

Lines in Shifting Sand

by tjwriter

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Chapter 1 of 1

Ronald Weasley had done a lot of things for his wife that he thought he would never, ever do. Inviting Severus Snape into their bed had been the last in a long list of lines he'd crossed.

One does not just invite ill-health, aging, crotchety Potions masters into one's marital bed on a sudden whim. Time is needed, measured in not hours and days but in weeks and months. The grit of sand needs gentle pressure and slow shifts to break down the necessary barriers. All parties involved need first reach growth and maturity.

We, in our limited knowledge, might not be able to comprehend such a thing. We, who have the belief that we have heard the whole story on these people, their proclivities, alliances, mannerisms, their very being, might find this tale out of the realm of possibility. For us to accept this, we must come to terms with the fact that the story we have heard is only half the story.

The story we know tells of a young hero leaning over a man thought a nemesis and villain and taking from him what the hero believed to be this man's dying memories and going back to the battle victorious. That, of course, is the truth. But what hasn't been told, and what seemed inconsequential to the story, was of the trusty side-kick and the love of his life returning to the place where the villain lay dying.

Would it surprise you to hear that the story we haven't heard is just as rich in intrigue, personal tragedy, healing, and in the precise way that decisions are made affects everything? Well then, this story will be very shocking indeed.

Would it be so hard for us to believe, that while the hero occupied himself with swirling memories that told truths denied him for his entire existence, answering questions about himself and the world around him that he had only begun to ask, his two best mates returned to the place where life slowly leaked out of their misunderstood and much loathed professor?

Many of you will ask the same question that Ron repeatedly asked as they returned.

"Why?"

"Because," Hermione answered. "Didn't you see his suffering? Didn't you see his desperation to get those memories, whatever they were, to Harry? Don't you want to know why?"

"I suppose Harry will tell us when he knows. What can we do now? Snape is dead; you saw it yourself."

"I saw him very near death; I saw him pleading for death, but I didn't see him actually die. Neither did you."

Ron was about to argue, but then thinking of the new knowledge he had of how *exactly* someone looks when they are dead really, truly dead...the look he had seen on

Fred's face...he stopped. He hadn't seen that in Snape. But surely, the man couldn't have survived, could he?

A long ago statement that he had tried repeatedly to erase came to his mind *I can teach you to brew glory, bottle fame and even put a stopper to death...*

He didn't argue about the mission any longer and even increased his pace to the Shrieking Shack. If anyone could survive this, it would be Professor Severus Snape. And Ron had to admit, he was curious as to what it all meant.

When they got to the place where Snape had been, all they saw was a large circle of blood and a trail of more blood. They followed it to a rickety sofa, where Snape lay, bottle of thick, creamy potion in his hand, the other hand smeared in blood. Rushing to him, they saw that he had actually applied the potion to his wound and that he was still breathing, if only barely.

"Professor? Professor?" Hermione whispered, hovering over the man's body. "Can you hear me?"

The man's eyes flickered underneath closed lids. There was a painful looking swallow as he tried to gather strength to speak.

Ron tried not to look at Snape's bloodied Adam's apple as it bobbed.

"Bout... time..." Snape breathed slowly out.

"Professor, what can we do?" Hermione asked hurriedly.

They watched his eyes again flicker, and Ron absolutely knew that the man was rolling them under their lids. He could almost hear the man reply *must I give you all the answers, Ms. Granger?*

"We need to get him to the hospital wing," Ron said.

"How?" Hermione asked. "He's the last person anyone wants to see; everyone believes him a traitor. Bring him back to the castle and you might as well kill him all over again."

"I'm not so convinced he's not a traitor," Ron said while he scanned the room. He found a ratty quilt over the mangled bed that had so long ago housed a werewolf. "But until then," he removed the quilt and covered Snape's body with it, "we will disguise him, take him to the hospital ward and see he gets treatment." He levitated Snape's body.

Hermione looked on with unabashed admiration. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Ron smiled. "You've had a pretty rough couple of days. Cut yourself a break."

As they walked out of the Shrieking Shack with a glamoured Snape floating before them, Ron had a sense of déjà vu as he thought of the last time they had left that place with Snape. He smiled at the memory, but unlike Sirius' turn, he didn't scrape his unconscious charge along the tunnel walls.

That would be the last humorous thought he would have for the rest of the long, drawn out night.

When they arrived at the hospital wing, they found that all of the beds were full and that there were auxiliary cots being levitated in by Madam Pomfrey and her medi-team. Pomfrey, herself, seemed about ready to collapse and barely looked at the unfamiliar face Ron and Hermione delivered to her.

"He had been bitten by a snake and is only alive now due to this," Hermione said, handing the bottle she had retrieved from Snape's hand.

Pomfrey sniffed the unlabeled bottle. "Clever."

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked.

"This is a very strong congealant. Without this to stop the bleeding, he wouldn't have survived." The women sniffed the bottle again, then looked at the man lying before her. Hermione had preformed the glamour and had really only changed a few things: facial structure, color of his hair. It was enough. "Tell me, who is this man?"

Hermione opened her mouth but seemed at a loss for an adequate lie...a first, surely.

"We don't really know," Ron answered instead. "We found him on the grounds, dead snake beside him and a handful of Death Eaters leaving. We assumed he is on our side and had fought valiantly against man and beast. The beast had died in the battle, and the Death Eaters had obviously left the man for dead."

He smiled, knowing that at least part of what he had said was true; Snape had been bitten by a snake and had been left for dead by evil incarnate. That the snake still roamed and that the Death Eaters really had been Voldemort himself didn't need to be discussed.

Hermione once again looked at him with awed wonderment. He liked that look.

Maybe it was that look, maybe it was all the death and destruction Ron had to face after the victory was declared, whatever the reason, he soon found himself moving himself, his fiancée and their almost-dead Potions master into a row house in an abandoned part of London called Spinner's End.

That was the first in a long list of lines he would eventually cross. He'd like to say he did it all for love, but we will see soon enough, there were other reasons, just as noble, but harder to articulate for our Mr. Weasley. He had barely time to acclimate himself to this new existence before the wind picked up and the swirling sand shifted around him again in the form of news that while he was planning a life for him and Hermione, she was busy planning a life for herself.

"What do you mean you're going back to school? We're supposed to be getting married, remember? Remember that I asked and you agreed?" Ron said.

He was standing on one side of the guest bed, hand on the post to steady himself. Hermione was sitting on the edge of the other side, applying the salve to Snape's wound, as they had to do four times a day.

It turned out, the potion he had concocted to survive Nagini's bite had stopped the bleeding but had done immeasurable damage to the man's nervous system and some pretty major organs of the body; the most important being his heart. He had remained at St. Mungo's for two months. Hermione went daily to reinforce the glamour.

They didn't know what charges Snape would have faced after Harry's announcements of his true allegiance and the facts behind Dumbledore's death, but they weren't taking any chances until the man was healthy enough to defend himself. They were going to tell Harry, of course they were, but the first few weeks after the battle had been so crazy for all of them. After that, Harry and Ginny had unexpectedly and with no word, taken off. A week later, Ron and Hermione had received a postcard apologizing for leaving without a goodbye, but that they just needed to get away from everything for a while. Ron's parents were a bit hysterical with the idea of Ginny out there on her own with Harry, but Ron and Hermione understood. They would have done the same perhaps, if they didn't have to make arrangements for the care of a half-dead professor.

"Of course I remember," Hermione answered with a sigh. "I'm not going back for the whole year. I'm just going to get some brush up tutoring and then sit for the NEWTS."

"Why?"

This sigh was a bit more exacerbated. "Ron, I want to marry you, of course I do. But there are a great many other things I want to do too; most of them require me to have

NEWS scores."

"So, how long are we talking about? How long are you going to be gone?"

Hermione swallowed. "Just three months in the beginning of term and two weeks at the end."

"What?" Ron boomed.

Hermione stopped what she was doing and looked at him with her finger to her lips. Then indicated the unconscious man on the bed.

"He can't hear us," he started, and then something dawned on him. "You started this conversation in here because you knew I couldn't explode."

"I did no such thing," she said, but her eyes didn't meet his.

"Fine. Go. But remember, next time you make plans that effect both of us, you might want to talk to me. Oh, and by the way, while making these plans to be gone for a good long part of this year, did you think about him?" He pointed to Snape. "What about him? If you think..."

"Of course not. I'll ask Kreacher or one of the other house-elves if they'd like the job."

"Great, so a rickety house, just me, Snape and Kreacher. Life just gets better and better. Why don't you see if Gwarp and Buckbeak want to shack up here too?"

She gave him that don't be ridiculous look, but got up and came to his side of the bed and stroked his arm. "I'm sorry. You're right. It was terribly unfair of me to do all of this without discussing it with you. I just didn't want you to talk me out of it."

Ron turned to her, and the look in his eyes told her clearly that the soft apology and small affection wasn't going to win back his favor. "First of all, I'm sad to see that you think so little of me that you think I would try to deny you anything...when have I ever talked you out of anything? Second, did you even think about me and what I might want at all?"

He gave her one more hurt look before walking to the door. He was just about to open it when he heard a voice he wasn't expecting, and though it was small and weak, it was still the same derisive tone.

"Ah, young love."

Hermione shrieked, and Ron spun around. Snape, who had been ignored while they had been discussing their future...or lack of one...had his head resting on his shoulder, like he had lost bones and couldn't hold it up. But his eyes were open, and he looked slightly irritated and extremely confused.

"Professor, you're conscious!" Hermione whispered through her fingers, covering her mouth in shock.

"I always knew you were quick like that," Snape said with a painful wheeze.

"You shouldn't talk too much," Ron said, approaching the bed.

"Tell me what's going on, and I won't talk at all," Snape answered.

Hermione and Ron told him about finding him, disguising him and taking care of him.

He listened and didn't say anything until the end. "How did we wind up here?"

"In Spinner's End?" Hermione asked.

Snape lowered his head slightly to indicate a nod.

"Well, we needed a place, a place where we could quietly move you, and while cleaning out your offices, we found the deed to this place, and since... well since..." Ron fumbled.

"You were declared dead," Hermione took over for Ron. "We bought the place cheap. But it's still your house."

"Keep it."

"No, of course not. We'll only stay until you don't need us anymore," Hermione said.

Snape tried to move his head so that she could see him better. If he were still unconscious, Hermione and maybe even Ron wouldn't even think twice before reaching out and assisting him, but awake, watching them, they remembered his past surliness, and neither could move. After a moment, he gave up and bowed his head, closing his eyes, drifting back into unconsciousness.

Ron and Hermione looked at each other, Hermione with tears in her eyes and Ron solemn. Suddenly, their problems seemed rather piety.

"I'm sorry," Hermione whispered soundlessly.

"I love you," Ron whispered back.

For the next couple of weeks, before Hermione had to leave for Hogwarts, she spent a lot of time in Snape's room, tending to him while he dipped in and out of consciousness. She had gotten over her fear of physically touching him while he was awake. He needed treatment, whether he wanted it or not, and he was no position to protest. But it was uncomfortable for both of them, so she usually waited until he was sleeping and very, very gently, applied the healing cream to his wound.

Ron spent a bit of time in the room too, watching what needed to be done, just in case he needed to tend to him while she was gone. No matter what he said to the contrary when angry, he wouldn't leave the man to suffer just because he thought the idea of touching the man repulsive. It was he who first discovered that while Snape was being tended, while he was being physically touched in any way, his color seemed to return...what little he had to begin with...and his breathing started to even, the speeding tattoo of his heart slowing in his chest that was so concave due to lack of nourishment and movement.

They didn't talk about him or about their relationship while in his presence anymore, for they were never sure when he was paying attention and when he wasn't. They did, however, spend a great deal of time talking about him while they were alone in other parts of the house. They spent most of their time in the library which was unsurprisingly the biggest, plushiest, most comfortable part of Snape's house.

"Why do you think it is that he seems to do so much better while being touched?" Ron asked a few days after Snape regained consciousness that first time. Hermione was in the library preparing for the NEWTs by perusing Snape's extensive collection of Potions books.

"I don't know. Maybe it tickles."

"Tickles?" Ron asked. She obviously wasn't listening he reasoned. "Do you imagine Snape's ever had sex?"

This got her attention from the books. "What?"

"You know, sexual intercourse with a female, or male; who knows, he might be into that."

"Ew, no!"

"No, not with a man, or not at all?"

"I mean, Ronald, no, I've never imagined Snape having sex."

"I didn't mean have you thought about it...gods I hope not...but what I meant was, do you suppose he's ever had sex?"

"I... well..." Hermione began but then stopped to consider. "I don't know," she finally said.

"Yeah, me neither. I mean think about what Harry said about Snape loving his mother and never recovering from her death. You think they ever? Or after?"

She looked perplexed, just like she always did when she didn't know the answer to something.

Ron and Hermione had only begun sleeping together but he couldn't even remember what it had been like to not be intimate with her. He laughed often about the fact that it had taken them seven years to have that first kiss, and about six hours after to have their first shag. Winning a war would do that to you, he reasoned. And though it had happened as they clung to each other exhausted and heart-sick from all that had taken place, it had been the best moments of his life, only topped by every other moment he'd had in bed with her since.

"What if he's never... never... been loved?" Ron asked, horrified by the idea. But thinking of what little he knew of the man, even after Harry told all he had discovered, it reasoned that it might be entirely possible. A few months before, if he had thought these thoughts, he would have smiled wistfully and remarked, *served the git right*. Now though, it only caused him to ponder.

Hermione however, having found what she was looking for on the bookshelf, was on to other things.

"Oh, *101 Things You Never Need to Know About Asphodel*. This is extremely rare," she said excitedly, gently removing it from the shelf.

"Maybe they stopped making the book since it says right in the title you don't need to know about it."

"Mmmhmm," was all she replied. One day he was going to ask for something extremely important when she was otherwise occupied and then hold her to that response.

On the morning of September 1, Ron found himself at the last place he imagined seeing himself for years and years, the platform beside the Hogwarts Express.

Hermione clung to him as if having serious second thoughts, and Ron tried really hard not to let her give into them. Nothing would please him more than for her to give up this crazy idea and come back home with him.

"Hey, what are you two doing here?" a voice from across the platform asked.

Ron and Hermione tore their eyes from each other to see Harry and Ginny walking toward them, smiling widely.

They took turns hugging each other. It had only been about a month since they had last seen each other, but in the last seven years, that's the longest they'd gone without so much as a post, after the last year, Ron had certainly never thought there would be a day that he didn't see Harry.

"Hermione decided that she didn't get enough education in the big, scary world last year and has decided to go back for a bit to sit for her NEWTs," Ron said.

"No! Really?" Harry asked, but he was drowned out by Ginny's ecstatic flailing and jumping up and down.

"Oh! That's brilliant. I was so nervous that I would be there alone!"

The engines started and drowned out any other conversation. Hermione kissed Ron one more time, Harry kissed Ginny one last time, and then together they walked onto the train, turning back to wave at their fiancés one more time before leaving.

"Don't you suddenly feel old?" Harry asked.

"Hey, I'm not the one dating a school girl."

"Oh, sod off." Harry laughed. "You wanna get a cuppa?"

Ron checked his watch. "Sure, I can stop for a spot of something before I have to be at work."

"Work? Where are you working?"

"I'm starting today actually, working for George in the shop. Just until he... well... until he..."

"I understand," Harry interrupted.

They made their way back out of the station.

"So, what are you going to do with yourself? Straight to Auror training?"

Harry ran his hand through his hair. "Actually, I was thinking of doing some more traveling. Being with Ginny was great, but, well, there are some places I'd like to see that she had no interest in."

"Yeah? Like where?"

"Oh, you know, places without magic or indoor plumbing. I wish you could come with me," he added as if an afterthought.

"I think I might have seen enough of the world last..." he stopped. Why couldn't he find a single topic to discuss without bringing up the painful recent past?

"Yeah," Harry said with an uneasy chuckle. "I understand, besides, you have work."

Yes, thought Ron, *and responsibilities you can't even imagine*.

He wondered if this was the right time to tell Harry about Snape. But as they sat down and Harry gave him an opening, he found himself stammering.

"So, where are you and Hermione living?"

"Oh... um... well... we... um... I mean..."

"Ron?"

"Sorry. We... uh... found a row house in North London. Spinner's End."

"Really? I think my mum grew up around there."

"Hmmm," Ron mumbled, scanning the shop looking for someone to take their order.

They talked through their tea though about nothing special: Harry telling Ron about his time traveling around Europe with Ginny. Ron didn't do much talking of his own, but he noticed that there was something different about both of them. Their talk wasn't as easy as it had been, and there were many subjects that they shied away from. Ron understood it; after all they'd seen and done, he understood Harry's desire to get away from it all, even him, but it still hurt. He wondered if they'd ever get to where they used to be.

Tea was over faster than normal, but Ron checked his watch again as if he were running late, as if that were the reason he was rising from his chair.

"You leaving right away?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, but I'll walk with you to Wheezes if you don't mind. I'd like to say hi and goodbye to George before I go."

"Of course."

It wasn't until right before they arrived at Diagon Alley that Harry asked what he seemed to want to know. "You ever think about any of them?"

"Them?" Ron asked.

"You know, Remus, Tonks, Dumbledore, Snape?"

Of course he didn't mention Fred; that would have been a stupid question.

"I sometimes think about Remus and Tonks...you know, when I think of Teddy. You seen him lately?"

"No, I'm going over there after I leave here," Harry answered.

Ron knew that he had ducked the Snape question again, and he could just let it go, but... "And Snape... well..." He turned and stopped Harry from walking. "Come by the house tonight before you leave, okay? There's something you should know."

"Know? About Snape? What do you know that I don't?"

Ron winced. "Just come by my house tonight."

Harry watched him for a moment, as if contemplating Legilimency. "Okay. Sure, I'll come by tonight. Just give me the address."

When Ron got off work, he Apparated right outside his house and quickly went through the place, straightening up before he went to check on Snape.

"How are you, Professor?" Ron asked, entering the man's room after lightly knocking and being bid, "Come in."

"Just splendidly, Mr. Weasley," Snape drawled, sarcasm dripping. He was sitting up against a mountain of pillows, as he preferred to spend his daytime hours. Kreacher was balled up in the corner snoring loudly.

"Looks like you've done in the poor house-elf."

"I don't know how. He barely got me up before he took his first nap of the day."

"I'm sorry," Ron said. It was a surprise to him that he really meant it. The man had no use of his limbs and had been confined to his room with no stimulation, nothing to do or no one to talk to for a large part of the day. No wonder he was a bit snippy. Ron wondered if this were the best time to tell him of Harry's visit, and again to ponder if perhaps the two one-time adversaries really needed to know about the current situation.

"Um..." he said, checking his watch yet again. It was already becoming an annoying habit.

"Spit it out, Mr. Weasley."

"Well, it's just that... I have a friend coming over, and..."

"Your soon to be betrothed is gone for half a day, and you already have a *friend* coming over?"

"What? No! Not that! It's not that at all. It's... it's... Harry. Harry is coming over. And I haven't told him... I mean we haven't told him... about... about you... you know, being alive... being... being here... and I... I just wanted to know... to ask..."

He stopped and mentally kicked himself before taking a deep breath. He'd have to nip this stammering before it became another annoying habit, that, by the looks of Snape's expression, would be mocked ruthlessly.

"I wanted to know if you wanted him to know that you were alive and here," Ron finally got out coherently.

Snape studied him. Ron was actually becoming used to that look and liked to imagine that it was because Snape was constantly reevaluating his opinions and preconceived notions of his former student.

"You are coming and asking me? Considering my wants?"

"Well, yeah. It's your secret. It is going to be hard enough healing your body if you are broken in other, unreachable places, you know? I don't want to cause you anymore... um... discomfort. Not if I can avoid it."

Snape bowed his head as well as he could and mumbled words that sounded very strongly to Ron like "Thank you."

Ron nodded his head again and waited quietly.

"Perhaps, it would be more prudent to see what Mr. Potter's feelings of me are first. I have no aversion to finally facing my past...and his opinions are of course very important to not only me, but the rest of the wizarding world that would like to label me a scoundrel...but, if he's not ready to deal with such things, believe me I would be the first to understand. Do *you* understand?"

"Yes, sir," Ron caught himself saying.

Harry arrived about an hour later, just in time for Ron to start a bit of dinner for them. The first thing Harry did after being let in is laugh at Ron in his apron. "Look at you. You have a house, you have an apron, you just need the missus and a few babies bouncing around."

"Watch your tongue! I have enough going on to add children." Ron said, ushering Harry into the kitchen.

"But you're really ready for the homemaker thing, aren't you?" Harry asked, popping a freshly chopped carrot into his mouth.

"It's more necessity than anything. You know how I like to eat, right? And you remember how dodgy Hermione's cooking was out in the... wild. What was I going to do, starve? So, I had mum give me some recipes, and Fleur offered some and, well, I find I enjoy it."

Harry smiled at his friend.

"You're not ready for the domestic life?" Ron asked, rather surprised. He had thought that was all Harry had wanted.

Harry shrugged. "I will be. I just... just..." Ron laughed. Turned out this bumbling was catching. Harry laughed too and started again, in a low whisper. "I just need some time away from all that is expected of me, all that people want that I can't give. You know?"

Ron did know. And he looked at the ceiling where two floors away lay a man who might possibly be one of those people. Could Harry give Snape what he needed?

"So, where did you find this house?" Harry asked, interrupting Ron's thoughts and simultaneously giving him an opening to test the waters.

"During the Reconstruction of Hogwarts, Hermione and I were cleaning out Snape's offices and we, well, we found a deed for this place. Free and clear. He had no descendants so the property went back to the Ministry, which was glad to sell it to us for an amazingly low price."

"I bet," spat Harry. Ron couldn't read if the vehemence was for the Ministry or for Snape. "But Ron, you know you two could have had Grimmauld Place, especially while I was traveling."

Ron smiled. "I know. But we didn't know how long you'd be gone, or what your plans would be once returning. Heck, we didn't even know if Ginny would be returning for her final year."

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered.

Ron waved away the apology and hated that they were still acting oddly around each other. The silence that followed didn't help his misery.

Harry looked around appraisingly. "So, this was Snape's home, huh?"

"Yeah," Ron answered. "I think he grew up here."

"Right," Harry mumbled. "This must be where he lived when he was friends with my mum."

There was another moment of uncomfortable silence before Harry started talking again. "You know, I went back to the Shrieking Shack after everything... that night, when the castle was quite and the sick and dead had been moved to places of honor. I went to find Snape's body and bring it where the rest were... but... well... it was gone."

Ron swallowed. He could neither lie nor tell the truth, so he said nothing.

Harry choked on a mirthless laugh. "Could you imagine if, after all of this, Snape survived?"

"What would you do if he had?" Ron asked, trying to sound only curious for curiosity's sake.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, I'd like to thank him in person for all that he did to give me what I needed to finish this once and for all, and of course I have a million questions I'd like to ask him, but..."

"But?" Ron asked, after Harry didn't go on for a minute.

"Well, it's just that I've hated him for so long and had to live with him loathing me and everything I stood for, and yes, all that he'd done absolves him for most of it, but... I don't know. Maybe that's one of the reasons I need to get away for a while. To sort this all out. Maybe."

Ron nodded. That made sense, he reasoned. So, until then, he'd take the responsibility to keep Snape's secret, for both Snape's and Harry's sakes.

Harry only stayed for a bit after dinner, proclaiming Ron the best cook since Hogwarts. That was saying something, Harry added, since he had been eating at the finest restaurants throughout Europe for the past few months.

"Keep in touch, please," Ron said at the door as Harry was buttoning his traveling cloak.

"I will; I promise."

"Where are you going first?"

Harry shrugged. "I think somewhere warm. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Ron tried not to sound too wistful. He was happy for his friend, of course he was, but a part of him...a big part at that moment...really wanted to go with him, to put all his new-found adult responsibilities behind him and travel the world. The thought of doing it without Hermione, though, was incomprehensible to him.

After Harry left, Ron looked around the house and sighed. He was already bored.

That really had to be the only excuse for finding himself doing things that he thought he would never do.

Perusing Snape's library shelves, he found a couple of novels that looked interesting on a bottom shelf. He scanned a few by a Muggle named Jules Verne and a set by a J.R.R. Tolkien and carried them to Snape's room for his opinion.

"Excuse me, sir, are you awake?" Ron asked as he opened the door in the darkened room. There was loud snoring, but it didn't seem to be coming from the bed.

"Yes."

"Would you like some light?"

"Please."

Ron went around the room lighting the oil lamps peppering the room. When he saw Snape's face, looking so defeated, Ron swallowed *If I'm bored...*

"Sir, I was going through your library."

"Deciding to learn to read after all this time, Mr. Weasley?"

"Sure, I thought I'd give it a go," Ron said, refusing to take the bait. After all, he was no longer a student, and while he couldn't imagine a time when he wouldn't be intimidated by his old professor, he didn't plan on letting himself be pushed around by him either. "I was just wondering if you'd read either of these and had any recommendations."

He held out the two books he had brought up. Snape looked at the titles and laughed. Ron stared at the man as if he were watching Snape grow another head. It was the strangest sound Ron had ever heard, but it was the first time that Ron's eyes didn't travel to the man's wounded throat, but instead his eyes, which were actually twinkling. *Holy shite.*

"Close your mouth, Mr. Weasley. You look like a fish."

Ron did with a dry laugh. "I'm sorry. I just never heard you laugh."

"It's been a rough couple of... decades."

"I bet. So, what about these books in particular made you giddy?"

"Well, it's just... don't you think you've had enough adventure and quests to last you a lifetime?"

"Well, which would you suggest?"

"Those are both good choices. I think you'll find some intriguing characters and familiar situations in that one," Snape said, casting his eyes on the *Lord of the Rings*.

"Would you like me to read it to you?" Ron asked, surprising himself almost as much as Snape.

"Excuse me?"

"Well, I just thought... I can't imagine sitting alone in this room for all this time can be at all pleasant, and I'd like to keep you company when I can, but I can't imagine us actually, you know, talking about things. So, I thought maybe I could read to you. It doesn't have to be these books; it could be the newspaper, one of your many, many Potions books." He kept the part about himself being bored out of it.

"That might be pleasant," Snape conceded. "As for the material, I will leave that up to you. Although I think fiction might be a bit of a nice relief these days, and for the news, I have no interest in the world and its rebuilding right now."

Ron nodded and pulled a chair up to the bedside. "Why do you think it is that wizards and witches don't have a lot of fiction? You'd think we'd have lots of great stories to tell."

"True, but I guess because all our great stories are considered non-fiction."

"I guess."

He opened the book and began...

"All that is gold does not glitter, not all those who wander are lost; the old that is strong does not wither, deep roots are not reached by the frost. From the ashes a fire shall be woken, a light from the shadows shall spring; renewed shall be blade that was broken, the crownless again shall be king."

When Ron next emerged from Middle Earth, the sun was peaking over the far off horizon and he'd gotten half way through the book.

"I'm so sorry," he said standing up.

"What? Why?" Snape asked, sounding surprised himself as if he, too, had lost track of time and place.

"You must be exhausted. I read all night."

"Exhausted? I've been sleeping all day long."

"Well let me get your medication, and then I'll leave you to get some sleep."

"Fine," Snape said. It sounded like he wanted to say something else, but he didn't, and when Ron came back to the bed, Kreacher was rising from his twelve-hour nap.

"You're being a lot of help," Ron growled at the yawning house-elf.

"You don't have to do that." Snape said, indicating the cream with his eyes. "The elf can do it. It can't be enjoyable."

Ron shrugged. "It's alright, I guess we might as well put Kreacher to work, you know, to work off his room and board."

Kreacher approached, hunched and mumbling his apologies. Ron told him to forget about that, and after he had tended to Snape, he could find some food in the kitchen. The house-elf looked at him with the watery eyes that Dobby had used when Harry did some small kindness to him.

"Thank you, sir."

Ron picked up the book and said goodbye to Snape, telling him if he didn't mind, he'd be back that night for another read. Snape nodded his answer. As Ron walked out, he saw Kreacher begin to apply the medicine and Snape flinched.

"Gentle, Kreacher," Ron reminded.

That night, he came back to Snape's room to continue the story and the night after and after and after. It was half way through the second edition of the book that he understood what Snape had meant about the characters.

"Have you figured it out yet?" Snape asked in a voice not at all condescending, which caused Ron to look up from the book.

"Well, I guess Frodo is a bit like Harry, right? A little, ordinary guy with a burden too big for him. Dumbledore is obviously like Gandalf. I guess I'd be that Sam guy...you know, minus the being short and having the hairy feet. Is there a you in here?"

Snape laughed painfully. "Who would create something like me?"

Ron smiled. "Yes, because that Gollum guy is so much more pleasant than you."

"He has his moments," Snape responded with a slight twitch of his lip.

"And this Sauron thing is this story's He Who Must Not Be Named?"

Snape looked at Ron but seemed to be talking to himself when he said, *He Who Must Not Be Named*. So innocent still. After it all."

"I'm not so innocent."

"No, don't think that I am demeaning you, Mr. Weasley. I do not mean that as if it is a bad thing."

"You know, sir, you could call me Ron."

"And you could call me something other than sir."

"Yeah, sure I could, as if the last seven years had never happened, Professor?"

"Yes, I suppose we've been beaten and shaped into our roles, our titles, haven't we?"

"I suppose."

They didn't talk to each other too much again until they had finished the series of books.

"Well, that was rubbish," Ron said, shutting the back cover on the last page.

"You think so?"

"After all that Sam and Frodo had been through, after all that Sam did for him and Frodo just leaves like that?"

"Ah, but Sam has his Rosie."

"I guess, but don't you think it's sad? Sam could pull his friend out of the fiery pits of Mordor, but he couldn't pull him out of his depression."

"Well, what would you do? Tie him down and make him see the world and all its glory?" Snape asked.

Ron swallowed and thought of Harry. How Harry was out there somewhere right now having adventures without him, having a life doing what he wanted while...he shook his head to clear it. "No, of course not. I'd let him go. But I wouldn't let him stay away."

"You are a true Weasley."

"Bothersome?"

Snape laughed that laugh again. "That's one way of saying it. I, of course, was going to say empathetically compassionate."

Ron laughed too. "Sure you were."

They shared a comfortable moment, and Ron felt the sand shift and the lines blur.

"Speaking of Sam's Rosie, I'm going tomorrow to see Hermione on this first Hogsmeade weekend." He couldn't believe that he still had to think of things like Hogsmeade weekends. "Do you need anything in the village, at the school?"

Snape's laugh turned bitter. "No, I think I've gotten all that belongs to me from that school."

The next day, Ron Apparated to Hogsmeade station, arriving just as the sun was rising. Before the students even rose, he was there waiting. He had rented a room at the Hog's Head and was planning on spending the day like no other outing ever conceived. He might stop to say hello to his sister, but it wasn't high on his list of priorities.

Hermione was one of the first students out of the gate and their reunion happened right there with a gaggle of students laughing and trying to maneuver around them. One of them was Ginny apparently.

"You two have fun!" they heard her call as they ran to the Hog's Head.

"I missed you so much," Hermione said in between kisses, working her cloak off.

"Has it really only been seven weeks?" Ron asked.

"Seven and a half," Hermione corrected. "I know. I've counted every minute of them, crossed them off my calendar."

"Why are you doing this again?" Ron pulled away from her, murmured a charm to the fireplace to get a fire going and pulled down the covers of the bed they were dancing toward.

"I don't remember."

"Me either."

Hermione began running her fingers up Ron's abdomen and chest, then back down, grabbing his t-shirt roughly and pulling it over his head.

"Let's get married."

"We are getting married," Ron answered, pushing his pants down around his knees.

"No, I mean like now. Right this second." Hermione removed her bra, and Ron forgot what they were talking about.

"Okay."

Their lovemaking was heated, rough and quick. And yet neither was disappointed.

"Let's do that again," Hermione said once she regained her normal breathing.

"Just give me a moment, love."

"Okay, you can recoup while you tell me all that you've been doing while I've been here."

"Oh, that should give me a minute and a half."

"How's George? The shop? The family? How is Snape? Is Kreacher helping?"

"George is doing good. He's been spending a lot of time with Angelina."

"Angelina? Really? What about Lee, has he seen a lot of Lee?"

"Sure, he's helping at the shop too. I'd say George has more help than he'd ever need."

"Nonsense, you can never have too much help."

Hermione was propped up on one elbow, looking at Ron who lay on his back, her hand mindlessly caressing his long arms. Ron took her hand in his, his fingers intertwining hers, engulfing them and kissed each one, then her wrist and worked his lips up her arm until he brought her down and kissed her shoulder, neck and chin, along her jawbone until his tongue licked her earlobe, his mouth enveloping it and sucking.

"Ready?" Hermione breathed.

"Always," Ron whispered heavy and warm in her ear.

He maneuvered so that he was hovering over her, kissing his way back down her jaw to her throat.

"Oh, I think you might have been right about Snape," Hermione said, completely ruining the mood.

Ron stopped what he was doing and looked at her incredulously. "Can we maybe talk about Snape later?"

She smiled her apology and took his face in her hands, kissing him. "Of course."

This time the lovemaking was slower and tender, and they lay exhausted for a long time after.

"So, what were you saying before?" Ron asked, hands under his head, feeling completely satisfied and slightly smug, as getting Hermione to scream in that particular way did to him. "Something about me being right?"

"Shocking, I know." Hermione smirked.

"Very funny. What was I right about?"

"About Snape responding to touch. I've been doing some reading..."

"Shocking, I know," Ron said this time.

Hermione smacked him playfully before continuing. "And there are some interesting findings in what, for a better name, is called, Healing Hands. What it really sounds like is what Dumbledore said about the power of love, this being the power to heal."

"You think Snape loves you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Not that kind of love. There are many ways to love someone. Gratitude perhaps, maybe someday respect. But, maybe you're right, too, when you wondered if Snape's ever had sex. If he'd never had kindness applied to his physical being, then that could be healing as well."

"Couldn't we hire someone to come in and um...love him?"

"That's not love."

Close enough was right on the tip of his tongue, but he bit it back.

"Then what do you suggest?"

Hermione shrugged as if she hadn't found the exact right piece to the puzzle to cure their half-dead Potions master.

"Be nice?" she suggested finally.

"Nice? I am nice. I read to him every night. I cook for him, feed him, make sure Kreacher treats him gently and with respect. I've done everything but cuddle up to him and sing him lullabies."

Hermione's eyes filled with that look of admiration that Ron loved so much. "You know, I wasn't just saying that lets get married now thing because I was horny and I needed you in me."

"Really? You want to get married now?"

"Maybe we could do it when I get back? That would be a nice Christmas present to ourselves, wouldn't it?"

"Don't these things usually take time and planning?"

"Only if we want to invite everyone we know and hold it in a castle or something. I was thinking something more intimate, just your family and my family. Unless you'd like something more."

"Not really. I'm sure Harry and Ginny will have an extravaganza when they get married; I can't imagine them getting away with anything less, so we'll see everyone then."

"Have you seen Harry lately?" Hermione asked, worried.

"Not since the day you got on the train. He came over for dinner."

"He came to the house? Did he see... does he know?"

"Don't you think I would have told you if they had met?"

"Yes, in all of those many, *many*, letters that you send?" Hermione smirked.

"You know I'm no good at letters. I respond to yours don't I?"

"Barely, obviously," she sulked. "If I didn't even know that Harry was at the house."

He told her what had happened and then about Snape in general.

"He seems to be different, doesn't he?" she said at the end.

"Maybe," Ron conceded. Then he surprised himself again. "Or, perhaps he's the same as he's always been; we've just misunderstood him from the beginning."

The third time they made love it was fierce and hot, starting from the moment Hermione pounced on him, working her way down, taking him in her mouth, and ended with her collapsing on top of him, breathing heavy and whispering sweetly in his ear.

They lay together for a bit, not talking, just caressing each other, as if attempting to memorize the feel of each other until the next month when Hermione would be back home. Ron loved the feel of her skin against his long, lazy fingertips. Stretching his fingers flush against the skin of her waist and squeezing gently, he watched the skin slip out of his grasp, seeing her skin go from pink to white and then blushing before returning to its regular hue.

This for the rest of my life, he thought with a contended sigh.

After they got dressed and Ron walked her back to the castle gates, kissing her again and again before watching her walk away, Ron Apparated to London, right outside of St. Mungo's. They were running out of Snape's medicine, and he needed a refill. He also wanted to ask the mediwitch if there was anything else they could be doing for the man. He didn't want to love Snape, but he would like to see the man get better. Seemed his life had been miserable enough without adding being an invalid to the list. As it was, saving him seemed sometimes like a cruelty if that was all that was left for him.

He returned home two hours later with the medicine and a list of exercises to do to ensure when Snape finally had the use of his limbs that they wouldn't be a large blob of muscleless mass.

"You want to do what, Mr. Weasley?" Snape asked, looking apprehensive as Ron removed Snape's covers.

"You need some exercise."

"Yes, well I guess I'll just hop up and nip out for a walk about, shall I?"

"Yeah, why don't you do that?" Ron answered. "But, if that doesn't work, how about you let me do some exercises for you?"

"What ever do you mean?"

"I mean," Ron started as he gently lifted up one of Snape's arms and, stretched it slightly at the shoulder then the elbow, "that I will help you with your exercises."

"Why?" Snape asked, his horrified look being replaced by curiosity.

"What do you mean why? Why do you need exercise? You have to know what happens to muscles that aren't regularly used."

"Of course I do. What I meant was, why can't you use magic? Why do you need to... need to..."

"Touch you?" Ron answered for him, sensing the man's unease. For a moment, Ron bristled; it wasn't like he was getting enjoyment from the experience. It wasn't like this is where he saw himself winding up after all that he'd seen and done.

Then he saw the look in the older man's eyes and knew it wasn't about being touched by Ron. He recognized that look...it was the look he would give to Harry when, without even thinking about it, without even *needing* to think about it, Harry would pay for something or give Ron something that he needed and couldn't afford. He saw the dependency and how weak it made a person feel in Snape's eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley, why must I be touched? Surely you're proficient enough in magic to do the work for you."

"I could probably, but why take the risk? Besides, Hermione believes there is a healing aspect to the actual laying-on of hands."

"She does, does she?"

"Yes, she believes in something called *Love Therapy* though, that isn't the word I'd give it."

"Love?" Snape asked, more than horror in his eyes now.

Ron chuckled. "Relax, it's not *that* kind of exercise. Hermione believes that there are many types of love. We need not even like each other, but if there is a bit of respect, a modicum of care, then a fusion of magic and well-beingness could transpire."

"How very Albus of her. Tell me, does Ms. Granger believe in letting you think for yourself?"

Ron dropped the man's arm and glared at him. He understood that tactic too, the abrasiveness to assuage your own feelings of weakness. But understanding it wasn't the same as liking or even accepting it.

"I'm sure you don't want to hear my beliefs on the subject," Ron hissed through his teeth, despite himself. He was pretty sure he would regret it.

"Ohh, is that emotion I detect, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron lifted Snape's leg at the ankle and then with the other hand under his knee, bent his leg and brought his knee to his chest slowly. He breathed through his nose and tried to tune Snape's badgering out, focusing instead on what he was doing. He heard the cracks of long-forgotten joints waking up and heard moans and grunts from Snape when he'd pushed a muscle past its limited endurance. Those were the sounds he needed to be alert for. Not the needling.

Snape continued, "You've been such a good boy. You'd make your fiancée proud. You'd make your mother proud. Doing all these things, without a thought to yourself. Helping this poor, pathetic shriveled up man with nothing in it for yourself. What must your thoughts be? Surely you have things you'd much rather be doing? Places you'd imagined you'd be. People you imagined you'd be surrounded by, people that weren't me."

Ron just mumbled and went to the other side of the bed, working on Snape's right side now.

"A life you imagined having..."

Ron pulled Snape's arm a bit harder than he had the other side.

"Tell me, why are you doing this? Why are you here with me? And please don't talk anymore of the many ways one loves another."

Ron smiled wickedly. "Truthfully?"

Snape nodded.

He moved to Snape's leg and continued the exercise with a shrug. "It is what it is. Do I believe in the magical power of touch? Maybe, maybe not. But the human body is a delicate thing, even yours, and to leave it to magic seems a reckless thing to do. Would a spell know that your leg can't reach past this point?" He brought the knee up again until he felt the muscle stretch under Snape's clothes and skin.

Snape didn't say anything, just grunted.

"Do I believe in the power of love?" Ron asked, placing one hand on the pelvic bone of Snape's hip and pushed as he leaned over him, clutching the opposite shoulder and pulling slightly so that he twisted Snape's upper body. Snape groaned again before Ron continued. "Maybe. I've seen what love can do. Both the good and the bad, as I'm sure you have as well."

He watched Snape's eyes and the flicker of fleeting understanding.

"You want to know what I believe?" Ron reached his arm under Snape's upper legs and the other hand cradled Snape's neck and pulled both slowly together slightly. "I believe that whether I wanted this responsibility or not, whether I like you or not, you are my charge until you are well enough to take care of yourself. So, while others talk of love and healing, why don't we be honest with ourselves. Things aren't going to change for us until we both make them change."

Ron tried not to look at Snape with this confession. He didn't want to see loathing or any other emotion. He couldn't help it, though. The respectful nod and smile was something he was not expecting.

"There is some Slytherin inside of you after all."

"Why? Because I have self-interest?"

"Everyone is self-interested to some extent," answered Snape. "Slytherins just aren't ashamed of it."

"Maybe there's a little Slytherin. Just keep it to yourself," he said with a smile before calling for Kreacher.

"You need a warm bath and then a rub down to really feel the effects of the work out."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley."

Ron nodded and then made his way down to the local pub for a drink... or twelve. It wasn't that his life was miserable, or that he couldn't see a way out, he just didn't think he was capable of going on this way. Harry had travel, Hermione had school, where was his thing? It couldn't be just this, could it?

Here it is that we find our young Mr. Weasley at a crossroads...the choice that we all must make in our lives at one point or another...between what is right and what is easy. Those of us who remember only a Ron who could abandon his friends in their hour of need for the want of a sandwich might believe him always choosing the easy. For those of us who remember that he came back, swam to the bottom of a frigid lake and brought his charge out of death's grip, that he faced his personal demons and, in the end, destroyed them with a sword's piercing thrust, that he then went on to become a valuable member of a team directly responsible for the end of a long and bloody battle of good triumph over evil, would not find it hard at all to believe that he choose the path of what was right.

We, of course wouldn't be as foolish as to say he did it willingly or without a bit of grumbling.

But he did come back home the next morning with an enormous hangover that the best of remedies couldn't relieve, went to work, then came home to prepare his household's dinner before performing the exercises he had begun the night before with Snape. After that, he went to visit his mother who had Floo-called him earlier, excited about an owl she had received from Hermione asking for help with the upcoming wedding. When he returned from the Burrow, he found a book and went back up to Snape's room to begin a new chapter.

And the next day he did it again, and the next, and the next.

To him, it didn't seem that he had made a decision; it felt more like he was fighting against rising, swirling sand trying to choke and suffocate him if he didn't constantly keep moving, one step at a time, one foot in front of the other.

It would have seemed like a small march to death if not for a few bright spots along the way. The first being the increased correspondence with Hermione, who was obviously missing him and excited to begin their life together, the other, surprisingly, was Snape. They weren't *sharing their feelings* or *bonding* or anything. In fact, the more time Ron spent with Snape, the less they talked; Snape's loathing of dependency bumping against Ron's increased obligations didn't allow for much conversation.

But it wasn't the man's shining personality or witty repertoire that bolstered Ron's outlook. It was his physical being. After about two weeks of exercise, Ron began to feel the muscle under his hand forming along Snape's bony arms and legs and see color return to his pallid skin.

The more he saw his ministrations paying off, the more Ron didn't mind the physical contact and the more he allowed himself to take care of Snape. He started to feel he had a knack for this. Soon he was administrating the muscle-soothing massages and applying the creamy medication that Snape still needed to eventually gain the ability to become mobile again. By the time that Hermione's last days at school came around, Ron's only use for Kreacher was to oversee Snape's bathing and the dressing and undressing of the man.

It wasn't just Ron who was coming to terms with his new reality. Snape also was finding ways to do more than merely survive. Perhaps he finally decided that he was no longer fate's whipping boy, and since he survived...when there was no reason that he should have...he ought to see it as a sign that life was finally his, and only his, to live as he saw fit. While Ron felt Snape's muscles and health return, Snape felt his magic returning, infinitesimally, but still, and with it came hope.

By the time Hermione came home from her schooling, Snape was sitting up, listening to the wireless, reintroducing himself to the news of the wizarding world. He was spending his days working out crossword puzzles with the help of Kreacher and had even challenged Ron to wizard's chess...once. Turned out, despite it all, Snape was still a *terribly* bad sport when it came to losing. And maybe due to everything, Ron was *incredibly* cocky about his superior talent with the game.

Also, by the time Hermione had returned, the wedding plans had been cemented by her and Mrs. Weasley. So, the day that she returned, they were hurried to the Burrow for the festivities. With the new hire of Winky to assist Kreacher in taking care of Snape, they were insured that he would be all right, even if not highly amused by the antics of a tired old house elf and his alcoholic assistant. Ron and Hermione promised to be back soon. Snape merely nodded and wished them luck with absolutely no sincerity.

The weekend was a flurry of parties, celebrations and ceremony, all of which was barely noticed by Ron who was only fully looking forward to the alone time with Hermione after it was all over. It was nice to see everyone, especially Harry and friends from school that he hadn't thought about since the last time they saw them all those months ago. So much had happened since then, and he didn't want to think about the life they had already started for themselves while he sat and waited for his to begin. But it all stopped that night, all the waiting, all the fears of drowning a sandy death.

Ron sat on the edge of a rented bed and watched his wife...he loved that word, *wife*...slowly undress before him. The years of sparring partner friendship, a year of soldiering in an army of three and the months of them being lovers, combined with the rings on their fingers, bonded them together and made them stronger and more assured than ever before. Hermione especially seemed to feel all-powerful as she began to give her husband a show, removing so very slowly her wedding dress, her corset, and garter belt before placing her stocking-clad leg beside him, allowing him to aid her in removing the silk.

He licked his lips as he looked into her shining eyes. Starting at the arch of her foot and with feather-light circles, he traced his way lazily up her ankles, shins, knee coming to the top of the stocking at mid-thigh. Leaning into her, he kissed her where the silk meet skin, rolling the stocking down a bit, he kissed again, and again, until he'd slid off the bed and had her foot in his hand.

She let him spin her around and place her softly on the edge of the bed where just before he had been. He was on his knees before her and, taking the other leg and lifting it, he removed the stocking. He draped her leg over his shoulder and began running his tongue along her thigh, kissing and sucking skin as he moved himself to her center.

She had laid herself down onto her elbows, her eyes on him, one leg still wrapped around his head, the other spread, exposing herself fully to him. He looked at her with a wicked grin as he licked his lips, causing her to whimper in anticipation as he spread her lips apart with his long, meaty fingers. He slid one finger in, and she arched her back and balled the blankets harshly with white-knuckled fingers.

"Fuck me," she whispered throatily. "Fuck me with your tongue."

As he continued stroking her with his finger, he licked and kissed his way to fulfill her demand. While he breathed her in, he thought of all those months in that horrible tent, how he had dreamed of moments like these, longed for them. That was before the damned locket around his neck slithered its thoughts into his head. Then the images turned dark and the longing became about possession, owning her, overpowering her, bending her to his will.

While he worked his tongue along her opening, he worked his free hand up to her nipples, teasing them with her fingers while his tongue teased her clit. She moaned loudly and clutched his shoulder painfully. As he worked his tongue deep inside of her, tasting her, he remembered that first time he had come to her, weary from battle, saddened with loss, and still feeling the guilt and filth of the horcrux's whispered desires, he had been shaken, timid and anxious to only take what she willingly gave.

He'd like to think he'd improved markedly from that first time, he thought as he twirled his tongue deep inside her before pulling out and diving deeper inside. But he had no intention to ever stop trying to be better, giving more. With a joyous, throaty chuckle, he caused Hermione to shiver and with a loud gasp, she came.

"For the rest of my life," he whispered as he got up and lay beside his wife, wrapping himself around her.

"For the rest of *our* lives," she corrected, her fingers gently swiping his sweaty fringe out of his eyes.

With gentle strokes, she wiped herself off Ron's face. He licked his lips one more time before she wiped her taste completely off them.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, kissing him.

"Hmmm," he hummed, putting his hand around her throat, running his thumb along her chin. "I can stand doing this for a bit more."

She kissed him again; licking his mouth open, she twined his tongue with hers. Just when he thought the kiss would last forever and he was lost in it, he realized that her fingers were tiptoeing down his side, swirling lazily on his hip.

"What now?" she asked, enlarging her circling caress until she had worked her way to his erection.

He took her hand, guided her to stroke his shaft and rolled onto his back, putting his hands behind his head. "Do with me what you will."

It was her turn to smile wickedly as she continued to stroke him a few more times before she, in one fluid motion, straddled him, situating herself so that she easily glided him inside her.

Ron bit his lip and pumped his hips to feel her wrapped around him more deeply. She rocked in a circle before rising up and back down again. Each time she slammed down on him, he rose up to meet her, his hands now on her hips.

"Harder," he begged, wanting to feel her all around him and the slide of her up and down him.

Their panting almost drowned out the slapping sound of body on body as she complied. Ron bit his lip painfully to stop himself from coming before her. When she stopped bouncing on top of him and rotated her pelvis slowly to feel him throughout her, Ron felt her shiver and knew that he was now allowed to come too. Pumping his hips one more time, he exploded inside her with one last grunt.

She collapsed on top of him, her head on his chest as if listening for his rapidly beating heart. Her hair tickled his face and he wrapped his arms around her, taking her hair into his fingers and plaiting it.

"Sorry," she said with a laugh.

"For what?"

"My unruly hair," she answered, taking the braid and flicking it so it fell down her back.

"Are you mental? Never apologize for that. I love your hair, always have."

She rolled off him, still resting her head on his chest. "Liar."

"Never."

They stayed like that, neither of them talking, running their hands along each other, until their fingers found each other and they danced them together before entwining them. Ron brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

It was quiet for a long time, and Ron was about to fall asleep when Hermione shocked him back into consciousness by asking, "Do you really think Snape's never had this?"

"What?" he sputtered.

She laughed at his expression. "I'm just curious, that's all. You think he's never been with a woman? A woman who loved him as I love you?"

"I don't think there is a woman who loves anyone more than you love me."

Hermione kissed him. "Well, that goes without saying."

"But, what *I'm* curious about is how your mind always goes to Snape while we're in bed together."

Now she stammered. "No it doesn't! What... How..."

She stopped. He watched her with mild amusement. She tried again. "It's just when I think of love, I think about how blessed I am and that makes me think of Snape, how sad he is, was..."

"Well, I don't know if he ever had the sort of love that we have or even if he's ever had sex. These are not things I think about. But I think we were right about the healing power of touch."

"Oh? Were we?"

They talked about the work he and Snape had been doing and how Ron thought it was affecting the man physically and he supposed mentally and emotionally as well. They had talked of Snape's health before, and Hermione had seen his progress in that bit of time she had been back before the wedding, but she hadn't heard Ron talk about his work with Snape the way he told it now. When he was done, he wiped away the tears from her eyes. It all seemed worth it.

"You're a good person, Ronald Weasley."

"So are you, Hermione Weasley."

"That's Hermione Granger-Weasley thank you very much."

Ron smiled and kissed her sweetly.

They all settled into an almost mind-numbingly comfortable existence. Ron continued to exercise Snape in the morning and evening before he went to work and after he fixed dinner. Hermione took over applying the medication and giving the massages, and she also kept Snape company throughout the day. While she studied for her NEWTS they discussed potions, herbology, and human transfiguration. Hermione even got him talking about the Dark Arts, in practical, theoretical bases, of course.

At first, Ron was relieved that Hermione took over the care of Snape. It allowed him to do other things he enjoyed. It wasn't until he realized there wasn't anything he really wanted to do that he started moping around.

Standing at the door, he listened as his wife's laugh lofted around the room. "Severus, it's true. Slughorn really told me you could replace it with the liver of a toad."

Severus? When did she start calling him Severus?

He asked her that night. Waving it off as no big deal, Hermione answered, "It's all about that thing I said, you know, the becoming friends? Being kind, remember?"

"Of course I remember, but...but..." He couldn't go on, couldn't articulate just what he was feeling. He didn't know himself.

But as he watched them interact throughout the next couple of months, how easy it was for them, how Snape talked about educational theories and cauldron maintenance and in there somewhere, he shared with her his beliefs and philosophies. He watched as Hermione kneaded Snape's back, kind and firm, and how he moaned into her touch, how she brushed his hair, tying it back out of his face. Ron realized with a jolt that he was jealous, and with another jolt that took his breath away, he realized he didn't know which one he was more jealous of.

He had worked really hard to gain Snape's respect, and in weeks, Hermione had come along and they shared stories and she called him Severus, and it was like they forgot all those years as overbearing professor and terrorized student and were like colleagues or something. No. He couldn't possibly be jealous of Hermione. It must be the way Snape practically purred under her soothing hand. The longing Ron could see practically dripping from Snape's eyes when he looked at Hermione. What was he thinking agreeing to this? If it were true that Snape had never been with a woman, what was he doing practically throwing his wife at him?

To speed up his rehabilitation, Ron began spending time at St. Mungo's, learning more about the human body, the power of magic and what exactly he could be doing to help get Snape's health back.

"What are you doing?" Snape asked when one day Ron entered his room with a determined look, pulled the coverings off the bed, reached his hands under the man's thighs and around his neck and lifted in one fluid movement.

"Getting you out of this room," Ron answered.

"Finally giving me the boot then?"

"Don't be daft. I'm just getting you out of that room, not the house, unless you'd like me to carry you around the neighborhood."

"Oh yes, what a handsome picture that would be."

"Good, because you're heavier than you look."

They had come down the stairs, and Ron was making his way to the library, making sure not to bump his bundle along the narrow walls.

"It's not my fault you insist on cooking all those heavy creamed dishes."

"Yes, that you hate so much you occasionally lick the platter clean."

Snape sniffed. "Only occasionally."

Ron smiled. "Which chair is your favorite?"

"That one is fine," Snape answered, pointing to the closest.

"Are you sure? I think that one over there next to the books on plants and their magical properties looks the most lived in."

"If you prefer," Snape answered.

Ron placed him lightly in the chair. "Are you cold?"

"Not really, however, a fire might be nice."

"Sure," Ron said, casting his wand on the fireplace first before lighting a few candles around the room. After that, he scooted one of the footstools over and sat down in front of Snape, who was still looking at Ron skeptically. Ron reached out and took Snape's hand, doing nothing to lessen that suspicion.

Taking Snape's hand in both of his and smoothing out the fingers slowly, one at a time before massaging the palms, Ron worked silently.

"Can you make a fist?" he finally asked.

Snape gave him a look that usually was followed by a cutting remark, but he seemed to stop himself and instead focused on his own hand. Slowly, very slowly and with a tremendous amount of struggle that caused his whole arm to shake, Snape began moving his fingers into a fist.

"Take it easy... that's it... breathe..." Ron murmured soothingly.

It wasn't a tight fist, but Snape panted in satisfied exertion when Hermione came into the room, celery stalk in one hand, open book in the other.

"Oh," she said when she realized they were in the library, then, "Severus, oh my! Look at you! You're up and you're...did you do that? By yourself?"

"Are you going to come over here and pat me on the back and get me a biscuit?"

Hermione glared at him but Ron chucked him under the chin. "That's a good boy!"

Snape's fingers twitched, as did his lips. "You're only giving me cheek because you know my wand hand is still not up to scratch."

Ron smiled wickedly. "Yes, that's *exactly* why I am being cheeky. That and I'm really quite pleased with your progress."

"What made you think of this?" Hermione asked, coming behind Ron and putting her hands on his shoulder, then hugging him.

"I went to see Mediwizard Palmer, and he suggested a few more exercises and perhaps a change of scenery."

"What new exercises?" Snape asked.

"Just what we were doing. Can you try it with the other hand? It's your wand hand, right? It should be easier, stronger to begin with, yes?" Ron said, taking Snape's other hand and beginning to massage his palms and fingers again. Hermione was breathing in his ear.

He was right; it was easier.

The celebration that night was subdued but pleasant as they all enjoyed a dinner in an up-to-now unused dining room, and Snape didn't even mind that Hermione spelled his utensils to feed him and his wineglass to rise to his lips and tip its contents into his mouth.

Later that night, after they had consumed their weight in elf-made wine and had put Snape to bed before stumbling to their own beds, Hermione said something relatively innocent that would change all of their lives.

"Tonight," she began, taking Ron's hand as she pulled him to the bed. "When you had Snape's hand in yours," she took her finger and ran it along his palm, "and when you took his fingers and stroked them, almost... lovingly..." She stroked his fingers.

Ron swallowed as she gave him that look that he liked so very much. "Yeah?"

"That was very..." she kissed his palm, "very..." she put his thumb in her mouth and sucked, "very sexy..." She took his hand and put it down her pants.

If he had objections, he forgot what they were. For a while.

Later, while they lay cuddly and post-coital, Ron remembered.

"You thought me touching Snape was sexy?"

She laughed. "Why do you always have to talk about Snape while we're in bed together?"

"Me?" he said, trying to sound affronted. "You're the one who's always invited him in here."

"Inviting him in here?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah, of course. Only..."

"No, no only..."

The next day when Ron got home from work, he found Snape and Hermione in the library listening to music and talking.

"Hey, how'd you get down?"

"Well, it turns out," Hermione began, "There's this thing called magic. You've heard of it?"

"Funny. I think he is a bad influence on you and your ability to use sarcasm effectively."

"Yes, Ronald, 'cause hanging out with you for the last eight years taught me nothing of sarcasm."

"You see? It's that."

"How was your day, dear?" Hermione asked, changing the subject none too subtly.

"Great. It is the era of toilet humor, let me tell you."

Ron noticed that Snape was busy balling his hands into fists, then releasing them and doing it again.

"How are the exercises?"

"I can feel the muscles in my arms returning," Snape answered, sounding slightly mystified.

"Brilliant. Care to work some more tonight after dinner?"

"Yes."

That night, they worked on rotating his wrist, the next night, it was bending at the elbow and the night after that, lifting his shoulders. By the end of the week, Ron sat beside Snape with a wand in his hand. Snape studied his wand longingly, as if a part of him he thought lost forever was within reach. Snape held his hand open and Ron placed the wand in it, not letting go until Snape's hand tightened around it. Then he took Snape's hand in his, and together they worked on swishing and flicking.

Hermione stood in the doorway watching them.

So sexy, she mouthed when he looked at her. He smirked at her.

Later, she brought out dessert, and Ron watched her, sitting on Snape's other side, taking care of Snape in her own way, and he started to realize that he wasn't jealous of either of them anymore. There was something else, however, as he watched them in their ease of each other, their laughing over something one or the other had read. The something else he didn't even want to begin to define.

The next week, they began to work on his legs. Thanks to the months of exercises Ron had been doing to keep the muscle from atrophying, they were able to get him to stand quite successful with Ron supporting most of his weight on one side and Hermione on the other. They shifted their weight to see if Snape could support himself. His legs shook, but for a minute, he was fully supporting himself before he again slumped into their support.

"Good job," Hermione said proudly.

Snape just mumbled his opinion.

"No, really," Ron said. "You can't expect too much to start with. Each and every time you stand up is an accomplishment. I know it doesn't seem it, you who have been so

strong for so long, but it all will take time."

Snape studied his former student before asking, slightly awed, "When did you get so patient?"

They eased Snape back into his chair before Ron answered. "I've been spending a lot of time at St. Mungo's, watching the Healers. We think magic is all-powerful and instantaneous, but I've seen remedies and I've seen miracles that take time, patience and belief when there is no evidence of success and I... well... I want to be a part... I want *us* to be a part of that."

Hermione gave him that look, but it was Snape's look that warmed him this time; the man actually looked proud. At least that's what Ron hoped the look meant; he'd never seen it before on the man.

"Are you saying you want to go into medicine?" Hermione asked.

Ron shrugged. "I don't know really. I mean that's what this year has been, hasn't it? Figuring out what I wanted to do. I've watched you go off and work towards a goal. I've seen Harry run away and try to find some peace for himself, and I've been here feeling sorry for myself because I wasn't doing either of those things. But maybe I was."

He turned his attention to Snape. "I know for you it's been a tortuously slow process, but I've enjoyed watching the progress. Do you even remember what it was like those first days when we thought you'd be gone every morning? When we thought you'd never again be conscious, able to even have a conversation, let alone be able to sit here and look at me like that, as if I've lost my mind? Really, when you think about it like that, it isn't that long of a time that you've accomplished so much."

"I could say the same for you," Snape said.

Hermione put one arm around Snape's shoulder and with the other hand, reached across him and took Ron's hand in hers. "I'm proud of both of you."

Ron twined his fingers with hers for a moment of somewhat awkward silence before he suggested they try getting Snape on his feet one more time before bed.

Later, Ron would curse what happened next on his unease at tender moments. That was why he buckled slightly when heaving Snape up to his feet and his slight misstep caused Snape to lose his negligent balance, which, of course, caused him to latch himself to the closest thing for support. That was how all three of them found themselves sprawled in a tangle of limbs and harrumphs on the library floor, Ron breaking all their falls by providing his body for padding.

Ron wrapped his arm around Snape protectively to make sure he didn't slide off in the momentum of the fall and crack his head onto the hardwood floor.

"Is everyone else okay?" Hermione asked.

"Splendid," Ron answered breathlessly. "Professor?"

"Fine."

Hermione started laughing as she readjusted to remove herself from on top of Snape's body without causing him any discomfort. She had almost gotten off him when he screamed and thrashed free, rolling himself away from them.

"What happened? Are you hurt?" Ron and Hermione both asked frantically going to him.

"I'm fine, just fine," Snape answered feverishly, keeping his back to them.

Hermione and Ron exchanged worried, puzzled looks.

"Did you pull a muscle?" Hermione asked, placing her hand gently on his bicep.

He shrugged her hand off violently and rolled onto his stomach. "I said I was fine. Please leave me alone."

Ron barked out a laugh, realizing what exactly was the man's problem. "Well, at least we know *thatall* your muscles work."

"Bugger off," Snape hissed.

Hermione looked from one to the other before her eyes bulged in understanding. "Oh."

"It's a good thing you don't need any help exercising that one," Ron continued his ribbing.

Snape growled.

Hermione shushed Ron and gently placed her hand on Snape's back, between his shoulder blades. "It's really not a big deal. It's a perfectly natural reaction to friction and pressure. You know that."

"Of course I know that," Snape said in a voice so low they had to lean in to hear it.

Hermione began rubbing his back in soothing circles. "How long has it been, Severus?"

Now it was Ron's turn to have his eyes bulge. *What are you doing?* he mouthed to her.

"*Relax*," she mouthed back.

"What do you mean?" Snape asked.

"I mean, when was the last time you were with someone?"

She lay down beside him and moved her hand from his back, to his shoulder and then cupping his chin, forced him to look at her.

"What concern is that of yours?" he whispered.

She began caressing his back again. "I could help you. *We* could help you."

"WHAT?!" both Ron and Snape said together.

"Shhhh," Hermione soothed. "It was just an idea. We'll talk about it later."

Snape and Ron didn't say anything for a minute, just stared at Hermione in awe. Finally, Snape said, "Hermione, could you stop touching me for awhile? It's really not helping."

Blushing, Hermione removed her hand, leaned in for a quick peck on the cheek and got up. "Of course."

"What was that all about?" Ron asked later that night, when he and Hermione were in their room getting ready for bed. They had given Snape some alone time before Ron had wordlessly Levicorpused Snape to his room.

"Don't act so surprised. You knew it was going in that direction, eventually."

Ron opened his mouth to object, but nothing came out. *Had he known that?* He'd like to deny it, of course he would, but thinking back from the beginning...the questioning of Snape's sexual experience, all the talk of love and its healing powers, the growing, maturing and dare he say, mutual respect...had he really thought this was where it would all end? He tried to fight the voice in the back of his head that said, *of course you had*, and instead focused on the practical aspects.

"How do you see this coming about?" he asked.

"Just leave that up to me," Hermione answered, pulling back the coverings of their bed.

"And after? What happens after?"

"Well, I guess that would be up to all of us, wouldn't it?"

"How about we sleep on it," Ron said, getting in bed beside her. He hoped he would be able to fully form and articulate his objections in the morning.

The next day, he had no new insights. They all seemed awkward and ill at ease with each other. Snape seemed to be apologizing to Ron with every look he gave him. For what, Ron didn't know. Perhaps for being aroused by Ron's wife? Well, by this point, Ron thought with a rather mirthless laugh, better Hermione than himself. For as much as he wasn't completely putting his foot down at the idea presented to him the night before, he would have serious restrictions to what exactly was performed in said situation. He'd have to lay the ground rules to Hermione before she got too carried away in her plans.

The little house on the little street in a little forgotten corner of London was an abyss, a gulf in time and place where things took place that had no explanation, no rational meaning outside its walls. That is what our Mr. Weasley kept telling himself, kept reassuring himself with as he walked slowly down the hall. His formerly villainous, crotchety, half-dead Potions master draped around his neck as they took tortuously slow and labored steps towards the bedroom door.

The door that would change everything, for good or bad, from that point onward.

When they arrived, Hermione was bustling around with nervous energy and ushered them to the bed she had prepared for the event. The sparse candlelight gave the room a grainy darkness that threw everything into soothing shadow, further illuminating the unreal quality of the night. The bed had been stripped of coverings, other than a silk sheet, if more concealment was needed.

"I know we've talked about this," Ron said to Snape as they walked in. "But let me say again. If any of what happens begins to strain any of your muscles, you need to let me know. You are getting stronger every day, but still, this shouldn't hurt...um...unless...well, unless you're into that...but still..."

They had talked about it, all of it. What was wanted, needed, expected and forbidden had all been discussed. Ron hadn't seen Hermione tackle a theory, a goal or a desire like this since the days of S.P.E.W. Snape might have thought this idea would blow over and nothing would come of it, but Ron knew better when he saw that gleam in her eye. There would be no stopping her.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley. I will keep that in mind."

"And I thought we talked about that," Hermione began to scold. "I can't possibly share a bed with two people who are so formal they can't even call each other by their first names."

"Sorry, I mean, thank you, Ron," Snape corrected.

"It's alright, Sev... Sever... yeah, sorry, it's still strange. How about if I call you Snape instead of Professor or sir? Would that be close enough?"

They both looked at Hermione for her approval. She crossed her arms and looked slightly put out. "I guess that will be acceptable. For now. If that is okay with you, Severus?"

"Fine."

With that settled, Ron brought Snape to the bed and helped him get situated in the middle of it. After that, with Snape lying down, Ron standing on one side of the bed and Hermione on the other, there was a long silence with them all just looking at each other rather hopelessly.

Finally, Hermione took the lead and untied the knotted belt around her silk robe, letting the robe fall to the floor. Underneath it was an outfit Ron had never seen before and he was thankful, as it allowed him to separate the Hermione standing across from him from the Hermione who was his wife. What she was wearing was a long, burgundy silk gown that seemed to float around her, keeping the skin beneath an alluring mystery and the exposed skin of her shoulders and arms an enticing invitation. Her hair was loosely plaited, tendrils of curls already escaped and she smiled nervously at both of them, the only chink in the alluring armor, but all the more sweet for its realism.

Ron swallowed, his mouth dry and throat scratchy. He noticed Snape doing the same, his eyes gleaming and looking awestruck. She gathered the material of her gown at her thighs daintily and lifted her knees so that she could crawl on the bed to meet Snape.

"May I kiss you?" she asked, reaching out to stroke his cheek.

Speechless, he nodded, only finding words as she bent to brush her lips to his.

"Wait, I want to say something first," he said, and she sat back up. "To both of you."

Ron sat down on his other side, as if knowing instinctively that what was to be said would be whispered in conspiratorial tones. He was right.

"I just want to say, that no matter what happens here tonight, what transpires after, that I am... am... immensely grateful for all you two have done. It's been a long time since I've... since I've been shown affections. Whatever your reasons, whatever your motives for taking me in, for healing my body... and for this attempt to... to heal something... basic inside me... well, words cannot express my... gratitude."

And it was those words of healing that eased Ron's mind. Perhaps it was just another excuse for possible deniability in the following days, perhaps it was his newly acquired interest in the profession of healer, but whatever it was, he felt more confident that there was a purpose for this for him that didn't involve curiosity or the desire to please his wife by playing along. He could be an active participant.

While Hermione leaned in to kiss Snape again, Ron lifted off his jumper, toed off his shoes and socks and dropped his jeans effortlessly before lying beside Snape. Rotating Snape's shoulders and the rest of his body so that he was on his side, Ron spooned behind him, draping his arms over Snape's, taking his hands and guiding them to cup Hermione's face. She wrapped one of her hands around both of the men; twining her fingers in Ron's hair, while her other hand worked its way under Snape's shirt and began caressing up his abdomen and chest.

Leaving Snape's hands where they were caressing Hermione's jaw and neck, Ron moved his own hands and began working his fingers down the buttons of Snape's shirt so that Hermione could more easily remove it before he did the same to the fly of Snape's trousers. All the while, Hermione still was kissing Snape deeply, causing a

humming sort of moan to work its way out of him.

While Ron sat up to remove Snape's trousers and pants, Hermione slipped out of her own gown, revealing nothing but flesh underneath it. This time, Ron moved behind Hermione and while she continued to kiss Snape, Ron sucked her neck, her shoulders, while again taking Snape's hands, this time guiding them to caress Hermione's breasts. She had one of her hands wrapped around Snape's shoulders and the other she snaked in between herself and Ron, taking his erection in her hand and stroking him.

Snape slowly kissed his way down to take her breast in his mouth while Ron placed his knee between her legs and spread them apart, bringing both his and Snape's hand to her thigh, where they then kneaded their way to her center. Ron spread her lips apart before guiding Snape's middle finger inside her. He noticed that Snape's hand was shaking, but looking at the man, Ron didn't think it was because of muscle fatigue.

Ron added one of his fingers to Snape's, and as Ron wrapped his finger around Snape's, Hermione moaned, bucked and increased her speed on Ron's shaft, running her thumb back and forth along his slit. He felt his orgasm rip through him as he felt Hermione come too. She wrapped herself around Snape as Ron wrapped himself around her.

They lay like that for a moment before Hermione gently straddled Snape. "Are you ready?"

He swallowed, nodded, and then answered, "Does it look like I'm ready?"

Reaching down and cupping his sac before running her fingers along the vein of his cock she smiled. "More than ready."

As she guided Snape's erection inside her slowly, he hitched his breath, his head thrown back, his eyes shut tight.

"Breathe," Ron urged, as he leaned on one elbow, surprisingly titillated by the scene. But, just as he was about to watch his lovely wife fuck the brains out of their former professor, it was over.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Snape chanted, seemingly horrified by his premature ejaculation.

"Shhhh," Hermione soothed, leaning over him and kissing him over and over. "It's okay; it's okay. Like you said, it's been a while."

"You have *no* idea," Snape whispered.

She rested her head on his heart, grasped both of his hands in hers and said, "We'll just give you a moment or two, see if you'll want more. Meanwhile," she looked at Ron, motioning with her eyes to her arse in the air.

He got the hint and got up behind her, with a knee on each side of Snape, he finished what the other man had started, going slow, giving the man time to recoup. This time, Ron didn't have to distract himself to stop from coming before her. Just as he began to feel ready to burst, Snape was ready again. As he came with a gasp, he slid out of her, and she hardly missed a beat before she had Snape positioned inside her again. This time, he lasted much longer as Hermione glided up and down his length. He came again moments after Hermione did herself.

Hermione wrapped herself around Snape in a sweaty embrace and when slipping off him, rotated him so that they were both on their side, facing each other, her head still on his chest, as if making sure he was still alive, for he had still not opened his eyes, not uttered a sound.

Finally he parted his lips and uttered a long gasping breath. Ron and Hermione sighed, and Ron wrapped himself around Hermione from the back, reaching around her, taking Snape's hands and placing his arms around them in a tangle of fatigued limbs. Ron knew that Snape would need a long bath and soothing massage, but that could wait.

"So that was what all the fuss has been about," Snape said, as if to himself. Ron and Hermione chose not to interrupt. Hermione kissed his chest, then his neck where the scar still stood out like a beacon of pain. He shuddered.

"What's next?" Snape asked, looking from Hermione to Ron.

Ron grinned and placed his palm on the other man's forehead. "Rise up! With these all-powerful

hands, I declare thee healed!"

Oh, if only it were that easy, our young Mr. Weasley thought. But if he had learned anything in the previous year, it was that ... like the tide's dance with the sand which took ions to form and shape a single pebble ... healing and magic took time.

So, it is here, with Snape's question of "What's next?" still ringing in our ears that we will conclude this story. The greatest gift a storyteller can give is an ending of hope, but more importantly an ending of *possibility*, of allowing our own imaginings to answer Snape's question for ourselves.

Sure, the author could have answered all questions, even tacked on an epilogue to tie it all up in a nice bow of absolute certainty and undeniably fact, but really, where is the fun in that?