

The Witches of Gilford

by pyjamapants

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Socks Were Better Than This

Chapter 1 of 12

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Disclaimer: As you're no doubt certain, I've no claim to the Harry Potter universe nor am I profiting financially from writing this story.

Effusive thanks to my betas kittylefish (comma and plot Goddess) and persevero (Fantastic Brit-picker and Grammar Queen) for their patience and immense help. This story would surely fall flat on its face without either of them.

Chapter One - *Socks Were Better Than This*

A casual observer in the Forbidden Forest on a blustery Tuesday evening in early January would have quickly noticed Severus Snape storming towards the gates of Hogwarts. This casual observer almost certainly would have performed Ear Scrubbing Charms at hearing the venerated war hero muttering a stream of swearwords fit for the back room of a Knockturn Alley dive rather than the august grounds of Europe's pre-eminent wizarding school. The stream of invective was impressive indeed, occasionally punctuated with the more palatable phrases "blasted Christmas present" and "interfering swot" and liberally peppered with more colourful phrases like "survived that damnable snake for this bloody nightmare" and "fucking socks from Albus were better than this".

Fortunately for the innocent witches and wizards of Great Britain, there were no casual observers in the Forbidden Forest that evening. Else, along with the verbal assault, they probably would have found themselves on the receiving end of some rather nasty hexes, just for the sheer fact that they were present. As it was, Severus Snape crunched through the snow alone with no physical target for his simmering rage. He reached the Apparition point, turned towards the castle one last time to glare in the general direction of the Headmistress's office, and Disapparated with a bang, leaving the phrase "fucking book club" to linger in the air in his absence.

Unlike those thousands of lucky innocent wizards and witches, Ginny Weasley did find herself physically present to bear the brunt of a similar tirade just outside London. Hermione thundered around her sitting room, arms flailing and gesticulating wildly. "Who the bloody hell does Molly think she is, meddling in my life like this? And could she not think of anything else? 'Oh, Hermione loves books... let's give her something to do with books!' Gah! I like literature! I like nonfiction! I like bloody academic journals! I

loathe the sort of pulpy crap that they always parade in the front window of Flourish and Blotts, which you can damn well bet is the kind of fluff they'll have us read at this damn book club!"

Witnessing this unusual outburst, Ginny silently wondered if perhaps Ron's swearing had rubbed off on Hermione a bit more than they'd all realized. "Good lord, Hermione," Ginny finally interjected. "By the way you're swearing, you'd think Mum had ratted you out to a band of renegade Death Eaters. Just give it a bloody rest! It's a book club for fuck's sake! How bad can it be?"

Hermione's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Ginny, sorry if I took out all my frustration on you, but," she continued, barely masking a now trembling lip, "I'm just not ready to trot out for socializing with strangers. I've just got past the worst of it, what with the holidays, and I need a bit of time to recover and, frankly, enjoy being alone before I even think about meeting someone new."

"I know, Hermione, but just give the initial meeting a go? Then you can make your excuses to Mum afterwards. Please, just placate her? You know she won't stop fussing over you unless you give on this one. Ron's been dead almost two years now, and at the risk of echoing Mum's speech when you opened her present, he wouldn't want you mouldering away in this apartment!"

Sighing loudly, Hermione acknowledged the truth in that last statement. She could only imagine Ron's ridicule at finding that his bossy, overachieving, know-it-all wife found that her greatest achievement for the previous weekend was donning shirt and pair of jeans before fetching the post, rather than wearing his old pyjamas as she normally did from sundown Friday to Monday morning. Granted, Hermione only accomplished that achievement because of a truly spectacular kitchen accident involving the empty food dish Crookshanks had nudged out to the room's centre, a plate of leftover chicken korma, and the coconut almond chip ice cream she'd placed under a Freezing Charm for afters. *Gods*, she thought, glancing about the disaster called her sitting room, *I've become a bigger slob than Ron ever was. Hmm, perhaps he would be proud. No, he'd have dragged my arse off the couch months ago and demanded a ritualistic pub crawl at the very least.*

Hermione gathered her cloak and gloves and nodded her reluctant assent to Ginny.

"And Hermione," Ginny urged as gently as possible, "try to enjoy yourself, please?"

Fully guilted into compliance, Hermione Apparated to the front of Flourish and Blotts. Pausing to glance at the front window, Hermione noticed that the gaudy display certainly exceeded all her expectations. With enchanted roses and curlicue script that shimmered in scarlet red, the display proudly proclaimed the upcoming book signing for Boedicia Coursette's latest bodice ripper. Peering into the shop, Hermione could see the slow but steady stream of witches heading towards the meeting room at the rear of the shop. Never before in her life had Hermione been reluctant to enter a bookshop. Summoning her much-vaunted Gryffindor courage for the second time that evening, Hermione flung the door open and trudged towards her doom.

Upon entering the meeting room, Hermione quickly surveyed its occupants and questioned Molly's sanity yet again. *Why on earth did Molly think this would be a good way for me to circulate amongst society again? There's no one here but dowdy old housewives!*

Just as she finished this thought, her eyes tracked over the room a second time in disbelief. There, in the midst of a sea of pink, lilac, and sweaters with kittens, stood a black-clad man who couldn't have been more out of place if he'd been trying to teach a bowtruckle how to apply Lavender's patented 24-Hour Lash Thickening Charm. Severus Snape stood scowling at a portly woman who obliviously droned on about the quality of the biscuits that Mr Blotts had served. Hermione sidled closer to the conversation, ostensibly to verify whether Snape had fallen prey to the Imperius curse. As she moved closer, she caught snippets of the woman's simpering tirade.

"Really, one would think they would have better nibbles than month-old chocolate biscuits and petit fours so hard you could recobble Diagon Alley with them." Martha Higgensbottom paused to snort indecorously at her own joke. "Goodness, I might have expected fare like this during the war, but everyone's celebrating these days! Why, I even heard the goblins served hors d'oeuvres when the bank reopened after the final battle. Surely they would have known that this book club would draw the likes of war heroes such as you, Mr Snape."

Severus inadvertently nodded, ardently wishing he could tell the women to bugger off. He would, really, but the seemingly innocuous caramel that he'd popped into his mouth upon arrival had effectively cemented his teeth together. Clearly the daft cow took his glare of displeasure as agreement with her criticism of the bookshop's spread. The woman continued to drone on as Severus noted that, whilst the fare might not have met with the approval of her distinguished palate, this hadn't limited the variety and quantity of treats perched on her plate nor the speed with which she inhaled them. Glancing about the shop, Severus desperately searched for an escape route. Alas, the door was blocked by Eunice Greengrass. Shuddering, he recalled the last time she'd cornered him, her bosom heaving as she declared that all heroes deserved a 'proper' thank you. Choosing the lesser of two evils, Severus opted to suffer Martha's continued diatribe. He continued to worry away at the caramel with his tongue, all the while attempting to ignore the witch. He began to call upon the Occlumency rituals that had kept him alive and relatively sane during all his years of service with the Dark Lord. Eventually, he was able to tune out her voice completely, while nodding every few moments as he mentally recited domestic and foreign ingredients for a variety of potions. The Japanese ingredients for a variety of specialized hallucinogens seemed particularly effective in distracting him from the obnoxious witch.

Then, just when he suspected he might need to depart for St Mungo's to have his jaws pried open, he felt the caramel begin to give. Simultaneously, the woman's censure was interrupted as she spied a bushy-headed woman lingering near the punch bowl.

"Goodness, Mr Snape, isn't that Hermione Granger behind you by the punch? Ooh, I simply must go tell Ethel Brummitch that we'll have two war heroes in our little club!" Martha Higgensbottom exclaimed as she left in search of Ethel.

Of course, as his cursed luck would have it, the exact moment that he turned to look in Miss Granger's direction, the caramel managed to loosen completely, causing his jaw to drop dramatically. Severus closed his mouth quickly and thanked the gods that the rotund witch had scurried off to meet her friend. He'd never been more pleased to see a former student in his life... well, except perhaps that time in the Shrieking Shack during the Final Battle. Snape's frown deepened as he realized that, in each of these instances, it had been the same former student who had come to his rescue. The same witch who was standing in front of him now, dressed no longer in student robes or the Muggle attire she had so favoured in her youth. No, this Hermione Granger had graduated to a simple, but elegant and professional, navy robe that certainly flattered her... No, best to stop that train of thought right there.

Hermione chuckled softly at the shock and relief that had seemed to briefly pass over Professor Snape's face. Stepping away from the frighteningly pink- and sea green-coloured concoction that sparkled in the punch bowl, she taunted with a mischievous glint in her eye, "Why, Professor Snape, I had no idea that the doily and tea cosy crowd was your kind of scene. How quaint! Or are you scouting out this group under the auspices of continuing your spy duties?"

"But of course, Miss Granger. During the height of war, I couldn't leave my post at Hogwarts to investigate pink-cardigan-wearing harridans. Except for the year we were so fortunate as to have one in residence."

Hermione's smile was quickly replaced with a look of absolute horror when, as if on cue, a petite witch at the front of the room cleared her throat and deftly brought the room to attention. Severus chuckled to see Hermione suddenly pale at the noise but visibly relax when she saw that Umbridge was not the group leader.

"Hello, my fellow bookish witches and wizards. My name is Matilda Broomshanks, and as moderator I'm so thrilled to welcome you to the very first meeting of Flourish and Blotts' very first Weekly Book Club. Within the next five minutes, please take your seats so that I can begin distributing the books and completing the Activation Charms."

"Activation Charms?" Hermione stammered, looking expectantly up at Severus whose expression clearly read 'Oh Fuck.'

"Best to make a run for it now, before those charms are complete. Perhaps we can bribe Filius into removing whatever ridiculous enchantments they've already placed upon us," Snape muttered.

Still playing the gallant war heroes, Severus and Hermione politely and discreetly edged towards the door. Or rather, they edged towards where the door had been located.

"Bugger, it figures they'd trap us in the pink-tinged nightmare," Hermione mumbled.

"Damned Minerva. 'Oh, just attend this one meeting, Severus. We all know you need to get out of the castle more often. I spent a good bit of money on this Christmas gift, and the least you could do is attend the first meeting'," Snape spat, in a frighteningly accurate mockery of Minerva's brogue. "She bloody well knew that if I came to this event, I'd be bound to attend the rest!"

Hermione briefly wondered whether Ginny had been an innocent bystander or willing participant in the guilt-fest that prompted her attendance. *Ah, well*, Hermione thought, *Those two bottles of Merlot I've been hoarding will solve that mystery this weekend.*

Snape scowled and stalked to the back row of chairs. He turned and glared expectantly at Hermione as if she were the one who had wronged him. He gestured to the seats, seeming to demand her presence to insulate him from the warbling mass of excited witches who had already eagerly taken their seats. Hermione reluctantly settled into the second seat to the aisle, while Severus grumpily sank into the aisle seat, arms crossed in front of him with his long legs stretching out under the seat in front of him, effectively trapping her. "Don't blame me for this. I didn't give you the cursed gift. I'm not the one trapping you here," Hermione blurted petulantly, "and I sure as hell don't want to be here, either."

"Miss Granger, your comments are neither appreciated nor necessary. If you're going to lend your voice to this cacophony, then please endeavour to utter something remotely distracting or entertaining."

"It's Ms Granger, thank you. If you're dissatisfied with my company, then I'm sure one of the fine witches here would jump at the opportunity to sit next to the only man in attendance," Hermione retorted, jumping when Severus actually growled in response.

They both reached up to snatch the books that Matilda Broomshanks had sent levitating over their heads as Matilda began extolling the virtues of the selected book.

Hermione balked. "Oh shit, not *The Witches of Gilford*. Lavender was complaining about this series when we had lunch last week. She found it so dull, fluffy, and patronizing that she binned it after the second chapter."

"Yes, well, we can be assured that if even Miss Brown found it beneath her tolerance for all things frivolous, then we can forgo the anguish by tossing the book in the bin immediately," Severus stated, ignoring the subsequent glare from Hermione.

Matilda continued, "Also, just outside the meeting room, you'll find a display with the exciting line of companion products to this series: cookbooks, illustrated guides to the household cleaning and organization charms, winter shawls knitted in exactly the same fashion as the main character does throughout this first book, and many, many more exciting items."

"I'll buy a shawl right now if it comes with a Self-Strangulation Charm," Severus muttered under his breath.

"Prior to importing the fine tradition of literary circles from the Muggles, we studied several such literary endeavours," Matilda continued as Hermione and Severus failed to suppress guffaws, "and discovered they are often impeded because people get busy with other things over the course of the sessions and either don't read or have other commitments. I'm excited to announce that we'll have lively discussions throughout the duration. Charms will compel everyone to read the week's chapters and attend the meetings, ensuring that the experience is enjoyable for all."

Hermione unsuccessfully tried to remove her jaw from her lap as she turned in disbelief to look at Severus. She was no mediwitch, but certainly it couldn't be healthy for the artery immediately next to Nagini's bite to be visibly pulsing.

"We'll be reading two delightful chapters a week and pairing up to take turns leading a discussion with the rest of the group during the club meeting. I think you'll all agree that this delightful book is the perfect way to while away the winter months. I'm ecstatic to announce that our club will culminate with a presentation by none other than the book's author himself, Richmond Greenleaf! Now, during next week's meeting, we'll establish the assignment schedule for the course of the club. Any volunteers for the first week should speak with me following the meeting."

Severus gritted his teeth and muttered violently to Hermione, "There are simply no words sufficient to convey how officious this has become."

Nodding her head in agreement, Hermione cracked her copy of the book and glanced at the table of contents, groaning aloud at what she saw. "So just how bad is it, Ms Granger?" Severus inquired, teeth still clenched.

"Thirty-six chapters plus an epilogue," Hermione said as she slammed the tome shut. "Counting this week's meeting and the author's chat, that's twenty weeks of torture. I may never speak to Molly Weasley again."

As Severus and Hermione felt the magical twinge that signified the completion of the Activation Charms, Severus could not help but recall a similar, though admittedly more painful, twinge that accompanied being branded with the Dark Mark. Ignoring the voice in his head that said perhaps he was being a wee bit melodramatic, Severus stood, abruptly conveyed his goodbyes to Hermione, and stalked from the room in a flurry of black robes. Hermione was left to stare at his back as he retreated, turning as she realized that the witch next to her was trying to introduce herself. Hermione responded in kind before gathering her cloak to leave. Like Snape, she wondered if the book club could get any worse. Deciding a long, hot shower was in order, Hermione stepped out of the shop and Disapparated to her home.

Author's Note:

In large part, "The Witches of Gilford" was inspired by the well known U.S. Mitford series that is extremely popular with the 55+ crowd. The idea for this story began with the paradoxical thought of Snape at a stereotypical book club. This particular series came to mind, as it is well read by the older generation in my family. I simply could not imagine a novel more offensive to Severus Snape. For a synopsis of one such book, feel free to read [this link](#) at Amazon. For insight into the particular horrors that might most offend our heroes, you might take a look at the one star reviews. Please note that I've not read the books myself and am not explicitly setting out to lampoon the books (as a consumer of other flavours of brain candy myself). You might spy some very basic plot similarities, but, again, I've not read the book. Anything beyond a superficial resemblance is pure coincidence. Persevero informs me that the familiar British 'Miss Read' series is relatively analogous to the Mitford series.

Please note that the characters Ethel Brummitch, Martha Higgensbottom, Boedicia Coursette, Eunice Greengrass, and Matilda Broomshanks are my own creation. Trust me. No one else would want them.

Evocative Chapter Titles

Chapter 2 of 12

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had

enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

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Chapter 2 - *Evocative Chapter Titles*

Minerva McGonagall rose late on the morning following Severus's initial visit to Flourish and Blotts. Knowing that Severus would be furious after attending the meeting, she reasoned that he wouldn't be able to resist seeking her out to vent his wrath sometime that day, and it would be best to avoid first encountering Severus in front of staff and students alike. Taking meals in her office was an indulgence that she rarely allowed herself, but today seemed just the occasion to warrant the treat. Taking the tray the house-elves had left, Minerva mused upon the circumstances that had prompted her ill-received Christmas gift.

It was no secret that Severus was a changed man since his encounter with Voldemort's fierce familiar. No longer under the constant pressure of maintaining his cover as a spy, no longer forced to loathe all Gryffindors on sight or kiss all Slytherins' arses, no longer pulled seven different directions by Albus's and Voldemort's machinations, and no longer hexed regularly by fellow Death Eaters or suspected of treachery by both sides, Severus had seemingly imploded into himself. Granted, it was rather nice to be able to approach the man without immediately reeling from the constant stress he exuded. But post-war Severus had not truly begun to unwind those coils of stress; he'd merely denied them by throwing himself into all things academic. When faced with under-performing dunderheads, he took steps to improve their performance, mitigate their shortcomings, and correct whatever misunderstanding had caused the latest cauldron explosion. Gone were the days of drastic and constant house point deductions, high-decibel floggings of both bright and dim-witted student egos alike, and nightly hall patrols in full snit, daring students to put so much as a toe out of line. Not that the students were taking advantage of this new Snape. If anything, they seemed to fear that his demeanour was the calm before the storm and that one day he would snap and unleash his legendary temper with violent and disastrous results. No, this new Snape was not a calm, pacified kitten. He was a fault line that had been dormant for far too long.

Minerva set aside her breakfast tray to begin processing the paperwork necessary for the upcoming graduation ceremony. Her mind still on Severus, she realized that, much to her surprise, she found she missed the snarky old Potions professor from days of old. Their verbal sparring had kept each of them on their toes, and Severus's sharp wit could always be counted on to entertain. But along with his altered conduct, the man had become a recluse from the adult world. He stayed in his dungeons nearly constantly, emerging only for breakfast, lunch, and the occasional dinner. True, his social interactions prior to Voldemort's fall were stressful, primarily consisting of frequent, irregular, and always ill-timed Death Eater meetings, daily planning sessions with Albus, and the occasional meeting of the Order of the Phoenix, but at least back then the man had left the sanctuary of his dungeons on a regular basis. Albus had even managed to cajole him into attending regular staff outings, which, provided you could read the man correctly, he had seemed to genuinely enjoy. She had discussed the situation with Albus's portrait and together they had concluded that she needed to get up Severus's nose a bit - an easy enough task considering the size of the man's nose and the long list of things that would annoy him. She had only to drive him out of his dungeons.

Minerva beamed as she glanced at the house points counter on her desk, which reported the totals shown in the Great Hall. Not yet noon and already each house was down over fifty house points apiece with Gryffindor down over eighty points. It seemed her Potions professor had been thoroughly rankled.

"YOU!" Severus bellowed at Minerva as he stalked into the staff room following his last class of the day. Minerva glanced up from her copy of Transfiguration Weekly and stifled the smile that threatened to peek out above the journal.

"Minerva, I'm a busy man who doesn't have an hour a week to spare to read a silly inconsequential book much less two hours to discuss it with even sillier, more inconsequential old witches! I have infirmity potions to brew, seven forms of classes to teach and grade, inevitable office hours with my NEWT and OWL level classes, not to mention Head of House obligations, detentions, and the seven grant applications I want to complete for my summer research. I insist that you find a way to get this gift of yours terminated," Severus demanded, certain that his appeal based upon such critical academic tasks would bring mercy from the Headmistress.

"Severus, you certainly could have time for social obligations if only you made it a priority."

"And how shall I accomplish this, Minerva? Do you have an extra Time-Turner lying around?" Severus spat.

"You have rarely been an idiot in the past, Severus Snape, and I won't stand for you acting like one now. Have your Slytherin prefects supervise your detentions. Offer extra house points for competent students willing to tutor or brew infirmity potions. And as for grading and grant applications, you and I both know that you have three NEWT level students wishing to apply for apprenticeships or university study in Potions. They'd each give an arm and a leg to aid in either task."

Severus's brow furrowed as he considered that Minerva's ideas had just freed up at least twenty-six hours a week of his time. She'd resolved his list of obligations rather quickly and neatly. "You came up with that argument before you even thought of purchasing the bloody gift, didn't you?" Severus demanded, wagging his finger at the Headmistress. "I believe Albus's painting is beginning to rub off on you, Minerva. If I weren't so utterly disgusted by your gift, I'd be impressed."

"Come now, Severus: is it really that bad?"

"You have no idea. They all twittered like magpies, giggled like first years, and dressed like Dolores Umbridge. Did you honestly think I could enjoy a moment of time I spent in such company?"

"Surely there must be a few witches in the group worth your time."

"Hardly. I do not understand why, Minerva, you've insisted on saddling me with this damnable book club!"

"Severus, it's simply not healthy for you to spend all your time cooped up in the dungeons. I told you last term that I expected to see you out socializing more. Since you failed to heed my direct order, you're lucky I didn't saddle you with something worse. Besides, I still owe you for all the grief you caused me while you were headmaster."

Seeing that he truly was fighting a losing battle, Severus glared at her and stalked out of the room.

Never one to procrastinate when it came to reading, on Wednesday evening Hermione, Crookshanks, a tray with biscuits and tea, and *The Witches of Gifford* all cosied up together on the sofa in front of a roaring fire. Hermione opened the book and began reading.

..oo0oo..

Nigel Reese stepped out of the Floo into the meeting room at the Horse's Mouth Inn, a rather dingy, ramshackle establishment nestled on the outskirts of the Irish village of Gifford. His chestnut, wavy hair swung over his shoulder as he elegantly banished the Floo powder that had settled on his immaculate white and royal blue robes. Nigel worried that the sophisticated cut of his robes, recently purchased from the world-renowned tailor Stephano Sartoria in London, might overwhelm the provincial sensibilities of the witches and wizards of Gifford. Perhaps once he was settled, he could find a local tailor and acquire more regionally appropriate robes.

The wizarding population here outside Gifford was fairly small, but Nigel had selected it from dozens of similar villages as the first village to receive the benefit of his new ministerial role. Nigel took great pride in his position as the first Ministry Outreach Official; in fact, the role itself had been his brainchild. While appeasing his department's desire for increased jurisdiction over wizarding settlements far removed from major populations, it would allow him to fulfil his greater mission, helping the wizards and witches of the Isles simplify their lives by better incorporating magic into their everyday routines. Perhaps while he was stationed in one of these villages, Nigel would find an appealing witch to settle by his side.

Hearing a noise, Nigel stepped into the parlour of the inn to find Nora Gallagher, the innkeeper's daughter, struggling manually to move a heavy couch presumably so that she could remove the rug underneath for cleaning. Eager to help the witch and to gradually improve the hideous building where he would be living until he could find somewhere more permanent, Nigel swiftly pulled his wand from his sleeve and gracefully cast a Locomotor Charm to move the couch. Nora turned quickly and eyed Nigel with barely concealed admiration, both of his wizarding skills and dashing appearance. Nigel flashed an impeccable smile at the witch and said, "Hello there, young Miss. My name is Nigel Reese. I believe my department secretary made some arrangements in anticipation of my arrival. By the way, I find that by casting a Dust Repelling Charm once weekly on the rug in my quarters back in London, I can skip rug cleaning, which is such a nasty chore, entirely. I'll be happy to show you that charm once I've settled into my room here."

Nora glowed under Nigel's greeting. She was in her early forties, and it had been decades since anyone had called her a young miss. She thanked Nigel effusively for his assistance. "Why, thank you Mr Reese! I'd have never thought of applying that charm to my housekeeping duties. You'll be a right treasure around here if you have more fantastic advice like that."

..oo0oo..

Hermione groaned as the text continued in a similar nauseating manner. Not fifteen minutes after she had begun reading, Hermione chucked the offending text across the room in frustration. Crookshanks skittered across the room, hiding under the curio cabinet, which overflowed with books rather than knick-knacks.

"How? How could someone write such misogynistic, arrogant tripe? The women in this book are as useless as flobberworms, Crookshanks," Hermione ranted at her innocent and bewildered familiar. "And Nigel Reese swans around like he's Merlin's gift to witches everywhere! It's utterly disgusting. It's worse than Draco Malfoy pandering for everyone's attention when Buckbeak scratched him." Hermione briefly wondered if Malfoy could have written *The Witches of Gifford*. Surely his vanity was satisfied by the flavour of the week that could be seen gracing his arm in the society section of each Monday's Prophet. And she liked to think that her former academic rival wouldn't have stooped to writing something this vapid. Crookshanks waddled over to the offending text and sniffed it with disdain. Groaning, Hermione bent to retrieve the text, telling Crookshanks, "Well, at least the first chapter only took fifteen minutes. I suppose there's something to be said for books with a reading level for firsties." The book suffered several more injuries before Hermione managed to complete the week's assignment.

Two nights later, Hermione was opening a second bottle of wine with Ginny and thanking the universe that at least alcohol consumption still behaved according to the laws of nature. Ginny was clearly starting to feel the effects of the wine, as her increased use of the word fuck, in all its forms, indicated. Hermione wondered if now was the time to ferret out whether or not Ginny had been a co-conspirator in this book club fiasco.

Ginny coincidentally selected that moment to ask Hermione what book they were reading for the club.

"We're reading *The Witches of Gifford*. Ginny, the book is horrible. No, really!" she continued at Ginny's eye roll. "By anyone's standards! Even Lavender hated it! This man just swoops into this absolutely picture-perfect town and the women, be they married, single, or widowed, fawn over him as he helps with their little domestic issues. These women can't even remember that weekly Dust Repelling Charms would keep their furniture clean or manage to cast Locomotor when they need to move a piece of heavy furniture!"

Ginny laughed. "Why, that sounds like just the book for you, Hermione!"

"It's awful, Ginny. The club meets for eighteen weeks, too, so it's not as if it will be over quickly. Ginny, tell me that you didn't have anything to do with this horrible idea."

"Not a single bit. Mum thought of it after she saw the signs in Flourish and Blotts before Christmas. She just wants you to meet someone special. I think this is her way of letting you know that it's okay to move past Ron. She figured you'd be less likely to find stupid fuckwits at a book club."

"Ginny, I'll be less likely to find **anyone** at a book club. Does she know anything at all about book clubs? They're almost exclusively attended by women."

"Oh, that's rich! I'll give you five fucking galleons if you show up at the next family event with a hot witch on your arm!" Ginny cackled before she drained the last sip of wine from her glass.

"Even if I were likely to switch teams, Ginny, it's not bloody likely in this crowd. I think they're all your Mum's age or older."

Ginny shuddered visibly at the thought. "So there aren't any delicious men lurking between the pages at Ye Olde Book Club for Senior Witches?" she said, slurring noticeably for the first time.

"No. There is only one man in attendance, and he is certainly not delicious, though he is lurking," Hermione said with a slight shiver as she refilled Ginny's glass for the fourth time.

"Oh? And just who is this lurking, not-delicious man?" Ginny asked before taking a long sip of wine.

"Severus Snape," Hermione answered as Ginny sprayed wine across the white carpet. Quickly brandishing her wand to clean the wine before it could stain, Hermione continued, "He's still the same acerbic old bastard we knew at school. You'd think the war being over would have mellowed him, but it appears not. He acted as if it were my fault that he was stuck there in a sea of pink-clad, gossiping housewitches."

"Severush Fucking Shnape," Ginny slurred, squinting as if trying to picture the scene Hermione had described. "What the bloody fuck made him drag his fucking arse to a fucking book club?"

Hermione poured the last glass of wine for herself, thinking Ginny had perhaps reached her limit, judging from her slurred speech and impressive bit of swearing. "Ironically enough, he and I are in the same situation. Professor McGonagall gave him the book club membership for Christmas as well. Honestly, Ginny, if it were anyone but Professor Snape, then I would think Minerva and Molly had intentionally set us up. But it's just too ridiculous to consider."

Ginny nodded her head in agreement. The conversation quickly devolved from there as more wine was imbibed, and the talk shifted to the sexual proclivities and performance of Ginny's flavour of the moment.

Tuesday night found Severus and Hermione once again begrudgingly walking into the meeting room in Flourish and Blotts just moments before the meeting was due to begin. Settling into the same seat at the back of the room, Hermione grimaced as she overheard one witch chatting animatedly with her friend about how very much she wished Nigel Reese would come to her house to fix the tap in her downstairs loo. Severus sat down to her right not a minute later, smirking at the look of derision plastered across Hermione's face.

"Careful, Ms Granger. I suspect if they discover we didn't like the book, we'll be seized and fitted with sweaters bearing kittens as punishment," Severus stated ominously.

Hermione snickered and responded, "Ah, torture via assimilation. Very effective."

Glancing at the slightly battered copy which lay in Hermione's lap, Severus taunted sarcastically, "I am appalled, Ms Granger. I had always understood from Irma Pince that you took utmost care when handling texts. That book looks as if it was used as a Quaffle in a Wee Wizards League match."

"And how exactly did your copy manage to make it through in pristine condition? You did read it, didn't you? It hardly looks as if it's been opened."

Severus grumbled, "The book resisted all hexes and potions that I attempted. I even tried transfiguring the book into another tome, hoping I could read any two chapters and still fulfil the charm's requirements. I didn't have enough time to attempt anything else, and I was already reeling from the Compulsion Charms making me read this tripe."

Interrupting their banter, Matilda Broomshanks stood at the front of the room and called the group to attention. "Hello, fellow readers. From the looks on everyone's faces, I can tell that you all thoroughly enjoyed this week's assignment. Well, since everyone's here, let's get started. I'd like to introduce our first two presenters, Ethel Broomshanks and Martha Higgensbottom. Ladies?"

Severus groaned upon hearing that Martha would be presenting. Surely the meeting would end well beyond the two-hour mark with chatty Martha at the helm.

"Hello, there! I'm Martha Higgensbottom, and Ethel and I are so very excited to be leading this first week's book club discussion. From the lively conversations we heard before the meeting started, it sounds like everyone enjoyed these first two chapters just as much as we did," Martha practically sang as she glowed like the sun.

Ethel continued, "I'm Ethel Broomshanks, and Martha and I thought this first meeting would be an excellent opportunity for us to get to know one another! Please introduce yourself and tell us your favourite part of the book so far. Martha and I both agreed that our favourite aspect was the delicious-sounding dishes that the Gilford witches seemed to always have at hand. We're both eager to dive into *The Witches of Gilford Cookbook* that we just purchased from the display outside! There's a recipe for treacle tart that looks absolutely divine! Now, let's start in the back of the room and work our way forward."

Hermione panicked. There was nothing remotely positive about the text itself that she could recall, much less deem a favourite. The witch four seats down began her introduction as Hermione sat, racking her brain for something positive to say before her turn came up. *Think, Hermione; think. Something other than "my favourite thing is that it's done." Plot? Characters? Setting? No, I hated all those. Theme? Was there a theme? Hmm. But I did like their selection of typeface, and the parchment was a lovely weight, nicer than usual, actually.* Hermione's pondering stopped abruptly as she realized that all the heads in the room were swivelled her direction, eagerly awaiting her response. "Oh, my name is Hermione Granger and, well, I thought the chapter titles were very creative and evocative," she blurted in a moment of inspiration as Severus snorted quietly beside her. She breathed a sigh of relief when the group seemed satisfied with her response, eagerly opening their own books and perusing the table of contents.

Severus began his introduction before any witch had a chance to comment on Hermione's observation. "My name is Severus Snape, and I found the characters and setting were very accurately depicted for such an idyllic little village," Severus stated from between clenched teeth, each word dripping off his tongue venomously in the same way one might describe Voldemort's festering corpse. Hermione choked back laughter, knowing precisely what doom that tone foretold. She waited for the impending explosion and was frankly disappointed when it didn't arrive.

Hermione and Severus both breathed a sigh of relief as the witches in the next row began their introductions. "Thank Merlin that's over," Hermione stated as Severus nodded in assent.

"I have read some truly horrible student essays over the years, but none of them held a candle to this utter shit. And what's more, those dunderheads weren't getting paid for their efforts."

"I'm not sure what was worse: reading it myself or hearing these witches coo over how much they adored it," Hermione lamented as the witches continued their introductions and glowing reviews. "I can't believe how insipidly the witches behaved in the book nor that the author would create such stupid characters." Noticing that Severus seemed unlikely to respond, Hermione settled in for the duration, letting her mind wander to the presentation she'd given earlier in the day for a potential client. A much happier place for her brain to frolic, as she thought about possible applications for the charm the group was requisitioning for development.

Emerging from her temporary reverie, Hermione winced as she heard Delphinia Appleblossom rave, "Oh, I just loved Nigel Reese's creative solutions to problems. I was so inspired. Why, I never would have thought of applying a Sticking Charm to my son's gloves to keep him from losing them when he plays outside."

Hermione sighed and whispered, "Then again, perhaps the author just knows the target audience exceptionally well. Really, how dim-witted do you have to be if you can't remember something like casting an Accio to retrieve an object from the far reaches underneath the bed?"

Eustace Abbott beamed over her favourite aspect. "Oh, I was so inspired by how he helped Widow Coursely with her Knitting Charms so she could donate blankets to the orphanage."

Hearing a noise from the seat next to her, Hermione turned and stared open-mouthed at Severus. Was he giggling?

"Can you imagine the reaction if a young Tom Riddle had been given a blanket from one of these hens?" Severus whispered, his shoulders shaking from trying to suppress his laughter. "I'm not sure who would have been more appalled: Little Tommy when given the cutest little blanket, or the witch who watched as her precious knitted creation was reduced to a pile of ashes."

"Why, Professor Snape, you're a bit more forthcoming with the wisecracks and camaraderie than I expected after last week."

"That might be due to the four shots of Ogden's that I swigged at the Cauldron prior to lugging my arse over here."

"You're drunk?!?"

"Right in one."

"And the Compulsion Charms allowed it?"

"I'm as surprised as you," Severus stated with his mouth quirked into the tiniest of smiles. "Perhaps you'd care to join me next week. I find drinking alone doesn't hold the same appeal it once did."

Hermione briefly goggled at him before agreeing. Merlin, this was a side of Severus Snape she'd never imagined to exist.

"Shall we say, 6:15 at the Cauldron next Tuesday? That would give us forty-five minutes to get pleasantly pickled," Severus suggested as the meeting showed signs of wrapping up. Hermione briefly wondered if the world were ending, too. Severus Snape as a friendly, chatty drunk?

"That sounds fine," Hermione said, standing to gather her cloak. "I'll see you then."

Author's Note:

Thanks so much for the excellent reviews for Chapter 1. I hope that chapter 2 is just as entertaining.

The contributions of the club participants were particularly difficult and nauseating to write. I hope they satisfy!

Firewhisky and Cider

Chapter 3 of 12

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

Disclaimer: As you're no doubt certain, I've no claim to the Harry Potter universe nor am I profiting financially from writing this story.

Effusive thanks to my betas kittylefish (comma and plot Goddess) and lettybird (Brit-picker extraordinaire). This story would surely fall flat on its face without either or both of you.

Chapter Three - Firewhisky and Cider

Severus groaned aloud when he awoke Wednesday morning with a hangover that defied description. He clumsily clambered out of bed and into the dressing gown and slippers that hung at his bedside. Stumbling to his personal storeroom, he swore upon seeing that his supply of Hangover Potion had dwindled to roughly a quarter of the dose he required. Wincing as the door slammed behind him, Severus made his way to his lab to brew the elixir that would return his higher cognitive abilities. He wondered as he prepared the ingredients, *How long has it been since I consumed enough alcohol to warrant a hangover? And what on earth was so bad that it merited the cave troll currently parading across both hemispheres of my frontal lobe?*

Taking the cauldron off the fire so the potion could cool prior to bottling, Severus tried not to inhale the nausea-inducing fumes. Once it cooled, Severus quickly downed the foul-tasting brew and sighed appreciatively as the last tendrils of his pounding headache began to dissipate. Walking back through his quarters to the bathroom for his morning shower, Severus spied *The Witches of Gifford* lying on the side table next to his armchair. Memories of the previous evening rushed back with astounding clarity. The meeting itself had been rather tolerable thanks to the assistance of Mr Odgen's famous brew, but Severus swore viciously upon recalling that he'd invited Ms Granger to join him at the Leaky Cauldron the following week. What had possessed him to schedule a drinking session with his former student?

Severus walked to his desk and pulled out a scrap of parchment. Surely he could come up with a plausible reason to cancel the meeting, couldn't he? Quill poised to dash off a brief note, Severus paused as he recalled how circumstances had led him to this situation. It all led back to Minerva McGonagall. Severus's newly mended head landed on his desk with a loud thunk as he abandoned hope of cancelling the appointment. Following a barb he had made about the Golden Trio during last week's staff meeting, Minerva had been fiercely protective of all three Gryffindors. In particular, she had chastised him for lambasting the now-deceased Ronald Weasley and his widow, Hermione Granger. How had it escaped his notice that the youngest Weasley male had died? Groaning, Severus recalled that Minerva possessed ears seemingly even keener than Albus's and would somehow find out that he'd drunkenly invited Hermione Granger out for a drink and then rescinded once he'd come to his senses. "No", he concluded, "it would be better to face forty-five minutes of Ms Granger's company than to endure months of Minerva's ire."

Severus stood from his desk and ambled into his bedroom to commence his morning routine as he considered the Widow Weasley. She did seem marginally less annoying than she had been as a student. He supposed this wasn't that surprising. Being an active combatant in a war, leaving school, and losing a spouse all tended to mature a witch or wizard. He had very nearly been impressed when she boldly teased him upon greeting him at the first meeting and had been shocked when she stood up to his admittedly undeserved verbal attack. But what the hell would they talk about for the forty-five minutes prior to the meeting? Was he to be regaled with stories of the Boy Who Lived Twice and the Weasley clan, which had grown exponentially, as expected? Would she pester him for details about his post-war activities? Or, even worse, would she dredge up the details of his near-death encounter with Nagini and subsequent rescue at her hands? He would have to think of his own topics of discussion that could sustain conversation throughout the meeting unless he wished to be held hostage by the rambling know-it-all. Grumbling, Severus reflected that this was why he never went out in public: he would rather drink potions made from his own toenails than make small talk with anyone.

Hermione reluctantly prepared to leave for the Leaky Cauldron to meet Severus prior to suffering another club meeting. She fully regretted having been so stunned by Severus Snape's behaviour that she had accepted his invitation to meet before the book club meeting. She had expected that the drunken Snape had lamented his impulsive invitation as much as she regretted accepting it. Frankly, she was surprised that she hadn't received an owl cancelling the appointment with her loathsome former professor. Still, she considered, he had been pleasant enough after knocking back his Ogden's the previous week.

Looking at the clock above her mantel, Hermione realized that she'd better get moving else she risked being late and earning Snape's wrath. It had been years since she had last visited it, but the Leaky Cauldron had always been a drafty, dingy old pub. Hermione grabbed her scarf, gloves, and cloak, casting warming charms on each before she Apparated.

Shaking off the nauseating sensation she always felt following Apparition, Hermione gaped open-mouthed at the pub. It looked as if the post-war remodelling fever had extended to the Leaky Cauldron as well. She could practically see her reflection in the pine bar. The benches and stools no longer looked as if they'd been salvaged from a 16th century pig farm. The lighting had improved, too. It wasn't bright enough to read, but it was light enough to illuminate the once-shady corners. Severus Snape was settled into a booth in one of these once-shady corners, and Hermione walked over to meet him.

"I've not been here in years. I had no idea they'd done up the place," Hermione said as she sat down.

Severus nodded and said, "Indeed. They've even added to the menu. I make it a point to stop by when I'm in town to purchase ingredients."

They were interrupted by Tom, still publican after all these years, as he delivered Severus's Firewhisky and inquired after Hermione's order.

Hermione launched the first question of the evening, asking, "So, how is it, exactly, that the fearsome Severus Snape let Minerva wheedle him into attending that first meeting?"

Severus grumbled, "She said some nonsense about not holing myself up in the dungeons."

Tom returned with the drinks as Severus determined that perhaps it would be best to send questions Hermione's direction so that he could avoid her irritating inquisition. "So how are you occupying your time these days, Ms Granger?" he asked.

"I'm a Charms and Arithmancy consultant," Hermione stated as she took a long pull from the excellent pear cider Tom had placed in front of her.

"And what sort of clients do you find yourself working with?"

"Occasionally, I have a project with the Ministry, but most often I work for a variety of private firms. There's quite a bit of research and development going on in the wizarding world these days, and often product developers will either require an extra wand to meet short-term goals or will have a specific aspect of a project to contract out

if they lack their own Charms or Arithmancy department."

He'd often considered leaving Hogwarts for the life of a private researcher but had been stymied by the pitfalls he had perceived in that plan. "Isn't it a pain in the arse marketing yourself to firms? Don't you constantly have to make new contacts and find work? And I can't imagine that you get to pursue the cutting-edge projects? Aren't you relegated to the grunt tasks that no one wants internally? What on earth could make all that worth the trouble?" Severus asked in rapid succession with an odd expression that made him appear as if he'd just swallowed a lemon.

Taken aback by the sudden return of his typical abrupt manner, Hermione stood slightly from her seat and leaned across the table to return fire at Snape. "Severus Snape, I do not recall you queuing up to offer career advice during my seventh year, so you may kindly piss off if you take offence at the path I've chosen."

"Simmer down, Ms Granger. I truly did not mean to put you on the defensive. The work arrangement you've described is something I've considered pursuing on occasion, and I'm quite interested in obtaining a more nuanced understanding of the benefits of such a situation."

Her anger somewhat deflated, Hermione settled back into her seat and took another long drink from her cider glass. Her interest piqued, she launched into her explanation with her typical nervous chatter. "Really?" she said with some degree of lingering disbelief. "Well, it began when I was at a bit of a loss as to what career I wanted to pursue after my NEWTS. I finally managed to narrow my interests to Charms and Arithmancy, but I still couldn't find any appealing careers that integrated the two. Then, at a family reunion, I spoke with a cousin who works as a Muggle programming consultant. We talked about some of the pros and cons of consulting, and he encouraged me to pursue my varied interests. When I left university and was ready to start working, he helped me avoid some of the mistakes and difficulties that he had encountered. But his biggest help was advising me to focus on developing my short-term and long-term goals. See, without a clear idea of the kind of projects you want one year out, two years out, and five years out, you'll accept anything that comes along. It's perfectly natural that every once in a while you take a project that doesn't meet with your goals just to meet your short-term goals like establishing your name or paying the rent. But without those long-term goals, those are the only projects you take. There's always easy grunt work to be had, and you can quickly stop being challenged intellectually."

Severus considered this discussion of goals. He'd always assumed that if he left Hogwarts, he'd be stuck brewing endless batches of Pepperup and Potency Potions. It had, rather stupidly, never occurred to him that he might have his choice of projects. Leaning forward, Severus listened more attentively to Ms Granger's rambling, though helpful, commentary.

Barely pausing to breathe, Hermione continued, "Really, one of the beauties of consulting is the peaks and valleys. There's usually downtime between projects or a lull as a project builds up speed. I use that time to work on my own private research. In turn, once I've invested enough initial research, I can usually write a proposal to get my work funded and see it to completion. When that cycle is complete, I'm usually ready for a period of doing grunt work on someone else's project. It helps me recharge." Hermione gulped the last of her drink. She was concerned that she was boring the pants off Severus Snape, having noticed his empty stare moments earlier. She cursed her tendency to chatter endlessly when she was nervous. Catching Tom's eye, she signalled for another round.

Now that Hermione had finally paused to breathe, Severus chimed in, "Is it difficult to establish oneself as a consultant?"

Hermione and Severus eagerly took their drinks from Tom as Hermione considered his question. "There's some up-front work to get yourself established, but it's really just a matter of winning your first two or three projects. Once you've started proving that you can deliver quality work by deadline, it's relatively easy to pick up additional projects." Seeing Severus's sceptical look, Hermione continued, "The wizarding world really is rather incestuous."

Severus sputtered as he nearly choked on his Firewhisky, so Hermione quickly responded, "I didn't mean it THAT way. I meant that everyone knows each other. Everyone went to the same schools, studied under the same professors, and worked for the same bosses. When there are only three to six companies in an industry, there just aren't that many opportunities. If someone has enough experience to advance and there's not an opening in their current company, then they leave for one of the others. Anyway, as a consultant, once you've made a name for yourself at a couple of firms, it's only a matter of time before word gets around or employees from the first company move to another."

"I had no idea that employees were so fickle," Severus stated.

Hermione interjected, "It's not a matter of fickleness. It's a matter of practicality and timing."

"So how was it that you got your start in the business?"

"Actually, Malfoy Enterprises was one of my first clients," Hermione said, bemused as Severus's eyes widened at her revelation. "I'm not sure who was more eager for us to partner on projects. In trying to rebuild their company, they were eager to claim the credibility that an association with a famous Muggle-born war hero would engender. I knew that I would get easy networking out of the deal. It was guaranteed press coverage, and I knew that if I could successfully demonstrate that I could be a valuable contributing member of the shrewd teams for which Lucius Malfoy is legendary, then it would recommend me well to other firms."

Severus eyed Hermione appreciatively. He would have expected the Gryffindor witch to run shrieking from an association with the Malfoys, particularly after that nasty business at the Manor with Bellatrix. That she was willing to put aside their horrific past encounters to further her career showed an ambition he traditionally expected out of his own house. "That was a rather risky strategy of yours, Ms Granger. Has it paid off?"

"Actually, it was Ron's idea that I try to get work for a high-profile client, though he didn't exactly have the Malfoys in mind," Hermione said as she reminisced with a smile. Ron had been furious when Hermione had approached the Malfoys, and he'd spent three nights on the sofa after voicing his fury rather impolitely. After seeing that his advice had indeed borne fruit, no matter how poorly he'd thought the seeds were sown, Ron had apologized and tried to earn his way back into Hermione's good graces by purchasing her the wizarding brief case that she carried to this day.

"The risk paid off handsomely, though. There were several clients early on who confided that they'd contracted with me on the strength of my work with Malfoy Enterprises."

"And you still have time to pursue your own research, you say?" Severus inquired.

Hermione nodded and said, somewhat hesitantly, "I just delivered some pet project work for the Ministry taken from my own research."

"And what was the topic of this research?" Severus inquired.

Hermione took a deep breath and began, "Generally speaking, the project covered Apparition." Hermione paused to verify that he actually was engaged in her discourse. Accustomed to inquiries about her work from only slightly interested parties, Hermione had developed both the long and short explanation. Seeing that Severus truly looked interested, she launched the long version. "When people Apparate, they typically think of a specific location but not one so specific that they risk interfering with other individuals. Let's say we were both to Apparate to the same location. It's extremely unlikely that you and I would envision precisely the same location since we have different perspectives. And even if we did envision the same place, our inherent magic can sense and make adjustments, so long as our concentration is not so great that we have pinpointed an exact location in our minds."

Severus asked, verifying that his understanding was correct, "So if we both chose to Apparate right now to the front door of Flourish and Blotts, even if we envisioned it the same way, one of us would land slightly to the left and the other slightly to the right." Seeing Hermione nod, he continued, "Why is that? How does the magic accomplish this?"

"No one is entirely certain, but I think that our magic behaves similarly to other physiological functions, like breathing. Just as one cannot die by holding one's breath, people can rarely kill themselves with their own magic. It is very difficult to perform magic that directly conflicts with the will to live. I think that's one of the reasons why wizarding suicide rates are so low compared with the Muggle population. One's own magic won't act against a wizard's own instinct to survive, and most wizards just wouldn't contemplate the manual means that Muggles use."

"So you've managed somehow to improve Apparition in your work for the Ministry?"

"Well, I've not improved Apparition itself," Hermione said, pausing as she nervously took another drink of ale. "When it stages a raid, the Auror Department often instructs its team to Apparate to specific coordinates to ensure that all the Aurors arrive at their precise locations. In a practice raid two years ago, a junior Auror reversed the digits in his own coordinates, causing him to Apparate to the same precise location as one of his colleagues." Hermione swallowed as she paused in her explanation, visibly having difficulty continuing. Were those tears glistening in her eyes? Severus cocked his head quizzically at Hermione's difficulty.

"Sorry," Hermione continued, quickly wiping a tear away, "Ron was the second Auror. St. Mungo's said they'd never seen a worse Apparition accident. They didn't even have a term for it because it technically couldn't be called splinching. Unfortunately, they couldn't do anything to save either one."

Severus grimaced at the grizzly situation. "Good Gods, that's awful! Minerva mentioned that Ron had died in a training incident, but she never mentioned how gruesome or senseless it had been."

"Yes," Hermione said as she sniffled rather noticeably. "Oh, I'm sorry. I really shouldn't have had that second cider. I'd never have told that story otherwise."

After years of conditioning by the Marauders, Severus usually instinctively fled or lashed out at the slightest sign that either he or anyone else was about to shed tears, so he was shocked to realize that he was instead offering a handkerchief to Hermione and, indeed, was even encouraging further discussion.

"How does this relate to the pet project work you mentioned?" Severus asked, trying to steer the conversation back into less emotional waters.

"Well, I created spelled parchment that makes planning group Apparitions much easier and safer. I'm quite proud of it, actually," Hermione said, nearly glowing as she described her work. "The Auror planning the raid defines various parameters: perimeters, time of day, the coordinates for objects likely to give cover, and statistics about the Auror team itself. After the information is written, a map appears on the back of the parchment detailing the precise locations for Apparition. Arithmancy formulas ensure that no coordinates are likely to be reversed. Plus, once the parchment holder is close enough to the site, the parchment shows the individuals' positions, rather like Harry's old Hogwarts map."

By the time Hermione wrapped up her explanation, the nagging sensation of the Compulsion Charms had started to gnaw at them. Glancing at her watch, Hermione exclaimed, "Shit, it's ten to seven. I suppose we'd better head to the bookshop."

Severus was astounded that thirty-five minutes had passed so quickly. This was the longest conversation he'd had with a single individual since The Boy Who Lived Twice had besieged him at his bedside in St. Mungo's, and that conversation had been rather one-sided since Severus could barely speak at the time. Granted, Hermione had done most of the talking during this exchange, but it was always in response to his questions: questions that he had asked with genuine interest. Not only that, but he was really fucking impressed with that bit of spell work she'd created. Despite all his intentions to the contrary, he'd actually enjoyed their evening together. Hoping that it was just the Firewhisky that was making the world seem so off-kilter, Severus stood and pulled his cloak on with rather more force than was necessary.

Pleasantly tipsy, Hermione and Severus ambled to Flourish and Blotts. Preferring conversation to awkward silence following her rather embarrassing outburst, Hermione asked, "So, how did you manage this week's reading?"

"Well, I've always tried to read academic texts in their native language rather than relying on Translation Charms. There are so many nuances in language that a charm isn't wholly reliable for Potions texts," Severus said as Hermione nodded in agreement. "I'm planning to purchase some Russian texts for my summer research so I've been learning Russian in my spare time. I translated *The Witches of Gifford* for practice."

"Oh, that's brilliant! I've been meaning to brush up on my German, so perhaps I'll try that, too. Alas, my coping mechanism wasn't so scholarly. I pushed my luck with the Compulsion Charms to see if they would force me to concentrate on the reading. I was at my parent's house for Sunday dinner and skimmed both chapters while we watched the telly after dinner."

"Did the charms allow this?" Severus asked as he opened the door to Flourish and Blotts for Hermione without quite noticing that he was being chivalrous.

"They certainly did. I'm happy to say that I barely recall the book, but I'm completely caught up on Eastenders," Hermione said with a self-satisfied smile.

Severus and Hermione settled into their now-customary seats at the back of the room. Shortly afterwards, Eustace Abbott and Flora Merriweather stood at the front of the room and proudly declared that this week they would be discussing the rich and entertaining characters encountered thus far in *The Witches of Gifford*. Upon hearing the topic, Severus and Hermione shared a brief, conspiratorial look intimating their opinions of the rich and entertaining characters. The week's meeting thus commenced and looked as if it would progress in much the same inane fashion as the previous one, though without the introductions and mandatory comments. Severus and Hermione quickly settled into an easy and amusing running commentary.

After Martha Higgensbottom mentioned how thrilled she was that her *Witches of Gifford* cookbook included the recipe mentioned in chapter five, Hermione blurted, "I swear, if that woman mentions Nigel Reese's kitchen prowess one more time, next week I'm going to bring stale bread to lob at her head."

The highlight occurred just a few moments before the meeting ended. Hermione began giggling uncontrollably when Eunice Greengrass described Nigel as an 'extremely handsome wizard that she'd love to get to know more personally'. Severus shuddered when witches around the room began to cackle loudly and echo their agreement with Greengrass's comment.

Severus leaned his head closer to Hermione and quietly said, "Here's my contribution for the week: Nigel Reese is an overdressed, big-headed nincompoop who thinks he is Merlin's gift to Gifford simply because he can perform spells that any competent witch or wizard ought to be able to cast in their sleep."

Hermione snorted indelicately and quickly tried to disguise it as a cough when the witch in front of her turned to cast a scathing look. Despite her continued lack of composure, Hermione reflected that perhaps she was happy that she'd had that second pint. It was much less unnerving to trade witty banter with Severus under the cider's happy glow.

As the meeting drew to a close, Hermione boldly commented that it had indeed been more entertaining under the influence and asked Severus if he might want to continue the tradition the following week. It was best she'd left the invitation until after the meeting. After their conversation at the Leaky, Severus had feared Hermione to be a sad drunk, which was not to be borne. Fortunately, she'd perked up during the meeting and had proved her worth as an amusing ally in the battle to survive Nigel Reese and his adoring fans. Much to Hermione's surprise, Severus agreed to the invitation as they wrapped themselves in their cloaks and went their separate ways.

Author's note: Not as witty a chapter, I'm afraid. Our characters are beginning to work through their demons. Nasty stuff indeed.

Oh, and lest anyone read my author profile and become suspicious of similarities, I do freelance work, but it's glorified data entry. It's not a bit as interesting as Hermione's work.

The Return of Caustic Snape

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

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Effusive thanks to my betas kittylefish (comma and plot Goddess) and persevero (Fantastic Brit-picker). This story would surely fall flat on its face without either or both of you. Special thanks to persevero for her most excellent descriptions of British pubs and chip shops.

Chapter Four - *The Return of Caustic Snape*

At the beginning of the meeting on the last Tuesday in February, Hermione determined that the time had come to pop the proverbial escape hatch. Delphinia Appleblossom and Eunice Greengrass had just announced that the week's discussion would cover the creative solutions and advice that Nigel Reese had prescribed thus far in *The Witches of Gifford*. Leaning closer to Severus, she confided, "I've been saving this until I was truly desperate to escape. We can only use this ploy once. Now, I've been a good girl and suffered through seven of these damned meetings, but I absolutely cannot tolerate the thought of listening to these witches prattle on for two hours about how ingenious they find Nigel Reese."

Severus was not surprised in the least that the clever witch had managed to contrive means to dodge the meeting. Severus's eyebrows rose when Hermione gestured to the object resting in her palm. When she tried to pass it to him, he responded, "Excellent idea, but surely you don't expect me to take that. I think it's in my contract somewhere that I can't wilfully promote, purchase, or partake of a product from Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes."

"But, Severus, surely you must see that you have to be the one to take it."

"I bloody well do not see why it has to be me. It's your damned idea."

"First of all, you get to leave this henhouse early because of my damned idea. Secondly, you know full well what this flock will think if I bolt out of here sick."

Severus stared at her blankly, curious as to why a blush was slowly rising on Hermione's cheeks.

Hermione continued in an even more hushed tone, "Anyone who sees a nauseous woman my age automatically assumes that she's pregnant. The way this group gossips, I'll be receiving Howlers from Molly berating me for sullyng Ron's memory with my inappropriate behaviour before I have the chance to Apparate back to my flat!"

At this, Severus rolled his eyes and quickly grabbed the Puking Pastille from Hermione's hand. Hermione fought to restrain simultaneous laughter, disgust, and awe when, three minutes into Ethel Brummitch's soliloquy on Nigel's prowess in the kitchen, Severus puked a spectacular tartan plaid across his and Hermione's shoes. After uttering an equally nauseating, "Oh, you poor dear," which she made certain was loud enough to turn heads four rows in front of her, Hermione made a deliberate show of pulling her handkerchief from her bag to wipe the small dribble of vomit from Severus's chin. She quickly cast Scourgify to return their shoes to pristine condition. Helping Severus from his seat, Hermione rose and slowly walked him towards the door, pausing to cast a series of Scourgifies on the shoes of surrounding club participants while quietly apologizing for the trouble. She made eye contact with Matilda Broomshanks, who nodded her assent that the two were free to leave.

Thankfully, she managed to shove Severus out the door both before Severus's next wave of nausea and before the triumphant grin erupted on her face. After disentangling himself from Hermione so that he could quickly down the remaining end of the Puking Pastille, Severus straightened his robes and smiled warmly at Hermione. "Having wanted to vomit at these meetings for weeks, I must admit it was quite satisfying finally to display my displeasure so ... visually. While I sincerely appreciate being liberated from this particular hell, I do believe you owe me a meal to compensate for the loss of my roast lamb and veg."

Still grinning from their escape, Hermione admitted that her light supper had left her hungry as well. "So what suits your fancy this evening?"

"It's been ages since I've been to a good chip shop. Do you know a good one?"

"There's an excellent chippy just round the corner from my flat."

Grabbing Severus's hand, Hermione Side-Along-Apparated them to the alleyway just behind her flat. They walked around the corner before Severus remembered to drop her hand. She laughed out loud and spun about, her cloak swirling wildly. Severus chuckled at her amusement and was particularly pleased with the mirth he saw in Hermione's eyes as she said, "I've never skived off a class or meeting in my entire life, even when Umbridge was in residence, but now I completely understand the appeal."

Severus smirked in reply as he opened the door of Chip's Chips, holding it for Hermione as she walked inside. Following her, he looked around the inside of the shop, confused to see only the order counter and, by the door, four rickety chairs, currently inhabited by four university students each of whom seemed about three sheets to the wind. "Ms Granger, where is the seating in this establishment?"

"Oh, it really has been years since you've been to a chip shop," Hermione replied, grinning cheekily. "Nowadays the shops with seating are rather a quaint rarity. Nearly all chip shops are takeaway, like this one. I'd expected that we'd take the food back to my flat, but if you'd rather go somewhere else, that would be fine," Hermione explained, suddenly feeling very awkward indeed. *This isn't some sort of date, is it? I suppose not. I can't imagine that he'd have suggested I pay if it were. Plus, even if they had seating, a chip shop really isn't somewhere you'd take a date. Wait, why am I wondering if I'm on a date with Severus Snape?* Hermione thought to herself.

Severus answered, "No, takeaway is fine. The one near my house at Spinner's End is dine-in, though I certainly wouldn't call it quaint. Ancient, dusty, greasy, and bland would be adequate descriptors but not quaint."

Hermione stepped up to the counter and placed her order, gesturing for Severus to place his. She quickly slapped down the requisite pounds. Severus protested immediately, "I didn't mean that you literally owed me my meal. How much do I owe you?"

"Absolutely nothing," Hermione replied. Spying Severus's put-out expression, Hermione continued, "If you like, you can repay the favour at the Cauldron sometime."

"Oh, alright then," Severus replied grumpily, turning to watch in eager anticipation as the cook dunked their fish in batter and tossed it into the fryer. Hermione wasn't wrong in her assessment; it had been at least a decade since he'd visited a chip shop. Now that he'd stepped foot inside, he was nearly salivating at the familiar smells. How could he have denied himself this guilty pleasure for so long? *Well, that explains it*, he thought as he spied the shelf where excess oil was dripping from fillets that had survived the fryer. *I'd best make it an early evening so I have time to take a Digestive Potion before the heartburn kicks in.*

Before he could strike up a conversation with Hermione to avoid watching the remainder of the cooking process, their orders were complete. Hermione eagerly grabbed the bags of food and scurried towards the door. Walking back to her flat, Severus commented on its location. "This doesn't seem like a normal building, yet here it is, nestled in the midst of London."

Hermione cast a quick Muffliato to ensure she wasn't overheard. "Oh, I love my building. It's like a bridge between both worlds. The residents are a mixture of Squibs,

wizards and witches, and Muggles who have wizarding relatives. Several of the charms involved in incorporating electricity and electronic equipment were part of my initial project with Malfoy Industries. Everyone has an Apparation point just outside their door, Floo access is available for every flat, and each flat has a customizable layout, depending upon how much you want to spell yourself versus paying their team. What's more, the whole building has wireless access: both wizard's wireless and Muggle Internet. Owl post and Muggle post alike are delivered in boxes by the front door."

"Quite impressive. You must hardly ever want to leave," Severus replied as they arrived at the front door of her flat, where Hermione began disassembling the wards. "Good gods, woman. You call yourself a Charms expert, and you have shoddy wards like this?"

"I'll have you know that the building wards keep anyone out of my flat whom I haven't approved."

"So the ones on your front door are just an inconvenience for you, then?" Severus teased.

"Well, just because I grant people access doesn't mean I want them around when I'm not here," Hermione replied defensively.

"You are a ridiculous witch. These wards wouldn't keep out anyone who was remotely determined."

"Oh, piss off, Severus," Hermione replied with a grin, opening the door and ushering him towards the table.

Hermione excused herself to the loo, leaving Severus to make himself comfortable after pointing him towards the refrigerator for beverages and condiments. He retrieved a glass and was surprised to find a bottle of pomegranate juice in the fridge. *They sell this in the shops now? I'll have to find out how much it is. It's always such a bugger to express and strain the seeds before I brew,* Severus thought as he settled at the table. He cracked open the container of mushy peas and began devouring them in earnest, musing over his hostess and peering around her flat in the meantime.

Contrary to his initial fears, Severus found that he very much enjoyed Hermione's company. Her witty banter made the book club meetings tolerable. In fact, he had found himself marking passages in the text each week so that he could be certain to make Hermione laugh out loud during the meetings. Their discussions at the Leaky Cauldron always kept him on his toes. Minerva had thoroughly ribbed him when she spied him reading Charms journals in the library last week. Really, it wasn't as Minerva suggested; he wasn't trying to impress Hermione, honestly. But it was true that she seemed to have awakened his long-slumbering intellectual curiosity. Hell, he'd registered for a joint Potions-Charms conference scheduled one weekend in April and had even resumed correspondence with some professional acquaintances whom he'd neglected over the years.

Still, he'd been feeling exceptionally restless lately. Something was nagging at him, and he couldn't quite put a finger on what it was. Since Minerva had recommended parcelling his time commitments out to his students, Severus found that, at least for the short term, he had nothing pressing to occupy his time. His classes were nearly running themselves at this point in the term, especially since selected older students were grading the younger forms' essays. True, he still had the older forms to grade, but they weren't nearly as much of a pain in the arse as those in the younger sets. He had considered beginning some of his research projects even though he'd not yet obtained approval, but frankly he just couldn't be arsed. Now that he'd had his taste of leisure, he just couldn't force himself to continue the brutal nonstop schedule that he'd maintained for over thirty years. His life was fairly unrecognisable when compared against six months ago and entirely the opposite of the one he had led during the war. Though sometimes he wondered if his rigorous schedule had been the only thing keeping his sanity in check; he'd caught himself staring blankly into space on numerous occasions lately.

Hermione returned to her seat and watched as Severus slowly traced his finger around the rim of his glass. He looked up at her as if startled to see her sitting before him.

Digging into her chips with gusto, Hermione thanked Severus in between bites. "Mmmm, excellent suggestion, Severus. I really should have grabbed a bite at the Cauldron earlier, but nothing on their menu sounded good at the time. This hits the spot."

Severus nodded his assent as he savoured the first bite of his cod.

"Have you heard back on your grant proposals yet?" Hermione asked.

"I've had two meetings with the Potions team at St Mungo's, and I'm scheduled to meet with the Ministry next week."

"I cannot believe you harassed me weeks ago about having to network when all the while you're running around making appointments with muckety-mucks yourself!" Hermione said, playfully tossing a chip at Severus.

"Cease and desist!" Severus exclaimed, tossing the chip back at Hermione. "I told you then I was just overwhelmingly curious, not harassing you. I've done nothing to warrant assault by chip!"

"Oh, I'm certain if I thought hard enough, I could find something you've done that would warrant assault by chip, with ketchup even," Hermione retorted, paling visibly when she realized her gaffe. "I, I'm sorry," she stuttered. "That was horribly rude of me, to jest about that. You must have people pestering you all the time for the gory details or giving you grief over your involvement."

"Actually, no one even alludes to the nefarious things I did or might have done during the war. In fact, no one mentions the war at all. It's as if it never happened."

"Really? Gods, that must be nice. Sometimes I fear I'll wake up to discover that this interlude was all a dream," Hermione said as she liberally applied malt vinegar to her cod.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Severus asked in confusion.

"It's impossible to escape from the war sometimes, what with the nightmares, the memorials, and the scrutiny from the press," Hermione replied.

Severus stared at her blankly.

"At least it's not as bad as it was immediately after the war. Everyone wanted to talk about it! I can't even remember all the times we had to recount everything. Harry, Ron, and I gave a full report of our year on the run to the Order. Then everyone in the D.A. had to hear it too, and we were eager to hear everything that had occurred while they were at Hogwarts. The Prophet wanted its piece, and then after I restored my parents' memory, I had to explain what had happened to them. Ugh, and Harry and Ron joked about it all the time. The way they told it, you would think that our time in the Forest of Dean was a glorious sleepover rather than the most miserable time of our lives," Hermione recalled, shaking her head. "I'm sure talking about it helped us recover from the trauma, though, especially since there were so many of us who shared common experiences. I'm sure it was even harder for you to discuss the war since your perception of events would have been so different from anyone on either side of the war," Hermione conceded.

"Actually, I don't believe I've discussed my involvement in the war with anyone since Albus died," Severus replied with furrowed brow. "Hell, I don't think I even related the events of Albus's death to anyone but Voldemort, which was a description so full of half-truths that it hardly counts."

"How awful! You've really kept it bottled up all these years? I'm surprised you've been able to stand it," Hermione exclaimed, reaching to lay her hand on Severus's forearm as she talked. "You know, I'll listen if you ever want to talk about it."

Severus nodded as he stared blindly at a small spot on the table. Hermione continued speaking, but Severus was scarcely able to hear her much less respond. Feigning exhaustion, he made his excuses and left shortly thereafter.

He couldn't recall Disapparating from her flat, but apparently he had since he was now trudging up the hill to Hogwarts. How had his life come to this? He'd sequestered himself to the point where he'd not discussed the single most traumatic experience of his life with anyone in the six years since it had happened, not counting a brief conversation with a certain portrait when he was installed as the Headmaster. Certainly he could have imagined living, and dying, alone when he was that miserable

teenager, dogged by the Marauders and pressured into joining the Death Eaters. But he liked to think that he'd changed since then, hadn't he? Then why the hell was it that it took a know-it-all former student to draw him out of his shell?

Severus swooped through the halls on the way to his first class of the day. Hermione had exposed a nerve the night before, which, now exposed, irritated him no end. Slamming the door as he entered the first class of the day, Severus threw a murderous glare at the Hufflepuff who had dropped her potions text upon being startled by his entry. The student cautiously bent to retrieve her book and jumped again when Severus abruptly commanded the students to follow the instructions on the board and begin brewing. One poor Ravenclaw girl tentatively raised her hand to enquire about the Jobberknoll feathers used in the potion. Severus answered impatiently, "Miss Dunnock, if you would just read the text as thoroughly as you ought, then you would have no questions. Begin brewing."

The day passed, and it seemed as if each class had grown more and more burdensome and idiotic than the one before. Severus rubbed his temples in an attempt to assuage his now throbbing headache. What had possessed the little buggers today? He'd had more exploded cauldrons by noon than he'd had the entire year. Each class was like teaching thirty Longbottoms at once. Severus groaned when he saw a house-elf cautiously poke her head around the door. "What is it, Winky?"

"The Headmistress is wanting you in her office for tea at half three, sir," Winky said hurriedly before quickly Disapparating elsewhere.

"Fuck, the last thing I need today is Minerva breathing down my neck," Severus swore, knowing that Minerva never extended an invitation to tea via house-elf unless she had a bone to pick.

Minerva eyed her clock expectantly. She'd invited Severus for tea after facing a steady stream of distraught students and heads of houses for two days straight. What on earth had rankled Severus so thoroughly? She'd not seen him be this vicious since the year before Albus had died.

Severus stormed into Minerva's office and demanded loudly, "What is it, Minerva? Classes have been horrific all week, and I've had a headache since lunch."

Minerva sighed and braced herself for an argument of epic proportions. It looked as though Severus was spoiling for someone to quarrel with him. Hoping that he wasn't out for blood, Minerva responded, "Severus, I've had students and professors alike parading in and out of here for two days complaining about your behaviour, so don't you dare walk into this office demanding things of me. Now, you've been crankier than a wet Kneazle in December. Tell me, what, precisely, is troubling you so much?"

"Why, Minerva, I didn't know you cared," Severus sneered.

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus. Of course I care!"

"Ah, yes, you've always been there when I needed someone, haven't you?"

"Severus, I will not stand for your sarcasm today. Now, tell me what has crawled up your arse and died?!"

"Oh, I'll tell you what's bothering me. Hermione Fucking Granger in one single night spoke more words to me about the war than anyone else in five years cumulative."

"Severus, you must be exaggerating. Surely you've talked with someone about the war before now."

"I am not fucking exaggerating, and of course I haven't fucking talked about it with anyone, Minerva," Severus roared. "Who the bloody hell would I have talked to? During the war, even if Albus hadn't fucking sworn me to secrecy until I could exchange the information with Potter, who could it have been, huh? Pettigrew, perhaps? Or the Carrows? You wouldn't spend a moment alone with me for fear I'd snap your neck in two, and the rest of the Order was out for my blood. Hell, the most I've heard of it from anyone was from Harry Bloody Potter while I was semi-conscious at St Mungo's. And since word came that I was pardoned, no one's said one fucking word to me about any of it!"

Minerva had been braced for a vituperative tidal wave from the man, but she certainly hadn't anticipated one of this magnitude. "And what would you have had us say, Severus? You arrived back at Hogwarts just before winter term after we'd spent months burying our colleagues and students, rebuilding the school, counselling survivors, and coping with our own grief. I know," she continued, holding up her hand to silence the protests that threatened to erupt from his mouth, "that you were physically unable to return before then. I know that it's no excuse for our behaviour, but we were exhausted from the war and had just begun to heal. We were tired of managing it, tired from fighting it, and tired of recovering from it. We should have talked to you, but our wounds were too raw. What would you have had us say, anyway?"

"For fuck's sake, Minerva," Severus bellowed. "Do you even remember what you said to me? 'It's good to have you back, Severus. I'm glad to see you're doing well.' Fucking hell, Minerva. That's what you say when someone's been on holiday!" Severus banged the desk with his fist for emphasis. "You could have said any number of things. You could have answered any number of questions. Have you even forgiven me for Albus's death? Have you apologized for believing the worst of me? Have you even acknowledged how fucking difficult it was for me to act as spy for all those years, having to alienate anyone who might have become an ally? Gods, Minerva, Albus forced me to **fucking murder** him! Do you have any fucking idea what that was like?"

Severus breathed deeply and considered launching another tirade against Minerva. Instead, he slumped into one of the chairs across from her desk. He looked up to see tears glistening in Minerva's eyes and all of the portraits curiously empty, their subjects having scuttled off to the relative safety of the rest of the castle.

Severus threw one last barb in Minerva's direction. "Oh, but I nearly forgot, Minerva. You *have* mentioned things since I came back. You saddled me with this fucking book club under the guise of paying me back for the trouble I put you through when I was headmaster. Well, you had best hope I NEVER decide to pay you back for the trouble you put me through."

Suddenly, it was as if all the anger, frustration, and exhaustion of the past thirty years had caught up with Severus and knocked the wind out of him. He leaned forward in the chair and rested his head in his hands. He sighed and said, "How the fuck did I manage to keep up the spying for so long, Minerva? I can't even bear thinking about it now, and it's been nearly five years. I've had nightmares three nights in a row, and I nearly jumped out of my skin on Wednesday when I thought I saw a snake out on the grounds."

"Piss and vinegar, Severus. You managed with piss and vinegar, with Albus following behind to clean up the aftermath." With a snap of Minerva's fingers, a quivering house-elf delivered tea and a tray of Severus's favourite biscuits. He began consuming both immediately. Minerva nodded, and the elf vanished with a relieved look on her face.

"Severus, I want you to take tomorrow and the weekend off. I'll take your seventh year class and supervise group revision for their NEWTs. I'll have the other professors cover your patrols for the weekend. Please, Severus," Minerva said, waiting for him to make eye contact, "please come to me if you'd like to talk. I never meant to push you away. As for Albus's death, I've forgiven you long ago, but I may never forgive Albus for putting you through that ordeal. And I'm truly sorry for doubting that you were on our side."

Severus replied wearily, "Minerva, I had no right to hold that against you. It's not your fault that Albus's plan succeeded so well."

"I am sorry, too, that we weren't more open with you when you returned. I suppose it didn't help matters that we completely believed in your closed-off, greasy bastard persona. Even if you'd been around just after the battle, I'm not sure anyone would have thought to approach you to discuss your emotional state."

"Oh, come off it. I always lingered around after staff meetings to talk about my feelings," Severus replied with a weak smile. "Minerva, do you need anything else of me? I believe the roaring headache and lack of sleep have caught up with me."

"No, I have nothing else. Let me call Winky to take you back to your chambers. You look dead on your feet."

At the Headmistress's summons, Winky popped into the room and eyed Severus warily. Upon receiving Minerva's request, Winky grabbed Severus's elbow and Apparated

him back to his quarters.

Minerva breathed a deep sigh of relief. "I can scarcely believe our esteemed Potions master was so wound up that he didn't notice the Calming Draught in that tea." She poured herself a tumbler of scotch, reclined in her desk chair, and removed her glasses, massaging the bridge of her nose. *Merlin*, she thought, *I hope that was the worst of it. I'm not sure I can take another day like this one.* She raised her glass to Albus's empty portrait frame. "Albus Dumbledore, you were a right fucker for leaving that man with no support."

A/N: Both kittylefish and I were uncertain whether canon allowed for house-elf Side-Along Apparation within Hogwarts. Clearly house-elves can Apparate within the building and grounds, so it logically follows that all forms of Apparation ought to be allowable.

Apologies for the late arrival of this chapter. My lovely betas have been injured and sick. And me? I ran 26.2 miles this weekend. Several upcoming chapters are either already in beta-land or nearly completed.

Lastly, many times it's hard to distinguish between canon and fanon or give credit where credit is due, particularly when something is adopted as fanon canon. In this chapters case, I honestly can't recall what inspired the idea of Severus consuming a Puking Pastille, but I feel I need to give a nod to Camillo's excellent story *Phoenix Feathers* in which a Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes product is consumed in spectacular fashion.

The Leaky Granger

Chapter 5 of 12

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

Disclaimer: As you're no doubt certain, I've no claim to the Harry Potter universe, nor am I profiting financially from writing this story.

As always, thanks to my betas kittylefish (comma and plot Goddess) and persevero (fantastic Brit-picker).

Chapter Five - *The Leaky Granger*

Severus drummed his fingers on the table and glanced up from his Potions journal for the umpteenth time since he'd settled into their traditional booth at the Leaky Cauldron. After a long weekend of finally discussing the war with various colleagues, especially Minerva and at last Albus's portrait, he was exhausted and short-tempered, and the tenuous hold he had managed to keep on his composure was beginning to slip. Where was that cursed witch? Granted, it wasn't official that they'd meet up at the Leaky before every book club meeting, but he liked to think it had become something of a standing, well, date. As the time until seven o'clock grew shorter and shorter, so did his temper. What began as mild irritation towards the witch bubbled slowly towards seething anger until boiling over with utter disgust for both her and himself.

Had he somehow offended the witch after the previous week's chip shop outing? He could barely recall anything they'd discussed, and he hoped he'd not ruined their friendly outing. Had she been insulted by his choice of venue? Had she been annoyed when he left so abruptly after they ate? Wait, why the fuck was he so concerned about Hermione Granger's opinion, anyway? Certainly he could enjoy a Firewhisky without her company. It wasn't as if he were unaccustomed to drinking by himself in a pub: he'd savoured many a drink at a table for one. Grumbling, Severus caught Tom's eye and signalled for another round.

Severus stomped off to Flourish and Blotts five minutes before the start of the meeting – late enough that the charm had grown uncomfortable. Upon entering, he cast several glances around the room, angrily searching out Hermione. He was astonished not to see her. Admittedly, he found himself impressed that she'd managed to skirt the requirements of the charm, but he swore under his breath when he realized she'd left him to fend for himself.

With a scant fifteen seconds until this week's dunderheads kicked off the meeting, Hermione popped into place in her usual seat. Severus grinned smugly that she'd not managed to outwit the charm's pull, but that grin quickly slid from his face as he took in Hermione's blotchy eyes, tear-streaked face, and rumpled black robes. Before he could ask her whatever was the matter, the discussion began. Fearing that he would, as usual, fail to find the proper words, Severus simply laid his hand upon hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. For a moment, this seemed to lift her spirits; the corner of her mouth betrayed the slightest upwards twitch.

The meeting began with its usual inane discourse, and Severus noted that Hermione seemed to have recovered somewhat from her upset. He observed her acutely throughout the meeting. Every once in a while, she seemed to struggle with her emotions, barely managing to contain them. Given how distraught she seemed to be, Severus thought she really was holding it together rather well. It wasn't until Eustace Abbott began talking about the Widow Courously that Hermione's composure began to falter and the light of comprehension began to dawn in Severus's mind. As Eustace Abbott continued to ramble about how lonely the Widow must be and how kind it was of Nigel Reese to spend time consoling the Widow, Hermione's composure continued to deteriorate and she began to snifle audibly. Several witches had turned to look at Hermione by the time Severus was finally able to catch Matilda Broomshanks' eye. With a suspicious look, Matilda granted them permission to leave early for the second week in a row.

With his hand on her back, Severus calmly ushered Hermione towards the door and outside to Diagon Alley. Still not understanding precisely what was causing Hermione to be *this* upset, but figuring that it somehow related to Ronald Weasley's death, Severus gathered Hermione into his arms as he prepared to Apparate. Hermione immediately dissolved in a flood of tears and clung to the front of his robes. Holding her tightly against his chest, Severus Apparated to the hallway outside her flat. She continued sobbing while they stood in the hallway, and he stroked her back lightly as he struggled to retrieve his wand without disturbing her. Thankfully, she'd not changed her pitiful wards since they'd gone to her flat the previous week, and he was able to dismantle them with relative ease. Severus opened the door, and Hermione was immediately snatched from his arms and engulfed by a bawling Molly Weasley. Apparently her wards didn't extend to preventing Floo access, either. Seeing that the rest of the adult Weasley clan was crammed into Hermione's living room with their attention riveted on the poor witch, Severus quietly ducked out of the door. It seemed Hermione would be well-tended in her grief without his attentions.

Severus Apparated to Hogsmeade and slowly began the trek to Hogwarts. He had a great deal on his mind this evening and found that the walk was helping to clear his head. For a man who, until recently, normally isolated himself from all but professional interactions, tonight had been a whirlwind of emotions. In the course of just two hours, he'd been anxious, irate, concerned, and entirely overwhelmed. That this shit-storm of feelings was all the fault of one bushy-headed, big-brained, attractive former

student was perhaps the most vexing aspect of it all.

Finally making his way into the castle and down to the dungeons, he paused briefly to hang his cloak in his quarters. While the pleasant buzz of Firewhisky was generally welcome, he needed a clear head to sort out his thoughts regarding Hermione Granger. *Gods, am I really doing something as ludicrous as analysing my feelings?* Severus wondered as he poured himself two fingers of Sobering Draught. After downing the potion, Severus walked to his personal Potions laboratory, gathered the necessary tools, and settled in for a night of inventorying his personal stock of ingredients, materials, and completed potions. Managing the inventory of his personal storeroom and laboratory was one of the few tasks that he'd not delegated to his newfound fleet of student minions. It wasn't that he didn't trust his best and brightest. He just honestly enjoyed the task and was loath to relinquish it. It was exceedingly relaxing, and he found that some of his best ideas sprang to mind during his time arranging, counting, and dusting.

Severus conjured a small, wheeled cart to support any bottles that would need to be emptied and cleaned. While he enjoyed arranging the cupboard, he was more than happy to assign a detention crew to clean and scrub out bottles with mouldy or desiccated ingredients. Pushing his sleeves up to his elbows, he set to work reviewing the expiry dates on his potions.

He had admitted to himself in previous weeks that Hermione, with her witty banter and fascinating mind, was slowly working her way under his skin. This week, though, had been entirely different. Where before he had felt camaraderie, curiosity, and a growing respect for her, this week he had felt something far more substantial. He had truly been discomfited at her obvious distress. He'd felt powerless during the meeting at not being able to console the witch and was enormously relieved when he was finally able to escort her from the room. As he noted that his supply of Honking Daffodil stamens was severely depleted, Severus paused to recall just how good she had felt in his arms. His stomach lurched at the thought of how she'd clung to him in return.

Momentarily distracted from his thoughts by the task at hand, Severus snorted with disgust. *Gods, did I really last brew Contraceptive Potion for my personal stores in 1992? It's still within its shelf-life, but I could certainly do without a concrete reminder of my long-standing celibacy.* Severus walked to the sink to empty and clean the bottle himself. It wouldn't do to have his students catch a whiff of the easily identifiable brew. As he rinsed out the bottle, he found himself idly wondering whether Hermione preferred Contraceptive Potion or Charm. Nearly dropping the bottle as his conscious mind registered the thought, Severus groaned aloud. *Fuck*, he thought as he leaned against the sink. *I think I've gone and fucking fallen in love with Hermione Granger. And what's worse, her heart still clearly belongs to Ronald Weasley.*

Hermione cracked one eye open and looked cautiously around the room. Why did it feel like someone had scrubbed out her brain and replaced it with very loud, very pointy candy floss? She reached up to rub her bleary eyes and felt how swollen they were. Ah, it was the hours of crying that had made her head feel as if she'd imbibed a decade's worth of alcohol in one night. Thanking the gods that at least a crying hangover didn't leave one feeling nauseous, Hermione lumbered out of bed and clumsily walked to the loo for a Headache Potion and to scrub the mossy feeling from her teeth. Feeling vaguely human again, Hermione wandered to the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee.

Excellent! Molly had stocked the refrigerator and cupboards full of all her favourite foods. "I think she's done my cooking for three months," Hermione mumbled, groaning when she realized that Molly must have examined the contents of her kitchen prior to stocking it. She'd been in between trips to the supermarket, and her supplies had dwindled considerably. Molly had probably thought Hermione was in danger of starvation. Taking out a serving of fried tomatoes, mash, and a small slice of cake, Hermione grabbed yesterday's post off the table and wandered into the living room to eat in front of the fireplace. If she was eating cake as part of breakfast, she could surely break the rules and eat in front of the fireplace, too. *Although, with the exception of when Severus and I ate here, when do I ever eat at the table?* Hermione mused. The table was one of many things that reminded her too vividly of Ron and was generally to be avoided at all costs. Every evening at that table, she had nagged him to eat with manners, watched him shovel down even her most horribly prepared meals, and bored him with the details of her latest project. Meanwhile, he would update her on the latest crazy incident at the Auror office, ignore her nagging, and greedily wolf down his meal, reaching for seconds and thirds, if possible.

Hermione occasionally regretted that they'd married rather impulsively so soon after the war had ended. In fact, it had been so soon after the war's end that the wizarding press had speculated that their rushed nuptials were a direct by-product of loose morals and general naughtiness from their year on the run. The press had dogged them constantly until it became apparent that there was no proof of their theory. Ron had taken great joy in privately ridiculing the press, finding it particularly humorous given that Hermione had entirely refused him entry to her knickers until their wedding night. She had often wondered over the years whether they would have got married at all had they waited. Their spats were notorious even before they were wed, and residing in close quarters certainly didn't reduce the intensity or frequency of their conflagrations. Yet, while their relationship hadn't been the easiest to manage, they had both quickly learned how and when to put aside their differences. In addition, Hermione had learned that sometimes it was actually best to pick a small argument with her husband. After Ron had vented his frustration on something minor, he was much better equipped to discuss an issue with the rational mind he normally possessed. But Hermione had cottoned on very quickly to Ron's penchant for lusty make-up sex and had immediately disabused him of the notion that purposefully picking a fight would lead to a steamy romp in the bedroom.

Their marriage had been no walk in the park, but they had loved each other dearly and had worked very hard at building a strong and loving marriage. Early on, they'd had one too many tearful fights in which Ron had accused Hermione of preferring the library to him and Hermione had retorted that Ron clearly would divorce her for Quidditch if given the chance. Afterwards, they'd mutually agreed to a rule that, unless a work emergency demanded their attention, they would spend three evenings a week in each other's company cultivating mutual interests. Honestly, it had surprised her to find that they even **had** mutual interests. Their favourite had been travelling, which had grown out of Hermione's extensive travels with her parents as a child and Ron's isolation at the Burrow, to which his family trip to Egypt the summer before their third year at Hogwarts had been the only exception. She smiled fondly as she recalled how, together, they had found great joy in researching Muggle and wizarding locations alike and had taken frequent trips to those places that fascinated them both.

Their last trip to Rio de Janeiro had been particularly enjoyable, and it had marked the first time they'd finally mastered the art of vacationing together peacefully. They'd each taken one day to themselves, with Hermione naturally attending several wizarding and Muggle museums while Ron took in a Quidditch match. As they had dined together that evening, they had taken turns exuberantly sharing the details of their day. With a quiver in her belly, Hermione could still recall the intense look that Ron had given her as he silently watched her talking excitedly with the waiter about a special installation at one of the Muggle museums. Ron had quickly paid the bill and rushed her back to the hotel, where he'd both told her and demonstrated quite thoroughly how arousing he found his brainy little witch. Hermione closed her eyes and smiled, feeling oddly at peace with such a memory for the first time since Ron's death. Perhaps the anniversary the day before had been more cathartic than she had realized.

Having polished off the last of her breakfast, Hermione summoned the coffee pot from the kitchen and reclined on the sofa to savour her last cup of the morning. The Weasley gathering in Ron's remembrance yesterday had been truly exhausting. Given the nature of her work, she was accustomed to spending most days in isolation, and she'd felt smothered by the presence of his entire family and his close friends. That it fell on the same day as the book club meeting had made it even more tiresome. Hermione had tried to leave discreetly without mentioning the reason, but Molly had spotted her grabbing her cloak and wouldn't hear of her departure. She could only imagine the matriarch's reaction when Hermione suddenly Disappeared from the Burrow, overriding its Anti-Disapparation wards. The Compulsion Charms, it seemed, were even more powerful than Molly Weasley's demanding presence. She chuckled as she wondered how Molly had reacted upon learning that it was her own Christmas gift that had caused Hermione's abrupt disappearance.

Reflecting on the meeting itself, she was rather surprised by Severus's behaviour. It was true that, two months into their book club sentence, she considered him a friend, but she'd not expected the attention or affection that he'd so freely given the night before. Even in her distress, she'd felt his close scrutiny throughout the entire meeting. She'd been a bit startled when he squeezed her hand in a gesture of comfort, and if she hadn't been crying her eyes out at the time, she might have verified whether he was someone else Polyjuiced when he had escorted her from the meeting and into his arms for Apparition. While Severus had become an attentive friend, always thoughtfully asking after the success of meetings or proposals that she'd mentioned, he was the last wizard whose company she would have sought for physical comfort. His prickly nature seemed to suggest that his cloak might literally be equipped with self-defence mechanisms against anyone who ventured too close to his person.

She really had grown to treasure her weekly meetings with Severus. He seemed to enjoy his time away from Hogwarts, and they never ran out of fascinating discussion topics. Frankly, it was a challenge to chat with someone who actually read some of the same research journals that she followed. Neville was her only friend who kept current with academic research, but, try as she might, she just couldn't maintain anything more than a superficial interest in Herbology. No, Severus was well-read on many subjects, including Arithmancy and Charms as they related to Potions applications. She found herself extending her usual reading habits just to keep up with the man. She was accustomed to friends playing different roles and satisfying different aspects of her personality, but she'd never had a friend with whom she could share this part of her life. Perhaps if she'd had more friends in Ravenclaw during school, she might have filled that niche earlier. But the Ravenclaws in her year had always seemed to be

put off by her abrupt and loud demeanour, and really, between keeping Ron and Harry in line, helping to foil the inevitable annual plot by Voldemort, and maintaining her studies, when would she have had time to form close friendships in other houses?

Hermione sighed as she thought of her friendship with Harry. They had lent each other a great deal of support directly following Ron's death, but since the immediate aftermath, it physically hurt to see Harry, and their friendship had become exceedingly strained. Yes, they were still friends and exchanged frequent owls, but it was impossible for the two of them to get together and not be constantly reminded that the third member of their Trio was forever absent. Harry had been at the Burrow yesterday, and that was the first time she'd seen him since Christmas. Blinking back the burgeoning tears, Hermione recalled how Harry used to stop by two or three times a week when Ron was alive. In particular, he had always made it a point to visit when Ron was out of town to distract her inevitable nerves that accompanied his Auror missions. Perhaps that tradition was why he never came round any more. Harry had last visited Hermione alone when Ron was on the mission from which he had never returned. In fact, he'd still been at the flat with her when Auror Dawlish had come to deliver the horrible news that she was needed at St Mungo's.

She was eager to abandon her current path of reminiscing. *Really, I've cried enough for one week.* Hermione thought as she stood up from the sofa and carried her dishes to the kitchen. Her mind quickly returned to Severus Snape. He had done her a great favour by escorting her home last evening; she'd been in no condition to Apparate. With her kitchen fully stocked with prepared meals, it was only right that she invite him over to repay him for his kindness. Grabbing a quill and a scrap of parchment out of her desk, Hermione dashed off a quick invitation for Friday night.

Severus arrived via Floo promptly at seven, bottle of wine in hand, just as Hermione was pulling the reheated roast chicken from the oven. Severus poured the wine as she carved the chicken, and the two sat down at the table to begin their meal.

"I know you'll be heartbroken, but please forgive me if I'm not as chatty as usual. I skipped lunch today, and now I'm ravenous," Hermione apologized.

"Oh, and I so hoped that you would update me on the status of the Weasleys and all their kin," Severus responded with a smirk as he placed a generous portion of chicken onto his plate.

Although the dinner was punctuated with the occasional short conversation, for the most part the two ate in comfortable silence. Hermione finished and placed her napkin on her plate, saying with a grin, "Molly may have many faults, being meddling and melodramatic to name a couple, but this chicken very nearly makes up for all of them. There's still some wine left. Would you like to adjourn to the sitting room to enjoy the rest of the bottle?"

Severus agreed and carried his glass to the sofa after refilling it. He stretched his right arm across the back of the sofa as he sipped his wine and gazed at the fire.

Hermione tucked her feet underneath her and leaned against the opposite end of the sofa. "Thanks for helping me get home the other night. I was in no shape to Apparate."

"You're welcome. If you don't mind my asking, what was the occasion for your distress?"

"The Weasleys had a gathering to commemorate the second anniversary of Ron's death. I'd have much rather stayed at home with a pint of ice cream, but Molly wouldn't hear of it."

"Indeed. I take it she was rather shocked by your sudden departure?"

Hermione sniggered. "Quite. She was horribly offended when I said I needed to leave the gathering early, and I do believe she was mortified when Ginny told her how and why I'd managed to Disapparate despite the Burrow's wards. Molly actually apologized for giving me the gift."

Severus replied with a look of abject horror, "You're not leaving the club, are you?"

Hermione smirked at Severus's desperate-sounding query. "Alas, even Molly's guilt can't undo the Compulsion Charms now that they've been cast." Hermione took a sip of her wine and commented, "Pardon me for saying so, but you seem much more relaxed than you did last week, and I don't think it's just the wine."

Severus rubbed his brow with his right hand before responding. "It was a rather challenging week, actually. After nearly imploding, I finally talked to Minerva about the war several times over tea. Eventually, I spoke with other members of the staff as well. To say it was difficult would be an enormous understatement, but, as you said last week, it was therapeutic to a degree."

She looked up at him with teary eyes and asked, "Does it ever get better, Severus? How on earth have you managed to live all these years with the pain of losing Lily and Albus?"

Severus closed his eyes and swallowed before speaking, his voice wavering, "According to Minerva, I managed by becoming an unholy terror. I'm not sure you should be looking to me for advice. But I can tell you that the pain does fade somewhat, though it's certainly always present, waiting to be remembered. It's a bit like an old injury that flares up on rainy days. There used to be weeks when I wouldn't think of Lily at all, and then suddenly something would remind me of her. Of course, when Potter was at Hogwarts, his presence chafed daily."

Hermione scooted closer and reached out to touch his hand. He grasped hers tightly in response. He opened his eyes and gazed down at her, meeting her eyes, before he swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. Gods, she was so close to him; it was nearly unbearable. She broke the delicate silence, asking, "But how do you make it easier? How do you keep it from crippling you on the worst days? It's getting better, but there are still days when I feel victorious for managing to get out of bed before noon."

He reached out with his free hand and brushed away the stray hairs that were plastered to her cheeks. "Apparently, I walled myself off entirely. I built the strongest shields imaginable for Occlumency, shoved memories into a Pensieve, and moved forward without ever glancing back. I gave myself no choice but to soldier on with an almost untenable schedule of duties. In short, I stayed so busy that I didn't have time to reflect. It wasn't until we talked last week that I realized that I'd not even begun to decompress from the war. I suppose I still haven't completely processed Lily's death, though it did help to think I was working to avenge her every time I answered Voldemort's call. I certainly don't think I'll ever recover from killing Albus." He startled Hermione as he began chuckling before he continued, "Apparently, Minerva was absolutely furious with Albus when she found out the truth of my situation. I've heard tales recently that they could hear her from as far away as Hogsmeade yelling at his portrait."

Smiling, Hermione looked at Severus and suddenly realized just how closely they were sitting. With unexpected insight, Hermione wondered if perhaps Severus's growing affection towards her signalled that his intentions extended beyond their current platonic arrangement. He had accepted and offered increasingly intimate gestures all evening. Her nipples tightened involuntarily as she realized that she could lean over just a bit and kiss him. She stopped herself, struggling to keep her hormones in check. *No matter how strong my feelings for this man might be* she thought, tabling the idea of him for future rumination, *I will not kiss him when we've just been discussing dead lovers and friends.* Summoning the last vestiges of her self-control while deciding to push the bounds of their familiarity even further, Hermione compromised and settled herself between Severus's open arms, resting her head against his chest.

Looking down with awe at the witch nestled in his arms, Severus tried to recall if he'd ever in his life shared such an intimate moment with a witch. Oh, he'd shagged witches before, but it had always been about instant gratification and divorced from any sort of emotional connection. He wondered distractedly if any of them had ever stayed the night; he rather thought not. Surely he'd remember if they had. Shaking off the haze of days gone by, he wondered again about the witch in his arms. Since he'd opened the floodgates on his memories and unresolved issues from the war, he desperately wanted to ask her about the night Nagini had nearly killed him. Why had she saved him? She couldn't have known at that point of his relative innocence. And why had he been forced to suffer Potter's presence in the hospital but not hers? Staring at the mantel above her fireplace, he began slowly rubbing her back with his right hand. He decided to abandon that possible line of conversation; she was already upset enough and surely didn't need him to dredge up his own issues. Perhaps it didn't really matter anyway. It would be far more satisfying simply to continue enjoying her company than to satisfy his morbid curiosity. He looked again at Hermione as she fidgeted and put her arm around his waist. Thank Merlin he had learned not to flinch at the occasional gestures that Hermione inadvertently made during their meetings at the Leaky Cauldron, briefly touching his hand or elbow to emphasize a point. This

exquisite torture certainly made his initial discomfort well worthwhile.

It wasn't until he heard a soft, barely audible snore that Severus realized Hermione had fallen asleep. There was no way to extract himself from her embrace without awakening her. He was loath to move her, and Severus supposed that there were far worse ways to be tortured to the brink of insanity than having a beautiful witch fall asleep in your arms. After he carefully shifted himself into a more comfortable position, Severus grabbed the knitted throw off the back of the sofa and covered the two of them. Knowing that he would pay dearly if his neck were not better situated, Severus transfigured the end of the sofa to better suit his needs and slowly drifted off to sleep.

Trendy Mini-Pastries

Chapter 6 of 12

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

Disclaimer: As you're no doubt certain, I've no claim to the Harry Potter universe nor am I profiting financially from writing this story.

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Chapter Six - Trendy Mini-Pastries

Ginny Weasley stared in utter disbelief at the sight that met her when she stepped out of Hermione's Floo. Her dear friend, Hermione Granger, was curled up on her couch in the arms of, holy fuck, Severus Snape! She'd known that the two were becoming friends. Hell, sometimes she couldn't get Hermione to stop prattling on about the man. She had wondered just last week if Hermione had begun harbouring a bit of a crush on him, but she had cast the notion aside. It was, after all, Severus Snape, greasy git of the dungeons and spoiler of adolescent romances for over thirty years. She'd certainly never considered the man's sexuality before and frankly found herself a bit queasy just at the thought that he might have designs on her beloved friend.

Ginny was now faced with a bit of a dilemma. Should she gather photographic evidence? Should she Floo to the Burrow and suggest that her mum poke her head through the Floo, ensuring complete mortification for all parties? Should she quietly leave and later pretend that she'd overslept for her girls' day with Hermione? Should she leave and return to knock on the door? No doubt Hermione would figure out later what Ginny had seen, but it would save them the initial embarrassment.

As she stood musing over what to do, Ginny couldn't help but recall one of the last times she'd seen Professor Snape. Years ago, he'd caught her and Dean Thomas in a rather revealing (but extremely satisfying!) position in what was supposed to be a secluded alcove on the fourth floor. He'd embarrassed her so thoroughly that she'd been unable to look Dean in the eyes for days. *He certainly took no care for my feelings at the time*, Ginny thought with an evil grin, having made up her mind as to her course of action. *I'll make it up to Hermione later because it's definitely the professor's turn for public humiliation* Before launching her attack, she verified the state of things. Ah, good. It **did** look like they were both fully clothed, so there was no danger of any permanent mental scarring from seeing her former professor's naughty bits.

"Good morning, sleepyheads!" Ginny sang as loudly and cheerfully as she could manage for nine o'clock on a Saturday morning.

Severus jumped a good two feet in the air and consequently dumped Hermione onto the floor, still fumbling to retrieve his wand.

"I'll just pop round to the shop and grab us some breakfast then, Hermione. Toodles!" Ginny said as she casually walked towards the door. Once safely outside the building, she collapsed in a fit of giggles. For a moment, she wondered if perhaps she should owl Minerva so that Severus's return to the castle would be spotted, likely with the running commentary of the entire female staff, but she swiftly dismissed the idea. No, she'd had her fun this morning, and it seemed a bit too mean-spirited to embarrass the man further, especially since it was clear he'd not enjoyed all the benefits that normally accompanied a walk of shame. Besides, she still wasn't entirely sure that Minerva and her mum hadn't been in cahoots on this enchanted book club thing, and she wanted to ensure she was in no way linked to those two busybodies in case Hermione and Professor Snape found them out.

Inside Hermione's apartment, Severus carefully administered a Healing Spell to the back of Hermione's abused skull. "Sorry about that," he mumbled, feeling her head to ensure that the swelling had completely subsided.

"Oh, it's not your fault at all," Hermione grumbled under her breath, casting a narrow glare at the door where Ginny had departed.

Severus dropped his hand from her head and looked nervously towards the door.

"Um, I guess my head's fine. So..."

"I should go," Severus said abruptly. "I'll see you Tuesday?"

Hermione nodded and watched as Severus fled through the front door as if renegade Death Eaters were coming through the Floo after him. She stalked off to the kitchen to make coffee in a foul mood indeed. Curses! When she'd made dinner plans with Severus, she'd completely forgotten that she and Ginny had made plans for a girls' day today. Otherwise she'd have cancelled or at the very least warded the Floo. Not that she'd really expected him to stay the night. But instead, she'd been robbed! She had no warm, fuzzy memories of falling asleep on the sofa with Severus, and thanks to Ginny she had no idea what it felt like to wake up in his arms. Gods, she'd probably drooled on him, too, or something equally humiliating.

Fuck! It had taken weeks for the man to come out of his shell. He still really wouldn't talk about the war with her, though at least it sounded like he was talking to Minerva. Ginny's little stunt had definitely sent Severus scuttling back into his shell. She angrily transfigured the sofa into two armchairs and tried not to think about what might have happened if they'd awoken together. She nursed her coffee as she stared into the fireplace, slowly acknowledging her nascent feelings for Severus.

Severus Snape stalked in horrified anguish up the grounds of Hogwarts. *Fucking Ginevra Weasley. It's been absolutely ages since I've felt this awkward. This is as bad as when Bellatrix debagged me following the last Death Eater initiation, crazy bitch. No wonder I usually keep to my dungeons*, Severus grumped as he fired his wand at a clump of knotgrass. *Fuck! I cannot believe I dumped her onto the floor* Severus whined to himself. *It's not as if I had a real chance with the witch before, but I certainly*

don't now, after I nearly concussed her.

Thanking the gods that no one was out on the grounds, Severus was relieved to slip into the castle unnoticed. Minerva, damned meddling witch that she was, would certainly comment later on his absence at breakfast, but the delay would give him time to think up a plausible excuse because no degree of physical torture would force him to reveal the real reason.

Severus reached his quarters undetected and dropped into his armchair in relief. Gods, he was exhausted. That sofa of hers must have been transfigured from sacks of potatoes. After summoning a house-elf to bring breakfast, Severus gave some serious thought to the notion of Hermione Granger. Was he too fucking old for this? How did he ever expect to keep up with a witch half his age? And why on earth did getting caught by Ginevra Weasley make him feel like a useless, graceless clod and a naughty teenager? Hell, he'd never been caught with a girl when he **was** a teenager. Severus shuddered with the realization that he'd inadvertently compared himself to those morons he taught. Thank Merlin it was Saturday and he wouldn't be forced into teenaged company. He didn't have a strong enough Anti-Nausea Potion in his stores to tolerate the dunderheads today.

Ginny returned to Hermione's flat armed with a huge assortment of trendy mini-pastries to placate her friend's anger. Even if Hermione wasn't enraged by her admittedly rude wake-up call, surely she would be smarting from that nasty spill she took. Entering the kitchen to be met with its owner's stony glare, Ginny wondered if perhaps she should have made a side trip for that organic clotted cream that Hermione liked so much. Hermione swiped the bag of pastries from her and stomped off to the sitting room, muttering to Ginny that there was coffee in the pot on the counter.

Summoning her courage – really there was no way this could be worse than enduring one of her mum's tantrums – Ginny poured herself a cup of coffee and walked to the sitting room to sit in one of the two armchairs that were once Hermione's sofa.

"You are an evil, spiteful woman, Ginny Weasley," Hermione mumbled around a mouthful of scone.

"Oh, but it was priceless, Hermione! I just couldn't resist!" Ginny sniggered as she plucked a small chocolate croissant from the bag. "So, Severus, eh?" Ginny asked as nonchalantly as possible.

Hermione blushed so much that she was nearly fuchsia.

"So, just going after him for the rebound sex, then? Or is it more serious? Wait, let me guess... you're fucking him for his library!"

"Ginny!" Hermione cried as she buried her head in her hands. "You may have noticed we were entirely clothed. We **did**not have sex."

"Ah, I notice that you don't deny wanting to fuck the man."

"Gods! Do you have to be so vulgar?"

"It's my best feature!" she said while rummaging through the bag to find one of the little pecan Danishes she'd bought. "So, how long have you had the hots for Professor Snape?"

"Right!" Hermione cried, grabbing the bag of pastries. "I'm holding the pastries hostage until you behave!"

"Oh, alright. Seriously though, you're following up marriage to my brother with a relationship with Severus Snape? Could you choose someone more different from Ron? I must have details!"

"Honestly! We're not even dating. We just... had an emotional conversation last night, and I guess I fell asleep while we were talking."

"Hermione, dear, you were in his arms. This isn't as simple as just falling asleep. Good grief, woman, stop with the blushing virgin bit!"

"Stop! I've barely had a chance to think this through myself," Hermione stated. "I'm not quite sure what to even tell you. We've been seeing a lot of each other lately, what with the stupid book club every week. I invited Severus over for dinner to thank him for being so kind on Tuesday when he brought me home early from the meeting."

Ginny grinned. "Yes, you should have seen the look of horror on the man's face when he opened the door to a roomful of Weasleys."

"Right, well, he came over, and after dinner we started talking about Ron and Lily and Dumbledore. I won't break his confidence by telling you the details of our conversation, but it was very emotional. And then, right in the middle of it, I realized I wanted to kiss him."

"What?!?"

"Well, the timing was awful so I didn't. Instead, I, um, insinuated myself into his arms, and I suppose I fell asleep with my head resting on his chest."

"So, you *cuddled* with Severus Snape? Cuddled?" Ginny asked with disbelief. "You realize you might be the first person ever to willingly touch the man, right?"

"Oh, stop it. He's not the man we thought he was in school."

"Really? Do tell," Ginny said, gesturing for Hermione to hand over the bag of pastries.

"Well, for starters, remember how caustic he was in the classroom? I think that was just his brand of humour. Because, trust me, the same sort of remarks levelled at the book club are hilarious." Seeing Ginny's disbelief, she continued, "No, really! I'll seriously harm you if you spill a word of this to Molly, but the meetings are almost my favourite part of the week. We've been meeting up at the Cauldron beforehand every week for drinks. He's had some excellent suggestions for some of the research I'm doing, too," Hermione explained.

"Look at you, you smitten kitten! Well, if Severus Snape is the one who puts that smile on your face, I won't protest. It's been years since I've seen you this happy. Just do me a favour and block your Floo next time, yeah?"

"No worries there, provided I can ever lure him back here," Hermione grumbled, shooting Ginny another glare.

"If he's worth anything at all, he won't be able to stay away," Ginny reassured her.

Having polished off the last of the pastries, the girls transfigured their cloaks into jackets and prepared to hit the streets of Muggle London.

Severus and Hermione shuffled into their seats at the book club. This week's pre-club drinking session at the Cauldron had been extremely awkward before the alcohol had worked its magic. What did one say to a wizard when the last time you saw him he was scrambling to leave your flat as if the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels? They ended up settling for small talk about the status of their respective research projects. Normally, such a conversation would have been stimulating and full of ideas; instead, it was stilted and strained.

The moment they had taken their seats, Matilda Broomshanks descended upon them. "Ms Granger, Mr Snape, I trust you'll be staying for the entirety of the meeting this week? Your early departures have been extremely disruptive, and I won't tolerate another."

Hermione nodded a bit sheepishly as Matilda continued her lecture.

"Next week is your turn to present, and I expect both of you to be as well-prepared as the other club members have been." With that, Matilda scuttled off to tend to the more cooperative members of the book club.

"Bugger," Severus said, casting a malevolent glare at Matilda Broomshanks. "How dare she treat us like errant first-years!"

"Yes, well, I suppose it was too much to hope that we'd get away unscathed after skiving off two weeks in a row."

Before Severus could reply, the witches leading the week's meeting stood to announce that they would be discussing their favourite village characters. Seemingly chastened by Matilda's reprimand, Hermione was nearly silent for the duration of the meeting.

Without their usual acerbic commentary to sustain his interest, Severus struggled to stay awake. Nightmares had plagued him nearly every night since first discussing the war with Hermione. His chats with Minerva were helping, honestly more than he'd thought they would, but it seemed the more he stirred up the past, the more he was doomed to relive it.

Last night, however, his sleep was interrupted by a nightmare that did not include the spectres of war. Instead the dream had taken a turn for the bizarre. Every woman in the book club had "auditioned" for the opportunity to become his bedroom companion. The things that Eunice Greengrass had done with transfigured ping pong balls were still making him queasy. Ethel Brummitch's offer to paint her entire body with the finest Belgian chocolate would surely put him off sweets for life. He could murder his subconscious for forcing him to contemplate what lurked beneath that woman's robes. But the coup de grace had been when Hermione showed up with a map of his body that was colour-coded to denote which regions were most sensitive to licking, kissing, temperature changes, and several other attributes which **never** would have crossed his mind. What's worse, he was quite certain Hermione would be capable of creating just such a piece of spelled parchment, which likely would include features even his subconscious couldn't imagine. He could scarcely look at the witch without recalling that damned map; it was all he could do not to blush.

The only thing keeping him awake through the world's most boring meeting was the knowledge that his proximity to Hermione would likely prompt an even racier dream. Falling back on his old Occlumency routines, he began listing ingredients, cursing himself soundly when he realized he'd named ingredients for, in order, Stamina Potion, Contraceptive Potion, and Draught of Everlasting Lust, which promised an exciting evening for all until the antidote was taken.

At long last, the meeting ended, and Hermione broke her silence. "Do you want to meet up Friday evening so that we can figure out what the hell we're going to present?"

Severus nodded in agreement and offered, "I have a meeting after dinner on Friday, but I'm available afterwards. Will eight o'clock work?"

"Eight's fine. There's rather a nice coffee shop a couple of minutes from my flat if you'd like to go there."

Severus responded, "I'll see you at your flat at eight, then." He grabbed his cloak and quickly departed, hoping desperately that he'd be able to put that cursed map out of his mind by Friday.

Shit! Hermione thought, glancing at her watch. Severus was due to arrive in ten minutes, and she still couldn't decide what to wear. *This is bloody embarrassing! Teenage girls take less time to figure out their outfits.* She wanted to look attractive but not so much that it was obvious that she was *trying* to look attractive. This wasn't actually a date, after all. Oh, but how she wished it was; since admitting to Ginny her growing attraction, she'd barely been able to spare two brain cells for anything but Severus Snape. She was immensely thankful that the current phase of her project merely had her mindlessly repeating on numerous Hogwarts textbooks the Capturing, Indexing, and Vetting Electronic Text Spell, or CIVETS as she liked to call it, that she had developed as part of a pilot project for the World Wide Wizarding Web for Malfoy Industries. Had her work required higher functioning thought processes, she'd surely be horribly behind. She couldn't wait until the project was over; she was under a confidentiality agreement until the WWWW pilot was released. She was dying to tell Severus about it. Just the potential in Potions alone was mind-boggling, never mind the connections between Herbology and Potions. Hermione forced herself to stop wool-gathering and resumed the search for an appropriate outfit.

Finally, she pulled out the purple wrap-around jumper that Ginny had given her for Christmas. Surprisingly less slutty than the clothes Ginny normally tried to foist upon her, the sweater certainly fit the requirements for the evening: tasteful, alluring without revealing more than the slightest hint of cleavage, and neither red nor green. She had just finished throwing on the jumper and jeans when the wards announced Severus's presence at the door.

She opened the door to find Severus bedecked in a black jumper and slacks that suited his figure **much** better than his usual robes. She struggled to keep her jaw from dropping as her eyes nearly wept with joy.

Severus was far more prepared to maintain his composure; she'd opened the door fully clothed rather than in the skimpy negligee she'd worn in last night's dream. Although recalling **THAT** mental image certainly didn't help him keep his cool.

"Hello, Severus. Let me just grab my notebook, and we can leave for the shop. I've been itching for some of their biscuits all day."

With that, the duo quickly departed for the coffee shop. Hermione and Severus had just retrieved their orders and seated themselves when Hermione's mobile began ringing. "I'm sorry, but that's my mum's ring. I'll just be a moment," she said, retrieving the phone from her bag. "Hello, Mum," she said cheerfully as she idly stirred her coffee. "Oh, that's awful. Will he be okay? Of course, I understand if you can't make it. No, I'll find someone to take your ticket so it doesn't go to waste. Give Dad my love, Mum. Bye."

Severus sipped his espresso and tried desperately not to gawk at the way that devilish jumper clung to her breasts.

Returning the mobile to her bag, Hermione explained to Severus, "My dad's come down with a stomach bug, so Mum won't be able to come to the concert with me tomorrow night." She paused, briefly second-guessing the opportunity that fate had given her. "I've got an extra ticket now: I don't suppose you'd like to attend?"

Severus reckoned he ought not to sound too eager. "What's on the programme for the evening?"

"Ravel's Bolero and pieces from Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Sorry, but I've forgotten which ones," Hermione replied, trying desperately not to look too hopeful.

Bolero! I fucking hate Bolero! Damned repetitive shit. Well, at least the Shostakovich ought to keep me from falling asleep. Severus thought before telling Hermione that he had no other plans for the evening.

"Excellent! Well, it starts at eight, so what time should we meet up?" Hermione asked, silently pleading that he would take the opening she'd left.

"I believe it's customary to take in dinner before a concert? Shall I make reservations for six thirty, formal dress?"

"That sounds excellent." Hermione was tickled pink. Not only had she brokered a date for the following evening, but it seemed they'd broken the logjam on conversation. "Right, well that's settled. I suppose we'd best get on with the book club presentation," Hermione said, wrinkling her nose in distaste. "Did you have any ideas?"

"The only idea I came up with was inspired by a party of seventh-year Slytherins that I broke up a few weeks ago: a Nigel Reese drinking game."

Hermione laughed heartily at Severus's suggestion. "Oh! Here's one: every time Nigel demonstrates a spell learned by first-years take a drink after someone has cast *Wingardium Leviosa* on your glass!"

Severus grinned and responded, "Every time a woman swoons at Nigel's feet, take a drink from a chalice shaped like an arse?"

Hermione nearly spat out her coffee. She thought for a moment and responded, "Hmm, every time Nigel refers to himself with a four-syllable adjective, take a drink after giving your best effort at kissing your own arse."

"Better yet, when someone forces you to read an officious novel, take eight drinks in succession while trapped in a Body Bind," Severus said as he scowled into his coffee cup.

"Seriously, though, I really just want to stir up the meeting a bit. Don't you think it's odd that not one single witch has commented negatively on the book? Not only is that unnatural, given the book, but it's highly improbable for any book! I mean, look at the two of us! We've suffered this thing all along without openly offering criticism. I bet there are witches in the group who are at least *slightly* put off by the book."

"Sounds reasonable. So, are we openly fomenting rebellion, or did you have something a bit more subtle in mind?" Severus asked with a wicked grin.

"I'm sure you'll be shocked to hear such an answer from a Gryffindor, but I was thinking that something more subtle might be more appropriate. I took some notes on some of the club members after Tuesday's meeting that should help us get the discussion moving," Hermione said as she pulled out her notes, leaned towards Severus, and began excitedly outlining her plan.

A/N: Persevero tells me that 'debugged' is the British equivalent of having one's pants forcibly removed while revealing one's underpants to the world. Figures that Bellatrix found out the answer to the infamous boxers vs. briefs debate.

Bolero (or When Introverts Date)

Chapter 7 of 12

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

Thanks for everyone's lovely reviews for Chapter 6. I know you're clamouring for chapter 8, the book club presentation chapter. With holidays and hustle and bustle of the end terms, I'm sad to say that chapter 8 won't post until late December. However, you've received this chapter far ahead of schedule in exchange. :) For my part, I'm planning to have the remainder of the story written and shipped to betas by the end of the year.

The chapter does include links to the music that Severus and Hermione encounter in the programme: the music certainly inspired my writing. Hopefully, it will add to your enjoyment. Several of the pieces are rather dark and distracting, and I'd recommend pausing your read to listen.

As always, Team Gilford would be nothing without betas kittylefish and Persevero.

And, of course, I've no claim to the Harry Potter universe nor am I profiting financially from writing this story.

Chapter Seven - Bolero (or When Introverts Date)

Hermione glanced around her flat in anxious anticipation of Severus's arrival. Until now, she'd managed to keep herself busy every waking moment since they had set their date. Last night, on the off chance that her friend was home on a Friday night, she'd floored Ginny when she returned home from the coffee shop. Ginny had squealed with delight upon hearing that Hermione had managed to secure what could safely be considered a date with Severus Snape. Ginny had pulled Hermione through the Floo, installed her on the sofa, and whipped up some incredibly tasty hot chocolate while she encouraged Hermione to spill the details. They'd chatted for hours, giggling as Ginny made increasingly lewd suggestions about Severus's voice, attire, habits, and equipment. As always, Ginny seemed to thrive on making Hermione utterly embarrassed.

I suppose that's what I love about Ginny. Uncomfortable though it may be, she always manages to push me out of my comfort zone when I most need it! Looking in the mirror, she'd wondered if perhaps she'd let Ginny push her too far this time. They'd gone shopping in preparation for her date, and Ginny had given quick counter-arguments to all of Hermione's protests. The heels were much higher than she could comfortably wear without looking like a newborn giraffe. Ginny had cast a Stabilizing Charm on the shoes and smiled sweetly at Hermione. The sheath dress revealed far too much cleavage, more than she had ever displayed before, and left little to the imagination regarding the rest of her figure. "Nonsense," Ginny had replied, "I've seen McGonagall in dresses more revealing than your conservative rags." The new knickers were entirely unnecessary. "You'll appreciate the confidence," Ginny had responded. The dress was too expensive. Ginny plonked forty quid down on the shop's counter to finance part of the purchase. The dress was **green**, for fuck's sake. Could she be more obvious? "You can never be too obvious with a man," Ginny had retorted.

Upon returning to Hermione's flat with their purchases, Ginny had rushed to the Floo and summoned Lavender Brown. Hermione's mortification had further increased with the revelation that Lavender not only knew the identity of her date but highly approved. Lavender had reminisced, "Mmmm. I used to sit in the back of his class, close my eyes, and listen to his voice when he lectured. I can't count the number of times he berated me for sleeping in his class. Thank Merlin, he never figured out I was daydreaming rather than napping! Of course, the daydreaming wasn't as effective with my eyes open. I bet you're glad that he's improved his looks a bit since the war, eh, Hermione?"

Honestly? Lavender had been perving over Professor Snape while they were still at Hogwarts? That was just... eww! And really, he hadn't done all that much to improve his appearance. Though she supposed his teeth did look a shade or two whiter, and he'd clearly stopped using axle grease to control his hair.

Hermione had been plucked, waxed, and trussed until her patience had very nearly snapped. Her eyelids felt as if they were drooping under the weight of Lavender's Patented 24-Hour Lash Thickening Charm. Her lips were so glossy they felt as if they'd been coated in Teflon. The French Twist Charm that Ginny had used for her hair was so tight that she thought she had better take a Headache Potion before she left. And who knew that there was a specific charm to exfoliate one's elbows? Fortunately, Ginny had more or less managed to keep Lavender in check. Hermione had consulted the mirror several times to verify with relief that her face had not adopted the cartoonish whole look that Lavender had often applied when left to her own devices at Hogwarts.

Hermione had drawn the line when Lavender had aimed her wand at her breasts. "What?" Lavender had asked, "Don't you apply a little Blushing Charm to your cleavage?"

"Of course not! They're my breasts! Am I supposed to look flushed the moment he shows up? What if it's chilly in the restaurant? I'll be pale white but for my glowing breasts!"

Lavender's face had clearly communicated her thoughts on the subject of rosy tits. Pouting, she had replied, "Next you'll tell me that my Granny's famous Girdling Charm is out, too!"

Seeing the expression of horror on Hermione's face as she looked at her barely visible belly, Ginny had kindly thanked Lavender for all of her efforts, complimented her artistry, and gently shoved her towards the fireplace. That had been fifteen minutes ago, and Ginny had left shortly after counselling one last time, "Stop your fretting, Hermione. With that dress, you'll be lucky to make it to the restaurant."

Perhaps she should have begged Ginny to stay longer. The anticipation was about to kill her. She looked out her sitting room window and contemplated her love life. Two years without sex, and she could honestly say that she hadn't missed it. But ever since that night on the sofa, just the thought of Severus Snape caused stirrings and flutterings in her belly. Weeks of friendship had coalesced into something far more tantalizing. True, she'd been mortified the following morning upon her abrupt awakening, but after talking with Ginny, that mortification had been overshadowed by a flood of memories: the way he had gently brushed her hair from her face, the feel of his calloused hand holding hers, the rumbling in his chest when he had softly spoken while holding her, and the feeling of his arms curled around her in comfort. What would it be like to kiss him? How glorious would he look naked? And how fantastic would it feel actually to wake up with him?

Hermione groaned and shook her head. Reliving that night in the moments just before he arrived at her flat was perhaps not the smartest of choices. Faced with a rush of arousal she'd not felt in years, Hermione was nearly overcome. Gods, she was tightly strung, nervous, and hornier than she could recall ever having been. It would take all her willpower not to jump the man when he arrived to escort her to dinner.

As if on cue, she heard Severus knock upon the door. Trying vainly to collect her wits before she opened the door, Hermione looked down in horror to see that Lavender's Blushing charm would have been overkill. She was lit up like a bloody Christmas tree.

Opening the door, she was dumbfounded at how well he'd cleaned up for the evening. He'd donned a dinner jacket and pulled his hair back, and, oh shit, had she forgotten to greet him?

"Hello, Severus. You look rather spiffy this evening."

"Thank you. Do you have the tickets? I don't want to miss our reservations."

Distracted as he frantically tried to force the disparate parts of his brain to cooperate, Severus took Hermione's arm in his and Apparated to The Hidden Charm, one of the newer and more exclusive wizarding restaurants that had opened since the war. They were led to their table. A short time later, Severus noticed that at some point their orders must have been taken since he no longer had a menu sitting in front of him. With any luck, Hermione would think that their companionable silence was nothing out of the ordinary.

Hermione, for her part, felt a bit miffed that he'd not commented on her dress. *So much for Slytherin green and its overpowering seductive force.* Still, she had caught him staring blankly at her chest several times. She supposed that was a reasonably good sign.

That's fantastic. She looks bloody gorgeous, and here I am in the shittiest mood I've been in since Potter stole into my Pensieve. Severus Snape did NOT like being distracted. His was a mind that was focused and precise, not scatterbrained and unable to concentrate on any one thing for more than three minutes.

Not for the first time in recent weeks, Severus cursed Albus Dumbledore thoroughly. How was it that the man could cause just as much trouble and consternation dead as he had alive? He'd been looking forward to this evening with Hermione and had planned a fairly relaxing afternoon in preparation. Instead, after being stuck in Minerva's office for four hours talking to Albus, he'd had to skitter down to his quarters, rush through his ablutions, and was still transfiguring parts of his clothing as he hurried towards the Apparation point. He'd certainly not had time to process all that he'd discussed with Albus during their tête-à-portrait. While the apologies from Albus were appreciated, he supposed, Severus hadn't fully realized until today the depths of the man's manipulations.

His head was still reeling from all that Albus had revealed. He ardently wished that he'd thought to grab a Headache Potion while in his rooms. He ordered a coffee, well before dessert, in an effort to forestall some of the pain, and he was cleverly alternating sips of coffee with Firewhisky in an attempt to stave off that knot that always threatened to span from one shoulder to another. Perhaps some chocolate for dessert would be in order as well. He looked at Hermione with slightly unfocused eyes as she finished telling a particularly long-winded story.

A bit irked that her amusing anecdote about the perils of owl-order take-out had failed to elicit even the smallest of chuckles, Hermione asked, "Severus, are you feeling okay?"

"Of course I'm feeling okay," he snarled. Severus spied Hermione's shocked and dismayed face. *Fuck! I cannot handle this today,* he thought as he rubbed his temples. "I just have a bit of a headache."

Severus excused himself to the Gents abruptly. He leaned over the tap and stared bleakly into the mirror, cursing his temper. He ~~had~~ knew that he'd inadvertently snapped at Hermione several times. He really ought to have owled her to cancel, as he was in no shape to do anything but mull over the afternoon's discoveries. But he was here now, and he ought to salvage what he could of the evening.

This was awful. He felt utterly eviscerated from his discussion with Albus. Combined with the rather revealing talk he'd had with Hermione on her sofa, he felt, well, *vulnerable* wasn't quite the right word. That called to mind images of a lonely, pathetic boy who was strung upside down with his underpants exposed to the world. No, he felt as if he'd woken from a nightmare to find he was standing on the ledge of a very tall building without his wand to conjure a safety net. He was not prepared to be so emotionally unguarded - yes, that was the right word. He was not prepared to be so emotionally unguarded in front of THIS witch in THAT dress. Hell, he wasn't accustomed to feeling unguarded ever with anyone, including his own person.

After splashing some water on his face, Severus made his way back to the table. He was relieved to see their entrées had been delivered in his absence but quite annoyed to see the waiter had lingered and was flirting with his date. It didn't help matters that she smiled prettily in response to his undoubtedly vapid comments. Upon seeing the rather murderous look in Severus's eye, the waiter departed hurriedly.

The dinner lurched along rather awkwardly. Hermione attempted conversation several times but eventually decided that focusing on the meal might prove more entertaining. In truth, the only thing that kept dinner from being an unmitigated disaster was the fact that the food was positively delicious and the waiter kept their wine glasses full.

Severus escorted Hermione to the concert hall to what turned out to be an excellent pair of seats. The change of scenery did his mind some good, and he was able to muster a bit of small talk with Hermione. How long had she been attending the symphony with her mum? Were these season tickets or a special purchase? What composers did she like best? He still wasn't up to maintaining a complete, two-sided conversation, but he was relieved to see that his questions launched Hermione into full-blown, know-it-all mode, effectively putting him on autopilot.

Severus nearly snorted out loud when he glanced at the programme. It was fitting to see that Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony was on the programme tonight, seeing as it was written in response to Stalin's death. It certainly fit his dark mood and the revelations of the day.

The orchestra began tuning, and Severus felt the tendrils of his headache returning. Hermione's incessant chatter and the cacophony, particularly from the string section, nearly made his vision blur. Just when he thought he might launch himself off the balcony, the conductor stepped onto the stage and quieted the orchestra.

Severus closed his eyes and [let the music surround him](#). While he'd desperately tried to put his conversation with Albus out of his mind during dinner, with minimal success, he seemingly had no choice but to reflect upon it now; the music was forcing him there.

The idea that here it was five years after the war and Severus was JUST finding out the depths of Albus's machinations made Severus sick to his stomach, though he

supposed he hadn't exactly sought out the information. Oh, he'd known and understood for years that Albus had manipulated everyone in the Order. Severus had been privy to the planning of some of those machinations, but he certainly hadn't agreed with most of them. Albus always seemed to forget that people tended to resent having their free will cleverly abolished. They'd also had countless arguments about how dangerous it was for Albus to disperse his plans so widely and secretly. If but one element of his intricate plans had failed, who would have been able to right the course of the war against Voldemort? Never mind the fact that Albus's plans left Severus in great personal peril, or the fact that he had ultimately left the defeat of Voldemort to children – a fact that he and Minerva had protested with Albus since the end of Potter's first year. He had more or less come to terms with all of that before today. It was water under the bridge, so to speak.

It was Albus's revelations and apologies about the Elder Wand that shook Severus to his core. Even after finally breaking his silence on the war and his involvement, he had studiously avoided analyzing those moments preceding his near death. He recalled now that Voldemort had mentioned the Elder Wand, but in the heat of the moment Severus had attributed his ramblings about a wand from a children's fairy tale to his former master's insanity. Severus clenched his fists at the thought, momentarily distracted by the start of the [second movement](#). Oh, he wasn't foolish enough to have expected to survive the war. Spying was dangerous business after all, and he'd reckoned he'd be hexed into oblivion by one side or the other. But the news that Albus had intended to send him back to the devil's lair, knowing that, in all likelihood, Voldemort would connect the dots and pin Severus as the Elder Wand's owner... that meant that Albus had effectively signed Severus's death warrant.

Thinking objectively, just the logistics of Albus's plan made Severus quake. Albus had banked on Severus killing him and nullifying the power of the wand. It was an enormous and incredibly foolish risk that Albus had taken. What if Draco HAD succeeded in his task? What if Snape had died of Dragon Pox? What if the nullification didn't work and some other Death Eater had killed him? And why in seven hells had Dumbledore let Draco disarm him? Fuck! Why not just cede the wand to Potter as soon as it became clear that the end was in sight? He'd made Potter force-feed him that awful potion. Why not have the whelp cast *Expelliarmus* on him as well? So very much could have gone awry and left Voldemort undefeated. What if Voldemort had murdered Severus before he could deliver the critical information to Potter? Hell, what if Potter had been unable to piece together all the disparate clues to track down the Horcruxes or the Deathly Hallows? He couldn't help but hold Hermione and Potter in higher esteem now: so much had fallen on the Trio's shoulders. It was astounding that they had triumphed and allowed to become fully functioning, and by all accounts, successful adults.

Severus recalled the fury he had felt all those years ago when Albus had let on that Severus had done figurative cartwheels and somersaults to protect Lily's son, only to have Albus lead him to the slaughter when the time came to defeat Voldemort. That had nearly crushed his respect for the man entirely. Finding out today about this business with the Deathly Hallows had obliterated what respect was left.

Along with the Occlumency training and greasy bastard routine that he'd confessed to Hermione, Severus had survived all these years of spying through carefully crafting his own personal myth: he was Severus Snape, steadfast, persistent, cunning, and loyal warrior. This wasn't a romantic myth where Severus Snape conquered all, but it was a myth that helped him compartmentalize and survive the often dismal circumstances in which he found himself. Steadfast, persistent, loyal, and cunning were, after all, much better descriptors than others gave him: evil, cowardly, snivelling, spiteful, pathetic, inferior, half-blood. It had been fruitless to reflect very much on the circumstances; that only sent him teetering on the edge of depression. No, it had been best to think of his life as a role – something that he was playing at, rather than his own isolated, pathetic existence. He was just living out the myth. Perhaps, he realized, it had started well before his spy days, back when he had given himself the moniker Half-Blood Prince.

Throughout the time that Severus had relied on the myth for his mental survival, Albus had played the role of benevolent dictator. After all, Severus had lived under his wing since he began teaching. He'd reported to Albus nearly on a daily basis once his spy duties resumed. Hell, Albus had been more of a father figure than anyone else in Severus's life. But now, looking back, he realized Albus had hardly been benevolent. He'd been as ruthless as Voldemort, only more inclined to use guilt, rather than *Crucio*, as a weapon.

It almost made it worse that the man, or rather the man's portrait, had apologized today. Knowing that the man had carried guilt to his grave over his treatment of Severus made it harder to hate him. Without Albus's remorse, Severus would have been able to write him off as a sociopath like Voldemort. Instead, he'd reluctantly acknowledged that Dumbledore hadn't been in the easiest of positions, either. At any rate, it wasn't as if one could inform one's pawns that they were marching off to certain death; it tended to put a damper on morale.

No, Severus thought as he sighed and settled further into his seat, *it won't do to stew over the actions of someone long dead, even if it does alter my perspective on my own history. There's nothing to be done for it now. Besides, I've wasted enough of my life holding on to hate.*

Finally, the [Fourth Movement](#) began, and Severus acknowledged that he was beginning to feel better. He'd thought about the Deathly Hallows business enough for now. Likely, he'd have some sort of epiphany in the next few days that would send him scurrying back through his memories again. But for now, his headache had dissipated, the tension between his shoulder blades had started to fade, and he could actually concentrate on the music. He stole a glance at the witch beside him and was relieved that perhaps he could finally enjoy her company, presuming he hadn't buggered things up by behaving poorly during dinner. She did look a bit agitated. *Perhaps the Shostakovich unnerved her*, Severus thought hopefully.

Fidgeting in her seat for what must have been the fiftieth time, Hermione thought, *This is the most excruciating concert I've ever attended.* She glanced at her programme. *Thank gods, there's just this last movement left until the interval. I may not survive through the end.*

Over the course of the evening, she'd all but abandoned hope that Severus would make some move towards renewing the affection they'd shared the week before. She'd tentatively touched him three times during dinner, but each time the man had turned positively green so she'd withdrawn immediately. Oh, but he'd placed his hand on her back as they shuffled towards the centre seats of the aisle. She'd nearly whimpered when he dropped it as they took their seats. It was embarrassing that just that one inadvertent touch could keep her senses on high alert throughout the entire first half of the programme.

Hell, at this point she'd given up on the affection and was merely hoping to survive with all her limbs intact *What the hell is wrong with him? He seemed eager to join me last night, but he's been cranky and irritable all evening. I can hardly believe his ill humour is all the work of a headache.* She stole a glance at Severus and saw a nearly shredded programme lying in his lap.

Hermione was quite put out with her raging libido, too. *He's been a complete arse all evening, and here I still want to drag him into an alleyway, shove him against a wall, and have my way with him. Where the hell did my backbone go?*

The lights flickered back on, and Hermione stretched her legs and arms.

"I'm going to visit the Ladies for a bit. Did you want to grab a drink in the lobby?"

Severus visibly paled at the suggestion. *The last thing I need is more alcohol. I've barely maintained control all evening. I'll never manage with another drink in me!* No. Shall I get you something?"

Hermione shook her head in response before escaping to the Ladies. She ardently wished that she'd managed to convince Ginny to get a mobile. Then she could call her from the Ladies for advice like any normal girl on a disastrous date.

Hermione stared into the mirror as she blinked back tears. Why the hell was this date going so badly? She'd been so sure that Severus was interested in pursuing something beyond friendship. Had she misread him? Why was he acting so aloof? Hell, that was being too generous; she'd nearly cuffed him several times for being such a prick.

Well, she supposed that she could at least enjoy the second half of the programme, even if Severus was determined to be a complete bugbear. She had been looking forward to hearing Bolero live for some time, and she wasn't about to let Severus Snape ruin it.

Hermione returned to her seat just as the house lights dimmed their first warning. A quick glance revealed that Severus must have surreptitiously cast *Reparo* on his

programme, and he looked a bit more relaxed than he had the entire evening.

"How did you find the first half of the programme?" she asked, attempting to avoid what would assuredly be an awkward silence.

"It was nice enough." *Very eloquent. Perhaps you should submit a review in writing to accompany that bold statement.* Severus scoffed as he scrambled to turn off his internal commentary.

"Well, thank you for coming. My mum would have hated to see the ticket go to waste."

Bravo, Severus, your company is preferable to throwing a ticket into the bin. What an accomplishment. Severus suppressed a wince as he tried not to react to Hermione's hopefully unintentional insult.

"No, thank you for inviting me. I'm sure I wasn't the most pleasant company during dinner, but my headache has finally gone away," Severus replied as he reached to rest his hand on her forearm.

Hermione was entirely unprepared for the gesture and startled, dumping her bag onto the floor. She reached down to collect its contents and swore as she rammed heads with Severus. She managed to collect everything just as the house lights dimmed.

Severus cursed his clumsy reactions, frustrated that he couldn't seem to restore the easy affection they'd shared before they spent that night on the sofa. Now, every time he touched Hermione he could feel her entire body tense. *It was just a fucking accident when I was startled out of my wits! The way she's reacting, you'd think I'd kicked her for accidentally stepping on my shoe or some such nonsense. She's like a skittish kitten! Fuck, does she think I'm a walking catastrophe? She touched me three times during dinner but jumped as soon as she realized what she'd done.*

Severus crossed his arms and settled further into his theatre seat, sulking with the knowledge that he'd well and truly buggered up his chances with Hermione. This evening had been pure and utter hell. It didn't help matters that she looked utterly ravishing in that fucking green dress. Was she trying to kill him?

The second half of the programme began, and Hermione smiled at the selection of pieces from Prokofiev's [Romeo and Juliet](#). It seemed so melodramatic – a bit like Severus ominously swooping through the halls of Hogwarts, actually. She fondly recalled when her mother had taken her to see Romeo and Juliet when she was young. They tried to take in a ballet every year. Was she ten when she saw that particular ballet? Hermione cursed herself thoroughly when she realized her mind had wandered off to ponder what Severus might look like in tights. How appropriate it was that she was listening to pieces from a ballet about lovesick teenagers. *Pish. I'm no better myself,* Hermione thought.

Finally, [Bolero](#) began. Hermione sat on the edge of her seat in anticipation. When they had initially purchased the tickets, her mum had talked excitedly about how much better it was to hear and see the piece live. Audio recordings just didn't do justice to the glory of seeing the melody move from instrument to instrument or seeing the piece begin so quietly with so few instruments until it gradually swelled to encompass the entire orchestra. It had been years since she heard the piece, and she hadn't quite understood how enchanting and erotic the piece could be.

Hermione could feel the melody winding its way through the orchestra and up towards the balcony. It was entirely bewitching and seemed to cast a spell that heightened all of her senses. Despite the fact that Severus was barely in her peripheral vision, she had never been so aware of anyone's presence. Each repeat of the melody, each chord, each note, each rest, and each beat all served to remind her that Severus Snape was sitting not six inches from her. She could *smell* the man, and it was so incredibly alluring.

Severus watched Hermione, wondering if she realized she was swaying ever so slightly to the music. As annoying as he had found Bolero in the past, this evening had Obliviated any notion he may have previously held. He wondered if that undulating melody were perhaps cursed, bespelled to taunt him. All he could imagine was Hermione writhing sinuously on a bed, beckoning him to join her. He shifted in his seat and discreetly adjusted both his boxers and the programme covering his lap. Torture. This piece was absolute bloody torture. Was there anyway he would be able to leave the theatre with his dignity intact?

Over and over again, the melody assaulted Hermione and Severus until, at last, the torturous piece ended and the symphony members took their bows. Hermione released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, wondering briefly if her legs would be able to support her when she stood up. She stretched again and, to Severus's relief, she leaned forward and watched the orchestra packing up, hoping to prolong the spell cast by the music and vainly trying to collect her wits before facing Severus. Finally, she sat back in her seat and turned to look at him.

He was smiling – actually smiling – for the first time the entire evening. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief that his good humour seemed to have returned. Perhaps the dark cloud that had settled over him had dissipated during the performance.

"Would you like to go out for a coffee?" Hermione asked hopefully. *Though why I'm eager to risk continuing this catastrophe of a date is a mystery.*

"Sadly, I have Hogsmeade duty tomorrow. I need to be getting back to the castle so that I'm rested enough to chase the horny little buggers out of the nooks and crannies of the village," Severus replied, perhaps too quickly.

Hermione was crestfallen. *Since when do they have Hogsmeade visits on Sundays? Bloody hell, Severus! Why not be more obvious, and tell me you need to go home and wash your hair?* she thought, trying desperately to conceal her dejection.

Oh shit! Was that a look of disappointment that had crossed her face? Was it possible that he'd misjudged her responses? "I believe it's customary for me to see you to the door of your flat?" Severus responded, proffering his left arm. *I believe it's customary,* Severus mocked himself silently. *I sound like a fucking etiquette guide!*

To his great relief, Hermione nodded and slid her arm through his.

The moment that they Disapparated from the alley behind the concert hall coincided with the failure of Ginny's Stabilization Charm on Hermione's shoes. She landed in the hallway and wobbled precariously on her spiky heels. Severus reached out to steady her and suddenly found himself with an armful of witch. He stared at the wide-eyed witch now inches from his face as her eyes slowly fluttered shut. He silently thanked every deity that came to mind.

Severus brushed his lips tentatively across Hermione's and groaned when she pulled him closer and sucked his bottom lip between hers. Kissing her was a sensory symphony all of its own. His hand slithered across the satin of her dress as he caressed the small of her back. The downy skin at the nape of her neck seemed to prickle at his touch. Her delicate hands sent shivers up his spine as they gently roamed his chest. The soft cooing noises she occasionally made were the most glorious sound he'd ever heard. The way her tongue flickered against his gave him goosebumps in places that had never seen the light of day. Kisses that had begun as slow, tentative explorations had become frantic. Hesitant touches in relatively chaste locations had escalated to unabashed groping. His arousal was building to a very heady crescendo indeed. Never had he imagined that she would feel **this** good.

He wasn't sure when he'd closed his eyes or how long they'd been standing there, but his eyes flew open when he heard the unmistakable sound of jangling house keys. Hermione blushed furiously and greeted her neighbour before quietly inviting Severus into her flat. He glanced at the neighbour's door and was relieved to see they'd been left in relative privacy.

"No, I wish I could," Severus said, pausing to nuzzle Hermione's neck, "but I really do have Hogsmeade duty tomorrow and ought to be getting home. It's nearly midnight." He felt Hermione stiffen when he tendered his excuse and quickly added, "The sixth and seventh years are being rewarded with an extra day for going an entire month without detentions."

Severus shuddered as he felt Hermione's lips upon his neck and her hands across his lower back and *gulp*, arse. "Ungh. You're making it very difficult to leave, Hermione.

Gods, you look incredible tonight."

"I've wanted to touch you all night. I'm merely collecting my due."

"I'm so sorry," Severus said as his right hand slowly crept up towards her breast.

"For what?" a rather confused Hermione asked. *By all means, put your hand on my breast, Severus. Don't apologize on my account.*

"Well, primarily that I have to leave, but also because apparently I was a complete idiot the entire evening. I misread your every reaction," he said, pausing to nibble at her earlobe. "I thought you were still upset because I nearly concussed you."

"Severus, I was only ever mad at Ginny for interrupting what might have been a very lovely morning for us, and I wasn't upset tonight. I was just nervous," Hermione said, blushing. "Was that the only thing bothering you tonight, though? I'd not seen you this agitated since, well, since I was a student. You know you can speak your mind with me, right?"

Severus's resolve to keep his mouth shut crumbled under the weight of her gaze. He pulled her against him and sighed against her neck in defeat. "I spoke with Albus's portrait today for four very long and painful hours. I didn't want to ruin the evening by bringing it up," he mumbled.

"Severus, you great lug," Hermione interrupted, thumping Severus on the chest and pushing him back so she could make eye contact with him. "You very nearly spoiled our **friendship** by not bringing it up. It's no wonder you were in a snit all night. It may not have been ideal dinner conversation, but I'd have been happy to talk with you about it, especially since it was bothering you so much. Anything would have been better than watching you brood throughout dinner and wondering what on earth I might have said to earn your wrath."

"Oh, shit! It was never you," Severus replied guiltily.

"Severus, you know that if we continue this," Hermione said, gesturing vaguely to the space between them, "then we'll both have to open up to one another. What on earth did Albus have to say that took four hours?"

"I'll tell you, but not tonight." Seeing that Hermione was about to protest, Severus continued, "I promise I will tell you. There are things I wish to discuss with you about the war independent of my discussion with Albus, and it may take some time."

"I'll hold you to that promise. You know there's very little you could say that would drive me away, don't you?"

"Enough!" Severus interjected with a sigh. "Repeat this to anyone, and I'll string you up by your toenails: I'm a bigger moron than half the students I've taught."

"Severus, only you could turn an apology into a threat, but I suppose I'll let you make it up to me." Hermione grinned as she kissed him again.

"How very charitable of you. When?" he asked, resuming his attentions to her neck. "Tomorrow's out for me. Are you free Monday evening?"

"No, I'm looking after Teddy Lupin on Monday."

"Would you like to meet up earlier than usual before Tuesday's meeting?"

"Absolutely. Shit, I've got a meeting that won't wrap up until five thirty or so. If you head to the Leaky early, I can pop over as soon as my meeting lets out."

"Mmmkay," Severus hummed by way of reply as he explored the juncture of her neck and collarbone. "It is patently unfair *lick* that I don't get *kiss* to see you for three days *suck*, and it's tragic that I'll be forced to share you with the book club that night."

Hermione was panting so heavily now that she feared she just might undress the man in the hallway. She could feel his cock brushing against her leg, reminding her suddenly and incredibly inappropriately of the summer when she was eight and she'd tried to light a fire by rubbing two sticks together. *Focus, Hermione. Focus.* "Please," Hermione begged as Severus continued torturing her neck, "come into my flat."

A very reluctant Severus stepped back and leaned against the opposite wall as he struggled to maintain his self-control. Mercy, she looked incredible. It seemed like her body was flushed from head to toe. She was clearly struggling to catch her breath, and her hairdo was beautifully mussed. *Just think how much better she would look spread out on a bed,* his libido cried.

Miraculously, and rather unfortunately for his libido, his reason returned. Given how apt Hermione and he seemed to be at miscommunication, not to mention his ability to make an unmitigated arse of himself, perhaps it would be best if they didn't jump into bed immediately. It seemed they had some ground to cover before such intimacy was introduced. "I don't think that would be wise, Hermione. I'll see you Tuesday." He delivered a quick peck on the cheek before Disapparating.

Hermione leaned against the wall and grinned sleepily. The evening had very nearly been a train wreck. If tonight was anything to judge by, the road ahead with Severus would be perilous at times. *Honestly, I can't believe he sat and stewed the entire evening. Mmmmm, but those kisses very nearly made up for it!* With that thought, Hermione fished out her wand and lowered the wards to her flat, kicking off those blasted heels when she went inside. She set wards on the Floo to stall Ginny in the morning, as she would certainly want an account as early as possible. No, after a night like this one, she looked forward to a well-deserved lie-in. Grabbing Crookshanks off the sofa, she sauntered off to the bedroom, all the while wishing for another male's company.

A/N: I believe [THIS](#) may be what Severus had in mind during Bolero. ;)

And last, happy Thanksgiving to everyone in the States. I'm thankful that this fic. has made so many people laugh.

The Salmon Mousse

Chapter 8 of 12

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

Happy holidays!!!

Many thanks this yuletide season to my awesome betas, kittylefish and Persevero.

And, of course, I've no claim to the Harry Potter universe, nor am I profiting financially from writing this story.

Chapter Eight - *The Salmon Mousse*

Cursing the Ministry's Anti-Disapparation wards, Hermione scurried down Diagon Alley to the Leaky Cauldron, her sensible shoes clattering loudly as they smacked the pavement. She glanced at her watch. 6:35! Shit, she only had twenty-five minutes before the blasted book club meeting! Well, at least the brisk walk would give her a chance to work off some of the nervous energy that had been dogging her all day. Hopefully, Severus wouldn't have given her up as a lost cause now that she was so horribly late.

She huffed irritably. She'd planned to leave the Ministry earlier, but the head of the Unspeakables simply wouldn't stop rambling on about the specifications for the project to integrate organisational charms into their department. Honestly, couldn't they trust her to review the twenty-page request they'd sent and ask appropriate questions? It was bad enough that the team had requested a preliminary presentation so that they could begin implementing her suggestions immediately. The schedule was aggressive to begin with, and the presentation would guarantee that she worked through the weekend. Normally, she wouldn't be irritated at the prospect, but she wanted her weekends free now that there was someone with whom she wanted to spend them.

Finally, the Cauldron was in sight, and she slowed her pace a bit so as not to arrive entirely out of breath. Her heart was racing. She was embarrassed to admit that, ever since Severus had rendered her senseless in her hallway, she'd spent hours pondering their tentative relationship. What would the future hold for them? How would he react the next time he saw her? Would they return to that awkward stage where they weren't quite sure how to behave around one another? Gods, she hoped not. This giddy and uncertain phase of a new relationship was absolutely foreign to her; she and Ron had immediately gone from a then-strained friendship to nearly married. Their grief, turmoil, and euphoria following the war had left no room for post-first-date jitters.

She flittered into the Cauldron, wishing she could school her face into that mask of indifference Severus had perfected so that, perhaps, the *entire* Wizarding world wouldn't realise she was a bundle of nerves. Oh, thank gods, Severus was sitting at their usual booth, and he smiled as he rose to greet her.

"I am so sorry to keep you waiting. The meeting went on considerably longer than I expected."

Severus hugged her briefly and pressed a quick, discreet kiss to her forehead before ushering her into her seat. "It really wasn't a problem. Your letter indicated you might be late, but I decided to arrive early anyway and brought something to occupy me," he said, gesturing to a stack of red-flecked essays. "Essays always go down better with a pint. I'd just finished them when you arrived."

"Have you eaten yet?" she asked, craning her neck to see if she could catch Tom's attention.

"I placed two orders for lamb shanks about thirty minutes ago. Tom said he'd keep them under a Warming Charm until you arrived."

No sooner had he spoken than Tom arrived at the table, levitating their plates and a pear cider for Hermione. Her stomach growled audibly as he set the plates down, and Hermione tucked into her meal with gusto. She swirled the first cut of lamb in the redcurrant and rosemary sauce and couldn't help closing her eyes as she relished the taste. She'd skipped lunch **again**, and the lamb was absolutely divine.

She sighed happily as she swallowed her first bite, and she opened her eyes to find Severus frozen, knife and fork in hand, as he stared at her. She noted the slightest bit of pink on his cheeks as he averted his eyes and began carefully sawing his meal into precise cubes. Squirring a bit in her seat, she stopped gawking at his hands and returned to her meal.

"So," Severus said as he speared a cube of lamb, "Are you looking forward to our bit of rebellion this evening?"

"Of course!" Hermione replied with a grin. "Though we never quite settled the question of which of us would critique the book and who would defend it. Shall we toss a coin?"

Severus's eyes narrowed. He'd hoped she would just forget this little detail so he could slip naturally into the role of antagonist.

Two hurriedly consumed meals, one cider, one beer, and one flip of a galleon later, their fates were decided. He suppressed a shudder as he reached for his cloak. It took every bit of his self-control not to sulk at having lost the coin toss. Stupid, lust-ridden affection. Only for Hermione would he defend the worthless piece of trash entitled, *The Witches of Gifford*.

With just a few moments to spare, Severus and Hermione arrived at Flourish and Blotts and took their places at the front of the room. Severus conjured a podium ostensibly for propping up their notes but more for shielding his nether regions from the prurient gaze of Eunice Greengrass. He suppressed another shudder. This bloody book club couldn't end soon enough. *Granted*, he thought, glancing at the woman standing next to him, *it's paid off in some respects*. Still, he wondered how he would survive several more weeks with the twittering mass of busybodies seated before them.

"Hello, I'm Hermione Granger, and this is Severus Snape. We'll be presenting this week."

Oh, gods, Severus moaned to himself, looking out at the crowd of witches perched on the edges of their seats. *So this is what Hermione meant when she was talking about public adoration of war heroes*. Oh, he recalled that some witch or another had commented during the first meeting on having two war heroes in the club, but he hadn't quite comprehended what it meant to the group. They seemed absolutely enraptured with them. He had *never* spoken to a group that listened so intently to the speaker. Hell, he was doing well to have three-fourths of his students fully engaged when he lectured. The focused attention was a bit unnerving; he was certainly not accustomed to being on display like this.

Hermione continued, "According to Matilda Broomshanks' thoughtful description during the first meeting, Flourish and Blotts put a lot of time and research into creating this book club, particularly focusing on the shortcomings of Muggle book clubs. Severus and I want to do our part to help make sure this book club is as well-rounded and true to form as possible. I did some research of my own, speaking with several individuals who have participated in book clubs. One of the major points they emphasised is that the meetings typically include quite a bit of healthy debate amongst members regarding the merits and shortcomings of the text."

The witches stared at Hermione blankly.

Severus continued, "In other words, people critique various aspects of the book. One person offers their opinion while someone else might disagree, engendering a lively discussion." More blank stares. What the bloody hell was wrong with these witches? He got a livelier response from terrified first-years when he demanded they explain the differences in the use of fresh versus coagulated dragon's blood. Surely the crowd's brains weren't so addled that they needed to be SHOWN how to critique something.

"For example, I might say," Hermione began, dramatically turning to face Severus, "I thought that the character development in this story was rather weak. We only find out about the motivations or back story of Nigel Reese."

Severus swallowed not a small amount of bile and countered, "Oh, but surely none of the other characters are as fascinating as Nigel Reese. Why would the author waste print giving each of them a tedious background for the reader to wade through?"

"Well, I would have liked to learn more about the Widow Coursey, for example. How old is she? How long has it been since her husband died? Did she and her husband have any children?"

Severus silently applauded her choice. No one could fault her for displaying interest in that particular character. He retorted, "Nonsense. Those kinds of details would only be interesting if she served a larger role in the plot. She only appears in two chapters, so it's not necessary to include her history. However, I'll concede it might be beneficial to have more information on SOME characters. Nigel seems quite interested in Nora Gallagher, the innkeeper's daughter. She has appeared in nearly every chapter to date. It might be interesting to know more about her."

Hermione turned to face the club again and explained, "As you saw, I criticised the author's characterisation. Severus countered with his own thoughts, though he did concede some truth to my argument. The point of this debate isn't to cause disagreement, but for everyone to examine their own reactions to the book more closely and to open up discussion."

Gods, she was sexy in pedantic-teacher mode. Severus glanced down to confirm that he was indeed shielded by the podium. Taking a deep breath, he surveyed the faces of the book club members. Several of the book's staunchest supporters looked like they'd swallowed a Snitch. Most of the crowd, however, wore the same blank expressions as they had before their little mock criticism. A few witches, though, wore thoughtful expressions. Ah, well, if the witches weren't going to volunteer, it was time to prod them a bit. Severus selected one of the pensive-looking witches and glanced at Hermione's list of target topics.

"Well, to get the discussion started, let's begin with a couple of open-ended questions and see where that takes us, shall we?" Severus said as politely as he could manage. "Let's continue our analysis of the characterisation with some questions directed towards individuals who presented some of the early chapters in the book. Ms Merriweather and Ms Abbott, when you presented chapters three and four, you were both very excited about the cast of characters the author was introducing. What are your thoughts on the characters now that you've read over half the book?"

Hermione watched Severus's part in the presentation with amusement. They'd determined that neither could be openly hostile towards the book or its many flaws if they wanted to remain blameless for any ensuing riots. So instead, Severus was the picture of congeniality, a role he wore like a ratty hand-me-down jacket that was already two sizes too small.

"Well," Flora Merriweather began tentatively, "I was quite excited that we would be reading a story full of witches to whom I could relate. But I suppose that I have been a bit disappointed." She sighed. "I still love the way Richmond Greenleaf describes the scenery of the town, and I occasionally find Nigel Reese rather amusing. But I must admit many of the witches in the book seem a bit dim."

"Dim!" Gertrude Robinson interjected. "Dim is too kind a word for the witches of Gilford! This book makes it sound like us rural witches are all morons who can't tell our arse from a tea kettle. Why, I'd have stopped reading the book if the Compulsion Charms didn't force me."

Several witches nodded their heads in agreement, but none volunteered additional comments. Hermione decided to prompt Ms Abbott for her thoughts. "Ms Abbott, what did you make of the characterisation as the story progressed?"

"Oh, I think it's perfect. Why, if the author focused more on the other characters, then we might not hear as much about Nigel Reese! I think I agree with Mr Snape," Eustace Abbott answered.

Severus winced as the woman associated his good name with praise for that pompous dunderhead. If this continued, he would have no need to consume a Puking Pastille in order to spill his dinner.

After Eustace's comment, the room exploded with responses.

Mary Dragonfire stated, "Oh, I think I agree with Flora and Gertrude. I thought the characters were quite one-dimensional. It seems the only reason the author created them was so they could be enamoured of Nigel Reese."

Eunice Greengrass clamoured, "And where are the men in this town? It seems to be all women except for Nigel Reese!"

"If I never hear about Nigel Reese again, it will still be too soon," Estelle Louper exclaimed.

Severus's mouth twitched ever so slightly. Their little coup was going quite well. The group's loathing for the book was just beginning to simmer. He glanced at Hermione proudly. It seemed she was correct in her assessment that there were other club members who were as disgusted as they were. Matilda Broomshanks glowered at them from the back of the room.

Ethel Brummitch chattered nervously, wringing her hands, "Well, I still love the book and all its characters, but I've had a nightmare with *The Witches of Gilford Cookbook*! I was so very excited about the cookbook, too! I tried one of the recipes, and we had to take my little grandson to St Mungo's for food poisoning! They said that the charms to cook the meat were inadequate!"

Martha Higgensbottom gasped in horror at her friend's revelation, clearly offended by the harsh criticism of her beloved book and its accompanying recipes. She sniped, glaring at Hermione, "Well, I don't think the chapter titles are very evocative at all, Ms Granger. But, regardless, this book has changed my life: Nigel Reese's mission has touched and inspired me."

Hermione suppressed a smirk at Martha's attempt to goad her. Honestly, she regularly argued points nose-to-nose with Lucius Malfoy. Martha was about as intimidating as Lucius's little toe. She had just opened her mouth to respond when Gloria Swampwater interjected, "Inspired you to do what? Fanny about at Ministry luncheons bragging about the latest recipe you've tried?"

"Oh! How DARE you! I'll have you know my salmon mousse was VERY well received!" Martha retorted.

Gloria snorted in response. "Well, you're certainly a big hit with the Apothecary! The first two times you brought in dishes from *The Witches of Gilford Cookbook*, they sold out of Digestive Potion within an hour. They said they'd not had such a run on any potion since that rumour during the war that Death Eaters had poisoned the beef bourguignon in the Ministry canteen. They've even asked for a warning owl from the department any time you announce you're bringing a treat so they can begin brewing in advance of the rush."

"Well, I never!" Martha raged.

"No, apparently you do quite a bit!" Gloria chortled.

Hermione glanced anxiously at Severus. They really ought to intervene before things got ugly; their plan to encourage dissent just short of full revolt would unravel if Martha Higgensbottom flew off the handle at this point in the meeting. If they let these two witches continue, they'd surely draw wands soon. But if Hermione interrupted, Martha's anger would be fuelled rather than quelled.

Thankfully, Severus caught Hermione's panicked expression and interrupted condescendingly, "Now, now, ladies. Perhaps we can limit our criticism to the book rather than our personal lives."

Martha's feathers were still noticeably ruffled as she settled back into her seat with a petulant scowl, but it seemed her outrage had been reduced from a boil to a simmer.

"We've covered the characterisation and now recipes in detail. Perhaps we could move on to some of the other literary elements: theme, imagery, plot, or setting. Shall we perhaps tackle the plot next?" Hermione suggested.

This time the witches needed no prodding to contribute. Hermione watched as the discussion see-sawed between the ardent defenders of the book versus a growing crowd

of detractors.

Bessie Thompson grumbled, "Gods forbid, what did this town do before Nigel Reese showed up? My twelve-year-old grandson is a better wizard than him."

"Surely that can't be true! Why, some of his solutions are so ingenious! I would never have thought to use Accio when I'd accidentally added the wrong ingredient to my baking," Delphinia Appleblossom contended.

The expressions of several witches clearly betrayed their thoughts of Delphinia's intellect.

"Well, I say it's no wonder the town is small. By the sound of it, they all starved before Nigel arrived," Narcissa Smith declared.

"Why, I think the idea of a Ministry Outreach Official is just wonderful. I know we'd love to have someone like Nigel around to help us. Our village pub could certainly use a round of his charms," Muriel Malone exclaimed.

"How on earth can you possibly take his position seriously? Ministry Outreach Official? MOO? He's clearly poking fun at rural witches again," Gertrude Robinson exclaimed.

Hermione exchanged a quick, conspiratorial glance with Severus against a backdrop of now constant complaining and bickering from the witches. Victory, it seemed, was theirs. She glanced at her watch. Goodness! Only five minutes left! She nudged Severus and pointed at her watch. The corner of his mouth twitched slightly before he returned his gaze to the crowd.

"That chapter about the Jarvey who had taken up residence in the neighbouring Muggle town's church and wouldn't leave until Nigel recited bawdy limericks? That was a bit much. I could have gone a lifetime without that creep spouting off all the words that rhyme with 'hunt,'" Mary Dragonfire said as she cringed.

"Let me tell you, if someone came into my house and told me flat out that I was casting the wrong charms for cleaning my great-grandmother's china, I'd string them up by their bollocks!" Estelle Louper exclaimed.

And with that comment, Matilda Broomshanks called an end to the meeting with a look that could melt cauldrons. Every bit of Hermione's concentration was spent trying desperately to keep a straight face. She and Severus gathered their belongings while the crowd continued chattering. Severus vanished his conjured podium, and they began making their way through the crowd towards the door. Along the way, several witches stopped to thank them for encouraging the open discussion; against such initial praise for the book, they'd been hesitant to voice their criticism.

Finally, the two of them made their way through the crowd to Diagon Alley. Severus turned to see a near-blinding smile upon Hermione's face.

Looking up at Severus, she asked, "Shall we grab a pint to toast our victory?"

"Absolutely," Severus replied with a grin that nearly matched hers.

Gods, but he was handsome when he actually smiled. "Will the pub across the street from my building do?"

"Certainly."

"Shall we Apparate to the alleyway, then?"

"I'll see you there."

In the manner of men the world over, Severus made a beeline for the pub the second his Apparation was complete. He was just about to exit the alleyway when he felt a hand tugging at the back of his robes. He turned to see Hermione looking at him expectantly, one corner of her lower lip tucked between her teeth.

"Severus, please? I've wanted to kiss you all night."

He could scarcely deny her request, since he'd been itching to do the same. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he pressed his lips to hers. He'd intended the kiss to be a brief expression of his feelings for the witch. Instead, it swiftly ignited like a spark in dry kindling after he felt her tongue flicker against his lower lip. Merlin, he'd never known snogging alone to be so exhilarating. No wonder the little brats were always sneaking off to every corner of the castle.

Her hands scrambled to grab the back of his cloak, and she suddenly found herself pressed against the wall of her building. What was it with Severus and walls? Oh, but the bricks pressing against her back felt unbelievably good. Her mind flashed an image of Severus, pants tangled around his ankles with her legs wrapped around his waist as he drove into her.

Unable to restrain herself, she pulled him flush against her and wrapped a leg around his. She felt her arousal ratchet impossibly higher as his hardness pressed against her. She hadn't doubted that he was aroused, but feeling him was quite another matter altogether.

Severus emitted a strangled moan and struggled to disengage himself. He visibly strained to regain his composure, panting and staring at her with a lustful craziness in his eyes that she'd never managed to inspire in anyone else. She would have been flattered if she weren't choking on her disappointment.

"Merlin, Granger, settle down. I don't fancy having our first shag in an alleyway."

"Granger? When the hell have you ever called me 'Granger'?"

"It sounded better. Besides, I'm not sure I could say your given name and 'shag' in the same sentence without embarrassing myself."

Hermione snorted. "You know, my flat is right there," she said, gesturing upwards.

"Your sense of urgency is certainly flattering, but I believe we have some matters to discuss before we take things upstairs," he replied imperiously.

His tone was a bit more authoritative than she liked; that little habit would clearly have to be addressed later. Though he was certainly welcome to adopt that tone once they took matters upstairs. Gods, his voice did things to her nether regions that were simply indecent. She nodded, tugged her clothing back into place, and cast several quick Transfiguration spells before they quit the alley for the pub. Pausing to admire the sight of Severus in denim, she pocketed her wand and clutched his arm before they crossed the street and walked into the pub.

"Just give me a moment to duck into the Ladies. I'll come and find you."

Severus nodded and wandered off to find a table. The pub was absurdly busy for a Tuesday night. He ordered a beer, a pear cider, and some baked Brie and settled in to wait for Hermione.

Their drinks were delivered, and he savoured the first swallow of beer. Bugging hell. What the bloody hell was taking her so long? Hopefully she would return before he lost his nerve. Not that he was remotely sure how to even begin this ridiculous conversation with Hermione. Hell, he himself still needed convincing that delaying physical gratification was a good idea. How could he manage to convince Hermione? Merlin knew, he had wanted to rip her knickers off back in that bloody alleyway.

Hermione returned from the Ladies and slid into the booth across from him.

"I don't want to sleep with you," Severus blurted.

Hermione's eyebrows nearly touched her hairline.

"Yet," he clarified in a panic. "I don't want to sleep with you yet." He nervously took a long swig of beer.

"Look, you may find this difficult to believe," he said with a wry grin. "But this relationship business doesn't exactly come naturally to me. I've had flings here and there in the past but nothing more involved. And I am hoping this could be something a little more substantial than several rolls in the hay."

Hermione nodded, listening attentively while she reached for her cider.

"It's just... this won't be simple, for either of us, I suspect. I'm sure I'll manage to cock things up royally while I'm figuring out how to behave properly, and I won't risk cursing our long-term chances by insinuating a closeness that we don't yet share. Contrary to popular belief, I am not entirely ignorant when it comes to women, and I know better than to introduce that intimacy before we're ready."

Hermione was surprised at this level of honesty from the man. Shit, he was genuinely serious about this, and it was clear that he was waiting uncomfortably for her response. Hermione replied with furrowed brow, "I suppose I can see how waiting would be best. Besides, how will I ever get you to behave if I don't have the promise of sex to lure you?"

She grinned a bit more evilly than Severus thought her capable. Suddenly his pants were a bit too tight... again.

"So, exactly how long do you plan on torturing me?" she asked with a saucy grin.

"I'll have you know, it will be just as painful for me as it is for you."

"No, seriously," she deadpanned. "How long will we wait?"

"I don't know... a month or two?"

"I suppose that's tolerable. So, tell me about these flings, will you?" Gods, she loved teasing him. It was a joy to see him so flustered.

Severus looked decidedly panicked as he glanced over his shoulder and, miraculously, saw their food. "Oh look, our food's on its way. We're here to celebrate, aren't we? Shall we toast our success?" he said, raising his glass. Hopefully she would forget her impertinent little question.

And toast their success they did. Now that the uncomfortable emotional bit was out of the way, they laughed until their sides hurt as they recounted the presentation and speculated on how the meetings might be a bit more tolerable in the future.

Hermione leaned heavily against Severus as they walked back to her flat. Other than dinner and the Brie, she really hadn't eaten all that much today. Perhaps having three pints over the course of the evening was a bit much.

"Will I see you this weekend?" she asked, stumbling a bit as she turned to look at him.

"I'm sorry, but I have that Potions-Charms conference in Brussels. Would you like to come with me? I've heard the conference itself is booked, but I'm sure I'll have free time. There are a couple of lectures I'd thought about skipping anyway," Severus responded, holding the door as they entered her building.

Hermione sighed as she pressed the button for the lift. She had known her project was going to throw a spanner in things. "The offer is extremely tempting, but during my meeting earlier, my presentation to the Unspeakables was bumped up to Monday. I'll need access to the Ministry's libraries to prepare, and I'm afraid Apparating back and forth to the continent would be a bit too draining. Besides, I'm not sure you'd survive the weekend with your upstanding morals intact."

"Behave, wench," he growled. "Are you free tomorrow or Thursday night?"

"I am free Thursday," she replied, stepping into the lift. "But don't you have rounds that night?"

"I do, but they don't start until nine-thirty. Would you like to meet for dinner in Hogsmeade? There's a new Indian restaurant I'd like to try. Sprout keeps extolling the wonders of their vindaloo."

"That sounds lovely."

"Could you meet me at the Hogwarts gates at five?"

She agreed and began removing the wards on her flat. "Would you like to come in? It's a platonic invitation, of course."

"I've stayed out a bit too late already. It's nearly midnight," he replied, wondering how he'd manage to end their outing with any shred of dignity.

"I'll see you on Thursday, then," she said as she stepped closer to him.

"Thursday it is," Severus said before he delivered a kiss that would normally be considered chaste but which still lit up her toes. She whimpered, and he chuckled before giving her another quick peck. He Disapparated with a twisted grin.

Hermione yawned as she recast the wards on her flat. Wasn't she naughty, keeping the professor out after hours? Grumbling, she realised that their self-imposed, or rather Severus-imposed, chastity was just as well. It wasn't as if their blasted schedules were likely to accommodate anything more than a frantic quickie any time between now and the end of June. Her project was sure to occupy nearly all of her free time for the next month, at which point Severus would be inundated with work for the annual OWLs and NEWTs. They'd be lucky to see each other with their clothes on, much less off.

She meandered to her bedroom to begin preparing for bed. She was brushing her teeth when she was assailed with the memory of their heated snogging session in the alleyway. She had never been quite as, um, eager as she was with Severus. It seemed they had chemistry in spades.

She sighed with resignation and crawled into bed. She begrudgingly admitted that she understood his point that, especially given their near-catastrophic date the week before, they clearly needed to establish a bit more emotional intimacy before they progressed much further in physical intimacy. They were excellent friends, but as soon as the conversation steered towards anything too personal, Severus had a tendency to scuttle back into his shell. She supposed it was his years of spying, amongst other things, that left him reluctant to reveal anything. Still, it was annoying, at best, when she asked Severus an innocent question about his youth to find herself suddenly revealing the story of how, over the summer hols one year, her cousin had climbed the chestnut tree in the village square and hung ALL of Hermione's bras on its topmost branches. She'd nearly broken the ban on underage magic when she had found out what Rebecca had done. She still had nightmares about running down the street, braless of course, only to find that her aunt had summoned the fire department to rescue her undergarments. But what was even worse, she couldn't recall how Severus had managed to connive her into telling that most embarrassing story. No more cider for her, it seemed.

Honestly, though, she wasn't sure how she would survive his presence while continuously reining in her rampaging libido. She'd have to come up with some way to block out her thoughts of just how wonderful it felt to have his body pressed against her. *Blocking my thoughts, hmmm*, she thought before surrendering to a fit of giggles that had her laughing out loud and clutching her sides after several minutes. *So that would be, what, Hypno-Libido? Crotchlumency?* She wiped the tears from her eyes as her laughter waned.

Finally turning off the lights, Hermione settled under the covers. Crookshanks hopped up for a bit of attention. He curled against her and purred, and she lazily petted him as she drifted off to sleep.

Crotchlumency (noun) - the practice of occluding one's mind so as to avoid inappropriate thoughts of a sexual nature. Frequent examples include thoughts of Argus Filch or Minerva McGonagall in their skivvies.

Happy holidays again. The next chapter is circulating in betaland.

A Well-crafted Plan

Chapter 9 of 12

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

Disclaimer: I'm not profiting financially from the publication of this silly little story.

Thanks to kittylefish and persevero for their immense help in whipping this chapter into shape. Kittylefish especially helped with some crucial de-purpling.

Chapter Nine - A Well-crafted Plan

Hermione fiddled impatiently with a beer mat while she sat waiting for Severus to arrive at the Leaky Cauldron. They'd been officially seeing each other for nearly two months with minimal success. Oh, it was nice enough when their schedules actually coincided, but chances to meet in person were so rare that they'd begun a rather regular and lengthy owl correspondence. They had, however, managed to broach several difficult conversations in person. She'd certainly expected him to continue his reticence, but he seemed to take his promise to open up to heart. Severus had described the painful revelations of his marathon discussion with Albus as well as several of the more challenging aspects of his role as former spy. She'd spoken several times about Ron's death and her subsequent depression. To her surprise, Severus had encouraged her to mend her friendship with Harry. Yes, the emotional aspect of their relationship was going swimmingly.

No, what really had Hermione's knickers in a twist was the fact that their physical relationship had not progressed to match their emotional one. Her reignited libido reminded her daily, sometimes hourly, that perhaps she should take a more direct approach to moving the relationship forward. If Severus chivalrously rejected her invitation into her flat one more time, she would not be held responsible for the magic unleashed by a libido that was clearly unsatisfied by frantic snogging and cautious gropes in the hallway.

Tonight offered a rare opportunity to move things forward. Her project with the Unspeakables had finally ended, and Severus had roughly a week before his schedule was overrun with OWL and NEWT duties. Always methodical when confronted with any problem, Hermione Granger had developed a plan to lure Severus Snape back to her den. Spying her beloved as he entered the Cauldron, she downed the last of the Firewhisky she was drinking for a bit of courage and stood to greet him.

As was their habit, Severus and Hermione shuffled into seats in the back row of the book club with moments to spare before the start of this second to last meeting. Thankfully, the book club had become considerably more tolerable since their presentation. No longer feeling as if they were attending worship service at the House of Nigel Reese, several participants had begun voicing what would be considered mild criticism in a normal venue but was usually taken as slanderous blasphemy by the book's staunchest devotees. It had made for several entertaining tiffs, particularly during the week in which participants were encouraged to bring dishes made from their favourite recipes, preferably from *The Witches of Gifford Cookbook*. The Flourish and Blotts staff would certainly have to consult *The Witches of Gifford Guide to Housecleaning Charms* in order to remove the myriad of ensuing stains from the floor.

Severus couldn't help but preen when he thought about how well their relationship had progressed. Well, he'd had a bit of help from the mild variant of Veritaserum that he'd downed before several of their early dates. It only made him more agreeable, rather than compelled to reveal information ... a bit like alcohol, he supposed, though without the accompanying loss of motor control. He supposed it had been a bit underhanded of him, but, in his defence, he had tapered the dose over time. Well, he had once he'd realised that Hermione wasn't going to throw him out on his ear for some of the deeds tucked away in his past. It occasionally still made him a bit dizzy to realise that when she promised unconditional acceptance, she genuinely meant it.

His body reminded him rather crudely every morning that he had a witch ready and waiting, and by all accounts eager, but he couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't quite ready for the emotions that would accompany the act. And while he would certainly never admit it to Hermione, he wasn't about to push the issue until he was convinced she wouldn't be mentally comparing his equipment and performance with that of the late Ronald Weasley. Well, that and he was terrified that crossing the line into actual sexual relations would uncover emotional land-mines for Hermione that he was assuredly ill-equipped to help her defuse. He'd managed to suss out that Weasley had been her only lover. He smothered a laugh when thinking that if Weasley's Quidditch or Potions performance were any indicators, then Severus surely had no worries of embarrassing himself with a subpar performance. Par would have been set sufficiently low as to guarantee success.

Shaken from his reverie by Matilda Broomshanks's instruction that all participants arrange their chairs in a circle for the week's discussion, Severus settled in to watch the cat fight that would hopefully accompany this week's meeting. He was reflecting on their usual date at the Cauldron and wondering if he should be concerned about the mischievous glint he'd seen in Hermione's eyes all evening when suddenly he felt Hermione place her hand upon his. Startled, he looked at her questioningly. For all the casual affection she regularly bestowed in more private settings, Hermione wasn't normally one for overt public displays of affection. Granted, the simple gesture of hand-holding wasn't an overwhelming display, but Hermione had been particularly paranoid about making their relationship known to this gossiping group. Severus was further alarmed when she leaned over to whisper in his ear and deliberately brushed her lips against *that* spot just underneath his earlobe before settling back into her seat. When she began seductively tracing her fingers over the hand she was holding, he wondered if someone had slipped a Lust Potion into her drink this evening.

It wasn't until he saw the smirk on Hermione's face that he fully realised she was executing a well-played and very public show of seduction. He vainly attempted to regain his composure as the evidence of her efforts threatened to become obvious. For good measure, Severus cast a Distraction Charm that willed anyone who looked at his person to pick up her copy of *The Witches of Gifford* and begin perusing the week's assigned chapters. He was appalled to hear the sound of rifling pages from roughly fifteen books. He blushed furiously when he looked up to see as many witches with their noses buried in the text. Leaning over, Severus hissed at Hermione, "You do not want to start this game with me, witch."

Hermione suppressed the shiver of lust that followed his threat and continued her ministrations on his hand, lightly tracing each of his fingers with hers. She'd seen the flurry of activity around the room and had immediately guessed what he had done. Feeling even more daring, knowing that they wouldn't be seen, Hermione slowly

removed her hand from Severus's and placed it onto his thigh. She heard his barely audible answering gasp and began steeling herself for the revenge that he would surely deliver.

After hearing Severus cast another Distraction Charm, presumably on her own person, Hermione felt Severus's hand on her thigh. She grinned, knowing that her plan was succeeding.

Immensely thankful for the Distraction Charm, Severus felt his cock twitch when his hand brushed across the raised strap of a suspender belt. *Fuck, does she wear this all the time? Or is it just part of tonight's diabolical plan?* Severus thought, desperately trying to will his erection into submission or, at the very least, cooperation. It was true that he'd cast the Distraction Charm, but if his concentration failed then so would the charm, revealing his arousal to the entire room of randy witches. He'd heard several of them speculating on how delightful Nigel Reese might be in the bedroom, and he shuddered at the thought of them speculating about his own dimensions and talents. With renewed concentration, Severus continued repaying Hermione for her efforts. His fingertips began drawing slow, deliberate circles on the inside of her thigh. He crowed inwardly when he heard her breath hitch. Severus fought again to retain his concentration and control when he noticed that he could see two hardened nipples protruding beneath her simple, but alluring, burgundy dress.

Dammit, the witch was tempting him further by slowly edging her hand closer to his cock. Taking a deep breath to collect his wits, he reprimanded her with a pinch to her inner thigh that made her cry out. He sniggered quietly when all forty club participants turned to look in her direction then immediately picked up their books. He could barely restrain outright laughter when he saw Hermione turn to deliver a withering glare only to be forced to pick up her own book.

Hermione rejoiced at the knowledge that she certainly was losing the battle of seduction against Severus Snape, but it was doubtless that she would win the war. She relaxed, content to enjoy the attention that Severus continued to lavish on her thigh. His hand teased ever so slightly higher, and she wondered whether she might have to feign illness soon to escape being tortured within the confines of the book club. If necessary, swooning certainly wouldn't be difficult to accomplish. Merciful Merlin, his fingertips were, to be utterly trite and clichéd, magical.

Finally, just when he wondered how much longer he'd be able to maintain the Distraction Charm, the meeting ended. Standing abruptly, he snatched Hermione's hand in his own and turned to leave the room. Hearing the sound of forty books opening and Hermione's ensuing laughter, Severus cancelled the charm, relying on the folds of his cloak to conceal him from public view. He continued stalking to the front of Flourish and Blotts with such speed and determination that she might have thought him furious with her, had he not been an active participant in the evening's battle. The instant they stepped foot into Diagon Alley and outside the shop's wards, Severus immediately Disapparated them to the hallway outside her flat.

She had barely had a chance to recover from the bewildering sensation of Apparation when Severus shoved her against the hallway wall. Immediately his mouth was upon her as his hands grasped desperately at her hips, pulling her body flush with his. She gasped as she felt the results of the night's campaign press between her legs. She heard him groan aloud when his cock made contact with her and quickly began digging in her handbag for her wand so she could remove her flat's wards.

Hermione began clumsily removing the wards while Severus nibbled the entire length of her neck. His attentions left her with barely the wits to perform the task aloud, and she was certain they'd have caused complaints from the neighbours if they'd had to rely on her ability to disarm the wards silently. She fumbled with the wards again, realising with certainty and yet another flood of arousal that she would soon finally succeed in bedding her wizard. If she could ever remove the blasted wards. Damn Severus for insisting that she increase the security on her home. After attempting to disable the last ward five times, she finally succeeded.

Before she could so much as blink, Severus had moved her inside the flat, closed the door, shoved her against the opposite side of the wall she'd just left, and cast a series of wards, in between nips to her collarbone.

She shuddered when she felt her dress vanish and cried out when he began nibbling her nipple through her bra as his hand plunged into her knickers. Now well beyond the ability to cast spells herself, Hermione reached out to shove Severus's cloak from his shoulders and began unbuttoning his shirt, running her fingers across his nipples once they were revealed. Pausing in his attentions to her breast, he threw his head back and moaned deliciously as she tweaked his nipples. His eyes closed in pleasure at the same moment that his calloused fingertip found her clit. She frantically pulled him against her so she could kiss him, groaning when she felt his tongue sliding against hers. Cupping his arse in her hands, she crushed his body against hers, trapping his hand against her clit and driving his cock against her thigh.

Severus groaned again, pulled his mouth from hers, and demanded, "Bed!"

"Too far!" Hermione replied and pushed against his shoulders. After he refused to let go, she felt herself moving away from the wall as he dragged her with him.

Severus felt the backs of his thighs hit the top of the sofa and realised Hermione's intent. He lifted her up and dumped her unceremoniously onto the piece of furniture. Meanwhile, Hermione summoned her wand and cast the spell to block the Floo while Severus scrambled to the front side of the sofa and began shedding his remaining clothes as quickly as possible.

She had just finished removing her bra and knickers and was reaching to undo her suspender belt when Severus joined her on the sofa. "Leave it," he demanded as his tongue flickered against her nipple and he slid two fingers inside her. Severus alternated between laving and suckling her nipples and continued to caress her with his fingers, occasionally flicking his thumb across her swollen clit. Fuck, he couldn't believe how incredible she felt. Every time he withdrew his fingers, he could feel her greedily clinging to him, and he frantically avoided thinking about how she would feel surrounding his cock. With no uncertainty, he knew that he would last an embarrassingly short time once he entered her.

Hermione keened under his attentions and grew even more impatient. Yanking his hair so that his head tilted and their eyes met, Hermione begged, "Now, Severus. Please."

Needing no further requests, Severus kneeled between her thighs. He removed his fingers and rubbed his fist over his cock, spreading her moisture.

Hermione made a frustrated groan as she watched him. It was the first opportunity she'd had to see his cock, and she couldn't help but lick her lips as she watched his hand. She couldn't recall ever having considered a cock beautiful, but his was absolutely gorgeous.

Stopping his ministrations, Severus looked up to see Hermione's response and smirked proudly. He leaned down and kissed her gently, a marked difference from all the kisses they'd shared so far that evening, and his eyes closed involuntarily as he slowly eased his cock inside her. She felt like velvet, like heaven, like home. "Nnnnnng," Severus whimpered unintelligibly before he opened his eyes upon completely seating himself inside Hermione.

Slowly, he began to move inside her and was rewarded with a series of breathy moans. Severus dropped his right leg off the side of the sofa to bear most of his weight, leaving his right hand free to attend to her breasts.

Hermione's eyes fluttered shut, and she focused on the darts of pleasure coursing through her body. Oh, gods, this was so much better than she had imagined, and she had imagined it quite frequently. She was hyper-aware of him: the musky scent of his arousal, the whimpers and moans that kept escaping his mouth, the delicate way his fingers tweaked and pulled at her nipple, and every wrinkle and ridge of his cock. She revelled in all the sensations, moaning each time she felt the head of his cock nudge against her g-spot.

Too soon, Severus thought as he felt his control begin to slip. Reaching between them, he lightly flicked Hermione's clit and immediately felt her begin to contract around him. Relieved to find his efforts effective, he repeated the movement several times more before he felt the contractions that heralded the arrival of her orgasm. Unable to hold back any longer, he rubbed her clit one last time before crashing his lips against hers. His hips began to thrust wildly, and he threw his head back involuntarily, shouting as his orgasm overtook him. He vaguely registered her thrashing head and accompanying moans as he felt his orgasm crest.

Severus rested on his forearms above her as he panted, desperately trying to catch his breath. Hermione laced her arms around him and pulled him down so that he lay atop her, his cock still throbbing inside her as it began to soften. She guided his lips to hers, and he was unable to suppress a smile as they kissed.

"Gods, that was fantastic. If I'd known you were that amazing, I'd never have let you convince me to wait."

"I'm sure the hour of foreplay beforehand had everything to do with your satisfaction. I'll promise to be devastatingly abysmal next time around. It wouldn't do to have your expectations set too high," he teased.

To his surprise, she reached out and tickled him in retaliation. Tickled! He had never been tickled in his entire life. Hell, he was surprised to find that he even WAS ticklish. He flinched and felt his cock slip out of her. The sensation apparently caught her unawares as well, and he was able to grasp her wrists and arrest her attack. He silenced any arguments with a series of kisses that left them breathless. Again.

Fuck, this was entirely overwhelming. He felt like a cat caught in the sunlight streaming through a window. Other instincts be damned, he just wanted to bask in the rays. Bloody hell, he'd been practically emasculated by the experience. He was waxing poetic like a pathetic greeting card. Perhaps a distraction would allow him to reclaim his wits and dignity.

"As lovely as this is, I don't fancy another night on your sofa. My back wasn't right for days after the last time," Severus said as he stood from the sofa, giving Hermione his hand to help her up.

Hermione smiled and stood up from the sofa. She felt exceedingly self-conscious walking in front of him naked as she led him down the hallway. *Although*, she thought as she glanced at him, *he certainly doesn't seem to have a problem with the view.* Flicking on the bedroom light, she stopped short in the doorway causing Severus to run into her. Oh, bugger. She stared at her bed. She'd spent so much time thinking about *sleeping with Severus Snape* that she'd not spent any time thinking about the logistics of actually bringing him into her bed. She and Ron had purchased that bed just after they had married. She could still remember christening it with him. Hell, Ron had been quite the traditionalist; they'd never had sex anywhere **but** the bed. How could she possibly think about sharing it with another man?

Severus placed his hands on her shoulders as he asked, "Do you have extra sheets, love?"

Hermione gestured silently to the bathroom where presumably Severus could find the linen closet.

"Right, I'll go and transfigure the sofa, then."

As he departed to the sitting room, she continued staring at the bed as she leaned against the door frame. It made no sense whatsoever, but somehow this moment felt like the end of her marriage to Ron. Oh, she had known rationally that he was long gone. After all, how many nights had she cried herself to sleep alone in that very bed? But now, she was wilfully leaving the marriage behind. She couldn't help but feel like she was betraying him with Severus. Dashing tears away from her eyes, Hermione berated herself for ruining a perfect evening with Severus with her maudlin reflections. How could she not have considered this hitch in her seduction plans? Though she supposed it wasn't all that surprising. Lately, she'd been working so much that she barely had two brain cells left to rub together by the time she crawled into bed. No, she'd spent most of her waking time in the office - a place Ron had hardly ever ventured. She'd joked that all the books and colour-coordinated notes made him have nightmares of NEWTs revision, and she suspected that the joke was fairly close to the truth.

"I'll make us some tea," Severus said as he handed her the bathrobe he'd found hanging in the bathroom and left her standing in the hallway.

She really didn't understand this step backwards in her grieving for Ron. She'd had a much easier time talking about him lately. She really had thought that she was coming to be at peace with it. It still hurt sometimes, but their marriage, and his death, were firmly fixed in the past. It was hard to believe that just a couple of months ago his death had still been very much a part of her present. She was no longer a grieving widow, and she had Severus to thank for that.

Perhaps what bothered her most was that, against all rational expectations, Severus Snape ... twenty years her senior and a man who had grimly earned every stitch of black that he owned ... was a much better mate for her than Ron could ever have been. Being with him wasn't a constant uphill struggle as her marriage to Ron had been. She felt traitorous for even thinking it. Even worse, the last time she'd indulged in the 'What if Ron Were Still Alive' game, she'd found her heart aching at the thought of not being with Severus. She had immediately distracted herself. But now, standing at the edge of the master bedroom, it all came rushing back.

Having realised that perhaps leaving Hermione alone with her thoughts whilst she stared at her marital bed was not the wisest of ideas, Severus returned and gently ushered Hermione towards the kitchen.

Hermione sank into her chair at the kitchen table. Dammit. Something else that reminded her of him. Stupid flat. She nervously fidgeted with her hands while she watched Severus fiddle with her electric kettle. Oh gods, she was still wearing her wedding ring. She wore it out of habit and had never had reason to stop. Shit. Removing it would invite scrutiny for which she simply wasn't prepared. What on earth would Molly say to her when she noticed? But she certainly couldn't continue to wear it now that she very clearly was no longer Ron's wife. It seemed traitorous to Severus.

Severus wrestled with his temper as he finished preparing their tea. Dammit. He had known she wasn't ready for this, and yet he bloody let her seduce him anyway. He wasn't sure if he was more upset with himself or her. Fuck. They were surely headed towards an extremely uncomfortable discussion. He'd weathered all their previous discussions about ... he cringed ... emotions and feelings over her lost husband, but those discussions hadn't involved his own person. He was free to be detached and objective. But standing here watching her sniffle after he'd JUST had his cock inside her was something entirely different. Bugging hell. He'd suffered through this once before over twenty years ago. He snorted to himself. At least this time, he didn't have to worry about Hermione scurrying away to the arms of her betrothed. Still, just because her husband was dead didn't ease the sting of it. He'd offered up himself, only to have her attention diverted at the sight of a piece of furniture. How typical. Fucking women. No wonder Aberforth cavorted with goats.

The tea had finished steeping, and he supposed he couldn't delay the inevitable any longer. He adjusted his transfigured bathrobe (dammit, his scratchy wool cloak may not have been the best of choices) and carried the tea tray to the table. "Perhaps we rushed into this, Hermione," Severus said as he began pouring her tea.

"No!" Hermione declared vehemently.

Severus set the teapot down with rather more force than was necessary and glared at her with a look she'd not witnessed since she was a sixth year. "Hermione, I will not compete with Ronald Weasley for your affections."

"Severus, you aren't," she began arguing before he interrupted.

"Clearly I am," he replied through gritted teeth. "Otherwise, why the bloody hell would you be so upset?"

Rising from her chair, she struggled not to yell in retort. "Severus, that's exactly the problem! You aren't remotely in the same league as Ron. How could you possibly think you were competing with him?"

"Playing dense does not become you, Hermione. I could see you struggling with it by your bedroom, and I can see it now!"

"Severus, there is no contest, and THAT is the problem."

"What in seven hells do you mean?"

"Yes, I'll admit to having inadvertently compared you to Ron. The problem is that Ron fails against you in nearly every regard. I'm GLAD you're the one here. I'm GLAD that it's not Ron. Do you understand what that means? I'm GLAD he's not here." She was crying earnestly now. "I'm GLAD that he's..."

Somehow, mid-tirade, the light of comprehension finally dawned on Severus Snape. Fucking hell. He'd never been picked over someone else. That it was someone not of corporeal form didn't matter to him in the slightest. He knew full well the significance her husband had had in her life. He crossed the room before she could finish saying something about Weasley's absence that he knew she didn't really mean and wrapped her in his embrace.

"Shhh, love. You prefer me, then. Is that what you're trying to say?"

She nodded against his chest with a muffled sob.

"Crazy witch. You feel miserable and guilty because of it?"

Impossibly, she cried even harder. It would seem he'd managed to hit the nail on the head. Perhaps he wasn't so daft when it came to this relationship business. Now, how to get her to cease her blubbing on his cloak? He cautiously began rubbing his right hand on her back as his left clutched her waist.

"Hermione, why is this bothering you so much? Surely you knew you weren't going to mourn him forever and you'd move on some day."

She sniffled. "Well, yes, but you and I are only together because Ron died." Her sniffles reverted to sobs once more.

"Hermione, I have never known you to be so irrational. You don't know how things might have turned out, even if his accident had never happened. There is nothing wrong with accepting what has happened and being content to move forward." Oh, disgusting. Did she just snort against his robes?

"Yes, I can see historically you've excelled at accepting what happened and moving on."

Severus spluttered.

"But I see what you mean. One can't argue with fate," she said, pulling him closer.

Her sniffing had seemingly subsided, but Severus continued rubbing circles on her back.

"Thank you for making me see reason," she murmured with a heaving sigh.

"I had no choice. You were being horribly unfair to yourself, and you very nearly said things about Weasley that I know you didn't mean."

"And how exactly is it that you had no choice?" she teased, cocking her head up to look at him.

"If I'd let you continue, it might have been years before we shagged again," he joked, trying to lighten the mood.

Hermione chuckled against his chest. "Eager, are you?" she asked and looked up at him with a grin.

Well, he hadn't been until she looked at him. His cock twitched. He swallowed the now sizable lump in his throat and brushed away the hairs that had adhered to her face. "I am now," he rasped before brushing his lips softly against hers.

He felt her breath catch before she returned his kiss, her tongue slowly sliding against his. There was a tenderness to their kiss that had never been present before. He wondered, briefly, if this was a result of their coupling or their argument. His hands easily separated the sides of her bathrobe, and he clutched her body hungrily.

He took it all back. They hadn't rushed into this. Gods, he wasn't sure how he'd ever be able to keep his hands off her in the future or how he would keep from blurting out things during their coupling that he clearly meant but wasn't prepared to reveal. If only they'd progressed to the point where a gag was a suitable suggestion.

She tugged him into the sitting room. Her jaw dropped as she goggled at the four-poster bed that stood in the middle of the room where her sofa and coffee table once were. The sheets were an entirely different colour and texture than anything originating out of her linen closet. "Is this modelled after your own, or were you inspired to create this out of your imagination?"

"Mmmmm, I suppose that's for me to know and you to find out," Severus replied as he playfully nipped at her neck.

"Gods, how do you manage to do that?" Hermione groaned.

"Hmm?"

"Instinctively find the precise spots that render me senseless."

"Like this?" Severus asked, licking the bit of skin between the middle and ring fingers of her right hand.

"Yesssssss," Hermione hissed.

Severus chuckled. "Magic."

"Oh, good grief," she said, rolling her eyes as she pushed him onto the bed. She honestly wasn't sure where this playful version of Severus Snape had come from, but she wanted more of him, that was certain. Perhaps it would be best to begin rewarding him for good behaviour.

Severus was quickly distracted from further witty comments by the feeling of her mouth trailing kisses across his hipbones and stomach. His startled yelp made Hermione laugh, which sent tantalising puffs of air across his loins. Gods, was she trying to seduce him or give him a heart attack? He groaned as her lips descended upon his cock. He was certain he sounded like a babbling idiot, but Hermione didn't seem to mind. She seemed intent on lavishing attention on him. He indulged in it until he could hardly bear any more, tugging her up so that she straddled him.

With eyes half-mast, he watched her face as she lowered herself onto his cock. Her eyes fluttered shut, and her lower lip retreated into her mouth. Fuck, she was gorgeous. He was mesmerised by watching her: the slick juncture where their bodies met, the captivating expressions that graced her face, her finger circling her clit, and the way she experimented with several hip angles before finding the one that made her moan. The position wasn't particularly mind-blowing for him, but he supposed that was just as well. It wouldn't do to make good on that promise of an abysmal performance.

Her orgasm hit her by surprise, and she tumbled forward against his chest. After several moments, Severus thrust his hips beneath her, and she shuddered in response. Oh, gods. She'd entirely forgotten how sensitive she could be after her first orgasm.

After Severus nudged her in one of the five universal gestures that signalled for a change in positions, she slid off of him with a twinge of regret and rolled onto her back. Oh, but it was lovely to watch him settling in between her thighs. She realised that she'd been so wrapped up in her own pleasure earlier that she'd missed the opportunity to observe Severus with his guard completely down. He slid into her, and she resisted all temptation to close her eyes and relish the sensation. She smiled, wondering if Severus knew that he stuck his tongue out about a half centimetre every time he altered his positioning or that he grunted every time the head of his cock bumped against her cervix. Gods, this was overwhelming. It felt like they were sharing the best sort of secret together.

With the desperation of their first coupling out of the way, Severus took particular care to enjoy their second. This was his opportunity to explore his witch and discover what felt best for both of them. Ever the researcher, he tried a variety of angles, speeds, and positions. He resolved on a sharp snapping motion of his hips followed by a slow withdrawal. Each thrust was punctuated with a moan from Hermione, and it was only after several such thrusts that he realised he'd lucked into finding an angle that pressed hard against her g-spot. Yes, this was definitely a mutually satisfactory position. He carefully noted their positioning, trying to commit all the details to long-term memory before his orgasm came along and Obliviated him. Oh, bloody hell, she was coming, and he swore he'd never felt such pressure on his cock in his entire life.

He looked down, mid-thrust, to see tears glistening in Hermione's eyes, accompanied by a watery smile. He quickly kissed her before his control could slip further and all manner of Hufflepuff-type declarations escaped from his mouth. Instinct suddenly took over, and his hips began moving faster of their own accord. Before long, his orgasm ripped through his body, carrying all conscious thought along with it.

Hermione giggled to herself. It was rather adorable how babies, drunks, and orgasming men all lacked the ability to employ consonants with any degree of precision. She

stroked Severus's hair as he panted irregularly against her throat. He leaned up to kiss her again before flopping onto the bed next to her.

She propped herself up on her elbow and continued observing him. He looked like his mind was a bit more occupied than was normal for someone who'd just come. Good grief, he wasn't having second thoughts, was he? After an orgasm like that?

He turned and looked at her quizzically. "Something on your mind, Hermione?"

"I was going to ask you the same. You have that expression you get when you're trying to figure out something."

"Just trying to determine which adjective is the precise opposite of abysmal. I believe stellar will do in this instance," he replied smugly.

"Prat." Leave it to Severus to bring his haughty arrogance into the bed as well. She quickly berated herself when she felt herself clench at the thought.

She yawned before commenting, "We never did have that tea."

"Would you like me to brew some more?"

"Mmmm. That would be nice. A blend with no caffeine, I think," she murmured sleepily.

She was embarrassed to catch herself ogling his arse as walked to the kitchen. *Bloody hell, I've had seconds and now I'm looking for thirds?*

By the time he returned, tea in hand, she was asleep. Surprisingly, he wasn't tired at the moment. Wandering over to her bookshelf, he picked up *An Arithmancer's Guide to Successful Potion Brewing* before returning to bed. Sliding under the covers whilst trying not to disturb his slumbering witch, he propped himself against the headboard and lost himself in the text. Though a bit rudimentary, it did give him some insight into concepts he only knew instinctively. Perhaps he would have to borrow it to peruse when he was a bit more alert. He yawned sleepily but continued reading. He drifted off with the book flattened against his chest.

A/N: Thanks so much for your lovely reviews for the last chapter. While Hermione might have had to wait an unbearable couple of months, you didn't!

Be a dear and review? I've made some excellent new friends in the course of writing this, and I'm eager to meet more! Don't be shy!

The Illustrious Richmond Greenleaf

Chapter 10 of 12

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

Disclaimer: I reap no financial benefits from the use of JK Rowling's characters.

Enormous thanks to my fantabulous beta team: kittylefish and Persevero.

Chapter 10 – *The Illustrious Richmond Greenleaf*

Hermione awoke with a leisurely stretch, her eyes flying open when her leg brushed against Severus. Her stomach cartwheeled at the novelty of waking next to him. *Though*, she thought with a small moue of disappointment, *next time I'd rather awaken curled up against him. And why on earth can I feel his hip bone jutting against my shoulders?* She took a deep, contented breath and smiled with the fuzzy remembrance that her plan had indeed been successful. She winced as she rolled over to solve the mystery of Severus's sleeping position –perhaps the plan had been too effective. The dull ache in the back of her head shrieked that the Firewhisky might have over-performed as well.

She examined her sleeping lover and found he was propped up against the headboard with a book spread-eagle across his chest. Goodness, had he slept like that all night? She suppressed a snort. He'd whinged about sleeping on her sofa the last time, and yet he'd spent the night folded in half. She gently plucked the book from his grasp, marked his place, and winced again as she leaned over to place the book on the edge of her curio cabinet.

As delicately as possible, she rolled over again to face Severus, who was smirking smugly at her discomfort. "Good morning to you, too," she grumbled. "Just see how you fare when you try moving."

"I believe my rounds keep me a bit fitter than you, dearest." His emphasis on the last word landed it somewhere between insult and endearment.

"Oh, no! Severus, doesn't your first class start in," she cried, craning her neck to glance at the clock, "twenty minutes?"

"I owled Minerva last night just before I made tea. Are you perchance available to join me on my first ever voluntary day off?"

Hermione's jaw dropped. This was quite the unexpected treat; even on weekends they'd not yet finagled an entire day together. "You, Severus Snape, took the day off from teaching?" she asked with disbelief.

Severus stretched in mock leisure – an effect which failed miserably when he grimaced halfway through. "Of course I took the day off! Why would I want to spoil the first shag I've had in years with a day of teaching? I simply told Minerva that you were poorly and I would be taking the day to tend to you."

"You didn't," Hermione groaned.

Severus's mouth twitched as he fought his usual smirk. "I told her you seemed to have come down with something during the book club meeting." He flinched as her pillow smacked his chest. "What? You certainly seemed feverish to me." He sniggered.

Hermione retrieved the pillow and promptly buried her head underneath it. Voice muffled, she responded, "I'll never be able to look her in the face again without being embarrassed."

"I'm certain she already suspected we were shagging."

Hermione removed her head quickly from beneath the pillow and glared at Severus. "Why exactly is Minerva McGonagall speculating on our sex life?"

At this, Severus had the good grace to look sheepish. "Well, she may have commented on my improved disposition and guessed at its cause. Not wanting to engage her in a discussion on such a topic, I stalked off rather than try to persuade her otherwise."

Hermione sighed and shook her head before gently easing herself from the bed. Grabbing her wand from the curio cabinet, she Summoned the bathrobe he'd given her the night before – the guest robe. She could never bear such a lurid shade of purple first thing in the morning. Her stomach nearly revolted at the sight of it. "I'm going to start the coffee and then pop in the shower," she said as she tightened the sash.

"Perhaps I could borrow your kitchen to brew a muscle relaxant?" Severus asked as he grunted while struggling to unfurl from his cramped position.

Hermione nodded before ambling towards the kitchen. She had just set the coffee to brewing when Severus hobbled in, looking slightly the worse for wear. She directed him towards the cabinets with her cauldrons and basic ingredients. *He can figure out how to hoist the damn cauldron up on the stove himself* she thought as she padded down the hallway to her bedroom.

Hermione stared groggily at the mirror while she brushed her teeth. Fumbling, she grabbed a Headache Potion out of the cabinet and downed it after she spat out her toothpaste. She shuddered. The combination of toothpaste and Headache Potion made toothpaste and orange juice taste like an exotic cocktail. Hermione flicked her wand at the shower, filling the stall with steam. As was her habit prior to stepping in the shower, she removed her wedding ring. She hesitated, holding it in her hand and examining it. Gods, she and Ron had been so young the first day she'd worn it. Too young to afford an engagement ring. Too caught up in their whirlwind of emotions to be bothered. Her index finger traced the edge of the silver band. She smiled wistfully before closing her palm around the ring and walking into the bedroom. Her eyes darted to their bed, and she kissed the ring before placing it in the Turkish puzzle box which served as her jewellery box. She felt immeasurably lighter and at peace when she walked back into bathroom, pulled the door to, and stepped into the shower.

She groaned in relief as the water cascaded over her. Oh, the muscle relaxant would be nice once it was done brewing, but nothing quite compared to a piping hot shower. Mercifully, her building included a neat bit of spellwork to keep a perpetual supply of hot water. She began to lather her rat's nest of hair and sighed. She hoped Severus hadn't thought her angry with him when she left the bed. Granted, she wasn't exactly pleased her former Head of House had speculative knowledge of her love life, but she supposed she'd survived far more embarrassing and public scrutiny over the course of her life.

Besides, it's not as if people won't eventually assume we're shagging anyway, especially if we move in together or— She shoved her head back under the spray, quickly back-peddalling to avoid that train of thought. She'd only just grown accustomed to the thought of having lost one husband. Her brain stuttered at merely considering the idea of taking on another one.

She grinned as she heard the door open and rushed to rinse the last of the suds from her hair. *Brilliant! He finished the potion quickly and decided to join me.* Loofah in hand, she was still waiting expectantly minutes later. She shoved open the curtain to be met with the plaintive meow of her familiar. Grumpily, she hurried through the rest of her ablutions; there would be no peace until she filled the kneazle's dish.

"Merlin, I feel so much better now," she exclaimed as she shuffled back into the kitchen.

Severus paused his cauldron scrubbing to gesture towards a vial of completed muscle relaxant.

Hermione downed it in one gulp and embraced Severus as he continued to wash. "Ah, that didn't even taste like rubbish. I think I might keep you around," she teased.

Not discouraged by the grunt she received in response, she continued, "Go on and shower. I'll finish this up and start breakfast. Oh, there are extra toothbrushes in the top right drawer."

Severus replied with quirked eyebrow, "Keeping a steady supply for all your lovers?"

"Hardly. I am the daughter of dentists, you know. I had to spell the box of floss so it was bottomless."

She resisted the urge to chuck the sponge at Severus's backside as he left the room. She finished scrubbing the cauldron and set it on the counter to dry. Rummaging in the fridge, she managed to find the makings of a decent omelette and began chopping tomatoes and onions. Prep work completed, she sipped her coffee and listened for the shower to shut off, thinking about the naked man it contained. Caught in her reverie, she very nearly missed hearing the water stop. She'd just flipped the omelette when Severus lumbered back into the kitchen, grabbed his coffee cup, and refilled it.

"Thank gods. I feel vaguely human again," he said as he leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. "Might I lend a hand with anything?"

"Just grab the juice from the fridge if you'd like any and have a seat," she replied, loading the omelettes onto plates and collecting the toast before joining Severus at the table.

Several moments passed in relative silence as they ate. Having polished off half her plate, Hermione asked, "So, first shag in years, eh?"

Severus choked on his orange juice.

Once he'd cleared his windpipe, she continued, "Who was your last?"

Still coughing intermittently, Severus grumbled, "Just dive right in, will you? Yes, this seems like perfect breakfast conversation."

Grinning, Hermione replied, "Oooh, you've brought the sarcasm out to play this morning. I seem to have hit a nerve."

Severus scowled at her and stuffed a large bite of omelette into his mouth.

"So, who was it?" she persisted.

"I can hardly see how it's relevant or, for that matter, any of your business." He snatched another piece of toast.

"Goodness, you're being rather tight-lipped. It wasn't—" Her face paled.

Severus glared at her, his cutlery clanking as he set it on his plate. "It wasn't who? I'll be quite amused to see who you think it was."

"Well, I only say this because it's the only possible explanation I can imagine for you being so reluctant to admit it." Hermione hesitated.

"Stop prevaricating. Who?" he demanded.

"Me stop prevaricating? Fine. Did you have to pay for the shag?" she blurted.

Severus clutched his sides in laughter. "No! I'd never so much as think of touching a Knockturn Alley whore. There aren't Prophylactic Charms strong enough for me to

disrobe in the vicinity!" He shuddered at the thought. "No, it was Aurora Sinistra." At her expression, he continued, "See! I rather thought you wouldn't want to know."

"But you still work with her. Isn't that awkward?"

"Hermione, we had a physical relationship only. I broke it off ... the year I taught Defence. She actually began seeing Aberforth shortly before the Final Battle."

"You had a relationship that was purely physical?" she asked with not a small amount of discomfort.

Severus laughed again. "Well, yes. And it's a fair step up from a moment ago when you thought I frequented prostitutes!"

"Fair enough." Hermione still looked a bit troubled at the idea. "I don't think I could shag someone without being emotionally involved."

"Hermione, with my role as a spy, I couldn't have maintained an emotional relationship. Look, this was a good part of why I wanted to wait before we went to bed."

"I can accept it. I just don't like the idea of having to share you in any way. I mean, I suppose I'm not. She's moved on, and the two of you were never really attached." She was still frowning, but her features had recovered from their initial shock.

Severus shook his head, smiling. At Hermione's questioning look, he explained, "I believe you're jealous. I rather think I like it."

Hermione rolled her eyes before returning to her breakfast. Severus smirked and picked up his fork. They finished in comfortable silence.

Severus reached across the table and grasped Hermione's hand, rubbing his thumb over her ring finger. "Was this intentional?"

"It was." She smiled a bit despondently.

"You needn't take it off on my account if you're not ready," Severus offered reluctantly.

"Severus, I've probably been ready for longer than I wanted to admit. There will always be things that remind me of Ron. I don't need to wear a constant reminder of him."

"You're certain? It won't bother me if you want to wear it a bit longer."

"Yes, I'm quite certain, but thank you." She squeezed his hand. With breakfast complete, Hermione collected the dishes and carried them to the sink. She was elbow-deep in soapy water when she felt Severus's hands on her hips.

"I do not intend to spend my much coveted day off watching you wash dishes the Muggle way."

"Have something else in mind, did you?" she asked, leaning back into his embrace.

Severus's right hand wound its way inside her bathrobe. His thumb made several light passes across her nipple before he rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. She whimpered as his other arm clutched her tightly and he pressed his body against her. He was already half-hard and quickly rising to full attention. She looked down to see her hands clutching the edge of the sink. Trying to turn to face Severus, she found he held her firmly in place.

"No, you tormented me quite thoroughly last night, and I believe this is my chance to repay the kindness," he murmured as his right hand continued toying with her nipple while his left slowly brushed across the top of her mound. "No knickers? How very naughty."

She gasped as his fingers ghosted across her labia and skittered down her thigh.

His hand firmly kneaded and stroked her thigh. "Now, let's talk about the suspender belt you were wearing last night. Is it a regular feature? Or does it only come out to play on special occasions?"

"I wear it," she faltered as his hand journeyed upwards again, "only on special occasions."

"Then we shall have to address that. I want to see it quite often," he mumbled as his hand returned to caressing her thigh.

Hermione smirked and replied, "Oh, I think you'll like its friends, too."

"What? Friends?" Severus blustered.

"Many delights await you in my lingerie drawer."

Severus chuckled, sending puffs of air across her neck. He nudged her legs farther apart and slid his finger between her folds. She heard his sharp intake of breath at discovering how excited she had become. He removed his hand from her left breast, and she whined at the loss of contact. Her right breast eagerly responded when he shifted his attentions. He avoided her nipple, teasing the edge of her areola, which crinkled in response. Gods, she wanted more. These half-touches were driving her mad. She shimmied against his hand, trying to direct his fingers to where she needed them.

For a moment, she thought he was going to relent and touch her. But his clever fingers insisted on skirting around her clit. It swelled in fury in response. She whimpered again, which earned another chuckle. Severus continued circling her clit, refusing to give the slightest relief to the now painful ache.

"Gods, Severus. Please. No more teasing," she begged.

"And why should I stop?"

"You teased me for months! I wasn't teasing you last night; I was pushing you over the edge," she argued.

"Hmmm. Perhaps I should be thanking you instead. Yet, you never told me there was a *antire* drawer of lingerie to be explored," Severus complained before circling her clit one last time.

Finally, he grasped her poor, neglected clit between two fingers – which two she wasn't certain and bloody well didn't care. He gently tugged once, and her vision narrowed to the farmhouse-style tap in front of her. He plucked it again, and her legs began to wobble. She shifted her weight so she leaned on the sink. He established a rhythm, alternating between sharp pulls on her clit and soothing upward strokes. *Fuck!* She could feel his cock pressing against her while he steadily jerked off her clit. He quickened the pace, and soon she was bucking against him. Her orgasm burned through her. Without anything filling her, the direct pressure on her clit scorched. Her body, moving of its own volition, tried to twist away from Severus's hand.

He held her firm and continued stroking her, determined to wring out the very last of her orgasm. It raced through her until she begged, "Please, stop!"

Seemingly determined to control the pace of their encounter, Severus continued to stroke her clit as she twitched against him. She shuddered in relief when she finally felt his movements slow. Her erratic pulse showed signs of returning to normal. Her limbs began answering requests from her central nervous system. At last she relaxed, slumping against the sink with great heaving sobs of breath escaping her.

Finally, his arms loosened, and she was free to turn and face him. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a heated kiss. "Where on earth did you learn a trick like that?" she asked. "Or don't I want to know?"

"You're not the only one who can learn things from books, Hermione," Severus answered with a wry grin.

At the word 'books', Hermione's ears perked. "Oh, really? Well, I'm quite fascinated to know what else your books have taught you. Perhaps there's something for me to learn, too."

"Perhaps we can organise an exchange – lingerie for books."

"You want to wear my lingerie?" she asked cheekily.

Severus swatted her bum. "Wench, I'll teach you to twist my words."

Hermione ducked out of his arms and ran to the living room, glancing back to make sure he was following her. He was following, shedding his bathrobe along the way. He tackled her just as she made it to the bed. She landed on her back and was immediately caged by Severus's body. He kissed her hungrily and then angled his hips so that his cock brushed against her. She clutched his hips with her hands and demanded, "No more bloody teasing."

He relented and quickly thrust inside her. She relished the sensation of his cock filling her, satisfying the emptiness that had racked her earlier. That first, intense, exhausting orgasm had wrung any lingering reserve from her. Gods, she wasn't normally quite so vocal, but her swollen, aching G-spot had her climbing the walls. It demanded attention. "Now! Faster!" she heard herself begging Severus and marvelled at the desperate, pleading tone in her voice.

He brought her legs to his shoulders and began driving into her with forceful, steady strokes, his cock nudging her G-spot every time. Tears trickled from her eyes at the pleasure, and Severus stopped suddenly. "Are you okay? Have I hurt you?"

"No. Feels so good," she whimpered.

She watched a brief, but proud, grin flash across Severus's face before he quickened his pace. Gods, she was close. Her orgasm hung just out of reach. She struggled to fit her hand between their bodies. Finally, she was able to brush her index finger against her clit. At last, the tense coil that had been building inside her tightened, tightened, and snapped. The orgasm rushed towards her and washed over her, leaving her nearly oblivious to Severus's continued movements. When she next opened her eyes, Severus had collapsed on top of her, resting his head upon her chest. She lazily moved her hand through his hair.

He raised his head and smiled feebly at her before lifting himself up and flopping on his back next to her, panting. "Gods, I think I need to start brewing Invigoration Draughts again."

Hermione groaned. "Make it a double."

"Bossy pants. 'Harder! Faster! Brew me a potion!' I'm not going to get a moment's peace with you, am I?" Severus propped himself up on one elbow and gazed at her fondly.

"I don't recall you complaining, dear." She smiled.

"Mmm," Severus responded and leaned over to kiss her again. He leaned back and stared at her, absently running his hand down her ribs to her hip. His brow furrowed pensively, and his fingers cradled her head while he rubbed her scalp. "Why did you save my life in the Shrieking Shack, Hermione?"

"How could I not?" she asked, confused.

"But Potter hadn't seen my memories yet. You didn't know my true role."

"Severus, I'd had suspicions before, but your behaviour in the Shack made it fairly clear where your loyalties lay."

"Well, if you felt that strongly, why didn't you visit me at St Mungo's?"

Hermione sat up abruptly. "Severus, I DID visit you in St Mungo's."

Severus's face contorted in disbelief. "You did? Why don't I remember? How many times did you visit?"

"Just once."

"That put off by me, were you?" Severus needed.

Hermione glared at him. "Severus, you asked me not to return."

"Well, it's not like you to give up so easily. You're usually quite persistent." He noticed the pained expression that crossed her face. "Oh, bugger. What exactly did I say to you?"

"Severus, it doesn't matter. You don't remember me being there, and I can scarcely recall what you said."

"I hardly believe that. I can see your lower lip starting to quiver. What did I say?"

Tears hovered on her lashes. "You said that if I didn't remove myself from your hospital room immediately, you would see to it that I never had the privilege of sitting my N.E.W.T.s."

"Well, that sounds rather tame compared to my usual insults, though I can see that particular threat being quite effective in your case," he considered. "Shit, there was more, wasn't there?"

Hermione nodded, clearly trying to maintain her composure. "Look, I'd really rather not say the rest out loud. You were rather cruel, and it convinced me not to return."

He glanced at Hermione nervously. "Come here." He opened his arms, hugging Hermione tightly after she shuffled into his embrace. "Whatever it was I said, I'm terribly sorry. I'd love to blame it on the pain and potions, but I suspect I'd have been just as surly without the snakebite."

She sniffled a bit and clutched him in return.

"I'd never hurt you on purpose, love." He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and held her until they fell asleep.

Tuesday night found Hermione and Severus walking down Diagon Alley with an extra spring in their steps. Severus held the door as they sauntered into Flourish and Blotts, several minutes early for once. Hermione practically levitated as she walked towards the meeting room.

They had just settled into their seats when Matilda Broomshanks loomed over Severus like a storm cloud. She flicked her wand angrily, casting a Privacy Charm.

"Your behaviour throughout the duration of this club has been absolutely abominable. You repeatedly hoodwinked me into releasing you early from the meetings. You encouraged club members to malign this wonderful book. Last week was the final straw. You should have had no reason to cast a Distraction Charm in the midst of our meeting. I don't wish to imagine what shenanigans you were up to. I would expect better behaviour from any witch or wizard, but the two of you should be particularly ashamed of yourselves. The entire wizarding world looks up to you."

Severus watched Hermione with amusement throughout Broomshanks's tirade. First, her lower lip had disappeared completely into her mouth. Her face turned a deeper shade of red with each sentence. At the word 'shenanigans', her upper lip disappeared, too.

Matilda Broomshanks paused to allow her lecture sink in. She zeroed in for the kill and continued, "I've met with the other managers of Flourish and Blotts, and I'm quite pleased to announce that you are forthwith banned from all future Flourish and Blotts book clubs."

Severus glanced nervously at Hermione. Her lips had resurfaced when her jaw dropped. She seemed primed to argue with Broomshanks, and he feared they were about to miss a golden opportunity. He grasped Hermione's hand, hoping to signal that she should follow his lead.

He asked solemnly, "Ms Broomshanks, are we banned from Flourish and Blotts entirely or just its book clubs?"

Matilda scowled. "Regrettably, the other managers felt your steady patronage over the years merited limiting the ban solely to the book club programme."

"Thank you, Ms Broomshanks. I believe I can safely speak for Hermione when I offer our utmost thanks. I certainly will sleep better knowing that I'm safe from the clutches of the Flourish and Blotts book club."

Matilda stamped her foot in frustration. "I cannot believe your nerve. This book club has received accolades from both *The Daily Prophet* and *Witch Weekly*, and just last week the European Wizarding Book Publishing Forum awarded Flourish and Blotts its highest honours for our innovation. In my day, a witch or wizard would have been proud to have taken part in such a ground-breaking club."

"Yes, well, in my day, witches and wizards who cast binding agreements without the express consent of the recipients were given a Dementor's Kiss."

Matilda's face, which had been screwed up in her fit of rage, contorted with horror at Severus's statement. "I beg your pardon, I have an author to be attending." She cancelled the Privacy Charm and scuttled off to a curtained area at the front of the room.

Severus sat back smugly in his chair. Honestly, he found it hard to believe no one had objected to the invasive nature of the Compulsion Charms. Perhaps all of the other club members had been willing participants from the start. He'd contemplated bringing the charms to the attention of some acquaintances in the Auror department, but he had checked himself after realising he'd have to admit his participation, reluctant though it may have been, in the damned club. No, there weren't enough galleons in Gringotts to persuade him to publicise his participation in this farce. He glanced at Hermione and was taken aback to see her hunched over, shoulders shaking and hair obscuring her face.

"Bloody hell, you're not upset at being banned, are you?"

"No!" she exclaimed, shaking her head.

"You're not mad that I spoke for you, are you?" Severus asked hesitantly.

"Well, normally I might have been. In this case, I doubt I'd have managed to string two words together without laughing," she replied, wiping tears from her eyes. "Oh, that was too much. I will admit, though, it is a bit embarrassing to be banned from a bookshop in any capacity. It's almost as bad as being thrown out by Madam Pince for muttering to myself during O.W.L. revision. Oh, you were brilliant. I'd have argued with her just on principle." She paused to catch her breath and began giggling again. "Shenanigans."

"I'm so glad I could be of service," Severus replied. He chuckled. "You missed seeing her face when I accused her of capital crimes."

At that moment, Matilda stepped out from behind the curtain to introduce the author, preventing Hermione from responding. Oddly, for a crowd with such mixed reactions to the text, the excitement in the room was palpable. At seeing Broomshanks, the crowd gradually quieted.

"Richmond Greenleaf, the illustrious author of *The Witches of Gifford*, has a long history of publishing wildly successful books. For his first foray into fiction, Richmond adopted his pseudonym in order to publish with a degree of anonymity. His other books have been either nonfiction, instructional texts, or autobiographical works and include such best-sellers as *Gadding with Ghouls*, *Voyages with Vampires*, and the *Witch Weekly Best-Seller of 1993*, *Magical Me*.

"Oh, fucking hell. Not him!" Hermione cried in a whisper before burying her face in her hands.

Severus looked at Hermione with bewilderment. *Who on earth could be that bad?* He supposed he wasn't exactly familiar with any wildly successful books nor, for that matter, any books published in the last thirty years. His tastes tended to lean more towards obscure works from the twelfth through seventeenth centuries. Severus returned his gaze to the front of the room in time to see the author peek from behind the curtain. "Nimue's knobby knees. I thought that dimwit was locked away in St Mungo's."

Hermione replied with muffled voice, "Apparently not."

Oblivious to her miscreants' discomfort, Matilda Broomshanks continued her introduction. "On behalf of Flourish and Blotts, I am proud to present author Gilderoy Lockhart."

The room erupted with thunderous applause. Severus and Hermione cringed before slumping down into their seats.

"Thank you, thank you," Gilderoy began, gesturing for the crowd to settle down. "The lovely Ms Broomshanks here tells me that your group has had an absolutely delightful time exploring the idyllic little village of Gifford. I must say I was quite honoured when Ms Broomshanks and the proprietors of Flourish and Blotts selected my work of fiction as the book of choice for their first foray into the world of book clubs. This book is so dear to my heart, and it inspires me to know that my humble words have enriched the lives of so many."

"Humble words," Severus snorted quietly to Hermione. "That man wouldn't recognise humble if it strode up, dropped its pants, and waggled its naughty bits in his face."

"How very clever of you to make 'humble' gender neutral when you personify it."

"Well, I never was quite certain where Gilderoy's preferences lay. He'd flirt and fawn at anything with a pulse."

Hermione stifled a laugh. "Stop it. You're going to get us into more trouble."

"Hermione, we've already succeeded in earning banishment. Aside from a well-placed hex, there's nothing more they can do to us, and I highly doubt Broomshanks would want to be known for hexing two exalted war heroes. Now, I suggest we sit back and enjoy the spectacle."

Noticing her look of pique, he rolled his eyes. *Muffliato*.

Gilderoy rambled on a good ten minutes, oblivious to the titters and snorts that had emanated from the back row. Ending his lengthy introduction, he said, "Well, now that you all know a bit about my background, I thought I might open the floor to your questions."

"Oh, Mr Lockhart. My name is Delphinia Appleblossom. As a child, I spent many years in a village just like Gifford, and I just think you've captured it brilliantly. There was a fountain in the village that was just like the one you described in Gifford. One of our town buildings was once overrun by Jarveys too! Granted, it was the local primary school. Oh, I think the wee ones' ears were bleeding after the headmistress finished administering Ear Scrubbing Charms! This book was like a journey back to my childhood! Why, every moment I was reading, I expected my head to pop up asking you for help! She always was so busy raising the five of us, and I certainly think she

could have benefited from so many of the solutions Nigel Reese used in the book. Once, she had a horrible infestation of gnomes in her show garden just like Amelia Darling did in the book! Fortunately, with the publication of your wonderful books like the *Guide to Household Pests*, it was so much easier for our generation, but you've certainly shown again how things can be much easier for all of us!"

"Why, thank you, Ms Appleblossom. It's so very heart-warming to know that my simple words can inspire readers all over the country. Oh, I never tire of hearing how many lives my works have touched. Yes, you in the pink and yellow sweater, what's your question?"

"Mr Lockhart, do you have plans to write a sequel? I'm absolutely dying to know what happens between Nigel Reese and Nora Gallagher," Eunice Greengrass asked eagerly.

"I dare say you can guess what happens between Nigel and Nora, though there may be a sequel if I'm properly inspired," Gilderoy answered with a wink seemingly directed towards the second seat from the right, back row. The audience tittered in response.

With a shudder, Hermione slumped even further in her seat, trying to position herself so the large Augurey hat three rows in front obscured her from Lockhart's view. Had he just winked at her? How horrific!

Martha Higgensbottom jumped up excitedly and asked, "Mr Lockhart, I bought *The Witches of Gilford Cookbook* and *The Witches of Gilford Guide to Housecleaning Charms*. Are you writing any other books to go along with the series?"

Lockhart cleared his throat and responded, "Well, I have several additional supporting titles and products to accompany *The Witches of Gilford*, but I'm afraid my publicist is keeping me quiet about what we have in the works. Perhaps you ladies would like to share some of your favourite ideas."

"Oh, I'd love to see a calendar with some of the inspirational charms and solutions from the book," Flora Merriweather offered tentatively.

"Bloody turncoat," Severus grumbled.

Delphinia Appleblossom chirped joyously, "I wish I had a *Witches of Gilford* blanket. That would be just the perfect thing to curl up under in front of the fire while I'm reading *The Witches of Gilford* and eating a batch of Auntie Gertrude's fudge from *The Witches of Gilford Cookbook*."

Eunice Greengrass swooned, "Mr Lockhart, your voice is so charming. Why, I'd love it if my book were spelled so that I could just tap my wand and hear you reading it to me!"

Gilderoy frantically jotted down ideas as the witches continued tossing them out, galleons sparkling in his eyes.

Severus whispered incredulously, "Bloody hell. Is the bugger actually writing down their suggestions? Greedy bastard. As if the world needs *Witches of Gilford* sweaters."

Hermione shuddered. Really, the merchandising was utterly ridiculous. Though she suspected Molly would have appreciated something from the line for her birthday were it not for Gilderoy's involvement in the Chamber of Secrets. When initially confronted with Hermione's less than enthusiastic response about the book club, Molly had raved about the book. It would be quite amusing to see Molly's reaction once the news broke that Richmond Greenleaf was really Lockhart. Hermione grimaced. It made sense now why Nigel Reese had seemed disgustingly familiar.

Gradually, the impromptu *Witches of Gilford* product focus group ran out of ideas, and Lockhart solicited another question from the crowd.

"How did you get your start as a writer?" Bessie Thompson asked.

Lockhart visibly brightened at the question. "Well, I spent several years working in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes where I discovered I had a flair for the written word."

"He probably got sacked for falsifying his reports," Hermione muttered.

"I suppose we now know where he mastered Obliviates," Severus snorted.

"I also found that there were so many fascinating journeys that an adventurous young wizard like myself could undertake. I took it as my mission to travel the world resolving wizarding conflicts, fighting daring dark creatures, and faithfully reporting back to my loyal readers. I made it my mission to let the wizarding world know how all of the arduous tasks were performed so that my hard work could benefit future generations."

"Oh, goodness. I may be physically sick," Hermione whinged as Lockhart asked for one final question.

"How did you get the inspiration for Nigel Reese?"

"Oh, this ought to be good. I wonder if he'll own up to self-insertion," Hermione mused.

"Well, last year I had a wonderful opportunity to spend several months in the beautiful English countryside near Lacock," Gilderoy began.

"And now we perhaps know where St Mungo's ships graduates from the Janus Thickey Ward," Severus murmured as Hermione made a note to have her parents sell their summer cottage.

"I was quite the local celebrity and was invited into many a home during my stay. While I was there, I couldn't help but notice that many of the local housewitches were most inefficient in their use of magic. I advised several witches on the most expedient charms to use, but I found that many witches bristled when someone directly advised them on superior methods for tackling their household duties. I don't believe I've ever found myself in the situation where my performance was critiqued in such a direct fashion, but I suppose I can imagine how such feedback could be ill-received. At any rate, I was confident that my new mission would be not to travel the world reporting back adventures but to help a bit closer to home. At that point, I was inspired to take a less direct route. Surely, the witches of Britain would be more receptive to such advice if someone else were giving and receiving it! And thus Nigel Reese was born."

Severus began chuckling. "Ah, Lockhart, you just don't know when to quit. That little exposure may cost you your fandom."

"If only we were so lucky," Hermione replied, spying very few disgruntled witches in the crowd.

Sensing that Lockhart was on the verge of royally sticking his foot in it, Matilda Broomshanks nudged him aside and retook the podium. "Thank you so very much for being a part of this extraordinary and wonderful book club. I bid you adieu and hope to see you again for our next book club starting in September when we'll be reading Amortensia Appleby's upcoming novel, *Destined to Love: The True Story of Salazar Slytherin and Helga Hufflepuff*"

Hermione and Severus both shivered as they felt the tingle that announcing the end of the Compulsion Charms. Hermione slumped back in her seat and groaned, "Thank gods, that's all finally over."

Severus snorted as he cancelled the *Muffliato* spell that encased them. "Indeed. Let's get the hell out of here," he urged, pulling her hand as he stood up. They'd nearly made it to the door when their escape was interrupted.

"Miss Granger! Miss Granger! Wait, please!"

Hermione stood stock still with her eyes screwed tightly shut.

Severus tugged at her hand, trying to persuade her to move the two feet separating them from freedom. Glancing back to see Lockhart pushing his way through his adoring crowd to catch up with them, he dropped her hand and shuffled off to look at a book display.

Bloody coward, Hermione thought.

"Oh, Miss Granger! I'm so glad I caught you before you could leave."

She turned to face Gilderoy Lockhart and released a breath she hadn't realised she was holding. "Yes, Mr Lockhart?"

"Oh, please call me Gil," he begged, grabbing her hand and pumping it vigorously. "I've thought about sending a note in the past, but I always felt it would be a bit too impersonal and not nearly as meaningful as a tête-à-tête."

Hermione removed her hand from 'Gil's' and shot a stern glare at Severus, who was barely suppressing his laughter while pretending to examine an endcap featuring Sylvester Sciusus's latest, *The Mating Rituals of the Three-Crowned Hooting Buffalo Squirrel* Hermione made a mental note to pick up a copy for Luna's birthday.

Undeterred, Gilderoy continued, "I've always wanted to thank you for publishing your research on the reversal of Memory Charms. I understand the research was based on Memory Charms you cast on your own parents. I, of course, understand first hand how challenging it can be to share such difficult and personal information with the world. Yet, the rewards are boundless, aren't they? At any rate, I wanted to thank you personally for taking the time to share your research. Your findings led to exciting developments for all patients in the Janus Thickey Ward, particularly its most famous patient, me! Why, I never imagined, all those years ago, that one of my pupils would produce such critical and fascinating work. Although, I suppose it's not surprising that any one of you excelled given the unparalleled instruction you received in my classroom."

Hermione groaned internally. Her research had been driven by her overwhelming guilt and, of course, desire to have her parents returned to her with memories and mental faculties intact. During her research, she'd ardently wished many a time that she had never cast the Memory Charms on her parents in the first place. Any previous longing was now dwarfed.

Gil continued rambling, "Anyway, I wasn't sure you'd heard that your research had such far-reaching and significant outcomes. My recovery did not garner quite the attention from the press that you might have expected. Sadly, it coincided with the capture of Rodolphus Lestrage and was horribly overshadowed by that dreadful tale. Pity, all that gruesome business with He Who Must Not Be Named. I'm sure the war would have ended much sooner had I not been otherwise engaged. I must say I'm quite adept at—"

This simply had to stop. Hermione interrupted, "You're quite welcome, Gil. I'm pleased my research proved helpful for St Mungo's. Sorry, but I'm afraid I have plans for the remainder of the evening. Congratulations on your recovery and your book." She made towards the door. Severus could follow or not.

"Before you go, I was wondering when you might have time in your busy schedule to join me for dinner at the Prancing Pegasus."

As the gears in her brain clunked noisily, Hermione found great difficulty in formulating a response *Dammit! This is the second time my brain has frozen around him.* She eyed him warily, wondering if the sneaky idiot could manage a nonverbal Imperius.

Severus interjected brusquely, "I can assure you, Ms Granger's evenings are otherwise occupied."

"Why, Severus, old chap! I thought that was you in the back of the book club. I must confess I'm a bit shocked. I rather thought your tastes ran a bit darker."

"Indeed. I found the entire experience a waste of time and parchment. I've never read such horrific tripe in my entire life. Good day!" Severus barked before grabbing Hermione's hand and storming out the door of Flourish and Blotts.

They Apparated to the alley next to Hermione's building, and Severus immediately stalked off towards the pub across the street.

Scurrying after Severus, Hermione couldn't help but be amused at Severus's reaction to Gilderoy Lockhart. She'd have been far more appreciative of his daring rescue had he not abandoned her in the first place.

She was horrified enough by her own personal history with Lockhart, but Severus had had to teach alongside, duel with, and mop up after the flouncy fool. Nightmare seemed a kind word for the ordeal.

"Gods, I hadn't thought of that idiot in years." Hermione slid into the seat across from Severus. He seemed quite serious about celebrating their freedom; drinks were already on the table.

"Indeed. I'd hoped he'd be interned in the Janus Thickey Ward for life. His botched Obliviate was the first time I ever, albeit begrudgingly, found myself thankful for a Potter and Weasley's existence," Severus grumbled.

"Oh gods, Harry and Ginny will both tease me about this mercilessly," Hermione moaned, covering her face with her hands.

"Why on earth would they tease you about Gilderoy Lockhart?"

"I may have had a bit of a crush on him at the beginning of second year," Hermione mumbled into her hands.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Severus began chuckling, clearly having distinguished the relevant bits of her sentence.

Hermione lowered her hands and glared at him. "You heard me, prat."

"So you had a crush on old 'Gil', did you?"

"Fine. I'll admit I was a bit enamoured of him at the beginning of term – when I was twelve," she admitted with gritted teeth. "I'd read all of his books over the summer and was certain he would be such an excellent teacher. Needless to say, my opinion of him eroded over the course of the year."

"Yes, his books certainly painted a dashing image of him. It's a wonder his publicist managed to keep the news that he'd swiped all of his tales from other witches and wizards out of *The Daily Prophet*."

"No kidding. His little stay in the Thickey Ward wasn't picked up by the press either. However did you manage to tolerate him as a colleague?"

"Gods, it was bloody awful. All year long, that man stalked me. He tried to badger me into making his blasted beauty potions for him. He gave me tips on improving my duelling skills – even more so after I wiped the floor with him. And I'll never forget the day he accosted me in the staff room, waving his wand in my face. 'Why, Severus, I know the perfect Teeth Straightening and Cleansing Charms.' For once, he managed to catch me completely off guard. I only barely managed to dodge the charm. It hit Hagrid and transfigured all his teeth into Flobberworms. It took Minerva and Poppy days working together to set Hagrid to rights, and you can imagine how loath Hagrid was to banish the nasty little beasts."

Severus shook his head and took a long drink from his pint. "Bugging hell, that insolent twerp was a walking disaster."

"I honestly don't know how you survived watching any of the DADA teachers. It must have been agonising to watch them fail year after year."

"Actually, Lockhart wasn't the worst Defence Professor Hogwarts ever saw. There was one... Professor McTwaddle. He was brought on board just after Voldemort's first defeat. Gods, if you thought the Cornish Pixie incident in your year was awful—" Severus shook his head. "McTwaddle released a nest of Ashwinders into his fourth-year class."

"Oh gods! What happened?"

"We sent fourteen students to St Mungo's. Poppy was fit to be tied."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "You know, it's rather unfortunate that the club is ending just now when you'll be so busy with end of term. I wonder when I'll see you. Loathsome as the meetings were, I at least got to spend time with you."

Severus groaned, "Don't remind me. This weekend is the last Hogsmeade visit before exams. From here on out, the little buggers will be wound up. My fifth- and seventh-year Slytherins are already stressed out. I've had to brew extra potions for Poppy. She's had five Ravenclaws with beginning signs of ulcers."

"Do you think you'll be able to get away much at all before term ends?"

"I rather doubt it. Between revision sessions, career counselling for sixth years, inventories, and – oh gods, I don't want to think about it anymore." Severus took a long drink from his pint. "Fucking students."

"I'm sorry, Severus. Oh, I received an owl from Molly today. There's a party for Bill and Fleur's little one the last weekend in June. Do you think you might be able to go with me?"

"Bugger, that's my first free weekend." Severus frowned, his eyes flitting up from his glass to meet Hermione's hopeful expression. "I suppose I can."

"Excellent!" Hermione beamed. "Well, if tonight's the only night we have for a month, shall we return to my flat for shenanigans?"

"Shenanigans, indeed," Severus replied, rising from his seat and offering Hermione his arm.

A/N:

Kudos to indigo_rose for nearly guessing the identity of Richmond Greenleaf. She guessed that Nigel Reese was Gilderoy. Close enough. oscarxena, however, wins the grand prize for asking if Gilderoy was writing under a pseudonym.

Early on, kittylefish and I were trying to come up with a clever pseudonym for Mr Gilderoy Lockhart. I wanted very badly to use an anagram of his name. That didn't produce anything viable, so I played around with some other combinations, substituting English and Irish surnames. None stuck; however, I did find that Nigel Rhys O'Riordan anagrams to Gilderoy's Air Horn ... which is amusing, but not quite something he would choose for himself.

Finally, at this point in the story, I can point out that my internet name sources informed me that 'Nigel' means 'champion/knight' and 'Rhys' is a surname of Welsh origin that translates to the word 'ardour', meaning eagerness, love, and passion. All this effectively means that Mr. Marty Stu, Nigel Reese was the Knight of Passion – a fitting Marty Stu name for Mr Lockhart.

And lastly, thanks so much for your patience in waiting for this update. I've been a busy little bee, betaing, running, working, and helping moderate the upcoming Lumione exchange. And kittylefish and I combined forces to spring an April fool's gag on TPP: [The Golden Ring](#).

Chapter 11 is done and being betaed, and the epilogue is nearly complete. Thanks for sticking with me!

It's a Small World After All

Chapter 11 of 12

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

Disclaimer: I reap no financial benefits from the use of JK Rowling's characters.

A million, billion thank yous to my fantabulous beta team: kittylefish and Persevero.

Chapter 11 - *It's a Small World After All*

Hermione Apparated to the front yard of the Burrow, guiltily clutching Dominique Weasley's present to her side. Molly and Arthur looked after both Victoire and Dominique during the hours that Fleur worked at Madame Malkin's. She knew a battery-operated toy would delight both grandfather and granddaughter. When she'd walked into Hamleys, she'd headed straight for the *Wall of Gifts One Only Bought for Parents One Wanted to Torture* Honestly, it wasn't until she was standing in front of the dazzling array of obnoxious presents that she'd realized such a gift was likely to drive Molly to distraction. Of course, after the thought of payback had entered her mind, gift searching quickly shifted to a quest to find the present most likely to give Molly migraines. She was certain she'd heard the clerk chuckling at the maniacal gleam in her eye. But Molly had earned it, after all, with her book club gift. *However*, Hermione thought a bit sheepishly, *the 'It's a Small World' Multi-Cultural Pull-Along Toy may have been a bit over the top*. The four extra battery packs Severus had encouraged her to buy after she'd owed him afterwards were surely overkill.

She slunk around to the backyard, hoping to find Harry with a minimum of fanfare. Some obnoxious twit, meaning Ginny, had told everyone, meaning Molly, that she was dating Severus Snape and that he, of all people, would be attending the birthday party of a one-year-old. Her arrival without him would be noted by everyone, and she just wasn't in the mood to be gently – or not so gently in George's case – ribbed by everyone about her absent beau.

She clenched her teeth in frustration. Severus was supposed to have joined her at her flat last night. He'd owed her late in the afternoon to say that he was unavoidably detained, most likely until around three this afternoon. He had not written why he'd been delayed, but his spiky handwriting was particularly ferocious. Whatever it was had

clearly annoyed him as much as it had her. Damn school. She'd never thought she would find herself cursing her beloved Hogwarts. But lately, instead of 'Charming Alma Mater Which Reminds Me of the Glorious Days of My Childhood (All Trouble With Voldemort Aside)' it was rapidly becoming 'The Annoying Thorn in My Side That Inhibits My Newly Rediscovered Sex Life'.

Oh, it wasn't that Severus was entirely physically unavailable at the end of term. No, he just reverted to the acerbic, scathing professor she recalled from her youth. Actually, it felt considerably worse than how he'd treated her as a student; when she was fifteen, she'd had no expectations that he'd be kind or considerate of her feelings. She had surprised him, hoping for a bit of afternoon delight during one of his free periods three weeks ago, but instead Severus had delivered a blistering speech about how he had far too much to do and if she couldn't keep her hands out of his trousers for one bloody month then perhaps she should satisfy herself elsewhere. She'd emerged from the dungeons slack-jawed and dumbstruck several moments later and considered it an outstanding victory that she'd not burst into tears until she was within sight of the Apparition Point.

Severus had sent five separate owls apologizing for his unfortunate explosion, along with six boxes of Honeydukes' Best, a dozen exotic quills from Scrivenshaft's, three bottles of elf-made wine, and eight vials of homemade bath potions he'd squirreled away for the first occasion when he would inevitably revert to his caustic self. She sniggered quietly. It was probably quite true what Ron had suggested many a time during their Hogwarts career: Severus very likely had *needed* a good shag. However, she hadn't been stupid enough to risk their fragile relationship by surprising him again. Instead, she'd indulged quite regularly in her bag of purchases from Coco de Mer, the Muggle shop Ginny had kindly shown her where one could choose from a tasteful and extensive array of products for relieving one's own hormonal needs. It figured that the one Muggle place Ginny had found without Hermione's assistance was a sex shop. Though she still hadn't quite forgiven Ginny for withholding such valuable information for months, if not years.

Severus had been rather sweet, particularly by his standards, since their fight. He had owled her daily without exception, even if the letter only consisted of an extended rant about whatever series of incidents had exasperated him that particular day. His missives frequently had her howling with laughter. Though for all that Severus hated teaching, the tremendous pressure he placed on himself – and by extension his students – to perform well on their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s was rather charming. Pity that despite such dedication he couldn't manage to enjoy the profession.

The combination of his letters, his luxurious bath salts, her assorted adult purchases, and the three extra, though rather lacklustre, projects she'd taken had helped her survive the past three weeks with her sanity intact. She fairly quivered with excitement as she thought about seeing him again today. Honestly, she was shocked when he'd agreed to come and flabbergasted when he hadn't begged off after he'd been kept at Hogwarts. She smiled. It spoke rather well of his affections that he wasn't skipping out on a one-year-old's birthday when he clearly could have made excuses.

Finally, she succeeded in sneaking around the side of the house to find Harry and Bill surveying the damage that a recent storm had caused to one of Molly's beloved apple trees.

"Hello, boys," she called out as she stepped over a downed limb.

"There's no boys here, Hermione. Only big, strapping men!" Harry quipped before scooping her up and embracing her in a bear hug.

"Eeep! Put me down, Harry!" Hermione cried, straightening her skirt after Harry deposited her.

Harry made an exaggerated show of looking around. "Missing someone, aren't you?"

"Severus will be arriving later. He got detained at Hogwarts yesterday," Hermione explained. "What, Bill?" she asked when she noticed the eldest Weasley propped against a tree, shaking his head.

"I just can't believe you managed to get Severus Snape to agree to show up here. Do you have any idea how many times Mum harassed him to come to dinner during the war, or even to stay late for dinner after meetings? You must be doing something very, very well if he's willing to show up here – and for Dominique's party too. And by the looks of that pretty blush spreading across your cheeks, he must be doing something right too." Bill's grin seemed like it might have wrapped around to encompass the back of his head.

"No kidding. Not only is it a Weasley party, but it's his girlfriend's former in-laws. Whatever did you promise him in exchange for his presence today?" Harry wheedled, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Honestly, I'd begun to wonder if we'd ever see you this happy again. I suppose we'll have to go easy on Severus today if he's what's making you glow from head to toe," Bill proposed.

Hermione was about to ask if she could get that promise in writing when Arthur called Harry and Bill over. She jumped as she felt a pair of hands on her hips.

"Doing something well, am I?" Severus's voice rumbled against her neck.

She whipped around and embraced him, trying not to squeal like a first-year. "Oh, what kept you, Severus?" she cried into his chest.

"A few of my more enterprising seventh-years decided to leave a time-activated surprise. Honestly, I'd have been furious if it wasn't such a clever bit of magic."

"Something worthy of the Weasley twins?"

"Indeed. You can only imagine how happy I'll be to see George. By the way, I've not forgotten your promise to reward me for attending this circus today."

Hermione glanced around to see if anyone was looking their direction. Wrapped up in their own conversations, it seemed no one had even noticed Severus's arrival. Hermione tugged his hand and led him into the nearby garden shed where Arthur kept his random assortment of Muggle devices. She cast a quick set of Locking and Soundproofing Charms on the door before pushing Severus against the work bench. She practically threw herself against the man, crushing her body against his as she clutched his jaw and kissed him hungrily. She'd just flicked her tongue against his lower lip when he pushed her away.

"What are you doing, Hermione?" he asked, panic rising in his voice.

"Delivering your reward, silly."

"Not here!"

She ignored his protests and continued her efforts. "Gods, I've missed you, Severus." Her fingers danced across his chest. "Mmm, thank you," she murmured in between nibbles at his neck, "for forgoing your cloak today. I wouldn't want to wrestle with all that fabric."

"Hermione, stop this!"

"Severus, I cast a full set of wards on the door. We're fine." She fumbled with the placket on his trousers. "I was so very disappointed when you couldn't make it last night. Now stop trying to push me away, or I'll charm your hands to the work table."

Severus made vague noises of dissent before relaxing slightly against the table. "Would you please stop this? We can leave right after the cake is served, and I promise I'll thoroughly ravish you in the comfort and privacy of your own flat."

Hermione chuckled against his neck. "Oh, no, we have to stay through cake *and* presents, which is why you've earned this special prize just for showing up today," she corrected him affectionately as she withdrew his mildly interested cock, which was hardening despite its owner's protests.

Severus's Adam's apple visibly quavered. "Hermione! It's a bloody shed! I will not have sex next to Arthur's collection of plugs!"

She ran her thumb down the vein that meandered along the underside of his cock and delighted in his audible gasp. "Excellent. I hadn't planned on full sex. I'd rather not risk the splinters," Hermione said, sinking to her knees in front of him until her eyes were level with his cock, which now bobbed at half-mast.

"Bloody hell! I meant for you to reward me later!"

"Oh, there's more for later," she replied with a smirk before slowly flicking her tongue across the head of his cock as she squeezed its base. She looked up into his eyes and smiled before her tongue travelled down to replace her hand. She licked sinuously back up the shaft where she paused to suck and bathe the v-shaped ridge just underneath the head. She watched his eyes flutter shut, breaking their eye contact.

His mouth dropped open, and his ragged breaths rewarded her efforts. He muttered one last protest – a rather unflattering comparison between her tenacity and niffers – before his hands left the work table to wind their way into her hair. As her hand caressed his balls, he cried, "Please, more!"

She supposed she'd teased him long enough. Besides, if she went missing for too long, then someone would likely investigate her whereabouts. She heeded his pleas and slowly sucked the head into her mouth, laving it with her tongue.

"Good gods, get on with it," he demanded, grasping her hair more firmly.

Taking him completely in her mouth, inch by inch, she laughed at the moan she received in response. She revelled in her temporary power over him. Every action, every technique seemed to elicit a different sound. She was shocked at how vocal Severus was. He moaned and panted and very nearly whimpered at her ministrations.

Severus eventually relaxed into her care, returning his hands to the work bench. She studied his non-verbal encouragement, adapting her technique to elicit the loudest chorus of groans and unintelligible mumbles. Eventually, her jaw began to ache. She shifted backwards and released his cock from her mouth, pumping him slowly with her hand. "Severus," she whispered.

His head snapped forward and his eyes flew open. "What?" he asked with an impatient groan.

She continued caressing him, drawing out her break before she answered him. "I've wondered what you would taste like, what you would look like from this position, for months. Can you believe I waited this long?" She rubbed her thumb underneath the head of his cock.

"No," he cried, thrusting his cock into her hand. "Oh, gods, suck me again, Hermione, please!"

"Only since you asked so politely." She returned to her task, sucking on the head while her hand quickly pumped his shaft. His hips began bucking wildly, and she knew he would not last much longer. She redoubled her efforts and soon found him on the edge of orgasm.

"Oh, gods! I love you!" Severus shouted as he came. His hips slowed, and his ragged breaths calmed.

Hermione's jaw dropped, which was rather awkward given its position and occupation at the time. He loved her? She'd suspected the first tinglings of such emotions herself but had tabled such musings until she could see the man for more than six hours at a time. After all, what good would it have done to resolve that she loved him, only to pine after him for a month while he languished at Hogwarts?

Before she could muster a reply, or even, well, remove Severus's cock so that she *could* reply, the door to the shed flew open. A small figure limned in sunlight stared at them for a moment before shrieking and running away. Hermione quickly disengaged and tucked Severus back into his trousers. Mortified did not begin to describe the expression upon his face. Still, perhaps they could sneak out of the shed without the entire party learning of their indiscretion.

They stepped out just as Victoire Weasley completed her mad dash across the back lawn and threw herself into her mother's robes, clutching them as if they might shield her from the horror she'd just experienced.

"Maman! Auntie Hermione had her mouth on Mister Snape's willy!" Victoire cried.

"Ah, mon petit chou, I am sure Auntie 'ermione waz, er, just inspecting Monsieur Snape to make sure 'e 'ad bazed properly. It weell be all right, Victoire. 'ave a biscuit," Fleur consoled the distraught girl, scowling at Hermione and Severus.

The entire party, it appeared, had heard Victoire's outburst. Molly and Minerva were gaping open-mouthed at Severus while a contingent of Weasley siblings snorted and sniggered over by the punch bowl. Arthur broke off his conversation with Bill and Harry to grouse about having to Scourgify his workshop – *again*. She clutched Severus's hand and turned to face him, an ill-formed and wholly inadequate apology tumbling from her mouth. He just stared at her dumbly, teeth clenched, with the artery next to Nagini's bite pulsing visibly. Hermione thanked Merlin that orgasms tended to rob Severus temporarily of his verbal abilities. Otherwise, he'd no doubt be delivering a blistering rebuke for her disastrous adventure.

Bill Weasley hurried over and shoved a pint of ale into Severus's hand. "Sorry about that, mate. Victoire came into her magic a couple of months ago. We've not found a Locking Charm strong enough to withstand her clever little fingers. She's drawn to the damn things too. Disillusioning and Distraction Charms are right out too. The best we can do is set wards that alert us when she's managed to get into something. At this rate, I believe she's destined to be a Curse Breaker before she's passed her O.W.L.s. The little bugger's caught us in the act several times, though never in that particular act. Thank gods. Mummy and Daddy's special hug was hard enough to explain."

Gradually, Severus's colouring returned to normal. "Thank you for the ale, Mr Weasley. I believe it will take several more to make me forget that particular horror. I'm sorry that your daughter had to be subjected to such lewd behaviour," Severus said, glaring at Hermione as if he'd not encouraged her one whit. "I can only hope I've left Hogwarts before that one so much as thinks about the Sorting Hat." Severus paused for a first drink from his ale. "How is Gringotts treating you these days?"

Hermione sighed in relief as Severus slipped into an easy conversation with Bill. Perhaps she should circulate and attempt to exhaust the Weasley brood's vast capacity for teasing and public ridicule before Severus emerged from his conversation.

She felt awful. She'd honestly hoped her impish little adventure would relax Severus so that he could enjoy the afternoon. She'd been rather pleased that she'd found her inner vixen. "Pssh. That plan failed miserably," Hermione grumbled to herself as she walked over to where George, Angelina, Harry, Charlie, and Ginny stood, red-faced, with grins that could illuminate the night sky over Western Europe. *Might as well get the worst of it over with.*

"Oi, Hermione. I didn't realize we had another reason to celebrate besides Dominique's birthday," George chirruped happily as she approached.

Perhaps I ought to have let them chortle amongst themselves before I joined them. Ah, well. Where's my Gryffindor courage? Hermione thought. *I suspect my Gryffindor courage is hiding in the shed underneath one of Arthur's projects.* Hermione sighed inwardly. "What else are we celebrating, George?" Hermione asked, bracing herself for the punch line.

"Why, it seems you've acquired your plumbing license!" George guffawed loudly.

Hermione sighed laboriously. "Very funny, George. Who's next? Go on. Get it out of your system."

Ginny's face turned sombre as she reached her arm around Hermione's shoulders. "Now, now. I'd like to propose a toast to Hermione, here. Hermione, you're a right and honourable witch. You're truly a woman of your word. I always know that when you say something will happen, I can take that statement to Gringotts," Ginny exclaimed to the group, glass raised. They looked at her oddly, wondering when the joke would arrive. "What? Last week, I asked Hermione if she would be bringing Snape, and she replied, 'Yes, Severus will be coming.' How true! To Hermione!"

"To Hermione!" the group chorused before resuming their belly-aching laughter. Hermione couldn't resist a smile at that jab. She glanced over at Severus and found him smirking at her. *Ah, good. He realizes I'm taking the full force of their teasing. Perhaps we'll make it through today after all, though I don't doubt this will be the longest afternoon of my life.*

"Charlie? Harry? Angelina?"

Harry seized the invitation, grinning like the madman he'd vanquished. "I'd like to make another toast to our Hermione. Hermione, our years at Hogwarts were filled with many significant moments. Moments that seemed inconsequential at the time. Moments that, in retrospect, were turning points for our entire lives. A troll lumbering into a bathroom. A mysterious locket we found while cleaning Grimmauld Place. A term's reading list full of the most ridiculous tripe ever written by witch or wizard alike. Little did we know that on a crisp November morning in our second year at Hogwarts, the battle for Hermione's heart would be fought and won. I'll never forget the day that Gilderoy Lockhart went wand-to-wand with our dear Professor Snape. A battle of two equally billowy wizards, one in resplendent purple, the other in stark black. A battle of flourish against cat-like finesse. And, lastly, a battle of flounce versus stealth." Harry, at last, raised his glass. "Hermione, while I certainly wouldn't have imagined you dating Professor Snape, bane of my Hogwarts existence, I'm sure as hell glad you didn't choose Gilderoy Lockhart. Molly's glad too. She'd have had to cast enlarging spells so the back garden could contain his ego."

The crowd tossed back their drinks again, and Hermione sighed wearily as she heard Ginny filling George and Angelina in on Gilderoy's recent career and dating moves. They guffawed at the end of the tale. Disrupting their laughter, Charlie cleared his throat, his face as grim and unreadable as an ancient tomb. "Hermione, I cannot believe that at your first family event with Ron's replacement you would have the poor manners to give your partner a blow job in Dad's workshop."

The crowd stood agog. Tears welled up in Hermione's eyes. Ron had been the furthest thing from her mind, obviously *Fuck, now I've gone and alienated the entire family. Of all the stupid, selfish things I've ever done*, her inner McGonagall droned on. She missed the glimmer in Charlie's eye amidst her self-castigation.

Charlie renewed his dressing down. "Yes, Hermione, everyone knows that the workshop is reserved for full shags only and no sooner than the third family event. Prior to that, all blow jobs, hand jobs, and heavy petting are restricted to the swing by the pond. Goodness, did my little brother teach you nothing of our family traditions?"

The entire group breathed an enormous sigh of relief before bursting into their loudest chorus of laughter yet. Hermione tried to conceal her embarrassment behind her glass of Molly's fruit punch. Perhaps getting all the teasing out of the way at once was overrated.

The crowd abruptly stifled their laughter as a dark shadow approached behind Hermione.

"Is this lot giving you trouble, dear?" Severus asked, drawing himself up to full height.

Reverting to their teenage selves, the majority of the group began an intense study of their footwear before mumbling and shuffling off to other areas of the garden. Only Harry and Hermione remained.

"It's nice to see you've not lost your touch, Professor." Harry grinned.

"How are you faring, Hermione? It was quite foolish to surrender yourself to the mercy of that pack of wolves." Severus quashed the urge to add 'my brave little Gryffindor' to the end of his statement and mentally kicked himself twice for even thinking it.

"I'm fine. They were just taking the piss." Hermione sighed. "And rightfully so," she added.

Severus leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "And you'll be rewarded quite handsomely later for drawing their fire as well as for delivering the warmest, wettest welcome I've ever received." Severus could feel the upward curve of her lips when she turned and kissed him briefly. He congratulated himself for playing the situation to his advantage. Yes, it would be exceptionally nice having a randy, quite skilled, penitent witch on his arm when he left this abomination of a social gathering.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered in reply. "I rather thought you might be angry."

Severus reassured her with a quiet chuckle, glancing to ensure that Potter wasn't listening to their conversation. No, Potter was examining the contents of his punch glass with more scrutiny than he'd ever mustered during a single Potions lesson. Severus returned his attention to Hermione. "I might have been furious, if you'd not just treated me to the finest orgasm I've had in a month."

"Well, thank heavens for that, then." Hermione's shoulders relaxed, and the little wrinkle in her brow vanished.

"Indeed," Severus said with a tight-lipped smile.

Harry cleared his throat, interrupting their private discussion. "So, Professor Snape, it seems as though you and Hermione are getting along well." Harry smirked as he summoned a pitcher and refilled his glass of Molly's fruit punch.

"Potter, I can do without your cheeky commentary." Severus eyed the pink, frothy concoction with horror akin to what many first-years displayed for his collection of pickled reptile brains.

"Seriously, sir. It's good to see her happy again. I'd have never thought it, but you two appear to be good for one another," Harry replied.

"Thank you, Potter. I can't say I was looking for your approval, but I suppose it's good to know I have it," Severus conceded with only the slightest of grimaces.

"Thank you, Professor. That was almost ... kind."

"Yes, well, it's amazing what a bit of time in Arthur's workshop can do for a man. Oh, look, Hermione, they're about to serve the cake." Severus grabbed Hermione's hand and tugged her across the yard, leaving a petrified Potter in his wake.

"I cannot believe you just said that to Harry!" Hermione laughed as she followed behind him.

"Yes, well, I've already been caught with my hand in the biscuit jar, Hermione. I may as well get some amusement from it. Are we still departing following the cake and presents?"

Hermione nodded while mentally shaking her head in disbelief. All humiliation aside, it seemed her risqué shed adventure had been well worth the trouble. Severus was more relaxed and amiable than she'd seen him, well, ever. They reached the cake just as Bill was hoisting Dominique onto his lap. Molly had clearly outdone herself with the cake. The four-tiered, pink- and purple-iced monolith sat on the table, its enormous candle already aglow. Dominique stared at the candle, entranced by the flame dancing on its wick.

Clearly pleased to have the elusive professor in attendance, Molly gushed, "Severus, we're so glad you could come today."

Several muffled sniggers emanated from the group of red-headed twenty- and thirty-somethings.

Molly looked flustered as she realized the cause of the crowd's amusement. She turned from the cake, her left hand on her hip and her right brandishing a knife. "You lot! Enough with your bawdy jokes, or I'll have Arthur join me in the workshop, without Silencing Charms, and we'll really turn your ears red."

Molly's comment immediately silenced the group and left them with pained expressions as they contemplated her threat. George, in particular, looked as if he'd swallowed an entire box of U-No-Poo.

Satisfied that her brood would behave, Molly raised her wobbly voice and prompted the group to sing "Happy Birthday."

Bill made a show of blowing out the candle, and Dominique squealed with laughter, clapping her hands with glee. She glanced repeatedly from her father to the candle, and her lower lip began to tremble when she realized that the great sport of candle-extinguishing had ended. She glared at the candle determinedly, and the flame sprang to life. Bill glanced nervously at Fleur and blew out the candle again to Dominique's peals of laughter. Shortly afterwards, the flame flickered into existence again. And again. And yet again.

"George, what's the bloody counter spell for this ridiculous candle?" Bill asked, panic creeping into his voice after the candle had reignited for the fifth time.

"Bill, I have no idea. I think it's Mum's."

Molly nodded, her hands twisting her apron into a knotted jumble. Several attempts were made to distract Dominique from her new found talent. Eventually the subject of presents was mentioned, and Dominique toddled off to begin ripping the brightly coloured paper from her teetering stack of gifts. Bill and Fleur were whispering frantically to one another. Molly began hurriedly slicing the cake and serving it to the amused guests.

Severus chuckled in Hermione's ear. "Looks like Locking Charms are the least of Bill's worries. His little tyke is a Pyromancer." After a pause, Severus continued, "I believe I like these birthday parties. It seems the next generation will avenge all their parents' mischief."

"Yes, but imagine having a Pyromancer in your Potions class. Not exactly the safest of circumstances, I would think."

Severus blanched, mentally adding "Talk with Minerva about advertising for a replacement Potions professor" to his list of tasks to be accomplished over the course of the summer. He wasn't aware of any recent graduates or apprentices who would meet his exacting standards. He groaned inwardly; the search might span years.

Having seen the worry cross Severus's brow, Hermione continued teasing, "Just imagine what George and Angelina's spawn will be like, especially after the child is regaled for years with stories of Uncle Fred."

"Now you're just being cruel, Hermione. Do you really want to cope with the nasty mood you're going to cause if you continue this line of teasing?"

Hermione snorted and conceded to his argument. She nudged him towards where Molly was distributing cake.

Molly rushed through her task, shoving plates into their hands while she cast worried glances in Dominique's direction. Dominique had torn through her packages with an enthusiasm suited to her age and had very nearly reached the last of the presents. "Go on," she said, shooing them away. "I've got to get this served before Dominique looks at the cake and sets fire to the candle again."

Severus and Hermione hurried away towards the arbour which marked the entrance to Molly's rose garden. "If she's so concerned, perhaps she ought not to have placed the candle in her brassiere," Severus muttered.

Before Hermione could reply, they were joined by Minerva. Mischief flashed behind her glasses. "So, Severus, did you succeed in sorting out your dungeons?"

"Indeed," Severus said sourly.

"Oh? Severus, you didn't tell me what kept you," Hermione prompted, her head cocked to the side in curious amusement.

"Two ruddy seventh-year Slytherins cast spells that revealed – on the *walls of the dungeons* – all of the romantic encounters that I missed catching during my patrols. Names. Dates. Locations. Durations. Thankfully, they spared me the more intimate details of the encounters. Thousands of points, I assure you. Thousands."

Hermione nearly dropped her cake on the ground as she laughed. "Let me guess. Not a Slytherin among them."

Severus's mouth twitched. "There were a few, here and there. I suspect the miscreants who cast the spell reckoned that any Slytherin stupid enough to plan their romantic encounters in the Astronomy Tower deserved exposure."

Minerva interjected, "How do you know it was your Slytherins who cast the spell, Severus? Why, I know several Gryffindors and Ravenclaws who would have been capable of such advanced spellwork."

The glare Severus levelled at Minerva looked as if it would slice cauldrons in half. "They left a rather unique and amusing signature. It seems Reginald Emerson and Cyclamen Parkinson were engaged in amorous activities *just outside my chamber door* on Thursday night. Given Filius's ravings about their seventh-year project on data logging charms, I rather think it's too coincidental. Besides, no Slytherins would be so daring without significant personal benefit."

"How would they expect to benefit from this, Severus? I would think they've rather risked your ire."

"Nonsense, they've given me enough information to ensure that Slytherin wins the cup next year. Plus, they've both been after me for months to write them letters of recommendation. It seems they've earned them with their rather impressive stunt."

"Well, why were you late?" Hermione asked.

"Because the bloody Board of Governors is visiting the school on Monday, and Minerva," he paused to glare at her again before continuing, "insisted that the information be removed post-haste. I had to cast *Evanescio* one by one on the blasted, bugging things, so I suppose it's just as well I started early. I had just closed up my chambers to leave when the damned messages began popping up. I suspect the blighters keyed their prank to my wards."

"Ah, Severus, you never were one to appreciate a spot of foolish wand waving," Minerva chortled, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

"Particularly not when it means I learn *far* more about the mating habits of Hufflepuffs than I ever wanted to know, including their propensity to copulate in the nook behind the statue of Artemis Pervelicious just outside their common room." Severus shuddered.

At that, the conversation petered out, and the trio put fork to cake. Severus exchanged a meaningful glance with Hermione. She had, after all, promised they could leave after presents and cake. She nodded slightly at the inquisitive quirk of his left eyebrow. Minerva's presence kept his cock from anticipating their departure.

He'd just swallowed the last bite of the sugary confection and was about to make his goodbyes to Minerva when Molly approached.

"Severus, I am so happy to see you here. I can't count the number of times Arthur and I invited you for dinner during the war. I suppose all we needed to do was have Hermione ask you!"

"Yes, Molly, I can assure you that having one of my *students* invite me for dinner would have been successful," Severus replied sarcastically.

"Apparently, it might have worked if Gilderoy Lockhart had stepped in!" Molly guffawed, her breasts bouncing so enthusiastically that Severus wondered if she might concuss herself.

"What's this, Molly?" Minerva demanded.

"Oh, that book club we sent them to ..." Molly gasped for breath. "It was a romance novel for housewitches even older and frumpier than me, written by Gilderoy Lockhart. He unveiled himself as the author at the last meeting and then asked our Hermione out to dinner."

Severus reflected that, in all his years of teaching at Hogwarts, he thought he knew what it sounded like to hear witches cackle. Clearly, he'd never heard Molly and Minerva together, sides clutched, with a cackle that would terrify the wart off a hag's arse. Minerva tittered so forcefully that her glasses slipped off her nose entirely. A button flew from Molly's blouse and landed in the sticky pool of frosting that remained on his plate.

He glared at them until their laughter dwindled. "You two were in on the whole thing, weren't you?"

"Whatever do you mean, Severus?" Minerva asked, still drunk with laughter.

"You planned on Hermione and I being stuck in that infernal book club together! You set us up!" he accused, his voice laced with venom, as if they'd had him publicly arrested on trumped up charges of goat-related misconduct. He clutched Hermione's hand in solidarity. Whenever the topic had come up, Hermione had always turned the most enchanting shade of purple – not all that dissimilar to the colour of a Stomach Settling Potion just before it began to boil – and began mumbling an equally colourful tirade about her former mother-in-law's meddling nature.

The two witches clung to one another in a renewed gale of laughter. With the missing button, Molly was on the verge of wobbling out of her blouse. Severus kept his eyes trained entirely on the freckle just to the left of her nose. Hermione seemed to have her gaze directly centred on her shoes.

Molly wiped tears from her eyes as she struggled to speak. "No, Se-heh-verus, neither of us had any idea about the other's gift until mid-March or so. That we didn't conspire against you makes it even more hilarious!" Glancing at her red-faced, breathless non-co-conspirator, Molly succumbed to laughter again.

In the face of such blatant ridicule, Severus tossed aside any remaining consideration for social niceties and informed Hermione, "Presents have been opened. We have eaten cake. I believe it's time for us to leave."

Hermione barely had time to utter a muffled goodbye and wave to Harry before Severus had whisked her to the edge of the wards so they could Disapparate.

They reappeared outside her flat, Severus swearing under his breath, and Hermione hurriedly began disassembling her wards. This wasn't entirely the homecoming she'd envisioned. Frenzied hallway froissage had been more the arrival she'd had in mind. Wards down, she ushered Severus into the flat.

He wilted against the door frame. "*That* was bloody awful. Thank gods, I don't have to see Minerva for two weeks." He slumped further down the door frame. "She will be positively insufferable until this blows over. Merlin, and without a flock of students to distract her too."

"Can I get you a drink?" Hermione asked, wondering if perhaps a dose of Skele-Gro might be in order.

"No," Severus answered, shaking his head wearily. "Just give me a few moments to imagine the unspeakable horror that awaits me. It shouldn't be much worse than facing Voldemort," he said with a tired, lop-sided smirk.

"All right, I'll be back in a moment then," Hermione said before venturing down the hallway to her bathroom.

He called out to her retreating backside, "We shall address the other manner in which I was publicly embarrassed when you come back."

Hermione wondered if it was possible to cast a Cheering Charm strong enough – and inconspicuous enough – to travel from the loo to the living room.

When she returned, Severus was propped against her living room window, perusing a book on preventative medical charms. He paused his examination, eyebrow raised. "You, witch, have quite a bit to answer for."

"Why? No one teased you at all. I drew everyone's fire."

"Still, you certainly owe me. Straight from dunderheads to ... I don't even know what to call them." Severus pinched his nose between his forefingers. "'Mister Snape's willy' is not a phrase I ever want to suffer again. I believe that may have been even more embarrassing than anything the Marauders ever dreamed of doing. That little brat must be Sirius reincarnated."

"Severus!"

"How did the little bugger even know my name?" Severus wondered aloud.

Hermione sighed. "I had dinner with Bill and Fleur two weeks ago, and she overheard us talking about you. Gods, pictures were trotted out and everything. Bill has the most unflattering photo of you skulking around one of Albus's birthday parties."

Severus scowled. "Yes, that would probably be the last birthday party I attended prior to this one. I'd just made that unholy agreement to end Albus's life the following year. Bastard forced me to attend that damn party, claiming my absence would be suspicious, especially if word got back to Voldemort that I'd not attended."

Hermione swallowed a small amount of bile and resisted the overwhelming urge to gather him into her arms. "Oh, gods. What a sadistic arsehole!"

"Yes, there's nothing quite so enjoyable as toasting the health and long life of someone you've promised to murder," Severus commented, sarcasm dripping from his every word. "Enjoyable as this is, I would much prefer it if we could change the subject of our conversation to something more pleasant. Despite the trials of the last twenty-four hours, I find I'm feeling rather frisky at the moment. Now, perhaps you might explain what inspired you to accost me in such a public place."

She stammered, half-words fumbling over themselves as she scrambled to adjust to the abrupt change in conversation. She'd nearly cobbled together a reply when Severus interrupted her efforts.

"Wait, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" she asked confusedly.

Severus shushed her. "Shhhhhh. There it is again."

Hermione listened quietly for several minutes. She heard no discernible sounds. Even the noisy hum of the refrigerator wasn't audible from where they stood. She raised her eyebrows questioningly at Severus and shook her head. *If he's hearing noises, perhaps the end of term damaged him more than I suspected* Hermione thought.

"That is the sound of uninterrupted, private space. No toddlers, no interfering old biddies, no dunderheads, no red-headed menaces."

A shiver raced down Hermione's spine to her toes and scurried back up to dissipate around her nipples. "Yes, we are alone, aren't we?" She plucked the book from Severus's grasp and turned around to place it on the shelf.

Severus's arms caged her against the shelf, and he nipped at the nape of her neck. "Taunting me at that damned book club ... sucking me off in the shed ... you're quite the exhibitionist, aren't you?"

Hermione squirmed in his arms. "No more so than you are a giant tease."

Severus's chuckle reverberated throughout her body. His hands slowly inched her skirt up until it was rucked around her hips.

He dragged his thumb across the front of her knickers and gulped at his discovery. "Hmm, just talking about it has got you excited again. You were very, very excited when you had me in your mouth, weren't you?"

Hermione whimpered and rubbed against him.

"You've been turned on since last night, I'd wager." His hands brushed the sides of her breasts, leaving her knickers strangely exposed. "Poor Hermione, all alone, with no one to play with her. Did you touch yourself? Hmm? Did you play with one of those new toys you taunted me with in your letters?"

Unable to speak, Hermione shook her head vigorously.

"Goodness. So wound up, and how very generous of you to tend to me in the shed."

At the word 'shed', Hermione was plucked from her lusty haze. "Severus, is it true? You love me?"

After an exasperated sigh, Severus released his tenuous hold on her breasts and turned her around to face him. "I can't say I appreciate your sense of timing at the moment, but of course I love you. I'd have never said it if I didn't mean it." His intense stare met her sparkling gaze. She hung on every word as he continued, "I'll admit I didn't intend to say it quite so soon. However, your methods of torture seem quite effective at extracting the truth." Severus swallowed. "Hermione, the last month without seeing you has been horrible. I was quite afraid I'd lost you when I verbally assaulted you at Hogwarts. I couldn't have borne it if my outburst had driven you away."

"I might have gathered as much from your five apologies and copious gifts," Hermione replied with a small grin, her hand brushing his cheek. "I'm afraid you won't be rid of me so easily."

"And why is that?" Severus asked, the slight waver in his voice betraying not a small amount of trepidation.

Her smile glittered as her hands ran through his hair, root to tip. "Because I love you too, Severus."

She heard a sharp inhalation, and then his mouth was upon hers. His lips plucked hungrily at hers, his tongue desperate to taste her. For several moments they stood, snogging like sixth-years in the springtime, basking in one another's affection. Their need, their hunger seemed to grow exponentially.

Before, when either of them had initiated sex, there had been extensive teasing – a prelude, a build-up. However, it seemed Severus had no patience for such games during this encounter. Within the span of a few minutes, amidst a flurry of sloppy kisses, he had disrobed the both of them, manoeuvred them from the sitting room to the bedroom, laid her on the bed, and, now, had positioned himself between her thighs. "Need you," he mumbled, his hand fumbling rather clumsily at her entrance.

Thankfully, she was ready for his advances – had been ready for nearly twenty-four hours. She supposed she *had* been tormented and taunted this time. Rather cruelly, in fact. Damn school. She whined as he removed his hand, stopping when she felt his cock stabbing blindly between her thighs. She reached down to aid it towards its target.

"Oh, gods, I've missed you," Severus groaned as he fully seated himself inside her.

Thus began the clumsiest, most awkward coupling she'd ever been party to. Noses bumped whenever they kissed. Her hips lunged jerkily forwards when they should have retreated. His hand nearly crushed her breast when he tried to fondle her, placing too much weight on her as he miscalculated the mechanics of his position. They were frantic and hurried and seemingly entirely unpractised at the task. "Yes, there," Hermione would groan, only to have Severus immediately shift his attentions elsewhere. It might have been a complete failure but for the steady chorus of endearments that arced between them.

Desperate to find the most satisfactory position, Hermione hooked her ankles over Severus's shoulders, and they both moaned at the new contact between them. He clutched her thighs, and soon, too soon, his thrusts quickened. Before she could protest or suggest a change in positions, Severus was thrusting wildly, groaning, and, evidently, coming. He lingered for a moment, panting, before he lay down next to her.

Her gaze flickered wildly across the ceiling. He was done? Finished? Flopped onto his back, looking as drained as a spent tube of toothpaste? She was taut. Wound-up. Tormented. She *needed* to come. Soon. Her brain flitted through all the words it knew, searching for some combination she could string together that would return Severus to the task at hand without impugning his manhood. Tears clung to the edges of her lashes as she fought her disappointment and aching need.

The bed shifted slightly, and Hermione closed her eyes, waiting to hear the sound of rummaging from the bathroom or kitchen.

She jumped as she felt Severus lazily suck her nipple into his mouth. Then his hand meandered down her stomach, over her hips, and across her mons. His blessedly long fingers – seemingly having recovered from their earlier bout of ineptitude – ghosted over her entrance before dipping inside.

"Yes! Please!" she cried. Her body wiggled down the mattress, trying to force Severus's fingers deeper.

He chuckled against her breast as his clever fingers continued their explorations. "Gods, you're even tighter now. You are ready to come, aren't you?"

She squirmed. "Yesssss, Severus, I need to come. Please!"

"Mmm, I can't wait to feel you clenching around my fingers." His lips began to tease her other nipple, and he looked at her confusedly when she pushed him away.

"Please keep talking," she begged, bringing her hands up to clutch at her distended nipples.

His voice rumbled as he shifted down to encamp himself between her legs. "You look so gorgeous, spread out in front of me. I've never had such a pretty treat waiting for me at the end of term." He paused to press a kiss to the inside of her thigh.

She froze in anticipation. Oh, gods, he was perfectly positioned for – oh, Merlin, yes! She keened when she felt his tongue flutter across her clitoris.

Every other word punctuated by another swipe of his tongue and thrust of his fingers, Severus continued speaking, "I am ... very much ... looking forward ... to spending ... much ... much ... more time ... with you ... this summer." Cruelly, he abandoned his pursuit and rested his cheek against her thigh. "Yes, just imagine how well we'll know one another by the end of my holiday. How much entertainment we'll have found between your sheets."

Severus's fingers, which had occasionally brushed across her g-spot, now firmly pressed against it. Impossibly, her body tensed even further. Gods, it was like her orgasm was hovering just out of reach, dangling in front of her, waiting for her to grab it. Oh, perhaps it was as simple as reaching out to seize it. Removing her left hand from her breast, she grasped Severus's head and forcefully returned his mouth to its previous occupation. Severus took direction splendidly and promptly sucked her clitoris into his mouth, his tongue rasping hard across it.

"Yes, unnngh, more," she pleaded before finally, finally, tumbling over the edge.

Severus licked and sucked and pressed until he'd wrung the very last of her orgasm from her exhausted body.

Adrift on sensation, she was surprised to see it was still light outside when she opened her eyes. She lay there, catching her breath, as her mind, and pulse, continued to race. The bed shifted again, and Severus flopped, exhausted, next to her. "That was fantastic," she murmured breathily, rolling over to curl against Severus's belly. "How long is your holiday? How long will you be here?"

"How long would you like me to stay?" Severus asked, nuzzling her neck.

"Careful how you phrase that. I might respond with something rather more long term than you're looking for." Hermione rearranged her hair to allow Severus unrestricted access to her neck.

"Alas, I have only six weeks to give," Severus said with an undercurrent of remorse.

Confused, Hermione blurted, "Six weeks? I thought you only had two weeks? What about your experiments? Don't you have experiments to run this summer?" She swore she could feel Severus's smirk against the back of her neck.

"Well, in two weeks, I have students coming back for the summer to assist me."

Hermione shifted, sat upright, and stared at him open-mouthed. "You, Severus Snape, have students coming back for the summer?"

"Yes, I do. A Ravenclaw and a Gryffindor even."

"You have ... You've never done that before."

"Quite true," Severus said smugly, a grin threatening to break out across his face.

"What brought about this change?" She continued staring at him in disbelief.

Severus's fingers reached up and lazily traced patterns around her nipple. "Sometime during the spring, I began to suspect I might not want to spend every moment of my summer in the dungeons, but all my grant applications had already been submitted and approved."

"But you're the one professor who never accepted student applications for summer work. I'd nearly wondered if it was written somewhere in the school by-laws. And yet, you took on students for the summer because of me?"

"Indeed."

"Well, that's a declaration of love if I ever heard one." A blush and a delighted smile crept across Hermione's features.

"Mmm hmmm." His hand dropped to her hip where he continued his artistry. "So, will you be busy with projects this summer?"

"I believe I might be able to find some time to spend with you. I tried to leave some room in my schedule on the off chance I could assist you and speed things along."

Severus snorted. "I believe I might explode more cauldrons than Neville Longbottom if you were in the room while I was brewing something complicated. Although, if we keep this up, I may need to take on additional assistants," Severus grouched, rubbing his wrist. "Either that, or I'll have to learn how to brew right-handed."

"Smart-arse. You can brew a potion for your precious wrist in my kitchen this evening."

"Good, now hush up. You've entirely worn me out, and I believe I've earned a nap." Severus pulled up the sheets and coverlet, flicked his wand towards the windows, which shuttered obediently, and kissed Hermione soundly before clutching her against him and falling asleep.

A/N: Just one more chapter to go! Thanks for sticking with me despite my pokey posting schedule!

Epilogue

Chapter 12 of 12

The war and subsequent clean-up has ended, and the wizarding world is beginning to come out of its shell. Having had enough of Hermione and Severus's bookworm, introverted ways, Molly and Minerva give well-intentioned Christmas gifts aiming to push our heroes out of their comfort zones and into the arms of a well-read, like-minded witch or wizard. Will our heroes ally to survive with their wits intact? Will they overcome their personal demons? Will they find love within the pages of the detested novel?

Disclaimer: I reap no financial benefits from the use of JK Rowling's characters.

There are not enough biscuits in the world to thank Dreamy_Dragon and Persevero for their help betaing this chapter.

Chapter 12 - Epilogue

Severus wiped his brow as he Levitated the last of his books into what must have been the hundredth box. He didn't know how Muggles coped with moving house. Even with magic, it was a right pain in the arse. This day ended one of the most gruelling months of his life. Oh, he might have thought his year as Headmaster was the height of stress, but it paled in comparison to a month filled with N.E.W.T.s, O.W.L.s, trying to pass along the bulk of thirty-odd years of teaching to his replacement, completing on a house just outside Leeds, and snagging the occasional hour with his future bride so that he didn't lose his mind entirely.

Waving his wand again wearily, he shrank what had better be the last cursed box and Levitated it into the beaded bag Hermione had loaned him. *Surely, I've packed everything now*, he thought, wondering if he should even bother walking through his soon-to-be-former quarters. If he'd missed packing something, he didn't bloody need it. Everything, save his books, was replaceable—indeed, probably *needed* replacing anyway. He sighed. *Better have a look-see, just in case*. With his luck, it would be Hermione's undergarments that were left behind. Severus threw open the door and glared at the empty bedroom as if daring one of his possessions to have the temerity to remain unboxed.

The drawers were open and empty. The wardrobe was entirely bare, save for a collection of mangled wire hangers. The bed linens were folded and neatly stacked. He stared at the bed a moment, trailing his hand along the foot board. For a fleeting day several months ago, he'd considered installing it in his new home, but when he'd asked the house-elves, they'd said it belonged to Hogwarts. In fact, all the furniture would be staying at the school. Leaving the job, the furniture, and the dungeons behind was both liberating and fairly terrifying—like being stripped of his robes and shoved out of the dormitory in his underwear.

His thumb worried the carving in the centre of the foot board. Odd that he felt such an affinity towards a bed that brought back such unpleasant memories. Staring at the ceiling for countless nights after Lily died. Feeling the increasing slow burn of the Mark as Voldemort returned to power. Suffering through whatever punishment Voldemort had decided to mete out. Cursing the devil's bargain he'd made with Albus. And many long, lonely nights, especially when he'd been Headmaster.

Still, there were a smattering of good memories over the years. His recent adventures with Hermione. Or misadventures on occasion. Working through the entire Kama Sutra—Muggle and Wizard—with Septima. And way back in his fifth year of teaching, when he'd sneaked his first girlfriend into the castle and lost his virginity in that bed. She was a Slytherin from two years behind him, working at Scrivenshaft's to pay for expenses at some Scandinavian university. *What was her name? Beatrice? Benita? No, Bennividere.* Yes, a name so horrid she'd insisted everyone call her Benny, which never failed to bring to mind his father's drunken chortling at *The Benny Hill Show*.

Severus snatched his hand back as he realised he was fondling the duvet. "Enough of this," he muttered out loud. It was foolish to stand around reminiscing about thirty years of sporadic bedroom encounters, especially when he had a lovely partner awaiting his arrival. Another two minutes of stalking through his rooms revealed that nothing had been left unpacked. It was time to leave.

He scooped up the beaded bag, then decided that perhaps he should check his office again, just to be certain. Dammit, he'd thought that by the time end of term rolled around, he'd be doing backflips to escape this dank existence. Leaving was unexpectedly difficult. He stood at the threshold to the room, fiddling with the shoulder strap of the bag. His office, too, was barren. Not surprising, since everything in it was his—well, except for the pair of essays from the Weasley twins that were never returned after their sudden departure, but he'd packed them along with decades of notes, obscure texts and personal research equipment.

Wandering through the office door into the classroom, he was shocked to see his replacement standing over a cauldron, inventory in hand. "Already at work while the cauldrons are still warm from the last salvo of end-of-term explosions, Professor Baneberry?"

Professor Baneberry looked up, his broad smile looking horribly out of place in the Potions classroom. "I just wanted to get the infirmary stores squared away before I leave for my holiday."

"Ah, a wise move. And here I thought you were mapping out course changes before I'd even left the castle."

Baneberry averted his eyes and stared at the cauldron. "Well, I had been considering some changes to the fifth-year curriculum, introducing some of the theory a bit earlier. Not too much, of course, what with O.W.L.s, but I had thought some experimentation with potions adaptations might better engage the students' interest."

Baneberry nervously fingered his inventory, looking up warily to gauge Severus's reaction. Seeing that the Potions master did not disapprove, he continued, rattling off a series of minor changes as well as a number of major ones. Severus supposed that perhaps, even for the wizarding world, twenty-five years with the same set of textbooks might signal time for a change. But, as he stood there listening to Baneberry prattle on, Severus realised he really, truly did not care one whit whether first-years were introduced to cauldron safety during their first lesson. It wasn't his bloody problem any more, and the little buggers would still blow up three Quidditch teams' worth of cauldrons over the course of the year.

Severus began to regret having walked into the classroom. It seemed as if Baneberry would never cease rambling with youthful enthusiasm about how eager he was to guide young minds. Finally, Severus seized a moment's pause to reassure Baneberry that it was a comfort to leave his legacy in such capable hands and wished the man good luck. He hurried through the corridors, saluting the Bloody Baron, wishing a portrait or two well, and narrowly dodging what looked to be a troll bogey thrown by Peeves. He was both surprised and agitated to find Minerva, Septima, Pomona, Poppy, and Argus waiting in the Entrance Hall to bid him farewell. And dammit, Albus had hijacked the portrait of Bertrand the Barmy for the occasion as well.

The sun glinted through the open castle doors. His freedom was within sight, and he grew more fidgety as the well-wishing continued. One would think that he'd not spoken to his colleagues at all in the past few months. Inquiries as to his plans. A chorus of well-wishes, both to him and Hermione. Had they decided on a honeymoon location? Would the Hogwarts staff be invited to the hen night? Where was it, again, that their new house was located? Severus was fingering his wand, considering Unforgivables, when Minerva finally interrupted and shooed him out the door.

He trudged down the hill towards the Apparition Point one last time, stopping to look back at the castle when he'd completed the descent. A chapter—no, a three-part, miserable and seemingly never-ending trilogy—of his life had ended, and he was all too happy to see the back page of it. He'd wrestled with many of his Hogwarts demons this past year and laid most to rest, including more or less settling his lingering struggle with Albus Dumbledore. Full resolution of conflict had been achieved, and it was time to begin a new volume, hopefully one that didn't involve repeated abuse of his person.

After patting the beaded bag to ensure he'd not left it somewhere along the way, Severus turned on his heel and Disapparated.

He opened the door and tentatively peered inside. He'd not seen the place since they'd completed on the house and was a bit afraid of the state that he might find it in. The wallpaper had been utterly hideous, and his stomach churned at the thought of both seeing it and the forthcoming chore of removing the cursed stuff. With his luck, the owners had used Permanent Sticking Charms on the wretched walls.

"Hello," he called as he shut the door and deposited the bag onto a short table that graced the entry way. Odd. He'd rather expected an armful of curly-haired witch the second the hinges had creaked. He stepped further into the house and surveyed the sitting room. Crookshanks glanced up lazily from a tasteful leather couch, no doubt enhanced with anti-scratching charms. The Kneazle regarded him for a moment, then returned to his slumber. Severus spied the most recent journals fanned out on the coffee table, along with the stunning full-colour copy of *Grouper's Guide to Magical and Muggle Flora Native to the British Isles* that Hermione had given him for Yule. A number of photographs adorned the mantel, and a handful of decidedly academic trinkets and mementoes were distributed about the room. Not so many as to look cluttered (and attract additional companions at birthdays and Yule), but enough to look sufficiently lived in. It seemed Hermione had made a good bit of progress unpacking in just a week. Not only that, but she'd replaced the wretched floral wallpaper with a coat of rich, bronze paint.

"In here!" she called from the room they'd decided would be their study.

Severus grumbled to himself as he walked down the hallway. Whatever was keeping her from greeting him had better be worth the trouble. He rounded the doorway and froze. She was wearing a faded, tightly fitted T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and shorts that were positively indecent. Oh, yes, this was worth the trouble.

"Hi, Severus! Just give me a moment while I finish this shelf," she said in a chipper tone that seemed to dance circles around his ankles like that Kneazle of hers.

His tongue suddenly rendered as useless as his appendix, he nodded as she went about shelving the copies of *Charms Monthly* that she'd clutched to her bosom. She emptied her hands, and he swore he could see London, France and half of Belgium when she bent over to retrieve another stack of periodicals.

He swallowed the sizable lump in this throat and mentally chastised himself. The sight of her was so befuddling, his brain resorted to American playground chants. Any further loss of brain cells, and he'd be quoting Lemsip advertisements. He cleared his throat and said, "I see you've decided not to stick to that absurd notion that we forgo christening the house until after the wedding."

She'd hoisted another handful of magazines above her head, revealing a swath of pale pink belly, when she turned to look at him confusedly. "No, I haven't changed my

mind. Why ever would you think that?"

His eyes narrowed to slits as he tried to determine if she was just being coy or if she was honestly oblivious as to the effect of her costume. "Why would I think that? Perhaps because I've seen you more fully clothed in bed."

"Oh, these things?" Hermione asked as she looked down, blushing. "I just wanted something that I wouldn't mind getting dirty."

At the word dirty, Severus fought to keep his eyes from rolling to the back of his head. "An interesting choice of words." He stalked towards her, lust gleaming in his eyes.

Her eyes widened as he approached. "Severus! I need to shelve the periodicals!"

"Sod the periodicals." Severus backed her against the bookcases and set about trying to convince her that her proposed abstinence was quite possibly the most ridiculous idea she'd had since suggesting they paint the kitchen lemon—*lemon!*—yellow. He was midway through leaving a purple, cauldron-shaped mark on the side of her neck when Hermione began fumbling with his trousers. "Oh, thank Merlin," he groaned, groping for his wand.

A swish and a flick and Hermione's indecent shorts and presumably scanty knickers dropped to the floor along with his trousers. Another flick banished the bra that had lurked underneath that obscenely tight T-shirt. Hermione started to pull the shirt over her head, but Severus stilled her hands. "Leave it, please," he asked, punctuating his request by tugging her nipple in between his thumb and forefinger.

"O-okay," Hermione moaned before clutching Severus's head and bringing his lips to meet hers. "Missed you." Her arms twined behind Severus's neck, and she shifted her weight and wrapped her legs around him.

Gravity threatened to spoil the entire escapade. "Oh, bugger! My back! Blasted end of year cauldron inventory!" He glanced at the convenient bookshelves to the left of them. After he had transfigured one of the shelves, Severus waddled, trousers around his ankles and witch around his waist, to the newly-made ledge where he deposited Hermione.

Severus shuffled over to the desk, leaning on it for support as he clutched his back. He murmured a Healing Charm as he toed off his shoes and kicked the trousers and pants from his ankles. His fingers fumbled at his shirt buttons as he drank in the sight of Hermione.

Her hair was in complete disarray from her cleaning and unpacking. Were it not for the smudges of dust he could see on her forehead and shirt, he'd have thought she'd been entertaining someone in the bed rather than digging through boxes. He glanced at her shirt. That T-shirt would be featured in every one of his wanking fantasies for the next thirty years. The clingy blue fabric hugged her form so tightly that she'd hardly needed a bra. His eyes travelled further down her form. Her legs were still spread from having been wrapped around him. He realised his mouth was hanging open and closed it abruptly.

He'd been standing there ogling Hermione for several moments. Perhaps it was a bit rude of him to participate in such solitary, self-indulgent pleasure. An apology on his lips, his eyes flickered up to Hermione's face only to find her hungry gaze riveted on his cock. He chuckled as he walked, unencumbered, to the bookshelves. Hermione grinned at him as he approached. "If I'd known this would be the sight awaiting me, I'd have taken the house-elves up on their offer to pack and move my belongings," he murmured before lowering his head to suck her nipple, the shirt soft against his mouth.

Hermione moaned in response, arching against him. His fingers dipped in between her thighs, and she moaned again. Severus chuckled as he teased her. Her perch on the extended shelf meant she had to cope with his light touches. If she moved forward, she'd fall to the floor. She growled at him, grabbing his hand and forcing his fingers where she most wanted his attention.

It was Severus's turn to moan as he discovered how very ready Hermione was. He abandoned his attentions to her nipples, briefly marvelling at the way the damp fabric clung to her. His lips sought hers as his fingers entered her, his thumb dancing circles around her clitoris.

"Severus! Please!" she begged.

He'd anticipated this moment daily for weeks. He'd wanked countless times to the memory of the feel of her as she first surrounded him, pulling him closer and deeper. The reality was even better than his fantasies. Once fully nestled between her thighs, he paused, fearing that things would be over all too soon if he moved so much as a centimetre. He rested his forehead against a shelf, shutting his eyes and panting.

After catching his breath, he looked at Hermione. Her eyes were dazed, and she sported a wicked half-smile. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, and his carefully cultivated control snapped. He clutched the shelves on either side of her and withdrew. And then thrust into her. They groaned in unison, and their lips collided, as uncoordinated as their earlier attempts at undressing. He withdrew again, far more quickly than he'd intended, unable to restrict his pace. This encounter would not be lasting long. He tucked one hand between them, rubbing Hermione as best he could, given their awkward positioning. Fortunately, she was as tightly wound as he, and he soon felt her clenching around him.

Their shouts echoed in the nearly empty library as they came. Severus kept his remaining grip on the shelves, fearful that his legs might buckle if he were to let go. Panting, he rested his head on her shoulder, delivering kisses to her neck in between gasps for air.

"Oh, Severus, I've missed you," she mumbled against his neck.

"Perhaps as much as I've missed you," he said, his lips quirking against her skin. He pushed off from the shelves, stepping back to relish the sight of his satisfied lover. A stabbing pain ripped through the afterglow. He groaned as he rubbed the heel of his palm against his back.

"As very enjoyable as that was, next time we christen a room in this house, remind me to conjure a bed," he grumbled. "I refuse to cuddle with you on hardwood floors. Come on."

The faintest of tickling sensations awoke Severus from his nap. He raised his hand to brush Hermione's hair away, momentarily confused when he found her absent from the bed. The sound of the shower running answered that question. But what on earth had awakened him? True, he had been a rather light sleeper during the war, but the past year, he'd been sleeping like the dead. Well, non-Inferius dead anyway.

He inhaled and lodged a tuft of Kneazle fur into the cavern of his left nostril. "Oh, bugger!" he shouted as he looked about in a panic, terrified to breathe again through his nose lest he suck the damned thing into his lung. "*Accio handkerchief!*" He blew his nose as if his very existence depended upon the outcome, finally stopping at the tenth or eleventh go.

His eyes darted to the bathroom where the water had just shut off. He heard Hermione step out of the shower. He discreetly checked the handkerchief. Excellent. No Kneazle fur in his bronchi. Much as he liked the beast, the insidious shedding was going to pose a problem when it came to brewing. Perhaps wards in the doorway? Better yet, maybe he could talk Hermione into developing a charm to attract loose fur straight to the bin.

Nestling back under the covers, Severus watched as a dust mote meandered in the sunlight. What a unique sensation... to be entirely free from that pile of rocks in

Scotland. He rolled over onto his stomach, burrowing further into the bed's warmth. Merlin, it was almost too comfortable, which could prove quite problematic. A week ago, the promise of his new personal laboratory had been a beacon of sanity amidst the end of term. But that had been before he'd tried the bed. It could well be months before he even unpacked the shiny new equipment. Perhaps he could pursue one of the bevy of research projects which required extensive reading rather than brewing. Yes, a conjured lap desk. Perfectly brewed tea in one of the Hermione's, no, *their* mugs with the built-in Heating Charms. His potions journals just an *Accio* away in the library. Hermione wandering through the room in just her knickers. Oh, this would be a happy life indeed. He smiled smugly at the long overdue change in fate.

After dumping her laundry in the basket, Hermione smirked at Severus. "Well, you look rather pleased with yourself. Who knew you could recover from the end of term so quickly?" She lifted the covers and clambered back into bed. "Budge over."

"Yes, well, knowing that I won't be returning has lightened my spirits immensely, especially when combined with the restorative powers of a good shag. Might take several more to really put me to rights, though." He winced as he made room for Hermione. "That and a cauldron or two of muscle relaxant."

"Oh, roll over and I'll massage your back." She delivered the kind offer with an eye roll. "Poor thing."

"We'll just see how you hold up after such activity in twenty years' time. Of course, at that point, I'll have to hire out a gigolo to perform the service." The bite of his words succumbed to happy sighs as Hermione's hands slid across his back, seeking the tender spots at the root of his distress.

Pressing her thumbs hard against his lower back, she quipped, "Yes, because a wizard in his late sixties is *ancient*. Ah, well. Something to look forward to in my middle age."

Severus snorted into his pillow. He groaned as Hermione found a particularly sensitive spot. "Merlin, that's enough. Any more and I'll melt into the mattress."

Hermione flopped onto the bed next to him, running her fingers through his hair and tucking stray locks behind his ear.

"Please tell me we have nothing scheduled for at least the next three weeks," he begged.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Actually, I don't think we have anything but unpacking on our schedule until the wedding. I've cleared my work calendar."

Severus smiled as he slid his arms around Hermione and clutched her close, nuzzling that spot on her neck. "Thank Merlin. I thought we'd be running around like trolls with our heads cut off with a thousand last-minute tasks."

Hermione broke from his embrace, staring at Severus as if he'd become an Inferius. "Severus, *weshould* be running around like trolls with our heads cut off. I don't think I slept more than five hours a night in the months leading up to my wedding with Ron."

Determined to cling to his vision of carefree summer days spent shagging in the new bed—and the new living room and the new kitchen—Severus mumbled into the pillow, "Well, I'm sure that was a much larger affair. I'm sure there was much more to handle."

Hermione snorted. "Weddings do *not* work like that. We should be calling florists, haggling with the reception hall over table placement, totting up final numbers for the caterers, and a million other things."

Severus sensed that his vision of a placid summer was about to explode, like a class full of first-years' cauldrons.

"*Accio wedding binder.*"

Severus ducked as a silver binder sailed from the living room into Hermione's waiting palm. She rifled through the pages until she found what looked to be a checklist. She removed it from the binder, and Severus's gut roiled as the paper swelled to form a twenty-page notepad. Pulling a biro from the binder's front pocket, she ran the tip down a column of tasks.

She muttered under her breath, "Yes, well, that's everything that was supposed to be done by May. Ah, here's June. Severus, did you get fitted for new dress robes?"

"Well, more or less."

Hermione levelled an icy stare in his direction. "What do you mean 'more or less'?"

"Well, I had an appointment at Madam Malkin's, but there was an accident in the classroom," Severus explained, continuing to ignore Hermione's Arctic stare. "I met

Minerva in the hospital wing, and, well, Poppy used a charm to take my measurements, and Minerva went shopping for my robes. They should arrive next Wednesday."

Hermione looked sceptical. "You sent Minerva shopping for your dress robes?"

"Well, she offered, and she does have excellent taste. Whatever she selected will probably look infinitely better than anything I might have selected."

Hermione's pursed lips told him she agreed, despite the principle of the matter. She proceeded to rattle off a dozen additional line items from her list. With increasing terror, Severus was forced to admit that Minerva had volunteered for virtually every task on his list.

"Severus, did *you* actually do *any* of the things I asked you to do?" She jabbed the blunt end of the biro into his thigh for emphasis.

Severus thought very hard about how best to answer this question. He was quite sure he'd done something or other, but nothing was springing to mind. And yet admitting such would be the height of stupidity. Their new couch was comfortable, but not comfortable enough for a fortnight's stay. He replied, picking at the hem on the sheet and clearing any shreds of sarcasm from his voice, "Hermione, I got the list just after the Easter hols, and the end of term is always challenging. I honestly wouldn't have delegated everything to Minerva except that she always offered, and I thought it might be better to get everything done than to do something half-arsed or forget it completely." There. That didn't sound so horrible. Perhaps he would get the hang of this husband thing after all. He raised his eyes from the sheet to look at his future wife.

She was *not* impressed with his response. Bugger. Well, perhaps he could get himself out of the situation still. "Are there any tasks left I can help you with?"

Her jaw clenched, Hermione flipped to the next page of the list. Her face paled.

"Hermione, what is it?"

A flurry of expressions warred for dominance: embarrassment, anger, frustration, amusement, guilt. Eventually, a fit of giggles overcame her. Severus, mind-boggled, stared at her with the confusion of the recently Obliviated. And her laughter continued. Severus wondered if, perhaps, the wedding binder was cursed. Scratch that, he knew the damned thing, by its very nature, was cursed. Her increasingly maniacal laughter set his hair on end. "Hermione, what is going on?"

"Hello, pot. I'm kettle," she choked out amidst her laughter.

"What? Hermione, you're frightening me. This wedding business has sent you around the bend."

She looked up at him, wiping tears from her eyes. Calming herself somewhat successfully for a moment, she managed to choke out between gales of renewed laughter, "I delegated... nearly everything from my list... to Molly! And here... I was... about to take you to task." Her face froze in horror and the laughter ceased. "Oh, bugger, Severus. Minerva and Molly are planning our wedding."

The colour drained from Severus's face. "You mean those two harridans are at the helm of our small, private ceremony?" The chill in Severus's voice could have frozen lava.

"*Accio Owl Post!*" Hermione winced as a stack of correspondence wobbled into the room.

"Been neglecting a few things, have you?" Severus suppressed a grin. He was so off the hook for dumping tasks onto Minerva.

The stack of teetering parchment settled onto the bed in front of Hermione. She sprang up and flew to the dresser, fumbling through the drawers.

"Hermione, what are you doing?"

"I need to finish unpacking the library. Can't really do that naked since we haven't got curtains up yet," she mumbled as she wrestled her way into a T-shirt.

Severus's jaw hit the duvet. "You mean we shagged in a room with no curtains? Wait, Hermione, you were going to look through this stack of post!"

Her head tilted, and she gaped at him. "Oh, I was, wasn't I?"

Severus chuckled as he shook his head. "You really are getting rather scatterbrained." He reached for the post. And promptly jumped up, grabbing his trousers. He was halfway across the room when Hermione stopped him.

"And where are *you* going, Severus?"

"The lawn needs mowing," he argued, hopping towards the door with one leg in his trousers.

"The lawn's fine. Do you have your wand, Severus?"

The witch had gone batty. Completely batty. "Of course I do! Can't it wait until I've at least done the front?"

Hermione shook her head. "Do me a favour and cast a Detection Spell on the post, please."

Severus sighed. It seemed there would be no mowing until his blasted witch's curiosity was satisfied. A flourish of his wand made five pieces of post turn burnt orange. The meaning of the fiery glow permeated his grass-obsessed mind. He levitated them to a separate stack. "*Finite Incantatem*." They ceased glowing but now risked combustion courtesy of Hermione's mutinous glare.

"I think I might understand why I was so motivated to redecorate," Hermione hissed through gritted teeth as she snatched the offending pieces of post. "There had better be a damned good reason why Molly cast Repelling spells on copies of the florist's order, date confirmation from the caterer, quotes from three different bands to play at our reception, a swatch of a truly hideous shade of baby blue fabric that will be Ginny's dress, and the guest list."

Severus should have been infuriated, really, that the woman had run rough-shod over their wedding. Instead, it seemed it was his turn for highly inappropriate laughter. He tried to suppress it, really. He wouldn't have thought Molly Weasley capable of such deception. That she'd gone to such lengths was nearly comical. Nearly.

"Oh, bugger." Hermione glared at Severus's bark of laughter. "Severus, this is serious. The guest list has over six hundred people listed!"

His laughter juddered to a halt. "Six hundred! What, did they invite every idiot that has ever walked through my classroom?"

"And then some, I'd say," Hermione murmured, idly flipping through the list. "Bloody hell, she's invited the book club."

Molly Weasley clearly studied the Dark Lord's *One Hundred and Thirteen Creative and Subtle Torture Methods*. Really, he'd much prefer a well-aimed Cruciatus Curse. "Next you're going to tell me that Gilderoy Lockhart is officiating at the ceremony."

"Severus! Don't you dare joke about that! It's too bloody frightening!"

Hermione halved the stack of correspondence. "Here." She shoved one of the piles at him. "Skim each of them and write anything of note on this."

An hour and a half and four dozen or so expletives later, Hermione stared at the grim story told by the wedding binder.

"Well? How bad is it? What I saw in my stack was bad enough. I shudder to think what you might have uncovered. Did you know Molly's doing the cake herself? Do you think we'll have the honour of a pink cake with purple icing?" Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. All urges to laugh had long since dissipated.

Hermione sighed and rubbed the large knot pulsing at the base of her neck. She snatched up the parchment and tried to keep her voice from wobbling as she read, "Percy Weasley to officiate. Reception catered by Prancing Pegasus, quoted cost two thousand Galleons. Flowers by Fleur, quoted cost one hundred Galleons. Centrepieces by Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, cost fifty Galleons." With every line item, Hermione's voice rose a half octave. "Celestina Warbeck is scheduled to play at the reception for five hundred Galleons. And she's booked a honeymoon in, oh Merlin, Cancun for fifteen hundred Galleons. Severus! There's over five thousand Galleons in expenses here when you include everything!" Her panicked breathing jiggled the bed. "That's over twenty thousand pounds! That's more than the down payment on our house!"

Severus shifted so that he could sit behind Hermione. His fingers replaced her own on her neck, the tips of his thumbs pressing against the screaming vertebrae. He wanted to rail against every item in the list, but Hermione was already on the verge of tears. Adding his caustic rejoinder would *not* help matters. He wondered idly when he'd learned to hold his tongue. Clearing his throat, he gently asked, "Why would Molly do this, Hermione? She knew what kind of ceremony we wanted, didn't she?"

"Oh, one never knows exactly with Molly. I suppose she thought she was doing us a favour—that our marriage should be celebrated with the entire damn wizarding world. Although..." Hermione groaned as his fingers nudged against a particularly tender spot. "It wouldn't be a horrible networking idea, especially for you, but I really don't want our wedding to become some circus. Oh, Gods, Severus, if it's that big, the *Daily Prophet* will show up."

Her pulse beat an accelerando against his fingertips. He abandoned his massage and wrapped his arms around her. "Hermione, we don't have to do this Molly's way."

"But she's put down deposits for everything!"

"We'll pay her back," he said resolutely, stroking her arms to soothe her.

Her voice sounding as if she were a breath away from tears, she argued, "But if we cancel, she'll be furious and embarrassed and... Oh, Severus, she'll be horrified if she's already sent out the invitations."

Severus stretched his arm around to grab the binder. "If she's following your calendar, she won't send invitations until Tuesday." He felt, rather than heard, her sigh of relief.

"Hermione, I don't want this," he said, gesturing to the mound of correspondence. *You* don't want this. It could well drain our Gringotts vaults. I'll put my foot down and take the brunt of Molly's anger, and we can reclaim the planning."

She twisted around to face him, her eyes glinting with moisture. "Severus, that's rather generous of you, but you clearly underestimate Molly Weasley. There will be no wiggling out of this. The woman had no qualms with a magically binding book club, after all."

He traced a fingertip along her chin as he considered. "Hmm. Good point. If even we did win the argument, I wonder what the price would be. Well, there's only one solution then."

"I know." Hermione sighed. "And to think, I was actually looking forward to our wedding. Not any more..."

"Hermione, going along with Molly's manipulations is *not* a solution."

"Oh?" She jerked her head out of his grasp in surprise.

"Let's get married."

Hermione squinted at Severus, the suggestion that *he'd* gone round the bend hovering on the tip of her tongue.

"Today."

Her eyes widened. "Today?"

He nodded.

"But, Severus, Molly will be livid! The Howlers alone will make us prematurely deaf."

He threaded one of her curls through his fingers. "Hmmm. Lucky for us I've some experience constructing wards against them. Besides, better to ask forgiveness than permission."

"You say that as if it's a socially acceptable method for getting one's way," she said, glaring daggers in his direction to warn against using such a technique on her.

"It's exactly what Molly has done," he tossed back in retort.

"Oh. I suppose you're right." Hermione gazed at her kneecaps as if studying them long enough would yield the answer. "Today?" she asked, turning to look at him again, the idea clearly taking root. "Go and take a shower, Severus. I need some time to consider this."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead and left the bed, concealing his grin until he was out of sight. Much as he loathed Molly Weasley for her interference, the situation could well turn out in his favour. As he lathered up in the shower, he dared to daydream of a summer filled with reading, napping, and shagging, lots of shagging. He'd come up with ten locations to try out by the time he towelled his hair dry and five different scenarios when he wrapped the towel around his waist. He looked down at the rather attractive way the towel hung on his hips and considered another two scenarios. He prodded the flat line of his stomach. *Hmmm, I'll need to keep an eye on this now that I'm not walking fifteen kilometres a day.*

When he returned to the bedroom, Hermione was sitting on the bed, dressed in the T-shirt and shorts she'd grabbed earlier and flipping through the dreaded binder. She cast an appreciative glance at the towel as he walked to the dresser. He grabbed a pair of faded denims and a black T-shirt from the drawer. "So, have you decided anything?"

"I believe I have," she replied, the grin spreading across her face telling her answer. "Though, you do realise that, even if we elope today, Molly will still want to throw a party."

"That is... not ideal, but tolerable. We will be having a discussion with her about budget, however." He bent down to kiss his very-soon-to-be bride. "And I'll be damned if members of that insufferable book club are going to attend our reception."

She yanked him onto the bed next to her, wrapping her arms around him and resting her head on his shoulder. "Today then?" she asked with a smile.

"So it would seem. No sooner am I released from my prison up north than I'm shackled to my new fate."

Hermione's right hand was surprisingly hard as it smacked his chest. "Ha, bloody, ha. So, do we need to find witnesses to go with us? I suppose I can ask Ginny, but Molly will wring her neck when she finds out that Ginny helped us escape."

Severus shifted to grab his wand off the bedside table. "Hermione, I'm not certain we need to arrange witnesses *Accio beaded bag.*" The bag sailed into the room and landed in front of him with a clunk. "Oh, right, this may take some digging. Perhaps we should do this in the library."

On the twenty-third out of eighty-three boxes, all unwarded and returned to size, Severus found the volume he was looking for. Cradling the spine in his palm, he skimmed the table of contents for only a moment before flipping about a quarter of the way through the text. He pointed to the fourth paragraph. "I believe this spell will bind us with only ourselves and our magic present."

For a moment, Hermione stared at her betrothed. She glanced at the text, skimming the paragraphs immediately preceding and following it before flipping the cover to read its title. "Severus, why do you have a copy of *Handfasting and Marriage Rituals Through the Ages?*"

He glared at her. "It was handed down on my mother's side, thank you very much. Though I'll admit I may have flipped through it last November."

Shaking her head and grinning, she read through the passage again. "So, this is it? The Ministry will recognise this?"

"That it will. We'll just need to visit the registrar when it's convenient. They'll check our wands and record the marriage. In recent history, this ceremony was used numerous times during the wars, especially when couples did not wish to draw attention to their union." He paused, inspecting her expression. "Are you certain you want it to be just the two of us?"

She considered the question for a moment and then smiled broadly. "Actually, I think I might prefer it over what we'd originally planned. It's rather intimate, don't you think?"

A lump firmly lodged in his throat, Severus nodded. Such a bond would be more intimate, more personal than anything he had ever done. Much more intimate than mere sex. More personal than the Mark that had owned him for nearly twenty years. *Oh, bloody hell. Did I just compare marriage vows to taking the Dark Mark?* Severus prayed to every deity that his face had remained expressionless. He risked a glance at Hermione and saw her smirking. Dammit.

"You'll be fine, Severus. Thousands of wizards before you have survived their wedding vows. I have no reason to suspect you won't."

He tried not to glare. Really, he did.

"Come on, you'll feel better after some lunch."

As usual, Hermione was correct. After munching half a sandwich and a pile of crisps, Severus felt capable of attending to the details of their nuptials. "We need to determine where and when. Early evening? We could go out for dinner afterwards."

"The Enchanted Sceptre, perhaps?"

"I'll owl to see what time we can get a reservation. Did you have anywhere in mind for the ceremony itself?"

"I... Oh, gods, this is really happening, isn't it?" Hermione looked as though she might lose the lunch she'd just eaten.

Severus chuckled as Hermione took up the baton of pre-wedding jitters. "Yes, it is. And I believe you'll survive as well. Now, as for locations, the statue of the Battle of Hogwarts war heroes would present a lovely photo opportunity."

As expected, Hermione giggled.

"Or we could make it very easy for the press, and use the lobby of the *Daily Prophet*," he continued.

"All right, you idiot." She picked apart a crisp, leaving a pile of crumbs on her plate. "I'm not sure I have a specific location in mind. Somewhere outside? Somewhere we

don't go all that often, but not somewhere so obscure we'll never visit again."

Severus chewed the last bites of his sandwich as he considered. "I believe I know somewhere well-suited. The—"

"No! Don't tell me!" Hermione interrupted. "I trust your judgement well enough, and I'd rather have it be a surprise. It will make things a bit more... special."

No pressure then. Severus felt his nerves returning full force. "Right. Well, I need to owl regarding dinner. Perhaps we should find some way to occupy our time this afternoon to keep the jitters at bay?"

"Well, with both our efforts, we could probably finish the library this afternoon, presuming you can keep your hands to yourself," she said, grinning. "Oh, but I had one last question about the ceremony. Did you want to exchange rings? The text said they were optional."

Ah, *that* was the one task he'd completed on his own. He knew there had been something. Well ahead of schedule, even. "I happen to have yours already," he stated, trying not to sound as smug as he felt.

She beamed at him, pushing away from the table. "And I've purchased yours."

"I suppose we'll use rings then."

Together they walked to the library, where the afternoon passed in blessedly short order. Periodicals were shelved. Books from both their collections were unpacked, dusted, and organised into an ideal arrangement. An owl arrived to confirm a six-thirty reservation for dinner. And every last one of the books was shelved, the last one sliding into place as the clock chimed four.

At four, Hermione handed Severus the beaded bag and shooed him into the guest bedroom. Severus took ten minutes to change into a rarely worn set of dark blue dress robes. He divided the remaining forty-five minutes between exploring the house—yes, he was exploring, not pacing—and writing a note to Molly breaking the news of their elopement. He called for Frances, the owl Hermione had acquired last week, and instructed her to wait until sunset to deliver the message.

He was exploring the kitchen when Hermione entered. Severus narrowly avoided banging his head on the cabinet door when he caught sight of her. She was a vision in purple silk robes that ended mid-calf. Her hair was piled high upon her head, exposing her neck.

"It's almost a shame we're not getting photos today. You look stunning, Hermione," he said, restraining the urge to feel the fabric under his fingers. While there was no strict time schedule for their departure, Severus suspected Hermione would never forgive him if they became so distracted that they were rushed to make their dinner reservations.

"You look rather dashing yourself, Severus. And we'll look lovely in the Pensieve." She smiled, tucking her wand into her robe pocket. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. You're certain you don't want to select the location?" Severus asked.

"So long as it's not midpitch at Chudley, I'm quite certain the location will suit me."

Severus looked truly appalled. "Centre field at Chudley? I would never do such a thing to you. Whatever would give you that idea?"

"Well, that was where Ron suggested when we entertained the idea of running away during the night."

Shuddering, Severus offered his arm for Side-Along Apparition. "Are you ready, Hermione? Ballycastle awaits."

"Ballycastle! Severus! No Quiddi—Oh, yes, Severus, how very clever to tease your very-soon-to-be-wife."

"Well, I do try to be witty. Now, shall we?"

With a look of distrust, Hermione took his arm and closed her eyes against the dizzying pull of Apparition.

She opened her eyes and gasped. "Severus, it's gorgeous! Where are we?"

"The magical section of the Lost Gardens of Heligan. As a licensed Potions master, I have Apparition privileges. I thought we might walk through the Lost Valley until we found a suitable location. Does this suit you?"

Hermione nodded, her eyes glistening. Severus cast charms to protect their shoes from the muddy path and added a Notice-Me-Not Charm for good measure. They walked arm-in-arm into the woods, the green canopy of the oaks blocking out the summer sun. They stopped here and there along the path, pointing out flora or fauna, and Severus regretted they'd not sneaked out in May to wed while the bluebell wood was in bloom. Eventually, they approached Top Pond, and their steps slowed. The lake was calm; the verdant trees along the shoreline reflected in its surface. "Does this look like the spot?" Severus asked, knowing the answer.

"It's perfect," Hermione choked out.

He turned to face her and brushed a tear from her cheek. Their eyes met, and Severus thanked Merlin for Molly's interference. For a moment, they lingered, their eyes shining and thumbs rubbing across one another's knuckles.

"Ready?" he asked at length.

Hermione nodded and pulled his ring and her wand from the inner pockets of her robe. With fumbling hands, they each placed rings on one another's fingers. Then, for the first time in his life, Severus Snape willingly handed his wand to someone else. He received hers and was surprised by the warm, welcoming feel of Hermione's magic.

Clasping Hermione once again, Severus held her wand steadily over their hands and incanted, *"Unanimi nostri magici conjungemur."* A tendril of magic arched between them.

Blinking back tears, Hermione raised his wand. *"Unanimi nostri magici conjungemur."*

They shivered as the circuit of magic closed. A heavy silence filled the air, broken moments later when a robin chirped from a nearby tree.

"So, we're married, then, husband?" Hermione asked, trading wands once again.

"Yes, we are, wife." Severus slipped his arms around his bride and closed the distance between them. Their eyes closed. Their lips met, and for several minutes they stood alone in the world.

From the moment the vows were completed, the remainder of the evening passed in a blurry haze. Severus wished he could say that dinner at The Enchanted Sceptre

was worth every knut of the twenty-five Galleon dinner bill. He vaguely recalled the waiting staff being particularly attentive once Hermione let it slip that they'd just married, but they could have served Hippogriff liver on cardboard and he wouldn't have noticed. The lamb, beef, or whatever he ordered was probably delicately spiced and cooked to perfection. The wine was presumably appropriate for the meal, if more than a touch soporific. The side dishes were probably the ideal accompaniments. The coffee... he did remember the coffee because without it, he would have fallen face-first into the chocolate mousse.

This new incarnation of Severus Snape was turning out to be a besotted fool. All he could clearly remember from dinner was staring into Hermione's shining eyes. She was his, he was hers, and the rest of the world was as trivial as a gnat to a troll. Whether his utter obliviousness to the outside world was caused by the magic of their newly formed union or the occasion itself, he would never know. But given the idiotic grin that had been plastered on his face for the duration of the meal, he counted himself lucky that six hundred of his closest and not so close acquaintances had not witnessed the event.

Severus also wished he could say that the sex following their return to their home had been the most spectacular of his life. But he recalled precious little about that either. Immediately after Apparating home from dinner, Hermione had pulled him into the bedroom, casting a spell to disrobe both of them. Within short order, she had pushed him to the bed and straddled him. Judging by the sated smile currently adorning her face, she'd reached completion. His own orgasm was stronger than any Befuddlement Charm, and he wondered if a summer of love might render him an idiot of Longbottom proportions. Before he could consider the downsides of such a massive brain cell loss, Severus drifted to sleep.

Severus stretched, his limbs protesting the previous day's activity. Groggy though it would make him, perhaps a Healing Potion would set to right the abuse of packing, sex against a bookcase, unpacking, and general exhaustion from one of the most hectic days of his life. But the Healing Potion could wait. Rolling over, he attempted to wrap an arm around Hermione. The warm spot told him she was not long departed from their marriage bed. He stretched again and stood, shrugging on his robe. He shuffled into the hallway, and the scent of coffee beckoned him to the kitchen.

"Morning," he mumbled as he moved to kiss Hermione on the cheek. She flinched, and he braced himself for the imminent Tooth Cleaning Charm. The tingle of the charm was soon replaced by the warmth of her lips on his. Breaking the kiss before it could escalate into a bout of kitchen sex that would only injure him further, he mumbled, "Mmmm. So much better than waking to an Alarm Charm and breakfast in the Great Hall."

"Such glowing praise," Hermione teased with a grin, turning to the refrigerator to remove enough breakfast ingredients to feed half of Slytherin house.

His protest died on his lips when his stomach rumbled loudly. He grabbed several vegetables to begin slicing, but Hermione shooed him away, shoving a mug of coffee into his hand. Grateful for the brew, he kissed her again and wandered over to the window, rubbing the remaining sleep from his eyes.

Severus squinted at the front lawn and rubbed his eyes again. A flock of small, red corpses littered the lawn. Severus smiled around the lip of the coffee mug. He turned to find Hermione grinning at him.

"I've counted seventeen so far. Your missive to Molly certainly ruffled her feathers."

Severus snorted as yet another Howler hit the wards and landed lifelessly on the ground, the delivery owl flying off in a dazed wobble.

"I'd considered dashing off a note to let her know your excellent wards are Howler-proof and that, oops, we couldn't receive her correspondence. But it might be best to let her blow off steam."

Severus snorted his assent and left his observation deck. He grabbed plates and cutlery and set the table.

"Besides," Hermione continued, dishing out what looked like a very promising omelette, "if we stop the Howlers, she might see fit to visit in person."

He stifled a yelp as he poured coffee over his thumb. "May Merlin save me from interfering ex-mothers-in-law," he grumbled as he sat at the table.

"Whatever shall I do to make our marriage worth the hassle?" she asked with a saucy wink as she scooped up a bite of breakfast.

"I suppose I might come up with ways you could make things worthwhile," Severus mused. "I believe you could begin by joining me in the shower following breakfast."

If Severus noticed Hermione eating more quickly than usual, he had the good grace not to comment. As he polished off his meal and gulped the last of his coffee, Severus decided that this new volume of his life—though the first chapter read like the racier bits of the tawdry novels he used to confiscate from his students—would suit him very well indeed.

~Fin~

Author's Note: There are so very many people to thank for this last chapter. First off, thank you, readers, for your patience and for continuing to read! Work, fic exchanges, and a recalcitrant muse made it seem like this chapter in particular would never be written.

First off, thanks to Mollysister and MoreThanSirius, for your support in Chicago. Extra special thanks to MoreThanSirius for the most stunning gift of a Witches of Gilford Cookbook AND for indulging me with some drive home brainstorming that broke the muse's three-month mental block. Thanks for pointing me in the direction of the Hissing Harpies as well. I'll be reading their hijacked wedding shenanigans soon! (and taking notes on the swearing!)

Thanks to Walden Pondering for assisting me with the Latin marriage vows. Unanimi nostri magici conjungemur = "Let us be joined by our magic, as one."

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The Lost Gardens of Heligan (the wedding location) was one of many beautiful places suggested by Persevero and can be found online at: <http://www.heligan.com/>

Lemsip (whose commercials are the only thing worse than American playground chants) was suggested by Dreamy_Dragon. One stunning example is here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vy_xQexVzlk