions Master's. She wondered why she had thought earlier that the professor was incapable of showing tenderness when she was now being proven so utterly wrong. It was true, Professor Snape was rarely so outwardly affectionate as the Lord Governor had been earlier when he'd stroked her cheek. But that was simply because the professor's tenderness was of a different kind, not because it was any less, not in any way diminished, not in any way unworthy of mention. If anything, it was even more intense than what the Lord Governor had to offer, because of the closeness Hermione shared with the professor through their understanding and their relationship that came of it. Even though they were not a couple in any sense of the word, it could not be denied that Hermione belonged to him and that, in some ways, the professor belonged to her. They were one, and this rare display of his tenderness proved it once more.

"Sir?" Hermione called for his attention. "Why have you not used the salve yourself when... interacting with me?"

A short pause followed, devoid of the usual heaviness that silences in their conversations brought with them.

"I have found it not conducive to my aims," eventually came the reply.

"How so?" Hermione queried.
This time, the answer was quicker to follow.

"The nature of our positions and their relation to one another requires a certain availability that may not always be able to afford the patience needed for brewing and applying such a method of contraception," the professor explained. "Considering that there has yet to arise the need for artificial means of lubrication in our... interactions, as you call them, Miss Granger, I fail to see the necessity for using the salve that I offered the Lord Governor."

Hermione's question had not been fully answered, and the professor knew it, for he continued a few short moments later.

"There is a potion," he said. "It is rather expensive, especially in comparison to the more common version that is offered to witches. That is why I would not offer that to Lord Malfoy. It would not do to waste the resources required for said potion on the Lord Governor, nor would it do to thus imply to him that constant availability of such... services as he availed himself of tonight. On top of all that, having Lord Malfoy depend on the salve being provided will ensure that I need to be present for him to indulge in his dirty pleasures."

Hermione knew that the Potions Master was not calling her dirty, but was rather degrading the Lord Governor's disgusting joy in abusing a young student of what he claimed to be inferior descent.

Together they listened to the silence for a while. Hermione revelled in the velvety warmth surrounding her tired body, and the professor indulged her, seated on the floor next to the tub.

"Help me, sir," Hermione asked after a while.

"With what, Miss Granger?" the professor inquired.

"Help me," she repeated, "end the night on a good note."

The Potions Master appeared surprised, and Hermione supposed that he probably thought that this was what he had just attempted to do. She stood from the bath and stepped out of the tub, taking him by the hand. The simple act of entwining her fingers with his somehow seemed more intimate to her than anything they had shared prior to this moment, and if she wasn't quite mistaken, the professor felt the same way. A wave of warmth hit Hermione when a Drying spell hit her body, and she turned to smile at the Potions Master, never faltering in her steps as she led him back to his desk.

Hermione let his hand drop when she pushed herself onto the surface of the desk once more, then grabbed the professor by the waist band and drew him nearer. Her eyes were on his while she freed his cock once more, and she noted the surprise that darted across his expression before he reigned in his features.

"Miss Granger," he protested, "what are you -"

"Please," she interrupted him, "please, sir, I need you, I need this, I need to -"

And Hermione saw that the professor understood. He understood that the memory of Lucius Malfoy painfully possessing her body, robbing her poor behind of the innocence it had not been prepared to shed, much less for this particular wizard, could not be allowed to be the most recent one she had of his desk, and he complied. Gently pushing her backwards, the professor helped her lie as she had the previous week, and entered her. If either of them were surprised that he could still become hard after the exhaustions of this long, long night, neither mentioned it, as their surprise vanished underneath the wonder that was the professor's tender descent into her body.

They started out as gentle as could be, and if either of them had felt anything beyond their close
mentor-ward-relationship for the other, it might have been called love making. As it was, none of that existed between them, no romantic notion of a war-torn couple in the middle of a conflict that divided the whole of Wizarding Britain in two. What shone through, however, was the professor's pride of his student, and a reluctant affection that he allowed himself for once. The emotion was almost tangible, but this, too, soon vanished as their coupling went from tender to desperate, as their movements went from rocking to rutting, and Hermione fell apart around the Potions Master's cock one last time this night. The professor had no more essence to spend, but he too gained immense enjoyment from their connection, and was left beyond satisfied, even though his body was incapable of any more orgasms for the moment.

When she had calmed down enough to hear her own breathing through the loud pounding of her heart once more, Hermione slipped from the desk and came to her knees in front of the professor. She longed to tend to him, to show him that she cared, but was held back. Confused, she looked up at him.

"You will go back to your quarters now, Miss Granger," the professor stated as his hand came to cup her cheek, taking the sting of rejection out of his dismissal, "and I will rest assured that your behind will bear the imprint of my hands for a few more hours. I told you, there is satisfaction to be gained from the knowledge that another bears your trace."

And Hermione understood once again what the professor would not say out loud. The Potions Master would be going to bed with her essence upon his manhood, and she experienced the same kind of contentment he seemed to gain, simply knowing that her scent would linger upon him for a few more hours.

"Good night, sir," she bid him after she had dressed. Despite all that she had gone through this night, her heart was light with the knowledge she had just gained. The professor wanted to smell of her.

"Good night, Miss Granger," he replied, and then she was gone from his quarters.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter Forty, wherein a crown is received.
Sunday, February 8th, 1996

How Hermione managed to go about her daily business without constantly thinking back to the abuse she had had to suffer at Lord Malfoy's hand – amongst other appendages – she would later be unable to say. The important thing was that she did manage, throwing herself into her studies and into the boys' homework alongside her own. Adding that to their planning for the D.A. and her Occlumency practice, her schedule was rather full, and the Sunday following her ordeal in the professor's quarters was no exception.

In fact, Hermione was working on her grip on the Pure Black when Harry cut through her concentration. He was talking about his dreams again that did not appear to be getting any better, despite his training with the Potions Master.

"Maybe it's a bit like an illness," Hermione suggested. "A fever or something. It has to get worse before it gets better."

Harry did not seem to care for that suggestion.

"It's lessons with Snape that are making it worse," he disputed. "I'm getting sick of my scar hurting, and I'm getting bored walking down that corridor every night. I just wish the door would open, I'm sick of staring at it -"

"That's not funny," Hermione interjected with enough venom in her voice that even the Potions Master might have raised a single approving eyebrow. "Dumbledore doesn't want you to have dreams about that corridor at all, or he wouldn't have asked Snape to teach you Occlumency."

Hermione hated having to abandon the professor's title, but for once she was hoping to get through to Harry. He was all too lax about his mental studies, and it was no wonder that his dreams were getting ever worse. She knew that his antipathy towards the professor wasn't helping one bit, and that the professor probably wasn't making things easier for Harry, either, but then again, why would he? Professor Snape didn't spare Hermione one bit in her Occlumency training, and it wasn't she who had an evil megalomaniac corrupting her life with visions of his equally evil plans and machinations.

"You're just going to have to work a bit harder in your lessons."

She should have known that this was not the thing to say, but even though Harry didn't want to hear it, this had needed to be said. Tough love, it seemed, wasn't working too well, though, judging from his reaction.
"I am working!" Harry insisted, rather insulted that she proved to think otherwise. "You try it sometime, Snape trying to get inside your head, it's not a bundle of laughs, you know!"

Hermione was this close to shouting Harry down, telling him all about how she'd managed to train while being whipped, bled, drowned, and even coaxed to an orgasm – although amusingly enough, that last notion would probably be the most outrageous one to him.

Yes, learning under the professor was no 'bundle of laughs', as Harry had so adequately put it, but then again, neither were the troops of the self-styled dark lord intent on taking over Wizarding Britain. Harry himself had told them that, had told them that it had been more sheer luck than true skill that had kept him alive in his interactions with You-Know-Who. But now it seemed that he was content to rely on that luck, even though he should have known all too well by now that luck would not keep He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named out of his mind.

"Maybe…" Ron began.

Shut up, shut up, shut up, Hermione chanted in her mind, knowing that whatever Ron was about to say would be in support of Harry. He might intend well, trying to excuse Harry's poor performance in Occlumency and his continued dark dreams, but all it would do was convince Harry that it was okay to neglect his training. Did Harry clear his mind before bed every night as the professor demanded? Hermione did not think so, nor did she think that whatever Ron had to contribute to their conversation would help Harry in his studies.

"Maybe what?" Hermione snapped. Better get this over with. It wasn't as if Ronald would be ignored, anyway.

"Maybe it's not Harry's fault he can't close his mind," Ron suggested in a most ominous tone of voice.

Yes, Ronald Weasley did most certainly mean well, but then again – how did the saying go? – the road to hell was paved with good intentions.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, knowing perfectly well what Ron meant.

"Well," he continued, "maybe Snape isn't really trying to help Harry… Maybe he's actually trying to open Harry's mind a bit wider… make it easier for You-Know –"

Hermione was swaying between anger and hysteria. Anger won. Dumbledore wanted her to stand up to her friends in support of the professor? Well, stand up, she would.

"Shut up, Ron," she seethed, her control snapping and allowing her to now voice her earlier thought. "How many times have you suspected Snape, and when have you ever been right? Dumbledore trusts him, he works for the Order, that ought to be enough."

"He used to be a Death Eater," Ron insisted, despite the angry glare that was sparkling so brightly in Hermione's eyes, the boys should have feared that she might set the common room on fire. "And we've never seen proof that he really swapped sides…"

This stupid argument, repeated time and again until Hermione wanted to vomit, was ridiculous on too many levels. Harry, whose mind apparently was an open book to You-Know-Who, could not be trusted with any important information, simply because his antagonist might extract that information right out of his thoughts. And that was assuming that Harry would manage to keep his mouth shut in the first place, which he most often didn't, petulant, angry teenage boy that he was. Ron, who at times appeared attached to Harry at the hip, could not be trusted either, because whatever Ron was
told, Harry would know within the hour. Hermione, now, she was not officially of age and would not be inducted into the Order until she was out of school either way, she knew.

That was another big issue: why would anyone who was not a member of the Order ever be given any concrete evidence pertaining to the loyalty of one of their members? And even the inducted members would not be given every single piece of information available. In fact, that was how a secret organisation worked – everyone was informed on the strictest need-to-know basis, and there was a very good reason for that. His parents being murdered due to information slipped to You-Know-Who by an Order member should help Harry accept that fact. But of course, being the impatient, impertinent boy that he was, Harry wouldn't accept anything that meant any kind of information was being withheld from him. Because he would rather see the teacher he hated in mortal danger – even though said teacher was a hero who willingly put his life in danger in order to help the Light gain any kind of advantage that might win them this war – by obtaining concrete proof to where his loyalties lay, than accept that there were some things that he simply had to – well – accept.

It would be a waste of breath to tell Harry that, though. He might listen to her words with one ear, but his brain would wave them right through, bleeding out of his memory via the other ear, never to be remembered. And Hermione did need her breath if she was to work on her Pure Black.

"Dumbledore trusts him," was all she said. "And if we can't trust Dumbledore, we can't trust anyone."

She hoped that at least this notion would sink in. There was nothing wrong with hoping, after all.

---

**Saturday, February 14th, 1996**

"Ruddy Merlin, what the heck does that beast want at this time of night?"

Hermione was drawn from her sleep by Lavender's rather loud muttering. She wanted to curse her classmate. She was always in sore need of the precious sleep she could gain on Friday nights. Morgana knew the professor kept her busy on Thursdays, robbing her of her rest by training her in the prefects' bathroom. Of course, she was all in favour of training as hard and as often and as long as they could. But for Lavender to wake her in the night following her private lessons with the Potions Master was simply unthinkable.

And what a workout she had had! The Potions lessons had been difficult enough, what with the professor demanding she continue brewing wandlessly and wordlessly. He had also charmed a Blood Quill to draw blood from her body, cancelling the healing that usually followed, and customizing the area of her body it would attack. And thus it had come that, while Hermione was busy trying to manage her ingredient preparation and potionneering without a wand, all the while Occluding her mind to the best of her abilities, the professor had been sitting at his desk, doodling away, his doodles appearing as cuts on her tender skin.

The results had been beautiful; Hermione would be the first to admit that. She might admire them even more, however, if she didn't need to be the one to carry the painful cost of displaying them. A Venomous Tentacula now spanned the whole of her back, some tentacles reaching so low that they curled around the top of her thighs. It was a truly stunning piece, impressively detailed and depicted as accurately as if the actual plant was stuck on her skin. It had taken the professor both the double period on Monday as well as the single lesson on Thursday to finish it.

No healing had to be had after that, though. Working on Hermione's pain tolerance, the professor had not tended to her wounds before starting on a new drawing in the bathroom. It had been a surreal
experience, despite everything Hermione had become used to from the professor. He had had her hover just beneath the surface of the pool, needing to breathe under water all the while, while also Occluding against the eyes that bore into hers through the thin layer of liquid between them. Her head had bumped into the edge of the tiled tub a few times as she winced at several cuts that went deeper than she was used to. The Potions Master had been bowed over the pool, his eyes fixed on hers, his face appearing upside down from Hermione's perspective.

Later she found that he had been drawing a scene from her memories. A Devil's Snare was retreating from a magical source of the brightest light. The image spanned her whole abdomen, some tendrils of the plant caressing the upper curls at the apex of her thighs. The light was bursting from her navel, as the Potions Master had painted it. How he had managed to draw this piece the right way around from facing her upside down, without touching her nor holding parchment or the like in his hands, Hermione might never know. Too intensely concentrated had she been on controlling her breathing, maintaining her mental walls, and holding on to the screams that wanted to escape her as the water between her and the professor grew red from her own blood, to notice how exactly the man had managed that particular feat.

The painting had taken time, and thus Hermione had spent more hours than usual in the prefects' bathroom. How she had managed to stay awake throughout her Friday classes and aware enough to actually follow her lessons, she could not tell, but she vaguely remembered falling into bed immediately after dinner, and nothing afterwards.

Except for her dreams.

She had dreamed of a steady drip-drip-drip as the Potions Master drew a beautiful bluish black plume over her tummy, her skin cast in the dim light she managed to conjure with her eyes closed and her heart braced against the pain. It was a memory of the first night the professor had 'painted' on her, her skin his canvas and her life's essence his paint. The dream had been dark, just an impenetrable blackness surrounding her despite her awareness of the light just beyond her eyelids, interspersed with the steady drip-drip-drip of her blood hitting the wet tiles.

"Sweet Circe's racy lace, what's wrong with these bloody curtains?" Lavender continued to curse, now closer to Hermione's ears.

Shaking off the haziness of her sleep-deprived, dream-addled mind, Hermione roused herself. Oh, she thought. It appeared that her dorm mate was trying to open her curtains. Well, good to see that her wards held strong, preventing such a feat, she mused, even though much to Lavender's annoyance.

Deciding to help the girl, Hermione drew open her bed curtains from within, revealing the blonde. An owl was perched on her left arm while the right was fighting the heavy fabric surrounding Hermione's bed.

"Mighty Morgana, Hermione, did you not hear the owl?" Lavender asked in a stage-whisper that carried her annoyance all too well. "It's been pecking at the window forever!"

Perhaps, Hermione mused, the drip-drip-drip of her dream had not been blood leaking from her stomach. Perhaps it had been a bird seeking entrance to deliver a letter in the middle of the night.

"Your curtains seem to be stuck from the outside, by the way. That ever happen to you?" Lavender asked.

"All the time," Hermione mumbled.
Of course, it never happened to her, but it would not do for her classmate to know that. Hermione would continue to ward them shut every night, so if her dorm mates ever needed to reach her again while she was resting in her bed and would be unable to open her curtains, it might be best they believe that a usual problem for everyone, lest they get suspicious.

"You have an owl," Lavender offered unnecessarily.

Sitting up and holding out her arm for the bird to hop over, Hermione accepted the owl. Lavender crawled into bed with her, for whatever reason. Seating herself at the bottom end of Hermione's bed, the girl lifted the covers to warm her feet under.

Not lifting her gaze from Hermione, Lavender asked impatiently, "Well? Aren't you going to open it?"

The address on the tiny scroll bound to the owl's leg simply read "Princess". Hermione blushed, guessing who it had come from. The moment her hand touched the parchment, the ribbon holding it to the owl fell away and the scroll changed into something different. Something that appeared to be origami.

"Is that... a flower?" Lavender asked in awe. "A Lotus blossom?"

It largely resembled a Lotus blossom, to be sure, but Hermione knew that it wasn't supposed to be one.

"Seems like it," she agreed.

After all, Lavender did not need to know that Hermione was being sent a crown made of folded parchment in the middle of the night.

"Oh look," Lavender exclaimed in a barely hushed tone, "there's a pattern painted onto the petals!"

There was no pattern. What ink graced the crown formed runes. Ancient runes, at that, Hermione noticed. Ancient Nordic runes that would require a translation tome that was practically impossible to get one's hands on these days.

To her, they were as easily readable as her own handwriting. After all, their author had learned the encryption spell from Hermione herself, when he had aided her in charming the watch for the professor. The runes fell away to reveal a beautifully curved script that Hermione was glad to know stemmed from a man she had all but lost hope on hearing from until the summer.

A queen would not be seen without her king on such regal a day, the note read. A princess, however, until such day as she might choose to wear the crown, might need to face this occurrence alone. The king has the utmost faith in her strength, her poise, and her beauty to shine at the side of whoever she might grace with her presence today, or to walk by her own, a force to be reckoned with, a jewel blinding the pebbles amongst which she wanders. He wishes her the most glorious day, today and on all days that his heart has to remain yearning for the time at which they may meet again.

Be safe, princess, it continued after a line break. Be safe for me.

And that was all.

"Hermione?" Lavender cautiously asked through her obvious curiosity. "Is everything alright?"

Looking up from the stunning crown, Hermione seemed to be seeing Lavender through a blurry haze. It took her a moment to realize that her eyes were filled with tears.
"Yes," she replied. "Yes, everything is alright; very much so."

"Who is it from?" her dorm mate pressed, now that nothing seemed to be amiss.

"The king," Hermione muttered.

"Excuse me? I did not quite catch that."

"Oh, just somebody I met over the summer," Hermione replied, now loud enough for Lavender to hear.

"Just somebody, huh?" the girl echoed. "Sure, sure. You must have left quite the impression on somebody if he sends you something this artistic. And calling you 'princess'; my, my. I wish I ever received such a beautiful Valentine's card from a boy."

And with that, she was gone from Hermione's bed to crawl back into her own and catch a few hours' more sleep.

Hermione blushed profusely.

No boy, she thought, remembering the words Kingsley had used to describe what he would do to her if she were his. She had never expected to receive something for Valentine's Day from him, though. Or from anyone, really, for that matter. The thought that it must be past midnight, and thus February 14th already, had not even crossed her mind until Lavender had said the words.

He was missing her, Hermione thought, and the thought alone warmed her from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes. His heart was yearning for her, and with a pang, she realized that a part of her own heart was yearning for him, as well. He had become something of an anchor in the furious sea of her life, the only thing tethering her to her sanity in the storm raging around her.

She felt horribly guilty for being unable to give him what he wanted, what they both wanted, and horribly indebted and eternally grateful to him for accepting and respecting that fact. He did not press her for what she could not provide, but gently pulled her closer to him.

She was not falling in love with the man. Her descent into this intense emotion was not chaotic and unplanned as a fall usually was. It was as gentle as being guided down the stairs. He was saving her from the immense height at which she stood, endangered and trembling in fear. He was leading her to the safety that she had come to associate with the depth; the depth of his voice, the depth of his feelings for her, the depth of the warm fuzziness that surrounded her when his lips pressed against her forehead, imbuing her with everything he could provide for her.

She did not know how long she sat in her bed, holding the crown in her hands, her fingers tracing the petal-like spikes, following the curves of Kingsley's handwriting. A sense of peace had filled her that allowed time to slip by unmourned, and that allowed her body to find rest despite the severe lack of sleep.

When she managed to gently lift herself out of the emotional reverie that the Auror's note had lovingly tipped her into, she made a decision. Throwing back the covers, wand in hand, she was out of her bed and on her way.

There was not a sliver of doubt within Hermione's mind that any attempts to continue sleeping in her bed would be futile after the emotionally rousing note from Kingsley. Thus, instead of even trying to find any more rest in the dorm, she Disillusioned herself and made her way to the prefects' bathroom.

Once more she admired the elves' efficiency in cleaning the huge room from what messes she and
the professor made there every Thursday night. Then again, she snorted to herself, hers were probably not the only bodily fluids to grace the luxurious bathroom on a regular basis, considering that it existed in a school filled with teenagers.

Chasing those thoughts from her mind, she set to filling the pool with scented water and lots and lots of bubble bath. One of the towels was quickly Transfigured into a plush pillow. Immersing herself in the water, Hermione placed said pillow under her head on the edge of the pool, and fell into a light, but incredibly restful slumber that was on the brink of tipping into another, even deeper emotion.

She was woken several hours later, when the door to the bathroom was opened and two people entered whose feminine giggles clearly identified them as girls. Having navigated through the bathroom in the black of the night, Hermione squinted against the sudden light as the sconces lining the walls jumped to life at the flick of a wand from the new entrants. A gasp brought the giggling to a full stop when the two of them appeared to notice that the bathroom was already in use.

"Granger," one of the voices tersely acknowledged her presence, and Hermione relaxed back into the bath, having already halfway risen from the tub in the dazed zone between sleep and full awareness.

"Hi, Hermione," the other voice greeted more cordially, a hint of the earlier giggles colouring the tone.

"Good morning, Katie," Hermione replied to the latter girl, "Angelina."

Hermione half-closed her eyes again, enough to appear asleep, but sufficiently wide open to see what the girls were doing. Katie seemed to relax at that, thinking that Hermione wouldn't be watching them undress. She snapped out of the surprise that had been plainly written on her face at the unabashed manner in which Angelina had been shedding her robes, even though Hermione was present, and followed the Quidditch captain's actions.

"Are you preparing for a date as well?" Katie asked, discarding her robes next to where Angelina had let her own fall to the floor, and joining her teammate as they both descended the ladder into the water, still hot from the pool's charms. It turned out that they had both gone starkers underneath their robes, and Hermione allowed her mind a single moment to admire their beauty before their figures were obscured under the thick layer of non-bursting bubbles.

"If by date you mean February 14th," Hermione replied, "then yes, I am mentally preparing for the onslaught of kitsch and slobbering, hormone-filled teenagers that is certain to hit me today."

"So you won't have company in Hogsmeade today?"

The raised eyebrow was almost audible in Angelina's voice, negating the necessity for Hermione to raise her head and open her eyes from her comfortable recline on the pillow. The real question behind the voiced one was clear: where was the mystery man she had been set on giving herself to before the Christmas holidays?

"I will not be without company in the village," Hermione answered. "But no, I will not be accompanied by anyone in the romantic sense. I will walk alone, if you so will, and I will do so with strength and poise," she partly quoted Kingsley's words at the girls, leaving out the 'beauty' part.

A pleasant lull in the conversation followed in which Hermione tried to convince her still tired, but overall quite well rested body to rouse itself from the pool. After all, the professor might not appreciate her staying in the same room, much less in the same bathtub, with the girl who had
brought her to her first orgasm induced by somebody other than herself. She had almost managed that feat and was on the brink of following through with leaving the bath and after that the bathroom, when Katie's voice cut through her inner struggles.

"So, say, Hermione," the girl asked, "will you be taking points for me being in the prefects' bathroom without actually having that privilege?"

Hermione raised her head to look at the chaser.

"That depends," she replied, eyeing the wary expression that stole into Katie's face. "Will you be tattling on me to that new female Gryffindor prefect for being out before curfew's over? I hear she's a real stickler for rules."

The sixth year still looked a little shell shocked when Angelina chimed in.

"Nah, I wouldn't worry about that one," she said with a wink, a smile playing about her full lips. "I hear she's supposedly joined some secret defense association - some prefect she is!"

"Imagine the scandal if somebody were to find out about that!" Hermione exclaimed, smiling as well, as comprehension dawned on Katie's face that they were teasing her. "So what do you say, Katie," Hermione proposed, "I won't tell if you don't?"

Certain of the confirmative answer she was going to receive, Hermione was already climbing out of the bath when Katie replied to her retreating back, "You have yourself a deal there."

Almost out of the bathroom, Hermione heard Katie ask Angelina incredulously, "Did you just flirt with Hermione?"

"Don't be ridiculous," came the Quidditch captain's answer, "why would I need to flirt with Granger when I can do so much more pleasant things with you?"

Hermione smiled to herself, happy for the two girls, as she closed the bathroom door to the sound of Katie's response being cut off with a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter Forty-One, wherein a visitor from Wiltshire is being discussed.
Saturday, February 14th, 1996

The girl had seemed happy at breakfast.

Happy.

Well, no, that was not quite right. The girl had seemed exhausted in a rather relaxed way, if such a thing was possible, but had also appeared to be on edge. Until an owl had arrived, that is. At receiving that message, she had become excited, talked onto the Potter boy in such urgent a manner that he had looked ready to promise her anything as long as she stopped pressuring him, and then she had hurried off, the letter still clutched in her hand.

Yes, in a manner she had seemed happy. Now, what was he supposed to make of it?

There was nothing wrong per se with the girl being happy at times, of course. It was the timing itself that made Severus suspicious. What was the girl doing, being happy on this cursed Valentine's Day, of all days? Was there a paramour she was hiding? Had that owl had she had received come from a secret lover?

Naturally, the girl was free to heap her emotions onto whomever she liked, as long as it wasn't the Potions Master. There was just that simple manner of teenage girls forcing their emotions on some poor wizard who would then presume that the witch's feelings meant he would get some, and teenage hormones would usually dictate that said wizard was perfectly correct to think so.

There was no reason for the girl to be unsatisfied with what Severus had to offer her, of course. He had certainly been seeing to her sexual needs over the past few weeks, and satisfactorily so, too, if the deep moans escaping her throat and the ecstatic twitches of her body and the words 'oh yes, sir, yes' repeatedly tumbling from her lips were any indication, which they most clearly were.

No, Severus was not the girl's lover, nor would he ever be. He had no tender emotions to offer her. Tending to her as he had done the weekend prior was the maximum of comfort he was able to afford giving her, and there was nothing more to be had. The girl was well aware of that fact, he knew. She would be receiving no heartfelt declarations from the Potions Master, but he had so much more to give her than other wizards did: he could stimulate both her mind and her body, and he did so with both passion (though he hid that rather well most of the time) and with an expertise that she would be hard-pressed to find in any other.

So how dare the girl seek out another man? How dare she smile and get excited about a fucking note on fucking Valentine's Day of all days? Could she not appreciate what she had? Had she no taste? Had she no manners? Did she not know that it was bad form to entertain one wizard while stringing along another?

The girl was his, and he would make certain that she knew it.

Looking up from where his eyes had been directed at his feet, staring but unseeing where he was going, Severus found that he had climbed to the top of the Astronomy tower. That was just as well. Perhaps he might find some peace in the quietude and the wide view. Perhaps he might have a few undisturbed thoughts while he was here.
Perhaps he might throw himself off of the tower. At least that would free the girl, and the poor sod she was stringing along might have an actual chance. Not that he cared. The girl was his, Severus's, and death was too easy a way out of her commitment to him now.

"What a rarely peaceful Saturday, would you not say, Severus?"

Severus cursed inwardly. Of course his luck, dubitable as it already was, would have to come to an end at some point. The old man would always, always see to that.

"As rare as seventy percent of the school body leaving Hogwarts grounds, Headmaster," he replied to the wizard stepping out of the shadows. "The village of Hogsmeade might disagree with you on the issue of the peacefulness of this particular Saturday, however."

Dumbledore had the audacity to chuckle.

"Miss Granger appeared to find it peaceful," he continued as if Severus had not spoken. "She did certainly seem happy at breakfast."

So he was not the only one to have noticed, Severus mused.

All the while, the headmaster's eyes twinkled with a furore that Severus felt the sudden, desperate need to Occlude his mind so intensely, to enforce his mental walls to such a thickness that he himself would have trouble reading his own thoughts. He suppressed that need but remained on his guard. One always had to be on their guard when in the presence of Albus Dumbledore.

"I have noticed nothing of the sort," he stated instead.

"How curious," the headmaster noted, "for someone as perceptive as you, Severus, not to have noticed something like this."

"Perhaps," Severus countered, "the emotional rollercoaster rides of pubescent Gryffindor witches hold so little interest for me that they manage to escape my mind."

Dumbledore remained silent, as if waiting for more to come. More did come, indeed.

"Or perhaps," the Potions Master continued vehemently, "the mere notion of cluttering my mind with such mindless observations as the sensitivities of a teenage student is so abhorrent to me that my eyes know to filter the sight and ensuing recognition of such sensibilities out of my perception before they can reach my memory. In fact, I find this possibility the more plausible of the two."

"I will freely admit that I find that remarkable," the headmaster said. "Your ability to form such a strong opinion on a matter of such professedly little importance to you, that is."

He let that sink in for a heartbeat or two before continuing.

"Nevertheless, I am glad for Miss Granger to have found some happiness in her life," Dumbledore insisted. "There is so precious little of it to be found these days, and Miss Granger did appear stretched rather thin these past few months. Between the everyday struggles, the lingering stress, and the constant mental pressure," there was a strange emphasis on that last part, "she often looked as if in physical pain."

A battle of wills ensued. Fixed under Dumbledore's heavy gaze, Severus found himself staring into the headmaster's all-seeing eyes, both serious with the gravity of what they were discussing, and twinkling with all the benevolence the elder wizard had to portray if he wanted to continue the charade of kindly old man.
Severus felt conflicted. On the one hand, he wanted nothing more than to prove his strength by holding the headmaster's gaze, proudly maintaining his shields, unwilling to back down and break the connection. On the other hand, it might be wiser to follow his role of faithful servant and bow to the headmaster, thus withdrawing the challenge to break into Severus's mind.

Fortunately for the Potions Master, that decision was taken from him when the headmaster faced the banister, gazing out onto the greenery surrounding the castle.

"This schoolyear has proven rather stressful for everyone so far," Dumbledore admitted. "Threats are sprouting of the ground from all sides. Tom's return, the Ministry’s stubbornness, and now Madam Umbridge's teachings - Miss Granger is not the only one stretched rather thin, I'm afraid. And thus, the individual's needs must often take a step back and allow the needs of the Greater Good to come first."

Severus was beyond astounded. Another inch and his chin would audibly be hitting the floor. Albus Dumbledore did not falter. Albus Dumbledore did not doubt himself, nor did he admit to any levels of stress, neither high nor otherwise. And above all, Albus Dumbledore did not confide in the likes of Severus Snape.

"Shouldn't those two be the same?" Severus asked, uncertain of what to say in response to the old man's confessions. It was often better to pose a question, anyway.

"In general they should, yes, my boy," the headmaster agreed. "It is the peculiarities in which they often differ. I cannot always care for everyone's individual needs, much as I would like to see to them. That is why it makes me all the more happy to see a talented, capable, bright, determined student such as Miss Granger attend to their own needs, or to see them find a person who will take care of those needs."

He turned his back to the scenery in order to face Severus once more.

"Do you think me wise to put my trust in Miss Granger's ability to make the right decision in finding a suitable caretaker?" he asked.

For once, that question appeared to be a genuine one, and the headmaster's longing to hear an honest answer seemed real.

"People often call you wise, Headmaster," Severus sidestepped before plunging right in. "But I have frequently found that you are too trusting. And if you believe Miss Granger to be in need of a 'caretaker', as you say," he spat, "then perhaps you need to rethink the wisdom in placing your trust in Miss Granger's decision-making abilities."

Dumbledore smiled, although the expression was tainted by a small tinge of sadness.

"I have yet to misplace my trust, Severus," he proclaimed.

Where he had earlier contemplated throwing himself off of the Astronomy tower, Severus was now weighing the pros and cons of doing that same thing to the headmaster. Either the old man was purposely forgetting Peter Pettigrew, or the whole swapped Secret Keeper business had been an elaborate plot to - what? Get Severus's childhood love killed? To entrap him into eternal service to the white-bearded megalomaniac who called himself the Leader of the Light? To groom the Potter boy into the perfect little child soldier by robbing him of both his parents?

History might disagree with Albus Dumbledore on whether his trust had ever been misplaced or not, but Severus chose to keep that observation to himself.
"Seeing as Miss Granger has neither approached Minerva nor has she made any attempt to approach me, nor do Harry or the youngest Mister Weasley appear unusually worried about her, I will assume that she is handling her life quite well. As such, I will continue to place my trust in Miss Granger's decision, whichever that may be. After all, she has often proven to know exactly where and when to seek outside help."

"I wonder," Severus mused aloud, "why you would seek my opinion in the correct or misplacement of your trust, Headmaster, when you have no intention of heeding said opinion anyway."

"Because, Severus," Dumbledore insisted, "you have always thought too lowly of yourself."

"Most people will disagree with you there, Headmaster," the Potions Master countered. "Tales of my arrogance seem to precede me wherever I go."

"Lesser minds will find arrogance in anyone cleverer than them," the headmaster stated boldly. "Most will not recognize brilliance, neither when it sticks their nose in their faces nor when it penetrates their very minds."

A pause ensued in which Severus decided not to comment on the headmaster's assessment of his nose. After all, it went with a rare compliment to his intelligence, and little as though he might like the older wizard, his brilliance was not to be denied, and it made the compliment all the sweeter.

Still, a few kind words every few years would not sway the Potions Master's opinion of Albus Dumbledore.

"So," the old man opened in what he probably thought to be a casual manner - as if there was any such thing as innocent small talk with the headmaster -, "your quarters have been seeing their fair share of activity lately."

If Severus had been drinking red wine, the headmaster's long white beard would now be sprinkled in pink. As it was, there was no wine to be had atop the Astronomy tower, and it was better this way. It would not do to become intoxicated in the formidable elder wizard's presence, nor would it be wise to tip one's hand by spraying fermented grape juice all over the man. Instead, the only outward sign that Severus had heard the headmaster's observation showed in his eyes that jumped to meet Dumbledore's piercing gaze. Other than that, not a single muscle in Severus's body dared to move.

"Those visits from Wiltshire have been surprisingly frequent recently," the headmaster continued.

"It does appear that even the company of a dour Potions Master is preferable to the alternative of remaining in one's own home in certain circumstances," Severus replied.

Of course it was more pleasant to sit drinking in sophisticated silence, rather than to subject oneself to the incessant chatter of a certain mad witch, the insanity of her mind only increased when adding alcohol to the equation. He elected not to mention that two visits could hardly be called frequent, nor was it possible to derive a pattern from them. Unless, of course, Dumbledore suspected that Lucius might come calling that night, and was talking to him because of that assumption.

"I will not presume to know what pleasures an accomplished wizard from Wiltshire might find in an old, draughty Scottish castle," the headmaster commented, "neither in matters of company nor otherwise. I will simply trust you, Severus, to take care that said wizard does not overindulge in those pleasures."

If Severus had entertained any doubts before that the headmaster knew nothing more than he let on, those doubts would now have been eviscerated. It did not matter how much exactly Dumbledore
knew of was going on between Lucius and the girl, or between Severus and the girl for that matter. It was enough that he did know that something was, in fact, going on.

Apparently, though, it was not enough to set the older wizard into action. Severus felt bile rise in his throat, thoroughly disgusted that the benevolent, kind, light Albus Dumbledore would allow a known Death Eater to abuse and violate a teenage student under his care. Then again, what was Lucius doing that differed so greatly from Severus's own dealings with the girl? Shouldn't Severus be glad that he himself had not be called out on the arrangement he had trapped her into?

No, he thought, determined to persist in his anger. To think that the headmaster knew what was going on and was doing nothing to intervene -

But looking at the greater picture, when had Albus Dumbledore ever supported Severus in his pursuits of the one witch he wanted for himself? When had he ever saved the object of Severus's desire from their darker fate?

Images of Lily danced through Severus's mind. Lily - her green eyes wide as she stared into his face when they'd first met. Lily - her green eyes sparkling with laughter as they gossiped about their fellow students in those first years at Hogwarts. Lily - her green eyes narrowed in fury as she warned him to stay away from her. Lily - her green eyes unseeing as she lay limply in his arms, tears rolling over her rapidly cooling face that were not her own.

No, Severus knew, there would be no help to be had from the headmaster.

"Does he trust you?" the man in question cut through Severus's internal musings.

"He trusts me enough to let me know the depth of his hatred for his sister-in-law's company," he replied.

"Nothing else?" the old man queried.

"Barely."

"Are there any doubts in his mind?"

"Certainly," Severus confirmed, only to tone the statement back down. "Any wizard as entitled as Lucius Malfoy will be prone to doubting everything and anything that so much as hints at posing even a minimal threat to their luxury and privilege."

"But is there any substance in his doubts?" Dumbledore pressed. "Anything solid?"

"Solid as a wisp of smoke in the autumn mist," Severus stated.

Let the old man have the drama he loved so much. A little poetic waxing wouldn't hurt him.

"No, less than that even," he reassessed. "A whisper of the wisps of smoke. The Dark Lord is travelling much of the time, seeking out places Morgana knows where. The amount of immediate involvement that Lucius shares with the Dark Lord has been minimal up until now. He is yet to be engaged in the Dark Lord's current agenda, and with the minimal exposure comes minimal doubt. Lucius is merely annoyed at the unwelcome house guests he has been forced to entertain; nothing more so far."

"Smoke,"

"Smoke," the headmaster mused. "Smoke, one can work with. What one lacks in smoke, one might make up by strengthening the fire."
"Even the strongest fire, if burning correctly, will not emit much smoke, Headmaster," Severus countered.

"Ah, yes, I'm afraid you are too right there, Severus," Dumbledore amended. "But the crux of the issue is how to define 'correctly'. In this context, for example, it would be 'correct' to burn some greens."

Greens, Severus thought to himself, almost choking on the strong inhale that he did not allow himself. Surely the tottering old fool didn't mean to -?

"I should not think that Lucius will care much about what happens to Potter," Severus drawled, hiding his rising bile at the mere notion of using children to lure out one of the Dark Lord's henchmen.

"Not Harry, no, I don't believe he would care much about him," the headmaster agreed. "But I am thinking of another boy – close in age; peers, in fact –"

The knut dropped, and it created a tsunami in Severus's mind.

"I will not allow my godson to come to any harm, Albus," the Potions Master stated, his rage glacial and barely contained, threatening to freeze the older wizard into a statue made of the same material as his oh-so-benevolent heart. He hoped beyond hope that using the headmaster's first name might cut through to him.

It did not.

"Then save him, if you must, Severus," Dumbledore said, and a dismissive wave of his hand accompanied that idea, "save the young Mister Malfoy from the fire. But rest assured: the boy will be licked at by the flames first."

And with a swish of his disturbingly brightly coloured robes, the aged wizard was gone from the tower, and Severus was once more left alone in the furious flurry that were his thoughts.

_Did something happen today, Miss Granger?_ Severus found himself asking later that day.

The watch in hand that the girl had gifted him for his birthday, he ignored the fact that the article held a diamond of immeasurable worth, at least in sentimental value, although many a wizard might pay good galleons to own what the girl had given Severus so willingly.

He had fought with himself whether to contact the girl via watch. It had a struggle that he had ultimately lost (or won, depending on how one looked at it - a constant dilemma with inner arguments), as evidenced by the fact that he was now sending a message through the encrypted Protean charm.

_You seemed more smug at dinner than usual_, he added when a few seconds had passed without answer.

He chose not to dwell on the fact that he had just implied that he was making a habit of watching the girl at dinner, which he decidedly did not. It was simply a matter of being a staff member at this illustrious institution, because as a member of the Hogwarts staff one should always be prepared for anything to happen during meal times in the Great Hall, and as such it was wise to constantly be keeping one eye (or better yet, _both eyes_) on the student body. That the girl happened to be one such student and he had no choice but to keep said eyes on her, as well, as part of the collective whole, was inevitable.
And indeed, the girl had seemed happy, even more so than she had at breakfast. The headmaster might not care that the girl had been forced to give herself to a Death Eater that was not incidentally a double agent of the Light, but Severus had very much a vested interest in the girl's sexual life where it did not include him. They had an arrangement, after all, and as such it was his right, his duty, even, to know of every man in her life.

Finally, after more than ninety seconds had passed - *what had the girl been doing that it took her so long to reply?* - the watch gave a flare of heat.

*I had a very productive day in Hogsmeade*, the runes spelled. *That is all, professor.*

*So you are not simply overjoyed*, Severus asked, waited a few seconds for the message to go through, and then continued his thought, *at the obnoxious amounts of pink today?*

Again, more than a minute passed before a reply was forthcoming from the girl. Perhaps she had been having trouble to close her mouth after it had fallen open from the shock of the dour Potions Master's attempt at dry humour.

*I'm afraid there's only so much pink*, the ciphers read, *that I can take in at any given time.*

*The High Inquisitor will be sad to hear that*, Severus replied. *Or overjoyed to be the only pink in your life*, he added.

At the other end of the castle, Hermione was lying in her bed, the curtains warded firmly shut. Harry had still been pouting about his horrible date with Cho when she had left him and Ron alone in order to answer the burning locket hidden underneath the high neckline of her sweater. It had been difficult to disentangle herself from the boys, and she had had to hurry in order not to let the professor wait any longer than usual.

She had been stunned when he had inquired about her acceptance of the abhorrent amounts of pink that seemed to permeate the very air on Valentine's Day, too shocked to think that perhaps the remark had been intended in the professor's own brand of humour. His following comments as to Umbridge's assumed reaction to Hermione's distaste of the colour left little doubt as to his mood, however. It seemed that the Potions Master wanted to play.

*If there was one source of pink*, Hermione replied, *that I had to content myself with for the rest of my life*, - the limited space of the messages might be an issue that would need to be addressed at some point, she mused - *it would not be the Madam Undersecretary's.*

A pause followed.

*Carry on, Miss Granger*, the professor prompted.

If the professor wanted to play, then play they would.

*It would be yours.*

Now it was Severus's turn to be stunned.

*Mine?* he asked, then cursed himself that the question had slipped from his mind and into the charm that connected the watch in his hands to the locket around the girl's neck. He had not meant for her to know that question. He caught himself before his next question, *'how so?*', followed.
*Elaborate*, he demanded instead.

*I appreciate the pink you bring out in me, sir,* came the reply, almost immediately this time.

It did not slip Severus's notice that the girl had reverted to the title she was to address him with when they were… *extra-curricularly engaged*.

*When I make you blush?* Severus queried, knowing full well that this was not what the girl had meant, but wanting to make her spell it out, most literally.

*That too,* she evaded his implied question.

*When I make you bleed?* he provoked further.

*Say it, girl,* he chanted internally. *Go ahead and say it.*

*Not so much, but that too,* came the surprising reply. *Or rather, I appreciate the noble cause behind it,* the girl amended soon afterwards.

*Noble cause,* Severus scoffed to himself. Yes, the girl was still training for withstanding torture, but that did not mean that *his* intentions were always equally true, even when they coincidentally worked towards the girl's goal. He could not place a name to the emotion he felt when painting the girl, and even if he had been able to do so, he might have hesitated. All he knew was that his chest swelled with unwanted pride when the girl took everything he had to give her without complaint, with ever-increasingly stable Occlumency shields, and with minimal tells of her pain.

*Which pink then, Miss Granger?* Severus spelled.

Another pause followed. The girl knew the answer to his question, Severus was well aware of that, but it appeared that she was hesitant in her choice of how to spell it out.

*The one I was allowed,* the ciphers around the watch's face spelled, *to take back to my dorm last weekend.*

There it was, finally, all out in the open. Severus felt strangely elated by the knowledge that the girl must have enjoyed her spanking almost as much as he had. Of course, he had noticed that she had seemed hesitant when she'd thought that he had healed her skin of all trace of his hand's imprints, but to have her go ahead and actually admit to the fact -

*Would you like me to replicate that pink?* Severus asked before he could stop to wonder how it was that the girl made him forget himself this way.

---

*Something did happen today, though.*

Hermione had just been sending off the message when the locket heated, displaying the professor's latest text. She wondered how the Protean charm would react when two messages were being sent at the same moment, and from opposite ends.

A silence followed that could either mean that the professor was waiting for her reply to his question, not having received her statement of something happening, or that he was waiting for her to elaborate. Usually he would not hesitate to demand she elaborate, of course, but considering even the possibility that he might be upset enough to simply *wait* for Hermione to elaborate rather than outright demand it, was frightening enough that she decided to be proactive and tell him everything,
whether he had received her message or not.

*I happened upon Angelina this morning,* Hermione confessed. *Or rather, she happened upon me, in the prefects' bathroom. I left as soon as was polite.*

Once her last message was through, the reply was almost instantaneous.

*Need I remind you of our agreement, Miss Granger?* the locket read.

Hermione's hands were very almost shaking when she made to reply, afraid that the professor might break off her lessons simply because he *assumed* she had been unfaithful to their deal.

*You need not, sir,* hastened to reply. *I have been and will be sticking to it.*

Another pause followed in which Hermione hardly dared to breathe. So much hinged on the professor's acceptance of her answer, or on his lack thereof. When her locket finally burned, she almost ripped it from her neck in her haste to see his response. What she read had her want to jump in joy until her bed broke.

*Are you attempting to distract me from my question,* the runes spelled, *by mentioning Miss Johnson?*

Hermione managed to reign in her urge to physically celebrate the professor's reply. Only her face split into a huge grin in her relief. If the Potions Master could still *tease* her, then he would continue *to teach* her, as well.

*It has worked once before, after all,* she wrote back.

If he could tease, then so could she. After all, it was him who had brought up distraction by mentioning Angelina, even if nothing of the sort had been Hermione's intention. But she remembered all too well that images of her interactions with the dark skinned, beautiful Quidditch captain could capture the professor's attention on occasion, to such an extent that he forgot to secure his Legilimetic hold on her mind. It had been what had enabled her to cast him out of her head in December, after all.

*I have since learned to maintain constant vigilance around you,* the heated locket read.

*Constant vigilance, you say, sir?* Hermione countered with a smile playing about her lips. *I would be most sad to see you lose a leg and an eye.*

Somehow, Hermione failed to imagine the professor with physical disabilities such as the retired Auror was burdened with. Then again, acquiring a magical eye such as Alastor Moody used might be the only way for the Potions Master's gaze to become any *more* piercing than it already was.

*You are free to check if all legs are still in place,* the locket challenged.

Hermione hesitated. Pleasant as sexual intercourse with the professor was, she had no appetite for engaging him tonight. Her heart was still rattled in the most beautiful way by the moving letter Kingsley had sent her, and she wished to preserve that feeling for at least the duration of the weekend. As such, she would have to decline the professor's challenge.

*I would beg off for tonight, sir,* she wrote back.

The ensuing pause lasted for only a few seconds before the accusations began.
So something did happen to make you forget our agreement.

The message stung.

I have not forgotten, Hermione argued. Besides, the agreement requires both parties to be in the mood.

So it is simply a matter of mood, the Potions Master's response deduced. I could help you with that, Miss Granger. You need not even ask.

Of all the moments for the professor to show generosity –

There is no sense for me, she said, in getting used to spending Valentine's Day in company.

You might come after midnight, he suggested.

It appeared that Professor Snape had an answer for everything. Hermione knew she should not have been surprised.

I would not want to dishonour our agreement, she now tried a different tactic. I've been amiss in getting a full eight hours of sleep on the past two weekends already. It would not do to knowingly do so again.

Hermione was on the brink of breathing a sigh of relief after the locket had remained cool for several seconds. The professor had been countering her arguments as he would do curses: rapid-fire and without hesitation. She was already preparing herself to draw a deep breath that would beg to be let out in a whoosh of relaxation. Then –

It had taken Severus several seconds to calm down. He had almost laughed at the girl's attempt to counter his pressure by turning his own arguments around on him. Almost. But he would not be denied tonight. Not by this mere slip of a girl who had in the past been so eager to find herself underneath him, open and accommodating.

And if your mentor – he did not dare call himself her professor or her teacher, lest he spoil his own mood – could be convinced to give you leave from that particular part of the agreement for just one weekend?

He would need to research how to lengthen the maximum number of letters that could fit in one message for this watch, he mused. Or better yet: he would have the girl do it.

I would still beg off, the girl violently ripped him from his musings. I would be too sleep-deprived to be good company.

Severus scoffed. It was not her company he wanted, although it was not as unpleasant as it had once been. Still, what was she thinking? That he wanted to engage her in conversation, of all things? No, there were much more pleasant engagements to be had.

But there had to be a reason why she was evading him. The letter from breakfast popped into his mind, as did the ensuing expression of satisfaction that had spread all over the girl's face and posture at reading the slip of parchment. What had happened?

What happened today? Severus demanded to know.
No more playing games. It was time for answers.

*I received a letter,* came the girl's reply after a moment's hesitation.

As if he didn't know that already.

*A secret admirer, Miss Granger?* Severus queried.

*Secret, yes,* the ciphers spelled, *but not to me.*

*And now you are suddenly up and about to abandon our agreement?*

Severus should have expected such a thing. Witches were fickle, he knew, and teenage witches even more so. To trust in the girl's fidelity, if he wanted to call it that, to trust in her loyalty, to trust in her proclamations of respect, had been foolish. Had he been so starved for pussy that he had allowed the girl to wrap him around her finger? Had he lost all sense, all mind for propriety? Even if he had been unable to keep his hands off of her, as he had obviously been, he should have just shagged the witch and be done with her. To wrangle some kind of commitment from her had simply been begging for her to break it.

Yes, Hermione Granger was just as fickle as all the other witches in the world. Severus may have been stupid enough to trust that she wasn't, but the proof was glaring him right in the face: silence.

There was no reply.

Hermione cursed the wizard. How *dare* he question her integrity? How *dare* he question her honesty, her loyalty, her commitment? *How dare he?*

She was tearing through the castle, hurriedly making her way down to the dungeons like an avenging angel. Only, Hermione was no angel. Not anymore. Not for one Severus Snape.

*How dare* he rip her from the loving fuzziness that was buzzing around her heart after Kingsley's letter? *How dare* he disregard her boundaries? *How dare* he dishonour their agreement?

*How dare he?*

She pounded against the door to the professor's office that had appeared in front of her much earlier than usual. For a moment, Hermione was surprised at her own speed, but there were more important matters to focus on now. Somebody would need to have their arse handed to them on a Slytherin-silver platter.

"Go away," the least welcoming voice she had ever heard shouted from within.

Hermione wanted to laugh. First he had done his best to convince her to come to him, and now he wanted her to go away? That would not do.

The professor's voice may have sounded less welcoming than ever, but fortunately, Hermione did not need his welcome in order to enter.

She simply barged right in.

"Miss Granger," Severus sneered when the door to his office banged open. "Ever heard of knocking?"
"I did knock," the girl had the audacity to sneer right back.

"I did not hear you," he lied without any finesse. Sometimes the girl needed a message to hit her in the face like a brick. This was such a time, he assessed.

"Well, I did not hear you yell at me to 'go away', sir," she seethed.

The girl had some nerve. If he hadn't been so enraged just then, Severus might have been impressed. As it was, he did not only have to hold on to his fury regarding the girl, he also had to fight the urge to curse himself for not adjusting the wards that allowed her in.

"Considering how willing you were to avoid my presence, Miss Granger," he countered, "one might wonder why you would seek me out now?"

"I am not abandoning our agreement," the girl insisted. "Nor have I ever abandoned it, nor will I ever abandon it in the future."

"So you are here to offer yourself up to me now?" Severus scoffed. "What makes you think I still want you, Miss Granger?"

The girl ignored him.

"I wanted just one day to myself," she said, more to herself than to Severus, but he heard her nonetheless. "Just one day of pure joy."

"You speak of purity," Severus spat. "And what would I do to impede that? Would I disturb your precious purity? Am I defiling you, Miss Granger?"

"Those are your words, not mine," the girl countered. "But if you want to put it that way, then yes, sir. Yes, you are defiling my joy right now."

"You wanted it," Severus accused. "You begged for it, begged for me to give it to you."

"I have never denied that," she confirmed. "But I also do have the right to decline your attentions for one single day."

"Ah, but you wanted two days, Miss Granger," Severus argued. "I offered to let you come to me tomorrow, but you insisted on having Sunday 'off' as well."

"How preposterous of me," the girl exclaimed, "to want one whole weekend off!"

They stood facing one another, both of them seething. A few moments passed in which neither of them spoke. Eventually, the girl seemed to deflate a bit. Her defensive stance vanished, but the defiant sparkle in her eyes remained.

"You know what, sir," she challenged, "you want me to give myself to you? Well, take me, then. But don't take my body. Take my mind instead."

Her shields came down the moment Severus's mind pressed against them, but of the girl's own accord. She wanted him inside her mindscape, and he tumbled right in.

It took Severus a moment to orient himself. Before he could discern up from down and left from right, pictures began to assault him. The sheer number of images and the strength of emotion that lay behind them overwhelmed Severus as the girl started to broadcast impressions at him. Heart-to-hearts with Shacklebolt. Shacklebolt
guessing about the older man in her life. Shacklebolt discerning that the girl wasn't free to entertain him. Shacklebolt accepting that limitation. Shacklebolt promising to wait for the girl. A number of memories of Shacklebolt pressing his lips against the girl's forehead, and the heat that coursed through her whole body after such kisses. Runes written onto a parchment flower that decrypted themselves in front of Severus's eyes, holding words of devotion. The girl, practically skipping through her day on an emotional high from the curious letter.

There was nothing of the note she had received at breakfast, Severus noticed. Whatever had happened in Hogsmeade had nothing to do with her reluctance to come to him. Was that supposed to satisfy him? He did not know.

He was being thrown out of her mind again. He did not fight it. There were more important things to attend to than the girl's ability to control his venue into her brain.

"You are mine," he stated with all the vehemence he was feeling.

"I have never disputed that my body is yours, sir," the girl amended. "For now."


The distance between their bodies, small as it was, was crossed with just a few long strides. The girl found herself backed against a bookshelf, her body caught between the wealth of knowledge hidden therein and the hardness of Severus's body against hers. Her hair was tangled around the fingers that held her head to his with both hands as his lips clashed against hers.

The kiss was as rough as Severus was feeling, his lips against hers as grating as the memories of another wizard's claim on her heart had been against Severus's mind. He did not want her emotions, but that did not mean anybody else was allowed to own them. Severus was a possessive man, and the girl was his, mind, body, and soul. There was no place for anyone beside him.

He did not know how long the kiss lasted. All he knew was that he was thrown back by a burst of magic, aided by two tiny hands pushing against his chest. The girl was panting. With a start, Severus noticed that so was he.

"How dare you," she cursed, although it sounded almost like a sob. "You just had to go and destroy this day, didn't you?"

"You are mine," Severus repeated hotly, scorchingly. "If I cannot have you, Miss Granger, then nobody will."

"Then nobody will," she stated, "at least not for this weekend. I will continue to honour our agreement. Good-bye, professor."

And with that, she was gone from the room.

Her passing words felt like a slap to the face. They turned his blood to ice. With a single word, a single manner of address, the girl had effectively destroyed his mood and had put Severus into place. She knew that she was not to call him 'professor' during their sexual interactions. She had essentially told him that his kiss did nothing for her, and that she would not be subdued by it – as if he had not noticed that by her actions alone.

He had kissed the girl. Why, he could not say, but Severus did notice that it had been the first time that they had kissed. It had not been a gentle kiss, not loving, not tender. It had not been anything a first kiss should be like, because Severus Snape did not kiss. He was no wizard who kissed, nor was he a wizard to be kissed. This had not been anything that a first kiss should be, because it had not
been a 'first kiss'. It had been a last kiss, an only kiss.

It had been a mistake.

For all the heat that Severus had felt earlier in his rage, he now wondered at the temperature in his office. Even for a February in Scotland, the dungeons appeared suddenly particularly cold after the girl had gone.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Chapter Forty-Two, wherein the similarities between love and blood loss are explained.
"Oh, Harry," Hermione sighed in her exasperation. "Well, I'm sorry, but you were a bit tactless."

"Me, tactless?" Harry raged.

He would go on to tell her how he had done nothing wrong, Hermione knew, and he probably believed that, too. She was glad that she had spent Sunday locked away in her room, hidden behind the thick curtains that surrounded her bed, her fingers idly playing with her parchment crown from the handsome wizard whose heart was yearning for her and who her own heart was yearning for in turn, while she had immersed her mind in the Pure Black. She had tried to banish the whole enraging conversation she had had with the professor from her mind, as well as the kiss he had forced upon her, and Occluding had helped… a little.

Explaining to Harry in how many ways exactly he had gone wrong during his date with Cho, Hermione was secretly proud that he had managed to hold himself so well together during his interview with Skeeter that she had practically thrown on him. She had figured that if she didn't give him any time to over-analyse himself into a snitch, he would simply go through with it, and he had done just that. Judging from the approval he had been receiving from the other Gryffindor boys so far, it seemed the interview would pay off in more ways than one. Even Seamus had been listening with more than half an ear when the boys had been talking about it.

"You should write a book," a muddy Ron suggested as he dug into dinner, "translating mad things girls do so boys can understand them."

Hermione did not even need to respond to that, as just a second later the whole conversation turned to Quidditch. While Harry was still half-glaring, half-mooning after Cho, Hermione allowed her own eyes to wander to the High Table.

A book, she snorted to herself. A book wouldn't be helping anyone. After all, she had been rather determined and stringent in trying to reject the professor's advances on Saturday night, and he, the consummate Slytherin and thus people-reader extraordinaire, had simply ignored all that. What good was there in witches giving clues if wizards were so intent on misreading or dismissing them?

Just then, the Potions Master's eyes met hers. His eyes narrowed for the fraction of a second, as if having heard her thoughts. Checking her Occlumency shields which had become her constant companion these days, she could detect no fault with them. Focusing back on the professor, his eyes had returned to their usual size, no longer trained on her. His face was a mask of emptiness, too. Hermione had thought that she might have come to be able to read him quite well, but she realized that perhaps the professor had been the one to let his guard down with her, allowing her to read him...
to some extent. Now, his guard was firmly back in place, and Hermione had arrived back at square one.

Today's Potions lesson had been spent Occluding while trying to help the hopeless boys around her brew their own concoctions, all the while doing her best to adequately finish her own. The professor had not approached her, but a constant pressure around her mind told her that he was there. At least he had not completely abandoned her as he had the last time their ability to miscommunicate at the worst of times had become blatantly obvious.

Then again, she mused, following up on her earlier thought, if she was bad at reading the professor, then the professor was even worse at reading her. He had kissed her, for Morgana's sake! Kissed her, as if she had any romantic notions towards him.

And truly, she didn't. No romantic inclinations whatsoever. Yes, she deeply respected the professor, found him physically pleasing and his facial features arresting, and yes, he could do things to her body –

But she held no emotions for him other than those – respect, lust, and a weird kind of trust that came with allowing somebody to hurt you and to violate your mind –, and above all, she held no hopes that they, the two of them together, would ever be more than they already were. And even if such a thing was possible, which it wasn't, and if the professor was interested in that, which he wasn't, she would do her all to discourage him of any notion that included the two of them as any kind of item in any kind of future, foreseeable or far away, it did not matter. This, they, would never happen.

There was nothing she could do to distance herself from him now, of course. Yes, she might beg off their sexual relations, and she could abandon their lessons – alright, there was a lot she might do to distance herself from Professor Snape. There was nothing she wanted to do, though. Those lessons were what had started all this mess, and she was grateful for receiving them and felt determined to go through with them. The sex was a great way to relieve stress and get rid of the tension that was creeping up on her from all sides at all times. Plus, the sex was great, period. And it wasn't as if she could just get up and take on another lover. Their agreement was quite clear in that point.

And much as she hated allowing the Lord Governor any kind of power over her body, she knew that the professor had promised to teach her about sexual torture, and Lord Malfoy was doing quite a good job of that so far. With the intimacy she had shared with the Potions Master, Hermione was not certain that her mind, capable though she usually was of compartmentalizing, would be able to differentiate between 'benevolent' sex and 'teaching Miss Granger about what it means to be raped' sex. In a way, she was glad for the Lord Governor's involvement, as it meant that her relationship to the professor could remain unblemished. Well, less blemished than it already was, that is.

Of course, that was before the Potions Master had gone ahead and kissed her. Kissed her, as if that would change anything.

In a way, she supposed, it had changed everything. Or nothing, maybe. Hermione wasn't really sure about that yet. It had definitely ruined the pleasant bliss she had been revelling in ever since receiving Kingsley's note.

Perhaps there was some way to distance herself from the professor, Hermione suddenly remembered. It would be a minor thing, nothing he would ever learn of nor understand if he ever were to learn of it. It would be enough, though, she hoped, for herself to feel as if that chapter of their unfortunate conversation and his misguided kiss would be finished.

It was time to return a book.
"Professor McGonagall?" Hermione approached her Head of House after their double Transfiguration period the next day.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" the professor said. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if this might be a good time to return a book."

"You go right ahead, Miss Granger," the elder witch encouraged. "Irmia rarely attends lunch in the Great Hall. I am quite certain that she will be in the library to take back any books you might wish to return. Although I am not quite certain why you would need to ask me about that?"

"Well, you see, professor," Hermione said in a hushed tone voice, "I wasn't hoping to return a library book, exactly."

Understanding dawned upon the professor's face.

"Would you care to have lunch with me, Miss Granger?" Professor McGonagall offered. "February in this castle are far too cold and draughty for an old witch like me to make the long way down to the Great Hall every day."

"I would appreciate that, professor, thank you," Hermione gladly accepted.

Once they were safely ensconced in her office, the Head of House applied her usual privacy charms to the room and blocked the Floo. Another flick of her wand had the already burning fire crackle even more brightly, causing another wave of heat to envelop the air surrounding them and imbuing it with a most pleasant warmth.

"I take it your undertaking has been successful, Miss Granger?" the elder witch queried without preamble as she accepted the velvet-wrapped tome back.

"It has indeed, professor, thank you," Hermione confirmed.

"And have you since noticed any irregularities?"

"Irregularities?" Hermione echoed, confused.

"Irregularities, yes," the professor repeated. "I have not asked this earlier as I did not want to jump to conclusions regarding your activities over Christmas break, but now both the holidays and Valentine's Day have passed, and I've been wondering how your body has been faring so far."

Understanding dawned in Hermione.

"I was late," she said. "At first I thought the Contraceptive Potion had not worked correctly, but I trusted Madam Pomphrey to only hand out perfect brews. A few days later, my period set in, and it was – well, 'excruciating' would be putting it mildly."

"You poor girl," Professor McGonagall exclaimed. "I would have told you about it; it's only that it affects everybody differently, and I did not wish to put you off performing whatever ritual you would choose. The whole issue with side effects is poorly researched, and documented even worse, so I could not be sure if you would notice any of it at all. I must say, though, you held yourself remarkably well in my classes. Was Madam Pomphrey able to alleviate the pain somewhat?"

"I took something for the pain," Hermione simply stated.
There was no use in telling her Head of House that she had gone to the Potions Master for help, rather than seeking out the school nurse. There was even less use in telling her that the only way for Hermione to keep herself upright had been compartmentalizing the pain away as well as she had been able to do, and keeping a low profile. There was nothing but damage to be had, of course, if she were to tell the now relieved-looking witch that a very, very potent Pain Relief draught had not been the only medicine the professor had prescribed her. It might give her a heart attack (or five) if she ever were to know that Hermione had fallen apart around the Potions Master's clever fingers every night, and even once during their lesson.

"I am glad," the professor said.

"If I may ask, professor," Hermione queried, "is there anything known about why these side effects occur? I had not even thought at the time that they might be in any way related to the ritual I performed."

"Your body was adjusting to the loss of the power that lay in its innocence," Professor McGonagall began to explain. "It was draining a certain amount of power from your magical core as soon as your body showed signs of preparing itself for another way of holding innocence—a child. The drainage manifested as physical pain. The reserve your body was building will be imbued in your child at the time when you will carry a baby, and you will shed that power, in a way, when giving birth. Essentially, your core was split for any offspring you may have in the future, so that they may carry your magic within them."

The whole process overwhelmed Hermione, as it was all news to her. Instead of trying to mull all that additional knowledge over there and then, she decided to hold on to something the professor had said earlier in her explanation.

"You mentioned a loss of power," she said. "Does that mean that I actually gave away part of my magical powers by performing the ritual? Why would anybody do that if it meant diminishing one's own power?"

Why would you allow and even encourage me to do that?

The question, though unvoiced, hung heavily in the thick, warm air, hovering almost visibly, tangibly, in the space above the professor's desk between her and Hermione.

"Miss Granger," her Head of House enunciated very clearly, "I had hoped that you might have placed more trust in me than to assume that I would ever recommend that you perform a ritual which would lessen your powers. Especially in the midst of a war," she added.

"Magical power," the elder witch continued, "is much like love: when divided, it multiplies. Yes, your body was robbed of that part of your powers for a short time, but it rebuilt that part, drawing from your strength during such time. The energy required for that rebuilding and the toll that effort took on your body resulted in increased menstrual pain. That is all."

"There is no love lost between me and the…" Hermione hesitated. "The one who participated in the necessary prelude for the ritual."

"If that is the way you speak of him, then I am inclined to believe you there, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall half smirked, half admonished. "But if the concept is not to your taste, then think of magical power like you would of blood: too large a loss will kill you, of course. But if you lose only a small amount, then your body will be quick to remedy the loss by producing the amount necessary to meet your requirements. However, while still experiencing the blood loss, or loss of power, as it were, your body will be weakened. That is exactly what you experienced."
"I did not feel weak during that time," Hermione voiced her objection. "Physically, yes, of course, but not magically. I did not feel any difference in my magic, in fact, other than that concentrating was difficult and would at times result in unwanted outcomes."

The Head of House smiled.

"Of course you wouldn't feel weaker, Miss Granger," she explained not without warmth, but as if Hermione was a little dull for suggesting so. "You hold a huge potential of magical power within you that has never required extensive use here at Hogwarts. For the lessons as we hold them, only a rather small amount of power is necessary that does not even brink on what powers you could draw upon if you set your mind to it, Miss Granger. As it is, the amount of power you engage in this school setting is well within the range of the power that remained accessible to you during your body's recreational phase."

Hermione was intrigued.

"Then how do I harness my full potential, professor?" she queried.

She wondered for a moment how it came that she hadn't felt weaker with the professor during their extracurricular lessons, since she was certain that those required a far higher level of magical power than her usual classes. Thinking back, however, she remembered that January had been a difficult time for the both of them. He had ignored her, assuming and accusing her of sleeping around on him despite their agreement. There hadn't been much time between the start of term and the beginning of her cramps that had been so excruciating she had been certain she had to die.

"It is as simple and as difficult a matter of believing in your own power, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall stated warmly.

Hermione didn't quite manage to catch the impolite and incredulous snort that escaped her throat. This was third class Divination lessons all over again.

"I beg your pardon, professor," she said, completely unapologetic, "but I believe in the triumph of facts."

"Then you are no true believer at all, Miss Granger," her Head of House chided without bite. "Belief is so much stronger than factual knowledge; defies it, in fact. But if you're not willing to believe in something beyond your imagination, then I suppose you would do best to create those facts you state to believe in yourself."

Hermione, feeling properly admonished, but not quite ready to admit defeat by giving the elder witch's advice a try, thought back to the last couple of months.

"I've been trying, professor," she said. "I've been constantly trying to push my own limits, to become bigger than myself, but it's just – it's so hard."

"Oh, my dear girl," Professor McGonagall chuckled, "that is because in order to push your limits, you have to encounter them first. Is there anything you have failed at yet?"

*Don't close your eyes.*

The words flashed through Hermione's mind as if they were burned into the inside of her eyelids.

*Don't cry out.*

Had she failed at anything yet?
"Don't bleed."

Yes, she had.

"Yes," she stated.

"Have you really?"

At the time, it had seemed so important to follow those three instructions that the professor had given her. Thinking back now, Hermione knew that the real task had been to close her mind to the Potions Master's forced entry. Yes, part of her task had been to learn how to preserve her life's essence in situations of torture, and to keep her wits about her and any and all information to herself. But truly, a nosebleed?

"I – partly," she confessed. "There were stipulations around the task I had to accomplish, and I failed one of those."

"And did you believe in your ability to accomplish said task, any and all stipulations included?" the Transfiguration teacher queried.

"No," Hermione stated, almost snorting again at the mere notion of that, but this time catching herself in time. "It was impossible to do so, at that point in time, at least."

"With that attitude, everything will have the power to become impossible to you, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall explained. "You know, I remember a time when it was commonly thought that no Muggle-born could ever surpass any, much less all of their yearmates of 'purer' descent."

"That is simply preposterous," Hermione exclaimed emphatically. "Why would children from wizarding families be any better at doing magic than those from a muggle background? And how can anybody in this society expect to defy You-Know-Who when such antiquated ideas are ingrained and socially accepted?"

She was lucky, she realized in retrospect, that her Head of House seemed to be in a generous mood, for she did not chide Hermione for raising her voice at her.

"You see, Miss Granger, that is just the thing," the elder witch continued. "It has been considered impossible for muggle-raised children to make up for those eleven years of magical learning that is naturally acquired in a magical household during childhood. Of course, the lack of available pre-school education for children from a muggle background is horrible, but that is not what we're discussing here. Logically speaking, it is very difficult to accomplish the same level of ability and intuition for magic by only studying at Hogwarts, without being raised into being a magical being. So even though the expectation that it is impossible to manage that is preposterous, the thought behind it really isn't that unreasonable, nor is the notion an antiquated one.

"But it will be antiquated, and very soon, if I'm not wrong here, Miss Granger. It is a simple, but profound fact – since you believe in the triumph of facts – that you have proven and are still continuing to prove everyone wrong. You, Miss Granger, have managed to academically and magically surpass even Draco Malfoy, a young wizard whose parents were able to and did afford a whole contingent of private pre-school tutors. You, a Muggle-born witch, have become the brightest witch of your age. Those notions, Miss Granger, will be antiquated because you are teaching new facts to this ancient society. Those ideas will be antiquated because you made them so.

"For a young witch who is busy over-throwing a whole society's ideas about what is 'normal' and what is 'to be expected', it appears to me that you are inordinately insecure about your own abilities,"
Professor McGonagall concluded. ""Your extraordinariness is such a fact that has triumphed over common expectations, so why will you not believe in that?"

Hermione was stunned. She didn't know what to say. Never in her entire life had she heard such an impassioned laudation to her person. She sat gaping for what must be an impolite amount of time, trying to come to terms with what she had just heard.

"I don't want you to think on what I've said," her Head of House eventually interrupted her confused mental whirlwind. "I want you to internalize it. Go now, Miss Granger, and believe. There is nothing that you can't do, so go out and do it."

She didn't remember getting up from her chair, slinging her book bag over her shoulder and going to the door, but when she was called back, Hermione's hand was just in the process of pressing down the handle of the Transfiguration office's door.

"Pray tell, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall asked, "which ritual did you use in the end?"

Hermione blushed. She wondered how to politely compose her answer for a moment or three before replying.

"I do trust you, professor," she eventually stated. "I trust you so deeply to let you know that the ritual I chose has been completed, which rules out quite a number of options what I might have chosen. However, it would be neither prudent nor appropriate to tell you more, I'm afraid, however much I would like to confide in you."

The elder witch smiled genuinely.

"That is a very prudent and appropriate answer indeed, Miss Granger," she assessed. "You are an accomplished and mature young witch, and you have just confirmed the wisdom that lay in trusting you with my clan's grimoire. I am proud of you."
"I wasn't certain you would come."

Breathing was easy tonight, seeing how Hermione didn't hover underwater, instead choosing to await the professor with her head firmly above the surface of the pool. How she was able to tell that he had entered the room, dark as it was, she did not know, but something had changed in the atmosphere, and she had gotten the distinct feeling that it was he.

"Are you so uncertain of your skills, Miss Granger?" the professor challenged. The sconces lining the bathroom walls flickered to life, casting a warm glow over the room. "So insecure about the abilities you acquired in my lessons? Should I take that as an insult to my teaching methods?"

Hermione sighed. Trust the professor to turn such a simple sentence into a sexual reference.

"You will take it as you will anyway, sir, so why should I waste my breath and try to tell you how to take it," she countered. "Of course, I had not thought you crude enough to stoop so low as to make use of such an innuendo, but I see that I've been wrong there. However, if that's how you want things to be, then they will be on my terms."

The professor chuckled darkly, and the sound sent cold shivers down Hermione's spine that countered the pleasantness of the warm liquid surrounding her.

"I am not one to relinquish control, Miss Granger," the professor asserted.

Hermione mustered him for a moment or two before nodding.

"No, that, you are not," she agreed. "You are one to steal control, but I am about to take it back."

"If you feel that you have lost control, Miss Granger," the Potions Master suggested, "then it appears that my lessons have failed."

This time, it was Hermione who had to chuckle.

"Or perhaps," she countered, "it is time for you to learn something for a change."

A single raised eyebrow was her only answer for a minute that took its time ticking by.

"Miss Granger," he eventually intoned, "it is important to know when one has lost, and to recognize when the time has come to stop fighting."

"In that case, sir," Hermione replied, "I suggest you give up now."

Severus found himself sitting on one of the benches lining the prefects' bathroom, immobilized, without any idea of how he had got himself there. Or perhaps, he hadn't got himself there at all. Perhaps the girl had something to do with that.

She was just now leaving the pool. Rivulets of pearly water ran down the hourglass of her body, highlighting the beautiful shape that fit so perfectly in his hands. Only, said hands were quite unable to fit themselves around anything at this time, seeing how he was apparently unable to move them from where the girl's magic had them pinned in place.
Despite the furious riot of her curls, her plain features, and her short statue, the girl was beauty
incarnate to Severus. But no matter how arresting he found her beauty, his whole attention was
captured by the sight of her tummy.

Her skin was criss-crossed with lines white and red. Silver shone the places in which the cuts from
his 'painting' had turned to scars on her milky white skin, and angry red stripes illuminated her pale
tone where the wounds had become inflamed.

"You have not healed them."

Neither of them was certain whether that was supposed to be a question or not, but it wasn't really
important as the girl answered anyway.

"You did not explicitly allow me to do so, sir, so no, I did not heal myself," she explained. "I wanted
to learn how to take the pain, and I've been learning. A lot."

The girl came to stand directly in front of Severus. Between his open legs, her breasts were at his
eyelevel this way. He knew that it would be only too easy to free himself from whatever spell the girl
had him under that was pinning him in place, but Severus found that he had no desire to do so. Too
shocked was he by the wounds marring the girl's perfect body. Another part that had been
untouched about her, destroyed by him. He felt that he was slowly robbing her of every kind of
innocence she still had.

He had assumed that the girl would take care of herself. Or rather, he had completely forgotten about
the wounds he had caused her. Their fight the prior weekend had rather unsettled him in a most
unpleasant way, and her pain had been the last thing on his mind. But to find that she would neglect
herself thus, would trust him enough to assume that he would remember to take care of her health
even when furious with her, was just a little moving, and very, very stupid.

Severus might not have any desire to free himself, but his desire to heal the girl was immeasurable.
That came as a surprise to him, but he could not summon any concentration to ponder that. He didn't
ponder how he was suddenly able to move his right hand, either. He simply laid said hand upon the
girl's taut stomach. His long, slender fingers spanned the flat expanse of her silky skin. His magic
rushed from his fingertips into her body, warm waves of benevolent power imbuing her body with
the skill to knit itself together, until there was nothing left of the red and silver stripes that had marred
her white flesh before.

His gaze would not budge from where it was glued to the girl's now healed abdomen. Time rushed
by, or crept by; Severus was unable to tell. All he could do was revel in the wholeness that was the
girl's restored appearance of being untouched, unmarred by all he had been throwing at her.

"Surrender to me, sir," the girl's soft voice begged him.

His eyes flitted upwards to meet hers. The expression he found there was pleading, and he felt some
of the ice surrounding his heart melt.

"Please," she whispered.

Severus complied. He opened his slacks and freed what lay underneath them. He was surprised to
find himself hard and ready to penetrate the girl, but paid that surprise no mind. Instead, he allowed
his hand back into its previous immobilized state, and watched as the girl straddled him.

His lips opened to release a quiet moan as the girl sank onto him, ever so slowly. Bracing her hands
behind herself on his knees, she leaned back. Severus was in heaven. Even when her hips began to
move, he found his highest pleasure in watching the waves of her lust ripple down her freshly healed stomach.

It wasn't long before she came, and the clenching around his cock drew Severus's own release from his loins. They remained as they were for a few seconds, or for several minutes, *who cared, really?* Eventually, though, the girl made to stand up.

"Thank you," she said in a quiet voice.

*No, thank you,* Severus's mind shouted.

"Don't mention it," he replied instead.

The girl hesitated for a moment.

"I just wanted to say ~"

Severus cut her off.

"No, truly, don't," he repeated, "don't mention it."

The girl simply nodded her agreement, then she was gone.

Tugging himself away, Severus stood, stretching his legs to shake out the kinks the girl's weight had sneakied into them — not that he minded in the least. Furious as he had been with her, seeing the girl's marred stomach had taken all the wind out of his fury's sails. He had allowed her control, and it had been surprisingly satisfactory. Transcendent, almost. Too beautiful to analyse apart by trying to put a term to it.

A sudden sound disturbed the almost perfect silence in the bathroom. Severus had become used to the water rhythmically lapping at the pool's tiled walls, but a *crack* was not a sound to expect in the middle of the night.

Looking up, Severus found that a window had sprung. It was the glass painting of the mermaid, only the mermaid was now wearing a blindfold, her lips gagged, her hands tied. She was thrashing about, trying to lose her restraints, but it was no use. All her thrashing had caused, was a little tear in the glass she was painted upon.

A silent *Reparo* had the window whole again. Severus made his way to the bathroom door from where he *Vanished* the mermaid's gag and hand ties. Not that he had ever liked the too-happy chit, but it would not do to have her wreak havoc by destroying her own painting. For a moment, he wondered when the girl had found the energy and presence of mind to remember to get rid of unwanted witnesses, such as the mermaid. He felt almost proud of her. Almost.

He was gone from the bathroom before the mermaid could rip the blindfold from her eyes.

---

**Monday, February 23rd, 1996**

"One might wonder," Severus snarled a few days later, loud enough for the whole class to hear, "why you still insist on bothering Potter and Weasley with your incessant harping, Miss Granger, when the past four years have proven, *ob-viously*, that even the combination of book recipes, blackboard instructions, and your own 'helpful' advice will not render the results of their brewing any more useful."
While Potter's brew held some colour that might almost come close to the shade of reddish brown it was supposed to be at this state, it was far too thin. Weasley's concoction, while closer to the desired sluggish consistency as perfectly demonstrated in the girl's cauldron, was coloured a ghastly greenish grey that looked more like decayed mushrooms, half-digested and puked out again, than anything else. Longbottom's cauldron was emitting small puffs of smoke every now and then, as the blackened powder of what remained of his attempt at this potion was slowly burning to dust.

The girl had been constantly whispering to the three dunderheads, and seemingly without drawing breath in between instructions. All her efforts had been for nothing, though. Or, perhaps, not for nothing. Longbottom hadn't blown up the class yet, and that in itself was an accomplishment, Severus supposed. Not that he'd ever say so.

"Well, if you cannot be expected to sort out your classmates' potions, Miss Granger," Severus continued in his usual scathing tone of voice, "I suppose sorting out those leftover ingredients in the store room – without magic – will be more to your level of expertise."

A swirl of his wand Vanished the girl's perfect brew, and with a whispered 'Yes, professor,' her head low, the girl disappeared into the adjacent store room.

The girl's excitement had been impossible to ignore this morning, as had the onslaught of letters the Potter boy had received, or the fury of that pink-clad Ministry toad. When secretly perusing the copy of The Quibbler that his students had been quick to supply for their Head of House, without needing to be asked and, more importantly, without needing to be told to do so without disclosing their identity, as necessitated by Educational Decree Number Twenty-seven, Severus had come to the realization that this was what the girl had been so happy about on Valentine's Day. This, concocting this interview and having it published, was what had constituted as a 'productive day' for her. This was what he had suspected to be her secret lover.

Severus walked up and down the rows of tediously working students once more before casually – or as casually as he ever did anything – making his way over to the store room. He would never apologize to the girl, of course, for whatever she thought he had done wrong during their, say, difference of opinion that Saturday. But perhaps a good, nice orgasm or two, combined with her happy mood, might help bring her to the realization that conceding all control over their sexual interactions to Severus would be the wise road to take.

He opened the door to the store room to find the girl.

However, she wasn't alone.
Life was good, Hermione decided. The professor and she had apparently been able to mend things that had been broken between them, hopefully enabling them to return to their previous kind of 'normal' in their interactions. His decision to send her to the store room for the rest of the lesson certainly implied as much.

With how happy Hermione was at *The Quibbler* posting Harry's interview with Skeeter, and with Umbridge's subsequent ban of said newspaper – thus making more than certain that everybody in the school would be getting their hands on the article –, she looked forward to whatever the professor might have in store for her (no pun intended).

The remainders of the previous Potions class's ingredients were sitting in the store room, waiting to be sorted. Hermione wasted no time in tackling that task. It was true, the professor would probably just do it all with a flick of his wand when he inevitably came to claim her, but it wouldn't do to just stand idly by and wait for that to happen. Besides, this gave her something to occupy her nervous hands with while waiting.

Hermione was facing the deep end of the store room when she heard the door open behind her back, quietly but not soundlessly. A smile split her face, but she did not turn around. If her actions slowed in anticipation of the professor's touch, she did not notice.

"Are you always this lacklustre when given clear instructions, Granger?" a familiar voice drawled.

Hermione twirled around in shock, urgently needing to face the wizard in the store room with her in order to see if his face matched the voice.

"Malfoy!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"I, for one, expected you to display more passion," he stated, "but then again, you are no better than any other Mudblood; too lazy to even complete the most menial of tasks satisfactorily. You are merely proving that there are no exceptions to the rule, after all; no matter how sure you are of yourself, Granger."

"I can complete any task satisfactorily," Hermione asserted. After a second's thought, she added,
"Not that I need to prove that to you, Malfoy."

"See," he countered, "that is where you are wrong, Granger."

He casually strolled a step or two deeper into the store room, closer to her.

"This old babbling disgrace of a headmaster may have convinced you and your kind that you are in some way, in any way, equal to pureblood wizarding folk, but rest assured: no royalty would ever mix with mud."

Images of Lucius Malfoy claiming her body assaulted Hermione's mind. It was true, the Lord Governor had made a point of ascertaining that her body would not carry his child, but that did not mean that he was averse to mingling and mixing with her whenever he felt like it. Hermione might almost hope for Draco's statement to be true, if only it helped her to escape his father's clutches.

"I wouldn't be too certain about that, if I were you, Malfoy," she replied.

To her shock, Draco chuckled darkly, venturing another step closer.

"That is right," he agreed, "remind me again why I'm in here."

Hermione was confused.

"I have no idea why you would go to the store room in the middle of the period, Malfoy," she said. "Did you need anything?"

"No, no, Granger, you misunderstand me," he chuckled again. The sound caressed Hermione's spine in the same way a dementor would caress a foxglove. "You already have reminded me of why I came to the store room – to see that passion I expected from you, to see whether you can… perform to my satisfaction."

She did her best not to let her fear seep into her voice, calling about her all her Occlumency skills in order to mask her emotions. Hermione could not help the dread that travelled up her spine with every step that Draco Malfoy took further towards where she stood in the back of the too-small room.

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" she asked.

"I am talking about teaching you to respect your betters," he began to explain, and was interrupted before he could continue.

After all, that was exactly the right thing to say to chase Hermione's fear away. Her ire was awakened, and her bravado rose right with it. She could not hold back all the sass pressing to come out to play, even if she'd wanted to.

"I do respect my betters, Malfoy," she corrected his assumption. "It is simply that I do not count you among them. One might assume that four years of continuously being beaten by me to becoming the best student of the year would help you understand that, but then again, if after four years of repeating the same lesson you still do not understand, then it should not surprise me why beating you is so easy in the first place."

Draco ignored her, as if she hadn't even spoken, much less interrupted him for several sentences.

"…and that begins with the correct address," he continued. "When you find yourself alone with me, you will be calling me Master Malfoy from now on."
Hermione half snorted, half scoffed, half choked on the combination of the two, and half wondered how many halves would be needed in order to make a whole lot of sense of this bullshit Draco was talking. She supposed there couldn’t be enough halves in the world to accomplish that feat.

"'Master'?” she repeated, in equal parts amazed at his audacity, enraged at his presumptuousness, and humoured by his loss of grasp on all reality. "I am not stupid enough to call you that, unlike the buffoons you call your minions."

In the back of her mind, she wondered what was keeping the professor from joining her in the store room. Where was he? Why was he leaving her alone for so long? Surely he wouldn't be long now – would he?

Draco’s face mirrored her smile, only that the temperature in his was glacial, lacking all humour that was so warmly displayed in her own expression, no matter how worried she was at this moment.

"Yes, yes," he agreed, "laugh while you still can, you filthy mudblood."

Another step had him intruding on Hermione's comfort zone, pressing in on her personal space. She knew she would have to keep him talking, would need to improvise, for whatever he was planning, it would not be good.

"It's no wonder, really, that Parkinson looks up to you, Malfoy,” Hermione stated. "With how smashed in her face looks, there can't be much space left for anything worth being called a brain."

Another step.

"Although,” Hermione was desperately fishing for anything to say, "by that rule, Crabbe and Goyle should be geniuses, judging from the size of their heads."

And another step.

"It's obvious that they aren't, though," she continued, "so I suppose there is just too much of a body to go with their heads, and when contributing their mental capacity to their body mass, there just isn't enough of brain to go with their brawn."

A final step had his chest flush to hers. Her back was pressing into the shelves behind her. She did not remember stepping back from Malfoy's approach, but it appeared that he had successfully manoeuvred her into a corner.

"I wonder," he mused, in a deceptively gentle tone of voice, "when you will realize, Granger, that you are wandless, and, as if that wasn't enough, alone with a very, very angry wizard."

Hermione's eyes widened. The professor had sent her to sort through the ingredient leftovers without magic, so she had not thought to bring her wand. After all, she had assumed that Professor Snape would be joining her shortly, and she thus found herself thoroughly unprepared against an impending assault by a fellow student. Of course, she had been practicing her wandless magic relentlessly over the past few months, but to find herself face to face with a possible and very much unexpected foe, trapped without hope of escaping, made all her memories of the training she had undergone fly out the figurative window.

"You don't seem particularly angry," she said.

It was the only thing that came to mind for her to possibly say at this moment, in this situation. Hermione hated how small her voice sounded.
"You and I are both very much aware that Potter called my father a Death Eater in that little interview of his," Draco stated, the venom in his voice making her flinch. "This kind of slander can't go unpunished. Several of my mates agree with me on that. In fact, the only reason I am alone with you right now is because I wanted to punish you all by myself before handing you over to Crabbe and Goyle."

"Malfoy," Hermione stuttered, trying to find something, anything to say that would make him stop. The angry bulge in his pants spoke volumes about his intent. "Malfoy, I –"

"You – what? What, Granger?" he spat. "You didn't think the Slytherins would be the very first to notice that you're walking around like a common slag? Face painted in bright colours; hair sleeked down as if anyone would be able to forget that nightmare you call your mane; skirt shortened to an indecent length, even by Gryffindor skank standards? Displaying your assets to the world like a trumped up trollop? The funny thing is," he chuckled, and Hermione felt herself shrink even more, desperately attempting to merge into the shelves digging into her back, "that despite your worst efforts, nobody would agree to shag you. Your aura didn't change a single iota until Christmas break. You went home for the holidays, did you not? Did Daddy Muggle have to break you in, because the mean boys at magic school wouldn't touch a cheap muggle like you?"

"You sick –"

"I didn't even think to lower myself to using you, Granger, you know," Draco continued. Hermione felt beyond sick. "But seeing how you still haven't understood your place, I will bow to the necessity of teaching you a lesson. In fact, you should thank me."

"Draco," Hermione tried again, "please –"

"Oh, please me, you will, Granger," Malfoy stated. "But first you will thank me – and that's 'Master' to you."

Hermione found herself being forced to her knees. Looking up, she found Malfoy's expression to be empty, even though the underlying cruelty necessary to commit the act he was about to commit shone through.

"Now open up wide, Granger," he commanded, "and say 'Thank you'."

"Fuck you, Malfoy," Hermione spat. She almost choked on the sob that fought to escape with those three words.

"Make no doubt, Granger," Draco smiled, and not in a good way, while tugging open his robes, "I fully intend to do so."

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!