

Unlikely Allies

by Romione Ravendor

She needs his help, and though he doesn't know it, he needs hers.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 10

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We don't own them. It's all JK Rowling's. We're just borrowing them for the moment.

Hermione looked down at the mess before her. She could brew brilliant potions, cast powerful spells, and translate ancient runes, but for the life of her, she could not cook. The toast was burnt, the eggs were runny, and she didn't even want to *think* about what happened to the sausages. Not only that, but her fingers were in agony. She had taken to keeping some of her salve in the kitchen due to the amount of times she had burned herself trying to cook.

Sighing, she pulled down her old standby a box of fresh breakfast buns that she kept handy. *Perhaps I'll have to ask Molly for help one of these days*, she thought and then dismissed the idea. At least until she and Ron were married, or at least engaged.

Hearing Ron come out of the shower, she took the plate of buns and the fresh pot of tea to the table just as Pigwidgeon and Diana flew through the window. Because of Pig's small size, she had purchased her own owl so that she could make the deliveries that Pig couldn't. The assorted mail dropped onto the table in a heap as she dropped into her chair.

"Morning, love," Ron said as he kissed the top of Hermione's head. "Mmmmm, buns and tea. What's in the post this morning?"

Hermione smiled as he sat down. "Probably a lot of junk mail. You know, the *Daily Prophet*, *The Quibbler*..." she said, sorting through the mail. "Oh, it looks like your Quality Quidditch Supplies catalogue came in. Here's a letter from Harry and Ginny..." She stopped dead as she came to the next letter in the stack.

"Brilliant!" Ron said. As he took both the catalogue and the letter, he noticed Hermione looking strangely at her letter. "What's that?" he asked.

"It's a letter from Hogwarts," Hermione replied, looking at the envelope curiously.

"Hogwarts?" Ron asked whilst chewing on his bun. "What'd they want you for?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, opening the letter and reading it. Her eyes opened wide as she read the contents of the letter, and her mouth dropped open. "I don't believe it."

Ron looked over her shoulder. His eyes widened as he read the contents.

"Blimey, Hermione!" he exclaimed. "Minerva wants you to teach Transfiguration!"

"I know. I *never* expected this." Hermione took a sip of her tea as she read over the letter again. Looking over at Ron, she noticed that he'd opened the letter from Harry

and Ginny. "What do Harry and Ginny have to say?"

Ron grinned. "Ginny's pregnant," he said. "She's two-and-a-half months along."

"That's great!" Hermione smiled. She was happy for her friends, but she also was a little jealous. She wondered if and when Ron would get around to proposing. "I'll have to owl them later. After all, I have some news too."

Ron's eyes widened. "Other news besides Hogwarts?" he asked.

Hermione laughed. "Don't worry, our contraception spells are still working. No, just about the offer at Hogwarts."

Ron laughed nervously. As much as he would have wanted children, now was definitely not the time. He mentally sighed he and Hermione had been dating each other since after the final battle, and yet after all this time, he was still trying to come up with the courage to propose to her. He knew she was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

Which then brought him to Hermione's news a teaching appointment at Hogwarts. On one hand, he immediately felt happy that such an offer would be made to her; after all, she was always and forever helping others with their studies. She had helped Neville avoid a T in Potions and had constantly been badgering Harry and him to do their homework. She'd probably make a great teacher. On the other hand, he felt it was another sign that the picture he had in his mind would never come to pass. The so-called Golden Trio would not always be together. He and Harry had trained to be Aurors; Hermione had decided to take an apprenticeship in Transfiguration instead. With the possibility of Hermione accepting Minerva's offer, he wondered if they would still be able to live together. If Hermione would have to move to the castle, where would he live? Would this affect Hermione's answer if he were to propose to her?

He took a deep breath and smiled at Hermione. "Yeah," he said, "I didn't think they'd fail; after all, you're brilliant at Charms."

Hermione blushed. "Thanks. Not that I wouldn't mind being a mum someday. Just not now." She looked at the letter again. "She says she needs to know in a week's time. It's almost August, after all. She would need time to find someone else."

Ron nodded. "Yeah, and September is just around the corner." He glanced at Hermione, who was still examining the letter. "Uh, 'Mione?"

She looked up from the letter at him. "Yes?" she asked, taking a sip of tea.

"What does Minerva's offer include?"

She consulted the letter again. "Forty Galleons a week, and she is giving me the option of staying at the castle or commuting since we live in Hogsmeade."

Ron gave an inward sigh of relief. If Hermione would be allowed to continue living in their flat, then there really wasn't anything that should prevent her from accepting Minerva's offer. The only issue was that their time together might very well be curtailed. He never recalled the professors having much of a social life outside of school, but then again, how many students were friendly enough with their professors that they would seem "normal"?

"How many hours per week would you have to work?" he asked.

"In general, thirty-five hours would be the minimum, which may or may not include marking essays or preparing for lessons or exams. On Wednesday nights, however, I have to patrol the corridors until midnight, so I would stay at Hogwarts through dinner that night and then come home when I am finished."

Ron nodded. It could have been worse. But he wasn't very happy about the thought of not being able to spend at least one day a week with her. He wondered what he'd do with himself when she was busy in the castle. He enjoyed their mealtimes. Well, she couldn't cook like his mum, but it was nice just to *be* with her. "Would you have to work on weekends? Or even on Hogsmeade weekends?" he asked.

"I don't think I will have to work on weekends, but I might have to help with Hogsmeade weekends from time to time. Not that it would be a problem, really, since we *do* live in Hogsmeade. Besides, I have a feeling that once Quidditch season starts you will want to come and watch the games, won't you?"

Ron chuckled. "Right in one." He smiled. "But... well, it just seems like a lot of time away, and I'd really miss you terribly when you have to stay in the castle. And... well, I just..."

Hermione smiled, stood, and went over to put her arms around him. "I would miss you too, but don't forget: you work about the same schedule, and sometimes you are called out at late hours. And it's only one night a week that I will have to stay late. We'll have the nights and the weekends." She frowned a bit as she felt a burning pain in her chest. "That last sip of tea must have gone down wrong."

Ron looked in alarm at her. "'Mione? Are you okay? What's wrong, love? Your face is getting red."

"Yes, just some heartburn, that's all," Hermione replied, giving him a reassuring smile. "I think I'll go see if we have some of that antacid potion." She kissed his cheek and went back to the bathroom.

Ron looked at Hermione's retreating form, then sat back down in the chair. For the past several years, friends and family alike had been pressuring him to finally ask Hermione to marry him, but for some reason, he had resisted their suggestions, coming up with varied excuses ("We're not ready yet," "She's really busy with her apprenticeship," "Things are really busy at work," "It wouldn't be fair to her if it meant she'll have to spend all her time alone."). Now that there was the possibility of not seeing Hermione every day, he wondered if perhaps it was too late for him to think of proposing to her. Or should he just do it, right then and there, once she emerged from the loo?

Whatever objections he might have to Hermione taking the Hogwarts job was outweighed by the look of sheer rapture on her face when she first opened the letter. It would be a dream job for her and was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. He decided that if she really wanted the job, he should not stand in the way of her accepting it.

Hermione returned, feeling a little bit better. The pain hadn't gone away completely, but it didn't hurt as much. "Thank goodness we had some of that left."

Ron took her hands in his and squeezed them. "I'm glad, love," he said, smiling. "'Mione, I was thinking I know how much it means to you to be able to work as a master in a job you love. I'll admit that I'm not exactly happy about the thought of spending too much time away from you, but at least you'll be able to do something where you can make a difference. Is this a job where you feel you can truly be happy?"

"Yes, Ron. Ever since we were going to Hogwarts I thought about how great it would be to teach there. I didn't think I'd ever get the chance or that I would get it this soon. After all, I'm only twenty-five years old. But I would love to take this opportunity."

Ron nodded. "Then I'd say why wait a week? Let's celebrate, Professor Granger." He drew her in his arms and gave her a kiss.

Hermione wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back. It was shaping up to be a beautiful day.

A/N: Many many thanks go to ladyinthecloak and ron.chessmaster for the beta-reading. We would also like to thank SouthernWitch69 for all her hard work and effort to make this a Variety Challenge to remember. ♥

Prompt info: 4. How Did That Happen?

a. Take an event in the HP series that didn't turn out the way you thought it would. It can be an injury which happened to someone, someone who died who shouldn't have, or maybe someone you thought would die lived.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 10

She needs his help, and though he doesn't know it, he needs hers.

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Hermione stood up from her desk and stretched. Everything was all ready for the start of the school year, and she was very excited. The last two weeks she had been at Hogwarts, preparing her classroom and getting everything prepared for her students. She had spent some time with Ron, but she had been distracted by her coming job.

Going into her rooms at the school, she took out the robes that she had chosen for the evening. Molly was having a dinner at the Burrow, and she was looking forward to it. It would be the first time everyone had come together since Ginny and Harry had announced Ginny's pregnancy and she had accepted the job. Her robes were red and gold, the Gryffindor colours, and she put her hair up in a French twist. All in all, she was happy with the results.

Heading out of the castle to the Apparition point, she pictured the Burrow's orchard and Disapparated.

Ron was waiting for her in the orchard. He was a little nervous but quickly calmed himself. He was dressed in royal blue dress robes that were cut in such a way as to emphasise his broad shoulders and slim waist. He shuddered slightly as he remembered the hideous dress robes he had worn at the Yule Ball during his fourth year and was grateful he had earned enough money to ensure he'd never have to wear such things ever again.

When Hermione appeared, Ron stood up and noticed how elegant she looked. He admired the way the robes hugged her curves and the way her hair framed her face. He smiled broadly and greeted her with a hug and a kiss.

"Oh, Hermione," he said, breathing in the floral scent of her hair, "you look beautiful!" He gave her another kiss and said, "I missed you, love."

"I missed you too, Ron," Hermione said, looking at him and smiling. "And you look very handsome. Almost makes me want to skip the dinner and go spend some time alone with you." She gave him a mischievous grin and a wink.

Ron grinned back. "As do I," he said. "But Mum will kill us if we're not there. And besides, who can pass up all that wonderful food!" He took her hand, and they walked through the orchard toward the house.

"So, is your mum in a good mood? I know that she's not exactly happy with our living arrangements. I just want to be prepared in case."

Ron shrugged. "To be honest, she hasn't said much since you left for Hogwarts," he said. "I guess she thinks you've moved to the castle and have your own quarters there. As far as I'm concerned, she can continue thinking that way. I think it will make life easier for us."

"Okay. That's good to know." They reached the house and Hermione was assaulted by Harry.

"Congratulations, Professor Granger!" Harry said, giving her a hug. "I always had a feeling you'd wind back up at Hogwarts one day."

"And congratulations to you, Dad," Hermione said, returning the hug and kissing his cheek. "Where's Ginny?"

"Loo," Harry said with a shrug. "Seems like she's there most of the time these days."

"Well, from what I've read, that's pretty normal," Hermione said with a smile.

Ron made a face. "Eww," he said, making a face. "That is a bit too much information." He turned to Harry. "So, mate, how are things?"

Harry chuckled. "Not much since we last saw each other a couple of hours ago at work." He stepped aside as Ron and Hermione entered the Burrow. "Everyone else is here already. Fleur, Audrey, and Angelina are helping Mum in the kitchen, and Irina, Katie, and Tonks are with the kids."

Irina, Charlie's wife, had come from a large family in Romania and had been accustomed to taking care of a lot of children. She always enjoyed spending time with her Weasley nephews and nieces. Fred and Katie's twins, Gideon and Fabian, were already showing signs of the mischievous behaviour that characterised their father and his twin when they had been children. Tonks, who was pregnant and clumsy as usual, was entertaining the children by changing her nose into various animal noses. Ron smiled as he heard the often raucous laughter coming from the sitting room.

He sighed. The almost relentless pressure from his relatives to propose to Hermione intensified in the days following her appointment as Hogwarts' newest Transfiguration professor. The more he spent time with his extended family, the more he knew he wanted to be with Hermione and to raise their children together. He subconsciously patted the pocket which contained a small, black box. Before he had arrived at the Burrow, he'd made a quick trip to Diagon Alley to visit his Gringotts vault where he'd collected the parcel he was hoping to present to Hermione before the day was done. His musing was interrupted when Percy and Audrey's four-year-old daughter, Little Molly, ran toward him and attached herself to his legs. He noticed she was shaking. He gently detached the girl from his legs and wiped away her tears.

"What's wrong, Molly?" he asked.

Little Molly raised a shaking finger toward the sitting room. "Teddy's mean," she wailed. "He called me pox-face."

Ron tried to keep a straight face. Little Molly inherited the infamous Weasley complexion with her flame-red hair and a face full of freckles. "Molly-love," he said gently, "you have a great face. Maybe you can tell Teddy he has mousy hair."

"But when I do that, he makes his hair turn purple," Little Molly wailed.

Ron chuckled. Remus and Tonks' son, Teddy, was an Metamorphmagus like his mother and occasionally liked to tease the younger children. "Come here," he said as he picked her up. He walked over to join Hermione, Ginny, and Katie. Little Molly was very happy to see Auntie Katie and held her hands out to her. Katie laughed and said, "Come here, you little imp. I'm sure you'd rather be with me than with Uncle Ronniekins."

Little Molly rubbed her face into Katie's shoulder, then gave the others a toothy smile. "Molly loves Auntie Katie," she announced.

Hermione smiled at Little Molly. "Your Aunt Katie is a very good Quidditch player. Maybe one day she'll take you for a ride."

"You bet I will!" Katie told her niece. "Besides, don't you listen to Teddy. I think your freckles are beautiful."

Just then Teddy came over to them, and Little Molly announced, "Auntie Katie says my freckles are bootiful. So there!" With that, she stuck her tongue out at him.

Teddy stuck his tongue out at Little Molly as his hair turned a bright shade of red and his face appeared to have over-large red specks that made him look like he had spattergroit. "Pox-face, pox-face, ickle bickle poxy-face!" he cried as he ran to the other room.

Little Molly wriggled out of Katie's arms and chased after Teddy, her hair streaming behind her. "Teddy meanie!" she cried.

The adults laughed as Angelina came into the room. "Oi, you miscreants," she said, "dinner will be served soon."

Katie came over and gave Angelina a hug. "It's great to see you again, Ange," she said as she linked elbows with her and marched out toward the garden. The others followed them.

Remus smiled as he saw Hermione coming outside. "Well, Professor Granger. I understand that you are taking over the post of Transfiguration this year. It will be a pleasure working alongside you."

Hermione's eyes opened wide as she understood what he had just said. "You're teaching again at Hogwarts?"

"I am," he replied, his eyes twinkling merrily. "Minerva owled me a couple of months ago and offered me the Defence position again."

"That's wonderful. We never forgot the year you taught us at Hogwarts."

Ron and Harry joined Hermione and Remus. "Wicked!" Ron said. "At least we'll know the kids will be in good hands."

Harry nodded. "You were one of the best Defence teachers we ever had," he added.

"It will be nice to teach alongside two of my former students. It was no surprise to find out that Neville Longbottom took over Herbology from Professor Sprout when she retired."

Molly started giving them looks, so they finally took their seats around the table. Hermione sat in between Ginny and Ron and gave Ron's hand a squeeze.

Ron felt a calming reassurance when he felt Hermione squeezing his hand. He smiled at Hermione as Fleur, Audrey, and Angelina started bringing the food to the table.

"Mmmmm, cottage pie!" Ron exclaimed when Audrey put the dish near him. "Excellent!"

George grabbed the dish and pulled it toward him as he scooped out a generous serving. "I'm sure this was Angelina's contribution," he said. "She makes a wicked cottage pie."

"Good thing I made three of them," Angelina said, coming outside and shaking her head at her husband. "You know, George, you have that every week at home. You *could* save some of it for everyone else."

"Take it from me, Harry," George said, looking at him, "once your wife gets pregnant they get ornery!"

"Oh, is that so?" Ginny said, glaring at her brother. "Well I will have you know that being pregnant has *not* made me ornery."

"Oh, right," George said with a nod. "I forgot. You were ornery before." He grinned and then ducked as Ginny shot a Bat-Bogey Hex at him.

"Ha, ha! You can't retaliate!"

Molly shot George and Ginny a glare that could freeze fire. "George, Ginny, you will stop that at once," she said sternly.

George and Ginny looked down at their plates and mumbled their apologies.

"Now," Molly said as she wiped her hands on her apron, "of course we are celebrating the appointments of Hermione and Remus to the Hogwarts academic staff tonight. And of course, Ginny and Angelina will be adding to our growing family. Let's drink to that."

Everyone else stood, raised their glasses, and drank to the health and good wishes of Hermione, Remus, Ginny, and Angelina.

After the toast, there were sounds of silverware clinking and multiple conversations around the table.

"Daniel, chew with your mouth closed."

"Do you have any names picked out yet?"

"Are you ready for the school year to start?"

"I haven't had a lot of morning sickness like I did with George Jr."

"No morning sickness here, thank goodness."

"So how does it feel to be a father, Fred?"

"You know how your parents keep telling you to wait until you have children when they're frustrated with you?" he asked Angelina.

Angelina rolled her eyes. "Believe me, I've heard that many times."

"Well," he said, "Gideon and Fabian are a handful-and-a-half, and I can see what Mum meant when she told George and me that!"

Right at that moment, a clump of mashed potato hit him squarely in the face. Teddy and Victoire were holding their hands over their mouths, trying but failing to hold in their laughter.

"You see what you have to look forward to, Harry?" Fred asked, glaring at his niece and Teddy.

Suddenly, a pea hit George in the nose, and it wasn't hard to tell where that one had come from, since George Jr was getting ready to throw another one.

"Now, do you see what you two taught " George started to ask, but then a roll sailed across the table and Harry caught it neatly. Soon the food was flying fast and furious over the table.

"Victoire, zat iz not proper!" Fleur scolded her daughter.

"Molly, no. Now behave!" Percy said sternly.

Angelina shook her head as she stood up and cast a *Sonorus Charm* on her throat. "Everyone stop, right now!" she announced.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked up at Angelina.

"Children, you know better than that. Now sit down and behave, or we will send all the children off to bed without your sweets."

She looked around, cast a silent *Quietus* on her throat, and started Vanishing the mess from the table.

"And here I thought we wouldn't have to worry about something like this until we got to Hogwarts," Hermione said, grinning at Remus.

Remus shrugged. "It's good practise. However," he said, turning to Teddy, "you are the oldest, young man. So you need to set a good example for the other kids."

"Thank Merlin they are not all the same age. Can you imagine if all of them went to Hogwarts the same year?"

"Well, there are going to be at least three children going in the same year, since Angelina, Ginny and I are due about the same time," said Tonks. "And that will be a year or so after the twins enter."

Teddy's hair turned a deep midnight blue as he tugged on his mother's sleeve. "I'm sorry, Mumsy and Dadsy," he said.

Tonks pulled her son into a hug. "At least I know you're sorry for what you did," she said.

Eventually, the plates were cleared away, and Molly and Fleur helped bring out the cakes and the tarts to the table. Angelina followed with a full tea service floating behind her.

As the cakes were served and the tea poured, Ron stood up and cleared his throat.

"Yes, Ron?" Charlie called out.

Fred and George looked at each other with widened eyes. "A Galleon says he'll finally do it," Fred said to George.

"You're on," George said.

"Erm," Ron started.

"I can't hear you!" Fred exclaimed.

Harry frowned at Ron as he pointed his wand at Ron's throat and silently cast *Sonorus* at him.

Ron looked at Hermione and took her hand as he went down on one knee. He pulled out the little box from his pocket with his other hand and presented it to her.

"Hermione, we have known each other since we were firsties at Hogwarts. We have gone through so much together, and... erm... well, uhhh..."

His face turned as red as his hair, and he took several deep breaths.

"Hermionewillyoumarryme?" he asked in a rush.

Hermione squealed and threw her arms around Ron's neck, giving him a kiss.

The table erupted in cheers.

"Finally!" Ginny exclaimed.

George slapped a Galleon into Fred's hand, and Fred pointed his wand toward the sky and shot fireworks from it. Molly, Fleur, Irina, and Audrey were wiping tears from their cheeks, and Remus, Arthur, Percy, Charlie, and Bill were pouring Firewhisky for each other.

Ron and Hermione finally broke their kiss, and Ron slipped the ring onto Hermione's finger.

"Oh, Ron, it's *gorgeous!*" Hermione gushed, looking down at the beautiful ring on her finger.

All the women gathered around Hermione to look at the ring.

"Auntie Katie, what happened?" Little Molly asked, looking at Katie.

"Molly, your Uncle Ronnie and Hermione are going to get married. That means you're going to have an Aunt Hermione."

"Auntie Hermi, Auntie Hermi!" Little Molly cried, running over to Hermione.

Hermione looked down at the little girl and bent down to pick her up. "I love that name."

Little Molly put her arms around Hermione's neck. "Auntie Hermi," she said. "I'm glad you're going to be my auntie," she said.

"Me too, Molly. Maybe you, Dominique, and Victoire can be my flower girls. Would you like that?"

"Yeah!" Little Molly struggled to get down and then ran over to Victoire and her sister Dominique. "Auntie Hermi says we can be flower girls!"

Ron chuckled as he saw Little Molly run to her cousin. He turned his attention to Hermione. "Hermione, you have made me the happiest man on the planet," he said. "This ring has been in the family for many generations. It belonged to my great-great-great grandmother. You do me and my family honour by agreeing to wear it."

"I feel honoured to wear it," Hermione said with a smile. "It's so beautiful." Hermione smiled as she saw Molly and Arthur walking over to them.

"Hermione," Molly said as she took Hermione's hands. "We are so pleased and honoured that you will be an official part of our family. Arthur and I always hoped you two would come together, and our wishes have come true."

Arthur placed his hands on Hermione's and Ron's shoulders. "Indeed they have," he said. "We offer our blessings to you, and our congratulations."

"Thank you, Arthur and Molly," Hermione said with a smile, giving them each a hug. "I have always felt like a part of your family, and since my parents died a few years ago, you really are the only family I have."

"You are like a daughter to us," Molly said, wiping away tears from her eyes. She then turned to everyone else. "Let's drink to the happiness of Ron and Hermione."

Everyone stood up, mumbled Ron's and Hermione's names, and took a sip of their drinks in tribute to the newly engaged couple.

Hermione looked over at Ron and gave his hand a squeeze. She couldn't remember ever being so happy.

A/N: Many thanks go to ladyinthecloak and ron.chessmaster for the beta-reading. We would also like to thank SouthernWitch69 for all her hard work and effort to make this a Variety Challenge to remember. ♥

The engagement ring: <http://www.e14k.com/images/A119lrg.jpg>

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 10

She needs his help, and though he doesn't know it, he needs hers.

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Ron sipped at his tea as he reflected on the events from the night before. He smiled when he thought of Hermione, and how happy she had made him when she'd accepted his proposal. It felt like a huge weight off his shoulders, especially considering how much pressure he was under from friends and relatives alike to propose to her. He grabbed another bun from the plate and was nibbling on it absentmindedly when Hermione joined him at the table.

"Good morning," she said, going over and giving him a kiss, then taking her seat.

"Good morning, love," he said. "So, today is your big staff meeting. Are you ready for it?"

"I'm as ready as I will ever be. Remus will be picking me up here at nine." She took a bun, took a small bite out of it, and then swallowed. "You wouldn't believe the dreams I had last night. All good, of course," she said with a smile, pouring herself a cup of tea. "How did you sleep?"

"Very well," Ron said with a smile. "And of course, being with you makes everything so much better."

"Same here, Ron." She reached over and took his hand. "And my ring is beautiful. I couldn't have imagined a more beautiful ring."

Ron twined his fingers with Hermione's, turned her hand over, brought their joined hands to his lips, and kissed the inside of her wrist. "And I couldn't imagine a more beautiful woman." He leaned over and gave her a chaste kiss on the lips.

Hermione blushed as she smiled at him. "You are such a charmer, Mr Weasley. And a handsome one at that."

"And I'm sure that's why you love me, Miss Granger."

"Of course. Well, that and your taut body," she said, giving him a scandalous wink. "But that's something to get into at a later time."

Ron blinked as a blush spread across his face. They heard a knocking on the door before he could respond. "Oh," he said. "Is it time already?"

"Yes, I guess it is," Hermione said, standing up. "I should go brush my teeth, but then I'll be out. Do you want to let him in?"

"All right," Ron said as he stood up and went to the door. "Ah, Remus, right on time. Please do come in."

Remus smiled as they shook hands. "Good morning, Ron," he said. "I assume Hermione is not ready yet?"

"Not yet, but she'll be down shortly," Ron said. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No thanks," Remus said. "We should be going soon, as Minerva has called a staff meeting at ten."

At that moment, Hermione came down the steps and gave Remus a smile. "Good morning, Remus. How are you doing this morning?"

"Quite well," Remus said. "Are you excited about today?"

"Excited and a little nervous. At least you don't have to travel on the train like you did in our third year." Hermione looked at her watch and then at Remus. "I guess we should get going." Going over to Ron, she gave him a hug and a kiss. "I'll be back later, probably this afternoon. Why don't you go for a flight? It looks like perfect flying weather outside."

"Indeed," Ron said as he hugged and kissed her back. "But I should be getting into work. Harry might wonder what is keeping me if I don't turn up soon."

"True. Well, it's almost the weekend, so perhaps the weather will be nice then. Have a good day and be careful, okay?"

Ron smiled. "You take good care of me, love," he said. "Let me know how the meeting went." He gave Hermione a goodbye kiss. "Remus, I'm leaving her in your capable hands. Don't let her get too carried away," he said with a wink.

Hermione and Remus both laughed and then headed out the door.

"He can be completely nutters sometimes, but I would never have it any other way. I imagine you feel the same way about Tonks' clumsiness."

Remus smiled. "I do indeed," he said, a note of fondness in his voice. "Tonks just wouldn't be Tonks without her running into the occasional glass door."

"It's as much a part of her as her ability to morph," Hermione agreed. They started walking up High Street and toward Hogwarts. "I never imagined that I would get to teach alongside you."

"Neither did I," Remus admitted. "But it will be an honour I will cherish forever and ever." He grinned at her mischievously.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and laughed. "You are as nutters as Ron, you know that?"

Remus' eyes widened, and he pressed his hand to his heart. "No, really? I had absolutely no idea," he said in mock indignation.

Hermione smiled to herself and thought how nice it was to see Remus joking. Everyone had been so happy to know that Remus and Tonks had both survived the war, despite their serious injuries.

"So, what night do you have for patrol? I'm on Wednesday nights," she said, changing the subject.

"I believe I'm on for Thursdays," Remus replied. "Take some comfort that you had already left by the time the current seventh years were firsties. At least then they'll take you seriously when you try to take House points from them."

"Yes, I am thankful for that. Can you imagine their reactions if it had overlapped?" Hermione looked up and realised that they had come to the gates of Hogwarts. A sense of nostalgia swept over her as she gazed up at the large castle.

Remus noticed Hermione's reaction and placed his hand on her shoulder. "It's still as majestic as ever," he said. "So much has happened over the years, but despite it all, life goes on." He touched the gate, and it opened of its own accord. "Shall we? After you, Hermione."

They made their way through the gates, up the steps, and through the doors to Hogwarts. "Where is the meeting usually held? In the Great Hall or in the staff room?"

"Under Albus, it was either in his office or in the staff room," Remus answered. "I believe Minerva mentioned the staff room for today's meeting."

They made their way to the staff room. As they entered the long panelled room, they noticed the professors already present and seated in the various mismatched dark wooden chairs. Neville waved his hand at Remus and Hermione to get their attention and gestured to them to take the two chairs next to him.

"Remus, Hermione, so nice to see you," Neville said as he handed cups of tea to them.

"It's nice to see you too, Neville," Hermione said, putting down her cup of tea and giving him a hug. "How is Hannah doing?"

"She's doing well," Neville said. "Business is going very well at the Leaky, and she's always busy. How are Ron and Harry?"

"Harry is doing well. We just saw them last night, and they are very excited about the baby. The Weasley family is growing by leaps and bounds," she said with a grin, holding out her left hand.

Neville's eyes widened as he noticed the ring glistening on her finger. "Hermione," he whispered, "he finally did it. Ron's finally proposed."

"Yes, he did," Hermione said with a grin. "And we're *very* happy."

"Congratulations!" Neville exclaimed as Minerva cleared her throat and called the meeting to order.

"Thanks," Hermione whispered back. "We can talk after the meeting."

"Thank you, everyone, for joining me. It looks as if we are all here..."

Just then the door opened, and Hermione gasped as the figure stepped in. She felt the room spinning, and then darkness engulfed her.

Severus Snape walked into the staff room and scowled when he noticed Remus and Hermione sitting next to Neville. He had never thought he'd ever see any of these people ever again. But then again, he had never expected to survive the war. And when he had found himself unexpectedly alive after having been bitten by that thrice-damned snake, the last place he'd ever expect to find himself was back at Hogwarts. In the past, he had successfully resisted Minerva's pleas for him to return to Hogwarts, but for some inexplicable reason, he had decided to accept her offer to return after she had promised an unlimited supply of potions supplies and other ingredients, and the chance to continue his research unimpeded in exchange for his time teaching.

He frowned as he realised he would be surrounded by Gryffindors. It would be trying enough to deal with the constant flow of dunderheads in his Potions classes. Adding the new Gryffindors to the staff list would add to his unpleasant-things-to-deal-with list. He swept past everyone and took a chair in the farthest corner of the room. A commotion brought his attention back to the centre of the room where he noticed Remus, Neville, and Poppy Pomfrey tending to Hermione.

"She'll be fine," Poppy said. "It looks like she's just fainted." She cast a diagnostic charm over Hermione, and when she was satisfied the readings were stable, she pointed her wand at Hermione and muttered, "*Enervate*."

"Hermione," Poppy said, "can you hear me?"

Hermione heard Poppy's voice and slowly opened her eyes. "I can hear you," she said quietly. "I just... didn't expect to see him."

Poppy frowned at Hermione. "Him?" she asked. "To whom are you referring?"

Hermione's eyes drifted over to Severus. "I saw him die..."

"I must admit that I am surprised as well," Remus said quietly, looking at Severus.

"He's most certainly not dead," Poppy said briskly. "He's been with us for the past several years."

"Several years?" Neville asked. "But I've been here for at least three years, and this is the first I'm seeing of him."

Poppy shook her head. "No," she explained, "I meant that he has been alive and hopefully well for the past several years. I believe he's been doing some private research when Minerva begged him to return here and take the Potions classes."

"If Professor Granger is feeling better, perhaps we can continue the meeting," Minerva said in a kind but stern voice.

"Yes, I'm okay," Hermione replied, sitting up a bit straighter in her chair. She picked up her cup of tea and took a couple of sips out of it, hoping it would raise her blood sugar a bit. The tea did make her feel better, and she gave Minerva a smile.

"As I was saying, thank you for attending this meeting. I would like to welcome Severus Snape and Remus Lupin back on staff as our Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts professors, and welcome Hermione Granger as our new Transfiguration professor."

Everyone grew quiet as Minerva mentioned Snape's name. They all turned their heads to the corner where he was sitting. Severus very slightly inclined his head in acknowledgement, but otherwise made no other indication to the others.

Minerva took out a stack of parchments from a pocket in her robes and tapped her wand against the stack, which caused the parchments to float toward the other staff members.

"Here are your timetables," she said. "Please make a note of your patrolling nights. Also, please make a note of Hogsmeade weekends. I expect all staff members to be on duty at those times."

"With the retirements of Horace Slughorn and Clarence Haskell, it necessitates the need to assign new Heads of House for both Slytherin and Gryffindor. Severus will resume his position as Head of Slytherin House, and Remus, you will now be Head of Gryffindor House."

Both Remus and Severus acknowledged Minerva with a nod.

Minerva distributed more parchment to the Heads of Houses.

"Here is the list of prefects for each House," she said. "Also, please note Victoria Gershenson of Ravenclaw and Stephen Bizzell of Slytherin are our Head Girl and Head Boy this year."

There was more mumbling amongst the staff before Minerva cleared her throat.

"Please don't forget your duties. I would also like copies of your syllabi by the end of the day today, which you may send by Floo at your earliest convenience. Thank you for your time. We shall meet again in one month's time. Off you go."

Hermione turned to Neville. "It's nice to be working with you." She quietly thought how proud she was of him, of how far he had come since they had met in their first year.

Neville smiled. "It'll be fun," he said. "The students have generally been very good, and they've enjoyed my classes. I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"You were always so good in Herbology. It wasn't a surprise that you were chosen as Professor Sprout's replacement."

Neville blushed. "Thanks, Hermione," he said. He frowned and shook his head. "I just can't believe Snape is still alive though. And blimey, he's going to be teaching with us! I don't know if I can handle that!"

Hermione put her hand on Neville's arm. "Do you remember our third year, Neville? How you pictured him in your gran's clothing?"

"I remember that. I quite enjoyed that class," Remus said with a mischievous smile.

"Neville, he is not your professor anymore. He is your colleague, and we are all on even standing. If you show him respect, he will show the same to you." Hermione gave Neville an encouraging smile.

Neville sighed as a pained expression crossed his face. "I suppose," he said. "But still, he scares me. I know I'll be so nervous when he's around."

"Neville," Remus said, "if you can wield the Sword of Gryffindor and decapitate Nagini, surely you can face Severus." He put his arm around Neville's shoulders. "And besides," he added, "considering how he nearly died, I would think Severus would be grateful to you for killing that ruddy snake."

Neville sighed as he nodded. "I suppose so," he said quietly.

"The three of us, Harry, Ron and I, saw his body in the Shrieking Shack. There was so much blood," she said with a shudder. "I have never been afraid of him. I was shocked when I saw that he was alive, and that is why I fainted. But although I know that I was in the minority, I enjoyed his classes very much, even though he clearly did not like us Gryffindors."

Remus gently shook his head. "Keep in mind he was deep under cover," he said. "He could not afford to show favouritism to any other House but his own, and Merlin forbid if he were to compliment a Muggle-born and the child of a Death Eater were to hear that and report back to his or her parents. I didn't appreciate what a difficult role he had back then, but then again, I'm sure the two of you have heard about my not-so-friendly past with Severus."

Neville and Hermione nodded.

"Severus has never been an easy man to get along with," Remus continued. "Lily was the only person I knew who truly knew him before he fell into bad influences within Slytherin House. Give him a chance, but don't take any vitriol from him personally."

"I won't," Hermione said with a smile. "My skin is as thick as it was while I was at Hogwarts and thicker. One thing that the final battle taught me is not to sweat the small stuff. Even Ron has matured greatly since our time at Hogwarts."

"As have we all," Neville said.

Severus did not linger after Minerva dismissed the staff. He immediately left the staff room and swept down to his private quarters in the dungeons, his black robes billowing dramatically behind him. When he entered his quarters, he removed his teaching robes and sank into his settee in front of the fire. He massaged his head as he summoned a glass and a bottle of Firewhisky. After pouring a generous measure into his glass, he took a sip and reflected on the past few months. He had not been entirely pleased to see Minerva make her annual trip to Spinner's End. He'd known she was going to try to convince him to return to Hogwarts. It had been the last thing he wanted to do, as there were too many bad memories associated with Hogwarts. Never mind that for a long time, Hogwarts had been the only home he'd known. He was not sure what had induced him to accept her offer this year. He had never been enamoured of teaching, but it was a stable source of income for him, plus the idea of being able to do research on an unlimited budget was highly appealing.

He had not been all that happy to see the knot of Gryffindors in the staff room, however. He had become accustomed to working alongside Remus during his first stint as Defence professor; however, the thought of working alongside Longbottom and Granger was a bit distasteful. Longbottom had been a dismal student, and Severus was exceedingly surprised to see him on staff. Granger was nothing but a book-quoting parrot, and if she was as irritating as an adult as she had been as a child, this would be a very long year indeed.

He downed the rest of his drink and threw the glass at the fireplace where it shattered into many pieces. He put his head in his hand and thought he truly must have been mad for thinking he could return to Hogwarts and function as a normal staff member. Only time would tell just how his relationship with the others would turn out.

It was fifteen minutes after they had been dismissed when Hermione stood up and gathered her papers that she had been given. "I believe I'll go turn in my syllabus and check once more to make sure everything is set; then I'll be heading home. I live right in Hogsmeade, so I won't be staying here at the castle," she said to Neville. "I shall see the two of you tomorrow."

She left the staff room and made her way to the office that had once belonged to Dumbledore. She looked on the sheet that she had been given and found the password to the gargoyles.

"Shakespeare."

The gargoyles turned and allowed her access to the stairway. It wasn't long before she stood outside the office and knocked on the door.

"Come in, Hermione."

She opened the door and smiled at the older witch as she entered. "I brought you my syllabus."

"I wondered how long it would be before I saw you," Minerva said, accepting it from her.

"I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity."

"I remember how good a student you were, and how you encouraged Mr Weasley and Mr Potter to do their work. You were one of my very best students, and I knew that one day I would offer you this position if I were still alive."

Hermione blushed slightly, knowing that a compliment from Minerva McGonagall was rare. "Thank you. Well, I will leave you to your work." Hermione turned away from the desk and started toward the door.

"One moment, Hermione," Minerva said sternly but with a hint of a smile in her voice. "I believe you have forgotten something."

Hermione turned back, confused. "Have I?"

"Yes. Don't you have some news to share?"

Hermione laughed. "Yes, I do. Ron proposed last night." She held out her hand to show her supervisor. "I believe we are planning a summer wedding."

"Congratulations. I always had a feeling about the two of you."

Ron Apparated into the sitting room as he cried out, "Oi, 'Mione! I'm home!" He listened carefully and heard the sloshing of water coming from the bathroom. He smiled as he realised she was upstairs, bathing. A couple of thoughts sprang immediately to his mind: he could join Hermione in the bath or he could be nice and put the kettle on for tea. The Ron-that-was would probably have used a vanishing spell to remove all his clothes and jump into the bath with Hermione. However, he thought it would be nice to have a cuppa after a relaxing bath. *Kettle it is*, he thought as he shuffled off to the kitchen.

He had the tea and a tray full of tea sandwiches he brought from the office ready by the time Hermione appeared in the sitting room, refreshed after her bath. He stood up, gave her a hug and a kiss, and greeted her, "Hullo, love. How was the meeting?"

"Hi, Ron," she said, returning his affectionate embrace. "It went well on the whole, but it was not without its surprises." She sat down and took a cup of tea off of the tray. "You probably should sit down before I tell you this." She knew that he was going to be as surprised as she had been.

Ron sat down. "Okay, love," he said. "What news have you to tell me?"

She took a sip of tea and a deep breath before saying, "Severus Snape is alive, and he is teaching Potions again at Hogwarts."

Ron's mouth dropped. He stared incredulously at Hermione. "Pull the other one," he said. "He is not alive! We saw him die!"

"We *thought* we saw him die. But we also thought Remus and Tonks were dead, remember? Apparently, he has been in hiding all this time, doing research. I, of course, made a spectacle of myself. I am quite certain that everyone is wondering what Minerva was thinking when she hired me."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean 'made a spectacle of yourself'? What happened?"

"I fainted. I saw a man I thought was dead walk into the staff room, and I fainted." Hermione blushed furiously at the memory. "Poppy checked me over, and there wasn't anything wrong that she could find. I think it was simply the shock."

"Honestly, 'Mione," Ron said, balling his hands into fists, "if I hear that greasy git does anything to you, I swear, he'll be hexed six ways to Sunday."

"He won't do anything to me," she assured him. "We are all staff, we are all equal. I am no longer the insufferable know-it-all student that he had so many years ago. I know that Neville is nervous, though. Of course, Severus always made him nervous. I just reminded him of our third year, and I think that helped him a bit."

"Severus?" Ron asked, his voice rising up an octave. "You call him *Severus*?"

Hermione looked confusedly at Ron. "Yes, like I call Remus Remus, Neville Neville, Minerva Minerva, Filius Filius, and every other teacher by their first name." She thought for a moment. "Well, I didn't actually call him anything. He came into the meeting late and left as soon as we were dismissed."

"But this is Snape, the bat of the dungeons, we're talking about!" Ron exclaimed. "He was horrid to us when we were in school. And what he did to poor Neville! How can you see him as anything but that now?"

"Ron, even Remus was acting civilly towards him." She told Ron what Remus had said to both her and Neville. "You remember what Harry had told us about the memories that he had seen."

Ron sighed. "I know, 'Mione," he said, "but I still can't get over how badly he treated us. But mark my words he'll do something that'll make you remember what an evil git he is, and I don't care if he was trying to save Harry's arse all that time."

Hermione mentally shook her head at Ron. Deciding to change the subject, she took a sandwich. "Thanks for bringing home these sandwiches. Why don't we go over on the settee and enjoy the rest of our night together?"

Ron smiled as he took her hand. "I'd like that," he said.

Hermione stood up, and together they walked over to the settee, sandwiches and cups of tea in hand and all thoughts of Severus Snape gone from their minds.

A/N: Many thanks go to ladyinthecloak and ron.chessmaster for the beta-reading. We would also like to thank SouthernWitch69 for all her hard work and effort to make this a Variety Challenge to remember. ♥

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 10

She needs his help, and though he doesn't know it, he needs hers.

We don't own them. It's all JK Rowling's. We're just borrowing them for the moment.

Severus woke up early the next morning. A constant pounding in his head reminded him of the events of the day before as he reached for the Sobering Potion on his bedside table. The realisation that students were expected to arrive that evening made him shudder. Grimacing at the taste of the potion, he wondered why he had given in to Minerva's demand that he return to Hogwarts. He sighed as he went through his morning ablutions.

Severus eventually made his way to the Great Hall and was relieved to find a large pot of coffee and a copy of the *Daily Prophet* waiting for him. He poured himself a generous amount of coffee and immediately hid himself behind the paper.

A raucous laughter came from the staff entrance, and Severus glanced surreptitiously above the paper to notice Granger and Longbottom arriving for breakfast. He turned the page and buried himself in the paper as they reached the table.

"That really sounds like an interesting predicament," he heard Granger say to Longbottom as they neared the table. "What did Hannah do?"

"Oh, you know Hannah. She was hardly fazed. She handled it a lot better than I would have."

"Good morning, Severus," Hermione said, taking her seat at the table.

Severus raised an eyebrow at Hermione and grunted in return.

Hermione shook her head at him and poured herself a cup of tea.

"So when are you and Ron planning to get married?" Neville asked as he poured his own cup of tea.

"The wedding will most likely be this summer. I have several friends who I want to be in the wedding, and we'd like it to be a convenient time for everyone. How many years have you and Hannah been married?"

"Four wonderful years," Neville replied. "We were married on a beautiful August evening, and on Luna's recommendation, we spent a couple of weeks in Majorca before she returned to the Leaky and I continued my apprenticeship with Professor Sprout."

At that moment, Remus entered the Great Hall and took his seat at the staff table. "Good morning, everyone," he said pleasantly. "How is everyone this morning?"

"Fine, thank you, and you? We were just discussing weddings," Hermione said, giving him a smile.

"Is that so?" Remus asked. "It's hard to believe that Tonks and I have been married for eight years now."

"It's hard to believe time moves that quickly," Neville said. "It seems like yesterday that Hannah and I were married."

Hermione looked over at Severus and tried once more to include him in the conversation. "I think it's great that you are teaching again." She didn't get an immediate response, so she looked over at Neville and Remus and shrugged.

Remus leaned over to Hermione and whispered, "I wouldn't try it. He's all wrapped up in his paper, and it's obvious he doesn't want to be disturbed."

Hermione made a noise that sounded a lot like, "Hrmp," and turned her attention to her tea. "So, what House is going to win the House Cup this year, do you think? I am quite certain that it will be Gryffindor."

Filius entered the Great Hall and glided straight over to the Gryffindors. "I highly doubt it," he said as he picked up a piece of toast. "Gryffindor hasn't fielded a decent Quidditch team since Ginevra Weasley left."

"Well, it is possible to win the House Cup without winning the Quidditch cup," Hermione said thoughtfully. "If the students are smart and they don't insist on causing a lot of trouble." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Severus raised an eyebrow at Hermione as he looked over his newspaper at her. "And what makes you think this current crop of students won't reveal themselves to be troublemaking dunderheads?" he asked with a sneer.

"Maybe because I am an optimist and my opinions of dunderheads differ from your own," Hermione retorted. "Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses. Even the best witch or wizard has things that they can't do."

Severus made a coughing sound that sounded like, "flying," and he grunted and went back to his newspaper.

"I know mine, thank you very much," Hermione said, glaring at him. She took some eggs and sausages from the platter in front of her and started eating. She inwardly wondered if he knew what his weakness was or if he thought he was all-powerful.

Remus laid a hand on Hermione's arm as she viciously tore into her sausages. "Hermione," he said softly, "is it really worth it to pick a fight at this time?"

"No. I just don't understand why he has to be the way he is," she replied softly so that only Remus and Neville could hear her. "It seems like he makes himself this way on purpose so that no one will ever get close to him again and he doesn't have to worry about losing someone else like Lily."

"Well, that's his problem, isn't it?" Remus said. "Why don't you just drop it and leave him be? Enjoy breakfast, as this will be the last peaceful, student-free breakfast we'll have for a while."

Neville nodded in agreement. "And believe me, meals here can get rather boisterous at times."

Hermione took a few more bites of food, choosing to ignore the side of the table where Severus sat. "How are you doing this morning, Filius?" she asked, including the small man in the conversation. "I still remember the lesson where you taught us *Wingardium Leviosa*."

Filius chuckled. "That is my most favourite lesson," he said. "It's always a pleasure to see all the feathers float up to the ceiling when the students are successful. Although," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "I do remember one student from your year who had a tendency to explode things with his wand."

Neville and Hermione laughed as they remembered some of Seamus Finnigan's more memorable spells-gone-awry.

"And I'll never forget the night that you stood up to Ron, Harry, and me in our first year, Neville. It was thanks to you that we won the House Cup that year," Hermione said with a fond smile at Neville.

Neville blushed. "Yeah, well, I was afraid that we were going to lose more points."

"And who could forget our first flying lesson?" Hermione asked with a small shudder.

Neville also shuddered. "That was scary," he said. "But you'll have to admit that my Remembrall did play a role in getting Harry on the Gryffindor Quidditch team."

"Oh?" Remus asked as he swallowed his eggs. "Is that how it happened?"

"Yes," Filius said. "Minerva kept going on and on about how he caught that thing. Mr Potter was the youngest Quidditch player in at least a century."

"I often wondered if Harry might try out for professional Quidditch. But he wanted to be an Auror, and that is what he and Ron became." She smiled proudly as she remembered them becoming Aurors.

"Good thing they did, too. We lost a lot of Aurors during the war and retirement," Remus added.

"Well, Merlin willing, none of us will have to go through anything like that again anytime soon. Once in a lifetime is enough for me."

"Me too," Neville added.

Severus headed to the library to check if the latest copy of *Helvetica Alchimica Acta* had arrived. He was not looking forward to dealing with young students again and was particularly dreading facing the first years, as some of the most spectacular accidents had generally involved them. The Gryffindor/Slytherin classes had historically been the most difficult to teach, and he was expecting history to repeat itself, as it had in previous years when he had taught Potions.

He left the library with journal in hand and was looking forward to returning to his office to read it over a nice cup of tea. His musing was interrupted when he felt someone physically run into him. He dropped the journal as he caught an armful of a very flustered, red-faced Hermione Granger.

"Miss Granger," he hissed as he abruptly let her go, "what is the meaning of this?"

"I want to know why you insist on isolating yourself from everyone," Hermione blurted out. "You know, I was attempting to include you in the conversation at breakfast, and all you did was either ignore me or try to reply with snide answers."

Severus arched an eyebrow at Hermione. "I fail to see why this should concern you," he said softly.

"Why? Because believe it or not, I enjoyed your class. Yes, you tried to alienate me with all of the other students you had. Yes, you did your darndest to make me hate you. But you taught me a lot, and because of you, I can brew my own potions for my needs."

Severus was taken aback by her words. His momentary astonishment was replaced by his usual expressionless mask. He grabbed Hermione's arm and led her rather ungracefully into an unused classroom. He threw her into the room, and as the torches came to life with a non-verbal spell, he sealed the door and cast a Silencing Charm. He turned around to face Hermione and folded his arms across his chest.

"What do you want, Miss Granger?" he asked.

"What do I want? I want, first of all, for you to start treating me like a colleague instead of one of your students. I am almost twenty-six-years old, and I am not a child." Hermione's anger was building up in her chest. "I rather doubt you would have thrown another one of your colleagues into a classroom like you just threw me."

Severus narrowed his eyes and scowled at her. "First of all," he said in a voice of deadly calm, "respect must be earned. Secondly, I treat everyone as I have always done. Do not assume anything about me, as you have no idea how I would act or react under any situation."

"I know more than you think I know," Hermione said, mimicking his stance. "I know what you went through for so many years. I know what you had to endure. Harry told me about what he saw in the Pensieve. He told Ron and me everything." She felt some pain in her chest but ignored it. "I can't imagine what it had to have been like for you all those years. But you were given a second chance, damn it. Why can't you let yourself enjoy life instead of making everyone shy away from you?"

Severus clenched his teeth and gave a low growl as he loomed over Hermione. He was so close that Hermione could see a vein pulsing at his temple. It was generally a sign that Severus was close to the breaking point.

"Miss Granger," he hissed, "that is none of your damned business. I certainly do not need your pity or your concern, and I do not need anyone clucking over me like a flock of damned hens. I demand you cease your busybody nattering immediately."

"You didn't scare me when I was your student, and you don't scare me now," Hermione said, her voice rising higher. "You know, I thought I understood why you were so difficult after Harry shared your memories. Yesterday, when I found out you were alive, I thought maybe you might have changed. But now I see that working for Voldemort was just an excuse that you were using for being the way you already were!" The pain was building up in her chest, but she wasn't backing down.

Severus moved so that his face was just mere inches away from Hermione's. "Don't presume you know me based on memories that Potter whelp had no right to share with anyone else," he said with a deadly quiet tone to his voice. "I will admit was I none too pleased to see I am colleagues with you, the werewolf, and the clumsy oaf," he added. "You were nothing but a parrot, needing to impress everyone with your ability to memorise texts without truly understanding what they meant. Why Minerva thought hiring such an insufferable know-it-all was a good idea is completely beyond me."

"I was apprenticed to one of the best masters of Transfiguration around, and I earned my position on staff fairly!" Hermione yelled, angered at the fact that he refused to raise his voice. "I guess you don't know how many times I defended you to Harry and Ron. But I guess that doesn't matter to you!" She gasped, feeling the pain inside her chest burn her like a Stunner right to the heart, and felt the room spin as darkness engulfed her.

Severus noticed her wince in pain and reacted very quickly when he saw her fall face-forward towards the floor. He caught her and gently laid her on the floor. As he wordlessly unlocked the door and lifted the Silencing Charm, he conjured his Patronus and sent it to Poppy Pomfrey. He then turned his attention to Hermione and cast a diagnostic charm over her. The dark aura emanating from her chest puzzled him greatly only Dark curses would give auras like that. He cast a few Dark-detection spells over her chest as Poppy came barreling through the door.

"Severus," she said breathlessly, "I came as quickly as I could. What happened to Hermione?"

Severus shook his head. "We were having a discussion when she appeared to experience sudden pain in her chest, and she fainted." He cast the diagnostic charm over Hermione again and pointed out the dark aura over her chest. "That was undoubtedly caused by some sort of Dark curse."

Poppy nodded. "I agree with that assessment," she said. "But how could this be? And who would go around hexing her like that? The war ended seven years ago."

Severus shrugged his shoulders. "I wonder if this might be a vestige of any injury she may have suffered back then," he said. "To my knowledge, the Aurors have captured most of the remaining rogue Death Eaters who could have been a danger to her."

Pomfrey nodded as she stood and conjured a stretcher. Both she and Severus levitated Hermione onto the stretcher. "Thank you, Severus," she said. "I'll take over from here. In the meantime, perhaps you can try to determine what that curse is and figure out if there are any counter-curses or potions that could help her."

Severus nodded curtly as he left the room and went down the hall, his robes billowing behind him.

When he returned to his office, he paced the floor, wondering how Hermione could have been hit with that particular curse. It appeared to be a Burning Curse that was embedded under the skin. He also wondered how many years she had suffered from it. He sat down heavily on his chair and put his head in his hands. Not only was her condition first and foremost in his mind but her words also cut through his consciousness, and it made him feel guilty for causing her the stress that might have triggered her pain. *I guess you don't know how many times I defended you to Harry and Ron. But I guess that doesn't matter to you!* Her words echoed in his head as he sank into despair. He couldn't understand why she had defended him, but he found it oddly comforting. He vowed to himself he would work to figure out exactly what curse had been cast on Hermione and would not rest until he found a counter-curse, a potion, or a combination of both. It was the least he could do.

to remember. ♥

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 10

She needs his help, and though he doesn't know it, he needs hers.

We don't own them. It's all JK Rowling's. We're just borrowing them for the moment.

Severus eventually made his way to the hospital wing to check on Hermione. He swept through the double doors and went immediately to her bedside where Poppy and Minerva were discussing her condition quietly. They acknowledged Severus' presence with a nod.

"How is she?" Severus asked.

Minerva frowned at him. "Fancy you caring," she said coldly. "If I was noticing correctly, you were giving her the cold shoulder this morning at breakfast."

Poppy put her hand on Minerva's shoulder, shaking her head slightly. "Minerva "

"Poppy," Severus said, "she's right. Miss Granger was trying to engage me in conversation this morning with her little group, and I was not in the mood for it. She later saw fit to confront me near the library, and we had a private discussion about it." He turned his attention to Hermione. "Poppy, is there any improvement?"

Poppy shook her head. "She is still not conscious, and whatever hex hit her appears to have gotten worse. I've had to place her under a stasis charm, as I don't like what her latest data is telling us."

"Perform the diagnostic charm again," Severus said.

Poppy performed a modification to her usual diagnostic charm. A dark purple haze floated above Hermione's chest. Both Minerva's and Severus' eyebrows rose as they observed the haze, as well as a series of runes Poppy's charm generated. Minerva's hand flew up to her chest as she sat down heavily on a chair. Severus swore under his breath as he interpreted the runes.

"Poppy," he said, "it is not a burning curse. You were right to put her under a stasis charm."

"Do you know what it is?" Poppy asked.

Severus shook his head. "Without knowing who cast the curse, it is difficult to say. However, I have my suspicions." He then cast a couple of Dark-detecting spells he had not cast earlier and shook his head. He looked up at Poppy and Minerva with a grave expression. "If I'm not mistaken, she may have been hit with some sort of slicing hex," he said.

Minerva moaned and Poppy gasped in shock. "How, why, and who?"

Severus sighed. "It is difficult to say. It is conceivable this could have happened to her during the war and that it could have been some sort of time-delayed hex. It could also have been a type of hex that is triggered by stress. Did she give any indication at all she was in any sort of pain?"

Poppy shook her head. "None at all. She appears to be a healthy young woman."

"What about her fainting spell yesterday?" Minerva asked.

"I don't believe it's related," Poppy said. "I did some diagnostic charms then, but this dark aura never came up."

Severus traced his lips with his pointer finger. "If I recall correctly, she had been badly injured during her fifth year when Potter had made that ill-advised trip to the Department of Mysteries."

Poppy frowned and leaned her head to one side as she tried to remember that incident. "Oh, right," she said. "She had quite enough damage to be getting on with. She had been on ten different potions for several days."

Severus frowned at Poppy. "Do you recall what curse may have hit her?"

Poppy shook her head. "Hermione said she had recalled the person had hit her with a wordless curse. It would have been far worse otherwise."

Severus nodded. "She didn't say who cursed her?"

Poppy again shook her head. "Not that I recall," she answered.

Severus Summoned a piece of parchment and a quill and wrote the names of a couple of potions. He handed the parchment to Poppy. "These are potions that I'm sure you have in stock," he said. "You may give her half a vial of each and then lift the stasis charm. She will regain consciousness shortly thereafter."

"All right," Poppy said. "I'll determine if she will be well enough to be out and about after she wakes up."

Severus nodded as he turned on his heel and left the hospital wing, his robes billowing behind him.

Harry was shuffling through parchments on his desk when he noticed someone trying to Floo-call him. Eventually, Severus' head appeared in the fire.

"Professor Snape," Harry said as he moved a stack of parchments off to the side. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"May I come through, Potter?" he asked.

Harry made a motion, inviting the Potions master in his office. Severus stepped through the Floo and brushed off the ashes from his robes. Without waiting for any other

invitation, Severus seated himself.

"Potter, I would like to know what sorts of injuries Miss Granger sustained during her last two to three years at Hogwarts."

Harry frowned. "Why do you need to know that, sir?" he asked.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose as he tried to find the words to explain Hermione's condition. "She collapsed earlier this morning," he said. "Madam Pomfrey and I cast several different diagnostic charms on her and determined she may have been hit with some sort of Dark curse, mostly likely a time-delayed curse of some sort."

Harry's eyes widened. "Merlin's beard," he breathed. "Well, during our fifth year, Hermione had been hit by some non-verbal curse that Dolohov cast on her "

"Dolohov, you say?" Severus asked.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Come to think of it, it may have been a purple flash."

Severus nodded. "Anything else, Potter?" he asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Not long before Voldemort was killed, we had been taken hostage at Malfoy Manor. Hermione had been tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange. I think she had also cut her with some enchanted knife, but Hermione had had those injuries cured at Shell Cottage."

Severus nodded again. "May I assume Miss Granger was subjected to the Cruciatus Curse?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, she was. I can't say how long for, maybe anywhere between ten to fifteen minutes."

Severus stood up. "Thank you, Potter. That was most helpful."

"Professor Snape," Harry said, "will she be okay?"

Severus sighed and looked intently at Harry. "Only time will tell, Potter," he said softly. He headed to the fireplace when Harry grabbed Severus' sleeve.

"You will keep me updated, won't you, sir?" Harry asked.

Severus gave an imperceptible nod. "I must be on my way." He strode to the fireplace, threw in some Floo powder, and called out the Hog's Head.

By the time Severus returned to the hospital wing, Hermione had regained consciousness and was arguing with Poppy Pomfrey. He overheard Hermione begging Poppy to release her so she could attend the Welcoming Feast and Poppy's steadfast insistence that Hermione stay in the hospital wing for the rest of the day and night. Their arguing became rather loud at one point, but stopped abruptly when Severus appeared at Hermione's bedside.

"Miss Granger, Poppy," Severus said in greeting.

"Severus," Poppy said. "What have you discovered?"

"I have an idea what may have happened, but I'll need to do another set of tests to be sure." He then looked at Hermione. "Miss Granger, I trust that you will stay still and hold your tongue as I carry out these tests?" he asked in a tone that brooked no disagreements.

Hermione started to protest but finally nodded grudgingly. The look of determination never left her face, however, and both Poppy and Severus had an idea that it would not be long before she was arguing again.

Severus gave a curt nod as he began waving his wand in intricate patterns. Various runes floated above Hermione, as well as auras of different colours that hovered above her chest and ribs. He also cast similar charms along her neck as well. He quietly discussed the results with Poppy before he cancelled all the spells.

"Miss Granger, have you been suffering from any sort of pains, particularly chest pains?" Severus asked.

Hermione thought for a moment, and then narrowed her eyes at him. "From the way you were talking to me and treating me, I don't know why you care."

Poppy rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Hermione," she said, "I don't care what issue you two were arguing over. Just answer his questions, will you?"

Hermione looked from Poppy to Severus and finally relented. "I have been having pain for a couple of days. I thought it was heartburn, and I was treating it as such. The potions I have taken seemed to help a bit but not like I would have thought."

Poppy frowned and Severus raised an eyebrow. "Exactly what potions are those, Hermione?" Poppy asked.

Hermione thought a moment and then said, "It was a basic antacid potion. I don't know if I imagined that it worked because I expected it to or if it really made me feel better. I just know that the pain I felt today was worse than I ever felt before. I've read descriptions of how a heart attack feels like, and this pain matches that." Hermione paused and looked from Poppy to Severus. "Is something wrong with my heart?"

Severus and Poppy exchanged glances, and Severus raised an eyebrow at Poppy. Poppy nodded at him and turned to Hermione. "No, Hermione," Poppy said. "We don't believe it's your heart. At least, the diagnostic scans don't indicate that. However, we will need to know a bit of your medical history, especially related to any war-time injuries that may have been inflicted upon you."

"It's been seven years since the war ended; I don't know how that could make a difference now," Hermione said, frowning. "And up until a few days ago, I was feeling fine."

Poppy and Severus exchanged another glance before she looked at Hermione again. "How many days exactly was a few days ago?" She looked sternly at Hermione. "And do be forthcoming with us. The more honest you are with us, the better we will be able to help you."

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to remember. "Thinking back, it seems like it's been going on for about a month now. It was so mild that it didn't seem like it was anything to worry about. It happened a couple of times after I ate something spicy and then once when Ron and I had argued."

Severus, who had been looking intently at Hermione, inwardly growled, as he knew she was not being completely honest with them. He then glanced again at Poppy, who rolled her eyes and looked again at Hermione.

"Hermione, you are not answering my question," Poppy said sternly. "*What war-time injuries did you have?* And believe me, my question is completely relevant to the pain you are suffering at the present moment."

Hermione sighed. "The only thing I can remember happening to me during the war was being under the Cruciatus Curse not too long before Voldemort fell. Ron, Harry, and I were captured and held by the Malfoy family. Bellatrix tortured me I don't know how long it went on, but I remember it seemed to have gone on forever."

Severus' eyes widened before they narrowed as he glared at her. "You mean to say you were subject to the Cruciatus Curse at Bellatrix's wand?" he asked, his voice deadly quiet and calm. "Why didn't you say anything about that, you foolish girl?"

Poppy put her hand on Severus' arm, but Severus wrenched his arm away as he and Poppy continued to glare at Hermione.

"It's not something I like to think about. Could what I am going through be related to having been tortured by the Cruciatus Curse?" She swallowed a bit. "May I have some water? My mouth is dry." She looked down at her hands in her lap so that they couldn't see the emotion in her eyes.

Severus turned to Hermione's bedside table, poured water from a pitcher into a glass, and handed it to her. He gently placed his fingers on her chin, which caused her to look up at him. "Not in this instance, Miss Granger," he said softly. "However, you should be examined thoroughly for any possible after-effects from that curse." His eyes, which appeared to soften briefly, took on a hard edge. "Bellatrix Lestrange was anything but gentle."

Poppy nodded. "I will give you a complete medical once we've finished our discussion, Hermione," she added. "But I don't believe you're telling us everything. What I'm most interested in at the moment, and I'm sure Severus will concur, is what exactly happened that night in the Department of Mysteries." She put up her hand. "Before you protest further, Hermione, I know you didn't tell me the complete story after you regained consciousness back then. We need to know the entire story before we can even have any hope of helping you." She then glared at Hermione sternly. "Regarding our earlier argument, young lady, the sooner you tell us, the better the chances of your attending the Welcoming Feast tonight."

Hermione took a sip of water and closed her eyes, remembering that night nine years ago that she had never forgotten. "Voldemort had sent Harry false information, saying that Sirius was there. We went with Dumbledore's Army to rescue him. I remember we were looking for the prophecy, and then the next thing I knew, we were fighting. Everything happened so fast. But I'll never forget that purple streak of light.

"Blood. So much pain. It made the Cruciatus Curse look like a scratch. I thought I was dying." She took another drink of water and settled back on her pillows.

Severus nodded, satisfied that he received all the information he required. But Poppy was still insisting on more information. "Hermione," she said as if the last shreds of her patience were being tried, "who did this to you?"

"Antonin Dolohov," Hermione said with pain in her voice. "He was masked, of course, but I heard someone tell him to 'Get the Mudblood.'"

Poppy's eyes widened in alarm. She sat down heavily on a chair.

Severus closed his eyes. "That is what I was afraid of," he murmured. He opened his eyes and looked at Hermione. "Miss Granger," he said, "I may have figured out what you may have been hit with, and now that I know who did it to you, it confirms in my mind what it was." He sat down at her other side and glanced at Poppy. She nodded and took Hermione's hand. He then looked back at Hermione and continued.

"Dolohov was particularly skilled with these types of hexes. Confirm for me one detail, Miss Granger: do you recall if he issued the hex verbally or non-verbally?"

"He didn't say a thing." Hermione looked down at the engagement ring on her finger and turned it. "I need to know the truth. Could this kill me?"

"It's difficult to say," Severus said. "Had he issued this hex verbally, you would not be with us today."

Poppy squeezed Hermione's hand and placed her other hand on her shoulder.

"However," Severus continued, "because it was issued non-verbally, the effects were different. First of all, it becomes a time-release slicing hex, and in general, stress will trigger it. Secondly, it acts slowly, and once it's activated, it will continue to slice at you. If it is left untreated, it will kill you eventually. It might take years, but it will run its course with devastating results."

Hermione was quiet for a few minutes, seeming to process the information. Finally she gave a half laugh. "Here I thought my life was going to be normal after the war. What kind of treatment is there for it?" Her voice was quiet but steady.

"I'll have to devise one," Severus replied. "I have some references that I'll have to consult, but I suspect a combination of potions and counter-charms should help." He frowned in thought. "Dolohov is dead, and one would think that whatever hexes or curses he would have cast would not be in effect post-mortem. However, this particular curse was one of his own devising, and he was particularly well-known amongst the Dark Lord's followers for it. He loved using it against Muggles and Muggle-borns."

"I want to help," Hermione said, sitting up a bit straighter.

Poppy and Severus exchanged glances. "Miss Granger," Severus said, "I'm not even sure of everything that may be involved with this modified curse, and besides, considering the symptoms appear to be stress-induced, it might not be wise for you to be involved with this project."

"I believe it may be more stressful for me to be sitting around and waiting on word from you. You have just told me that this curse will eventually kill me if we don't find a treatment. I have a future to plan with Ron. I think that you know me well enough that I don't do well standing by and waiting for results."

Severus frowned in thought as he traced his lips with his pointer finger. "I will need to discuss this with Poppy and Minerva," he said.

Poppy nodded. "You have been under a lot of stress, Hermione," she said. "You do not need to be under any more, especially considering you will be teaching a heavy course load, and you are just a first year teacher at that!"

Hermione chuckled. "Considering what I did during the years I was at Hogwarts, in addition to having taken and not only passing but receiving Outstandings in all of my subjects, I can't see that it will be that much different." She looked at Poppy and then at Severus. "Is there something that I can use to help to alleviate my symptoms, even if it isn't a cure?"

Severus and Poppy glanced at each other. "Miss Granger," Severus said, "as I said, Poppy, Minerva, and I will discuss this before we proceed. The curse is so slow-acting that it will not kill you immediately."

"Yes, but I can't pass out from pain every time I become stressed. That isn't any kind of life for anyone," Hermione said, looking at the two of them.

Poppy placed one of the two potions she had administered to Hermione before she regained consciousness on her bedside table. "Take an eighth of a teaspoon of this with meals," she said. "I need you to check in with me every morning before your first class. No strenuous work, no lifting or levitating anything heavier than half a stone, and, for Merlin's sake, try to minimise your stress. In the meantime, I will need you to stay here for the rest of the day."

"What about the Welcoming Feast?" Hermione asked, looking at Poppy. "I can't miss that. How is it going to look if I am not there for it? I'll take it easy until then. I've completed all my preparations for tomorrow's classes. But I don't want to miss my first Welcoming Feast as a new professor."

Poppy sighed. "All right, Hermione," she said. "You may go on a couple of conditions. You are to stay here until shortly before the students arrive from Hogsmeade. Secondly, if you experience any burning whatsoever, you are coming back here." She waved her wand over Hermione. "Now I will know if you are experiencing any burning. If you agree to these conditions, you may go, even though I tell you this against my better judgement."

"I agree," Hermione said with a nod. She wondered what she was going to do about going home that night, though she had a feeling that she would be pressing her luck to ask about it. "Would it be possible for me to have something to eat? I guess I made you two miss lunch as well."

"Oh, child," Poppy said. She went to the fireplace and Floo-called the kitchens. Shortly thereafter, a house-elf appeared with three trays and disappeared with a click of its fingers. "Tuck in, Hermione. You too, Severus," Poppy said. "This will be the last of our sustenance before the students arrive tonight."

Hermione took a bite of the food and looked over at Severus. "Thank you for helping me," she said, looking at him. "And you also, Poppy," she added with a smile. "I don't think I'm going to tell Ron yet. If it comes time to tell him, I will. But I know that he's just going to worry, and that will make things worse."

Severus sipped at his pumpkin juice and slightly inclined his head as Poppy nodded. "That, Hermione, is entirely up to you," she said. "Do what you feel is best, but remember, you must keep your stress levels to a minimum."

After Severus left the hospital wing, he rushed over to the Hog's Head and Flooed to Harry's office. He stepped through without waiting for Harry to acknowledge him.

"Professor Snape," Harry said, knocking over a tower of parchment as he stood up abruptly. "Have you any new news?"

Severus inclined his head as he regarded the young Auror. "I do have news," he said quietly. "However, before I continue, I need your word that you will share this news with no one except Miss Granger and myself."

Harry regarded him for a brief moment, but finally nodded. "I won't say anything. What is wrong with Hermione?"

Severus narrowed his eyes at Harry. In general, he knew Harry could keep his word; however, he wanted to ensure that Hermione's poor excuse of a fiancé would know nothing of what transpired earlier that day. "Potter, I will need a wand oath from you. I emphasise you cannot share this news with *anyone*, not even your wife or her brother."

Harry's eyes opened wide in surprise, but he held up his wand. "I swear to you that I will not say anything about what you tell me to anyone except you and Hermione."

As Harry's wand glowed golden, Severus, satisfied with Harry's response, could see that his worry over Hermione was overshadowing his loyalty to his wife and his friend. "Very well, Potter," he said. "First of all, I thank you for your information. It helped me determine what has been ailing Miss Granger." Severus sighed. "It is quite serious," he continued. "It is a good thing that Dolohov's curse had been cast non-verbally. Had he verbalised that curse, Miss Granger would have died that evening at the Department of Mysteries." He looked intently into those green eyes that had haunted him for so many years. "It is a time-delayed slicing hex that is aggravated by stress. Poppy and I will be devising a cure for her, but it will take time, and Miss Granger must be kept as calm as possible."

Harry's face paled slightly and he sat down. It was several moments before he said anything. "Damn that Dolohov! If he wasn't already dead, I'd go after him myself. Is there anything that I can do?"

Severus shook his head. "No, not at this point, Potter," he said. "I don't know what Miss Granger's home life is like, but if you can help ensure she is kept calm, you will do much to help her as we work on a cure."

"I'll see what I can do. I'm sure you know that Ron and Hermione argued a lot when we were at Hogwarts. Things have gotten better now that the years have gone by, but well, every couple has its arguments." Harry looked at his former Potions professor. "Tell her that I am thinking of her."

Severus nodded. "I do recall Weasley and Miss Granger having had a rather testy relationship whilst in school," he said quietly. "That is extra stress she does not need." He turned toward the fireplace and placed his hand in the tin containing the Floo powder. "I understand she is commuting from home," he said. "I trust you will do your part to ensure her stress levels are kept to an absolute minimum?"

"I will," Harry said in a serious tone. "After all she did for me in school, it's the least that I can do for her."

Severus nodded curtly as he threw the Floo powder into the fireplace and disappeared in a swirl of his billowing black teaching robes.

Harry went back to the case he'd been working on before Snape appeared, but his mind wasn't on it. His mind was on his friend who had stood by him through everything. He didn't know what he would do if something happened to her, and he didn't know how he was going to keep the information from Ron and Ginny.

A/N: Many thanks go to ladyinthecloak for the beta-reading. We would also like to thank SouthernWitch69 for all her hard work and effort to make this a Variety Challenge to remember. ♥

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 10

She needs his help, and though he doesn't know it, he needs hers.

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Minerva sat in her office, her mind occupied. Her thoughts lay on the young woman down in the hospital wing. She remembered how enthusiastic Hermione had been when she had accepted her offer of a position and how she had been the first to turn in her syllabus.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a voice she hadn't heard for a few days. She looked up at Albus' portrait to see him smiling at her, his blue eyes twinkling.

"Minerva," Albus said, "you seem occupied. What do you have on your mind besides the return of the students?"

"I never could keep anything from you," Minerva replied. "It's Hermione Granger. She collapsed earlier today. I just received a message that Severus and Poppy are on their way to talk to me about their findings."

"Oh?" Albus asked as he pulled out a sweet and popped it into his mouth. "Sherbet lemon?"

"No, thank you," Minerva said, raising her eyebrow at him and wondering how he could give her one to begin with since he was in his portrait. She also was surprised that all he had to say about Hermione collapsing was, 'Oh?'

Albus chuckled. "You know where they are usually kept, Minerva, just in case you change your mind." His eyes twinkled once again. "So, about the esteemed Professor Granger. I was wondering when you would have a meeting of the minds concerning her condition."

Minerva looked at Albus' portrait sternly. "Do you mean to tell me, Albus, that you knew about her condition?"

Spreading his arms, he answered, "Heavens no, Minerva. Not at all. But she is good at hiding things, isn't she?"

"I don't know how it is possible, Albus Dumbledore, but you are more annoying in death than you ever were in life." Minerva rubbed her temples in frustration. "I have no doubt about her abilities, but her health concerns worry me."

Albus chuckled. "Your esteemed Severus Snape used to tell me the exact same thing," he said lightheartedly. "But indeed, her health would be something of concern. Do ensure that she is being completely honest with you. If she has a secret she feels she must hide, she will do it with no regards as to how it will affect her."

"I will be certain to do that, and yes, I know that she is an overachiever. Look at what she did during her third year here. She was one of my very best students, but she was always afraid that what she was doing wasn't good enough."

"But of course, how can I ever forget?" Albus asked. "She was an exceptionally bright student, and I am sure she will be an excellent teacher and mentor."

Minerva nodded and was about to say something else, but then a knock came at the door. "Please, come in," she called out.

The door opened, and Severus and Poppy swept into the room. "Minerva," they both murmured in greeting.

"Good afternoon. Please, sit down," she said, offering them each a chair in front of her desk. "I understand that you are here to give me an update on Hermione's condition."

"Yes," Poppy said. "She's resting comfortably right now and will hopefully be well enough to attend the Welcoming Feast tonight."

Minerva took a sharp breath in. "Have you been able to determine what is wrong with her?"

Poppy and Severus looked at each other before Poppy made a facial gesture to Severus to indicate he should be the one giving the explanation to Minerva. Severus sighed as he faced Minerva.

"Unfortunately, yes," Severus said quietly. "She was hit by a curse whilst she and her... friends were in the Department of Mysteries in her fifth year "

"What does that have to do with her current condition, Severus?" Minerva interrupted.

Severus scowled at Minerva. "As I was saying," he said even more quietly, in a tone which indicated he was annoyed, "she was hit by a curse whilst she and her friends were in the Department of Mysteries in her fifth year. The deliverer of that curse was Antonin Dolohov."

A gasp interrupted Severus, but he ignored it and continued his explanation.

"Luckily for Miss Granger, Dolohov delivered that curse non-verbally, which essentially bought her more time "

Minerva looked sharply at Severus. "Are you saying that she could die?"

Severus snarled at Minerva. "If you would stop interrupting me, woman, you would know the details as we know them at the moment." He glared at Minerva before he continued. "The curse Dolohov used was one of his specialities. It's a slicing hex, which, if cast verbally, would have surely resulted in death if not attended to immediately. However, because it was cast non-verbally, it became a time-released slicing hex that's triggered by stress. The more stressful the event, the more pain she will experience."

"So that is what caused her to pass out today," Minerva concluded. "Do you know the extent of the damage yet? It has been nine years since that curse was cast on her. What can be done for her?"

"She is on a course of pain-relieving and Blood-Replenishing Potions at the moment," Poppy said. "It's a shame she is not living in the castle because she really needs to be monitored very closely. I will insist that she meets with me every morning to ensure the curse doesn't cause any more damage than it has already."

"The most important thing is that she not be exposed to high amounts of stress," Poppy continued. "And, Severus and I agree on this point: until we figure out a cure, the fewer people who know about this, the better."

Minerva nodded gravely. "I will do everything I can to make sure her stress is minimised. Do you know for certain that she has told you everything? Albus and I were just discussing how she likes to keep things a secret, especially when she is trying to prove herself."

Severus nodded. "I figured as much," he said softly. "However, she confided in us the relevant injuries she had suffered during the war."

Poppy nodded her assent. "She was less than forthright, that is for certain," she added. "But we impressed upon her the importance of telling us everything if she wanted to be cured."

"Thank you for telling me, Poppy and Severus. I will advise the other professors that she is not well, but I will not tell them the nature of her illness. I am certain that Remus and Neville at the very least will want to go and see her."

"Of course," Poppy said. "I hope they will exercise restraint and not spread this news."

"It would be highly preferable if they do not know the exact nature of Miss Granger's injuries," Severus added.

"But then again, we cannot prevent her from telling the others if she so chooses," Poppy interjected.

Minerva nodded. "I don't know that she will want to tell anyone. She has never wanted anyone to pity her, for as long as I have known her."

Severus raised an eyebrow at Minerva, but didn't make any comment.

Poppy nodded and added, "Well, that should be enough to reassure us."

Severus looked as if he was deep in thought. "Minerva," he started slowly, "Miss Granger expressed interest in assisting us in developing a cure for her affliction. Given that we need to minimise her stress levels, what are your thoughts as far as granting or denying her wish is concerned?"

Minerva thought for a moment. "Given her persistence, I would grant her wish conditionally. As long as it does not affect her negatively, I would allow her to help you. However, if she starts to show any sign of tiredness or pain, she will have to stop. I understand her need to be involved; she was always proactive. But if it starts to make her the slightest amount worse, she will need to be pulled from the project."

Severus sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose. That was not exactly what he wanted to hear from Minerva, but he knew he shouldn't have been surprised at her response. Apparently, Poppy seemed to share his sentiments.

"But, Minerva, to subject that girl to more work when she probably has enough to be getting on with might be the death of her!"

Severus glowered at Poppy. Poppy's expression softened somewhat as she added, "Well, you know what I mean; I didn't mean having her join this project would literally kill her."

Minerva offered Severus one of her rare smiles. "I seem to recall a certain Potions master who was very ill this time seven years ago. Someone who did not want to rest, who wanted to help with his own cure. It's not easy to wait for results when you can be a part of the process."

Both Severus and Poppy scowled at Minerva. "You do have a point," Severus muttered.

Poppy shook her head. "I certainly can't refute that." Then she turned to Severus and started shaking a finger at him. "If I hear that girl is being overworked, a pox shall be upon your black, glossy head, Severus. Mark my words."

Severus rolled his eyes while Minerva tried, but failed, to hold in her laughter.

"You two are going to be the death of me yet," Minerva said, shaking her head. "Now, I will give Remus and Neville the barest details. I am certain that the two of you have better things to do than to sit here, keeping me company all day. Please keep me up to date on how Miss Granger is doing."

Severus and Poppy stood up. "Very well," Severus said as he turned on his heel and swept out of the room.

Poppy looked rather amused as she watched Severus leave the room. "Honestly, Minerva," she said, "I think that man is really a drama queen in disguise."

They were startled by a familiar voice, clearing his throat rather loudly.

"Ladies," Albus' portrait said, "please do remember who the true queen is in this room."

Poppy rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Albus, if you were living, I would be throwing a pillow at you right about now."

Albus laughed a deep, rich laugh.

"And to think I fancied you, Albus," Minerva said, shaking her head.

Albus laughed again. "Oh, Minerva, I am truly flattered. But alas and alack, I am but pigment on canvas."

"Not to mention being the queen of Hogwarts castle," Minerva said, giving him a wink. "With classes starting tomorrow, I daresay our first years will have their share of explosions, spills, and injuries. Shall I see you tonight at the Welcoming Feast tonight, Poppy?"

Poppy smiled as she inclined her head. "You shall, Minerva," she said.

Hermione stood up slowly from the bed she had been resting on since the afternoon. She was feeling no pain, but she felt a little shaky. Nevertheless, she was determined to attend the Welcoming Feast. Remus and Neville had come to visit her a couple of hours earlier, and it had been apparent that they didn't know what was wrong with her, since they had told her that they had hoped her anaemia would improve and that she would feel better soon. The explanation that they had been given worked out so well that she thought she'd use it with Ron as well. After all, it was the truth. The visit had cheered her up greatly, and she had thanked them for coming to visit.

She pulled on the robes she'd bought for the feast and checked herself in the mirror. Other than looking a little pale, she didn't think she looked that bad. Even though her hair had calmed down considerably since her student days, she still used liberal amounts of Sleekeazy when she wanted to look nice, and she had applied it before putting it in a French twist. As she examined her work in the mirror, she was very happy with the results.

Poppy came out of her office with a pain-relieving potion and a pitcher of water. "Hermione," she said, "if you are so insistent on attending the Welcoming Feast, you will have to drink more of this potion and an entire glass of water before you may go." She then put a stern expression on her face as she started wagging her finger at Hermione. "But, young lady, at the first sign of pain or discomfort, I will order a house-elf to bring you straight back here where you will stay until breakfast tomorrow morning. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Poppy," Hermione said meekly. She took the potion and drank it, then drank the glass of water. "I wouldn't admit this when Severus is here, but I am a little scared. I don't want him to look at me as someone who is weak because I still think he looks at me as one of his students. But I know I can tell you."

Poppy took the vial and the glass from Hermione and looked at her with an assessing eye. "Hermione," she said, "it's okay to be a little scared. And please do give Severus a little credit. I don't think he sees you as weak."

"I hope not," Hermione replied. "Well, let's go to the Welcoming Feast and greet the new students."

Hermione and Poppy made their way to the Great Hall, and Hermione took her seat next to Neville and Remus.

"Oi, Hermione," Neville whispered, "when it comes up, you'd better eat the spinach. I don't want to see you have another anaemic episode."

Hermione made a face. "Well, I guess if it's going to make me feel better, it will be worth it. Maybe one of these days, someone will develop a spell that will make food like spinach taste better."

Remus leaned over and whispered into Hermione's ear. "It's not that bad," he said softly. "In fact, it's quite good for you."

"I know how good it is for me," Hermione said brusquely, then lowered her voice as the older students entered the Great Hall and took their seats. "I want to enjoy my first Welcoming Feast, so let's discuss this later, shall we?"

Remus and Neville rolled their eyes as they looked over the students at the tables. Neville was sharing his impressions of some of the more memorable Gryffindors amongst the current crop of students with Remus and Hermione when everyone quieted as Filius, fulfilling his role as Deputy Headmaster, led the first-year students into the Great Hall.

"Oh, Merlin," Remus breathed, "I'd forgotten how small the firsties look!"

Hermione smiled as she watched the newest students enter the Great Hall. "Remember when we first arrived, Neville? How Trevor got away from you and how Draco got Sorted into Slytherin right away?"

"How could I forget?" Neville asked. "I was so scared that I didn't belong because everyone thought I was the closest thing to a Squib!"

"And look at you now, you're a professor! A lot of people told me I didn't belong because I was a Muggle-born." Hermione smiled at Neville.

"I was a bit of a misfit myself," Remus said. "No one knew I was a werewolf, and Albus had to make so many special arrangements for me."

"Here's to being misfits!" Hermione said, smiling at Remus and Neville. "I really wouldn't have it any other way, would you?"

Remus and Neville looked at each other. "Erm, no, Hermione," Neville said softly. "It was really painful at the time."

Hermione reached over and gave Neville's hand a squeeze. "You have become a wonderful wizard, and I am very proud of you. You are one of my best friends."

"As are you," Neville said with a smile.

Remus cleared his throat. "As touching as all this is, I believe Filius is getting ready to start, as he's got the stool and the hat in hand."

Sure enough, Filius placed a three-legged stool on the ground in front of the first years and then set the Sorting Hat on top. This effectively silenced everyone in the Great

Hall as they waited in anticipation for the hat to break into its annual song.

I've been around for many years.

Seen a lot of smiles and a lot of tears.

I've seen peace and I've seen war

I've witnessed these walls fall to the floor.

But now the war is over and the day is here

To do away with anger and unfounded fear.

The raven and the badger, the lion and the snake

Should call a truce for the future's sake.

For years ago, the founders of this ancient school

Sat around and thought of each and every rule.

I know that there was one who did not like the plan

But now there's no more bloodline of that ornery man.

So let's all work together and each do our part.

Cast aside your prejudices and look into your heart.

We know that we can do it, together we can live.

Each of us has a part, a gift that we should give.

What will be your answer? Will you hear my call?

Will you turn away, or will you be standing tall?

For now I look you over, each and every face.

I know that we can make our world a better place.

As soon as the Sorting Hat finished, applause rang out throughout the Great Hall.

"That's a nice message of unity, don't you think?" Neville asked.

"I agree," Hermione said, daring to glance down at Severus and wondering if the Sorting Hat knew more than they gave it credit for.

Filius took a large scroll out of his pocket ("I often wondered how he managed to fit that huge thing in his robes," said Neville), unrolled it, and announced to the first years, "When I call out your names, you will sit on the stool, and I will place the hat on your head. When it announces your House, you will go and sit at the appropriate House table.

"Alexander, Adrian."

A small, brown-haired boy walked hesitantly forward, sat in the chair, and had the hat placed on his head. After what seemed like a few minutes, the hat shouted, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

Filius removed the hat, and Adrian Alexander hopped off the stool, ran off to the Hufflepuff table, and sat down amidst applause and cheers from his fellow Hufflepuffs.

Hermione watched as the rest of the students were sorted. There was one young girl who was Sorted into Gryffindor who reminded her of herself at that age. She was eager, excited, and even had curly hair, although not as curly as hers had been at eleven.

It didn't seem long before Fidelia Zamora was sorted into Ravenclaw, and Minerva stood.

"Now, everyone, tuck in."

Hermione looked eagerly at her plate as the food appeared, and soon the hall was filled with students and staff alike talking as well as the sounds of dishes being passed.

"Ah," Remus said as he put some steak and kidney pie on his plate. "I had forgotten how wonderful the Hogwarts food is."

Neville placed a slice of watercress and herb quiche on his plate. "If you're not careful, you could gain a lot of weight here. We're not young students with a wildly high metabolism rate anymore."

"Says the one who probably spends all his free time wrestling exotic plants in the greenhouses," Remus said as he piled some chips on his plate.

Hermione chuckled. "I probably will have to take Ron some food home each night. Thankfully, we know where the kitchens are and have known where they are for some time, thanks to you," she said, winking at Remus.

Remus blushed. "Well, erm, it's not exactly information that should be made freely available," he said.

Neville chuckled. "You'll have to admit, it was very useful information to have whenever we wanted to have a House party after Quidditch victories."

Hermione, Neville, and Remus laughed merrily as they continued their meal.

Severus, who was sitting at the far end of the staff table, wasn't eating much himself. After having provided for himself for so long, he was finding the food a little bit too rich for him. He served himself a bit of spinach salad, but spent most of the time pushing his food around his plate. From time to time, he stole a glance across the table to Hermione to assess how well she was tolerating the crowd and the food.

Poppy glanced pointedly at Severus' plate and at Severus before following his gaze across the table to Hermione. "I think she's holding up pretty well, Severus," she murmured.

Severus gave a curt nod in response as he sipped his pumpkin juice.

Poppy looked again at Severus' plate and frowned at him. "You're not eating all that much, Severus."

Severus scowled at Poppy. "And why does this concern you?" he hissed.

Poppy rolled her eyes. "Don't play that game with me, young man," she said sternly. "You need to eat to keep up your strength."

Severus scowled at her again before turning his attention to his plate with a muttered comment that sounded like, "Bloody busybody."

After the food had been eaten, both dinner and dessert, and the plates were once again gone from the tables, Minerva stood up and walked to the podium. Pointing her wand at her throat, she cast *Sonorus* and cleared her throat.

"Now that we have all eaten, I have a few announcements before we are dismissed for the night. First of all, our Head Boy is Stephen Bizzell of Slytherin House, and our Head Girl is Victoria Gershenson of Ravenclaw."

This announcement was met with much chatter, as, usually, the Head Boy and Head Girl were from the same House.

"Prefects, please look for notices from our Head Boy and Head Girl regarding Prefect meetings." Minerva consulted her notes. "As always, the Forbidden Forest is off-limits to all students, as is Hogsmeade Village to anyone who is not at least a third-year student. Quidditch tryouts will be held next week. Please see your Quidditch captains if you are interested in trying out for the House team. Lastly, Mr Filch has a list of items that are banned from use at Hogwarts, most of which may be purchased at Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. Any student found with these items in his or her possession will have them confiscated and may receive detention."

She took a deep breath and continued. "Those of you who were here last year will notice that we have a few new faces on staff. First of all, I would like to welcome back Professor Severus Snape, who will be resuming his positions as Head of Slytherin House and Potions professor."

Severus inclined his head slightly in response. There was a smattering of applause, with the loudest applause coming from the Slytherin table. Mostly, students were looking at him curiously, as they had heard many stories about the "brave, selfless Potions master who had spied on He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and protected the son of his long-time love." There were a few gasps from those who thought Severus had died shortly before the end of the war.

"I would also like to welcome back Professor Remus Lupin, who is the new Head of Gryffindor and the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor," Minerva added.

Remus stood and acknowledged the applause, with the loudest cheers coming from the Gryffindor table. There was also some curiosity from the students, particularly from those who had heard he was one of the war heroes. There were also a few gasps from those who thought Remus had been killed by Death Eaters along with his wife during the final battle. Overall, the applause greeting Remus was more warm and sustained than that which had greeted Severus.

"Finally, I would like to welcome a new professor to Hogwarts. Please join me in welcoming Professor Hermione Granger, who will be teaching Transfiguration."

Hermione stood up and smiled at the applause and cheers she received, giving the students a slight bow. She wasn't surprised when she saw students whispering to one another, as she knew that her name was known by most people in the wizarding world. At last, she took her seat, her heart feeling light.

Everyone in the Great Hall stood and joined in singing the school song. Once the song was over, Minerva cleared her throat once more.

"Now, I know how excited and eager you are to get to bed, so off you go. After all, classes start early tomorrow morning." Minerva cast *Quietus* on her throat after making this announcement.

When the students were dismissed, Hermione was surprised at how tired she was. She looked up and noticed Poppy coming to her.

"Hermione!" Poppy called out.

Hermione smiled at Poppy because she had almost expected it. "Hi, Poppy."

"Hermione," Poppy said as she came up to Hermione. "I just wanted to check on you and see how you're doing."

"I'm fine," she assured Poppy. "I'm just a little tired, that's all. I'm going to go home and get a good night's sleep."

"You haven't experienced any burning or light-headedness all evening, have you?" Poppy asked.

"No, I just feel tired. I'm looking forward to going home and getting some sleep."

Poppy nodded. "All right, young lady," she said. "You may go. But don't strain yourself, and try to go to bed straight away. I will need to see you early tomorrow morning before your first class. Please give me at least thirty minutes of your time tomorrow morning."

"All right, I will make sure that I am here in enough time. Thanks for all you did today, Poppy," Hermione said. "I really appreciate it."

Poppy nodded and placed her hand on Hermione's shoulder. "You're very welcome, dear."

Hermione turned to leave the Great Hall through the staff entrance. Much to her surprise and irritation, Severus was waiting for her at the door. She blew some stray hairs away from her face in an irritated huff as she approached him.

"Miss Granger," Severus said quietly, his head inclined slightly in greeting.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she regarded the Potions master. "Mr Snape," Hermione returned quietly. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Severus raised an eyebrow at her. "I must discuss a matter of utmost importance with you."

Hermione looked at him and nodded. "I am feeling rather tired. Would it be okay with you if we walk while we talk, or do you have to patrol tonight?"

Severus shook his head. "No, no patrol," he said. "And yes, that is acceptable."

"Thank you." Hermione took her cloak from the hook hanging just inside the door and put it on, then went through the door as Severus held it for her. When the two of them were outside, she turned to him. "Am I correct in guessing that this has to do with my wish to assist you with finding a cure?"

Severus gave a slight incline of his head. "Indeed," he said. "The Headmistress, Madam Pomfrey, and I had a discussion about this earlier today. We agreed that you may assist us in finding a cure on a few conditions: the most important being you must ensure your stress levels are down to a minimum, as your symptoms are entirely stress-induced, and secondly, you must not tell anyone about our work or the true nature of your condition."

Hermione nodded. "I won't tell anyone. I have been using the excuse that I have anaemia, and that is what is causing my symptoms. Ron has enough on his mind, and I don't want him to worry about me. If he knows about my condition, it may only make things worse."

Severus gave a curt nod, and they lapsed into silence for part of the walk. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed how tired and pale Hermione appeared. He sighed inwardly as he thought of what he was going to tell her. "Very well, Miss Granger," he said. "We will need to do some research first before we can devise a plan of action. If I recall correctly, you are quite adept at library research, considering some of those essays you had written whilst a student here."

Hermione was wondering exactly what he was going to say to her, but she didn't expect what he said. A disbelieving chuckle escaped her before she could stop it. Was he really giving her a compliment, or was he simply using it as another way to say that she was a parrot? She glanced at his face and did not see a sneer upon it, so she figured that was a good sign. "It is true, I do enjoy doing research."

Severus gave another curt nod. "Indeed. For the first couple of weeks, I recommend we research this curse. It will be easier at the beginning of term when there won't be as much homework to mark. Most of what we will need should be in the Restricted Section in the library. I may have a couple of books that could assist us in this endeavour."

"We should start with slicing hexes. Another area to examine would be the effect that casting a normally verbal spell non-verbally would have on the target of interest. If we start with trying to understand completely the theory behind these hexes as well as the theory of verbal versus non-verbal spells, we could start thinking of possible ways to counteract the curse that afflicts you."

Hermione listened and quietly processed the information that he had given her. It seemed like quite a daunting task, but it wasn't the first daunting task she had undertaken in her almost twenty-six years. The difference was that the task was usually done for someone else, namely Harry. She looked at Severus and wondered something. She wanted to ask him, but she also was afraid of what he would say in response.

"Once we study our notes, we can start devising a cure," Severus continued. "I think we will need to use both charms and potions or, most likely, a combination of the two. Once we get to that point, we might have to work in the lab. I have ample lab space near the Potions classrooms in the dungeons where we should be able to work undisturbed."

Hermione nodded. Noticing that they were close to the flat she shared with Ron, she turned to him. "Thank you for walking me home and for allowing me to work with you." They arrived at the front door, and she smiled at him. "I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast, then?"

Severus bent his head as his hair swung forward to cover his face. "Indeed, Miss Granger. Good evening."

"Good evening." Hermione gave him one last smile before opening the door and entering the flat. Crookshanks ran to greet her, and she bent to scoop him up in her arms. "Hi, Crookshanks. Did you miss me?" she asked, rubbing her face into his thick fur and listening to him purr.

Ron went halfway down the stairs, clad in a fluffy orange and black towel. "Oh, you're here," he said. "I didn't hear you come in." He went downstairs and gave Hermione a kiss, much to Crookshanks' displeasure, as he growled when Ron crushed him against Hermione's chest. "How was your day, love?"

Crookshanks squirmed from her arms, and she let him drop to the ground to return Ron's hug. "You know, you two are going to need to get along," she said, shaking her head. "As for my day, it went very well. I don't think I told you yesterday, but Remus was made Head of Gryffindor. It couldn't have happened to a nicer man," she said. "And for the first time in history, we have a Head Boy and a Head Girl from two different Houses. The Head Boy is from Slytherin, and the Head Girl is a Ravenclaw."

"Oh, really?" Ron asked. "But that's really good on Remus that he's the Head of Gryffindor." He winked and nudged Hermione in the ribs. "I'll bet he'll let them get away with a lot of things. He won't be as strict as McGonagall was."

"No, probably not," Hermione agreed. "How about your day? When did you get home? Did you have something to eat?" She gently broke away from him so that she could remove her cloak and hang it up, then made her way over to the couch. "I need to get these shoes off. Maybe I'll try a Cushioning Charm on them tomorrow. Or maybe I'll just charm my trainers to look like fancier shoes." She handed him the bag that she had brought from Hogwarts. "If you haven't eaten yet, I brought you something."

He opened the bag and his eyes widened. "Oh, Hermione! I think I love you! This is most excellent!" He Summoned a plate from the kitchen and pulled out steak and kidney pie, mashed potatoes and gravy, and an entire treacle tart. He also pulled out a flagon of pumpkin juice that was kept at the right temperature with a judiciously placed Cooling Charm. "This is brilliant! A real Hogwarts dinner!" He gave Hermione a hug and a short, sweet kiss. "Thanks, love," he murmured before he sat down and tucked into his meal.

"While you are eating, I think I'm going to go upstairs and relax in a hot bath." She leaned over and kissed him gently on the cheek, then slowly stood up. Making her way out of the living room, she was glad that he was too engrossed in his food to notice how slowly she was walking.

Fifteen minutes later, she was soaking in a hot tub and enjoying it immensely. Snape's actions had been quite confusing, to say the least. Earlier in the day, he had been yelling at her, throwing her into a classroom, and basically saying that she had no business being a teacher. And not half an hour ago, he had walked her home. He had tried not to show it, but his concern for her seemed obvious. But did he simply see her illness as another puzzle, another challenge to solve, or did he really care about her well-being?

She could feel her eyes starting to close as she puzzled over the mystery that was Severus Snape.

Ron enjoyed his meal so much; it took him back to simpler days when Harry, Hermione, and he had been students at Hogwarts, enjoying their meals in the Great Hall with their other Gryffindor mates. He smacked his lips in satisfaction and then Banished the used dishes to the kitchen where he used his mother's Cleansing Charm to clean them. He listened for the usual sloshing of water that occurred whenever Hermione bathed and was rather puzzled when silence greeted him. Hermione never took quick baths, and he became concerned.

He took the stairs two at a time and went into the bathroom. Shaking his head, he regarded Hermione fondly. Her chestnut curls cascaded over the edge of the tub, and her face looked angelic in its repose. He smiled gently as he noticed her chest rising and falling slowly and steadily as she breathed. She was the loveliest sight he had ever seen, and his love for Hermione felt like it was going to burst out of his chest. Summoning the fluffiest, non-Chudley Cannons towel from the linen closet, he Levitated Hermione out of the bath and gently wrapped her in the towel. He allowed the Levitation Charm to dissipate slowly as she landed softly into his arms, and he carried her out of the bathroom, across the hall, and into their bedroom. After laying her gently on their bed and lovingly arranging her hair on the pillow, he kissed her tenderly and slipped underneath the covers next to her where sleep very quickly claimed him.

A/N: Many thanks go to ladyinthecloak for the beta-reading. We would also like to thank SouthernWitch69 for all her hard work and effort to make this a Variety Challenge to remember. ♥

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 10

She needs his help, and though he doesn't know it, he needs hers.

We don't own them. It's all JK Rowling's. We're just borrowing them for the moment.

Hermione sat in her study, reading over one of the books she had purchased from Flourish and Blotts. For almost three weeks, she had been working with Severus, trying to find out what they could about the curse that was affecting her. During that time, she had been taking her potions faithfully and trying to avoid stress. It wasn't exactly easy with some of the students she had, especially the Slytherins. They all knew that she had fought against Voldemort, and they knew her background. Things weren't as bad as she suspected they would have been years ago, but they were bad enough. She had told Poppy everything she had felt and how things had affected her, and Poppy had told her to send her Patronus if things got too bad. Fortunately, she hadn't had to use it yet.

Hermione and Severus had made some progress on the curse that was affecting her, but the progress was slow and frustrating at times. However, she was glad she was helping with the research because the suspense and the waiting would have driven her crazy.

Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was nearly time to go to the Burrow for the Weasleys' Sunday dinner. If she had her druthers, she and Ron would not be going. She was so tired, and she still had some papers to mark.

Hearing a knock at the door, she looked up and called, "Come in."

The door opened a crack, and a tuft of ginger hair curled around the door. "Oi, 'Mione," Ron said, "it's nearly time for Sunday dinner, and I'm starving." He slipped into the room, hugged Hermione from behind, and kissed her in a particularly sensitive spot just below her earlobe. "Are you almost done, love?" he asked.

"I still have a stack of papers to mark," Hermione said, trying to hide a yawn that escaped. "You can go if you want, and bring me back something to eat."

Ron pulled away and pouted. "You mean you don't want to go with me?" he asked.

Hermione put her hand up to her head and looked at him sideways. "Is your mother going to care if I bring some papers along with me to mark?"

Ron pouted again. "Aww, Hermione," he whinged, "can't you relax for a while and just enjoy a meal there? At least for today?" He made his most pathetic puppy-dog eyes at her.

Hermione sighed in exasperation. "Well, I don't have this class until Wednesday "

"Yeah, and it's only Sunday," Ron interrupted. He grabbed the quill from her hand and put it down. "Come on, Hermione. We don't have to spend a long time there if you don't want to." He again made puppy-dog eyes at her. "Please, 'Mione? For me?"

"All right. You don't play fair, you know. You know that I can't resist that look when you give it to me. Let me go put on something nicer and we can go," Hermione said, standing up and stretching.

Ron gave her a hug and a kiss. "Excellent," he said, smiling. "I'll be waiting for you in the sitting room, love."

Hermione went upstairs and changed into a pair of knit trousers and a blue jumper. Looking into the mirror, she decided to put on some makeup because her face was much too pale. A few minutes later, she went back downstairs.

"Okay, now I'm ready."

Ron smiled as he took her hand. "You look wonderful," he said, looking her over appreciatively. "Shall we Side-Along or Apparate separately?" he asked.

"You look very nice too, Ron. Why don't we Side-Along?" Hermione said, giving him a smile. "That way we can go together."

Ron smiled. "All right," he said. He offered his arm, which Hermione took, and wrapped his other arm around her waist. "On three," he said as they turned and Disapparated with a pop.

They appeared in the orchard at the Burrow and were immediately greeted by Victoire, Dominique, and Little Molly.

"Auntie Hermi! Uncle Ronnie!" they exclaimed.

Hermione bent down and put her arms around the three girls. "Hi, you three. Are you staying out of trouble?"

"Yeah," Victoire said. "But you know what?"

"What, Victoire?" Hermione asked with a smile.

Victoire looked side to side and then whispered, "I made a glass fly today!"

"That's wonderful!" Hermione said, giving the small girl a hug.

"I wanna do some magic!" Little Molly exclaimed as she pulled on Hermione's sleeve.

"You will very soon," Hermione said, giving the younger girl a hug.

"Oi, 'Mione!" Ginny said from afar. She walked slowly to her and the girls. "I'm so glad Ron was able to pull you away from your endless marking of essays to spend some time with us," she said after having given Hermione a hug and a kiss. She then linked arms with her and gently nudged her toward the Burrow. "So," she asked saucily, "how is life with my git of an Auror brother?"

"Well," Hermione said, giving her a wink, "I think he's frustrated because I am too tired or too busy to do much but take a bath and sleep after we eat dinner. And then there's Wednesday nights when I don't get home until after midnight because I have patrol that night. But he loves the fact that I bring dinner home every night from Hogwarts. But enough about us. How are you and Harry doing? Have you started thinking of names yet? How about decorating the nursery?"

Ginny chuckled. "I'm going to leave that to Harry. There are pictures of the nursery at Godric's Hollow before all that stuff had happened. I think Harry wants to decorate the nursery in a similar way as the nursery over there.

"As for names: if it's a boy, he will be James Sirius, after the two men he wanted to honour the most," she continued. "If it's a girl, probably Lily, but we haven't decided on a middle name yet."

"Those names are perfect," Hermione said. "By the way, I think Ron and I will probably wait until summer to get married. After all, I would love for you and Tonks to be in the wedding, and if we wait 'til summertime, you will both be more comfortable."

"Hermione," Ginny said, "did I ever tell you that I love you? You are so considerate of us!" They entered the Burrow. "Oi, everyone! Ron and Hermione's here!"

Ron gave Ginny a funny look. "Of course they know we're here, Gin! They have eyes; they can see!"

Ginny stuck her tongue out at Ron as Fred and George passed by.

"That's really mature, sister," Fred said.

"But of course, our little brother was equally mature," George said.

The twins then gathered Hermione into their arms, and she squealed loudly as they lifted her from the floor to their shoulders.

"How many bounces should we give Hermione?" Fred asked with a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Well, how old will Hermione be tomorrow?" George asked with a twinkle in his eye.

Hermione looked down at her soon-to-be-brothers-in-law. "Will you two put me down right now?" she asked in an exasperated tone, and then she became quiet. Blushing, she said, "Erm, twenty-six, I guess. But I don't know if I could take twenty-six bounces." She couldn't believe she had forgotten her own birthday.

"Oh, yes, you can!" Fred exclaimed. "As you said, you're only twenty-six." He looked over at his twin. "Ready, Gred?"

"As ever, Feorge," George said. "On three!"

The twins started tossing Hermione up in the air for the first of twenty-six times. The others were clapping and squealing with joy and amusement whilst Hermione's eyes widened, and she let out a frightened squeak as she was flying in the air with apparently nothing below her but those mischievous twins.

"Please, stop!" she cried out as she felt herself falling.

Harry, wondering what all the noise was about, came rushing into the room and groaned when he saw the twins throwing Hermione up in the air. He whipped out his wand and cast a Levitation Charm on Hermione, letting her down slowly so she landed in his arms. Hermione was shaking and sobbing as he set her down on her feet. He then turned to the twins with a deadly expression on his face.

"You prats!" Harry exclaimed. "You shouldn't be doing that to Hermione; don't you remember how much she hates heights?"

Fred and George looked properly chastised. It got worse when Molly came barreling into the room.

"Fred and George, you should know better than that!" she said sternly, her hands on her hips. "You should set a better example for the younger ones. Now into the kitchen with you! Now!"

Fred and George hung their heads and slumped their shoulders as they shuffled into the kitchen after their mother.

Harry turned to Hermione and offered her a handkerchief. "Hermione, are you okay?" he asked.

Hermione took a deep, shuddering breath and wiped her eyes with the handkerchief Harry had given her. "I'm okay. Thanks for stopping them. I don't think those two will ever grow up." She looked down at her clothes. "I think I'll go upstairs and get my clothes straightened out. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Harry caught Hermione by the sleeve before she went upstairs. "Hermione," he said softly, looking intently into her eyes. "We need to talk. Alone. Preferably before you go back home tonight."

Hermione looked over at the others, who seemed to be involved with watching the younger children play. "I don't think we'll be missed. Do you want to talk now?" She didn't know what Harry wanted to talk to her about, but it was obvious it was important. "We could go for a walk in the garden if you want. I just want to go wash my face."

Harry nodded. "That's fine," he said. "Go freshen up and catch your breath. I'll be waiting for you out there."

Hermione went up to the bathroom, washed her face, and straightened her clothes. Some things never changed. Thankfully, she had the fact that she didn't like heights working for her. Otherwise, she might have had to endure that until the twins were finished or until the charm alerted Poppy to her condition.

Once she calmed down sufficiently, she went back downstairs and slipped out the back door, heading directly for the garden.

Harry noticed her coming and beckoned her to a bench under the oak tree. As soon as she sat on the bench, he wandlessly cast a Notice-Me-Not charm and *Muffliato* over them. Hermione felt the tingle of the wards going up and regarded Harry with a questioning look. Harry held up his hand and said, "I'll explain everything. Just be patient."

"Okay," she said quietly. "Is there something that you need me to help you with?"

Harry shook his head. "No, nothing like that," he replied. "Don't be offended, Hermione, but you're the only person I can discuss this with. It's about... well, it's about you."

"About me?" Her forehead furrowed in confusion as she tried to think of what he could mean. "I don't think I follow you."

Harry sighed. "I'm not quite sure how to begin actually," he said. "Well, erm, I know you haven't been feeling all that well lately "

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "What do you mean? I have been feeling fine!"

Harry shook his head. "Hermione, please. Try not to get too excited "

Hermione took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. "Harry, I don't know what you are talking about," she said defensively.

Harry looked at Hermione intently. He mentally sighed and wondered how he could explain his concerns to Hermione without betraying Severus' confidences. He decided a direct approach was needed, and if he came to a point where he could not explain things, then he'd know why. "Hermione," he began, and when he noticed her start to interject, he held up his hand and said, "Please, don't interrupt me; it's hard enough for me to even know where to begin." He took a deep breath and exhaled very slowly. "A few weeks ago, Professor Snape came to see me. He was very worried about you "

Hermione eyes widened as she looked at Harry. "Did you know he was alive? What did he tell you about me?"

Harry growled at her. "Hermione!" he hissed impatiently. "Please, don't interrupt me! I'm getting to that!" He took another deep breath and arranged his expression to one of forced calm. "As I said, he was very worried about you, telling me that you had fallen ill and collapsed the day of the Welcoming Feast. He wanted to know about any and all injuries you had suffered during the war. So I told him what I knew, and he seemed to be most interested in the curse you received by Dolohov's wand."

Hermione shuddered a bit when Harry mentioned Dolohov and nodded to encourage him to continue.

"Well, I told him what I remembered of that evening, but he didn't seem to react too much. But then you know him - he is very good at hiding his feelings. He came back to visit me a second time and said that particular curse is affecting you now, causing you pain whenever you're under a lot of stress. He wanted me to make sure you're kept as calm as possible, which is why I stopped Fred and George from completing their silly birthday bounces on you."

"Thank you," Hermione said, giving him a small smile. She was torn between being upset at Severus for telling Harry about her condition and being relieved. "But you still didn't answer my question asking if you knew that he was alive."

Harry started to answer Hermione's question, but found he couldn't say anything. He tried a couple of times, but shook his head. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he said, "I can't."

"That was one of the biggest shocks of my life, seeing him alive!" Hermione said loudly, remembering the day she saw him walk into the staff room. She felt a slight burning in her chest as the memory engulfed her.

Harry placed his hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Hermione, please calm down! Please. Breathe slowly, in and out. Yes, that's a good girl."

At that moment, he noticed Madam Pomfrey Apparate into the garden. Harry cancelled the Notice-Me-Not and the *Muffliato* spells, attracted Poppy's attention, and beckoned her to them.

"Madam Pomfrey "

"Harry, please call me Poppy. Is Hermione feeling a burning sensation in her chest?"

Hermione nodded. "Just a small one."

Poppy quickly pulled a couple of vials from her pocket and gave them to Hermione. "Drink all of these potions, Hermione," she said. She then turned her attention to Harry. "And you, young man. What is happening that made her pain return?"

Harry tried to speak, but found he couldn't. He shook his head as he looked at Hermione.

Hermione drank the potions and then turned to Poppy. "Don't blame it all on Harry. He was just trying to help me. Fred and George decided that they should bounce me into the air for my birthday, and Harry and I came out here, and he told me that Severus told him about my condition."

Poppy's eyes widened. "Fred and George did WHAT?"

"Don't worry Harry came out and stopped them before they did too much. And Molly, well, you know how she can be."

"Well, thank goodness at least one of you lot has a good head on his shoulders," Poppy said. "I must return to Hogwarts. Hermione, do try to keep as calm as possible." She pulled out two more vials from her pocket. "These vials contain Calming Draught. Take it as needed, but no more than a teaspoon every three hours."

Poppy turned to Harry. "Keep her calm, Harry."

Harry nodded as Poppy Disapparated. He looked at Hermione and recast the Notice-Me-Not charm and *Muffliato*. "About Professor Snape, I can't talk about it. He asked for a wand oath, so I can't discuss that with anyone. Nor can I discuss your condition with anyone else except you and Professor Snape. He also asked for a wand oath for that. I do know that he's going to try to find a counter-curse to whatever it was that Dolohov hit you with."

Hermione nodded. "I am helping him with that. I couldn't just sit here and do nothing. You know that about me." She reached over and gave Harry a hug. "It feels good to be able to talk with someone my own age about it. I don't want to tell Ron about it, not just yet."

Harry hugged her back. "I can't even tell Ron. Professor Snape was pretty specific as to whom I can discuss this with, but he did mention I cannot discuss this with Ginny or Ron." He shrugged. "I wondered why, but then again, if either of them know it, the entire Weasley family will know it. But as far as helping him is concerned, are you sure it's not going to be too stressful for you? After all, Professor Snape did say it's important you're to be kept as calm as possible."

Hermione chuckled. "That was the main argument that Severus and Poppy brought up. I think it would be more stressful for me to just sit by and not know what's going on. I am going to use the story that I have anaemia, so if you hear me say that, just go along with it. I get tired more often, and if Ron sees me taking the Blood-Replenishing Potion, it will go along with that diagnosis."

Harry nodded. "That makes sense," he said. "Well, I do remember you always had to be doing something. I guess I'm glad that for once, the research you're going to do will be for you and not for me or any other reason. Professor Snape did say that hex can make you really sick if left untreated." He hugged Hermione again. "Good luck," he whispered in her ear. "I'd like to think we'll be teasing each other about our grandchildren and great-grandchildren when we're old and grey."

Hermione's eyes misted over. "Hey, I helped defeat the most evil wizard of all time. A little hex like this isn't going to take me down." She tried to sound braver than she felt, but she knew that she wasn't fooling Harry at all. "We probably should be getting back. Everyone's going to wonder where we are, and Merlin help us if Rita Skeeter gets wind of it." She gave him a wink and put the vials in her pocket.

Harry laughed as he cancelled his spells. They went back to the Burrow, only to be greeted by adults and children alike, with a huge cry of, "SURPRISE!" Fred and George had somehow decorated the room with an eye-popping array of brightly coloured streamers and balloons and were grinning like loons as they pointed out a huge three-tiered cake that had sparklers going off on the top-most tier.

Hermione grinned at Harry and waggled her finger at him. "You devilish wizard," she said, grinning. Ron came up to her, and she put her arms around him, giving him a kiss. "I guess it's a good thing I didn't stay home tonight, isn't it?"

Ron chuckled. "Yes, love," he said. "Happy Birthday." He kissed her back.

"Thank you," she said, laying her head on his chest.

"Hey, you two, get a room!" Fred called as George catcalled.

"Isn't anyone hungry?" Molly asked, coming further into the room.

"Yeah, we've got a house full of pregnant women here. And one Ron," George added.

"Oi!" Ron exclaimed, glaring at George. "You'd better watch it!"

"... or I just might decide to gift you with my Bat-Bogey Hex," Ginny added.

"You know, you guys are all going to have to give me advice when I get pregnant, since you are all going to be experts by then."

"Did you set a date yet?" Tonks asked, coming over to hug Hermione.

"Well, I said to Ginny that I think we might wait until summertime because I want my bridesmaids to be as comfortable as possible when they are in our wedding," Hermione said.

"Oh, Hermione, that is so sweet of you!" Tonks said, smiling.

"As touching as all this is," Molly said, "we should go outside and have our dinner; otherwise we'll be keeping all of you until well past midnight."

Fleur, Audrey, and Angelina went into the kitchen to help Molly bring the food outside while everyone else gradually went outside. Irina and Katie brought the cake outside to enjoy after dinner.

The dinner-time conversation was varied and animated. Everyone wanted to know about Hermione's first three weeks as Transfiguration professor and peppered her with questions about the current crop of students, as well as how she was getting along with the academic staff.

"I'm enjoying teaching a lot. Of course, it's rather different to be teaching alongside the professors who have taught me, but they have received me well. I don't believe a certain Potions professor was all that happy to see me, but he has come around. Naturally, Hagrid was very excited to see me, and he gave me one of those bone-crushing hugs that are rivalled only by Molly's." She beamed at Molly and then turned to Fred and George. "By the way, you two are infamous at Hogwarts, not only because of your products which are still banned but because there's still a spot of swamp back from your sixth year. Argus can't bear to clean it up, if you can believe that, and it's become kind of a monument to the two of you."

Fred and George grinned at each other. "Wicked!" they both exclaimed.

"And it must have been really special if even Filch doesn't want to clean it up," Fred said.

"Even more so if he doesn't assign a poor firstie detention to clean it up with a toothbrush," George added.

Hermione laughed. "Oh! And I didn't tell you the really big news! The Head Boy and Head Girl are from two different Houses this year. The Head Boy is from Slytherin and the Head Girl is from Ravenclaw." Hermione looked down at Remus. "I'm sure Remus has some stories of his own to tell."

Remus chuckled. "You're doing just fine, Hermione," he said. "After all, your students change matches into needles, and I just have to discuss nasty curses and hexes with my students."

"Oh, yes, but you are Head of Gryffindor." Hermione turned to her plate of food and took a bite. "Even as good as the food at Hogwarts is, nothing beats your cooking, Molly."

Teddy and Victoire were starting to feel bored. He started to change the appearance of his face and hair and, after looking up at the sky, made his face into a perfect sphere, with his face and hair taking on the colour of pale moonlight.

"Oh, Teddy, that is awesome!" Victoire squealed.

Audrey looked at Teddy and frowned. "Why, Teddy," she said, "you look like " Her eyes widened as she looked up at the sky. "Merlin's beard!" she exclaimed. "It's a full moon tonight!" Everyone's eyes turned towards Remus.

Remus felt rather uncomfortable with the attention. "Erm," he started.

"Remus, it's a full moon and you're still human and whole," Ron said. "You were healed, weren't you?"

Remus nodded. "Yes, I was."

"But that's wonderful!" Hermione exclaimed. She looked at Remus thoughtfully and came to a realisation, but she didn't say anything. She would ask him later. "I'm sure you are very relieved to be able to live a normal life."

"Very much so," Remus said. "That's why Tonks and I felt confident enough to try for another child. It's going to be nice to be able to give Teddy a brother or a sister."

The others approached Remus and patted him on the back or gave him a hug, which he accepted gratefully.

After dinner was finished, clouds started to gather, and the air smelled of rain, so the food was gathered up and taken inside. Fortunately, everything was inside before the first drops started to fall. Hermione took one of the dishes into the kitchen and poured herself some water.

"Thank you for doing this, Molly."

"You're very welcome, Hermione," Molly replied. "Anything for our wonderful girl."

Hermione blushed and gave Molly a hug. "This is just like old times. How many meals have we spent here over the years?"

"As many as needed, dear," she replied. "Oh, but we must go open your presents now before everyone goes home."

She led Hermione and everyone else to the sitting room, where a large pile of presents was waiting for Hermione. Little Molly tugged on Hermione's sleeve.

"Auntie Hermi, can I help you open presents?" she asked.

"Of course you can. I would never be able to get these all opened without my special helpers. Come on, Dominique and Victoire, you can help too, if you want." Daniel and George Jr were completely engrossed in some sort of game, so they weren't the least bit interested in helping. Hermione sat down on the floor, and the three girls sat near her. "Okay, which one do you think we should open first?"

Little Molly pointed at the biggest present. "That one, open that one!"

"Okay. I'm going to need a lot of help with this one, it's so big!" She picked up the box and put it on her lap so that the girls could help her. "On three. One, two, three!" They tore into the paper, and it wasn't long before there was nothing but a bare box on her lap. She lifted the lid to find a beautiful hand-knitted jumper, hat, scarf, and mittens set in a rich shade of blue. "Thank you, Molly," she said, smiling at her.

"You're welcome, dear," Molly said.

Hermione and the girls went through the entire pile of presents and saved a small parcel from Ron to open last. "I want to open this one on my own because it comes from Uncle Ron," she said.

"Okay," the girls said. They crowded around Hermione as she opened the box. Her eyes widened when she saw the necklace and the little red and gold charm. "Oh, Ron," she breathed. "It's beautiful!" She lifted the necklace from the box and held it up so that everyone could see it. "Will you help me put it on?"

Ron smiled. "It will be my pleasure," he said. Hermione gave him the necklace, and Ron placed it around her neck and fastened the clasp. "There you go, love," he said.

"Thank you, everyone," Hermione said, turning to them.

"Well, if that is all of the gifts, I wonder if anyone is interested in having some cake and ice cream?" Molly asked cheerfully.

"Me, me!" Little Molly cried, jumping up and down. Even Daniel and George Jr looked up from their toys.

"Ithe cweam," Daniel said.

"Cake!" George Jr exclaimed.

Molly laughed. "Come along, children. Let's have your cake and eat it, too."

Hermione went into the kitchen and started cutting the cake as Molly served the ice cream.

"Too bad it had to rain," Hermione said, looking out the rain-splattered windows.

"Yes, that was a shame. What kind of ice cream would you like, dear?" Molly asked, looking at her.

"Chocolate, please, thank you." Hermione cut enough pieces for the group and started laying them out on the table.

Everyone was eating their cake and ice cream, sipping on tea, and enjoying one another's company. Soon the time came for everyone to go home. The children surrounded Hermione and gave her hugs and kisses before they left with their parents. Remus squeezed Hermione and said his goodbyes with the admonishment to relax before their next round of classes. Eventually, Molly, Arthur, Ron, and Hermione were the only ones left. Molly set the dishes to cleaning with her very effective Cleansing Charms as she wiped her hands on her apron and studied Hermione very carefully.

"Hermione, dear," she said, "you've been looking really tired, and your complexion is pale. Are you sure you're not overworking yourself?"

Hermione gave her what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "I have been seeing Poppy, and she discovered that I am anaemic, so she has been giving me a Blood-Replenishing Potion "

Ron frowned at Hermione. "Blood-Replenishing Potion?" he asked. "Why in Merlin's name do you need that? Does this have anything to do with your heartburn?"

Hermione took a breath. "The reason she gave me the Blood-Replenishing Potion is because anaemia has to do with the blood. It means my body isn't producing enough red blood cells. And no, it doesn't cause heartburn. I had probably eaten something that didn't agree with me that day."

Molly looked sternly at Hermione. "Well, since you're living at Hogwarts, I can't criticise you for not cooking nutritionally balanced meals," she said. "You'll just have to eat iron-rich foods so you won't be so weak."

Ron moaned. "Oh, and I just don't want to hear it from the pureblood gits about how this is proof that Muggle-borns' blood is inferior."

Arthur glared at Ron. "Ronald Bilius Weasley, whatever made you think of such drivel?"

Ron shrank from his father's gaze. "Sorry," he mumbled, "but there is still a lot of that rot going around. I hear about it every day at work."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "They should have heard the Sorting Hat's song this year. It talked about how we need to come together and how we need to put our differences aside. Didn't they learn anything from Voldemort's reign of terror?" Hermione took a deep breath and reminded herself to keep calm.

"Apparently not," Molly said. "Honestly, the nerve of some people." She hugged Hermione and kissed Ron on the cheek. "Ron, why don't you be a perfect gentleman and accompany Hermione back to Hogwarts? I'm sure she has some early classes tomorrow."

Ron and Hermione exchanged glances. "Of course, Mum," he said. He took Hermione's hand, and they walked to the garden where they Apparated back to their flat in Hogsmeade.

"I had a wonderful time tonight, Ron. I had completely forgotten that tomorrow is my birthday," she said, standing on her toes and giving him a kiss.

"You've been so busy, love," Ron said. "Come home early tomorrow so we can properly celebrate your birthday. After all, you only turn twenty-six once."

"I will see what I can do," Hermione promised. "As long as my students behave themselves." She gave him a sly grin. "Why don't we go upstairs, and I'll put on one of my birthday presents?"

Ron's eyes widened. "What birthday present did you receive that would make me... oh Merlin!" He swallowed hard.

"A gift that was given off to the side," she said with a wink. "I don't think your mum would have approved."

Ron swallowed again as he felt a twitch in his nether regions. "Oh, Merlin," he said, blushing.

"Unless you don't want to..." Hermione said, letting the question hang.

"Oh, no," Ron said. "I mean, yeah, uh, yeah." Grinning in his endearing lop-sided manner, he scooped her up in her arms and kissed her.

Hermione sighed in happiness as they made their way upstairs and to the bedroom. For the moment, she was going to enjoy herself and not worry about her health.

A/N: Many thanks go to ladyinthecloak for the beta-reading. We would also like to thank SouthernWitch69 for all her hard work and effort to make this a Variety Challenge to remember. ♥

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 10

She needs his help, and though he doesn't know it, he needs hers.

We don't own them. It's all JK Rowling's. We're just borrowing them for the moment.

Severus and Hermione spent the next few weeks in the library, researching a variety of subjects such as the efficacy of hexes and curses when cast verbally versus non-verbally and different Slicing Hexes and their effects. Both of them did their work during their free periods, and occasionally, Severus asked Hermione to stay for dinner or spend some extra time on the weekends to continue their research. Sometimes, Hermione brought books and parchments home to continue her reading well into the night.

They managed to compile a list of ideas to test. One evening, Severus sat on the settee in front of the fireplace, poring over a set of parchments. When his eyes started wandering over his cramped, spiky writing, he closed them and contemplated the conundrum that was Hermione Granger. She no longer reminded him of the irritating, bushy-haired, buck-toothed know-it-all who was the bane of his existence whilst she was a student. She matured but then again, what student amongst her peers had not grown up too soon as a result of the war? As he tapped his quill against his lips, he admitted to himself that her company was not as trying or challenging as he'd thought and that he had come to enjoy the companionable silence that accompanied their evening research sessions. Shaking his head, he reflected on how amazed he was that anyone, and most especially Miss Granger, would willingly spend any sort of time with him. He persisted on addressing her formally but finally gave in after she'd insisted

for the umpteenth time that he should call her Hermione because, as she put it, "I feel like a little schoolgirl when you address me as Miss Granger." Rubbing his forehead, he sighed as he recalled Hermione's insistent tone of voice.

The hex Dolohov had cast on her puzzled him. He figured it was one of Dolohov's specialities that he had loved to use against Muggles and Muggle-borns. Dolohov generally had cast it on either their chests, or in the case of most Muggle-born girls and women, their wombs. It was an interesting academic exercise to determine what effect Dolohov's issuing that particular hex non-verbally would have on the victim. He was fervently hoping that he and Miss Granger... no, *Hermione*, could find something, whether it be a potion, some sort of charm or counter-curse, or a combination of the two, that would alleviate her symptoms at least or, even better, cure her completely. Now that he had the opportunity to know her better, the thought of losing her to this curse started to bother him. He had sworn to Albus Dumbledore that he would protect his students, and since she had been one of his students at the time she had been hexed, if he were to lose her, it would feel like another failure on his part.

A piece of parchment shot out of the fireplace and hit him on the forehead between the eyes. He blinked several times and glowered at the offending piece of parchment. After having cast several Dark-detection curses and other curse- and hex-detection spells on it, he broke the seal and frowned at it. It was from Miss Granger no, *Hermione*, and she seemed to have found a key piece of information. She wanted to see him before classes tomorrow. Reaching for his quill, he scratched out an answer, then sent the parchment back through the Floo.

He cast a tricky charm that told him the time down to the nearest second, and it told him it was getting very late. In the past, he could have subsisted on very little sleep, but after a lifetime of physical abuse, he found his aging body needing more and more rest in order for him to function. Flicking his wand at his parchments and books caused them to stack neatly at his well-worn desk. He stood up, stretched, and wandered off to bed.

Hermione heard her alarm going off sooner than usual and glanced at the time. Six o'clock? Why would she be waking up so early? It was at least a half hour earlier than she normally got up. But then she remembered the breakthrough she had made the night before. In a book she had specially ordered from one of Flourish and Blotts' foreign branches, she had read about a potion that helped with the long-term effects of curses, but she didn't know how they were going to get some of the required ingredients. The potion was difficult to brew, though considering who she was working with, she knew that wasn't going to be an issue.

She sat up slowly and gave herself a push to get up off the mattress, taking care not to wake Ron. She could feel she had become worse over the past few weeks. It wasn't anything major, but she was more tired, and she was using a lot of cosmetics so that she didn't look so pale. She went into the bathroom and took her shower, using a quick drying charm to dry her hair, and sighed at her pallid complexion.

As she was coming out of the bathroom, she heard Ron walking around. *Damn it!* she thought. *Fortunately, I have a ready excuse for why I'm leaving so early*

"Up so soon?" Ron asked as he kissed her. "Why so early, love?"

"Good morning," she said, returning the kiss. "We have a meeting this morning to discuss Halloween. I think Minerva is doing something different this year."

"Oh?" Ron asked. "Something different from floating pumpkins and wonderful food?"

"Yeah. I don't know what it will be, but I heard talk it might be a masquerade ball. I never realised how many meetings teachers had to go to during the year."

Ron shrugged. "Well, all Harry and I ever had to worry about was enduring your constant nagging for us to study and staying out of trouble," he replied. "We never knew what the teachers did when they weren't teaching or watching us in the Great Hall or patrolling the corridors at night."

"True," Hermione said. She hugged him. "I'm sorry I woke you up. I was really trying to be quiet." She suppressed a yawn and smiled at him. "Why don't you go back to sleep and get another forty winks for me?"

Ron grinned. "That sounds like a great idea. Thanks, love." He kissed her and shuffled back to bed.

Hermione was glad he had accepted her reason for leaving so early, and she didn't have to explain further. Gathering up her books and notes, she put on her cloak and the scarf Molly had given her for her birthday. It hadn't snowed yet, but there was a hint of it in the air, and Poppy had advised her against catching a cold.

Several minutes later, she entered the warmth of the castle and was heading to the dungeons towards Severus' office when she stopped short. A cup of coffee sounded good, and she thought maybe he would enjoy one as well.

She made her way to the picture of the bowl of fruit and tickled the pear to open the door to the kitchens. When a house-elf greeted her, she smiled.

"Good morning," she said politely. "May I come in, please? I'd like to get some coffee for myself and Professor Snape."

The house-elf nodded, scurried off to a corner, and came back very quickly with a tray laden with a coffee pot, two mugs, milk, sugar, and chocolate-covered biscuits. "Does Missy wants anything else?"

Hermione thought for a moment, remembering Severus' fondness for fruit. "I believe Professor Snape is fond of fruit..."

"Yes, Master Potions professor likes bananas and berries." The house-elf disappeared to another corner of the kitchens and returned with a bowl heaped with cut fruit, which was placed on the tray. "Does Missy wants anything else?"

"No, thank you very much," Hermione said with a smile.

"Missy is most welcome," the house-elf said, bowing low to the floor.

Fifteen minutes later, Hermione was glad to see the door to Severus' office. Using a Levitation Charm on the tray, she knocked on the door.

Severus glanced at a clock on the mantle. Naturally, Miss Granger... no, *Hermione*, would be several minutes early. He sighed, rubbed his forehead, and said, "Enter."

Hermione Levitated the tray in front of her as she entered the room, her bag of books on her shoulder. She wondered exactly what his reaction was going to be. Actually, she had a good idea what it would be.

"Good morning."

Severus slightly inclined his head in greeting. He looked past her at the tray laden with coffee and food and scowled at it. "And what, pray tell, is all of that, Hermione?" he asked quietly.

"It's cold outside, and I felt like having a cup of coffee. I thought perhaps you would like one too." She Levitated the tray over to a small table.

Severus glowered at the bowl of fruit and the biscuits that were sitting on the tray. "What made you think I would want any of this?" he asked, gesturing to the food.

"The biscuits were the house-elf's idea. As for the fruit, I noticed that you enjoy it at breakfast. You don't have to eat it if you don't want it." She took the coffee pot and poured herself a cup, putting milk and sugar in it and sitting down.

Severus was taken aback by Hermione's observation. His momentary look of surprise was quickly replaced by a mask of indifference. He raised an eyebrow at Hermione as he poured himself a cup of coffee and sat on his chair. "I didn't know you'd care to notice trivialities like that," he murmured.

Hermione took a sip of coffee and looked at him over the top of the cup. "If there is something the past fourteen years has taught me, it's that you never know when the most inane piece of information may come in handy."

Again, he was taken aback by her words. It sounded like something he would have thought, but not articulated. After all, he had spent most of his adult life spying for one side or the other. He bent forward over his cup, allowing his hair to swing forward to cover his face. He carefully regarded her through his hair and marvelled at the conundrum that was Hermione Granger. He took a sip of coffee, then straightened up to look at her. "Well? What information did you find that caused you to interrupt my morning?" he asked.

She reached into her bag to bring out the books and notes she had taken. "I had requested that Flourish and Blotts contact their branches abroad to get us a larger scope of information. Since I did, and still do, spend most of my time and salary in there, they didn't think any requests that I made strange. The books I found were most useful," she said, handing him two books, one on curses and the other on potions. "There is a curse in there that is similar to mine, and it may have been where Dolohov got his inspiration. The potion that is made to counteract it is difficult, but not impossible for an experienced brewer. It does take time, and then there's the problem of bringing in foreign ingredients into the country."

Severus took the books and read the passages she had marked. "This does indeed have some promise," he murmured whilst tracing his lower lip with his pointer finger. "There will be no problem bringing these ingredients here. You needn't worry about that." He read on for a few more minutes before a light chime started to ring. He looked up at the mantle clock and groaned softly. "Classes will start in ten minutes. Have you any free time today?"

Hermione looked at her watch as well. "Poppy is going to have my head; I haven't gone to see her yet today." She thought for a moment. "I am on patrol tonight, so I will be remaining after dinner. Would between dinner and lights out tonight work for you?"

Severus nodded curtly at her. "Seven tonight. My office."

"Very well. Until tonight, then." She knew there wouldn't be much chance of them crossing paths between now and then, since she usually took her lunch in her office, marking papers and doing research. And on Wednesdays, she often took a brief nap after classes were over so she could stay awake during patrol. She hurried to the Hospital Wing to get her potions and then went off to her first class.

Later that evening, Severus and Hermione were ensconced in Severus' private laboratory with books and parchments scattered all about. They debated points, pored over books, scratched their quills over parchments, and debated some more. In between the intellectual discussions, other more personal topics popped up from time to time.

"You want to know what kind of books I like to read for fun?" Severus asked incredulously. "Why on earth would that interest you?"

Hermione shrugged. "It's a guilty pleasure of mine. You may think that I read all kinds of books for the knowledge I can garner from them, but truth be told, I am a fan of tales of fantasy. For example, the tales of Tolkien are some of my favourites, as are those of C. S. Lewis."

Severus frowned at her. "I haven't really read much outside of my school texts or academic journals," he said softly. "My mother loved Shakespeare and liked to read Jane Austen's books to me when my father wasn't listening."

"I am also a fan of Shakespeare. I did not mention it because most people find it much too academic. If you would ever like to take up reading, I can make some recommendations. I know of an excellent used bookstore in London I frequent quite often."

Severus inclined his head forward until his hair swung forward to cover his face. "I thank you," he said softly.

They continued working until Hermione had to take her rounds. They were starting to formulate a plan to proceed with their work. Hermione's discovery was exceedingly helpful, and they came up with several formulations they could try on the potion she had found in one of her books. The only potential problem was procuring ingredients, but Severus' extensive contacts amongst potioners and herbologists made the process easier.

Severus and Hermione were supervising the brewing of various potions in five different cauldrons. She offered to take notes for him, but he glared at her and waved his wand toward his Quick-Quotes Quill as it started copying down whatever it was he was dictating at it.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him and turned back to one of the cauldrons.

They had spent much of their spare time brewing potential antidotes to Hermione's curse-induced illness that Minerva had to remind them both that the Halloween masquerade ball was only three days away.

"And why this should concern us, Minerva?" Severus asked.

Minerva huffed exasperatedly at Severus. "Honestly, Severus," she said, "we've only been planning this event for the past month or so. Of course, all staff must be present and dressed appropriately."

Severus' upper lip curled into a sneer. "And just what constitutes 'appropriate wear'?" he asked disdainfully.

Minerva shook her head at Severus. She should have known better than to try to engage him in conversation when he was busy brewing. "You are incorrigible," she said, throwing her hands up in exasperation. She turned to Hermione, who was wiping her brow as she stirred. She was about to say something to her when Hermione held up her hand, stirring and counting at the same time.

"Honestly, Hermione, there are times when it seems like you forget you are a witch," Minerva said, her eyes twinkling. "Surely, there are charms you can use to keep track of how many times you've stirred a potion."

Hermione came to a point when she could pause. "I want it to be exact, I guess. This potion may be my only hope to have a normal life. Although," she said with a small laugh, "I hardly know what that is." She looked at Minerva. "Are significant others allowed to attend?"

"In theory, yes," Minerva replied. "However, please keep in mind your duties. I highly doubt you will have a chance to enjoy much time with your, *erm*, significant other."

"Thank you. And I promise I will not neglect my duties. I think you know me better than that," Hermione said, giving the Headmistress a smile. "I'll have to think of something clever to wear for my costume."

"I am sure you will think of something appropriate," Minerva said. "Severus, Hermione, I will leave you to your brewing." She smiled at them with a sparkle in her eye and swept out of the dungeons.

"The Weasleys surprised me with a birthday party September 18th," Hermione said, tentatively broaching a subject that she had been curious about. The time that they had been working together on the potion had allowed the two of them to open up to one another.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Yes, so?" he asked.

"It was the night of a full moon. Remus and Tonks were there." Smiling at him, she continued. "You don't have to answer this if you don't wish to, but were you the one who came up with that cure?"

Severus' eyes glittered strangely as he looked at Hermione. "And what do you stand to gain if you were to hear the answer?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing," Hermione answered honestly. "But thanks to studying with you and thanks to what I know from my sixth year, I know you would be more than able to come up with one."

Severus looked down at his cauldron as he muttered a charm over it whilst stirring the potion in figure eights. A slight flush crept up on his cheeks. He couldn't remember the last time anyone complimented him willingly and genuinely. Not looking up from his cauldron, he said quietly, "These three cauldrons should be left to mature over the next three days. Your two should be placed in stasis and allowed to sit over the week."

Hermione nodded, placing her potions in stasis. "There was something else that happened on the 18th. Harry and I had a talk. He told me that you had told him about my condition."

Again, his eyes glittered strangely as he looked up from his cauldron to Hermione. He had agreed to allow Potter to discuss things with Hermione, but he didn't expect him to have said anything so soon. Given the argument that led to the discovery of Dolohov's lingering curse, he wasn't sure how she would react to his consulting with Potter about the circumstances behind her receiving that hex in the first place. He schooled his features into cool indifference as he regarded his colleague.

"Yes," he said softly. "I would have expected him to do so."

"I wasn't thrilled at first. But considering what Ron's brothers did to me when I arrived at the Burrow and considering the fact that I don't want to worry any of my friends, I am glad I have someone my own age to talk to about it. I'm just glad he doesn't blame himself for it, which is one thing I was a bit concerned about."

Severus frowned and pursed his lips. "What did those miscreants do to you?" he asked in a soft, deadly voice.

"They picked me up in their arms and started bouncing me for my birthday. Fortunately, Harry saw it and stopped it before they got far. I never have been a fan of heights, and no one really thought anything of it, thank goodness." She shivered a bit at the memory.

Severus nodded curtly, still with a closed expression on his face. "I am sorry for your sake of the circumstances that led Potter to speak with you," he said, "but perhaps it is just as well. Potter can be quite useful in our endeavour."

She studied him closely, but he was not allowing anything through his mask. She wondered, not for the first time, what made him want to help her. She had done nothing for him, really, except for being the insufferable know-it-all in his classes and probably annoying him. She noticed a softness in his eyes that she'd never seen during the time she was a student, and she noticed how much younger he looked now, even though years had passed. She supposed it was his years of spying which had given him the aged, hardened look back then, as it would have done to anyone. She estimated his age to be mid-forties, since Harry had said he'd been a student at the same time as his parents.

"It's nice to be able to work alongside you," she said at last, not wanting him to know that she had been scrutinizing him.

He inclined his head slightly. "I was going to suggest we meet again on Monday, but with that infernal Halloween Ball, I'm afraid we will have to rethink our plans." He sighed. "Perhaps it's just as well. I am making arrangements with Master Gong to send some *sheng di huang*." He Levitated the cauldrons to a cupboard that had temperature-regulating and inert-atmosphere charms applied to it. Still facing the cupboard, he said softly, "It's getting late, Hermione. You should go home. I will tidy up here."

"Thank you," Hermione said, smiling. "Have a good weekend. As this is a Hogsmeade weekend, perhaps we will cross paths. Ron and I often go out shopping on the weekends, and I thought maybe, even though it's not my weekend to help with Hogsmeade, I might come out just the same."

Severus nodded. He was still contemplating the puzzle that was Hermione Granger. To him, it was a strange thought that she, or anyone else for that matter, would even have any sort of regard for him. As for his work with Hermione's cure, he tried to convince himself it was merely an academic exercise that might be developed as a potential cure for others who might have survived Dolohov's hexes and curses. Or perhaps it was a good way to research the different effects that casting a hex verbally and non-verbally would have on a target. Still facing the cupboard, he said quietly, "Good evening, Hermione."

"Good evening," Hermione said, fastening her cloak around her shoulders and leaving the dungeon. He was helping her so much, and she wished she could do the same for him.

A/N: Many thanks go to ladyinthecloak for the beta-reading. We would also like to thank SouthernWitch69 for all her hard work and effort to make this a Variety Challenge to remember. ♥

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 10

She needs his help, and though he doesn't know it, he needs hers.

We don't own them. It's all JK Rowling's. We're just borrowing them for the moment.

Ron wandered into Harry's office and noticed Harry was finishing up the last of his paperwork. Shrugging mentally, he went to a small table where Harry generally kept containers full of items from Honeydukes. He helped himself to a Chocolate Frog and then went to a cooling cupboard where he pulled out a bottle of Butterbeer. Settling into one of Harry's chairs, he finished his snacks whilst waiting for Harry to complete his work.

"Hi, Ron," Harry said without looking up from his parchments. "Yes, you may have some Chocolate Frogs and Butterbeer. Make yourself comfortable."

Ron made a face at Harry. "Why does it seem like you're always busy and I'm always bored at work?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "I'm never bored," he said. "There's always something to do." He eyed Ron very carefully. "You don't usually pop into my office on a late Friday afternoon. What's on your mind, mate?"

Ron took a deep swig of his Butterbeer and looked at Harry. "It's Hermione," he said.

Harry sat up straighter in his chair. He'd been too busy to check on her, and he had hoped she was not overworking herself. Occasionally, he received an update from Snape, but even then, he was generally not very forthcoming with news. He wondered if Hermione had told Ron anything about the lingering effects from Dolohov's curse or of the work she was doing with Snape.

Thinking of Hogwarts' Potions master made him snort quietly. That was quite the odd couple. He never thought Hermione and Snape would get along with each other, much less be able to spend more than a few minutes in the same room together. But then again, they were both intellectuals who could think of nothing better than to spend the day lying around with their noses in a book. They both loved research and were both well-versed in many different subjects.

Harry cleared his throat and focussed his attention on Ron. He noticed with a pang the worried look in Ron's blue eyes and wondered how much he would be able to tell him. "What about Hermione?" he asked carefully.

"She is spending an awful lot of time at Hogwarts," Ron said. "I know she has all her classes to teach, and she is always taking home essays to mark, and it just seems she doesn't have an awful lot of time for me. I know I shouldn't feel bad about that because I'm sure it's not easy to be a first-year teacher, but still, I'd like to think she would save a little bit of time for me. By the time she gets home, she's so tired; the only thing she wants to do is fall into the bed and sleep. At least she brings me nice food, but still." Ron looked at Harry with pleading eyes. "I just want my fiancée back, Harry. I miss her."

Harry sighed. "Listen, Ron, I know she is really busy, and of course you, of all people, should know that once she puts her attention on something, she'll put her entire heart and soul into it. I know the students love her, and she always makes time for her students to come to her if they need help."

"But is it supposed to take up nights and weekends also?" Ron complained. "She says she is spending a lot of time in the library in the evenings, and sometimes she goes back to Hogwarts on the weekends to do more research or for a place where she can spread out all her papers and mark them to her heart's content. But when do I get time to spend with her?"

He looked down and kicked Harry's desk. "Sometimes I wonder if she should have accepted the job in the first place."

Harry frowned at Ron and stood up. "You don't mean that, mate," he said with an edge of steel in his voice. "So what if she has a lot of work on her plate? She just wants to do extra research to ensure she will be the best teacher she can be. And besides, you remember all those essays we had to write? Just think how much time it must have taken for the professors to mark them. Don't be a selfish prat, Ron." Harry regarded Ron carefully. He thought it was rather obvious Hermione hadn't shared anything with him concerning her illness, as Ron hadn't even mentioned anything related to it. "Listen, Ron," he said, "I heard this is a Hogsmeade weekend. Why don't you ask her to go out with you and make a day of it?"

Ron scowled at Harry. "I'll bet she'll say no because she has to spend all that time in the library," he grumbled.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Ron, remember she's a teacher there. She has to be out, supervising. You should take advantage of that. You don't have to go to Madam Puddifoot's, but at least you can walk around town, pop into the shops, have a Butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks, and say hello to Madam Rosmerta."

"I guess so," Ron said.

"Listen, Ron," Harry said, putting his arm around his lanky ginger-haired friend. "Why don't we just go home now? I know Ginny wants me home for dinner early today."

"What do I have to go home to?" Ron asked. "Hermione sent an owl to tell me she'll be home late today and not to wait for her. But she did say she'll ask the elves to prepare a Friday special for me."

Harry shook his head as he grabbed his cloak from underneath a stack of parchments. "You git," he said affectionately. "You're always thinking with your stomach. Come on, I'll race you to the Floo."

Ron laughed. "Nah. You'd think we'd grown up and knew better than that."

Harry held open the door and allowed Ron to pass through it before he sealed his office and put up some wards. "Now that's a shock, Ron," he said playfully. "When did you mature and grow up?"

Ron laughed. "You prat," he said, clapping him on the back as they headed out towards the fireplaces.

Hermione yawned as she Apparated just outside her flat on High Street. She had stopped at the kitchens and ordered a couple of sandwiches and some tarts to take home with her because she was hungry, and she and Severus hadn't stopped to eat that evening. She noticed how her clothes were looser on her, but whether that was a side effect of her illness or of all the work she had been doing, she didn't know.

Opening the door quietly so she didn't wake Ron, she entered the flat and removed her cloak. It was nearly November, and it was getting colder by the day. As she walked into the sitting room, she was surprised to see Ron still awake, fully engrossed in a Quidditch match on the wireless.

"I didn't think you'd still be up, Ron."

"Oh, hi, 'Mione, didn't hear you come in," he said. "It's the big Cannons match against the Beaters, and I'm hoping they'll win one for once." He stood up and kissed her. "Oh, sandwiches and tarts! You're brilliant, did you know that?"

He looked so eager that Hermione didn't have the heart to tell him she'd brought them for herself, having sent his dinner over with one of the house-elves earlier. Smiling, she said, "Well, I thought we could have a late night snack. I figured if you weren't still up, they would keep in the icebox. I think I'll go get changed and come back down. Can you pour us some Butterbeer?"

"Sure," Ron said. "Oh, thanks for the dinner earlier. Lenny popped in and brought over a roast, carrots and peas, mashed potatoes, and a trifle. And Ginny sent over a bowl full of creamed spinach just for us. She said she made extra and wanted us to have it, so that and her fish and chips are also in the icebox."

Hermione cringed internally at the thought of the spinach. Despite that, her stomach rumbled at the sound of the food. "Okay, I'll be down in a few minutes, and we can eat." She gave him a hug and a kiss and made her way upstairs, Crookshanks mewing at her feet to let her know that he had missed her. She rolled her eyes as she heard Ron's whoops and cheers in response to the Quidditch match.

Ron set the mugs of Butterbeer on the table and plated the sandwiches, fish, and chips. He also set the tarts on a plate and placed a mild Warming Charm on them. As he savoured the wonderful fruity aroma of the tarts, he noticed Hermione coming back down the stairs.

"Oh, 'Mione," Ron called out, "I've set the table. Let's eat."

Hermione entered the kitchen, dressed in her flannel pyjamas and a warm pair of socks. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a ponytail, curlier than usual due to the hairstyle she wore when she was at Hogwarts. "That smells wonderful," she said with a contented look on her face. She sat down and took a sandwich and a piece of fish. "So, tell me how your day went," she said before hungrily taking a bite.

"Oh, it was the same. You know, go out on a call, get the baddies, do the paperwork, sit around at my desk. Nothing much," Ron said vaguely. "And you?"

She had just taken another bite of sandwich when he stopped talking, so she had to take a moment to swallow. "Let's see. One of my seventh years is expressing an interest in becoming an Animagus. Pity I never learned that. It would be interesting to do, I think. Tomorrow's the first Hogsmeade weekend. Oh, and you are welcome to come to the Halloween banquet this year. It's a masquerade ball, so I'm going to have to figure out what I am going to wear."

Ron looked down at his plate. Remembering what Harry told him, he decided he had nothing to lose but to ask his question. "Well, erm, 'Mione," he started, "about tomorrow. I know you have to be out and about because of the students, but I was wondering if you'd want to go out with me and... well, you know, maybe go to Honeydukes and Fred and George's Hogsmeade shop, and maybe have a Butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks, and..."

"Ron, hold on one minute. I had already planned to spend the day with you tomorrow. It just so happens this isn't my weekend to patrol Hogsmeade. I can give them an extra set of eyes, but it's on my own terms. Besides, how bad are the students going to behave with an Auror in their midst?" she asked, taking a couple of chips off the plate and eating one.

Ron's face brightened. "Oh, 'Mione, that's great!" he exclaimed. "And if a Slytherin were to make trouble, watch out! I can draw my wand faster than they could say 'Voldemort!'"

"Speaking of making trouble," Hermione said, remembering her birthday and, furthermore, remembering Severus' reaction to what the twins had done to her. "If your brothers even *try* bouncing me when we go in their shop tomorrow, I will have something to say about it."

Ron made a face at Hermione. "Aw, come on, 'Mione! Have a sense of humour about it. And besides," he said as he took a chip from her plate, "if they had wanted to bounce you, they would have had plenty of opportunity to do so the last three times we had Sunday dinner at Mum and Dad's."

"Well, knowing that, they might be trying to lure me into a false sense of security. And speaking of sense of humour, I don't recall you being very forgiving about it the last time they pranked you with that very real-looking spider. I don't remember laughing at you when you were terrified of it." Hermione bit into her food once again, more to try to calm herself down than out of hunger, glaring at Ron all the while.

Ron put his hands up in supplication. "Okay, okay, 'Mione! Honestly, it's all in fun. And besides, remember I'm a quick draw on the wand. If they as much as whisper a *Levicorpus* on you, they'll be slammed by a *Protego* so strong, they won't even know what hit them!"

Mentally shaking her head because Ron kept forgetting that particular levitation spell was supposed to be cast non-verbally, she looked at him as if to gauge his sincerity. "Okay. Otherwise, you will be sleeping on the settee." She sighed and sipped her Butterbeer.

Ron went down on one knee in front of her and placed one hand on her arm whilst lifting the other as if he were going to make an oath. "'Mione, I solemnly swear that I will be up to all good and no mischief."

Hermione rolled her eyes and snickered. "Mischief managed then, I suppose. All right, I believe you. So, what are you going to go as for the masquerade ball, do you think?"

Ron shrugged. "Oh, I dunno. What do you reckon?"

"Well, since we are always talking about Merlin, why don't we go as two characters from that time? I could go as Lady Guinevere, and you could go as Sir Lancelot. I know how much you love chess, and you *were* the knight on Minerva's giant chess board back in our first year."

"'Mione, you're bloody brilliant!" Ron exclaimed as he placed his head in her lap. He lifted it to look up at her and added, "You do know how bloody brilliant you are, right?"

Hermione laughed, and it felt good. "Yes, so I have been told." Crookshanks, interested by the smell of fish and Ron's voice, came to investigate. "I think we can spare a bit of fish for you, Crooksy." Hermione broke off a piece of fish and fed it to her familiar, who purred his thanks.

"What time do you have to be out there tomorrow, 'Mione?" Ron asked.

Hermione offered Crookshanks more fish. "I think I should be out by ten o'clock."

Ron watched as Crookshanks leapt up on Hermione's lap, curled up, and purred as she continued to stroke his orange-yellow fur. He shook his head as he took another swig from his Butterbeer. "You are a nuisance, you know that, you little animal?" he asked mockingly.

The half-Kneazle lifted his head and glared at Ron before he put his head back down again.

Ron rolled his eyes as he stood up and stretched. "Shall we go to bed now?"

Hermione raised her eyebrow at him. "You don't want to know what's going to happen with the Cannons?" she asked as she gently placed Crookshanks on the floor.

Ron took her hands in his. "I can always read about it in the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow," he said. "Sometimes, there are more important things than a Quidditch match on the wireless." He drew near and tenderly kissed Hermione. "Like you, for example," he whispered in her ear.

She smiled warmly as he helped her up. *Well*, she thought to herself. *Ron Weasley has really grown up.*

She followed him up the stairs until he didn't think she was going fast enough. He swept her up in his arms and carried her to their bed, laying her gently down. Nothing at that time seemed to be more important than being together.

A/N: Many thanks go to ladyinthecloak for the beta-reading.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 10

She needs his help, and though he doesn't know it, he needs hers.

We don't own them. It's all JK Rowling's. We're just borrowing them for the moment.

Ron blinked his eyes and wondered why the room was so brightly lit. He noticed the light streaming through the window and groaned. It just *couldn't* be morning already. He and Hermione had just fallen asleep. Looking over to where she was sleeping, he admired her peaceful face, her long lashes, and her wild, untamed hair. He was

surprised she hadn't woken up yet. Glancing at the clock on the bedside table, he noticed it was half-past seven. Sighing, he thought, *Perhaps she just wants a nice Saturday morning lie-in.* A smile crept on his face as he decided to do something special for Hermione, and he had just the thing – a nice breakfast in bed.

He wasn't all that adept in the kitchen, but with his mum's books on basic cookery, he thought he could manage. Carefully getting out of bed so as not to wake her, Ron silently left the room and went down the stairs into the kitchen.

Moments later, he had a nice spread on the tray he was preparing to take upstairs to Hermione: pancakes covered with berries, a small pitcher of clotted cream, and tea made just the way she liked it. He levitated the tray up the stairs and into the bedroom where he noticed Hermione was sitting up and stretching.

It was a moment before she noticed him, but when she did, she smiled. "Good morning." She then noticed the tray. "Ron, did you make me breakfast?" she asked, pleasantly surprised.

Ron gave Hermione his lop-sided grin. "I did. I thought it would be nice to have a good breakfast before we go this morning. And if you want bacon and eggs, I can pop back downstairs and make that for you."

"No, this looks delicious! After all, I have to replenish my strength after last night," she said. "Did you make yourself some breakfast too, or are you going to do that now?"

Ron looked at the huge pancake sitting on the plate. "I didn't think you'd be able to finish that on your own, love," he said.

Hermione laughed. "Oh, now I see how it is," she said. "Let's see how we do with this one, although I have to warn you that you may have to make more after we are finished." Turning to her bedside table, she took out the vials containing the potions she took every morning and swallowed her measured doses. She was normally awake before Ron, so he never saw her do this.

Ron looked at the potion vial in her hand quizzically. "Oi, 'Mione," he said, "what's all that?"

"It's for my anaemia," she answered plainly. "Remember during my birthday dinner, your mum had commented on it, and I said I was anaemic? Poppy gave me a potion for it, and I'm to take it three times a day before meals."

"Oh," Ron said sheepishly. "I forgot. Is it helping?"

Hermione nodded. "It seems to be. I know I'd feel a lot worse if I didn't take it."

Ron nodded as he poured another cup of tea for himself. "And we can't have that now, can we?" he asked. "So, where do you want to go first today?"

Hermione thought for a moment as she cut a piece of pancake for herself. "Why don't we go and see about the costumes first? That will take the longest time, and they can be made while we shop other places if need be."

Ron grinned. "Whatever you say, my Lady Guinevere," he said as he popped a blueberry in his mouth.

"And, of course, I know you want to go into Honeydukes," she said. "It may be rather crowded with all the students in there." She smiled at him. "Do you remember one of our first trips to Hogsmeade back in our third year?"

"How can I ever forget?" he asked. "I think it was our second trip when Harry joined us wearing his Invisibility Cloak."

Hermione chuckled. "I'll never forget him hurling those snowballs at Malfoy. Who would have thought that cloak was the proof the story of the three brothers was true? Hard to believe, isn't it? Sometimes, the most insignificant things can be pointing to something bigger on the horizon."

Ron took Hermione's hands in his. "But you see, it all turned out for good. And now, we're living in a time of peace. Hopefully, no child will have to grow up the way we had to." He dipped his finger in the clotted cream and placed a bit on the tip of her nose. "If you're done with breakfast, may I take your tray?"

"One moment, please," she said. Like he had done, she dipped her finger in the clotted cream and placed it on his nose. "Now we match, and now you can take it." She giggled at his surprised look and smiled coyly.

Ron kissed her on the end of her nose. "Not anymore," he said, chuckling. He took the tray and left the room, going down the stairs and into the kitchen. After placing the dishes in the sink, he cast the Cleaning Charms he was becoming more adept at using.

Hermione got out of bed and left the bedroom, calling down the steps, "I'm going to go hop in the shower. I'll be downstairs in half an hour."

Approximately an hour later, Ron and Hermione stepped out of their flat and walked hand-in-hand down the street towards Gladrags' Hogsmeade shop. Along the way, they noticed groups of students laughing and talking, and Ron smiled inwardly, remembering the days when Harry, Hermione, and he had been students themselves, bundled up in their woolen scarves and hats, heading to the Three Broomsticks for a nice tankard of freshly warmed Butterbeer.

They reached Gladrags and entered the shop where Lucia, the shopkeeper, greeted them with her usual warmth and good cheer.

"Professor Granger! Auror Weasley! So nice to see you this morning!" Lucia said warmly. "How may I help you, dears?"

"We are in need of costumes for Hogwarts' Halloween masquerade ball. I will be going as Lady Guinevere, and Ron will be going as Sir Lancelot."

"Ah, very good," Lucia said. "I have just the costumes for you." She disappeared into a back room briefly before she emerged holding two large garment bags.

"The contents of these two bags should suit your needs," she said. "They are charmed to adjust to fit you. You just need to let me know if the colour will suit your needs."

Ron peeked in one of the bags. "Erm, Lucia," he said, "I have ginger hair. I don't think having this much red will suit my complexion."

Lucia studied Ron very carefully. "And yet, Auror Weasley," she said, "you wear red robes as a sign of your position. Very well. Why don't you go into the changing room and put on the costume. I will see about adjusting the colour for you." Then she looked at Hermione. "And you, Professor. Why don't you also try your costume, and we'll see if it needs adjustment."

Hermione went into the dressing room and put the dress on. It was a beautiful shade of blue, and the sleeves were similar to webbing. The bodice had gold threaded through it, and it showed off her slim figure nicely. She stepped out of the dressing room in front of the full-length mirror so that she could see herself better.

Lucia assessed Hermione with a critical eye. "I don't think I need to make any adjustments, Professor," she said. "I think it's perfect."

Ron also emerged from the dressing room, wearing a red and black tunic with a collar made of mail. He looked at Lucia with a slightly dissatisfied look in his eyes. "I think I feel rather lost in this," he whinged.

Lucia cocked her head as she regarded Ron. "Yes, you do," she said. "Your shaggy ginger mane doesn't help matters any."

Ron pouted. "But I like my hair this way," he said. "Nothing, not even having to wear a costume, is going to make me cut my hair."

Lucia rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to ask you to cut your hair, Auror Weasley," she said with a touch of irritation in her voice. "However, I do agree that colour scheme just won't do." She stood there, thinking about how to adjust the costume when she waved her wand in loops and semi-circles. She then regarded the results and said,

"This should fit your complexion better. What do you think?"

Hermione regarded Ron's costume with a bit of surprise, but smiled. "I think you look very handsome, Ron. It goes perfectly with your hair and your complexion."

Ron looked at himself in the mirror and grimaced. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no! A thousand times, no!" he exclaimed. "I *will not* wear green! I refuse to wear this colour! It makes me look like a bloody Slytherin."

Lucia rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Auror Weasley," she chided. "Let me guess you were a Gryffindor."

"I was then and always will be..." Ron hoisted his hand as if he were lifting an imaginary sword. "... A part of the Noble House of Gryffindor!" he finished.

Lucia shook her head and chuckled. She did more wand waving, and the results were a black tunic with gold trimming with a golden lion emblazoned on the chest. The cape was also black with a shiny golden lining. "There you go, Gryffindor," Lucia said. "What do you think of it now?"

Ron smiled broadly. "Now, that is more like it!" he exclaimed. "Hermione, what do you think?"

"Well," she said, regarding him once again, "you do look like a Gryffindor in that. Very much so, in fact. I wasn't lying when I said you looked very handsome in green..."

Ron made a face at her. "I don't care if everyone claims I look great in green," Ron said. "I refuse to wear it. I don't want to be like any damned Slytherin."

Lucia gasped. "Language, Auror Weasley!" she said sternly. Her expression softened. "I'm glad you like the colour scheme. I was hoping you'd appreciate the colours of my old House," she added.

Ron grumbled. "At least it's better than Slytherin."

Hermione rolled her eyes skyward. "I think you should have heard the Sorting Hat's song this year, Ron. I think I might have to give you a detention later." She held out her arms. "So, what do you think?" she asked.

Ron put his hands on her waist and twirled her around. "You look stunning," he whispered in her ear. "And delicious. You look good enough to eat." He chuckled and then turned towards Lucia. "I think we'll take these. Please could you charge them on my Gringotts account?"

"Ron, both of them? I mean, I am making good money..."

"Nonsense," Ron said. "We are more than comfortable on my Auror's salary. The costume is a small thing. Please let me pay for these." He looked at Hermione with his puppy-dog eyes that he knew she could not resist.

She took a deep breath and rolled her eyes again. "All right." To Lucia, she said, "Sometimes it's better to go along with him than to argue, I have found."

Lucia smiled. "I believe you have just discovered the best way to deal with your man in the most harmonious way," she said. "Very well, then. Enjoy the costumes and your day."

"Thank you, and you as well." As they got to the door, she turned to Ron. "Why don't we send these costumes back to the flat so that we don't have to carry them around all morning, and we can enjoy ourselves?"

Ron frowned at Hermione. "Are you a witch or what?" he asked as he shrank the parcels and put them in his pocket. "So, what do you say? Honeydukes next?"

"If we had banished them, Ron, that is also magic," Hermione said, shaking her head. "Okay, Honeydukes it is." She then thought of something and knew she should warn him. "Ron, just in case we run into him, you should know that Severus is one of the professors on duty today in Hogsmeade."

Ron screwed his face in disgust. "Bloody Slytherins," he grumbled. "I bloody well hope we don't run into that greasy git. That will ruin my day."

"If you could see him the way I see him, as a colleague instead of a professor, you might feel differently, Ron," Hermione said quietly.

"Hrmph," Ron answered. "He's always treated us badly, and he'll always be a big, greasy bat to me. Come on," he continued, starting towards Honeydukes. "Let's get some chocolates. I'm starving!"

Maybe chocolate will sweeten your temperament, Hermione thought to herself. She wondered what Ron would think if he knew how that *big, greasy bat* was helping to save her life. Someday he would learn, and then he would eat his words faster than a Chocolate Frog. She followed him into the shop, which was full of eager students.

"So, what are you going to get?" she asked him, her mind still on what he had said.

"Of course, I'm going to get more Chocolate Frogs," Ron said happily. "I might also go for a Cockroach Cluster or two. Oh, and I must have more Bertie Bott's Every-Flavour Beans!"

Hermione looked around. She hadn't eaten a lot of sweets when she was younger due to being the daughter of two dentists, but she did have a sweet tooth. "I think I'll get some fudge and some of those Sugar Quills."

"Mmmm, excellent choice," Ron said. "I'm surprised you aren't going for the Tooth-Flossing String Mints."

"Oh, right." Hermione went up to the counter and, before Ron could say anything, said, "I would like two boxes of Chocolate Frogs, three Cockroach Clusters, two boxes of Bertie Bott's Every-Flavour Beans, a box of assorted fudge, ten Sugar Quills, and a box of Tooth-Flossing String Mints." She handed the woman the money before Ron could protest.

Ron sheepishly took a Chocolate Frog out of the parcel and started eating it as they left Honeydukes. "Thanks, 'Mione," he mumbled in between bites.

"You're welcome. I certainly wasn't going to let you pay for that," Hermione said, taking a Chocolate Frog for herself. "Want to get a Butterbeer now?"

Ron rubbed his stomach. "I think I'll want more than a Butterbeer," he said. "Let's get some food. I'm starving!"

They headed over towards the Three Broomsticks, chatting excitedly about the Halloween Ball and remembering other balls from their past. As they entered, they noticed Neville and Hannah waving at them, and they went to join them.

"Oi, Hermione, Ron, so nice to see you!" Neville said.

"Hannah!" Hermione said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "How did you manage to get away from the Leaky?"

"Eh," Hannah said, "that's why I have hired help. Thanks to them, I'll be able to attend the Halloween Ball on Monday with Neville." She smiled brilliantly at Neville, and Neville blushed as he returned the smile.

"Did you and Neville get your costumes, Hannah?" Hermione asked as they were brought menus and ordered Butterbeers.

"Yes," Hannah said brightly while Neville blushed even more furiously. "I'm going to be a mermaid while Neville will be a merman. I want him to dress like King Triton."

Neville mumbled something rather incoherently as Hannah playfully swatted him on the forearm.

"Oh come on, Nev, you know it'll be fun!" Hannah said excitedly. Turning to Hermione, she said, "So, Hermione, what are you and Ron going as?"

"I'm going as Lady Guinevere, and Ron is going as Sir Lancelot. Don't worry, Neville. Ron had some misgivings about his costume as well. More the colour of the costume than anything, however," Hermione said, smiling.

Ron grunted. "At least my costume is befitting of a Gryffindor now," he said. "Could you believe they tried to put me in *green* tunic?" He rolled his eyes in distaste at the thought.

"What's wrong with that?" Hannah asked. "With your eye colour and complexion, you'd look dashing in green!"

"His complaint was that it was Slytherin's colour, and yes, he looked wonderful in it," Hermione said, patting Ron's arm. "However, you are going to appreciate this, Hannah. His tunic is black and gold. My dress is blue. In fact, it's dressy enough that I could wear it for a formal occasion without it looking like a costume."

"Nice!" Hannah exclaimed. "I can't wait to see your dress!"

"You know, we'll have to have you two over sometime," Hermione said. "We live right here in Hogsmeade at the end of High Street."

"Oh, really?" Hannah asked. "That's great! I'm sure I'll be able to break away from the Leaky some time. Just let me know when, and I'm sure we'll be there."

The waiter came and Hermione ordered a shepherd's pie. "What are you going to have, Ron?"

Ron looked at the menu. "A steak and kidney pie sounds great."

The waiter took their orders and sent them back to the kitchen. "So, how is business at the Leaky Cauldron, Hannah?" Hermione asked, taking a sip of Butterbeer.

"It's going pretty well," Hannah replied. She gave a small bark of laughter. "Never thought I'd grow up to be the landlady of the Leaky Cauldron, but life has a way of being unpredictable."

Neville took Hannah's hand and squeezed it. "And besides," he added, "being the landlady does have its benefits. The students think it's cool that we live above the Leaky Cauldron."

"I think it's neat, too," Hermione said. "We're just fortunate we don't have to worry about living at the castle. I don't think any of our professors were married when we went to school. Now they have at least three professors who are."

"Perhaps it will keep us better grounded," Neville said. "Our professors always seemed uptight."

Ron shrugged. "They probably had other things to worry about, like fighting evil Dark Lords while trying to drill some knowledge into our thick heads."

Hannah looked at Ron. "What happened to the old Ron? You're all mature and grown up now."

Ron shrugged again. "Dunno," he said. "I think I'm the same as I've always been."

Hermione looked at Ron fondly. "I don't think I would ever like it if he became as stoic as I am. He and I compliment one another, really. Of course, I have a feeling that Ron would be much happier if I could learn to cook like his mum. But with bringing food home from Hogwarts, I keep him fed and happy."

Ron chuckled. "But you're not my mum," he said. "And besides, as long as you're at Hogwarts, we'll be able to enjoy all that wonderful food."

As if drawn by magic, the food arrived then, and they spent the rest of the time eating and chatting about nothing in particular. The food, as always, was delicious and the company warm and inviting. The Three Broomsticks was starting to get busy, so they didn't linger long after their lunch, saying goodbye and making their way back out into the cold.

"Maybe since there are a lot of students going into the Three Broomsticks, now would be a good time to go see your brothers' shop," Hermione suggested as they made their way along High Street.

"An excellent idea," Ron said happily. He offered his arm, and Hermione took it.

They entered the Hogsmeade branch of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes and were immediately assaulted by brightly coloured lights and flashes. Ron and Hermione felt a hand on their shoulders, and they turned around to see Fred (or was it George) grinning broadly at them.

"So nice to see you here!" he said.

Ron squinted at his older brother. "Fred?"

"No, George," he said. "Fred's at Diagon Alley. Feel free to have a look." His eyes slid over to Hermione. "Unless you're here to police my customers; I heard most of our stuff is on Hogwarts' forbidden list."

"I'm not here in any official capacity, George," Hermione said. "However, I'll have to warn you that Professor Snape is on duty today. We've bought our costumes for the ball on Monday night, and we've just been walking around Hogsmeade."

"Ooooh, ickle Ronniekins is going to be in costume for the Halloween Ball," George said, pretending to wipe away a tear.

"You're just jealous because they didn't have anything cool like that when you were at Hogwarts," Hermione said with a grin.

"Eh," George said with a seemingly disdainful sniff, "we made our own parties." He winked at Hermione. "Wanna see our latest Thirty-Minute Daydream Charms?"

Hermione thought for a moment and looked at Ron. "Is it safe?" she asked, directing the question to Ron. "I haven't forgotten my birthday, you know," she said, glaring at George.

George winked at her again. "You just need to relax; you're too tense," he said. "And this charm should be safe. Fred and I tested it on ourselves."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah, and I still remember the time you tested your Multi-Flavoured Blowing Gums on each other. You were pink, and Fred was purple for a couple of weeks."

George made a face at Ron. "Nothing a general antidote can't cure," he said.

Hermione sighed and looked at George. "Okay, I'll try it. But I have to warn you, Ron has sworn allegiance to me in case of anything untoward."

"Ooooooh," George said, his eyes widened. "Finally, ickle Ronniekins is learning chivalry!" He pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes. "He's growing up, Hermione. He's no longer a little irritating boy."

"Yes, he is," Hermione said with a haughty expression on her face. "When are you going to start?"

George chuckled while Ron blushed a deep crimson. "Keep your shirt on, Hermione," George said. "We could start it..."

He was interrupted by a loud noise that made the three of them turn their heads. "That came from outside," George said. Ron and Hermione looked at each other then ran outside. They saw a Gryffindor and a Slytherin student duelling each other, and they appeared to be levitating large, heavy objects at each other. Hermione immediately took charge and non-verbally executed a Disarming spell at the combatants. She neatly caught their wands in her hands and glared at them in a manner that could freeze fire.

"Fifty points each from Gryffindor and Slytherin!" she said sternly. "Furthermore, you have lost your Hogsmeade privileges for the rest of the school year. Not only that, you will have detention with Mr Filch every Saturday until the Christmas holidays." She looked at the two fifth-year students. "Do you know how many students you could have injured?"

The Slytherin student, Marcus Willoughby, pointed his finger at the Gryffindor student, Justin Oakley. "He started it," Willoughby said. "And I'm going to complain to my Head of House for unfair treatment."

"Will you?" a soft, silky voice asked. "And, Mr Willoughby, just what do you think such a complaint will achieve?"

Willoughby's face fell as he recognised the tall, black-clad, billowing person standing next to him as his Head of House. "Erm, well, Professor Snape, if I was just defending myself..."

"Silence!" he hissed. "I don't care who may have started this or who may have been defending himself." He looked menacingly at both students. "You both exhibited despicable behaviour, and I fully support Professor Granger's punishment."

Willoughby frowned and muttered under his breath, "Bloody Professor is getting soft. I'll bet in the past, he would have defended his Slytherins from unfair treatment by Gryffindor professors."

Severus turned to the fifth-year Slytherin with a look of malice in his eyes. "You, Mr Willoughby, are a fool," he said in a deadly quiet voice. "There is a distinct difference between defending a student if he was wrongly accused as opposed to making excuses for one who was correctly identified as an aggressor. For your continued insolence, as much as this pains me, an additional twenty points will be taken from Slytherin, and you will not be allowed to attend the Halloween Ball." He glared at Willoughby. "Do I make myself clear?" he hissed.

Willoughby looked sullenly at Severus. "Crystal," he said.

"You will be returning to Hogwarts now," he said in a deadly quiet voice. His eyes darted to look at Oakley. "And you, Mr Oakley. You, too, will be returning to Hogwarts. Upon your return, the both of you will report to Mr Filch for detention."

Both boys looked down at the ground.

"Well?" Severus hissed. "What are you waiting for?"

The boys turned around and started running towards the castle. Severus dusted off imaginary dirt from his robes and regarded Hermione and Ron, who were standing nearby, taking in the scene. He inclined his head slightly toward Hermione as he swept by without any further comment.

Hermione looked at Ron, wondering what he thought about what had just happened. Maybe this would show him that Severus really was changing.

Ron admired the way Hermione had handled that incident. He knew she was scarily brilliant, and she had just shown it with her wandwork. What surprised him, however, was Professor Snape's intervention. He had fully expected him to defend his Slytherin and to even award Slytherin the points Hermione had taken away. Much to his surprise, he saw how Snape had further penalised the student and sent both boys back to Hogwarts. He nudged Hermione and whispered in her ear, "Who was that, and what have they done with Professor Snape?"

"I told you, he has changed," she said rather smugly. "Now what? Did you want to go back in your brothers' store?"

Ron shook his head. "I wouldn't mind going for a walk with you," he said. "I'm sure George will understand."

After a nice stroll around the village, they started walking back towards their flat. When they reached High Street, they ran into Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape. Ron flinched as he saw Snape and wondered why they were so far off into the residential areas of Hogsmeade.

"Hermione," Poppy Pomfrey said, "there is a matter of great importance that we must discuss with you. If you don't mind, we'll need to discuss this amongst Hogwarts staff only." She gave Ron a pointed look.

Ron looked at Poppy and at Severus and nodded. He sighed as he muttered, "I'll see you at home, okay?"

"Okay," Hermione said, giving him a kiss. She watched as Ron walked away and then turned to Poppy and Severus once he was out of earshot. "The charm went off again, didn't it?"

Poppy shook her head. "No, Hermione," she said. "You didn't feel any burning in your chest, did you?"

"No, but I was concentrating on the students and not on myself." She felt confused. "I guess I just thought that was what you wanted to talk to me about."

Poppy and Severus looked at each other. "Concerning the incident earlier," Severus said, "naturally, it had to be reported to Minerva. She demanded that you be examined, and Poppy and I agreed."

"All right," she said. "I wanted the chance to talk to you anyway," she said, nodding at Severus.

"Very well," Severus said as the three of them started back towards town and the Thestral-drawn carriages that would take them back to Hogwarts.

Poppy examined Hermione and sent her away with more potion-filled vials. She and Severus walked down to the dungeons and entered his office. Severus ordered tea from the house-elves, and they settled themselves at his desk.

"You wanted to speak with me, Hermione?" he asked softly.

She gave him a smile as she sipped her tea. "I want to thank you for illustrating a point that I have been trying to make to Ron since I started working here. I think you could have knocked him over with a feather today."

Severus raised an eyebrow at Hermione. "And what point is that, may I ask?"

"That you have changed. I have seen it, and not just because you are helping me." She studied him for a moment, trying to decide whether or not to say what she was thinking. "I know what our years at Hogwarts did to Ron, Harry and me, and we didn't have to do the things that you did. I can't imagine the hell you had to go through over the years, but the fact that you are the way you are now shows great strength on your part."

Severus ground his teeth. He didn't know what to say to that, but he wasn't very happy that she brought this up yet again. He narrowed his eyes at Hermione and said icily,

"I asked you this earlier in the year, Miss Granger. I shall ask you again. What. Do. You. Want?"

Hermione sighed and sadly shook her head. "I don't want anything. No, that's wrong. I do want something."

Severus frowned at Hermione. "And that is?"

"I want you to know that I appreciate all that you have done, and that I have seen the changes in you. I want you to know I think for you to have survived all this time without going mad or without losing your humanity is truly amazing, and I salute you for it.

"There's nothing else I want, Severus. You know what it's like to be dying. I know that I have to face the fact that we may never find a cure. But because of you and Poppy, I am able to spend this time with my friends and family."

Severus sighed. He rubbed his temples as he felt a headache coming on. That was certainly not the answer he expected from her. He was trying to decide how to answer her. He eventually looked up at her with a tired expression on his face.

"I have never been what you could call a nice man," he said quietly. "I am as I've always been. I did what needed to be done to fulfil a promise I made. I never expected to survive. As for you, Miss Granger, you are young, and you have your whole life ahead of you." He looked at his desk, sighed, and continued. "Part of my job as a professor here is to protect my students." He looked up at Hermione and looked at her intently. "At the time you received that hex, you were one of my students. If you were to die now, I will have failed in my duties as a staff member here."

Hermione was quiet for a few moments, processing all of the information. She chose her next words carefully because she didn't want to incite his anger. "I took the same oath," she said quietly. "When I first knew about my illness, one of the things that worried me was the fact that Harry would blame himself. He doesn't, not that I know of anyway. But if it had come up, I would have told him it was my choice to go to the Ministry with him that night, just like it was my choice to go searching for the Horcruxes with him during what should have been my seventh year here. Ron and I both knew we might have died on that trip."

She took another sip of tea. "You may find this strange for a witch to admit, but I read the Bible. When my parents were alive and when I was younger, we went to church together. It's said that we all have a free will. I could have chosen to stay at Hogwarts during the Ministry fight. I could have come back to Hogwarts in my seventh year instead of going on the hunt with Harry. But I chose to go with him. No matter what you do, students are going to make the choices they want to make. Today was a perfect example. Those two students had a choice to make. No matter who started it, the other person could have turned away and not continued to fight.

"I believe everything happens for a reason. Maybe I was destined to become ill for some reason. I don't know what that reason is, but I have a feeling one day we'll know. Remember the Sorting Hat's song?"

Severus, starting to tire of the witch's blathering, merely grunted in response.

"I think it has something to do with that. After all, did you ever think we would be working together as colleagues, much less working on potions together?" She finished her tea and stood up. "Thank you for giving me this time. I'd better go home or else Ron and Crookshanks may have the place torn up by now."

Severus grunted. "Keep out of trouble, Miss Granger," he said softly. "I don't want to see you anywhere near Poppy for at least the next couple of days."

Hermione bit back a chuckle. "I'm going home before Ron comes looking for me. Have a pleasant weekend, Severus," she said, leaving the office with one last smile.

Severus waited until Hermione left his office. Putting his head in his hands, he tried to relax even as his head throbbed from his developing headache. He had no idea what to make of Hermione Granger. By all rights, she should have been put off by his gruff demeanour; however, she kept prattling on about changes she claimed to have seen in him. He admitted to himself that perhaps her company wasn't as insufferable as he thought it might be, and he actually enjoyed spending time with her, whether it be in the lab brewing together or in the library, arguing over some point in Charms, Arithmancy, or Potions theory. It was a feeling that was rather foreign to him. He had never known anyone to demand nothing of him in exchange for his company. And yet, she made no demands upon him. It was, in a word, refreshing. But he still wasn't sure what to make of her. He stood up and realised just how tired he was. The thought of spending the rest of his evening in his quarters was quite appealing, and he started to make his way there.

A/N: Many thanks go to karelia for the beta-reading.

Ron's costume: <http://www.costumesofnashua.com/CNWebSite105/Active905/Pages/CostumeRental/Medieval/Pics%20Medieval/SSAM25Lancelot.jpg>

Hermione's dress (with thanks to JunoMagic for the inspiration): <http://www.schatzkammer.de/shop/index.php?artikel=1311>, but in a blue colour, not green.