**COMPLETED**

The new Ministry had fully exonerated Severus Snape for what he had done during the war and further awarded him with the Order of Merlin, First Class for his extraordinary work as a spy. It wasn't a popular move with the public, however, and Hermione Granger defended him to anyone who would listen, but even The Prophet grew weary of her advocacy. But after reading a magazine specializing in romance stories, she sees an opportunity to defend Professor Snape once more by way of a tale about the recent war featuring a character very much like the irascible and unsociable potions professor. Adopting a pseudonym to hide her identity, she carefully weaves the people she knows into the plot through subsidiary roles. When the story takes off - especially with the young women of Hogwarts - it disrupts the school in a variety of ways, but no one is more upset, infuriated, or seriously hacked-off by it all than the model for the protagonist, and when he finds out who the author is, he plans to eviscerate them. But as it progresses, the story becomes far more than a simple matter of rehabilitation for the two people most closely touched by the tale.
my system, I will be going back to it - it's half way finished, as is another story. Please let me know what you think of this!

Disclaimer - What you recognize is J. K. Rowling's, what you don't is mine.
Hermione was unprepared for how emotional she felt getting off the Hogwarts Express without her friends. Ginny was babbling enthusiastically about embarking on her last year at school – even if it meant that she and Harry would see each other less frequently – but Hermione had never missed Harry and Ron more than at that moment. At the end of the war, the wizarding world had heralded the three of them as heroes for a new age and the job offers had come flowing in. At the end of the summer, and after having been exempted from needing to sit their NEWTs, the boys enrolled in auror training. A similar waver had been extended to her as well, and there were several tempting positions with the new Ministry, but she turned them all down, preferring to go back to school and finish her education – she needed proper qualifications if she wasn’t going to trade on her fame for the rest of her life.

Professor McGonagall was now headmistress and had made special arrangements for her return. She would have one-on-one tutorials in her examination subjects with individual professors with one notable exception – the potions master would make no allowances for her and she would have to attend his seventh-year potions classes. There was one other concession. In respect of her age and status, her mentor had thoughtfully arranged for her to have a single room with its own bath, and for this she was especially grateful. She was well over a year older than the current seventh-year students, and it felt even more than that, given the vast differences in their experiences, so the privacy would be most welcome.

It didn’t take her long to empty her trunk, but she still had to hurry and change into her uniform or she would be late for the sorting of new students. And that’s when she got a tangible understanding of just how much things really had changed. She hadn’t worn her uniform in nearly a year-and-a-half – it had been tight then – and now she found that the skirt wouldn’t close and the shirt buttons were dangerously strained. She wasn’t a girl anymore, and she had a woman’s curves to prove it. All she could do was wear her robe on top of some dark colored Muggle clothes – the gown was snug at the shoulders and too short, but that’s all she had. She briefly thought of transfiguring them, but experience had taught her not to waste her magical energies foolishly – with a long and tiring evening before her, she didn’t want to drain herself merely for the sake of some clothes.

Finally changed but now officially late, she hurried down to the Room of Requirement, which was serving as the dining hall and central meeting point until the Great Hall was repaired. Rounding the last turn in the corridor, she ran full on into her potions professor with a resounding oomph. She stumbled backwards and fell ungracefully on her backside. She stared up into his perturbed face as coal black eyes raked up and down her sprawled figure.

In the dim and flickering light of the corridor she looked much the same as when he had last had any significant contact with her, which was that horrible night a year past, the night of Dumbledore’s death. Bile rose in his throat at being reminded of it so suddenly and vividly by the third member of the Golden Trio – she was ever the over-achiever, annoying him even before the Welcoming Feast had begun. He swallowed hard. “Ten points from Gryffindor for being out of uniform – and another ten for being late, Miss Granger,” he sneered as he stepped over her prone body, the bottom of his long robes dragging across her as he continued on down the hallway. Maybe he could get a house elf to put wine – or better yet, whiskey – in his dinner goblet instead of the always undrinkable pumpkin juice.

“Lovely to see you, too, professor, and looking so well,” she muttered inaudibly. “No, no, I can
manage,” she continued, struggling to her feet and rubbing her bum.

She slipped quietly into the back of the room and took a seat at the end of the Gryffindor table, trying to ignore the curious looks that were being sent in her direction. She smiled wanly at her fellow students, uncertain if they were staring because of her status or unusual attire. Someone called her name halfway up the table, and when she turned to see who it was, Ginny Weasley enthusiastically beckoned to her. Hermione smiled congenially but otherwise waved her off – it was going to be hard enough to get through the meal without having to make idle chit chat with Ginny’s friends.

Looking beyond her friend, she saw her head of house and potions professor come in from a side entrance at the front of the room. With his expression as inscrutable as ever, he took his usual seat while the new headmistress settled the Sorting Hat on its stool and then stepped to the lectern. Her welcoming speech was as upbeat as she could make it – expressing the hope that students would always be mindful of the many sacrifices that had been made on their behalf in the recent war and exuding optimism about the future. But with the memories bearing down upon her – from her own school days as well as the war – Hermione could not dispel the melancholy of the moment. She kept her head down until the headmistress was finished, at which point the dinner appeared to loud cheers.

During the meal, Hermione let her thoughts drift as the students around her discussed various professors and speculated about what their classes would be like that year, but her attention was caught when they turned to the subject of potions. The general consensus was that Professor Snape was a first class prick, but also an exceptionally knowledgeable prick who was never – ever – be challenged or crossed. The conversation unsurprisingly transitioned to what he had done during the war, and several students expressed doubts that he had ever actually been on Dumbledore’s side – one even had the temerity to suggest that it would have been better if he had died in the Shrieking Shack like he was supposed to.

Hermione dropped her fork loudly on her plate and turned to glare at them – having kept to herself, they had quite forgotten that she was there.

“How dare you, how bloody dare you impugn the unstinting loyalty and extraordinary bravery of one of the finest professors this school has ever seen!” she seethed. “If it weren’t for him the whole lot of you – and your families – would now be bowing and scraping before Voldemort, begging to be allowed to kiss his scaly foot, you craven know-nothing little toads!”

They stared at her openmouthed as she continued to tick them off. “While you were all home with mum and dad – safely tucked up in your beds having your cocoa,” she sneered, “that man was risking his life to save your sorry arses – and the rest of the wizarding world to boot. What stinking ungrateful hypocritical warthogs you all are!”

As her voice grew louder, a wave of silence worked its way up the Gryffindor table and heads started to turn in her direction. He was the first to notice that something was wrong – as usual – followed by his senior colleague. The headmistress had seen that look on her student’s face before, and knew she needed to intervene quickly or more than words would soon be exchanged. She dabbed at her mouth and laid down her napkin as she pushed her chair away from the table.

“Need help, Minerva?” he jeered as she passed behind him.

“It’s fine, Severus – it’s my house and I will handle it,” she replied gruffly.

By now, everyone had noticed that something was up, and interested faces followed the headmistress as she made her way to the back of the room.
She stopped directly in front of her protégé and looked at her sternly across the table. “Is there something wrong, Miss Granger?” she asked as her gaze shifted critically to the students sitting around her.

Hermione suddenly realized that the entire room had gone quiet.

“No, professor,” she responded, suitably chastened.

“Good, because we wouldn’t want anything to disrupt what should be happy celebration – *would we?*” she asked expectantly, her gaze piercing Hermione and her immediate dinner companions. There was a quick chorus of “No, professor.” Minerva frowned at them and was about to turn away but caught herself. She looked again at her star student, who blushed and self-consciously tried to pull her ill-fitting robe closed – it barely met in the middle.

“Please see me after dinner, if you would, Miss Granger,” she sighed before turning on her heel and walking back to the head table.

The students involved cast angry and accusatory looks in Hermione’s direction, which she returned with haughty disdain. She wasn’t afraid of them, she wasn’t afraid of *anyone* anymore, not after having survived the worst war the wizarding world had ever seen. Nor was she desperate to make friends, as she had been when she first started at Hogwarts as an eleven year old. They could just sod off as far as she was concerned, and she straightened her back and continued with her dinner with the composure of someone who fought on principle and knew she was right.

“Five minutes into the new term and your students are already misbehaving, headmistress?” he mocked as she rejoined he colleagues at the table.

She wanted to tell him he had some nerve asking that question, but bit her tongue. She had extended considerable forbearance to him the past few months after learning his true role in the war, and he was slowly coming around in spite of himself – she wasn’t going to jeopardize that progress, but it irked her nevertheless.

“What were they arguing about?” Flitwick asked as she retook her seat.

“They didn’t say,” she replied tersely, shaking out her napkin and returning it to her lap. They might not have said, but she knew *precisely* what they had been fighting about, and was fairly certain that the man at the end of the table also knew. To his consternation, Hermione had defended him loudly and publicly to any who would listen to her in the days following the end of the war – it was one of the reasons why *The Prophet* no longer sought her out for interviews. He had complained bitterly to Minerva that he didn’t need a *schoolgirl* spearheading his defense, but he had done so in barely a whisper from his bed in the infirmary at the time. He would have bled to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack if not for that schoolgirl, although Hermione had insisted he never be told that – she didn’t want him to owe anyone anything anymore. Under the circumstances, he had some nerve indeed.

The rest of the evening proceeded without further interruptions and the new intake of students were sorted and everyone eventually sent off to bed. Hermione stayed behind as instructed and waited patiently and a bit self-consciously as the headmistress had a few words with the ever irascible potions master, who didn’t even so much as glance at her when they were finished.

“Do you want to tell me what happened this evening?” her head of house inquired, finally turning to address her.

Hermione debated how to respond. The headmistress might want to know if one of her staff was
being disparaged, but on the other hand, she wasn’t a snitch and was entirely certain that her potions professor was more than capable of dealing with a handful of ignorant, snotty-nose, self-righteous students.

“No, professor,” she responded resignedly.

“Well, if you don’t want to tell me what you were arguing about, perhaps you would be so kind as to inform me why you aren’t in uniform?”

“Nothing fits anymore except my tie,” she commented, extending her arms to demonstrate her point – the sleeves of her gown now hit above her wrists. “I didn’t want to expend the energy transfiguring them, so I sat at the back of the room. Professor Snape has already deducted points,” she mumbled, “and for being late because of it,” she hastily added.

“Yes, I’m sure he has,” Minerva commented, almost under her breath. “We’ve talked about this already, but let me make the offer once more. I can wave the uniform requirement if you want, just wear something discrete under some robes that fit you properly.”

“I appreciate that, professor, really I do, but I don’t want to stand out,” she gently explained.

“Very well,” Minerva replied, fully understanding her student’s position after all of the attention she had received immediately following the war. “We have a cupboard full of second-hand uniforms you can look through. We had better do it tonight, though, or Professor Snape will deduct more house points at breakfast.”

She picked up the Sorting Hat and led the way to a storage room next to her office – it was full of uniforms of every variety, some of which looked like they dated back to the sixteenth-century.

“Start looking through these,” she gestured, “I need to put the Sorting Hat to bed – it gets very cranky after an evening’s work.”

“I do not!” the Hat sputtered grumpily.

Hermione ran her hand along the hangers, finally stopping and pulling out a faded yellow garment from the Elizabethan era. She held it up to herself just as the headmistress returned.

“I don’t suppose I could wear this one?” she asked cheekily as she fingered the ornate ruff.

“Only if you want to wear the colors of Hufflepuff,” her mentor replied with a smirk.

“I think I’ll pass,” Hermione giggled, putting it back.

They continued to go through the antique uniforms, commenting on each generation’s incarnation, until the headmistress paused at one from the early 20th century. Running a hand down its front, she slipped it off the hanger and held it up to Hermione. It was a Gryffindor uniform, in mostly red and gold.

“You wouldn’t have been able to wear this a year ago,” she observed, “but you certainly could now – you’d look quite good in it, too.” She then searched for and found the Edwardian corset that went with it. Hermione looked at it in dismay.

“How on earth were students supposed to sit and work at their desks all day in this?” she asked disapprovingly, fingering the boned garment. “You certainly wouldn’t have been able to play Quidditch, and I doubt you could have ridden a broom, either.”
Minerva smiled indulgently. “They were very different times, my dear,” she said affectionately. “Witches were expected to as decorous as their Muggle counterparts back then – they weren’t allowed to slouch or play Quidditch.”

“Well that’s good, because they certainly wouldn’t have been able to,” Hermione interjected acerbically.

“And as for brooms,” her mentor continued, “only the loosest witches dared to sit astride a broom.”

“How did they . . . .”

“Sideways,” she interjected, “with one leg laid over the front of the broom – I think the closest term would be sidesaddle.”

“That sounds pretty dangerous,” Hermione observed.

“Oh it was, but it meant that the few witches who did ride brooms were among the most accomplished fliers around.” She smiled. “I was taught to fly that way as a young girl,” she said nostalgically.

Hermione stared at her head of house in admiration and briefly wondered how old she might actually be, but the moment passed quickly, and Minerva put the clothes back, moving on to the modern uniforms. Going through them, however, it became clear that they were all simply too small to fit.

“The fact of the matter is,” she observed, “these are for girls, and you’re a woman, now. We’ll have to think of something else.”

“Well, I really don’t want to buy anything that I’m only going to wear for a few months,” Hermione replied, going from one hanger to the next. “How about this?” she asked, pulling out a white shirt.

“That’s a boy’s shirt,” Minerva said dismissively.

“So?”

“It’s not going to fit very well,” she commented, pinning it to Hermione’s shoulders – it was indeed a bit big.

“It’s going to be hidden under a robe anyway – who’s going to know?”

She had a fair point, so they went through the boys’ uniforms and found three shirts and two pairs of slacks.

“I don’t much care for female students in trousers, but I think we can make an exception. As for robes, you can wear my old teaching gown – it ought to fit, and we can attach Gryffindor colors to it without too much trouble, I think.”

Suitably kitted out, the headmistress locked the storage room. “I haven’t gone through that cupboard in years,” she said, smiling indulgently at Hermione. “Who says we’re too old to play dress up,” she whispered conspiratorially, as Hermione grinned. “Now off to bed with you,” her mentor gently chided.

Hermione was still smiling when she turned a corner and again ran straight into her potions professor, not so hard as to bounce off and fall on her arse this time but her face was uncomfortably squashed against his coat.
Looking down at her, he knitted his brow and puffed impatiently. “Is this the way the term is going to proceed, Miss Granger? Hurtling into me at every opportunity like a bludger?”

“Sorry, professor,” she replied contritely, backing away and rubbing her nose.

He looked pointedly at the clothes in her arms.

“Professor McGonagall is lending me these for the year,” she quickly explained, hoping she wasn’t about lose yet more points and acquire a detention as well.

He continued to stare at her disapprovingly for a few moments more, frowning the whole time. “Very well, Miss Granger. Get to your room,” he scowled as he brushed past her, continuing on his rounds without giving her a second look. She sighed exasperatedly and tried to concentrate on the reasons why she had defended him at dinner.

No one commented directly on Hermione’s hodgepodge uniform, although her unflattering baggy trousers did attract a few snickers. Still, no one seemed to object to the lenience that was being extended to her, and she quickly, quietly, and without further fuss settled into her school work. Talking to her professors in one-on-one tutorials was stimulating even if the material they were covering wasn’t especially challenging, but after a couple of weeks of this regimen, she felt rather . . . well, bored, she reluctantly had to admit. She found herself missing the drama and adventure that had always been part and parcel of her earlier school days with Harry and Ron. She had been looking forward to spending as much time as she wanted on her classes without those kinds of interruptions, but instead found that she often had huge chunks of time on her hands. She supposed she could sit her NEWTs and be done with it all, but having committed herself, she wanted to stick with it – she was no quitter. Besides, she was filling some of that free time by tutoring Ginny, even if her friend was proving to be rather unreliable when it came to their agreed meeting times.

“I know, I know,” Ginny said breathlessly as she rushed into the dining room one afternoon and threw her knapsack down on the bench.

“You’re late,” Hermione commented anyway, “and you’ve missed lunch.”

“I just got finished with Professor McGonagall’s class. Rory Stuben transfigured me into a badger and had trouble reversing the spell. It took McGonagall until just now to transform me back,” she explained, clearly annoyed.

“Well, eat this,” Hermione replied, offering her the untouched sandwich on her plate, “and take some fruit for later.” As Ginny stood at her shoulder and tucked in, Hermione opened her friend’s book bag, which was already quite full. She took out two books and a magazine to make some room, but when she saw the weekly publication, she paused, holding it away from her as if it was contaminated.

“Witches Only?” she barked in shocked surprise. “You read Witches Only?” she asked incredulously.

“Yeah, so?” Ginny mumbled.

“Ginny, no self-respecting witch reads that rag!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, please,” her friend choked out between bites.

“These things have absolutely no literary merit whatsoever!”

Ginny carried on eating as if she hadn’t heard her.
“They lack coherent plots and are entirely formulaic – stereotypically dark but brave and daring wizards,” she said scathingly, “beautiful but flighty witches who need constant rescuing, and cardboard supporting characters.”

Ginny snorted her disdain of her friend’s critique and looked away.

“Ginny, stories like these and the magazines that publish them undermine the confidence of young witches,” she went on, exasperatedly.

Her friend rolled her eyes.

Hermione continued undaunted. “The female characters in these stories are unable to protect themselves—despite being magical—and would almost certainly succumb to some horrible fate if the hero wasn’t around to make sure they didn’t enter dark and seemingly deserted manor houses alone, accept drinks or broom rides from strange wizards, or just go off generally on their own after having been specifically told not to do so. The only reasons these magazines sell,” she finished, lowering her voice, “is because of the sex.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Ginny smirked, refusing to be embarrassed.

“They put unrealistic notions into the heads of naïve young women,” she replied sharply.

“Have you read one?”

“What?”

“I asked, have you ever actually read one of these?” Ginny asked, nodding at the magazine in question.

“Well, no,” she hemmed and hawed, “but . . . .”

Ginny cut her off. “I’ve got to run to Arithmancy,” she announced, dusting the crumbs from her clothes and stuffing the books and fruit into her bag. Hermione held out the magazine for her to put away.

“You keep it for a while,” she said, closing up the satchel and pulling it on to her shoulder. “It’ll certainly be more fun—and probably a lot more instructive—than that,” she said, wrinkling her nose at the potions book lying face down in front of her friend.

Hermione grimaced at the magazine in her hand as Ginny headed out, followed by the rest of the students who had dawdled with their lunch. She gathered her own books and parchments and headed to the library. She saw her potions professor reprimanding a student who had the misfortune of being caught in the hall after the bell had tolled and managed to scurry into the library without attracting his attention.

She quickly settled into what she was coming to think of as her corner. The table was really only big enough for one person to use, especially if that person spread out their work, as she typically did. She put her potions textbook on the reading stand, laid out a piece of blank parchment, and set to work. Ten minutes later and she found she had reread the same page five times and still couldn’t remember a single thing about it. Unable to curb her curiosity, she finally pulled out the magazine and, checking to make sure no one was watching her, hid it within the larger, open potions book. Resting her elbows on the table with her chin in her hands, she started to snort her way through the material.

Although it was the nineteenth installment of an ongoing story, there was a brief recap of the plot up to that point, not that she felt she had gained anything by reading it. The story was exactly what she
expected it to be – utter rubbish. The female figure was a leggy, auburn haired – definitely not ginger – bimbo with boobs, but their idea of a dark wizard actually made her laugh out loud, to the disapproval of Madam Pince, who shushed her from across the reading room. Dark wizard? She could give them a dark wizard that would make their puny-arsed specimen curl up in the fetal position and cry for his mum.

When she finished reading, she slapped the magazine face down on the table in disgust – her kneazle could write something better than that – and resumed her work, her real work. But another ten minutes went by and she still hadn’t turned a page what for thinking about the story. The sex scene between the main characters was, she had to admit, rather . . . arousing, even if it was full of tautologies – just how many synonyms were there for penis, clitoris, and natural lubrication? And the ludicrous adjectives used to describe orgasms put Professor Sprout’s floral greenhouse to shame. She started to conjure various scenes and scenarios in her mind, piecing them together with witty dialogue, until she finally gave up on her book and started to jot down some thoughts on the still blank parchment in front of her. And then an idea struck her – a rather sneaky, daring, and rather exciting idea that might accomplish what she had set out to do only a few months before but had met so far with only limited success.

She had always understood that the first rule of fiction was writing about what you knew, and what she knew – intimately, in fact – was the recent war, which had been peopled by the most incredible figures she had ever known. After some deliberation, she decided to keep to the general formula of such stories, at least to some extent, but with some marked deviations. She envisioned a spy thriller with a certain thinly disguised and highly masculine wizard at its center. Rather than being predictably moneyed, aristocratic, and respected by all, her character would be poor, misunderstood, and very – very – dark. She had no truck with unrealistically bold, adventurous, and action-minded heroes – oh no, hers would be disciplined, calculating, and meticulous in his strategy. He would hide behind a mask, move in the shadows, and dissemble obsequiously. Only when forced would he draw his wand, and then he would have no match – his bravery then would be breathtakingly audacious.

She imagined him paired with a young, conventionally beautiful but entirely capable witch who occasionally came to his rescue by applying her brilliant mind to the difficulties they faced. She would be a formidable force in her own right, and while they would initially clash – in part because he seemingly could not move beyond a long lost and unrequited love – mutual distain would transition into respect, evolve into admiration, and finally ripen into passionate love, all against the backdrop of political turmoil that would have the potential to tear them apart, literally and metaphorically.

They would both work for the Ministry of Magic, she decided, he as a potions master for the Department of Magical Health, and she as a professor with the Office for Magical Education. They would also be members of a secret Inner Circle collaborating with the Minister for Magic, who would be facing a long-standing political opponent. That rival would be working to see them and their friends and colleagues dead. He would have already killed two of their number – the woman their spy had secretly loved and her husband. Revenge and redemption would be the spy’s principle motivations for becoming a double agent.

Hermione scribbled away the afternoon, completely fired up at the possibilities of rehabilitating her professor’s reputation by way of a piece of fiction, building sympathy and support from a previously disparaging public for the man who had in fact saved the wizarding world from unimaginable darkness. It was only when Madam Pince told her that she wanted to lock up in order to go to dinner that she reluctantly put away her parchment and quill – it had been the most satisfying four hours she could ever remember spending in the library, which was saying something. She handed the magazine back to Ginny without comment – her friend gave her a maddeningly knowing smirk – and spent the
entire meal thinking about how she wanted to proceed. She stayed up late and finally finished the chapter in the early hours of the morning. She felt a bit sleep-deprived throughout the day, but was otherwise thoroughly invigorated intellectually by her project – it was the only thing she could think of during her tutorial with Flitwick, who seemed not to notice her inattention.

By the end of the week, she had three chapters under her belt – the principle and some of the secondary characters had been introduced and the early stages of the plot laid out. On a lark, and using an owl from the Hogsmeade postal service to hide her identity, she sent the chapters – along with a prospectus for more – off to Witches Only under the assumed name of J. H. Bailiff. Over the weekend, she continued to develop the plot and flesh out her characters, and when she sneaked off to Hogsmeade during lunch on Monday, a letter from the editor was waiting for her.

Since she didn’t have permission to be away from school, she didn’t linger in the street where someone might notice her, but headed straight back to school, reading as she went. She could barely contain her glee. The letter informed her that war stories were exceedingly popular at the moment and the magazine simply couldn’t get enough of them. They were prepared to postpone a handful of stories already in the queue and publish her work after the current romance finished its run at the beginning of October. Based on her proposal, the editor suggested a completed story of around twenty chapters to be published weekly, for which they would pay her five-hundred galleons in compensation. She was completely gobsmacked – the most she had ever made was £1,000 working as a receptionist for her dentist parents one summer, and this was more than twice that figure. If she was agreeable to the terms, all she had to do was sign the contract and provide a synopsis suitable for advertising purposes.

After getting beyond the shock of the money being offered, she started to feel a bit nervous. She wasn’t worried about the length they were suggesting – the chapters didn’t have to be especially long, and there was plenty of material to work with – but she still had some concerns about whether or not the characters really would be sufficiently compelling. They stuck out to her, but then she was Muggleborn and everyone in the magical world seemed a tad bit nutter, even her best friends. While pondering this, she walked boldly and unthinkingly through the school’s open door, turned left, and bumped into the back of her stationary potions professor, who stumbled a few steps towards the three Hufflepuff sixth-years who were being told off for smoking in the boys’ toilet.

Whirling swiftly around, he glared at her ferociously. “Merlin’s balls! What are you playing at, Miss Granger?!” he exploded. “Off with you!” he said sharply to the students behind him, who didn’t wait to be told a second time. “I realize, Miss Granger that you have been accorded certain privileges,” he gritted out, “but buggering off to Hogsmeade whenever you feel like it isn’t one of them. Fifteen points from Gryffindor and detention, with me, tonight after dinner.” With that, he turned and struck out for the dungeons, his wildly flapping robes making him appear rather like the bat he was sometimes accused of being.

She signed the agreement the instant she got back to her quarters.
Hermione’s detention was spent scrubbing out cauldrons, which she didn’t actually mind since she could steal glances at the model for her fictional dark wizard when he wasn’t looking. After having sat in his classes for nigh on seven years, she was rather surprised at what she had never really noticed before. She knew that there were exactly twelve buttons on his frock coat and that the top three were always left undone, and was vaguely aware that there were also buttons on his sleeves – nine, to be exact, between his wrists and elbows – but she had never noticed that there were four of them at the bottom of his trousers as well. She had never seen anyone so buttoned up in all her life. Generally, his clothes had always seemed rather shabby, stained with holes burned into them by Merlin knew what dangerous things he brewed, but in fact they were made of fine wool. On closer inspection, the modest black cravat he wore looked like it was silk, and the pristine collar that peeped out above it appeared to be starched – stiff and seemingly unyielding. All in all, his clothes were a concise metaphor for a man who was clipped and succinct in public, but otherwise very private with a rich inner life, much of which had been surprisingly focused on a young woman whose impact on his adult years was almost incalculable. She couldn’t help but think how devastating it must have been for him to see those aspects of his life splashed across the pages of *The Prophet*.

As she walked back and forth behind his chair, washing, drying, and then shelving the clean cauldrons, she caught scant traces of his scent, which reminded her strongly of the forest, which was probably where he got a lot of his potions ingredients. The only things she could identify with any certainty were heather and pine, though whether they were ingredients he had recently handled or a component of his daily grooming rituals she couldn’t tell.

The light from the large lamp on his desk gave him some color and put his aquiline nose and high cheek bones into high relief. His eyes moved rapidly back and forth across the parchment and she noted the fierce look of concentration on his face, the way he pursed his lips as he scribbled on students’ essays – she guessed they were disparaging remarks, based on his frown.

“Is there something you *need*, Miss Granger?” he asked in a bored tone, startling her out of her reverie – he hadn’t even looked up.

“Umm, I’m finished, sir,” she mumbled, wiping her hands with a towel and then hanging it up to dry. How he managed to *see* someone without actually *looking* at them was beyond her. It was a good trait for a spy, though, and she immediately added it to her growing bank of attributes for her
nominally fictional character.

“Then your detention is at an end,” he drawled, finally turning his head in her direction and piercing her with eyes that were so black that she might have been looking at the night sky.

She blushed under the weight of his gaze, suddenly remembering that he was a Legilimens. She swiftly schooled her thoughts. “Good night, then, sir,” she said quickly as she hurriedly left.

He watched her retreating figure and briefly wondered what had gotten into her – there was no reason to stare at him like she had been doing for most of the evening. He briefly wondered if she was ill – her cheeks were pink, but that could have been from having her hands in hot water. Still, there was definitely something a bit . . . off about her tonight, and it wasn’t just the ill-fitting clothes that Minerva had the nerve to call a uniform. He quickly put it from his mind and turned his attention back to the abysmal essays in front of him.

Hermione wrote up what she preferred to think of as her research the instant she got back to her room. Observing him in close quarters had been helpful and she didn’t want to forget a thing. With twenty or so chapters ahead of her, she was going to need every detail she could get, so she spent the rest of the evening meditating on his features. She went to sleep with him still very much on her mind, and not for the first time – lying alone in her bed thinking about her potions professor felt like old times.

Each morning she jotted down ideas that had come to her during the night, and continued with the note taking in between her tutorials. The story that had been running in Witches Only would be concluding soon, so she needed to work steadily, and she forged ahead with chapters four and five while mapping out those that were still to come. She kept a close watch on Ginny and her Friday morning mail, which was when the magazine was usually delivered. It appeared right on schedule at the end of the week, and she knew the current romance had finally finished when a teary-eyed Ginny passed it on to one of her friends at dinner. By Saturday morning, half of the seventh-year Gryffindor young women had read it and Hermione secretly smiled to herself as they enthused about it at breakfast. One week – just seven days – and it would be her story they’d be reading. She couldn’t wait.

As expected, an owl dropped the magazine – annoyingly in Ginny’s bowl of oatmeal, Hermione was chagrined to see – the following Friday. Ginny’s friends all laughed, and Hermione made a weak attempt to do the same, but her heart was racing with anticipation. The young women around her scrunched up close as Ginny read the description of the new story aloud:

New in Witches Only – Love in a Time of War

He is a dark wizard with dangerous secrets – emotionally scarred by the loss of an unrequited love and bent on revenge. She is a witch of exceptional ability who with every breath works to keep him alive. Can she heal his heart as well? Can they survive the upheavals, betrayals, and losses and find love in a better world of their creating? Or will they fall victim to the turmoil of wizarding politics? A tale of love lost and perhaps . . . found again? Find out in Witches Only!

There was a flurry of excited giggles and Hermione rolled her eyes, but she was pleased at their reaction – it was a good start. She also heard them talking about chapter one in the common room the following day, agreeing that it sounded promising – it prompted her to spend the rest of the weekend revising.

Chapter two, which actually managed to land in Ginny’s hands the following week, also got a warm reception, but with chapter three, her friend’s interest seemed to be tapering off a bit. She was disappointed in this, and determined to find out what had changed. Saturday afternoon saw Ginny
sprawled out in the common room with her charms textbook. Noticing the magazine sticking out of her bag, Hermione saw her chance.

“You’re studying rather than reading your magazine?” she teased.

“I have an essay due on Monday,” Ginny replied, sighing heavily.

“I bet you’d rather be reading one of your stories,” she fished.

Ginny merely shrugged her shoulders.

“What, have you gone off them?” she continued to prod.

“No, it’s just this current story . . . .” Ginny trailed off.

“What about it? Not enough plot or character development?” she asked, trying to sound critical.

“No, they’re okay, it’s just . . . .”

When Ginny didn’t finish, she pushed again. “It’s just . . . what?”

“It’s not very . . . exciting at the moment,” she offered.

“Exciting being a euphemism for . . . .”

“Snogging and such things, alright?” Ginny responded in a loud whisper, perturbed at having to spell it out and drawing the attention of a few students who were also lounging in the common room. “So far all it’s really been about is this bitter, unpleasant dark wizard pinning for a woman who not only didn’t love him but has actually been dead for over fifteen years. What sort of man does that, I ask you?” Hermione blanched, certain that Ginny would make the connection, but she continued, undeterred. “And then there is his colleague, who for some unknown reason secretly thinks he’s as hot as a cauldron fire, and yet the two of them fight like dragons. I don’t get it.”

Hermione waited nervously for her to continue, and when she didn’t, pressed again. “That actually doesn’t sound like too bad a premise to me,” she observed hesitantly, more than a bit relieved that Ginny hadn’t made the connection to their potions professor – if it didn’t immediately jump out at her, then perhaps it wouldn’t with the reading public either, at least not yet, not until she was ready. “Clearly, the author’s intent is to get these two together – maybe they’re just laying the foundation for future chapters,” she went on, “you know, slowly building tension between the characters.”

“Well they had better get a move on!” With that Ginny gathered up her book and parchments and headed off to her room, leaving Hermione to ponder her first negative review. She had time – just – to revise chapter four, and so shut herself away for the rest of the weekend. All she needed was to preview things to come. She crept out before breakfast first thing Monday morning to get it into the mail, and this time was careful not to get caught sneaking back in to the school.

Chapter four arrived on time the ensuing Friday morning, but rather than immediately opening it up, Ginny put it to one side and got on with her breakfast. It sent a wave of anxiety through her, but Hermione couldn’t force her to read it – she would just have to wait. Twenty-four hours later, though, she had the satisfaction of seeing Ginny talking more enthusiastically about it as she ate her eggs. She described to her friends how the now tragic dark wizard had dealt with his sexual urges through the years by wanking in the shower or visiting prostitutes in Knockturn Alley, both approaches leaving him physically sated but emotionally empty. He was still oblivious to how his female colleague continued to watch his every move with deep longing in spite of their many conflicts. The young women seemed mildly interested, and Ginny promised to pass on the magazine
when she was finished.

Hermione spent the rest of the morning lazing around the common room, looking at the handful of seventh-years studying and wondering how many of the young women present had read her story. When Ginny and her friends showed up, she was on alert, thinking that they would be talking about it and urging others to pick it up. And yet, they sat down in a corner, got out their Arithmancy texts and began working on their assignments. She was more disappointed than she wanted to admit. She had been trying to get Ginny to study more and should have been happy that her friend had finally taken her advice, but she wasn’t. She wanted readers, and a hell of a lot more of them than just four Gryffindors, who seemed to be the only ones currently interested in it. She would have to start revving things up to get their attention, and with that thought, she headed back to her room for another revising session involving a bit of dreaming on the part of her characters in chapter five.

It was easily enough to do. She simply added a section at an appropriate place – the wizard had a deeply passionate dream about his female ministry colleague after she prevented him from being uncovered as a double agent the previous day. He was somewhat unnerved by his nocturnal event, thinking it a betrayal of his long dead love. Meanwhile, his colleague had her own provocative dream about the wizard, even though he had chewed her out for having saved his arse.

The week passed slowly, not because she wasn’t continually working on her story, but because she was eagerly awaiting the arrival of the next issue and, more to the point, the reaction to it. This time, Ginny unfurled the magazine the instant it hit the table and started to read. The blush spreading across her face told Hermione – as no words could – just how much she was enjoying the latest installment. Ginny’s friends started to giggle just at the possibilities of what she was reading and they vied with one another over who would get the magazine next.

By Monday morning, a third of the Gryffindor seventh-year young women were putting dibs on the magazine. Some of them were still arguing about it by the time they got to their potions class that afternoon, and their heated whispers at the back of the room during his lecture made for an infuriated potions professor, who took off a total of twenty house points and gave two detentions. With the end of the class looming, there was a struggle between three of the girls and the magazine landed with a resounding plop on the flagstone floor. There was some scurrying to retrieve it but it was too late.

“Leave it,” he instructed ominously. With a flick of his wand, the magazine flew into his hand. He gave the periodical a cursory glance before scowling in the direction of the students at the back.

“And this pertains to potions exactly how?” he asked mockingly.

There was some snickering from some of the boys in the class.

“Silence!” he barked. He briefly examined the magazine in his hand and sneered. “Material such as this betrays not only exceedingly poor literary tastes,” he said derisively, looking around at the young women in the class, “but the smallness of your minds. It is good for nothing, not even for lining the cages of the revolting creatures Hagrid has in his care. But if you must read such rubbish – and I concede it’s probably written with schoolgirls in mind – then do so on your own time and in the privacy of your rooms.” He slapped the magazine down, directly atop his lecture notes, and took his seat behind the desk. “I believe you have assignments for me,” he stated coolly.

One by one, the students brought up their essays and left. Hermione fumed as she waited in line. He had made some critical remarks without actually having read the material in question, which seemed rather slack when it came to making an objective literary critique – the fact that she had done much the same thing only few weeks back was staunchly repressed. Besides, she thought uncharitably, he taught potions, not literature. She dropped her parchment onto the growing pile and left in a huff, not that he noticed as he leisurely looked through the book in his hand. When the last student had gone,
he picked up the stack and took it to his quarters, depositing it on the coffee table in front of the hearth where he would do his grading later that evening.

At dinner, he was on the receiving end of hostile looks from a fair number of the seventh-year female Gryffindors. Word got around quickly, and they clearly didn’t like having their reading habits belittled, not that any of them would ever dare to complain to his face. Indeed, one glare from him was all it took for them to direct their attention back to their meal. They quickly faded from his mind – *Merlin’s balls*, he had better things to think about, not least of them being the eighteen parchments waiting for him back in his quarters.

He was on his second whiskey when he got through the last essay and was confronted – once again – with the copy of *Witches Only*. He looked at it with disgust. He had seen these sorts of magazines before over the years and been singularly unimpressed – they tended to be even *worse* than he had described in class. But tired of reading mind-numbingly dull essays, and reluctant to look at class plans for the following day, he thought it might be amusing to survey the drivel contained within its pages.

The well-thumbed magazine opened directly to the featured story – *Love in a Time of War*. He snorted – what *twaddle*. He read the recap and then settled in for a good laugh. But once he got into the narrative, he found himself genuinely intrigued. He had to admit that the writing was solid enough and the characters reasonably well-rounded and developed. They even seemed . . . *familiar*, in a vague sort of way. He didn’t find that particularly surprising, given that the author was clearly using some of the events of the recent war as a backdrop. He didn’t even object to the sex, such as it was – oblique references to wanking, anonymous whores, and wet dreams. It was all a bit puerile, but probably nothing that the older female students in the school hadn’t read or heard about before. He smirked at the no doubt female author’s imaginings of male sexuality and briefly wondered who the novelist might be. *J. H. Bailiff* was probably a pseudonym – writers of these kinds of stories almost always were – so it really could be anyone, given how much had been published about the war since its end only months before.

When he finished the story, he got up and headed for bed. The one thing he truly relished since the end of the war was being able to go to sleep without worrying about being awakened in the middle of the night in order to attend on the Dark Lord. There might other reasons why he sometimes couldn’t sleep – like the occasional nightmare and tension in his balls – but at least *His Scaly Darkness* wasn’t one of them anymore.

He woke in the morning with a raging erection, which he attributed to his late night reading – it was relieved perfunctorily in the shower. Having taken care of the matter, he was irritated to find himself coming back to the story again and again as he worked his way through his daily classes. Something about it kept pressing at the back of his mind. While the recap had filled him in on the first four chapters, he now wanted to read them for himself. The only problem was how he was going to find earlier copies of the magazine – he wasn’t sure if the publication had even made it beyond the young women of Gryffindor. He scanned the room at lunch time, looking for tell-tale signs – groups of girls giggling more than usual – that it had spread to other houses. He saw four likely candidates at the Hufflepuff table and decided to follow them out as they got up to leave. He tracked them to the library, where they settled down at a table between two book stacks. He heard the rustling of bags, and when the giggling began once more, he pounced. Rounding the corner of the shelving as if searching for a book, he saw two magazines being swiftly shoved under the materials on the table. He gave them a suspicious look, enjoying their unease at having been caught.

“And what do you find so amusing about . . . *herbology*?” he asked silkily, fingering the texts lying on the table. The students blushed but otherwise didn’t move a muscle. He pushed the books slowly aside, prolonging their torment while revealing the object of his hunt. Picking up the magazines, he
scowled at the students. “Five points from Hufflepuff for each of you,” he said disgustedly. “Get back to work!” he ordered before turning and leaving. None of them noticed that he had failed to find the book he had ostensibly been looking for.

That had been easy, he thought smugly. Examining the covers, he saw that they were two different issues – based on the blurbs on the front, he realized that he now had chapters three and four. His lips curled slightly upwards – all he needed now were the first two installments. The thought that others might also be playing truant prompted him to check the rest of the library. He worked his way stealthily around the reading room and stacks, but all of the students he encountered were clearly doing their schoolwork, some with more enthusiasm than others – he passingly noticed that, as usual, Hermione was furiously scribbling away on a piece of parchment with a book in front of her. She was such an over-achiever – so Gryffindor, he thought patronizingly as he left.

The matter of where to look next came to him as he passed the Slytherin common room on his way to the dungeons. He paused in thought. Magazines were always strewn about, but while the students should all be in class or the library, he’d still need an excuse to be there, just in case he was spotted. Quidditch practice, that was it – the pitch was closed due to an infestation of dragon mites. The announcement cancelling all practices was posted, but he could tell any student he encountered that he was just making sure everyone knew about it – he would simply come off as an attentive and concerned head of house. If he could deceive the Dark Lord all those years, he could certainly mislead a bunch of students, even if they were from his own house.

He strode proprietorially into the common room but it was empty. He looked around and frowned. The house elves kept it as tidy as they could, but newspapers and magazines of all varieties lay atop the room’s flat surfaces and were even stuffed between the cushions on the sofa and chairs. The students – even his students – had the habits of vermin. He grimaced – he wasn’t going to frisk the furniture, so he pulled out his wand and quietly cast Accio. No less than six magazines came barreling towards him – at speed – and he flung his free arm in front of his face to protect himself from the onslaught. He would need to be more specific in future when it came to issue numbers. He knelt down and quickly found the two that he didn’t have. Hearing someone approaching, he had just enough time to slip the ones he was keeping up his sleeve and send the rest to where they had come from.

The first-year who appeared in the doorway froze the instant he saw his head of house, who in turn watched with interest as surprise followed by trepidation crossed the student’s face before being transformed into a look of brave determination. His students did him proud – most of the time, at any rate.

“I didn’t mean to startle you, Mr. Starkey,” he said not unkindly – the student’s expression eased considerably. “I merely wanted to let the Quidditch team players know that practice was cancelled this week owing to an entomology emergency.”

Starkey took in his excuse and then slowly grinned – he had heard from other students that their head had a dry wit, although this was his first experience of it. “I’ll make sure the message is passed on, professor,” he said cheerfully, bouncing slightly on his feet as so many of the young boys seemed to do.

“What are you doing here out of class anyway?” he inquired, frowning slightly.

“Forgot my book, sir,” the boy chirped.

“Go on, then, and be quick about it,” he replied, but there was no real bite to the command. His trademark frown, however, was well in place by the time he was back in the corridor. His younger Slytherins needed encouragement and he was more than willing to give it – within limits, at any rate.
– especially when there was no one else around to see. As for the older ones, well, they needed
discipline in the face of raging hormones, and he was happy to provide that as well. He spent the rest
of the day in the classroom trying to instill that discipline in some very slow learners while thinking
about the evening’s reading he still had ahead of him.
The Plot Thickens

Chapter Summary

Snape discovers that he is the model for the main character in Love in a Time of War, and that many of the people he knows are also included in the story.

Chapter Notes

Please do let me know what you think!

The Plot Thickens

He was a disciplined man – no one could dispute that fact since he was now famous for it. After all, he waited nearly twenty-years to see justice brought to bear on the . . . thing that had killed his childhood friend, his first – and only – love. But his legendary patience was being sorely tested as he worked his way through the day’s essays – from his desk, he could see the magazines on the coffee table, taunting him – he had a bad feeling about them. He set his jaw more firmly and ploughed onwards, and only when they were finished did he put them aside. He grabbed a bottle and tumbler from the sideboard and set them on the table. Flicking his wand and igniting a fire in the hearth, he settled into his reading chair and picked up the first magazine.

Two hefty whiskeys and an hour later, his fury and indignation knew no bounds. He had a death grip on the magazine containing chapter four, and when he finished the last word, he leapt to his feet and threw it across the room. His eye was drawn to the coffee table and – seeing the other periodicals lying there – he kicked it, sending it several feet away. It wasn’t enough – not nearly enough – to satisfy his blinding rage, and he leaned down and tipped the piece of furniture end over end, the weeklies falling to the floor. He then took out his wand and blasted it in smithereens. He could have carried on like that all night, but he didn’t want to destroy all of his furniture over a publication for teenage girls, so he bolted from the room, slamming the door behind him.

His brisk footsteps echoed loudly in the hall and stairs as he made his way up from the dungeons. It was time for his patrol anyway, and woe betide the rule breakers tonight. Working his way through the corridors and galleries – yanking back curtains and tapestries and peering into dark alcoves and corners in search of student reprobates – he swished his wand back and forth, mimicking the curses he would use to eviscerate the piece of shite that had turned the facts of his life into a slice of entertainment for a gaggle of schoolgirls. But he found no one breaking curfew – he realized too late that he had been mumbling the spells, and any students who might have been lingering where they shouldn’t have been were long gone, forewarned of his looming presence.

Two circuits around the castle and he gave up, returning to the dungeons. Back in his study, he tidied up the mess – the table was a complete loss, as was his tumbler. The bottle of whiskey, however, was made of sterner stuff and hadn’t broken – there were a few good swallows still left inside. He picked it up, and though tempted to consign the magazines on the floor to the fire, he thought better of it – he might want them as evidence for whatever legal action he was certainly going to take. He
fell into his chair, took a slug straight from the bottle, and considered the periodicals that now lay smoothly stacked in his lap. He took a couple of deep breaths, and then he considered the case in front of him.

There were some striking similarities between him and the main character that went _well beyond_ coincidence, starting with their physical characteristics. The dark wizard of the story wasn’t conventionally handsome, but he _was_ physically compelling. Tall with pale skin and a perennially brooding expression, his eyes – according to the author – were bottomless black pools that reflected a formidable and penetrating intelligence. His aquiline nose fit the long line of his jaw that culminated in a squared off chin. His expression could shift effortlessly from supreme arrogance to impassivity in an instant as circumstances demanded. His blue-black hair was worn long, sometimes tied back in a shortish ponytail, with strands escaping at his temples, framing and – when required – hiding his face. They shared, too, the same sartorial tastes, and he wondered caustically if they shared the same _tailor_ as well.

The two of them also had remarkably parallel experiences, motivations, and skills. The fictional figure had been toughened by a rough and unhappy childhood that was made more difficult by an unrequited love. The resentment over this – and some bullying by his peers – built over his teenage years and prompted him to join the Minister for Magic’s political rival once he graduated from Hogwarts. But when the woman he loved from afar was killed during a Ministry mission, the wizard felt responsible for it, having quite inadvertently let slip where she could be found to his new master. No one had blamed him, but he nevertheless had carried the weight of that guilt with him ever since and it was what prompted him to become a double agent on behalf of the Ministry. Since her death over fifteen years before, he had turned into a man of few words, and most of those were usually cutting and dripping with sarcasm – he didn’t suffer fools gladly. He was also now highly disciplined, adept at deception, and an expert at reading the motives of others and predicting their responses to events. Further, he was a keen dueler and a master of several areas of magic. In short, he was an exceptionally powerful wizard that few were brave – or foolish – enough to cross, at least openly and directly. And then there was the final connection – they were both saddled with the cumbersome name of a relatively mediocre Roman emperor that no one had ever heard of.

He took another swig of whiskey. The author had _some bloody fucking nerve_ using _him_ as the central character of their story. Even though they were largely complementary about his skills, he still didn’t want the personal aspects of his life discussed in public, and he would take legal advice first thing in the morning, _oh yes he would_. When he got through with them, the author wouldn’t be able to so much as write a postcard – he would see to it _personally_.

That said, he _was_ highly amused by the representation of some of his colleagues. The Minister for Magic in the story was Albinia Portal, an older, quite powerful witch who was undoubtedly Albus in drag – he thought the author had hit that one pretty much on the nail. The Deputy Minister was a Welsh Minerva – Mardwyn Gryffudd, a lanky wizard of Methodist extraction with a lilting musical accent. Flitwick was represented by the tall, dapper, and unfailingly _charming_ Fidelis Flintshire. The description of the Minister for Sport practically had him guffawing out loud. Roland Beer was a tanned, ex-Quidditch player lothario – obviously a feminized version of the masculine Madam Hooch. The Head of Magical Creatures department was Henried, a weedy rambler – Hagrid minus a ton or so in weight and beard. Madam “Poppy” Pomfrey had been transformed into good old Doc “Pappy,” the Minister for Magical Health.

The Weasleys were also well represented. There was Lance Westly, who worked for the ministry, his irrepressible and formidable stay-at-home wife, Polly, sons Geoffrey and Faron – who were in business together – and daughter Gisele, who was still in school. He casually wondered what had happened to Charlie, Bill, and Percy, but they had never made much of an impression on him and apparently they hadn’t on the author, either.
Other members of the Order of the Phoenix were included, too— he thought that Rufus Chien was an appropriately laughable name for Serius. Hilariously, Madeye had been turned into a woman— Serene Yademe— but clearly the author had a softer spot for the other two pains in the arse. Wolfgang—who seemingly didn’t have a last name— was an entirely ordinary man in love with an auror, the tall, graceful, and cultured woman, Sylvie Thomas, who always dressed to the nines and spoke in Received Pronunciation. Despite his personal hostility, he grasped the poignancy of their descriptions if only in an intellectual way—they were Lupin and Tonks as they would like to have been in real life.

However, he did not recognize the female figure his character was paired with—a young witch named Persephone, who everyone called Perse. She had long, straight, silky blond hair, vivid blue eyes, and a peaches-and-cream complexion, the very epitome of beauty. Sophisticated, intelligent, and capable, with a facility for charms and transfiguration, she had rescued Domitian from being publicly exposed as a spy in chapter four, much to the wizard’s chagrin—apparently, the fictional character didn’t like being helped any more than he did.

Although she’d only been with the Office for Magical Education for a year or so, Perse already had a small circle of loyal friends, and he recognized every single one of them as his former pupils. He tipped his proverbial hat to the author’s sense of humor in terms of their casting. There was Cary, a quiet, bookish young man with glasses who provided research support for the aurors, one of whom was Lance’s daughter and the object of his affections—Regina Westly, or Reg for short, a rather muscular and sporty woman with spiky ginger hair. He snorted at that—Potter and Weasley were inseparable in real life so they might as well be fictional lovers. Then there was Nigel, a tall, strikingly handsome and confident young man who, because of his knack for potions, worked as a consultant for the Ministry—Neville should be so lucky, he thought scornfully. Nigel’s friend, Diana—a stunningly beautiful no-nonsense brunette—was with the Ministry for Information. So much for Luna. And then finally, there was the quite unprepossessing librarian named Hominy. Mousey with unmanageable hair, dull eyes, and a pale complexion, no one had ever seen her outside the library—rumors were that she actually lived there, and weeks often went by without any of the characters laying eyes on her. The author seemed to share his own succinct assessment of the brightest witch of the age—an irritating and unimaginative know-it-all rule-follower, more attuned to books than people. Everyone jokingly described her as having real grit. He was rather surprised by Hermione’s severe description, even if he entirely agreed with it. In light of the kinder representations in the story, he could only assume that she had somehow pissed off the author—probably by her immensely irritatingly Gryffindor ways, he thought disparagingly.

As for the plot, he was only too familiar with it, even with the changes that had been made. The opposition was headed by Bob Valmont, nicked named The Snake for his cold, reptilian-like demeanor and the use of the image as a political identifier for his party. Rather than Death Eaters, The Snake had Green Shirts and like their counterparts they used out-and-out thuggery to undermine the Minister for Magic and Ministry policies generally. Valmont believed that Domitian was his agent, feeding him insider information on the Ministry. Little did he know that the dark wizard spy was intent on secretly foiling as many of Valmont’s plots as possible in advance of the coup attempt that was coming.

Among Valmont’s key supporters was Mark Lucinius, a short, tubby, and rather drab man but also one of the wealthiest wizards in Britain who served as The Snake’s banker. Lucinius’s son was serving as a mole in a low level administrative position working in the area of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts. In the story, he whines and whinges a lot and doesn’t even merit a name—people just call him Arti-Farty and ignore his constant admonitions to be careful with the Muggle objects, all of which he thinks are exceedingly dangerous.

He stood and finished off the last of the bottle. Dropping the magazines on his desk, he drifted into
the bedroom. He sloughed off his clothes and, after his evening ablutions, slipped between the sheets. The alcohol meant that he immediately fell asleep but also that it didn’t last – by two-o’clock he was wide awake, and he lay there for the next four hours turning the story over in his mind, again, and again, and again. At six, he gave up and got dressed, intent on doing a bit of preliminary legal research before breakfast.

The school library didn’t have a lot of wizarding law books, but they were enough to tell him that the privacy of witches and wizards – especially Ministerial employees, which Hogwarts’ staff essentially were – wasn’t nearly as protected as he had imagined. Most of the facts of his life were already in the public domain and since the names and some of the events of the story had been changed, and even a new character introduced, it was unlikely that he would succeed if he sought damages or tried to prevent further publication. The author didn’t seem to be writing with malicious intent – one of the requirements for actually winning such a lawsuit – and if he was perfectly honest, it was a fairly accurate likeness of both his bad and good points, or at least of what few virtues he felt he possessed.

He was still mortified, however, and intensely irate over having his personal details indiscriminately thrown about – again – and being cast as a romantic antihero. The information about his personal life, though, was at least accurate, but his activities as a spy were being wildly distorted. Certainly he had a realistic understanding of his abilities – now that Dumbledore and the Dark Lord were dead, he was arguably the most powerful wizard in Britain, with Minerva as his female counterpart – but he had never flaunted his position. He had simply done what had been required to redeem himself and that was it – everyone in the Order had been assigned difficult tasks and they had all played their parts just as well as him.

But he had to let it rest, at least for now since none of it was strictly libelous. Instead, he would keep an eye out for chapter six, which was due to come out Friday – there might be additional clues about who was writing this rubbish and then he could seek extra legal means of putting an end to it. The simmering tension the situation caused made him grumpier than usual and students dove for cover whenever he was spotted in the corridors. His classes had never been so quiet, as he – and everyone else – waited for the next installment.

Hermione was on tenterhooks by the end of the week, knowing that chapter six would continue to stir the pot that bubbled among the seventh-year young women. Her principle characters had both had highly erotic dreams about each other in the previous episode, but this time, they would consciously engage their fantasies as they satisfied themselves alone in their respective flats. The sex scenes in the chapter had been surprisingly easy to write. After having been on the run for months with two young men, she knew something about male tendencies – regular solitary walks and morning stiffies that they desperately, sometime hilariously, tried to hide. It was all so much easier for a woman.

She noticed with glowing pride that there were many more magazine deliveries to the Gryffindor table at Friday’s breakfast than there had been previously. Throughout the morning, she watched as they were passed from one seventh-year student to another, and even across other houses, but she was alarmed at how careless they were being about it. She heard from Ginny that Professor Flitwick had almost caught sight of one exchange in charms, and it was passed around almost openly in front of Professor Trelawney. When the two of them approached their potions classroom, a copy was being tossed between some of the seventh-year male students as its Ravenclaw owner desperately ran back and forth, trying to get it back. Both Hermione and Ginny gasped as they neared, seeing what the other students did not, which was the rapidly approaching figure of their infuriated professor, who arrived just in time to intercept the magazine as it was thrown once more across the corridor.

He bellowed at everyone who was involved, and even those who had been standing around
watching, but Hermione was chagrined that he deducted more points from the Ravenclaw student than from anyone else – it was simply too bloody unfair. They were shooed into the classroom, and with her back to him, Hermione couldn’t see the self-satisfied look on her professor’s face. He now had chapter six.

He had to wait until after he had completed his evening patrol to sit down with his prize, and he did so with another whiskey, fully prepared to cut the chapter down to size. It began with an afternoon ambush that turned out rather badly for those who were fighting for the Ministry. The Inner Circle convened an emergency meeting in the face of it, and it had not gone well.

It was late and already dark when Domitian got back to his flat – it was cold, which suited his temper. He poured himself a whiskey and fell back into his reading chair by the old Victorian grate – he didn’t even bother to ignite it, nor did he turn on the lights, rather he just sat there and fumed in the icy darkness as he nursed his drink. In the last year, as Valmont’s power grew and he attracted more deluded followers, division within the Inner Circle over how to counter his maneuvers also increased. His fellow colleagues were incensed that one of their number – Rufus Chien – had been killed that afternoon fighting off a group of Green Shirts who had broken into the Ministry to steal campaign plans for the next election. They wanted to know why they hadn’t been warned of this in advance by their spy.

Domitian didn’t like what they were implying and told them as much, saying that he had contacted them the instant he had found out about the hit. They expressed doubts about his explanation – an altercation nearly broke out right there in the Minister for Magic’s office over the issue and Albinia had to intervene, forcefully. She threw her support entirely behind him, and while that had brought the others back in line, they clearly hadn’t been pleased. They didn’t trust him and he sure as Merlin didn’t trust them, either. Albinia was the only one keeping things together.

But she wasn’t his only ally, it seemed. When the accusations started to fly, Perse had stepped forward to support him, and had done so with righteous indignation that anyone could doubt his true loyalties. He sneered then and he sneered now over his drink. He didn’t need her support – he was perfectly willing to go it alone. In fact, he preferred it that way. And yet, as he poured himself another generous measure, his mind kept going back to her physical bearing – she had straightened her shoulders and stuck out her chest as she balled one fist and clutched her wand ominously in her other hand. Her hair was tangled and her clothing still rumpled from the earlier confrontation, but her eyes were fierce as she declared unequivocally where she stood on the matter of his allegiance, daring anyone to contradict her. Of course several did dare, and rather loudly, and then Albinia had stepped in and ended it.

He might not have wanted – or needed – her support, but he had it anyway, and he certainly enjoyed the view, at least in retrospect. The buttons of her shirt had nearly popped from the pressure while her long, slender legs parted alluringly as she had assumed a fighting stance. In the quiet solitude of his dim and chilly front room, he imagined relieving the stress those buttons were under, thought of the full, rounded mounds the shirt protected and pictured them enticingly breaching the top of her brassiere. He could visualize those long, stockinged legs curled around his waist, almost feel her feet roaming up his back towards his shoulders, as he pushed into her and was enveloped by a succulent yet scorching heat. He could almost taste her lips on his – parted and teasing his tongue – whispering hotly all the things she wanted him to do to her.

Domitian came with a roar. He didn’t remember undoing his trousers, yet ejaculate nevertheless covered his hand and formed streams across his shirt. His breathing was ragged and as he brought his glass to his parched lips, he realized that he had broken it in his ecstasy – he could feel the burn of the alcohol on the rather nasty cuts his hand now sported. He vanished what was left of the glass and cast a healing spell over his palm and fingers. Then he waved his wand over the rest of him, got
up, and staggered into the bedroom, falling flat on the bed without even undressing. He was asleep almost immediately.

He sat there for a moment, rather dazed. He rubbed a shaky hand over his mouth and chin, and then reached for his own bottle of whiskey. He was rather taken aback by just how near the truth the author had managed to get. Order meetings had often been as contentious as they were described in the story, and over exactly that issue – his commitment. And while there hadn’t been a Perse for him to go home and think about, he had stopped in Knockturn Alley on more than one occasion after these confrontations for a bit of physical relief. And sometimes he had simply gone back to the dungeons and taken care of it himself, just like Domitian. The author – whoever they were – was still pissing him off mightily, but now they were also making him more than a little uneasy and he had never liked that sensation.

He raised the magazine once more and took up where he had left off.

Perse was no less frustrated by the meeting than Domitian had been. When she got home, she immediately drew a hot bath, and as she sank beneath the water, she turned the day’s events over in her mind. Some of his colleagues had been far too quick to cast blame for that afternoon’s disaster, while Domitian’s touchiness over the issue of his loyalty only seemed to rile them further. Everyone had hair-trigger responses these days, and that could be a potential problem as open conflict between the Ministry and Valmont drew closer. She was especially troubled by the fact that their colleagues had ganged up on him, rather like a pack of dogs – none of them would have had the guts to confront him individually, of that she was certain. Without Albinia to mediate, she wondered what might have happened. She knew he hadn’t welcomed her own declaration of support – had probably despised her for it, in point of fact – but they all had to see that fighting among themselves only made them weak and gave Valmont the advantage.

She pushed those thoughts away and tried to relax, but the tension in her body simply would not abate. The image of Domitian kept creeping into her mind unbidden. Since the orgasm she had while dreaming about him the previous week, she had started to notice him even more than before. She had noted his habit of absently rolling his wand with his long, dexterous fingers – he often fiddled with it while he was deep in thought, and she found his accompanying expression of concentration rather . . . arousing, she had to admit. She knew him to be a meticulously thorough individual and she fleetingly wondered if he brought that same level of attention to his love making. Well, love making might have been a stretch for the kind of encounters she suspected he usually had.

Perse scooted further down into the water. It was hard imagining him with a woman – there were seemingly no soft edges to his personality – but as her hand slipped absently between her thighs, she pictured the two of them together. She was completely naked and he was still in his frock coat. She laughed at the thought, but the swift electrical wave that swept across her abdomen prompted her to keep him fully dressed in her mind. Those long fingers of his teased her, drew her closer to her climax as his deep, smooth voice in her ear asked her to come for him . . . come for him . . . and then she did.

He threw the magazine to the floor – since he no longer had a table – and leapt to his feet. As he paced around the room, the whiskey in one hand and the fingers of his other running through his hair, he was intensely aware of the fact that the author had been close enough – and had seen him with some degree of regularity – to have picked up on that wand tick of his.

Then there was that other thing that was bothering him. He threw back the rest of his drink and strode purposely into the bedroom. He stripped off quickly, flinging his clothes in the general direction of a chair and continuing on into the bathroom. Once in the shower, he let the hot water run over him as he stood there unmoving. And then, as he had done so often in the past, he reached
down and stroked himself to completion.
Chapter Summary

The faculty decides on a new policy in the face of the increasing disruptions caused by Hermione's story, and Professor Snape devises a new way to get a hold of the new chapter.

Chapter Notes

Comments keep me motivated - just say'n!

A New Policy

There was excitement in the air at breakfast – the whole school was going on the last Hogsmeade outing before the Christmas holidays in just a few weeks’ time. Hermione took a break from writing and went as well, and while perusing the shelves in the local bookshop, she was immensely gratified to see so many female students buying copies of the current issue of Witches Only. There was some joshing by the older boys when the girls came out of the store with their purchases – a few taunts and some snowballs – but nothing truly hostile. But there was a troubling scene that evening at dinner when some of the seventh-year Gryffindor male students, egged on by their younger counterparts, poked fun at the reading habits of their female peers. The targets of their teasing turned on them viciously and told them that the boys of the school should take some lessons from the magazine stories if they wanted to learn how to please a witch. The immediate comeback – that the girls wouldn’t know a real dick from a dildo – rather backfired on them once they realized what they had actually said, and they returned to their meal, soothing their bruised egos by grumbling that they wouldn’t date them in a million years anyway.

Hermione smirked to herself as she watched the rather loud exchange play out. Interest in the story was building and things were about to ramp up significantly, and then . . . then a subtle shift would begin. She enjoyed the rest of her meal, pleased at the developments, but completely oblivious to the fact that the headmistress and several other professors looked put out by it all. Decidedly put out.

The fracas at dinner Friday evening was at the top of the agenda at the faculty meeting the following Monday afternoon. The staff room was a hive of activity when he arrived. He made his way to the back of the room as usual, willing to sit there and listen while grading essays but otherwise refraining from contributing unless absolutely forced to do so. All of his colleagues – to a one – were talking animatedly about the story circulating among a significant portion of the student body. He hadn’t seen them that worked up over a piece of writing since Tom Riddle’s diary.

When Minerva arrived and called the meeting to order, everyone started talking at once, but Vector’s voice was the one that carried over the cacophony.

“Minerva, you have to put a stop to it!”

The headmistress motioned for everyone to quiet down, now that the subject of the meeting had been
“Did you see what happened at dinner Friday night?” Sprout interjected.

“I think we all did,” Minerva responded tightly.

“It was inevitable – I had two girls fighting over the magazine just before my afternoon class today, and they ended up ripping it in half,” Sinistra added.

“You need to ban it, Minerva,” Vector said, firmly, “before it really gets out of control.”

“Oh, please,” Hooch snorted and folded her arms in disgust. “You can’t just go around banning things you dislike or happen to disagree with – it goes against every principle this school stands for,” she said exasperatedly.

“But it’s obscene!” Trelawney offered rather tremulously. There were a few sotto voce murmurs of agreement with her statement.

“It is rather explicit and as with all of these kinds of publications, it’s going to get even more so as the story continues,” Pomfrey observed.

That caught his attention, and his head shot up from the parchments he was marking.

“How explicit?” he asked with genuine interest.

“Haven’t you ever read any of these before?” Sprout queried.

“It’s all I did as a student,” he sneered.

“These aren’t the stories from when you were in school – things are a lot more explicit these days,” Sprout further explained.

“How much more?” he continued to question, wondering to himself exactly how pornographic things were likely to become.

Hooch, who was the closest one to him, leaned in his direction. “A lot more. These kinds of stories specialize in building unrelieved sexual tension until about two thirds of the way through, and then they usually get very explicit. Right now,” she continued with a gleam in her eye, “there’s just been some, shall we say, solo outings by the principle characters . . . or so I’ve been told,” she lied, having got the latest issue off a student only that morning. “I imagine that there are probably still half a dozen chapters or so to go before we get any serious horizontal action.”

That gave him pause. The discussion continued around him as he considered the implications. Based only on what he had read so far, it looked like he was going to have full on, hot, passionate, steamy sex with Perse – or rather his character was. And most of the female student body – not to mention Merlin knew who else, his colleagues almost certainly – were going to read about it. Chapter six had just been foreplay in the scheme of things. His stomach sank and he swallowed hard. He rubbed his mouth and chin to try and calm himself, but the unease in his face prompted Hooch to lean over once more.

“You look like you’ve just seen your life flash before your eyes,” she whispered. His head jerked in her direction and he scanned her face, looking for signs of duplicity but finding only genuine concern. No, he quickly realized, she didn’t know, but just how long would it be before she – and everyone else – figured it out?
He shook her off impatiently, and when his attention refocused once more on the discussion, his colleagues had moved on to debating if such material would promote promiscuity among the student body. While Pomfrey’s medical opinion was that the story might actually serve as an outlet for raging hormones, she was taking no chances and planned on stocking more contraceptive potions just to be on the safe side.

“Still, they should be banned,” Vector insisted unequivocally.

His mind suddenly raced. If the school banned the magazine, it would make it nearly impossible for him to lay his hands on future issues, since he wouldn’t be caught dead buying the damned things – or polyjuicing himself in order to do so – especially not on a weekly basis. He slipped easily into his spy persona.

“I fully understand everyone’s concerns – I share them,” he dissembled seductively. “But banning the magazine won’t actually keep it out of the school, rather it will only make it that much more attractive to our young women.” As his colleagues considered his point, he continued. “Perhaps it would be possible to limit accessibility to the sixth and seventh-year girls – those students who are legally of age – with house point deductions if caught reading it in class or when they otherwise should be working,” he calmly suggested.

“Yes, I agree with Severus,” Sinistra spoke up, “and a lot more house points should be lost and detentions imposed if younger students are caught with it, period.”

Stillness settled on the room, everyone waiting for the headmistress to weigh in. After a moment of careful thought, Minerva folded her hands in front of her.

“Well, I agree with Rolanda that we shouldn’t ban it if only on principle – it would be a slap in the face of everyone who fought in the war to preserve our way of life, which includes the freedom to read and think what we please. Besides, we couldn’t legally keep the older girls from buying them anyway. I think the only sensible thing we can do is impose some limitations along the lines suggested by Severus and Aurora. Does anyone have difficulties with that?”

The headmistress looked around the room at the faculty, who in turn looked at each other. He didn’t think it was ideal for his personal situation, but he could still work with it. With everyone in general agreement, it was adopted – the policy would be announced that evening at dinner.

As the meeting was breaking up, Minerva motioned for him to stay behind. Once the last of their colleagues was through the door, she turned to him expectantly.

He arched a brow.

“Is there anything further you want done?” she queried meaningfully. He showed no reaction – he wasn’t going to give anything away until he was quite certain that he understood exactly what she knew.

“You don’t have to play spy with me, Severus,” she observed shrewdly, “I know who Domitian really is.”

He sniffed. “I’m sure I don’t follow.”

“And I’m sure you do.” She sighed meaningfully. “You forget how long we have known each other, Severus. I’m your former teacher, your colleague, a fellow member of the Order . . . and I’m your friend, whether you want me to be or not. And besides,” she said with a twinkle in her eye that would have done Dumbledore proud, “she has you pegged to a tee.”
“She?” he asked as nonchalantly as he could.

“Of course it’s a she!” Minerva exclaimed. “You can’t possibly think that a man wrote this?”

The corners of his lips curled up slightly in distaste. “No, indeed I did not.”

“Are you going to take legal advice?”

“I’ve looked into it, but it’s not promising,” he replied with disgusted resignation. “I’m a public figure, now, and the details of my life – courtesy of The Prophet,” he spat, “are pretty much common knowledge.”

“Well, I confess I’m glad you are letting it ride,” she commented, sounding truly relieved. He looked at her questioningly. “You let that sorry excuse for a paper run wild all summer long with the most outrageous stories about you without so much as a peep, and when your supporters – and there weren’t many of them – came to your defense, all you did was berate them. Now that someone is trying to put your life and deeds into perspective, seducing the reading public quite literally with the truth . . . well, it would be too bad for you to try and stop them, that’s all I’m saying.”

“I should have sued the paper for libel the instant they started publishing their rubbish,” he grumbled.

“Yes, you should have, but you didn’t, and here you are,” she swiftly replied, with all of the certainty and reproof of a Scottish Presbyterian. “Are you going to be able to deal with it?” she further pressed.

“Well, I’m certainly not happy with the more personal aspects of my life – not to mention the invented ones – being paraded around for purposes of entertainment,” he replied sarcastically, “but I haven’t been openly disrespected in the story nor technically defamed so I guess I’ll have to deal with it.” And indeed, he would deal with it – decisively, in fact – once he found out who the purple quill belonged to, but she didn’t need to know that.

After a moment, he asked his own question. “Does anyone else know it’s me?” he probed.

“To be honest, I don’t think many of them have actually read for plot or character development – I think they’ve just skipped straight to the . . . the good stuff, shall we say. So no, I don’t think they’ve caught on yet, but you do realize that they will eventually?”

He sneered. “Yes, I had grasped that small detail.” His cover would indeed eventually be blown, and when it was . . . he didn’t know what would happen then.

Minerva’s pre-dinner announcement concerning the new policy on magazines such as Witches Only – and the brief lecture encouraging students to widen their literary repertoire – went down like an over-weighted thestral that evening at dinner. A few of the young women the talk was aimed at looked suitably rebuked, but most were politely indifferent. There was some laughter on the part of the young men in the face of her address, which the headmistress stifled with a sharp glare and a reminder that the basis of friendships of all varieties was respect and if students didn’t learn that in their formative years at coeducational institutions such as Hogwarts, they were likely destined to spend their lives single and most definitely alone.

As the headmistress went on, Hermione felt all the blood drain from her face and she slumped down, hiding behind the shoulder of the student sitting next to her. Her breath came in shallow gulps as she tried to tamp down the rising panic. She looked furtively at the head table through hair that strategically covered her face. Was her mentor’s concern solely about the behavioral problems the
magazine was causing, or did they all know more than she was letting on? Did they suspect her authorship or Domitian’s real identity? Most of the faculty sported inscrutable expressions, although Vector and Sinistra looked especially forbidding, but then they always did. Hooch was toying with her wine goblet while Sprout played with the tableware. As for her real concern, he looked pretty much as he usually did, only more so – bored beyond measure, with a sneer on his face that indicated his disdain at apportioning any of the dinner hour to talk about such things. No, they didn’t know anything about the story other than the fact that it was disrupting classes – she breathed a sigh of relief.

Once the admonitions were over, dinner immediately appeared. She had been hungry when she sat down, but now felt distinctly queasy from the aftereffects of the adrenalin rush.

“Mione – you okay?” Ginny asked solicitously across from her. “You’re white as parchment,” she observed with concern.

“Um, no, actually, I’m feeling a bit under the weather – I think I’ll just go back to my room,” she replied, grateful for an excuse to leave. They were sitting near the door, and she got up discretely and slipped out unnoticed.

Back in her room, she ran a hot bath. Stripping off, she eased into the water, letting its warmth and the cucumber scent of the bath oil calm her down. Her reaction to the headmistress’s address was irrational, she told herself – there was simply no way that anyone could discover her secret. Not even the publisher knew her real identity, and even if they found out, they were still contractually bound to maintain her non de plume under quite severe penalties. But she also counted on the fact that the author could be absolutely anyone, given how much had been published about the war. As for Domitian, well, she knew that the time was coming when there would be no question as to who he really was. That was rather the point behind writing the story – securing the sympathy of readers for Domitian well before they realized the character was actually modeled on Hogwarts’ potions professor. But she wanted to delay that discovery for a bit longer, wanted to make sure that readers were sufficiently ensnared to continue the story regardless right to the very end, at which point she knew – she just knew – they would have nothing but unqualified support for the man who had played a major role in saving the wizarding world from unimaginable darkness.

Secure in the knowledge that her authorship had not been – and would not be – uncovered, she began to relax. Her thoughts pushed logically onwards. The faculty had every right to be concerned about the disruptions the magazine was causing in their classes, she told herself. Indeed, after thinking about it further, she convinced herself that she actually welcomed the new policy – there was a time and place for everything, after all, and school work came first.

Having put those concerns to rest, she reflected on the implications of the new policy. Her story was obviously becoming popular – very popular. She allowed herself a self-satisfied giggle and wondered what her readers would make of chapter seven. At first, she had been rather hesitant and thoroughly embarrassed writing the sex scene, and the first draft of it had been stilted in the extreme, but with each successive rewrite – and there had been no less than twelve of them – as well as a bit of first-hand research, it got better. Rather than focusing on the sex itself – and having relieved her own personal tensions on the issue helped immensely in that regard – she concentrated instead on the language and structure. She wanted the section to flow naturally and bring readers further into the story. She was content with the way it now read, but she was also acutely aware that it had the potential to blow the new policy – and a few of her friends’ heads – completely to ribbons. She hoped it wouldn’t prompt a complete ban, but even if it did, she had to be true to the narrative and think about readers outside the school.

The new policy made for much calmer mealtimes and quieter classes, although Hermione spotted a
couple of students in the library with the magazines hidden by open books on reading stands, much like she had initially done. Of course the story was still openly discussed in the Gryffindor common room, much to the chagrin of the male students, and she suspected similar scenarios were being played out in the other houses as well. One more chapter, just one more, and after that, things would take a turn and cool down a bit.

The true impact of the previous Saturday’s visit to Hogsmeade became apparent when Friday morning came around again. It was clear from the number of owls that flew in that a fair number of students were tired of relying on the generosity of others and had taken out subscriptions on their recent excursion. In view of the headmistress’s talk, though, the giggles and squeals of delight that coursed through the room were at least stifled to some degree. Since they weren’t allowed to read it at mealtimes, or even have it out in the corridors, most of the recipients abandoned their breakfast and hurried off, anxious to read the latest installment in the privacy of their rooms before classes started.

He had seen the owls, noted carefully who had received them, and then watched as the recipients left their breakfast behind – he would need to target them and their friends to secure chapter seven. He still hadn’t figured out how he was going to do that, however. It wasn’t going to be easy – it was unlikely the magazine would be lying around common rooms this time around, given how popular it was, and he assumed that students were going to be a lot more careful about reading them in the library as well. Nor could he count on the male students to make a display of them in the corridors. He would have to think of something else.

The something else came to him over lunch, and he was prepared for action by the time his seventh-year potions class met that afternoon. This would be a brewing day, and he had the directions for a potion none of them had ever seen before written out on the chalk board. At the top of the hour, he began.

“The potion you will be brewing is a muscle and nerve restorative. Those final products that pass inspection will be sent to the infirmary. Since all of you clumsy clogs might need this at some point in the near future, I suggest that you pay particular attention to your work,” he said ominously. “It is a highly sensitive potion and requires the utmost care in preparation – the slightest contamination by any fluids, powders, or other foreign objects will ruin it, which would be most unfortunate given the expense of the ingredients,” he warned. “Therefore,” he continued after a dramatic pause, “your pockets and book bags must be cleared of anything that might accidentally ruin the potion. To ensure compliance on this matter, I will personally do the inspection.” He glared out over the room. “Empty the contents of your pockets and satchels on your desk.”

There was some groaning and a few murmurs about how he had no right to go through their belongings, but no one actually had the nerve to speak up – they had seen cauldrons exploding in the past because of the kind of contamination he was talking about and had no desire to be victims of someone else’s carelessness. He started at the back and immediately found what he was looking for.

“Tsk, tsk,” he scolded disapprovingly as he slowly moved from row to row, seizing every magazine he came across – along with a variety of potential contaminates. When he finished, he stood at the front of the room, glowering at the class with a face like thunder. “I am confiscating these,” he said, holding up the weeklies in one hand, “so that you will not be distracted by them, as some of you have been in the past,” he rebuked. “And I am seizing these,” he continued, fingering the various objects on his desk. “for safety reasons. All of you know better than to bring food, liquids, and makeup,” he snarled with revulsion, “into this classroom. We do dangerous work, here, and I will not have you jeopardize others by inattention or sheer foolhardiness,” he concluded sharply. “The assignment is on the board – get on with it,” he snapped.

As Hermione went back and forth collecting her ingredients, her eyes flitted towards the stack of
magazines on his desk – there had to be six or seven copies just in this class alone. That was excellent news, and halfway through the hour she started to hum to herself as she worked on her potion. She didn’t notice that, as he circled the classroom, he honed in on the sound and stopped right behind her. He watched her work for a moment, and then bent down close to her ear.

“Miss Granger,” he finally intoned with a sneer.

She jumped visibly and turned, their noses almost touching. “Yes, professor?” she squeaked, too startled at their sudden intimacy to cringe at his tone.

“What do you think you are doing?” he demanded severely.

Hermione looked back at her cutting board and cauldron – everything seemed to be in order.

“No that,” he said impatiently, “the humming.”

She blushed. “Just happy in my work,” she replied breathlessly. And she was happy, for the most part, certainly happier than she had been in a very long time.

“Well cease and desist,” he drawled.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask precisely what he wanted her to cease and desist – the humming or her happiness. Erring on the side of caution, she merely nodded her head, grateful that he hadn’t penalized her house.

“Ten points from Gryffindor,” he said slyly, smirking at her over his shoulder as he moved on to the next student.

She hung her head – he hadn’t quite ruined her good mood, but he had definitely cut it down to size. As usual, she was the first to complete the assignment and took it up to his desk for testing. When he looked up from the bottle, she dared her own smirk, knowing that she had brewed a perfect potion.

He scowled. “Five points to Gryffindor,” he grumbled.

She arched a questioning brow – it was usually ten for the first student who presented a correct potion.

“Was there anything else, Miss Granger?” he growled, trying to stare her down.

She thought about challenging him – seriously considered it – but she was certain that it wouldn’t get her the other five points. In fact, it would likely lose her even more and gain her a detention, so she huffed before spinning on her heel and returning to her station to clean up.

Bloody Gryffindors, he thought. When was she just going to grow up?
Chapter Summary

Chapter seven of Hermione's story causes quite a stir, and the faculty finds out who the model for Domitian is, much to Severus's chagrin.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a bit longer than usual. Please let me know what you think - comments help keep me writing!

Something to look forward to: Severus finds out who the author is In the next chapter!

Discovery

He almost immediately picked up on the certain . . . effervesce at the house tables at dinner that evening – there was an inescapable buzz in the air. There wasn’t a magazine in sight, but he could tell from the lowered heads engaged in private conversations – not to mention the occasionally escaped giggle – that furtive discussions about the story were going on with at least a quarter or so of the student body. But he was completely nonplussed by the looks he got from some of his colleagues as he took his seat. Sinistra and Vector looked at him with distaste, while Flitwick sent him what appeared to be an expression of sympathy. By contrast, Trelawney was positively batting her eyes at him – at least as far as he could tell given the coke bottle glasses that she wore – while Sprout shot him a hungry, predatory glance. Hooch was openly – and lasciviously – admiring, and Minerva couldn’t bring herself to look at him all. Even Hagrid turned away, clearly embarrassed about something involving him.

They knew. Fuckingfuckityfuck, they bloody knew it was him. It had to be in chapter seven, which was back in his study – there hadn’t been any time to read it since he had seized copies earlier in the day. He quickly looked out over the room – the staff might now know who Domitian was, but it seemed that the students were still ignorant. He promptly decided that he would take his meal elsewhere.

Ultimately, he didn’t bother with dinner, but rather went straight to the sideboard in his quarters for a bottle and glass, grabbing the magazine from his desk. He put the bottle on the floor next to his chair and sat down – he really need to replace that coffee table. He set the fire to blazing and opened the publication. Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself and started to read.

Albinia stood to the side of her desk, sipping her eleven o’clock coffee and finally going through her morning mail. She unwrapped a small package done up with brown paper and string. Inside the box was another one, containing a delicate gold ring set with a single ruby. There was a brief accompanying note from a distant cousin explaining that it had belonged to Albinia’s mother and she wanted her to have it. Without thinking, she slipped it on her finger – and immediately gasped and fell to the floor.
A note from Albinia asking him to come to her office was waiting for him when Domitian got back from a meeting with Valmont. He knocked and then entered – he was expected, after all. Albinia was standing by the great window behind her desk. Her back was to him and she was looking out over the city – it was a grand view. She slowly turned, her hands crossed casually in front of her. As Domitian approached, she nodded to the object on the desk.

“What do you make of that?” she asked.

Domitian bent down to look at the ring closely before taking his wand from his sleeve and casting diagnostic spells over it. “It’s been cursed,” he stated bluntly.

“So I gathered,” she replied, a bit tersely.

“I’ve read about these kinds of curses, but I’ve never seen one before,” he said quietly as he continued to run his wand back and forth.

“Until now,” she supplied. “Valmont?”

“Yes – I recognize the signature of his magic.” He paused and slowly raised his eyes to her. “You haven’t done anything foolish . . . .”

“Like try the ring on?” she asked ruefully as she raised her scarred hand for him to see. His heart raced as he straightened. Drawing her to sit down as calmly as he could, he dragged a second chair over and extended her arm outwards on the desk, waving his wand over the burn mark on her finger.

When he stopped, his lips were set in a thin line.

Albinia laughed slightly. “You have a terrible bedside manner, Domitian.”

“I have potions . . . .” he began softly.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Albinia said, giving him a steely gaze. “How long?”

He clenched his jaw and looked away.

“Domitian – it is vital that you are honest with me.”

He turned and slipped his hand under hers, studying the damage again, trying to still himself. “It will take the curse eight, maybe nine months or so to work its way up your arm,” he stated as dispassionately as he could.

“Then we have time,” she observed, staring into the near distance.

“Some,” he conceded. “I will do a bit of research, and then begin treatments – they might be helpful . . . .” he trailed off. He felt fairly certain that he could extend her life, but they both knew that the curse would ultimately be fatal. He didn’t know what else to say. It was obvious that she wasn’t going to wallow in grief, there was simply too much at stake, but he was finding it difficult to suppress his own anguish. She had been the nearest thing to family that he had ever had. She hadn’t exactly mothered him so much as mentored him with the feeling and compassion of a doting aunt – she was his friend, whatever their differences over the years. He pushed away his emotions – she had made it clear that they wouldn’t be welcome.

Albinia interrupted his thoughts. “Right, then. The first order of business is to make sure that nothing like happens to anyone else – I won’t be the only target in the Ministry.”
“Indeed,” he replied, taking a deep breath. “All incoming mail must be carefully examined – high ranking officials must not open anything they receive at their residences, either. Issue a directive that all owls are to deliver mail and packages – personal as well as work related – to a central depository. Make it sound as though it’s a reform measure to improve the efficiency of the mail generally. We should inform Mardwyn and Fidelis, and possibly Doc Pappy as well in case of any accidents, but we should keep the true reasons for this from the rest of the employees – we don’t want to frighten them unnecessarily since it’s highly unlikely that they will be targeted.”

Albinia’s eyes settled on the ring. “What do we do with this?”

He thought on her question – he had an idea.

“If the circumstances were different, I would urge that we destroy it – immediately – but there might be something else we can do.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“For something like this to be lethal, the caster has to imbue the object with a bit of themselves – the curse weakens them as much as it . . . harms the victim,” he explained delicately, mindful of Albinia’s situation. “I should imagine that Valmont expects to get this back at some point, along with any others he may send, reabsorbing the magic and thus restoring himself to full strength. If we wait to destroy this – give him the impression that you don’t know what it really is – and then keep any others he sends . . . .”

“We can destroy them all at once, right before the final confrontation,” Albinia finished for him.

“Exactly. He won’t be expecting it. It won’t stop him, but it will take him by surprise and weaken him, giving us at least one advantage,” he noted with grim satisfaction.

Albinia nodded. “I’ll find a safe place to keep this – and anything else that is sent,” she said, lifting the ring with the tip of her wand and dropping it back into the box it came in. “I won’t share with you where that’s going to be, however, in case he reads your mind – I’ll find a way to let you know where they are when the time comes. Until then, tell no one in the Ministry of this,” she commanded, indicating her raised hand.

He could only agree with her decision – Gryffudd, Flintshire, and Pappy needed to be read in, but otherwise no one should know the blow that had been struck that morning – it would be too demoralizing and play into Valmont’s plans.

“What do you want me to tell Valmont? He might ask me if you’ve been injured.”

She thought for a moment, leaning forward and folding her hands on the desk. “Tell him that you don’t know, say that I’ve taken to wearing gloves – let him draw his own conclusions but still be left unsure. Tell him that I’ve shown you the ring but that you kept from me the fact that it is cursed with dark magic.”

Domitian nodded, and reached for the doorknob, but then paused, turning back to her.

“Albinia,” he began.

“I’m fine, Domitian. We must keep our eyes focused on the ball, as the Muggles say,” and with that, she got up and returned to the window. All he could do now was give her the privacy she clearly wanted, and so he quietly departed.

He lowered the magazine, remembering only too well the moment he told Albus that he had been
cursed. It had been the hardest thing he’d ever had to do, and his old friend had taken the news as stoically as Albinia had done. It was strange. He knew the effects of adrenaline – the body, when faced with a great shock, tended to heighten all of the senses, making one hyper-aware of their surroundings in preparation for fighting or fleeing. Certainly that had been the case with him. He could recall in painful detail the individual threads in the embroidery on the headmaster’s robe, the scent of lemon in the air from his candy, the exact pinkish tint of his nails . . . and the perspiration that had immediately broken out on his own skin as he realized what had happened. All of it was as fresh as if it had taken place only that afternoon and not more than a year-and-a-half since.

He shook his head to clear it, and considered the more immediate implications of this information. As far as he was aware, none of the current student body – with probably the exception of Ginny Weasley, and of course Hermione Granger, who he was certain wouldn’t read this kind of trash – knew that these events paralleled to a large extent what had happened with Dumbledore, but some of the faculty certainly knew. It apparently hadn’t taken much for at least one of his colleagues finally to put things together. That person, or perhaps persons, had no doubt gone back and read the earlier installments – everyone likely had confiscated copies in their possession – and even if they had given the chapters only the most cursory of glances, it would have been enough to realize that he was the dark wizard of the story. Nor could they be ignorant any longer that most of the staff were also represented there in some way. It would only have taken one person reading the story to make the right connections and pass on that information to the rest of the staff. But that new insight didn’t entirely explain the looks on their faces at dinner – there was something else going on. He poured himself another drink to fortify himself for whatever was coming.

Domitian dropped everything when Albinia sent him yet another urgent summons later that day and he prepared himself for the worst as he sped to the Minister for Magic’s office.

“What’s happen?” he asked, reaching for Albinia’s damaged hand.

“I’m fine, Domitian,” she said reassuringly, “it’s Perse.” Domitian followed her gaze to Gryffudd and Flintshire, who were trying to restrain someone thrashing on the couch.

“She and two of her colleagues were caught out in Knockturn Alley this afternoon while they were surveilling a meeting of Green Shirts,” Albinia quickly explained. “They were spotted and you can guess the rest. They were able to drive off their attackers but Perse was grazed by some kind of spell.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it before – I can’t break it,” Flintshire commented, both frustration and desperation clear in his voice.

“It appears to be a dark spell, and we thought you might recognize it,” Gryffudd added.

Domitian went over to the young woman writhing on the sofa. She looked as though she was in pain, and yet . . . there was something different about it. He ran his wand down the length of her, chanting softly. When he finished, he clenched his jaw.

“Do you know what it is?” Albinia quietly asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid I do,” he replied worriedly.

The three ministry officials exchanged apprehensive glances.

“It’s a maledictionem orgasimus – a sex spell,” he said gruffly. “It’s designed to drive the victim into insanity. The targets of such spells must climax almost continually or the tension will build to such a degree that it will drive the individual literally out of their minds. It’s designed so that it won’t
immediately be recognized in the usual ways – it’s why even an expert like you couldn’t diagnose it,” he explained, looking at Flintshire.

“And by the time someone does . . .” the charms expert began.

“They would be past caring for,” Domitian finished, completing the thought.

“So she has to . . . relieve herself, then,” Gryffudd observed.

“Except she can’t, not on her own – no one can under the effects of this spell. That’s what makes it so insidious. The victim can’t remain still, can’t control their limbs – it has to be done by someone else, and continually, which is, of course, simply impossible.”

“What can you help her?” Albinia asked, getting straight to the point. “Is there a counter-spell?”

He frowned. “Yes, but she has to climax first.” His colleagues, having first looked at each other, were now collectively staring at him – expectantly.

“Out!” he barked sharply – precious time was slipping away. His colleagues hastily scrambled for the door.

Domitian looked at Perse. Her face was flushed and her lips periodically emitted painfully sensuous groans. Her lids flickered open now and again and the pupils were so dilated that her eyes seemed almost as dark as his own. She rubbed her legs together seeking relief as she tried to touch herself through her skirt, but her arms flailed about uselessly – the moaning grew louder and was beginning to turn into desperate whimpering. While he wasn’t immune to her physical charms, as his recent emissions more than attested to, he never expected to be in a position to touch her – at least not intimately. Nor did he want to under these horrendous conditions, but she was in distress and it would only grow worse with each moment’s delay.

He took off his Ministry robe before unbuttoning the top of his coat and loosening his cravat. He ran a hand up her leg, but it jerked away, making it suddenly obvious to him that there would be some difficulty in keeping her still, or at least still enough for him to do what needed to be done. Stupefy wasn’t an option, given that it would only heighten her torment if she was unable to move – there really was only one thing he could do.

He carefully stretched out on top of her body, pinning her legs beneath his as he ran an exploratory hand up her inner thigh – she was wearing proper stockings, which would make things easier. He laid his wand on the arm rest, within easy reach for when it was time to cast the necessary counter-curse, and then pulled her skirt up to her thighs. Taking a deep breath, he slipped his hand under her panties and eased his finger between her wet lips. She jerked involuntarily, throwing her head back and emitting a feral growl. This wasn’t going to take long, he realized, and she came almost the instant he touched her engorged clitoris. Her head whipped from side to side as she pounded the sofa insensibly with her fists for what seemed like an eternity to Domitian. He had never seen the spell at work and was horrified – and also more than a little fascinated as well, he had to admit. When he reached for his wand, she grabbed his shoulders so hard he knew there would be bruises.

“Again,” she managed to grit out between clenched teeth.

Once more, it only took the lightest of touches to make her orgasm. He repeated the process a further five times before he could reach over her head for his wand. The counter-spell took effect immediately – Perse’s limbs finally stilled, although she was still breathing hard. He lifted himself up, gently tugging down her skirt and folding her open robe around her exposed legs. As he studied her for adverse effects, he was forcefully struck by her disheveled state – and by his own increasingly
painful arousal. There was a tentative knock on the door followed by Albinia’s muffled voice.

“Is everything alright?” she inquired.

He wasn’t sure he could answer that question at the moment. Picking up his robe and holding it discreetly in front of himself, he let them back in. He didn’t much care for the rather astonished looks on everyone’s faces as they focused their eyes on his loosened coat and neckwear. He knew from experience that his face would be unusually and quite noticeably flushed. He sneered at them contemptuously – what the bloody hell had they been expecting?

As he made to leave, Albinia stayed him with a hand on his arm. “Domitian . . . .” she began.

“She’ll be alright,” he assured her. “Her muscles will be sore from the spasms – I’ll send up a potion to ease them. I don’t know how much she may remember about any of this, but unless she asks specifically, I would spare her the gory details,” he gritted out. He turned to leave, but again was stopped. By now, he was acutely aware of his own needs.

“Yes?” he replied impatiently.

“Thank you,” she said with genuine gratitude.

He paused and then nodded before swiftly heading back to his office, where after securing the door he proceeded to administer some self-relief. As he did so, the thoroughly satiated expression that had been on Perse’s face was at the forefront of his mind. Like her, he came quickly, and as the tension started to leave his body, he began to think more rationally. He could not become involved with her. They had become too comfortable in each other’s company of late, serving as they did on several missions together, and that growing tolerance if not actual comradery would simply have to end. He was older, her superior in the Ministry, and likely to die at the end of the confrontation that was coming from Valmont and his minions. He had to exert some control. They might have to work with and see each other on a daily basis, but he would neither pursue nor encourage her, however much he might be tempted – it was as much for her sake as it was for his own safety. He had to maintain some self-control, he just had to.

He secured his trousers and went next door to the lab. Opening a cabinet, he searched along the shelves until he found what he wanted. He handed a small bottle to one of the laboratory technicians with instructions to get it to the Minister for Magic’s office as quickly as possible. Domitian never made a request, and the young man sprinted all the way, placing it directly into Albinia’s hands. Gryffudd was just about to carry a weak and nearly boneless Perse to her flat through the floo, and the Deputy Minister promised Albinia that he would make her take the potion the instant she was home.

Once she was settled deep in her bed, dopey and drowsy from the potion, Perse tried to make sense of that afternoon’s events. She remembered the initial encounter with the Green Shirts, but only pain after that. Well, pain wasn’t quite the right word – she wasn’t sure there was a right word for what she had felt – maybe agony, but not any ordinary agony. She remembered feeling highly aroused, and recalled a constant stinging sensation in her nether regions for a long stretch of time that had driven all thought from her mind. There had been a weight on her, pressing her down into the sofa she woke up on. Words were spoken – she was almost sure of it – soothing words in a deep familiar voice that tried to calm her. And then there was release, wonderful, glorious, mind-boggling release. But it began to build almost immediately again . . . again . . . again. The word repeated itself – or perhaps she had repeated it, she wasn’t certain, but finally the pain had eased and then stopped altogether. In that moment, she was hardly able to lift her arms, but whatever had consumed her had gone – all she was told was that she had been hit by a powerful spell. But she thought she remembered a face – his face – looking down at her, and felt contented and safe. Contented and safe
– Perse drifted off with those words repeating in her mind.

*What the fuck?!* Nothing much shocked him, not after having suffered through the Dark Lord’s depravities for three years, but *Merlin’s balls*, he was frankly taken aback at what he had just read and he refilled his glass with a shaky hand. Yes, the two principle characters had each had an erotic dream in chapter five and a bit of self-pleasure in chapter six, but this was this was different. *Completely* different. No wonder his colleagues had looked at him the way they had – he wasn’t sure he could look at *himself*. He sat there nursing his drink, replaying the scene in his mind, again and again and again . . . .

He suddenly got up from the chair and gulped the rest of his whiskey, banging the tumbler firmly on the desk as he passed it on his way to the bedroom. A flic of his wand and the buttons of his coat were instantly undone – he quickly shed his clothes before heading into the bathroom. The contempt he felt over the author managing to generate such a high state of arousal – yet *again*, maddeningly – was surpassed only by his need to *address* that arousal. He could despise them *after* he took care of his current pressing needs. As he took himself in hand, he thought of Perse, and how much he wished she wasn’t just a work of fiction.

Severus skipped breakfast, depriving his colleagues of another opportunity to stare at him speculatively. He knew – he just knew – they were wondering if the concluding events of chapter seven had any foundation in reality. *Damn and blast it all!* He would have to keep a low profile the rest of the weekend, which is what he usually did anyway but he didn’t like feeling compelled to do so. Come Monday, however, he’d have to show his face, and at another faculty meeting as well. *Fuck fuck fuck.*

The giggling among the young women at Saturday breakfast was controlled – *just* – although it was given full reign in the Gryffindor common room all weekend. The story was all they could talk about, and Hermione assumed it was same in the other houses as well. The sex spell scene had clearly gone down well – *very* well. The idea for it had come from a gab session her former roommates had late one night during her sixth year. They had idly speculated about dark spells, and the conversation had come around to sex, as virtually *all* of their conversations inevitably had done. She had cast a silencing spell so she could read in peace and quiet on her bed, but when it wore off she couldn’t help but overhear their theorizing. In retrospect, she felt she should have footnoted the passage, given credit to where it was really due, since they had made it relatively easy for her to write the section, even if she *had* gone through twelve drafts. And the scene had done its job *superlatively*, just as she had intended.

She was immensely relieved that chapter seven hadn’t provoked an outright ban of the publication because, having securely hooked her readers – admittedly by rather nefarious means – she could now begin to reel them in ever so slowly, so leisurely they wouldn’t even notice that their attention was being redirected to the story line. Henceforth, she planned to pull back on the sexual encounters, introduce them perhaps every other chapter as the story progressed. A bit of unrelieved sexual tension – some steady *simmering* – would only further emphasize the seriousness of the plot. She hadn’t set out to write pornography, after all, just add some erotic elements to what was already an enthralling story, one that was important and relevant to all of their lives. She had probably pushed her mentor and head of house to the very limits of her tolerance, but it was now going to cool down a bit.

He skipped the first two meals on Monday, and in between managed to avoid his colleagues, but there was no getting around the faculty meeting that afternoon. He approached the staff room with fierce determination – he had confronted worse in his time, *much* worse – and he wasn’t going to be intimidated by a bunch of tittering, up-tight, frustrated coworkers. Just as the previous week’s gathering had been nothing but raucous noise, this one was eerily quiet, and the whispered voices he
had heard in the corridor went completely still on his entry as all heads turned to look at him. His menacing expression was enough to keep them from expressing their thoughts openly, and he proceeded to take his usual seat with practiced coolness. He pointedly ignored their stares, which were a repeat from Friday night, and laid out his essays to grade, just as he always did.

“How are you holding up, old boy?” Flitwick ventured.

“Fine,” he bit out, keeping his eyes focused on his parchments.

Minerva swept into the meeting and immediately got down to business. “First of all, by now you’ve all probably realized that the central character of the current story in *Witches Only* is modeled—loosely,” she quickly added, “on Severus and his wartime activities, and I would like to extend to him our deepest sympathies over the embarrassment this has caused and offer him our unqualified support.”

He had stopped writing when she began and now he raised his head. From the looks on some of his colleague’s faces, they hadn’t expected her to stand behind him. He smirked.

“Yes, well,” he drawled, “it is only a very general likeness, as you say, but I appreciate the sentiment.” He would let them squirm, not knowing which parts of the story were actually real. From the look on Trelawney, Sprout, and even Hooch’s faces, he knew which aspects they at least wanted to be true.

“Are you going to sue?” Sinistra asked sharply and expectantly.

“The libel laws being what they are, I wouldn’t win.”

“You could always hex them,” Vector said snidely.

“While that’s what the dark wizard of the story would do, it’s not something I care to contemplate,” he responded evenly if quite untruthfully.

“Why not? Weren’t you a dark wizard yourself?” Vector challenged accusingly.

He narrowed his eyes, but before he could hex her outright Minerva intervened.

“Severus was an accomplished spy, and fooled a great many people, including his colleagues, it would seem,” she said sternly, glaring down the table. Having defused the situation to some extent, the headmistress swiftly moved on. “It won’t be long before the students make the same connections we have, and we have to be prepared for it. Severus, since this most nearly concerns you, do you have any suggestions about what our response should be?”

His attention finally shifted away from Vector to the front of the room. “I believe that each installment is headed by a disclaimer stating that the characters and events depicted within are purely fictitious— I think that should be our position,” he suggested steadily.

“No one’s going to believe that!” Sinistra sniped.

“Then have them write lines until they do!” he exploded, his patience at an end. “Or better yet, tattoo it to their foreheads – *in reverse* – so they can fucking see it in the mirror every time they look at themselves, which is about once every twenty minutes! It’s *bloody fucking fiction*!”

Sinistra harrumphed, crossed her arms, and glared at him, clearly offended.

“Yes, I think repeating that it’s fiction should be our official line,” Minerva interjected smoothly.
“They’ll soon get bored with asking the question if that’s all we respond with – if any student becomes obstreperous, just send them to me.”

With that, the meeting broke up, and he left with his head held high, even though he, too, was worried about what the students’ response might be. He had weathered the Dark Lord – surely he could face down a bunch of pea-brained over-sexed, fatuous children. In the meantime, he was going to find out who was writing this slop and put an end to it once and for all. He just needed a bit more information.

The students all still seemed in the dark when chapter eight came out on Friday, and by chance, he caught Sprout reading it that afternoon in the staff room, which he had been passing after having finished his study hall duties for the day. The door was open and he saw her engrossed within its pages, so much so that she didn’t notice him creeping up from behind.

He bent over and whispered into her ear. “Anything . . . interesting?” he cooed as she tried to hide it within the depths of The Prophet.

“Bugger, Severus!” she said, clutching her chest and trying to catch her breath. “You could have given me a heart attack!”

“Why bother when that will do it for me,” he said scathingly, nodding slightly at the materials in her hand.

“I took this away from a student this morning – she had sneaked off from the rest of the class to read it in the potting shed.”

“Oh really?” he asked, sounding like he didn’t believe her.

“Yes,” she said emphatically.

“Well here, then, let me rid you of this spurious . . . literature – I’ll see that it’s properly disposed of,” he said, grasping the top of the magazine firmly. Sprout was reluctant to let it go, but with a forceful tug he managed to yank it out of her hand. He sat down at the table and put it to one side as he spread out student essays.

“You’re going to grade here?” she asked tentatively.

“Hmmm,” he replied. “It has all the things I require at the moment – quiet, natural light, and not a student in sight.” And with that, he began marking the first parchment.

Sprout frowned, then gathered her things and left. Severus smiled to himself – he marked the first two essays to make sure she had truly gone before turning his attention to the magazine. This time, he wasn’t going to wait until he was in his quarters to read it. Instead, he put up some wards on the door and dove straight in.
Author, Author!

Chapter Summary

Severus is completely dumbfounded when he searches for and ultimately discovers exactly who is responsible for writing Love in a Time of War.

Chapter Notes

As promised, an early posting - another to follow on Saturday! Comments are always welcome!

Author, Author!

In the weeks following the executive order that all post should be filtered through a central depository, several more items – sent this time to various people in the Ministry – were identified as being suspicious. They included an old-fashioned metal Quidditch helmet addressed to the sport-obsessed Gryffudd, a charmed goblet sent to Flintshire, a writing pen for Lance Westly, and a book forwarded to Hominy the librarian. Based on their magical signatures, Domitian determined that they had all come from Valmont, and Albinia had promptly whisked them away to where she had hidden the ring. But two other questionable items that were also flagged were different from the rest. One was a bottle of wine addressed to the Minister for Magic, and after some testing Domitian concluded that it had been poisoned. However, he did not detect any dark spells, just the contamination, so it could not be proved conclusively that it came from Valmont. Several days later the contents of another package were discovered to have been tampered with. This time it was a necklace – again for Albinia – and while it was cursed, it didn’t have Valmont’s magical signature. Also, the jewelry was of Muggle origin, which The Snake would never have deigned to touch.

“So these didn’t come from Valmont?” Albinia inquired.

“Not directly, at any rate, but they’re clearly from someone who sides or perhaps even works with him.”

“Any guesses?”

He pondered the question. “Suspicions only,” he finally replied.

“Let’s hear them,” she ordered firmly.

He took a breath. “Arti, down in Muggle Artifacts,” he replied, “Lucinius’s son. He has access to these kinds of things and I can well imagine him thinking that killing you might benefit his father.”

“It seems like a rather halfhearted attempt, don’t you think, given that he knows about the new policy on incoming mail?” Albinia asked.

“Perhaps,” Domitian said coolly, “but his father is under intense pressure – it’s getting increasingly
difficult for Lucinius to find the money necessary to finance Valmont’s many and nefarious ventures,” he observed. “Much of his own fortune is gone, and that of other leading followers is also dwindling.”

Albinia gave the matter some thought. “I assume that all of these various attempts are signs that the confrontation is coming soon,” she said more than asked almost to herself.

“A matter of months, I should imagine, although he hasn’t shared his plans with me,” Domitian supplied.

“Find out what you can, Domitian, and please take precautions,” she added. “I doubt he would hesitate to attack you, so carry some emergency potions with you at all times from now on – it could mean the difference between life and death.”

The conversation between Albinia and Domitian returned to Lucinius’s frustrations and possible growing disillusionment with Valmont, but he only scanned it, focusing instead on the notice at the bottom of the page.

Note from the editor: Witches Only wants to remind its readers that Love in a Time of War will go on hiatus until after the New Year. It is a long-standing tradition that we publish holiday-themed material during this time. Witches Only wishes you a Happy Christmas and we will see you in January!

Relief surged through him. It would certainly make for a quieter Christmas all around if students remained ignorant of Domitian’s identity for just a bit longer – he didn’t much fancy the idea of his name being bandied about at family holiday tables, though he knew it wouldn’t be put off indefinitely. In the meantime, however, he could dedicate all of his energies to finding out who the author was so he could hex them to Hades and back. And that definitely would make for a quieter spring term.

He spent some time in the castle’s muniment room searching the school’s records for J. H. Bailiff and turned up nothing. He next persuaded Minerva to contact the publisher on the excuse that she wanted to ask the author to come and speak at the school, but got nowhere with that angle – the editors clearly protected their writers. As a last resort, he asked Arthur Weasley to check any registries of witches and wizards the Ministry might have, telling him that Bailiff was a distant family relation he wanted to contact, but again, nothing came of it. So he was going to have to study the stories themselves for whatever clues they held as to the true identity of the author.

He sat forward in his reading chair by the hearth – all of the magazines were spread out on the new coffee table, open to the relevant pages for easy reference, while his quill and parchment were at the ready to take notes. Up until chapter eight, the author could have been absolutely anyone. The Prophet had covered the war extensively – if almost entirely after the fact – interviewing as many of the main players as possible who were willing to make statements. In the face of those who weren’t willing – and there were a lot of them, including him and Minerva, Potter and his friends, as well as the remaining members of the Order of the Phoenix – the paper had moved on to second, third, and even fourth-hand accounts. When even those became too outlandish – a truly ridiculous number of people were all too ready to claim they had fought in the battle or worked in the resistance – The Prophet had turned to official Ministry testimony as a last resort.

But chapter eight had contained information that only a handful of people had full access to. Very few knew the specifics about what had happened with Dumbledore in the months leading up to his death. The incident with the necklace was commonly known because it had involved the cursing of a Hogwarts student – the news had spread like wildfire among the students and quickly on to their parents. But only a small group knew about the ring and poisoned wine – the Golden Trio, of
course, and maybe a couple of their friends, several faculty colleagues, and members of the Order, many of whom were now dead. There were still a lot of names, but he was certain they could be further whittled down.

While he agreed with Minerva that the author was likely a woman, he wasn’t going to make any assumptions at this juncture, and so he listed all of the male candidates. He started with Slughorn and then dismissed him almost at once. If his former professor had written it the story would have featured a celebrity potions master with an outsized sense of his self-worth who touted his own talents every other paragraph. It wasn’t him. His old friend Flitwick came next to mind, but he was far too much of a genuine gentleman ever to have written the smut scenes. There was Arthur Weasley, of course, but he lacked the imagination, and he, too, probably would have balked at the sex. As for Shacklebolt . . . well, he certainly didn’t have any hang ups about sex. He was good looking with a flamboyant style, all attested to by the witches who now flocked to him whenever he appeared in public, but if the new Minister for Magic had any time left at the end of his day, it would be spent wooing some of those witches, not writing about the war. It wasn’t him, either.

That left Potter, Weasley and his immensely irritating brother George. He immediately dismissed the boy who lived and his sidekick simply because they were barely literate in his learned estimation. And while George should have been a strong possibility, given his sense of mischief, he thought the story was far too subtle for his usually heavy hand. No, he had to concur with Minerva – the author was definitely a woman.

He started another list, and quickly wrote out five names – Minerva, Ginny, Luna, Hermione, and Molly. From years of experience, he knew that Minerva was capable of many things, but he doubted she was up to writing explicit sex scenes, and he suspected that any romance from the youngest Weasley’s quill would feature the chosen one, not the bat of the dungeons. Miss Lovegood’s preferred genre was likely to be more fairy tale than war romance – anything from her would certainly be literary, but probably also full of schemes and tropes that would make readers’ heads spin. As for Hermione – he simply couldn’t fathom it. She was far too serious for such a frivolous endeavor, and likely too much of a prude as well since she appeared to be completely inexperienced as far as he could tell. The fact that she dated Weasley for a couple of months pretty much confirmed that assumption as far as he was concerned. Molly, though, was a real possibility. Her children were friends with Potter and thus had access to information the rest of the student body did not, while as a member she had been intimately involved in the Order’s business – she had also fought in the final battle. On further consideration, he could well imagine that behind her motherly exterior she had the earthiness required to spin such a yarn – she couldn’t have had seven children and not have picked up a thing or two about the joys of sex along the way. But he still wasn’t sure. What he needed to do was observe her in action, listen to her speak, note her vocabulary and cadence and see if it was even close to the author’s style. And the perfect opportunity to do that was actually nearly upon him.

Even though the Order of the Phoenix was now mostly made up of the Weasley clan, it nevertheless continued to meet on a monthly basis. He deliberately arrived early at Grimmauld Place and sat in the kitchen, ostensibly reading The Prophet but actually observing his target closely. Molly was cooking as usual, with Weasley and George dodging her spoon as they tried to get samples of the meal to come. Bill and the former Miss Delacour were also already there, as was Percy, in Ministry robes so overly starched that he wondered how the young man could sit in them – at least it gave him some backbone, which he was otherwise singularly lacking. The Weasley girl and Potter were at the far end of the table, making eyes at each other while holding hands and playing footsie beneath the table. It was revolting enough to make him want to vomit. Hermione, he noted, was predictably in a corner, reading of course – no surprises there.

As the clock struck six, Molly directed her brood to clear their things from the table in advance of the Order meeting. The young lovers reluctantly parted and Ginny reached across for her open book bag
and missed, knocking it instead to the floor. A copy of *Witches Only* fell out, and as the young woman hurriedly scrambled to pick it up, Molly stomped on it loudly. The room immediately fell quiet. She retrieved it from the floor and, seeing what it was, began to berate her daughter for buying and reading such trash.

He was just starting to enjoy the spectacle – Molly in full throttle was something to behold – when Arthur and Kingsley came in. Waving the magazine in her hand like a flag to a bull, the Weasley matriarch asked the menfolk if there wasn’t something the Ministry could do about banning or at least censoring such material. Shacklebolt started to open his mouth to reply when she cut him off, anticipating his response by telling him not to give her any guff about *free speech*. Arthur did what he usually did when she was in a fury, which was to push her gently to a quiet part of the room to try and calm her down. He took the magazine out of her hand and flapped it behind him for someone to take. George got to it before Ginny could, and started reading from the latest chapter.

“They stood outside Valmont’s manor in the howling rain, when suddenly, lightning struck a nearby tree. Domitian grabbed Purse by the waist and hauled her out of the old oak’s path,” he began in an exaggerated dramatic voice.

Ginny lunged at him, but her brother mounted a chair.

“It was a closely run thing,” he continued reading, “they could have both been crushed. A light appeared in the distance – someone was coming out to check on the damage.”

Ginny picked up her bag and began hitting him with it. George climbed on the table and slowly moved towards him down its length – he whipped up his newspaper before the young man could tread on it.

“Domitian wrapped his cloak around them both and disapparated. They landed a block away from the Ministry in a darkened alley, his arms still around her protectively as she clutched the cloth of his coat in her small hands. Perse could feel the heat of his body warming her cold, rain soaked skin . . .”

By this point, Molly was yelling over Arthur’s shoulder for George to get his dirty boots off the table. When Arthur turned to see, he swiftly walked over to where his son was standing and dragged him down. He grabbed the magazine and handed it to Ginny, nudging her out of the room.

George high-fived his youngest brother and Bill while Potter grinned in spite of himself. Fleur had stayed well back from it all and she and Hermione simply rolled their eyes, while Percy hadn’t even cracked a smile. Wanker, Severus thought, even though he, too, had remained impassive as the scene played out in front of him. But he was a spy and Percy was just . . . a wanker.

Molly returned to the stove, still muttering under her breath, as Arthur brought out a bottle and offered him and Shacklebolt a drink. When Minerva finally arrived – late, as usual, but as he knew only too well, that was the life of a head – she was only too glad to accept a glass herself. With everyone finally there, Kingsley called the meeting to order, and they wasted no time in getting down to business – the sooner it was over, the sooner they could all eat. The agenda mostly concerned plans for a commemoration service and the laying of memorial stones at Hogwarts for those who fell in the war – there was also some discussion about admitting new members, like Ginny, Neville Longbottom, and a number of others. If they wanted to keep the Order going, then they needed to make some decisions about recruitment.

As the remaining members of the Order debated this, his thoughts drifted back to the list of candidates. He supposed that Molly’s anger over the magazine could have been an act, but he really didn’t think it was – her outrage seemed genuine enough, and he couldn’t imagine who she might
have been performing for. He looked again at Minerva, who was just then pursing her lips in thought at whatever was being said. She would have turned wizards’ heads in her prime, he had no doubt of that, but he still couldn’t see her writing such material, especially not after their conversation about the matter and the measures she was pursuing to limit access to the magazine. The only other viable candidate was sitting at the far end of the table.

Hermione was leaning on her elbow, her head in her hand and her long hair framing her face. She was completely lost in thought, as oblivious to what was going on with the meeting as he was. And then slowly – oh so very slowly – she looked up and he was stunned by the expression on her face. Her eyes were dark and a sensuous smirk played on her lips.

*Sensuous?*

He tried to prevent his own countenance from revealing the wave of shock and disbelief he felt at that moment. It took a few seconds more for her to become aware that he was staring at her, but when she did, she became clearly flustered – he noted a blush working its way up from her exposed neck to her face. She sat back quickly, hiding behind Bill’s shoulder, out of his line of view. And that’s when he knew – it was her. He had seen countless guilty expressions in his time, and that was an absolute classic. It wasn’t just that she was thinking about sex – oh no, everyone did that at boring meetings like this – his instinct told him that she was thinking about sex involving him.

And then the pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place. She was in an unrivaled position – with access to a variety of sources – to know what he had done as a spy and what it had cost him over the years. Her transfiguration tutorials with Minerva were held in the headmistress’s office, where Albus’s portrait hung – how often might she have passed the time talking with him as she waited for her very busy professor to arrive? She was such a curious thing, she would have questioned the late headmaster thoroughly, and she wouldn’t have hesitated to ask Minerva about him, either. His colleague, no doubt in a laudable effort to improve his reputation, had probably shared with her the fact that he regularly suffered terrible physical abuse at the hands of the Dark Lord and his followers. His old friend had sat many times, often for hours on end, at his bedside in the infirmary, witnessing firsthand what he had suffered. He could also easily imagine that Potter had told her about the more private aspects of his memories as well, even if he didn’t do so with anyone else. And finally, she had fought in the battle and seen and experienced everything up close and personal.

He paused to think about this this last bit more carefully – there was something nagging him at the back of his mind. He had had the foresight to carry anti-venom and blood replenisher with him in those last months in anticipation that the Dark Lord and Nagini would turn on him, and Domitian was urged to do something very similar in chapter eight – he had no doubt whatsoever that the author was foreshadowing Domitian’s need of life saving potions later on. So Hermione had to know about the anti-venom and blood replenisher in order to have included something like them in the story. But even taking those potions, he still would have bled to death on the floor of the shrieking Shack the night of the attack if someone hadn’t bound his neck wounds and levitated him to the infirmary. No one at the time seemed to know – or was willing to tell him, at any rate – who that someone had been. But now he knew. The only way she could have known about those potions – the only way they could have ended up in the story – was if she had been there that night in the Shrieking Shack and found the empty vials in his hands. She was the one who had saved his life and she hadn’t said a *fucking word about it*.

His thoughts were momentarily interrupted.

“Severus?” Minerva inquired in a low voice.

He slowly turned to look at her as she continued to search his face.
“Are you alright?” Her expression was one of concern. “You look a bit pale.”

He arched a brow.

“Paler than usual,” she added with all seriousness

He swallowed with some difficulty. “I’m fine,” he responded neutrally if a bit hoarsely, reaching for his drink.

Minerva turned her attention back to the meeting, though she clearly wasn’t entirely convinced by his assurances.

The meeting ended shortly after that and Ginny returned to the kitchen to help get the meal ready. The senior members of the Order chatted, and he nodded at the appropriate places, but he was really focused on studying Hermione as surreptitiously as he could. He was immediately struck by the fact that she was about as far removed from her fictional character as one could get. She wasn’t mousey in the least. Her hair was an attractive chestnut with lighter highlights – she usually tied it back at school, but tonight, it flowed over shoulders and down her back. She had let it grow long and the weight of it now kept it from being bushy. When she reached to lay a plate in front of him, he looked into amber eyes with flecks of gold. She smiled hesitantly at him, her now small, white, even teeth barely showing between parted lips, and he suddenly thought how cruel it had been of him not to have punished Draco back in her fourth year for transforming them into virtual tusks. He felt belatedly ashamed for having made her sit through his class like that instead of allowing her to go straight to the infirmary.

As she set out the tableware in front of him he also noted her coloring – she might not have the much desired English rose complexion, but on close inspection her skin was nevertheless clear and luminous with a hint of color in her cheeks. And as she worked her way around the table, laying everything out, he suddenly – and somewhat uncomfortably – realized that her figure had matured in the last year. He hadn’t noticed it before, what with the ill-fitting uniform and robes she wore for school, but in her jeans and snug sweater, it was obvious that she had become a woman, with all the telltale signs – she had truly grown up and he’d never noticed. How in Merlin’s name could he have missed that? What had happened to the spy who let nothing – nothing – escape his notice?

He continued to study her every move over dinner. Her eyes sparkled when she laughed, and she moved easily in and out of the conversations around her – she was no longer an awkward schoolgirl but a self-possessed young woman with all the appropriate social graces. While she still had pronounced opinions on the various topics of conversation, and offered them up without hesitation, she wasn’t pushy about it and didn’t correct anyone, rather she simply . . . fit in with the other adults around the table. How could he have been so utterly and completely blind?

Usually, he was the first to leave after Order meetings were over, not bothering to stay for dinner, but for once, he didn’t want the evening to end – he could have watched her all night. But when it did come to a close, he suggested that Ginny side-along apparate with Minerva before offering his arm to Hermione. It cut him that she hesitated, and yet he well understood the reason why. When had he ever been nice to her? Still, she ultimately took his arm and with a crack, they were once more back at Hogwarts.

Inside, Hermione and Ginny said a quick good night to their professors, and he watched them ascend the staircase and disappear from view.

“Are you alright, Severus?” Minerva queried once again.

He turned to look at her. “Why wouldn’t I be?”
The slight hesitancy in the tone belied his words, however, and she smirked. “Good question.” When he didn’t reply, she turned on her heel. “Goodnight, Severus,” she offered in a knowing voice that he failed to pick up on.

He set off for the dungeons, and when he got there he poured himself a stiff drink and flopped in his chair, not even bothering to ignite the grate. He should be angry. He should be furious. He should be breathing fire and relishing the prospect of dismembering the third member of the Golden Trio in the very near future. And yet . . . he could hardly take it all in. She was the author of the story. She had pushed everyone to the side – everyone – and made him of all people the central character. It should have been an account of her best friend’s exploits – it should have been about Potter. Why the bloody hell wasn’t it? Was it because she had saved his life? And why the fuck hadn’t she told anyone? Or had she? Surely Minerva knew? And then, there were all those sex scenes. She had written those scenes. Holy fucking Merlin.
Debriefing

Chapter Summary

Severus discusses Hermione's authorship with Minerva, and is forced to confront some things from his past.

Chapter Notes

Severus always has to know the 'why' of things . . . .

Drop me a note and let me know what you think!

Debriefing

He didn’t know how long he sat in his chair, turning the evening over and over again in his mind, but it was certainly very late when he finally got to bed. He drifted a bit – images from the story and recent events mingled disturbingly – but otherwise he didn’t really sleep. He got up early and the face he saw reflected in the bathroom mirror was rough – dark smudges under his bloodshot eyes, and stubble on his cheeks and chin. Nor did the copious amounts of alcohol he had consumed the night before help his head any. He showered and shaved, dressed, and made his way up from the dungeons. Breakfast wouldn’t be served for a good hour, and even though it was still dark, he strode out briskly into the morning Scottish mist, hoping to clear his mind. Hagrid, who was going about his chores, was startled to see him.

“Morn’n, p’fessor – don’t off’n see you out this early.”

Severus nodded at the keeper but kept up his pace – he didn’t think he had the stamina to go several rounds with Hagrid without caffeine. By the time he returned to the school, his head had cleared and he was intent on speaking with Minerva, regardless of the hour. He breezed past the early risers and went straight to the headmistress’s office. He knocked firmly on the aged door.

“Come in, Severus.”

Stepping inside he was confronted with a bit of a surprise.

“I’ve been expecting you,” she said calmly, gesturing to the breakfast sitting on the coffee table in front of her. There was a warming fire in the hearth, and she poured out a coffee, handing it to him as he took the chair across from her.

“Would you like anything?” she asked, indicating the assortment of pastries and fruit laid out before them.

“Only answers,” he replied coolly, sipping from his mug.

She nodded and sat back in the chair, drinking her tea.
“Did you know she was the author?” he asked almost accusingly, as if he had been betrayed.

“Not until last night,” she said evenly.

He arched a brow.

“You’re not the only one who’s been trying to find who the author is,” she informed him tersely. When he didn’t respond, she continued. “I’ve had my own list of candidates, and I suspect it contained the same names as yours—well, minus mine, of course,” she added shrewdly. His eyes widened slightly. “I do hope you didn’t seriously think it was me?” she stated with some exasperation.

“Let’s just say I took you out of the running fairly early in the process,” he covered smoothly.

“The only other serious possibilities, then, were Ginny, Molly, and Hermione. We both know that Miss Weasley would have featured Mr. Potter as the hero, given their relationship, but Molly... I can well imagine that you considered her a real contender,” she observed. “What made you rule her out?” she asked.

“A copy of the magazine in question fell out of Miss Weasley’s book bag just before you arrived. Molly nearly had an apoplectic fit,” he filled in.

“Yes, I can imagine,” Minerva said thoughtfully.

“But how did you work out that it was Miss Granger?” he questioned.

“I watched you,” she replied, sipping her tea.

“Would you care to elaborate?” he asked steadily.

“I watched you watching her,” she continued smugly. “The look on your face when you realized it was her said... everything.”

Again, he arched a brow.

“You hid it well, I’ll give you that, but the shock and disbelief flitted across your face for a moment—just one tiny second. And then all color drained from your face—well, what color there was, that is,” she added under her breath. “And then I looked at Hermione. She seemed... guilty, somehow, and embarrassed, flustered. You couldn’t see from where you were at the end of the table, but she kept her head down, focused on her hands throughout the rest of the meeting.”

He processed this information in silence.

“What are you going to do,” she finally asked, quietly.

“I don’t know,” he replied, more than a bit perturbed that he truly hadn’t made any decision. They sat quietly for a bit longer. “Do our colleagues realize that they are featured in the story?” he inquired.

She nodded. “Yes, and they are actually quite pleased with the way they’ve been drawn. Albus found it highly amusing to be depicted as a woman.” They both looked to his portrait where he appeared to be sleeping—but one never actually knew for sure with him. “The only complaints I’ve had have been from Sinistra and Vector,” she commented leadingly.

“Oh?” he asked.
“Yes – I think they are quite put out that they aren’t actually in the story!”

“That sounds about right,” he sneered. “Incensed by the tale until they find out their colleagues are in it, and then they’re unhappy that they haven’t been included.” He thought on that point for a moment. “Are you offended by the way you’ve been depicted?” he asked.

She laughed softly. “Actually, I’ve grown quite fond of my doppelganger. Mardwyn has a degree of perspicacity that I would truly like to possess.”

“At least Miss Granger got something right,” he frowned.

She looked at him quizzically. “Are you really that displeased with the way Domitian has been depicted?”

“Well, he’s certainly had more sex than I ever did as a spy,” he noted acerbically, enjoying Minerva’s reaction.

“I don’t think I really needed to know that,” she huffed, and then waited patiently for him to continue – he took his time formulating an answer.

“Of course I was furious at first, as you well know,” he said slowly, studying the coffee mug in his hand. “The notion that someone would use me as the model for some kind of... hero... was embarrassing in the extreme.”

“But now?” she prodded.

“How could he explain it? His life had been such a fucking mess. Hermione had offered up a simple explanation for it – the fact that he had never known love, not real love, at any rate, not the unconditional and all-encompassing love that comes from family and close friends, nor the kind that comes from a partner or lover, where there is a meeting of minds and souls as well as bodies. She had softened the rough edges of his early life, but the actual facts of it nevertheless remained sharp and biting, at least to him – those things could not be changed by merely recasting them in a more understanding light. So what if seeing that justice was served became the principle objective of his life? So what if it took nearly twenty-years to achieve? So what if he was abused by the Dark Lord in the process? So what if his name was dragged through the mud by everyone he knew – and by even more that he didn’t? So what if colleagues and students still looked at him with loathing and suspicion? So fucking what. It was no more or less than what he deserved. He may not have meant to betray the woman he loved, hadn’t even realized he was doing it at the time, but the information he had given the Dark Lord nevertheless contributed to her death. Nothing could mitigate that as far as he was concerned, certainly not some fictional romance.

“My only real regret about this whole business,” he began carefully, “is that I am not the caliber of man Miss Granger apparently thinks me to be.” He stared at the dregs in his mug.

“What on earth makes you think you aren’t?” she gently asked. He shook his head at the seeming inanity of her question. “Maybe you’re a bit surlier than Domitian, but not by much,” she continued good-humoredly, but there was no response to this gentle teasing and he continued to contemplate his coffee. She sighed wistfully.

“Youthful indiscretions,” she began, “they are what we would most like to go back in time and change. And yet... the mistakes of our youth go into making us who we are. Without them, we would lack understanding and compassion for others – as well as for ourselves,” she added
pointedly. “You’ve lived too long with this burden, Severus, longer than you should have, longer than Albus should have allowed,” she observed, briefly glancing disapprovingly in the direction of the late headmaster’s portrait. “I know it’s cliché, but you have to forgive yourself – you have to let it go. Your guilt drove you for almost the whole of your adult life, drove you to make sacrifices none of us can ever truly contemplate or comprehend. It made you a formidable force against the greatest evil we have ever seen in the wizarding world – and it damaged you further. But that part of your life is over – it’s finished. You have more than atoned for any wrong you thought you did. Now you have this tremendous opportunity to move on – don’t throw it away, Severus. Don’t you bloody dare throw it away,” she said, quietly ferocious.

He squirmed a bit under her weighty gaze. He didn’t know how to respond, either to her . . . or to the opportunity she spoke of. He could see Dumbledore snoozing away in his portrait just over her shoulder. The old coot had certainly taught him how to die, but not how to live – for that, he was on his own, it would seem.

He looked off towards the bank of windows behind the desk to gather his thoughts. “What on earth ever possessed her to write this in the first place?” he finally asked a bit hoarsely.

Minerva sighed at his obvious reluctance to discuss just what his opportunities might now be and instead directed herself to his question. “I’m only guessing, but I think boredom partly played some role. She’s always been more advanced than her peers and she’s been insufficiently challenged by her course work this year. I don’t really have that much to teach her and neither do her other professors, or so I’ve been told – she just needs age and experience to refine what she already knows. How has she been doing in potions?”

The immediate answer to Minerva’s question was straightforward enough – her work had been perfect. Absolutely perfect. She wasn’t being challenged by the assignments he set, not challenged in the least, but she really should have been. He could have done individual tutorials with her, like his colleagues, and he would have seen to it that she was challenged plenty. She would have thrived under those conditions, and yet . . . he had insisted that she sit out the year in the seventh-year potions class. Why?

He mentally berated himself as he thought about it. He hadn’t been able to see beyond the things that had irritated him when she was younger – preternaturally bright and eager, that . . . and painfully vulnerable. She was a Muggleborn witch in an alien world, almost friendless except for Potter, Weasley, and a couple of misfits – Longbottom and Lovegood were just as much outsiders in their own way as she was. The truth was that she was simply too much like him at that age. He had retreated into the darkness in the face of the torment of his schooldays, but she seemed indomitable and ploughed ahead regardless, full of hope. It wasn’t simply that she was part of the Golden Trio that bothered him – as he had told himself at the time – it was the fact that she faced the world with her chin stuck out and dared it to snub her, and when it did, she got up and defiantly dared it again. That Gryffindor courage was frustrating, annoying, maddening, and simply . . . breathtaking. And more than a little enviable, he had to admit, suddenly feeling ashamed.

“Severus?” Minerva interrupted. He lifted his eyes to her. “I asked how Hermione was doing in potions.”

“Fine,” he mumbled, clearing his throat. “I don’t understand why she even bothered to come back, frankly – exemptions were given to her friends, so I don’t know why she didn’t avail herself of the same opportunity.”

“She has always been about doing things the right way – academically, at any rate,” she observed with some exasperation.
“But she could have sat her NEWTs at any point in time and no doubt passed with exceptional scores.”

“I agree, but this is Hermione we’re talking about – she felt she had missed out on last year’s instruction and didn’t think she’d be able to give the exam her best.”

“In that case, why didn’t you at least let her wear something other than that dreadful excuse for a school uniform, differentiate her from the regular students out of respect for her age and experience?”

“I did give her the option, but she refused – she didn’t want to stand out.”

He snorted. “She would stand out whatever she wore.”

“I’m glad you think so,” she replied slyly.

Seeing her smirk, he further qualified his statement. “What I mean is that she would stand out academically.”

“You don’t think she stands out in any other way?” she swiftly retorted, recalling the way he had looked at her at the previous evening’s meeting of the Order.

“She’s a perfectly . . . attractive young woman, if that is what you are asking,” he promptly rejoined, “but in any case, she shouldn’t be afraid of standing out in a crowd.”

“Her experience as an adolescent has taught her that she will be belittled – at least by some – if she . . . stands out.”

Her comment stung – she was talking about him and his treatment of Hermione when she was a young student.

“Blast it all, Minerva,” he sniped, putting his mug down firmly on the table with a resounding thud. “I was under stresses that no one – not you and certainly not that old gas bag up there – could possibly understand. It’s a wonder I didn’t hex the whole of her class.”

“Yes, I think it probably is,” she laughed gently. The silence descended again.

“You said partly,” he began once more, “she wrote partly out boredom – why else would she have done this?”

She sighed thoughtfully. “I can only speculate, but given her vigorous defense of you over the summer, I imagine she continues to believe – rightly, as it happens,” she added firmly, “that your sacrifices should be recognized and honored by the wider public.”

He looked away, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

“And again, I think she wanted to be challenged,” Minerva went on. “What could be more challenging in the circumstances? The Ministry may have been on your side, but no one else wanted to listen to her this summer, so faced with a unique opportunity, she took up a quill and crafted larger-than-life characters set against the backdrop of war – and not just any characters or any war. And whatever you may think of the sex, it’s an ingenious way of drawing readers into the story without them even realizing it, letting them see for themselves what happened and allowing them to draw the appropriate conclusions. Oh, she’s a clever one,” Minerva added with more than a little pride.

“Clever enough to use real people and real events,” he critiqued.
“Clever enough to make people care, which none of the other printed accounts managed to do,” she instantly volleyed. “Somehow clever enough to have seen behind the mask you wore all those years – her respect, admiration, and . . . whatever else might now be there, wasn’t diminished in the least by it. Yes, I find that particularly interesting.”

He scowled at her, immediately dismissing out of hand the potential implications of her statement. He had one last accusation to make.

“Why didn’t you tell me she was the one who bound up my neck wounds and got me to the infirmary?”

Minerva pursed her lips and then took a sip of her tea before responding. “She asked me quite specifically not to say.”

“Why on earth would she do that?” he asked sharply.

The headmistress turned to stare into the fire, considering her response.

“Minerva?” he pushed.

She lifted the cup to her lips once more before placing the china on the table. Then she looked him straight in the eye.

“She thought you had already had enough masters in your life – she didn’t want you to feel like you owed her some kind of debt. She said . . . .” Minerva paused again. “She said she would have tried to save anyone she found in that situation, even Lucius Malfoy – although she did add that she wouldn’t have done it with quite as much enthusiasm if it had been him.”

He couldn’t help barking out a disdainful laugh. “Yes, I can well imagine.”

“Which means,” she continued pointedly, “that Hermione wanted to save you.”

They stared at each other for a moment longer before he rose to his feet. “Thank you for the coffee . . . and the information,” he said.

“What are you going to do?” she asked with concern as she also stood up.

“I still don’t know,” he replied. “The magazine is on hiatus until after the holidays – it gives me time to consider my options.” He headed for the door.

“There is one other thing,” the headmistress said.

“Yes?” he asked, turning to look at her with impatience, his hand on the doorknob.

“You can stop skulking around the school and terrorizing students in your attempts to confiscate magazines.” He looked at her in all innocence. “And you can also stop looking at me as if you don’t know what I’m talking about. I heard about the seventh-years emptying out their bags for inspection. Really, Severus, it was pathetic,” she chided.

“And your point?” he asked.

“I’ve taken out a subscription, and I’ll gladly pass it on to you after I’ve read it.”

“I hope you aren’t using school funds for that,” he observed scathingly.

“Would you really care if I were?” she retorted.
“Good day, Minerva,” he called out over his shoulder as he left.

He thought on just exactly what his options were as he made his way back to the dungeons. He could confront her directly – chew her out for her presumption – but that just didn’t have the appeal he had thought it would a couple of months before. He could confront her and express his . . . appreciation – he supposed – for what she was trying to do and then tell her to put an end to it. Or he could do nothing. That was about the extent of his choices. Of course, he didn’t have to do anything at the moment. As he told Minerva, the story was on hiatus until after the New Year – he really did have time to consider what he was going to do.
Hiatus

Chapter Summary

Severus wants to get to know Hermione a little better over the break so he can decide what to do about the story, and so makes her an offer she simply can't refuse.

Chapter Notes

There are mushrooms in this chapter and I readily confess that I don't know that much about them, although I certainly now know more than I used to! Both of the mushrooms mentioned here grow in Scotland late into the fall, and I am making an assumption that they might be around even in December if the environment (the Forbidden Forest) is sufficiently protected.

I was hoping to put this up mid-week but I was felled by a terrible cold (which I still have). I will do my best to put another up on Wed. but no promises - it will just depend on how I'm feeling. Comments might cheer me up . . . . !

Hiatus

There was only one week left before the Christmas break, and each time Minerva saw the potions professor she expected him to announce the hanging, drawing, and quartering of one of the most accomplished students that had ever graced the halls of Hogwarts. He half expected to make that declaration as well, and yet . . . he continued to hold back. Instead, he studied Hermione closely over the passing days. While she regularly sat with Ginny and her friends at mealtimes, she didn't participate much in their conversations. Sometimes it was clear that she was absorbed in her own thoughts – he scathingly assumed she was focusing on some aspect of whatever chapter she was then writing – but other times she seemed to be listening with care to what they were talking about, even if she wasn’t contributing. He came across her several times in the library that week as well, furiously scribbling away, and he was tempted to sneak up behind her to see what she was really working on – but he didn’t, for some reason. And finally, he watched her intently in class – she was as methodical and meticulous as she always was, and where the seventh-year students still had difficulties with stirring sequences, she boldly charged forward, completely undaunted. He did, though, notice something amiss one afternoon, a slight shaking in her hands – if he didn’t know better, he would have classified it as post-Cruciatatus tremors. It didn’t keep her from wielding her knife or affect the brewing of the potion, but it was there, and he was struck by the tension in her face. It was obvious to him – if not to the peers around her – that she was in discomfort if not actual pain and he wondered if she had taken a tumble on one of the shifting staircases. But in focusing on her hands, he also suddenly realized that she never raised them in class anymore, hadn’t waved those fingers in his line of vision all term, not even once.

As he shadowed her throughout the week, questions started to form, like why she cast herself as the unattractive and unassuming librarian. Surely it wasn’t just self-deprecation or to draw attention away from herself as the author. Did she really see herself that way? He hoped not, because he certainly
now saw her differently than that – quite differently.

It was when Minerva asked if he would stand in for her during the break that an idea started to form. The school would be virtually empty – the construction company rebuilding and carrying out repairs to various parts of the castle wanted to get into the common rooms and dorms to do some work, so none of the students were going to be allowed to stay over the holidays as some had always done in the past. The headmistress made an exception for Hermione, whose parents were out of the country – where, he didn’t know – so she would stay in one of the school’s guest rooms. Hagrid would still be around and some of the other faculty would drift in and out based on their own holiday plans, but it was mainly going to be just him and Hermione for most of the break. This would allow him to interact with her on a more informal basis, see if he could discern her motivations and gain some perspective on the whole story business. Minerva made him promise, however, not to deduct house points or confront her directly over her authorship until she got back – she wouldn’t allow Hermione to stay in the school unless he agreed and he had done so, reluctantly. Not that he actually envisioned taking her to pieces just yet – he simply didn’t want his options restricted in any way.

While the students were dragging their luggage and pets down to the station, Hermione was settling into a guest room just down the corridor from her mentor’s office and quarters – she had been given the password for the duration. She was invited to take dinner with the faculty that night, although it was a very informal affair, just a cold collation. Most of the staff came in for a quick bite and left just as hurriedly, hoping to start their holidays away from school as quickly as possible. There were polite questions about how her studies were going and return inquiries about their plans for the break, but she was just as interested in having an early night as they were. When she finished, she excused herself and left quickly, turning sharply to the right as she exited the room and running straight into her potions professor. But instead of stumbling backwards or getting her nose smashed between his buttons, he swiftly grabbed her upper arms to steady her.

“I thought you weren’t going to do that anymore, Miss Granger,” he commented deftly. They were so close – her hands were flat on the front of his coat and he held her firmly in place as he peered down into her face. Her eyes locked with his and for a moment she couldn’t breathe, she literally . . . just . . . couldn’t . . . breathe. He wasn’t scowling at her as he had done before, rather he looked . . . curious was the only word she could think of, and if she wasn’t entirely mistaken, the corners of his mouth twitched ever so slightly, as if in amusement, but that simply couldn’t be right – it had to be the dim light playing tricks.

She blushed under the force of his scrutiny and hastily stepped back, pulling her hands away as if she had burnt them. “Sorry professor,” she mumbled, wondering how many points it was going to cost her house. But instead of deductions, he asked a question.

“I understand, Miss Granger that you will not be going home for Christmas?”

“No,” she replied, wondering how he would turn that fact into a disparaging witticism.

“I have a number of important things to brew over the holidays – I could use some assistance.”

There was a moment of silence between them as she took in what he said. Furrowing her brow, she slowly raised her eyes. Seeing that he was serious and waiting for her response, she blushed.

“Oh, yes, professor,” she eagerly replied, “I’d love to help!”

He quirked an eyebrow – it was almost too easy. “Meet me at the front entrance at 10:00 tomorrow morning. Wear something appropriate – I need to collect a few things from the forest beforehand.”

“Yes, yes I’ll do that,” she said, her face lighting up with excitement.
He continued to stare at her for a moment before nodding ever so slightly and stepping around her to
go into dinner. He hadn’t seen anyone get that enthused over the prospect of walking out into a wet,
Scottish winter morning since . . . well, ever, actually – even Minerva knew where to draw the line.

He smirked on seeing that she was already waiting for him when he got to the main doors the next
day – at least some things about her were still predictable.

“You’ve had a proper breakfast, I assume?” he queried brusquely as he approached.

“Um, yes,” she answered quickly, rather taken aback by his question. She couldn’t imagine him ever
asking a student if they’d had a proper meal, but then he was head of a house, responsible for the
health and well-being – well, health, at least – of his students so he had to care at least a little . . . .

He didn’t need to use _Legilimency_ to read her train of thought. “It’s just an inquiry,” he said in a
bored tone as he walked past her. “I don’t want to have to carry you back to the castle because you
skipped breakfast, so let’s not make it into an advanced Arithmancy equation,” he quipped,
practically disappearing into the thick, Scottish fog that whirled around him as he stepped out into the
dreary morning.

“Yes, professor,” she replied, hurrying from behind – she practically had to jog to keep up. They
didn’t speak until they were deep in the forest and he veered off the path, picking his way carefully
through underbrush.

“What are you looking for, professor?” she ventured, careful to follow literally in his footsteps.

“Dinner,” he replied simply, looking around. Spotting what he was searching for, he went over to a
tree and looked up. Sticking out just above his head was a cluster of mushrooms.

“Laetiporus sulphureus?” she asked, catching up with him.

He looked down at her and arched his brow but said nothing – of course she would know what it
was. He flung back his cloak, revealing a worn leather satchel slung over his head and shoulder. He
pulled out a small paper bag and filled it about a third of the way up. Then he moved on – she
dutifully followed.

“What are you looking for now?”

Again, he located his quarry and made his way over to it, kneeling down. “Cantharellus cibarius,”
he observed as he started to harvest them.

“Chanterelles,” she noted, also stooping.

He stopped and looked at her, clearly frustrated. “Miss Granger,” he started, “is there a mushroom in
this forest that you do not know?”

Her anger flared – he was annoyed because she actually knew something? “Not likely, professor,”
she answered coolly, looking him straight in the eye since in their crouched positions their heads
were nearly at the same level. “What do you think we ate while we were on the run last year?”
Understanding slowly crept across his face. “We weren’t staying at B&Bs, you know, we were
camping, and if you think I was going to eat something that Harry or Ron had scavenged from the
forest, you are out of your mind,” she said critically, swiftly adding professor after remembering who
she was talking to. He smirked, and he watched as a faint blush bloomed on her face. It was the bane
of her existence, her blushing, but since she couldn’t control it, she merely lowered her eyes and
reached for the bag in his hands, holding it open as he returned to the business in front of them.
"What else did you eat while you were . . . camping?" he asked drolly.

She looked up and then away, her eyes scanning the forest floor. "Nuts, berries, seeds, that sort of thing. Sometimes we were able to get milk if the cows were far enough from the barns so we wouldn’t be seen, or a few eggs taken at night from a hen house."

"Chickens?" he prodded, putting the mushrooms in the bag.

"No," she said simply, continuing to stare off in the distance. "We did what we had to, but we really didn’t want to take anything of significant value, anything that would attract attention or be missed."

"Surely a chicken . . . ." he looked up at her profile.

She shook her head slightly but was still focused on the near distance, as if she could see her memories in front of her. "Ron caught a couple of wild pheasants, and a grouse or two . . . there were feathers everywhere," she smiled slightly in remembrance. "I managed a couple of ducks and Harry trapped a few hares, and sometimes there was fish . . . but those were relatively rare occasions." The smile faded. "The worst were boiled nettles and dandelions, but sometimes we didn’t have a choice," she finished quietly.

She turned suddenly and caught him unawares. There was a hard look in her eye that startled him. He swallowed reflexively, immediately regretting every meal he had that last year in retrospect, not that he had eaten all that much himself.

She looked down at the bag. "Do you want to get any more?"

"No, this should be plenty," he mumbled, clearing his throat and stuffing the bag into his satchel as he stood. He took a deep breath as he started back for the path, with her just behind him – he didn’t want her to see how troubled he had been by her account. He had heard the highlights of their year of living rough. The Prophet had made it sound like some grand adventure – breaking into Gringotts, stealing the sword of Gryffindor, and escaping on a dragon, all while camping out in picturesque parts of the country. But the everyday reality of their lives had been very different, harder than he or anyone else had realized, and he knew that they wouldn’t have stood a chance without Hermione, of that he was absolutely certain – one wrong mushroom and the boy who lived would have died quite ignominiously.

When they reached the path, he had regained his composure, and gestured for her to start down the trail. She hesitated, expecting him to set the pace, but she began walking and he fell in beside her. She had just gotten comfortable with that arrangement when he broke the silence.

"Why did you defend me this summer, Miss Granger?" he quietly asked.

She looked up at him, but he continued to stare straight ahead.

"You didn’t seem to be in any position to do so yourself, professor," she responded softly.

"That doesn’t quite answer my question." There was no bite in his words, and she sensed that he was genuinely interested in her motivation.

She sighed. "Because you deserved defending, sir," she replied simply, and in his peripheral vision, he saw her stick out that Gryffindor chin of hers. "You sacrificed so much – more than any of us can truly imagine – and while your extraordinary bravery and courage was officially recognized, the wider public continued to treat you like dirt. It . . . rankled," she bit out, still outraged on his behalf.

"You are romanticizing me, I fear," he commented, deliberate in his word choice to see her reaction.
“It’s not my intention,” she began defensively, but she quickly caught herself – it was just a coincidental use of the word, he wasn’t implying anything by it. She chanced a glance just to make sure but his expression was as inscrutable as ever. “I . . . didn’t mean to . . . glamorize anything,” she continued hesitantly, “I only wanted everyone to know what you had really done, but it was difficult to get their attention.”

“The wizarding world generally did not want to hear what I had done,” he answered stoically, as his amusement at her discomfiture faded. “If Mr. Potter hadn’t thrown his support behind Kingsley’s decision to . . . favor me with that medal, the Minister for Magic might well have found himself out of a job.”

Her response was an indignant huff that spoke volumes – witches and wizards were going to hear about it whether they wanted to or not.

He could practically hear her thoughts. She was indomitable even if misguided, but once everyone realized who her dark wizard really was, she would be forced to see things from his perspective – she’d have no choice, she would be shouted down once more.

They continued on to a small stream, where he collected some algae, explaining that he would dry it and use as a potion ingredient. He also gathered some bark, needles, and leaves from several different trees. Moving on to a nearby cave, she expressed some apprehension about meeting bats inside.

“I assure you, Miss Granger, I’ll be the only bat inside, and as for my much touted vampirism, I promise not to bite you,” he said, wanting to add at least not until later as his eyes naturally drifted to her admittedly rather enticing neck. It was a moment’s thought, and he banished it almost as quickly as it had flitted through his mind. She had no time to appreciate his quip – or notice his casual appreciation – before he grabbed her hand and pulled her slowly into the mouth of the cave. The further in they went, the tighter her grip became until she reached up with her other hand and clutched his upper arm. He paused, and drew the lighted tip of his wand to her face. She no longer looked apprehensive – she was bloody well terrified.

“It’s not just the bats,” he observed, all amusement evaporating from his face.

“Small enclosed spaces,” she bit out, clearly trying to regulate her breathing as her eyes darted back and forth.

“You can go back and wait for me outside if you wish,” he started.

“No,” she breathed out quickly, still hanging on to his arm, “I . . . can . . . do this,” she said determinedly.

“It’s just over here,” he said calmly, guiding her to one side of the cave. He lifted his wand to a purplish growth. “It’s a rare moss that has special magical properties – this is the only place I’ve ever seen it,” he informed her in an even, soothing voice. “It boosts the power of healing potions significantly,” he added, carefully letting go of her hand and reaching inside his satchel to pull out a small glass jar. She released his arm, though reluctantly. “I’m studying ways of cultivating it,” he continued, trying to distract her. “I don’t think it can be done in my lab, but the walls of this cave – and perhaps others in the area – might be seeded with it to increase its production.”

“I see,” she responded in a tight voice as he scraped at the growth. He turned briefly to look at her, noting that, while clearly ill at ease, she was managing to hold her own, even if only just.

When he was finished, he ran the flat of the knife against the lip of the jar before sealing it. He wiped
the knife with a rag and put everything back into the satchel. Looking at Hermione, he could tell that her arms were clenched across her chest under her cloak. With a protective arm draped around her shoulders and his lighted wand in front of them, he steered them out of the cave. Once in the fresh air, her relief was palpable.

“Well done, Miss Granger,” he said quietly, rubbing her arms briskly through her cloak – she was pale and breathing deeply. “I’ve seen mature, Quidditch-playing wizards hyperventilate in caves larger than that one until they either passed out or ran screaming for the entrance.”

All she could do was nod and keep swallowing hard.

“A cup of tea and a bit of lunch wouldn’t go amiss – we should head back,” he said, reaching for her trembling hand, reflexively squeezing it.

They walked briskly and the color soon returned to her face. He should have let go of her hand, but he found he didn’t want to and he tried to hide that fact by pointing to where other important potion ingredients could be found at different times of the year only a few paces off the path – if he kept up a running commentary, maybe she wouldn’t notice.

Hermione still felt a bit disoriented. She had been taken aback when he dragged her into the cave – she told him that she didn’t like bats, but he had deduced the truth. She had hardly been conscious of her near death grip on him, and was rather surprised after the fact that he hadn’t shaken her off – it was what she would have expected him to do. And rather than mocking her fear, he had almost comforted her in the face of it, putting his arm around her shoulder as they made their way out of the cavern. But most disconcerting of all, though, was how he had reached for her again as they made their way back to the castle, not that she objected – his warm hand completely enveloped her smaller one in a way that she found immensely comforting. His sudden conviviality, however, was distracting and she had difficulty noting the location of important potions ingredients while also trying to figure out why their palms were still tightly pressed together.
Further Revelations

Chapter Summary

Hermione gets a peak at Severus's quarters while he learns more about her experiences in the war.

Chapter Notes

UPDATE: For those of you who have already read this, I think there might have been a misunderstanding when I posted my Author's Notes earlier today. This story is absolutely finished - I won't leave you hanging! What I was trying to say was that I have managed a couple of mid-week updates in the recent past but I am just getting too busy for that, SO I will only be posting on Saturdays from here on out. So look for new chapters on Saturdays! Whew!

Further Revelations

Severus did finally let go of her hand once they were out of the forest and within view of the castle – he covered himself by stating rather brusquely that he assumed she had regained her bearings, to which she had nodded her assurance, even though it wasn’t quite true. As they got closer to the school a door she had never seen before appeared and they weaved their way through various dark passages until they were finally outside his private quarters – she hesitated at the threshold, wondering if he had meant for her to follow him into his rooms or go to the hall for lunch.

“Miss Granger,” he called gruffly, “are you coming in or would you prefer to eat out there?”

“Um, so we’re eating here, then?” she asked, peering around the corner of the door, still a bit unsure.

“Unless you have some objection?” he asked.

Lighting the fire with a wave, he spotted the magazines on the coffee table – he quickly and discreetly transferred them to the desk as she slipped off her cloak and hung it next to his on the rack beside the door. He pretended to look through some parchments but in reality watched her survey the room from behind his curtain of hair.

She was rather taken aback at the décor of his study. The floor was stone, but it was almost completely covered by thick carpets strategically placed around the room. Unsurprisingly, there were floor to ceiling bookcases along all four walls – the only gaps were for several doors. A huge desk sat to her right and she gave him a tentative smile as he continued to fiddle with a stack of essays. Across the room in front of her was a small table covered with books and parchments and surrounded by four mismatched chairs. To the left was a large fireplace with a simple wooden mantel – two wing-backed chairs were to either side and there was a small sofa across the length, with a coffee table in front of that. It was all unexpectedly warm, even . . . cozy.

“We’ll have an early lunch, and then get to work in the lab,” he stated matter-of-factly as he moved
from behind his desk and gestured for her to sit down in front of the fire. He called to his house-elf and asked that lunch be brought.

“It’s very . . . comfortable down here,” she said, still looking around as he sat down in his usual chair.

“You were expecting medieval instruments of torture?” he baited her, the corners of his mouth twitching ever so slightly.


“People think it will be cold and damp, but the dungeons draw up the dry, natural heat in the ground.” He reached down and pulled back a corner of the rug. At his urging, she leaned over and put her hand to the floor – it was, as he said, reasonably warm.

“It will slowly get colder over the next couple of months, but the rugs will keep it from being unbearable. In the summer, while everyone is boiling above” – his eyes briefly lifted upwards – “it’s comfortably cool down here.”

“And I suppose the books provide insulation,” she observed further, her eyes straying over his shoulder to the shelves beyond.

“Quite,” he agreed. Noting her eager look, he saw an opportunity – he cleared his throat. “I would have no objection to you browsing over the break,” he said smoothly, knowing she would be unable to resist the temptation.

“I wouldn’t want to bother you,” she politely responded, but her interest was nevertheless clear – she was nearly breathless at the possibilities and her eyes scanned the shelves once more.

“It wouldn’t disturb me . . . unduly,” he replied, feigning a degree of sacrifice, “though you would have to read anything you find here – I’ve lost too many books over the years to allow them leave this room. And of course, there will be some books that you will not have access to at all – for reasons of safety,” he added.

“Of course, professor,” she immediately conceded.

“Good,” he said smoothly, just as lunch appeared on the coffee table in front of them. She practically devoured her soup, and as he watched her eat, he wondered how long it would take to ease the memory of those long, hungry months, how much time would have to pass before the fear that she might be sitting down to her last meal for a very long time would finally leave her. It unnerved him, and more than he wanted to admit.

After lunch was cleared away, they adjourned to his personal lab, which was off the study. Hermione was suitably impressed, and wandered around, peering into the glass doors of the cabinets to see what treasures they hid as he busily laid out the equipment they would be using.

“If I could have your attention, Miss Granger,” he said, tearing her away from her exploration. “I’m going to make that seeding foundation for the moss from the cave. It’s finicky – I’ll be doing the brewing while you prepare most of the ingredients. Once we start we cannot stop until it’s finished, not even for breaks, so if you need to . . . .”

He didn’t have to finish the thought – the tea was already working its way through her system.

“Where . . . .” she began.

“The door to the right of the hearth – then straight,” he directed, failing to include the information
that she would be passing through his bedroom. Fleetingly, he wished that he had thought to transfigure some of his furniture – he wondered what her reaction would have been seeing a rack instead of a bed and a few chains rather than tapestries on the walls. On the other hand, he didn’t want her including it in her story – if, that is, there was going to be any more chapters – but he also didn’t want her gossiping about it. Merlin, he certainly didn’t need his colleagues speculating further on his sexual proclivities. It would have to be enough that she was seeing his bed and perhaps at least *wondering* about it.

She made it several feet into the room before she came to a sudden halt and realized where she was. Her eyes were drawn first to his bed. It was a four poster, as all of the school beds seemed to be, but it was more opulent than what students slept in. She couldn’t help fingering the heavy velvet curtains – surprisingly they were a dark rust color rather than Syltherin green, and the ones at the foot of the bed were tied back. The bed itself seemed huge to her, but she realized that his height probably required it.

She bit her bottom lip – the temptation was just too great and she sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress felt firm with just a bit of give – *just like him*, she couldn’t help thinking hopefully before being overtaken by a fit of nervous giggling at the fact that she was in her professor’s bedroom and actually sitting on his bed. She leapt to her feet at the sudden bustling she heard a mere two doors away and quickly straightened the counterpane, smoothing out the creases that were evidence of her transgression.

She took in the rest of the room. Most of it was paneled, although the one exposed stone wall was covered by a substantial tapestry. The large armoire and dresser were from a different era – simple if a bit bulky with the wood polished to a high degree. There was a classic 16\(^{th}\) century crisscrossed chair with a carved back, and a needlepoint cushion that had seen better days. The room as a whole was virtually free of knickknacks of any kind. The scent of forest pine she caught every once in a while from his robes was stronger here, though not overpoweringly so.

Given the bedroom, she was startled at the relatively modern bathroom. It wasn’t luxurious by any means – it must originally have had a tub, but it had been replaced by a glass shower stall at some point in time. In all, it was efficient, functional, and again, free of clutter. His toothbrush stuck out from a glass on the sink while a razor lay to one side – it was an old-fashioned straight edge, of course, suitable for shaving but also useful if caught unawares without a wand. She almost giggled again at the thought, but it was more in continued nervousness over the glimpse she was getting of his private life than anything else. Potions might be a messy business, but she doubted her professor would ever resort to actual bloodletting – at least not by *hand*. The thought made her shiver as she imagined her lithe professor dueling in defense of himself and others, as he must have done during the war. She snickered once more – she really was starting to romanticize him. Maybe she should include a scene or two . . . .

Again, her thoughts were abruptly interrupted by more noise coming from the lab and she snapped back to reality. But looking around, she found she really didn’t want to leave. The natural wood and earth colors of the upholstery felt comfortable, inviting, even, and she briefly thought that she’d enjoy spending time there – and then promptly blushed at exactly what that might entail. She waited a moment for her face to cool down – she had to remember that she was only there on sufferance. Reluctantly, she closed the door on this intimate peek at his personal space and returned to the lab.

When she reappeared, he couldn’t help smirking to himself – there was no mistaking her flushed features. She had clearly liked his bedroom, and he briefly wondered if Perse would get to see it the story, but he again caught himself – he had to stop doing that since he hadn’t made any decision yet about allowing the story to continue.
He watched as she got down to work, and immediately interrupted her. “Tsk, tsk, Miss Granger. You’re dragging your sleeves across the board and contaminating the surface. Sleeves up,” he commanded curtly. He returned to his own tasks and missed the worried look that suddenly came over her face. She swallowed hard and put down the knife, slowly turning her cuffs back two turns. Her scar was still mostly covered, though only just, but as he was across from her and to the left, she didn’t think he’d be able to see it. She resumed her work.

Interspersed with his instructions, he explained what he was doing at each step, otherwise, they didn’t converse. His level of concentration was impressive, especially since he was working entirely from memory. After seemingly endless hours of crushing, slicing, chopping, shredding, and pressing, her wrist was distinctly shaky and sore – the tips of her fingers were stained various colors and there were a few nicks here and there. A burning sensation had also settled in the center of her back, and she rolled her shoulders periodically to alleviate it. He noted her movements and waited for the inevitable complaints about the physical demands of brewing – but they never came and he was grudgingly impressed.

When he announced that she had prepared her last ingredient, she began to clean up by hand – if he had done nothing else in his career he had at least taught his students that some things were better done the hard way. Once finished, she pulled up a stool and continued to watch him work from a respectful distance. He was a real master, and rarely measured or weighed his ingredients, relying solely on two decades of experience. When he reached for a small bag of dried leaves, he poked through them before finding one that met his standards. Likewise, he sniffed a small jar containing a powder before taking a pinch and adding it to the mix. He held up a vial to the light and, not liking the color, told her where she could find another on his cabinet shelves. It was pushing six in the evening before he was finished – the solution would need to sit undisturbed overnight before it could be decanted.

With this announcement, she went to the sink and filled it once more while he started to transfer the equipment to the counter next to her. Opening the cabinet below, she found a drainer and set it to her right. She worked quickly, letting the water run slowly though continuously in order to rinse everything thoroughly. He took another sponge and started to wipe down the work table. He briefly glanced up as she stretched her left arm over in front of herself, ran a spoon under the flowing water, and then reached further to set it into the drainer, all while holding on to the scrubber with her right hand. He thought he saw something on her arm, and waited for her to do it again. There was no mistaking the scar, or rather scars the second time – they were red and clearly raised. The bottom dropped out of his stomach as he made out the word.

Where the fuck had that come from?!

At that moment she turned to see if there was anything else to wash, and he adjusted his expression. He came around the end of the table to rinse the sponge and watched as she pulled the plug from the bottom of the sink.

“The soap,” he began, nodding to a bar at the back of the sink, “Pamona . . . Professor Sprout makes it special for me – it helps with the stains and dispels the odor.” As she washed her hands, he could see she was being careful to keep her left arm back so the cuff wouldn’t run up. When she was finished, he traded her a towel for the soap, and noted that she quickly rolled down her sleeves and buttoned them the instant she was done. He wanted to ask her about it, but this didn’t an appropriate moment.

“Go freshen up – I’ll see you back here for dinner in an hour,” he casually instructed.

“Excuse me?” she asked, looking up at him wide eyed with surprise in her voice.
“It’s essentially just us in residence at the moment – Hagrid will be staying at his hut – and it probably would be easier on the house-elves if we shared a meal,” he supplied quite untruthfully but knowing full well that his statement would ensure compliance while preventing awkward questions.

“Oh, right,” she said carefully. “So, seven, then?”

“Yes – is that enough time?”

“Oh, yes, plenty of time,” she said. In other circumstances, she would have preferred to go straight to bed after showering, tired as she was, but she was also hungry and didn’t want to bother the elves, not to mention the fact that the prospect of dinner with her professor in his quarters was perking her up considerably, so an hour it was. “I’ll see you shortly, then,” she said, heading into his study – he heard the door close behind her a few seconds after that.

He looked around the lab. It would have taken him twice as long to make the foundation if she hadn’t been there to help. His mind, though, kept going back to her arm – he had been shocked by what he had seen, and she appeared to be quite sensitive about it. He went to one of the cabinets and stared at the shelves before reaching for a small, red jar. With a wave of his hand, the lights went out and he proceeded into the study. He stood for a moment by the hearth and looked at the container in his hand. The only question was whether she would let him look at her arm. He set the jar on the mantle and went into the bedroom to clean up – for once, he was actually looking forward to dinner.

He deliberately didn’t clear off the small dining table in his room – eating in front of the fire would be more conducive to getting to know Miss Granger further, he decided. The wards signaled her arrival before the knock on the door, which he answered in person. He stood to one side for her to enter and as she walked past he caught a whiff of cucumber that he found rather . . . appealing. Her hair was damp and she was casually dressed, just a long sleeved knit tunic over a pair of jeans.

“Something to drink?” he offered.

Confusion flitted across her face – she didn’t drink . . . did she? “Um,” she hummed in thought.

He immediately saw her dilemma. “I have some Madeira I keep for those rare occasions when Minerva visits. Would you like to try some?”

“Yes, that would be nice,” she said quickly, suddenly feeling awkward. As he poured her drink, she noticed that the coffee table was laid out for their dinner.

When he returned, he handed her a small crystal glass. She sipped tentatively as he took a fortifying swallow of his whiskey. Finding the Madeira to her liking, she gave him a warm smile that made his pulse . . . suddenly . . . race. He could not take his eyes off of her clean, freshly scrubbed face – the tip of her tongue briefly appeared between parted lips to discretely catch the amber liquid remaining there, and he had another nip of his drink to hide the effect she was having on him. He didn’t trust himself to speak, so he merely gestured to the set table and she moved to assume her place on the sofa. The instant they were seated, plates of food appeared.

As soon as they started to eat, she asked him about the other things he planned to brew over the break, but she only half listened to his responses, still caught up in the expression that had been on his face when she tried the aperitif. He looked so . . . so completely . . . she wasn’t sure there was a word for it. He had seemed to . . . like what he saw, and it had sent a tingle down her spine. She was glad when they sat down, because she was afraid that she would have spontaneously combusted if she had stood there another minute under the weight of his gaze.

Though nodding at all the right places, and encouraging him to continue when he paused, he knew
she wasn’t as engaged in the conversation as she let on – she was studying him, though it was done so artlessly that he couldn’t really be offended. Domitian’s physical features had already been fully elaborated, so he knew her interest wasn’t related to the story – that . . . pleased him, he was surprised to find.

As they talked, she noted that the fine lines around his eyes disappeared as he relaxed. Indeed, his features generally were softened in the firelight, and by the fact that he had dropped his usual façade – he didn’t have to be a spy or a dreaded professor here in his own quarters, and he looked years younger for it in this setting. She was acutely conscious of seeing – of being allowed to see – a side of him that few if any students ever got.

They both enjoyed the mushrooms he had picked, which had been paired with pasta. When they were finished and the dishes had been cleared away, he had tea brought for her while he enjoyed another whiskey. He passed her a journal with an article on the moss they were trying to seed, and he tried not to stare at her as she sat back, quietly reading it. When she was done, she put the journal on the table and poured out a second cup.

“When will you go back to the cave to try it?” she asked, sipping her tea.

“Soon, certainly before school starts again,” he replied. “Are you volunteering to help?” he quipped.

“No thank you!” she reflexively answered, but she regretted it almost at once – would he have held her hand again if she had said yes? They sat there quietly for a few moments more until he couldn’t put it off any longer – he had to broach the subject that had been pressing on his mind since that afternoon.

“Tell me about your arm, Hermione,” he requested quietly, deliberately using her given name to ease the disquiet he instinctively knew his question would cause.

She stiffened immediately and didn’t look away from the hearth.

“I’m not trying to intrude,” he continued, “but I couldn’t help noticing it this afternoon in the lab.” She drained the rest of her tea and set her cup and saucer on the table, unconsciously pulling down on her left sleeve.

He got up from his chair, took the red jar from the mantle, and sat down carefully next to her, their knees slightly touching. He put the container on the table and held out his right hand expectantly.

“I just want to see that the injury has been treated appropriately,” he coaxed as dispassionately as he could, not wanting to upset her further.

She hesitantly extended her arm. Holding on to her hand, he gently slid the sleeve up to the elbow, exposing the scars. He stared at the eight letters that had been cut into the inside of her arm – MUDBLOOD.

“Who did this to you?” he asked quietly, his warm breath stirring the tendrils along her hairline.

“Bellatrix,” she whispered.

Yes, he could just imagine, the fucking witch – it was fortunate for her that she was already dead. He let go of her hand and reached for the red jar. Unscrewing the lid, he dipped a finger – with her elbow nestled in his left hand he spread the cream slowly across her skin with his right, back and forth, massaging it into the raised lettering.

“I want you to apply this twice daily – it will help fade the scars and make the tissue more malleable.
When you run out, let me know and I’ll give you some more.” He didn’t much like having to broach the next subject, but he had no choice, now knowing the likely origin of the tremors he had seen in her hands earlier in the week.

“This injury was proceeded by . . . .” he could hardly bring himself to say it aloud.

“Several rounds of Cruciatu,” she said breathlessly, involuntarily trying to pull back on her arm, but finding he held it firm.

“I didn’t ask to distress you,” he explained. “There are things I can give you for any residual effects.”

“She nodded stiffly, now sniffing a bit. “Do you . . . do you have symptoms?”

“Muscle spasms . . . sometimes . . . especially if I’m tired,” she reluctantly and almost inaudibly confessed, still refusing to look up at him.

“I developed a potion specifically for those,” he informed her, slowing his fingers on her arm until he stopped and released her hand. She felt cold the instant he got up, but he returned quickly from the lab and resumed his seat, holding out a blue bottle for her to look at. She reached out to run a finger over the distinctive writing on the label.

“Four drops in a bit of water when you feel them come on should stop them. It will also make you a bit sleepy, so you need to be aware of that. You can repeat after four hours, but no more than that in a twenty-four hour period except under my supervision.” He set the bottle down on the table and picked up her hand to look again at her arm. He ran a thumb over the raised lettering as he studied her profile. Her breathing had become shallow and she was struggling mightily for control.

“Scars remind us that we survived,” he barely whispered. Without thinking, he leaned in, pressing his lips softly to her temple. She sniffled and nodded slightly in acknowledgement.

“More tea, Miss Granger,” he cleared his throat and reached for the pot – it was empty.

“No, no thank you, professor,” she replied, turning to the side and wiping her face with a sleeve. “I really should go – I’ve got some things to do before I go to bed and you probably need some peace and quiet,” she declared, standing up and moving around the far end of the sofa. Picking up the jar and blue bottle on the table, he followed her to the door.

“Don’t forget these, Miss Granger,” he said, holding them out to her.

She took them and gave him a strained smile. “Thank you, professor, for today – and for these,” she added, holding up the ointment and potion.

She turned and headed slowly down the corridor. He stepped into the hall and suddenly found himself calling after her.

“Miss Granger?”

“Professor?” she asked, stopping to look back at him.

He pulled the door firmly closed behind him. “I’ll walk you back to your rooms,” he announced.

“I’m fine, professor, really, you don’t have to . . . .” She continued to protest even as he cradled her elbow once more and escorted her down the corridor – after a while she gave up.

It just didn’t sit right with him, her wandering around the deserted castle all on her own. Yes, it was quite safe and she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself, and if had been term time, he
wouldn’t have thought twice about it, but this was different – somehow.

It was rather a long way from the dungeons to the guest room she was staying in, and he provided a running commentary on the paintings they passed – unsurprisingly, more than a few of the figures in the pictures contradicted some of his more acerbic assessments. When they reached her room she waved her wand and her personal wards dropped. Opening the door, she paused.

“Thank you,” she said with genuine warmth. “I learned a lot today.”

“10:00 tomorrow, in my lab – you still have more to learn,” he said, trying to sound severe.

“Yes, professor,” she grinned and closed the door.
Arguments Internal and Infernal

Chapter Summary

Severus's chaste kiss sparks a lot of internal debates, although the even keel that is once more reestablished is again threatened by the characters' temperaments by end of the afternoon.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who is reading, and a special thank you to those who have kindly left comments - they help me in tweaking successive chapters (they really do!). The next posting will be next Saturday.

Arguments Internal and Infernal

The introspections – and self-recriminations – began the instant her door had closed. What in Merlin’s name did he think he was doing? Kissing the head of a student in some sentimental display. that was not who he was. In all his years as a head of house, he had never done that – not even once – rather he had mastered the knack of saying the right thing and pairing it with a practiced look of understanding if not exactly sympathy. With the really young ones, he might apply a squeeze on the shoulder as well.

But this was different, he told himself as he made his way back to the dungeons. She wasn’t being picked on by her peers and her newt hadn’t died. She had been tortured – over an extended period of time – by the craziest fucking witch he had ever known. In many ways, Bellatrix had surpassed the Dark Lord in her depravities. He would like to have pulled Hermione into an embrace, demonstrated that such scars mattered not one whit – she had been close enough, he had wanted to do it, but he had hesitated. That was something new to him as well. He was usually quite straightforward with such things – quickly negotiating the service he wanted and then immediately completing the transaction. But this wasn’t some tawdry back alley encounter and Hermione most certainly wasn’t a Knockturn whore. And while he typically disapparated the instant his physical needs had been satisfied, in this case there was the potential for infinitely more than a quick, dispassionate hand or blow job. He might actually want to pursue this more seriously.

The notion flitted through his mind before he even realized it was happening. Pursue this more seriously? What in Merlin’s name was he thinking? He paused in front of an ancient mirror hanging over a fireplace in one of the corridors he was passing through. The blueish light radiating from his wand did nothing for his craggy reflection and it was enough to push away such ridiculous notions – it was the alcohol talking, the arduous day and late night, the proximity of an attractive woman. He would feel – no, think – differently about it in the morning.

The cold was starting to seep through his clothes and he turned away to continue his downward trek to the dungeons. What had prompted him to escort her back to her rooms, anyway? It wasn’t as though it was a bloody date. But the thought didn’t gain any traction. No, he wouldn’t chastise
himself over that – no decent man would allow a young woman to walk back to her quarters in a deserted castle unaccompanied at that time of evening, even if she had played a major role in taking down the most powerful and sinister wizard of all time.

Hermione had a lot pressing on her mind as she got ready for bed. What in Merlin’s name was that all about? Apart from Harry, Ron, Professor McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey, she hadn’t shown her arm to anyone, not even her parents. She hadn’t wanted him to see it either, but he had seemed genuinely concerned, at least concerned enough to use her first name and have a jar of special cream ready to hand. She took it straight to the bathroom, setting it on the sink.

As she started to undress, she paused to look at her arm. It was hideous, repulsive, but he hadn’t been put off – he had actually touched it, worked the cream thoroughly into the wounds. His caress had been gentle, and it had soothed far more than her physical scars – he had told her they were the tangible evidence of having survived, and then . . . and then, magical Merlin, he had kissed her. It hadn’t felt overtly sexual, but it did seem as though some kind of connection had been established between them over the course of the evening, one that made her ache even now. She would like to have thrown herself into his arms – she had been close enough, had wanted it, in fact – but held back. She didn’t want to embarrass him, make more of something than it probably was.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror – it was all hair as far as she could see. She wouldn’t scare children or small animals but otherwise couldn’t imagine him looking twice at her in that way. It was easy enough to explain away his attentions that evening – he had been drinking, it was the end of a long, tired day, it was late, and he knew better than most what torture was like. His attention was only driven by sympathy. Tomorrow, things would be back to normal between them, she was certain of it.

She approached his quarters at exactly one minute to ten the following morning – the door immediately opened and just as swiftly closed behind her.

“In here, Miss Granger,” he called.

She went into the lab where he was already at work. Before she had a chance to say good morning he nodded to the cutting board and knife on the other side of the table – there were an array of ingredients laid out waiting to be prepared. She stepped up and reached for the blade but froze when he growled.

“What have I said about sleeves, Miss Granger?”

He gave her a stern look before resuming his examination of the potion that was bubbling away in front of him. She rolled up her cuffs and looked at the various ingredients.

“What are we doing today, professor?”

“Some brewing for the infirmary,” he replied brusquely. “Blood replenisher, skelegrow, pain potions, and in your case,” he said, waving to a piece of parchment on the table in front of her, “a nerve regeneration potion.”

She leaned forward and began to read – it was in his own spikey writing, which meant that it was likely of his own creation. She looked up tentatively but his eyes remained fixed on his own work.

“Get a move on, Miss Granger – I’m two up on you already and there won’t be any stopping half way through for lunch,” he said sourly. Yes, things were certainly back to normal between them.

She checked the ingredients and equipment that lay on the table against the instructions and quickly
set to work, trying hard not to think about his cold manner – it wouldn’t do to make a mess of things when he was exhibiting so much confidence in her abilities. Well, maybe confidence wasn’t quite the right word – it felt decidedly more like *tolerance* this morning.

He watched her out of the corner of his eye. He had lain awake *all night* turning over the events of the previous evening in his mind, and by morning he had come to the conclusion that he needed to keep his distance if he was going to make a rational decision over what to do about her and her blasted story. He had to forget about the smell of her hair, the feel of her skin under his fingers, the way the light from the fire had warmed her face and made her eyes sparkle. He clung to the outrage over having his private life turned into a public spectacle by a *student*, and not just *any* student, but Harry bloody Potter’s best friend – he almost snarled aloud just thinking about it.

He looked across the table. She hadn’t noticed, she was too caught up in what she was doing, too eager to *learn* something new, he silently scoffed. But then he caught himself – why did that *bother* him so much? Hadn’t he been eager to learn at her age? *His* studies, however, had been spurred by ambition and his desire for power and they had taken him down the wrong path, whereas her thirst for knowledge was for its *own* sake, not something dark and perverted. He mentally berated himself – just as he had to resist sentimentality, so did he also have to be careful not to let his temper cloud his judgment.

Oh fucking Merlin’s balls! he thought crossly as he huffed. He slammed his spoon on the table with one hand while running the other down the side of his face. Hermione froze for a moment, then glanced quickly in his direction, just to make sure his cauldron wasn’t about to explode. He was focused on its contents and she wondered if he had somehow ruined his potion. Given how temperamental he currently seemed, she deemed it wise not to inquire, and so returned to her own work.

He had to get a fucking *grip* on himself. This back and forth internal debate only annoyed him further. He chanced another look at Hermione but she was keeping to herself. Picking up the spoon, he spelled it to stir as he turned his attention back to the other ingredients. They continued to work silently until she finally finished her assignment. Before cleaning up, though, she needed him to check the final product.

She cleared her throat. “Professor?” she asked a bit anxiously, not wanting to set him off.

He looked up and saw that she had finished. Setting his knife to one side, he rounded the table to examine her potion. Leaning over the cauldron, he waved the fumes upwards into his face and sniffed slightly. Reaching for a glass spoon, he scooped out a bit and raised it to the light – it was an iridescent green. He dipped a finger into the liquid and tasted it before slowly turning to look at her expectant face – her hands were clasped nervously in front of her and she looked worried. He had the strongest urge to tell her the unadulterated truth, that it was perfect – absolutely sodding *perfect* as usual – but he stopped himself.

“It is . . . *adequate,*” he heard himself coolly say instead. The grin that spread across her face made him momentarily wonder if he had misspoken. No, he was certain of what he had said, she just took it as high praise. He handed her the spoon in vexation, returning to his own brewing as she began to clean up. She almost hummed with satisfaction as she busied herself and he couldn’t help the twitching in his lips – it took some effort to stifle the smile that threatened to grow.

When she had finished, she approached him cautiously. “Is there anything I can do to help, professor?”

He looked up from his cutting board – her earnestness was . . . *admirable*, he decided, not grating.
“No, thank you Miss Granger,” he responded a bit more warmly. “It’s time for lunch – go.”

“I can wait,” she offered.

“Again, thank you, but no,” he replied evenly, “I have some time here still to go.”

“Shall I get your house-elf to bring you something?”

It was a small thing, it would give her a ridiculous amount of pleasure and cost him nothing while quelling the growling in his stomach. “Soup – have him put it in a mug so I can drink it while I work. Now, leave me in peace, Miss Granger,” he commanded, waving generally towards the study, and while the words may have been harsh, the tone was one of mock exasperation.

He heard the pops of his house-elf going back and forth, and a bit after that the clattering of dishes. She then appeared in the doorway with his soup.

“It’s vegetable,” she quietly informed him, setting it carefully on a side counter, well away from where he was working to avoid cross contamination. Then she left to eat her own lunch. She reappeared after a half hour and scowled at his untouched mug, but otherwise said nothing.

“Can I do anything?” she offered again.

“This is almost finished and when it is I’ll have my lunch. In the meantime, you may browse my shelves. Pull something out, look it over, and we’ll talk about it over dinner,” he replied, nodding once more in the direction of the study – it was an order, but it wasn’t severely said.

Hermione wandered back into the other room and went to the nearest shelf – within minutes she had pulled down several volumes, and she took them over to the coffee table and settled down to read.

An hour later, after having finished brewing and cleaning up, he returned to his study sipping his reheated lunch. Hermione was stretched out on the sofa at an angle, the book in her hands resting on her chest while two others lay on the table. It was so quiet, only the occasional snap of the fire and the gentle susurrations of her steady breathing. From the binding, he could see that she had selected a book on memory charms – he picked up the other volumes and they, too, were on the same subject. Not quite what he had expected, he had to admit. He took his usual chair, put his feet up on the table, and nursed his soup. It was good to sit down and he pulled on the small pillow behind him until it rested at his lower back.

He looked over to where she lay. She really was . . . quite . . . lovely – there was nothing wrong with acknowledging a mere fact, he told himself. Why she didn’t have a dozen suitors and more was beyond him. She was attractive, independent minded, and most importantly, bright and articulate – all in all, infinitely more personable than she used to be. Weasley most certainly hadn’t deserved her but then . . . who would?

It was a rhetorical question, but the names of former students he had had over the years started to fly through his mind, and he dismissed each one of them in turn – too stupid, too narcissistic, too sporty or outdoorsy. Too lecherous, too whiny, too controlling or violent . . . the list went on. None of them were good enough, none of them would challenge, encourage, or support her in her many interests – none of them would be able simply to keep up with her. It would seem that the only man perfect for her was . . . him. The thought made him smile – he probably really was the only man right for her, at least theoretically speaking.

He set his mug gently on the table so as not to wake her and then settled back in his chair. He was tired, but it felt good – it was the kind of satisfying exhaustion that came from a job well done.
top of that, he was warm and sated, with a lovely woman to feast his eyes on. Slowly, he nodded off.

*Her elbow rested in the palm of his left hand as he rubbed the cream slowly across her arm. Her breathing had become shallow and she was struggling for self-control.*

“Scars remind us that we survived,” he comforted as he leaned towards her and pressed his lips to her temple. Feeling her move, he pulled slightly away, meeting amber eyes flecked with gold that looked longingly into his own. Withdrawing his left arm, he wrapped it around her shoulders. His lips trailed lightly down her cheek until they finally brushed against hers. A tentative hand worked its way up his chest and he felt it thread through his hair at the back of his neck. The kiss was initially soft and gentle, but became more insistent as she arched into him. His tongue slipped between her lips and he ran it along her perfect teeth. With his right hand now at her hip, he pulled her to him, turning her slightly so they could stretch out along the length of the sofa.

“Professor,” she whispered breathlessly as he pressed the proof of his interest firmly into her thigh.

“Professor . . . .”

He woke with a start. Alarmingly, she was peering into his face and her hand was on his knee, perilously close to his erection, which was covered by his frock coat, but only just. As his senses adjusted, he became conscious of the wand in his hand – she had no idea how close she had come to having it jabbed against her.

“I’m sorry, professor, but you were moaning – I thought you might be having a bad dream.” There was concern in both her face and voice.

As he sat up, he sheathed his wand and straightened his coat, discreetly making sure the upper most part of his trousers were shielded from view.

“Yes, thank you Miss Granger,” he replied formally, clearing his throat.

“Should I have Timber bring some tea?”

“Yes, if you would,” he quickly answered, getting to his feet. “I will return momentarily,” he added as he headed into the bedroom and shut the door. He continued on into the bathroom and closed that door as well. Gripping the sides of the sink he braved a look in the mirror as his heart pounded. The signs of his arousal were there – a flushed face and dilated pupils – though the most revealing aspect of it was firm against the porcelain. Another few minutes and he would have shocked her by doing a lot more than just moaning. Turning on the faucets, he let the cold water run over his hands before splashing some of it on his face – it wasn’t quite where he needed it, but he didn’t have time to do much else. When he finished, he felt sufficiently recovered to return to the study, where he found tea waiting for him.

“I’m sorry, professor,” she began, handing him a cup. “I don’t usually fall asleep in the middle of the afternoon.”

“Nor do I, Miss Granger – I won’t say anything if you don’t,” he said smoothly, carefully watching her reaction over the top of his cup.

His comment clearly flustered her. “I . . . I would never . . . never deliberately say anything to embarrass you,” she managed to get out, unable to meet his eye and wondering a bit over his comment.

“I would certainly hope not,” he continued, watching a blush creep up her neck to her face.
To break the awkwardness, she offered him a plate of biscuits. He passed on them, but she helped herself – she wouldn’t be able to say anything incriminating if her mouth was already full.

He downed his tea as quickly as he could and put his cup and saucer on the table. “When you are finished, you need to bottle the nerve regeneration potion,” he observed, getting up and going into the lab. She gulped her tea and followed swiftly behind him.

He set a small cauldron to melting some wax as they decanted their respective potions. Corking the bottles, they then dipped the stoppers quickly into the wax. He put a few of the bottles on his shelves and packed the rest to take to the infirmary.

“I could drop that off, if you like, professor,” she offered.

“The wards will not recognize you, Miss Granger,” he said, securing the lid on the box.

“Oh, well then – if there’s nothing else to do, I think I’ll get some fresh air before dinner, while there is still some daylight left,” she thought aloud as she followed him into the study.

“Do not go into the forest, Miss Granger,” he instructed, opening the outer door for her – she nodded absently as it latched behind them. “Miss Granger,” he called as she started down the corridor. She stopped and turned to look at him. “I mean it – do not traverse the forest. The creatures that live there and do not hibernate are particularly aggressive this time of year.”

She hadn’t planned on going anywhere near the forest, but nothing raised her ire more than someone telling her not to do something based on the assumption that she was somehow inherently weak and feeble. “I assure you, professor, I will be alright,” she laughed a bit tightly.

He retraced his steps, stopping mere inches away from her – he stood nearly a foot taller than her and he used every inch to intimidate as he narrowed his eyes and looked down his long nose. “You will not go to the forest,” he continued to insist in his best forbidding professorial tone.

“If it’s such a dangerous place, why did we go there yesterday?” she challenged, her irritation growing.

“Because I know the forest and can protect myself,” he growled.

She took a deep breath and straightened her back, gaining half an inch – she stood her ground and repeated her assertion. “I, too, can take care of myself,” she maintained, defiantly staring right back at him.

“Well that’s good to know,” he sneered as he leaned further down, “because I’m sure the bugbears, werewolves, trolls, giants, centaurs, and all of Aragog’s many children would be only too delighted to make your acquaintance. And let’s not forget about that three-headed monstrosity that Hagrid has the impertinence to call Fluffy running loose around the place.”

She glared at him a moment before turning on her heel and walking briskly away.

He steamed as he watched her retreating figure. Why wouldn’t she just agree? All she had to say in response to don’t go into the forest was I won’t – just two bloody words. Instead, she fluffed herself up like a cat and stuck out that blasted Gryffindor chin of hers.

He fumed all the way to the Infirmary and was still chewing on it when he got back to his study. And then it occurred to him that he had a way of finding out where she had gone. He sat down at his desk and opened the central drawer, pulling out a folded parchment and opening it on his desk – it was his own version of the Marauder’s Map, made when he became headmaster in order to track the
Carrow, and potentially any other of the Dark Lord’s minions who might be sent secretly to check up on him. It had a significant advantage over the original in that it covered not only every passage way, secret or otherwise, in the castle but the lake and Forbidden Forest as well – it even included Hogsmeade village – so wherever she went, he would be able to find her.

He opened the parchment and scanned it quickly, starting with the forest – if he saw her traipsing around there he would assign her detentions for the rest of her life. But he saw only the woodland’s magical creatures moving about and so widened his search. He saw motion on the corner of the map – it was the Giant Squid frolicking in the lake, and there on the shoreline stood Hermione, presumably watching. He let out the breath he didn’t even realize he had been holding – she was safe. Relief flooded him, and although he tried to explain it away by telling himself that the last thing he wanted to do on a cold Scottish winter night was go in search of a wayward student, it would have been a lie, and while spies deceived others, good ones did not lie to themselves.

*Bugger.* His interest in Miss Granger really was starting to feel distinctly more than academic.
Memory Charms

Chapter Summary

Severus learns about what Hermione had to do in order to keep her parents safe, and his esteem for her in light of it (and other things) continues to grow.

Chapter Notes

Again, thanks to everyone for your very kind comments - let me know what you think of this chapter!

Memory Charms

“Did you have a good walk,” he asked impassively when he opened the door.

“Very pleasant,” she replied coolly, her head held high as she entered his study.

“Yes, the Giant Squid is very frisky in this kind of weather,” he observed mockingly.

She rounded on him. “You followed me?” she demanded angrily.

“No Miss Granger, I did not,” he replied evenly, going to the sideboard and fixing their drinks.

“Then . . . .”

“Whatever else you may be, Miss Granger, you aren’t a fool. You know perfectly well why students aren’t allowed to be in the forest except under supervision – the dangers are all too real. You respect rules that are intended to protect you . . . at least most of the time,” he added almost under his breath. “I had no doubt that you would not go into the woods and merely . . . speculated that perhaps you went to the lake instead,” he lied.

She felt distinctly deflated and didn’t look at him directly as she accepted the Madeira and took her place on the sofa. He assumed his usual spot, tumbler of whiskey in hand and a smug smile threatening to break out.

Her face was flushed in annoyance – he had been spot on. She did indeed know the risks and would never be so imprudent as to go strolling through the woods on her own, especially not with nightfall approaching. But if he knew her so well, why had he earlier insisted that she promise not to do what he already knew she wouldn’t anyway? It was such a typically male way to behave. She had also wondered at the time why he hadn’t threatened – and carried out – house point deductions. While she suspected that he wasn’t supposed to, given the holiday, she also knew that it wouldn’t actually have stopped him. It began to dawn on her that he hadn’t been her professor and she his student in that moment – the exchange between them had been infinitely more complicated than a mere walk in the woods.
Sensing him watching her she suddenly felt tingly all over, as if her skin was being pricked by a thousand needles – her breathing had also shallowed. She slowly lifted the glass to take a sip and turned slightly in his direction, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. His elbow rested on the arm of the chair, the whiskey tumbler held aloft in front of him as he gazed at her. She couldn’t completely decipher his expression, since she couldn’t see his mouth, but sensed that something had changed between them, something fairly significant, something that she hardly dared to think about. Another electrical charge whipped through her body and she shuddered involuntarily.

He felt as though he was in a trance as he watched a wave of emotions play out across her face – frustration, embarrassment, confusion, and then . . . something else – it looked like realization of some sort. Whatever it was, it made her blush again. He could not take his eyes away from her lips as they gently touched the rim of her glass, and he nearly gasped aloud when she turned her burnished eyes – the same warm color of the Madeira – in his direction. He wanted her and by Merlin’s ghost, he was pretty damn sure that she was attracted to him as well. The raw power of that fact almost propelled him across the space between them, but the sudden pop signaling the appearance of his house-elf startled him and, jerking his hand, some of his whiskey sloshed over the front of his coat. Now he did rocket upwards, but only to magic the mess away. He couldn’t help but glare at Timber, who berated himself over his ineptitude. Well that moment was gone, he thought ruefully.

Dinner appeared almost at once. Feeling a bit awkward, Hermione peppered him with questions about the potion she had brewed that afternoon. Was it his? Did he invent many potions? Did he publish the results in professional journals? Did he brew only for the Infirmary or were some of his potions sent to St. Mungo’s? What did he have planned tomorrow’s work? Halfway through the meal he almost wished she’d hurry up, finish her dinner, and leave him in peace, but only almost – he knew the questions were a nervous reaction to what had passed between them earlier.

By the end of the meal she was starting to lose steam, and as per usual, he fixed himself another whiskey and ordered her some tea. He pulled the three books she had been looking at earlier from the mantle and began flipping through one of them.

“You have a particular interest in memory charms, Miss Granger?” he inquired, resuming his seat.

“Um, well, not especially, but I did . . . still do, sort of, but not too much . . . it’s . . . it’s complicated,” she babbled over her tea.

“I suppose there’s an answer somewhere in all of that – if I dug deep enough – but perhaps you would save me the trouble?” he asked, quelling his impatience.

She gulped some of her tea in preparation of her answer.

“You see,” she began, “I, um . . . when it became clear that . . . that . . . um,” she stumbled.

“Miss Granger,” he growled.

“I altered my parent’s memories,” she blurted out all at once.

The silence hung between them for a moment. “You did . . . what?” he finally asked incredulously – surely he had misheard.

She put her china on the table. “Not quite two years ago . . . I . . . I altered their memories, made them think that they wanted to change their names and move to Australia.”

“What kind of an idiot are you, Miss Granger?!” he suddenly bellowed, slamming shut the book he was holding with a resounding pop.
“The desperate kind,” she barked defensively and with growing emotion. She bowed her head, squeezed her shoulders forward, and clenched the front of the sofa cushion with her hands in an effort to control herself.

He immediately regretted his outburst. “Miss Granger, I . . . .”

She cut him off. “I didn’t know what else to do,” she began to explain. “They would have been targeted by Death Eaters – others were – and I couldn’t let them be killed . . . or worse. It took nearly a year of planning,” she continued, now rocking a bit. “I read everything I could find – Dumbledore lent me some books, but he was adamant that I had to do it on my own. Now, of course, I realize that he knew he wouldn’t be around for very much longer, and that others might not be either – I had to be able to manage without help,” she stated bluntly.

He leaned forward, set the books on the table, and rested his elbows on his knees as he rubbed a hand across his mouth. She finally looked at him, her eyes brimming in the light of the fire. “I . . . I was so . . . so afraid,” she mumbled, looking at him as if pleading for his understanding – it was the first time she had given voice to her fears, and it was obvious that she continued to be haunted by them.

He forced a neutral expression as he took in the enormity of what she was telling him. “You did . . . manage to restore their memories?” he asked carefully, feeling his way around the subject.

“Yes, yes I did,” she sniffed, smiling slightly and wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. He reached into a pocket, pulling out a pristine handkerchief and offering it to her. She took it gratefully. “They were really angry at first, but when I explained why I had to do it . . . .” she trailed off as she discreetly blew her nose. “It’s hard for Muggles to understand what the war was like, and I didn’t want to frighten them further, even if only after the fact.”

“They’ve . . . forgiven you?” he asked hesitantly.

She nodded. “Yes, but they’ve also made me promise never to do it again . . . at least, not without asking first,” she smiled tightly.

He continued to stare at her, still a bit stunned by her confession. “Are there any gaps in their memories?” he asked.

“No . . . well, none that I’m aware of at any rate,” she continued. “I stayed with them almost two months over the summer, had them do a timeline of their lives, quizzed them about the stories they told me while I was growing up, had them identify people in the photos I took out of storage . . . everything seemed intact.”

He let out the breath he had been holding. “You took an unbelievable risk,” he observed quietly and without judgment this time.

She looked away, focusing on the fire in the grate. “I . . . I just did what I had to in order to protect them,” she replied, continuing to grip the sofa cushions as if they were a lifeline – she almost couldn’t bear thinking about what it might have cost her.

He sat back in his chair, like her staring into the hearth and meditating on what she had just told him. It took incredible skill – and even more daring – to do what she had done. If she had made a mistake with the multiple spells, even a very slight one, she might not have been able to restore her parents’ memories. She had known that, but had done it anyway. She was willing to let them go, willing to risk living the rest of her life without their love and support in order to protect them. He had known a number of wizards and even a few witches who were physically fearless, but this kind of courage
was on an entirely different scale – Gryffindor bravery indeed.

She was the one who finally broke the awkward silence. “Where did you get them?” she asked, nodding at the books on the table.

“I don’t really remember,” he commented, after pondering her question. At first, he didn’t understand why his response set her to giggling, but then caught it and gave her an impish look.

“And the rest?” she inquired, her eyes quickly surveying the shelves around the room.

“Some were given to me as gifts, but most were purchased on order. A few were acquired more . . . irregularly,” he teased, sipping his whisky and hiding a slight smile behind his glass, knowing that she would want to know more.

“Irregularly?” she predictably prodded.

“I got a fair number from Lucius Malfoy’s personal library over games of backgammon and wizard’s chess. I got several more from when he tried to win them back on a wager that he could out drink me,” bringing the tumbler to his mouth as if to prove his point. “His wife found him lounging in one of the manor’s many candelabra the next morning, covered in wax – with singe marks on his impeccable clothes – and no idea how he got there,” he snorted at the memory. “Needless to say, he didn’t engage in any more bets with me over anything.”

She snickered.

“Albus lost two very fine 18th century potions volumes over how many cauldrons Neville Longbottom would melt following the disastrous start to his fourth year,” he recalled almost warmly, “and I got a few more from some of my colleagues over bets about school Quidditch matches.”

“Ever bet on Gryffindor?” she asked cheekily.

“Had to on occasion,” he lamented, though sounding disgusted at the very notion. “I don’t like to lose, you see,” he added pointedly.

Now she did laugh out loud.

He transitioned to explaining how things were arranged on the shelves around the room so that she would be able to find the books she wanted. While the largest selection concerned potions, he had texts covering a variety of areas including arithmancy, charms, British flora and fauna, and even one volume on divination. She couldn’t keep her mouth from quirking at that information.

“It was a gift,” he explained, “from Albus, of course,” he smiled ruefully. “He thought every subject taught in the school should be represented.”

“Yes, of course,” she commented humorously.

The brief burst of fond nostalgia faded at the mention once more of the late headmaster – he contemplated his whiskey before taking another sip of his drink.

“Do you miss him?” she softly asked.

He gave the question serious thought as he swished the amber liquid around in his glass. Albus had been his teacher, mentor, and sometime friend. He had been maddening in his optimism, infuriating in his eccentric-professor persona, and chilling as a strategist. The old codger had teased, pushed, and sometimes coerced him, but he had also kept him steady when things looked their bleakest and
taught him how to play the deadliest game in the world – and win.

“Yes, Miss Granger,” he replied softly, “I miss him – bastard though he frequently was.” He threw back the rest of his whiskey and rose to refill the glass.

“I should go,” she announced quietly, getting up and making her way around the sofa.

“You don’t have to leave, Miss Granger,” he said quickly as she headed for the door.

“I have some reading I need to do – my professors have set me assignments over the break and I don’t want to get behind,” she explained.

He considered that statement and immediately saw yet another opportunity. “Perhaps we should settle on how you are going to spend the rest of your break, Miss Granger,” he commented officiously, recharging his glass. “I suggest that you spend mornings in the lab, have lunch, and then work on your other subjects in the afternoon,” he said. “You could do your essays here, if you wanted, make use of these books,” he continued, gesturing to the shelves around them.

“I don’t want to be a bother – wouldn’t I be in your way?”

“Not if you’re working over here,” he said, looking at the small dining table. “It will give me an excuse to clear this away. I’ve got some brewing to do, essays to mark, class plans to make. I don’t think we’ll be too much in each other’s way – so long as you don’t natter on about every single new thing you learn,” he added just loud enough that she would be able to hear him. Seduction was an art form, and the prospect of using his library – and learning something new, of course – was her weak spot and he would stroke it accordingly. He smirked to himself as he watched her think it over.

“Right, well, I’ll bring my assignments down with me in the morning, if that’s alright?” she replied, opening the door to leave.

He put his whiskey on the desk and went to the door, keeping her from closing it behind her. She stepped backwards into the corridor as he shut it.

“Seriously, professor, you don’t have to walk me back to my rooms,” she blurted out, but he extended his arm indicating that she was to lead the way. Some of the portraits acknowledged their passing, and they chatted amiably about the brewing assignments he was planning on setting her. When they reached her quarters, she waved her wand and opened the door.

“Thank you again, professor,” she smiled shyly.

“I’ll see you in the morning, Miss Granger,” he murmured as beguilingly as he could. She nearly melted on the spot, and quickly slipped into her room before her blush became visible in the dim light of the corridor.

He retraced his steps through the castle, dissecting that evening’s events as he went. She was most definitely interested and he idly wondered if she was as expressive and responsive as Perse. He supposed he should have been wracked with reservations, tormented by the differences in their ages and the ethics of a teacher-pupil relationship, but he really just couldn’t be bothered. It was a given that she would score Outstanding in all of her subjects that year, but the only marks that really counted were her NEWTs, and he had no influence over those, though he knew she would do exceptionally well. She was also of age – beyond it, in point of fact – and had more than demonstrated that she was a full-fledged adult by having fought valiantly in battle. No, he had no qualms whatsoever in pursuing her. The only thing that stayed his hand was Minerva. She might have been peeved if he took house points away from her star pupil during the break, but he knew for
certain that she’d absolutely have his balls for breakfast if he seduced Hermione while here on her own in the castle. He wondered how the headmistress would feel if he wooed the young woman right under her nose, surrounded by other students instead.

Their days quickly settled into a set routine – she brewed in the mornings and then had lunch with him. Following a brisk walk in order to stay awake, they then settled down to their respective tasks. Over dinner, they discussed what she was doing for her other professors, what he had planned for his classes in the spring term, and various research projects he wanted to work on. The only interruptions were the actual holidays themselves. When she went to the Weasleys for Christmas he couldn’t bring himself to do any brewing. Instead, he seeded the caves with the potion they had made, but that only took him up to the lunch hour, after which he promptly fell asleep in his chair. When he woke up he tried to do some reading but found it difficult to concentrate – his eyes kept wandering to the sofa . . . her sofa. When he literally couldn’t stand it anymore he walked the castle corridors, ostensibly to make sure everything was in order, but in reality to try and ease the tension in his mind and body. Late in the day, he even strolled down to Hagrid’s hut, but the gentle half-giant wasn’t there, and he returned to his quarters and had a drink instead.

He didn’t know if she would come by when she returned – it might be late, she had said. He had been invited to go with her, but the Weasley tribe was hard enough to bear at Order meetings, and he thought he might burn down their Christmas tree and decorations if he had to endure them in a truly festive mood. As the day slipped into evening, he was starting to rethink that decision. And then he felt the wards shimmer – she was back and nearing his quarters.

He leapt up and yanked open the door – she had a silly grin on her face as she approached, and he arched a brow at the small container she was carrying.

“A piece of Molly’s Christmas pudding – wait ‘till you try it!” She breezed past him and settled herself familiarly in front of the fire, carefully opening the carrier and taking out the plate, setting it on his end of the table. As he sat down, she picked up his tumbler and poured a bit over the pudding. Tapping it with the end of her wand, it ignited, the bluish flame gently caressing the dark mound.

“Do you have a fork?” she asked.

“The kitchen, through there,” he said, indicating a door in the corner of his study. The sound of drawers being opened and closed filtered into the room as he watched the flames slowly burn down. His throat tightened. It was such a small gesture, one that she probably hadn’t thought twice about doing, but he found it meant everything to him in that moment. He reached for the whiskey and took a good slug in order to still his emotions.

As he stared at the fruit cake a fork was laid in front of him. Picking up the plate, he could smell spices and the delicate scent of fruit. The bite was warm and melted like butter in his mouth – he closed his eyes to better appreciate the experience. When he slowly opened them, she was looking at him eagerly with gold flecked amber eyes, her face a reflection of pure joy.

“Isn’t it delicious!” she exclaimed, with a beaming grin.

“Yes,” he barely managed to choke out, “absolutely . . . wonderful,” although he wasn’t referring to the pudding.

When he had finished, he walked her back to her room. She chattered on unselfconsciously about her day at the Burrow – the presents, food, and games, and George’s very good prank in honor of Fred involving the Christmas turkey getting up and dancing on its drumsticks as Arthur tried to pin it down and carve it. They said goodnight at her door, and with an extra wide grin she promised to return in the morning as usual. As he strolled back to his quarters, he realized that it was the best
Christmas he had ever had, even though it had only lasted an hour.

When he got back to his study and began to extinguish the lights, he saw a small package sitting on the table – it was wrapped in plain green paper with a white bow. Sitting down, he peeled the paper away. Opening the box, he pulled out a small tumbler – etched on one side was the shield of potioneer’s guild and on the other his first and last initials. A small card was inside the glass.

*Dear Professor,*

*A small token of my thanks for letting me use your library over the break.*

*Happy Christmas!*

*Hermione Granger*

He was completely dumbfounded. She hadn’t needed to do that, and he certainly wasn’t expecting it. It was another one of her small gestures – they seemed to come so naturally to her – and it left him utterly breathless. He picked it up and carried it to the sideboard, setting it down gingerly before going into the bedroom to begin his nightly ablutions. As he prepared for bed and continued to think on her present, he tried to ignore his raging erection – he had one most nights, now that she was spending so much time in his quarters. He wanted her – not just her body but *all* of her – and while a wank might satisfy his immediate needs, he knew it was only a temporary solution to something that had suddenly become so much more than that.
Seeing in the New Year

Chapter Summary

Severus and Hermione spend New Year's together.

Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoy it - let me know what you think!

Seeing in the New Year

They returned to their usual routine for the week after Christmas. He thanked her rather solemnly for the etched tumbler she had given him, which caused her to duck her head and blush rather prettily, and awkwardly mumbled regrets over not having gotten her anything, although she was adamant that he had already given her a present - his time - but his heart sank when she announced she would be going to Grimmauld Place for New Year’s Eve. Everyone in the Order would be there along with some of his colleagues – he had been invited, too, but he had thrown out the invitation when it had come in early December. Now, however, he found that the gathering had a bit more appeal. After lunch he asked when she was planning to go and then peremptorily announced that he, too, would be attending and that they should leave together. She readily – positively eagerly – agreed, he noted with satisfaction.

As the afternoon progressed, she became increasingly restless, shifting in her seat, checking the clock repeatedly, and even sighing impatiently over her books. He gave no outward sign that he was aware of her agitation, being only too conscious himself of how slowly time seemed to be passing, but when the small hand of the clock did finally reach five, she promptly excused herself and dashed off.

The prospect of being accompanied by her professor made her giddy with anticipation, and she practically ran the whole way to her room. But an hour of grooming – shower, shampoo, and some fumbling with a safety razor, then the application of a touch of mascara and lip gloss with an unsteady hand – didn’t make all that much difference to her appearance as far as she could see. Her hair still looked disappointingly . . . substantial was the kindest description she could think of, but at least she had something nice to wear – her mum had bought her some clothes when she had been in Australia, and while such activities had never much interested her, she had acquiesced to a shopping expedition in an effort to help renew the mother/daughter bond. To her mind, however – as she stood in front of the mirror, all kit out – she looked pretty much as she usually did, just in heels and a dress. And to cap it all, she was ready an hour before she even needed to leave. She picked up a book and settled into the chair by the hearth, mostly ignoring it to watch the minutes slowly tick by once more.

When she left, he had worked on, trying to make up for the time lost from having been distracted by her fidgeting all afternoon. At half six, he finally put down his quill and wandered into the bathroom. He took special care with his person, sharpening his razor for an extra close shave and working his tooth brush vigorously, as if such activities would somehow reduce the size of his nose or improve
the look of his teeth. At least the lankiness of his hair had been addressed, even if temporarily, by a quick shower. After dressing, he checked himself one last time in the mirror – who was he trying to kid? The only thing he could do to improve his appearance was to lean forward and allow his hair to hide as much of his face as possible. His lip curled reflexively and he scowled at his reflection before turning quickly away.

She was already waiting for him at the front entrance, dressed in a warm, floor length cloak, and they walked silently down to the apparition point. Holding out his arm expectantly, she took it with a shy smile and almost immediately felt the pull in her mid-section as they turned and twisted away. They arrived in the small enclosed garden across from the house – checking the street for passersby, they walked up to the door, which opened automatically. The portrait of Mrs. Black started yelling insults the instant they had crossed the threshold.

“Half-blood traitor! Turning on your own kind, and bringing that filthy Mudblood into this noble house! Such scum is a desecration!”

He steered Hermione to the stairs and told her to go up, then circled back to the portrait, which continued to spew forth.

“Nothing but dirt under our feet, muck from the byre!”

He growled as he pointed his wand at her face. “If you ever speak about that young woman like that again, I will erase your stinking mouth!”

“I’m a magical portrait, you coward turncoat,” she sneered, “there isn’t anything you can do to me!”

“And I’m one of the wizarding world’s premier potioneers,” he whispered menacingly as he stepped closer. “I will make it my purpose in life to concoct a magical turpentine to wipe that snarl right off your wrinkled mug permanently, you acid tongued hag. You’ll still see everything but you won’t be able to say anything.”

“Troll!” she started, but then stopped abruptly as he rested the tip of his wand on her lips.

Just then the door opened and Minerva breezed in.

“Severus!” she exclaimed in surprise. “I didn’t expect to see you here! You never come to these sorts of things!”

He said nothing, but followed her up the stairs, glancing back at Mrs. Black, who glared at him.

The chair next to the door in the front room was piled high with cloaks, and he added his and Minerva’s to the stack. Looking around, he searched for the only reason he was there – he found her arm and arm with Potter and the Weasley girl and . . . and . . . what the fuck was she wearing?! It was a copper colored dress with three-quarter length sleeves and a full skirt that hit just above her knees – her bare and slender legs were perched on a pair of black high heels. He looked around and suddenly realized that everyone was dressed up. The younger people were in smart Muggle clothes, the older ones in traditional robes – even Minerva had a tartan sash across her shoulder. He should have known, not that he would have dressed any differently but he did have apparel that wasn’t stained, burned, or moth eaten. As he was considering the sartorial splendor of the guests, Arthur sidled up with a tumbler of his favorite beverage.

“Somehow, I don’t think you’re the Christmas punch sort,” Arthur observed conspiratorially, offering him the whiskey – he nodded his appreciation. Kingsley almost immediately joined them
and he and Arthur began to talk Ministry business. Standing on the periphery half listening, he watched Hermione navigate the Weasley hoard. Potter, whose back had been to him, turned to say something to his ginger-haired sidekick and met his gaze.

_Bugger._

Harry paused, but then walked boldly over to where he was standing – Hermione watched him track across the room, and other heads also looked in their direction.

His former student stopped right in front of him. “It’s good to see you, professor,” he said, and stuck out his hand. Just over his shoulder, he saw Hermione nervously bite her lower lip and wring her fingers. His eyes drifted back to the young man in front of him – he slowly reached out and took his hand.

“Thank you for inviting me, Mr. Potter,” he replied as evenly as he could through his clenched jaw.

“It’s truly my pleasure, professor – I’m glad you decided to come.” They had stopped shaking but the young man hadn’t released his hand. “Given all we’ve been through, don’t you think it’s time you started to call me Harry?” he asked with genuine warmth.

It took all of his legendary control not to sneer in response. “As you wish . . . _Harry_. And you should note that I’m not your professor anymore.” It wasn’t quite an invitation to use his first name, but it was at least a public acknowledgement that their relationship had now changed from what it had been – he felt the guests breathe a collectively sigh of relief.

Harry grinned. “I don’t think I’ll ever have the nerve to call you anything but professor . . . _professor_!”

The urge to lift a blistering brow was stiffly resisted. “I’m sure it will come with time and practice, Mr. . . . _Harry,_” he replied with practiced detachment, hoping that it really wouldn’t. When he looked up, he saw that Hermione was beaming, with her hands clasped in the joyful way she had. The corner of his mouth crept up slightly and the conversations, which had stopped dead in their tracks when Potter had greeted him, took up where they had left off.

Minerva caught the brief, wordless exchange between her colleague and student, and as Molly began setting out the food – and the Weasley sons made a bee-line for the buffet table _en masse_ – the headmistress cornered her protégé.

“How is your holiday going, Hermione?” Minerva fished.

“It’s been very nice, professor,” she enthusiastically offered. “How about yours?”

“Oh, it’s been alright, though I confess I’m ready to be back at school – I can only take my family in small doses.” Hermione nodded in sympathy. “How . . . how are you and Professor Snape getting along?” she asked.

“Just fine,” Hermione answered, smiling warmly. “He’s been quite good company, actually.”

Minerva arched a brow. “Really?” she said, trying to mask her disbelief. “What have you two been doing?”

“He’s been having me brew in the mornings, and then we have lunch. In the afternoons, I work on my courses and he grades or brews in the lab,” she informed her head of house.

“And dinner?” she pressed.
“Yes, we have dinner, too,” she replied almost dreamily, then remembered exactly who it was she was talking to and caught herself. “It seemed silly to eat our meals separately,” she added matter-of-factly, trying not to blush. “He had a good point – it only would have made more work for the house elves.”

Minerva nearly choked on her drink – more work for the house elves? How lame could he get? “But you’re . . . you’re working in his . . . study?” she asked as evenly as she could.

“He’s letting me use his library in the preparation of my essays,” she explained, hoping it sounded innocent enough, which, in fact, it was. “He’s got so many more advanced texts than Madame Pince and they are reinvigorating my thinking.” She took comfort in the fact that she wasn’t actually lying to her mentor.

“Indeed,” Minerva slowly acknowledged. “And . . . has he deducted any house points?”

“No,” she smiled. “I assumed he couldn’t over the holidays.”

“Has he . . . yelled at you?” she inquired further.

“Only a couple of times,” she snickered.

Ron sidled up to the two of them with a plate heaving with food. “Better get in line, Mione . . . professor, or there won’t be anything left,” he said between mouthfuls.

They looked at his haul. “I can well believe that, Mr. Weasley,” Minerva commented dryly. Hermione took the opportunity to end what was becoming an uncomfortable conversation, excusing herself and making her way to the table while the headmistress looked around the room and found her target.

He was still standing with Arthur and Shacklebolt, and he turned as she approached – he was more than a little alarmed at the look on her face and he steeled himself instinctively, as if he were about to be confronted once more by the Dark Lord.

“Having a good break, Severus?” she asked in a knowing tone of voice that immediately put him on his guard.

“Reasonable. You?” he replied, assuming a bored look.

“Fine, fine . . . you and Hermione getting along?” she prodded.

“Well enough,” he responded dispassionately.

“I see,” she commented. “It must be hard, just the two of you, bumping along together in that big old drafty castle. I hope she hasn’t been lonely,” she goaded.

Shacklebolt made his way to the table, and Arthur held out an arm indicating they were to follow, but they gestured for him to go ahead.

“What are you playing at, Severus!” she hissed under her breath, once they were alone.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Minerva,” he said indifferently.

“I’ve just been with Hermione, and I know how you two are spending your days!”

He arched a questioning brow.
“She’s in your quarters virtually from first thing in the morning until after dinner!”

“That’s not quite true – we sometimes go for walks in the afternoon,” he rejoined smoothly, taking a sip of his drink.

“Don’t get smart with me, young man!” she spat, stifling a desire to reach up, pinch his ear, and drag him into the hall for a full blown dressing down.

“Oh for Merlin’s sake, woman!” he whispered forcefully. “She’s getting extra tuition by helping me catch up with some brewing and I’m giving her access to my books. You told me yourself that she hasn’t been challenged this last term – well my library will certainly take care of that!”

“And the meals?” she persisted.

“What about them?” he growled warningly.

“If you seduce her, so help me Merlin I’ll hang you in chains over the castle wall!” she threatened.

“May I remind you – madam – that she is of age and perfectly competent to make decisions about her personal life.”

“She’s also a student and I have a duty of care,” she rebounded.

“Bollocks!” he retorted harshly. “She’s not some defenseless little girl who needs protecting. *Merlin’s balls,* she fought valiantly in a war, the worse one the wizarding world will probably ever see, and lived to tell about it – no mean achievement. She doesn’t need your protection, and I resent the insinuation that I would ever do anything to cause her harm after having diligently protected her – *and her imbecile friends* – for seven fucking years. But if I did decide to embark on a relationship with her,” he threatened, leaning in closer, “Merlin himself couldn’t stop me, so save your Puritan outrage for someone else!”

He threw back the rest of his drink, shoved the empty tumbler into her hand, and stalked from the room. Minerva swallowed hard and then chanced a glance around her – everyone seemed focused on their meal and hadn’t noticed their exchange. Taking a deep, calming breath, she went to the drinks table and refilled their glasses. Filing through the room, she, too, slipped out unnoticed.

She knew where he went – it was the same place he always went when he had to wait around for Order meetings to begin. With a whispered spell, the door to the library opened and then closed behind her. He was sitting in front of the cold hearth with a face like thunder. She handed him the drink – he reluctantly accepted it – and took the seat opposite him. With a wave of her wand a fire ignited in the grate. After several minutes, she broke the silence.

“That was quite a declaration, Severus,” she observed.

He didn’t respond.

“Are you falling in love with her?” she asked quietly.

He merely glared at her, still saying nothing as he slowly lifted his glass to his lips.
“I apologize unreservedly for my comments – they were uncalled for,” she said gently and contritely. “Please let me assure you that I wasn’t making any judgments as far as your suitability is concerned. In point of fact,” she continued carefully, “I think you two would be well-matched – as I recall hinting at in a previous conversation – but only after her exams.”

She searched his face for a reaction – any reaction – but he sat there motionless, looking at her stonily.

“The next few months are going to be very stressful for her,” she continued. “She’ll be finishing up her courses and revising for her NEWTs – she shouldn’t be unnecessarily . . . distracted any more than she will be already.”

They sat unspeaking for a few minutes more before Minerva rose. “I’ll leave you to your thoughts,” she said, quietly leaving.

His thoughts indeed. He stared unseeingly into the fire. Why did Gryffindors always jump from desire straight to love? Or was it just that Minerva was simply turning his lust into something that would be more acceptable? He wanted Hermione, certainly, but in love? He inwardly scoffed as he finished his drink and set it on the end table. Tilting his head back he closed his eyes. Love was for fools, young fools at that – he had been one, once, so he should know. Love disappointed, love hurt, love left wounds that made his physical scars pale into insignificance. He cared about her, that much he was willing to admit, but he would not love her, he decided. Not, though, because he was afraid of Minerva – the interfering old biddy – but because she did have a good point about the young woman needing to focus in these last few months. However, he could still prepare the ground for when she would no longer be a student and he could approach her as a potential lover. That much he absolutely could do, and Minerva could just mind her own bloody business.

As the alcohol eased his mind and the fire warmed his body, he drifted off.

The front hall was dark when he came in. He could smell generations of dirt and grime – the dust alone had to be decades older than he was. Light from above illuminated the narrow stairs, and an unseen force compelled him to climb until he was just outside the partially open door. Pushing on it, he stepped into the front room at Grimmauld Place. It was light and bright, far removed from the forbidding gloom of the rest of the house. As he entered and took off his cloak, laying it on the chair next to the door, he looked around – there was no one there except her. She was standing at one of the tall windows looking out and turned around and smiled as he approached.

“Happy New Year, professor,” she whispered as he reached for her waist and slowly drew her towards him. Her arms snaked up his chest, and with one hand hooked around his neck and the other cupping his cheek, she pulled his head down towards hers. “I promise it will be a better one than the last,” she breathed against his lips before kissing him firmly. He silently declared his intentions as he wrapped his arms around her tightly and deepened the embrace.

A huge explosion outside the window startled him awake. He reflexively reached for his wand, ready to meet whatever threat was bearing down on him. Through the window he saw overlapping circular patterns of various colors that shimmered and then quickly faded, all accompanied by booms that rattled all the glass in the room. He could hear whooping and hollering from within the house – it was midnight, and he took a cleansing breath to calm himself. He supposed he should make his way back to the party.

When he came in, the celebrations had quieted a bit, and everyone was gathered around the windows watching the fireworks. George hung back a bit and Hermione, who was standing nearby, went up to him. Taking the young man’s hand, she reached up with her other and rubbed his arm before resting her cheek against it. He tilted towards her, lightly touching the top of her head with his.
Merlin, it had to be a better year because there was simply no way it could be worse than the last one had been, he thought to himself as he watched the scene play out.

When the display was over, everyone drifted away from the windows and started making noises about needing to be off. He wasted no time digging through the pile of coats and cloaks to pull theirs out. She looked at him gratefully as he approached and began making her goodbyes.

“Arthur, Kingsley,” he offered and they nodded in response. He was just securing his own cloak when Potter joined them – once again, the wunderkind stuck out his hand. He grimaced, but he took it – the things he was prepared to do . . . .

“Happy New Year, professor,” he offered, before turning to Hermione, first kissing then hugging her. “See you again soon, Mione,” he said quietly.

She smiled and then headed for the door, missing the stern look her mentor sent across the room to her escort for the evening – he responded with a look of disdain.

As they descended the stairs, he glowered darkly at the portrait of Mrs. Black, who had been awakened by the celebrations. She scowled disapprovingly but otherwise kept her tongue.

The night air was bracing, and at the last moment, he suddenly opened his voluminous cloak and enveloped her. He continued to hold her as the dizzying pull of apparition faded and the familiar scent of Scottish pines floated around them. Slowly, he pushed her away and she reluctantly withdrew her hands from the front of his coat. She raised her head to look at him and for a moment thought – hoped, really – that he would kiss her.

The exact same notion was also running through his mind, but the potential consequences of such an action were racing lightning fast right behind. If he kissed her now, under the clear, moonlit sky, pleasantly warm and still buzzed from his whiskey, he wouldn’t hold back – he’d take her to his bed, and then . . . and then the coming year really would be as almost as bad as the last one had been. If the board of governors found out about any relationship, he’d likely be fired, despite her being of age. If the students discovered their secret, she would be mercilessly taunted and humiliated. No doubt it would then be splashed across The Prophet, becoming an even wider scandal, so much so that they wouldn’t be able to go anywhere without people pointing and staring. He could weather it – he always had – but she deserved better than that, especially as she prepared to take NEWTs.

Fuck. He hated it when Minerva was right.

He stepped further away from her and cleared his throat, gesturing to the school gates. Disappointed, she pulled her wrap tightly around herself and proceeded ahead of him. Once inside, he briefly thought about saying goodnight, there in the entrance, and letting her return to the guest room on her own, but he just couldn’t bring himself to behave so ungentlemanly, so he followed silently behind. When they got to her door she flicked her wand and the wards dropped. She then paused, having come to a decision. Swiftly turning around, she stood on her tip toes and kissed him quickly on the mouth.

“Happy New Year, professor,” she said softly before opening the door and disappearing inside.
Another Shot at New Year's

Chapter Summary

Severus gets another shot at "properly" celebrating New Year's.

Chapter Notes

First of all, apologies for not posting yesterday as per usual - I had a migraine, which kept me away from the computer all day.

Secondly, I forgot to mention Severus thanking Hermione for her Christmas gift in the last chapter - I fixed it mid-week, but in case you missed it, it's right at the beginning. Just so you don't have to go back, let me give the lines here:

"They returned to their usual routine for the week after Christmas. He thanked her rather solemnly for the etched tumbler she had given him, which caused her to duck her head and blush rather prettily, and awkwardly mumbled regrets over not having gotten her anything, although she was adamant that he had already given her a present - his time - but his heart sank when she announced she would be going to Grimmauld Place for New Year's Eve."

All I can say is that it was a very hectic week, hence the migraine first thing Sat. morning! Thank you for your patience. Preview: Hogwarts will be back in session for the next installment. And now on with the story!

Another Shot at New Year’s

She replayed the kiss over and over again as she prepared for bed. It had taken every bit of her Gryffindor courage to do it, and it was over so quickly that she barely remembered how his lips felt beneath hers. The expression on his face wasn’t exactly one of shock but she had taken him by surprise, and when she pulled away his lips were parted as if to . . . to . . . say something? Continue the kiss? She didn’t know, but it had felt very good and she would like for it to have gone on longer – so much longer.

As she lay in bed, her body ached for him, and she thought about what lay beneath all those blasted buttons, imagined what he might look and feel like without his coat or shirt – as slender as he was, he had felt remarkably solid and substantial under her hands. She had tried to dismiss these kinds of thoughts since her fifth year. In her pre-war days, she had rationally attributed her interest to an immature and wholly stereotypical schoolgirl crush, but those feelings hadn’t gone away, rather they had intensified and matured in the face of thinking and writing about his actions and motivations. Whatever was happening now, it had progressed well beyond an adolescent infatuation – it had turned into something quite different, of that she was certain – and less than a half-hour before, she had acted on it. She only hoped that she hadn’t ruined everything.

He didn’t know how long he stood there in the drafty corridor, but it was several minutes as he
processed her embrace. It had happened so quickly he didn’t even have time to put his arm around her waist, much less return her good thoughts for the New Year. His throat was dry and he had difficulty swallowing, but what he really thirsted for was the taste of her lips once more and the warmth of her body pressing against him. It was only when he heard her moving around on the other side of the door that he slowly began his descent to the lower regions of the castle. The next few months were simply going to be agony – thinking about just how much that was going to be the case kept him awake most of the night and he got up early to work in the lab in order to try and distract himself.

She couldn’t sleep – he was too much on her mind – so she put on the lights and wrote instead. The story was slated to pick up again in mid-January and she wanted the chapters to be as strong as possible in order to rekindle interest. Her concentration, however, waned the closer the clock got to ten and it was all she could do to pace herself so she wouldn’t arrive early than she usually did. Excited and nervous by turns as the door to his quarters opened at her approach, she had decided to act as if nothing had changed and watch for any reaction on his part.

He was already in the lab and it looked like he had been there for a while – she wandered in with a big smile and a hearty good morning. He looked up briefly and nodded, registering her presence, but then immediately turned his eyes back to the parchment he was reading. So far, nothing was any different than it had been previously. He placed the instructions for a potion in front of her and bid her get started, telling her that she would be brewing on her own since he had to start preparing class plans for the new term. It was all so matter-of-fact that she didn’t know what to think, but she got down to work, still uncertain about his response.

As he retreated to his study and sat at his desk – distinctly not thinking about class plans – he heard her bustling about in the next room. He thought about how careful he had to be in striking the right balance between being her professor for the next four months while slowly building up to transition to her lover the instant she was done with her wretched exams – it required a delicate touch. He had already decided to continue her private tutorials – she would assist with some of his classes, but her instruction would take place in the lab or in his study, brewing and discussing her work and other assignments. She deserved to be academically challenged – he owed her at least that much for having wasted her time by insisting that she sit in on the seventh-year class all fall. He would maintain his public and professional persona as a nasty, unpleasant man, while continuing the familiarity he allowed her in private – she was intuitive enough to understand the need for this arrangement without him actually having to explain it to her.

His considerations were interrupted when she slipped quietly into the room and headed for his drinks cabinet – he looked at her quizzically when she picked up the bottle of Madeira but didn’t say anything when she took it back to the lab. An hour later and she was at his desk, asking him to check her work. As usual, he sniffed the contents of the cauldron before holding a sample up to the light, then dipped his finger and tasted it. It wasn’t exactly wrong, but she had done something to it. He looked at her and arched a brow expectantly.

“Potions usually taste pretty unpleasant, but that headache remedy is particularly vile, so I added a bit of Madeira,” she supplied, glancing at the bottle sitting amongst the other ingredients. “It’s a largely inert addition – it shouldn’t affect the potion’s efficacy, only its taste, although the alcohol might actually give it a slightly longer shelf life.”

“Are you trying to turn students into raging alcoholics?” he teased with mock seriousness.

“No, sir, only enable them to get the potion past their back teeth,” she cheekily retorted.

He smirked. He really didn’t much care what his potions tasted like – the whiny little buggers could
take their medicine and be grateful for it – but it seemed to be important to her and it was little enough. “Make a note of how much you added to the instructions,” he said casually, almost smiling at how pleased she seemed.

“Lunch, Miss Granger?” he asked, pausing at the door.

“Yes, thank you!” she bubbled as she began to clean up.

This was going to be easy, he thought.

After their meal, she sat at the dining table, rising every so often to retrieve or replace a book while he got on with his own work. Around tea time he suggested they walk down to Hagrid’s to stave off sleepiness. The gamekeeper fixed tea and proceeded to share with them every excruciating detail of his rambling holiday in the Highlands over the break. Long before Hagrid was done, he was in need of the headache potion she had brewed that morning, and he excused himself, insisting, though, that she return to the castle in her own time.

As he passed through the gates, he saw Flitwick, who was just returning from the break, and it struck him just how little time they had left before the faculty would begin showing up – Flitwick would no doubt expect to have dinner with him, and he suddenly and quite desperately wanted one last evening alone with her. He did have one option – it was far from ideal, but it would serve its purpose.

“Severus,” Flitwick acknowledged as he approached. “Good holiday?”

He fell in step with the charms professor. “Well enough,” he offered noncommittally, “yours?”

“Spent some of it at the Ministry trying to break some rather unpleasant spells cast on various items seized from Death Eaters and their families – mostly books, but there were several rather valuable Muggle objet d’art, surprisingly enough,” he replied matter-of-factly.

He huffed knowingly. “I suppose a lot of it came from Malfoy Manor,” he commented rather than asked.

Flitwick didn’t flinch. “A fair amount.”

“What’s going to happen to it?”

“The ministry will keep the darker articles and probably return the rest. I should warn you, though, that aurors are finding unlabeled potions as well. So far, the Ministry lab has been able to identify and deal with them appropriately, but Kingsley wanted me to ask if you’d be willing to be on-call if they come across any they can’t handle – I’ll fill you in at dinner.”

“Can we discuss it tomorrow? I have a prior commitment tonight.”

“Oh,” he said, clearly startled at the news. “Well, is Miss Granger still here? Perhaps I can . . . .”

He cut him off. “Actually, she’s going with me.” Flitwick raised his brow questioningly at this unusual announcement. “Slughorn is having a dinner party – I’ve put him off for years, but with the war now over, he won’t take no for an answer,” he continued only half truthfully. “If I take Miss Granger . . . .” He deliberately trailed off, leaving his colleague to fill in the rest.

“She’ll run interference for you, yes, yes, I understand,” he said, dismissively. “Well, I’ll see you at breakfast then,” Flitwick called over his shoulder as he headed for the stairs.
The last thing in the world he wanted to do was spend the first evening of the New Year with his old potions professor – he had been invited every year since graduating, even though both of them knew perfectly well that he’d never attend. Tonight, however, would be an exception, but first, he had to intercept Hermione on her way back to the castle. He saw her in the distance, making her way back, and he met her at the gate.

“I thought you needed a headache potion,” she puffed as she neared.

“The walk cleared my head,” he responded. As they proceeded in, he quickly formulated a strategy. “I meant to tell you that I won’t be here for dinner this evening.” He relished her look of undisguised disappointment. “I have an engagement, you see, a small gathering with my old potions mentor.”

“Professor Slughorn?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I don’t suppose . . . .”

He paused for effect, and she looked at him expectantly.

“You were in his Slug Club, weren’t you?” he asked as if he was just remembering.

“Um, yes, yes I was,” she replied, though without enthusiasm.

“Oh – I see how it is. Well, I will attend on my own, then – goodnight, Miss Granger, I’ll see you in the morning,” he said, trying to sound regretful as he branched off in the direction of the dungeons.

“Wait!” she squeaked, catching up with him. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt – what were you going to say?”

He looked at her eager face. He should be ashamed, he really should, but he wasn’t.

“I was thinking you might wish to accompany me. You’d be able to meet some former alumni and I’m sure Professor Slughorn would be delighted to see you.”

While it was clear that the prospect of an evening with Slughorn had the same attraction for her as it did for him, he took some satisfaction in watching her weigh her options. If she declined, she would – as far as she knew – spend the evening on her own, so the question was how much she wanted to be with him. Was it worth putting up with Slughorn’s inanities?

“Would we be very late in getting back?” she asked cautiously.

“Not terribly,” he drawled, “we both have work to do in the morning.”

“Yes, alright,” she said as she gave him a weak smile.

He almost felt guilty – most of Slughorn’s guests would be stuffed shirts and the old fart would show her off to everyone like some kind of prize, but it also meant that she’d want to leave early, and then they could have a drink in his rooms.

“I suggest we skip dinner – old Horace will lay out a nice spread,” he observed, though if Slughorn proved stingy, it would mean having a late meal with her as well as a drink. “I’ll meet you at the entrance at 7:00.”

She nodded and headed up the stairs – he watched until she disappeared around a corner. He smirked – he couldn’t have planned it better.

This time, he put on his dress clothes. They were no different than his usual day wear except that
they were newer and lacked the signs of his profession. As expected, she was ready and waiting for
him when he reached the entrance, and though she was wearing her long cloak, he spied high heels
and bare ankles – that boded well. Very well. He offered his arm and they walked to the apparition
point.

They arrived in the lane of a rather sparsely populated village. The house in front of them was
obscured by a large hedge with a weather-worn door in the middle. It opened at their approach, and
beyond was a late medieval manor house – light poured invitingly from the many lattice windows.
As he escorted her into the entrance, she slipped off her cloak and he was pleased to see that she was
wearing the copper dress he had admired the evening before. The house elf who took their outerwear
gestured to a large reception room.

“Severus!” a surprised voice rang out as they stood in the doorway.

The room went eerily quiet – he scowled as his eyes raked over the guests, who returned his look of
distaste in full. Most were people he recognized from his school days and since, although a few were
closer to Hermione’s age. The one thing they had in common, though, was that they were all pains in
the arse, and their collective sense of self-righteous entitlement still set his teeth on edge.

“Severus,” Slughorn exclaimed again, setting down his drink and plastering a smile on his face as he
came over to greet him. “This is an unexpected surprise! And . . . and . . . and you’ve brought Miss
Granger,” he bumbled as he tried to maintain his jollity. “I believe you know everyone here,” he
gestured generally to the room, “but let me make some introductions for Miss Granger,” he said,
taking her elbow. “Please make yourself at home, there’s whiskey and . . . and . . . some hor
d’oeuvres . . . .” He trailed off as he steered his former student to a group standing by the hearth.

The conversations resumed, but furtive glances continued to be thrown in his direction as he helped
himself to one of Slughorn’s fine single malts. He watched his former professor show off his trophy
for a few minutes longer before drifting into the library to peruse his collection. He was just settling
in with a book when he heard a woman’s angry voice. Recognizing it immediately, he leapt from the
chair, returning to the reception room to find Hermione facing down three of Slughorn’s former
students – he didn’t need to be told what the subject of their conversation had been.

“Now, now, Miss Granger, I’m sure they didn’t mean it quite like it sounded,” Slughorn mediated
nervously.

“Of course they meant it,” she retorted, eyeing them with undisguised contempt. “Where were you
three when we were facing Voldemort and his followers?” she sharply asked the trio in front of her.
“In fact,” she said, slowly turning to look around the now quiet room, “I don’t recall seeing any of
you at the last battle with Professor Slughorn,” she said accusingly. A few at least had the good grace
to shuffle their feet and look away. “I’m afraid I must be going, professor,” she said as politely as she
could manage before sweeping from the room. Slughorn put his drink on the mantle and followed.

He already had her cloak ready and was settling it around her shoulders when Slughorn stayed her
with a hand on her arm.

“I’m sorry, my dear,” he said, his eyes drifting upwards to settle on her escort. “You’re right, of
course, there is no excuse for their behavior,” he offered by way of apology, more to him than to her.

“And I’m sorry, too, professor,” she softened slightly, as the two men faced off. “I wasn’t invited and
I shouldn’t have come.” She smiled weakly and turned to leave. Slughorn stepped aside and held the
door open – the pair of them disappeared into the lane, leaving the old professor dismayed and
staring into the cold night.
She stumbled a bit after disapparating, though he had a firm grip on her arm and kept her from falling. It wasn’t until they were almost to the gates before she broke the silence.

“Why did you want to go to Professor Slughorn’s tonight?”

“I didn’t, especially,” he replied, “but it seemed churlish not to now that the war was over.” It wasn’t exactly a lie . . . .

“But you knew the kind of people he’d have there,” she persisted.

“Slughorn has a first rate library,” he temporized, knowing that information was likely to put an end to her questioning.

She was quiet for a few moments. “You didn’t . . . borrow anything, did you?” she asked, trying not to giggle.

He smirked. “Old Slughorn has those books carefully warded – I wouldn’t have been able to get them past the front door without him knowing.”

“No need – who among Hogwart’s students would be interested in reading the likes of *Potions and Arithmancy – Brewing by the Numbers*? Apart from you, that is?” he added drolly. She giggled again.

They were just going through the gates when a familiar voice called to them.

“Severus! Miss Granger!” Turning, they saw Flitwick huffing and puffing his way up the hill. Hermione heard the swift intake of breath and felt his grip tighten on her arm before he pulled completely away.

“You’re back early from Slughorn’s,” Flitwick commented breathlessly as he caught up with them.

“Yes,” he agreed, not wanting to fill him in on the details. “I only went for appearances sake – fortunately it will be another twenty years before I have to attend another one,” he said in a bored, detached tone.

“What did you enjoy yourself, Miss Granger?” he asked as they walked to the entrance.

“No particularly,” she answered truthfully. Flitwick laughed in response.

“Well, Severus, I had dinner with Hagrid, but maybe you’d like to stop in my rooms for a drink – I can tell you more about my time at the Ministry and what you might be facing in terms of confiscated potions.”

Damn and blast. There was no way he could get out of it – there would be no cozy dinner for two down in his quarters.

“Yes, certainly. I’ll just see Miss Granger to her room.”

They ascended the stairs in silence – at least he could be grateful that Flitwick went back to his quarters rather than tag along with them.

“I’m sorry, Miss Granger, you’ve missed your dinner,” he commented as they wound their way through the corridors. “Have Timber bring you something to eat.”
She nodded, and he noted with grim satisfaction that she, too, seemed disappointed. When they got to her door, she waved her wand to drop the wards before turning to him.


“Was the argument about me?” he interrupted. “Hermione?” he pushed when she didn’t respond.

She raised her head at the sound of her name. “Yes,” she finally replied, defiantly. “They had no right, they weren’t there, they know nothing about the circumstances . . . .”

He put his fingers to her lips to stop the tirade that was about to pour forth. She stopped mid-sentence, her wide eyes staring up at him in surprise at his gesture.

“Last night, Miss Granger, you wished me a Happy New Year,” he said softly, inching his face closer to hers. “I would like to offer the same to you.”

He pulled his hand away, braced himself against the door frame with it and leaned in, brushing his lips lightly against hers. When she took a startled breath, he pressed his advantage. The fit was perfect, and he couldn’t help touching the tip of tongue to hers ever so slightly, just enough to taste her and make her wonder later if it had really happened. He pushed off from the wall, searing the look of wonderment and desire on her face into his memory. He left her breathless and clearly wanting more, just as he had intended. That kiss was going to have to sustain them both for a good long while, several months, in fact, and he, at least, wasn’t entirely sure how he was going to make it.
School Resumes

Chapter Summary

School resumes, and as Hermione and Severus settle into their new schedule, the students eagerly await the resumption of Love in a Time of War.

Chapter Notes

I want to thank all of you for reading - this story is quickly becoming the highlight of my own school term, I have to say. If you would like to share a comment, well, that would be great!

School Resumes

Several more of his colleagues returned the next day and he resigned himself to the fact that he would no longer have Hermione all to himself, which was perhaps just as well, at least for the time being – he really did have to settle down to work on class plans. He told her that they wouldn’t do any further brewing until the term started, and though obviously disappointed, she accepted that fact, informing him that her essays were finished so she didn’t need access to his collection – at least for the time being. He smugly noted that she was clearly trying to leave open the possibility of using it later, which would have to be in his quarters since she knew he didn’t lend out books. But for the moment, she told him that she, too, had other things that needed attending to before classes began. He had no doubt as to what those other things were, and he realized with a start that he still hadn’t made a decision about the story – he tried not to think about it as he went about preparing for the resumption of the term.

The weekend came, and Minerva arrived Saturday afternoon, stretching out her break almost until the very last minute. He couldn’t blame her – he had always found it dispiriting to come back from the holidays to the hustle and bustle of the school term, although it was made considerably more tolerable this time around by the prospect of still being able to see Hermione regularly, not only in class as an occasional assistant but in his lab and personal quarters for her private tutorials. Being close to her and unable to act on it – yet, at least – would be a strain on his system, but not seeing her would be simply unbearable after the easy existence they had shared over the break. He would have to be careful, however, to maintain his public persona. Even sitting there Sunday evening, having his dinner and looking out over the room, he knew – without having to turn his head – that Minerva was watching him to see if he was watching Hermione, who, to his consternation, was doing all too good a job of not watching him.

Hermione looked forward to the beginning of the new term if only because it would usher in a sense of order and routine, which she found she needed at the moment. She had felt discombobulated for much of the break – yes, she had been thrilled to use her professor’s library and excited to be allowed to help him brew potions in his private lab, but being in close proximity to him had been more than a little . . . unnerving, and things had definitely taken a sharp turn at the start of the New Year. She was quite relieved that he didn’t seem inclined to talk about what had happened between them, afraid as
she was that he would push her away by spouting rules concerning the impropriety of student/teacher relationships, reminding her of their differences in age, or, worse, simply dismissing her feelings for him outright. She wasn’t a child anymore – she had come of age during the war and wouldn’t be put off by anyone simply because they were older than her. But these were discussions that she didn’t want to have until she had taken her NEWTs. She wouldn’t feel as though she was a free agent until they were out of the way once and for all. In the meantime, she would still get to see him regularly while the story would allow her to continue to explore her feelings for him.

She was relieved to see that the new term was beginning with little fuss, which probably owed not a little to the fact that the magazine wasn’t going to start running her story again for another week. Her strategy of cooling things down in order to refocus the attention of her readers was bearing fruit. Over Sunday dinner, she listened intently to Ginny and some of her friends talking about aspects of the plot in some detail, but especially Domitian’s willingness to become the Ministry’s double agent, single-mindedly working to bring down Valmont even if it took him the rest of his life – or cost him his life, period. All of them agreed that it was a noble thing for him to do and a bit unexpected as well, given some of his darker and less sociable qualities. This led them naturally to another salient point, which was how those sacrifices negated his seeming moral ambiguity and made him an effective spy. It was apparent that these young women had gone back and reread the story and were starting to think about it more deeply, which was exactly what she was hoping would happen. Over dinner, she chanced a glance or two at the high table, but he seemed preoccupied with his meal. Still, the sight of him, and the prospect of working closely with him over the next few months excited her intellectually and warmed her in places other than just her heart.

When dinner was finished, he waited to get up until he saw her leave, and was almost immediately waylaid by the headmistress.

“Join me in a whiskey, Severus,” Minerva commanded rather than offered.

He followed sullenly behind all the way to her office, and was in no better mood when she handed him a tumbler of her best scotch. Sinking into one of the chairs by the hearth and stretching his feet towards the fire, he sipped his drink as he watched her settle in across from him.

“I need to know – what have you decided to do?” she asked, cupping her glass in her hands.

He looked away, focusing his attention on the flames in the grate. It was time – he had to make a decision. If he confronted Hermione, even non-judgmentally, he wasn’t sure what would happen to their budding relationship, especially if she refused to comply with his wishes, and he knew her well enough to believe that she just might. If he said nothing, more of his private life would be laid bare for all and sundry to wade through – but on the other hand, continuing the story might also draw her further to him. Why did his life always have to be so fucking complicated?

He took a steadying breath, knowing what his answer inevitably had to be. “I think it would be best for the school if I . . . .”

“Stop right there,” Minerva said sharply, putting up her hand. “You’ve done enough of that, making personal decisions based on what would be best for Hogwarts and its students. That is now my purview – make the decision based on what is best for you.”

“You think I really have some choice in this?” he asked ruefully.

“We both know you do,” she responded firmly. When he didn’t immediately respond, she continued. “If it will make your decision any easier, you should know that, as headmistress of this esteemed institution, I deem it of vital importance that our students – and the wider wizarding world – know the unvarnished truth about what we’ve just been through, otherwise we can’t go forward with our
lives in any meaningful way. In fact,” she said, pausing for emphasis, “I think it’s the most important thing our students could learn this year – it’s infinitely more important than studying how to transfigure one object into another or brew a headache potion, don’t you think?” she looked at him steadily.

“You do realize that if I don’t step in, the story is going to continue to disrupt this school,” he persisted. “And I’m not just talking about the titillating sex,” he bit out. “It won’t be long before the students realize who Domitian really is and then things will get exceedingly difficult, especially when – not if – their parents find out.”

“We’ll deal with things as they come,” she responded resolutely. “Make your decision.”

He swallowed hard under her steely gaze. “I . . . .” He cleared his throat. “I won’t say anything for the moment – although if things become too contentious I will revisit my decision,” he finished quickly.

Minerva relaxed considerably, finally lifting the whiskey to her lips. He downed the rest of his drink and set it on the table between them, preparing to leave.

“There is just one more thing,” she announced primly, freezing him in his place.

“Isn’t there fucking always?” he lamented wearily, sitting back down.

“You should know that Hermione will be keeping the guest room just down the corridor from me for the rest of the term,” she informed him. “She can share the necessary passwords with Miss Weasley, but otherwise, she needs the privacy and space to work these last few months.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You don’t trust me?” he scowled.

“It’s not you I don’t trust.”

He arched a brow.

“It’s hard to resist a determined Gryffindor,” she observed knowingly.

The corners of his lips lifted ever so slightly.

“You can wipe that supercilious smirk right off your face,” she sniffed. “We both know she’s interested – I’m just trying to make it easier for you to resist,” the headmistress smiled wickedly.

“Until she’s done with her NEWTs,” he threw down. Minerva scowled and pursed her lips, but otherwise said nothing in response as he got up and left.

He rounded a corner down from the head’s office and saw Hermione at the end of the hall as she was about to go into her rooms.

“Professor!” she eked in surprise.

As she stood there, the only thing he could think of was how much he wanted to strip her of that ghastly uniform and burn it – androgyny didn’t suit her in the least. Of course his thoughts then immediately settled on the notion of just stripping her, period. That, too, would solve the issue of her genderless appearance.

“Miss Granger,” he oozed. Before either of them could say anything else, Minerva appeared around the corner. When he turned to look at her, her lips were pursed disapprovingly – again.
“Hermione, here is that book I was telling you about earlier,” she said, passing the text around the man between them and eyeing him suspiciously. The young woman took it and, under the weight of the headmistress’s glare, said her goodnight, slipping into her room and closing the door behind her.

“Am I going to have to follow you out every time you leave my office?” Minerva hissed. He smirked at her before stalking away.

It was a smooth start to the new term. Hermione spent the first three mornings of her week assisting with his classes, then brewed in the lab in the afternoons or discussed her essays and readings in front of his hearth and a pot of tea. It was all working out very much to his liking, but after two weeks of glutting himself on her presence, he was still startled Friday morning when a parliament of owls descended on the room, almost all of them with a magazine in their beaks. Upon delivery, more than two dozen of the female students who had shown up for the meal immediately abandoned their breakfast and practically sprinted from the room with chapter nine. He looked over to where Hermione was sitting, discerning a smile on her face in between spoonfuls of oatmeal. He then looked down the table to Minerva, who was also just getting up, her own copy of the magazine clutched in her hand. She returned his glance knowingly and, passing behind his chair, whispered that she’d hand it on to him at lunch. When he saw Hermione getting ready to leave, he, too, got up – he had classes with the first, second, and third-years to get through.

Time dragged, but eventually the clock tower signaled the end of his morning lessons. As he headed into lunch, Minerva was waiting for him in the hall, periodical in hand. He took some comfort in the fact that she didn’t seem unduly upset.

“Well?” he asked as he approached.

“There isn’t much plot this week,” she said acerbically. “She’s probably just trying to get readers’ attention after the holiday, but I do think she’s setting things up for a discussion between Domitian and Albinia concerning the Minister’s . . . um . . . .” She was about to say murder but changed her mind at the last minute, letting the thought hang there between them.

“Yes,” he replied, catching on immediately. “I can imagine only too well what the topic of that conversation will be about,” he said uncomfortably.

The magazine was rolled up and she tilted one end so it rested on his chest. “Still, I think you’ll enjoy it,” she smirked. He took the periodical, stuck it in a pocket inside his robes, and followed her into lunch. Some of the older girls were giggling in groups at the different tables, and he understood immediately Minerva’s allusion – there was some kind of sexual encounter in chapter nine, and it was sufficiently titillating to cause an outbreak of blushing among its young readers. A wave of apprehension rolled over him – swiftly followed by a twinge of excitement.

He sat down, calmly unfurled his napkin, and tucked into his lunch. To outward appearances he seemed no different than usual, but he was starting to feel distinctly . . . tense. He was tempted to skip lunch and retreat to the dungeons, but feared he’d be in no fit state to take on the seventh-years in an hour. Hermione – who apparently was having her meal elsewhere – would be there, and when class was done, they were slated to do some work in the lab. No, it was probably best if he stayed away from his rooms for the time being.

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair and tried to concentrate on his plate. He finished before the hour was out and had just about decided to make a short visit to his quarters after all – it would have to be a quick one – when out of the corner of his eye he spotted three seventh-year Slytherin boys trailing behind a couple of girls from their own house. He sensed trouble and quickly rose, whipping down the center of the room, his robes billowing wildly behind him. By the time he reached them just outside the doors, one of the young men was on the floor clutching his groin as his companions...
seemed frozen in place, their hands held defensively in front of themselves. The young woman who had hexed him stood her ground and kept her wand pointed at the writhing figure.

“He tried to touch me inappropriately,” she announced agitatedly. This assertion was backed up by her friend who, equally outraged, was nodding vigorously.

“Well I don’t think he’ll try to do that again, Miss Pruitt, so you can put away your wand,” he replied tersely. “Get to class, all of you,” he growled as he pointed his wand at the boy’s crotch and muttered a healing spell. The young man stilled and felt around a bit before exhaling. Severus bent over, grabbed a fist full of robe and shirt, and hauled the student to his feet.

“Thank you, professor,” he said, clearly grateful.

“What have I told you, Mr. Pendergast, about not touching without being invited to do so?” The student looked sheepish. “It wasn’t a rhetorical question,” he sneered.

“You said . . . you said some girl would hex my bollocks off,” Pendergast mumbled.

“Yes, and I was right, wasn’t I?” he snarled.

“But that magazine, they’re all reading it – isn’t it what they want?” the young Slytherin whined defensively.

Severus leaned over until they were nose to nose.

“A curse on your stupidity, boy. You can’t blame the magazine for something you’ve already a predilection for.”

“Predi . . . predilick . . . .” Pendergast stumbled.

The student’s lack of vocabulary only infuriated him further. “Keep your hands to yourself! If you don’t,” he warned, “I might not be able to fix it next time! Ten points from Slytherin,” he growled reluctantly as he turned on his heel and headed for class, his more personal problem now taken care of.

He barreled into the room just as the clock tower chimed the hour in the distance. “Your assignment,” he barked, and with a wave of his hand, the instructions for that day’s work appeared on the chalk board. “Let’s see if you can keep from blowing yourselves up today, shall we?” he commented snidely before taking a seat at his desk.

The sound of shuffling feet filled the air. He watched as Hermione supervised the distribution of ingredients from the storeroom. As the room quieted and the students got down to work, he began marking papers, although his thoughts soon drifted. What did he have to be so cranky about? The incident with Pendergast was annoying, but the boy had gotten the lesson he so richly deserved and would no doubt behave himself henceforth. Indeed, once word of the encounter made its way around the school the incident would serve as a warning for others not to make a similar mistake. He had a lovely young woman to run his class – he briefly raised his eyes to where she was showing a student how to dice an ingredient – and would be spending time alone with her in his private lab when it was over. And then there was a new chapter to look forward to that evening. He almost smiled but caught himself – glancing around the room, no one apparently had noticed.

When class was finished, she followed him into the lab where she found three vials already set out on the work table.

“Each of these contains a different potion,” he began. “Your assignment is to identify them, or short
of that, list as many of the ingredients you think are in them. You may smell the potions and hold them to the light but do not taste or otherwise touch them. Then I want you to speculate on whether or not you could combine them with each other. Save all of your process work – I will want to review it. You have one hour.”

She set her book bag on a stool and took out a self-inking quill and several pieces of parchment. Within minutes, she was deep in thought and scribbling away. He watched her work for a while, but then left her to it. He returned with mugs of tea forty-five minutes later, just as her time was up.

“Quill down, if you please,” he said, breaking her concentration and handing her a mug – she took it gratefully, murmuring her thanks. Wisps of hair that had escaped the tie at the back of her neck framed her face, which was flushed. Her eyes were bright while her bottom lip was red and slightly swollen from having nibbled on it as she worked. Standing across from her, he reached over and pulled the parchments to his side of the table. As he quickly scanned them, she sipped the tea nervously. Satisfied that he had the gist of her line of thought, he looked up.

“So tell me about these potions, Miss Granger,” he instructed in his best professorial voice.

She set the mug down and rested her hands on the stainless steel surface.

“They are all medicinal potions – blood replenisher, skin-gro, and I think a nerve regeneration potion,” she said, pointing at each one in turn.

“But you’re not sure?” he pressed, tapping the third one.

“I recognize most of the ingredients,” she said, pointing to a list on one of the parchments in front of him. “Alone they would, at the very least, stimulate the nerves. I’m assuming that the other ingredients enable the potion to do more than that, and more probably means regeneration.”

He arched a brow. “Never just guess, Miss Granger,” he chastised. He read through the list. “You are missing four ingredients.” He rattled them off for her, although she had heard of only one of them.

“Willow bark would ease muscle inflammation,” she speculated aloud, “which would be critical in nerve regeneration – it . . . it is a nerve regeneration potion, isn’t it?”

He quirked his mouth. “Yes, Miss Granger, it is,” he conceded. Before she could raise a smile, he posed a question. “Could you use it in combination with any of these other potions?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” she commented.

“Nor would I,” he agreed. He moved on, tapping the next vial. “Blood replenisher you said?”

“Yes, but not any ordinary one.” She uncorked the vial and sniffed. “It kind of smells like the molasses biscuits my grandmother used to make,” she commented.

The corner of his mouth twitched. “That’s because it has blackstrap molasses in it – the potion doesn’t just assist the spleen in blood production, it also treats anemia.” She nodded at this information. “Could you use it in the same way you would a regular batch of blood replenisher?”

She thought for a moment. “Yes,” she said firmly.

“Tell me about this one,” he continued, fingering the last vial.

“Skin-gro – for bad scrapes and burns.”
“Could you take it with the blood replenisher?” he asked, gesturing to the dark brown liquid.

“Yes,” she unhesitatingly replied.

“But _not_ the nerve regeneration potion, you said – why not?” he asked.

“It would probably make skin wounds painful, perhaps unbearably so.”

“Indeed it would,” he responded, pleased with her answers. She furrowed her brow. “You have _questions_, Miss Granger?” he gently mocked.

“Not so much questions, really,” she answered, “just observations. These are, well, _natural_ additions to potions that are comprised of mostly _magical_ ingredients. The combination is a bit surprising.”

“Is it?” he questioned.

“Not to me, you understand,” she quickly interjected, “but I imagine that _certain_ witches and wizards – especially those who most recently supported _You Know Who_ – might balk at what could be described in some circles as Muggle herbal medicine.”

“An _astute_ observation,” he conceded, “although you are forgetting one thing.”

She looked at him quizzically.

“Most people do not have your keen discernment. All anyone would likely know was that the potions they took _worked_. Combining the _natural_, as you describe it, and the magical is appropriate since physiologically witches and wizards have more in common with Muggles than otherwise. With our backgrounds, you and I understand this, but there are, as you say, some people – and regrettably more than a fair number of potion masters as well – who foolishly refuse to accept that, who fear being tainted by what isn’t magical.”

She let what he had said sink in.

“And with that, Miss Granger, your lesson today is at an end,” he said, pulling three labels from his pocket and reattaching them to the vials. As she reached to retrieve the parchments, he stilled her by putting his hand on top of hers – it was warm and completely enveloping. Her eyes jerked up to his face.

“I need to read this over more carefully, Miss Granger,” he explained smoothly.

“Of course, professor,” she just managed to breathe out. He lifted his hand and watched as she picked up her book bag and slowly crossed the room. She paused at the door before turning.

“Thank you, professor,” she smiled shyly.

“You’re welcome, Miss Granger,” he said, favoring her with a slight smile in response. He stood there until he heard the outer door latch, and then re-shelved the vials in the proper cabinets. He put out the lights and returned to his desk to finish the grading he had begun earlier, but his mind wandered and settled on the image of a small hand on parchment – capable and yet entirely soft and feminine under his own, rough palm. He curled his fingers and could almost feel her warmth.

He shook his head to clear it – there was work to be done. Sitting up straighter, he pulled his chair closer to the desk, but something in his robes bumped against the edge. Pushing the chair back, he felt the inside pocket, suddenly remembering. He pulled out the magazine and stared at it for a moment before taking it over to his reading chair by the hearth. The essays could bloody well wait.
Reestablishing the Connection

Chapter Summary

Severus finally gets to read the latest installment, and like the other readers, the writer has his full attention once more. He also has a job for her . . .

Chapter Notes

I am sorry to be posting this a good six hours later than I usually do - in my defense, I had a lot of errands to run, not least of them restocking the cabinets and refrigerator! I hope this will have been worth the wait - let me know!

Reestablishing the Connection

He sensed there was something up even before he reached the Ministry foyer – several employees rushed past him, bypassing the lifts and taking the stairs down. As he stepped into the Atrium, bedraggled aurors and members of the Inner Circle were arriving singly and in groups via the floo network – several stumbled before falling into a heap on the floor. There had obviously been some kind of skirmish with Valmont’s Green Shirts – their clothes were scorched in places while a few held their hands over what looked like mostly minor wounds. There was further commotion behind him as other members of the Inner Circle hurried to their injured colleagues. It took a few moments before his presence was noticed, and then the accusations started to fly.

Cary leaped to his feet, the only thing preventing the young man from actually attacking him physically being Reg, whose arms were wrapped tightly around him.

“What the bloody hell do you think you are playing at?!?” Cary shouted angrily. Based on the expressions on those around him, it was a question they all wanted to know the answer to.

“You’re supposed to be working for us,” Sylvie hissed as Wolfgang placed a restraining hand on her arm.

“We were ambushed tonight,” Serena stated with venom as she pushed her way to the front. “The Green Shirts knew we were coming. Someone,” she said, lingering over the word, “betrayed us.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” he spat. “Valmont knows he and his followers are being watched – I’ve told you that myself, suggested strategies to cover and protect yourselves, but did you listen? Do any of you ever listen?” he snarled. “So you were lured to some spot tonight,” he speculated, “assumed that he was having another gathering of some sort, and were caught out – the way you lot clump around London he probably heard you coming ten streets away,” he threw drown.

Serena was undeterred by his assessment. “How much is he paying you, Domitian?” she demanded, beginning to circle around to his side. He turned slightly to keep her in view. “Where does your loyalty really lie?” she continued accusingly.
Things had taken an ugly turn and his wand was drawn an instant before Serena’s appeared in her hand. The others swiftly followed her example, and more than a dozen weapons were now all pointing directly at him.

“How about an after work cocktail with your colleagues, Domitian – one laced with a generous measure of Veritaserum?” she jeered menacingly.

“Think you could actually manage it, Serena?” he taunted. He shifted towards the others, who raised their wands higher and took a step back, mindful of his reputation as a dueler in spite of the fact that he was wildly outnumbered. He smirked knowingly at their inherent and completely justified fear of his abilities.

He heard Perse’s heels on the marble floor a split second before she flung herself in front of him. She faced his attackers with her own wand raised and her other arm stretched out protectively – they would have to go through her to get to him. For a moment, he was rendered speechless by her move, but then he became enraged by it – he didn’t need some young woman coming to his defense, he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself.

“Get out of the way!” he growled lowly.

“And have even more slanders hurled at you when you hex them to next week and back?” she snapped over her shoulder, glaring at their purported comrades at arms.

“ Enough!” Albinia bellowed angrily as she stepped out from a lift, having instantly assessed the situation. The room went quiet – under the weight of her disapproving stare, the wands of his challengers were lowered, albeit sullenly. “Need I remind you – once again – that all we do when we accuse and attack each other is empower Valmont? He thinks he is invincible, and when you behave like this . . . he is.” She let that sink in for a moment. “I am here to tell you that we will face setbacks – some of us will lose our lives in this fight, and anyone unprepared for that does our side no favors. If you can’t handle that particular truth then you need to leave – now,” she finished severely, looking around at the weary group before settling her gaze on Serena. Some had the good grace to look ashamed, but more than a few – Cary, Sylvie, but especially Serena – still looked at Domitian with undisguised hatred and suspicion.

Albinia turned to address their spy. “I believe you have a meeting you need to attend,” she said, coolly dismissing him.

Domitian sneered at the ragged group before sheathing his wand and drawing his robes around him. Turning on his heel and heading for the nearest floo, he disappeared in a flame of green light.

Perse’s eyes met Albinia’s for the merest of seconds before she nodded almost imperceptibly – the young woman quickly took off after him. She stepped out into the street and caught the last flap of his robe as he rounded a corner. Disillusioning herself, she hurried along, tracking him as he expertly navigated the dark passageways of London.

He seethed as he made his way to where Valmont was holding yet another interminable meeting – the real meeting. The time was coming – and sooner than they realized – when all of this in-fighting would be moot. Albinia would be gone and the Inner Circle would be left to try and keep her plan together, and when that happened, his life was forfeit. His so-called companions of honor would no more hesitate to kill him than they would Valmont if they believed he was being less than forthright, which was what they thought pretty much all time, now.

He was only a few blocks away from the meeting place when he got the distinct feeling that he was being followed. All week he had sensed that someone was trailing him, although he hadn’t been able
to catch them. As he turned the corner of yet another dark alley, he slipped into the shadow of a recessed doorway and waited.

He was completely obscured from the street, and when he felt the air shift from someone disillusioned walking by, he reached out and shoved them hard – face first – into the door, murmuring Finite Incantatem.

Perse squeaked in spite of herself. She felt his breath on her neck as he took in her scent. He stiffened.

“I should have known,” he snarled, roughly whirling her around. “Nosy busybody – just have to stick your wand into everyone’s business, don’t you? What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?” He had her boxed in, with his hands against the door on either side of her shoulders.

“You . . . need someone . . . .” she started.

“Someone to . . . what?” he demanded harshly.

She didn’t immediately respond, but rather peered at him in the dim light. “You just . . . need someone,” she said softly.

He was taken aback by her remark and he found his anger starting to dissipate. They were so close that he could feel puffs of air against his lips when she spoke. He relaxed into her slightly as the tip of his nose touched hers before tracking down her cheek and along her jaw to her ear. “What makes you think you know what I need?” he jaggedly breathed. He knew should fling her away, nurse his annoyance with her and keep his distance as he had vowed to do, but instead his hands shifted of their own volition from the door to her arms as he retraced the path across her face. He brushed against her lips ever so lightly and started to press into her further when a barely audible pop caught his attention.

“Fuck! Follow my lead,” he hissed as he grabbed her hands and pushed them behind her, holding them in place at the small of her back.

A faint light appeared to his left. “Who’s there?” a low, gravelly voice asked. Recognizing it immediately as coming from one of Valmont’s minions, he growled audibly and slowly turned, curling his lips to bare his teeth.

“Oh, it’s you, Domitian,” the man said. Perse kept her head turned away so her face couldn’t be seen. “A bit of skirt before the meeting?” the Green Shirt laughed lecherously. “Just the thing to take the edge off. Why don’t I take over from you when you’re done?” he leered.

“There won’t be anything left when I’m done,” he replied darkly, “unless you have a taste for necrophilia.”

The man’s lascivious sneer evaporated and he scowled in distaste. “ Fucking degenerate – only you enjoy such perversities,” he slung at him before stalking off to the meeting.

Domitian pushed her back into the shadows, his lips next to her ear. “You will be the death of me, witch,” he ground out, still holding her hands behind her. But while his words were hard, his lips were soft against her skin as they coursed towards her mouth once more – he would have one kiss for his troubles. Her lips were parted when they finally touched, and he drank from them as if it would be his last memory of her, which it could easily be, given Valmont’s increasing unpredictability. She knew this as well as he did, and so held nothing back, boldly tilting her hips against his erection and absorbing his involuntary moan.
A car horn sounding at the end of the alley startled them from their embrace and he quickly regained his senses. Stepping back, he pulled her out from the wall.

“I will see you disapparate, witch,” he barked. Drawing her close, he gave her one further warning. “Don’t ever presume to follow me again!” he rebuked sharply before pushing her away.

Perse gave him a frustrated and yet firmly defiant look before spinning around and disappearing.

Fuck. She really would be the death of him, one way or another if he wasn’t more careful. He swiftly walked the short distance to the gathering place and tried to clear his mind – he needed to be ready in case Legilimency was on the agenda for the evening, as it often was these days. His master’s paranoia was growing worse as time wore on, and he often invaded the minds of his followers to see what they had been up to and what they truly thought. In addition to Occluding the usual things, he would now have the added burden of hiding his disgust when Valmont took to gloating over the injuries his followers had inflicted that evening.

Entering the room where Valmont’s supporters had assembled, he immediately bumped into the Green Shirt who had accosted him only moments before. The man looked him with disgust, but when his eyes drifted down Domitian’s face to his mouth, he visibly paled. Suddenly realizing the presence of something wet, Domitian reached up with a finger and swiped his lower lip. Looking at it, he saw a bright red smear – Perse must have bit her lip when he pushed her into the door.

Domitian smiled nastily as he slowly licked his finger clean before running his tongue carefully over his lips, as though he were afraid of missing even the merest drop.

"Delicious," he observed with salacious smirk. For a moment, he thought the man was going to vomit. Instead, the minion swallowed it down and quickly moved away from him. All in all, it wasn’t a bad performance, and he knew it wouldn’t take long for his . . . tastes to become common knowledge among the rest of his Green Shirt colleagues. It might not be a bad thing, in fact, if The Snake believed him capable of the worst kind of depravity – it would serve to solidify his loyalty in Valmont’s mind without actually having to do anything. Yes, that kiss had been very . . . helpful, he thought, carefully Occluding anything else it might also have been.

Severus tossed the magazine onto the coffee table and unconsciously rubbed his finger along his bottom lip. Well, she had certainly succeeded in getting at least his attention again. He pondered the chapter as he adjusted his trousers – he was safe for another week, but he knew Domitian’s true identity would be blown before very long, and he only hoped that Minerva could handle it.

As he had watched Hermione in class, and then working in his lab over the course of that week, he had been grudgingly impressed with her ability to compartmentalize – it reminded him too much of himself not to be. There was no hint whatsoever about what she did in her free time – to all outward appearances she was the same old brainy know-it-all swot who so used to get up his nose, only she didn’t irritate him anywhere near as much as she had once done. Quite the opposite, in fact. Teaching slothful students day in and day out left him starved for intellectual stimulation that his colleagues could only go so far in addressing. But she kept him on his toes, mentally as well as physically. So far, and with just a handful of official tutorials behind them, he felt positively refreshed . . . and incredibly aroused.

Merlin’s balls. Just thinking about her as he sat through Friday’s dinner made him ache. It had been a few weeks since he had indulged himself, but if he didn’t do something soon, his head was going to explode – both of them. Leaving before the pudding was served, he went straight to the bathroom when he got to his quarters, trying to clamp down on the rising urgency as he methodically stripped off – someday he’d like to do this somewhere else and not on his own. When he finally reached the shower, he briefly thought about turning the nob to cold but that worked only for just so long – each
arousal was more painful than the last. He braced his hands against the wall as the water sluiced down his back and the scent of his shower oil wafted upward. It didn’t take long. A bright, sparkly light marred his vision as he came, and when it finally started to clear, he was still breathing hard and his legs were shaking. Turning around, he slid down the wall and let the water pelt his face.

He slept well – he usually did after so intense a release – and there was almost a lilt in his step as he strode into breakfast. A full fry up appeared in front of him as he sat down, but when he reached for his coffee, his eye caught on the object of his desire. It was a rare sunny winter day, and she was sitting in a shaft of gentle morning light – it flickered through her free-flowing hair, making it look as though she was enveloped in a nimbus. After a moment of staring at her, she raised her eyes and he felt as though he had been pierced. She smiled a bit shyly, careful not to be noticed by those around her, and he felt a tingling sensation starting to spread under his napkin. He sat for a moment contemplating his plate – Minerva breezed past him on her way to her seat murmuring something about a more sensible diet. He pulled his napkin slowly off his lap and scooted his chair back. He laid the cloth on the table and headed for the door. It wasn’t the food that was going to kill him – NEWTs were still more than two months away.

Hermione looked up a second time, but he had already left. Unless he had some brewing emergency, she wouldn’t see him the rest of the weekend except at mealtimes, and even then only at a distance. After spending so much time with him over the holidays, and now meeting him only a few times a week, she felt . . . . Bereft was the closest word to describe the way she felt at not seeing him on Saturdays and Sundays as well. A thought flitted through her mind – maybe he had gone to the library. She had writing to do and immediately decided to do it there, just in case she saw him.

With each creak of the library door, she looked up to see who was there, but she didn’t lay eyes on him for the rest of the weekend – not even at mealtimes – and knew even before she came into dinner Sunday night that his seat at the high table was likely to be empty. Halfway through the meal, though, she saw him and Flitwick at the side door, but rather than taking their places, he retrieved Minerva and the three of them stepped out into the hall. The headmistress returned after several minutes and resumed her seat, but her other professors did not. She was rather surprised when Minerva’s eyes, which had been scanning the Gryffindor table, settled on her. Almost at the same moment, the students sitting around her fell silent, as if a Dementor had somehow managed to sneak into the room. Startled out of her reverie by some familiar throat clearing, she whipped her head around and found herself staring into his mid-section – she slowly drew her eyes upwards.

“Um, did you need to speak with me, professor?” she asked a bit timorously.

“If you can pull yourself away from your lively dinner companions,” he replied crossly, said companions blanching as they suddenly remembered how hungry they were and focused their attention on their meal.

Hermione climbed over the bench as he gestured towards the door. He sneered reflexively at the students, who were clearly relieved that they, too, hadn’t been summoned into the hall to have a word with their dreaded potions professor.

“I regret having to pull you away from your meal, Miss Granger.”

“No, no, that’s fine professor,” she quickly interjected a bit breathlessly.

“It would seem that I have to be away for a few days this week,” he began irritably. “You may recall that Professor Flitwick has been working to remove some very unpleasant charms on items confiscated from a number of the Dark Lord’s followers.” She nodded. “In the latest batch, they’ve found quite a few potions as well – all unlabeled – and the Ministry can’t dispose of them properly without knowing what they are, so I’ve been seconded to London for a few days.”
“Do you need help, professor?” she asked eagerly.

The corners of his lips curled slightly at the thought of the two of them being away from school – *alone together* – but then quickly pushed it aside. He couldn’t muck around, not with this.

“No, Miss Granger, it’s far too hazardous, but there is, however, something that you *can* do to be of help.”

She waited expectantly.

“My classes need to be covered until I return. Professor McGonagall and I both agree that you are more than capable of taking them in my place.”

Her eyes widened and she gaped at him. “But . . . but . . . .” she stammered.

“Do you doubt our judgment?” he interrupted.

She wrung her hands. “I’ve never done anything like this,” she said hesitantly.

“Oh *course* you have,” he quickly retorted. “For six years you kept Potter and Weasley from flunking out of this institution, and were responsible for Mr. Longbottom squeaking by in potions.” When she looked ready to protest again, he held up his hand, curtailing her. “I will draw up detailed lessons plans for you to follow. I need to be at the Ministry at nine, and your first class starts then as well, so be at my office at eight tomorrow morning – that should give us time to go over everything before we have to begin our respective days. Breakfast will be waiting for you – until then, you should get some sleep,” he advised. And with that he swept off – he had a lot to do before leaving in the morning and he wasn’t going to coddle her since she could handle things perfectly well, whether she knew it or not.

Hermione didn’t sleep – at all. Tutoring her friends was one thing, but teaching whole classes was quite another. She could overawe the younger students, but the older ones would likely challenge her authority. She only hoped the threat of her professor’s retaliation would be sufficient to keep them in order. And then there were her concerns about the work that lay ahead of him in London. The potions the Ministry had in their possession had to be very dark indeed if they had to call him in to consult.

As usual, the door to his quarters opened at her approach. He looked up as she entered and grimaced – her uniform grew more atrocious in his eyes each time he saw it. While *he* at least was acutely aware that a woman’s figure was hidden under her clothes, to other students she no doubt looked like someone playing dress-up in an ill-fitting costume. She was going to get some flack over the next few days, but at least he could look forward to deducting house points and issuing detentions for bad behavior when he got back – if she didn’t hex offenders all the way to the infirmary first, that is. Once her temper was up, she didn’t suffer fools gladly, especially in potentially dangerous situations – he wouldn’t want to be a sixth or seventh-year doing something foolish while under her watch.

They sat at the dining table and ate in silence as she read through his class plans. The lower grades would be doing basic brewing – no dangers there – but the upper levels had several difficult potions to get through. The work was perfectly straightforward for someone of her abilities, but some of the students were likely to have trouble.

He finished eating before she did and he got up to rummage through some papers on his desk before going into the lab. She joined him there as he packed the supplies he might need.

“Questions, Miss Granger?” he queried as he worked.
“Not as such, professor,” she replied. “I assume you want me to test the potions for accuracy, but do you want me to score the essays as well?”

He paused. It hadn’t occurred to him that, advanced as she was, she could take some of the more onerous aspects of teaching – like grading – off his hands. He couldn’t help himself. “Of course, Miss Granger – it is part of the job, isn’t it?” He should have felt guilty about that, but it was about time for her to see what the grand profession was really like.

He cast his wand over the case, sealed it, and then grabbed it off the work table, heading back into the study – she followed closely on his heels. He turned to look around the room to see if he had forgotten anything before settling his gaze on her. She looked worried.

He sighed impatiently. “Miss Granger, they are dunderheads of the first order. They may be inventive pranksters and I grant you the mistakes they make can sometimes be dangerous, but you have dealt with infinitely worse, let me assure you, as a student – and since,” he added pointedly. He reached for a pinch of floo powder from the pot on the mantle but paused before flinging it into the fire. “Miss Granger – I have every confidence in you,” he said, suppressing a smirk, knowing full well the impact it would have on her.

“I won’t let you down, professor,” she said more firmly than she actually felt as he disappeared into the hearth.

Her parting words were still ringing in his ears when he stepped into the Ministry lobby. “You never have,” he said to himself as he walked briskly towards the lifts.
Unmasking

Chapter Summary

Hermione teaches Severus's classes for the week, and does so with only one mishap. Severus comes back to Hogwarts to find that his/Domitian's cover has been blown.

Chapter Notes

Sorry I'm posting this a couple of hours late - I promise I will try to do better. This chapter is a bit longer than usual - hope you enjoy it! Drop me a line if you do!

Unmasking

Minerva was waiting for Hermione when she got to the potions classroom. Her presence should have calmed her, but it only made her more nervous.

“I made an announcement at breakfast about you taking over Professor Snape’s classes during his absence this week.”

Hermione nodded distractedly – she could just imagine the gleeful expressions of the older students as they contemplated the mischief they could get into while on her watch.

“I also made it very clear that any misbehavior would be severely punished,” she said, as if reading her thoughts, “and I want you take that admonition seriously as well. If anyone steps out of line, I want to hear about it. Is that understood?” she asked severely.

Hermione hesitated – she didn’t like telling tales out of school, or out of the classroom, as the case might be.

“Miss Granger,” Minerva said sharply, immediately getting her full attention. “I mean it. This isn’t just about you – it’s about the safety of everyone in class. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, of course, professor,” she responded contritely. She hadn’t looked at it that way until now.

“Good,” she replied, turning and heading down the corridor. “I expect a report at lunch, Miss Granger – a full one,” she called over her shoulder as she disappeared around a corner.

Hermione took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. She entered the classroom rather more quietly than her professor usually did, although she walked just as briskly to the front of the room where a cutting board and several knives were already laid out. Announcing that she was going to be demonstrating knife techniques, she bid the first-years gather round. She took them through three procedures before sending them back to their desks to practice with mock ingredients. There were the inevitable nicks and cuts, but mercifully no one actually succeeded in lopping off a finger by the end of the hour. The two classes that followed were also uneventful, and she was relieved to be able to reassure Minerva at lunch. But she decidedly had misgivings about the seventh-year potions class
that afternoon that she did not share with her mentor.

As students filed into the room there was some snickering, which she tried desperately hard to ignore – Hermione smiled wanly at Ginny, who gave her an encouraging thumbs up, but even she was giggling a bit with her friends at the prospect of a student teaching them, even if she was universally lauded as the brightest witch of the age.

When the bell tower chimed the top of the hour in the distance, she waved her wand and the brewing assignment appeared on the board. As the students collected their ingredients, she noted furtive glances being exchanged between five male students – one each from Ravenclaw and Slytherin, and three from Gryffindor, she was perturbed to see. She watched them like a hawk as they picked up their supplies. The first half of the hour was spent checking everyone’s preparations, but she was especially on alert when the actual brewing began and kept her wand in hand – concealed in the sleeve of her robe – just in case. With fifteen minutes still to go, she heard a distinctive pop, and her eye was drawn to movement near the back of the class – the Ravenclaw student was backing away from his cauldron.

“Dispareo!” she immediately cast, and the cauldron in question instantly vanished. This was followed in quick succession by three more pops, each one of them swiftly dealt with in a similar fashion. It had all transpired so quickly that the rest of the class didn’t realize that something had happened – or rather had not happened – only after the fact. But her mind was still racing. Five students but only four pops – there was one more to go. As if on schedule, she saw the last of the group in her peripheral vision moving back a pace or two, a mischievous grin on his face. Instantly, she turned and cast over the heads of students who quickly ducked down.

“Prohibere!”

The green slime that had been in the cauldron was now suspended in mid-air. Cold anger flooded her, and she sneered disparagingly at the student responsible as she rounded the table to face him directly.

“Wipe that smirk off your face right now, Mr. Boddington, or I will do it for you.”

Of all the students in the room, only Ginny knew what she was fully capable of, and while she was enjoying the display, she felt obliged to caution her fellow Gryffindor accordingly.

“Robbie, don’t be stupid,” she said.

“She can’t do anything – she’s not a teacher,” he laughed.

“Immobiles rictus!”

Boddington suddenly found himself unable to smile – or frown for that matter – what with his jaws completely immobilized. As his anger rose, Ginny cautioned him one last time.

“Robbie . . . don’t be a fool . . . .”

As he lunged for her, the force coming from Hermione’s wand pushed him backwards, where he found himself completely stuck to the wall, his arms splayed out from his torso.

“Anyone else have something to say about this little lark?” she seethed, looking specifically at the four others who were involved. When they didn’t reply, she barked at them sharply. “What? I didn’t hear you,” she hissed.

There was a chorus of breathless “No, Miss Granger” from the pranksters.
She straightened and looked around the room – all eyes were fixed on her and they revealed both shock and a certain degree of fearful anticipation of what she might do next. She approached the cauldron and looked at the ingredients on the table – several stood out. Boddington had brewed the base of the potion as per the instructions on the board, but had clearly added things that turned it into something that was definitely not academically oriented. Based on what she was seeing, and estimating their quantities, she expected the potion was designed to smell like pig shite. Now she smirked.

“You three,” she said, addressing the students immediately around Boddington’s station, “pick up your book bags and get out of the way.” The students in question hastily scrambled past her with their belongings. “You lot,” she said, pointing her wand and gesturing at Boddington’s fellow conspirators, “up here.” As they approached, she released Boddington, who rubbed his jaws and arms resentfully.

“Gather ‘round, gentlemen,” she invited ominously. They looked apprehensive, but otherwise obeyed.

Once they were in place, she backed up. “Don’t even think about moving,” she commanded. Pointing her wand at the mess that was suspended in the air, she cast. “Aliquam!” The green slim continued upwards for a split second before descending and splattering the five students, the table, and the floor.

A collective ewe spread around the room and students backed away in revulsion – the smell was nearly overwhelming. She turned to the rest of the class. “Collect your things and leave,” she instructed, lifting the sleeve of her own robe to her face. “Shut down your cauldrons but otherwise leave things as they are,” she mumbled behind the wad of black cloth – the room emptied quickly. “As for you,” she turned to the five students, “get started on the process of restoring this room to the way it was before your little jolly – and do it by hand.” They groaned, but ceased under her hardened glare. “That includes the brewing stations of your peers.” There was more grumbling under their breaths, but they didn’t challenge her authority and set to work.

As she stepped into the corridor – drinking in the fresh air and trying to collect herself – she thought about how catastrophic things might have been if they had been brewing something truly dangerous, especially since she suspected their potion was largely based on guesswork. There was no time to dwell on it, however, since the next class – mercifully the last of the day – was just starting to gather in the corridor. She directed them to the library and charmed a sign on the door for the rest of the students to join her there. Once assembled, she set them an essay – with Madam Pince grudgingly agreeing to watch over them – before returning to the potions classroom to oversee the cleaning. Halfway through, she heard the brisk click of heels on stone getting closer. She knew who it was and, more to the point, so did the students – Pince must have flooed the headmistress after she left the library.

The smell hit Minerva so abruptly that she nearly stumbled back into the corridor. Casting a bubble around her head, she came back inside. Hermione grimaced in sympathy as the headmistress surveyed their progress.

“That will be ten points from each of you for this disruption . . . and ten more for disrespecting Miss Granger,” she said grimly. All five raised their heads to look at her as she pronounced the penalty, but Minerva’s icy glare stopped them cold before they even began. “What Professor Snape may decide to add will be entirely up to him,” and at that they did groan. She took Hermione out into the hall for a private word. “You did well, Miss Granger,” she said, admiringly, releasing the protective charm around her head. “I’m sure once this gets around, you’ll have no more difficulties.”
Word did indeed get around, and quickly, Hermione was astounded to see. By dinner time, the younger students looked at her with awe, while the older ones cast her glances of grudging respect. They enjoyed a good prank as much as anyone, but cauldrons exploding with potions thrown together on the sly and smelling of the byre could have made victims of them all and *that* they did *not* appreciate. As Minerva predicted, the rest of the classes went forward without a hitch, so much so that when the headmistress told her that her professor wouldn’t be back until Friday evening, she felt perfectly comfortable carrying on in his stead. It cut into her writing time, but at least her other tutorials had been suspended for the duration – she could catch up on the weekend.

She skipped breakfast Friday morning in order to get the potions classroom ready, so she missed the delivery of chapter ten – and the ensuing stampede of young women heading off their rooms to read the latest installment before class. It wasn’t until lunchtime when she joined Ginny and her friends that she more fully remembered what the chapter contained.

“It’s *him*, I tell you,” one of them was insisting as Hermione sat down – her ears immediately pricked up.

“It can’t be anyone else – can it, Ginny?” another pressed.

Ginny looked decidedly uncertain as she fiddled with her fork.

“I mean, you were practically a member of the Order,” the first one continued.

“What does Harry say about it?” the other asked.

Ginny turned to look at Hermione, and her friends followed suit.

“What do you think, Hermione?” one of them asked.

At that, Ginny roused herself. “She won’t know anything – she’s not reading it,” she said matter-of-factly. Her friends turned away, and Hermione felt relief at not having to lie. They continued to speculate, however, and as she looked around the room, it seemed that other of their peers were also doing the same thing. She was surprised to see that some of the older boys were being drawn into the conversations as well.

“Hello, everyone,” Luna chirped as she sat down across from Hermione.

“Luna, are you reading that story that’s going around?” the young woman sitting next to Ginny inquired.

(Of course,” she replied, tucking delicately into her lunch.

“Doesn’t the main character – Domitian – *remind* you of anyone?”

“You mean Professor Snape?” she asked forthrightly.

“See, I *told* you,” one of them said as Ginny’s friends all started talking at once, ignoring Luna now that she had confirmed their suspicions.

But Hermione couldn’t disregard her since the young woman was staring directly at her in an alarmingly curious way. Hermione blushed and discreetly raised a finger to her lips, hoping against hope that Luna understood this most basic of non-verbal gestures – the Ravenclaw merely quirked her head to one side and stared at her with big silvery blue eyes. But before more difficult questions could be posed, Ginny and her friends rose and drifted over to another table to discuss things with other students. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.
“Why don’t you want students to know Professor Snape is Domitian?” Luna asked airily. “You did use him as a model after all,” she stated as Hermione quickly shushed her and looked around to see if anyone had heard.

“Luna, you’ve got to promise that you won’t tell anyone I wrote this,” she adamantly pleaded.

“Why? It’s very good, you know,” she commented, taking a sip of her pumpkin juice.

“Well, first of all, it would really upset Professor Snape to know that one of his students is the author, and I don’t think Professor McGonagall would be very happy about it, either.”

“Then why are you writing it?”

Hermione sighed heavily. “I’m trying to rehabilitate his reputation, get people to see him as he really is without letting their prejudices slant their view. I want their sympathy for Domitian to be so strong that they will easily transfer it to Professor Snape when they find out who the character really is.”

“Do you think you’re succeeding?”

“I don’t know – I wasn’t counting on everyone working out his identity quite this soon,” she replied as she looked around the room with growing concern at the several groups of students who were clearly discussing their suspicions with each other.

Hermione reached over and put a hand on her friend’s arm. “You’ve got to keep this a secret, Luna. If people knew I wrote it they would dismiss it out of hand – you may remember that no one wanted to hear me defend him over the summer.”

“Except my father, of course,” she replied nonchalantly.

Hermione forced a smile. “Yes, The Quibbler was a staunch defender,” she reluctantly admitted, even if the other more bizarre articles it also published only raised further doubts about her potions professor.

“I’ll keep your secret, Hermione – I wasn’t going to tell anyone anyway,” she hummed, taking another bite of her lunch.

“Thank you,” she said, patting her arm in relief before quickly excusing herself. She went back to the classroom and for the first time worried about how her professor was going to react to being identified as Domitian. She really couldn’t predict what he might do. Since the students had started to guess his identity, she could only assume that the faculty already knew, which meant that he had taken it well so far. Maybe he would continue to do so – but she doubted it.

There was quite a buzz at dinner, and she imagined it would be difficult to find any student who hadn’t yet heard the rumor that Domitian was modeled on Professor Snape – it seemed as though it was all anyone could talk about. Snippets of conversation wafted her way, and it ran the gamut from confusion about what he had done during the war to thoughts on his sexual prowess. It was a bit of a relief that none of it seemed openly hostile. She sneaked glances at the head table, and while the staff was more subdued than usual, they nevertheless chatted quietly with each other. The best that could be said about the headmistress was that she seemed watchful as well as a bit wary.

Hermione picked at her meal, continuing to listen in on the discussions around her – the suspense was nearly killing her. And then the room suddenly grew eerily quiet, and she knew immediately what that meant. Like everyone else, she looked up to see their potions professor and Flitwick making their way to their usual places at the table.
He pulled out his chair and paused – he was startled by the relative stillness in the room. He looked at Minerva, whose expression told him everything he needed to know. He scanned the house tables once more, his expression slowly turning to one of utter contempt. Fucking fuckity fuck. Away for week, working all hours to neutralize some of the darkest, most dangerous potions he had ever encountered, only to come home to this. It only took them bloody long enough to figure it out. He sat down and snapped his napkin with his rather more force than was necessary – the snap echoed around the room. His dinner appeared before him and he dug in – he had been living on rubbish the Ministry cafeteria dared to call food for five long days, and he wasn’t going to be denied a decent meal now.

His audience drifted back to their own plates when they realized he wasn’t going to acknowledge them or their suspicions. Hermione was rather impressed – and more than a little relieved – at his response. He didn’t look her way once, but kept his attention fixed on the food in front of him, conversing sparingly with Flitwick, who sat next to him and was clearly oblivious as to what was really going on. When the meal was over, she left with Ginny and her friends and went back to her room, wondering if he would send for her over the weekend to discuss the classes – or anything else that might be on his mind.

As his colleagues rose from their places, he didn’t need to be told to follow Minerva to her office, where he accepted the tumbler of whiskey before relaxing into one of the chairs in front of the hearth.

“I take it you were successful in identifying and disposing of the questionable potions the Ministry found?” she began casually.

“Mostly. There are still a few that will have to be dealt with using neutralizing potions geared specifically to their magical signatures. I’ll brew the base over the weekend, finish them next week, and then go back to the Ministry,” he offered informationally. “Miss Granger will need to take my classes again – unless there have been problems,” he stated.

“That should be fine,” she responded, joining him with her port. “As for your classes, I’m sure it will come as no surprise that she handled herself well,” Minerva observed, sipping the drink in her hand.

“The students behaved themselves?”

“I didn’t say that,” she corrected him. “There was a minor incident Monday afternoon with five of the seventh-years – some kind of stink potion. She caught four of the cauldrons before they erupted, and then had the culprits gather around the last one so they could experience what they had brewed first hand. Then she had them clean it all up – without magic,” she reported with a gleam in her eye.

“Let me guess . . . .” but before he could continue she interrupted.

“Yes, it was the Frightful Five. I took off twenty points from each of them – half for disrespecting Hermione,” she informed him, “but I let them know that you might want to express your own . . . disappointment in them as well.”

He snorted and sipped his whiskey, but the levity passed quickly and the silence fell over them.

“I take it that chapter ten has pulled off Domitian’s mask?” he finally inquired almost dispassionately.

“I’m afraid so,” she said, putting down her port and getting up to retrieve the magazine from her desk. He held out his hand expectantly when she returned, but she hesitated.

“Severus,” she began.
“Minerva?” he replied evenly, mimicking her tone. He waited a moment, then reached forward and pulled the periodical firmly from her hand. “Have there been questions yet?”

“Not that I’m aware off,” she replied, retaking her chair, “but I’m sure there will be, once the . . . the shock wears off and they have the weekend to think about it.”

“Indeed,” he replied caustically.

“If you need to talk . . . .” she began gently.

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary.” He finished the rest of his drink, stood, and placed his glass on the mantle. “Goodnight, Minerva,” he said, walking to the door and closing it quietly behind him.

He went to the potions classroom first, to see – and smell – the damage, but there wasn’t even a whiff of what had happened. The corrected essays and the scores from the potion assignments were all carefully laid out on the desk at the front, and he fingered them with a certain degree of satisfaction – at least he didn’t have to face that as well as everything else. He continued into his office – he didn’t want to read in his quarters, not this time, at least, he wanted somewhere bright and as clinical as possible. The lights lit automatically and with a flick of his wand, they burned with appropriate intensity. He laid the magazine out on his desk and found his place.

It was late and the Ministry was virtually empty of employees. Domitian went straight to the Minister for Magic’s office where he found Albinia waiting for him.

“What news?” she asked, immediately getting to her feet and coming around her desk.

“He grows tired of waiting,” he replied hesitantly.

Albinia laughed slightly. “So, I’m not dying fast enough for him.”

“He . . . he has started to speak of assassination,” he informed her.

She nodded. “And who would he have carry it out?”

“Arti,” he said bluntly.

“And of course the problem with that,” she observed ruefully, “is that Arti’s heart won’t be in it – he’ll mangle it at best.” She was quiet and thoughtful for a while. “No, we can’t let him do it – it must be you.”

His eyes widened in disbelief. “What?” he finally barked.

“You – it must be you,” she repeated firmly. “We can use my death to our advantage – if you are the one to do it, Valmont’s trust in you will be further solidified.”

“You don’t know what you are asking!” he replied incredulously.

“Would you have me die at the hands of Lucinius’s inept son?” she asked sternly. “Only you have the compassion to allow me the dignity to die in a manner of my own choosing – only you have the courage to cast the blow.” She stood and stared him squarely in the eye. “I will be dead anyway within a matter of months, and we both know the kind of death I’ll be facing if we let that happen – excruciating pain and a loss of bodily functions while still being fully cognizant of what is happening to me. That is the death you would be condemning me to. You must do it,” she said emphatically.

The anguish in his face reflected the inner turmoil.
“We have known each other a long time, Domitian,” she said quietly, “since our school days. We’ve had our differences over the years, but we muddled through because we shared something deep in the core of our being – mutual respect and, dare I say it, friendship. If you care about me, if that friendship has meant anything at all to you,” she desperately pleaded, “then you will do this – for me.”

“And what about the fate of my soul in doing something so repugnant, so foul, so . . . ?” he spit out before she put her hand to stop him mid-flow.

“Your soul will rest easy knowing that this is what I asked for, what I truly wanted. Look into my mind, see for yourself,” she entreated, tilting her head upwards ever so slightly. He hesitated, but then her lips moved and he barely heard her whisper. “Please, Domitian.”

Without looking away, he unsheathed his wand and slowly brought it to her temple. “Legilimens,” he said almost inaudibly

The thought was there at the forefront of her mind – he did not have to look for it. She wanted this, wanted him to be the one to give her the ending she wanted. There was no anger or fear, no regrets or hesitation. Having seen what he needed, he immediately withdrew.

He looked at her as shock, sorrow, and . . . something else he couldn’t quite pinpoint vied for dominance in him.

“There will be no rending of the soul when you do this because you know my true thoughts on the subject,” she continued. “In the normal course of events, if the curse was allowed to play out, I would have had you brew me something to take, and you know that. You know it in your mind . . . and in your heart,” she said softly, placing her hand on the left side of his chest. “That fact is what will keep your soul intact when the time comes.”

He knew she was right, of course. He would have brewed a vial of Cum Somno Semper – Sleep Ever After. It was illegal, but if they had ever reached that point, they would have been well beyond such niceties – she would have taken it, and if she hadn’t been able to hold it to her lips on her own, he would have helped her. There was only one difficulty, but she was already ahead of him.

“You must prepare yourself – this must be our last private meeting together, and you must avoid as many public ones as you can.”

The advice was stark and pierced him like a shard of ice. The Avada Kedavra – he had to mean it when it was cast or it would have no effect. From this minute forward he had to focus his mind – his soul – on every argument he had ever had with her, every slight she had given him over the years. He had to nurse every grudge and feed it continuously if he was going to be in any position to cast the spell.

“You are the only one I know who can do this one last service for me – you are the only one I trust,” she said with conviction.

And then he realized that the . . . something that was nestled between his shock and sorrow was pure rage, and that was the moment the process began. He truly hated her in that moment for putting this burden on him, hated the position she was putting him in, hated the self-loathing it would generate in the aftermath of it all. He narrowed his eyes and she moved away, stepping back behind her desk and resuming her Minister for Magic persona.

“That is all, Domitian,” she said coolly – there would be no emotional goodbyes.
He nodded stiffly and left. He strode swiftly through halls towards his office. When he got there, he slammed the door so hard that an official photograph of him and the Minister for Magic hanging on the outer wall fell with a bang on the floor and broke. He hardly noticed as he sat down behind his desk, yanked open one of the bottom drawers, and took out a bottle of whiskey and a glass. His hand shook as he poured out a measure – seeing it tremble made him even angrier, and after tossing the liquid back in one go, he flung the tumbler across the room, where it shattered. Merlin – damn her miserable bones to Hades!
Unwanted Publicity

Chapter Summary

Severus is not pleased that the students have discovered he is the model for Love in a Time of War, and his relationship with Hermione becomes a bit tense. But he is incandescent when a certain publication also makes the same connection.

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone - this chapter is slightly longer than usual and is a bit of a cliff hanger. I just couldn't find another cut off point. Hope you enjoy it - let me know! I always like hearing from you!

Unwanted Publicity

He supposed it could have been worse, but he wasn’t sure how – it was so close to what their conversation had been that it felt like it had happened only yesterday. He rubbed his face vigorously to try and break the chapter’s hold on him. He got up abruptly and, grabbing the magazine from the desk, retired to his quarters, the lights flickering out behind him. He knew this was coming and had braced himself for it, but it didn’t make it any easier to bear.

He sat down at his desk and tried to distract himself by looking through the marked essays, but his mind kept going back to the chapter. Given the verisimilitude he concluded that she had to have gotten her information from Albus’s portrait. Bugger it all. Once more, he would have to hide his grief and steel himself for worse to come, because come it would and every eye would be on him for some revealing reaction.

Eventually, he became aware that his eyes were focused on the familiar script that was dashed across the top essay in red ink. On top of everything else, he still had to deal with her – or not, as the case might be.

In that moment something in him snapped, and with one swift motion, he stretched his arm across the desk and swept it clean, the essays floating in the air while the heavier objects plummeted to the floor. He stormed out of the room, slamming the door as hard as he could. It was nearly curfew and the handful of students who saw him striding purposefully through the halls scattered before him. The gargoyle stationed at the staircase slid away from the entrance even before he finished barking out the password. He took the stairs two at a time until he finally reached the corridor he had been in only an hour before. Moving past the headmistress’s office, he stopped directly outside Hermione’s door – light streamed out from under it into the dim passageway. He contemplated it as he stood there trying to catch his breath. He pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers, and as his breathing calmed, so did his temper. When the light suddenly went out he inhaled deeply, turned, and quietly went back the way he had come.

Hermione half expected him to summon her that evening, and was both relieved and worried at the
same time when he didn’t. No one saw him all the next day, either, which in itself wasn’t anything unusual since he often kept to himself on the weekends, but given that everyone now knew Domitian’s true identity, students were on alert for any sightings of their potions professor.

She had resolved to spend Saturday catching up with her writing – unless, of course, he called for her. Every noise outside her door made her stiffen in expectation, but each time, the footsteps and voices remained muffled and far away, centered as they seemed to be on the headmistress’s office. Periodically, she looked up from her desk to check the window, in case a Hogwarts owl was flying in her direction to deliver an inter-school memo. Likewise, the fire in the hearth remained quiet despite her many glances. She went down to lunch, mainly just to see if he was there, but when he didn’t put in an appearance, she grabbed a bowl of soup and took it back to her room.

He was absent at dinner as well, and there was speculation – at least at her end of the table – that he might be spending his evening with whoever the real Perse turned out to be. Indeed, it quickly became apparent to her that the students had spent much of their Saturday sleuthing out the identities of the other characters, and there was some snickering at her expense over how she had been depicted in the story. She ignored them since she was the one manipulating their sensibilities, including those they had about her – they could laugh their fool heads off as far as she was concerned. When she didn’t respond to their teasing, they moved on, focusing on Ginny and the fictional love story between the characters representing her boyfriend and brother. Hermione got up soon afterwards and headed back to her quarters.

She was about to open the door to her room when she heard Minerva talking with someone around the corner – they must have come up just behind her. The second voice sounded male, so she crept to the end of the corridor.

“I’ve flooed him several times, Filius, but he’s not answering,” the headmistress was saying.

“And I’ve been down twice today to knock on his door – it’s possible he’s gone off home, you know,” he commented.

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “He’d never abandon his duties as head of house without letting someone know – he’s still here, he just wants to be left alone.”

Hearing the door close, Hermione went back to her room. She kept telling herself that there was nothing extraordinary about her professor keeping to himself, that he wasn’t the sort to get worked up by the tittle-tattle of a bunch of over imaginative students, that the revelation wasn’t likely to induce a fatal fit of melancholia. Rage she could certainly imagine, although he had looked fairly collected at dinner the previous evening, all things considered. Still, the conversation she had just been privy to worried her a bit. Well, a lot, she had to admit.

He hadn’t been much interested in breakfast, lunch, or dinner – his presence would only feed the students’ prurient interests, and frankly he had more important things to think about, or so he kept telling himself. He needed to meet with Hermione before the weekend was over to discuss how the classes went so he could plan for the coming week, and he also had to get the base for the neutralizing potions done as soon as possible – he would need her assistance with that. And sometime in the coming week, he would actually need more – much more – than her mere assistance, at least with one of the neutralizers. He pushed it behind his occlumency walls, but Sunday morning, when he really couldn’t delay it any longer, he had Timber deliver a terse request for her to come to his lab after breakfast.

She was a bit nervous as she approached his quarters. She knew he would not have been happy about the revelation on Friday night regardless of the expression he presented in public, and while she felt confident that her own identity hadn’t been exposed, she was still uneasy about the mood he
might be in – Timber could only tell her that he had been brusque, but that was nothing out of the ordinary for him.

As usual, the door opened as she neared. She entered quietly and assumed a quiescent pose in front of his desk, waiting as patiently as she could for him to address her. Although he didn’t look up, her hands were within his line of vision, and she was wringing them – he knew from experience that this was nearly always accompanied by some nibbling on her lower lip. He had no intention of easing her nerves, however, and he let her fidget – it was the very least she deserved for what she was putting him through.

Finally, he put down his quill, rested his elbows on the desk, and steepled his fingers. Looking at her worried expression, he smirked inwardly. “I’ve sampled a few of the essays – the scores are generally appropriate, but your comments are virtual lectures,” he drawled. “Direct them to their text books or other material by all means, but make them do the work, otherwise they will learning nothing,” he said disparagingly.

“Yes, professor,” she replied, suitably chastened.

“I understand from the headmistress that there was an incident with the seventh-years on Monday.” He continued to eye her over his hands. “Do you want to add anything to her report?”

“I’m sure that Professor McGonagall has told you everything you needed to know,” she said quietly.

“Humph,” he snorted doubtfully, but otherwise let it go – he would take care of the Frightful Five tomorrow. “I may need to you to fill in again – there were some tasks I was unable to complete without further preparation. To that end, I will need your assistance this morning and then this week to brew several neutralizing potions – you will be missing a few more tutorials with your other teachers.”

“That should be fine, professor – I’m all caught up and I’m sure everyone will understand,” she said, wanting to be as agreeable as possible under the circumstances. She continued to wring her hands and bite her lower lip.

He knew he would be angry with himself later, but her obvious contrition struck a nerve. Although he was seriously pissed with her about his personal situation, he couldn’t help thinking about how much he had genuinely missed her. Flitwick had been fine enough company in the short term over Shacklebolt’s whiskey, but he didn’t have her bright eyes, supple lips, and nearly breathless excitement when it came to working in the lab or discussing articles in the latest potions journals. If he had to choose between the two, Filius came a distant . . . seventh, or possibly eighth.

He stared at her with an intensity that sent an electric charge through her nervous system – then she felt the blush working its way up from her neck, and she looked down at her entwined fingers to hide it. He didn’t need to use Legilimency to see that she had missed him as well – her inability to mask her emotions made her an open book to him, at least in this one respect.

After watching her squirm for a moment, he pushed himself up from the chair and headed into the lab and she followed dutifully behind. “These neutralizing potions are going to be difficult and time consuming. We need to prepare the base for all three this morning, and then finish them off over the next few days.”

“Why do we need three different neutralizers?” she asked, regaining her composure.

“A standard neutralizer will work with most potions, but the ones the Ministry is dealing with are infused with dark magic. Very dark magic,” he added for emphasis. “The neutralizers have to be
Hermione thought about what he said and furrowed her brow.

“Yes, Miss Granger?” he queried, only mildly annoyed.

“I assume that you’re going to have to imbue the neutralizers with . . . um . . . .” she stammered, hesitant to give voice to her theory.

“. . . with magic that is as dark as the potions themselves,” he finished for her. “What this means in practical terms is that there will be points in the brewing process when I will ask you to step out of the room.”

“Surely I could . . . .”

“I will not entertain discussions about this – do you understand?” he asked sharply, his dark eyes boring into hers – why did she have to argue with him about absolutely fucking everything?

She wilted under his intense gaze. “Yes, professor,” she replied.

With the flick of his wand, a parchment appeared on the table in front of her. “Start gathering the ingredients,” he ordered, as he began to lay out the equipment they would need.

The potion was every bit as difficult as he had intimated, and they worked in relative silence. By early afternoon, the base was finished – it now needed to cool and steep for twenty-four hours. They began the arduous task of cleaning up and when they were nearly done, he suggested that she summon Timber to bring them sandwiches, since the lunch hour was nearly over.

The meal was laid out on the table in front of the fire when he came through. He grabbed a sandwich and took a long draught of the tea she had poured for him. As he began to eat, he looked in her direction – her face was tense and she hadn’t yet eaten any of her lunch.

“What is it, Miss Granger?” he asked tersely as he reached for the small container of mustard that had come with his roast beef on rye.

“I . . . .” She wasn’t certain she even wanted to ask.

“I’m throwing you out of here when I’m done with this,” he said, gesturing at the sandwich with his knife, “which is going to be in about five minutes. If you have something to say, you’d better get a move on.”

She straightened noticeably at his curt tone. “I was just thinking how . . . upset you must have been, coming back on Friday night to find out that you’re the central character of this . . . this war romance that’s going around,” she blurted out, taking a huge bite of her sandwich when she finished, more because it would give her something to focus on than anything else.

He shot her a perturbed look.

“Upset, Miss Granger? Upset doesn’t even begin to cover it,” he snarled as he put the mustard back on the table and picked up his lunch.

“What . . . what would be . . . the right . . . word . . . or words?” she mumbled as crumbs fell lightly onto the napkin in her lap.

“Enraged would be a good start, followed by furious, incensed, livid, and very seriously hacked off,”
he scowled.

“But you’re depicted as a hero,” she managed to choke out as the dry bread raked her esophagus.

“I’m not a fucking hero,” he retorted harshly.

“Yes, you are, sir,” she insisted, coughing a bit.

“Making amends for a foolish error in judgment does not turn someone a hero,” he snarled, finally slapping the sandwich down on the plate.

“There’s more to it than that,” she persisted, gulping down some tea.

“How do you know, little girl?” Every word dripped with sarcasm. “Can you not wrap your Gryffindor head around the concept that a lifetime’s remorse and restitution cannot make up for the loss of even one life?”

“Did you deliberately betray Harry’s mother to Voldemort?” she finally managed, putting down her own sandwich. He flinched visibly, though whether because of her friend and his mother or the mention of the Dark Lord she couldn’t say. “Did you want her dead?” she persisted.

The question brought back painful memories. There were days when he had certainly told himself that he wanted her dead, when he had wanted her to suffer for the pain she was causing him, but such feelings were mere matters of moment, fleeting, dredged up when his youthful emotions had gotten the better of him.

“Can you not understand that you saved so many lives?” she was saying.

“But at what cost?” he said sternly, with an edge to his voice that she hadn’t heard in a long time. “You do not know what those lives cost, Miss Granger – you do not know the full story. Now . . . get . . . out,” he ordered bitterly.

She hadn’t seen him look so fierce or – more frighteningly – forcibly controlled since before the war. She wasn’t afraid of him as she might have been then, but she was certainly unnerved and didn’t wait to be told twice to leave. Covering her half-eaten lunch with her napkin, she immediately got up and left.

She went back to her room to try and work, but was too keyed up to concentrate – their heated exchange weighed heavily on her mind. Eventually, she gave up on studying and took a long walk around along the lake to try and calm her roiling emotions. His accusation – that she didn’t know the full story about what he had done – had hit hard. Whatever Dumbledore and the headmistress had told her about him and his activities, and how ever her imagination had managed to fill in the missing gaps, she had to remember that he had actually lived what she was writing about, and was perhaps even reliving it because of her. She was acutely aware of the guilt he felt over it all. There were days when it simply rolled off of him in waves – their disagreement at lunch was merely a glimpse of what he carried around with him every minute of every hour of every day. But having looked through several books on psychology as she prepared to restore her parents’ memories – trying to prepare herself for both success as well as possible failure – she had taken on board their professional advice, which was that those suffering from survivor’s guilt had to hear, and hear repeatedly that they were not to blame for things that were out of their control. If she hadn’t been able to reverse the memory spells, she would have thrown herself into the arms of her friends, who would have reinforced what she had read – she was not to blame herself, she had protected her parents in the only way she could in the face of unimaginable danger. And she knew they would have repeated that sentiment it until it sank into the very heart of her being.
But there was no one to tell him that sort of thing. Her head of house had confided that he had brushed off her apologies for having thought the worst of him – as well as her assertions that he had nothing to blame himself for under the circumstances. Minerva also revealed that he hadn’t spoken – at least alone – with Dumbledore’s portrait to sort out his feelings over having had to do the unspeakable. And while Harry, Ron, the Weasleys, Shacklebolt and everyone else had thanked him for his service – and were genuinely sincere in their gratitude – there was no one close enough to tell him what he really needed to hear. Being reviled by the public in spite of official recognition also hadn’t helped matters.

For someone who prided himself on his ability to apply reason and logic to every situation, he could be shockingly short-sighted when it came to matters pertaining to himself. It was a huge chasm in reasoning to think that the Dark Lord would never have heard about the Prophesy if he, ignorant of its import, hadn’t revealed part of it – it really had been only a matter of time. And he was most definitely not responsible for the discovery of Harry’s family – that could be laid entirely at the feet of Peter Pettigrew. Even if a loyal member of the Order had been their Secret Keeper, the Potters would no doubt still have been out and about, going to meetings and the like, making themselves a continual target. Certainly it wouldn’t have taken much to figure out that Godric’s Hollow was a likely hiding place for them, given Dumbledore’s many connections with the village. There were failures to be sure, but he was taking on ones that were not his responsibility. Somehow he had to recognize – be made to recognize – and accept that fact, and since it wouldn’t happen on his own, she needed to keep writing, showing him through the story and from the positive responses it got that no one blamed him for anything and were, in fact, quite grateful to him for helping to keep them free.

A loud boom interrupted her thoughts. Looking towards the castle, she saw his distinctive figure flying away from the school on a broom, his black robes flapping wildly in the wind. He flew fast – faster than she had seen even Harry or Ron fly – dangerously skimming the tops of the trees in the Forbidden Forest as he went. She watched until he disappeared in the distance and then sat down on a log, watching the sky. When it finally started to get dark, she gave up on seeing him again and made her way back to the castle. He wasn’t at dinner, and she wondered if he had even returned to the castle. She was still on edge herself and she went back to her room and wrote well into the night – she didn’t notice the blur that swept past her window, and it was past midnight before she crawled into bed and fell into a troubled sleep.

By late afternoon, the tension was starting to get to him again, and rather than a repeat of tearing apart his living quarters, he took out his broom and trudged upwards to the courtyard – there was nothing like flying furiously at dusk to clear the head. As he flew just above the tree line of the Forbidden Forest, he noticed – and recognized – the lone figure standing on the lakeshore below. He had to get her and that fucking story – and everything it represented – out of his mind, even if only for a little while, and if he had to fly the length and breadth of the country to achieve some degree of equilibrium, he would do it. He flew for hours – he could have flown all the way to London for all he knew – and while the effort succeeded in pushing away the most pressing thoughts, they all came roaring back with a jolt as he flew past the windows in the headmistress’s tower – Minerva was working late, it seemed, and so, apparently was the woman he had so desperately tried to get out of his mind. He knew from experience that it would take a hefty dose of Dreamless Sleep before he would truly be able to call it a night.

When he came into breakfast the next day, all conversations ceased, and he glared ferociously at anyone who dared to meet his eye. He stayed just long enough to hand Hermione plans for his morning classes and brusquely inform her that he would be using the time to finish the first of the neutralizing potions. It was on the tip of her tongue to protest being excluded from the process, but from his expression it was clear that he wasn’t open to any discussion on the issue, so she simply took the materials without saying anything, but she was disappointed.
The classes went without incident, and she took in two short assignments. She skipped lunch to grade them, leaving everything on the desk for him to collect at his leisure before heading to the library. The wards on his classroom let him know the instant she had gone, and he wandered in to pick up the students’ work. He had finished one of the potions that morning, but it had been a hard slog without her assistance, and the other two were even more complicated – he was going to have to relent and let her help with the second one. As for the third . . . well, there was no choice – she had to help. He took the essays back to his quarters and set them on the desk – he would look through them later since he was already tardy for the afternoon staff meeting. He was tempted to brush it off entirely, but knowing what was on the agenda, he had to go.

The meeting was already in progress and everyone turned to look at him when he came in. He scowled but said nothing and assumed his regular seat.

“As I was saying,” Minerva resumed, “now that the proverbial cat is out of the bag, have any of you been approach by students about the story?”

He was dismayed to see that every single one of them had fielded at least some questions about it.

“I assume we’re all on the same page about the response to such inquiries – that the story is just fiction?”

Again they all nodded.

Minerva opened the folder sitting in front of her. “I’ve started to receive the expected letters from concerned parents,” she said, holding up several pieces of paper. “So far, it’s just been a matter of assuring them that their children are perfectly safe and referring them on to the Ministry’s official report concerning Severus’s role in the war.”

“Have any of them mentioned the sex?” Hooch snickered.

He glared at her, and to his consternation, she winked right back. He curled his lips and growled before looking accusingly at Minerva, as if to say that he had told her so.

“A couple have mentioned it, yes,” the headmistress replied evenly, ignoring him, “and I’ve informed parents that it is up to them – not us – to regulate their children’s extracurricular reading materials. At the same time, I also told them that such efforts would likely be pointless, given how available the magazine is within but especially outside these walls.”

“Have they asked you to ban it completely from the school?” Flitwick inquired further.

“Yes, and I’ve explained our policy, that students under sixteen are forbidden to have or read it, but that the only restrictions we can impose on students older than that is to prohibit them from reading it in the public areas of the school.”

“I’m sure that was reassuring,” he snarled.

“Maybe it’s time to reconsider the policy,” Sinistra ventured primly.

“We can’t do that,” Flitwick interjected forcefully.

“Of course we can,” Vector said tightly. “We can just as easily unmake a policy as make it,” she observed snidely.

“No, we can’t,” Hooch insisted, now taking the issue seriously.
“That would just be the start, don’t you see,” Flitwick continued. “It would be opening Pandora’s box. What would be next?” He turned to Sinistra. “Aurora, you’ve been supplementing the magical textbooks on astronomy with a scientific Muggle one – suppose a parent told you to drop it from your curriculum? What if a parent decided that Divination” – he now looked at Trelawney – “wasn’t a valid subject of study? Would we be compelled to fire Sibyl?”

Everyone shifted uncomfortably in their seats, recalling only too well when Umbridge had tried to do just that. Trelawney whimpered audibly as Sprout tried to soothe her.

“And what about the books we have in our library?” Flitwick added.

Madam Pince suddenly looked fearful. “They wouldn’t,” she exclaimed in horror.

“They would,” Hooch answered firmly, “especially any texts they deemed to contain, shall we say, dubious kinds of magic.”

“But . . . but . . . but most of those texts date from the very founding of the school!” Pince said indignantly, as if that somehow settled the issue. “Besides, we keep them in the restricted section!”

“It wouldn’t be enough, Irma,” Flitwick observed knowingly.

Silence settled on the room as the implications sank in.

“Are we agreed, then, to keep to our original policy?” Minerva asked. They did agree, and more strongly than they had only moments before, although he was chagrined to note that it wasn’t really on his account.

Minerva quickly moved on to more mundane items, and the meeting ended just before his afternoon class. She looked as though she wanted a private word with him, but he pointedly ignored her and went on his way.

His entrance to class was no less dramatic than usual, although everyone, including Hermione, who was stationed at the front of the room, ready to assist, jumped noticeably. It was a start, he thought – they needed to remember that he was their supremely snarky, demanding, and wholly unforgiving potions professor.

“Turn to page three-hundred and fifty-one in your books,” he commanded, making it sound like a veritable threat. “You have one hour to brew the potion – get to work!” The students immediately sprang into action, keeping their heads down and eyes averted as they gathered what they needed, even though he continued to glower threateningly at them.

“They are yours, Miss Granger,” he drawled scathingly, “try not to let any of them destroy the classroom. Report to me afterwards,” he threw down before heading for his quarters, sparing neither her nor the class even a parting glance.

“Yes, professor,” she replied, even though she knew he was by now too far away to hear her.

The hour passed quickly enough, and to her relief, there were no cuts, burns, or inhalation incidents. When the room had emptied out, she collected their potions and proceeded straight to his quarters.

Setting the rack of potions on his desk, she nervously smoothed down her hair and clothes and headed into the lab. He was reading through a parchment, so she waited at the door for an opportune moment to let him know she was there. Finally, she cleared her throat.

“Are you ill, Miss Granger?” he asked acerbically without looking up.
“Um, no – just alerting you to my presence. I left the students’ potions on your desk.”

“Avail yourself of the facilities – we have a lot of work to do and there won’t be any breaks until we are done,” he said tersely.

She immediately went off to do as he asked, and when she heard the bathroom door close two rooms away, he set the parchment down and leaned on the table with his knuckles. He could stop this right now. All he had to do was to tell her to put down her bloody quill. She would do it – he could make her do it. But after a moment’s thought, he wondered if he really could. She had to be under some kind of contract – what if it couldn’t be broken? The thought that he could perhaps purchase the remainder of it briefly flitted through his mind – not bloody likely, he had to concede after considering it further. Even he could see how profitable the story was – there hadn’t been so many of the damn magazines floating around the school since . . . ever, as far as he could remember, and Merlin only knew how popular it had to be outside in the wider public. No publisher would be foolish enough to end so lucrative a story only halfway through its run. If she didn’t finish it, she’d be facing not only the loss of her fees but probably a huge penalty as well. She might even be held liable for the magazine’s lost revenues – she’d never get out from under that kind of debt.

*Merlin’s balls.*

He was scowling fiercely when she returned.

“Are you alright, professor?” she asked, unable to keep the concern from her voice.

“Do I look alright, Miss Granger?” he snapped.

She stiffened. “I’ve seen you look better, sir,” she temporized.

He said nothing, but handed her the instructions and set to work as she read through the parchment. She reached for the first ingredient and placed it on the cutting board, the knife poised in her hand.

“So help me Merlin, if you don’t roll up your fucking sleeves, Hermione, I’m going to rip them from your shirt!”

Her head jerked up and her mouth gaped open at his outburst – without looking away, she quickly turned up the cuffs. He almost laughed at her shocked expression. Instead he smirked as the possibilities of tearing off her clothes right there and then went swiftly through his mind. She blushed and finally looked away. As she picked up her knife once more, his voice continued to ring in her ears. He had used her first name, had threatened to tear up her shirt, and then he had given her a smoldering look that she thought might well set her on fire. She had never been so utterly . . . and completely . . . aroused – her hands even shook a bit as she began to process the ingredients.

He watched her work for a moment before his eyes drifted to her arm – he could just see the last letters of the profanity that marred her skin. More were exposed when she reached in front of her for one of several small bowls to put the prepared ingredients in. Merlin, he wanted to touch that arm again, assure her that she should wear those scars proudly. The cauldron popped, and he turned his attention back to the business in front of him.

They worked perfectly in sync, and after two hours of meticulous work, she got to the last three ingredients, which she didn’t recognize. She looked around to see if there was anything she still hadn’t prepared, but everything was accounted for.

“Where will I find these, professor?” she asked, pointing to the missing items. He stepped closer to read over her shoulder, his nose just brushing her hair. He was suddenly accosted by the faint scent
of cucumber. It was almost over-powered by the ingredients on the table and the potion bubbling away in the cauldron, but it was there, rising just above everything else. The memory of a freshly scrubbed Hermione coming back to his quarters after the marathon brewing session over Christmas suddenly came flooding back to him.

She was acutely aware of him – again. He was near enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his chest her back and shoulder. “Professor?” she nearly whispered, trying to mask her growing breathlessness.

He quickly backed away, fearing that if he didn’t immediately retreat he wouldn’t be able to resist pressing his growing interest against her backside.

“I’ll be taking over from here, Miss Granger,” he said, clearing his throat. “Just . . . just gather your things and go.”

“I don’t mind,” she stated, turning her head to look up at him with gold flecked amber eyes.

After a moment’s pause he looked away. “But I do,” he said rather hoarsely. “You have no business being around these things – now do as I say.” His tone was noticeably gentler than it had been earlier, but she didn’t want to rile him up again by insisting that she could handle it.

“Of course, professor,” she replied obediently.

She washed her hands and then quietly left the lab – he heard the door to his quarters close a few seconds after that. An hour later, and the potion was finally finished. He set it next to the one he had brewed that morning – only one more to do, although it would be extremely troublesome to make, and in ways he didn’t care to think about.

It was nearly the dinner hour by the time he cleaned up the lab and he jumped into a cold shower. He had to keep his wits about him, which meant banishing – even if only temporarily – thoughts about his lab companion. He wasn’t particularly hungry, but he knew the only way to tamp down speculation among the student body was to make his regular weeknight appearances as if nothing at all was out of order. So he joined his colleagues and picked at his meal, trying to ignore the looks he was getting from students.

Breaking into his thoughts were the owls, which were arriving with a late, special edition of The Prophet. Almost everyone at the head table got one, and several were delivered to a handful of the older students in the room. He was about to fold it up and excuse himself when the headline caught his eye. Immediately below the masthead was title of the principle article, written in lettering nearly twice its usual size – War Romance Character Modeled on Hogwarts Professor! The sub-headline was even more jarring – Severus Snape – Don Juan War Hero.

He stood up so quickly that his chair tipped over backwards behind him, the deep thud echoing around the room. He opened the paper to the next page and the articles blared out at him like a horn – Hogwarts Students Make the Connections, Headmistress and Staff Appalled at Development, Harry Potter Outraged, Minister for Magic to Make Statement . . . . He was having so much trouble taking it all in that he didn’t notice Minerva whip out her wand and swiftly wave it around – the papers were abruptly yanked from students’ hands, forming a spinning vortex that was speedily sucked into one of the burning hearths where all of the periodicals were immediately reduced to ash. Her voice seeped into him as through from a great distance.

“Filius, have all of the mail redirected to your office – nothing goes out or gets delivered until tomorrow after this has been dealt with. And inform the faculty we’ll be having an emergency staff meeting in half an hour.”
Then he felt someone plucking at his sleeve, but he ignored it as he continued to rifle through the paper. “Severus!” she repeated sharply. He looked up and scowled malevolently over the students, who stared at him opened mouthed. “Now!” she hissed.

With one last growl, he followed her out. They said nothing as they walked briskly to her office, but the door wasn’t even closed before he started.

“Fucking, fuckity, fuck!” he roared as he began pacing angrily back and forth across the room. “Bloody fucking Rita Skeeter and that libelous piece of shite they call a newspaper! When I’m done suing her and the fucking editor I will own that rag – the wizarding insecticide I will personally apply afterwards will be too good for her! And as for the author of this entire fucking mess,” he ground out through his teeth as he paused to shake the newspaper at the headmistress, “she won’t even want to write her name when I’ve finished with her! Six years I put up with her and her friends’ infantile behavior – saved their sorry arses too many times to count!” he continued to rant, roaming around the room. “Returned her to human form after polyjuicing herself into a fucking cat, brewed the potion that unpetrified her, prevented her from being attacked and turned into a werewolf by Lupin, brewed the potions that healed her from the debacle at the Department of Mysteries . . . . I should have handed her – handed them all – over to the Dark Lord myself!” he spat.

“Severus, I understand . . . .” she began calmly but he wouldn’t be stopped.

“You understand nothing!” he bit out, nearly hyperventilating in his rage. “My life has been turned into a public spectacle!” he railed, fisting the magazine in the air. “Your clever little Gryffindor has ensured that my name will be paired with this load of bollocks for the rest of my life! I’ll bet she’s even penning the newest edition of Hogwarts – A History just so that future generations of school children can enjoy the joke as well!” He wadded up the newspaper and tossed it high into the air. “Incendio!”

“I don’t believe I saw anyone laughing at you,” she began again, swatting at the bits of burnt paper that floated in the air.

“Let me assure they soon will be!” he snarled, turning away and running his fingers through his long hair.

A knock came at the door, and with a wave of her hand, it opened. Flitwick hurried in.

“I’ve taken care of the mail and our colleagues will be in the staff room in about fifteen minutes,” he stated, looking between the two of them. “What’s next?”

“Yes,” he sneered, turning to fix his burning eyes on her, “what’s next? You were so keen to assume responsibility for managing this – what are your plans, headmistress?”

“Well, the first thing I’m going to do is send you to your room without any pudding for your surly tantrum – I’ve seen little boys behave better than you tonight,” she sharply chastised him.

“You’re going to try and refute this codswallop?” he asked scathingly.

“No, Severus, I’m not – we’re going to give it a bit of a twist and then embrace it,” she said firmly with a gleam in her eye.
The Defense

Chapter Summary

Hermione is mortified at all of the publicity, but Rita Skeeter is no match for Minerva, who finesses the reporter.

Chapter Notes

I am posting this a bit early today. It's another longish chapter and I hope you enjoy it! Do let me know!

The Defense

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he snarled.

Ignoring him, Minerva calmly addressed the charms professor. “Thank you, Filius, for taking care of the mail and getting everyone together – we’ll join you and the rest of the faculty in just a moment.” Flitwick nodded, clearly glad to make his escape. She took a pinch of floo powder and threw it into the grate, calling for the Minister for Magic. When he was about to put his question again, she shushed him as Shacklebolt responded.

“Kingsley, it’s Minerva – we have a situation,” she began.

“Yes, I know, I’ve just seen it – we need to talk as soon as possible,” he replied.

“Listen – can you get in touch with Arthur, Molly, and Messieurs Potter and Weasley and meet me here in my office at 8:00 this evening?”

“I’ll do my best. You have a plan?”

“Indeed I do,” she said confidently, as she finished the call.

“What are you up to, Minerva?” he asked suspiciously.

“Never you mind,” she replied briskly. “Floo to your quarters, and stay there until I collect you in the morning – talk to no one,” she ordered, taking him by the arm and half pushing, half pulling him towards the hearth. He took a pinch from the pot of powder she offered but paused to look at her questioningly.

“You won’t be any help with this, and shouldn’t be a part of it anyway,” she said resolutely. “Just leave it to me – I told you I would handle it and I will, now go.”

“Tomorrow morning’s classes . . . .” he began.

“I’ll take care of it. You have to trust me,” she said emphatically.
He narrowed his eyes and gave her a long look. After a moment, he threw in the powder and stepped into his study. He poured himself a stiff drink and sat down in his reading chair by the fire – it was going to be a long night, and he hated to think what the next day would be by comparison.

Hermione had briefly seen the front page of Ginny’s copy of *The Prophet* before they had been whisked away into the flames, and it was enough for her to know that things had been blown all out of proportion. She had to see Professor McGonagall, and she had to see her as soon as possible to sort things out. She went to her room to splash water on her face before dealing with what lay ahead – she had a horrible feeling that, regardless of the affection in which she was held by her head of house, it was likely that she was about to be expelled.

She stepped into the corridor and heard the door to the headmistress’s office close, followed by retreating footsteps. She could hear muffled voices for another minute or so and then . . . nothing. Straightening herself and her clothes, she proceeded to the door and knocked firmly. When it swung open, her mentor was at the desk scribbling on a piece of paper.

“Ah, Miss Granger . . . Hermione,” she said, briefly looking up. “I was just about to go find you. I don’t know if you caught any of the headlines in *The Prophet* this evening?”

“Um, yes, yes I did, and I need to tell you . . . .”

“I’m off to have a quick meeting with the staff,” she interrupted, gathering up her notes, “but I would like you to wait here – Kingsley, the Weasleys, and Mr. Potter will be here soon. We all need to discuss how we are going to handle the situation,” she said hurriedly as she headed for the door.

“Professor,” she interjected, “there is something rather important I need to tell you.”

“Well I’m afraid it will have to wait until after we’ve dealt with this,” she replied, reaching for the door.

“You don’t understand,” she pleaded desperately.

Minerva cut her off. “I assure you, Miss Granger, it *can* keep,” and then she was gone.

Hermione sat down dejectedly in one of the chairs by the hearth and sighed heavily.

“It will be alright, Miss Granger,” she heard Dumbledore’s voice say comfortingly.

“No, professor, I don’t think it will,” she replied forlornly, looking up at his portrait. “You see, I’ve done something I probably shouldn’t have . . . .” she trailed off, staring gloomily into the fire.

“I know.”

Her eyes darted to the portrait. “What do you . . . know?” she asked hesitantly as he scrunched his eyes and gave her a sympathetic smile.

“Well, for starters, I know you wrote – *are* writing – that story about Severus.”

Her face went red and she leapt out of the chair, sputtering.

“It’s alright, Miss Granger, I won’t tell anyone,” he quickly promised.

“Does . . . does Professor McGonagall know? Or Professor Snape?” she cringed.

“Neither of them have spoken of it to me,” he replied, technically truthful if nothing else. She slowly let out the breath she had been holding.
“Well they will soon because I’m going to have to tell them,” she said despondently.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why did you write the story in the first place, Miss Granger?” he gently prodded.

She sighed and turned away, walking over to the bank of windows behind the headmistress’s desk. “People were so awful to him over the summer,” she began. “I tried to defend him, but the general public was just too ready to believe the worst, even though the memories he gave Harry when he thought he was dying, and everything you left behind cleared him with the Wizengamot. Ginny gave me a copy of Witches Only, and I thought this might be a way to . . . .” She paused, staring out into the night. “I thought I could write a story, you see, change a few things – characters, events, and the like – and no one would know until near the end that Professor Snape was the model for Domitian, by which point he would have had the readers’ full sympathy and support. I know it sounds crazy now,” she quickly added, “but I really did think this was a good idea at the time.”

“And it’s still a good idea,” he said encouragingly.

She slowly turned to look at him. “It is?” she asked incredulously.

“I get around, you know – I’ve heard what’s being said about the story. It’s popular, and not just because of the, um, sex,” he mumbled. She blushed and looked down in embarrassment, but he pushed on. “It has succeeded beyond your wildest imaginings – it’s being discussed in the halls and common rooms. Students are talking about the story and the issues you’ve raised, talking about having to act against one’s essential nature, assuming a despised and hated persona, being forced to do things one would never otherwise contemplate. They are talking, Miss Granger,” he said calmly, “about being willing to lay down one’s life for the good of everyone else.”

“But it’s causing so much trouble – Professor McGonagall . . . .”

“Minerva has it all under control, I assure you,” he interrupted.

“. . . and Professor Snape has found it all to be very . . . upsetting,” she ploughed on.

“Yes, yes he has,” he conceded. “The truth can make us very uncomfortable, but that’s not to say that we shouldn’t hear it anyway, and no one needs to hear it more than Severus right now,” he said with genuine warmth and affection.

“So . . . you don’t think I should tell Professor McGonagall?” she asked hesitantly.

“I’m not going to tell you what you should do – it has to be your decision – but I think that waiting a day or two might give you a better perspective on things. If matters haven’t worked themselves out, you can still sit down with Minerva and discuss the situation.”

Just then the floo roared into life and Shacklebolt stepped out of it, followed immediately by Harry and Ron in their Aurors’ robes. Dumbledore winked at her behind his glasses before she turned to accept the hugs being offered by her school friends, who immediately started talking over each other. Molly and Arthur Weasley arrived several minutes later, and after a few words with them as well, she sidled over to where Shacklebolt had perched himself on the corner of Minerva’s desk with an open copy of The Prophet in his hand.

“‘Hogwarts’ potions professor is an insatiable and irresistible lothario, and parents should be very concerned about leaving their children in his care,’” Shacklebolt read aloud.

She gasped audibly and stole a glance at Dumbledore, who nodded and raised his hands reassuringly.
"That’s ridiculous!" Molly snorted indignantly.

"That’s Rita Skeeter,” Harry supplied. “Snape should sue.”

“But we all know he won’t,” Arthur commented resignedly.

“No,” Shacklebolt agreed, “no he won’t – he’ll just take it like he’s always done.”

“That, or catch Skeeter out some dark and stormy night,” Ron mumbled almost to himself. Hermione poked him in the arm.

“Well, he may feel he has to take it, but we don’t,” Harry said firmly. “The stuff she’s saying about me – about all of us – is libelous and I have no intention of letting it go.”

“I don’t think it will come to that, Mr. Potter,” Minerva stated, catching the last part of the conversation as she came in the door with Ginny behind her.

“Harry!” the young woman squealed excitedly, flinging herself into his arms.

“Blimey – hasn’t seen her family in weeks, and he gets all the attention,” Ron said teasingly. Pulling herself out of Harry’s arms, she was hugged in turn by her family.

“This is all very touching,” Minerva broke in, “but I’m afraid we have more important things to discuss, and time is short.”

“You have something up your sleeve, Minerva?” Shacklebolt stated more than asked.

“I do indeed. Let me explain how this is going to work . . . .”

It was a late night and early morning for everyone. He was in the shower when Timber appeared in his bathroom and passed on the headmistress’s message – he was to be ready for a meeting in her office at 10:00 a.m., sharp. He was prepared well before that, dressed in his best clothes, the ones he had worn to Slughorn’s New Year’s party. There was a proper way to do this, he thought as he reached inside his robes to pat a piece of paper that stuck out slightly from an inner pocket.

The instant Minerva called for him he stepped through the hearth – and came face to face with the bleached-blond harridan who had penned much of the garbage that The Prophet had published the evening before. He growled and instinctively reached for his wand, but Minerva was quicker, stilling his hand.

“Ms. Skeeter, perhaps you would care to set your things down and help yourself to some refreshments before we get started,” she said convivially, gesturing to the sideboard across the room that was laden with coffee, tea, and sweet rolls.

“Oooo,” she cooed, “don’t mind if I do!” Dropping her satchel into one of the chairs, she sashayed over to the breakfast items on leopard-print stilettos.

“This is your idea of handling it?!” he hissed. “Are you completely deranged?!”

The grip Minerva had on his arm turned to steel. “Don’t blow this, Severus, or I’ll hex you so fast you’ll spin all the way back to your diaper days!” she whispered threateningly. “Follow my lead,” she said between clenched teeth.

“I’ll get you for this, you Scottish pain in the . . . .”

“Well this is cozy!” Skeeter purred as she set a small plate and mug of coffee on the low table in
front of the chair that she was now perched on. “Don’t mind me,” she said, eyeing them gleefully, digging out a small pad of paper and a dicta quill.

“Severus, won’t you sit down,” Minerva said, smiling tightly as she steered him to the chair opposite as she took a place on the small settee between them, facing the coffee table and hearth.

“So Professor Snape,” Skeeter began, leaning in, “why do you think J. H. Bailiff chose you – of all people – to be the model for the protagonist in her story?” She reached down, picked up her pastry and took a bite.

“No idea,” he replied in a scathingly airy fashion.

When it was clear that he wasn’t going to answer any more fully, Minerva jumped in. “Severus is so modest, you will have to forgive him,” she said, reaching out and patting him on the knee. His scowl deepened and he looked at her waringly – it did no good. “In point of fact, Severus’s many qualities make him perfect for this kind of story, don’t you think? Years of sacrifice born out of a selfless love, unstinting bravery in the face of mortal danger, an unhesitating willingness to lay his life on the line, all on behalf of what is right, just, and good. Who else but a recipient of the Order of Merlin – First Class, mind you – should feature as the hero of a story about the recent war?” Minerva beamed at the reporter with smug satisfaction, though her smile became more fixed when she turned to him.

“Hasn’t this been a major disruption at the school?” Skeeter pressed insidiously, licking her fingers to remove the icing from the Danish. “Shouldn’t students be spending their time studying the usual wizarding subjects, like Arithmancy, Transfiguration . . . Potions?” she asked expectantly as she loudly sipped her coffee.

Minerva leaned forward and picked up a napkin from the table, handing it to the reporter. “Oh the students have a full curriculum, let me assure you, but we also encourage them to learn about the wider world outside this institution, especially since so many alumni of this school made the ultimate sacrifice for that wider world. And it’s easy to see why so many students have resorted to this story – it’s so . . . accessible. What better way to make the efforts of everyone who contributed to bringing down the Dark Lord seem immediate than an exciting piece of fiction based on actual people and events?”

“Yes,” she drawled, eying him speculatively. “And just how much of it is fiction?”

“Almost all of it,” he said dryly.

“Surely you could be a bit more fulsome,” Skeeter prompted. “There is no need to hide your light under a bushel.” She chuckled unattractively as her over large, augmented bosom bounced up and down, stressing the fabric of her jacket.

“Hide my light . . . .” Minerva shot him a forbidding glance and he schooled his temper and his expression. “The Ministry interviewed everyone in the Order, everyone who fought – I have nothing to add to the official record,” he said with finality.

“Come, come,” she said in an exaggerated fashion, flashing her bright sharp teeth at him, “the dashing hero in the story seems to have quite an admirer and I’m sure our readers would like to know if you have your own real life Perse to soothe your troubled brow.” She looked at him with anticipation.

The vein in his temple was starting to pulse noticeably but before he could erupt Minerva drew the reporter’s attention away from him.
“Sadly, that is the author’s invention – *artistic license* is what I believe they call it,” she provided informationally. “Naturally, we’d all be *delighted* if Severus found someone truly *worthy* of him,” she quickly added – he stared at her as though she had lost her mind.

Skeeter turned to the quill scribbling away next to her. “The tragic war-hero still sorrows after the lost love of his youth,” she quickly dictated *sotto voce*. Turning back to her quarry, she feigned a sad, wistful but entirely predatory smile. “No doubt many of my readers would be *thrilled* at the chance to help you . . . *forget* the pain of your loss – even if only for a few *hours*. I could introduce you,” she winked knowingly at him.

He slowly stood and Minerva recognized the look in his eye. “Why you . . . .”

“. . . are so kind to him, he cannot fathom,” she interrupted, also getting to her feet. “Severus is taking his time, you see, concentrating on easing back into the life of the school, and then perhaps he can begin thinking about more . . . *romantic* matters,” she said evenly.

“So you plan on staying at Hogwarts, even though it harbors so many terrible memories for you?” Skeeter asked as she picked up her satchel and handed her mug to Minerva.

When he didn’t respond, Minerva elbowed him discreetly.

“Yes,” he drawled in a monotone voice.

“Brave man,” the reporter replied, stepping around the far side of coffee table so she could squeeze his shoulder in counterfeit sympathy. She continued to smile lewdly at him as she slowly ran her hand down his arm, clearly trying to feel the muscles underneath.

“Very brave,” Minerva readily agreed, “we’re all so very, very proud of him. Did I mention he was awarded the Order of Merlin – *First Class*?” she inquired with a sickeningly sweet smile.

“Yes, I believe you did,” Skeeter said absently, continuing to leer at the potions professor. Putting her hand down the front of her bulging jacket, she pulled out a damp and rumpled business card. She slipped it between two of the buttons on his coat, and then placed her hand over the spot, caressing it suggestively. “Call me if there is anything – absolutely *anything* – I can do to help. I’m available all hours,” she said breathlessly.

“Where are you off to next, Ms. Skeeter?” Minerva asked, wanting to hurry her along before he reduced her to her animagus form and broke out a vial of the insecticide he had promised to brew.

Reluctantly pulling away from him, she straightened herself and sent the quill and pad back into her satchel. “Harry Potter,” she bragged smugly, “and then Kingsley, of course,” she continued to boast familiarly.

“You don’t want to join your colleagues?” Minerva asked solicitously, gesturing to the door of her office. “Talk to the faculty and some of the students, go to some classes, have lunch perhaps?”

“No, I must be off – have to get to the next story, you know. It was a pleasure seeing you again . . . *professor*,” she said huskily, giving him one last lascivious look before throwing floo powder into the grate and disappearing into the hearth.

“Supercilious *tart*,” Minerva immediately spat, going to her desk and banging down the coffee mug.

He held the arm that Skeeter had stroked away from his body. “Poppy may have to amputate,” he commented, taking out his wand and levitating the business card from his coat and dropping it into
the fire. He cast a cleaning spell over his arm and chest, and once he was satisfied that he was free of any lingering hair, skin, or dust mites belonging to the reporter, he joined Minerva, taking a seat in front of her desk.

“So this was your big plan,” he observed sarcastically. “It won’t work, you know.”

“Oh I think it will,” Minerva said with confidence, folding her hands in front of her. “She was very taken with you, I must say,” she observed critically.

“I’d fuck the Dark Lord himself before I’d ever lay a hand on that hag,” he said bluntly as Minerva sucked in air between her teeth disapprovingly.

“Severus, please,” she drawled, running her fingers across her forehead as if in pain. “I do not need either of those images in my head.”

“What’s this business about her other colleagues?” he inquired.

“I had Miss Weasely inform two dozen or so of her sixth and seventh-year friends – students she could trust – and instructed her to tell them that The Prophet wanted their take on the story. Miss Weasely was to encourage them to seek out the two reporters at breakfast, in the halls between classes, in the library, and at lunch – if they last that long,” she smiled wickedly.

His lips twitched. “You set a bunch of hormone driven, teenage girls on unsuspecting reporters, with orders to monopolize their time, until they ran screaming from the castle?” he asked slowly and deliberately.

“Wouldn’t you?” she replied with a knowing look.

“You weren’t worried that some of the boys might try to get a disparaging word in?” he almost smirked.

“As if they could. Besides, they’d never get a date until after they graduated if they did – and maybe not even then.”

“That was all very calculated for a Gryffindor,” he observed admiringly. “And what about the faculty?”

“There was a third reporter here to interview some of them in the staff room as they passed through between classes this morning.”

“You aren’t concerned about what at least some of them might say?”

“Flitwick put the fear of censorship into them yesterday, and reinforced it last night at our brief meeting. I suggested that anyone who didn’t have something good to say should find someplace else to have their elevenses.”

He barked at that, then slowly sobered. “She said something about interviewing Potter and Kingsley – what have they got to do with any of this?”

“We had a very quick, informal meeting last night with them and the Weasleys. Everyone agreed to make themselves available to The Prophet. The editor nearly wet himself over the opportunity to actually interview Order members rather than having to go to all the trouble of making things up,” she commented in disgust. “I don’t think we’ll be hearing anything negative about this again.”

“You forced them to defend me?” he said, outrage lingering at the edge of his accusation.
Minerva sighed. “No, Severus, I did not – no one was forced. They volunteered – all of them. They wanted to do this for you, and don’t you dare ask me why,” she added fiercely. “If you can’t figure it out, then you don’t deserve their good opinion.”

He absorbed the rebuke and pondered the situation – he had only one question left. “And what about the author?” he asked rather quietly.

Minerva smiled gently at him. “She helped Miss Weasley identify the right students – and she took your lessons this morning.”

He harrumphed but otherwise said nothing.

“She’s very good you know,” she stated.

He looked questioningly at her.

“Teaching, I mean – she has a real knack for it. She also clearly has a genuine talent for writing as well,” she observed more wryly.

He arched a brow but said nothing as he got up to leave.

“Before you go, I’ll just take that letter of resignation you’ve got in your pocket,” she said, extending her hand.

“What?” he said, attempting an innocent look.

“I’ve told you before, feigning ignorance just doesn’t suit you. I know you Severus – I know you wrote up a letter before you came this morning, so hand it over.”

Sheepishly, he reached into his pocket, slowly drawing out the document. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Put it with the others you’ve submitted over the years, of course,” she said affectionately, glancing at an approving Dumbledore. He laid it in her hand and went back to the hearth.

“Don’t be seen until after lunch – just in case,” she advised without looking up, pulling some papers from a stack and starting to go through them.

He took a pinch of powder, but paused before throwing it in. He turned his head slightly and looked down at the floor. “Thank you, Minerva,” he said softly.

She stopped what she was doing and turned in his direction. “You’re very welcome, Severus,” she replied with genuine warmth.

Once he was gone, Minerva gave the late headmaster’s portrait a knowing look. “That was well done, old girl,” he said.

“Yes, it was – and don’t call me old girl,” she huffed, turning back to her desk.

“Sh’ll be the real making of that boy,” he continued.

“Indeed, I think she just might,” Minerva replied, looking once more at the hearth through which he had just left. “If he doesn’t kill her first.”
Neutralizers

Chapter Summary

Severus finishes the last of the neutralizers - with Hermione's help - and The Prophet once more complicates his life, though in an entirely unexpected way.

Chapter Notes

Finally, we get to the third neutralizer that's been worrying our hero, not to mention the first issue of The Prophet since Minerva executed her flawless frontal attack! The next chapter is titled Consummation - just thought you'd like to know! Do let me know how you like this installment!

Oh, and a Public Service Announcement: I've been down with the flu all week. High temperature, aches and pains, and lots of other unpleasant symptoms that I will spare you. I get a flu shot every year, although my area hasn't gotten them in, yet. But when they do, and even though I should technically be immune, I'm getting one anyway. All I'm doing here is asking that you think about it. I'm not a physician and this isn't professional advice (so please don't flame me), but influenza isn't to be trifled with.

Neutralizers

Having changed out of his best clothes, he blew into the afternoon sixth-year class in his usual, inimical way, only this time, a few heads turned to watch with interest as he swept down the center of the room. Hermione stood off to the side at the front waiting for instructions, contrition writ large across her face for what had transpired over the last twenty-four hours. When he reached his desk and turned to face the class he was confronted with unusually attentive students. No one was fumbling to get their things out of their book bags or even fidgeting on their stools as was usually the case. Instead, sixteen pairs of eyes were focused solely and intently on him. He detected no hostility, only curiosity and . . . and . . . . Fuck! It was sympathy! They felt sympathy for him! He nearly growled out loud. Instead, he sneered derisively at the deluded sods and ordered them to turn to page sixty-seven in their texts. They snapped to attention, eager to do his bidding, but that didn’t mollify him in the least.

“Miss Granger will once more oversee your brewing today as my skills are needed on an infinitely more important project.” The students looked from him to her and there was no mistaking the disappointment in their faces. He couldn’t help smirking at the shifting dynamics taking place right in front of him, but this tiny sliver of gratification quickly faded.

“What are you waiting for, Miss Granger?” he frowned, looking her way as she continued to stand motionless to one side.

“Um, nothing, sir,” she blustered. “Please read through the instructions before gathering your ingredients,” she announced in a hesitant voice as students reluctantly lowered their heads to begin
their task.

“Report to my lab when you are done here,” he curtly ordered before turning on his heal and swiftly departing.

Just getting the lab ready for brewing the last neutralizer took the entire class period, and he was still setting things up when he heard her come in. Rolling up her sleeves without having to be told, she read over the parchment lying on the table – it was going to be extremely complicated, and her concern grew when she moved on to the second page.

“Um, professor?” she asked nervously.

“Yes, Miss Granger?” he responded automatically as he retrieved the pre-prepared neutralizing base from a cabinet to the stainless steel work table.

“What . . . what is the potion you are trying to neutralize supposed to do?”

He froze. She hadn’t asked about the other Ministry potions, which had been rather straightforward poisons, if such dark things could ever be classified in so mundane a fashion. But the potion that this particular neutralizer was for was different – it killed by rotting a person from the inside out, beginning with the digestive tract. What made it especially diabolical, however, was the fact that it took a long time to work and the individual was conscious throughout the whole process – it was designed to torture as well as kill. He had never seen such high levels of toxins in anything he had ever worked with before. It took only a minuscule drop to be lethal, which led him to believe that the potion was ultimately designed for wide distribution in a water system of some kind – a Muggle water system.

But even more distressing than all of that was the fact that he had contributed to its making – he had brewed the base. It was one of the first things the Dark Lord had him make some three years before, which is why he recalled it almost immediately when he analyzed the potion in the Ministry lab. At the time of its making, he was told that it would be used for a variety of innocuous healing potions that just about anyone could augment – it rang true, given Voldemort’s recent return – so it hadn’t set off any alarms, and maybe some of it had been used to amend the Dark Lord’s new physical form, but some of it was also used for a more nefarious purpose. As for the additional ingredients that turned it into a deadly weapon, he assumed that they had been secured from less scrupulous potioneers from somewhere abroad, probably from the same masters who had made the other two poisons. It made him wonder why he hadn’t been compelled to make them instead. Did Voldemort suspect his loyalty? Did the Dark Lord believe that something this evil might jeopardize his loyalty? Or was it simply his general paranoia, which kept him from sharing the details of his many plans with his followers, including his spy? He would never know, but certainly he felt an obligation to rid the world of it as quickly and efficiently as possible.

He didn’t want to share any of this with her, even though he had known that he would eventually have to ask if she’d be willing to part with some of her vital fluids – that aspect of the neutralizer had been weighing heavily on his mind for days. He reached over and slowly slid the parchments across to his side of the table. He scanned her worried face and took a deep breath.

“It’s a poison, Miss Granger, the likes of which I have never seen,” he said in a barely audible voice. “Just knowing the particulars of something so evil would taint your soul. If you insist,” he continued solemnly, “I will tell you, but for once, will you just trust me and ask nothing more about it?”

Her throat tightened and she found it almost impossible to swallow. She had known fear – it had been her intimate companion for most of the previous year. Every horcrux had terrified her, the events of Malfoy Manor still haunted her, and she couldn’t count how many times during the last
battle she thought she was about to die. And yet none of that frightened her as much as whatever it was her professor was withholding from her. If he could hardly contemplate it, strong as he was, how on earth could she?

“Of course, professor,” she heard herself whisper.

“Good girl,” he quietly responded, and returned to what he had been doing.

“Oh, we’ll get them as we need – some of them react badly when they are in close proximity to one another.”

“So . . . .”

“How do we get them in the potion?” he finished for her. “It’s tricky, which is why,” he continued, “when I tell you to leave the room, you will leave the room. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, professor,” she readily agreed.

“Let’s begin.” He went to the cabinet and pulled out a jar of dried aconite. She couldn’t help staring at the label when he set it down – one leaf alone could kill a grown man. He then drew over the paper bag lying nearby, taking out what looked like flowering carrot tops.

“Conium maculatum,” he said as he laid them on her cutting board.

“Poison hemlock,” she noted with some apprehension. They were fresh, too, hardly wilted at all, which meant he had been up early that morning. She wondered where he had gotten it, given the time of year.

“There is a sheltered cove deep in the Forbidden Forest,” he offered informationally, knowing where her thoughts would be taking her. He opened a drawer, pulled out a pair of leather gloves, and handed them to her.

“Can’t I just spell my hands for protection?” she asked, fingering the gloves as she looked them over.

“Humor me,” he replied, taping her hands with his wand, casting the protection spell over them. He gestured for her to put on the gloves, and once she had done so, he taped her hands again. “One slip of the knife, one weak point in the spell – I’m not taking any chances.” Not with her life, he thought to himself.

She picked up the knife and began dicing the hemlock while he used large tweezers to select several choice aconite leaves and flowers.

They worked quietly – slowly and deliberately – for nearly two hours. She had already gone into the other room twice while he prepared and added several dangerous ingredients, but now he put the potion under a stasis spell. “I must ask you to step out of the room again, Miss Granger, while I add the next to last item.” She immediately, and without question, laid her knife on the cutting board and turned to leave. “Do something useful while you’re out there, won’t you?” he drawled mischievously, as he waved his wand in the direction of one of the walls, revealing a secret cabinet. “I’ll be out momentarily.”

She called on Timber to bring them tea, and he joined her a few minutes later.

“That didn’t take long.”
He said nothing, reaching for his mug as he sat down, his mind already trying to frame the question he now needed to ask. “Miss Granger . . . there is one last ingredient that is essential to the neutralizer that I’ve not yet . . . acquired.”

“Can I help you get it?” she instantly asked.

He smiled ruefully. “It’s actually something you already have,” he trailed off. He could see she was pondering the question.

“It’s blood – isn’t it,” she stated rather than asked – the darkest potions almost always demanded such a sacrifice.

“Yes,” he replied. “I can’t use my own, you see, it has to come from . . . .”

“A Muggleborn,” she swiftly deduced.

All he could do was nod. They sat there in silence as they drank their tea.

“How much do you need,” she finally had the courage to ask.

“More than a few drops, but not as much as to make you faint – unless you are already prone to doing that,” he murmured, trying in his own way to reassure her.

She stiffened. “I think I can manage it without keeling over,” she said defensively, hoping that her much touted Gryffindor courage would indeed sustain her.

He finished his tea and got up. She swallowed the last of hers in one gulp and followed him back to the lab. A white, pristine towel lay on the table next to the cauldron, and he beckoned her over to it.

“Are you quite certain about this, Miss Granger?” he asked.

“Perfectly,” she replied, with more confidence than she felt. “Besides – where would you get it if I weren’t willing?”

“I would ask Madam Pomfrey to find a willing donor,” he replied, lifting her left hand and studying it. He reached for a prepared wipe and ran it over the side of her wrist, where it joined with her hand.

“And if she couldn’t find one?” she nervously teased.

“Miss Granger,” he said in mock frustration, picking up on her anxiety through the tension in her arm as well as from her voice. As he searched for the right spot, he got a close up view of her scars as well, and his jaw clenched in response. The potion needed the blood of a Muggleborn – a Mudblood – and here was her arm, outstretched and scared, as though it was one of his ingredients neatly labeled and stored in his stockroom.

“Are you alright, professor,” she inquired, her apprehension growing.

“Perfectly,” he lied, suppressing his own nausea. He drew her up close to the cauldron. “I have to do this so that the blood will drip directly into the potion,” he explained. “I’m afraid I can’t numb your wrist with any spells or topical solutions – it could have an adverse effect on the outcome – but the knife is very sharp, which will help minimize the pain.”

“I understand,” she said a bit breathlessly – he seriously doubted that she did.

When he looked at her, she was fixated on the spot he had chosen – he had to distract her. “Hermione?” he said firmly. Her head jerked upwards – there was no mistaking the apprehension
there. “Keep your eyes focused on my face – do not take them off of me, not even for an instant.”

His look seared and all she could do was gulp and nod. Without looking away, he reached down
blindly with his right hand, pulling back a fold of the towel and picking up the knife that had been
concealed underneath. Stepping in front of her slightly, with her arm tucked under his so that she
could not see what he was doing, he moved her hand and held it steady over the simmering cauldron.
In one swift move, he slid the blade across her skin. She gasped in pain but did not look away from
him – he could see her in his peripheral vision as he counted the drops. When he got to fifteen he
could just see panic starting to creep across her face – she was also starting to try and pull her hand
back.

“Shssss,” he whispered, turning his head slightly, “it will take only a few more moments – just
relax.” But she wasn’t relaxing and he didn’t fancy holding her hand forcibly over the cauldron – he
didn’t want to betray her trust, but neither did want her to knock over the potion they had spent so
much time preparing. “Take a deep breath with me – breath in,” he commanded. “Hold it . . . breathe
out. Again – breath in – hold it – release. Once more . . . .”

When he had counted to thirty-seven, the potion began to hiss, and he withdrew her hand, quickly
wrapping it tightly in the towel to staunch the flow. He stirred the cauldron with his right hand while
still hanging on to her arm with the left. Another five stirs and he withdrew the glass spoon and put
out the fire. He then turned his attention to his donor.

He gently unwrapped her hand, trying not to flinch at the deep red stain left behind on the towel. He
ran his wand along the length of the wound, sealing it as he went. A smooth pale line was left
behind, and he reached behind her for the tin of ointment he had ready. Just as she had done at
Christmas, she watched – mesmerized – as he rubbed the cream into her skin.

“Thank you, Miss Granger – you have help make the world a safer place,” he said softly, his breath
warm against her forehead. He found himself starting to lean in – or perhaps it was her – desperate
for his lips to touch her soft, smooth skin. At the last minute, he pulled away, releasing her. “You
should . . . go . . . and rest, Miss Granger,” he said awkwardly, beginning to gather up the
equipment, transferring it to the sink.

“I can help you clean up,” she countered weakly, staring down at the knife and bloody towel.

She felt his hands on her shoulders as he pulled her away from the table and walked her to the lab
door. “I’m afraid I must insist,” he said with quiet determination. “I grant it wasn’t a lot of blood in
the scheme of things, but this kind of work can take its toll. Once more, just . . . humor me.” She
looked up at his face as he peered down at her. His lips were thinly set and his eyes were pinched –
he looked paler than she had ever seen him before.

“Of course, professor,” she mumbled, starting to feel a bit shaky now that the adrenaline was starting
to wear off.

“Have Timber bring you a cup of tea, then lie down.”

She smiled faintly and left.

He stepped once more to the table and leaned against it, supporting himself with one hand as he ran
the other across his forehead and down the side of his face – his skin felt damp and clammy. He
looked into the cauldron – the potion was blood red, red from her blood, her sacrifice. The smell was
sickly sweet.

It was all too much. He jerked around, took two steps to the sink and heaved – hard – his abdominal
muscles straining to empty his stomach. When it finally ceased, he turned on the taps and splashed cold water over his face. He hadn’t had a reaction like that since his student days. It wasn’t the blood per se – not that he wasn’t sick unto his very soul seeing so much of it the last few years – but rather it was the fact that it was her blood, and it was the third time it had been spilled because of the Dark Lord.

He called for Timber, who arrived virtually instantaneously, begging to be told how he could be of service. He didn’t like having Timber – or any house elf, really – help clean the lab, but he didn’t think he could do it on his own.

“Did Miss Granger ask you for some tea?” he asked in a tight voice.

“Miss Granger did, Professor Snape, sir, and Timber was glad to get it for her. Can Timber get some for you?” he asked eagerly.

“Perhaps later,” he said as his stomach roiled a bit more. “What I need now is help cleaning up, but,” he added quickly as Timber was on the verge of snapping his fingers, “under my direction.”

Timber beamed – the potions professor rarely allowed him, or anyone else, to help. It was a great honor.

Hermione stroked her wrist absently as she lay on her bed. She hadn’t been able to think about it at the time, but in retrospect, his grip on her had been firm and assured. In spite of the violence inflicted on her wrist, he had been remarkably gentle and had steadied her when she had started to lose control – his effect on her had been hypnotic, and how he managed to do that and keep track of the blood dripping into the potion she really didn’t know. And soon, he would be applying those same nerves of steel to destroying potions that clearly unnerved even him. She didn’t want to speculate about the potion he had brewed the neutralizer for, but her mind nevertheless drifted in that direction. Two things were clear to her – the potion was designed to kill, and if he needed the blood from a Muggleborn, it was likely designed to kill witches and wizards like herself. An involuntary shiver coursed through her – it was no wonder he didn’t want to talk about it.

Although not terribly hungry, she dragged herself into dinner, just to pick up on what was being said about recent events. Conversation at the Gryffindor table was focused on what the sixth and seventh-year young women had told the two reporters from The Prophet, which almost immediately led to further discussions about Domitian’s – and thus Professor Snape’s – motivations. They were all in agreement that honor was at their core, but more divided on whether their actions were driven principally by the sustaining memory of a young love, a sense of remorse for youthful indiscretions, a quest for justice and redemption, a sense of fraternity with colleagues and friends, or the heartfelt desire to help save the wizarding world from unimaginable evil. There was even speculation that a new love in their lives had kept them going as the climax approached.

She couldn’t help smiling, even if only to herself. Dumbledore’s observations came back to her – they were making the proper connections, seeing and thinking about all the right things. She spared a glance for the high table – nothing was out of the ordinary, or at least seemed that way, even though she noticed that she wasn’t the only one frequently turning her head to the front of the room. The headmistress looked distinctly smug as she chatted amiably with her colleagues, who also appeared to be in rather high spirits. The only one who seemed completely unfazed by it all was him. He steadfastly kept his eyes glued to his plate, pushing food around with his fork and turning only occasionally to speak with Flitwick – when he got up to leave, it actually looked like he had hardly eaten anything at all. If he noticed that most of the students watched him leave, he gave no indication of it. Again she smiled – he couldn’t ignore his adoring fans forever. Eventually, he would have to acknowledge – and accept – their admiration and, more to the point, their respect.
When she came into breakfast the next day, most of the students were huddled in groups reading the morning edition of *The Prophet* over each other’s shoulders. There was the occasional giggle from the girls when they saw that they had been quoted, and while the boys snickered at their vanity, she was pleased that they were no less interested in the paper than their female peers. While she, too, was keen to see what the daily had to say, she couldn’t get within five feet of one, but given that the headmistress and some of the other professors at breakfast were reading their copies calmly, even occasionally smiling, it was clear that her mentor’s blitzkrieg had worked. Soon after her arrival, he came in and the room quieted as all of the students turned in his direction. He favored them with a scowl in return and was about to take his seat when he saw his subscription sitting at his place. Picking up the rolled periodical, he raised his eyes to scan the room. Sneering, he gripped the paper tightly and abruptly left.

He didn’t dare read the paper in the corridors on the way back to his quarters – he wasn’t about to be taken publicly unawares as he had been at dinner on Monday evening. Sitting down at his desk, he called for Timber and requested toast and strong coffee, which appeared almost instantly – then he unrolled the paper. Splashed across the top of the front page was the title of the first article – *Bookish Professor Self-Deprecating*. Beneath that in slightly smaller lettering were two other stories – *Students Admire Character Based on Professor* and *Minister for Magic Calls Professor ‘National Hero.’*

“Fuck,” he mumbled aloud in horror.

He opened the paper where his dignity was further assaulted – *Hogwarts Professor Role Model for Students, Hogwarts Faculty Laud Colleague, What students Learned about Courage from Professor*, and, most maddening of all, *Potter Proud to Call Professor ‘Friend.’* It couldn’t get any worse. And then he turned the page – *Molly Weasley’s Romantic Advice to Professor.*

His eyes widened and he slammed the paper on his desk with a resounding thwack. He immediately got up and headed for the lab. Pacing back and forth several times and running his fingers through his hair, he finally stopped in front of the work table. He leaned forward, letting his palms rest on the cool stainless steel as he took several deep breaths. There was simply no help for it – he had to read the paper, or at the very least *skim* the fucking articles so he’d be prepared to face everyone else who had read it.

Straightening himself, he went back to his study and sat down. Bolting his toast – practically in one bite – he washed it down with half his coffee and went back to the first page. The lead article was positively sycophantic, peppered with adjectives like *modest*, *self-effacing* and *shy*. Shacklebolt had been more restrained, but the article was nevertheless – and quite nauseatingly to his mind – littered with every synonym in the dictionary for *courageous* and *self-sacrificing*, including *plucky*, for *fuck’s sake*, which he was fairly certain wasn’t actually in the Minister for Magic’s vocabulary. Rita Skeeter and *The Prophet’s* staff clearly wrote with a thesaurus at their elbows.

By contrast, students enthused over his dry wit in the classroom and care for their safety in the face of a dangerous subject while professing great admiration and respect for him generally – he would disabuse them of *that* folly soon enough. His colleagues praised his skills as a potioneer and his professionalism in the classroom. Well, most of them did at any rate – Vector and Sinistra clearly had taken Minerva’s advice and stayed away from the staff room. Potter’s interview, at least, was to the point – he expressed the very firm opinion that the war would *not* have been won without him. Skeeter described the young man as humble, diffident, and unassuming – a marked departure from her usual slagging – and suggested coyly that, being so similar, he and Potter just *had* to be the best of friends. *Not bloody likely.*

And then he came to Molly’s piece. “He’s *quite* the Byronic hero – a loner, cynical and scathing of
the ambition and frivolity of others, defiant of tyrannical authority, a fierce and loyal friend but implacable to his enemies, and proud, though in the best sense of the word.” Byronic hero? Where the fuck did she get that from? Oh, right, Arthur – sod the man and his love of Muggle literature.

“And like every antihero,” she went on, “there is a gaping hole in his heart – wistful and longing for what he believes is beyond him. If he can just accept the respect and – dare I say it – affection that he is now held in, he will find his own heroine, his equal, and she’ll help him move beyond his past. He just has to be patient. You can’t search for love – it has to find you.”

What absolute tripe – the next time he saw Molly fucking Weasley he was going to see to it personally that she choked on one of her own fucking Yorkshire puddings. But there was more, naturally – the woman never knew when to shut up. When asked about his effect on the older female students in the meantime, she observed that he was “far more suitable for schoolgirl crushes than Gilderoy Lockhart ever was.” Well thank bloody Merlin for that, he thought caustically, wadding the paper up and flinging across the room into the hearth. His eyes drifted upwards to the clock on the mantle – fucking Merlin. He had exactly ten minutes to prepare himself for the horde of blithering idiots that was his sixth-year potions class. And if any of them valued their lives so little as to mention any of the articles, he simply wouldn’t be held responsible for his response.
Consummation

Chapter Summary

Student perceptions of their potions professor are starting to change, while Domitian and Perse finally consummate their feelings for one another.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry I haven't responded yet to any of the comments this week - I was (still am) so far behind on work that I just couldn't get to it. But I promise to do so later today. I hope this chapter will help make up for my tardiness - it's what I think we've all been waiting for! Let me know if it meets with your approval!

Consummation

He swept into class in his usual distinctive way but was almost immediately thrown off track mentally by several students along the aisle softly greeting him with “Good morning, professor.” He scowled and otherwise tried to ignore them. When he turned to face the class, he was confronted with eager and expectant faces. He snarled.

“You will be working in pairs, this morning,” he began sternly. “One of you will prepare the potion on page two-hundred and eighty-three, and the other that which appears on page sixty-two. In one hour, I will give you the instructions for combining them. Let me caution you,” he said, lowering his voice ominously and leaning over the desk, his arms stretched out and his hands gripping the edges. “These potions must be prepared to a level of exactness I have yet to see from most of you. If they are not precisely in balance, combining them will be exceedingly dangerous,” he enunciated carefully.

Normally, such a pronouncement would have instilled an appropriate level of terror in his students, but the ninnies looked positively excited. That was not the effect he had been striving for. He sneered – by assigning three different potions, he had just tripled the chances of them blowing him up and they couldn’t be more pleased at the prospect. Absolutely bloody perfect.

At the one hour mark, he passed around testing strips. “For those of you doing the first potion, the strip should turn vermilion. Potion number two should turn the strip chartreuse.” The students looked at each other questioningly, and then slowly turned their eyes to him. He sighed impatiently. “Red and yellowish green,” he filled in patronizingly. Walking down the center of the room, he surveyed the results, checking to see if they had turned a suitable color – one of them had not.

“Miss Cooper, your testing strip has turned purple – how do you account for that?” he queried testily.

“Ummm . . . I’m not sure, professor, but it’s a pretty color, though, don’t you think?” she replied dreamily, holding it up for him to see as several of her peers snickered. With a flick of his wand he vanished her potion.
“You just cost your partner half the points for the assignment, Miss Cooper.”

Her partner wasn’t appreciative. “Abigail,” he sniped, “keep your mind on your work instead of that damn magazine!”

“That’s good advice, Mr. Smythe,” he commented caustically as he made his way to the front of the room. Waving his wand at the board, a set of instructions appeared and the students began combining their potions. When they had finished, he had them test it again. “Bring your strip up and compare it to mine – if they match, you will have successfully prepared the potion to treat Pixie Pox.”

A number of *ooohs* and *ahs* rippled through the room – the pesky disease had affected a number of magical creatures in the forest the previous fall, not to mention several pets belonging to students, and this was the first time that they had brewed something to be given to animals. Potions that tested too light or dark were vanished – along with house points – but at the end of class, there were ten vials that passed inspection. It was a respectable return, more than he had been expecting and probably enough that he wouldn’t have to brew any himself at the next outbreak. The successful students exalted over their success, more so than he was used to seeing, but those whose potions had not been up to snuff looked truly disappointed and he was unused to that as well. Usually, students accepted failure with a maddeningly indifferent shrug of their shoulders, but their frustration today was clearly evident for him to see.

Similar scenarios played out in all of his other classes, and this in spite of the fact that he was no less snarky or disparaging than he usually was – students paid attention to what he had to say, and those who performed well basked in their success, and those who didn’t hanged their heads dejectedly. He’d always wondered what it would be like to teach students who didn’t just *have* to be there but actually *wanted* to take his classes. He hated to admit it but there might be an upside to all of the publicity he was getting of late.

His only disappointment was that he saw Hermione only briefly over the course of that day and the following one. She had resumed her tutorials with her other professors, but he had cancelled their usual meetings in the lab for the rest of the week – the last neutralizer they had made was still proofing and he didn’t want her anywhere near it. And since she usually assisted with the potions classes that came early rather than late in the week, they hadn’t spent any time together, alone or otherwise, in two days and he missed that. Just how much so was brought home – and hard – the only time their paths actually crossed.

He was reprimanding two Gryffindors who had knocked over a suit of armor in their rough housing between classes. She was coming out of the library just as he was giving them detention – they were going to have to spend several of their evenings polishing the medieval body plate. She smiled when she saw him and positively grinned at the assignment, even though points had been taken from her own house. He wanted to acknowledge her but simply couldn’t, not in front of other students. When she looked in his direction again during dinner, he had to pretend that he hadn’t seen her.

Still, by the end of the week, he felt that he had reestablished a certain degree of equilibrium. There hadn’t been any backlash over *The Prophet* articles – quite the contrary, in fact. Owls to the editor had been positive in the extreme. But when he sat down to breakfast, about to tuck into a good fry up, his stomach lurched at the sight of that morning’s mail delivery – he had completely forgotten that it was Friday and there was another bloody chapter to get through. The young women practically assaulted the owls to get to their magazines, and with a quick look in his direction, they scampered off to their rooms, giggling.

He looked to his right and saw Minerva’s subscription waiting for her at the table, but she was
nowhere to be seen at the moment. What few colleagues had made it to breakfast were at the end of
the table, chatting away amicably, while only a third or so of the student body remained at their
tables, and they were mostly the younger pupils. Slipping his wand from his coat sleeve, he cast a
gentle Accio – the rolled up periodical slowly slid across the table, and when it was within reach, he
pulled it into his lap. He vanished his breakfast to the coffee table in his quarters and got up and left –
the food was still warm when he sat down in his reading chair a short time later. He was a little
apprehensive, but forewarned was forearmed, and after taking a bite of his beans and fried toast, and
a hefty gulp of his coffee, he untied the magazine and opened it up.

Perse knocked politely on Albinia’s door and then entered. The Minister for Magic was sitting at her
desk, and she turned over the parchment she had been scribbling on as Perse sat down across from her.

“Perse, I need to ask a favor of you,” she began.

“Of course, Minister,” she promptly replied.

“You should wait to hear what I’d like you to do before you commit,” she smiled indulgently at the
eager young woman. Out of habit, she leaned forward and was about to clasp her hands together
and rest them on the desk but quickly caught herself. Only a handful of people – Domitian, Gryffiudd,
Flintshire, and Pappy – had seen the effects of the curse, and the fewer who knew about it the better.
She wasn’t wearing gloves, so she sat back, crossed her legs, and let her hands settle in her lap.

“I need someone who can serve as a messenger between me and Domitian.”

Perse furrowed her brow. “Have you and Domitian had a falling out?” she ventured carefully.

Albinia smiled ruefully. “Not exactly.” When Perse persisted with her questioning look, the Minister
continued. “It’s . . . complicated – I hope you won’t be offended if I simply leave it at that?”

Perse slowly nodded, but she didn’t much like the thought that the two most important people in the
fight against Valmont were no longer on speaking terms.

“In regards to this, I must ask you not to volunteer any information about me unless he asks. I don’t
think he will, but don’t offer it in any case.”

“Alright,” she responded hesitantly.

“I also need someone who can carry information back and forth between him and the Inner Circle
as well.”

“He’s not going to attend meetings?” she blurted out, unable to keep the uneasiness from her voice
– the situation was starting to sound even worse than she feared.

“He can’t – it’s partly a matter of appearances, you see,” she explained. “He needs to keep his
distance in order to maintain his position with Valmont.”

It sounded true enough, although Perse doubted it was the only reason why he was avoiding Inner
Circle gatherings. The two women stared at each other, neither of them blinking. Albinia’s blue
eyes, which usually conveyed such warmth and feeling, were now cold, steely, and all seriousness,
but that didn’t keep Perse from trying to read her. After a few moments, Albinia broke the silence.
“Will you do it?”

“Yes,” Perse quietly replied.
“Good.” Albinia stood abruptly and Perse immediately got to her feet. “There is one last thing,” the
Minister said as she reached under the neckline of her blouse and dug out a chain with a key on the
end of it – she pulled it over her head. Walking around the side of her desk, she offered it to Perse
with her good hand. The young woman turned it over in her palm and then looked at Albinia for an
explanation.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you what it is, but it’s important that you let Domitian know that you have it.
He will tell you what to do when I’m . . . when it is appropriate,” she corrected herself.

Perse nodded, slipping it over her head and arranging it so it was hidden from sight. Although they
were already mere feet apart, Albinia stepped even closer.

“Whatever Domitian may do in the future, whatever terrible things your colleagues may say, you
have to promise me that you at least will always think the best of him,” she demanded in rather
anxious tones. Perse could not fail to notice that the Minister’s façade had slipped a bit – she was
clearly worried about him, seriously worried in fact.

“I always have, Minister, and I will to continue to do so,” she replied with conviction.

“Do you promise?” Albinia asked one last time, trying not to wring her hands.

Perse was a bit taken aback. “Yes, Minister – I promise,” she assured her a second time.

With that, Albinia relaxed noticeably and quickly regained her composure. “Then I look forward to
seeing you at tonight’s meeting,” she said, going back to her chair and turning her attention to other
matters on her desk.

“Yes, Minister,” Perse replied perfunctory and then left. It had been a very odd exchange, and the
young woman couldn’t keep from thinking about it all day. That evening, she watched Albinia’s
every move, but the Minister seemed to be her usual self – she wasn’t giving anything away.

The meeting was less contentious without Domitian present, and plans for a variety of contingencies
were drawn up for when Valmont decided to make his move. When the gathering broke up, Albinia
gave her a knowing look, and Perse immediately left to find Domitian and make her report. She
knew where he lived, so she apparated several blocks away, disillusioned herself, and kept to the
shadows. She surveilled his house from a small park across the street. There were lights on in both
the ground and first floor windows, but she waited until the downstairs went dark to make sure he
didn’t have company. She approached the house but didn’t knock – she felt the tingle of his wards,
which meant he already knew she was there. What she wasn’t prepared for was suddenly being
yanked across the threshold, the door closing surprisingly quietly behind her.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing?!” he hissed menacingly, pinning her hands against the
wall.

“I . . . I was just . . . .”

“What?” he seethed. “What was so fucking important that you had to risk being seen by a Green
Shirt coming into my home?”

“I’m supposed to be your intermediary,” she explained, “passing information back and forth
between you and the Inner Circle.” The weight of him kept her immobile as he considered the
information, not that she seriously considered struggling against him.

They both stood there a moment in the darkened hall trying to catch their breath. There was just
enough street light flowing through the transom window for them to peer into each other’s eyes.
Their faces were mere inches apart, and after a few moments, he came in closer, hovering over her lips, almost touching his nose to hers, as he studied her intently. She held her breath as his lips coursed as light as a breeze along her jaw.

“It’s not safe for you to be here, Perse,” he breathed.

“I was careful – no one followed me,” she managed to whisper back.

“I wasn’t just talking about you being seen,” he responded, his lips now at her ear. They trailed down the side of her neck as he inhaled deeply. He could still scent the night air in her hair and on her skin, with undertones of . . . cucumber, he thought. Once again, he knew he should push her away, throw her out, but found the temptation too great.

She didn’t realize he had released his grip on her until she felt one hand at her waist and the other pulling the neck of her shirt to the side to get at her shoulder. With one hand on his chest, she reached out with the other and threaded her fingers through his long hair, scraping her nails along his scalp. He lifted his head, leaning into her hand. Opening his eyes he looked at her with such intensity, such hunger and desire that she felt almost on fire even in the chill of his front hall. Her lips parted and he seized the invitation, crashing into them so hard her head banged against the wall. She was no less fierce in her attack. She had wanted him for so long that nothing – but nothing – was going to stop her now. Her arms wrapped around his neck and he pressed determinedly into her, his arousal rigid against the hollow space next to her hip. Swiveling her hips, he groaned audibly as his head jerked away from her.

“Perse,” he gasped as she continued to move against him. She didn’t waste any time. Pulling her hands away from his neck, she quickly undid the buttons of his shirt.

“Perse,” he gritted out once more, grabbing her wrists and restraining her once more against the wall. He struggled for breath. “We . . . we can’t do this. You’re Muggleborn, a target already – if anyone found out they’d come after you for certain,” he said raggedly.

“You can keep a secret and so can I,” she boldly asserted.

“We both know my chances of surviving all of this are very slim,” he continued.

“I’d say that goes for all of our chances, but I’m still going to fight to stay alive, and so are you, Domitian,” she gritted out. “And while I’m alive I’m going to live as well,” she said resolutely as she pulled him down and kissed him fervently.

“Then so be it,” he mumbled against her lips. With no warning, he bent his knees slightly and slung her over his shoulder, heading quickly up the stairs. She barked his name and demanded to be put down as she shook her legs in protest – slinging her shoes off in the process – but he paid her no heed. He kicked open his bedroom door and set her down in front of his bed. The abruptness of being upright made her sway, but he grabbed and held her still – his voice in her ear was deceptively soft.

“If we do this, Perse,” he breathed heatedly, “there will be no turning back. You will be mine for as long as I live, however long or short that may be.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged, clinging to him.

“Tell me!” he demanded imperiously, tightly squeezing her arms and shaking her.

“I am yours,” she said, her words spilling out in puffs of air against his cheek. “I have been for a long time, now.”
“Yes, indeed you have,” he growled possessively, nipping her earlobe.

With his strong arms securely wrapped around her, he laid them out on the bed – she tilted her hips upwards as he pushed himself against her. The urgency of the moment returned in a rush, and his hand snaked up between them, his fingers trying to work the buttons of her shirt. In frustration, he tore them, ripping the garment in his quest for what was underneath. Satisfaction was momentary as he struggled with her bra.

Perse could not focus on anything beyond ridding them of their clothing – the desire to feel skin against skin was overwhelming. She pushed on his shoulders and he moved to sit back. Quickly undoing her bra, she shrugged out of it and her blouse, throwing them to the side. He had already discarded his shirt and now she ran her hands through the dark hair on his chest while he stared down at her glorious breasts – they were so much . . . so much more than his imagination had been able to conjure. As her hands slipped behind his neck to pull him closer, he leaned down to take one of her puckered nipples into his mouth. Her breath caught, and when he bit lightly, she moaned and arched upwards. He suckled, kneading the other generous mound until he had of necessity to stop and pull away, lest he come before they had hardly even begun.

He backed off the bed, but she followed to its edge. Breathing heavily and flushed from their arousal, they continued to stare at each other with naked desire. Unselfconsciously, she wet her lips and quickly slipped out her slacks. When she had completed that task, she reached and slowly undid his trousers. Stepping out of his clothes, he lighted on her dark blue underwear. She leaned back on her elbows and he pulled them down her long, soft, perfectly proportioned legs. The panties were warm in his hands and her blush deepened when he raised them to his face, taking in her scent – she almost came at the sight.

“Domitian,” she begged desperately as she backed her way to the center of the bed and opened her legs welcomingly. He needed no further encouragement and swiftly stretched himself along her length, settling between her thighs. They kissed frantically as he rubbed his member between her folds, readying himself. As he found her center, she unexpectedly raised up, impaling herself. Neither could stifle their sudden pleasure – he gasped involuntarily, and she moaned against his lips. Her eyes opened slowly, and though in a daze, she was struck at the expression of shock and wonder on his face at the intensity of it all – this was the real man behind the mask he always wore, and she wanted him more than she wanted air.

As he tried to calm his breathing and regain some control, it occurred in the deepest, darkest, most isolated regions of his mind that he hadn’t done this – hadn’t truly been with a woman – since . . . well, ever, really. This, right here with Perse, this was the real thing, and the fantasy he had been living with for almost two decades couldn’t even begin to compare – now, nothing less than this would ever satisfy him again.

He leaned down to pour his soul into her mouth – he wanted to make her swallow him up whole, and she responded in kind, parting her lips to take him in. They began to rock, slowly at first, while they continued to sup, taste, and spar. He massaged her breast, played with the nipple, pinching it until she groaned in pleasure. His large, warm hand roamed downwards until it rested between them. He curled his fingers in her hair before slipping one of them even further down, seeking – and finding – the pea nestled in its cushioned pod. He circled it and her response was immediate – her grip was bruising on his shoulders, but he didn’t care. He continued the movement, sensed her tension building, heard her breathing increasing, and finally felt her stiffen momentarily before relaxing into her climax.

Her head tipped back. “Domitian!” she called breathlessly and repeatedly as she came.
“Here,” he whispered encouragingly and more than a little smugly.

As the feeling started to dissipate, Perse began to move determinedly against him, pushing and grinding into his groin. “Domitian . . . oh god, please, Domitian,” she begged as she writhed in seeming agony, pulling at him as if he weren’t already flush against her cervix. He couldn’t help but respond to her desire – she was tight to begin with, but now her muscles squeezed him until he was nearly blind from holding back. But there was no need to restrain himself any longer, and he threaded his arms behind her knees, pushing them to her shoulders as he leaned forward. He thrust forcefully into her, and each time a tiny grunt escaped her lips – it was almost more than he could bare. Reaching around, she was just able to caress his sack – and that’s what tipped him over the edge. The distinctive tingling in his balls signaling the inevitability of it all came on forcefully.

“Perse,” he rasped, “you completely . . . undo me,” he just managed to get out before bright stars crossed his vision. In that moment, there was release – wonderful, glorious, explosive release, and . . . and . . . something else. In his state, he couldn’t quite label it, but it was good . . . satisfying in a way that nothing else in his life had ever been. He wouldn’t try to analyze it right now, maybe later, after . . . resting.

Rolling onto his back, he dragged Perse with him, and she draped an arm and a leg over him familiarly.

“Domitian,” she mumbled, her lips vibrating against his skin. “I almost forgot. Albinia gave me a key,” she mumbled, fingering the chain that now lay on his chest between them.

“Later, Perse,” he replied, just before he closed his eyes and slipped into the most restful sleep he had enjoyed in years.
Chapter Summary

Severus has difficulties dealing with the consequences of Perse and Domitian consummating their relationship.

Chapter Notes

Hi, all,

I'm sorry I haven't been able to respond to your emails yet - the internet was out in our area for most of the week, but I will attend to them very soon! Thank you for all of your comments - they keep me wanting to do this, they really do! So, if you enjoy this chapter - and it's quite a bit longer than usual - do drop me a line!

Afterglow

He was perspiring, breathing heavily, and painfully aware of possibly the hardest erection he had ever had in his life. The clock over the mantle indicated that he had exactly five minutes to get his arse to class, and cancelling it simply wasn’t an option. There was no faster way to draw unwanted attention to himself than for it to get around that he had missed class – it would be a race to see who burst into his chambers first, Poppy or Minerva, and he really didn’t want either of them to see him in this state. No, there was no help for it, he’d have to grit his teeth and simply bear it until . . . fucking hell, it would be lunch before he’d have any free time! Slamming the magazine down on the coffee table, he stood and, after adjusting his trousers, headed for his sixth-year potion class.

He had always enjoyed the grand entrance. He had spent years perfecting it – striding authoritatively into class dressed head to toe in black with his robes billowing behind him, firm in the knowledge that the display was every bit as intimidating as he intended it to be. He had never failed to revel in the impression he made – it was the one part of his day that he could always count on.

Until now.

On this particular morning, he was chaffing and focused on keeping his frock coat from riding up. His physical discomfort was further increased by the overpowering scent that nearly floored him the instant he came into the room – his eyes were burning and he was just barely repressing a walloping sneeze. The final insult to his dignity was the fact that, rather than being overawed, even more female students than the day before were smiling at him and offering their good wishes for the morning. Those hopes had already been thoroughly dashed – the thought that Hermione was a good deal more experienced than he ever would have guessed had ground them firmly under foot.

When he turned and faced the class, his attention was immediately drawn to the desks in the front row, or rather more truthfully it was drawn to the sight of some well-proportioned legs – sans socks – sticking out from under said tables. Given the alarming expanse of thigh he could also see, he briefly feared that the young women the legs were attached to might be sitting at the desks in their
underwear. When he finally drew his eyes upwards, he encountered faces that looked at him longingly.

_Longingly?!

His mouth suddenly went dry and he moved back a step. Scanning the room, he realized something else – all of the young women in class were congregated at the front, while their sullen male peers had been relegated to the back. He had to nip this in the bud, and he had to do it _right now_. He favored them with his best, professorial sneer.

“For years, I’ve had an idle curiosity as to how some of you managed to dress yourselves in the morning. Today, that concern has become _literal_. Everyone in the first three rows, _stand up_,” he ground out.

The young women reluctantly got to their feet, revealing that they were in fact wearing their skirts, even if they had been turned into mere scraps of plaid cloth tightly wrapped around their hips.

“You will return your skirts to their original, regulation length and design,” he commanded. When they hesitated, he glared at them menacingly. “_Now._”

The dozen or so students took out their wands, pulled back their robes, and returned their clothing to its original state, their skirts now falling to their knees.

“And your _socks_,” he snarled scathingly. There was snickering from the back of the room, and he deliberately let it go as the young women dug out their leggings from their book bags.

Once their uniform had been dealt with, there was still the problem of the nauseating perfumes. He had been in class less than five minutes and he was nearly on the verge of a migraine. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he realized he could not possibly carry on with class in this contaminated environment.

“In the future,” he bit out, “anyone coming to class smelling like a _trollop’s boudoir_” – more guffaws from the back – “will be sent to Madam Pomfrey, to be scourged with as many cleansing spells as she can think of. Gather your belongings and go wait in the courtyard,” he ordered peremptorial.

Once they had gone, he cast a few spells over the room, but lifting his sleeve and sniffing, he found that the obnoxious scent had already permeated his clothes. He cast further spells but could not entirely rid himself of the fumes that had made his sinus passages raw. Abandoning the classroom, he made his way up from the dungeons. As he rounded a corner, just down from the library entrance, he collided with Hermione, knocking the books she was carrying out of her hands.

“Is this the way the term is going to proceed, professor? Hurtling into me at every opportunity like a _bludger_?” she quipped good-humoredly as she knelt down to pick up the volumes.

It should have been flattering that she remembered what he had said to her the first night back at school, but he was once again flooded with warring emotions. As she tried to stand, he grabbed her arm and hauled her up rather more forcefully than he needed to, though she gave no indication that she had noticed. When she raised her face to him he was a bit taken aback by the shadows under her rather tired looking eyes – he replied with the only thing that came into his mind.

“Miss Granger, if I hurtle into you, I promise it _won’t_ be like a bludger,” he mumbled almost to himself. But she had heard him clear enough and blushed, hugging the books to her chest. “What are you doing out of class?” he asked gruffly, trying to stifle his concerns about whatever past she might have had.
“Professor McGonagall was called away from my transfiguration tutorial by Hooch and Pomfrey – I think someone must have fallen off their broom and hurt themselves, so I’m going to spend the rest of the time in the library,” she replied. “I don’t mean to be . . . personal, professor,” she continued tentatively, scrunching up her nose, “but have you had some sort of . . . accident?”

“How some of the young women in my sixth-year potions class had regrettable application issues with their toilet water this morning,” he responded distastefully. “They are going to gather ingredients from the forest – it might help dissipate their poisonous fumes, but I rather doubt it.”

She could easily imagine the scene that had just played out in his class. The clash of fragrances at breakfast had put her right off her oatmeal, not that she was particularly hungry to begin with given how poorly she had slept. On her way to the headmistress’s office, she had also seen some sixth-year girls taking off their socks and transfiguring their skirts – it amused her that they were now seeing their potions professor in rather a new light, and she wondered what he had made of that.

Just over her shoulder, he saw movement in the distance – it was Vector, marching officiously towards them with her own stack of books trailing her. His posture stiffened abruptly and he resumed his scowl. “I will let you know if I need any assistance in the lab this weekend, Miss Granger,” he stated formally before brushing past her. Confused, she turned to watch his retreating figure, and saw the reason for the rapid change in demeanor – he barely nodded at his colleague. She waited to open the door for the Arithmancy professor and then followed her inside.

He taught his other morning lessons back in the potions classroom and had no further difficulties with any of the students. They had heard the rumors about Domitian having sex with Perse, but being first and second-years they were mercifully still young enough to be revolted by the idea of anyone – not just their potions professor – having intimate relations, period. He was almost grateful for the looks of disgust they threw in his direction, but it did nothing to keep him from brooding on Hermione’s apparent sexual expertise.

He decided to skip lunch in order to shower away the scent that continued to offend both his nose and sensibilities, but he was waylaid by Minerva – she stood in the doorway as his last class filtered out. Closing the door behind her, she didn’t pause for the niceties.

“I believe you took my magazine this morning, Severus,” she said, “and I’m here to collect it.”

“You aren’t old enough to read it,” he smirked.

“That’s exactly what Rolanda said when I asked to borrow hers,” she replied archly. “Hand it over.”

“I don’t carry it with me, you know,” he replied sarcastically.

“Then I’ll accompany you to your quarters to retrieve it,” she countered.

“I was just on my way to lunch, actually – I’m scheduled for the first two hours of the study period this afternoon and you know how cranky I get if I don’t eat beforehand,” he volleyed snidely. It was bad enough that Merlin knew how many people were going to read that sex scene, but he especially didn’t want Minerva to see it – it felt like a violation of his . . . their privacy.

“It won’t take long to stop by your rooms,” she said, marching over to the door at the front of the room that none of the students except Hermione ever seemed to notice – she wasn’t going to be put off. He opened the door, allowing her to precede him into his quarters. He retrieved the magazine from the coffee table and handed it to her with pointed reluctance.

“Don’t read it in public,” he quipped acerbically. She huffed as she took a pinch of floo powder,
called for her office, and disappeared into his hearth.

He went to the bedroom and stripped off his clothes – even the cleaning spells he had cast could not completely dispel the odor that still lingered. After summoning and then instructing Timber to do what he could with them, he went through to the bathroom, where the scent of toxins was finally defeated by old fashioned soap and water. He only wished it was as easy to wash away his anxieties concerning Hermione.

He hadn’t been expecting her to be a virgin, but the degree of experience implied in the present chapter seemed . . . well, extensive, and that did bother him. Were young women her age really that sexually practiced? Was he that out of touch with mores of young people? Over the years, when he had caught students breaking curfew – snogging and petting in the castle’s alcoves and dark stairwells – they had always looked hilariously inexperienced, what with their arms and legs all akimbo. They were obviously aware of their ultimate destination but seemingly had little comprehension of the equally enjoyable process in getting there. But she came across as a full-fledged woman who had an intimate understanding of sexual desire as well as technique – just thinking about her . . . er, Perse speeding him . . . Domitian on his way by cupping his . . . their balls was giving him yet another erection. He glanced down at his member, which looked back at him eagerly. Fucking Merlin. If he gave in, he’d be groggy all afternoon – he had to put it out of his mind so he could continue with the rest of his day, and to that end, he turned the cold water on full.

Having regained control of his thoughts, he stepped out of the shower, dried himself off, and found a clean set of clothes waiting for him on the bed. When he was once more presentable, he picked up some papers from his desk to grade and was headed for the door when he heard something crash into the coffee table. Looking over the sofa to see what it was, he found that Minerva, weighing in on the chapter, had thrown the magazine through the floo system and it now lay on the floor. Still feeling more than a little unsettled himself about the situation, he left it there and began the long trek up from the dungeons.

When he got to the study hall, the room at once quieted. He looked contemptuously at the many heads that were turned in his direction – he noted, almost without thinking about it that Hermione wasn’t there. He grimaced.

“Contrary to the ruminations of The Prophet’s editorial staff, Hogwarts isn’t a social club – get to work!” he barked, setting his papers down at the end of the table. From that vantage point, he could sit and grade while keeping an eye on the miscreants.

He had just started to read the first essay when Hermione hurried breathlessly into the room.

“You’re late,” he observed tersely without even looking up.

“I’m sorry, sir – Professor Flitwick forgot the time,” she explained.

His lips settled into a thin line – saying nothing, he pointed to an open spot halfway down the table. She took up the place and laid out her work. He was on the third essay when a soft, feminine voice to his left drew his attention – the raised hand belonged to a seventh-year young woman. He huffed impatiently.

“Yes, Miss Birch,” he said testily, deliberately not getting up.

“Um, I’m having trouble with this charm – could you help me with it, professor?” she sighed heavily. Her seeming breathlessness, coupled with a coy smile was all he needed to see.

“Miss Granger,” he said gruffly.
Her head jerked up.

“Miss Birch is having difficulties with her . . . charm,” he sneered. “Since you are taking advanced instruction in the subject, perhaps you would be so good as to her help her,” he said derisively. With that, he resumed his grading, and while it was clear to Hermione that Miss Birch most definitely did not need assistance, she gave it to her anyway, brushing aside her half hearted thanks when she was done.

When another sixth-year female student tried the same tactic, he sent an enthusiastic, spotty-faced third-year boy over to help with her Arithmancy equations. There were a few laughs, but one stony glare silenced them. Shortly after that, a seventh-year young man, who looked like he had just stepped out of the upscale *The Gentleman Wizard* magazine approached Hermione and asked if she would help him with a transfiguration problem. Immediately overwhelmed with a sense of possessiveness, he launched himself at the student, escorting him swiftly back to his table where he gave him the instruction he requested, thoroughly infusing it with lashings of condescension.

Thwarted in all directions by their cantankerous professor, the students soon quieted down and he got back to his grading. Every once in a while he glanced up to watch her as she worked. She appeared even more tired than she had that morning – at one point, she sighed audibly, set down her quill, and rested her head in her hands, rubbing her fingers back and forth across her forehead. He wondered if his colleagues were working her too hard, trying to make up for lost time when she had taught his classes. He would ask them about it at the next staff meeting.

As the end of his first hour of duty approached, Hermione headed off to her herbology tutorial with Sprout. At the end of the second hour, Sinistra finally relieved him of the afternoon hell that was the weekly study hall. He was half tempted to take the air. He hadn’t been to the greenhouses lately, but he resisted the urge, knowing that Sprout could sniff out a fabricated excuse at thirty paces, so he went back to his quarters to grade. And brood. Throughout the literary nightmare, he had deliberately not dwelled on the implications of Hermione writing the story’s sex scenes, but with the current chapter, he could no longer ignore it. By dinner, he was nearly a wreck from imagining her consorting with most of the young men from her year, including Neville bloody Longbottom, for fuck’s sake. He was desperate for some reassurance, and there was only one person who was likely to be able to give it to him. He arrived early in order to secure a seat next to Minerva, who was already there.

“I take it you didn’t care for your afternoon reading?” he queried as he sat down.

“I assumed you wanted it back as soon as possible,” she replied just as dryly.

“And you were afraid that *I* would debauch her – it would seem we are both too late for that,” he continued petulantly as he stared disconsolately at his meal.

She glanced at him, taking in his furrowed brow. “I very much doubt it,” she replied knowingly.

“And you say that because . . . .” he fished.

“Just because she *writes* about sex doesn’t necessarily mean she’s had any significant personal *experience* of it,” she offered. Seeing him relax slightly, she picked up her goblet. “The only person she’s ever been associated with romantically is Mr. Weasley, and the fact that they are still very good friends, even though they are not seeing each other anymore, suggests – to me, at least – that they were never intimate.”

“How do you come to that conclusion?” he pressed, trying not to sound hopeful.
Minerva sipped her pumpkin juice. “She could just about forgive a friend for abandoning her and Mr. Potter at a critical moment while searching for horcruxes, but not a lover. It would have been too much of a betrayal, and as we know, Miss Granger places a very high price indeed on honor and loyalty.”

He gave it only a moment’s thought. “So it was someone else, then, someone she met this summer,” he grumbled morosely, feeling even more miserable than before.

“I imagine that restoring her parents’ memories took up pretty much every moment of her time, not to mention the fact that she didn’t come back heartbroken or with her head-in-the-clouds – she didn’t meet anyone in Australia, if that’s what you’re concerned about.”

“I assure you I’m not in the least bit concerned about her amours,” he retorted defensively, yet also fully aware that Minerva knew he was lying through his teeth.

“I imagine that she is far more susceptible to the impact of a long acquaintance,” she continued speculatively. “I believe Muggles call it a slow burn.”

“And you know so much about such things because . . . ?”

She looked at him slyly out of the corner of her eye. “I may be more than thirty-five years older than you, Severus, but I have had some passing acquaintance with love over the course of my life. Someone like her doesn’t fall in love easily.”

He picked up his goblet and sat back in his chair, casually swirling around the disgusting liquid. “May I remind you that Gilderoy Lockhart set the heart of every young woman – and more than a few older ones – aflutter on looks alone some years back?” he sulked.

“She was twelve,” Minerva supplied.

“You weren’t,” he swiftly retorted.

Minerva snorted indignantly. “I’ll have you know that I was on the record for opposing his appointment, but Albus wanted a bit of window dressing for the school’s governors,” she commented critically. “I think you’ll find that what she ultimately wants is someone who is her intellectual equal. I have no doubt that this was the cause of her breakup with Mr. Weasley – watching endless Quidditch matches and having a half dozen or so babies in rapid succession was never realistically in the cards. No,” she said firmly, “she’d never get into bed with someone she didn’t love, and she wouldn’t truly love someone who didn’t stimulate her intellectually.”

“Then how would she know about . . . .”

“I told you,” she interrupted him. “She’s a young woman – an extremely bright and imaginative young woman, with the same passions and desires as anyone else.” Minerva shifted in her chair to look at him more fully. “But what if she was as experienced as Perse? Would it really make a difference in the way you feel about her?”

Their conversation had taken a sudden and alarmingly personal turn and his eyes locked with hers. Would it make a difference? And then he realized that the jealousy he felt over Hermione had an unpleasant familiarity to it – it was the way he had felt about Lily. He had been foolish at the time – young and ridiculously foolish – and he had driven her away. But he was older, now, and infinitely wiser.

“No,” he answered slowly and resolutely, “not one bit of difference in the least.”
“I’m glad to hear it,” she said with satisfaction, turning back to her dinner. He contemplated his plate once more – it now didn’t look quite as dismal as he had initially thought.

He slept better for having spoken with Minerva, not that he would ever share that information with her. It was irrational to be resentful of any previous partners she might have had – only madness lay in that kind of thinking, and he wasn’t going to travel down that path again. The only thing that really mattered in the scheme of things was that he would be her last lover. He wasn’t exactly sure when he had come to the decision that such thinking implied – it was certainly well before the publication of chapter ten – but he accepted it, now, as easily and unthinkingly as he breathed in and out. It was inevitable – she was his and his alone. He knew she had feelings for him, but having Minerva more or less confirm, quite indirectly, that Hermione was likely thinking along similar lines put his mind at rest. They just had to get past her exams.

He felt distinctly calmer at breakfast, which is why the onslaught of owls took him completely by surprise – it was Saturday, after all, not Friday. Almost all of them headed straight for him – at speed – and as the mail started to rain down, he took refuge under the table. When it finally stopped and the birds departed, he slowly emerged and saw dozens of letters and packages littering the table and floor next to his chair. Minerva and Hooch arrived at the tail end of the bombardment and now approached cautiously.

“What’s all of this?” Minerva asked in bewilderment.

He frowned and picked up one of the letters, opening it as the flying instructor levitated a few boxes from the floor and set them on his chair.

“Severus?” the headmistress asked worriedly as he scowled at the parchments in his hand – he passed one of them to her. Putting on her spectacles and reading it through, her face settled into a frown. “Well, I’m fairly certain that’s physically impossible,” she commented disapprovingly.

“Actually, it can be done,” Hooch observed informationally, reading over her shoulder. “He just has to have good balance and she has to sit facing backwards to get her feet in the stirrups.”

Minerva looked at her censoriously, her lips still drawn.

“There’s art,” he added acerbically, handing the headmistress the second piece of parchment.

“Oh dear Merlin,” she gasped, clasping it to her chest after a quick glance at the moving figures of a naked couple enthusiastically copulating on a broom.

Hooch pried it out of her hands. “See?” she said, pointing at the picture.

Minerva turned away quickly, waving her hand dismissively. “I hate to think what might be in the boxes,” she observed looking around.

“I’m not opening any more of this here. It might not be safe – for any of us,” he said caustically, giving her a snide look and plucking the parchments from Hooch’s hand. With a flick of his wand, he vanished all of it to his quarters, much to the disappointment of his student audience, some of whom were now standing so they could get a better view of what was going on. He glared at them, but they weren’t deterred in the least. “I’ll take breakfast in my rooms, where I can savor my fan mail alone,” he said disdainfully.

“You had better arrange to have your mail go to the owlery for the time being,” the headmistress called after him.

It took him over an hour to get through it all. Most of the correspondence was from women who
wanted to set him up with their daughters, sisters, nieces, and – in one instance – their grandmother, he was enraged to read. A handful wanted him entirely for themselves, and provided quite explicit details of what such an encounter might entail – some activities were indeed physically impossible, others borderline dangerous, and a few simply disgusting. By contrast, the packages were a combination of things – jam, biscuits, fruitcakes, and in one instance, a pair of knickers, which he incinerated on the spot, but a few actually contained expensive or otherwise hard to get potions ingredients, which he could definitely put to good use. After casting a few diagnostic spells to make sure none of the food was tainted, he had Timber take it all down to Hagrid, who would enjoy the treats far more than he would.

He hadn’t seen Hermine at breakfast, but then, he wasn’t there all that long. He kept a watch out for her at lunch, but the only times he saw her all weekend was at dinner, and even then she was at the far end of the Gryffindor table, so he didn’t get a very good look at her. She sat with Ginny Weasley and her friends Sunday evening, but she wasn’t really participating in their conversation – she looked as though she was imply pushing her food around to be social, and she got up to leave before the pudding had been served. He couldn’t leave it at that.

When dinner was over, and Minerva was safely ensconced in her office, he went to Hermione’s room and knocked. When she opened the door, he was disconcerted, though not by the fact that she was wearing a robe. She had looked tired before, but the circles under her eyes had darkened and her eyes were puffy and red.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Miss Granger, but since we didn’t meet in the lab last week, I didn’t have an opportunity to speak with you about your other work. I take it that you are keeping up with the reading?” he inquired smoothly, effortlessly hiding his real concerns.

“Of course, professor,” she immediately replied, “I would never neglect my studies!”

“No, of course not,” he said, though without his usual sneer. “Although we still can’t do any work in the lab until I’ve transferred the neutralizers to the Ministry, I think it would be prudent to review what you’ve been reading – tomorrow, the usual time?”

“Yes, professor!” He was pleased to see her expression brighten at the prospect.

“In the meantime, Miss Granger, I think you should get some rest.”

She blushed and clutched the top of her robe closed, only just realizing what she was wearing.

He turned on his heel. “Tomorrow, Miss Granger,” he called over his shoulder. He evaluated her appearance more thoroughly as he steadily worked his way down to the dungeons. She looked fairly worn-out, but a good night’s rest could be remarkably restorative – if she could sleep. He would have the answer to that in the morning, when she assisted with his classes.

He looked forward to blowing into his first class of the week in his usual way, and this time he was mentally prepared for the good mornings that were sent his way – he growled in response – but the spring in his step faltered when he saw his desk, on which sat a vase containing a straggly bouquet. And not just any flowers, oh no, carefully selected flowers – a gladiola symbolizing strength of character and a daffodil for chivalry clearly referred to him. But then there was a yellow chrysanthemum signifying a secret admirer, along with red tulip for a declaration of love, a red rose for deep love, and an orange rose indicating passionate love. And if he still couldn’t figure it out, it was all held together by a passion flower vine with several purple blooms on it. It was a hideously haphazard mess, but the message it conveyed was unmistakable.

His face involuntarily contorted as he circled the desk suspiciously, as if the container was likely to
“Miss Granger,” he bit out.

“Yes, professor?” she said, trying hard – and mostly failing – not to giggle.

“Take . . . this to the infirmary – I’m sure it will cheer whoever has the misfortune to be there,” he sneered.

She scooped it up and carried it with all solemnity down the center of the room, as if it was the Sorting Hat itself. Once the door closed behind her he could hear her laughing – it was faint, but it was nevertheless there. Not a muscle in his face so much as twitched. He barked out the day’s assignment with his usual disdain, but they refused to cower. Instead, they rose from their seats, smiled at him – well, at least the young women did – and collected their supplies for the assigned brewing. When Hermione returned, she still wore a smirk.

“Madam Pomfrey sends her thanks,” she couldn’t help but snicker.

“We will have words later, Miss Granger,” he hissed quietly as she passed him, and although he was genuinely annoyed, he was also relieved that she looked better than she had the night before – still a bit drawn, but improved.

The tokens of affection continued to pop up throughout the day. At lunch, there were no less than six apples at his place at the table and a badly knitted green scarf tied to his chair. When he returned to his quarters, there was a box from Honeydukes leaning against the door – the very sight of it prompted a growl. He collected his usual stack of papers, tucked the box of bonbons under his arm, and headed off to the regular afternoon faculty meeting. On reaching the staff room, he found that Trelawney had taken the chair next to the one he usually sat in, while Hooch had been displaced by Sprout. Merlin’s fucking ghost. Having instantly assessed the situation, he took a seat between Flitwick and Minerva’s spot near the head of the table. In response, Trelawney whimpered, Sprout sighed, and Hooch – who was now closer to him than they were – simply snorted approvingly. Sinistra and Vector rolled their eyes. Although conscious that he was the center of attention, he nevertheless coolly and calmly began marking his essays. He was on the second one by the time Minerva came in.

She was slightly taken aback at the new seating arrangements, but recovered quickly.

“Any announcements?” the headmistress began.

“I would be grateful if everyone would discourage students from giving me things,” he scowled, not even bothering to look up as he slid the box of chocolates to the center of the table.

The women stared at the package.

“Well I’m not proud,” Hooch huffed, reaching for the box. Opening it and taking a piece, she passed it down the table.

“In a similar vein,” Minerva noted, “it has come to my attention that the sartorial habits of some of our young women have lately become rather . . . rather . . .”

“Slatternly,” he supplied as he continued grade.

“Relaxed,” she swiftly and sharply corrected. “Please be vigilant about enforcing the school uniform code.”
Hooch snickered again.

“Perhaps we should meet with our older female students, talk to them about appropriate behavior and related habits,” Sinistra offered censoriously. He raised his head and glared at her stonily.

“I really don’t think that will be necessary. This will pass,” she noted, “and probably sooner rather than later,” she added almost under her breath, which drew his attention. They exchanged a knowing look. Once Domitian killed Albinia, he was certain that he wouldn’t be plagued with any more “good mornings” or trifling gifts – he almost felt saddened by the thought. Almost.

“Any other announcements before we move on?”

This time, he actually took the trouble to lay down his quill. “I wanted to ask those of you who are tutoring Miss Granger how she is doing in her studies.”

The consensus was that she was doing her usual superlative work.

“Why do you ask?” Minerva inquired on their behalf. “Is she having trouble with potions?”

“No, she’s up to her usual high standards,” he assured her, “but she’s also been looking a bit fatigued of late.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that as well,” Sprout offered, “but I suspect she’s just working extra hard at the moment studying for her NEWTs.” Everyone seemed to concur with that assessment, and so he let it drop – he returned to his marking and Minerva continued with the meeting. But when they were finished and his colleagues had all gotten up to leave, the headmistress signaled for him to remain.

“Why are you asking about Hermione’s studies?” she asked once the room had emptied out.

“As I said, she looks tired and I don’t think she’s been sleeping very well.”

“Well Pamona is probably right,” Minerva responded. He stared at the essays, fingering the top corners with his right hand. “But you’re not convinced,” she stated rather than asked.

“She’s had exams before,” he explained, meeting her gaze, “and positively thrived in the face of them. And she did so even while having to deal with all of the . . . disruptions caused by the forces of the Dark Lord.”

“You think the story’s getting to her,” she suggested.

“We both know what’s coming – she’s probably working . . . what, two or three chapters ahead of what people are reading?”

They were silent for a moment, contemplating the ramifications.

Minerva sighed. “All this while, we’ve been focused on how the story affects you, but it’s clearly going to take its toll on her as well.”

“Indeed,” he replied soberly.

“There isn’t much we can do without giving away the fact that we know she’s the author.”

“Perhaps . . . .” he hesitated.

“Perhaps she could talk to Albus’s portrait.”

“She not the only one who could do that,” she gently chided – he looked down again at the papers in front of him and frowned, but otherwise said nothing. “That’s one option, certainly,” she continued, “or perhaps she could take an evening and see Mr. Potter – she could use the floo in my office. The change would no doubt do her some good.”

He didn’t like to admit it, but an evening with the always irritating young man probably was a good idea.

“You might suggest it to her, then,” he remarked.

“Yes, I will. In the meantime, we’ll keep an eye on her as best we can,” she said firmly, getting up from the table. He gathered his papers and followed her out the door.

Hermione was waiting for him when he got back to his quarters. Letting her in, he called for tea, and once they were settled comfortably by the fire, he took her to task for her response to the flowers.

“I couldn’t help it,” she replied defensively, trying to tamp down another giggling fit.

“It’s wholly inappropriate,” he responded irritably as he accepted the tea she had poured. “I’m old enough to be their father, for Merlin’s sake, and whatever that story may suggest, I’ve certainly never given them any reason to see me as anything other than the heartless, disagreeable, foul-tempered potions professor that I actually am.”

She couldn’t suppress the smirk, or hide it behind her cup and saucer.

“What do you find so amusing about that, Miss Granger?” he asked gruffly.

“But you’re not really all of those things, professor,” she quipped. “Well, maybe the snarky part is true,” she corrected herself, but he noted that she had said it with a disarmingly warm smile.

“I assure you, Miss Granger, I am all of those things and more,” he glowered, trying hard not to let the corners of his mouth drift upwards.

“If you were heartless, you wouldn’t have protected us – all of us – as you did for so many years. And while you can be disagreeable,” she conceded, stealing a quick glance at him, “who wouldn’t be, facing dunderheads all day, every day for months at a time? Merlin, I’m disagreeable after being around them any length of time myself.” She took a sip of her tea.

“And my temper, Miss Granger?” he asked almost coaxingly, as if baiting a trap.

“While it is legendary,” she acknowledged, “it manifests itself in real wit and rather impressive sarcasm – I wish I could be that frank and biting at times. And even if they do see you that way,” she rambled on, “it’s offset by other, more positive qualities.”

He harrumphed. “You delude yourself,” he retorted, but not harshly. When she made to speak again, he held up his hand. “And you will not regale me with what you imagine my virtues to be. Now . . . where are you in your reading, Miss Granger?” he asked, changing the subject. She was further along than he would have thought, given the demands on her time, and they discussed her questions and comments about the material. After an hour, and a second cup of tea, he brought their conversation to a close.

“I have a new assignment for you, Miss Granger,” he said as she started to put her books in her bag. She looked up expectantly. “Go back to your rooms and lie down. Don’t open a book – or pick up a
quill – until tomorrow. Have dinner – actually lift the fork to your mouth and eat – then just relax the rest of the evening.” She looked at him quizzically. “You are overworking yourself, and when you do that, you make mistakes – which are dangerous to everyone,” he quickly added to cover himself. “It’s far better to take a break than to push onwards regardless.”

She blushed at his observation. “The work still needs to be done,” she said a bit defensively.

“Yes, but not necessarily all in one go,” he said decisively.

She finished packing her books, closed the bag, and got up to leave. He walked her to the door but paused, his hand on the knob. “That is your assignment, Miss Granger – do not disappoint me,” he said chidingly.

She raised her head. “Yes, professor,” she replied grudgingly.

At dinner that evening he had the satisfaction of seeing her actually consume most of her meal – when she glanced in his direction, he nodded slightly in approval before turning to engage Flitwick in conversation. As the charms professor droned on, he wondered how shocked his colleague would be if he knew that in his imagination he was feeding Miss Granger the sticky toffee pudding they were currently enjoying, and was getting it all over her. Cleaning her up would probably take most of the evening, in fact.
The Loss of all Innocence

Chapter Summary

Domitian is forced to fulfill Albinia's request and it has a predictably distressing effect on everyone but especially on Severus.

Chapter Notes

We all knew it was coming . . . . Let me know what you think.

The Loss of All Innocence

He left for the Ministry with the neutralizers Wednesday morning, after having passed on the lesson plans for his classes to Hermione. All that day – and throughout the next – her thoughts were invariably centered on him and the dangerous work that he was doing. She was familiar with the general process of neutralizing potions, but the ones he was working with were quite out of the ordinary – she knew the work had to be risky given that he didn’t even want her in the lab with the stuff, and while she had every confidence in his abilities, still, she worried. And then the following morning, she had something else to be concerned about – chapter twelve arrived, right on schedule. This time, not only did virtually all of the older female students bolt from the room, but so did a fair number of the young men as well. She truly didn’t know if that was good . . . or bad.

The seventh-year potions class was the first of the day, and it was unusually quiet as she approached. No one turned when she entered, but there was an unmistakable pall over the room. Some of the young women were sniffling discreetly and the older male students looked suitably somber. She didn’t know what to say – she herself had wept openly as she had penned the chapter. While he had scheduled a brewing assignment for that morning, she thought it unsafe under the circumstances and instead set them an in-class essay to write – the lethargy they displayed in getting out their writing materials was enough to convince her that the change was justified. Still, she would grade it before he came back and perhaps that would make up for having deviated from the lesson.

Likewise, lunch was a subdued affair, and the afternoon dragged – it felt like Dumbledore had died all over again. Dinner wasn’t much better, and her concern over her professor – who still hadn’t returned – ratcheted up a few notches when the headmistress failed to put in an appearance. She couldn’t help but fear that something had happened. But Minerva’s absence from the hall wasn’t anything especially unusual, and the rest of the staff seemed their usual selves. She took a few deep breaths and tried to calm down.

Minerva had contacted Shacklebolt earlier in the day, asking him to let her know when her potions professor was slated to come back – she wanted to meet him at the apparation point in order to head him off. Just before dinner, the Minister flooed her – they were going to have a quick drink before he left – so she headed for the school grounds rather than the high table. She didn’t have long to wait.

He knew the instant he saw her. “Albinia? Chapter twelve?” he asked evenly as he strolled up to her.
“I’m afraid so. I didn’t want you to go into dinner unprepared.”

They started their slow walk back to the school.

“How did it go at the Ministry?” she asked as lightly as she could.

“Fine,” he replied nonchalantly, although she knew perfectly well that there wouldn’t have been anything easy about the work he had just completed. When they got to the entrance, she pulled out the latest issue of *Witches Only*. He tried to take it from her, but she held on to it tightly.

“You should talk to Albus when you’re done,” she suggested.

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” he countered, gifting her with a steely gaze as his grip grew more determined.

“You haven’t talked him properly yet . . . .”

“I’m not talking to a fucking portrait, Minerva!” he barked.

“Don’t be such a . . . a man,” she retorted exasperatedly.

At that, he yanked the periodical from her grasp, giving her a withering look before he turned and strode purposefully towards the staircase to the dungeons.

She sighed heavily. “Men,” she said scornfully under her breath as she retreated to her office, like him deciding to skip dinner altogether.

Although he hadn’t eaten since breakfast, food held no allure for him, but alcohol definitely did, and the only decision he needed to make when he reached his rooms was whether he should get drunk before or after he read the latest chapter. It wasn’t a particularly difficult choice – why wait? He took a large tumbler and rather than pouring out his usual two fingers worth, he didn’t stop until the amber liquid was almost to the rim – it would save him the trouble of refilling. He stripped off his robes, partially unbuttoned his coat, and sat down in his reading chair. With a flick of his wand, a fire ignited in the grate and he raised his feet – boots and all – to the coffee table and sat back. He took a gulp of his whisky and opened the magazine.

*Domitian was in his office, having an after work drink with Flintshire and discussing how to strengthen the Ministry’s protective wards, when he heard voices in the distance warning what staff were still around that Green Shirts had invaded the Atrium and were working their way up to the higher floors. Domitian knew in an instant that the coup had begun.*

*The charms expert got up and headed to the open door – he never made it. Domitian hit him square in the back with a spell and he moved quickly to catch his colleague as he sank to the floor. The voices got nearer, and when Perse and Diana appeared in the doorway, he beckoned them in.*

“Fidelis has collapsed!” he proclaimed. The women knelt down and Diana cradled his head. “Stay here with him until he recovers . . . I’ve got to go down to the Atrium,” he said quickly, getting to his feet. But before he could leave, Perse grabbed the sleeve of his robe.

“I’ll go with you,” she said, pulling out her wand.

“No,” he quickly replied, putting his hands on her shoulders, “you need to stay here – with Flintshire.”

“But . . . .”
“For once, don’t argue with me Perse!” he said sharply. She saw desperation in his expression – felt it, too, through his tightened grip – and she responded to it.

“Be careful, then,” she said worriedly. For a moment their eyes met – hers were filled with anxiety and concern, and his were . . . remorseful, sad, as if he carried the burdens of the world on his shoulders.

He gave her the slightest of smiles. “I am confident that you will know what to do,” he said firmly but cryptically before he dashed out of the office, closing the door behind him.

“He’s been Stupefied,” Diana announced next to her.

“What? What are you talking about?” she asked apprehensively, kneeling down to examine Flintshire more closely.

“His eyes – you can always tell,” she replied. Just as Diana cast Finite, Perse looked over at the door. It was glowing yellow and red – Domitian was warding them in. She leapt up and began pounding on the door with her fist, yelling for him to stop. Then she backed away and began testing his spells – the lock wouldn’t budge. She attempted sheer force to break it down, but it was clear that it would take more wands than just hers to rip it from its hinges. She was soon joined by a recovered Flintshire.

“What happened?” Perse asked as he cast a diagnostic spell on the door.

“I heard you in the hall and got up to see what was going on – he Stupefied me from behind.”

“Are you alright?” she asked, starting to take apart the complicated wards.

“It wasn’t very strong, barely enough to knock me over. Stop, Perse,” he said, lowering his wand and reaching out to get her to do the same. “It will take longer than we’ve got to undo these spells – we’re effectively locked in.”

Domitian’s last words ran through her mind – “I am confident that you will know what to do.” And then she remembered. She walked to his desk as if in trance and pulled open the central drawer. In the right hand corner were the seven worn Muggle pound coins he had told her about when she had shown him the key Albinia had given her – she had expressed concern about his safety and he had mentioned the money. Now she picked one up to scrutinize as Diana and Flintshire joined her at the desk.

“What is it?” Flintshire asked.

“An insurance policy.” When her companions looked at her quizzically, she amended her statement. “It’s an emergency port-key – one of several. He told me about them,” she said, pointing to the other coins. “He had them ready in case he needed them.”

“Where are they keyed to go?” Diana probed.

“I don’t know – he didn’t say,” she responded slowly as she continued to think it through, “but it was somewhere he considered safe.”

“For him,” Diana observed suspiciously. “For us, it could be a trap – he might be waiting on the other end.”

“I don’t think so,” Perse pondered thoughtfully. “He could have Stupefied us as well as Fidelus and turned all three of us over to the Green Shirts – but he didn’t.”
"But he sealed us in!" Diana exclaimed. "Surely he’s going to come back for us!" And just at that moment, they heard spells being cast in the hall.

"I am confident that you will know what to do," Perse stated firmly, convinced, now, of the message.

"Perse?" Flintshire asked, glancing nervously at the door.

"It’s what he said to me before he left – it’s our way out. Put your hand on mine, over the coin, so I can activate it," she quickly ordered.

“I don’t trust him," Diana declared, starting to back away – the racket outside was getting closer.

"Perse – are you sure?" Flintshire asked urgently.

She smiled mournfully. "I am certain of it."

Flintshire grabbed Diana, dragging her forward and forcing her hand on top of Perse’s. Then he stepped away.

“Fidelis? What are you doing?” she frantically asked.

“I’m staying,” he announced, and when Perse broke away from Diana he grabbed her hand and placed it once more on top of that of her friend. “I’ll be fine,” he quickly explained. “They need experienced people to staff this place, and if I stay, maybe I can lessen the consequences.” When Perse opened her mouth to protest he abruptly interrupted. “We don’t have time for this!” he reprimanded sharply. Just then, they heard the sound of the door being blasted from the other side. “Activate it!” Flintshire desperately implored as he retreated. The last thing Perse and Diana saw before spinning away was the door being blown in by a handful of Green Shirts.

Domitian tried not to think about what was taking place in his office. He knew that Flintshire would soon be conscious, and he only hoped that Perse remembered the port-keys in his drawer – they could get away without implicating him.

The spells were now going every which way, and he pushed his thoughts of Perse behind his occlumency walls – he needed to focus. He cast innocuous spells at the few Ministry employees he came across, incapacitating them but otherwise leaving them uninjured – he had to get down to the Atrium where he knew the fighting would be the worst. When he reached the open mezzanine, he had a good view of the action below. It was early evening and most of the employees had already left for the day, but the handful that remained were holding their own, but only just.

Movement attracted his attention and he raised his eyes – Albinia was almost directly opposite him. He hadn’t seen her in weeks, and it was clear that the dark spell cast by the ring was really starting to affect her. She moved hesitantly along the wall, and then she looked up. Seeing him, she limped over to the railing and slowly straightened, holding herself proudly erect even though she needed support to do it.

He suddenly heard footsteps behind him – Expelliarmus! Albinia’s wand was ripped from her hand and it flew over his shoulder. Turning quickly, his eyes met Arti’s – the young man was visibly shaking even as he clung to the stolen wand.

“Stay where you are!” Domitian gritted out, pairing his command with a fierce look. Arti’s fearful eyes darted back and forth between him and Albinia as he hugged the wall.

Domitian circled around towards the Minister for Magic. The fighting below began to taper off as
heads started turning upwards. He stopped a few yards away from her, rolling his wand in his hand. They stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity, until her lips emitted the faintest whisper.

“Domitian – please.”

His response was swift. The words of the killing curse echoed around the atrium, followed by a sickly green light flowing from his wand. Albinia crumpled almost immediately to the floor, as collective gasps and one lone wail filtered upwards.

He had done it – he had fucking done it – and now he felt . . . numb. He was only vaguely aware of Green Shirts herding almost uncomprehending Ministry employees below to the center of the Atrium – he barely heard the heavy footfalls that were pounding up the stairs. Three of Valmont’s men appeared across from him, standing gleefully over Albinia’s body. Looking up, he sneered at them.

“Get her down to the morgue,” he spat before he turned, grabbing Arti by his robes and shoving him along as they made their way down to the main floor.

One particularly bullish Green Shirt had his wand jammed into the side of Gryffudd’s throat. Looking around, he saw several others – including Flintshire – in similar positions. He breathed a mental sigh of relief that Perse wasn’t among them.

“Domitian – what have you done?!” the Deputy Minister blurted out accusingly. He turned and coolly considered his former colleague.

Lucinius, who had held back from the fighting, appeared at his shoulder. “Valmont said to give this to you the instant the deed was done.”

Domitian took the scroll and broke the seal. Once he had read it through, he passed it back to Lucinius to peruse.

“It would seem as though I am now the new Minister for Magic,” he announced. Gryffudd struggled against the arms that held him back. “Traitor!” he thundered.

“Let’s finish it!” his captor snarled as the Deputy Minister struggled against his hold.

“No!” Domitian commanded forcefully as he moved to stand in front of his former colleague. “No,” he continued more calmly, looking him over. “We need experienced administrators to run the government.”

“We can’t trust them,” someone said behind him, followed by murmurs of agreement.

“We won’t work for that reptilian piece of trash!” Gryffudd spat. Punishment was swift as one of the Green Shirts standing nearby stepped forward and punched him in the face – blood from his nose splattered on the arms of the minion who held him captive.

“We don’t have to trust them,” Domitian soothed, coming in even closer to Gryffudd, “and they will work for us,” he continued emphatically, starring down his one-time friend. “There are more of us than them, here, and they have an interest in keeping government working. Take them to the meeting room,” he ordered, pulling a handkerchief from a pocket. “I’m sure the Deputy Minister will be only too delighted to show you the way,” he said disdainfully as he pressed the piece of cloth into Gryffudd’s hand to wipe away the blood that trickled from his nose.

“Where are you going?” Lucinius asked as Domitian turned and made his way to the lifts.
“I must secure Albinia’s office and then dispose of her body,” he said officiously.

The Green Shirts started to round up their prisoners as Domitian proceeded to Albinia’s office. Once there, he warded the door. He stood quietly in the middle of the room, taking in the knick-knacks that seemed to cover every inch of the walls and litter all of the flat surfaces in the office. Going over to her desk, he sat down. One by one he opened the drawers and looked through them perfunctorily – he doubted she would have been careless enough to leave anything incriminating about him behind, but she might have left . . . something to console him with, something that only he would recognize. But there was nothing.

He got up and looked at the pictures lining the room – he was even in a few of them but he was never one for publicity and it clearly showed in his face. The pictures nearest her desk, however, were more personal, of friends she had known over the course of her life. A small photo hung off to one side, and he leaned in to look at it more closely. He had never noticed it before. It was a photo of him, Gryffudd, Flintshire, and a handful of other mutual acquaintances at the Quidditch World Cup about ten years prior. He remembered the moment well – he had bet Albinia a bottle of very fine scotch that his team would win, even though it had been nearly fifty years since they had last taken home the cup. He was positively gleeful at the victory, and Albinia was looking over at him from the side. Her expression was one of pure joy – not because of the win, since she had bet on the losing team and wasn’t even watching the field – but because he took so much pleasure in the victory. And he did indeed look . . . happy, and he recalled remaining that way for a few hours more over the raucous meal they had afterwards at a pub in Diagon Alley.

He took the photo from the wall, peeled the picture from its frame, and slipped it into a pocket. There would be no more matches or celebratory whiskeys, just as there would be no more arguments over budgets and personnel. The scent of her jasmine perfume lingered in the air, and soon that, too, would be gone as well.

How could she have been so fucking foolish? he now allowed himself to ruminate. Constantly issuing warnings to everyone else to be careful, and yet when it came to it, she was the one who blundered. She just had to try on that fucking ring and bring everything crashing down on his head.

Suddenly, the glass in all of the pictures shattered and the frames fell to the floor. He turned his wand next on the furniture in the room, blowing each piece apart. When only the desk remained he sheathed his weapon. Reaching under the top edge, he tipped it over by hand.

“Domitian?” a loud voice called from the other side of the door. He was breathing heavily, not so much from the exertion it took to destroy her office but from the anger he felt at having to be a part of it all in the first place. He unwarded the door and whipped it open – Lucinius peered around him to see the damage that lay beyond.

“Did you find anything useful?”

“No,” he ground out, pushing past the grey faced banker. There was something else he still had to take care of.

He waved off his Green Shirt colleagues as he headed for the underground morgue. When he got there, he found the minions who had brought Albinia down looking through desk drawers and cabinets as her body lay haphazardly on an examination table.

He wanted to roar at them, beat them senseless for their blatant lack of respect. Instead, he told them in a cold but steady voice to get upstairs where they would be more useful. They didn’t question his authority and left immediately – they knew him too well to disobey.
When he was finally alone, he approached the table. After running his wand over her body he straightened her limbs, tucking her robes neatly around her. He found a sheet and covered her with it before levitating her into one of the two viewing rooms that were used when families were called in to identify their deceased loved ones. After situating her on the little raised bed, he looked at her one more time. The irony of her serene expression in the face of the violence that had been done to her wasn’t lost on him – peace, it seemed, was an elusive thing and came only when one stopped breathing.

“But it isn’t over yet,” he mumbled aloud as he pulled the sheet over her head.

He backed out of the room, and once the door was closed he cast a spell. The walls slowly closed over the door as if it had never been there. He cast further spells so that anyone looking for the chamber would think that there had only ever been just one room to begin with.

All he wanted to do now was find some dark room and drink himself into oblivion, but that wasn’t possible. He was now the one in charge and there were many more unpleasant things he had still to do before the night was over.

He wasn’t sure what time it was when he woke in the morning, but it had to be late. The fire had clearly gone out many hours before and there was a crick in his neck that added to the pain that pounded in his ears, behind his eyes, and at the back of his head. Slowly straightening himself out, he pushed up from the chair and took a hesitant step – he heard something crunch beneath one of his boots. Looking down, he could see that he must have dropped his glass sometime during the night and it had naturally missed the carpet – it lay shattered on the flagstone in a small puddle of whiskey. He looked up, swayed a bit, and felt his stomach lurch in an ominously familiar way. He staggered to the bathroom as quickly as he could, supporting himself as he went by hanging on to furniture and door frames – he barely made it. Even after there was nothing left to bring up, he continued to heave. When the retching finally ceased, he leaned against the tiled wall and slipped his way down to the floor. He whispered the name of his house elf and almost immediately reeled from the ensuing almighty crack off to his side.

“Hangover potion,” he just managed to say, but he forgot to tell him to walk to his lab to retrieve it and so was subjected to another head-exploding clap. When Timber returned with a bang seconds later, he grabbed the poor elf by the arm.

“Will you stop doing that?!” he gritted out as he relieved the elf of the potion. Seeing that Timber didn’t understand, he mumbled for him to be still. He uncorked the vial, tossed it back, and waited for it to take effect. The pain lessened and the nausea calmed a bit, but no amount of potion was going to sober him up completely – only a shower, some strong coffee, and several more hours would do that. This was as good as it was going to get for the time being.

“Help me sit up,” he over-enunciated, and at once felt the elf’s magic slowly lifting him towards the toilet seat. He held out one foot expectantly as he struggled with his coat. Timber pulled hard and when the boot suddenly let go, the elf tumbled over backwards. Undeterred, the magical creature seized the other boot, and it, too, finally slipped off. He watched the ridiculous scene dispassionately, as if it was happening to someone else entirely. He had just about given up trying to get his coat off when the elf quickly squeezed between him and the wall and yanked determinedly on the sleeves. He moved on to his shirt buttons, and on completing his task, Timber darted behind him once more and relieved him of his garment. When the elf reached to help him with his trousers, however, he stayed his tiny hands.

“This I can manage on my own,” he slurred sardonically. With some difficulty, he got his belt off and undid the buttons. He pushed the trousers down his hips as best he could, where Timber then pulled
them the rest of the way off. He sat there in his underwear, studying his diminutive companion through bleary eyes, and thought about the events that had brought him to this wretched point in time – sitting on the toilet, still too drunk to undress on his own, being assisted by his painfully cheerful and over-eager house elf.

Oh yes, now he remembered, it was that fucking war romance written by that infuriating Gryffindor chit he couldn’t get his hands on . . . mind off. The title character had killed his friend. No, that wasn’t right . . . he had killed his friend . . . his mentor . . . yes, that’s what it was really about. He hadn’t wanted to, but the tight-arsed bugger had guilted him into doing it. He had been reviled by all his colleagues, all of his . . . friends? No, he didn’t have any friends, no one was friends with him, he was only a tool, a weapon, a means to an end, everyone knew that, especially him. But now it was over and done with . . . but . . . but someone was dredging it all up again, writing about it. She was writing about it, she of the lovely gold flecked amber eyes and soft skin. He wanted to kiss that skin, taste it, make her forget about those profane scars. He wanted to . . . to . . . wring her pretty little neck for making his life a misery . . . making him a laughing stock, forced to suffer her presence until . . . NEWTs, he could have her after her exams, Minerva said he could . . .

“Sir?” a small voice squeaked annoyingly. He raised his eyes. “Would Professor Snape like to shower?”

Barely nodding his affirmative, the shower sprang to life. “Shall Timber help Professor Snape?”

“Professor Snape doesn’t need Timber’s help in the shower,” he said caustically as he slowly and ever so carefully got himself into a standing position. “What Professor Snape needs is for Timber to get him some coffee.” The instant he voiced his desire, the elf loudly cracked away. He grabbed his head in agony. “Stop doing that!” he growled as he pressed his hands against his ears. There was another crack but it came from some other room in his quarters – Timber had heard, and he nervously approached him with coffee, the true nectar of the gods.

“Shall Timber bring Professor Snape his breakfast?”

“Professor Snape will let you know,” he hissed after taking the first bitter sip on the way to recovery.

After sending Timber away, he stripped off his socks and underwear and stepped gingerly into the hot, steamy shower, his coffee mug gripped tightly in one hand. He might just live. He wasn’t certain, but if the Dark Lord could be defeated, then anything was possible.
Chapter Summary

Severus has no idea what to expect from his students after Friday's chapter, which had Domitian fulfilling his promise to Albinia, while to her dismay Hermione comes face to face with a student who bears a striking resemblance . . . to . . . Perse.

Chapter Notes

The bit about using milk to help relieve the burn of hot chili peppers is true. Otherwise, it's turned a bit dreary in my neck of the woods, but there is something that would cheer me up . . . .!

The Aftermath

He finally surfaced at breakfast Monday morning. To students inexperienced with weekend benders, he seemed no different than ever, but Minerva wasn’t fooled. His jaw line was tense and his eyes were unnaturally clear, certainly way too bright for that early in the day – he had obviously taken something. She scanned the room. The students were quieter than usual and were watching their potions professor as surreptitiously as they could. One of them, however, was looking at him with concern rather than mere curiosity – guilty concern she was mollified to see. Hermione was absently stirring her oatmeal and sucking her lower lip between her teeth, sneaking peeks like the rest of them.

Glancing to her left, Minerva noted that the best he could do were soft boiled eggs and soldiers, and he was only picking at them as he drank his coffee. When he gave up on breakfast altogether and got up to leave, she followed quickly on his heel.

“Severus,” she called, reaching out to pull on his robes.

“What?” he huffed impatiently, turning to scowl at her.

“You know where my office is,” she offered gently.

“Same bloody place it’s always been, I assume, unless you’ve appropriated other space over the weekend,” he snarled before walking off.

She wanted to take offense but found she couldn’t – it was probably better this way.

When he later barged into class, his first years jumped visibly, but he couldn’t enjoy it – it was just too easy, he hadn’t really earn it. Approaching the desk, he noted that Hermione looked almost as bad as he felt, which only had the effect of deepening his scowl. He turned and faced the class – nearly two dozen impossibly youthful faces, all looking at him with undisguised fear. Again, it made him distinctly uncomfortable.

His attention was drawn to movement in the first row – two students from his house were elbowing
“Mr. Starkey – Mr. Jennings,” he drawled, and when the boys stopped to look up at him, they paled – the standardized desk made them look even younger than they were.

“Ask him,” Jennings whispered loudly to his companion.

“Sir . . . .” he stammered.

“You had a question, Mr. Starkey?”

“Yes sir. Were you . . . .” He was elbowed none too gently when he paused.

“Spit it out, Mr. Starkey, before I slip into my dotage,” he said gruffly, pinching the brow of his nose.

As with their encounter in the Syltherin common room in the fall, he saw trepidation and then resolve cross the boy’s face. “Were you afraid?” he asked tremulously. He looked at the boy uncomprehendingly for a moment. “Of . . . you know,” he continued sheepishly. Jennings leaned over and said something into his ear. Starkey looked at him briefly and mouthed the word oh. Turning back to his professor, he rephrased the question slightly. “Of you know who.”

He almost laughed aloud at the absurdity of it. But as he drew his eyes over the room, it was clear that it was a question they all wanted to ask – they had lacked Starkey’s boldness but were now eagerly awaiting his response. He glanced briefly at Hermione, who looked distinctly worried that they were all in for an explosion.

He returned his gaze to the boy. “Yes, Mr. Starkey,” he drawled. Everyone in the room gasped, and he quickly continued. “Anyone who tells you they weren’t,” he bit out slowly, “are lying.”

“But how . . . how did you do it, face it every day . . . I mean . . . ,” the student stammered.

“Fear is a highly motivating force,” he interrupted. “It helps you keep your guard up, your wits focused, and your reflexes sharp – there is nothing like it to help you survive impossible situations.”

“Well, there is one other thing,” he heard her nervously venture behind him, but he didn’t turn around.

“What’s that, Hermynee,” Starkey attempted.

“Love, Daniel,” she quietly replied.

Some of the boys pulled faces at that, while a few of the girls cooed and nodded approvingly.

“Enough,” he barked, bringing the tittering to an abrupt end. “Turn to page one-hundred and seventy-five.”

The room was soon filled with the sounds of feet shuffling back and forth between desks and the storeroom as students collected their ingredients, then it was just knives chopping and cauldrons gently bubbling. He gave every appearance of having settled down to mark the essays in front of him, although in fact he watched Hermione as she flitted from table to table, checking on everyone’s work – the students responded well to her. But she still looked rather . . . careworn was the word that came to mind. Maybe he would skip their afternoon tutorial altogether and send her back to her rooms. Merlin knew he could use a nap.

At the end of the hour, as students were filing out, Starkey walked slowly up to his desk – he raised
his brow questioningly.

“Sir?” he mumbled.

He frowned at the boy but nevertheless put down the quill and clasped his hands in front of him in order to give the diminutive Slytherin his full attention.

“Thank you for answering my question, sir. Usually when I ask about the war, the grownups put me off, as if I’m too young to know anything – but I’m not,” he firmly asserted.

The corners of his mouth turned up ruefully. “I know you’re not, Mr. Starkey,” he said quietly, “now, be on your way.”

“Yes, professor,” he half-grinned as he dashed from the room.

“You can wipe that smile off your face, Miss Granger,” he said brusquely without turning as he once more bent over his papers.

“Yes, professor,” she said warmly, mimicking Starkey’s response as she began preparing the room for the next class.

He wondered how long it would take for that morning’s exchange to make its way through the student population. The answer was less than three hours – by lunchtime, it seemed as though everyone knew, and he was on the receiving end of looks that ran the gamut from perplexity and disbelief to admiration and respect. But the one he really couldn’t bear, and which drove him to take his sandwich back to his quarters, was Minerva’s – she looked positively proud.

The younger students were one thing, but when he burst into the classroom after lunch, he steeled himself for righteous indignation and ill-disguised hatred from the seventh-years. After all, they had known Dumbledore – greatly admired, even loved the old bugger – which is why he was completely dumbfounded at his reception.

“Good afternoon, professor,” a male voice called firmly from his right. It was a sodding Gryffindor, of course. There was another greeting to his left – this time a boy from Ravenclaw. Two of his Slytherins along the aisle also offered salutations.

He rounded his desk and came to rest his left hand on the chair, keeping the right one free in case one of the blighters tried to hex him. But as he scanned the room, he sensed no imminent danger. In fact, he had their rapt attention and . . . and something else – he feared it might be affection, but he wasn’t sure, never having experienced it firsthand. Maybe it would go away if he ignored it.

“Today, you will brewing a pepper-up potion. You will need to spell protection for your face and hands when it comes time to work directly with the peppers – the vapers can burn your eyes and nasal passages while the oils can blister your skin. Those of you who are successful with your potion . . . may keep it.” That aspect of the assignment met with widespread approval, although he tried to temper their enthusiasm. “You’ll need it for your exams,” he cautioned, “so don’t waste it.”

Still, the students seemed excited at the prospect and immediately settled down to work. Given the potential problems working with the peppers, both he and Hermione monitored everyone closely. Halfway through the class, she called him over to one of the tables.

“Cassie . . . er, Cassandra is starting to experience some burning sensation in her fingers,” she said worriedly. He joined her and held up the student’s hand to examine it more carefully.

“I assume you cast the appropriate spell, Miss Milestone?” he asked tersely.
“Yes, professor. I have an allergy to peppers so I was doubly careful,” she informed him.

“Miss Milestone, you should have informed me that you were allergic,” he said impatiently. “I would have set you a different task. I’ve gone over this sort of thing before – repeatedly.”

“But it hasn’t been a problem in the past, professor. My father loves his spicy food,” she explained, “and being Muggleborn, he likes to do things by hand – I’ve cut up peppers with him before and never had a reaction like this.”

He furrowed his brow. “When was the last time you did that?”

“Not for a couple of years, anyway,” she responded.

“It’s possible that your allergy has become more pronounced since you went through puberty” – she blushed at that – “and the spells may not be as effective as they used to be.” He turned to Hermione. “Have Timber bring me a bowl of milk – not the blue stuff the headmistress drinks,” he said scathingly, “but the full fat variety. Then go to the lab and bring the aloe concentrate.”

By the time she returned, Miss Milestone was soaking her fingers in the milk bath. Hermione handed him the ointment and then was instructed to check on the rest of the class. He, too, made another pass through the room. At the forty-five minute mark, students began bottling their potion, and Hermione stationed herself at his desk with a batch of testing strips, noting their results on a piece of parchment. Though busy, she kept one eye focused what he was doing with Miss Milestone, becoming increasingly alarmed as he carefully dried and examined each individual finger. Her stomach tightened and her heart raced – she nearly sputtered her objection to his ministrations out loud when he began to rub the ointment thoroughly into the student’s skin. She knew from personal experience exactly what his fingers felt like when they massaged bare flesh. She noted with dismay Cassie’s flushed face, her sparkling blue eyes, and the way she flirtatiously flicked her long blond hair back with her other hand. The only thing lacking was a beaming smile that revealed perfectly proportioned gleaming white teeth. And then, as if on cue, Miss Milestone favored him with a smile that would have melted chocolate, and was just as luscious.

“Hermione!” Randall Butterby exclaimed when she nearly knocked over his vial from inattention.

“Sorry, Randy,” she swiftly apologized, her face going red with embarrassment.

When he vanished the bowl of milk, he gave Miss Milestone the ointment to take with her and turned away, seemingly unaffected by his encounter, but Hermione knew how well he could hide his reactions and couldn’t help but wonder if he had been aroused touching the young woman. Cassie had certainly been pleased, given how she hugged herself before collecting her things – she headed out the door where, in the corridor beyond, she was almost immediately swallowed up by her giggling friends. It suddenly struck her that the seventh-year young woman could easily have been the model . . . for . . . Perse.

She didn’t know how long she stood there with her mouth open as the realization sank in, but it was enough for him to notice.

“Fish impressions, Miss Granger?” he drawled, as he began to gather up the parchments on his desk.

“Sorry, professor,” she gasped, trying to calm her breathing as she turned her attention back to the matters at hand. “Everyone’s potion passed except these three,” she said, pointing to places on the parchment. “And of course Cassie’s,” she added tersely.

“Miss Milestone will be doing something else to make up for it,” he commented absently as he
looked down the list.

“I could supervise her, if you want,” she volunteered, not entirely selflessly.

He looked up. She was pale and her eyes looked pinched and tired – it obviously had been a long weekend for her as well as for him. “No, that won’t be necessary. Take the afternoon and get some rest – you really are starting to look drained,” he observed.

“I’m fine, nothing a bit of tea wouldn’t put right,” she said, feigning cheerfulness. “We could talk about that article in *Potioneers’ Monthly* you lent me.”

“Away with you, Miss Granger,” he growled in mock annoyance before he turned and headed for the entrance to his quarters, leaving her alone in the classroom.

The smile slipped from her face as she watched him go. She picked up her bag and wandered dejectedly through the crowded corridors, trying desperately hard not to think about the shapely figure that went with Cassie’s other model-like features. She managed not to cry until the door to her room was firmly closed behind her, but it was a closely run thing.

She dropped the book bag on the floor and flung herself on the bed, giving full reign to her distress. He was her professor – he was only supposed to caress her skin! All the tension that had building up for weeks came pouring out of her. Time and again she had put herself in his place in the story, imagining what he had gone through while also wrestling with how events had affected her. Like Perse, she was trying to support the man she . . . she . . . the man she loved – after all these months she was brave enough to admit that she loved him – and now Cassie Milestone was reaping all the benefits of being her . . . er, Perse’s double while she was dismissed as . . . as looking drained. It was all so wretchedly unfair!

She thought they had grown, well, close over the Christmas holidays, all those meals and everything. He had held her hand, after all, asked her to a party, even kissed her – actually kissed her, on the mouth no less – at New Year’s. But wait – that was only after she had kissed him. Had he only returned the kiss out of politeness? But wasn’t there a bit of tongue involved as well? A return kiss that was merely a courtesy typically did not involve tongue . . . or did it? Was she simply misremembering, seeing things as she wanted them actually to be?

But even if things hadn’t been quite as warm as she recalled, and she still wasn’t convinced on that score, hadn’t they grown rather . . . rather comfortable with each other over the passing weeks? She was remarkably familiar with him these days – or did he usually permit students more leeway in private than he did in public, at least when they weren’t serving detentions? What about all those mugs of tea in his quarters as they discussed her work? Maybe he did that as a matter of course when he met with senior students . . .

Her thoughts went back and forth until she finally drifted off, but it was anything but a restful sleep. One moment Domitian was touching her . . . Perse, and the next he had morphed into her black-haired, dark-eyed potions professor. The room they were making love in slowly transitioned from Domitian’s to the one in the dungeon, with its massive bed and rust-colored velvet hangings. Then she . . . Perse transformed into Cassie Milestone while she was suddenly relegated to the threshold of the bathroom, unable to say or do anything except weep helplessly at the scene playing out in front of her. The two of them slowly looked in her direction and laughed as the door slammed in her face.

The sound was like an explosion in her ears and she sat bolt upright. Her heart was racing and she was breathing heavily from the adrenaline coursing through her veins. The clock on her bedside table read nearly six o’clock, which meant she had been asleep for a couple of hours, but she was anything but refreshed – she had a terrific headache from crying out. She felt light-headed making her way
into the bathroom, and she nearly burst into tears again at what she saw in the mirror – puffy, bloodshot eyes, blotchy patches, and a red nose that was congested. Dinner held no appeal, but she had to see him, even if it was to watch him looking at her. She splashed some cool water on her face, which soothed her skin and helped reduce the swelling of her eyes – some drops took care of their inflamed condition. Perhaps with the subdued lighting, no one would notice.

Her spirits dropped even further when she found that the only place left at the Gryffindor table was just a few places down from the bint and her friends, who were still talking about the encounter.

“Such lovely long fingers,” one of them sighed.

“And no doubt masterful!” another chimed in, provoking yet more excited giggling.

Cassie pondered her fingers for a moment before slowly bringing them to her lips and reverently kissing them. Then they all turned towards the high table – and giggled again. Just at that moment he looked up and saw them – his expression never changed and he quickly lowered his head, but they all blushed and leaned in to one another for more frantic tittering.

Unable to take any more of it, she got up and headed for the door, but a hand reached out and stayed her.

“Are you okay?” Ginny asked.

She desperately wanted someone to confide in, but knew that it would make difficulties for her friend if she did. “Not very hungry,” she replied truthfully, smiling weakly. Ginny got up from the bench and went with her to the door.

“Hermione, you look . . . .”

“What?” she interrupted rather defensively, recalling her professor’s drained remark.

“Tired,” Ginny said simply.

She sighed contritely – her friend was genuinely concerned about her. “I’ve had a lot on my mind,” she mumbled, fiddling with her hands and looking longingly at the door.

“I get that – everyone’s been a bit . . . a bit off, what with this latest chapter,” she commented. “Oh – but you’re not reading it, of course,” Ginny quickly added.

“I do know what’s happening,” Hermione sharply corrected her.

Ginny nodded sympathetically. “Look – just try and get some rest, okay? There’s more to life than studying, you know.”

Hermione sighed again before reaching out and squeezing her friend’s hand. “I’ll do my best – thanks, Gin,” she said, relieved to get away from the hot-house atmosphere that was the dining hall that evening.

From a distance, it looked as though the youngest Weasley was being solicitous, encouraging her to take better care of herself. He watched as Hermione left and the young woman resumed her seat – then his attention drifted up the table.

Merlin’s desiccated balls! Those ridiculous girls were looking and giggling at him – again. Initially, he had wanted to send the silly cow straight to Pomfrey, but knew only too well that the allergy could instantly bloom into an emergency on the way to the infirmary – it had been prudent to treat it
himself. And now his reward for being cautious was being subjected to the preposterous and infuriating attention of a student and her immature friends. He also fervently regretted not docking points instead of scheduling a makeup assignment for the following afternoon. He was supposed to have a tutorial with Hermione, but he planned on delaying it until the weekend – the advantage in doing that was that they could work in the lab without interruptions and then have a leisurely lunch, all without raising anyone’s suspicions. He might be able to get her to relax a bit – at the very least, he could press a vial of Dreamless Sleep on her.

The next morning, Hermione looked worse than the day before and was decidedly cool towards him while being reasonably pleasant if a tad bit impatient with all of the students. He ignored it, attributing it to her fatigue. When he suggested they walk to lunch, she haughtily informed him that she was joining some friends for sandwiches elsewhere and stalked off. Since he saw Ginny Weasely at lunch, he wondered what friends she might have been referring to. And then he realized that she was mad – at him – though for what he couldn’t fathom.

Her behavior was unchanged in the class following the lunch hour, and he grew increasingly annoyed. The sixth-years picked up on his mood and kept their heads down, hoping to avoid one of his classic commentaries on their sub-par results and general lack of aptitude for potions. It only infuriated him further that she followed in his wake offering quiet words of encouragement. The room emptied out in record time at the end of the hour.

“Don’t encourage their foolishness, Miss Granger – it will only get them killed, and likely us along with them,” he snarled.

She gave a slight humph but otherwise didn’t respond as she began to put away the equipment.

“Leave it,” he instructed tersely. She looked at him questioningly.

“Miss Milestone will need it for her make up assignment this afternoon.”

“You scheduled it for . . . .” She stopped herself.

“I am postponing your tutorial,” he informed her.

She drew a deep breath and raised her chin. “Yes, of course, professor. I’m certain Miss Milestone probably needs a lot of extra . . . one-on-one instruction,” she observed frostily.

“Not everyone is a know-it-all – like yourself,” he countered, equally chilly.

She grabbed her satchel and headed purposefully for the door.

“Wait,” he growled just as she reached for the door handle – she was tempted to ignore him. He got up and came around his desk, walking slowly down the center aisle, stopping halfway. She hadn’t turned around – one hand was still on the handle while the other was balled into a fist at her side.

“You will meet me at ten Saturday morning for your tutorial, Miss Granger,” he commanded authoritatively. There followed an interminably long pause – her nails bit into her hand, the pain being the only thing keeping her from crying. “Now you may go,” he growled lowly in a condescending tone of voice.

She flung open the door without looking back only to come face to face with Cassandra Milestone. Her eyes raked quickly down the young woman’s torso – the student’s tie hung loose and low, and the top buttons of an altogether too-tight shirt were undone, exposing a very impressive cleavage.
She pushed past the young woman, suppressing the urge to run down the hall away from a real life Perse.

“Well excuse me,” Miss Milestone commented, over dramatically stepping out of the way. Collecting herself, she stood in the doorway, the light from the corridor windows surrounding her like a golden aura.

His breath caught at the sight of her – standing in front of him was the seeming personification . . . of . . . Perse.

“I’m ready for my assignment, professor,” she announced in a husky voice.
Losing Faith

Chapter Summary

Cassie Milestone is put in her place, while Domitian must witness the death of Faith Marlowe, curator of Muggle artifacts, in Hermione's latest chapter.

Chapter Notes

So, you knew this was coming as well - Charity Burbage/Faith Marlowe. Part of last week's cliffhanger is resolved, but it won't be completely dealt with until the next installment, which will be intense but also cathartic. As always, let me know what you think!

Losing Faith

Miss Milestone was undeniably physically attractive, and when she breathlessly told him that she was ready for her assignment, more than a few vivid scenarios swiftly played through his mind, just as she had intended, but they most certainly did not involve her in any leading role – that part was entirely reserved for the young woman who had just left in a jealous snit. At least he now knew what she was angry about.

“Are we ready to get down to work?” she asked again breathlessly.

“Not quite.” Like Hermione, he, too, was initially disconcerted by her provocative attire – hopefully, no one had seen her enter the room dressed like that – but he quickly became infuriated. Merlin save him from addled minded would be femme fatales. “I strongly suggest you adjust your uniform and put on your robes, Miss Milestone – the potion you’ll be brewing is unforgiving of exposed skin,” he sneered, handing her the instructions for the assignment and reopening the door with a flick of his wand, hoping the unimaginative wannabe siren was just smart enough to understand that this most certainly wasn’t some kind of romantic tryst. She was, and after doing up her buttons and tie, and pulling on her robes in disappointment, she went to the nearest table and got down to work – he left her to it.

He set out some grading, but his thoughts drifted. In all the years he had known her, he had never seen Hermione act as she had done. He knew about the tiff with Weasley over the Brown girl a few years back – had seen some of it play out in the infirmary when the young man had been accidentally poisoned – but the earlier episode seemed to pale in comparison. It was clear that she was seriously jealous of the student in front of him who was currently and quite annoyingly making a hash out of the assignment. Miss Milestone might be eye-catching but she was also facile and almost proudly ignorant of anything other than cosmetics, as far as he could tell, rather like the late but still vacuous Miss Brown.

Although he was sorely tempted to let her stew for a while, if only because of all the trouble she had and was continuing to put him through, he didn’t want to make her genuinely ill, and she already
looked bad enough as it was. He would have to put things to right – somehow – although it was
doubtful if he’d see her before Saturday, since she was done assisting with his classes for the week.
Fuck. He really was too old to be dragged into these kinds of farces.

Hermione showed up only for dinners the rest of the week, but even then it didn’t look like she ate
very much and she never stayed for pudding. Saturday couldn’t come soon enough for him, but there
was still Friday to get through first. He was so used to seeing the cloud of owls arrive at breakfast
that he hardly batted an eye anymore, as long as they weren’t aiming for him. As usual, the students
scurried out of the hall with their magazines, and even Minerva abandoned her breakfast in her rush
to read it.

“I’ll send you a message before class if there is something you need to know immediately,” she
promised as she swept by his chair. When he didn’t hear from her, he assumed that nothing
catastrophic had occurred in chapter thirteen. The only change in the overall demeanor of his
students that morning was an increase in manners – there were still the ubiquitous good mornings,
but to this was added the occasional thank you as well. He didn’t deviate from his usual scathing
remarks, which were delivered with his customary panache, but now he detected faint appreciative
chuckles. He could live with it – if he absolutely bloody had to.

At lunch, Minerva passed the magazine to him under the table – he asked for a quick synopsis.

“I’m afraid it’s about Charity.”

He flinched, and lowered his fork.

“Do you know something about that?” she quietly inquired.

“Yes, I . . . I know something about it. What else?” he asked quickly, hoping to divert further
questions on the subject.

“Domitian is secretly protecting the ministry employees from the two brutes Valmont has assigned to
be his assistants.”

“The Carrows?” he questioned.

“Yes, but not brother and sister, just your garden-variety street thugs,” she informed him.

“That’s about right,” he sarcastically observed.

“The younger members of the Inner Circle seem to have fled the Ministry and gone underground –
it’s implied that they are meeting secretly and making plans for a counter attack. You’ll be pleased to
read that Perse continues to defend Domitian unreservedly.”

His only response was a soft snort.

“Severus,” she said more gently.

“Minerva?” he responded suspiciously, fearing some emotional outpouring.

“I don’t think I ever told you how very . . . proud I was at the way you protected the students – and
us – from the Carrows’ excesses.”

He looked away, uncomfortable at being thanked. “It wasn’t enough,” he said quietly.

“It was more than you realize,” she said, putting a hand on his arm and squeezing it before he wiped
his mouth with the napkin and got up from his chair, clutching the magazine. He was off the rotation for the Friday study hall, which meant that he could read the latest chapter and not have to see anyone afterwards. His obligations were over until Monday morning – with the exception of Hermione’s tutorial the following afternoon – and he would have the weekend to recover from what was undoubtedly going to be very unpleasant.

It had been twenty-four hours since the takeover and the Ministry was now fully secured. Most of the department heads remained in place, their sole interest being to mitigate the damage as best they could. Domitian had been blunt and to the point with them – behave, and they would be left alone to get on with their work. Make mischief, and they would punished appropriately. He didn’t elaborate, but no one had any illusions as to what the penalties might be if they stepped out of line.

He had removed all traces of Albinia from her – now his – office and installed his own desk. With just two wing-back chairs in front of it, the room looked stark. The clock struck the hour – it was time. Valmont was due to arrive at any moment to survey his new kingdom, and he needed to be in the Atrium to greet him.

The Ministry staff scattered before him like mice as he made his way down to the main entrance. It was better this way, he thought – they were less likely to get into trouble if they kept out of sight. The Atrium was a sea of Green Shirts, and they, too, parted to allow him to pass through. Valmont arrived almost the very instant he had taken his place at the front.

He bowed courteously as The Snake surveyed his followers, a twisted smile of satisfaction crossing his lips as he did so. His eyes – one brown and the other so light a grey that it looked almost white – were drawn upward to the glass ceiling high above and then back down again, coming to rest on Domitian’s bowed head.

“Domitian,” he hissed smoothly, “you must show me around, introduce me to your staff.” He fell in step behind Valmont as he processed through the crowd of eager supporters, accepting their obeisance as if he were a Persian potentate.

They worked their way up the building, floor by floor. Domitian was relieved to see that his earlier warning was bearing fruit – employees kept their heads down in The Snake’s presence and answered his questions meekly. But when they reached Flintshire’s office, he knew there was going to be trouble. While the minister managed to keep a civil tongue, the tone of his responses was clipped and he could not disguise the hatred in his eyes. It didn’t help that Flintshire – like himself – was a good eight inches taller than Valmont, but where he slumped to minimize the difference, the charms expert stood proudly upright. Either the man didn’t realize it was raising Valmont’s hackles or, more foolishly, he didn’t care, but Domitian knew the outcome of the encounter was inevitable. The instant Valmont turned to leave, he saw Flintshire sneer at his back, and that’s when it happened. The Snake’s wand was already out when he whipped around.

"Crucio!"

Flintshire hit the floor with a sickening thud as his body began to convulse violently. Domitian maintained his seemingly indifferent composure, a skill he had honed over the years, but he found it unexpectedly difficult this time. Previously, he had seen only other Green Shirts subjected to The Snake’s wrath, and he couldn’t have cared less about their welfare. And on those occasions when he had been compelled to take part in various raids, he had prevented his colleagues from using the Crucius Curse on innocent victims on the grounds that it unnecessarily drained their magic when they had other, more important things to do. But this was different. Flintshire was his friend, or was as close to being one as he usually ever got. All he could do was grit his teeth and hope that it didn’t go on for very long.
Valmont was breathing heavily when he finally released the minister, whose limbs continued to spasm in the aftermath.

“You will need to teach your employees better manners, Domitian,” he spat scathingly.

“I apologize, sir – it’s their first day and they still have much to learn,” he temporized.

“See that they do or I might not be as forgiving next time,” Valmont commented, wiping his upper lip with the back of his hand before leaving the room.

Domitian knelt down and looked into Flintshire’s unfocused eyes. “This isn’t a fucking game!” he barked. He got up and pulled his robes tight around him as he hurried to catch up with Valmont, who was about to enter the Deputy Minister’s office.

He got to the door first, opening it to allow his master to enter before him. As they came into the room, Gryffudd slowly rose from his seat and stepped out from behind the desk – he wore the same defiant expression that Flintshire had only minutes before. As Valmont surveyed the office, he carefully circled so that he came to stand directly behind the Deputy. He slipped his wand from his sleeve and held it at the ready.

The Snake turned his discolored eyes on Gryffudd. “So, do you think you can work for our new Minister for Magic?” he asked coolly.

When Domitian heard him take a breath to answer he ran the point of his wand down the man’s back – Gryffudd straightened at the feel of it.

“I have never had problems working with him before,” he hedged.

Valmont laughed – it was a repulsive thing. “Domitian, I do believe we have a politician, here,” he said slyly. He came right up to Gryffudd, standing mere inches away. “And as long as he continues to play the politician, we have use for him, do we not?”

“Most assuredly,” Domitian murmured. Valmont stared at the Deputy speculatively a few moments more before turning and leaving abruptly. Domitian sheathed his wand and then grabbed Gryffudd sharply by the arm.

“Go to the lab and ask whoever is there for Potion C – take it to Flintshire, and for fuck’s sake be discreet about it!” he hissed. Releasing him, Domitian stormed out the door. He didn’t need to explain himself further. Gryffudd – and Flintshire, Pappy, and Albinia, for that matter – knew that he had developed Potion C to deal with the after effects of the Crucius Curse. So now the Deputy knew that the charms expert had been tortured.

Valmont was already in the Minister for Magic’s office when he got there, his retinue hanging around outside in the corridor. The Snake was sitting proprietarily in his chair.

“You really should do something with this office,” Valmont said, looking around critically.

“My needs are limited, sir,” he replied smoothly.

“As well I know, Domitian, but you represent me, now,” he said chidingly, “and I require all of the appropriate accoutrements.”

“I shall see to it at once, sir.”

“See that you do.” Valmont pushed up from the chair. “There is one department, Domitian, that I
haven’t seen, yet.”

He arched a brow questioningly.

“Muggle Artifacts,” he announced.

“I didn’t think you would be interested in anything so trivial,” he replied with genuine surprise, hoping to put him off.

“Nothing must be kept from me, Domitian – nothing,” Valmont said, an unpleasant edge in his voice.

“Of course not, sir,” he bowed slightly. He was going to have to take The Snake down to see Faith Marlowe – with any luck, she would have had the good sense to flee the ministry rather than try to stay on.

But luck was against him, and when they reached her department, deep in the lower levels of the Ministry, he heard her Muggle radio blaring. A Muggle buzzer also sounded, announcing their arrival – she had it installed in case she was off in the storerooms when someone visited. Valmont located the sound and blasted the box from the wall.

“What on earth . . .” he heard her say as she came out from behind some shelving halfway down the room. She immediately stopped in her tracks when she saw who it was. It was obvious that she wanted to flee, but apparition was restricted to the Atrium, and it wouldn’t take long to find her if she tried to hide. So she did the only thing she could do, which was to stand stock still. As Valmont slowly moved forward, Domitian noticed that her two assistants – who he knew were Muggleborn – were peeking out from behind the open door of her office. With a flick of his hand, the office lights went out – staring straight at them, he put a finger to his lips. One of them nodded in understanding and they slipped noiselessly back into the darkness.

“Will you do the honors, Domitian?” he sneered.

“Faith Marlowe, sir,” Domitian said quietly.

“And what do you do, Miss Marlowe?” Valmont inquired as he walked around her and down the aisle she had been working in.

“I study and catalogue Muggle artifacts,” she replied, shakily.

The Snake picked up a rectangular piece of plastic with buttons at one end and a small screen at the other.

“And what is this?” he asked, coming up behind her and reaching around to show her the object in question.

“It’s . . . it’s a cell phone,” she answered.

“What does it do?” he continued.

“Muggles use it as a form of communication.”

“Why are you studying it?” he pressed.

“To see if it has any use in the wizarding world.”

“And does it?”
“I . . . don’t know, I’m still . . . .”

Before she could finish, Valmont tossed it into the air, aimed his wand, and shattered it.

“The answer to my question, Miss Marlowe,” he enunciated menacingly as he slowly circled back to stand in front of her, “is no – the wizarding world has no place for such Muggle contraptions!” He leaned in, their noses almost touching. “They will only contaminate us!”

After a tense silence, Valmont stepped away from her.

“Are you Muggleborn?” he asked contemptuously.

“No, I . . . I’m a half blood, like yourself,” she responded.

Domitian’s heart sank as he clenched his fists and took a steadying breath – she had nearly done it.

“What . . . did you say?” Valmont asked, his voice dripping with venom.

“I . . . I . . . .” she stammered, realizing her mistake.

“There will be no Muggle Artifacts Department in the new Ministry. Your services are no longer required, Miss Marlowe,” he said coldly. “Avada Kadavra!”

Domitian involuntarily took a step forward, clenching his fists as his mouth opened to express his objection. He caught himself and just managed to school his expression as the vivid green light dissipated and Valmont turned his visage on him.

“All in a day’s work, Domitian, as you will find,” he said dispassionately as he stepped past him. Domitian spared a glance in the direction of the office, where the two young women were still in hiding. At least they would live to see another day – somewhere far, far away from the Ministry if he had anything to do with it.

Once they returned to the Atrium, Valmont signaled for two largish Green Shirts to step forward.

“Alec Karew and Andrew Boxer – they will help you keep order and discipline in the Ministry.” The ox-like figures grinned hideously at him with mouths virtually devoid of any teeth. Disgust rose up in his belly, but he pushed it down.

“I’m sorry you do not trust me to see to such things,” he began smoothly.

“You already have enough on your desk, Domitian – I want you to focus on implementing my policies, not trying to keep hundreds of people in line.”

“My authority here may be undermined by their presence,” he observed evenly, trying desperately hard not to sound argumentative.

“They will be answerable to you,” he assured him, “although I think you will find them handy – they know all about . . . discipline. Now I must go,” he said. Pausing, he took one last look around the Atrium. “I don’t know how you did it all these years, Domitian – it must have been so relentlessly . . . boring.”

“Well, it isn’t any more,” he said silkily.

Valmont smiled at him, clutched his arm, and came in close. “Find and bring me those items we discussed,” he said briefly before releasing him. The look in The Snake’s eyes chilled him to the bone. With his entourage in tow, Valmont made his way to the apparition point and quickly
Domitian turned to the two thugs he had been burdened with. He narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice. “All infractions are to be brought to my desk and nothing is to be done without my express permission,” he snarled.

“You’re not going to go soft on them, now, are you?” Alex Karew asked, the warning implicit.

He squared his shoulders and looked down his long nose at the two of them. “I know these people intimately, know the kind of punishment that will distress them the most. That is what we all want – isn’t it?” he pressed back with force. The pair immediately buckled under his steely gaze.

“Of course,” they readily agreed, backing down. Domitian turned on his heel and headed for his office.

Over the following weeks, Karew and Boxer brought every perceived infraction – and a good many imagined ones – to his attention. He assigned offenders unpleasant duties, but the brutes protested bitterly that he was too lenient. When they Crucioed several office staff on their own initiative, he treated them to the same punishment. As they lay on the floor, gasping in front of his desk, he reminded them that experienced staff was needed to keep the Ministry running, and that if employees were tortured beyond their ability to work, then Valmont might be sorely disappointed – in his enforcers. That threat lessened their enthusiasm considerably, but Valmont was right, he found – it was a lot for him to do, keeping the place running while also trying to protect the people he worked with, all the while knowing that the Inner Circle was plotting against him. He could just imagine how much Perse had to hate him, now – first Albinia, and now Faith. She would no longer be his staunchest defender.

But he was wrong – completely wrong.
Chapter Summary

Severus faces the death of Charity Burbage and falters; Hermione provides some much needed perspective while also revealing her own demons.

Chapter Notes

I know some of you are dying of angst on behalf of our heroes, but all I can say is that Severus is a man of his word - he keeps his promises, however difficult that might be. However, Domitian didn't promise anyone anything, as we will see next time! Until then, I hope you find this current chapter cathartic - as always, I love hearing from you!

Keeping Faith

In outline, chapter thirteen was just as Minerva had said, and yet . . . it was also so much more than that. Hermione didn’t have first-hand experience with the Carrows, so someone had clearly informed her about their proclivities – Lovegood, the Weasley girl, and Neville Longbottom certainly would have had stories aplenty, probably ones that even he didn’t know about. It made him ill just thinking about what those two degenerates might have gotten up to when his back was turned. At the time, he had desperately wanted to trap the pair in the Forbidden Forest where they would have met a just and no doubt grisly end, but he knew the Dark Lord would have sent others in their place, and they might have been yet worse than the brother and sister. But what really pierced his usually impenetrable armor was Charity Burbage. Hermione had got the intent behind the death of the Muggle Studies professor right enough, but she didn’t know the details – no one did apart from him and Shacklebolt, who he had told as a part of his official testimony over the summer. The new Minister for Magic had decided that the particulars of her death would only deepen the loss for her family, students, and colleagues, and he concurred. It was in the record, but access to the report would be severely restricted for the immediate future and the common assumption that her body was disposed of in some unmarked grave would be maintained.

Charity’s death had deeply affected him, had distressed him more, really, than Albus’s. At least the headmaster had known his time was limited and could look back on a long, productive, and largely happy life in spite of everything while taking some degree of comfort in the knowledge that there was a plan in place that might – just might – save the wizarding world when he had to leave it prematurely. Charity, though, hadn’t even reached her prime. He and his colleague were of an age – they had been at school together, but their paths didn’t really cross until they found themselves on the teaching staff. They had gotten on well – she was a Muggle-raised half-blood like himself, and they had the same cultural touchstones. Nor was there anything tight-arsed about her in the way there was with some of their colleagues.

He was starting to feel overwhelmed. Suddenly, the urge to get out of his dark and oppressive quarters overtook him and he bolted from the room. He took the steps two at a time – some fresh air wouldn’t go amiss. Once he got above ground, however, the inclement weather put him off, and
instead he wandered the halls. To those few students who saw him, he walked with purpose, but in reality, he was heading in no specific direction, which is why it startled him when after one particularly long staircase he finally registered where he was – on the floor, outside the very room, in fact, where Charity Burbage used to teach. He could just hear her ancient predecessor, who had been called out of retirement on a temporary basis, droning on about the advent of the automobile. He had argued for leaving the position unfilled until a permanent replacement could be hired but was overruled.

He moved on, passing by her office, where he vividly remembered Charity helping him fill out subscriptions to a number of Muggle pharmaceutical journals. They had been, and still were, very useful. She had gone out of her way to secure several volumes – from France, Germany, and North America as well as from Britain – for him to peruse in order to see which would be most applicable to his work. She had done it on her own initiative after a very casual conversation over dinner one evening. He had been surprised by her gesture, especially since it wasn’t something she knew much about, but most of all because she had done it with no expectation of a favor in return. Nevertheless, he gave her a couple of bottles of French wine he had taken off of Lucius Malfoy – he had no real taste for such things but thought she would enjoy them, and she did. Although her field wasn’t especially respected, particularly within his own house, he knew that a lot of the school’s other students – including Hermione – had considered her classes tough, and that spoke volumes.

The circuit around the castle failed to calm him, and by the time he returned to his rooms he felt distinctly on edge. It was still over an hour until dinner and he decided to tidy up his quarters. He started with the dining table, which was once more over flowing with papers and books. After finishing that, he wandered into the potions classroom to check that the storeroom was well stocked – it was, Hermione had seen to it. There was even time to summon his lesson plans for Monday and lay everything out for the first class. That, at least, got him up to the dinner hour.

But once he was seated at the high table, he found his appetite lacking. With a bit of prompting, he got Flitwick to bring him up to date with his current charms project, although he soon filtered him out as his eyes drifted to the end of the Gryffindor table where Hermione was once again pushing her dinner around her plate. As he looked at her, a pang of rather desperate longing suddenly engulfed him. In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to pull her close and let the warmth of her body seep into him, wanted to bury his face in her soft hair and breathe in the scent of cucumber. He needed to drown in her kindness, caring, and good sense – he needed her to save him and assuage the guilt that gnawed at his soul, not just over Charity, but over fucking all of it. As he continued to stare unblinking, everything to the left and right of his vision was consumed by a white haze and all he could see was her. He felt the electrical pulses priming his muscles, preparing him for action – he was ready to sprint down the length of the hall, and once he got there he would pull her up from the bench and clasp her to him in front of everyone, his agreement with Minerva be damned.

Flitwick elbowed him a split second before he could act on this impulse, effectively breaking his trance. By the time he was able to look to the end of the Gryffindor table again, she had gone. He felt empty – completely and utterly alone.

He was half tempted to take up his colleague’s offer of a whiskey in his rooms, but was afraid that the alcohol might make him lose what little control he had left, so he declined. Returning to his quarters, he tried to settle down with a book in front of the fire, but couldn’t get beyond the first page. Nor did he have the distraction of patrol duty that evening. Finally, he got up and went into the lab. Taking off his teaching robes, he started to lay out brewing equipment – he needed something to do, something physical that was sufficiently demanding to keep him mentally focused on anything except Charity or Hermione. Brewing had eased his troubled mind in the past – it was now his last resort.
It was nearly ten in the morning, and she pulled her mien back with a wide hair band. Examining her face, she looked tired, but then who wouldn’t if their thoughts and dreams were invaded on a regular basis by a skimpily clad, leggy blond whose blood-red nails repeatedly ran through the blue-black hair of her equally randy potions professor. She had seen them coupling nightly since that day in class – on his desk, the sofa, and once on the stainless steel work table in his lab. She most definitely had not been thinking of Cassie when she created Perse – had never really even noticed her before, at least not in that way – rather she had simply gone with a stereotype, but the seventh-year student nevertheless fit her down to the ground, at least physically. As far as her intellectual abilities were concerned, she doubted Cassie could brew tea successfully, much less boil the water needed for it. But as a fair number of the young men of Hogwarts regularly demonstrated in the corridors at night, brains were optional, sometimes even downright detrimental when it came to romantic entanglements. And if she wasn’t entirely mistaken, Cassie was of age . . .

After stuffing various books and papers into her bag, she set off for the dungeons. The wards tingled and the door opened at her approach. Once inside she proceeded directly to the lab. He acknowledged her arrival with a nod, but otherwise said nothing, which she found absolutely crushing, but she was determined not to show it.

From the state of the place, it was clear that he had been brewing for many hours, certainly since the wee hours of the morning – there were two boxes full of potions marked for the infirmary. He looked haggard, too, as if he hadn’t had much, if any sleep – certainly, he hadn’t shaved.

Everything was laid out on the table waiting for her, and she immediately got down to business. Neither of them said anything as they worked and it was an uneasy silence. He was doing a blood replenishing potion, and she noted that he didn’t even wince when it came time to slice his hand for the last ingredient. Hers was the more complicated brew – Skelegrow – so he finished well before she did. Without a single spoken word, he put away his ingredients, and those she no longer needed, and began washing up – he was just wiping down his workstation when she turned off the heat under her cauldron and took her cutting board and utensils to the sink. He left her to it, and as she scoured them, she heard the distinctive clink of the whiskey bottle against a tumbler. Something wasn’t . . . quite . . . right.

Once she was done, she extinguished the lights in the lab and wandered into the study. He was in his chair, tumbler in hand, staring into the fire – it was obvious that he was done for the day, even though it was only just past the noon hour.

She rested her hands lightly on the back of the sofa. “Professor?” she asked, jumping at how her voice ruptured the quiet of the room.

“Miss Granger?” he drawled, taking a gulp of his whiskey as he eyed her dispassionately.

“Is there something . . . wrong?” she asked cautiously.

He continued to look at her for a moment before slowly turning his gaze to the magazine on the table and taking another drink. She hesitantly came around the end of the sofa and sat down, nervously fingerling the periodical.

“Charity Burbage,” he said. She looked at him quizzically. “In the story, Faith Marlowe dies in defense of the Ministry’s Muggle Artifact Collection.” He paused to take another sip. “Do you know how the professor for Muggle Studies really died?” he asked almost tauntingly.

“It was assumed that she was killed by . . . by Voldemort. Her . . . her body . . . it was never found, I believe,” she replied tentatively, unease creeping into her.
“Indeed it was not,” he commented caustically. “Do you want to know why?” he asked with foreboding as his eyes bore into her.

Apprehension filled her – it was clear that she wasn’t going to like what he was about to tell her.

“You are always so curious, so interested in knowing the truth – well here it is, Miss Granger, the unvarnished facts. Her broken, tortured body dangled above a table while the Dark Lord and his minions – including myself, I should add – talked business. At the end of it – for a bit of entertainment – he killed her with an Avada Kedavra.” He stared at her with a haunted expression. “She called my name before she died... reminded me that we had been friends – everyone laughed.” He paused. “And then the Dark Lord gave her to Nagini,” he said with revulsion. “That’s why her body was never found, Miss Granger.” He lifted his glass once more to his lips and drank heavily.

It took a moment for the sheer horror of what he was saying to sink in, and as it did, she unconsciously clasped the back of the sofa to steady herself while raising the other arm across her chest protectively, trying to catch her breath.

“I imagine this rather alters your perception of me, Miss Granger,” he said softly with undisguised self-loathing.

She shook her head. “It alters nothing,” she managed to mumble.

“You are deluded,” he dismissively commented, the bitterness clear.

She looked up – his eyes were wild and filled with undisguised anguish. He was in a desperate, terrifying place, and it genuinely frightened her. She had some passing acquaintance with despair, had felt it while on the run and seen it in others since the end of the war – it was insidious, killing a person slowly, from the inside out. She couldn’t let him sink any further into that desolate abyss.

“Did you kidnap her?” she asked as steadily as she could.

“What?” he growled over the rim of his glass.

“Did you take her hostage?” she asked more firmly.

He looked away.

“Did you kill her?” she persisted.

“As well as – I watched as another did,” he spat contemptuously.

“Could you have saved her?”

“Save your word play for someone else, Miss Granger,” he sneered scornfully, “I know what you are trying to do.” He threw back the rest of his whiskey and got up abruptly, heading for the drinks cabinet for a refill.

She rose too, following right behind him. “You think I can’t handle the truth – well, how about you?” she deliberately goaded. He shot her a warning glance but she ignored it. “What would have happened if you had intervened?” she pressed sharply.

When he didn’t respond she reached over and yanked the bottle out of his hand as he poured, spilling some of its contents onto the counter. She set it down forcefully with a loud thud. Furious at her presumption he growled and took a step towards her.
“I’ll tell you what would have happened,” she continued, unintimidated by his stance or the fierce look on his face. “You, too, would have been killed, and where would we all have been then? Who would have been headmaster in your place? Umbridge?” He flinched. “What would it have been like with the Carrows free to do their very worst to the students?” she relentlessly charged on. “What would it still be like? Because without you – working behind the scenes – we would have lost the fucking war!”

“You don’t – can’t – understand,” he grit out, clearly struggling to maintain his self-control.

She turned away from him and paused, one hand on her hip, the other in her mass of hair as she tried to gather her thoughts. “You say I don’t – can’t – understand, but I do. I know what it’s like to . . . to feel . . . to know that I’ve killed someone.” She straightened and then turned to face him once more, confronting what she herself had been wrestling with for months. “The younger students – they were told to hide and hex, but the older ones . . . we didn’t need to be told we were fighting for keeps. I know I killed . . . Fenrir Greyback for sure . . . but there were others as well – there were just so many coming at us,” she recalled, the emotion making her voice crack. “I suppose you must think it’s easier for us to deal with it because we were defending ourselves, but it isn’t . . . hasn’t been . . . easy,” she struggled to get out. “If it felt easy, if we didn’t have . . . regrets . . . about what we had to do . . . we’d be no better than them.” She took a shaky breath. “Feeling acutely distressed over Professor Burbage . . . having to see and be forced by circumstance to say nothing and agonizing over it . . . it doesn’t make you a horrible person,” she said as evenly as she could, the tears in her eyes threatening to overflow. “Quite the opposite – it’s testimony to the fact that you still have your humanity.”

His self-pity had evaporated almost the instant she began telling him what the actual battle had been like, far, far away from the Shrieking Shack. He ran a hand across his mouth, trying to calm himself. “Miss Granger,” he began softly, “I . . . must apologize for my outburst – you should not be burdened with such things.”

“And neither should you, professor,” she replied quietly, her voice wavering. He smiled weakly. “I’m afraid it went with the job.”

“It shouldn’t have,” she asserted determinedly in response. He gave an indulgent look. “I wasn’t simply trying to make you feel better,” she continued, almost in a whisper. “There was nothing you could do. Nothing. It would have happened regardless – you know it as surely as I do – and we really would have been in a worse place if you had spoken out and given yourself away.”

A single tear did, finally, escape down her cheek, and he reached out and wiped it away with his thumb. Another trickled down the other side, and he caught that one as well. Before he knew it, she was sniffling against his chest, her hands pressed firmly against his coat – he wrapped his arms tightly around her, resting his chin on the top of her head. The warmth of her body seeped into him, infusing him with a sense of ease that he wasn’t sure he had ever experienced before.

As her breathing settled, though, he started to become alarmingly aware of her in a way that went beyond mere comforting – if he didn’t back away now, she would think he was the ultimate pervert, trying to take advantage of the situation. Reluctantly, he brought his hands to her shoulders, ran them up and down a couple of times before pushing slightly, noting that she was decidedly disinclined to move.

“You know where the bathroom is – I’ll have Timber bring us an early lunch,” he suggested, gently turning her shoulders in the right direction. She nodded and smiled at him shyly as she disappeared into his bedroom.
Confronting her reflection in the mirror, she was painfully aware of her runny nose and red-rimmed eyes – at least the tie in her hair had held. Things had gotten pretty heated between them. She didn’t know what had come over her, berating him as if he were Harry or Ron, challenging him as if they were . . . were equals. In the heat of the moment, she completely forgot that he was her professor and she his student – he seemed to have forgotten that fact as well, or simply chose to ignore it. He could have shut her down at any time, asserted his authority and sent her packing – but he didn’t. It was very like their brief standoff at Christmas when he told her not to go walking in the woods – they hadn’t been teacher and pupil in that moment either. This exchange, then, had been a rather important confrontation on more than one level.

She watched herself nibble on her lower lip, intensely aware that something else had also occurred. Cradled in his arms, the whole world was momentarily shut out and it was just them, two people scarred by life but safe, comforted, and protected in each other’s embrace. And then, in a split second, things had suddenly shifted – she became quite warm, hot, in fact, and her skin started to tingle all over. Her breathing quickened and her heart rate rapidly increased – surely he had noticed? She had been on the verge of raising her arms and slipping them around his neck, was about to stand on her tip toes so that she could press a kiss to his lips, when he broke away. Was it because he finally remembered she was a student? Because she was so upset? Because he didn’t think of her in that way? She hoped it wasn’t the last one.

She shook her head – he was waiting for her, she shouldn’t dawdle, she could sort all of it out in her head later. Bending down, she splashed away the visual remnants of their encounter.

He summoned Timber regarding their lunch the instant she disappeared into his bedroom – he hadn’t eaten anything since the night before, and not much then, and was feeling the alcohol in spite of the adrenaline rush sparked by their confrontation. Once the meal was laid out on the coffee table, he went to his desk and picked up a stack of student essays, looking around for something – anything, really – to keep him from thinking too much about what had just passed between them. It had taken all he had to push her away – if they had stood there a mere ten seconds more he would have broken the promise he had made, along with a fair number of school rules. He dropped the papers on his desk and pulled back his shoulders – taking deep breaths, he willed himself to be still, shoving everything behind his Occlumency walls. He would deal with what had happened later, when he was alone and had better control of his emotions.

He heard the bathroom door open and he quickly checked to see that the bottom of his coat was in place. When she came back into the room, she looked refreshed. There was an awkward moment – she twisted her fingers nervously – but then turned to the spread in front of the hearth, commenting that she had skipped breakfast and was ravenous. He was relieved that she didn’t want to talk about things – the time wasn’t quite right, yet, for that conversation. They took their usual places, deliberately avoiding mentioning their earlier exchange, focusing instead on the reading she had done for that week. He set her new assignments and went over upcoming lessons, including those for the seventh-year class, and this gave her the opening she had been hoping for.

“I assume you were happy with Cassie’s make-up assignment?” she ventured, feigning disinterest. He smirked at her attempt to dissemble and then cleared his throat and his expression.

“No, I bloody well wasn’t,” he complained honestly enough. “Botched it completely – had to deduct points for carelessness – burned a hole right through fucking desk. The school should bill her parents for the wasted ingredients. Couldn’t even dress herself,” he continued, referencing her disheveled appearance. “How she has survived this long as a student here is beyond me.”

A broad grin spread across her face as he recounted the student’s abysmal performance.
“You find that amusing, do you, Miss Granger?” he challenged with mock indignation.

“No, professor,” she replied, although she couldn’t entirely suppress her glee. He hid his own smile behind the mug of tea he was drinking. The message had been sent and received – she didn’t have to worry about Cassandra Milestone.

When they had finished lunch, he walked with her up to the ground level – which was as far as he dared – on the excuse that he had to pick up a book from the library. Mindful that they were in a public space, she formally thanked him for the tutorial and headed off.

As he watched her ascend the stairs, he knew what it was to be grateful. She had given him absolution. It wasn’t absolute – he didn’t think there would probably ever be any such thing as that for him – but she had pulled him away from the dark and back into the light, and he had reassured her that she didn’t have competition. It was enough – at least for now.
Caught

Chapter Summary

Severus and Hermione settle back into a routine; after having saved Perse and several of her friends from a particularly nasty Green Shirt, Domitian treats her injuries and comforts her as only he knows how.

Chapter Notes

Hey there! I am adding a warning to this chapter - there is some brief torture with a cigarette, but it's not graphic or prolonged. If you managed the novels, I think you can probably deal with this without difficulty. But I did want you to know before hand. This chapter is also a bit on the long side - there was just no appropriate place to divide it. Next time: Hermione is caught out, though in a completely different way. Thanks to all of you who have been kind enough to leave comments - they are much appreciated!

Caught

The Monday afternoon staff meeting had been subdued, to say the very least. Although no one mentioned her specifically, he knew that they were all thinking about Charity – how could they not be? None of them asked if he had more information about her death than what had been publicized by the ministry, but a few uneasy glances had nevertheless been cast in his direction. Normally, nothing stopped them from asking impertinent or unpleasant questions about anything, but this time, it was different. They were just savvy enough to understand that they probably didn’t really want to know more, and that if Shacklebolt was holding anything back, it was for their own peace of mind. Only Minerva stopped him before he could get to the door. He told her pointedly that if she needed to discuss something important, he could stay and talk with her for a few minutes, but he had to meet Hermione for a tutorial. He stared at her long and hard, trying to impress upon her by sheer force of will that she should just let the subject drop, and finally, under the weight of his gaze, she smiled weakly and confirmed it was indeed something she could deal with on her own.

Seeing Hermione, sitting quietly and reading at one of the desks in the potions classroom, was the balm he needed when he came back from the staff meeting. She smiled at him over her book before packing it away and following him into his quarters. They went directly to the lab, and as she dug out a hair tie from the bag she had dropped next to the door, he was suddenly struck by the blazing red and gold of her uniform. He was surrounded by white walls, black cabinets, and stainless steel counters and tabletops. Everything in the room was austere and sterile – except for her. If ever there was an analogy for his life, this was it.

When she stood, her face was flushed from having been bent over, and she was having some difficulty wrestling the tie around her unruly hair. He couldn’t help snorting and rolling his eyes, but it was mostly for show, and she knew it. Once the beast had been tamed, he slid a piece of paper across the table to her. She immediately began reading it over, and once finished she began gathering the ingredients and setting out the equipment that would be required. He retreated to the door to
watch her for a few minutes before slipping out altogether, settling down at his desk to finish the grading he had begun at the staff meeting.

The light chopping, along with the occasional clank of metal stirrers against the cauldron, relaxed him as no other sounds did, and he quite liked the notion that Hermione was only a room away, probably as content as he was with what she was doing. He was just finishing his marking when he heard the telltale signs of cleaning in the lab. Putting the essays to one side, he got up, stretched, and strolled in to see how she had gotten on.

“So, Miss Granger, what have you brewed?” he began.

She wiped her hands on a towel and came over and stood next to the cauldron. “I think it’s a general burn salve – I expect it will solidify once it’s cooled.”

“Correct. What kind of burns can you use it for?”

“Principally minor magical burns – it will draw out and soak up the residual magic – but it would also address the physical effects of the injury as well.”

He dipped a finger into the warm, thick goo, rubbed it between his fingers and sniffed, pulling a face as he did.

“What have you done to it, Miss Granger?” he growled, looking at her over his fingertips. It was her turn to smirk. When she didn’t reply he took another whiff. “Lavender,” he said disparagingly, continuing to glare at her.

“It’s good for burns,” she readily offered, “and it makes it smell nice,” she added under her breath.

“Yes, I’m sure the young men of Hogwarts – who tend to need more frequent treatment for burns than their female peers – won’t mind in the least having lavender scented cream slathered all over them after they’ve blown themselves up in the lab,” he commented sarcastically.

She let the opening to comment on the different attention spans of male and female students pass – she could bring it up later. “Well, instead of lavender we could add . . . .” She paused in thought and he arched a brow, now expecting an answer. “Umm . . . cloves?” she finally suggested.

He snorted again. “This isn’t a stew, Miss Granger,” he replied, wiping his hands on a towel before transferring a handful of small jars from the counter to the table.

“But cloves have antibacterial properties, help with inflammation, and boost the immune system, all of which are important in treating magical burns,” she explained, as if he didn’t already know all of that.

“They also have aphrodisiac properties, Miss Granger – as does lavender,” he added pointedly, “and it’s already hard enough keeping the halls cleared after curfew without fueling that particular fire. Unless, of course, you approve of clandestine assignations?” he asked enticingly, placing his knuckles on the table and leaning over so that he was almost within kissing distance of her lips. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open – he watched with amusement as her face reddened all the way up to her hairline.

He pushed away from the table before he really got into trouble. “Fill these now and put the lids on so they’ll form a vacuum – it will extend the shelf life. And in the future, Miss Granger,” he admonished, all amusement now gone from his tone, “ask about modifying the brewing I set you to do.”
She nodded at the rebuke, suitably chastened, and began filling and capping the jars as he finished putting things away. When she was done, she looked around the room, trying to find something that would keep her there just a bit longer, but the lab was as spotless as she had found it. She reluctantly picked up her bag and followed him into the study.

“For tomorrow, I’d like an essay on how you could tailor the general salve you just made to burns made by some of the more serious and nastier spells.”

“Which ones?”

“Surprise me,” he drawled sardonically. “I’ll see you at dinner, Miss Granger.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that she had planned on skipping it in order to get in more study time, but he caught her.

“Don’t make me have to order you,” he commented more sharply.

“Yes sir,” she replied with resignation. She slung the book bag over her shoulder and left quietly.

Tuesday and Wednesday went largely as Monday had – successful classes without serious incidents and satisfying afternoon tutorials over cups of tea. Not surprisingly, her essay featured some of the spells that had hit her friends during the last battle, and he took note of her suggestions for tweaking the burn salve – he would run them by Poppy in the Infirmary before setting Hermione to making several of them for her brewing assignment the following week. Since she didn’t officially have any instruction with him until then, he made it clear before she left that if she didn’t attend at least dinner each night he would haul her from her rooms – dressed or no – and make it as embarrassing as possible in front of the other students. She immediately blushed at the thought of him breaching her door, catching her in a state of undress, and dragging her away. On her way back to her room, she had the stray thought that he had done that on purpose, deliberately putting the image into her head.

He had never flirted much – ever – with women, but he was finding it rather enjoyable of late, especially since it so obviously affected her in delicious kinds of ways. He wondered at the effect his comment would have on her dreams – and his.

Friday morning came and the owls appeared right on schedule. As usual, Minerva took hers back to the office. Since he didn’t hear from her, he put it quite out of his mind until he noticed a slight uneasiness in the last two of his morning classes. It wasn’t anything he could put his finger on – the students were still just as respectful, but it was clear that their focus had shifted somewhat away from him. Overheard snippets of conversation in his sixth-year class ranged from “how could she endure that” to the more commonly expressed “how could a woman do that to another woman.” When his last lesson was over, he headed straight to the hall – he was nearly breathless when he sat down next to Minerva.

“Well?” he asked, trying to maintain his customarily cool exterior.

“Malfoy Manor,” she said grimly, handing him the magazine.

His face settled into a scowl – exchanging flirtatious banter with her had been a pleasant diversion, but now they were back to real life. “I don’t believe I care to eat before I read that,” he said gruffly after a moment, pushing his plate away and tucking the weekly into a pocket in his robes.

“It could have been worse,” Minerva sighed, “but at least Perse has Domitian.”

He looked her questioningly. “You will appreciate how the chapter ends,” she gently reassured him before turning to talk to Hooch, who was on the other side of her. He glanced down the Gryffindor
Hermione wasn’t there – so he got and went directly to his quarters.

They were targeted separately rather than as a whole group. Those who had left in pairs or more were better able to fight off the Green Shirts, but Perse was alone and was hit simultaneously by several spells before being swiftly whisked away. Regina had done her best, but there were too many of them and both she and Cary were also taken. Diana, too, had been snatched.

Perse was the first to arrive. Sound echoed in the cavernous structure, which stank of machine oil and diesel. The pungent top notes of fish and faint lapping of water she heard in the distance led her to believe that she was in a waterfront warehouse, probably in London since that was where Valmont was based, although she didn’t know that for certain. She was told not to move on pain of being hexed, and she was soon joined by the others. When their hoods were yanked off, they blinked against the dim orangish florescent light.

As Perse tried to get her bearings, a woman in a figure-hugging dark green suit stepped forward and slapped her hard in the face. She feigned falling, and the Green Shirt who was holding her lost his grip. Perse ran the heel of her shoe down the inside of his leg, twisted swiftly and punched him in the solar plexus, causing him to drop to his knees, gasping for breath. Before she could turn around she was hit from behind.

“Crucio!”

Perse fell to the floor, writhing in agony on the dirty cement. She didn’t know how long it went on – she lost all ability to think or reason – but when it stopped, she still continued to spasm.

“Let me introduce myself,” the woman in the green suit cooed. “Donna Atropa.” She took out a cigarette, lit it, and took a long drag. She stalked around the others, pausing in front of Diana and blowing the smoke into her face. “I want a list of the Inner Circle and their safe houses. If you tell me what I want to know, your demise can be quick and painless – if you don’t . . . it will be slow and exquisitely lingering,” she said in a sultry voice, making it clear which choice she preferred them to make.

Regina started to smile until it grew into an outright laugh. Donna approached her slowly, continuing to pull on her cigarette. She held it in front of Regina’s face, the threat clear enough, but her target didn’t flinch.

“Auror,” Donna commented dismissively, flicking ashes at Regina’s décolletage before moving away. “Do something useful,” she spat, kicking at the Green Shirt who was still on the floor, catching his breath. “Find Domitian, bring him here – he’ll be able to identify them.” The Green Shirt glared at her as he awkwardly got to his feet, but Donna shooed him away and he disapparated. She turned back to her captives. “In the meantime, we can still have a bit of fun,” she observed. “It’s one thing to undergo . . . interrogation alone, and quite another to have to witness it happening to one of your friends,” she sneered.

Donna turned away from them and slowly and deliberately circled Perse, who was finally coming around – with a flick of her wand, Perse’s hands and legs were tightly bound. Kneeling down, she ripped open the young woman’s shirt, exposing her brassiere. Drawing deeply on her cigarette, she then pressed the end of it against Perse’s skin, just above one of her breasts.

He heard the Green Shirt before he saw him thanks to the squawking young witch serving as his secretary – she followed the man into the office, sputtering that he didn’t have an appointment, as if such things really mattered any more. He waved her back to her desk.

“Donna thinks she’s caught four of the Inner Circle and wants you to identify them to be sure,” he
snarled, massaging his breastbone.

“Oh really?” he said in a bored tone, although the brute had his full attention.

“I recognize two of them. One’s an auror and I think the other is that blond bitch of a potions mistress,” he said lewdly.

Domitian’s mouth went dry, but he maintained his placid expression. “And where will I find them?” he asked, seemingly indifference to the Green Shirt’s information.

“Warehouse sixteen, down on the docks – I’ll take you,” he offered.

“No,” he responded coolly, opening his desk drawer and casually taking something out of it. “If these people really do turn out to be members of the Inner Circle,” he continued disinterestedly, “then Valmont should be informed. Go to him and tell him what you’ve told me.”

“Where will I find him?”

“Start with headquarters,” Domitian suggested, knowing full well The Snake would be at Lucinius’s house – it would buy him some time. Not much, but some.

He wanted to run to the Atrium, but had to keep calm. The instant the Green Shirt was gone Domitian apparated to warehouse fifteen and then crept to number sixteen, darting from shadow to shadow in the fading light, not that he needed any illumination to find his way – he had only to follow the screams.

The door was ajar, and peeking around it he could see Perse, bound and lying on the ground with Donna hovering over her. Regina, Cary, and Diana were standing a few feet away, held tightly by Green Shirts. All of their wands were gathered in a small pile, and several cigarette butts glowed nearby, meaning that the attackers intended to burn them, which was worse than simply breaking them – the pain was said to be excruciating and prolonged for the witch or wizard who lost a wand in that manner. Donna tossed her latest butt end over her shoulder, landing it directly atop the stack. He had to do something, and fast, for everyone’s sake, not just Perse’s. He knew that the auror was a fighter, and Diana a dab hand with hexes. Cary could at least conjure defensive shields if nothing else, but he needed to give them an opportunity to summon their wands.

Donna lit another fag, pulling on it deeply before pressing the glowing end to Perse’s chest. The young woman’s scream went through him like a bolt. Without even thinking, he spelled the hanging florescent lights to fall. Sparks flew from the bare wires, and the fixtures shattered on hitting the ground. That was all they needed. Regina slammed her head backwards into the face of the Green Shirt holding her while Diana broke the knee of her captor with a swift side kick. In the excitement, Cary managed to slip his Green Shirt as well, and all three of them immediately summoned their wands. As the fighting ensued, the warehouse was lit only by the spells flung back and forth. Perse fought weakly against her bindings. Donna’s arm was raised to curse her again when Domitian hit the crazed witch from behind – she fell ungracefully to the floor. As the fighting gradually moved to the far end of the building and away from Perse, he skirted the wall, his black robes making him virtually invisible. When he reached her, he knelt down and drew her to his chest. He summoned her wand, took one last look at the fighting at the end of the warehouse – there was only one Green Shirt still standing – and activated the pound coin he had taken from his desk. Arriving in an empty and isolated meadow, he immediately disapparated them to his house. He laid her out on his bed and vanished the bindings. There was no time to treat her – he had to get back before he was missed – so he pocketed her wand and adjusted his wards, ensuring that she wouldn’t be able to leave, not that it was likely she had the strength to do so, but he had learned the hard way never to underestimate her.
He timed it perfectly, arriving at the warehouse mere moments after Valmont. Together, they found Donna and her companions out cold on the floor. Valmont was seriously displeased at the sight – he cast an *Enervate* just so he could *Crucio* them back into unconsciousness for their incompetence.

It was a half hour before he could get away. Perse was slipping in and out of consciousness and her muscles were still twitching now and again. He took several vials from the bathroom and set them on the night stand, along with her wand. One after another he poured the potions down her throat, and after a few minutes her thrashing figure finally stilled.

His heart was still pounding and he took the opportunity to lie down next to her – he didn’t intend to fall asleep, but the adrenaline rush was wearing off and he dropped off quickly. Waking when she began to stir, he lit the lamp next to the bed after casting a blackout over his windows so the light wouldn’t be seen from outside – everything needed to appear normal to anyone passing. Getting up, he went to the other side of the bed and ran another set of diagnostic spells – she watched sleepily as his wand went back and forth.

“You were bloody lucky it didn’t go on any longer,” he said sternly, looking down at her. “What happened?” When she didn’t immediately reply, he collected the empty vials and took them into the bathroom. He came back with a small jar and sat down next to her – she flinched slightly at the jostling, but he misread the movement. “I know you don’t trust me, but consider that I could have taken you to the Ministry rather than to my bed,” he said derisively as he unscrewed the jar lid. She reached up to stop his hand.

“It . . . it was the pain when you sat down. I do trust you,” she whispered emphatically if a bit weakly. “Why wouldn’t I?”

He stared at her as dispassionately as he could. “Because I’ve committed murder, turned the Ministry over to Valmont, and driven off the Inner Circle, just as they always feared I would do – and that’s just for starters,” he said bitterly as he carefully opened her torn shirt, revealing the burn marks on her chest. She watched as he dipped a finger into the ointment and gently rubbed it into each of the blistering spots.

“There might be places under the bra,” he said gruffly, looking at the scorched material.

As she tried to reach around to undo it, he stopped her. Slipping his wand under the center of the garment, it split in two. She lay back as he carefully peeled away the fabric – there were three more marks, but they weren’t blistered, only a bit red.

“You haven’t answered my question – why would you trust me?” he demanded tersely.

“Because you’re doing this,” she replied softly, watching as he dabbed a bit more ointment over the worst of the injuries. She looked up and their eyes locked – the anguish that briefly passed over his face almost made her cry, but it was swiftly replaced by exasperation.

“What the bloody hell happened?” he demanded more forcefully than before.

“Some of us – I don’t know how many – were attacked a few blocks away from our meeting place. Three of them got me – there was no time to react.”

“And the others?” he grit out.

“I don’t know, we didn’t get to talk before . . . before things started to deteriorate,” she replied.

He screwed the lid back on the jar and set it forcefully on the night table. He got up abruptly and paced, the fingers of one hand running roughly through his long hair. Finally, he stopped to face
“When are you all going to learn that this isn’t some kind of fucking game?” he growled. “You have to take some basic bloody precautions, for fuck’s sake!”

“We did take precautions,” she replied angrily, “no one – but no one saw us going in – which is why we thought it was safe to sneak out and disapparate away!”

He gave that information some thought. “Then it’s likely you’ve got traitor in your midst.”

She sat up, flung the blanket back, and drew her legs over the side of the bed. “I think we know that now,” she spat, holding her head steady with one hand as she struggled to her feet.

“And where in Merlin do you think you’re going?” he barked.

“I need to warn the others,” she said, rising and taking a few tentative steps.

“You aren’t going anywhere,” he pronounced firmly, “not for a while, at any rate.”

She glared at him. “You can’t keep me here,” she glowered.

He began moving towards her, slowly and with intent. “Oh, I think I can,” he drawled forbiddingly, “and I won’t hesitate to tie you to that fucking bed if that’s what it takes,” he threatened. His face came closer and closer until the back of her knees hit the mattress and she was prone once more. But he kept coming until his hands were finally positioned on either side of her arms – he slipped a knee between her legs. “What if I simply kept you here for the duration?” he continued, the dangerous edge still in his voice as his dark eyes roved over her exposed chest. He lowered himself to his elbows so that he was half lying on her. He brought a hand up to caress a breast, careful to avoid touching her burns. “I could ward this room against all comers,” he said, his voice barely audible, “keep you safe so I could have you every night.” He leaned down and circled a nipple with his tongue, round and round, until he took it into his mouth and suckled gently. “Would you like that?” he paused to murmur.

Her response was to snake hands over his shoulders and around his neck as she moaned softly. He lifted his head and moved upwards to kiss her parted lips. At first his touch was light, but urgency quickly crept in, and his hands gripped her upper arms as though he were clinging to a life preserver in the middle of a roiling sea. He meant what he said – he wanted to keep her in his room and in his bed, wanted to sink into her calm waters at the end of each stormy day. She reached down to her skirt, trying to tug the garment upwards, but he grabbed her wrist. Reluctantly, he started to lift himself up and away from her, but she held onto him tightly.

“Apart from the fact that members of the Inner Circle would kill me on sight – and perhaps you as well if they knew who you kept company with – you’re not strong enough for this,” he said regretfully.

“If I’m strong enough to be tortured, then I think I can withstand making love,” she whispered pleadingly. He shook his head doubtfully, but she was determined and pressed a hand along his rigid length – he hissed in spite of himself. Her hand lingered there before moving upwards towards the belt. His eyes never left hers as he quickly undid his trousers and shoved them down his thighs as she raised her skirt. Feeling the wet gusset of her underwear, he pushed it aside and slipped easily into her warmth. She immediately clenched and he paused to catch his breath. Looking down at her flushed face, seeing his desire reflected in her own eyes and hearing her pant ever so slightly, he suddenly realized just how much he truly did want to hide her away. They could leave the country – he had the means to do it – go someplace where they’d never be found, perhaps the other side of the world, some uncharted island where they could live out their days in sunshine and warm waters. These thoughts consumed him as he rocked back and forth, imagining nights under the open sky.
They could get away from this dreary island, away from the dirt and grime of the city, away from the decay and moral corruption.

She was so close – he could feel it. His nimble fingers plied her skillfully, the crescendo building until she finally cried out her climax, with him close behind. They came down slowly, deliberately taking their time. He ran his hand repeatedly along her face and neck, down her arm to her hip and then up again along her side. She watched in fascination as he seemingly tried to memorize every inch of her.

She cupped his face. “When this is over, we will go away,” she promised fervently.

He briefly thought about his island fantasy – but that’s all it was, all it could ever be, because he knew he wouldn’t survive the conflagration that was coming.

“Stop it!” she said sharply, reading the misgivings in his face. “Don’t you dare go thinking you won’t survive, don’t you bloody dare! You had better do everything you can to make it through this, because if you don’t, I will come after you! I will not let you go!” He rested his forehead against hers for a moment, trying not to smile at the illogic of her threat – he wouldn’t contradict her, though, not here, not in this moment, but he knew better than she did what his chances were.

They lay together a little longer until he finally moved and she managed to get up. Straightening her clothes as best she could, she stepped carefully towards the bathroom. While she refreshed herself, he reviewed the evening’s events and came to the conclusion that it was finally time to tell her about the key. When she came back into the room, she was just starting to do up her shirt, and his eyes lingered on the item at the end of the chain around her neck.

She saw where he was looking and nervously began fingering the small piece of metal. He had closed himself off the instant she had told him that Albinia had given it to her, had actually physically withdrawn from her at the news that the late minister had specifically instructed her to tell him about it. He had put her off at the time, saying cryptically that the time wasn’t right to explain everything, but even she could see that things were now rapidly changing.

He motioned for her to sit on the bed as he drew a chair over and placed it directly in front of her. He sat down wearily, and leaned forwards, his elbows on his knees. “A few months back,” he slowly began, “some . . . things were sent to Albinia and several other people at the Ministry, items that were imbued with very dark magic. One of them . . . injured her, and she locked all of the objects away in some secret place. She didn’t tell me where, just that I would know what to do when the time came. I believe the key she gave you is essential to finding and destroying those objects.”

“Why didn’t she just destroy them then and there?”

“Because the timing wasn’t right,” he replied. “Certain . . . matters had come to pass first.”

“Certain . . . matters,” she repeated slowly, turning over the possibilities in her mind. “She was injured, you said. Albinia knew she was going to die,” Perse stated more than asked.

“Yes,” he finally answered.

“This . . . object that hurt her . . . it was going to kill her regardless,” she again stated, her heart in her throat.

“Does it matter?” he asked with resignation.

“Of course it matters!” she replied emphatically. “It matters a great deal!”
“Not to me,” he quickly interrupted.

They stared at each other for a moment as she took in the possibility – the probability – that Albinia had arranged for Domitian to kill her, and do so in such a way as to make his loyalty to Valmont unquestionable.

“Domitian . . . .” The question was on her lips but he quickly interrupted her.

“You need to find the objects and then destroy them when I give you the signal.”

She stared at him blankly, but realized that he wasn’t going to discuss his involvement in Albinia’s death, so she turned her attention to the issue at hand. “Do you know what these things are?”

“Yes – a ring, an antique Quidditch helmet, a goblet, a writing pen, and a book,” he replied.

“But you don’t know where they are?”

“Albinia took the responsibility of hiding them in case Valmont probed my mind, but I am certain that the key you have is vital to finding them.”

She gave the information some thought. “When will it be the . . . the right time to destroy them?”

“I don’t know precisely – it may be months, but it could just as easily be only a week,” he hedged. “In any case, it’s important to locate them sooner rather than later. Don’t take them – they are safe where they are – but you need to be able to get to them quickly when the time comes. And you mustn’t destroy them until I send you word. Alright?”

She nodded.

“One more thing,” he said, taking her hands into his, “and this is critical – you absolutely must not engage with the objects. Don’t drink from the goblet, use the pen, look through the book, that sort of thing. There may be some magical compulsion to do so, but you need to fight it with every fiber of your being. Do you understand?”

She swallowed hard and shook her head once more. “I may need some help with this,” she ventured as she started to think things through.

“It would be wise to keep this to yourself as much as possible, but if you do need help, be very careful – confide only in those you absolutely trust.” She understood. He reached for her blouse to finish buttoning it up.

“You should go,” he said reluctantly, standing when he was done and returning the chair to its place against the wall. He went into the bathroom and after rummaging around, came out with another vial, which he pressed into her hand. “This will help with the aftereffects of the Cruciatus,” he mumbled. She slipped it into a pocket.

“How can we stay in touch?” she asked quietly.

He stepped away slightly, taking his wand from his sleeve. Reaching towards her chest, he lifted the key and spelled it before allowing it to nestle once more between her breasts. “It will warm noticeably when I need to see you. You can apparate directly to this room – I’ll make sure the wards are set to allow it,” he said. “But don’t come unless I call you – it could be dangerous otherwise. And Perse?” She looked up. “Find that traitor, or all your lives are forfeit.”

She nodded and retrieved her wand from the table. She looked at him once more – he seemed so
forsaken that she couldn’t help but wrap her arms around his neck one last time and kiss him softly. Quickly releasing him so she wouldn’t cry, she stepped away, turned her back, and disapparated.

At that moment, he felt as though his very soul had been ripped from his being.
Caught Out

Chapter Summary

This time, it's Hermione who is caught out, and Severus has some concerns about it. Meanwhile, Perse locates the cursed items Albinia hid and settles on a plan to destroy them when the time comes.

Chapter Notes

UPDATE!!!

Hi, again - for some reason, the last two pages of this chapter did not load this morning, and in order to address it, I had to delete the whole chapter and reload it - cross your fingers that this actually works! Someone drop me a line and let me know if it ends past "She needed to adjust her thinking." Oh, and let me know how you like it.

Whew!

A brief preview for next time: the Inner Circle expels Valmont's people from the ministry, and Perse and Domitian take on the task of destroying the cursed items.

Caught Out

He had fully given himself over to Domitian and Perse’s passion, and while the hot spray of the shower was some comfort afterwards, it was nothing to what he desperately wanted, but true relief was still weeks away – or perhaps even longer than that. He only recently realized that he hadn’t figured in a period of courting after Hermione finished her NEWTS. However much he thought she was attracted to him, he couldn’t just drag her down to his dungeon lair the instant Minerva conferred a Hogwarts diploma on her.

Bugger it all to hell – it was always fucking something. The only thing he was certain of at the moment was that he couldn’t sit there any longer dwelling on it since he had to be elsewhere in less than a half hour.

He entered the room right at the stroke of the bell, much to Sprout’s consternation, but he saw no reason to arrive early and assume even the last few second of anyone else’s Friday afternoon study hall duties. Some of the students looked up to register the transfer of authority, and he glared at them if only to ensure that no one asked for his help with their work.

He looked briefly at Hermione as he arranged himself at the end of the table, but his eyes quickly drifted further down and he noted that the Weasley girl was watching her friend like a hawk – he briefly wondered if they had had a disagreement, such was the intensity of her gaze. The two hours passed quietly enough, although by the end of it he was disquieted by whatever was playing out between the two young women. The instant they were dismissed, Hermione shot from the room, leaving her clearly displeased friend behind in the scrum to get to dinner.
Once he was in his usual place at the front of the hall, he surveyed the Gryffindor table – the youngest Weasley was continuing to glare at Hermione, who was doing her best not to look at anyone, including him. There was something very odd going on, and then it struck him what it had to be. This wasn’t some quarrel, at least not yet – no, Miss Weasley had discovered her secret and wanted to talk to her about it.

*Fucking Merlin’s ghost* – that’s all he needed, all any of them needed. Not that there was ever going to be a good time to reveal secrets, but there were better moments than this. NEWTs were only weeks away, not to mention the fact that Hermione was undertaking private tutorials with him – what students, parents, and the Boards of Governors might make of that if her authorship was revealed before she graduated simply didn’t bear thinking about. He had a sinking feeling about it all, and he pushed his plate away.

Hermione chose her moment to escape well, suddenly leaping up from the bench to exit with a large group of students, but Ginny was right after her. He got up abruptly. It was unlikely that she would head for the Gryffindor common room, and the library was probably out as well. No, she’d retreat to somewhere private, probably her room, which mercifully was isolated from other students, although he felt fairly certain that the Weasley chit had the password.

He had just reached the top of the stairs when he heard loud banging reverberating along the corridor.

“Hermione! Open up!” an angry voice demanded. He stalked quietly to the corner, remaining just out of sight. The pounding began again, stopping only when the door opened with a whoosh.

“What?!” the owner barked.

“You lied to me!” Ginny accused. “You said you weren’t reading them!”

“I’m not reading them,” Hermione weakly retorted.

“No, you’re bloody *writing* them!”

“Well,” she paused, “that’s still not *reading* them.”

“Semantics,” Ginny hissed. “There’s such a thing as *lying by omission*.”

The door closed and he crept up next to it with a sense of *déjà vu* – it almost felt like old times. He could hear loud, slightly muffled voices, which were made clearer with the casting of the right spell.

“Why didn’t you bloody tell me you wrote the story?”

“I didn’t tell *anyone*, Gin,” she replied. “I had to be very, very careful.”

“And you didn’t trust me to keep your secret?”

“Would you have approved?” she snapped.

“What has that got to do with anything?” Ginny volleyed.

“I didn’t want the flack,” she bit out. They stood there for a moment, just staring at each other until Hermione moved away and took a seat by the hearth.

“How did you find out?” Hermione asked wearily.

“I’ve been wondering about it for a while, but this last chapter cinched it. You, Harry, Ron, and...
Luna . . . the collapsing lights gave it completely away. It could only have been Malfoy Manor,” Ginny replied rather smugly.

“No doubt the boys know?”

“I doubt it – I mean, they know about the story, of course, but it’s unlikely that they’ve actually read it,” she observed, sitting down in the chair opposite. “You could have told me, you know,” she added somewhat petulantly.

“I’m sorry, Ginny, really, I am. It was just something I wanted to keep to myself. It’s . . . it’s . . . .” She trailed off, staring into the fire and wringing her hands. But then she still and looked over at her friend. “It’s actually been helping me come to terms with the war,” she gently explained.

“Writing about it has forced me to think about it – it’s hard to explain.” She sank back into the chair and sighed. “I’ve felt a bit . . . lost these last few months,” she admitted. “That last year, we practically lived on adrenaline, and how we all managed to come out of the war alive is just . . . beyond me.”

Ginny flinched and looked away. “But of course, we didn’t all come out of the war alive, did we?” she asked softly, reaching over and laying a hand on her friend’s knee. “I know how hard it’s been dealing with Fred’s loss – you and the boys had all summer to be together, to start working things through with your family.” Ginny sniffled and brushed away an errant tear. “I . . . I really haven’t had that,” she stammered.

They sat quietly for a moment, as she gathered her thoughts. “Once I was able to get my bearings,” she slowly began, “I went to Australia to restore my parents’ memories – you already know that, but what you don’t know, what I didn’t share with you, or Harry, or . . . .” She was about to say anyone, but she had told someone — him — over the holidays, and she smiled wanly at the memory, but even he didn’t know the worst of it. “What I didn’t tell you was just how . . . difficult it all was. While they readily forgave me, they were . . . were rather . . . alarmed, I guess, that I could have done that to them. And then there were all the diagnostics that had to be run, spending weeks making sure everything had returned to normal – but there was nothing normal about any of it,” she said with a catch in her voice. “They were thousands of miles away from where they should have been, living lives that now seemed strange to them, and I was the one who had done that to them. I had nightmares for months — still do occasionally — where I dreamed that I failed to . . . to . . . to give them back their lives.” Her voice caught. “After everything that had happened,” she said quietly, “I really was looking forward to coming back this year if only for a bit of downtime, for some structure and routine — and then I got this idea for a story.”

“But I still don’t understand why you’re writing a story about Snape,” Ginny said, all the fight gone out of her.

Hermione stared into the flames and smiled ruefully. “It was a way of not focusing on my troubles and aiding someone else who needed help — and deserved it,” she added emphatically. “After the battle, everyone was lauding us, patting us all on the back. We three were being hailed as heroes — and it was certainly true enough of Harry — but it was also the case that we had come rather late to the game, so to speak.” She looked at her friend, almost pleading her to understand. “Don’t you see?” she asked, leaning forward in her chair. “Professor Snape was the real hero in all of this. After the first wizarding war, he knew that Voldemort would be back, and he stayed on at Hogwarts to help Dumbledore, to be there when Harry finally came to school. The last three years, he walked a very dangerous line, pretending to be a Death Eater but in reality, spying for the headmaster and the Order. He risked his life for us every single day, Ginny, and he was treated like dirt for it — by everyone. It rather put my own woes into perspective, don’t you think?”
“He was a mean, nasty, unpleasant git,” she commented.

Hermione smiled ever so slightly. “Did you ever stop to think about the role he had to play? He couldn’t be seen openly favoring any of us – it would have blown his cover. Draco, Crabe, Goyle, Pansy Parkinson – they were all telling their Death Eater families what was going on at Hogwarts, what he was doing. He was constantly being watched, his every action scrutinized.”

“But he’s still a mean, nasty, unpleasant git,” she continued to complain.

“Yes, yes sometimes he is,” Hermione replied almost affectionately. “Old habits die hard, I suppose, but it doesn’t lessen his sacrifices one iota,” she stated firmly. “No one outside the Ministry or Order wanted to hear that right after the battle. Since the public didn’t want to listen to me or any of his supporters over the summer, I decided to defend him another way, seducing the public with the truth.”

Ginny snorted. “Seduce them is right – geez, all that sex involving him!”

She blushed and looked away, saying nothing.

“Nooooooooo . . .” Ginny drawled incredulously. “Please tell me you’re not,” she said, sitting up and leaning forward. Hermione blushed more deeply and still made no comment. “You are! You actually fancy the git!” she yelped incredulously.

“And what if I do? I’m certainly not the only one who recognizes some of his finer qualities,” she offered stiffly.

“Yeah, but the others are only interested in a dirty fantasy shag on a classroom desk with their demon potions professor and sometime spy – you’re actually seriously interested in him, aren’t you?” she persisted, her eyes wide with realization.

“What do you want me to say, Gin?” she blurted out, getting up from her chair and moving around the room from one piece of furniture to another in agitation.

“What’s the problem?” Ginny asked, bewildered by her friend’s reaction.

“Well for one thing, I’m still in school . . . .”

“You won’t be in a couple of months.”

“And for another, I’m writing this blasted story,” she quickly added. “If he ever found out it was me, my organs wouldn’t even be worth potions ingredients.”

“So don’t tell him,” her Ginny suggested.

“Yes, I have considered that,” she replied testily.

“Well . . . what else is there?”

Hermione looked at her incredulously, as if her friend could follow her thoughts, but Ginny merely raised her shoulders questioningly.

“Look at me!” she ordered, her arms stuck out to her sides.

“What?”

“Thank Merlin for that – she’s all looks and no substance.”

“Well I’m all substance and no looks.”

Ginny rolled her eyes and got up from the chair. Standing in front of Hermione, she grabbed the sides of the oversized shirt and pulled them snug behind her friend, revealing well-defined curves. “You’ve filled out very nicely these last two years, though you’d never notice wearing these . . . these . . . things,” Ginny said derisively.

“But my hair, Gin,” she replied woefully.

“I won’t lie to you, Mione – it’s never going to be fashionably straight or sleek, but you’d be surprised what a good stylist and some decent hair care products could do for you. I’m not talking about being a slave to your grooming,” she barreled on, keeping Hermione from interrupting, “but I can see how this could be tamed into, say, individual tendrils – lots of them, all over,” she said, pushing her hair this way and that as she walked around her. “You could even wear it up. You’ve got some lovely highlights – the right hair style would really showcase them.”

“And my boring brown eyes?” she nearly whimpered.

Ginny dragged her over to the hearth, put her hands on Hermione’s shoulders, and peered into them. “They’re amber,” she said decisively after a moment, “with gold flecks,” she added leaning closer in still to get a better look.

Hermione started to giggle. “You almost make me sound like a siren temptress!”

“Would you like to be?” Ginny asked cheekily.

“Not exactly, although I wouldn’t mind looking less like a student,” she responded honestly.

“And it’s time a certain someone sees and thinks of you as something other than a student as well,” Ginny stated matter-of-factly. “Not that I believe he’s the sort to make judgments based on looks – glass houses and all that – but you’ll be, what, twenty at the end of this summer? It’s past time to leave the schoolgirl behind. Why don’t we go to that salon for witches in the village the next Hogsmeade weekend? Pick up a few things and learn how to do your hair?”

“Um, I don’t think the next trip is until graduation . . . .” Hermione replied, running the schedule quickly through her head.

“Perfect!” Ginny squealed, jumping up and down. “You can get your hair done for the Leaving Feast!” Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’ll be perfect, you’ll see! Now,” her friend said, sitting down and leaning forward expectantly, “tell me all about it.”

“All about what?” she asked, plopping back down and tucking her feet underneath her legs.

“I’ve just got to know what’s going to happen in the next chapter!”

“Ginny, you already know what happens!” she moaned.

“Not the particulars, and I’d like to be one up on everyone else!” she giggled.

That alarmed her, and she sat up and put her feet back on the floor. “Ginny, you’ve got to swear not to tell anyone about this,” she admonished in all seriousness, “and I mean anyone.”

“Of course!” her friend readily assured her. “My brothers might not be able to keep a secret, but I
certainly can, and I will, I promise.”

She was only marginally appeased. Ginny sighed. “And I won’t hold you hostage for advanced reads, either,” she continued, “so tell me if you want – or not – it’s up to you.”

Ginny was eager – she could see that – and she’d had no reason not to trust her in the past. Besides, she felt confident – mostly – in her friend’s ability to keep a secret. Sitting back in the chair, Hermione started to tell her about Perse’s search for the origins of the key. The count was now at two, not including the late headmaster, who realistically was probably the weakest link, and she only hoped her hand wouldn’t be forced a fourth time.

He had kept his ear to the door for as long as he could. The ungrateful Weasley whelp had just called him a mean, nasty, unpleasant git – for the second time – when he heard voices approaching. Minerva had clearly invited colleagues back to her office for an end of the week drink, and he deemed it wise not to get caught with his ear up against the door of a room belonging to one of his of-age female students. Minerva might understand – as long as he gave her a recap of what he had heard, which in fact he needed to do – but it would be hard to explain to everyone else, and so he abandoned his post, hoping to get a bit of his tartan colleague’s best whiskey.

He slipped into the headmistress’s office as unobtrusively as he could, although his arrival didn’t go completely unnoticed – Minerva immediately headed towards him with a tumbler and the scotch.

“You left the hall in a hurry,” she commented under her breath as she poured out a couple of fingers.

“It would seem that Miss Weasley is aware of who the author is,” he quietly informed her, looking at his coworkers over the rim of his glass as he took a sip.

“And?” she asked anxiously.

“It doesn’t appear as though she’s told anyone and no doubt Miss Granger will exact a promise of secrecy from her,” he observed, “although whether she will be able to keep it is yet to be seen,” he muttered under his breath.

“Well, her nearest siblings were never able to,” she observed acerbically.

“If the other students find out, Miss Granger’s continuance here will be untenable,” he continued.

“If the worst happens, she can immediately sit her NEWTs and be done with it – I’d make the arrangements myself,” she said firmly.

“Yes, but there would likely be more publicity, what with me having tutored her privately all term. Questions – unpleasant questions – would be asked, given that I’m the model for Domitian.”

“And we would deny them – vigorously,” Minerva said emphatically, before eyeing him suspiciously. “Unless there is something you need to tell me,” she added expectantly. When he didn’t respond, she straightened and her expression turned distinctly school-marmish. “Severus?” she pushed.

“There may have been a kiss or two at New Year’s,” he offered dispassionately.

“Either there was or there wasn’t!” she hissed exasperatedly. “Which is it?” He merely arched a brow. “Severus?” she sputtered.

“Oh don’t get your knickers in a twist, woman!” he jeered under his breath. “I was moved by the holiday spirit – isn’t everyone?”
“Yes, I’m sure hardly anyone would bat an eye at the thought of Ebenezer Snape hanging around the mistletoe!” she whispered heatedly. After a moment, she sighed heavily. “Nothing else needs explaining?”

“No – I gave you my word, Minerva, and I’ve kept it,” he replied impatiently, “but that wouldn’t necessarily stop the gossip, and I’m not sure even you could maneuver the press around to our side a second time.”

“Then we’ll just have to hope that Miss Weasley can keep her mouth shut,” she replied, grimly.

“Indeed.”

He actually felt fairly confident that Hermione would be able to keep her friend in line, but he would monitor her discreetly, and if he suspected any wavering on her part, the only daughter of the House of Weasley might just find out how mean, nasty, and unpleasant a git he really was.

His contact with Hermione over the course of the following week was the same as it had been – she continued to be an asset in class and her brewing remained consistently perfect. On Wednesday, they had another lively discussion – over yet more tea – about a potion she had brewed the day before. Thursday was dreary without her presence in his classes or his lab, and then of course on Friday morning the owls arrived with chapter fifteen. Hermione didn’t even look up, although her friend sported a sly smile, which he interpreted to mean that she had read an advanced copy. He picked up the magazine at lunch and Minerva refused to reveal any spoilers, so it wasn’t until after dinner that he had a chance to sit down and read it.

Perse studied the key in the same way that she studied everything – with several books open to various important places. The key wasn’t charmed in any way. It was an ordinary looking silver colored key with two scrolled initials – L&A – embossed on the flat head. When her ideas about what to do with it ran out, she decided to show it to Regina, who she thought might have a unique perspective given her job. The auror had most recently ferreted out the traitor in their midst – a petty thief who couldn’t resist an offer of money from Lucinius. He had little information to give up on his employer, and Perse didn’t like thinking too much about what the Order might have done to and with him. Certainly he would have been Obliviated, but she knew from experience that Serena Yademe liked exacting a pound of flesh from those who betrayed the cause. Regina was closed-lipped about it when Perse met up to consult with her.

“There’s no need for you to know – suffice it to say that we are no long vulnerable from that particular quarter. Now,” Regina moved on, changing the subject, “what did you want to talk to me about?”

Perse showed her the key, but the only observation the auror made concerned the fact that it was Muggle in origin. And that’s when everything clicked. She had been looking for magical origins, when in actuality the key was Muggle. How could she have overlooked the fact that such keys were foreign in the wizarding world? She was Muggleborn, for Merlin’s sake, had spent her school holidays living with her Muggle parents in a Muggle town. She had to adjust her thinking.

There were any number of things that Muggles used keys for, the most common being the doors of their homes and offices and motorized vehicles. It didn’t look like any car keys she had ever seen – besides, it was highly unlikely that the Minister for Magic would have hidden dark magical objects in the boot of an automobile. It might be a door key, but it was considerably smaller than the one her parents had for their house. However, her parents did have a set of keys similar to hers, and she remembered seeing them at some point – what had they been for? She didn’t dare get in touch with them to ask – members of the Inner Circle had largely gone to ground, and it was likely that their families were being watched in case they made contact. The only thing she could do was talk to a
Muggle locksmith.

She found one easily enough, although the young man at the counter of the shop was initially quite suspicious. She spun him the story that she had found the key in the nightstand that had belonged to her recently deceased grandmother, although he only really became more cooperative when she leaned on the counter exposing her cleavage – it was so cliché she almost laughed in his face, but he provided her with helpful information. He felt fairly certain it was to some kind of lock box, but not one at a bank, since they used plain keys without identification for security purposes. He thought it might be for a private vault, one perhaps housed at a law office, and he suggested that if her grandmother had left a will, she contact the firm that had drawn it up since they sometimes embossed their keys. She politely asked to use their phone book, and under the section labeled Law Offices, she found one that looked promising – Lawson & Abbott, offering full services including private lock boxes. Even more significant was the fact that the script in the title of the firm was the same type stamped on the key.

Perse was now at the point of needing help, and once again she turned to Regina. She was careful, however, not to mention Domitian, saying only that she was working on instructions Albinia had given to her before she died. Regina promptly corrected her, saying that the Minister for Magic had been murdered, but she let it pass – for the moment. The two of them scoped out the premises of Lawson & Abbott – which ironically were only a block away from Lucinius’s house – and even persuaded the manager to show them one of their larger security boxes. The customer key used to open it was exactly the same as the one Albinia had given her. The only question now was which box belonged to the late Minister for Magic.

The pair of them left with brochures and promises to be in touch. Perse was certain that they could get into the office, the vault, and even the lock box, but she was concerned about finding the right container – she didn’t sense any magic in the vault, which meant that Albinia had probably cast some kind of spell on it. Regina assured her, however, that the aurors’ office dealt with that sort of thing all the time, using spells that weren’t commonly known – she had no doubts about being able to locate the right box. Indeed, the auror cheerfully predicted that they could be in and out fairly quickly, although Perse was considerably less blasé about it.

There was also the difficult task of how to destroy the objects when the time came. Perse had given the problem considerable thought and finally came to the conclusion that it would probably take more than a mere spell – she settled on fiendfire. It would require the tow of them to do it – one to cast and the other to help to control it – and they’d have to do it on an isolated beach somewhere in case things got out of control. Perse knew just the cove, along a rather isolated and deserted part of the Cornish coast – the surrounding cliffs would hide their activities. All she needed to do now was wait for Domitian’s signal.
Fiendfyre

Chapter Summary

The action of Love in a Time of War is picking up - with Domitian's help, the Inner Circle makes its move against Valmont's ministry, and he and Perse destroy the magical items. Tensions at Hogwarts are also rising - the story now has the attention of the young men as well as the young women of the school, and even Severus is unable to wait for Minerva to pass on her copy.

Chapter Notes

Hi, all, sorry to be a bit late in the day posting this - so much to do this time of year and so little time to do it! Anyway, this installment focuses especially on Domitian and Perse, but next time will see a major revelation that I think will satisfy. That's all I'm going to say! In the meantime, let me know what you think of this one!

Fiendfyre

The action of the story was starting to pick up. After having scouted out the Muggle law firm of Lawson and Abbott in the previous installment, Domitian signaled Perse to retrieve the cursed articles in chapter sixteen the following week. She and Regina broke into the premises easily enough, just as the auror had predicted, and snatched the box of magical items. There was a close call with a pair of drunken Green Shirts, who stopped them as they were coming out of the building, but they were swiftly taken care of and were left – sans their clothing – in the entry way where they were certain to be found in the morning by the law firm’s employees. Perse expressed particular amusement to think that Lucinius would have to bail them out of a Muggle jail. She stored the box in her room at the Inner Circle’s safe house where she was staying. Mindful of Domitian’s warning about the compulsion to interact with the items, she had put up a shield even before they had retrieved the box from the vault, but the dark magic was so strong that it had to be recast every twenty-four hours or so – she found it both physically and mentally draining.

The students eagerly tapped into the story’s rising tensions, and there was heated discussion at the house tables over what was going to happen next, the young men now as keenly interested as their female peers. Hermione continued to be gratified at the response, but if she was perfectly honest with herself, she was also looking forward to being done with it. As events moved steadily towards their climax, she was finding it increasingly difficult to write. She was now only a week ahead of the story and the strain was starting to affect her overall well-being as she relived those last few months and attempted to transpose it into the fictional narrative – the circles under her eyes were getting darker and Ginny’s concealer could only do so much. Even when she managed to snag a few hours of sleep, the story-line continued to play out in her dreams in disturbing ways – Domitian and her professor were now virtually interchangeable in the action, and she watched on the periphery, unable to move as they interacted with Perse and other characters in the story. She desperately wanted to be finished with it before her NEWTs – there were only a handful of chapters to go, but they were also going to be the most difficult of all of them to write and she wasn’t entirely sure she had the mental
and emotional strength to sustain her. As the owls flew into the hall with chapter seventeen, and as the older students picked up their magazines and left — along with several of the staff, including the headmistress — she had a moment of doubt. The only one who seemed singularly unaffected by the flurry of activity around him was her professor, who continued eating his breakfast with aplomb.

He noted the arrival of chapter seventeen with equanimity — he wouldn’t get to read it until Minerva passed it on to him at lunch, so there was no reason for him to get too worked up about it before hand since the worst bits had already been written, at least as far as he was concerned. There were four classes to get through before he would be free, and he had recently embarked on a kind of experiment, where he tried to deduce at least the tenor of each new chapter based on what he could detect from his students’ demeanor. He knew, for example, even before he read it, that seventeen was action-driven rather than infused with sex. The students were keen, but there was no self-conscious tittering among the young women in class, and his instincts were proved right when he took the magazine back to his quarters during the lunch period.

The key felt distinctly warm against her skin, but Perse was following Lucinius and there was no one to take over for her. He stopped at a tony Muggle café where, based on the way he jabbed his finger in the air just inches from Arti’s face, it looked as though he was trying to instill some backbone into his progeny. She thought his choice of restaurant, however, might be significant — Green Shirts would never patronize such an establishment, so whatever he was doing was definitely on the sly. Perhaps he was losing his enthusiasm for Valmont and could be turned — it was something the Inner Circle would have to discuss.

The key burned hotter, not so much as to scorch her skin, but it was uncomfortable — he was certainly a demanding bugger. She followed Lucinius and Arti to a side ally and watched them disapparate. Now she could attend to Domitian.

He was looking out the window, impatiently tapping his wand against his hand when she arrived.

“I summoned you twenty minutes ago,” he surly complained.

“I can’t always just drop everything,” she replied just as gruffly.

“This is important!” he barked.

“So was what I was doing!” she bit back.

He flung the curtain closed and wandered over to the dresser, where he absently fingered some items lying on top of it. “So what kept you, then?” he asked, trying to restrain himself.

“Lucinius — he was having lunch with Arti,” she began. He rolled his eyes dismissively and was on the verge of launching an invective, but she held up her hand to prevent him from interrupting. “At a Muggle café. Is it possible that he might be wavering?” she asked.

He gave it some thought. “Possibly . . . he’s almost bankrupt, and he knows that the Inner Circle’s response to the Ministry takeover will be coming soon. Valmont is becoming increasingly paranoid, lashing out at everyone in his attempt to retrieve the items you have in your possession. Lucinius might be making plans to save at least his son, if not himself and his wife — he’s always been good at tacking.”

“Should we try and approach him?”

“I don’t think there’s going to be any time for that,” he said ominously. “As I said, Valmont is becoming progressively unstable. How close is the Inner Circle to being ready to retake the
Ministry?”

“How close do we need to be?”

He paced around the room. “He visited the Ministry yesterday and Crucioed virtually everyone he talked to – Gryffudd, Flintshire, even Doc Pappy, not to mention all of the underlings he encountered. Soon – very soon – he’s just going to kill them outright. The time to strike is now.”

“When do you suggest?”

“Tomorrow evening, if possible, after most of the staff has left for the day – they won’t be any help to you, and might actually be a hindrance if they are caught and held hostage. The Green Shirts have become lax and I don’t think it will take much simply to drive them away – even Karew and Boxer won’t suspect a frontal attack.”

“I’ll tell them to be ready tomorrow evening, then. How will we get in?”

“There’s an old, bricked up Victorian fireplace down in the morgue. Albinia pointed it out to me when the Atrium was being built. The other floors were closed when the lobby was finished – but not that one. I’ll break through the drywall and brick, and cast a concealment spell on it. I’ll make sure the morgue is empty from 7:00 p.m. on.”

“You’re certain it’s open?” she asked skeptically.

“Who did I say gave me the information?” he asked with some annoyance.

She didn’t reply. They stared at each other for a moment, but just as they started to move closer, there was a loud banging on his front door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night,” she said quickly.

“Perse,” he said, staying her before she could leave – his hands gripped her upper arms as he stared into her eyes. “This isn’t the end, only the beginning of the end. Valmont will immediately regroup – he’ll lead the charge in the next confrontation, and that’s when he will be defeated. When I next summon you, bring the cursed items here and tell the Inner Circle that the real battle is nearly upon them.” With that, he bolted from the room, and Perse disapparated. There was no time, even, for a last embrace.

The chapter continued, but he knew the story so well that he only skimmed it. The Inner Circle – or rather Order of the Phoenix – did what it had always done, which was to question the origins of the information and dither. Somehow, though, Perse managed to convince the members without having to reveal Domitian as her source, saying only that the lead had come from within the ministry and knowing that they would immediately think of Gryffudd and Flintshire. He filed the magazine away with the rest of them.

It was a quiet weekend, followed by far too quiet a week. Minerva had to attend a number of meetings with the Board of Governors and Minister for Magic to hammer out the details over the coming memorial service and rebuilding contracts and she asked Hermione to take her classes at the start of the week, so he released her obligations to him for the duration, though not without a lot of grumbling on his part. This meant that he caught only glimpses of her from a distance – in the corridors and in the dining hall – she didn’t eat much he was rather concerned to see. He missed her assistance with his classes, as did his students, who repeatedly and quite irritatingly asked when she might be coming back. He might be a war hero and Domitian a quasi sex-god, but they had developed an affinity for the gentle ways of Miss Granger. But then, so had he.
He took no pleasure brewing in the lab on his own, and found himself moping over his afternoon tea – they should have been sparring over her work. By Wednesday, his restlessness drove him to the staff room to have his cuppa while he marked students’ work. It wasn’t ideal – various colleagues wandered in and out, and he growled when any of them were foolish enough to try and engage him – but he couldn’t bear his empty quarters another minute.

The post arrived Friday morning and as per usual nearly half the students and most of the staff – including Minerva, who had returned the day before – scampered back to their rooms and offices with the latest installment. When he got to class, he knew that chapter eighteen had been an all-around crowd-pleaser – there was obviously enough action to satisfy the young men and sufficient sex to make the young women blush and giggle at each other. He couldn’t wait.

_Literally._

He dismissed his last class of the morning a half-hour early on the not entirely spurious excuse that they were all dunderheads and couldn’t properly wield a knife even if their lives depended upon it, which it sometimes did. Rather than send half the class to the infirmary with severed fingers from inattention, he set them an essay on the proper way to hold and use a blade. He then beat a path to the headmistress’s office as quickly as he decently could, and to his consternation found that Minerva wasn’t in – he rattled the door handle, but it wouldn’t budge. Sticking his wand in the lock, he tried _Alohomora_, but again, it wouldn’t open. He half contemplated blasting the door off its hinges – he could always fix it afterwards – but had no doubt that the portraits in the office would blab, and they weren’t subject to _Obliviation_. Kneeling down, he peeked through the lock opening – he could just see her desk and, yes, there it was, on top a stack of books. Perhaps an _Accio_ – there was just enough room for it to slip under the door . . .

“What in Merlin’s name do you think you’re _doing?!_” a voice heavy with outrage and disapproval barked behind him in a rich Scottish brogue.

“What the bloody hell do you _think_ I’m doing?” he sharply retorted, standing up.

She sighed and quirked her mouth as she waved her wand, opening the door. He didn’t wait for an invitation, rather he barged in, striding purposefully to her desk and grabbing the magazine.

“You couldn’t wait even twenty minutes?” she asked disparagingly.

He scowled and blew past her without another word – he would take lunch in his quarters.

_The floo was open, just as he had promised it would be, although it was small, which meant they had to come in one at a time – it took nearly a half hour to get everyone through. The plan was for them to scatter throughout the building via the staircases, which would be empty given how late it was, with the main contingent converging on the floor where the principle offices were located. At precisely the top of the hour, the attack would begin._

_They crept in quietly, but the alarm was soon raised. Gryffudd was still in his office, and when it became clear what was happening, he took the lead. Domitian, Karew, Boxer, and the rest of the handful of other Green Shirts were driven down one floor to the next until they were all out in the open in the Atrium. Members of the Inner Circle stood motionless as the Deputy Minister dueled with Domitian – Perse could hardly contain herself. He defended himself well, blocking spell after spell but refusing to cast any himself even as Gryffudd continually challenged him to do so, calling him a traitor and a coward. At one point, he redirected two hexes, effortlessly taking out Karew and Boxer, who were standing just behind him and off to the sides. Once they were out cold on the floor, he disapparated, to the loud cheers of the Inner Circle. Perse felt only relief that he had gotten away safely, although she was soon consumed with a new worry – Valmont’s response to losing the_
Ministry. It simmered at the back of her mind as they secured the premises and prepared for The Snake’s counter attack – she kept feeling for the key, to see if it was warm.

The call came late the following day. She slipped away, picked up the box containing the magical items, and apparated to Domitian’s house. Setting her burden aside, she immediately embraced him, and then pulled away slightly, checking him for injuries. He looked exhausted, but was otherwise still in one piece – the blame had been laid on Karew and Boxer, who were being kept in an incapacitated state in a secure room in the Ministry.

There was no time to discuss recent events. He picked up the box, took her arm, and together they apparated to the Cornish cove she had selected for the mission. It was a dark afternoon and storm clouds churned ominously in the sky just off shore. The sea was rough, and although the day wasn’t terribly cold, the wind was sharp and stung their faces with blowing sand and salt spray. Domitian waded out several feet into the cold water, and set the box on a large rock jutting out above the waves. He returned to her side.

“You will need to brace yourself – fiendfyre has a kick to it, not to mention the strength it will take to fight the compulsion,” he cautioned.

“You want me to cast it?” she asked, looking at him incredulously.

“It needs to be someone who isn’t . . . who isn’t tainted,” he replied euphemistically, “otherwise, the items will simply absorb the energy.”

She looked towards the rock and focused on the small box that sat on top of it. “I’ve never cast it before,” she said, unable to keep the worry from her voice.

“Casting won’t be a problem – the real issue is controlling it. It requires absolute concentration – you cannot allow yourself to be distracted or the fyre will reverse itself and consume you.” He grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face him. “When you cancel the shield, the compulsion generated by the dark magic of the items will be pronounced. You must push it completely out of your mind and maintain your connection to the fyre – do you understand?”

She swallowed hard as she took in the warning.

“I will help you direct and control it – and put it out when the time comes – but you have to cast it and you must be constant in your focus.” Perse nodded in understanding, but the apprehension was still clear on her face. “You can do this,” he said assertively, his dark eyes boring into hers.

“We can do this,” she replied with more confidence than she felt.

He kissed her brow. “Prepare yourself,” he said calmly as he took up his position several yards down the beach.

She turned in the direction of the rock and concentrated all her attention on the box. After a few moments, she extended her wand, and with a quick flick, removed the shield. The compulsion was like a physical blow and she stiffened her legs against it. Slowly, she pushed it out of her mind and cast the fiendfyre. A vivid orange bolt erupted from the end of her wand. The liquid stream undulated back and forth as she wrestled with it, but then she felt a guiding strength, as though another hand had joined hers on the wand – it was Domitian, and together they directed the flame towards the rock as steam hissed from where the foam of the waves splashed upwards and touched it. They gradually maneuvered the fyre up the side of the rock until they managed to settle the end of it on the box. The compulsion grew stronger but also more frantic – just when she began to wonder
how long she would be able to keep her concentration or maintain the stream, the compulsion began to lessen and her focus became clearer. A loud wailing suddenly emanated from the box – a sooty mist rose above it in the shape of a snake and for a moment she thought it would sail through the air and grab her, but it finally burst apart and the items simply melted over the rock.

It was done. The compulsion was gone, destroyed with the items themselves – she could pull back now. But the fyre wouldn’t retreat. Again and again she tried to end it, but it seemed to have a life of its own and continued to flow. She resisted the rising panic, the desire to flick it away from the tip of her wand, and kept the fyre concentrated on the rock, which was starting to glow.

“It won’t stop!” she yelled to him without taking her eyes off the target.

“Keep your focus!” he shouted.

She felt his power withdraw, and she brought her other hand to the wand to help steady the fyre, but it was fighting her mightily. And then beyond the rock she saw a wave heading directly towards her – before she could react it knocked her completely off her feet, but it also put out the flame. As the wave retreated, she felt a strong hand on her arm, pulling her upwards out of the chilly water and into an embrace.

“I’ve got you,” he said soothingly. They stood there for a moment, breathing hard. Finally, she looked out to the rock – it had split in two and steam was rising into the air.

“Let’s get you dried off,” he said, half carrying her up the beach to a shallow cave. Once inside, he spelled her clothes dry and then drew her tightly to him. After a few moments, he started to pull away.

“No!” she cried, desperately grabbing fistfuls of his coat.

“He’s wounded and probably calling for me even now,” he explained softly.

“I won’t let you go like this,” she breathed, reaching up and kissing him fiercely. He hesitated only for the briefest of moments before he pushed her roughly against the side of the cave, pressing the length of his body against her. They frantically tore at each other’s clothing with all the desperation wrought by their circumstances. When her skirt was finally above her thighs, she lifted one leg to his hip. Having already released himself, he pulled the other one to his waist and plunged into her. He paused to calm himself, his chin resting on her shoulder, his breathing ragged against her neck.

“Domitian,” she pleaded softly.

He lifted his head and kissed her hard – she returned his passion and both drank deeply of the life force flowing from their lips. He began to move, slowly at first, but then more determinedly, rhythmically – her fingers dug into his back as the tension built. It didn’t take long. Soon, she burst forth with an anguished cry that echoed around them and he picked up his pace until he, too, readily gave into his climax. Still breathing heavily, he loosened his grip, and she slipped down the rough wall of the cave, standing unsteadily. He quickly stripped off his coat and laid it on the sand. Sitting down, he pulled her into his lap and cradled her against his warm chest. They didn’t exchange platitudes – it would have made a mockery of what still lay ahead of them.

Finally he stirred and she reluctantly struggled to her feet, straightening her clothes.

“I will not say goodbye to you,” she said quietly but firmly as they faced each other, “so you must do everything you can to survive.”

He cupped her face in both hands, and kissed her gently with all of his soul. “I will do my best,” he
promised – he had to give her something to hope for, even if he knew the chances of him coming out alive were very much against him.

He sat in his chair unmoving for a very long time, too drained even to summon a fortifying whiskey. Chapter eighteen had gone down hard. Domitian had Perse to sustain him in his trials, had her waiting for him on the other side, but there hadn’t been anyone filling that role for him. All he had – all he had ever expected to have – was an end to his suffering and, if he was unusually lucky and didn’t die too early in the final battle, the knowledge that he had successfully redeemed himself by avenging a long lost love. When he had woken up in the infirmary, he didn’t know whether to be angry or relieved, although The Prophet made that determination for him when the details of his private life infuriatingly became fodder for the newspaper. He resumed his position as potions master at the school more out of habit than from a genuine desire to get on with his life. But now . . . now he felt quite differently about it all. He had become vested in living again, and it was all down to yet another Gryffindor, an exceptionally kind, brave, and resolute woman who had more in common with Perse than she could ever realize. He could hardly wait for Monday to come, when she would be back in his classes and they would resume her tutorials.
Memorials

Chapter Summary

The stress is making Hermione ill and she misses a couple of chapters, but she gets some much needed care and encouragement from an unexpected - or perhaps not so unexpected - source.

Chapter Notes

Hi, all,

A lot - and I mean a LOT - happens with our heroes in this chapter. I hope you enjoy it - please let me know!

Memorials

He didn’t see her all weekend – she didn’t even come to dinner. If workmen and Ministry officials hadn’t been parading in and out of Minerva’s office Saturday and Sunday concerning the upcoming memorial service, he might have braved checking up on her, but he really didn’t want to run into any of the headmistress’s guests – certainly he didn’t want to be seen hanging around the guest rooms. Since she also didn’t come into breakfast Monday morning, he decided to get to class early, before everyone else so that he could have a quick word with her. She was already there – her back was to him as she set out the equipment the students would need for first lesson.

“How were Minerva’s classes?” he asked casually as he laid out his lecture.

“Fine,” she replied absently and quite insufficiently.

“Is the old saying true? Did the mice play while the cat was away?” he asked sarcastically.

“Well, they all managed to transform themselves back to the way they were originally by the time she returned, and that’s all I cared about,” she quipped humorously as he watched her lithe form busy herself around the room.

At one minute past the hour and he was already in full throttle about the anti-nausea potion they were going to brew. As he dug into the subject matter, the slight clattering of glass vials just behind him started to grate on his nerves – what the bloody hell was she doing? He was just getting to the good part – where he gleefully warned students that they would be consuming an emetic with a ten second delay at the end of the class in order to test their results – when a crash finally broke his concentration.

“What in the name of Merlin are you doing?!” he barked as he whipped around.

Her wand was poised to clean up the shattered beaker when he paused and really took her in for the first time that morning. He noted the poorly executed attempt to conceal the dark smudges under her
eyes, but absolutely *nothing* could hide how drawn she looked. His attention was diverted to her hand, which was shaking. His lips settled into a thin line as he swiftly vanished the mess. Taking her by the elbow, he escorted her out of the room, and behind them she heard an *uh-oh* here and there along with a couple of snickers – to all appearances, it looked like she was in for a complete bollocking.

Out in the hall, he turned her to face him.

“Have you taken the potion I gave you?” he asked quietly.

“At six, when I got up,” she informed him.

“Is it worse than usual or about the same?” he gently pressed.

“It’s a bit more . . . *pronounced*,” she replied shakily, clasping her hands and rubbing her knuckles and fingers.

“Go back to your room – take another cap full and lie down. I’ll check on you at lunch – I’ve got something else you can take if it becomes necessary.” He had to fist his robes to keep from reaching out and caressing a shoulder or running a finger down her pale cheek to show her that he understood, but there were too exposed – anyone might see them.

“Thank you,” she said softly. As he watched her retreating figure, he called to her.

“And Miss Granger?”

She turned to look at him as he closed the distance between them. “I meant what I said – *lie down*. No books or anything *else* – just *rest*. Do you understand me?”

She nodded guiltily, as if she had already been caught out, which of course she had. He smirked and returned to class – she heard him berating the students as she continued on her way. At the lunch hour, he appeared at her door with another potion, and after calling Timber to fetch her some food, he stayed until she had finished every last bit of it. When she was done, he was adamant that she take the second potion, but she resisted.

“I have a tutorial with Professor McGonagall later this afternoon,” she protested.

He arched a brow. “Not today, you don’t – I’ll speak to the headmistress. Now, don’t make me *Imperio* you,” he threatened, holding up the vial, although there was no real bite to his words. Only when she had fully consumed it did he take his leave, knowing that she would soon be asleep. In fact, the potion was likely to keep her under until at least breakfast – he would send Timber to check on her periodically.

He ran into Minerva returning from her own lunch when he rounded the corner of their shared hall.

“A quick word,” he said gruffly, following her into the head’s office. She summoned some tea and he took the chair in front of her desk.

“Miss Granger?” she asked with concern.

“She won’t be having a tutorial with you today,” he began. “I’ve just given her something to help her sleep – that, and made her eat something. This is on top of two doses of a potion to help with the residual *Cruciatus* spasms.”

Minerva frowned as she poured out the tea.
“She’s wearing herself out with this story,” he continued. “I’m certain it’s the stress from writing it that triggered this current episode.”

“What do you suggest we do?” she asked.

“Perhaps it’s time to intervene – just put a stop to it,” he replied, ignoring the cup she set in front of him.

Minerva sighed. “Severus, I know it’s distressing to watch – believe me, I do – but Hermione has to see this through.”

He huffed in disagreement.

“Hear me out,” she said, setting down her cup and saucer. “As I’m sure you’ve come to realize, writing this story is now as much about her coming to terms with everything that has happened as it is about rehabilitating your reputation.”

“But is it something we should allow her to do on her own?” he countered.

“Yes and . . . no.”

“Merlin’s fucking balls, woman!” he snorted in exasperation – anyone else and he would just hex her and get it over with.

“She has to work out how she thinks and feels about things – no one else can do it for her,” she explained, noting his impatience. “What we can do, however, is be there to support her.”

“What a load of sentimental shite. How on earth do we support her if we can’t tell her that we know she’s the author of the story?” he asked tersely.

“Sometimes it really is enough simply to be with a person, supporting them in other less direct ways. The message in that kind of thing is implicit, that they are surrounded by people who care about them and are there should they be needed.”

“All theory – what’s the actual practice?” he retorted scathingly.

“Oh, Severus,” she said gently, “sometimes you really are incredibly obtuse.” She carried on quickly before he could rebound with the scornful retort that was on the tip of his tongue. “First of all, you noticed that something was wrong, and sent her to rest when she didn’t have the good sense to make that decision herself. Then you gave her a potion to help with the spasms and made sure she had a decent meal. The care and concern in those actions speak volumes – more eloquently, in fact, than anything you probably could actually have said,” she muttered almost under her breath.

He glared at her in response.

“We’ll keep a close eye on her and adjust her schedule so that she can get more rest. I can come up with some excuse to give her the week off in Transfiguration – can you do the same?”

He was willing to forgo her assistance in class that week, and cancel the brewing he had planned, but he was damned if he was going to give up seeing her entirely.

“I will still need to meet with her to go over her reading. It shouldn’t be too taxing,” he continued acerbically, “sitting in front of my fire, drinking my tea, and lecturing me on how the editors of Potioneers’ Monthly made a mistake in publishing whatever article she was assigned to read.” He didn’t need to see Minerva’s smirk behind her cup to know it was there. He got up abruptly and left.
When he checked on her in the morning the spasms had stopped and even the dark circles had lightened, but she still looked tired and remained too pale and thin for his liking. She was clearly disappointed at her reduced schedule but perked up considerably at the prospect of still being able to meet and discuss her reading with him. So Tuesday and Wednesday afternoon they had tea – complete with sandwiches and scones since he knew she had skipped lunch – in his quarters as she gave her opinions on the reading she had done. He only half listened to her castigate the judgment of the journal’s editors – the only thing he wanted more than for her NEWTs to be over and done with was for the story finally to conclude, and more for her sake than this.

Friday morning came and the owls dropped their loads on eager subscribers, but as he met his first class of the day, it was obvious from the disappointed looks on his students’ faces that something wasn’t quite right. From what he could gather from the snippets of whispered conversations, that week’s magazine did not include chapter nineteen. The publisher’s excuse was that the author was ill – which was true enough in its way – but assurances were made that the story would pick up where it had left off the following week. At lunch, he shot an “I told you so” look at Minerva. He didn’t see Hermione at all on Saturday, so before turning in, he checked the map from his headmaster days – she would pace for a moment and then stop, presumably to write. Since Minerva was still in her office, he trudged determinedly up to his colleague’s door. She let him in, gave him a good stiff whiskey, and dissuaded him from going down the hall to Hermione’s room and breaking her quills and burning her parchments – he promised to give it another week.

Hermione continued to look bedraggled, but she hung on, resuming her assistantship with his classes and completing her assignments, not perhaps with as much vigor as in the past but her work continued to be beyond that of any other student in the school. Midweek, there were further disruptions – the memorial service was scheduled for Friday, and the faculty really did have preparations to make. Still, neither he nor Minerva were too preoccupied not to notice the fallen looks on the students’ faces when they searched their Friday mail delivery for the latest installment – she had missed another deadline. They both knew that the publisher wouldn’t accommodate her indefinitely.

She and Ginny had been allowed to meet Harry and Ron in Hogsmeade for lunch that afternoon, ahead of the memorial service, and Hermione took the opportunity to nip into the post office. There was a letter waiting for her, and she knew what it said even before she opened it. The editor had understood her missing a week, but was definitely not happy about her skipping yet another one. There was no overt threat, but he strongly encouraged her to meet her contractual obligations. She put the note away and tried to enjoy spending time with her friends, but the story remained very much on her mind – she only caught every other word or so as the young men regaled them with all the mishaps of auror training.

They were nearly the last to arrive for the memorial service – none of them were in any hurry given what lay ahead – and the courtyard was crowded with people. Students lined the perimeter while those witches and wizards who had fought in the battle – and the families of those who hadn’t survived it – gathered in front of the damaged Great Hall where the foundation for the new entrance was ready to receive memorial stones featuring the names of the fallen. It was a somber occasion. Shacklebolt, surrounded by Ministry officials, made a brief speech, and Minerva, too, had a few poignant words to say about the alumni who had died. Then one by one the stones were carefully levitated into place for the new entrance – Tonks and Lupin, Madeye, Fred, Lavender Brown, Colin Creevy . . . the list seemed endless, and even Harry and Neville’s parents were commemorated. The last block – the keystone – had Dumbledore’s name across it, and after it had been set, there was a teary moment of silence.

After the service, the students were quickly herded back to their study hall, but everyone else remained, mingling and speaking words of comfort and remembrance to each other. As she
wandered around, she heard snippets of conversation that touched on the story – everyone, it seemed, had read it and fully recognized the plot line and the various characters. To her consternation, even Harry and Ron were chatting about it when she caught up with them.

“How is the story going down with students?” Harry casually asked as she came up.

“They seem interested enough, I suppose,” she replied dismissively.

“That not what I hear!” Ron sputtered in surprise. “Ginny said it’s all the students can talk about, that they were actually fighting over copies of the magazine when it first came out! And now, everyone’s got their own subscription, including Professor McGonagall I hear!” he grinned.

“Surely you two, of all people, can’t be happy about it!” she said heatedly.

“Why not?” Ron asked.

“Well let’s see – Harry’s been relegated to a minor place in the story, and you’re depicted his spiky haired, weight-lifting girlfriend!” she said sharply.

The young men looked at each other. “So?” they asked simultaneously and laughed. She rolled her eyes.

“I think it’s great,” Harry informed her enthusiastically. “I never wanted to be a hero in the first place. In fact, I tried all summer to shake the action persona that I was given by The Prophet and this has finally done it. I mean, who wants to be constantly stopped, congratulated, and slapped on the back? It’s nice to have a meal out and not be interrupted. And the letters – you have no idea what those have been like!”

Ron snickered knowingly and then added his own perspective. “Yeah, and I’ve never had so many dates in all my life!” he exclaimed. “Women assume I’m some kind of male . . . feminist,” he said, stumbling over the word. “They make me the most unbelievable offers, and of course, I can’t refuse them!”

“Besides,” Harry continued, “Snape does deserve all the attention. He’s the one who really is the hero of the story – both of them.”

She looked at them exasperatedly.

“You’re just unhappy about being cast as a mousy librarian,” Ron observed, trying to be humorous.

Harry glared at him, but it was too late.

“I’m not unhappy about the way I’ve been portrayed!” she replied shrilly. She looked back and forth between them. “You just don’t understand,” she muttered under her breath, spinning on her heel and pushing between people to get away. Harry and Ron just stood there, gaping after her in confusion.

He witnessed the exchange from across the courtyard, finding it more than a little satisfying that she had turned her back on her witless friends – clearly, they had had words. Just as he was about to make his way over to her, Minerva’s voice rang out over the crowd, inviting them all inside to take refreshments. The courtyard gradually cleared, leaving just him and Hermione, who was standing in front of the new entrance, taking in all of the names. He walked up quietly behind her.

“I couldn’t help but notice, Miss Granger, that you seemed distressed by your . . . friends’ conversation,” he began.
She glanced briefly over her shoulder. “We were talking about that bloody story in *Witches Only,*” she spat derisively.

“What about it?” he asked, moving to stand next to her, his own eyes trailing over the names of the fallen.

“They think it’s *hilarious,*” she said scornfully. “Harry never wanted to be a hero, so he’s happy about his diminished fan base – people aren’t stalking him anymore, stopping him on the street, or sending him indecent propositions through the mail. And the depiction of Ron,” she continued scathingly, “is apparently getting him more women than he can *possibly* handle.”

“Do you have a problem with any of that?” he prodded, glancing down at her.

“Not in and of itself, but the story . . . it’s . . . it’s just . . . *disgraceful,*” she finally managed to get out.

He turned to look at her more fully, his brow furrowed with concern. “Why do you say that?”

“It trivializes the war, it . . . it makes a *mockery* of those who lost their lives fighting for the light,” she blurted, becoming increasingly emotional.

“It’s just fiction,” he said evenly.

“*Is it?*” she asked bitterly, on the edge of weeping openly. “It’s about the war and we all know it. People were horribly maimed and tortured . . . *people we knew . . . people died.*”

“It’s *fiction,*” he repeated adamantly. “In fiction, *anything* can happen – people *don’t* have to die,” he observed leadingly.

“But people *did* die,” she argued, refusing to move beyond the literal as the tears started to slip down her cheeks and blurred the names before her.

He reached out and gently but firmly placed his hands on her upper arms and turned her to face him. Her obvious distress cut him to the quick.

“In fiction, people who died can live again – and have the life they were *supposed* to have.” He paused briefly and took a deep breath. “People who read this story will see a side of those involved that would otherwise have gone unrecorded – and be *inspired* by them. History gives us the names of those who fought, but literature makes them fully *real,* makes them *immortal.*” His grip tightened and he leaned in, staring at her intensely. “Do you really think that readers don’t already *know* what happened here?” he asked, his head nodding slightly towards a pile of rubble just off to the side. “Do you think that they don’t know that people died, and did so in ways that are simply *unimaginable*? *The Prophet’s* accounts of the war may have been outlandish, but the Ministry’s reports were sobering and horrifying in their detail – and also *dry* as dust, virtually clinical. But this story is *different* – it depicts the very *best* of flawed individuals who courageously fought for the light.” He paused as if suddenly realizing something – his eyes drifted to the stones fronting the new entrance. “It shows them acting and making sacrifices for the *ultimate* reasons,” he nearly whispered, his words slowing to a trickle, “for what is right and just, sometimes . . . *for love itself.*”

He turned away from the stones to look at her in wonder at the unexpected revelation. Her tears had stopped, and amber eyes flecked with gold stared back at him, questioningly. “Isn’t that a worthy message?” he mumbled almost to himself as comprehension – and the tiniest sliver of acceptance – settled over him. “Isn’t it *exactly* the kind of legacy they *deserve,* however it may be couched?” The gentle smile he favored her with was genuine and introspective, without any hint of his usual irony or cynicism. “You’ve performed nothing short of *magic* with your quill, Miss Grange . . . Miss *Bailiff,*”
he quietly corrected. “You’ve made them live again.”

Her eyes widened as her mouth slowly fell open. Her heart began to pound and her pulse race. He knew! He fucking knew! And then the next realization hit her – he obviously had known who and what she was . . . for a very long time! Oh dear Merlin! He was going to kill her – her organs would be used for potion ingredients after all, she’d be serving detentions for the rest of her life – right up until the morning of her funeral – she’d be expelled, wouldn’t be allowed to take her NEWTs, never get a job . . . . She leapt lighting fast from one irrational thought to the next until she finally remembered all the sex. Involving him. She could feel the blush swiftly rising.

He took sinful pleasure in watching the range of emotions play out over her face, from shock and surprise, to apprehension and embarrassment. His tranquil expression quickly vanished, replaced by a knowing smirk at her discomfiture. They stared at each other for a few moments more before he dropped his hands from her shoulders and steadied himself.

“I . . . I didn’t know you were a fan of . . . of fiction,” she stammered, feeling supremely awkward and preparing herself to be eviscerated.

He continued to contemplate her with barely concealed amusement. “I am when it’s done well.”

She looked down and nervously wrung her hands. “Surely not . . . not that . . . that rubbish in Witches Only,” she half-stated, half-asked, trying not to look as mortified as she felt.

“Popular fiction . . . even . . . erotica can be . . . inspirational,” he observed knowingly in his seductive baritone. She turned an even deeper red.

The bell tower rang out the hour, breaking the moment

“Classes wait for no one,” he commented officiously as he straightened his shoulder, “and I’m sure you have some work you should be getting on with, Miss Granger,” he said, his meaning clear. He gazed down at her for another moment before carefully adjusting his robes and billowing away.

Hermione stood there, trying to take it all in. She turned back to the stones, sobering as she read each of the names again in turn. The story wasn’t just about him anymore. Whatever difficult and excruciating explanations that still lay ahead for her, she had to finish the story, had to give the characters – and the people they had been modeled on – the dignity of closure. He wasn’t going to stop her. If anything, he was encouraging her to see through what she had started.

She skipped the reception and holed up in her room all weekend, furiously writing and revising. He had Timber take her food at regular intervals, and the elf reported back that she ate at least some of it. On Monday morning, she showed up early at breakfast with a package under her arm, stopping in only long enough to grab a roll and gulp down some coffee. Even from his place at the high table, he could see that she looked like she had gone multiple rounds with a troll – and lost – but she at least appeared calmer. When she made to leave, he got up and swiftly traversed the length of the hall, catching up with her just as she was about to step outside.

“Going somewhere, Miss Granger?” he insinuated behind her.

“It’s against the rules for students to go to Hogsmeade on their own,” she informed him self-righteously, but with her hand still on the door handle.

“Which is why I shall accompany you,” he said smoothly, gesturing for her to lead the way.

Only when they were clear of the school did he ask if she had a productive weekend.
“It was . . . hard,” she confessed, looking off to the side, afraid to meet his eye, “but it does feel as though a weight has lifted from my shoulders. Thank you, by the way, for sending Timber to look after me,” she said, glancing up at him.

“Timber, like all house elves, lives to serve, and since the war ended, he hasn’t had many opportunities to do that,” he replied.

“Perhaps, but he wouldn’t have come to me if you hadn’t sent him,” she noted. She wanted to ask him why he wasn’t angry with her, why he wasn’t snarling and spitting and threatening to have her hung, drawn, and quartered, but she didn’t want to disturb the equilibrium of the moment, so they walked in silence the rest of the way. He stood outside as she conducted her business at the post office, and when she was done, they walked leisurely back up the hill to the castle, their arms close enough that they occasionally brushed against each other.

“How far did you get with this chapter?” he finally inquired.

“Through the final battle,” she quietly replied.

“Is there an accounting of . . . of who lived and who did not?” he asked in a tight voice.

“No. I just left it so that the reader knows the Inner Circle won, but not what it cost them.”

“Is there going to be a chapter after this? An epilogue?” he asked, keeping his eyes on the path in front of them.

“I really haven’t decided.”

“In my experience, it isn’t helpful to leave things . . . unresolved. Perhaps . . .” he trailed off.

“Perhaps . . . what?” she asked, curious.

“Perhaps you should think about it this coming week – we could then talk about it over dinner, say, Friday evening?” he hesitantly suggested.

She blushed. “Would that be . . . allowed, given that I’m your student?” she nervously ventured.

“You’re of age, and your tutorials and days assisting me are – as of right now – at an end,” he commented.

“Oh,” she said, unable to hide the disappointment, he was gratified to see.

“NEWTs are only a few weeks away – you’re more than ready for them – and I think a bit of rest would be more beneficial than writing one more essay or brewing one last potion.”

They were at the school gates – he paused, and she continued on a bit before turning to look back at him. “Have dinner with me and we’ll work out this last chapter. It will all be perfectly respectable, I assure you. I promised Minerva I wouldn’t . . . distract you I think is how she put it, until you had taken your NEWTs.”

“Professor McGonagall knows?” she gasped, a blush rapidly appearing on her neck and face. “And you’ve been talking about me?!”

“Of course she knows,” he smirked as he headed for the entrance. “The headmistress sees and knows all. And as for talking about you” he continued as he slipped passed her, “who isn’t talking about the author of one of the most successful wizarding stories in recent times?” he tossed over his
shoulder.

She ran to catch up with him. “Who else knows?” she asked breathlessly.

“Miss Weasley, probably the always perspicacious Miss Lovegood – maybe even that old wind bag up in Minerva’s office – but I suspect your publisher doesn’t know,” he smugly speculated aloud.

She sputtered behind him, and once they were inside, he turned to her, having resumed his professorial persona.

“I will see you next Friday, Miss Granger, seven sharp – don’t be late,” he drawled condescendingly for the benefit of the students milling around. “And do close your mouth – no need to be a walking advertisement for your parents profession,” he added for good measure as he made his way across the entrance hall to the stairs that led to the dungeons. She clapped a hand over her mouth reflexively – and then secretly smiled to herself as she headed for her rooms. She had work to do.
The Final Battle

Chapter Summary

Hermione's latest chapter, which now has the attention of the entire school, focuses on the final battle - the Inner Circle wins, but at what cost? Hermione meets up with Severus to discuss the possibilities.

Chapter Notes

Hi, all,

This chapter is a foretaste, so to speak, of things to come - after all, Domitian and Perse still have to be sorted out and Hermione hasn't sat her NEWTs, yet! Do let me know if you like this chapter - comments are my fuel! Only three more to go . . . .

The Final Battle

They had no further contact over the course of the week, although glances were discretely stolen in the dining hall, where she now regularly appeared. When he caught her at it – or even when she caught him at it – she blushed and he simply smirked. It seemed as though Friday would never come, but when it finally did, attendance at breakfast was higher than anyone could remember seeing in quite some time, and chapter nineteen, which contained the final battle for the Ministry, was received with all due reverence by both the students and the staff. Nearly everyone – even the younger students – cleared out, and he, too, got up and trailed Minerva back to her office. They settled into opposite chairs in front of the hearth, and the headmistress began to read aloud.

_The Inner Circle was gathered in the Minister for Magic’s office while their compatriots waited for instructions down in the Atrium. The back and forth between members had been fierce after Perse revealed the role that Domitian had played down through the years but especially more recently._

“So we’re just supposed to take your word for it?” Cary asked incredulously. “Have us believe that Albinia asked Domitian to kill her?”

“Not just my word,” Perse replied vigorously. “She was already dying – Mardwyn, Fidelis, and Pappy can confirm it – and she wanted her death to be of some benefit to the Inner Circle’s endeavors.”

All eyes turned to the Deputy Minister, charms expert, and medical wizard, who in turn looked grimly at each other.

“It’s true,” Gryffudd cautiously confirmed, taking his time to think it all through. “She had been cursed by the ring.”

“What kind of curse was it?” Serena Yademe asked.
“A dark one – very dark – and without a counter-spell. It probably would have killed her within a matter of months,” Flintshire replied.

“That still doesn’t prove anything,” Regina sniped.

“Then pair it with the fact that we were able to get into the Ministry because Domitian unblocked a forgotten floo,” Perse argued impassionedly. “Tie it to the fact that he didn’t cast offensive spells, only defensive ones after we got in, and practically handed us two of Valmont’s goons in the process. Link it to the fact that he helped destroy the magical items, and by doing so made Valmont weaker. And finally, connect it to the fact that he protected everyone who works here as best he could, preventing Karew and Boxer from doing their very worst.”

“He didn’t intervene when Faith Marlowe was killed,” Serena stated bluntly.

“But he saved her assistants,” Pappy spoke up. Members looked questioningly at the doctor. “When I treated them for shock, the young women – both Muggleborn, by the way – told me that he put out the light in the office so they wouldn’t be noticed and signaled for them to keep quiet. It was their opinion that Valmont was already planning on . . . .” He paused and took a steadying breath. “He was intent on doing what he did the moment he entered the room, and Domitian wouldn’t have been able to stop him.”

“How do we know this hasn’t all been part of some elaborate plan?” Cary demanded hotly. “How do we know we’re not walking into some kind of trap?”

“Well, first of all, we’re not walking anywhere – the fight is coming to us,” Perse bit out, “and he’s given us the day, the time, practically the very minute it will all come down.”

The naysayers were losing the argument and Cary parried one more time. “Fidelis – for Merlin’s sake, Valmont Crucioed you on his first visit, and Domitian stood there and did nothing!”

“That’s . . . that’s not entirely true,” Gryffudd spoke up. He cleared his throat as all eyes turned in his direction. “Like Fidelis, I was fully prepared to resist Valmont – and no doubt be tortured for it as well – but Domitian stopped me, spared me The Snake’s wand. And then he sent me off to get the potion with which to treat Fidelis. I didn’t say anything at the time because . . . well, because we thought the very worst of him.”

The room was eerily quiet as everyone tried to process the notion that the man who had seemingly murdered the Minister of Magic in cold blood was still working for them, even after he had taken over the Ministry.

“Mardwyn – it’s your call,” Wolfgang said evenly, stepping forward, speaking for them all. More moments passed as the Deputy Minister considered his options.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” Gryffudd finally began in a thoughtful voice, “but all of the evidence points to just one thing – that Domitian is still our agent and will be fighting with us when the time comes.” There was some rustling in the ranks, mainly with Cary and Regina, but he silenced them with a raised hand. “With all of that in mind, as the acting Minister for Magic and the senior member of the Inner Circle, I ask you not to attack Domitian with lethal spells. Some will have to be thrown in his direction in order for him to maintain his cover, but make them weak – showy, but insignificant. Allow him to be the superlative actor he has clearly been these last fifteen years and more.” He looked around the room. “I want everyone’s agreement on this,” he added, looking pointedly at Serena. The two stared at each other for a bit longer before she capitulated, though she gave in with ill grace.
“I’ll still be keeping my eye on him, don’t you think otherwise,” she grumbled her dissent, stalking out of the room.

There were murmurs of compliance as the room started to clear, but Perse noted that Cary and Regina seemed reluctant to make that promise – she stayed them and they stiffened noticeably.

“Reg,” she pleaded, “you helped me steal the magical items, and I couldn’t have done it without your help, but now I’m asking you – both of you,” she said, eying Cary, “to trust me. I don’t want to have to keep tabs on the pair of you as I’m fighting Green Shirts who will be trying to kill me.”

Cary and Regina exchanged glances before nodding slightly and slipping past her. It wasn’t a clear guarantee that they wouldn’t try to take Domitian out, but at least they might stay their wands until they – like Serena – were satisfied he was fighting for them rather than Valmont. It was the best she could do.

Perse joined her comrades in arms and took up her place – the time was quickly approaching and her heart was in her throat. They had certain advantages to be sure – they were in largely protected positions and Valmont and his minions would have to fight out in the open. He would be weaker, too, but also angrier, which would continue to make him very dangerous. They would be ready and waiting to ambush them, but his forces would still outnumber them at least three, perhaps four to one. The best that could be said was that they were as prepared as they could be for what was to come.

The attack came suddenly with Green Shirts whooshing in from seemingly every direction and the air was soon thick with flashing lights – the spells cackled and reverberated loudly in the Atrium. She had just enough time to see Domitian take up a position some distance behind Valmont before she was fully engaged. A significant number of Green Shirts were taken down almost the instant they apparated, caught out by their target’s unexpected and vigorous defense, but from there on it was a tough fight. It was principally the Inner Circle stationed on the main floor with those less experienced in combat situated on the Mezzanine level, where they could cast from above and duck when they were targeted in turn. At one point, Perse was dueling two Green Shirts at once, but out of the corner of her eye, she saw Domitian hex one of them surreptitiously, which enabled her to put the other quickly out of commission. She tried to keep him in her line of vision as best she could, and while her colleagues were throwing spells in his direction on occasion, he easily deflected them. When one of them actually grazed him on the shoulder, it did no damage – members were holding back she was relieved to see. This enabled him to fight from behind and many a Green Shirt literally didn’t see what hit them and brought them down. This reinvigorated her, and she threw herself into the battle.

She didn’t know how long the fighting went on for, but Valmont’s numbers steadily diminished. Gryffuidd and Flintshire kept him busy, but eventually, the last of his supporters dropped their wands in surrender. He was standing alone in the center of the Atrium as one by one the Inner Circle began to converge, their wands pointed directly at him, but he refused to yield.

“Domitian – take your place beside me,” he commanded, flicking his wrist to draw him forward.

“Never!” Domitian said, his conviction booming through the Atrium.

Valmont slowly turned to the man who had been his closest confidant, confusion writ large on his face.

Domitian straightened his shoulders. “You have committed every despicable act imaginable, subjected the good and the righteous to vile humiliation, and taken lives with as little thought for them as one would have for an insect. I have borne it all with fortitude and resolution, knowing that
justice would come and that you would be repudiated. Yes,” he sneered as realization settled across Valmont’s face, “I have worked all these years – every last one of them,” he carefully enunciated, “for your destruction. I have been obsequious to vomit-inducing levels, withstood the brutal physical favors you deigned to mete out to your supporters, and reported on your every sniffle, sneeze, and fart. Nothing – absolutely nothing – escaped my notice. And now everyone who ever had the misfortune of crossing your path will now be avenged!”

Only Perse noticed the twitch in Valmont’s hand and without thinking she cast a shielding spell virtually simultaneously as The Snake turned his wand on Domitian. The sheer force of both spells knocked him backwards and off his feet, and when Valmont spun forward once more to take on his enemies, nearly a dozen spells pierced straight through him. The rays of light emanating from each wand reflected upwards towards their castors, illuminating grimly determined faces. His demise wouldn’t be due to any individual, but rather from the combined efforts of everyone involved in the fight, from the highest to the lowest. The only hand missing from this collective effort was that of the man who had struck the first blow so many years before, ensuring Valmont’s eventual defeat there on the floor of the Ministry Atrium. When they were finished, the only thing left of The Snake was a small pile of ash. It was then that Perse realized that Domitian was lying unmoving on the floor.

They sat there quietly for several minutes as Minerva took out a handkerchief from her sleeve and discreetly blew her nose, the memory of the real battle still sharp and fresh in her mind.

“Do you think she’ll just leave it at that?” she finally asked.

He had been staring into the fire, but he slowly lifted his head and cleared his throat.

“I . . . I have suggested that she consider tying up the . . . the loose ends.”

“You have suggested?” Minerva quizzed him, suddenly sitting forward in her chair and eying him suspiciously.

“She knows I know,” he replied. “She knows you know as well,” he further quipped, smiling slightly.

“And how did that happen, may I ask?” she inquired severely.

“The memorial service – she was . . . distraught, and I made some observations about fictionalizing real events,” he replied casually in the face of her glare, knowing how much it would irritate her.

“You don’t think that was rather unwise?” she chastised.

“I’m not sure she would even have addressed the final battle if I hadn’t spoken up. You did want her to finish, didn’t you?” he volleyed.

“What exactly did you say to her?” she asked tightly.

“I suggested that she think about it this week . . . and have dinner with me tonight to thrash it out more fully.”

Minerva remained bolt upright. “Severus,” she drawled warningly.

“She’s not my student any more, Minerva,” he informed her, standing abruptly to leave. “I’ve released her to her own devices and I suggest that you and everyone else do the same – she needs rest right now, not further instruction.”

“Severus,” she growled threateningly, getting to her feet just as he reached the door.
“It’s just dinner, Minerva,” he drawled, “but I would remind you that NEWTs are almost upon us,” he finished provocatively, slipping out before she could say anything further.

As evening approached, Hermione became increasingly nervous. She eschewed her uniform – such as it was – for more casual Muggle clothes, since she didn’t want him thinking about her student status or her age. Nor did she tell Ginny what was afoot – there were some secrets that she felt her friend would be constitutionally unable to keep whatever promises she might make. It was with nervous anticipation that she approached his quarters. She felt the wards as she neared and this time he opened the door himself – clearly, he had been waiting for her.

“Miss Granger – punctual as always,” he said mockingly, though more for the benefit of anyone who might overhear them than to disparage her.

“Of course, professor,” she replied in her know-it-all voice. He almost smiled at that, but instead beckoned for her to enter.

Disappointingly, she noted that the table across the room rather than the cozier one in front of the hearth was set for dinner.

“Madeira?” he offered smoothly, already at the cabinet filling their glasses. She nodded, reaching across herself to run a hand up and down her arm awkwardly. She smiled shyly as she accepted the aperitif. After they had both sipped their drinks, he gestured for her to take her usual seat on the sofa, and this time he joined her rather than settling into his reading chair. She sat forward rather primly, her knees together and her free hand resting demurely in her lap while he sank into the generous depths of the upholstery, extending an arm behind her across the back of the sofa.

She was perched at an angle, and he watched as her nervousness played out in her face – her eyes were firmly fixed on the fire in the grate. He took another sip of his whiskey.

“You can sit back, you know – your virtue is quite safe, I assure you,” he said with just a hint of humor. She scooted back a bit, although she was still far from relaxed.

“Chapter nineteen was well-done,” he began, trying to ease the tension. She nodded in acknowledgment, and sipped her Madeira. “It’s the only thing I’ve heard students talking about all day. Not one of them had read their potions texts, so I blame you – personally – for the two melted cauldrons and multiple botched brews in my classes this afternoon,” he commented, trying – and failing – to sound genuinely annoyed. She smiled at his attempt.

“Have you thought any more about what you might do with a final chapter?” he asked carefully.

The smile faded a bit and she stilled. A moment later, as if some decision had been made, she finished her wine in one go and reached forward to set the vessel on the table. Taking a fortifying breath, she twisted around and sat further back, one leg on the cushion in front of her so that she could face him.

“Have you?” she finally replied.

“Well, I have thought of possible scenarios,” he responded, “although everything hinges on the ultimate fate of Perse and Domitian, don’t you think?”

“I do,” she hummed thoughtfully in agreement, but otherwise giving nothing away.

“So, will the dark wizard and brilliant witch of the story finally be together?” he pressed with just a hint of anxiety.
“I think that rather depends,” she said softly, almost breathlessly as she looked at him hesitantly.

He took another, larger drink of his whiskey, suddenly uncertain of himself. “On what?” he asked, steeling himself mentally to be rejected as he had been all of his life.

“On whether or not the dark wizard can put his past behind him, whether he wants a second chance at life,” she replied almost inaudibly.

His heart leapt at her response and the plea that was in her eyes – he took a deep breath in relief.

“If you had asked me that question earlier on in the story, I think that Domitian might have said no. But now,” he continued, placing his glass on the table next to hers, “I believe the character has had a change of heart in light of his contact with this exceptional and compassionate young woman.”

He lifted his hand from the back of the sofa and gently tucked a stray curl behind her ear before running the back of his finger slowly down her cheek. “I think,” he continued, his voice deepening, “that the character would now like to have a go at life, if his young lover is willing to show him how to do it,” he said, slowly inching closer in with each word until they were finally touching.

Her lips were soft, warm, and tantalizingly tinged with the remnants of the sweet Spanish wine. As he continued to sup, her lips parted and she found the whiskey still on his tongue very much to her taste. With one hand now entwined in her hair, his other rested on her thigh, and as the heat of it radiated through her jeans, she raised her hand towards him hesitantly. He spread his fingers wide, savoring the sensuous friction of the denim as he moved slowly upwards, spurring her to wrap her arm around his neck. He pressed forward in a way she would have prudishly termed wanton had such sensibilities not vanished the instant their lips met. As they continued to pour themselves into each other’s mouths, his hand veered, sliding under her hip. Her legs were drawn across his lap until he was able to turn her slightly and lay her shoulders onto the sofa, her knees now curving over his thigh. His lips traced the line of her jaw to where it connected with her neck.

“Do you have any idea how you have tormented me these last months?” he whispered hoarsely, his breath tickling her ear.

She drew in a surprised breath at this information and arched further upwards, trying to press against his chest. He kissed and tasted his way to her throat while his hand continued its trajectory until she felt her breast being gently kneaded – she gasped again, unprepared for the jolt that went through her. He expertly undid the buttons of her blouse and pulled the cloth away to get closer to her cucumber scented skin. The strap of her bra was brushed off her shoulder and he peeled away the cup before descending hungrily on the exposed and puckered nipple. Alternatively suckling and nipping, her groaning grew louder and she felt a distinctive hardness firm against her hip. The tension between her legs suddenly intensified and she instinctively squirmed against him in her search for relief.

It was then that he slowed his ministrations, pulling back. He abandoned her breast reluctantly, putting her bra and blouse back into place. Carding her hair soothingly, he tried to calm his breathing. “We have to stop,” he said raggedly.

She looked at him questioningly.

“Not until you are done,” he said, “not until after your NEWTs and the Leaving Feast – I promised,” he reminded her.

“She had no right,” she said a bit resentfully, but her expression softened in the face of his gentle ministrations.
“She had every right, and you know it – we both know it,” he sighed with resignation. “While you are certainly of age, the whole point of coming back here was to finish your education – that has to be your primary concern for the moment.” He sat up, dragging her, too, into an upright position as she finished doing up her shirt.

“We will come back to this,” he said resolutely, but she didn’t look up as she buttoned her blouse. “Hermione?” he commanded in his trademark professorial tone. Her head whipped up in indignation at the tone. “This isn’t over,” he smirked, leaning down to brush lightly against her lips. As he pulled away, a shy smile slowly spread across her face. “In the meantime,” he continued, getting to his feet and offering his hand, “there is the business of concluding this story, and I have some ideas you might like to consider.”

If it had been anyone else, she might have described the sparkle in his eye as a twinkle, but since it was him, she preferred to label it deliciously devious.
Chapter Summary

Love in a Time of War finally concludes, and everyone is shocked, while there are moves afoot among the faculty to deal with the two wizarding wars in a more structured way.

Chapter Notes

Hi, all,

Well, that's Perse and Domitian sorted! I suspect the conclusion to Love in a Time of War wasn't actually much of a surprise, but I still hope you enjoyed it - let me know! One story down, one to go! Until the penultimate chapter next week, here's wishing everyone a very happy holiday!

Resolutions

Hermione spent all of Saturday writing, with Timber periodically appearing with snacks. When she went into dinner, she ran into Ginny, who remarked on her good mood, commenting leadingly that the writing must be going well. She merely smiled enigmatically in response, having already told her friend that she would have to wait to read the last chapter, just like everyone else. Sunday passed productively as well, and first thing Monday morning she slipped down to the village before breakfast to post the very last installment to Love in a Time of War, the resolution to Domitian and Perse’s story – it was a beautiful, sunny spring morning, and it felt like it in every way. When she returned to the hall for a bite to eat, he was already in his seat, and while his expression never changed, she noted a certain look about his eyes when he briefly glanced in her direction. She ducked her head and smiled to herself since it wouldn’t do to grin at him publicly, and the feeling warmed her. And so it went all week.

Come Friday morning, it was nearly a full turn out once again, and as before, he accompanied Minerva back to her office for a dramatic reading of chapter twenty, even though he had helped plot it out.

She rushed forward, flinging herself at his limp body. As her tears began to fall, Gryffudd gently pulled her away so that Pappy could work his trade. After a few diagnostic spells, the medical wizard stood and looked around the room in agitation – first aid was being given here and there, while Green Shirts were being rounded up and taken away by aurors.

“What is it? What do you need?” Gryffudd asked with concern.

“Fidelis,” he muttered, continuing to scan the room, “I need Fidelis.”

“I’ll find him and bring him to you – where do you need to take Domitian?”
“The morgue.” Perse gasped involuntarily. “It will have everything I need,” he added quickly, trying to sound reassuring. He carefully levitated Domitian and guided his unconscious form to the lift that would take them to the lower levels. Perse picked up his wand from the floor and, feeling his magic still coursing along its length, held it close to her chest. She stepped further into the Atrium, frantically searching for Flintshire’s face in the crowd. Gryffudd joined her, and after a moment he simply barked out his name.

“Flintshire!” the Deputy Minister boomed.

“What?” an irritated voice above them responded. They raised their eyes as Flintshire popped his head over the railing.

“Fidelis, get down to the morgue as quickly as you can – Pappy needs you!”

He hurried away while Perse and Gryffudd headed for the lifts.

Domitian lay sprawled on the examination table, one hand across his chest and the other along his side as Pappy frowned in concentration, waving his wand back and forth, taking in the information. Flintshire was only a moment behind them, and immediately assumed a place next to the medical wizard. As he and Pappy consulted, Perse slowly took in Domitian’s motionless figure. His robes were scorched in places and blood was splattered on his boots. It seemed impossible that someone that pale could be alive.

Flintshire finally turned to her and the Deputy Minister. “Do you know what happened?” he asked.

“I cast a shielding spell just as Valmont turned his wand on him,” Perse barely managed to choke out.

“That explains part of it,” he muttered

“Explains part of what?” she asked, grabbing his arm anxiously.

“It would seem that your spell deflected most of Valmont’s attack, but not all of it. There’s also something else here I don’t understand,” the charms expert muttered.

Instinctively, Perse stepped forward to clasp Domitian’s hand . . . and found an empty potions vial cradled in his fingers. She swiftly offered it to Pappy who sniffed it.

“Vitae et Anima – shrewd,” he commented. “very shrewd.”

“What’s Vitae et Anima?” she asked impatiently.

“It translates to life and soul and is a prime ingredient in some of the most powerful of healing potions – Domitian must have been carrying this around in the expectation that Valmont would eventually turn on him. He wouldn’t have known what form the attack might take, so he brewed something general that would at least keep him alive until other help arrived. Clever man.”

“But what do we do now?” she asked frantically.

“I think we can lift the rest of the spell if we four put our wands together – come over here,” Flintshire instructed, gesturing for Perse and Gryffudd to position themselves next to Pappy on the other side of the table. “All of our wands must touch – I will cast, but do not break away until we are done,” he instructed. They nodded and squeezed tightly together as they extended their wands towards Domitian’s motionless form. Flintshire joined them, touching the tip of his wand to theirs and cast. A grey mist slowly rose from Domitian’s chest and swirled above him – Perse felt cold,
colder than she had ever been in her life, but she was suffused with love for the man they were now all trying to save, and she drew inner strength from it.

Flintshire’s voice continued to sound in her ears even after he finished the incantation and the vapor dissipated. She was afraid even to breathe for fear that it would dispel the hope she still held, but then they all jumped when Domitian suddenly gasped for air and started to cough. Pappy quickly rolled him on to his side to ease him upright. When he finally raised his head, he found himself staring into teary blue eyes.

Perse immediately embraced him and he allowed himself a brief moment of relief. She kissed his forehead, cheek, and chin, his eyes, nose, and finally his mouth, and there she lingered to convince herself that he was alright. After a few moments more, there was some discreet throat clearing behind her, and they slowly, grudgingly broke apart.

“What happened?” he asked.

“You were hit by Valmont,” Flintshire informed him. “Perse’s shield deflected most of it, but if you hadn’t taken the Vitae et Anima you most certainly would be dead.”

Domitian looked at her, and for the first time took in the soot, torn clothes, and nasty scratch on her cheek. Seeing his wand in her hand, he gently pried it from her fingers and ran the tip down the edge of the wound, murmuring a healing spell that knitted the flesh back together. When he finished, she raised her hand to touch it but he stayed her, leaning in to kiss where it had been.

“Well . . . um . . . we should get back upstairs, see if we can be of some use,” Pappy suggested diffidently and moved towards the door.

“Wait,” Domitian commanded. He slid off the table, rounded it, and stood in front of the back wall. He made several complicated strokes with his wand, and when he finished, the wall slowly disintegrated, revealing the hidden door. It opened with yet another spell and a light flickered on inside. Beyond the entrance they could see a shrouded figure lying on an examination table – there wasn’t any need to tell them that it was Albinia.

They quietly filed into the room, with Domitian taking a position at the far end of the table. He drew the sheet down to her waist – she looked as serene as the day he had entombed her. He gestured to Pappy, who immediately scanned her with his wand, his incredulity growing with each pass until his mouth gapped open in wonder.

“She’s not dead!” he breathed.

“Indeed she is not,” Domitian confirmed rather smugly.

“But . . . I saw you . . .” Gryffudd stammered, “we all heard the spell, saw the green haze!”

“The acoustics of the Atrium made it possible for me to utter the words a fraction before I actually cast a powerful stasis spell – the green aura was merely a slight of hand.”

“But . . . but why?” Flintshire asked.

“Because I thought – hoped, really, without any reason to do so – that the curse she was afflicted with would disperse when the caster died.”

“Is that possible?” Perse asked hopefully.

Flintshire considered it carefully, reasoning it out. “Given that the curse was intimately tied to a
living part of Valmont, it is possible that it actually depended on it – the curse might well have lifted when he died.” He looked admiringly at Domitian. “That was ingenious thinking,” he commented.

“Well, I thought it was at least worth a try,” Domitian offered modestly.

“Pappy?” Gryffudd asked.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, shaking his head at his colleagues, “but there is no harm in cancelling the stasis spell and then we’ll know for certain.” He lifted her limp and damaged hand. “The curse will either lift . . . or it won’t.”

They all stepped back from the table to give the medical wizard room to work. He raised his arms, his wand firmly in one hand. It took only a moment, and they all waited with breathless anticipation.

Perse was so focused on Albinia’s face that when a tiny muscle next to her eye twitched ever so slightly she thought she was seeing things. But then it happened again . . . and then once more – it kept happening until Albinia finally opened her eyes and blinked furiously against the light.

“Domitian?” she asked weakly, looking straight up into his face as he peered down at her from above.

He allowed himself a slight smile. “Yes,” he said simply.

When Pappy ceased his movement, a look of wonder was on his face. “It’s gone,” he croaked in amazement, “the spell . . . it’s completely gone!” he gasped, examining her hand.

They all started grinning and laughing – Gryffudd slapped Pappy forcibly on the shoulder before reaching out and shaking Flintshire’s hand. Perse quickly pulled off the sheet and helped Albinia sit up. “What’s happened?” she asked, confused at her surroundings and her colleagues’ bedraggled state. Then she looked once more at Domitian. He leaned towards her.

“We won, Albinia – we actually won the fucking war!” he said quietly, his eyes gleaming. “And the curse on your hand,” he continued, reaching for it and holding it up for her to see, “was broken the instant Valmont ceased to exist. All that needed doing was to cancel the stasis spell.”

She flexed her fingers in disbelief – the hand was now as pink and healthy as its twin. “You . . . you disobeyed me,” she said quietly.

“Yes, well, you should be used to that by now,” he quipped acerbically.

She turned to him and smiled. Reaching out, she clasped his arm with her restored hand. “Thank you,” she said softly. Turning to her colleagues and fellow members – her friends – she started to laugh, and they all joined in.

“We should get upstairs,” Gryffudd urged after a few moments.

The Atrium fell silent as Albinia slowly made her way towards the center of the open space. Shock and disbelief were the initial reactions, but soon, people were swarming forward to greet her – there were shouts and tears of joy and jubilation. Members of the Inner Circle were front and center – Cary and Regina, Wolfgang and Sylvie Thomas, Nigel, Diana, and Henried. Lance Westly stood proud with his wife Polly, daughter Gisele, and sons Geoffrey and Faron, and even the always humorless Serene Yadame couldn’t stifle a smile. Miraculously, they had somehow all survived.

“Where’s Hominy?” Cary asked rather belatedly, looking around. Heads turned to see if she was among them and a murmur went through the crowd.
“She’s right here,” Albinia confidently asserted, slowly turning to face Perse, “where she’s been all along.” Silence spread through the Atrium like a wave as all eyes settled on the young woman standing next to Domitian.

Perse’s eyes grew wide and she began to stutter as she took in the stunned and incredulous expressions of those surrounding her. She turned to the man beside her, silently pleading for his understanding. Domitian looked at her fiercely before stepping forward, pulling her forcefully to him, and immediately disapparating to his house.

She stumbled a bit when they stopped spinning but he continued to hold her steady, albeit at arm’s length, his grip firm on her shoulders.

“Hominy?” he asked disbelievingly.

“Yes,” she barely whispered, fearing his rejection.

His stare was hard and penetrating. “Why?” he finally asked.

She stepped away from him as she nervously began wringing her hands. “No one would listen to me,” she desperately explained. “All they thought I was good for was doing research, tending to books, that sort of thing – but I knew I could help.” She paused. “I knew I could help you,” she said emphatically, beseechingly.

He continued to stand mute. Slowly, he raised his wand – she closed her eyes as he cast Finite Incantatem. Her long, straight, blond hair transformed into long, curly, chestnut locks, while her complexion paled considerably. She wasn’t quite as buxom as before, but her figure was still well-balanced. Although her blue eyes had turned amber, they sported gold flecks and continued to burn with the same intensity as before.

His wand fell unceremoniously to the floor. “I see no difference,” he abruptly declared as he stepped forward and drew her into an embrace so tight she could hardly breathe. His lips were everywhere all at once and she clung to him as he wrestled them over to the bed. He pulled her down next to him, ripping off her clothes as she tore at his coat. Only when he finally sank into her welcoming depths did they briefly calm. He kissed away her tears of relief as he hovered above her, her breasts grazing his chest as he started to thrust.

“You saved me,” he ground out in awe, “stayed . . . sustained me . . . gave me hope . . . saved me,” he panted.

“We saved . . . each other,” she spluttered, her fingers bruising his arms as she pushed against him, straining for her climax. It whipped through her like a dam bursting, and it went on and on, taking her outside herself, overwhelmed as she was with the knowledge that he was safe and in her arms, holding her, loving her.

He was immediately drawn into her ecstasy, his orgasm bursting forth with a clean, bright, untainted light. In that moment, the only thing touching his mind, heart, and soul was the woman who was clutching him to her and whispering in his ear that she was his forever. He could live with that – happily live with it for the rest of his life.

And he did.

Walking briskly to his morning classes, he smirked at the dazed faces of the students lining the corridors. Minerva had likewise been flabbergasted, rendered absolutely and completely speechless – it had almost been worth every agonizing moment of the previous seven months of aggravation just
to witness it.

He wanted to see Hermione, but there were classes still to get through, and she would be in the library studying. But he made sure to get to lunch early, as did everyone else who was waiting expectantly for her to arrive. The room stilled when she came in, but she feigned indifference, taking her usual seat at the end of the Gryffindor table and tucking into her lunch. When it was clear that she was going to behave as if nothing at all had happened – act as if she hadn’t essentially been paired with their potions professor in the storyline – the noise levels returned to their usual decibels. She overheard a few expressions of sympathy at her embarrassing predicament, but more than one envious eye was turned in her direction by some of the older female students. She refused to blush, however, and kept her attention firmly focused on her edition of *The Prophet*, for all intents and purposes seemingly ignorant of the contents of chapter twenty. The only drawback of doing that was, of course, that she didn’t dare look in his direction. At the end of the meal, and as the hall began to empty out, Ginny pulled her to one side.

“Well done,” she said, smiling affectionately. “You took me – took us *all* – by surprise. I’m glad, now, that you wouldn’t let me read it. Truly – *well done.*” With that, and a quick hug, Ginny took off for her next class while Hermione went back to the library.

Knowing that she would now be watched like a hawk, she didn’t visit his quarters over the weekend, and he appeared in the dining hall only infrequently. Certainly the two of them could not be seen together until after her exams were finished. By Monday, the furor had died down somewhat and students had ceased pestering her about her thoughts on the story, but they continued to speculate about him in hushed whispers in the corridors and in his classes, so much so that the nearly constant tittering prompted him to assign all of his students a potion that took away their voice for twenty-four hours – and then he made them drink it to test how well they had managed the task. No one failed – he had seen to it personally, and the resulting silence among a good section of the fifth, sixth, and seventh-year students was pure bliss.

Minerva gave him a disapproving scowl over the prank at the afternoon staff meeting, but virtually everyone else was fully appreciative of the quieter atmosphere. He had been a bit apprehensive about the meeting, concerned about how the developments in chapter twenty had gone down among his colleagues – their reaction would determine how accepting they would be of a *real* relationship in the very near future. He sneered at the openly disapproving looks sent his way by Sinistra and Vector, but their unfavorable opinion had been expected. Hooch was thoroughly amused by it all, predictably enough, and it was Sprout’s expressed opinion that Miss Granger could do far worse. Flitwick’s support was unqualified while Pomfrey was diplomatically silent. Everyone else seemed surprisingly uninterested – Madam Pince didn’t even look up from her book.

“Is this likely to prompt another series of articles in *The Prophet*?” Sinistra asked, sullenly.

“I want to make something absolutely clear,” Minerva began, her expression serious and determined. “Our first concern is Miss Granger and our other students. I will *not* have their last weeks with us disrupted in any way. They have exams coming up and we owe it to them to make sure that they do their best work. To that end, I am cancelling all excursions until NEWTs are over. The apparition point will be closely monitored and the wards will be set to allow only staff to pass back and forth. If the mail becomes problematic,” she said obliquely, “it will be held back until exams are finished.”

“Isn’t that censorship?” Vector asked snidely.

“Not in the least,” she replied smoothly, reaching under the stack of parchments in front of her to draw out a book with numerous pieces of paper sticking out from the top of the text. “There are precedents for holding back the mail during examination periods when the world outside these walls
was disrupted by wars, uprisings, and magical disasters. As you can see, I’ve bookmarked the relevant passages in *Hogwarts: A History* for anyone interested in reviewing it,” she said smugly, holding up the text in her hand.

When no one took her up on her offer, she set the heavy tome down with a satisfied thump. “Other business?” she asked brusquely.

“Questions about the war have picked up again . . . for *obvious* reasons,” Flitwick observed, “and I think we really *should* look into addressing them in a serious way and in an appropriate setting.”

“Perhaps content concerning the war could be added to the Muggle Studies courses,” Hooch suggested.

Minerva nodded thoughtfully.

“But students who don’t take those courses will miss out,” Sprout commented.

“We need to integrate the material more fully into the curriculum,” Sinistra observed.

“Well, we *could* make Muggle Studies a required component for all students,” Flitwick suggested.

“Or perhaps develop a course *just* about the war,” Hooch proposed. “We might even want to culminate with a weekend conference, get people who fought to give lectures, maybe even open it up to the wider wizarding community.”

“Would you be willing to be a part of such a program, Severus?” Flitwick asked, addressing his friend and colleague speculatively. He could feel everyone’s eyes on him, but he didn’t lift his head to meet them or even put down his quill, although he paused his writing.

“I would have to give it some thought,” he answered in a tightly controlled voice.

Only Minerva truly appreciated how difficult such a thing would be for him, and not wanting him to refuse outright, she redirected the discussion. “All of these are excellent ideas,” she observed, “and I think we need to start having further conversations about this among ourselves and with the Minister for Magic – he will want the Ministry to be involved, I’m sure. I will put this matter on the agenda for our next meeting – let me know if you have any further ideas or can think of things we need to address. This is something we no doubt would also want to talk to our Muggle Studies candidates about during their interviews, see if they would help implement and coordinate these things.”

“What’s the timeline for hiring someone?” Hooch asked.

“The position will be advertised before students sit their NEWTs and OLWs so we’ll start receiving applications soon after that. I think we can expect interviews to begin in early June,” replied informationally.

The agenda moved on after that, and a roster for invigilating exams was drawn up and plans proposed for the Leaving Feast. He paid little attention and it all washed over him as resumed his grading. If his colleagues hadn’t gotten up to leave, he wouldn’t even have realized that the meeting was over. Once the last of them were through the door and it was just the two of them, the headmistress sighed approvingly.

“That went well, I thought,” Minerva observed, gathering up her things and bestowing upon him an encouraging smile. “Giving them time to get used to the idea of the two of you together should make revealing any *future* relationship easier.”
“Indeed,” he replied, thinking along similar lines.

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that it would be advisable not to be seen too much in each other’s company for a while,” she stated more than asked.

“No, Minerva, you do not need to tell me,” he said snidely, beating a path to the door in frustration over the obvious, as if he was still a schoolboy. It was hard enough – in every way imaginable – to endure seeing Hermione only from a distance without his colleague rubbing his nose in it.

“And Severus?” she called before he could completely get away. He growled. “I would like you at least to think about being a part of any program we put together concerning the war.”

He stared noncommittally at her.

“We must never let this happen again, and it won’t, so long as people continue to speak out. This school has earned the right – and must assume the responsibility – of ensuring that the next generation learns from the follies of the previous one, don’t you think?”

Merlin, he hated when she did that.
Chapter Summary

Hermione feels a bit melancholy as her NEWTs approach, and Severus makes a suggestion, while something major is revealed at the Leaving Feast that shocks the entire school.

Chapter Notes

Well, here is the penultimate chapter - a major reveal awaits. Getting very sad, though, that this will all conclude next week. There is one thing that might cheer me up, though . . . ; )

NEWTs and the Leaving Feast

Hermione felt a little low when *Witches Only* arrived Friday morning, knowing that students would now be getting worked up about some other story, one that hadn’t come from her quill. She was a bit consoled by the fact that it was being compared unfavorably with hers at lunch, but it was still hard to bear and she pushed the food around her plate dejectedly. She gathered her satchel and left early.

Her lackluster appetite, rather despondent expression, and premature departure didn’t go unobserved. He, too, got up from his seat without finishing his lunch, heading for the library where he instinctively knew she had gone. Immediately spotting her bag on her usual table, he headed for the stacks. In the near distance, he saw her cross the aisle with a bit of paper in her hand, looking for a text she wanted. The library was virtually empty, and he slipped in behind her unnoticed – when she reached up to retrieve a book, he moved in close, lifting his arm high above hers to pull out the volume for her. She gasped slightly, and for a moment, she was completely enveloped in the warmth and scent of his robes. He moved deliberately slowly until there was no option but to step away and hand her the text. Dark eyes bore into hers and she bashfully returned his look.

“I believe this is the one you are looking for, Miss Granger,” he said in a deep, hushed voice.

She grasped it so that their fingers touched but he didn’t let go when she pulled – she looked down and then quickly back up again.

“Professor?” she automatically asked, perplexed.

“I was just wondering if you were working on another . . . project yet,” he asked obliquely.

“The only project I’m working on is getting ready for my NEWTs,” she said ruefully.

“Perhaps you should start thinking about what you’d like to do next,” he suggested, releasing his grip on the book – he clearly wasn’t talking about her exams.

“Yes, professor,” she replied thoughtfully as she hugged the book to her chest, “perhaps I should.”
“Like everything else, writing requires practice, Miss Granger, a constant honing of skills, a fact that usually goes unrecognized among your peers,” he drawled. The corners of his mouth rose ever so slightly before he sharply turned on his heel to leave.

“Professor?” she called softly, taking a hesitant step towards him before he exited the stack. He turned to look at her. “Thank you,” she said, “for the advice.”

He gave her a long, thorough look – one that made her blush but which she nevertheless fully returned – before he nodded curtly and disappeared around the corner of the shelf.

She moved to the end of the aisle and watched his retreating figure, thinking about how much she wanted to be wrapped up in those billowing robes. Ignoring the slight flutter of trepidation at the thought, she returned to the table and unpacked her book bag – she could worry about all that later, after her exams were finished.

Like everyone else, she was anxious on the first day of NEWTs, but while her peers bemoaned all the work they required, she quickly relaxed into them, enjoying being able to write so freely on her chosen subjects. It was with considerable satisfaction that she handed over her last essay on Friday afternoon. She stepped into the corridor and took a deep breath – she was done. The only things that would make it official were her scores – which would come in a week’s time – and the Leaving Feast the following evening. Then there was that other thing that would also signal the end of her student days – a rendezvous with a particularly snarky potions professor.

A few students were hanging around in the corridor, waiting for their friends to finish, but otherwise the place was empty. She wasn’t entirely sure what she had been expecting. He certainly wasn’t the sort to be standing by with flowers or candy as others were, but she still felt a bit deflated. It was rather like seeing students move on to the next story in Witches Only, even if they didn’t appear to like it much – it seemed so . . . anticlimactic. It was only an hour until dinner and she didn’t quite know what she should do – go back to her room or seek him out. Feeling grubby and more than a little stiff after being hunched over a desk all day, she opted for a quick shower – she wanted to look her best if she was going to see him after dinner.

The hot water felt good on her aching shoulders and the cucumber scented bath oil helped clear her head. She thought on what the evening ahead would be like – and immediately felt a wave of anxiety roll through her. In the days leading up to her exam, she had debated just how much to tell him, especially in light of the story, and still hadn’t come to any decision. She would simply have to play it by ear. She could do that – she was a Gryffindor after all.

Her heart fell when dinner began and he still hadn’t shown up. Doubts immediately started to creep in – maybe he was having second thoughts. He was a war hero after all and his reputation had been thoroughly rehabilitated, thanks in no small measure to her. Minerva had told her about the offers he continued to get from admiring fans, and he rarely went into Hogsmeade except early in the morning because women would trail around after him on the street if he left his errands for the afternoon. Based on the conversations she overheard in the corridors, he featured in the dreams of a good many of the young women of Hogwarts, and not a few of the young men as well. She had pretty much ensured that he could now have virtually any woman – or man – he wanted. Her thinking continued along similar lines throughout the meal, which she barely touched. So engrossed was she in morose thoughts that she didn’t initially hear her mentor, who had walked over from the high table as students started to leave.

“Miss Granger,” she asked once more.

Hermione turned her startled eyes on the headmistress and stood. “Yes, professor?”
“Professor Snape asked me to give you this,” she said, holding out a small, folded parchment.

She took it and tried to smile. “Why couldn’t he . . . .”

“I’m afraid there were some things he needed to attend to in London,” Minerva interrupted.

“Not more dark potions?” she blurted out anxiously.

“No, no, nothing like that,” the headmistress assured her, “just school business – some last minute matters that had to be taken care of before tomorrow evening’s Leaving Feast.”

Hermione visibly relaxed – he hadn’t rejected her. At least, not yet.

“I’m sorry your parents won’t be here for it,” Minerva continued.

“Well, it’s a very long way for them to come, and I’m planning to go out and see them anyway in a few weeks – we’ll celebrate then,” she replied.

Minerva nodded, and noted Ginny fidgeting by the door. “Your friends are waiting for you, Miss Granger, so I will bid you a good evening,” she said, briefly glancing down at the note in her protégé’s hand before turning to leave. Hermione blushed – shoving the parchment into a pocket, she quickly joined Ginny and they headed to the Gryffindor common room for the last night party. The festivities were already in full swing when they got there, which enabled her to slip over to the side to read the note.

Miss Granger,

Unexpected business has taken me to London, but I will return in time for the Leaving Feast.

Snape

The message eased her concerns considerably. While it was brief – brusque, even – and didn’t tell her anything more than what her head of house had said, the fact that he had made the effort meant that he had been thinking of her, and that was enough for the moment.

“Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“What?” she replied, startled from her thoughts, quickly shoving the parchment back into a pocket.

“For Hogsmeade – to get your hair done,” Ginny laughed, reaching for one of her long tresses.

“Oh, right – absolutely,” she answered firmly, remembering that they had appointments for the following afternoon.

“We’ve got to be careful not to drink too much, though,” Ginny went on, looking at the contraband bottles that were being passed around. “Hangovers can make having your hair styled unbearable.”

Hermione nodded in agreement, not that she had ever experienced such a thing. She stayed as long as she could bear to, which was less than an hour – students were laughing, dancing, and joshing each other while several had already ventured over to the window seats to snog. She felt distinctly apart from it all, and not simply because she was nearly two years older than most of the students. Parties like this one had never been her cup of tea, mainly because she wasn’t interested in the rowdiness that usually ensued at such gatherings, things that were going on right now in front of her – she slipped away unnoticed and spend the rest of the evening in bed, thinking about where she would be and what she might be doing in exactly twenty-four hours.
She ate breakfast virtually alone – nearly all of the seventh-years were absent and a fair number of the sixth-years as well, no doubt still in their beds nursing sore heads. His seat at the high table also remained empty, and she returned to her room – packing, though, only further lowered her spirits. She went down to lunch and was almost finished when Ginny appeared, clearly not having taken her own advice the evening before. Hermione summoned a cup of coffee and nudged the sandwich plate in her direction.

“I’ve got a headache potion in my room,” she offered.

“Already had one,” Ginny replied weakly, sipping from her mug and making a face at the food. Hermione couldn’t help a small smile. “Yeah, I know, I know,” her friend replied.

“I’d like to go into the village before our appointment to pick up some stationery – I want to write some thank-you notes for my teachers. I could meet you at the hair dressers, if you want.”

“No, I’m fine – just let me get a shower,” Ginny responded, slowly getting to her feet. “I’ll meet you at the gates in an hour,” she said, walking carefully from the room.

She was relieved to see that Ginny was in better shape by the time they headed for Hogsmeade, although her friend nevertheless winced now and again as her hair was done. The witch stylist working on her own hair had smoothed it out considerably before situating it all at the crown of her head. When she was finally allowed to look in a mirror, she was taken aback. A large bun was secured in place with antique looking combs, and hair billowed out ever so slightly around her head – tendrils along the hairline framed even and well-defined features above a slender neck. The style made her look not so much older but rather simply more mature. Ginny insisted on eyeliner and a touch of mascara, but she drew the line at anything else. They didn’t linger in the salon as there were other graduates waiting – they had tea in the village before heading back to the castle, and more than one appreciative glance was thrown in their direction.

When she finally got back to her rooms, she found a box on her bed with an accompanying note, both from her mentor. Concerned, she immediately ripped open the envelope.

_Miss Granger,_

_I think this would be infinitely more appropriate for the Leaving Feast this evening than your current attire. Perhaps Miss Weasley would help you with it._

_McGonagall_

She put the note on her desk and lifted the top off of the box. Inside was the gold and crimson dress her mentor had made so much of the first night she was back, when they had gone through the secondhand uniforms trying to find something suitable for her to wear. It and the accompanying corset had been cleaned and pressed and she took the dress over to the mirror, holding it up in front of her – the style of her hair was perfectly matched to the gown.

Once she actually squeezed into it all and could take in the full effect, she hardly recognized herself – she looked taller, elegant, even, with a well-defined figure.

“You look beautiful, Hermione,” Ginny breathed enviously as she peered into the mirror over her friend’s shoulder – she looked like the adult she now was. Hermione ran her hands down her figure, feeling more than a little uncomfortable showing off what had been hidden by over-sized clothes the last nine months.

Sensing her discomfort, Ginny reassured her. “You look great, Hermione, trust me,” she soothed,
helping her slip on the headmistress’s old teaching robe, which she had been wearing all year – if anything, it further heightened her figure. Before she could dwell too much on it, Ginny pulled her away and out the door.

Even though the Room of Requirement had expanded to accommodate both students and guests, it was still crowded. The narrow graduates’ table and the one for their families were situated at the front of the room, parallel to the high table but just below the dais, and rather than benches, chairs had been provided – house tables were in their usual formation just behind them. The students who were milling around did double takes as Hermione made her way through the room, with Ginny close behind grinning madly at the surprised looks on everyone’s faces. When they reached the table, Hermione looked over at her mentor, who stopped mid-conversation to smile at her approvingly. Following her gaze, the potion professor turned and his lips parted briefly in surprise and then approval as he took her in, inch by excruciating inch – she blushed. Almost immediately, Ginny started to squeal, and the pair of them found themselves enveloped in hugs from both Harry and Ron. The Weasleys were there, too, and after admiring her dress, Molly started to regale Hermione about the uniform she had worn when she had been at Hogwarts some thirty-five years before. But they all took their places when the headmistress called for their attention – once the school song was sung they settled in at their tables. Minerva offered a quick welcome and informed them that remarks and the awarding of diplomas would follow their dinner – with a dramatic wave of her wand, the feast appeared.

Hermione tried to refrain from looking at the high table, but when she did glance up half-way through the meal she found him surveying the hall. When his eye finally lighted on her, he smirked, though not in his usual way. He was admiring, certainly, but there was something else there, too, like he knew something that she didn’t. She didn’t have much opportunity to think on it, distracted as she was by all of the conversations going on around her.

At the end of the meal the dishes, serving bowls, and platers disappeared, leaving everyone to admire the high gloss of the tables as they had their coffee. The room quieted as the headmistress approached the lectern and introduced the Minister for Magic, whose speech predictably focused on the recent war and the indomitable spirit of those who had fought for the light. Among those singled out for recognition was her professor. When his name was mentioned, there was loud applause and more than a few enthusiastic whoops and whistles. He looked like he was about to bolt the room, but Minerva stood next to his chair, with a firm grip on his shoulder, preventing him from doing any such thing. Shacklebolt then cited those who were now forever memorialized on the stones of the new entrance to the Great Hall, and enjoined the graduates – and all of the students congregated behind them – to remember their contributions by living well and fighting injustice wherever they found it.

When Shacklebolt finished, the headmistress returned to the podium. After recognizing the graduates in turn, and presenting them individually with their certificates – it was all Hermione could do not to look in his direction as she crossed the dais – Minerva moved on to her closing remarks.

“There are several announcements that I would like to make concerning the changes that students will find when they return to school in the fall,” she began. “First of all, Muggle Studies is undergoing some significant curricular changes – among other things, material concerning the two wizarding wars will be integrated into the program. Secondly, there will also be a new, advanced seventh-year course – to be offered every spring – focused solely on those wars.” Murmurs of approval rippled through the room. “The course will culminate in a weekend conference in May to which students as well as the wider-public will be invited to attend. The conference will feature lectures and presentations from war veterans and historical analysis by scholars. In respect of all this, two literary awards have been established – a gold quill for the best non-fictional account of some aspect of the wars, and a silver one, for a fictional work. The first of these awards will be made . . .
Minerva paused to let this bit of information sink in – once the room had quieted, she continued.

“Since this year’s recipient – *unanimously* chosen by a committee consisting of both Hogwarts staff and Ministry officials – managed to merge fiction and reality so seamlessly, they will be given *both* awards.” Minerva paused again, her eyes glittering as the room stilled expectantly. “Would J. H. Bailiff please come forward and be recognized.”

Heads turned in every direction, searching for the person who had captured and held their attention for so many months. Hermione stared in astonishment at her mentor, who after a moment beckoned to her. The eyes of hundreds of people slowly settled on the young woman in the fitted gold and crimson dress who was slowly getting up from her place and hesitantly making her way once more to the dais.

The gasps were audible and incredulity was writ large on virtually every face, professors and students alike. Then the room *erupted* – the cacophony was *deafening* as the realization that Hermione was the author sank in. By the time she reached her mentor – who was beaming proudly – everyone had gotten to their feet, applauding, shouting, and whistling wildly. It went on for several minutes, and she was nearly in tears as she took it all in. She spared a look at the high table, smiling at her teachers in turn until her eyes came to rest on one in particular at the end – even he was clapping, and now she understood the smile that had played at the corner of his lips all evening.

Finally, the headmistress raised her hands, gesturing for everyone to quiet down and resume their seats – they did so reluctantly.

“I know I speak for my colleagues, Miss Granger’s friends, and really everyone who knows this remarkable young woman when I say that she’s kept all of us on our toes for many years, but never more so than in these last few months. There is no question but that she will go forth and likewise enthral the wider world as well, as she has done with her story, *Love in a Time of War*.”

The room exploded again as Shacklebolt and Minerva formally presented her with the mounted gold and silver quills. She ducked her head and smiled shyly at everyone, going back to her seat as quickly as she could, embarrassed at all the attention. But the instant she stepped off the dais she was immediately enveloped by Harry and Ron, Ginny and Luna, the Weasleys, and all of the other students, who surged forward to congratulate her – no one heard the headmistress announce that the evening was now at a close.

It was some considerable time before the crowd began to thin out, and Hermione found that the staff had already left, including him. She politely declined the Weasleys’ invitation to join them for further celebrations back at the Burrow, claiming exhaustion from the evening’s events, although she was far from fatigued. After seeing them off – Harry and Ron were especially warm in their hugs – she was finally alone, and while it was getting late, she knew at least one person who would still be up. She had been waiting for this all evening – well, for *months*, actually – and she made her way down to the dungeons, clasping her awards tightly.
Denouement

Chapter Summary

Severus and Hermione are finally free to express their feelings for each other.

Chapter Notes

I am both elated to see this story completed, and yet more than a little sad as well. As I have already told some of you, I have lived with this story for a full year, now. The idea came to me over Christmas 2016 and I worked steadily on it through that spring. I started posting it in July, with weeks in between doing some careful editing. And now it is January 2018 and I have posted the last chapter. One of you (and you know who you are!) suggested some one-shots for the future - a couple of ideas have already presented themselves so I will give it some thought. But I have two stories still in progress that need attention. One of them is the long-promised sequel to Mind Over Matter - about half of it really is done, and I don't like to leave things unfinished, so I will be working on it this spring.

I want to thank all of you for reading, commenting, and giving me encouragement, and I will try my hardest to have something else up as soon as I can. And now, the conclusion of our hero's story . . . .

Denouement

Her descent into the dungeons seemed to take both forever and yet no time at all, such were her roiling emotions from the evening’s ceremony. As she neared, his door automatically opened, just as it usually did. Stepping hesitantly inside, she watched him throw back his drink and put the glass on the coffee table. Getting up and approaching her, he looked supremely pleased with himself. His coat was undone, revealing a pristine white shirt underneath, the top of which was distractingly open at the collar, exposing an enticing triangle of skin – she had never seen him so casual.

“You knew,” she said softly, lifting the awards slightly.

He smirked. “It was what took me to London yesterday. Given the desire to study the factors leading up to the war in a scholarly way,” he explained, “it was thought that creating these awards – and then making the first ones this evening – would highlight what we’re trying to do, which is to promote serious discussion.”

She glanced at the metal quills before looking up once more. “I hardly know what to say,” she said almost inaudibly. “I would have thought that the . . . the nature of the story would have disqualified it from this kind of recognition.”

“While it’s true that many of my colleagues initially couldn’t see beyond the sex,” he observed somewhat disparagingly, “that changed as the story progressed. Domitian and Perse’s encounters actually made the war seem even more real, more relevant,” he went on, running a finger down her
cheek. “They demonstrated in an immediate way just how high the stakes were for everyone involved – Domitian could have lost Perse in all the fighting, and that would have been simply . . . unbearable,” he said, almost to himself.

“Just as losing Domitian would have devastated Perse,” she added softly.

“And lest you think anyone was unduly pressured into the decision,” he continued more teasingly, “you should know that neither Minerva nor I sat on the committee – Flitwick made the nomination and the vote really was unanimous. Now,” he said, arching a brow, “does that adequately address all of the doubts and insufferable questions that are swirling in your mind?” All she could do was smile and nod shyly.

He relieved her of the awards and set them on his desk. Turning back to her, she reached out and tentatively put her palm on his chest, relishing the warmth of his body and the steady beat of his heart under her fingers. Snaking one hand around her waist and the other to the back of her head, he drew her in close, trailing his lips across her forehead, down her cheek, and then along her jaw line until they met their counterparts. The kiss was soft and leisurely. He slipped his tongue into her mouth and between her teeth, seeking and finding – she could taste the whiskey he had been drinking when she had come in. As the kiss intensified and she stepped more fully into his embrace, he abruptly stilled before pulling away, holding her at arm’s length – she looked at him questioningly.

“We . . . we don’t have to do anything this evening,” he said resolutely – her lips parted in confusion. He squeezed her shoulders reassuringly. “I have every intention of . . . of courting you, and doing so in a proper fashion, Miss Granger,” he announced rather formally.

Hermione’s mouth curved upwards into a tender smile. “Oh, professor,” she sighed, “what do you think you have been doing these last few months?”

It took a moment for what she was saying to sink in, but as it did, he tightened his grip and his previously strained expression morphed into one of hopefulness – but he wanted to be certain. “Are you sure?”

Again, she nodded bashfully.

He raised her hand to his mouth, his lips lightly touching it, and led her wordlessly to the room she had fantasized about ever since having first seen it some months before.

The bedroom was warm and lowly lit, just as inviting as it had always been whenever she had used the facilities, although her nervousness was making it difficult to appreciate fully. He pulled her into another passionate embrace and kissed her more forcefully, more urgently, as he pressed into her – she could feel him even through the folds of the gown. She hadn’t planned on saying anything, had thought it would be alright – if she could write about it, surely she could muddle through, relying on her Gryffindor courage – but that strategy wasn’t working. Being so close to him – and about to get even closer – she felt momentarily overwhelmed, and the restrictive garments were making it that much harder to breathe. Reflexively, she began to struggle in his arms. There was a searching look on his face when he learned back, and she realized that she had to come clean with him about the story.

“I . . . ,” she gulped, “I should tell you that . . . .” Her hands, which had been gliding over his shirt virtually of their own accord, faltered in their explorations as she sought for the right words.

He palmed her shoulder, massaging it encouragingly. “What?” he gently asked. She put a hand on her diaphragm and looked up at him a bit fearfully as she began to pant. Noting her distress, he at once assumed a calm demeanor. “Let’s get you out of these clothes,” he said soothingly, turning her
to unhook the back of her gown. He slipped it off her shoulders and pulled it down her hips, and while that improved things a bit, the corset underneath was also quite snug.

As the dress billowed softly to the floor, all movement on his part halted – she waited, but the only thing she could hear was his sudden and quite pronounced intake of breath. Emerging below the edge of the corset were two long straps – bisecting symmetrical globes mostly covered in green lace panties – and these were attached to black . . . silk . . . stockings.

“Professor?” she asked haltingly, trying to look behind her – his eyes were fixated on her bum. “Seriously?” she huffed, somewhat indignantly.

Her question broke the trance, and he raised his eyes. “You have no idea,” he grinned lasciviously, as he began to loosen the laces. Once she was breathing normally again, he came in close, his hands resting at her waist. “I think it’s time you started calling me Severus,” he mumbled, kissing, tasting, and pecking her neck – she couldn’t help but snicker nervously given their current position. When he got to the end of her shoulder, he spun her around to face him. He stared openly – and hungrily – at her plumped up breasts as he backed away and lifted her hand so that she could step fully out of the gown.

Merciful Merlin, he nearly whimpered aloud – she was wearing the high-heeled shoes she had worn at Christmas and New Year’s, and the full sight of her nearly broke him. Free of the dress, he ran fingertips along the top of the corset as his other hand slipped to the back, following the vertical boning down to the top of her derriere. He paused briefly before going lower, cupping her cheek, giving it a mischievous squeeze and pressing his erection to her once more.

She could feel the tension deep inside her, knew she was as ready for him as she could be, but the pleasurable sensations – as well as his powerful masculine form and increasingly intimate and insistent caresses – continued to unnerve her.

“I . . . I have a confession to make,” she all but whispered, closing her eyes and hoping it would make it easier.

“And what’s that,” he replied almost absently in his attempt to slip his warm hand between her legs from behind.

“I really don’t have much . . . experience on which to draw, here,” she admitted timorously. The stroking went on for a moment longer and then ceased. He slowly drew back.

“What?” he asked in confusion, his voice deep with as yet unfulfilled desire. When she didn’t immediately respond, he put a finger under her chin and tilted her head up.

“Hermione? Look at me.”

She opened her eyes, desperately wishing he would use Legilimency and spare her yet further mortification. As he grasped what she was trying to say, he looked at her with disbelief and then started to laugh – hard – and she didn’t quite know whether to be utterly amazed or thoroughly enraged by it.

“Well I don’t think it that amusing,” she huffed, her hands perched provocatively on her hips.

She wasn’t expecting the hug he then gave her, or the indulgence kiss to the top of her head. He laughed a bit more before drawing back.

“What about all those sex scenes?” he asked humorously.
“I . . . I just . . . just made them up,” she confessed, blushing deeply.

“You have a most vivid imagination, Miss Granger,” he replied, brushing a stray curl before leaning in. “Would you like to find out how accurate you were?” he asked seductively.

“Yes, please,” she puffed hopefully as she self-consciously started to fumble with the buttons on his shirt – it was quickly discarded, as was his coat. Scars marred his chest and she traced the largest one with a finger, marveling at what he had endured for years in his service to the light. As she ghosted her fingers through the fine black hair sprinkling his pale skin, he grasped the front of the corset and, starting at the top of the busk, began to unhook the metal hoops from the studs with marked expertise. She didn’t hear the garment drop behind her – enthralled as was she in her own explorations – and paused just long enough to have her short camisole pulled over her head, but when she felt him massaging her breasts, thumbing her nipples and leaning down to sooth her skin with his lips and tongue, her attention faltered and there was only sensation. Pure and completely stupefying sensation.

With barely a wave of his hand, the duvet flew to the bottom of the bed and she felt the edge of the mattress at the back of her knees. Continuing to indulge his months-long fascination with her mouth, he lowered her to the bed. She whimpered when he pulled slightly away, even though he did so simply in order to attend to her aching breasts once more – she had never realized how much pleasure could be drawn from nipping them as he did. He moved further south, and she twisted and giggled when he dipped his tongue into her navel. Encountering her garter belt, he undid the clasps, skillfully and quite unhurriedly rolling the stocking down her legs before drawing off the belt itself. He ran his warm hands up her calves and knees and paused at the top of her thighs. Slipping a finger under the elastic of her green panties, he inched the back of it along her mons. She couldn’t help but freeze in anticipation when he continued his trajectory. He removed his hand and tugged on the top of her underwear, dragging them off her legs – she had never felt so exposed in her life and could feel the rising blush suffusing her skin. She fully expected him to dispose of the rest of his clothing and then join her, but was surprised to feel him moving up her legs once again. When he stopped halfway, insinuating his hands between her knees and pressing a kiss to the inside of her thigh, she realized what he was going to do. She wasn’t entirely certain how she felt about it, and hesitantly threaded her fingers through his hair.

“You . . . you don’t . . . have to . . . .” she struggled to get out, embarrassed to put a name to it.

“Oh, but I must,” he said emphatically. “You didn’t write about this – perhaps you couldn’t imagine it,” he smirked as he looked up her body, “but it most certainly should be in your repertoire – literary or otherwise.” He kissed the inside of her other thigh, and when she tried to clench them, he shushed her. “Open for me, Hermione,” he coaxed, pushing them further apart.

“I don’t think . . . .” she began tensely.

“Don’t . . . think,” he interrupted.

He put his lips to her in exactly the same manner that he kissed her mouth, she was astonished to feel. It felt . . . so . . . good, and she couldn’t stifle a breathless moan. She felt his tongue sweep upwards along her fissure and then linger – it was so intense that she involuntarily tried to jerk away from him, but he held her steady. Gently he stroked her, teased and suckled her until she was panting again. He tentatively slipped a finger inside her. She was exquisitely tight – it would be unparalleled delight to push into that, though he would have to do so with care.

She was close, now, and his focus returned to her pleasure point, humming his encouragement. The vibrations sent her over the edge – she froze and started to vocalize her climax. She bore down on his finger and he could feel the twinges, pulsing strong and rapid at first, but then growing weaker and
tapering off as she came down. As he pulled away, she heard the buckle on his belt, followed by a swish as he hurriedly yanked it through the loops on his trousers. She watched in fascination through half-open lids as he stripped, and was wholly unable to suppress a surprised gasp when he sprang free from his underwear. He couldn’t help but smirk with satisfaction as he moved upwards, kissing her lightly as he went before settling between her open thighs. She strained for his lips, somewhat shocked to taste her desire there.

“That . . . was . . . .”

“Was . . . what?” he mumbled in amusement when she didn’t finish the sentence.

“I . . . I don’t know,” she said, clearly a bit dazed, “I . . . I have nothing to compare it with.”

He raised his head and her expression captivated him entirely – he had never seen that loving and sated look before, not from Lily and certainly not from the women he had had brief encounters with over the years. She raised a hand to his face – he closed his eyes and leaned into it, kissing her palm. He did the same when she caressed his other cheek. Then her lips touched his, and they were resolute and assured.

She pushed on his shoulders and he shifted to his back – straddling his midsection, she ran her hands across his chest and bashfully bent to taste his raised nipples. He kneaded her shoulders as she began to slide lower, pausing frequently to press soft kisses to his skin. She tried not to stare when she got to his hips, but knew the blush on her cheeks gave her away. Settling on his lower legs, she confronted it directly, curling her fingers through his wiry hair and looking up at him for . . . for what, she wasn’t sure. His lazy smile was encouraging, as were his fingers carding through her hair, and she brushed his length with the back of her hand. When he arched up and hissed, she grew bolder, reaching under to cup him. She was startled to see his member twitch, and it drew her attention to the small bead of liquid at the tip. Touching it with a finger, she spread it over the head and then feathered his shaft with her fingers. The skin was as soft and smooth as silk, but he was firm beneath the surface – quite firm. On her second pass, she wrapped her fingers carefully around him and moved her hand downwards once more, her touch light and unsure.

He thought he would go mad, and she jumped when he unexpectedly covered her hand with his, moving them to the base of his penis and gripping it firmly while forcefully pushing into his groin. At first, she thought he was in pain, given his agonized expression, but when he opened his eyes, her mouth fell open at the look of pure lust reflected in them. After a moment, he released her. “You may continue,” he said in a raspy voice. Under different circumstances, the words might have been patronizing, but the snort that followed it almost made her laugh.

She knew the Latin for it, of course, but not the technique. Trial and error was decidedly not a part of her intellectual make up – one should never do anything without sufficient research and preparation – but it seemed appropriate here, so she leaned down and ran her tongue up from the bottom all the way to the top. The effect was electrical and he jolted upwards. She smiled smugly and then did it again, but this time lingering at the head, swirling her tongue along the rim – he fisted the bed sheets and clenched his jaw in an effort to stay still. Emboldened, she took his head into her mouth, watching for his reaction – he gripped her thighs, trying desperately not to buck. She continued her trek until she had taken most of him in – he was warm and pleasantly salty. Clasping his base, she raised her head and lowered it, then up and down again. After repeating this a few more times, he abruptly grabbed her wrist and pulled it roughly away – she let go of him with a pop and looked at him worryingly.

“Wasn’t I doing it right?” she asked anxiously.

Her flushed face, swollen lips, and bare breasts with their pert nipples contrasted almost ridiculously
with her naïve expression. But somehow, he couldn’t laugh – he wanted her so much it hurt.

He pulled her up next to him and then positioned himself on top of her. Dipping his head, he poured everything he was – everything he wanted to be – into a deep and lingering kiss, and she returned his passion. Shifting slightly, he reached between her thighs – his finger slipped easily inside. He moved in and out unhurriedly, introducing a second finger incrementally as he watched her attentively for discomfort. When her brow furrowed, he paused.

“Does that hurt?” he asked.

“It . . . it’s tight,” she replied a little uncertainly, and he gradually resumed his movements as he nibbled on her lips. Soon, though, her hips were responding in rhythm against his hand. Withdrawing, he rubbed the tip of his member back and forth, lingering at her clit. She arched upwards to meet him. He slipped just inside her entrance and felt resistance – when she opened her eyes, he found them as dark with desire as his own.

“This is going to sting a bit,” he whispered against her lips.

Her response was to fling her arms around his shoulders and kiss him fiercely, and at that moment he pushed in. The pain was sharp – she gritted her teeth to keep from wincing aloud. It was a strange though not unpleasant sensation, feeling that full, and as the discomfort subsided, she gradually relaxed.

He had felt her stiffen, and beads of perspiration broke out across his forehead as he struggled for control – he had never been enveloped so tightly – but he wouldn’t continue until she gave him a sign. As her arms loosened from his shoulders, he slowly pushed further in until he was fully cradled. He lifted himself onto his forearms and stilled his body, searching her face for distress.

Looking at her, lightly brushing the tendrils at her hairline, he saw what he had been truly missing for more than two decades. He had never wanted anything more in his life, not even Lily he faintly realized in the deepest recesses of his mind. His childhood friend had been a mere fantasy, and it shattered for good in that moment – what he had, right there, in his arms, was the real thing and nothing could ever compare with it. He nipped at her lips, teasing her as he began to rock, tentatively at first, but more vigorously when he felt her feet slip up his thighs and beyond his backside to rest at the small of his back. With one arm under her hips to hold her even closer, he leaned forward, and she favored him with an elemental cry emanating from deep within – her hands clutched his shoulders and she frantically ground her hips.

Her second orgasm took her virtually unawares, arising unexpectedly when he had changed positions. She froze momentarily, and the instant she groaned out his name and began to thrash, his own thrusts became increasingly frenetic until they culminated in him hoarsely calling out her name in his rich baritone. He didn’t know how long he hovered, panting above her – unable to do anything except but let it all seep into him – but when he opened his eyes she was smiling at him, warmly, tenderly, and with love. He knew it, felt it, and reciprocated it.

After a few moments, he shifted and lay back, taking her with him – she sprawled a leg atop his thighs and curled her small hand on his chest before snuggling her head into the crook of his arm. Once she quieted, he languidly stroked her arm.

“You saved me,” he murmured almost inaudibly.

“I think we saved each other,” she replied sleepily, her words rumbling into his side.

“Yes,” he huffed in agreement, “but I meant from the Shrieking Shack. Why didn’t you tell me it
was you who bandaged my wounds and got me to the infirmary?”

He again felt her stiffen, this time as if she was expecting him to be angry, and she started to rub his chest soothingly. “I didn’t want you to feel... obligated – to me or to anyone else. I wanted... I wanted you to be free...”

The force of that sentiment hit him like a physical blow, and he had no words – none whatsoever – to describe the all-consuming feeling that swiftly washed over him. It was as though he was seeing, feeling, even breathing for the very first time in his life, and he was suddenly and acutely conscious of a drowning weight having fallen away from his shoulders... from his very soul, replaced by something vibrant, uplifting, and intensely satisfying. He couldn’t analyze or label it, only revel in the purity of it.

Since speech eluded him, he simply squeezed her comfortingly in response. Wandlessly, the bedclothes were drawn up, and soon she relaxed, her even susurrations signaling that she had fallen asleep. He lay awake for a long time, not wanting to miss even a single moment enjoying the feel of her in his arms, but eventually, gentle Hypnos – usually as elusive as good fortune had been in his previous life – finally favored him with peaceful sleep.

He didn’t know how long they slept, but when he woke – flush against her back with one arm draped possessively over her hip – he was suffused with a sense of contentment. But there was one more thing he had to do, and he carefully eased away so as not to wake her – he quickly dressed and slipped out of the room.

It was dark – it wouldn’t be light for a couple of hours yet – and everything was quiet as he threaded his way familiarly through the corridors of the castle. He took the steps to Minerva’s office slowly and deliberately. When he reached the door, he tried the handle, only half surprised that it was unlocked. The lamp on her desk was lit, which also didn’t much surprise him – it was almost as if she had deliberately left it on. Throughout the course of the school year, Minerva had encouraged him – with all the subtlety typical of a Gryffindor – to talk with the late headmaster, using words like closure to spur him on. Certainly he had a hundred-and-one things to say to him, but he doubted he would have gotten as far as number ten on the list without irreparably shredding the canvas. But now...

Movement caught his eye, and he saw the former spy master – the one who had always been the most demanding of the two in his life – shift in his chair and look at him expectantly. He strode over to the portrait, stopping directly in front of it.

“I’m free, Albus,” he whispered, a note of awe and wonder in his voice. “I’m finally fucking free.”

The old man’s expression softened and he smiled affectionately. “I’m glad, Severus, truly, I am – it’s nothing more than you deserve.”

He nodded slightly in acknowledgement – it would take years to work through everything that had happened between them, but it was a start. He turned and put out the light, closing the door noiselessly behind him.

All he could think of as he retraced his steps to the dungeon was the warm, welcoming soul waiting for him in his bed. He couldn’t take his eyes off of her as he swiftly undressed and slipped between the sheets – she mumbled as he drew her close and traced the exposed column of her neck with his cold nose.

“Where were you?” she asked dreamily.
“There was something I needed to do,” he replied, cupping a breast and teething her ear lobe.

“It couldn’t wait?” she questioned as she shifted to give him better access.

“No, it couldn’t wait,” he whispered, “just as this can’t wait.” She smiled, fully giving in to his demanding caresses. Everything that had led up to this particular moment in time had completely shifted his perspective on . . . on everything, really, and nothing would ever be the same again. He could live with that, happily live with that for the rest of his life, and he knew she could, too.

*Five Years Later . . . .*

Having made his purchases at the apothecary, he strolled in to Florish and Botts. He scanned the immediate vicinity and sighed with resignation – of course she was nowhere to be seen. He wandered over to one of several tables in the center of the room that featured recent publications – he opened a couple of volumes, skimmed through some pages, and then put them back. Glancing at the second table, he saw titles relating to herbology – it was spring, after all – but he came to a full stop at the third display. The corners of his lips curled fondly upwards – he picked up one of the books and ran his hand down the dust jacket. At the top was a short blurb announcing that the tome was the fourth in the series *Spying for the Ministry*. Flipping it to look at the back cover, he came face to face with a black and white magical photo of the author – it was his very favorite, and he had a larger copy of it sitting on his desk. Her hair was loose and she was smiling – the warmth in what he knew were gold flecked amber eyes made his throat constrict with emotion, just as it always did. Beneath the photo was a brief biography.

*Hermione Granger, Order of Merlin First Class, teaches various subjects part-time at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where she also lives with her partner, Severus Snape, Order of Merlin First Class and Professor of Potions at HSWW. In addition to the series, Spying for the Ministry, Ms. Granger has written two historical novels based on well-known and beloved figures from the school’s distinguished past. Her first story, Love in a Time of War, originally serialized in Witches Only and first winner of both the Gold and Silver Quills, is soon to be published in one complete volume. She and Professor Snape regularly participate in the annual conference – held at the school every May – on the two wizarding wars. Ms. Granger also currently chairs the committee that chooses winners of the Quill awards.*

Just then, he saw the award-winning writer sidle up to the counter with three books. When he joined her, she started to defend herself.

“Before you start, you know I always get lust of the eyes when we come in here,” she explained sheepishly as he arched a brow at her purchases. A few people looked in their direction at her remark, though his scowl prompted them to resume their shopping. “Two Arithmancy texts, and for you,” she said, holding up a book, “*Potions and Muggle Chemistry.*” After paying the clerk, she dropped the purchases into her bag and started to leave, but he steered her to the table featuring her latest novel. She opened it up, beaming as she ran her fingers over the pristine pages. After a quick scan of the room to ensure they weren’t being watched, he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to her temple.

“You know, I don’t believe you’ve signed my copy, yet,” he commented.

“Haven’t I?” she asked airily.

“Perhaps you could redress that situation this afternoon?” he proposed enticingly, just loud enough that she and she alone could hear.

“What shall I write in it this time?” she teasingly whispered back.
He quirked a slight smile as he looked into amber eyes flecked with gold.

“Perhaps we could spend the afternoon . . . discussing it,” he suggested impertinently.

A grin bloomed across her face, and she grabbed the model for her stories firmly by the hand and dragged him quickly from the store. Out in the street, people barely batted an eye at the local author tugging determinedly on the arm of her tall companion, who as usual was dressed head to toe in unrelieved black and robes that billowed behind him – the scene had played out too many times over the years for anyone to do more than smile indulgently at the obviously besotted couple.

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