

CHAPTER 18

ON HERMIONE'S WORD

"I still can't believe I failed," grumbled Ron, lounging in the sitting area at Grimmauld Place, hours later, with Hermione, Harry, and Hannah at his side.

"Hold still, Ron!" snapped Hermione, struggling to adjust the straps on a large sling cradling his left arm.

"Ouch! Watch it! You're fixing it too tight!"

"Would you prefer if your arm fell off, again? You sent half a dozen first year girls to the hospital wing after they fainted from the sight of it slopping about in your soup bowl at lunchtime!"

"How long must I wear this bloody sling anyway? It's painful!"

"Madam Pomfrey said you must wear it until the adhering potion fixes your arm in place; it'll take at least a week."

"You'd think that she could've put it right, straight away. The Ministry managed to set Susan right last year when she splinched her leg off during Apparition practice!"

"Yes, but she stayed put after she splinched herself. She didn't continue to Apparate all over the room trying to repair the damage on her own. Honestly, Ronald, you're lucky Twycross stopped you before you ended up a permanent human jigsaw!"

"Did you hear all those ruddy pumpkin heads from the Slytherin House laughing at me? It was downright humiliating!"

"Settle down, Ronald. I'm sure they weren't laughing at you. They were probably just...laughing," reasoned Hermione.

"Oh, they were laughing at *him* alright, Granger," countered Hannah. "Chortling, actually."

"You don't know that for certain!" snapped Hermione. "They could have been going on about anything!"

"Don't patronize the poor bloke, Granger! Lying to him it isn't going to change the fact that he failed, and rather miserably too," said Hannah with a pompous grin.

“Thanks for clearing it up, Hannah. I hadn’t realized!” said Ron sourly, propping his feet heavily on the coffee table and taking in several disgruntled gulps of his mead.

Hermione’s expression was equally embittered.

“Lighten up, Ron!” scoffed Hannah. “Loads of people fail their Apparition exams the first time around, although most of them stop trying after separating themselves into three or four parts.”

Ron’s scowl was piercing.

Harry couldn’t help but laugh, though he felt entirely sorry for his red-hair-ornamented best friend.

“Aw, come on, Ronald,” said Hannah. “I admire your gusto! You certainly didn’t give up easily, even after shredding yourself into a pile of confetti.” She clapped her arm reassuringly around the cuff of his shoulder and said kindly, “Why don’t I head up to the kitchen and get you some more mead. I believe I have a whole bottle up there with your name on it.”

“Sounds great,” said Ron with a loud hiccup.

“Some more for you, Granger?”

“No, thank you. I have a feeling I’ll have to tend to Ron later.”

Hannah and Harry chuckled when they absorbed the full view of Ron’s newly acquired, lazy-eyed, drunken stare.

“How about you, Potter?” said Hannah.

“Maybe just one more, but that’s it, then. I don’t believe I can handle more than that,” he said with a bit of a slur to his speech.

“I agree. Besides, too much mead makes you snore terribly...and once you get going, even the Muffolo Charm won’t do the trick to silence you.”

Harry gave a brief chortle.

Hannah retreated upstairs into the secret kitchen, where she took to fumbling through the liquor bottles in search of the jug of mead. She recovered a large red marble decanter from the far back of the middle shelf, securing it by the neck in the tightly fisted palm of her left hand.

When she moved to set the bottle on the counter space, she was suddenly startled by a loud *CREeeaaAK!* and *STRrrrrETCH!* reverberation coming from the direction of the

pantry. She wheeled around with a start to meet the noise, watching anxiously as the magically concealed entryway to the corridor rapidly materialized and burst open with a loud BANG! She moved to greet the potential culprit with her arms crossed boldly in front of her, expecting to see Remus, or a fellow cohort from the Order passing through the enchanted entrance. Her face was fully prepared for the task, wholly wrenched with official condemnation and ready to support her undertaking of reprimanding the fool behind the rude disturbance. Much to her discontent, not a single soul faded into view.

Instinct had her reaching into the back pocket of her denim flair skirt for her wand and whipping it boldly before her in preparation for her defense. Unfortunately, she found herself the immediate and unanticipated prey of a silent Disarming Spell. Her wand was struck from the clutches of her insurgent grasp and cast into the far left hand corner of the room. Next, she felt the potent grip of a sturdy pair of hands secure her by the waist and the steamy sensation of a hungry, delectable kiss petition her lips while an invisible force carted her across the room and perched her upon the edge of the kitchen table.

“Severus!” hissed Hannah, swatting at the obscured space in front her until the palm of her hand met his invisible, densely robed torso.

Severus let out a low sinister snigger.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” spat Hannah.

Severus’s voice rang out low and compellingly as he replied, “I came to see you. I thought we could engage in a little bodily quest.”

“Are you insane! Potter and his friends are just downstairs!”

“And they’re quite plastered too. They’ll never be the wiser,” uttered Severus mischievously.

“And how exactly did you come to such a deduction? Are you *spying* on us?”

“Not spying, just checking in and ensuring all is well.”

“Liar!”

“I am not lying!”

“Pffft! I may not be able to worm my way into your mind, Severus, but I know jealousy when it flounces around in front of me, even when it’s invisible! So, spill it! How long have you been carrying on like this, *‘Making sure all is well’?*”

The room fell awkwardly silent.

Finally, Severus responded softly, “A few weeks.”

“A few weeks?! Oh, that’s rich! It’s nice to know you have such faith in my abilities, Severus, really it is!” Hannah snarled.

“You and Mr. Potter seem to be getting on rather impeccably.”

“Ah-HA! I knew it! THAT is why you are truly here!”

“He’s got quite a crush on you.”

“So?” snapped Hannah.

“So? How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t FEEL anything about it! I’m simply seeing to my assignment and abiding by Voldemort’s orders for me to stick close to Potter and his friends!”

“Yes, you’ve done so rather compellingly, I must say: all the handholding episodes, the enchanted mirrors, the occasional tender kiss upon his cheek.”

“Bugger off, Severus! How do you expect me to get Potter to confide in me if I’m not kind to him?”

“You can be KIND to Potter without relating to him in such intimate fashions.”

“Ugh! It’s no use arguing with you, is it? No matter what I say, you’ll contest it!”

“I’m contesting THIS, because, whether you realize it or not, Voldemort is quite conscious of Potter’s feelings for you!”

“Oh?” Hannah sneered. “And how do you reckon he’s come to such a profound revelation?”

“Rumors abound, Hannah. You’ve done much in the manner of parading your personal sentiments about.”

“MY personal sentiments?” she scoffed. “Give me a little credit, would you, Severus?! I’ve developed an artificial camaraderie with the boy, that’s it!”

“Be that as it may, I’m rather concerned about the intensity of the bond that has formed between you and Potter. However artificial you declare it to be, I assure you, Potter feels much differently. If you are not cautious, his high regard for you could prove to be quite a hindrance to our plan.”

“And what exactly do you suggest I do about it, Severus, hm?” she inquired testily.

“For the time being, I believe it would be in your best interest to request a reprieve from your duties as Potter’s sentinel and terminate his weekend retreats here,” said Snape resolutely.

“But, Voldemort has ordered the exact opposite of me! He’ll go mad if I he discovers I’ve forfeited my post willingly!”

“We’ll tell him that Remus removed you from duty in order to take on the position, himself. That shouldn’t come as a surprise to the Dark Lord. After all, Remus *is* Potter’s guardian. Besides, you’ll still have the capability of keeping watch over Potter and his friends to a similar degree through the use of your Invisibility Potion.”

“What am I to say to Remus?”

“Tell him you’re feeling overworked and you need a bit of a break. I am certain that he will cheerfully accept those terms without question, as he clearly opposed the appointment of you to the post in the first place.”

“And how do you expect me to explain away my excessive absence to him if I go carrying on with that Invisibility Potion all hours of the day? Surely, he’ll want to know what I’m doing with all my newly acquired spare time!”

“Simply say you’re resting, or visiting friends. I guarantee you, Remus will be far too busy tending to Potter to keep such close watch over you.”

Hannah grew highly suspect. “What *exactly* is going on here, Severus? I thought that perhaps this might have been about you being jealous. However, judging by the desperation in your tenor, I’m willing to bet there is a much deeper reasoning behind all of this. So, spill it!”

Severus hesitated before answering, “Relax, there’s no cause for alarm at the present time.”

Hannah gasped lightly. “Voldemort’s thinking of using me to seduce Potter to get more information out of him, isn’t he?”

Severus let out a low hiss.

“That creep! I can’t believe this!” ranted Hannah, rubbing the heels of her hands anxiously into her temples.

“Settle down. Nothing’s been made official, yet.”

“Settle down? Sure, that’s easy for you to say! You’re not the one who’s going to have to do all the dirty work!”

“Do you think I want my lover throwing herself about in such a reprehensible manner, especially to that *Potter*?!”

“Ugh! You better find a way to put this right for me, Severus, or you’ll have a lot more than Voldemort’s wrath to contend with!”

“That is why we’re removing you from your post before Potter’s feelings for you get out of hand. If we can keep him apart from you, perhaps he’ll grow weary and put his romantic interests elsewhere,” said Severus in a soft comforting tone.

Hannah could feel his hands caressing her shoulders reassuringly and his lips brushing lightly against hers. She sighed heavily as his soothing touch calmed her, swayed her. It always had.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll speak with Remus about it, tonight. I’m sure I can convince him to keep quiet about the circumstances behind the changes so that I can manage to remain in Potter’s good graces.”

“Excellent,” said Severus softly. Then changing his tone to a more roguish nature, he murmured, “Now, where were we?”

Hannah felt the sensation of Severus’s hungry hands slipping beneath the fabric of her skirt. His lips rushed along the silky fair skin of her neck and moved to reclaim her mouth.

“Uh-uh, stop it!” she whispered raspily in reproach.

“What’s the matter? I thought you always enjoyed our little invisibility games.”

“It’s not that! It’s — I can’t be up here messing about with you when those three are in the next room! It’s weird. Besides, they could catch you.”

“I won’t get caught. I’ve taken enough potion to remain invisible for hours,” said Severus wickedly, undoing the buttons on her blouse.

“Yeah, great,” said Hannah, swatting away at his invisible and wandering hands. “Instead, I’ll be stretched out across the kitchen table, whispering sweet nothings into empty space, and they’ll think I’m carrying on with myself!”

“So?” Severus said imperviously, leaning forward and dressing her in more of his kisses.

“Stop it, Severus!” she hissed, shoving away from him, rolling off the table, onto the floor, and tumbling into two of the chairs. She let out a loud shriek as her body came to a rest with a heavy THUD against the floor and both chairs piled on top of her.

Severus chortled.

“Very funny!” snarled Hannah, attempting to untangle herself from beneath the furniture. “Great, my skirt’s caught on the arm of one of these blasted chairs!” She bit her lip in frustration, grunting aloud as she tried to free herself, “It’s caught on this loose screw here.”

“Hannah? Is everything alright up there?” called Harry, tromping up the staircase to reach her.

“Oh no! It’s Potter!” gasped Hannah. “Quick, Severus, *HIDE!*”

“I think I’ve got that part covered,” replied Severus flatly.

“Hannah!” exclaimed Harry concernedly when he saw her scattered about the floor beneath the array of toppled furniture. “Are you alright? What’s happened to you?”

“I-uh-I’m fine. I saw a rat. It-uh...startled me and....Ugh!” she squealed, tugging madly on the hem of her skirt, which was still affixed to the side of the chair.

Harry smirked. “Here, let me help you.” He shoved the toppled furniture aside, knelt before her, and began working with the material of her skirt to separate it from the screw. “You’ve really got this tangled in here good,” he grunted.

“Tell me about it,” grumbled Hannah.

And looking to Hannah’s half undone blouse, Harry noticed her lingerie screaming out from beneath it. He blushed lightly and said, “You might want to uh,” he motioned to her chest, “fix that.”

“Oh!” gasped Hannah, leaning back to button her top. Without thinking, she swung her leg around in an attempt to turn her back to him, and Harry, who was still striving to unhitch her skirt, was yanked sharply forward.

“Wait, wait!” he said, losing his balance, knocking her over, and landing on top of her. There was a loud RIP, and the corner hem of Hannah’s skirt tore away from the chair.

“OW!” she exclaimed, through a loud snort and a fit of giggles.

“Sorry!” said Harry with a chortle. “At least you’re not attached to the chair anymore.”

Hannah continued to laugh.

“Morley!” howled a familiar voice from the location of the enchanted cupboard doorway, which stood fully ajar.

“Remus!” exclaimed Hannah in surprise, shoving Harry off her, and scrambling to her feet.

“What’s going on here?!” Remus hollered crossly.

“Nothing! I fell — there was a rat — and my skirt —” rambled Hannah incoherently.

“Her skirt was caught on the chair,” said Harry instantly in an attempt to clarify Hannah’s explanation. “I was helping her.”

“Her skirt was caught on the chair?” echoed Remus skeptically. “And you were helping her?”

“Well-yeah,” answered Harry breathlessly.

“While lying on top of her?”

“I fell,” said Harry innocently.

Remus’s face curdled as he addressed Hannah’s open blouse. “Was that before or after her blouse came undone?”

“Wh-I-it,” stuttered Harry, taking a good look at Hannah’s disheveled appearance and realizing that the circumstances were most certainly NOT playing out in his favor.

Hannah rolled her eyes and droned, “Remus, once again, it’s not what you think.”

“Zip it, Morley!” barked Remus. “Harry, you wait downstairs. Hannah and I need to have a little chat.”

“Honestly, Remus, nothing happened, I swear! I was merely helping her!” squeaked Harry.

“Harry, DOWNSTAIRS, now!” hollered Remus.

Harry scoffed, and with a disgruntled show of arms waving madly over his head, he plodded off into the secret room.

“So,” said Remus, turning to meet Hannah. “Where is he?”

Hannah’s face contorted with befuddlement as she continued to fuss with the buttons on her blouse to fix it closed. “Where is *who*?”

“Don’t play stupid with me! That blouse of yours didn’t come undone all by itself! And by the looks of Harry’s troubled nature, I believe him when he says he wasn’t the culprit! Now where did your LOVER run off to?”

“What are you going on about, Remus?” said Hannah irritably. “I was startled by a rat running around the kitchen,” (Which was the absolute truth, as the term “*rat*” most certainly expressed her current opinion of Severus.) “I hopped up on the table and fell.”

“And your blouse popped open?”

“What’s so surprising about that?” she said, standing to her feet and fluffing out her hair. “It could happen!”

“I’m more apt to believe the ‘*rat*’ did it.”

Hannah made a face. She swore she heard Severus sniggering in the background.

Then, motioning to the kitchen pantry, Remus proceeded with his merciless interrogation, “And what about the enchanted doorway leading into the corridor? I suppose that just swung open on its own, as well?”

“It was like that when I came up here. I thought you left it open,” she said coolly.

“Alright, that’s it!” Remus snarled. “Either you reveal to me the truth about what’s going on here, or I’m removing you from your role as Harry’s sentinel!”

Hannah smiled a sinister smile and replied softly, “It’s funny you should mention that, Remus...”

Harry tromped off into the sitting area of the secret room and plunked himself malcontentedly into one of the chairs by the fireside.

“What’s going on up there? We heard yelling,” said Ron curiously, taking a large swig of his mead.

“Aw, Remus caught me lying on top of Hannah.”

Ron, in an off-guard demonstration of astonishment, spit his mouthful of mead all over Harry.

“Thanks, Ron,” grumbled Harry, tugging at the front of his t-shirt to try to drain the beads of excess liquid off the surface of it.

“Harry!” gasped Hermione in reproach. “What do you mean Remus caught you lying on top of Hannah?”

“Knock it off, Hermione, would you? It’s not what you think. Hannah fell and got her skirt caught on one of the chairs. I was trying to help her and I lost my balance and fell on

top of her. Of course, Remus just happened to pick *that* precise instant to barge in on us and he went MENTAL.”

“I reckon so,” said Ron understandably.

“What’s that supposed to mean, *I reckon so?!’*” spat Harry defensively.

“Nothing,” said Ron dismissively.

Harry was unconvinced. “Ron?” he said in a commanding and edgy tenor.

“I just overheard Remus and Dad talking earlier. Remus seems to think there’s something going on between you and Hannah and that the two of you are trying to cover it up.”

“ARGH! When is he going to stop going on about that!” spat Harry in frustration.

“No offense mate, but you certainly haven’t gone to any great lengths to veil your affections for her,” said Ron.

“And she certainly hasn’t made much of an effort to enforce any boundaries on him,” chimed Hermione.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Harry crossly to Hermione.

“It MEANS that Remus is right about one thing; the two of you carry on as though you were boyfriend and girlfriend, *not* minder and associate.”

“That’s funny, it doesn’t seem that way to me!” countered Harry defensively. “It’s not as though she and I go about spending our days and nights snogging each other!”

Hermione looked to him impatiently. As if she were lecturing some sort of inexperienced child, she said, “Harry, intimate relationships are not ALL about physical intimacy.”

Ron snorted.

Hermione flashed Ron a sweltering glare, then, clearing her throat, she pressed on, “As I was saying, Harry, intimate relationships are composed of many factors aside from physical associations. Those factors include mutual trust, a solid emotional connection, effective communication, mutual respect, and core beliefs. It’s all relative, really.”

“Except for physical part,” interjected Ron crassly. “That always tends to get pushed aside and replaced with silly things like unwarranted trips to the library, or obsessive study habits.”

Unfortunately, for Ron, Hermione understood the implication behind his words all too perfectly. She grunted aloud in disapproval and fired a powerful Slapping Hex at him, knocking his bandaged arm clear across the sitting area.

“Nice one, Hermione! My arm will never heal properly on the count of you acting sore all the time!” shouted Ron. He stomped off to retrieve his arm, struggling to affix the appendage to the pit of his shoulder socket.

“Perhaps, you should learn to hold your tongue once in a while, Ronald!”

“Guys, please!” breathed Harry exhaustively, and redirecting his concentration on Hermione, he inquired hopefully, “So, Hermione, are you saying you think she likes me, you know, as more than a friend?”

Hermione scoffed. “Honestly, Harry, don’t you know anything about women?”

Harry was slightly embarrassed by her callously delivered implication.

“I believe it’s *more* than apparent that she’s falling for you. Everyone thinks so,” she said with a swift certainty.

Harry’s self-conscious slate was wiped clean upon ingesting Hermione’s exhilarating proclamation. Admittedly, he suspected this truth all along, although for some reason it didn’t fully register with him until it was confirmed aloud by someone objective, particularly by someone like Hermione. She always had a knack for looking beyond the surface of matters and discovering their deeper hidden meanings.

He focused on the top of the stairwell to the secret room kitchen, where out of sight, stood Hannah.

“So, why doesn’t she just say so? I mean, she knows how much I like her,” he said impulsively.

“Ugh!” grunted Hermione impatiently. “Harry, don’t you get it? She’s still in love with that man she’s seeing!”

Harry made a face showing he was totally lost in her point and said, in what he thought was a reasonable manner, “Shouldn’t she just talk to him, or me, make some kind of decision or—”

“Harry, love is not as cut and dry as you boys make it out to be!” interjected Hermione snappishly. “Hannah has been dating that man for nearly three years and she’s said she’s known him her whole life. I don’t believe she ever expected this to happen. It’s quite clear she’s completely at a loss for what to do. You must understand that he’s all she has ever really known. It’s almost as if she feels she owes him or something.”

Harry looked to Hermione sadly, feeling an unpleasant tightening in the pit of his stomach as he thought to himself, *So that's what Tonks meant when she said Hannah had to work out whatever it was that was holding her back.*

Poised directly before Hermione and desperate for her advice, he inquired further, "Well, what do you think I ought to do?"

"For starters, I think you should stop coming back to Grimmauld on the weekends. Only see Hannah during the school week, or on holiday, and STOP sleeping in that bed with her, for heaven's sakes! You need to BACK OFF and give her the time and space she needs to make up her mind without outside influence."

"But, she'll be here alone if I don't come back."

"Harry, that's not true! Lupin stays just down the hall." Laying her finger on her chin, she added in an aside approach, "Although I'm not so certain that's such a good thing." Then, perking up, she concluded, "But, Tonks is always visiting, as are Fred and George. They'll keep her company."

Harry's focus was on the kitchen stairwell, again. He didn't really want to have to concede to Hermione's opinion.

Hermione leaned forward, clamping his hands in hers, and with a brisk reassuring tone, she said articulately, "Harry, she'll be fine. Trust me. If you push it, you're going to end up being sorry for it."

"Oh, how do you figure?" said Harry, challenging what he believed to be a ludicrous assertion. *How could pursuing someone you love, who holds similar sentiments, be such a bad thing,* he wondered.

Hermione appeared slightly unnerved. "What I'm trying to say is this: if you try to influence her decision by suffocating her with your dotting words and overly-ambitious physical sentiments, she may begin to feel pressed to make a decision that she's not fully prepared to make and you could lose her for good."

Harry gulped Hermione's words down as if he'd just ingested a poisonous batch of mead. He knew that the prospect of losing Hannah for good was, by far, the last thing he was willing to stomach.

"Harry, just promise me you'll think about what I said," pleaded Hermione.

"Fine. Whatever," he grumbled, kicking back in his chair and propping his feet heavily upon the surface of the coffee table in an corporeal show of pronouncing himself more frustrated than ever.

“Alright, Potter, Ron,” called Hannah, gaiting dispiritedly into the secret room. “I’ve secured us enough mead for a few more rounds of drinks.”

Harry watched as Remus tracked along behind her looking extraordinarily satisfied. His focus was glued to Remus, who proceeded to glide across the secret room with the flair of a blissfully skirting cloud. Just before Remus exited the main entryway of the secret room into Grimmauld Place, he turned to address Hannah.

In a Morse code, upbeat fashion, he called out with a smile, “Tuesday, it is, Morley! It’s the right thing! All will be well!”

As the door snapped shut, Harry moved to observe to an openly distressed Hannah and inquired fretfully, “What’s going on?”

Hannah cleared her throat, and with an intensely bothered disposition, she said, “Nothing, nothing. Everything’s fine.”

But, Harry’s sixth sense had shifted into overdrive, leaving him fully knowing otherwise.