

Reconcilable Differences

by cocoachristy

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards**** <http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

He Who Can Destroy A Thing Can Control A Thing

Chapter 1 of 16

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Disclaimer: Everything in the Harry Potter universe belongs to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, the one and only Southern_Witch_69, who is always there for me. Southern did a lot of work on this chapter, which took a lot of time out of her already busy schedule, so Honeyduke's finest to her!

This is a response to Ladyofthemasque's YLC Challenge. See rules at the end of the chapter.

Here is some lovely artwork done for this fic from the 2007 SS/HG gift exchange:

http://community.livejournal.com/sshg_exchange/62553.html#cutid1

Prologue

He Who Can Destroy A Thing Can Control A Thing

Hermione quickly ran down the hospital corridor, Remus Lupin fast on her heels. She stopped at the door to his room, taking a deep breath *Why now? After everything that has happened, why now and like this? Please, God, let my father be okay.*

When she walked in the room, the first thing she saw was her mum, holding his hand and silently crying. "Mum, how is he? What happened?"

Jane Granger looked up into the face of her daughter. She had been through so much already with that blasted war. She took a deep breath and began by saying, "He was going to stop smoking. He'd wanted just one last pack of fags and that would be the end of it." Stroking her husband's hand, she continued, "He stopped in that little store round the corner from the office. As he was leaving, two men rushed in to rob the place. They shot your father and the clerk. The other man died instantly." Starting to sob

loudly, she explained, "He was only eighteen, Hermione! Eighteen! Your age, he was!"

Remus stepped forward and gently took Mrs. Granger's hand. "Would you like to accompany me to the cafeteria for some tea?" He knew Hermione wanted some alone time with her father.

Looking at her daughter once more, Mrs. Granger nodded. As she stood, she enveloped Hermione in a tight hug, and she whispered, "The doctors say if you talk, he can hear you."

As they walked out of the room, Hermione sat on the edge of the bed rather than the chair and lovingly stroked her dad's forehead. She was thankful that Remus had offered to accompany her after the message came. She likely would have splinched herself. Looking into her father's relaxed face, she said, "It ended today, Daddy. Harry defeated Voldemort." She could scarcely believe that only hours before she had been celebrating. "I may have stretched the truth a bit about how dangerous he really was, but it's okay. He's gone for good this time. Professor Snape said so."

"Remember I told you that I was joining the Weasleys in Romania? Well, that wasn't exactly the truth. You see, I went with my friends...Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville and Luna...to find the rest of the Horcruxes. I know you probably don't have any clue as to what that is, but it's something we needed to find and destroy before Voldemort could be defeated." Suddenly, tears started streaming out of her eyes. She was relieved and utterly afraid at the same time.

"Remember I told you about Professor Snape? How he killed Professor Dumbledore? Well, it was not as it seemed. Dumbledore and Snape had planned that. There was so much more to it than we knew about... at first anyway. I suppose I have forgiven Professor Snape since I have learnt all the details, but..."

Her words trailed off as she heard the flat beeping of the monitor connected to his heart. "Dad? DADDY!" Suddenly, she was shoved aside as the nurses and a doctor rushed in. There was nothing to be done. William Granger was gone. *Why, oh, why could he not have been taken to St. Mungo's?*

The funeral was a cold and dreary day. It was too much. There were too many losses already. Dumbledore, Hagrid, Seamus, Hannah, Neville... The list went on and on. Hermione didn't know how much more she could take.

After the funeral, Ron came to her. "Hermione, Harry and I have been talking. We need to get away from all this for a bit, and we want you and Ginny to come with us."

"You want to go on a holiday?" she asked numbly, not truly registering what he was asking.

"No, we want to stay away for longer than a holiday," he said regretfully. "Too much has gone on. It would do to have a change."

"What? Where? School is starting soon, Ronald. We've only got one more year to finish. Can't we wait and go next summer?" she asked hopefully.

"No. Harry wants to go now," her boyfriend explained. "He needs to do this, Hermione, just as much as I do. He is talking to Ginny about going now."

"Ron, Ginny won't want to go either. She has *two* more years to finish. We have to think of our futures, love. Besides, I couldn't leave my mum at a time such as this. If you'll just wait until summer, I promise I will go."

Ron sighed, feeling utterly rejected. He wondered if Harry was having any better luck with Ginny and doubted it. "Okay, Hermione. We'll wait."

Ginny burst into Hermione's room and waved a parchment wildly. "They've gone!" she exclaimed. "Just up and left us after everything! Look! I found this on the table at the Burrow this morning!"

She thrust it towards Hermione. Snatching it away and sitting up, Hermione read Harry's tiny scrawl. Jane Granger hovered in the doorway as her daughter read over the letter.

We know that nobody wants us to leave, but for now, it's the best decision that we could make. I would have gone by myself, but Ron refused to let me go alone. I've given Remus Lupin half of the Black funds and am allowing him to stay at Grimmauld Place. I don't know how long we'll be gone, but if any of you change your minds, please send us an owl. Once we're settled, we'll send more private letters to you all.

Harry

Teary-eyed, Hermione looked up to face Ginny and her mum. "I can't believe they've gone, leaving only a note to say their goodbyes. Ron told me that they'd stay."

Ginny nodded and sat next to her, taking the letter back to read it again. "Harry told me that he'd wait for me. When I went to sleep last night, he was sitting in a chair next to my bed, just staring at me. I should have known that something was wrong."

"I'd told Ron that I didn't want to stay at the Burrow. I wanted to spend my time here with Mum." Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "Surely this is just temporary, Gin. They feel they don't need any certificate from Hogwarts, and it's true. They can get jobs anywhere. So could we for that matter. We just happen to value our education more."

"But I can't be without Harry, Hermione. I love him," she said nearly inaudibly.

"I feel the same way about Ron, but I'll not give up my goals because he wants to go on an extended holiday." She patted Ginny on her back. "This is the rest of my life I'm talking about. What if they decided to come home in two weeks? We'll have missed the start of term. This is our last chance to go back before we're deemed too old for school." When Ginny didn't comment, Hermione played her trump card. "Don't you still want to be a Healer?" The girl had vowed that after seeing so much death and people in need of help that she wanted to become a Healer.

Nodding, Ginny said with sudden determination, "You're right. I'll explain how I feel to Harry when he writes to me. Will you do the same with Ron? Maybe they'll come back."

Hermione grinned. "I will."

Jane Granger added, "Let me make some breakfast, girls. We can talk about the plans you have while eating."

After her mum made breakfast, Hermione said, "I wonder if Professor Snape is truly going to be teaching at Hogwarts again? I'll bet that will be hard for him."

"Murderer," Ginny said snidely, crinkling her nose in distaste.

"What *is* the story with him?" Jane asked curiously. "I thought he was a hero?"

Hermione sipped her juice and explained, "Well, you know how I explained to you about the Horcruxes last night?" Her mum nodded. "Well, after we found and figured out how to destroy the last one, Professor Snape came back into our lives. We found out that Snape had truly been working with the Order the whole time, and nobody saw fit to inform us about it, saying they were afraid that Harry would try to harm him regardless of his spying. At that point of the game, the man was just too valuable a player to lose, as the Order needed him more than ever in the fight against Voldemort."

"I imagine you all felt betrayed," Jane replied.

Hermione had felt hollow when she learned that Minerva McGonagall had known the whole time what Dumbledore had asked Snape to do. Her mentor had admitted to her that the headmaster wanted to make sure that someone knew so Severus was not charged when the war was over. What everyone *didn't* know, including Professor McGonagall, was that the curse that burned Dumbledore's hand was slowly killing him.

"I did feel betrayed," Hermione admitted.

"We all did, especially Harry," Ginny interjected.

"It's to be expected," Jane replied. "Go on."

"Well," Hermione began, "they gave Snape Veritaserum, and he revealed that he'd given Dumbledore a potion to slow the process of death. Unfortunately, there was no known cure. He also reluctantly admitted that as hard as he looked, he just could not find or create an antidote in time to stop the poison. On that fateful night when Dumbledore drank down the potion the locket was submerged in, it only seemed to speed up the curse...no matter that he'd taken a potion. He felt like a failure, and when he looked at the headmaster that night, he could tell that he was dying. As instructed by a previous conversation, he lifted his wand and cast the Killing Curse." Hermione shrugged. "Not that it mattered to Harry."

"To any of us," Ginny added. "I'd bet that's why Harry wants to leave. He doesn't want to be in a world where murderers are glorified."

"That's not completely true, and you know it," Hermione snapped. She remembered what McGonagall had told her about Snape admitting that he could rarely sleep at night for thinking of what he had to do to the headmaster and how he'd failed him. Part of her pitied him.

"If Hermione hadn't worked so hard at convincing Harry, as well as the rest of us, we might not have given him the chance to continue helping us." Ginny grinned. "Your daughter is quite convincing."

"I'll say," Jane replied, wiping a few tears from her eyes. "William and I never knew what danger she was in. I am glad that he didn't have that worrying his heart before he died."

"I'm so sorry for lying, Mum."

"Would you mind telling me exactly how things ended for Voldemutt?"

"Voldemort," Ginny said. "My Harry kicked his arse." She slapped a hand over her mouth, though she continued to grin proudly.

Shivering, she thought of the final battle in Hogsmeade. "The Death Eaters and Voldemort had intended to bring the fight to Hogwarts, but thanks to Snape, we ambushed them in Hogsmeade instead. Those that lived in Hogsmeade, who did not wish to stay and fight, left." Tears softly fell as she thought of Neville. He had died that night, but his demise hadn't come before he took Bellatrix Lestrange with him. "We lost many friends that night. Luna, the girl you met at dad's funeral was Neville's girlfriend."

"Honey, if this is too hard..."

"No, it's all right," Hermione said, stiffening her spine. "Everyone in the Order and a few Aurors gathered in a protective circle round Harry, and we fought our way to Voldemort. It was a long and bloody battle, but in the end, good triumphed over evil...Harry being the victor." She smiled ruefully. Victory had such a high price. Things would never go back to normal; she could see that already. Too many mental scars would stay with all of them forever. She saw the horror in her mum's face, and it was then that she realized that her mum could have lost both a daughter and a husband on the same day. *Oh, Daddy! I miss you so!*

Hermione and Ginny continued to explain things to the curious woman until they realized how late it had grown. "Mum, I've got to go off and get my things for school. I'll be back this evening."

"I don't mind. Would you stop off at the solicitor's for me on your way?" she asked. "I don't think I want to deal with that today."

"Not a problem," Hermione agreed sadly.

Ginny agreed to meet her at the Leaky Cauldron within the hour. When Hermione went to her room to change, she sobbed openly. The tears were for her lost friends, for her father, for her mother, and for Ron and Harry. With them abandoning her like this, it seemed that they had died, too. Once all of her tears were spent, she wiped her eyes and washed her face. School started in a few days. She would take things one step at a time. She wasn't going to let her plans change because Ron and Harry didn't want to face reality. Her father had taught her that an education and a career were important. She would achieve that. It would not only be for her, but it would also be for him.

*** **Five years later*** **

Hermione could hardly believe that only five years before, Harry had defeated Lord Voldemort for good. *How can I even think of celebrating this? It was when my dad died as well, and the Ministry wants a big ruddy ball every year! But this year, the fifth, will be the biggest celebration so far.* Hermione sighed dejectedly. Victory, for her, was bittersweet. She would worry about the ball at the last minute. Tonight, however, she had other plans. It was her annual drinking night with Ginny, Luna, and the twins. It all started three years prior when Harry and Ron had come back into their lives for the first time since they'd fled Britain.

Feeling restless, she paced to her window and looked out. This day brought back so many painful memories for her. Sitting on the window seat, she remembered how her life had played out after her boyfriend and her best friend had moved away. Hell, when Harry and Ron had left, it had hurt a great deal, but that had only ended up making Ginny and her more determined to not give up as the both of them had. Their determination worked in their favor. Ginny had finished Hogwarts and had eventually apprenticed at St. Mungo's to become a Healer while Hermione had decided to work in the field of Potions.

Hermione was still bitter that Professor Snape had refused to apprentice her, and she had to look elsewhere. She'd ended up at Beauxbatons in France, and after her year of understudy was complete, she went back to London to work for the Ministry of Magic in a new department that had been created.

In the six months after Harry and Ron left, Hermione had frequently exchanged owls with them, not going more than a few days without hearing from either of them. After that, the exchanges were fewer, but a couple of weeks wouldn't pass by without word. The next year, she was off for her apprenticeship while Ginny was studying for her N.E.W.T.s and working as an understudy to Madam Pomfrey in order to prepare her for her apprenticeship. Harry and Ron said that they were trying to start a business, so the further infrequency of letters simply seemed to coincide with everyone being busy with their budding careers. Eventually, there were no letters.

Hermione had known in her heart that something was amiss, but she'd honestly felt that it was nothing that couldn't be rekindled when Ron came home. She'd never stopped believing that he would. Finally, after two years, Arthur received an owl from Ron telling him that he and Harry would be there that Saturday evening, and they wanted the whole family to be there, as they had a couple of surprises to show everyone. Hermione had been thrilled. Although her feelings had lessened greatly, she'd known it would be easy to find her way back into his life, and she'd been certain that it would be the same for Harry and Ginny.

Hermione remembered bitterly how she and Ginny took extra care with their appearance that night, wanting to make an impression on them and hoping they would be able to rekindle what they'd lost. They both had let their hair grow. Ginny's was a silky, red mane, which stopped halfway down her back and had long layers that framed her face while Hermione's was still curly. The length, weight, and aid of a Muggle mousse, however, had made the curls more manageable.

Bursting with nerves, Hermione had gone downstairs with Ginny to await their old lovers. Neither one had even looked for anyone else. For one thing, they were so focused on their careers that they didn't have time to have much of a social life. *What a joke to think that Harry Potter and his faithful sidekick, Ronald Weasley, would wait for us!* she thought, shaking her head as she recalled the night they returned. They'd heard a couple of loud *pops* of Apparition, and the whole family turned to face the door.

She laughed loudly when she thought of the shocked and scandalized expressions on everyone's faces at the sight that greeted them. Not one witch or wizard said a word for five full minutes. They were all just standing there gobsmacked, for the surprises that Harry and Ron had brought back with them were two pregnant women with gold bands on their left fingers. Resentfully, she thought, *Thanks for the warning, guys!* Hermione lost herself in memory, cringing as she did so.

Hermione was surprised by the appearance of the two wizards. Both were extremely tan and seemingly relaxed. Ron had long hair, which he left hanging wildly about his face, and of all things, he'd grown a goatee. He was wearing baggy, blue jean shorts, flip-flops, and a dark blue t-shirt, the front of which had the word "WAX" in large, bold letters. He also had an earring in his ear, though his hair covered it, so Hermione had to look hard to see it.

Harry had also grown his hair long, but he chose to wear it in a ponytail. He had on kaki shorts, flip-flops, and a bright green Hawaiian shirt. He wasn't wearing his glasses; Hermione had learned later that he had gotten Muggle lasik eye surgery. Ginny told her later that she noticed he had a tattoo of a stag smelling a lily on his left forearm.

The woman beside Ron was, in a word, gorgeous. She had very long, blonde hair and big green eyes. She had her arm looped through Ron's and was looking curiously at everyone around the room. The sight of her made Hermione want to vomit. She was everything that Hermione would never be, appearance wise anyway.

Harry's woman had tomato-red hair and big brown eyes. Fred laughed at the sight of her, mumbling that she could have been a Weasley. She stood in front of Harry, and he had his arms around her waist with his chin resting on her shoulder.

Molly was the first to gain composure and rushed to hug her runaway sons. The rest of the family followed suit...all but Hermione and Ginny, who had just had their hearts broken. Hermione felt rooted to the spot she stood on. One look at Ginny told her that her friend felt the same. In the expanse of five minutes, both of their dreams had been utterly destroyed. Though the boys hadn't written lately, Hermione never dreamed they'd been married or had children on the way. Hermione felt a little guilty because she knew that both she and Ginny were equally guilty of not taking the time to write. There had definitely been a letter or two since Ron had found another lover. Why had he or Harry simply not been honest with her or Ginny?

She inhaled an indignant breath as Ron looked directly into her eyes and announced, "I would like to introduce my wife, Samantha Weasley. She is about six months along now with my daughter."

At this point, Hermione let the memory slip away, and she sighed sadly. That had hurt. Out of everything that had happened, that had been the worst of it. Oh, he knew what that did to me, the git! I could still kill him for that humiliation! Everyone there felt my embarrassment and distress.

Hermione snorted. She was not alone in her mortification, for Harry had done nearly the same thing to Ginny. He'd glanced at her quickly, but he'd had the decency to look away before saying, "And this is my wife, Piper. She is about four months."

At least he seemed to have some guilt. Unlike Ronald She'd often played over those memories in her mind. It wasn't that she still loved Ron, but the way he'd gone about things had hurt her. Harry had hurt her by not telling her what Ron was about or even what he was about. "Did I say that was the worst pain? Maybe not," she murmured as the memory came back to her again.

Hermione almost felt sorry for Arthur as he chuckled nervously and said, "When you boys say surprise, you mean surprise! Where are our manners? Your wives must think we have none at all! Welcome to the family, Samantha and Piper. It's so nice to meet you. Please come to the table and sit down. I believe Molly has prepared a welcome back feast."

When Ron turned to escort his wife to the table, Hermione noted that the back of his shirt had the words, "It's not just for brooms anymore." Rolling her eyes, Hermione made her way to the table. She was only holding on by a thread, and from the expression on Ginny's face, she was, too.

"Oh, yes, I certainly did. Please, everyone sit down and tuck in!" Molly exclaimed, looking worriedly between Harry and Ginny to Ron and Hermione. Everyone always thought that Harry would marry Ginny and that Ron would marry Hermione, including Ginny and Hermione. This is just a bomb waiting to explode, Molly thought. And it didn't take long to prove her right.

Ginny, who had had enough about halfway through the meal, suddenly threw her fork down onto her plate and exclaimed, "This is fucking ridiculous!" Then, looking towards her brother, because she still had not been able to look into Harry's eyes yet, she whispered, "I cannot believe you."

Molly was mortified that Ginny had used such language at the table, especially in front of the new wives. She told her daughter, "Ginevra Molly Weasley! I will not have such language at the dinner table!"

"Fine! I'll leave the dinner table then! Go on and continue to celebrate the return of your lying, cheating sons!" The broken-hearted witch slammed the back door on her way out.

Hermione had no idea how she'd managed to sit down and eat for that long, but as soon as Ginny left the table, she went outside to get away from Ron and his wife. Samantha made Lavender Brown look intelligent. Basically, she was as different from Hermione as you could get, extremely beautiful and not too bright. Perfect for Ron! she thought bitterly. I guess he's making a statement.

And Piper? Hermione thought that Fred wasn't kidding when he'd said she could have been a Weasley. She even seemed to be a little athletic like Ginny. However, while Ginny had spunk, this witch doted and waited on Harry almost like a mother would. Maybe that was why Harry seemed to be attracted to red-haired women. He was looking for his mum.

Hermione was hurt beyond words at Ron and Harry's insensitivity. It wasn't only that Ron had betrayed her by finding another woman, but he'd never said a word. He had to have known how this would affect her. Why couldn't he have simply been honest and told her that he'd moved on?

She wanted to hate his wife, but the American witch seemed to be a very sweet person, who obviously adored Ron. It was also obvious to Hermione that Samantha had no idea of Ron's past relationship with her. Well, it didn't matter now. He was married and gone to her forever. There was nothing to be done for it. Damn it! Though her life had taken a different turn, and her feelings had faded some, she did still love him on some level and had hoped to start things anew.

After only a few moments alone, she heard a noise behind her and caught her breath as she turned to see Ron.

"Hello, Hermione. How have you been?" He was standing very close behind her with his hands jammed into his pockets as if he was trying his best not to touch her.

Hermione snorted and thought, He wants to go this route, does he? She turned to face him and said icily, "Well, fine, Ron, but obviously not as good as you've been doing, what with a wife and child on the way. Your wife is quite lovely. Grand of you to let me know you'd found someone else. What part of America is she from?"

Ron sighed. He knew he had hurt her terribly, but he honestly hadn't known how to tell her. It was wrong to just spring it on her like this, he knew that, but he wasn't sure of what to say. He honestly had no idea that she and Ginny were still waiting for him and Harry. Their letters over the past year had all seemed friendly only, and there weren't all that many. Not like when they'd first left. Hell, they figured they'd moved on, too. When the girls refused to go with them, the boys had felt betrayed, especially Ron. He'd felt that when he needed his woman the most, she'd not been there for him. "Both Samantha and Piper are from California. Harry wanted to go someplace sunny and be a

beach bum for a bit." Ron smiled slightly at the memory.

"Will you be moving back here? I know Molly would hate for her," she choked back a sob, "grandchild to be so far away."

"No, we are only here for a couple of weeks. Harry and I opened up our own t-shirt shop on Venice Beach called *The Beach Bum* with a Quidditch supply store in the back for wizards. It's called *The Golden Snitch*, and we need to get back. Maybe you and Gin can visit us sometime. We have missed you two. You look really good, Hermione."

Hermione didn't trust herself to speak, so she didn't say anything. Moving even closer to her and putting his hands on her shoulders, Ron said, "Really good. I didn't know seeing you again would affect me this way, Mione. God, but I've missed you." Then suddenly, without realizing it, he leaned down and kissed her.

She leaned into him at first, missing his touch, his scent. It didn't take her long to realize that this couldn't be. Hermione shoved Ron back and slapped his face with all her might. "How could you? Have you lost what little you have left of your mind, Ronald Bilius Weasley? You are married with a child on the way! Just... stay away from me!"

Hermione started running down the path to the front gate where she ran into Ginny, who was also crying. "What happened, Gin? I thought you were flying."

"I was. Harry decided to follow me. What a happy little reunion that was." She snorted. "He went on about how happy he was to see me again, how he missed me, and how sorry he was that he didn't tell me about Piper. Then, all of the sudden, he gathered me into his arms and tried to kiss me, so I left. I swear... I hate those two! How could they get married and not tell us?" She violently threw her broom to the ground, picked up a stray garden gnome that had wandered from the garden, and flung it as hard as she could. Spinning back towards Hermione, she said, "Let's go to the Leaky Cauldron and get pissed! What say you, Mione?"

"I say let's go!" Hermione said, having heard the best idea all day.

She had to laugh at the memory. They had Apparated to the Leaky Cauldron and proceeded to get extremely pissed. They'd been sitting at the bar, singing loudly and off key when Fred and George found them. Instead of making them leave, the twins had joined them.

Both boys had known that their sisters were hurting, and they'd felt it would be best just to let them get things out of their system. Shortly after the twins had arrived, Luna walked in. Ginny had called her over, and after hearing about what Ron and Harry had done, she'd decided to join in, too. She'd revealed later that she was still missing Neville and doubted she'd ever stop mourning.

Hermione remembered that Luna had started running her father's paper, *The Quibbler*, not long after she'd graduated from Hogwarts, and that left her little time for a social life. Not that she cared to have one. She admitted to Hermione that she was working really hard to get rid of the nickname Loony, and slowly but surely, she felt that she was accomplishing that.

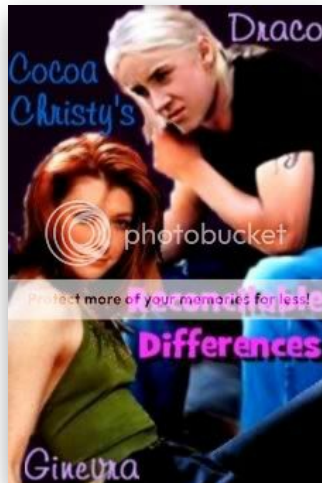
After the Leaky Cauldron had closed that night, the three witches Flooped back to Hermione's flat and passed out. Padma and Parvati Weasley had come to collect Gred and George, as Ginny had taken to calling them, to take them home. Padma was married to Fred, and Parvati was married to George.

After waking up the next morning, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna had decided to make this a yearly thing, so Hermione owed the Weasley twins to let them know that they wanted to meet with them annually. Thus, the annual drinks and dinner at the Leaky Cauldron began. "Which is where I need to be right now! Shite!" Hermione said, jumping up from her window seat.

Oh no! I have to hurry or I will be late! I want to get to the Leaky Cauldron before the twins do at least!

Christy's Notes: Well, there you have it: the first chapter to my YLC challenge. Please take a moment, and let me know what you think!

The chapter titles are quotes from science fiction author Frank Herbert. And the funny thing is... I've never read any of his books, but GinnyW assures me that at least the first few are very good. Here is a lovely picture Southern_Witch_69 made for this story!



Southern's Notes: Another great start on a story. I'm quite excited that someone else has taken up the YLC challenge.

These are the rules to Ladyofthemasque's YLC challenge on WIKTT

Rules:

1. This is a Severus Snape/Hermione Granger fic. Other characters may also be involved, get tested, get married, etc., but the main pair who ends up getting tested and marrying must be Severus/Hermione; they must be central to the story.
2. One or both of them may get tested, either jointly or separately, with or without knowing about the other's testing--the results of the tests are NOT dependent on both parties being registered with a particular agency, unlike Muggle dating services. However, the results of that testing determines their future marital/lifestyle status:
 - a. If they use the YLC, the YLC declares them as highly compatible, whatever anyone else says.
 - b. If they use another agency, they can be declared compatible or incompatible, at the author's discretion. (This is so that those who want to write a "let's elope and run away to Pago Pago" story can do so.)

3. Hermione MUST be 18 years or older (Severus, too, for that matter) when tested for compatibility, as must all who are tested for Geneamorphological compatibility. It is up to the author to determine whether this means the physical age of someone being tested (Hermione's age including the time added by the Time Turner from her third year at Hogwarts), or their chronological age (counting only the number of birthdays, and not the actual number of days lived). This minimum age limit is also required for getting married—only Muggles in Scotland can get married as young as 16, but those are Muggles, not wizarding-kind.
4. The rating may be any level, from G to NC-17.
5. There should be a valid, hopefully plot-driven reason for the testing/marriage to take place. Here are a few examples: Hermione and Severus are already in love but are nervous about whether or not they're compatible; an inheritance on one side or the other is at stake and marital status is a factor; marriage is necessary to safeguard one or the other; the marriage is meant to deceive or distract the enemy somehow; Hermione is pregnant (the author may decide who the father is); one of the two owes the other a serious debt, perhaps even a life-debt, and marriage is the price being demanded in payment; one of them is marrying the other for revenge (if this option is taken, and if the compatibility rating is deemed favorable, then getting married for revenge should backfire on the vengeance-seeker and the pair fall in love); some form of ancient, ritual magic is required by the Order, and it requires a marriage to be consummated (most common ritual ploy is the gathering of the blood of a virgin bride), and so on and so forth.
6. The story can take place before, during, or after the fall of Voldemort. If it takes place before or during the downfall of the Dark Lord, the question of Voldemort's reaction to their marriage must be addressed: the marriage must somehow be kept a secret; or it's part of some nefarious plot assigned by the Dark Lord; Severus has been outed as a spy and can now do whatever he pleases with his life; or whatever reason the author can suitably justify.
7. As this is an Alternate Universe (AU) challenge to begin with, Sirius Black and other characters whom have perished or vanished according to canon may be dead OR alive, at the author's discretion.
8. The nature of the testing is up to the author, whether it's a multiple-choice test or some fancy form of Divination, but it should include a format for testing one's compatibility with a specific person, and for a broad-based search, with questions for the witch or wizard being tested to indicate what sort of mate they're looking for. Examples include questions about whether they're looking for a Muggleborn, a Pureblooded, or Does Not Matter; whether Fertility is Important (they definitely want children), Fertility is Unimportant (they could take or leave children), or No Children (they don't want children, duh); and Region To Be Searched. In this latter option, any searching done within Great Britain would be presumed covered in the initial testing price; anything outside of Great Britain would probably come with an extra service charge, but testing for a mate in Europe would be far cheaper than searching for one in Australia, due to the distances involved.

Enemies Make You Stronger, Allies Make You Weaker.

Chapter 2 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****
<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: Everything in the Harry Potter universe belongs to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, the one and only, Southern_Witch_69, who is always there for me.

This is a response to Ladyofthemasque's YLC Challenge. See rules at the end of the prologue.

Chapter One

Enemies Make You Stronger, Allies Make You Weaker.

Severus Snape was impatiently waiting. He didn't like to be kept waiting, and it was ruining what was left of his slightly good mood. He was waiting for Draco Malfoy and Gregory Goyle. They were going to the Leaky Cauldron for dinner. He should have just met them there. At least he could have been having a drink while waiting.

As he glanced in the mirror, Severus thought he looked much the same as he always had, except he had gained some much-needed weight. His hair was a tad longer, but it was still just as black as ever. His face had also filled out more, and the gaunt look had disappeared. He was healthy now, which made him a happier person, although he never showed it. His temperament had never changed.

He honestly enjoyed meeting with his two former Slytherin students every so often for dinner since they'd completed their studies. *Has it been five years already?* The pair were the only two graduates from his House that he kept in such close contact with. He remembered how pleased he was when Draco had decided at the end of his sixth year, with the help of Narcissa, to side with the Order. Crabbe and Goyle, who followed whatever Draco did, went against their parents and sided with the Order as well.

As he waited, Severus thought back. He remembered how hard it had been when Draco and his two guards had gone against their families. He leaned his head back against the chair as he thought over the events. Crabbe and Goyle had not been as much help as Draco had been, but there had been times when those two had given him some valuable information. It was a pity that Crabbe had been killed in the final battle. Theodore Nott, who was trying to get to Potter, had just cast the Killing Curse when Crabbe flung himself in front of Potter. Severus smirked. Ironically, everyone thought Weasley, the long-suffering sidekick, would get that honor. Severus still mourned the boy, but he never confided to anyone that he did so.

Slughorn had fled again during the war, and afterwards, he'd informed Minerva, the current headmistress, that he had no desire to go back to teaching. Minerva had practically begged Severus to go back to teaching Potions, which he grudgingly did, but he did so only after being granted the Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts position. Thus, Severus had ended up in his dungeons once again. The insufferable Nymphadora Tonks was the current Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.

Severus sighed as he thought of Draco. He would be trying out for the Seeker position of a new Quidditch team on the next Monday. That was the only thing the boy cared to do, and Severus desperately hoped he would make it. He needed some direction. It still surprised the Potions professor that Gregory had ended up becoming a guard at Azkaban. With the dementors gone after the war, they'd needed bulky wizards to guard the prison. Goyle Sr. was currently rotting away there and cursing his son everyday that he worked for being a traitor to his cause. As he waited, his mind started drifting again.

Severus shuddered as he thought of Lucius Malfoy. He had suffered a much worse fate.

Narcissa had killed Lucius when he drew his wand on Draco to hex him during the battle. It was unclear if he meant to kill his heir or merely *stupefy* him, but when Narcissa saw her son about to be hexed, and by his father no less, she'd immediately taken action and killed her husband to protect her son.

When Potter killed the Dark Lord, Severus immediately knew it. His Dark Mark had burned horribly, glowed an eerie green color, and then faded. You could still see the outline of it, but it was only a whitish color.

The sorting out of all the Death Eaters and all the trials had been pure hell. The Ministry advisors...especially Fudge...had wanted to convict Severus, but the new Minister, Scrimgeour, had taken the testimony of the Order into account and questioned each and every one of them under Veritaserum. It was a long, drawn out process, but in the end, Severus was cleared of all charges. Even being cleared, Severus was still not completely trusted by many.

He was surprised that he was allowed to teach, much less be Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts, but with assurances from Scrimgeour that he was being monitored, the parents seemed to be calm about it. He was a *war hero* after all.

He still had nightmares, as he expected everyone did, but what haunted him the most was Albus Dumbledore. He'd give anything...hell, he'd even eat a sherbet lemon...to see those bright, blue eyes twinkling at him once more. Though he had access to his portrait, it was just not the same, so he avoided talking to it as much as possible.

Realizing these thoughts were starting to depress him, he quickly stopped himself and started thinking about his project and how he was going to have to go to the Ministry of Magic on Monday. *Damn them and their stupid red tape.* Bureaucratic dragon dung was what he called it, but he had to go through it to get the ingredient he needed. He just hoped he wouldn't have to wait too long. He wanted to finish this. He needed to do this for Narcissa.

Suddenly, he heard a knock on his door. Hurriedly walking to it so they could leave right away, he opened it and stepped out. "Draco, Gregory." He nodded in greeting. "Are you ready to go?"

Draco didn't look much like the supercilious prat he was in school, although he was still arrogant. He had let his hair grow slightly...not as long as his father's...and he'd stopped putting gel in it. He had filled out now and was no longer a gangly teen. Draco had grown in height as well; he was an inch taller than Severus, who stood tall at just one inch over six feet. His daily workouts to prepare himself for a Quidditch career had toned his body. Yes, his former Slytherin prince never had any trouble with the ladies...just as his father had never had trouble with them.

Severus was happy to note that Greg had changed, too. He was also tall, but he had turned his fat into muscle when he had gotten his job at Azkaban. He had been surprised at how strong some of those prisoners could be. He kept his black, wavy hair styled short and neat. Severus supposed he was not too bad on the ladies' eyes either, as he did okay. *Much like myself when I used to go out prowling with Lucius* he mused.

"Professor, how are you?" Draco asked. "The same snarky git you were last month, I see, eh?"

Greg chuckled at his best friend's comment and then said, "Yes, sir. We are ready to go."

Their former Head of House told them, "I have told you two repeatedly that you may call me Severus. You are no longer my students, and we have been having dinner together off and on for the past five years now. I think it is past time, don't you?"

Greg grinned and replied, "Yes, Severus." It sounded much like a husband, who would say, "Yes, dear," to a wife.

Severus rolled his eyes and said, "Shall we?" And they were off to the Leaky Cauldron.

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As Severus, Draco, and Greg sat down, Draco pulled three official forms from his robes. "Pro...er...Severus, mother has decided we are to fill out these forms, and I am to take them back to her to owl herself. She said you were going to try and refuse, and if you did, I am supposed to tell you that she would not be above filling the form out herself for you."

Severus raised an eyebrow and took the paper. The top of the form read:

Yenta Livery Company

Your Best Match For Your Best Money, Guaranteed!

Severus rolled his eyes and smirked. It was an old company. It had been around since 416 B.C. However, it had not been used in many years except by a select few because of the purebloods wanting to assure the *purity* of blood. However, the Ministry of Magic decided recently that the company was needed. During the war, when couples were not sure if they were going to make it or not, they hastily married. After the war, it seemed most of these hasty marriages had ended in divorce. Until then, divorce had practically been unheard of in the Wizarding world.

This company also helped to prevent Squibs through Ministry approved Geneamorphological testing. This testing also consisted of matchmaking, psychology, romance, and genealogy. It also allowed a witch or wizard to marry a Muggle, although the Muggle must take the test to see if they are compatible with a particular wizard or witch. If a witch or wizard decided to marry without consulting this firm, they were cast out of the Wizarding world.

Draco continued to speak as Severus read the form. "Mother said it was time that we three settled down, and she wants us to be happy." At the dark man's glare, Draco quickly added, "I know it's a process to find a wife, but you don't *have* to get married, sir. It is only good for three months. Would you just please fill it out to make mum happy? I don't want her to have anything more to worry about than she already does. You know you will never hear the end if you don't. Besides, we could all find our soul mates," Draco said, smirking. He didn't believe for one second that he would be very compatible with anyone, especially at this stage in his life.

Sighing, Severus asked Tom, the barkeep, for three quills and some ink for the three of them. He knew very well how determined Narcissa Malfoy could be and figured he would save himself some grief and just fill the damned parchment out. He read the first question aloud. "Which would you prefer? (A.) Pureblood (B.) Half-blood (C.) Muggle-born (D.) Any of the above."

Draco and Greg both said aloud, "Pureblood!" Severus smirked. They may have fought for the Order, but they were still prejudiced it seemed. They always seemed to forget that Severus himself was not a pureblood, but he was a half-blood. He silently checked D.

"Second question," he began, "how important is having children to you? (A.) Very (B.) Somewhat (C.) Not at all." At this, all three checked A. It was important to carry on your family name after all. Severus went on to the third.

"Please list any of your hobbies and some things you enjoy doing." Severus pinched his nose, absolutely hating the questions. However, he hated to see what Narcissa would write for him. He quickly wrote reading, working with potions, visiting museums, and going to the opera. He thought that would be enough.

After the boys finished filling out that question, he read the final one. "What Region would you like us to search, inside Great Brittan only or the entire world?" Severus wrote Great Brittan only. The less he had to meet, the better. After the questions were answered there was a place at the bottom to fill out name, blood origin, occupation, and location.

When he had completed the form, he sealed it and handed it to Draco to give to Narcissa. It was going to be a long three months.

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Not even realizing that her dreaded ex-Potions professor, Malfoy, and Goyle were there, Hermione, along with Ginny and Luna, were well into their cups when Fred and George pulled out the forms. The pranksters knew the witches would have to be pissed to fill them out. It had cost them 150 Galleons apiece, but after discussing it with their wives, it was decided that drastic action was needed. Ginny and Hermione were just not getting out and meeting anyone on their own, and Luna still mourned Neville like he'd died the day before. They all felt that after five years, it was time for the trio to find the loves of their lives.

"Okay, my loves, we need you to fill out these forms," Fred said, handing each witch a form.

"Yes, we need to send them off quickly," George agreed, handing them each a quill and setting a pot of ink in the center of the table.

They read the top of the form.

Yenta Livery Company

Your Best Match For Your Best Money, Guaranteed!

"Whass 'is?" Ginny slurred. "That marriage form? Nuh uh! No' me, no way!" Then, she started giggling hysterically.

The twins had anticipated this.

"We thought you might say that," George started, "so we decided if you don't fill them out..."

"We will fill them out for you," Fred continued. "However we choose!"

"Gred, Feorge!" Hermione started, but then she thought, *No, that's not right. Dang Ginny! She's got me mixed up!* "I mean, Feorge, Gred, umm... TWINS! Why? What good would it do?"

"All kidding aside, Hermione," said George. "We love you chits, and we think it's well past time you three found someone. This will help."

"Yes," Fred agreed, "and it's only good for three months before it has to be filled out again. And who knows, you may meet someone interesting."

"Right," George went on, "and we're not saying you have to get *married*, but who knows?"

"But that's what it's for!" Hermione chided, starting to sober up. "These are specifically to fill out if you are looking for a spouse! It would be like *heating* if we filled it out and didn't truly intend to!"

Rolling his eyes, Fred said, "Hermione, love, for once in your life, live a little and fib. The YLC does not have to know you are not looking for a *spouse*, and it's like we said: Who knows? You may get lucky and find a husband!"

"Fine, we'll do it," Luna said, reaching for her form to fill out.

Hermione and Ginny looked at the first question, and both answered D. They couldn't see what Luna put; she was not sharing her answers. The second question, Hermione answered B while Ginny answered A. Hermione wanted to get a little more ahead in her career, but later on, she did want kids. So they were important, just not right now.

Ginny had always wanted kids. She used to dream of having kids with Harry. *Little red-haired, green-eyed babies.* She had to stop that train of thought quickly. No need in being depressed when she was feeling fine pissing the night away.

Steeling herself, she and Hermione both forced themselves to finish filling out the forms and handed them to the twins. Luna had already finished.

As it was getting late, they decided it was time to head home. Luna and Ginny were going to Hermione's flat, as they always did on their annual outing. Hermione told them she wanted to make a quick trip to the loo, and then, she would be ready to go.

Draco, who was only slightly drunk, saw Hermione coming out of the loo and heading their way. *This is just too good an opportunity to pass up!* he thought, smirking wickedly. Right as she passed, he stuck out his foot and tripped her.

She landed on her knees and fell face first into Severus Snape's crotch. She looked up to see him looking down at her, slightly amused, with his arms folded across his chest. "Miss Granger," he purred, "although I have never turned down a woman on her knees and interested in servicing me, I must admit that this is not the place for it." He smirked down at her wide, brown eyes. "However, I would imagine this would be one of more pleasurable ways to get you to shut your know-it-all mouth."

Her eyes widened in shock and embarrassment before narrowing in anger. Hermione gripped the top of his thighs for balance to stand and started in on him. "Why you insufferable..." she shook her head to clear it. Smirking back, she told him, "No, I suppose the place for *you* would be a brothel in Knockturn Alley."

"Brothel, eh? So that's it! Getting in some practice for a job since I turned you down for an apprenticeship? Need work that bad?" He enjoyed the look on her face and couldn't wait to hear what retort would be next. Severus thought, *I must be too far into my cups to enjoy sparring with this Granger chit. Hell, I don't even want to think about the effect she is having on my body, especially after grabbing my thighs the way she did.*

This statement caused the Slytherin duo to laugh out loud, which only infuriated Hermione more. "Let me tell you something, you overgrown, greasy, git! I am working..."

"Problems?" George inquired as he put a protective arm around Hermione's waist. "Good evening, Professor," he nodded, and then turning to Draco and Greg, he continued his greeting, "gits."

"Mr. Weasley," George's ex-Potions professor returned. "No, I haven't any problems other than having to endure that little know-it-all. If you would be so kind as to remove her from my sight, I would be grateful. She *does* make my head hurt worse than the firewhisky."

Just then, the rest of Hermione's gang approached. Ginny and Luna were tired and ready to go to Hermione's to sleep. "Well, well, well, if it isn't the littlest weasel," Draco drawled. *Damn, but she has grown up quite nicely!* "Isn't there a scar-headed boy somewhere you should be following around?"

"Hello, Ferret Boy. I know that is so old and used, but I never get tired of calling you that! When you were a ferret, I think it improved both your looks and personality."

Luna, who seemed oblivious to the insults being thrown around her, greeted the three Slytherins. "Hello, Professor, Draco, Greg," she said as she smiled at each.

The only one to acknowledge her was Greg. He replied, "Loony," as he nodded. Her face fell as he called her that, and he wondered why he felt a small pang in his chest at the sight of her disappointed expression. If he didn't know better, he would think it bothered him that he'd hurt her feelings.

Just then, Draco jumped out of his chair to give Ginny a piece of his mind, but he tripped, causing Hermione to fall into Severus once again. "Really, Miss Granger, if you are that desperate, I am sure there is some male escort service that can help you out. Please try to keep your hands and body off of me." *Before you notice the raging hard on you are giving me!*

"Let's just go," Luna said before an all out fight started. Her good mood had faded at the mention of her old school nickname, and she wanted to go lick her wounds in

private.

Without saying another word, Hermione turned and led her four friends from the room, leaving the three men staring after them, each with a different thought in their minds. One was thinking of how a bushy-haired slip of a girl had aroused him, one was thinking about a loony girl with hurt feelings, and the other was thinking about Bat Bogey Hexes and how he still wanted his revenge for that.

Christy's Notes: Well, that was an interesting meeting, eh?

Southern's Notes: An interesting meeting for them all. I have my suspicions about things, and I'm eager to see what's next.

Kindness Is The Beginning Of Cruelty

Chapter 3 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****
<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: The entire Harry Potter world belongs to the lovely JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to Southern_Witch_69, my wonderful beta! Hugs and kisses to her.

This is my response to Ladyofthemasque's YLC Challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Two

Kindness Is The Beginning Of Cruelty

Hermione was in a good mood Monday morning as she headed into work. She always felt great after a girls' night out with Ginny and Luna. Fred and George were just the icing on the cake. Not even the horrid run-in with Severus Snape and his two cronies could dampen her mood.

She felt slightly guilty about filling out the YLC form with no intentions of getting married just yet, but she decided what's done is done. There was nothing she could do about it now. She really didn't want to think about what the twins would have put in her stead. Besides, she may just meet the wizard of her dreams! She rolled her eyes. Not bloody likely.

She really enjoyed her job. She worked in the Department of Potentially Volatile Potions and Ingredients, specifically created by the Ministry to monitor the purchase of certain ingredients. After the fall of Voldemort, Scrimgeour was worried that any Death Eaters not caught might try to create illegal potions, so he made it a law that certain ingredients had to be monitored.

If anyone wanted to purchase or grow any of the ingredients on the list, they had to fill out the proper paperwork. Then, Hermione's job was to find out everything there was about that ingredient, all the uses, and specifically what it was wanted for. After that, a thorough background check was done on the witch or wizard who wanted the ingredient.

The department was run by Hermione, answering only to Gilbert Whimple, who was also on the Committee on Experimental Charms. She had just sat down at her desk when Gilbert knocked on her door. "Come in," Hermione cheerfully called out.

"Good morning, Hermione. How was your weekend?" Gilbert felt a little nervous being here. Arthur and Molly Weasley had gone out to dinner with Gilbert and his wife this past weekend, and Arthur had asked Gilbert for a personal favor.

The family was getting worried about Hermione and Ginny, so the troubled couple had asked Gilbert *to highly persuade* Hermione to bring an escort to the next three Ministry functions, as they would be high profile. The first one coming up was the five year anniversary of the defeat of Voldemort, next was the annual Christmas ball, and that was followed by the New Year's Eve ball. All three were to be the biggest the Ministry has ever seen, what with people wanting to celebrate Voldemort's defeat.

Molly had confided that she'd heard from Ron that he and Harry were both attending the anniversary ball and possibly the other two. She wanted to make sure Hermione and Ginny would be okay, thus the insistence of bringing dates. This was how they were going to ensure Hermione did; Ginny was a different matter. They hadn't quite figured out how to see to her just yet.

Smiling up at her boss and thinking of her night out, Hermione answered, "Just fine, thanks. What can I do for you?" she asked, eyeing the mound of request forms piled on her desk. It was going to be a long day. One request could take weeks, sometimes months, to complete.

Clearing his throat, her boss nervously started, "You know that the anniversary ball is coming up in the next couple of weeks. We feel you should bring a date to this function and the other two as well."

Raising an eyebrow, but not quite mad just yet, Hermione inquired, "We? The Ministry is insisting on dates now? That's just ridiculous, Mr. Whimple." Laughing, she said, "The Ministry can't *force* me to come with someone."

Gilbert sighed. He was just no good at fibbing. "No, they can't force you, but they *can* highly recommend that you do. With all the losses in the war, they are going for family and friendship, love and happiness, and all that rot. They feel it would look better if the entire staff of Ministry Department Heads and higher ups come with a significant other." When she started to object again, he held up his hand and strictly told her, "Just do it, Hermione. I hear Percy Weasley is available. Haven't you always been close to that family?" He left her office before she could say a word.

Hermione was fuming. Just who did these people think they were anyway? Ruddy bastards! Percy Weasley? Just how desperate did he think she was? So, they want to insist she bring a date? Fine! She would find the biggest git she could think of. She would look for the most inappropriate bastard out there. They would never insist Hermione Granger bring a date to any function again.

*** **

Severus Snape was highly agitated. Instead of teaching his Monday morning class as he was supposed to do, he had to go to the ruddy Ministry of Magic to fill out proper forms for a very important ingredient he needed for the potion he was working on.

He was desperately looking for a cure for Lycanthropy. The Dark Lord had punished Narcissa Malfoy for what he'd considered betrayal. By having Severus take that Unbreakable Vow, Voldemort had said that she cost him his spy at Hogwarts. His punishment was to let Fenrir Greyback bite her whilst he was transformed in his werewolf state.

It had been around six years, and it was taking a toll on Narcissa. Severus knew that Minerva thought he wanted to help that git Lupin, which was all the better for him. That was probably the reason she let him go to the Ministry on a Monday morning.

Not very many people knew about Narcissa, and she wanted to keep it that way. But Severus knew how it affected her and Draco for him to have stay with his mother at the Malfoy Manor each month. She insisted he didn't need to bother because she always took her Wolfsbane, but Draco insisted on staying in case she needed him. And, if Draco got this Quidditch position, there would be nobody there to help her when he had to travel. The deputy headmaster often wondered if Narcissa was what was holding Draco back. If her son left, the Malfoy heir would want to hire someone, and Severus knew Narcissa would never allow that.

He sighed, rubbing his temples against his raging headache. Severus had hardly slept since Saturday night. He kept having images of that bushy-haired know-it-all down on her knees before him. The Potions professor was in a semi state of arousal the rest of the weekend, and it disgusted him that *she* was the cause of it. He decided to put Miss Granger completely out of his mind. He had more important things to think about.

The ex-Death Eater really hoped he would not have much trouble getting the papaver somniferum he needed. The ingredient, derived from the poppy plant, could be used to make different things such as opium. The opium, he'd learnt, counteracts with the sinewort in Wolfsbane to form a mind-altering state that could influence the body to remain in an unaltered state, tricking it into not transforming. Added to the Wolfsbane, the Potions master thought if taken once a day the week prior to transformation, it may put just enough in her system, causing it to force her mind to stop the physical transformation all together, but because of the mind-altering characteristics and the addictiveness of the papaver somniferum, it required approval by the Ministry to obtain...especially if one was a reformed Death Eater.

He arrived at the Ministry of Magic at nine o'clock and, after checking in his wand, he went directly to the Department of Potentially Volatile Potions and Ingredients. He met with a stern looking receptionist that had to be ninety-years-old if she was a day. "May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, I need to speak with someone about inquiring a potions ingredient."

"Do you have an appointment?" Her glasses were pushed down to the end of her nose, and she looked over the rims at him.

Severus sighed. "I was not aware that I needed an appointment. I can't imagine people are lined up to request ingredients."

"One moment please, and I will check to see if she is available."

So it's a she. I wonder who it is, Severus thought. He knew a requirement for this job was to have Master or Mistress of Potions status. This was a step higher than simply being a Potions master or mistress that taught at a school. To become a Master or Mistress of Potions, one had to apprentice for one year and acquire a certificate. He supposed he would have been offered the job himself if it had not been for his past. He was anxious to see who had the job.

"Right this way, sir." She led Severus to the door and told him to go on in. As he entered, his eyes popped out of his head *No, this can't be happening to me! Please, God, anyone but her!*

Hermione, who was still fuming over her conversation with her boss, looked up just as Severus entered the room *Well, well, well. And it's not even my birthday! The mighty Severus Snape needs an ingredient that has to be approved by me! Looks like my day is taking a turn for the better.*

Severus just stood there looking at her. "Have a seat Professor Snape, and tell me what I can do for you," Hermione said in an overly friendly tone that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"How did you get this job? I happen to know you have to have be a credited Mistress of Potions, and I refused to apprentice you."

"Think that highly of yourself, do you? Though you were my first choice, you are certainly not the only Master of Potions in the world, Professor. I apprenticed at Beauxbatons. I am surprised Minerva didn't tell you. Surely you didn't come here to ask of my credentials?" The smug witch raised a challenging eyebrow.

"I always leave the room when the golden trio is mentioned," Severus said with a smirk. He truly knew nothing of the three's personal lives, other than apparently Potter and Weasley now live in America and have married. "At any rate, I need to purchase some papaver somniferum."

"I see. Well, sir, just fill out these forms, and I will get to it in the order I received it," Hermione explained as she pointed to the stack of forms that had formed a tower on her desk.

Severus eyed the stack and raised an eyebrow at his former pupil. "How long do you think that will take? I need it by the Christmas holidays."

Hermione burst out laughing. The holidays started in about three weeks. "The Christmas holidays? You will be lucky to be approved by spring break."

"No, that won't do, Miss Granger. I need the papaver somniferum way before then. You will just have to move my forms to the top of the pile." The Potions professor sat back, assured that his former student would do exactly as he asked.

Why, that arrogant, ruddy, git! He thinks he can just waltz intomy office and dictate how things are done? He needs to realize I am no longer his student, and he cannot tell me what to do, that bastard! Hold on! Bastard? She appraised him from nose to toes. Raising an eyebrow she thought, *Yes, this might just work...if I can convince him. Let's just see how badly he wants that ingredient.* "Well, I might be able help you a little sooner."

"I see. You want something from me, which is not surprising. Okay, Miss Granger, tell me what it will take to get my paperwork moved from the bottom of that pile to the top."

Hermione considered the man sitting in front of her. He was rude, obnoxious, and perfect for her plans. She just hoped he wanted the ingredient enough to do it. "My boss told me this morning I am expected to start bringing a *significant other* to the next few ruddy Ministry functions. I want you to escort me to the next five."

Severus jumped to his feet. "Absolutely not! I like to bring my own dates, thank you!" Then, he smirked cruelly. "Just because *you* can't get a date now that Weasley has married another does not mean I will take pity on you." Severus Snape had never dated so much in his life as he had been doing lately. He found that being a *war hero*, who was still questionable, was like being a witch magnet. The witches flocked to him like goblins to Galleons, thanks to the silly witches having a bad boy complex. Oh, well, it was all the better for him.

He also had a rule where he'd only allow three dates with the same witch. By the third date, almost every witch he took out was ready to be bedded...if he'd not done so on the previous two. After enjoying what was so freely offered, he'd make his excuses and move on to the next one. He enjoyed this lifestyle and was not about to let little miss know-it-all mess up even one month of it.

Hermione inwardly cringed at the slap, but she outwardly remained cool. She would never admit how much his words had stung her. Folding her arms over her chest, she

told him, "Okay then, Professor. I will be in touch when I get to your request."

"This is blackmail! You can't force me to date you." He had a hard time believing that Hermione Granger could not find a date. She was not exactly beautiful by any means, but she was tolerable, he supposed. Surely *some* wizard would take her to these functions! Some wizard other than *him!*

Hermione rolled her eyes. Such drama! "I don't want *today* you. I want an *escort*. There is a difference."

"Hire one then. I believe I already advised you to do so Saturday night." The last thing Severus wanted to do was attend any functions with her, especially after all the things he had thought about them doing to each other this past weekend. If he closed his eyes, he could still imagine her on her knees in front of him. *If only she would keep her mouth shut.*

"I said *fine*," Hermione told him, snapping him out of his little fantasy. She was beginning to get offended. "But, instead of blackmail, why don't you think of this as quid pro quo. This for that. You stir my cauldron, and I stir yours." She *really* wanted Snape to be the one to escort her.

"That is an unfair analogy. I am a Master of Potions and cannot deny such logic."

"You forget yourself, Professor. So am I."

"So *you* say," Severus smirked, as he placed his hands on her desk and leaned forward. "However, you are just cutting your teeth on the stirring rod. I am a well-seasoned Master, if I do say so myself. Besides, not all Masters of Potions are created equally." He looked her up and down with distaste. "Some are definitely lacking."

"Yes, I know, which is why I am asking you to be my date." Hermione smiled wickedly, enjoying the light banter. She couldn't remember the last time she'd found someone who could keep up with her. Leaning forward herself to meet his stance, she told him, "I heard that you can't teach an old Master new tricks either." She raised a challenging eyebrow at him. *He will not intimidate me!*

He had to put a stop to this bantering now. It was arousing him too much. Severus could not remember the last time he'd had an intelligent conversation with a witch, much less an adequate sparring partner. He felt like bending her over that desk and teaching *her* some new tricks! Through gritted teeth, Severus said, "Three functions, not five."

"Done!" Hermione exclaimed triumphantly. Three was what she was going for to begin with. She had only said five to give herself some bargaining room. "I will get started on these forms right away. Let me give you my address so that you can come to my flat to pick me up for the anniversary ball."

"No, I will not be coming to pick you up. I will meet you outside the entrance to attend the ball, and I will not escort you home. After all, this is only for show, correct? I will be your date inside the ballroom only." *If I go to her flat and allow this sparring to keep up, we may miss the ball all together!*

"Good enough. Say seven?" Hermione had no idea why she was suddenly upset by the fact he would not come to her flat to pick her up. He was right after all; ~~was~~ only for show.

"Fine. Oh, and, ah, Miss Granger? Don't be late." With that, Severus billowed out of her office, slamming her door, and heading back to Hogwarts with only one thought. *This is a very bad idea.*

*** **

Ginny arrived at the Quidditch stadium a little wary. Anything involving Fred and George caused her concern. After she walked in, her concern was only magnified. She stood back in the shadows to see who all she recognized and found she recognized everyone there.

Draco Malfoy stood out immediately with his platinum hair. Beside him stood Marcus Flint and Miles Bletchley. A little bit further down were Andrew Kirke, Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell, and Roger Davies. *What in the name of Circe are those blokes up to now?*

Suddenly, she was grabbed from behind. "Ginny! So happy you could make it! Tell me, what do you think of the people out there?" Fred enthusiastically whirled her around.

"I think I am wondering what is going on. Where is George?"

"Someone had to mind the shop. Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes can't run itself, can it? As for what is going on, come with me and find out, little sis."

Ginny warily followed Fred to the pitch. Everyone stopped talking as soon as they saw the arrivals. "Weasley?" Draco asked incredulously. "What is this about? My time is valuable!"

"I am sure you are all wondering what you are doing here," Fred started as if Draco had not even spoken. "My brother George and I had a visit from... a silent partner about six months ago about the rise in the sales of Quidditch tickets since the war has ended. We noticed they have slowly been on the rise, and this year hit an all time seventy percent increase. So, with the help of our silent partner, we decided to start our own team. You ladies and gents are the lucky team members we have chosen, provided you can still play, that is."

As the murmurs started, Ginny asked, "Why am I here then? I haven't played in a long time, brother dear."

"You, my dear, lovely sister, are here to be our traveling Healer. Rules dictate that in order to have a traveling team and hold practices, we must provide a Healer to accompany them. What say you? You will be making a right sight more than you do at St. Mungo's."

It was a perfect job for her. Ginny had been in a rut for some time now. She was tired of the life she had been living as of late and had been thinking of a change. Traveling with the team, she could save most of her earnings, as the owners would provide the lodging while they were gone. *Maybe this is just what I need...to go new places and meet new people.*

While she was thinking, Fred added, "It would get you out of the Burrow, Gin."

That was the deal breaker. "Now, that's an offer I can't refuse!" Ginny exclaimed and held her hand out for Fred to shake. Instead, he put a quill in her outstretched hand. "Just sign on the dotted line please." Laughing, Ginny happily signed the contract after reading it through, wanting to make sure they did indeed provide lodging, among other things.

Ginny was informed she had to stay to watch the team practice. These guys were all very good, but they needed to work on working together. Angelina and Katie still worked well together; it was like they never stopped playing with each other. Marcus and Andrew seemed to start working well together, too, after a time of playing. Roger was soon in sync with Angelina and Katie while Miles seemed pretty decent at playing the Keeper position. However, Draco Malfoy was something else. He caught the Snitch every time within thirty minutes of its release. It was obvious he had kept up his skills.

Ginny found herself watching only Draco and abruptly stopped. She noticed when he was flying, he had no sneer or smirk on his face, just a look of pure joy that made him look quite handsome. *Too bad he's such an evil arse!*

While she was musing, she looked at Draco and found him looking directly at her. She forgot to breathe for a moment; he looked magnificent sitting on his broom. He

ruined the moment and smirked at her as if he knew what she was thinking. *Arrogant little prat!*

Draco had been on top of his game today, and he was grateful. He had been keeping up his Quidditch skills, and now, it looked as if that would pay off. He would be playing again even if those two Weasley wankers owned the team. It didn't matter as long as he got to play Quidditch and got his promised Galleons of course. He would have to hire someone to stay with his mother once a month, and he hoped he could find someone that he could trust. Draco knew she would fight him on that, but he'd feel better knowing she was not alone. He wished he could go back in time and kill the Dark Lord himself for all the pain and suffering he had caused the Malfoy family.

Weasley had told the team that he and his evil twin would not be able to always travel with the team, so they made Johnson captain. Figures. Draco refused to sign his contract without having his solicitor read through it first, but that was mostly just to aggravate Weasley. He knew he was taking this position.

They only had a few weeks of practice before the first game they were to play. Their silent partner was able to pull some strings to allow the team to start midseason. Whoever the silent one is must be very powerful and wealthy. Twin number one had informed them that they were to begin right after the New Year. He wondered what the Weaselette was doing there. It didn't appear she would be joining the team.

Suddenly, he felt her eyes on him. He looked up to see what she was looking at and forgot himself for a moment. She was sitting in the stands with the sun behind her, and Draco thought he had never seen anything more beautiful. He would never admit it to anyone, but he loved her fiery red hair. It was seemed to be a better shade than the rest of the Weasleys had. He got the sudden urge to kiss her just then. To hide his disturbing attraction to a *Weasley*, not to mention his body's reaction to her stare, he smirked at her nastily. As he knew it would, that single act broke the moment.

Finally, Weasley called an end to practice and rounded everyone up. "You guys looked good out there today, but you can all do so much better. We are going to have to practice everyday for three weeks, starting at six o'clock. Gin, you will need to be here for those in case there are any accidents during practice. Any questions?"

"What is the name of our team, Fred?" Angelina wanted to know. Fred always thought he would marry Angelina some day. Then one day after a game, he walked into the girl's locker room to surprise her, thinking she was in there alone, and found her and Cho Chang in a compromising position. The three laughed it off, but Fred lost a little of his heart that day.

"The Wicked Wazzock Warriors. If that is all, I will see everyone at six sharp. George will be able to join us."

As they were leaving the stadium, Draco caught up with Ginny. "Well, Virginia, what were *you* doing here? Learning how Quidditch is really played?"

"My name is *not* Virginia, arsehole." She wanted to get as far away from Draco Malfoy as possible. Ginny did not like the flutter in her stomach she got while watching him on his broom earlier. "As for Quidditch, all I saw was how much practice you need."

"Right, *Virginia*, I was the best one out there, and you know it. I say I even put your scarhead to shame."

Rolling her eyes, she said, "Still trying to best Harry, I see. You never could face that he is a better wizard *and man* than you will ever be. You will never best him; you will always be second." This time, it was Ginny's turn to smirk.

"No, that would be *you*, wouldn't it?" Draco hated how she had hit so close to home and decided to strike back at her. "I heard he married an American. Someone that sort of looked like you, only *much* hotter. I heard she could even afford women's clothes and didn't have to run around in a bunch of boy's hand-me-downs. Maybe that is what attracted Potter, eh? She actually looked like a woman!"

Ginny refused to let the tears pooling in her eyes flow in front of Malfoy. He had hurt her much more than he could realize, but she would never let him know it. Instead, she decided give back as good as she'd received, maybe even better.

"Listen here, you son of a Death Eater! I *am* a woman. I'm woman enough that I don't have to prove anything to you. Which, by the way, is your loss. So why don't you go home and play dress up in daddy's Death Eater robes. Maybe you can get mummy to bow to you. Then, when she realizes you are too much like Lucius, she can rid us of your existence, too!" Gin didn't know what caused her to be so mean. It was not in her nature to be so cruel. She knew she was hitting way below the belt, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. She just wanted him to hurt as badly as he had hurt her.

At first, Draco had felt bad when he'd seen how much he had hurt her. That was a foreign feeling to him. Usually, he was happy to crush people. But the look in her eyes stopped him cold...until she opened her mouth. Now, he wanted to choke the life out of her.

His grey eyes turned to icy steel when he looked her directly in the eyes and said, "I would suggest you stay away from *me* *Virginia*. Right now, I don't think I can be held responsible for my actions against ignorant witches who have no idea what they are talking about. *Never* speak ill of my mother again." And with that, he Apparated out of there as quickly as he could before he actually hurt her.

For the first time, Ginny actually felt afraid around Malfoy. She decided it was the look in his eyes. She had no doubt it was taking him some effort not to punch her. She was scared enough not to bother to tell him her name was *Ginevra*, as she'd started to do. For the next few days, Gin decided that she'd be staying far away from Draco Malfoy.

Christy's Notes: Well, the games have begun. What do you think of them?

Southern's Notes: Snape's such a prick. I'm still giggling over the Virginia Weasley bit. Hahaha!

Something Cannot Emerge From Nothing.

Chapter 4 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****

<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: All these lovely characters and all the Potter universe belong to JKR.

A/N: As always, many thanks to the wonderful Southern_Witch_69 for being a most awesome beta.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Three

Something Cannot Emerge From Nothing.

Draco vaguely wondered how he was able to fly without his broom. Everything was blurry, and his head was spinning.

Damn Roger Davies! He seemed to have forgotten that this was not Hogwarts any longer, and they were not Slytherin versus Ravenclaw.

Suddenly, he hit the ground, but the blow was not nearly as hard as he felt it should have been. He still had his eyes closed, so he felt, rather than saw, his head being cushioned. He cracked open one eye and realized his head was in Ginny Weasley's lap, and she was looking down at him.

"I must be dreaming if I am on my back with *Virginia* on top of me," Draco drawled out sarcastically.

"Oh, no!" George bellowed nervously. "He hit his head harder than we thought. He thinks Gin is someone named Virginia!" Turning to Roger, he hissed, "That was uncalled for, Davies!"

Ginny rolled her eyes. She was still highly upset about the altercation that she and Draco had before. She was extremely disappointed in herself. She was not a mean person by nature, but something about Draco just seemed to set her off. And when she'd tried to apologize, he'd laughed in her face. He'd told her he had not given one thought about something a *lowly Weasley* had said to him and that he could barely even remember the incident. Ginny knew that was not the truth. She remembered the hatred in his eyes after she had said those things about his mother.

She'd instantly regretted it afterwards. That was hitting way below the belt as far as she was concerned, and she felt she had no business saying those things. Just because *he* would, did not make it right for her to.

And her biggest problem with Draco was that Ginny felt attracted to him, and he was someone she absolutely could not stand. It puzzled her. Ginny knew he was very good-looking, but that was his only asset in her opinion. When he opened his mouth, his looks were ruined. It was just that when they argued, it turned her on.

Sighing, Ginny told her brother, "No, he thinks my name is Virginia."

Fred chuckled. He could sense the sexual tension between those two a mile off and decided to play a bit with his one and only sister. "Now, why would he think that, *Ginevra*?" Ginny shot daggers at Fred with her eyes.

"*Ginevra*?" Draco snickered. "No wonder you never bothered to correct me! I wouldn't admit to having a name like that either. You should have stuck with Virginia!"

Growling, Ginny abruptly stood, causing Draco's head to hit the ground. "He's fine," she proclaimed and then added to the twins, "I am off to Hermione's. I will see you guys later." As she walked off, she didn't notice the looks her brothers were giving each other as they rubbed their hands together in glee.

Because Ginny's leaving signaled the end of practice, everyone started heading for the locker rooms. Just before Draco could enter, two sets of arms wrapped themselves across his shoulders. "Malfoy, old chap," evil twin number one started, "we couldn't help but notice you are the only one who has not signed the contract."

"Too right," evil twin two agreed. "So, we have decided to take you to dinner and discuss things."

Draco smirked. He had every intention of signing that contract, but if the evil Weasley wankers wanted to wine and dine him, who was he to refuse? "All right. Just let me get showered and changed."

*** **

Hermione was vigorously cleaning her flat. Tonight was the welcoming home dinner, and she needed to work off some pent up energy before heading to the Burrow. Ron, Harry, and both of their families would be there. She could handle it. She knew she could.

She was not still in love with Ron...if she ever was. Hermione had been wondering for a while now if she was merely in love with the thought of being in love, and Ron had just been convenient for her. The past caused her to feel... inadequate. She hated feeling inadequate. How could she trust that if she found someone else that he would not leave her for the first pretty face that came along? Not that Hermione considered herself ugly, but she knew her looks were not the first thing that got her noticed.

To top it all off, she had to practically beg Severus Snape to escort her to those ruddy ministry functions *Severus Snape!* It upset her more than she was willing to admit. *Am I really that bad? I know it has been a while since I have dated, but that was by choice really. It's not that I haven't had offers!* Hermione's musings were interrupted by a loud banging on her door.

She opened her door to find an irate looking Ginny Weasley standing there. "I swear someone should put me out of my misery and kill bloody Draco Malfoy!"

Laughing, Hermione told her best friend, "Come on in. Did something else happen?"

Sighing, Ginny told her, "No. I tried to apologize for the things I said about his mother, and he brushed me off by insulting me. The day just went down hill after that. And now, we have about two hours before *the dinner*," she said, as she shuddered drastically.

"I know. It will be fine though." Looking at Ginny's disbelieving face, she asked, "You're over Harry, aren't you?"

"Yes, and I have been for quite some time. It's just... uncomfortable. You know? And do you know what I think it is that bothers me the most?" Hermione shook her head that she didn't. "It's the fact that I feel like he dismissed me. Threw me over. It's more of a pride thing."

"Yes, I know exactly how you feel there, but it's fine. We are both intelligent, beautiful, strong witches. Any man would be lucky to have either one of us!"

"You're absolutely right, Mione. And enough! I don't need a pep talk over Harry! It's Ferret Boy that has me all mixed up!"

"Oh? How so?"

"Well, I can't explain it really. He is horrid, evil, arrogant, and loathsome! However, when we argue, it really does something to me. Turns me on, sort of. That repulses me."

Oh, I can relate there! Bantering with Severus Snape really got my juices flowing! Maybe what you are feeling is just the heat of the moment. It's been so long since anyone has gotten any kind of rise out of you. You may just seem to transfer that into... What is the word? Lust?"

"Perhaps. It's just so infuriating! I don't like anything about him, personality wise, but when we start arguing, I just want to grab his face in my hands and lay one on him to

shut him up!"

Laughing, Hermione told her, "Try it. It may render him speechless for once. It only took slapping him for me, but then, I never had the urge to do anything else."

"Oh, hush you! Let's get ready for the dinner and knock 'em dead! What say you?"

"I'm with you. Let's go."

*** **

Hermione and Ginny opted to Apparate rather than Floo. Hermione hated Floo travel and avoided it as much as possible. Once inside, Hermione went to the kitchen to see if Mrs. Weasley wanted her to do anything while Ginny went to the sitting room. She wanted to say hello to her dad before going to see if her mum needed any help.

When she got to the sitting room door, she stopped in her tracks.

"Oh, hi, Mummy! Come wead wif daddy and me." The little boy shook his head. "Oh, you're not my mummy!"

Ginny looked into the bright green eyes of a red-haired little boy. Something in her chest constricted. She slowly looked to Harry. He smiled slightly. "Hello, Ginny. I would like to introduce my son, James."

Ginny looked at James. "Hello, James. It's very nice to meet you." She was proud that her voice did not crack and remained relatively steady.

"Hewwo. You wook wike my mummy," the two and a half year old informed her. "Are you my aunt Ginny?"

Ginny smiled softly. "You're right. I am. Thank you. I need to go see if my mum needs any help. It was nice meeting you, James." And with that, before Harry could say anything, she turned and left, never even noticing Ron and his daughter by the fireplace. Ron decided not to speak to her, as Ginny seemed to be upset. He hoped she was all right, but instinctively, he knew that she would not want him to follow her.

It was so confusing to Ginny. She did not love Harry anymore, but... That was supposed to have been *her* green-eyed, red-haired boy! The one she'd always dreamed of having. *It's not like I didn't know his wife was pregnant, but I never expected him to look like that! And when he called me mummy, it broke my heart. Oh, well, it doesn't matter, she convinced herself. No better way to truly move on than to be slapped in the face with reality!*

Hermione had walked into the kitchen to try and help Mrs. Weasley. She never accepted help, but Hermione thought it polite to offer at least. She was taken aback at the sight she saw before her.

There stood Samantha, Ron's beautiful wife, baking a cake in Mrs. Weasley's kitchen. Hermione couldn't believe her eyes! Mrs. Weasley never let anyone in her kitchen!

"Oh, hello, Hermione, dear! Nice to see you've made it. Dinner should be ready soon. Why don't you go have a visit with Ron and Harry? I daresay that you should meet little James and Grace! Off with you now."

Hermione stood there gobsmacked, gaping at Mrs. Weasley. Samantha had not spoken a word. *Perhaps she now knows of my past with her Ron.*

"Um, okay. I will be just out in the sitting room then." When Hermione walked to the sitting room door, the first thing she saw was Harry reading to a little boy that was obviously his son. *This must be James.* The sight made her smile. He looked happy.

Not having been noticed yet, she looked around the room. When she looked by the fireplace, she saw Ronald teaching his young daughter how to play chess. *Figures! How typical of him.*

She took a closer look at his daughter. *And here is Grace. How beautiful!* She had long, strawberry-blonde hair and clear blue eyes. At the moment, those eyes were narrowed in concentration. *Just like her father,* Hermione mused.

Quietly, Hermione backed out of the room before she was noticed. She was not ready to face them just yet. She decided to go upstairs and look for Ginny.

*** **

Severus Snape was not a happy Potions master. This was his first Sunday off in two months, and instead of working on his potion, as he wished to be doing, he had to go to the bloody Burrow and speak with Molly Weasley, as per Minerva McGonagall's orders.

What kind of name is the Burrow for a home? If my surname were Weasley, I would most assuredly not call my home the Burrow!

Severus did not blame Poppy for taking a three-month leave. Her sister was very sick, but he didn't understand why he had to be the one to go speak to Molly about replacing her until the mediwitch returned. Molly had insisted, much to his displeasure, that he come to dinner. *Blasted woman!*

Why could Ginevra not have been available? Minerva said she has taken a job as a traveling Healer with that new Quidditch team Draco tried out for. Well, bully for her! I just resent the fact I have to be the one to ruin my day off to go there! Hell, I don't even see why she would allow Molly to take over Pomfrey's duties, seeing as she's not a qualified Healer! He shrugged. "I guess the work she did with her daughter and Poppy during the war and battle counts for something." He nodded to himself, moving towards the house. *Poppy had said she'd Floo in each week to go over things and wouldn't mind being contacted in emergencies. That would be enough, I suppose.* Smirking, he said aloud, "If the governors' do not care, why should I?"

So, here he was in the last place he wanted to be with the most annoying people he could imagine about to eat...no doubt disgusting...food whilst convincing Molly and Arthur to go to Hogwarts for three months. Bloody terrific.

As soon as he knocked on the door, Molly came rushing to greet him. "Oh, Hello! Come in! Come in! It's so good to see you, Severus," she said a little too brightly. He knew he made most people, especially the Order members, uncomfortable. He reveled in that fact.

"Molly," he said in way of greeting. "I really don't need to dine. I just wanted to..."

"Oh, nonsense! We have plenty! Just have that seat there, and tuck in with the rest of us."

Merlin, spare me! I don't know if I can bear an afternoon of Weasleys!

Severus sat and then looked around to see who else occupied seats at the table. He noticed Weasley and Potter with their brood. *How lovely. A dinner with two-thirds of the trio! Now, my day is complete.*

Continuing his survey, he noticed Hermione and Ginevra. *There is the missing one-third!* He almost laughed. Hermione would not even look at him. *Now, this could be interesting. Could she be regretting forcing me to attend those functions with her?*

Just when Severus thought the day couldn't get any worse, in walked the twins with a very disgruntled Draco Malfoy between them. *Better and better, I say. St. Potter and*

his little sidekick should love this!

Draco huffed indignantly, "What is the meaning of bringing me to this... hovel? You led me to believe I was to be dining in one of the finer restaurants in London!"

"And so you are, mate!" George told him.

"That's right. Me mum's food is the best, if I do say so meself," Fred agreed.

"I highly doubt that! Why, the people alone are revolting. What makes you think I would lower myself to dine here? You people can't even afford a house-elf!"

"THAT'S QUITE ENOUGH!" Ginny yelled. Everyone at the table turned to look at her. Draco smirked. It made her blood boil. "Why, in the name of all that's holy, did you bring Draco bloody Malfoy into my home?" she asked Fred and George. "I get enough of him as it is during practice."

"Oh, *Ginevra*, you haven't even begun to get enough of me. One time and you will be addicted for life," Draco drawled.

Ginny, red-faced, started to stutter. Harry silenced her with a raise of his hand. Rising, he told Draco, "That will do. You will not come into this house and disrespect the people here."

Draco looked Harry up and down. *ME* disrespect them? Oh, forgive me. Is that something only you can do?" Looking towards Severus, Draco said, "It seems I have overstepped my bounds, eh? Once again, I am stepping on Potter's toes."

Severus smirked.

Arthur decided to stop things before they got out of hand. "Enough. Boys, what is the meaning of this?"

"Well," George started, "we need him to sign his contract, so we thought to plow him with good food and bad firewhisky. No better place than a Burrow Sunday dinner, I say!"

Severus looked towards Hermione to see her reaction to Draco because she had not said one word. He noticed she was studying Weasley's wife intently as she chewed her bottom lip. He shook his head. *How could Hermione compare herself to that witch?*

"Please, have a seat, boys. Dinner is getting cold." Molly turned towards Severus. "So, Professor, what can I do for you?"

As the boys took seats at the table and glared at one another, Severus replied to Molly. "I am not sure if you are aware, but Poppy Pomfrey's sister is very ill. Poppy is taking a three-month leave of absence, and Minerva has asked that you fill in for her whilst she is away. Poppy would be in touch weekly and could come through the Floo for emergencies. Would you be interested?" *Please say yes now so that I may leave here as quickly as possible.*

"Well, I'm not sure! That is a huge responsibility. Would I be required to live at Hogwarts?"

Just then, before Severus could answer, Charlie and Tonks Weasley came crashing in. "Sorry we're late, Mum! A herd of Hippogriffs got loose, and we had to round them up." Charlie had taken on Hagrid's job when the gentle half-giant fell during the war. Tonks was the current Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.

Hermione became very uncomfortable. Although Tonks was married to Charlie now, she knew that her first choice had been Remus Lupin. After the war, Tonks had really wanted to marry Remus. Although he loved her, Remus did not want to marry because of his affliction. Tonks had insisted they take the YLC compatibility test, just to see, and was highly disappointed when the results showed them to only be thirty-three percent compatible.

However, surprising everyone, her and Charlie turned out to be ninety-one percent compatible. Nobody in the family had even known that Charlie had filled out the forms. Remus decided to break things off with her because he knew of her desire to wed. She started dating Charlie, and Remus began to keep company with Hermione's mum, Jane Granger.

It seemed that after Remus had escorted Hermione to the hospital when her dad died, he'd gotten to know her mother. Afterwards, they kept in touch. Because neither of them ever wanted to get married, they kept each other company at times.

Hermione wouldn't call it dating, per se, but occasionally, they went to the Muggle theater or out to eat. Jane had even attended a Ministry function with Remus once. Even though Tonks had told Hermione repeatedly that she was not bothered by this, Hermione still felt weird around her.

After they settled, Molly turned to Severus. "So, would I be required to live there these three months? What of Arthur?"

"You would need to be there in case of emergencies. There are quarters the both of you would stay in."

"Well, Arthur and I will have to discuss it. This is too big a decision to make lightly. Tell Minnie I will let her know before Poppy leaves."

Severus nodded and looked towards Hermione again. It was as if he couldn't keep his eyes off the little witch *She is not that bad looking if you really look at her. Her hair seems more manageable now, and she has certainly grown into her body. My own body seems to respond to hers readily enough, much to my displeasure. I suppose those Muggle jeans she is wearing are to make a point to Weasley, but I believe he is too dense to realize it or even notice her.*

Taking his eyes off of Hermione because his body was starting to respond, he looked towards Draco, who in turn was watching Ginevra *What is this? An attraction or is the boy just taunting Potter? Indeed, Potter was turning all kinds of red watching the two of them. The sexual tension between Draco and Ginevra was extremely thick. Interesting...*

As soon as dinner was over, Hermione said her goodbyes and walked out the door. She had had enough. The way Snape kept watching her during the meal made her feel lacking in some way. She knew everyone thought she was pining over Ron, but in reality, she was getting funny feelings in the pit of her stomach from her ex-Potions master...feelings she really did not want to think on at the moment.

Before she could get away, Ron stopped her. "It's good to see you, Mione, though you are alone. Are you not dating anyone?"

"Ron, I really don't feel that my personal life is your business. You have enough to be getting on with." She turned to leave, but she added, "Your daughter is lovely."

"Don't be that way. I was just making friendly conversation, is all. We are friends, aren't we? I just want to see you be as happy as I am. I don't want you growing old alone."

What the hell? "Oh, there are no worries there. I have been dating plenty," she lied. She would not let this arsehole stand here and be so damn condescending to her. "I daresay, you will be very surprised when you see my date for the five-year anniversary ball."

Ron eyed her speculatively. "I am glad for you then. Oh, and Mione? Don't let Samantha's beauty get to you. She just has more beauty than most. You are very pretty, too."

Oh. My. God! That arrogant prat! "Trust me, Ronald, your wife possesses nothing that I want. Beauty or otherwise. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to be off. I have an engagement I am going to be late for!" With that, she turned on her heels and walked towards the front gate to Apparate home.

Severus had been hiding in the shadows. When Hermione had left, he followed her out. He couldn't say why, but when Weasley had stopped her, he wanted to hear what they said to each other. He especially wanted to see her reaction to him.

As he listened to the boy dig himself in a hole, he thought, *What a prat he is! How in the devil did Hermione put up with that little bugger as long as she did? She is far too intellectual for the likes of a Weasley at any rate. I say he did her a favor by marrying another.* As she started walking away and Ron went back into the house, he came out of the shadows.

Suddenly, Hermione heard a familiar voice calling her. "Miss Granger!"

Swearing softly and turning around to face Snape, she asked, "Yes?" *God, I cannot deal with him now!*

"Quickly, name the twelve uses of Dragon's Blood!" he commanded in his best teacher's voice.

Confused, Hermione rolled them off. "Oven cleaner..." After she had named all twelve, she continued, "...and a possible thirteenth that I read about in *Potions Today* it could possibly prevent scarring when added to burn-healing paste.

Smirking, Severus told her, "See? That is why you cannot compare yourself to Samantha Weasley. There is no comparison, really." With that, he Disapparated.

Well, what was that supposed to mean? That I am too bookish and boring to compete with her beauty, or she is too... simple to compete with my knowledge? Damn that wizard!

After Hermione left, Ginny had wandered behind the shed for a fag. It was the only thing that would calm her nerves, and she didn't feel like hearing a lecture from her mother right now. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Those things will kill you," Draco said as he took the cigarette from her mouth and put it between his lips.

"Oh, please, help yourself," Ginny told him sarcastically.

"Your Harry seems to have himself a nice little family there," he told her to gauge her reaction.

"He is *not* my Harry! I got over him some time ago!"

"Really?" he asked disbelievingly. "Prove it. Kiss me." Draco had no idea what made him dare her to do such a thing; he only knew he had wanted to taste her since dinner.

"I don't have to prove anything to you. I don't care if you believe me or not." She started to walk away and felt herself being pulled back and pushed against the shed.

"Well, I do care," he whispered as he brought his mouth to hers. She resisted, but only for a moment. She groaned as she opened her mouth, and his tongue invaded it. Just as she was really getting into it, a voice interrupted her pleasure.

"Don't let me interrupt," Harry sarcastically said.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Draco replied and tried to continue their kiss, but Ginny gently pushed Draco away.

"What is it that you need, Harry?"

I need nothing. Your mum was looking for you.

Ginny turned and walked away, leaving the two wizards to watch her go.

"Stay away from her, Malfoy!" Harry demanded.

"A little late to stake your claim, isn't it?"

"She is only doing this to make me mad. How does that make you feel? Second to Potter as usual? Or are you used to that feeling by now?"

Draco smirked. "You were nowhere in sight, Scarhead, while we were kissing. In fact, you never even entered either of our minds. And when she screams my name in pleasure, because trust me, it's only a matter of time, she won't even remember you exist."

Before Harry could reply, Draco Disapparated.

*** **

It was not unusual for Luna to find herself at *The Quibbler* on a Sunday. She was working extremely hard to make her paper a reputable one. No more Crumple-Horned Snorkacks for her, even if they *do* exist! She was trying to think of a story that no paper has done yet. Suddenly, an idea came to her.

That's it! I could interview the guards and prisoners at Azkaban! With the five-year anniversary coming up, I could write about the changes and regrets and how the guards are faring now that the dementors have been vanished. Everyone else will be breaking their wands trying to get interviews with Harry and the other Order members. Nobody will think of the guards and prisoners!

Gaining her second wind, Luna quickly sent an owl to Kingsley Shacklebolt, asking him to help her set everything up. *This could be the break I am looking for! I hope the Ministry approves and keeps this quiet!*

The next owl she sent was to Colin Creevey. Although he was a freelance photographer, Luna liked to use him as much as possible. With a newfound vigor, Luna began writing down interview questions. She wanted to be prepared as soon as she was approved.

Christy's Notes Well, that was some dinner, eh? Let me know what you think!

Southern's Notes: I love the Draco and Ginny interaction here! Woohoo! All I can say to Harry is that it's his fault that she's not his.

The Proximity of a Desirable Thing Tempts One To Overindulgence.

Chapter 5 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****
<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR. I am making no money from this.

A/N: Many thanks to my wonderful beta, Southern_Witch_69. She is awesome.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Five

The Proximity of a Desirable Thing Tempts One To Overindulgence.

Hermione was having a very bad Monday. She was still very upset with herself for letting Ron get to her the way he did. *Arrogant Git! How dare he just assume that I find myself lacking when compared to his wife! I have sure made something of myself without him!*

The threatening notes had not helped matters either. She knew they were from Mrs. Nott. *The witch is as stupid as her son. Doesn't have enough wits about her to use a dicto-quill! Like I can't tell her handwriting from the request forms she filled out!* Mrs. Nott had filled out forms about five months ago to request a questionable ingredient. After doing all the background searches on the witch and the ingredient, Hermione had not been about to grant her request. This had infuriated Mrs. Nott beyond measure.

At first, the notes were merely insulting, calling her Mudblood and the like. As the weeks passed, they became bolder. Today, she received one threatening her life. Not that Hermione was afraid, exactly, but really, it would be enough to try any witch.

She was going to have to go to Mr. Whimple, and she hated that. He would fret, which would, in turn, cause her to worry more than she usually would. Hermione sighed. *wonder if I should just wait to see what happens. Maybe she has had her fun and will stop now.*

She knew she would have to decide soon when she heard a knock on her door. "Come in!" she called out, knowing it was her boss.

"Good morning! How was your weekend?" Mr. Whimple asked, same as he did every Monday morning.

"Fine," Hermione absently replied, still trying to decide if she was going to show him the threats or not.

"I trust you have a date for the ball this weekend? It would not bode well should you come alone," he warned.

That stopped her musings short. "Yes, I do have a date as a matter of fact. Thanks so much for your concerns, sir. Whatever would I do without the Ministry looking out for my personal life?"

"Don't take that tone with me, missy! I was just following orders, I was. What's the big deal anyway? You know, you might actually enjoy the company of a fine, young wizard!"

Oh, yes. Fine and young indeed! I can't wait for you to get a load of him! How do you know that I don't already, hmm? Perhaps I choose to come to these functions alone because I find them boring, and I don't wish to put that off on any fine, young, wizards?"

Mr. Whimple sighed. He hated it when Hermione was in a snit. "That's enough. I'll not hear anymore. Those are the orders from upstairs, and you'll do well to follow them. Now, do you have any request forms for me to sign this morning?"

Hermione briefly thought of the threats and dismissed it for the time being. "No, not this morning, but I will Wednesday most likely."

"Okay. I will see you later then." When he got to the door, Mr. Whimple turned to Hermione and smiled. "Bringing a date won't signify the end of the world, you know. It will all work out for the best."

The best for whom? He seems more interested in my love life than I am! Yes, sir," she said, resigned to the fact she was being forced into bringing a date. With that, he turned and left her office.

By lunchtime, Hermione was ready to pull her hair out. She'd gone to test an acidic potion herself, and someone bumped into her from behind, causing her to spill the potion down the front of her best robes. Needless to say, the robes were covered with holes and beyond repair.

Sitting back at her desk and fighting off a headache, Hermione grabbed some parchment and a quill.

Gin,

I don't know about you, but I am having a most horrible day! How about dinner tonight and a few drinks?

I could really use the distraction anyway since the ball is this weekend. I am sure you could, too. Cleo will wait for your reply.

Hope to see you soon,

Hermione

Hermione tied the note to her owl and sent her on her way. She prayed with all she had that Ginny would agree. Her day was only half over, and already she wanted to crawl under her desk and hide for the rest of it.

*** **

Ginny's Monday was not faring much better. After that blasted kiss from Draco Malfoy, she had not thought of anything else. She had made a vow to herself to avoid that wizard at all costs. It seemed he had made a vow to constantly get in her face as much as possible.

As she sat and watched the practice, Draco flew over to her. "I was thinking..."

"Alert *The Quibbler!* Draco Malfoy was thinking!"

"We should go to dinner this week," he continued as if she had not interrupted him.

Ginny snorted. "Thanks, but no thanks."

Draco narrowed his eyes. No woman, witch or Muggle, had ever turned down an invitation from him before. *How dare she? She is lucky I would even lower my standards enough to take her...a lowly Weasley...to a public place before ravishing her!* "Why not, Weasley? Afraid you can't handle a real man after Potter?"

Ginny counted to ten. It didn't help. *Why does he constantly mention Harry?* "Listen, you tosser!" But before she could continue, a familiar owl flew to her and held out her leg.

Smiling smugly, Ginny took the note from the owl and read it. Looking back to Draco, she told him, "It seems I already have dinner plans. Thanks anyway." She knew he would automatically think the owl was from a wizard. Just what she wanted him to think.

"I see. Well, when you want to play with the big boys, Weasley, you just let me know. Until then," he said, mock bowing to her while sitting on his broom. Turning, he flew away without a backwards glance.

He's jealous; of that, I am sure. But hurt? I could have sworn I saw hurt in his eyes, but that cannot be. I know he can't stand me. He has to only be asking me out to make Harry mad. Well, I won't play those childish games! His feud with Harry is just that...his! They can both leave me out of it!

Taking her quill and ink out of the medical bag she carried, she used the back of Hermione's note to answer her.

Mione,

Drinks and dinner sound lovely. I will meet you at that new place, Envy, around seven. I will make the reservations.

Definitely see you soon,

Gin

After she sent the owl, she went back to watching the team. They were getting better and better. Draco seemed unstoppable. She had no doubt they would be ready for their first game after the start of the new year.

Suddenly, a Bludger hit Katie Bell and knocked her off her broom. She was speeding for the ground while Ginny was preparing for the worst. The very least of her injuries were sure to be broken bones and a concussion.

Out of nowhere, Draco flew under Katie and caught her, bringing her gently to the ground near Ginny. After thoroughly checking her over, Ginny was relieved to find nothing seriously wrong other than the hit on her head from the Bludger.

After Ginny gave Katie potions for both healing and pain, Fred and George called an end to practice that day. However, they had to be back in the morning at six. *Lovely,* thought Ginny. *Not too many cups for me tonight then. I think I will go home and soak in a hot bath before meeting Hermione.*

*** **

Luna was having an excellent Monday. Kingsley had come through for her, and here she was, waiting to interview one of the guards at Azkaban. She was barely able to contain her surprise when Gregory Goyle stepped into the room. She knew he worked there, as she had a list of the guards' names, but she hadn't expected to be interviewing him.

"Hello, Mr. Goyle," she started in her professional interviewing voice, "I would like to thank you for agreeing to speak with me." She held her hand out for him to shake.

Greg winced. "Please, call me Greg. Mr. Goyle is rotting away back there," he said as he pointed over the back of his shoulder with his thumb towards the locked cells behind the huge locked door.

"All right, Greg it is," she said, smiling. "How long have you worked here?" Luna wanted to get right down to business so she could interview some prisoners, perhaps even Greg's father.

"About four years," he answered as he studied her. *Wow, Looney has changed. She actually seems... pretty...in a weird sort of way.*

Luna's face was starting to blush under his scrutiny. "Do you find the prisoners behavior any worse with the five year anniversary coming up?"

"Not really. They are all nasty buggers, who are still yelling about divine power and ridding our world of impurities. Pathetic really. Of course, my father claims I have betrayed him, and the first chance he gets, he will kill me. Everyday stuff, that."

Luna's eyes widened in shock. "Your father threatens to kill you? Oh, Greg, I'm so sorry! How awful it must be for you!"

Greg smiled, enjoying her concern. He'd never truly had the concern of a witch before. It was nice. "Not really. Loo...um, Luna. I did what I had to do, and he did the same. Now, he pays for it and blames everyone but himself for his decisions. That is what they all do in here. I imagine any of them would kill any of the guards in here the first chance they got, especially if they thought it would let them escape."

Luna thought this over and accepted it. It made sense. She decided to go on with the interview questions. "Have there been any problems with the dementors gone?"

Greg frowned. "Not that I am aware of. No more than usual, I expect. But then, I came after the dementors."

"What are your main concerns regarding the prisoners?"

"Well, there are too many. When the dementors were here, most would get their souls sucked and be less of a problem to deal with. Most of the men in here committed some pretty horrific crimes, Luna. With overrun cells, things can get really nasty at times."

It bothered her that she was really starting to worry about him. *Why should I care if he gets hurt? He has always been a big bully and very mean in the past.* But somehow he didn't look too mean while sitting and talking to her. In fact, he reminded her of her big teddy bear. "Do you get hurt very often?"

He smiled. "No, not very."

Suddenly, she blurted out the question that had been on her mind since he walked in, "Are you married?" *Why, oh, why did I ask him that!*

Surprised, Greg asked, "Is that an interview question, Luna, or a personal one?"

Luna blushed prettily. "Well, not exactly an interview question. So, you don't really need to answer that. I am terribly sorry! That was very unprofessional of me."

"No, I'm not married," he answered quickly. For some reason, he didn't want to put her off. "As a matter of fact," he continued as he gathered his courage, "we could continue this interview tonight over dinner if you'd like."

"Well, I have really been wanting to try that new place, Envy. I heard it is very good and extremely hard to get into," she said as she looked at him with hopeful eyes. It had been so long since she had dined with a man on a date.

"What time should I pick you up?" For some strange reason, he was looking forward to this... dinner with Luna. Most of the time, his dates were located in Knockturn Alley... unless he counted the few times Draco had set him up. He really didn't know how to talk to women, even though they seemed to want to talk to him, but Luna seemed easy to talk to.

"I will just make us a reservation and meet you there around seven if that is okay. I want to interview a couple more guards and some prisoners. Colin should be here within the hour to take pictures."

"Okay, that works. I look forward to seeing you then," he said as he walked her through the door. Before they entered, he turned and warned her, "Be careful talking to those men, and remember, they are *Death Eaters*".

She smiled up at him. "I will, and Greg?" He turned to look at her. "I look forward to seeing you tonight, too."

*** **

Envy was very crowded when Hermione arrived. *The rumors must be true then. I hope this place is as good as I've heard.* She spotted Ginny right away, as there was no mistaking that Weasley hair, and made a beeline for her.

"Hi, Hermione!" Ginny said when she saw her walking towards her. "I went ahead and ordered your drink."

"Thanks, Gin! You have no idea how badly I need it," Hermione told her as she sat down. She was just about to take a sip when she noticed Severus Snape sitting at a table right in front of her with a beautiful, busty, blonde witch. *Well, I suppose that answers the question as to whether he thinks I am too bookish or not. I suppose I was right to doubt that his words were complimentary.*

Noticing her scowl, Ginny turned her head to look over her shoulder and spotted her ex-professor. Confused at Hermione's reaction, she asked, "What's wrong? He won't bother with us with her sitting across from him."

Not wanting to discuss the feelings she couldn't name, Hermione asked, "Do you have a date for the ball?"

Ginny sighed. "No, and I don't really care to be honest. Besides, all the attention will be focused on Boy Wonder, you know. Nobody will notice if I don't have one."

"Boy Wonder will notice," Hermione said sarcastically.

"Bugger him! My life does not revolve around Harry Potter!" *Why is everyone throwing him in my face today?*

Surprised by her friend's outburst, Hermione told her, "I never said it did. What I mean to say is that I think Harry and Ron pay an unusual amount of attention to our love lives."

"Sorry, mate. I didn't mean to snap at you. Honest. And I agree about the love lives part. Arrogant prats, the both of them!"

"Here, here!" Hermione said as she finished her drink. Just then, a waitress came to take their orders, and they both ordered another drink as well as food.

"Say Ginny, lets go dress shopping Friday. We could leave work a little early!" Hermione said excitedly, really liking the idea. "Let's get a dress that will knock 'em dead, the lot of them. We could call Luna and make a night of it!"

"Now that sounds like a plan! Will you be wearing a Muggle dress again this year?"

"Yes." Because the war had been about ridding the Wizarding world of Muggles and Muggle-born, Hermione always wore a Muggle gown to the anniversary balls. She decided to wear robes to the other two.

"Well, if I see one I really like, I may wear a Muggle dress, too!" Ginny said, getting excited about dress shopping.

Hermione grinned. "Great! I can't wait to go shopping. It's been so long!"

"Yes, but right now, I need the loo," Ginny told her. "I'll be right back."

As Ginny walked off, Hermione's eyes drifted towards Severus and his date. He wasn't at the table, so she studied the woman *Beautiful to be sure, but she's probably dumb as a rock! What would someone like Severus Snape see in her? If someone like Snape goes for looks, then I really am doomed!*

Suddenly, she felt warm air on her neck. "Something vexes you, Miss Granger?" he purred and was delighted to see her shiver. *My voice does have that effect on women, doesn't it?*

Hermione jumped. Turning to face him, she said irritably, "No, nothing vexes me! And for Merlin's sake, call me Hermione! It will look ridiculous if we are on a date and you call me Miss Granger."

"All right, Hermione then, even though it is not a true date. I suppose you may call me Severus. Now, why the sour face?" He knew she had been staring at him and his companion, and this was just too good an opportunity to pass up.

I suppose the only true dates he goes on involves Barbies. Bookworm Hermione is not worthy enough! No need to constantly remind me I had to blackmail him into escorting me! Ruddy git! Annoyed, she bit out, "My sour face has nothing to do with you," she lied, "so don't concern yourself. Don't you think you ought to get back to Barbie there before she tries to eat her soup with her fork?"

Raising an eyebrow, he said, "Not to worry, she ordered a salad instead of soup."

"Well, bully for her! Perhaps you shouldn't leave her by herself for long. She does not strike me as the type to care for not being attended to. A lot of wizards here have their eyes on her. Careful. She may forget who she came with."

"She will be fine for a bit. I am not that easy to forget at any rate. And may I say, you seem awfully worried, and may I add, judgmental, about someone you have never even met. Are you always this hard on strangers or just the beautiful ones?"

Hermione snorted. "What do you talk to her about, Severus? Your project? Or the latest article in *Potions Today*? She does not look like the intellectual type. Is she keeping you up on the latest fashion? I would have thought a man like you needed some sort of conversational stimulation."

Smirking, he said, "I'm not very intellectual in the bedchamber myself, which is where she really holds my attention. All that room requires is basic instinct. She stimulates me quite nicely there, and as far as conversation goes, I have my co-workers for that."

Blushing, Hermione simply said, "I see. So, it's bimbos for you, too, then...just like all other wizards. I would have thought your standards would have been higher. Well, don't let me keep you from your... instincts."

Severus surprised Hermione by laughing out loud. Looking towards his date, he informed Hermione, "Standards don't get much higher than that, my dear. She may not be the brightest witch in the coven, but she does have her strong points. For what I require, she does quite nicely. As far as being *intellectually* stimulated, well, I have books and the sort for that. Besides, not all beautiful people are stupid, just as not all less than beautiful people are intelligent. Now, I see she is getting restless, and as you pointed out, I would like to keep her eyes from wandering, at least for the remainder of the evening, so I shall bid you good night, Hermione. See you at the ball."

"Good night," she said as he walked off. Biting her lip, she thought, *Now I know that all wizards are attracted to is beauty and nothing more. Not that I am ugly by any means, but I am not that type of pretty.* She sighed, feeling defeated. It was not that she was jealous, because she truly wasn't. She had just come to the realization that when one compared intellect to beauty, beauty won every time, no matter the wizard...even someone like Severus Snape chose a type of woman she'd never be. It was a sobering thought.

Hermione's musings were interrupted by Ginny's return. "So, tell me about your day."

As Hermione was talking about her day, Ginny promptly interrupted her when she got to the part where someone was threatening her. "Hermione, are you mad? You have to tell someone!"

"Oh, she is just trying to bully me into approving her for the ingredient she wants. Well, it won't work! I am not one to cower to threats; You know that, Ginny. You wouldn't yourself!"

"These are not just idle threats. These are threats from dangerous people, Hermione! At least tell your boss or my dad!"

Hermione sighed. "I'll consider it, okay? It's just I don't see what she could do really."

"Well, I for one don't want to find out. This is serious! Just promise me if you get another threat, you will tell someone."

"I promise, although I think I have heard the last of it. At least, I hope I have."

Just then, the food arrived, and both girls tucked in, stopping their conversation to eat and let their minds wander.

*** **

On the other side of Envy, Greg and Luna sat discussing Azkaban. "Do you like your job there, Greg?"

"Yes, actually, I do. It's something I wanted to do for myself that nobody coaxed me into doing. It was all my idea, you see, to work there."

"What made you switch sides? I thought you wanted Voldemort to win."

Greg sighed. "Honestly?" Luna nodded. "Because Draco Malfoy did. I am sure you remember that in school Vincent and I did whatever Draco did or told us to do."

"Which was mostly bully everyone he didn't like," Luna agreed with amusement.

Greg was embarrassed. "Yes, I know. I was a mean tosser and a lap dog of Draco's!" he said while laughing. "But after the war and with Draco's mum being..." Greg stopped, realizing he was about to say too much. "Anyway, after the war, Draco was preoccupied, and I learned to think for myself. I thought about what I wanted and just did it. It was great actually."

Luna let the slip about Narcissa Malfoy slide, although the journalist part of her wanted to start questioning him. "Sounds like you have found your way. I am glad. It's hard, trying to move out of someone's shadow and make a name for yourself that you solely deserve."

"Are you talking about your paper?"

"Yes, that and my dad. He does not have the best reputation among reputable journalists. I just want to prove, mostly to myself but to everyone else as well, that I am good at what I do. I think this article may well put me on that path. So, thanks again."

Greg smiled. "No need for thanks. I am really enjoying tonight. I hope we can do this again sometime."

"I would like that a lot, Greg."

"Do you have a date for the ball?" Greg hoped not. He suddenly wanted to be the one to take her.

"No, I was just going to go and write about it."

"Could I persuade you to go with me maybe?"

Beaming, Luna said, "Oh, yes! That would be very nice! I definitely look forward to that!"

Smiling, they continued to eat, each now looking forward to a ball they had both dreaded not five minutes before.

*** **

It was starting to get late, and Hermione and Ginny decided they had better go. They were reluctant to leave because they were having such a fun time.

"I'll owl Luna tomorrow about Friday," Ginny told Hermione as they were leaving.

Hermione nodded absently. Severus and his date had left a half an hour before, and they were looking very cozy indeed. He'd not even glanced her way as he'd walked out. And why should that bother her? *It doesn't! I don't care what or who Severus Snape does!*

As they were walking out the door, Ginny glanced at the bar to see who was there. She gasped softly as she spied Draco Malfoy sitting there nursing a drink. Suddenly, a

witch sashayed over to him and whispered something into his ear that caused him to laugh.

Ginny could not take her eyes off the scene. Draco draped his arm around the woman's waist in an intimate, familiar way and whispered back to her. Not wanting to see any more, and hating the huge knot that had formed in her stomach, Ginny grabbed Hermione's arm and turned to leave, but before she could go, Draco caught her eye and lifted his drink to her in a mock toast. Scowling, she walked out the door.

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Severus Snape sat in his chambers brooding. Celine had wanted him; of that, he was sure. But where was he? Sitting all alone, thinking about that know-it-all twit. He had gone inside Celine's flat and had a drink, but when she started making some very remarkable moves on him, he'd made his excuses and left. He still could not fathom why.

He knew one thing. He could not get the look on Hermione's face out of his mind. After he had left her and gone back to his table and Celine, he'd glanced at her and felt a pang of guilt at her expression. It was not jealousy. Jealousy, he could dismiss. No, it was resignation he'd seen there. It was as if she had resigned herself to the fact that she was... less in some way or that she didn't compare, and that bothered him.

The fact was, he enjoyed sparring with her. No one, witch or wizard, could keep up with him except her. Most were either too afraid of him or did not have the intellect. Hermione was neither afraid nor lacking in intellectual skills. He supposed he might have gone too far tonight, but he had really enjoyed it.

But then he started thinking about what she'd said. *Damn her!* Celine was beautiful, but that was the only thing she had going for her. And, until tonight, those things never bothered Severus before. *Why should I care if a witch is a good conversationalist if she is good in bed? Does that make me shallow? Perhaps. But, gods be damned, I have earned the right to be shallow! I enjoy it!*

Severus stood and began to pace. *This is really getting out of hand. That woman is having too much control over me, and I won't have it! I will take her to those functions, get my papaver somniferum, and be done with her! Enough!*

He wondered if it would be possible to see Celine once more before the ball the upcoming weekend. He doubted it. She had been very upset that he'd left when he did.

Severus sank back down in his chair. *It's going to be a long three weeks!*

Christy's Notes: Up next is the ball! I wonder how our couples will fare. Leave me a line, and let me know what you thought!

Southern's Notes: Ah, I see the little know-it-all twit is getting to dear Severus, and I am glad. I like that Draco asked Ginny out, and it's good that she turned him down...for now. Luna and Greg, I love it! (Rubs hands together.) Now, I can't wait for the ball.

Without Change, Something Sleeps Inside Us, And Seldom Awakens.

Chapter 6 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****
<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR. I am making no money from this.

A/N Many thanks to my beta, the one and only, Southern_Witch_69.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Six

Without Change, Something Sleeps Inside Us, And Seldom Awakens.

Ginny was on her way to see Ron. She felt it was time to mend the rift between them and to get to know her niece and sister-in-law. Pushing away the funny feeling, which was telling her that she was betraying Hermione, she Apparated to Grimmauld Place where Ron and his family were currently staying. She had learned that Harry and his family were staying at Godric's Hollow. Apparently, he'd had the place renovated while he was away and was more than happy to allow Ron and Samantha use of Grimmauld Place as long as they wanted it.

She missed her brother...the git...and that was all there was to it. They had always been very close. Bill had Charlie, Fred had George, and she and Ron had always had each other.

Ginny remembered the many sleepless nights she'd had after Percy had betrayed the family, wondering if it was because he felt alone in his own home. He was the only one of them that was not part of a pair, but then, he seemed to like it that way. Shoving away the guilt she would always feel where Percy was concerned, she entered the old Order headquarters.

Walking into the sitting room, she found Ron sitting with Grace and Samantha on the floor playing Exploding Snap. Ginny grinned at the way Grace giggled and clapped when a card would explode. It suddenly hit her that this was her brother's *family*. They all looked very happy and content sitting there, and that made her smile.

"Hi, guys. That looks fun," Ginny greeted.

Ron looked up from his game and smiled brightly at his sister. It didn't matter why she'd suddenly stopped by, only that she had. He'd really missed her. "It is. Why don't you join us? I would like to see if you have improved at all," he egged, knowing what it took to get her going. He really wanted her to get to know his family.

"I could be a Muggle with no understanding of this game whatsoever and still beat you, brother dear."

"Oh yeah? Prove it then! Join us."

Prove it! Sounds just like Draco! Ginny quickly pushed those unwanted thoughts away.

Taking her hesitation to answer as reluctance to join them, Samantha quickly added, "We would really love for you to stay and join in the fun, but if you'd rather for Grace and I to leave the room, we will." Samantha knew her husband missed his sister and wanted to do anything she could to help bridge the gap between them.

"Oh, no! That's not necessary. Besides, I want to play with my niece! It's time that I get to know her better I think."

Suddenly, Grace looked up to Ginny and yelled, "Aunt Gin! Pretty!"

Ginny laughed and joined them on the floor. *This is going to be easier than I thought.*

By the time Ginny had eaten supper with them and gone home, she'd felt glad she had stopped by. They were well on their way to becoming brother and sister again.

She knew Hermione would not begrudge her that; her best friend had always insisted she should mend fences with her brother. Still, Ginny was going to tell her Friday when they went on their dress hunt. She wanted no secrets.

*** **

Hermione lay soaking in a tub full of bubbles. She had two hours before she had to meet Severus at the Ministry for the ball, and she was going to look her *best* *spent* *enough on my dress to ensure that*, she thought smugly.

Her thoughts drifted to Ginny and their meeting the day before. Ginny had owled her and asked if they could meet thirty minutes earlier...before Luna arrived...as Ginny had wanted to speak with her about something. That something had turned out to be Ron and his wife.

Hermione was very happy that Ginny and Ron were working out their differences. Even though she was an only child, Hermione knew there was a special bond between the brother and sister. She did not want to stand in the way of any reconciliation between the two.

But when Ginny started talking about Hermione reconciling with Ron, Hermione abruptly changed the subject. She knew she was not ready for that yet. She was still angry with Ron, and Harry for that matter, for one significant thing.

They'd left her. It wasn't that her boyfriend had left her, although that had hurt badly enough. It was more as in two-thirds of the trio suddenly left her behind. She had not only lost her lover, she had lost what had been her two best friends in the world for seven years, and they both left her without a backwards glance.

Hermione had always known that Ron and Harry were closer to each other than with her, but they'd always taken their adventures together. Not once had they excluded her. She wondered how they could just leave her that time...especially knowing she was still trying to get over her dad's sudden death.

Hermione sighed, lifting herself out of the bathtub. *It's been five years, and I am acting like a child. What's done is done, and it's time I stopped dwelling on this. I will start that tonight.*

She smiled as she remembered Oliver Wood and Lee Jordan approaching her and Ginny as they were waiting for Luna. Hermione had briefly dated Oliver while Ginny went out with Lee. Occasionally, if they were in town, they all went out together.

"Hello, ladies!" Lee said with enthusiasm. "It's been a while since we've had the pleasure of seeing you! How are you?"

Ginny smiled. "We're good. You guys have a seat, and buy us a drink. When did you get back into town?"

Oliver was currently playing Quidditch for the Tutshill Tornados and was often traveling. Lee had a job as a sports commentator for the Wizarding Wireless Network and traveled a lot as well. Ginny couldn't wait for Oliver's team to play the team her brothers had started, the Wicked Wazzock Warriors.

"Sure, we'd love to buy you two a drink. Just got in!" Oliver said. As they sat, Oliver turned to Hermione. "I wanted to ask you to the ball, love. I would have asked sooner, but I didn't know if we would be in town this weekend or not. What do you say? Yes?" he asked hopefully.

"Oh, Oliver, I'm sorry, but I can't. I already have a date."

Ginny looked at Hermione questioningly, but she didn't comment. I will ask her about this later!

"I bet Lavender Brown would go with you, Ollie. I am taking Parvati since Ginny already turned me down when I owled her last week, and you know those two like to do everything together." He turned and winked at Ginny. "Nearly broke my heart, you did."

Ginny rolled her eyes at his flirting. She was going alone by choice. The main reason being that she was planning on leaving as soon as possible. More than one wizard had asked her to go, but Draco hadn't been one of them. She kept telling herself she was glad.

"Okay, sure," Oliver agreed. "Set it up. I just thought I'd ask me best girl here first. Bad luck, eh, Hermione? I was looking forward to taking you, I was."

Hermione smiled. "Owl me the next time you are coming to town, and we will definitely get together."

"It's a date!" Oliver said.

"All four of us," Lee added, wanting to make sure he would get to see Ginny. He really enjoyed her company. But, like Oliver, he traveled too much to really be in a serious relationship. Those never worked out.

"Yes," Ginny agreed. "Sounds fun."

As soon as the guys had left, Ginny had pounced. "Whom are you going to the ball with?" she'd asked.

After Hermione had told Ginny all the details, Ginny had congratulated her on a perfect choice. They had both agreed the Ministry wouldn't be so interfering next year.

Hermione dried herself and went to the mirror. She had all her makeup laid out, so all she had to do was apply it. Smoky colors for the eyes with light red for her lips and cheeks. When she was finished, she looked at the overall effect. She had gone and had her hair done earlier in an elegant French twist. *Not bad, if I do say so myself!*

She walked into the bedroom and looked at her dress hanging on her closet door. She had decided on a simple black, satin, strapless dress with a slit up the back. It was very form fitting and showed her curves beautifully.

Smiling to herself, she grabbed her lotion bottle and poured a generous amount of the light floral scent in her hand and began rubbing it all over her skin. Next she lightly

sprayed her perfume over all the pulse points on her body.

Smirking, Hermione pulled out her sexy black underwear. She knew that nobody would actually see her in them, but it would make her feel sexy. She loved the feel of her black silk hose. She had thought that the seam up the back would bother her, but she couldn't even feel it. The garter belt added just the right touch.

Looking in the mirror, Hermione Granger had never felt so sexy. She didn't feel like the frigid, prudish, overbearing woman Ron had accused her of being. Slipping on her dress and heels, she felt even sexier. *Severus Snape won't know what hit him!*

*** **

Severus stood near the doors, slightly agitated. *The bint forces me to be here with her and doesn't even bother to show up on time. I should just enter and not worry with her. If I didn't need that papaver somniferum so much, I would do just that.*

His thoughts were suddenly distracted by a very beautiful witch in a black Muggle gown. *Who is she? She must not be from here, for surely I would have taught her!* He was startled when the witch walked right up to him and stopped, looking at him expectantly.

When he said nothing, Hermione said in an agitated voice, "Well, Severus, are you ready to go in? I don't wish to stand here all night." She briefly wondered if the heels were going to be a mistake, even though she placed a cushioning charm on them before she left.

"Hermione?" he asked in a disbelieving voice.

Hermione cocked her head to the side. "Yes, it's Hermione! Who else? Shall we?" she asked, motioning to the door.

"Yes, of course," he replied, acting nonchalant. He didn't want her to know she had any kind of affect on him whatsoever.

Hermione studied him in his black dress robes. *He looks so handsome and regal. And very proud.* "You look nice tonight, Severus."

Her ex-Potions professor looked surprised at the statement for a moment and then answered, "As do you. Perhaps if you groomed yourself in this fashion more often, you would not have to result in blackmail for escorts." He immediately regretted his barb when he saw the hurt look in her eyes.

Must he continuously remind me that he had to be coerced into coming with me? Am I truly that much of a horrible date for him? "I think that is our table there," she pointed, not wanting to spar for the moment. All her earlier thoughts of feeling sexy were quickly fleeing her.

Before she could walk away, he gently laid a hand on her shoulder. When she turned to look at him, Severus told her, "Your dress is very becoming on you, Hermione." She smiled at him and sat down.

They had not been sitting long when Rufus Scrimgeour called for everyone's attention. When he was satisfied all eyes were on him, the Minister of Magic called all the honorees to the front. He was ready to get started. Severus and Hermione slowly walked to the front, neither very excited to do so. Severus noticed the stunned looks his date was getting for her choice of escort, even if she did not.

She was surprised to find herself in between Harry and Ron. Ginny was on the other side of Harry and Luna was beside Ginny. It wasn't long before all the Order members took their place, and the ceremony began.

Hermione had tears in her eyes as huge portraits of the fallen heroes were suddenly illuminated...especially when she looked at Hagrid's jovial face and Neville's sweet one. She immediately looked at Ginny and Luna and noticed that they too had tears in their eyes.

After a long speech, with much homage paid to Harry Potter, it was time for the first dance of the evening. As the music played, Ron automatically took Hermione in his arms as she was walking by him to go to Severus.

Hermione quickly gave Severus a *help me!* look, but he just turned to Minerva McGonagall and began dancing with her.

Focusing her attention back on her dance partner, Hermione said, "Hello, Ron. How are you?" She inwardly cringed at how inane she sounded.

With his face contorted in anger, Ron asked, "What the bloody hell are you doing coming here with Snape? Trying to get back at me back after all this time?"

"Excuse me? You're not serious are you?" He continued to glare at her, and she said, "You are! Oh, my God, I don't believe it! You actually believe that my coming here with Severus has something to do with you. Pitiful, just pitiful. Let me set the record straight now, Ron. I am here with him because of him, not you."

"Severus, now, is it? It wasn't *Severus* at the Burrow Sunday! Hermione, I know what you are doing, and you can stop."

Laughing, she said, "Obviously, you haven't a clue as to what I am doing."

"Oh, really," he goaded. "What could you possibly see in him then? I can't see you having a lot in common."

"Are you kidding me? He is brilliant, witty, a great conversationalist, and he enjoys many things other than food and Quidditch! And as far as having something in common with him, well, we are both accredited Masters of Potions!"

"But look at him! He's disgusting, Hermione. Not to mention, he's too old. You could do so much better. Hell, you have done much better."

"I really and truly hope you are not referring to yourself, Ronald Bilius Weasley, because I have not told you the most appealing thing about him to me yet."

"Of course I am talking about myself! Who else have you dated? But what else could you possibly find appealing about him?"

"I've dated Oliver Wood for one. Not to mention Terry Boot! But that is beside the point. Severus radiates pure unadulterated sex appeal, but the thing I find most attractive about him," she leaned in and whispered in his ear, "is that he is *nobody's* sidekick."

Ron completely stopped and looked at Hermione. "That was hitting way below the belt. Perhaps you shouldn't go there, as you were never any good in that area in the first place. Too prudish for starters, but I don't have the time or inclination to go on."

With that, the song ended, and Ron walked one way and Hermione the opposite.

*** **

Just as Ron took Hermione in his arms, Harry automatically took Ginny in his. She stiffened at first, but then she relaxed enough to dance properly.

"It's good to see you, Gin. You look very nice." *Indeed*, Harry thought. *She looks lovely in her deep brown Muggle gown.* It had a halter-top and was cut very low in the front. "Ron tells me you went by his place the other day. He rather enjoyed it. I am happy you two are talking again."

"Yes, I enjoyed it myself. His wife and daughter are lovely."

"Well, maybe you could..." Harry stopped talking because Ginny suddenly stiffened and was looking towards the entrance. He turned to see what she was looking at and swore under his breath. Just arriving was Draco Malfoy with his mother on one arm and Pansy Parkinson on the other. Ginny couldn't take her eyes off the git.

When Harry looked back at him again, Draco smirked, angering Harry even more. "Not too subtle, Ginny, going after my biggest enemy like that."

"Huh? What are you on about, Harry? Going after who?"

"Draco Malfoy...my nemesis! I know what you are doing."

"Oh?" Ginny asked, becoming angry. "Please tell me, because I have no idea what you mean."

"You are acting like you are attracted to that tosser to get to me. Please stop degrading yourself like that! It's embarrassing for you."

"Let me get one thing straight...right here and now. I will talk slowly so you are sure to understand me. This is not Hogwarts, and everything that goes on DOES NOT involve Harry James Potter! Anything that I feel for Draco has nothing to do with you...AT ALL!"

Furious, Harry refused to reply, and he just turned and walked off, leaving her standing in the middle of the dance floor alone.

Embarrassed, Ginny turned to leave the floor when she felt a pair of strong arms circle around her. She looked up into the face of Draco, *he looks so good in those grey robes! They match his eyes perfectly.*

"I have come to a decision, Ginevra," Draco informed her.

"Do tell," she said sarcastically.

Smirking, he happily told her, "You need a new hero, so I have decided I am going to let you follow me around for six and a half years while I ignore you. Then, we will date for a bit. After that, I will go to another country and marry someone who looks just like you and move back here, but I will selfishly allow you to continue to lust after me from afar. After all, I *am* Draco Malfoy."

Ginny stood there staring at him, gobsmacked. "Have you lost your mind? I don't lust after you now! Hell, I don't even like you! And, to be a hero, you need to have some redeeming qualities, which you most certainly do not. Furthermore, with your conceited attitude, I think you lust after yourself, you pasty-faced pillock!"

"You don't have to like someone to lust after them, and I am not pasty, I am pale," he informed her. "One night with me, and you will forget Harry Potter ever existed."

"Sounds like you are the one doing the lusting, as you can't seem to stay away from me! And you're not merely pale, you're sallow," she teased. "And for your information, I do NOT want Harry. The way you go on about him all the time, I am beginning to wonder if you do."

Draco blanched. "Bite your tongue! Better yet," he purred seductively, "let me. And not sallow... Ivory-skinned."

"Not ivory, more like zombie!"

"Better to have pure, flawless, *ivory* skin than to be a spotty-faced witch!"

"Albino!"

"Wench!"

"Bloody tosser!"

"Fiery temptress!" *Holy fuck! Where did that come from?* Suddenly, he grabbed her and kissed her with all the built up passion she'd aroused in him.

The music stopped just then, and Ginny stepped back and out of Draco's arms. Pansy came up to them, gazing at Ginny resentfully. Stepping between them, she turned to Draco. "I do believe you escorted *me* to this function?" If she had her way, she would be Mrs. Draco Malfoy very soon.

With that, a confused and aching Draco turned and walked away, leaving Ginny standing on the floor alone once again.

*** **

As soon as the music stopped, Severus headed for the open bar. He spotted Hermione walking towards the loo with murder in her eyes *Why does she let that imbecile get to her?* He shook his head in disgust.

Suddenly, he heard his name. "Snape," Weasley said, sounding as if he was sparring for a fight.

"Weasley," Severus answered, not hiding his dislike for the boy.

"Well, I have to say, I never thought I'd see the day Severus Snape settled for *my* sloppy seconds," Ron gloated smugly.

Severus set his drink on the bar and looked Ron right in the eyes. "Yes, indeed. Sloppy would be the correct word where you are concerned. The poor woman had never even had an orgasm brought on by a *man* before me. Seems she had to always take care of that herself."

Ron blanched. He certainly did not want the images in his mind that Snape just created.

"I don't believe you!" Ron yelled, backing away.

"Right, well, I firmly believe you should never send a boy to do a man's job," Severus said, waggling his pinky finger at Ron.

Ron turned and walked away without another word. He could not believe Hermione would let this git touch her.

Severus mentally patted himself on the back for a job well done. He looked around the room to see if he could find Hermione. She should have been out of the loo by now. He angered as he saw her standing with the werewolf, smiling and talking. *Why would she insist I escort her to this bloody function and then purposely ignore me the entire evening? I have had enough of this! There are plenty of witches here to occupy my time until she deems me worthy enough to acknowledge my presence.*

*** **

Hermione was just walking out of the loo and looking for Severus when Remus found her. "There you are, dear! I have been looking for you. My, you look stunning tonight!"

She smiled warmly and hugged him. "It's so good to see you." Looking around, she only spotted Professor Sinistra. "Where's mum?"

"I wanted to speak with you about that actually. She wanted to be the one to tell you, but I begged her off. I know how you want to champion for the underdog, and I wanted to assure you that I am fine." At Hermione's confused look, he continued, "Your mother has met someone. A patient. His name is Phillip Monroe, and he works at the

London school of Economics and Political Science."

"But why? Were you two not happy together?"

Remus smiled and softly said, "We weren't really dating, love. We were never a couple. We just kept each other company at times. Please don't worry yourself over me. I'm just fine. I believe you know my date for this evening," he said as he gestured towards Professor Sinistra.

"Oh, yes! Hello, Professor!"

"Hello, Hermione. It's good to see you again." Hermione just smiled and nodded. She turned to Remus and told him, "I need to go find my date, but I would really like to catch up and talk with you more. How about lunch this week?" When he agreed, she set off to find Severus and clenched her teeth when she spotted him dancing with some Barbie he'd found.

Before she could get away, Oliver Wood waylaid her. "May I have this dance?"

Looking at Severus, she told him, "You most certainly can."

He took her in his arms knowingly and made small talk. Hermione was never one to care much for Quidditch, and that was his life. He noticed she was very distracted. Soon enough, the song ended.

Severus had noticed her dancing with Wood. *Why do I have to be the one to suffer her company? It would seem she has her choice of wizards! And why is Wood's hand so close to her bum? Severus shook his head. She went on and on about intelligence over looks, but she obviously does not follow those rules herself. Looks like she picks brawn over brain.* He was so distracted, he almost didn't notice the song ending.

He decided not to even mention Wood, as it would make her think he cared, which he most certainly did not.

As soon as the song finished, Hermione said her goodbyes and walked to the bar. Severus started unknowingly leading the woman he'd been dancing with towards Hermione.

Severus smirked when he saw the anger in his date's face. *Serves you right. Maybe at the next ball you will see that I am not a wizard to be ignored.*

"Hermione," Severus started, "I would like to introduce you to..."

"No introductions are necessary," she rudely cut him off. "I believe the next dance is *mine*." Turning to the witch, Hermione said, "If you will excuse us?" Not waiting for an answer, she pulled Severus onto the dance floor.

As Severus' dance partner watched them walk away, she wondered if they knew they were crazy about each other.

"That was rather rude, my dear. Whatever has gotten into you?"

"Cut the crap, Severus! I can't believe you would flirt and carry on with that bimbo when you are supposed to be on a date with me!"

How dare she! Was she not just in the arms of another man! A Quidditch star no less! Not a real date, a farce! And had you paid me some attention, mayhap I would not need to search out other dance partners. She is not a bimbo by the way; she is..."

"Yes, she is December's playwizard centerfold. I know. The wizards in this room have hardly talked of anything else."

"Yes, but in addition to that, her *name* is Hillary Hollingsworth." Severus smiled smugly as all color drained from his date's face. He knew she would recognize the name from the many journals Hillary had published.

"You mean, that is *the* Hillary Hollingsworth? The world renowned Mistress of Charms?"

"Indeed it is."

"But why would someone like her pose for playwizard? She is highly intelligent! I remember Ginny telling me once that when Bill couldn't work out a curse, she was called in. Miss Hollingsworth had it worked out by the end of the next day, and Bill had been working on it for over a week."

"What does that have to do with anything? She has a beautiful body and is obviously not ashamed of showing it. Apparently, you are not ashamed of your body either, considering the dress you are wearing. It is showing it off quite nicely."

Hermione widened her eyes in surprise, but she quickly narrowed them. *Is he complimenting my body or calling me a hypocrite?*

"Do you know her well?" she asked, wanting to change the subject.

"Not yet, but I plan to get to know her better. She was telling me where she is staying so that I may owl her this week. She wants to get together before she heads off to Cancun Monday."

"Well, too bad," Hermione crowed triumphantly. "You have to escort me to the ball next weekend, so you won't be able to."

Severus grinned naughtily. "I have to escort you next Saturday. I don't have to put up with you the other nights of the week."

Hermione turned away, hurt by his comment. *He truly detests being here with me. Actually, I think he detests me. Maybe I should just...!* Look, Severus, maybe we..."

Suddenly, Hermione felt a hand on her shoulder, stopping her dance. "Miss Granger," her boss, Mr. Wimple started, "where is your date for this evening? I specifically told you to bring one!"

"This is my date, Mr. Wimple. I believe you know Severus Snape?"

He sputtered, looking from Hermione to Severus. "But... But I meant for you to bring..."

"Stop right there, sir! You forced me to bring someone, but you will not dictate who I bring! I did as I was ordered, and you have nothing more to say about it."

"Quite right," Severus agreed. "Is there something wrong with me as her escort, Gilbert?"

"No, no, nothing, Severus. I just didn't expect... Well, anyway, have a good evening," he told them as he walked away *I thought I made it clear to her I meant for her to bring a suitable date! Someone she could possibly have a future with! Not that man! He is entirely wrong for her! I wonder what Arthur and Molly think of this?*

Hermione was positively fuming by this time. Turning to her coerced date, she informed him, "I have changed my mind. I want you to pick me up at my flat next week."

"Changing the rules mid-game, Hermione? How... cunning of you."

"Well, it's my game and my rules. I will give you directions before we go. Is that acceptable?"

"It has to be, doesn't it?" Severus was not going to argue with her about it. He felt bad that he had hurt her right before her boss interrupted them. *He doesn't know why I feel bad! I said nothing other than the truth, but still, for some reason, I don't like knowing that I put that hurt look in her eyes.*

Not answering him, but happy he was not going to fight her on this, she decided to enjoy the dance. She unconsciously leaned closer into him, and he in turn tightened his grip. Neither noticed the stares they were getting from everyone else.

*** **

Luna and Greg were having a fantastic evening. Greg could not stop starrng at her in her midnight blue dress. She was beautiful.

"Thank you for inviting me tonight, Greg. I am having a wonderful evening," Luna said as he held her in a tight embrace on the dance floor.

"I am also. I would have never believed it, but here we are. Have I told you how lovely you look this evening?" He loved to see her blush so prettily.

Luna obliged him and blushed. She was not used to having compliments bestowed upon her, especially since her Neville had died. "You know you have, and I will say again how handsome you look. I feel like I could stay in your arms all night."

"You can," he said mischievously.

"Well, um... I meant, that is to say..."

"I'm only teasing you, love, but just so you know, the offer is a standing one."

Luna smiled and decided to tease a little herself. "Well, if you are very lucky, I just may take you up on that offer sometime."

Greg's eyes widened, and he looked into her face. *I sure hope so! I want you more than you know!* "I was wondering if I may escort you to the next two balls...unless you have a date already?" *If she does, I will have to kill him!*

"Oh, I would love to go with you!" Feeling elated, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. Greg stopped moving and cupped her face, leaning into her for a sweet taste of her mouth. After looking into her eyes a few moments, they resumed dancing.

"I really think I am going to like you, Gregory Goyle," Luna predicted.

"Ditto," he said, never noticing the appalled looks he was getting from Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape.

Christy's Notes: What an interesting evening! Up next, we will see what Severus and Draco think of Greg and Luna!

Southern's Notes: Ah, I hope Greg tells those two tossers to sod off! He's quite cute with Luna. I'm still laughing at Draco. I hope that Hermione and Severus have a better date next time...more of a real one!

Saying Goodbye To The Past

Chapter 7 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****
<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my wonderful beta, the one and only, Southern_Witch_69. She is awesome.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Seven

Saying Goodbye To The Past

Hermione stretched and looked at her alarm clock. "Half past nine! Oh, no! I am going to be late!" She jumped out of bed and ran to the shower. She was due at her mum's at ten. They were going to brunch together and to visit her dad's grave. This wasn't only the five-year anniversary of the demise of Voldemort. This was also the fifth year since her father's untimely death.

As she was showering, Hermione thought back on the events of the ball the evening before. She grimaced as she remembered Ron's harsh words *Stupid tosser! Who does he think he is anyway?* Something had to give there. She didn't want to continue fighting with Ron and ignoring Harry.

Things with Severus had started out just as bad, but the evening had ended fairly well. Remembering the last few dances they'd shared caused her to slightly blush. It seemed they'd kept getting closer and holding onto each other more tightly. When it was time to go, he walked her to the Apparition point. Hermione could have sworn he was about to kiss her, but then suddenly, he bowed and bid her a good night. Most surprising was her disappointment that he didn't follow through with the kiss.

And shocked was the only word to describe seeing Luna there with Greg Goyle. Her first instinct had been to go speak with her friend, but after watching them a bit, she'd decided Luna seemed quite happy swaying in Greg's arms. Severus had seemed taken aback by them as well. She couldn't wait to speak with Ginny at the Burrow this evening.

Because she was going with her mum this morning, the Weasleys had decided on supper instead of lunch for their weekly Sunday meal so that Hermione could attend. However nice of them it was, she wished they hadn't bothered. She didn't especially want to go, except to see Ginny, but because they had changed their schedule around, she felt obligated. Sighing, she spelled her hair dry and went to dress.

Predictably, her thoughts drifted back to Severus. She wondered if he would contact Hillary Hollingsworth sometime this week and shook her head. *Of course he will contact her, you dolt! And why wouldn't he anyway? She is definitely one witch who has everything!*

Giggling to herself, she thought she should owl Severus and ask him to introduce them. She sighed as her thoughts became somber. Although she would be honored to meet Miss Hollingsworth under different circumstances, she really didn't think she could stomach Severus doing the introductions.

Best not to think of Severus and Miss Hollingsworth together today. It will be emotional enough as it is. With that last thought, Hermione Apparated to her mum's. *It's going to be a long day!*

*** **

Ginny stood in the middle of the Quidditch pitch glaring at her brothers. They had so graciously canceled practice today due to the ball the prior evening, but since they'd forgotten to inform everyone, the wankers decided that while everyone was here they could go ahead and draw names for Christmas. It was only a week away after all. Gits! *Why do we have to draw names anyway? Team spirit my arse!*

Draco Malfoy had been staring at her intently the whole time they had been there. It was making Ginny uneasy to say the least. He started to walk towards her at one point, but she deftly started up a conversation with Angelina. The word coward came to mind, but she brushed that thought away. *More like self-preservation.*

It hadn't been hard to miss the look in Pansy's eyes when the witch had seen her dancing with Draco. Obviously, she'd felt that Ginny had overstepped her bounds. Never mind the fact that Draco had practically grabbed her as she'd started to walk off the dance floor. *The prat! Why had he brought Pansy if he'd intended to harass me all evening? Well, maybe not all evening, she conceded, but that one time was most assuredly enough!*

Not having enough willpower to stop herself, she finally looked into Draco's eyes. What she saw there made her gasp and then shiver. Lust. That was the only word to describe his look. After a moment, another word came to mind: stalker. She felt like his prey. Uneasy, she turned to a smirking George, who held out the hat with all the names inside.

She rolled her eyes as she picked one. Because he so badly wanted to see who she got, she purposely waited until her brother walked away until she looked. *Draco! No, it can't be! Bloody brilliant! It seems I can't get away from him no matter what I do!*

Draco looked down at the little scrap of parchment he drew out of the Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes cap and scowled. Marcus Flint! *wonder who got Ginevra's name? Perhaps I could trade...*

Draco's thoughts were interrupted as the Gruesome Twosome dismissed everyone. He smirked evilly as he watched Ginny quickly Disapparate away. *You can run, my fiery temptress, but you can't hide!*

*** **

The first thing Hermione saw when she appeared in her childhood home was her mother sitting on the sofa crying as she held a picture of her dad close to her chest.

Silently, she walked to her mum, put both arms around her and gently rocked her, allowing her own tears to fall. "Shh, it's okay. I'm here," Hermione cooed.

"I know it's been five years, but it seems like only yesterday sometimes. I miss him so." Pulling herself together, Jane Granger turned to her daughter. "How did the ball go?"

Hermione laughed through her tears. As easy as that, the subject was changed. "Okay, I suppose. I ran into Remus. Is there anything you want to tell me, Mum?"

Staring sternly at her only daughter, Jane said, "Stop skating around the issue. I assume Remus informed you of Phillip?" When Hermione nodded, Jane continued, "Well, I really like him. We have a lot in common, and I plan on seeing him. Does that bother you?"

"No. Yes. I don't know...maybe a little." Hermione sighed. "It's foolish really. I certainly don't want you alone for the rest of your life, but I feel weird about this Phillip."

"Yet, you were okay with Remus? Why?"

"Maybe because I knew deep down Remus was only a friend, and I sense Phillip is more. Don't get me wrong. I'm happy for you; it's just... I dunno! I miss dad, and I feel bad for Remus, too."

"I'm sorry to cause you confusion, my darling, but Dad is not coming back. Remus and I are still very close friends. I have not tossed him aside, nor do I intend to."

Feeling foolish and somewhat childish, she asked, "Do I get to meet this illustrious Phillip?"

"Not for a bit yet, love. I have only just started seeing him. When I am sure of where this is headed, we will talk more. Now, tell me about your date. Remus was very taken aback with your partner."

Hermione giggled. She told her mum what the Ministry had strongly suggested her to do, mentioning their outlandish demands, how she felt about that, and why she'd asked...she refused to say forced...Severus to be her partner. When she finished her explanations, she started chewing her bottom lip. "The only thing is..."

"You enjoyed his company?" Jane could tell her daughter was smitten.

"Right," Hermione agreed. "And trust me. The feeling is not mutual."

"From what Remus has told me and from what you just explained as your reason for asking him in the first place, I can say I am somewhat surprised that you would enjoy his company and am quite relieved he does not return your feelings. Why on earth would you want him to?"

"Well, he is not as bad as I'd initially thought. I mean to say that he is different in his dealings with me as an adult than he was when I was his student. He is quite brilliant, too, I daresay."

Jane sighed. There was nothing she could say; she could see it in Hermione's face. She would talk more with her daughter on the subject later. "We had better get started if we are to see your father and make our brunch reservations on time."

With that, they both left for the cemetery, hearts heavy, thinking of the man they both loved and missed so much.

*** **

Severus had an early lunch set up in his private quarters as he awaited Draco and Greg. Draco had owled him earlier that morning, asking him if he would mind hosting, as he felt they needed to speak with Greg per his choice of companion last evening.

As he waited, he thought of Hermione. Indeed, she was no longer Miss Granger in his mind. He reminisced, thinking of how snugly she'd fit into his arms. After the awkwardness and the resentment of being forced to escort her fled, he found that he quite enjoyed himself. Reluctantly, he admitted, if only to himself, that he had hated for the evening to end.

It surprised him how badly he'd wanted to kiss her before they parted. He'd checked himself just in time, but not before he noticed the disappointment in her eyes. Smiling smugly, he sat in his favorite chair.

He had nearly owed Hillary earlier to ask her to dinner midweek, but he'd decided against it while writing out the invite *Damn it!* He had never limited himself to one witch, and it now seemed as if he was doing so with a witch that he was not even truly dating! All they had was a farce...nothing more!

However, he definitely would not mind bedding the aloof Hermione Granger. *Tread carefully there*, entered his mind suddenly, but he chose to ignore the internal warnings of his brain. Just because he could not get the woman out of his mind did not mean he was developing any sort of feelings for her. It was only natural for him to want the know-it-all, if only to find out if she truly was one in all things.

His musings were interrupted by a knock on his door. He rose to allow Draco and Greg entrance. "Good afternoon, boys," Severus greeted.

"Hello," Greg answered happily. He was still floating from the previous evening spent with Luna.

"Severus," Draco nodded as they all sat.

Not one to dally, Draco turned to face Greg to address the issue at hand. "I have to ask what the hell you were thinking last night, mate?"

Startled and a bit confused, Greg looked at Draco. "Eh? What do you mean?"

"What Draco is so eloquently trying to ask, Greg, is why on earth would you bring Luna Lovegood to the ball?"

Stiffening in his chair, Greg looked at Severus and then Draco. "Because I wanted to, and I enjoy her company immensely. What's it to do with either of you?"

Draco snorted. "You mean to say that you *enjoyed* the company of Looney Lovegood? Please, Greg, you are too good for the likes of her." Satisfied his mate would no doubt do his bidding as always, Draco tucked into his lunch.

"I have to agree here, Greg. She is not the right... type for you."

Furious, the bulky Slytherin turned to Draco first, barely able to control the urge to plow a fist in his face. "But I suppose a lowly Weasley would be just fine?" Then turning to his former Head of House, he continued, "Or a Mudblood?"

"That'll do, boy," Severus growled, barely able to control the sudden anger he felt at hearing Hermione called that degrading name.

"Yes," Greg agreed. "It will do. How dare the two of you take me to task for my choice of dates after who your own were!"

"Weasley was not my date last evening; Pansy was. A respectable and acceptable choice, I might add. The same cannot be said for you! Do you want to be the laughingstock among our peers?"

"I could care less what other people think or say! Do you think having a father in Azkaban for being a convicted Death Eater holds me in any kind of esteem? I enjoy her company, and nothing you or anyone," here he looked at the formidable Potions master, "says will stop me from continuing our association as long as she permits it. By the way, Draco, you may have taken Pansy Parkinson to that ball, but you were *snogging* Ginny Weasley on the dance floor within moments of entering. Bold statement, that."

Draco paled. He couldn't believe that Greg was actually standing up to him and Severus. *Looney must mean more to him than I thought.* Suddenly, Severus spoke.

"It appears that I owe you an apology, Greg, for my arrogance in speaking of your date in such a manner for one and for not recognizing your feelings and accepting them for another. If she makes you happy, then I wish you the best." *How can I be angry with him for calling Hermione a Mudblood when I am treating him no better. It would seem prejudice works both ways.*

Greg, still angry, only nodded. Not expecting Draco to speak, he was surprised when he heard, "I apologize as well. I don't understand the attraction, and I wonder if you two have anything in common, but if she makes you happy, mate, then so be it. I was just dumbfounded to see you there with her."

"Get used to it," was the only reply they received.

Both Severus and Draco nodded their acceptance, and Draco changed the subject. He didn't want to think of what people would say if he did actually convince Ginevra to go out on a date with him. *What? A date? It's only lust! No need to go on a date before we rut like pigs!* He knew Severus was blackmailed by Granger to take her to the ball, so he had no worries there.

*** **

Hermione arrived at the Burrow a little early. She wanted to speak with Ginny before the rest of the brood got there. After Arthur let her in, she headed straight for Ginny's room and knocked on the door.

"Come in!" Ginny called out. When Hermione opened the door, Ginny greeted her warmly. "Hermione! You're early, and I am so glad! How did it go today? Are you and your mum okay?"

Laughing, Hermione replied, "It's good to see you, too, Gin. We are both fine. I do have a reason for being early, though. Well, a couple of reasons actually. I think we should speak with Ron and Harry about their behavior towards us, and I wanted to ask if you saw Luna with Greg Goyle last night."

"WHAT? No! I left right after the first dance after the speech. Luna and Goyle? Why?"

Hermione laughed. "I don't know, but I can honestly say she looked quite happy. He did, too, for that matter. Now, what do you think about speaking with Ron and Harry?"

Ginny sighed heavily. "I agree that something needs to be done. It's quite ridiculous actually! I mean, just who do they think they are?"

"I don't know. Let's go find out, shall we?"

"Yes," Ginny agreed. "Let's."

They found the boys in the sitting room playing chess. Luckily, it was only the two of them in there. Hermione started the conversation. "Hello, Ron. Hello, Harry. Might we have a word with the two of you?"

Ron and Harry looked at each other and nodded. They had wanted to speak with the girls as well. "Sure, Hermione," Ron said. "What's up?"

"The behavior of you two towards us for one thing," Ginny said. "And we would also like to make it clear that our love lives are no longer any concern to either of you."

"Right," Hermione agreed. "You both lost the ability to chastise us in that manner when you married other people."

"Oh," Harry started, becoming highly agitated, "so if the two of you are making asses of yourselves, we are to sit by idly and say nothing?" Ron snickered.

Ginny narrowed her eyes, a warning of a huge temper building that all in the room were very familiar with, especially Harry. "YES! I have made mistakes in the past, Harry Potter, and I would like to think I have learned from them."

"By mooning over the likes of Draco Malfoy?"

"Well," Ginny smirked, "he's as different from you as I could possibly get, so that has to count for something."

Ron looked startled. "What are you on about? Draco Malfoy? Ginny, you're not seeing *him*, are you? Please, no!"

"So what if I am? It's my business."

"Enough," Hermione said. "The who is not the problem, boys. It's the reactions from you that we are concerned with and the way you guys are treating us. What did you expect? For us to be so devastated by your marriages that we would never date again? We had lives enough before you returned, and we'll continue to have them now."

"But, Hermione, are we just supposed to say nothing when we see what terrible mistakes you are making? Despite everything, I still care a great deal for you."

Hermione sighed. "I know, Ron, and I care for you, too." Looking at Harry she added, "You as well. I really miss our friendship." Turning back to Ron, she finished, "But I am going to date, and I would appreciate it if you didn't act like a jealous boyfriend when I do."

"Yes," Ginny said. "Exactly. How could the two of you be jealous after all this time? You each have your own lives and witches to share them with." Looking at Harry, Ginny said, "I know you can't still be in love with me."

"No, I'm not, but I do have these feelings. I suppose they could be called jealousy, for when I see you with someone... I can't explain it. I know I am not ~~still~~ *love* with you, but I do still love you. I feel like I want to protect you, and I don't want to see you hurt any more."

"Yes, well said, Harry," Ron agreed. "Those are my feelings as well. We have been through too much together for too long for us to stop wanting to protect you. And even though it's wrong, I have never seen you with anyone else, Hermione, besides Viktor, and I can't help but feel a little put out by that. I'm sorry."

"Well," said Samantha Weasley from the doorway, "that explains a lot." Ron paled.

"Too right," Piper Potter nodded. "I have to admit that we have been wondering what the problem was ever since we came to London. Now, we know." Looking at her husband, Piper asked, "Do you think I am blind, Harry? Do you think I don't see the resemblance between Ginny and myself?"

Having understood what Harry had just admitted to her, Ginny spoke up. "Piper, I don't know the circumstances of how you two met, but I can assure you that you are not substitute for me. We may look somewhat alike, but that is where the similarities end. Harry wanted a homemaker, and that is *not* who I am right now. Had he stayed and we ended being married to one another, it would have ended in disaster. I can see that now. He wanted someone more like my mum. Someone like you."

"Yes," Hermione spoke up. "Same here. I would have never been content to stay home and look after babies. Ron obviously needs that kind of wife. Not that I am belittling what the two of you do." Hermione smiled at both Samantha and Piper. "I am just saying it's not something I would be happy doing."

Samantha and Piper never took their eyes off their husbands during the speeches being made by Hermione and Ginny. Feeling confused, Samantha asked, "Ron, are you still in love with Hermione? Is she who you want?"

"No, love, I am not. It's you I want."

"What about you, Harry?" Piper wanted to know. "Do you still want Ginny?"

"No, Piper, I love you."

"Then you two stop being jealous, controlling asses and act like it!" Samantha yelled and walked out of the room.'

"I couldn't agree more!" Piper said. Turning to Hermione and Ginny, she added, "Sam and I would really like to have lunch with you two when you get the time. We would like to get to know you better." After saying that, she left the room.

Raising her eyebrow, Hermione told them, "I am guessing this is the end of it then? No more snide or hurtful comments? No more trying to control or dictate what or who, for that matter, we do?"

Both boys cringed, properly chastised. "Yes, it's the end of it. I don't want any more trouble with me wife!" Ron said.

Harry merely nodded in agreement. Then suddenly, he grinned up at Ginny. "I still say he's a ferret!"

Ginny just rolled her eyes. "Cute animals, ferrets."

Ron made a gagging noise, and they all shared a light laugh. He wasn't actually concerned that his sister wanted a Malfoy. How could she really? *Must be really wanting to get to Harry by doing that!*

"Seriously, though," Hermione said, "I understand how it would be hard for you guys, but all I can say is that you have to get over it or at least keep it to yourself. You need to realize that Ginny and I don't *want* your opinions on those matters." Ginny nodded her agreement.

Harry sighed. "Fine. No more opinions. Point taken. After all, Ron and I do want to stay friends with you two wenches," he teased.

"Agreed," Ginny said, relieved. "Friends."

After talking, the boys went to try and smooth things over with their wives, and the girls went back to Ginny's room until supper was ready. All in all, they felt it was a good talk.

*** **

Hermione was in a good mood by the time she returned to her flat. Feeling a bit reckless, she took out some parchment and a quill and sat down to write.

Severus,

I am writing to ask if you would care to join me for dinner at my flat Saturday night before we go to the ball. If so, be here by seven.

Should you choose not to accept, it won't hinder your getting the potion ingredient at the time I promised.

Yours,

Hermione

Calling Cleo before she could change her mind, Hermione tied the note to her leg and sent her owl to Hogwarts. She would have her answer soon enough.

Severus was making his usual rounds when an owl suddenly swooped down on him. "Merlin! Who the fuck sent me an owl at this time of the evening?"

Grabbing the owl somewhat roughly, Severus untied the note and shooed the owl away. After reading the letter, he smirked. *So, she wants me to have dinner with her alone at her flat. Interesting. I won't answer, as she didn't ask me to. She only said to show up at seven should I choose to come. Let the games begin!*

Had anyone been watching, they would have noticed an evil grin adorning the Potion master's face as he continued his rounds.

*** **

Luna decided to go to her office to write up her piece on the ball. After going over the photos Colin had sent her, she couldn't wait. *What in the world was Ginny doing kissing Draco Malfoy in the middle of the dance floor?* Luna decided not to post that picture, although she was sure the *Daily Prophet* would have no qualms about it. *The one of Hermione and Professor Snape is lovely though. Perhaps I should post that one.*

She was a little disappointed that she hadn't heard from Greg that morning. Luna sighed as she remembered the night before. For the first time since Neville's death, Luna had become attracted to another wizard. Instead of feeling guilt as she always thought she would, she felt extremely happy. Knowing he had to work that evening, she didn't expect to hear from him.

When she walked in her office, the first things she noticed were the twelve, blood-red roses on her desk. Totally surprised, she smiled to herself as she went to read the card.

I miss you. Can hardly wait until Saturday.

Love,

Greg

Luna buried her face in the scented flowers and inhaled deeply. *Why should he wait until Saturday? Maybe I will surprise him and bring dinner to him later this evening!*

With happy thoughts of the ball and Greg, Luna sat down and began writing.

Christy's Notes: Well, not much interaction with our couples, but at least we got Ron and Harry straightened out! Not to mention Draco and Severus!

Southern's Notes: Another great chapter. I am so happy that Greg stood up to his mates. I worried about that. I hope that Snape truly doesn't go out with that playwizard hooch. Can't wait for more.

One Week Until Destiny

Chapter 8 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

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Chapter Eight

One Week Until Destiny

Luna finished her article as fast as she could and went to lock up for the night. Impulsively, she picked a rose out of the vase and quickly Apparated home. She called on her only house-elf, Moonbeam, and asked her to prepare a picnic basket and to put the rose inside.

Rushing upstairs, she took a quick shower, changed her clothes, and added some perfume. After applying some light makeup, she quickly spelled her hair dry and brushed it until it gleamed. Satisfied with her appearance, she left her room.

Just as she was descending the stairs, Moonbeam appeared with the basket. Smiling brightly, Luna headed for Azkaban. The first thing she saw when she walked in was her Greg hunched over a parchment, furiously writing something.

"I hope I'm not interrupting you," she softly said. Greg jumped anyway.

When he realized it was Luna standing at the door, Greg's lips extended to a huge grin. "Not at all! Just writing a report. Please, come in and sit down!"

Startled, Luna said, "Greg! You have a black eye! What in the name of Merlin has happened to you? Here, let me see," she babbled as she gently took his face in her hands to examine his eye.

"Damn! Did he actually blacken it?"

"Yes, he did. Who is *he*?" Luna demanded.

Greg sighed heavily. "My father. He's just getting worse. I had to put him in solitary confinement tonight because of this," he explained as he pointed to his eye, "and he told me if he ever gets a chance, he will kill me."

"Oh, Greg, I am so sorry to hear that. Come here," she invited, as she held her arms out to him, wanting to comfort.

Greg didn't really need the comfort, but he would be damned if he was going to turn down a chance to be in her arms. He stepped up to her, and she hugged him tightly. "I brought us a picnic supper to share, but if you are not up to it, I can leave it here for you to have later."

"I am always interested in seeing you, love. Please stay and join me."

After awarding him with a smile and a light kiss, Luna sat at the other side of the table and started taking the food out of the basket. When she spotted the rose, Luna handed it to Greg. "This is for you. Thank you so much for the flowers; they are absolutely gorgeous! You made my day."

Feeling embarrassed, he only nodded and took the rose from her hand and started in on the chicken. They ate in companionable silence for a bit before Luna asked, "What are you doing Wednesday night?"

"Nothing," he answered.

"Would you like to come to my place for dinner? I make a very good roast beef."

Feeling very happy about receiving the invitation, Greg said, "Yes, I would love to. I get off from here at six Wednesday evening. Would seven be okay?"

"Perfect," she agreed as they finished their meal. *Things are looking up for me indeed.*

*** **

Monday morning had come too early for Hermione Granger. She hadn't slept well the night before because visions of Severus Snape kept filling her unconscious mind. Sighing, she got up to ready herself for the day.

She'd pushed Severus' file to the top of her list and was almost finished with all the grunt work and research needed to approve him. Absently, she thought about all the other requests she still had to go through. *Another long day for me!*

After a shower and a quick breakfast, she was just finishing her tea when an official looking owl flew in her window. Breaking off a piece of toast to feed the owl, she gently took the letter tied to his leg. Hermione gasped and almost dropped the letter as she eyed the outside of the parchment and read:

Yenta Livery Company

With shaking hands, she opened and read the letter.

Miss Granger,

We are very happy to inform you that we have found your match! It is very rare, but your compatibility percentage was an all time high at ninety-nine percent!

We suggest you make haste and set up an appointment as soon as possible. You have until the end of February to respond; after that deadline has passed, your questionnaire will be null and void. You would have to repay to resubmit.

We suggest you do not miss this unique opportunity! Don't delay! Please owl us at your earliest convenience to set up your meeting time and place with your match.

Thank you.

The YLC

"Oh, my God! How could I have forgotten about that? Now what will I do? Well, I have some time to think on it. Ninety-nine percent? Wow, that's high. Who could it be?"

Looking at the clock, Hermione sighed and put the letter in her top dresser drawer. *I will think more on this later.*

After she'd Apparated to work, Hermione began by going through her ingredients by owl requests. She hated those because she didn't always know exactly who was doing the requesting.

With her mind on the letter from the YLC and Severus, she began opening letters. Suddenly, two things happened at once: Her boss knocked on her door, and her hand began burning terribly from the letter she had just opened.

"Ouch! Damn! Enter, Mr. Wimple."

"Hermione? What's happened? Why, you're hurt!"

"It's nothing...just bubotuber pus."

"Nonetheless, you will go immediately to St. Mungo's. How did you get bubotuber pus on you?"

Pouting, she said, "I don't need to go to St. Mungo's." Then, sighing, she decided she would have to come clean about the threats she'd been getting. "I have been getting some rather nasty letters of late. At first, just name calling and such, but here lately, I've received idle threats. I guess she decided to actually go through with one."

"She? Do you know who is sending you these letters?"

"Not for certain, no, but I highly suspect Mrs. Nott. The letters started coming immediately after I refused her an ingredient request, and she didn't even bother to disguise her handwriting or use a dicto-quill."

Narrowing his eyes, her boss asked, "Why is this the first I am hearing of this? I should have been notified at once!"

"Because I didn't really take the threats that seriously. Perhaps I should have." Suddenly, she hissed, and tears started streaming out of her eyes.

"I'm sorry, my dear! Let's go now and discuss later."

Hurting too badly to argue, Hermione gratefully let herself be Flooed to St. Mungo's. Once there, in her rush to ease the burning of her hand, she barely noticed the flash of a bulb as she was rushed back to a room.

*** **

Severus Snape scowled into his morning coffee as he sat at the head table listening to all the dunderheads chirping happily around him *Only two more days until Christmas break!* He was still disgusted that he hadn't owled Hillary yet. The witch would be leaving on Friday. What was he waiting on? As the answer came to him, he scowled even deeper. *Damn Granger! She is nothing to me except a pain in my arse. I have no commitment to her; there is no reason I should not owl Hillary!* Except the fact he could not get Hermione out of his head.

Suddenly, the morning owls arrived, interrupting his thoughts. He paid them no mind, as he very rarely received anything. Just then, he was startled by an owl holding out its leg to him. The professor took the letter as the owl stole a piece of toast from his plate and flew off.

His eyebrows shot up as he read:

Yenta Livery Company

Damn Narcissa and her meddling ways! Now look at this mess. Resignedly, he opened and read:

Professor Snape,

We are very happy to inform you we have found your match! It is very rare, but your compatibility percentage was an all time high at ninety-nine percent!

We suggest you make haste and set up an appointment as soon as possible. You have until the end of February to respond; after that deadline has passed, your questionnaire will be null and void. You would have to repay to resubmit.

We suggest you do not miss this unique opportunity! Don't delay! Please owl us at your earliest convenience to set up your meeting time and place with your match.

Thank you.

The YLC

Ninety-nine percent? Highly unlikely. This place must've gone downhill. I have never heard of anyone scoring that high.

"SEVERUS!" Madame Hooch yelled.

"What is it? Surely there is no need for you to bellow in my ear, Rolanda!"

"Wouldn't be if you paid attention. What's that you've got there? Did you fill out a marriage compatibility test? What company did you use? What's your score?"

Cursing to himself that he'd allowed anyone to see the letter, he told her, "My letters are none of your concern. Mind your own business, woman!"

"Well, pardon me! I was just considering filling out one myself. Thought you might have some advice, that's all."

"Well, I don't." With that, Severus walked out of the Great Hall, robes billowing behind him. *Now what will I do? I suppose I should at least meet with the witch!* Only, he didn't want to. He wanted to see Hermione. *Blast that woman!*

*** **

Wednesday night found Ginny sitting in Fred and Padma's home with the rest of the Wicked Wazzock Warriors. *Only Fred and George would name a team that!* Ginny thought, amused. They were going to exchange gifts. Christmas wasn't until Saturday, but with the ball, the twins wanted to do it ahead of time. Plus, they wanted to give the team a pep talk before their scrimmage game against the Falmouth Falcons scheduled for Monday.

"Okay, team, Accio your gifts and rip into them!" George said excitedly. He was like a kid in a joke shop.

After the team had their gifts, Fred said, "What are you chaps waiting for? Let 'er rip!"

As they tore into their packages, Ginny slowly opened her gift and kept one eye on Draco. She knew he was going to be angry and decided to brace herself. She looked in her lap to find a beautiful quill and stationary set. The note read:

Happy Christmas, Ginny!

Love,

Angelina

Smiling, Ginny looked up to thank Angelina, but she instead met the furious eyes of Draco Malfoy.

Flint suddenly reached into Draco's box and pulled out his gift for all to see. It was a red and silver jersey, their team colors. On the top of the back was the number 01. Just under it were two words: **Ferret Boy**.

Everyone in the room burst out laughing except Ginny and Draco. She had not seen that look in his eyes since she'd spoke ill of his family that first day of practice. His cold stare made her shudder and look down. She'd known that he would be mad, but she hadn't expected to see that level of fury.

"Oh, the bouncing ferret!" Katie cried. "I had almost forgotten that!"

"Quite funny, that was," George said.

"Indeed," his twin agreed. "Instead of Malfoy on your team shirt, you can just use Ferret Boy!"

Hating to be the laughingstock in any situation, Draco got up, turning his cold, grey eyes towards Ginny, stormed over to her, threw the jersey in her face, and walked out the door without once looking back. *How stupid can I be? I actually thought... Oh, well. It matters not. I will get that witch for this if it's the last thing I do!* Draco vowed.

As he walked out, Ginny fought back tears of shame. *Why is it every time I do anything concerning that wizard I am the one who ends up feeling horrid? It was just a joke!* However, deep down, Ginny knew she had gone too far. *I will just have to make it up to him somehow!* Ginny vowed.

After she had Flooed home and got ready for bed, she noticed a small wrapped package on her bed. Cautious, she checked it for Dark magic or spells. Not finding any, she opened the gift. Inside was a small bottle of French perfume. The note simply said:

Ginevra,

I didn't get your name, but I wanted you to have this. Happy Christmas.

Draco

Ginny gently laid the perfume down and began crying.

*** **

As far as dinners went, Greg decided he'd never had a better one in his life. He was now sitting in Luna's sitting room, having tea and biscuits, and could not think of any place he'd rather be.

Patting the space beside her on the couch, Luna said, "Greg, why don't you come and sit by me?"

"All right," he answered. As he got up from the chair he was sitting in, he placed his cup and saucer on the table. He wanted his hands free.

Noticing that he'd put aside his tea, Luna quickly followed suit. "I have enjoyed having you here tonight."

"Can't have enjoyed it more than I enjoyed being here. Thank you for dinner; it was lovely."

"You're more than welcome," Luna said as she blushed. Wanting to be closer to him, she scooted over a bit.

When she looked up at him with her big, silver-tinged eyes, it was more than Greg could take. Framing her face in his hands, he murmured, "Luna," almost a whisper, and then he bent his head to taste her lips.

It was Greg that moaned first when Luna immediately opened her mouth for him. She had wanted to kiss him for a long time, too.

Then, it was Luna who moaned as Greg sucked her bottom lip with his mouth. He just couldn't get enough.

Reluctantly removing his mouth from hers to allow them to breathe, he started nibbling on her jaw, sucking in places as he feasted. When his hand cupped her breast, she jumped back. "Sorry... Sorry," Greg apologized as he tried to calm himself down. "I didn't mean to--"

"No, I'm sorry. It's just that... Well, um--"

"Are you a virgin, Luna?" Greg asked kindly.

"Not really." At his raised eyebrow, she hastily added, "I have had sex...once...with Neville. It was the night before the final battle. We'd decided that should something happen, we didn't want to die virgins, so we made love. Actually, it was two times, but both in the same night," she explained, blushing as she went.

"I see, and you loved him very much, didn't you?" Greg instinctively knew that love was the key for Luna.

"Yes, I did. I still love him. I suppose a part of me always will. Does that bother you?"

"No, not really, but I am not after competing with a ghost, Luna. I won't. I also can't be a replacement."

"Oh, no, never that! Besides, I couldn't replace Neville if I tried." Smiling and leaning into him, Luna assured, "When I am with you, Greg, I don't have any thoughts of Neville, and lately, wherever I am, I only have thoughts for *you*."

Surprised, but happily so, Greg leaned down and kissed her. "You invade my thoughts as well. I am really starting to care for you, love."

"And I am really starting to care for you, too. Just... could we take things a little slower? I mean, the snogging can continue, but for now, can that be enough?"

"Luna, my love, just being with you is enough, and if I get a snog or two out of it, well then, all the better."

Smiling, Luna reached up to cup his face this time. "All the better it is then," she murmured, as she kissed him tenderly.

*** **

Hermione couldn't believe it was already Thursday. After being treated at St. Mungo's Monday, Mr. Wimple had taken her straight to the Auror division to speak with someone about her threatening letters. Exactly what Hermione had wanted to avoid.

Sighing, she remembered the lecture Auror Savage had given her about not reporting the threats. After agreeing she was totally in the wrong, he had finally let her get back to work. However, after she'd stepped into her office, she had been sent home by Mr. Wimple and ordered to take it easy the rest of the day.

Now, it was only two days until the Christmas ball. As Hermione sat gathering her thoughts, a knock on her door startled her. "Enter," she called out.

Her jaw dropped when Severus stepped into the room. His appearance suddenly made her remember the letter she had gotten from the YLC on Monday. Gathering her composure, she asked, "What can I do for you, Severus? No classes today?"

"Of course not, as Christmas break started yesterday. I was just stopping by to check the status of the ingredient you promised I would have Monday next," he lied. He had seen her picture in the *Daily Prophet* and wanted to make sure she was okay.

That immediately got her ire up. "I said you'd have it by then, and you will. Is my word not good enough for you? Do you want me to sign it in blood? *Why would I think he'd actually stopped by to see me? I could have avoided this if I hadn't cancelled lunch with Ginny, Samantha, and Piper, but I have so much work to do! If I had not been out Monday, I wouldn't be so far behind.*

Raising an eyebrow only, he chose not to answer her. Nodding towards her hand, he asked, "What is the bandage for?"

"I accidentally got some bubotuber pus on my hand Monday. It's nothing really."

She must not read the Daily Prophet. If she did, she would realize that her picture was on the front page Tuesday! "You accidentally got it on your hand? Read the paper much, Hermione?"

"Not really. *The Quibbler* sometimes. Why do you ask?"

"There was a write-up about your so called accident in Tuesday's edition. It said you are being threatened. Is that true?"

"Well, for heaven's sake! It's nothing really. I can't believe that would be newsworthy!"

Starting to get irritated at her blasé attitude, Severus told her, "Threats of any kind are never anything to scoff at. Have you reported them?"

Narrowing her eyes, she said, "I did, and I still say they are nothing to be concerned about. Bubotuber pus, for Merlin's sake! Childish pranks, it is. Nothing more. Now, if

there is nothing else," she went on, wanting him to leave, "I have a busy day ahead of me. You are not the only one wanting ingredients."

Knowing a dismissal when he heard one, Severus simply said, "Fine. Good day." *Perhaps I should contact Kingsley and see for myself what is being done. The tiresome woman doesn't care enough about herself to make sure it is being taken care of, so someone else has to.*

As he turned and walked out, Hermione worked hard on getting her system under control. Only one thought entered her mind *Damn! I forgot to see if he is coming to dinner Saturday night!*

*** **

Hermione awoke the day of the ball resigned to the fact that Severus was not joining her for dinner that night. She had not heard from him since that day in her office and only then because he wanted to check on his precious ingredient. After he'd left, she'd started thinking about all the inquiring he'd done about her hand, and part of her had hoped that had meant he cared on some level. However, if he did care, he *would* have made plans to meet her for dinner.

Deciding to go to the Burrow to speak with Ginny, who was determined not to go to the ball, she left. Once in her friend's room, she immediately asked "Why, Gin? You bought that new robe and everything. You don't look sick."

"I'm not sick, Hermione," Ginny snapped. "I just don't want to go to the stupid ball. Is that a crime? Should you alert Azkaban?"

Raising her eyebrows, Hermione said, "Whoa! Hold on there. Now, I know something is wrong. If you don't want to tell me, that's fine, but don't snap at me like that for trying to help."

"There is nothing wrong; I just don't feel like going. I'm sorry I snapped. That was uncalled for. Don't press me on this, okay?" Looking at her friend closely, she asked, "You don't read the *Prophet*, do you?"

"It's all right. I'm sorry I pushed. No, I don't read that rubbish, and I am surprised you do!" *Why does everyone keep asking me if I read that paper?*

Sighing, Ginny arose from her bed and went to her dresser. "Let me show you something."

After Ginny handed her the paper, Hermione looked at it, utterly gobsmacked. On the front page of Monday's edition was Ginny and Draco, mid snog on the dance floor. Raising her eyebrow, she looked at her ginger-haired friend and asked, "Is there anything I should know?"

"NO! That tosser just came up and started dancing with me when Harry got mad and left me on the floor. I told you about Harry doing that, remember? Well, what I didn't tell you was that Draco took it upon himself to *save* me from the humiliation. Did a fine job, eh?"

"Doesn't look like you mind too much," Hermione acknowledged.

"I am so confused, Mione. One minute I want to strangle him, and the next I want to snog him senseless. I don't want to be attracted to him, but I am. And after that gift I gave him Wednesday night, well, I really don't want to see what he'll do to retaliate."

"He wouldn't do anything at the ball, Gin. You should be safe there. It would likely be at practice. Please go."

"You won't even notice I'm not there. You will be all wrapped up in Professor Snape," Ginny giggled.

"Not likely! Anyway, do you want to have to explain to your parents and brothers why you're not coming? What did they say about that photo?"

"Much of what you'd expect. My ears are still ringing from it. I finally told them to either bugger off or I'd go stay with him at the Malfoy Manor."

Laughing, Hermione said, "I bet that shut them up!"

"Right in one. I haven't heard anything else about it since."

Shaking her head, Hermione regretfully said, "I'd better go and start getting ready. Will you at least think about coming?"

Rolling her eyes, Ginny said, "Okay! You talked me into it. I'll come. See you there."

*** **

Sitting in her dressing gown at the kitchen table, Hermione was eating her Chinese takeout. She had already done her hair and makeup; after she ate, all she had to do was get into her robes. Severus would be there to pick her up for the ball at eight. She still had forty minutes to wait.

As she took a big bite of her egg roll, someone knocked on her door. Throwing her napkin down, she rose to answer it. Her eyes rounded with surprise to see Severus standing there.

Raising an eyebrow at the sight of her in a thigh-length, red, satin dressing gown, he snapped, "Well, are you going to invite me in? Dinner was your idea *She looks good enough to be the main course! What does she mean by wearing something so... seductive?*

Moving back so he could enter, she said, "I didn't think you were coming. You never said you were, so I just assumed you weren't going to make it. Besides that, you are twenty minutes past the time I'd requested." She looked down at her dressing gown, and her face reddened slightly. "Please excuse my attire."

"As far as I am concerned, your attire is just fine. I had an issue with some of my Slytherins." Smirking, he pointed to the table and asked, voice incredulous, "Is that what we are having? Chinese?"

"Well, like I said, I didn't think you were coming, so... I have enough to share, though, if you'd like."

Saying nothing, Severus just walked to the table and sat down, waiting to be catered to. After a few minutes of Hermione not moving, he asked, "Well? Are you joining me? Have you a plate and some flatware?"

"Oh, excuse me! Yes, just one moment." Severus admired her legs as she walked into the kitchen. When she came back, she had a plate, a fork, and some tea for him. After she made sure he was settled, she sat opposite him.

After eating a bit in somewhat companionable silence, he asked, "How did you enjoy your apprenticeship in France?"

"Oh, it was lovely! I spent a wonderful year there."

"Oh? You weren't overworked then?" When Hermione shook her head no, he asked, "What all did you get to experience?"

"Oh," she started excitedly, "everything! I saw all the sites, ate all the foods, wrote in a journal, and took a French lover of course." She smiled brightly at the memories. "I would love to go back and visit someday."

"The country or the lover? What was his name?"

Cocking her head, she replied, "Both I should think! His name? Why, Pierre, of course! What else?"

Severus snorted and took in her mischievous gaze. "Pierre? How cliché!" He smirked. "Come now, Hermione. Couldn't you think of a better name for a fake lover?"

She grinned. "It was the first name that came to mind." She took another bite of her egg roll. "How did you know I was only joking about taking on a French lover?" He simply shrugged and continued chewing his food. "Seriously, I didn't do that the first time there, but the next time I visit, I fully intend to. Isn't that what every tourist is supposed to do?"

Laughing despite himself, he told her, "I wouldn't mind going there myself again someday. It has been many years since I have seen the Eiffel Tower. Tell me, did you have time to actually do any work with potions?"

Sticking out her chin, she coolly replied, "I have my Mistress of Potions title, don't I? Tell me, do you ever regret not apprenticing me? Or how nasty you have been over the years?"

Sighing, Severus explained, "No, I don't. If I regretted one thing, I would have to regret everything, and trust me... I have done much to regret. I can't live my life on regrets, or I would not want to go on living. So, I leave the past in the past and don't dwell on it in order to survive. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do actually. It makes perfect sense. Besides, we're not the same people we were then, I think."

"No," he agreed, "we're not."

They continued the rest of the meal, talking of his project and various things of interest, enjoying each other's company immensely.

Soon, Hermione had to go finish getting ready for the ball. She would have been surprised to find out that Severus didn't want to leave her flat any more than she did.

*** **

The ball was in full swing when Ginny arrived. She'd bought a deep emerald green robe for the occasion and felt pretty. Her mood was much better, and she was ready to dance. She went to the bar to get a drink in order to scope out the crowd.

Draco had noticed her the moment she'd walked into the room. It really gnawed him that she looked extremely beautiful. He wanted her with a vengeance, but he had made up his mind that he would not act on it. *She goes too far. Besides that fact, she is a Weasley and beneath me!*

Looking over and seeing a very inebriated Marcus Flint, an idea came to Draco. "Say, Flint, see Weasley there?"

"Yeah, he came in with his hot little wife about an hour ago. How he got a piece like that--"

"No, you dolt! Ginevra! There," he pointed, "by the bar!"

"Ginevra? Oh, you mean Ginny? Yeah, she's a hot little piece, too. Man, I'd love to get a hold of her...if you know what I mean."

"Well," Draco drawled, "you're in luck. I heard her tell Angelina and Katie that she thinks you're a looker, and she wants you. You should go make a move while she is sitting there all alone."

"A looker, you say?" Marcus was surprised. Ginny had never looked twice at him that he had ever noticed. "Yeah, I think I will. Thanks, mate."

Draco just grinned and sat back to enjoy the show.

Ginny was startled when a big hand grasped her shoulder. "Marcus! You scared me. Are you having fun?"

"Not really, but I hope to be soon," he said as he leaned towards her.

Ginny backed away. He was obviously drunk. "Well, that's nice," she said, not knowing what else to say.

"Let's dance... for starters."

"Um, no, thank you. I was just going to finish my drink here." Ginny was really starting to get a weird feeling.

"No problem. I don't mind waiting." Marcus all but leered at her.

"Well, I really need the loo. Have a nice evening." Ginny suddenly wanted to get as far away from Flint as possible.

Saying nothing, he watched her walk off. After a minute, he decided to follow her.

Draco laughed. *Any minute now, Flint will come back with a handprint on his cheek, and Weasley will be thoroughly disgusted. Serves the witch right, I say!*

After a few minutes, Draco wondered what was keeping Flint. Deciding to go see for himself, he was shocked at the sight before him. The idiot had Ginny pinned against the wall with his body, trying to stick his tongue down her throat and his hand up her robe.

"Geroff! I said **no!**" Ginny was desperately trying to push Flint off of her, but to no avail.

"Come on, Ginny! I know you want it. Draco said you like my looks! He said that you said you want me!"

"Stop it! You're drunk, and I don't want your hands on me. Leave me be, Flint, now!" Ginny was really getting scared. "Get your damn hands off of me!"

Suddenly, Flint was pulled from her and thrown on the ground. "What the bloody hell do you think you are doing, Marcus? When a woman says no, it's no she means!" Draco was barely holding his fury in. He wanted to kill Marcus Flint with his bare hands. *How dare he put his hands on her in that manner!*

"But... but you told me--"

"Shut it! It doesn't matter what anyone told you! When a woman tells you to stop, you stop. Now, the best thing for you to do would be to remove yourself from my sight before I do something I wouldn't truly regret."

Seeing the murderous look in Draco's eyes, Marcus fled. He knew that Draco meant what he said.

After Marcus left, Draco turned to a trembling Ginny. Softening his voice, he said, "Ginevra? Are you okay? I'm so sorry."

"It's fine. I am just a bit shaken." Turning her frightened eyes to Draco, she said, "I didn't think he was going to stop!" After the first tear fell, Draco tenderly took her in his arms, murmuring to her softly.

Suddenly, she remembered what Flint had said. "Why would he say you told him I wanted him? I never said that! What would make him think...? Oh, I see," she said furiously, shoving Draco away from her. "So, Draco, this is your revenge? Getting me pawed by a drunken Flint? Well, bravo! A job well done, I say."

"No! That is not what I meant to happen. I just meant for him to hit on you some. I never thought he would put his hands on you unwanted."

"Perhaps under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have, but he was drunk, Draco. What did you expect? Now, I have had enough of all this. I can't take anymore. Stay away from me, and I will do you the same courtesy, okay?"

Never, my fiery temptress. "Fine, whatever you want." Nodding once, he walked away, too shaken to argue with her at that moment. He couldn't believe Marcus! Damn! *will just have to make things right between us.* Smiling to himself, Draco thought, *She won't be able to resist the Malfoy charm once I turn it on full blast! Now, I think it is time I had a little chat with my mate, Marcus.*

Ginny decided to go home after that. Not that she was worried about Flint anymore. She knew he would not bother her after Draco had threatened him. She just wanted to leave, especially since she hadn't wanted to come in the first place.

Searching the floor for Hermione, she smiled as she saw the happy look on her face as she danced with Professor Snape *Not likely to be wrapped up in him, eh?*

Luna looked just as happy in Greg's arms. *I am really going to have to owl her soon and find out the scoop on that!*

Hermione or Luna never noticed their friend's distress or observation of them, as they were too busy in the arms of their favorite wizards, exactly where they wanted to be.

Christy's Notes: Well, the first letter has been sent! I wonder how our couple will react to them! Poor, stupid Draco!! *Shakes head*

Southern's Notes: Ginny feels guilty about what she did, and she can't see that Draco didn't mean for it to go so far. What a hypocrite, I say! I like that Snape and Hermione seem to enjoy each other more. Greg and Luna are so very cute.

Destiny Begins

Chapter 9 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****

<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: The Harry Potter universe belongs to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Nine

Destiny Begins

The scrimmage game against the Falmouth Falcons Monday morning was hard for Ginny. Flint had sent her purple hyacinths and a long note of apology. Ginny had just wanted to forget the incident ever happened. Luckily, he kept his distance from her. She knew Draco had a lot to do with that.

Draco was another matter altogether. He was avoiding her completely. He'd never even once looked her way, and Ginny had felt the loss of those stormy eyes immensely. She had made up her mind to set things right with him once and for all. They had both acted childish, and she desperately wanted to fix the rift. She'd rather missed their playful sparring. It was all the hurtful jabs she could do without.

Sighing, she looked up just in time to see his watchful eyes glaring at her. His eyes were so consuming; they made her shudder. Smirking at her discomfort, he turned away and lazily caught the Snitch, ending the game and showing everyone how the Falmouth's earned their name.

Watching Draco strut onto the field to do the customary handshakes, she quivered. *It's a damn good thing Draco wasn't in Gryffindor. One look at him in the Quidditch uniform, and I would've been a goner. Red looks fantastic on him!*

Ginny stood by the locker rooms waiting for him to come out. She was determined to clear the air. After every last player came out without any sign of Draco, Ginny decided to go in.

Draco stood under a hot spray of water. He had waited until everyone left the locker room, wanting to be alone. He had a lot on his mind...his mother for one thing. The full moon was coming soon, and Draco had wanted to ask for a few days off to be there with her. Narcissa had flat out refused, telling him it was time to live his life without a burden of a werewolf mother.

Then, she had gone on a tangent of him marrying and settling down and how Pansy Parkinson was such a nice, pretty witch. Draco knew it wasn't necessarily Pansy his mother wanted him with; it was just that every time Draco needed a date she was who he called upon. His old standby. He did not love her, and that was that. He hated to do anything to disappoint his mother, but he refused to marry just to please her.

Marcus Flint was another thing. He'd gone to have a heart to heart and laid down the law there. Flint would probably never even look at another Weasley as long as he lived. Draco did feel a little guilty about what happened; after all, *he* was the one who planted the idea in Flint's mind. The moron. But still, he'd had his hands on Ginevra unwanted, and the man needed to learn that was not acceptable. Draco reckoned he'd taught him that fairly well.

The most pressing thing on his mind, however, was one Ginevra Molly Weasley. He was all set to charm his way back into her good graces. After giving it a lot of thought,

however, he'd decided he wouldn't bother. They were toxic to each other. It seemed they both knew which buttons to push and pushed them with a vengeance. But, damnit! He wanted that witch something fierce.

He had just turned the water off, wrapped a towel around his waist, and stepped out of the shower when he heard someone enter. Unconcerned, it was probably just someone coming back to get something they'd forgotten. He started moving to his locker for his clothes, but Draco stopped dead when he saw his fiery temptress standing there.

"Something I can do for you, Weasley?"

Ginny was dumbstruck. There he was, in nothing but a towel, with water dripping in all the right places. He looked like a tall glass of water, and she was damn thirsty. She stood mesmerized as she watched a drop of water flow from his chest down his stomach and into the towel.

Knowing lust in someone's eyes when he saw it, Draco cleared his throat to get her attention from just below his navel to his face.

When she looked into his eyes, he felt a jolt. Clearing his throat again, he asked, "What are you doing in here?"

"Oh," she stammered. "I wanted to talk to you."

Sighing because he really didn't want to do this today, he said, "I think we said all we needed to at the ball, Ginevra. There is nothing else left."

Panicking a little, she said, "Yes, there is!"

Annoyed, he asked, "What? What the hell is left? I'm tired."

Walking towards him, she started rambling nervously, "Well, I wanted to thank you for the perfume and for the Flint thing. And I really want to apologize for that jersey."

"Be quiet." He held his hand up as if to stop her. "No more. That gift was childish, woman! This whole thing between us is ridiculous, and I don't want your thanks or your apologies!"

Exasperated, she yelled, "Well, what *do* you want?"

Lightning fast, he pinned her against the locker and crashed his mouth to hers, hot and hungry. She groaned and fisted her hands into his wet hair and pulled him as close to her as she could get him, as she opened her mouth to allow him entrance.

Draco trembled at the intensity. He grabbed her bum and pulled her close enough to feel the arousal he'd had for her, and only her, since the first day of practice. At that moment, she sighed, "Draco," and he returned to his senses.

Pushing back and away from her, he commanded, "Leave."

"What?" It took a moment for her to gather her bearings. Her clothes and body were damp from their embrace. "Why?"

"Because if you don't, I will take you right here on the locker room floor. Then, I would be no better than Flint." He really needed to calm himself. It was like she was in his blood or like she was a potion that he needed to survive.

"Draco, please don't compare this to what Flint did. It's not the same. I wanted...want...your hands on me."

"No, you don't. Or, you may now, but you'd regret it later. I know how you feel about me."

"Do not tell me how I feel! Would *you* regret it later? I know you don't think too highly of me either."

"See, that's my point. You *think* you know how I feel about you; so afterwards, you would hate yourself. Let's just leave things be."

"I don't want to leave things be, but clearly you do, so I have to respect that. I'll go. But know this, Draco Malfoy; I have never wanted anyone as much as I wanted you just now. *Anyone*."

With that, she turned, achy and needy, and left a very frustrated and empty feeling Draco alone and extremely confused.

*** **

Monday morning found Luna sitting at her desk, morning tea forgotten, as she went through the pictures Colin had sent her from the ball. There was a lovely one of her and Greg she'd decided to frame. She smiled dreamily as she thought of Greg. She discovered she was in the beginning stages of love, and it made her giddy. She hadn't felt loved this way since Neville.

Suddenly, an official looking owl swooped in her window and onto her desk. She noticed the words **Menta Livery Company** right off. "Oh, they have found a match for me?" Luna was surprised. Opening quickly, she read:

Miss Lovegood,

We are very happy to inform you we have found your match! You have a very high compatibility rate at ninety-four percent!

We suggest you make haste and set up an appointment as soon as possible. You have until the end of February to respond. After that, your questionnaire will be null and void. You would have to repay to resubmit.

We suggest you do not miss this unique opportunity! Don't delay! Please owl us at your earliest convenience to set up your meeting time and place with your match.

Thank you.

The YLC

Well, there is nothing else for it. I will have to contact Greg. I wonder if I could talk him into taking the test?

Picking up her quill and some parchment, Luna started writing.

Greg,

I need to talk to you. I was wondering if you could meet me for lunch today at the Leaky Cauldron? Say around one?

Hope to see you soon. I miss you already!

Love,

Luna

Without delay, she called one of the messenger owls for *The Quibbler* and sent the letter to Greg, instructing the owl to wait for a response. She hoped she could talk him into taking the test soon.

*** **

Greg was sitting in the staff room at Azkaban when he recognized one of the owls from *The Quibbler*. Holding his hand out, he took the parchment and read it. Understanding that the owl had been instructed to wait for his response, he walked over to a desk for a quill and some ink.

Luna,

Lunch would be fine. I can't wait to see you either. I also have something I want to talk to you about.

Love, Greg

He sent the owl off with a treat and the letter. He'd been edgy since receiving the YLC letter that morning before he left for work. *What am I going to tell Luna? Well, she just has to take the test; that's all there is for it. I won't have anyone else...she is the only one for me.*

Sighing, Greg went to do his prisoner check with thoughts of Luna on his mind. He was glad his father was still in solitary confinement; he just didn't think he could take him today.

*** **

Severus Snape sat at his desk in his office scowling into his coffee. His first class hadn't even started, and today was already turning out to be a bad one. Minerva had informed the staff this morning at the weekly staff meeting that she wanted to have an informal get together this week, staff and their dates only. She wanted everyone to meet Friday in the Room of Requirement.

Then during breakfast, he'd received a reply from the YLC informing him that his request to meet his *potential mate* would have to wait as she had not replied to the letter as yet. *What the bloody hell is the witch waiting for? I want to meet her so I can discourage her immediately! Damn Narcissa anyway!* Severus sighed.

He didn't have the time or inclination for casual dates during the week. He would have to invite Hermione. Saturday night's ball signified the end of their agreement. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. He knew one thing. He'd not gone this long without sex in a long time, and his body was aching for the release only a woman could provide. *But not just any woman*, Severus thought to himself. *Hermione Granger.*

The insufferable witch had somehow wormed her way into his thoughts, and no matter what he did, he could not stop thinking of her. Growling, he grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill, writing a quick note to invite Hermione to the castle Friday night for Minerva's gathering.

A knock at the door interrupted him, aggravating him all the more. "Enter!"

"Hello, Severus, darling! It's been ages!" Narcissa said as she airily waltzed into the room and kissed both his cheeks.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he greeted, "Narcissa, you are looking as lovely as ever. To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Amused, she said, "Why, Severus, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you weren't happy to see me. I just wanted to stop in and see how things are going."

She has an ulterior motive. I know it! What does she want? "It's always a pleasure to see you, my dear." As if a light bulb went off, he said, "Oh! You must be here to collect your Wolfsbane! My apologies!"

Smiling, she said, "Yes, I do need that, but I also wanted to see you. I've noticed you have attended the last two balls with Hermione Granger." Narcissa wasn't exactly sure she approved of that. She would judge for herself how he felt.

Pausing midway to his lab, he turned back. *So this is her reason? Nosey witch!* "What of it, Cissy?"

Warming to the use of her nickname that only family or close friends would dare use, she simply told him, "I just think it a bit odd, that's all. She doesn't seem your... type, if you know what I mean."

Cocking his infamous eyebrow, he said, "No, I'm afraid that I don't know what you mean. What would you deem my type?"

Narcissa knew that tone, so she also knew to tread carefully. "Oh, don't get into a snit, Severus. The two of you just don't seem a likely couple. That's all I am saying. Um, have you heard from the YLC?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, I have." Noticing her relieved look, the agitated Potions master said, "Don't let it get your hopes up. The witch in question hasn't replied to her letter to set up our meeting. Perhaps she has come to her senses and will save me the trouble of dissuading her."

"For heaven's sake, Severus. Must you be so morose? She just may be the perfect woman for you, and you would throw her away? For what purpose?"

"For the purpose that I don't want...or need for that matter...a woman nagging in my ear!" Severus exclaimed, looking pointedly at her. *It seems Hermione is the only woman I can tolerate for any length of time without sex involved. Oh, but I would love to have the sex involved!*

Just then, their conversation was interrupted by his owl. Severus knew this was Hermione's answer to his inviting her to the gathering. Without looking at Narcissa, he took the parchment from the owl and opened it. Her note simply said,

It's a date! I will come to the castle at seven. See you then.

Hermione

A wild thought suddenly came to the dark, brooding, wizard. *Dear Merlin! We are dating! I am dating Hermione Granger.*

That particular thought led to many more interesting ones, but before he could explore the implications of actually dating the witch and the complications thereof, the most current pain in his arse spoke.

"Bad news, dear? You look like you have just seen the ghost of the Dark Lord." Narcissa didn't think it was possible for Severus Snape to become any paler than he usually was, but he had definitely proven her wrong there.

"No. It's nothing for you to concern yourself with. Let me get your Potion, Cissy," he said absently. "My class begins soon."

Knowing when to back off and pick her battles, Narcissa said nothing as he handed her the Wolfsbane. She would talk to him another day.

*** **

The *Leaky Cauldron* was not quite as busy at one as it had been at noon. That is why Luna had chosen that time to meet. She smiled brightly when she saw Greg enter.

After a quick search, he found his witch in a corner, obviously awaiting him. He worried about what she wanted to talk about, although she looked happy to see him. Walking up to the table, Greg kissed her hand before he sat. "Hello, love. I have been looking forward to seeing you ever since I got your owl this morning. Is everything all right?"

"Actually, no, it's not." Seeing his anxious look, she immediately wanted to soothe him. "No, it's not you or us. It's this," she said as she pulled out her YLC letter. "You see, a while back, the Weasley twins coerced Hermione, Ginny, and I to fill out the forms. I had honestly forgotten about doing it until I received their owl this morning." Narrowing her eyes, she asked, "May I ask what's so funny?"

Pulling out his letter, he said, "Only this. Narcissa had the same idea for Severus, Draco and I. What are we going to do?"

"We are going straight to that company right now and demand them to run ours together and see what the percentage is. I don't want to meet with anyone else, Greg. It's *you* I want!"

"Oh, I have no intentions of meeting another. Lets go, love."

Lunch forgotten, they both rose to go to the YLC building to straighten it out.

When they arrived, there was nobody there in the waiting room other than the receptionist. Looking up, the bubbly witch asked, "How may I help you today? Do you wish to fill out forms and see if you are compatible?"

"No," Greg told her. "We have already filled out forms and have received letters saying our match has been found. What we would like is for you to run a match between us," he said as he waved his hand between Luna and himself, "with the forms we have already filled out."

"That is highly irregular, sir." The receptionist frowned at them both. "What are your names?"

"Greg Goyle and Luna Lovegood," he answered. He didn't care if it was irregular or not. He was not meeting another witch.

Looking through her files for the names and the match that had already been found for the pair, she raised her eyebrow at Greg. "Is this some kind of joke, sir?"

"Joke?" *What is she on about?*

"Yes, joke. It says right here in your file that your match is Luna Lovegood and right here in her file that her match is Greg Goyle. Now, if you are not happy with these results--"

The receptionist was suddenly interrupted as Greg picked Luna up and swung her around, both laughing. After kissing her soundly, both unable to believe they were the other's match, he asked, "What do we do now, Luna?"

"Plan a wedding?" she asked hopefully.

"My thoughts exactly!"

All thoughts of the receptionist forgotten, the happy couple left the YLC building. They had a wedding to plan! After making plans to meet at Luna's after work, they both left to finish their day so they could hurry back to each other.

*** **

Hermione was nervous about the gathering for some reason she could not place at first, and then it came to her. *This is an actual date...not an arranged ball escort for an ingredient.*

She knew that he had eaten dinner at her flat the weekend before, but somehow this was different. *Because he asked, not you, her mind told her. He actually wanted to bring me out of all of his other... choices.* Hermione ignored the part of her mind that told her it could just be because it was more convenient to ask her. She didn't want to be a convenience; she wanted to be wanted. By Severus. She wanted to be wanted by Severus Snape. Lord help her!

Not wanting to overdress, she simply wore her *going out* robes. A little dressier than work robes, but not fancy enough for a ball. They were the color of walnuts, and she thought they complimented her nicely. She had no doubt Severus would be in black.

Gathering her courage, she Apparated to the front gates of Hogwarts and was surprised to find Severus waiting for her. "Hello, Severus! I didn't expect to see you here!" Laughing to herself she thought, *Black it is!*

Cocking his head, he asked, "Where else would I be? Of course I would be here; I invited you!" Extending his arm, he said, "Shall we? *She looks very nice...should I compliment her?* Severus was becoming exasperated. She was just a witch, like any other! *No, unlike any other. That is the problem.*

Taking notice of the slight irritation she assumed she caused when she questioned him, she simply took his arm and allowed herself to be led to the Room of Requirement for the party. You could have heard a quill drop when Severus entered the room with Hermione. All eyes were on the couple.

"Hermione!" Minerva greeted. "What a pleasant surprise. I didn't expect to see you here, but I am glad you are."

"It's good to see you, too, Professor."

"As I have told you before, let's have none of that 'Professor' business. Call me Minerva, dear, or Minnie if you prefer. As you know, all my close friends do."

Pleased, Hermione turned to her favorite Hogwarts professor and hugged her. "I'd be honored to call you Minnie. It's just hard to get used to!"

After that, the tension melted, and Hermione and Severus went to mingle. Severus never left her side for a moment.

"What's the deal there, Minnie? What is the Hogwarts Deputy Headmaster doing sniffing around your favorite cub?"

"Oh, really, Alastor! He escorted her to the last two balls as a favor, and now she is returning the favor. Nothing more." Alastor Moody had been an escort at times to the headmistress when she was in need of a date. He had always tried for something more, but she never allowed it to go any further than friendship, though she did think about it at times.

Spinning his magical eye to look directly at her, he asked, "You believe that, do you? I always thought you had plenty of common sense. Never would've tried to bed you otherwise."

Huffing, Minerva turned from her friend to look at the couple in question. What she saw startled her. *Why, Severus is very attentive.* She noticed the casual touches, soft

murmurs in her ear, and the way Hermione blushed when Severus looked at her a certain way. She briefly wondered just how far they'd gone. *For Merlin's sake! Do they even know they are in love?*

Remus stood with Professor Sinistra, watching the couple questioningly. Oh, he'd heard the odd whispers since they'd walked in, but, up until now, he'd ignored them. He just could not wrap his mind around the fact that Hermione would willingly want to be with Severus, but if seeing was believing, his proof was right there.

It seemed that nobody in the room could take their eyes off the pair. Irma and Rolanda were off gossiping in a corner with a wild gleam in their eyes. Poppy and Pomona were a bit more discreet, but they were obviously discussing the unlikely couple nonetheless.

Admittedly, Severus was showing a side of himself that no one had ever seen before, but it was still disconcerting. The man was most known these past couple of years for his ample selection of witches, and Remus was loathe to see Hermione hurt. Knowing that talking to Severus or Hermione was out of the question, he decided he'd have to owl Jane first thing in the morning.

At around ten, Severus was ready to leave. He desperately wanted to get Hermione alone. Enough was enough; he was going to have her tonight. His body and sanity couldn't take any more. Leaning into her and whispering in her ear, he asked, "Would you care to come to my chambers for a nightcap before you have to return to your flat?"

Blushing only slightly, she replied, "Yes, I'd love to."

After saying quick goodbyes, the couple left, heading for his chambers.

After they entered and he had her comfortably seated on the couch, Severus offered the object of his obsession a glass of wine. She nodded her acceptance, and he poured them both a glass of chardonnay. Sitting himself beside her, he handed her the wine.

"Umm, very nice. Thank you, Severus."

"You're welcome," he purred seductively in a voice known to stir the blood in many witches.

Hermione felt the shiver go up her spine right before the ball of tension gathered in her stomach. At a loss for what to say, she turned to him and started babbling, "The gathering was nice. I had a wonderful time tonight. Thank you for inviting me."

"The evening is not over yet, my dear," he barely whispered. Taking her glass from her, he set it on the table next to his. As he turned back to face her, he was pleased to see her nervously biting her lip. *Good. She knows what's coming.*

Gently cupping the back of her neck, he pulled her to him for a kiss. A kiss he felt all through his body to the bottom of his feet. When she moaned and opened her sweet mouth to him, he plunged.

Hermione felt as if she were flying through the air on the back of a hippogriff...terrified and excited at the same time. She couldn't think of anything except this man and the things he was causing her body to feel with only a kiss. Grabbing his hair, she pulled his face closer to hers.

Needing to feel more contact, Severus pulled Hermione on his lap so that she was straddling him. They both moaned as their centers connected. He deftly unzipped her robe and attached his mouth to her bra-covered nipple. He only briefly thought, *Excellent! Creamy-colored lace! I wonder if her knickers match?* before he grasped her hips to bring her closer.

Panting heavily, Hermione pushed back. This was all going way to fast. She was appalled she'd just let a kiss go so far. "No, Severus, stop."

He was so caught up in her taste and the scent of her perfume he didn't hear her. Suddenly, he felt her small hands pushing his chest, causing him to break apart from her body and her heat. With the blood pounding in his ears, he irritably asked, "What is it?"

"We have to stop. I don't want to do this."

Filled with arousal mixed with anger, never a good combination, he bit out, "You were doing a damn fine job of acting like you did!"

Hermione shakily got to her feet and started pacing as she zipped her robes. "I'm sorry. I'm just not good at casual sex. I let this go farther than I should have."

"Casual sex?" *There was nothing casual about that!*

"Yes, casual sex! You know, a different partner every month or as often as you can have one? That's not me, Severus. I am not that kind of person. I'm sorry; I don't know what else to say."

Insulted of her low opinion of him and still highly aroused by her, Severus wanted to lash out. "I see. So, its promises you need?"

"Well, I--"

"Commitment... You have to have it before you will give in to your... baser natural instincts?"

Sticking her chin out proudly, she coolly answered, "Yes, I need a commitment. I refuse to be the flavor of the month. There is nothing wrong with that. I am past the time in my life where sex is something casual. I have been there a couple of times before, and now I find it leaves me feeling unsatisfied. I just need more in this stage of my life." *How do I tell him that he specifically means more to me than just some casual fling? That I think he already has the potential to hurt me more than Ronald Weasley ever did?*

"Hmm, yes, and tell me, how did commitment and promises work out for you last time, *dear*? I could say the words you wish to hear, have you, and then marry the next witch that catches my fancy. That seems to be the status quo."

Hermione jerked back as if he'd slapped her. Surely a slap would have hurt less. With tears in her eyes and a quiver in her voice, Hermione walked back to where Severus was sitting and climbed into his lap once again. "You're right. Absolutely." Putting her arms around his neck, she started to nibble his jaw. "No false words. No lies. No promises or commitments."

Starting to nod in agreement with her, Severus put his arms around her waist pulling her close to him once again, reaching for her zipper. *That's more like it!*

"You can date whomever you want, and I can do the same," she said and then kissed him hard, as if sealing the deal.

Just as he started to get into the kiss, her words penetrated into his lust-filled brain. *Hold on... who is she planning on dating?* "What do you mean?"

Confused, Hermione looked into his unreadable, narrowed black eyes. "Just what I said. Isn't that what you want? For us to be able to date others?" *Why is he stopping?*

I will kill any wizard who lays a hand on her! "Well..."

"Oh, my God! Do *you* want promises now? Double standards do not suit you, *dear*." At his furious stare, Hermione calmly got off his lap.

After taking a drink of her wine and pulling herself together, she quietly told him, "Okay. Here is what I think we should do. We have one more ball to get through tomorrow night. After that, you are not... obligated to see me again. If you decide after tomorrow that you would like to continue seeing me, let me know. We will go from there. Take tonight and whatever time you need to decide what you want. I will do the same. If we decide to take this any further, we'll talk then." *Oh, I hope he wants to continue seeing me!*

You will not get away from me that easily! I will have you!"Fine, we will do things your way."For now, that is."Let me walk you to the gate."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Hermione fixed her robes that she'd just realized were still partly unzipped and walked to the gate. After setting a time for him to pick her up for the ball, she quickly Disapparated home.

Severus turned to walk back to his quarters, more dissatisfied and aroused than he remembered being in quite some time.

*** **

The ball was very tiresome for Hermione. Severus was more formal at this one than he had been at the first one. He'd only danced once with her so far and only touched her during that dance. *Did I make a mistake last night? No! We have to both agree on where this is going. Sex always complicates things*Sighing, she turned to see Severus dancing with some random witch. It depressed her more than it angered her. He looked so at ease with that woman...unlike the stiff politeness he had shown her.

Hermione startled when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned and looked into the very happy faces of Luna and Greg. Unable to help herself, Hermione smiled back. "Hello, you two. Having a good time?"

"Yes," Luna said. "I wanted to tell you and Ginny both at the same time, but apparently, Ginny is not here. I am too excited to wait! Look!" Luna exclaimed as she held her finger out for inspection.

Hermione was startled to see the round diamond on Luna's left ring finger. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Well," Greg started, "if you think that it's an engagement ring, then it is!"

Hermione was too stunned to speak. Luna saved her the trouble. "Remember those forms the twins had us fill out? Well, Greg is my match! He had filled one out, too, along with--"

"Greg, Luna," Severus suddenly greeted. "What is going on?"

"We're getting married," Greg proudly said while silently daring the man to make a snide comment.

"I see," Severus said while looking at Hermione. She seemed as surprised as he did. "Then congratulations are in order. I will go to the bar and get us all a glass of champagne."

As he walked off, Luna asked, "What's the deal with you two, Hermione?" She noted that Hermione had not taken her eyes off her ex-Potions professor once since he started walking to the bar.

"Honestly? I don't know." Turning to the happy couple and smiling, Hermione said, "Have you set the date yet? Will it be a big wedding?"

As the pair started telling Hermione of all the plans they had made so far, her mind drifted to Severus.*Well, after tonight, I will know if he wants to see more of me, but if tonight is any indication, I don't think he will.*

Suddenly, she was overcome with sadness, realizing she would miss him terribly. She never knew that at that same moment, Severus was planning their next date in his mind and how determined he was not to let her go so easily.

Walking back to the trio, Severus handed them each their drink and made an appropriate toast. When the next song began, Severus led Hermione to the dance floor. "Oh, making time to dance with me?" she asked, sounding a bit more snide than she'd intended.

"Problem, Hermione?"

"Only that you are *my* escort this evening, and it would be nice for you to actually escort me!"

So, she is jealous? Interesting."I see." Suddenly wanting to be alone to speak with her, Severus started, "Hermione, why don't we--"

Whatever he was going to say was suddenly cut off by the countdown to midnight. While everyone was counting and drinking, Severus had stopped on the dance floor, still holding Hermione tightly in his arms.

She couldn't take her eyes off his. She heard no music, no countdown, or anything else. All she knew or saw at that moment was Severus Snape.

When Severus heard the last three numbers counted down and a loud, "HAPPY NEW YEAR," he slowly bent his head down. Right before he kissed her, he whispered, "Happy New Year, Hermione," and then very gently placed his lips on hers. This kiss was not hot or demanding like the night before, but it seemed loving and caressing. Hermione thought that fact made it no less potent.

It was at that precise moment that she realized she was in trouble.*Oh, no! I've gone and fallen in love!*As his lips were tenderly nipping hers, she decided she would worry what to do about it the next day.

Christy's Notes: Well, we have at least one couple planning a wedding! Lemons next chapter...but what couple?? Care to guess? Let me know what you think!

Southern's Notes: I was worried about Snape and Hermione here, but thankfully, things have turned around nicely.

New Beginnings

Chapter 10 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to

their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****
<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: The Harry Potter universe belongs to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Ten

New Beginnings

Hermione was busy catching up on her much neglected work Monday morning when she heard the knock on her door. Not wanting to take the time out of her paperwork to actually hold a conversation with Mr. Wimple, she irritably called out, "Enter!"

"Is this a bad time?" Severus smirked at her surprised expression. "I don't wish to disturb you; I am here for my ingredient approval."

Of course that's why you're here! What other reason? Certainly not to seem! She still had not decided what to do about the fact that she found herself in love with the arrogant man in front of her. She worried about it for the rest of the weekend, tossing and turning both nights. Inevitably, whenever she thought of being in love with Severus, she was reminded of her YLC letter. *I am going to have to contact them. I have to let my match know something, one way or another.*

"No, it's fine. I have everything ready for you. This approval is good for the next six months. Should you need anything else after that for the changes you are making to the Wolfsbane Potion, it won't take hardly any time at all to approve you. Are you ready to start the alterations?"

"Thank you, Hermione. Yes, I am finally ready to start, though it has been a trial trying to revise here and modify there. I swear I have a whole journal of notes written. I wish I had kept more abreast with my Arithmancy skills."

"Oh, I agree. I have found that when trying to alter just about anything, Arithmancy really comes in handy!" Hermione's face lit up, as it always did when speaking of academics.

Severus studied her a moment, as if he was trying to decide something. *I wonder if she would care to come to my lab sometime and..* Shaking his head, he simply started, "I had intended to invite you to dinner this weekend but--"

Suddenly, all of the excitement and happiness deflated from Hermione. *He doesn't want me after all. How could I have been so stupid as to believe that he did?* It's no problem, Severus. Really. I understand. Thank you for escorting me to the past three balls. I have no doubt I will not be demanded to bring a date again!" Hermione looked down at the papers on her desk to avoid his penetrating black stare.

"If you would be so kind as to allow me to finish? I was saying that I had intended to invite you to dinner this weekend, but I don't think I want to wait that long to see you again. Would Wednesday night suit you?" He folded his arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow at her in question.

Thoroughly embarrassed, Hermione still could not bring herself to look him in the eyes. She simply nodded her acceptance and told him, "I'd love to go to dinner with you Wednesday."

"Good. Would seven be an acceptable time to pick you up?"

Finally looking up from her papers, she smiled at him and said, "Perfect."

Before Severus could speak again, they heard two swift knocks on the door. Before Hermione could call out, the door suddenly opened, and her boss stuck his head in. "Hermione! You will be pleased to know that the Aurors have picked up Mrs. Nott."

"They did? Did she actually admit to sending me the threats?" Hermione found it difficult to believe the woman would admit to such a thing.

"Well, no, not at first, but after a couple hours of interrogation and three drops of Veritaserum, well, she had to tell the truth, didn't she? She started talking and didn't stop until the whole story came out about how you refused her an ingredient, and she would not tolerate being told no by a lowly *Mudblood!*" Mr. Wimple suddenly started when he realized just who was in the room with Hermione.

"Severus," he greeted. "I must say this is quite a surprise. To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?" Looking at the form in his hand, he said, "Oh, yes, your ingredient. Hermione told me just last week you were going to be approved for it! I remember signing the approval now. Jolly good!"

"Yes, I did need these forms, Wimple, but my main reason for stopping by was to see Hermione and confirm dinner plans with her for this week. Now that I have done so, I will take my leave." Turning to Hermione, he picked up her hand and lightly brushed his lips over it. "Until Wednesday, my dear." Before she could reply, he turned and walked out the door, leaving a flustered Hermione in his wake.

Shaking his head in a disapproving manner, Mr. Wimple said, "My, that man sure has a certain..." He trailed off, unsure as to what adjective one would use to aptly describe Severus Snape.

"Flair," Hermione finished for him. "The word you are looking for is flair."

*** **

Tuesday afternoon found the Wicked Wazzock Warriors team on the coast of Northern Ireland to play against the Ballycastle Bats. Ginny snorted to herself. Bats made her think of Professor Snape, which led her to thoughts of Hermione and how Ginny knew she was falling for him, if she hadn't already. Surprisingly enough, he seemed to care for Hermione as well.

A loud scream brought Ginny out of her musings. Looking up, she gasped and put her hand to her mouth. Hanging fifty feet in the air, barely holding on to her broom, was Katie Bell. Apparently, she'd been hit by a Bludger and knocked from her broom. Just as her hands started to slip, Marcus caught her and put her safely back on her broom. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

As the game resumed, her gaze predictably turned to Draco. He looked so handsome and confident while flying. She'd heard a lot of the other witches talking about him while she was in the loo. *He will definitely have his pick tonight!* Ginny thought sourly. *Stop kidding yourself. He has his pick every night!* Sighing, Ginny told herself she would not worry about it.

She cringed as she remembered how she threw herself at him in the locker room. All she knew at that moment was that she had never had a need or want so powerful.

Had he asked, she would have shagged him right there on the floor. *He made it clear he does not want anything to do with me, so why can't I get him out of my mind?*

Suddenly a cheering crowd caused Ginny to look back towards the pitch. Deep thoughts had caused her mind to wander away from the game. She looked up to see a very proud Draco Malfoy holding the little Golden Snitch. She smiled brightly.

After the team had cleaned up, Fred and George informed everyone that they had gotten each person a room at the local pub, and they wanted everyone to celebrate the victory.

It was a tiresome day for Ginny, so she opted to just go to her room and forego the festivities. *Tired my arse! You just don't want to see all those groupies fawning all over Draco!*

She had only been in her room about twenty minutes and had settled down with a medical journal when she heard a knock on her door. Assuming it was one of her annoying brothers, she flung the door open and yelled, "WHAT?" before seeing whom it truly was.

Grinning and still high from the win, Draco stood there holding up a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other. "If Miss Weasley won't come to the party, then the party will come to her."

Smiling, but just a bit wary, she opened the door to allow him entrance. "I am surprised you were able to tear yourself away from your groupies, but I thank you just the same."

"Groupies? Well, it was only a matter of time really," he teased. "What with all my charm and good looks, you can't really blame them."

Laughing, she said, "You're right. How did you slip away unnoticed?"

"Claimed I had to use the loo. Works every time."

"I see," she smiled. "Well, have a seat and pour me a glass. Was your mum here today? I didn't see her. I figured she would want to see your first professional game."

Draco unknowingly frowned. He had spoken with his mother via Floo earlier. He'd wanted to go home, but she had adamantly refused, claiming she did not need a babysitter. "She was unable to attend. She is... sick."

"Oh, Draco, I'm so sorry. I hope it's nothing serious."

Eyeing her intently, Draco came to a decision. He decided to tell her everything. He wasn't sure why he suddenly felt the need to talk with Ginny about his personal life, only that he desperately wanted her to know everything.

After he was finished, Ginny felt waves of guilt remembering the things she had said to him during that first day. She had been so horrid to him. "Blimey! And you have taken care of her all these years?"

"Well, she's not a burden...not really. The Wolfsbane keeps her docile during her transformation. It's just that I have always been there during, you know? I worry."

"I am sure you do. Tom Riddle sure messed up a lot of lives, didn't he?" she observed sadly.

"Tom Riddle?"

Ginny looked at him with surprise. "Tom Riddle was Voldemort. He almost killed me during my first year at school, as I am sure you know, and he would have succeeded had it not been for Harry."

Fighting the jealousy he felt at the mention of Potter, he asked, "Why would I know that he tried to kill you?"

"Oh, please!" She shook her head disbelievingly. "You know your father gave me that diary. You were standing right there when he did. *He really has that innocent look down pat!*

"I honestly don't have a clue as to what you are talking about. Would you tell me?" Draco was fighting a ball of dread that had formed in the pit of his stomach. Part of him didn't even want to know.

Looking into his eyes as if trying to see if he was telling the truth, Ginny started, "Well, do you remember the year that Lockhart came to teach?"

He nodded that he did and then rolled his eyes. *Like I could forget that nancy boy!*

"Well, do you remember that day in Diagon Alley? The day our fathers fought?" Again he nodded that he remembered. "Well, when Mr. Malfoy picked up my book to throw it in our face that it was second hand before fighting with my dad, he slipped a small diary inside of my Transfiguration book. That diary belonged to Tom." After she finished telling Draco the whole story, he looked devastated.

"I don't know what to say, Ginny. I mean, you were eleven! How could he do such a thing?"

"Because, to him, I was just a *Weasley*, but please don't think that I hold you responsible for what your father has done. I don't."

Draco nodded. He wondered if his mother knew. *It doesn't matter if she did or not because that git would not have cared if she disapproved.*

Suddenly, Draco jumped up. "Oh, no! I forgot! I was supposed to meet Amber thirty minutes ago!" He was stunned to realize that he had been talking with Ginny for a little over two hours. "I have to go."

Highly disappointed but trying not to show it, Ginny simply said, "All right. I really enjoyed talking with you tonight. Perhaps we can do it again sometime."

Torn between going and staying, he told her, "I would really like that. I hate to, but I really need to go."

"I understand." She smiled weakly. "I will talk to you later. Bye."

After he'd left, Ginny felt very depressed. She really had been enjoying herself and hated to see him go. Resigned, she made her way to the bathroom to soak in a bubble bath. She had barely gotten out of the tub and dressed when she heard a knock on her door.

She was astonished to find Draco standing there. "Draco?"

His mouth watered at the sight of her. She'd obviously just gotten out of the tub. Her sweet smelling skin was flushed, and her hair was still damp. She was standing there wearing his **Ferret Boy** jersey and white socks. He vaguely remembered throwing it in her face the night that she gave it to him. She had nothing else on. "Tell me it matters, Ginevra."

"What?" She was genuinely confused.

"Tell me that it matters to you that I went off to meet with another witch." *Please tell me it matters!*

Regarding him for only a moment, she whispered, "It matters. More than I want it to."

That admission was all it took. Draco suddenly pulled her into his arms and kissed her with all the pent up passion he'd had for her. He admitted, "I couldn't stay. She's not you. When she started to kiss me, I looked into her eyes. They were blue, not brown. Her hair was black, not red. She didn't have any freckles! Everything thing was all wrong, you see. She wasn't the witch I wanted to be with."

Ginny pulled him back into her arms and quickly began kissing him just as passionately as he'd kissed her, backing into her room, pulling him with her.

Draco kicked the door closed with his foot and pulled back a bit to look at her. It was overwhelming how much he wanted...needed...her. Above all others. She was the one who haunted his dreams.

She was all shades of fire and heat against his ice, and he knew he was about to get burned. He relished the thought. He barely had enough thought to perform a Contraceptive Charm.

He had wanted to go slow and easy, but he knew he was too far gone with need. Fisting his hand into her blazing hair, he roughly jerked her head back and began to feast on her mouth once again. She whimpered with need of her own, and he almost lost it.

She pulled his shirt from his trousers and placed her hands under the fabric to have contact with his skin. She began to rub his chest and stomach, just barely grazing the tip of his erection through his trousers, which caused him to shiver.

He stopped long enough to pull the jersey over her head, and she stood before him in only her tiny red knickers and white socks. He couldn't move. "Please, Draco. I need you. Don't pull back now!"

He pounced on her, dragging her to the floor. He wanted to taste every part of her. He wanted to kiss every freckle. He wanted to make her scream his name. He wanted her to belong to him. *Wait! Not belong to me!* 'Yes,' another voice conceded, 'belong to me.' He wanted to own her.

He kissed his way down her stomach, nipping and biting. He marked her possessively just above the navel. *I want her quivering with need for me and only me!*

Ginny cried out in ecstasy and kicked away her knickers. *More!* was all she could think. "Don't stop; please, don't stop!"

Draco had no intentions of stopping. He lightly nipped the inside of her thigh before plunging his tongue into her moist heat the instant her legs parted a little more. He was too far gone to show any finesse. *Delicious!* The more she groaned, the faster he went. He was torn between allowing her to orgasm or plunging into her burning heat. Suddenly, the decision was taken out of his hands as she grabbed his hair, bucked her hips, and hissed, "Ahh, Draco, yesss!"

Quickly moving up her body, smug in the fact that her mind was full of only him, he jerked his shirt off as she began fumbling with his trousers. She had barely gotten them down his hips when he immersed himself into her...completely oblivious to the clothing he hadn't managed to get completely off.

He took her fast and hard, only just able to please her once more before he spilled inside of her. As she cried out his name a second time in orgasmic bliss, he called out her name simultaneously. Barely able to hold his weight, he collapsed on top of her, breathing heavily.

She was rubbing mindless patterns on his back, basking in the after-effects when he found his voice. "Incredible. You are simply incredible."

"Mmmm. Would you like to move this to the bed? And perhaps completely remove your trousers?"

Suddenly, he looked at her with a mortified expression. He couldn't believe he had taken her like an animal right there on the floor! "Oh, Gin, I am so sor--"

"If you apologize for this, I will not be responsible for my actions! This was amazing, Draco!"

"Yes," he agreed. "But you deserve better than to be taken on the floor!"

Ginny giggled. "I don't think it gets much better than that."

"Oh," he promised, "it does."

Looking into his eyes, she challenged, "Prove it!"

After getting up and completely removing his remaining clothing, he lifted her into his arms and said, "With pleasure," as he carried her to the bed and began showing her just how much better it could be.

*** **

Mr. Livingston, President of the Yenta Livery Company, sat in the chair behind his desk and regarded the woman before him carefully. "I am not quite sure what to make of your request, Madam. It is exceedingly unusual and has never been done here before. We are a respected company!"

"Oh," she waved her hand in front of her nonchalantly, "I highly doubt that it's never been done before, sir. I am willing to make it worth your while. All you have to do is make sure that my form matches his...one hundred percent...and make his real match disappear."

Eyeing her intently, he asked, "How much worth my while are we talking?"

"One hundred thousand Galleons. You can have half now, but you won't get the rest until he gets his form stating that I am his match."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. That was a lot of Galleons. "Fine, I'll do it. I will have the documents matched and--"

"No, you fool! Do it yourself! The less people who know the better." Calming down a bit, she said, "I will add another ten thousand if you tell me who his true match was."

"Why? Neither he nor his match will ever know." He didn't like the thought of this woman having that information. She seemed dangerous.

"Because I want to know!" She lifted a bag off of the floor beside her chair. "This bag contains sixty thousand Galleons. Should I remove ten of those?"

Sighing, he said, "No. That won't be necessary." He picked up Draco Malfoy's file off his desk and told her, "His ~~true~~ match was Ginevra Molly Weasley at ninety- seven percent." Looking farther down, he smirked. "When you contacted me, I ran your form against his. You were only twenty-nine percent. Are you sure you want this bloke?"

She suddenly stood and looked down her nose at the man. "Obviously, there is a flaw with your system. ~~A~~Weasley? Please!" With her dignity holding on by a thread, she turned to leave. "You will get the rest when he gets the form. Good day."

Crikey! That witch is off her broom! I pity Mr. Malfoy, but the Galleons will come in handy.

*** **

Hermione and Severus sat in the restaurant, barely touching their dinner. They were both somewhat nervous and didn't know what to say. Suddenly, Severus said, "This is

ridiculous! The purpose of this dinner was to get to know one another and see if we want to go any further. We can't do that unless we talk."

Laughing nervously, Hermione said, "You're absolutely right. It's just that this is different. Before it wasn't an issue. Now, well, it just is."

"Yes, it is. Why don't we start by stating our expectations?"

"Well, the main thing with me is this: If we are truly going to give," she waved her hand between herself and Severus, "this a chance, I think we should be exclusive."

"Okay, agreed. But know that this is new to me. I am not going to answer to you for every little thing, nor will I continuously inform you of my whereabouts." He cringed inwardly at the thought of Arthur Weasley and even Remus Lupin...both always cowing to their witches. He would never be that type of man.

Hermione bit her lip in thought. "What would it hurt to let me know where you will be? I think of it as a courtesy. Besides, if you are seen with another witch, I may jump to the wrong conclusion if I am not informed beforehand."

Severus raised an eyebrow at this. He was highly annoyed by this statement. "I suppose, Hermione, it all comes down to trust. You are going to have to trust me." Seeing the skeptical look on her face, he was angered even more. "You cannot punish me for the things I have done before you, nor can you punish me for the things Weasley did. You will either trust me or not, but I won't bend on this."

Sensing that he was getting angered, she agreed. "Okay, Severus. You're right. Trust is the most important thing. Without it, we may as well stop things now. So, we won't inform each other of every little thing. I will trust you until I have reason to do otherwise...just as I expect you to trust me."

He nodded. They were adults starting a relationship, not each other's keepers. "I find that I do enjoy your company, quite more than I expected to actually. I would like to see you again this weekend if it's agreeable."

"You don't have to sound so surprised, you know!" She grinned broadly. "I enjoy yours as well, and yes, this weekend would be lovely."

They continued their dinner, talking about their interests and the Wolfsbane project until the last bite was eaten. She shyly asked, "Would you like to come back to my flat for a drink before you head back to Hogwarts?"

Smirking, he told her, "Yes, I would."

After they had Apparated to her flat, Hermione took his cloak and poured them both a glass of brandy. Severus started a fire while she was pouring their drinks.

Sitting on the couch next to him, Hermione leaned her head back on the couch and closed her eyes. She all but purred, "Mmmm, this is nice." Stretching, she asked, "Tell me what you think of Greg and Luna?"

Watching her stretch unabashedly, he said, "I was very much against the union at first, but after speaking with Greg, I find that I cannot have anything bad to say about it. He seems very smitten with her. What about you?"

"I think it's wonderful," she sighed dreamily. "I was really worried about her after Neville died, but then, BAM! Greg is certainly not what I expected."

Folding his arms over his chest, he spat, "For a Slytherin, you mean?"

"NO! For a Draco Malfoy crony who made my life hell in school. You have to admit that he was nothing but a big bully! However, he has certainly changed, and I can tell that he really cares for Luna."

Somewhat mollified, he said, "Yes, a lot of people have changed since school. I am finding that I like those changes."

"Oh? Can you be more specific?" she teased.

"I can be *very* specific," he told her as he leaned in to take her lips in a slow sensual kiss.

Before she knew what was happening, Severus laid her back on the couch and was grinding his hips into hers. This was still going too fast for her. "Severus," she said regrettably. "We need to stop while we still can."

"Why? We both want this!" He felt like he would explode if he didn't bury himself within her soon.

"Yes, but I have to be sure. This is only our second date after all."

"By my calculations, it's our fifth."

Smiling, she said, "No, the balls that we attended don't count. You were... coerced into those. This is only the second date that you actually wanted to be with me." Suddenly, an idea came to Hermione. "Is this your weekend off?"

"Yes, I am off from Friday at five p.m. until Sunday at eight p.m. Then I have to make my rounds. Why do you ask?" He was very curious what the little witch had in mind.

"Why don't you plan to spend the weekend here with me? I have a spare room. Since we are both in the wedding, we could just go together. You could even go to the Burrow with me for Sunday lunch!" Hermione was really starting to like the idea of having Severus in her life.

"Well, I don't know about the Burrow on Sunday, but I would enjoy spending the weekend and attending the wedding with you. I shall return here on Friday evening. Seven okay?" *And I don't plan on staying in the spare bedroom.*

"Yes, that's perfect. It will give me time to get off of work, come home, and cook for you. Does that sound good?"

"I don't know. Can you cook?" he needed.

"You will just have to come and find out."

He leaned in very close to her ear and whispered, "I am looking forward to it, my dear." *I do hope to be coming this weekend, indeed.* He smirked when she shuddered.

Gently cupping her face, he kissed her once more. After making sure her brain was foggy, he pulled back. "Until Friday."

"Right. Friday."

He smiled to himself, satisfied that he had so thoroughly addled her brain with only a kiss *Just you wait. I can do so much better!*

After he left, Hermione went to soak in the tub and began to ease the ache between her legs that he had caused. She knew she had wanted him and had been fantasizing about him, so when they kissed, it brought other images to her mind, which made her want more than kissing. She knew that pleasuring herself was not the same, but it would have to do. *For now anyway!*

Later, as she laid in her bed and thought of the evening's conversation, all she could think was *Friday cannot come soon enough. I know I will give in this weekend...and I*

would wager he knows it to. For some reason, that thought did not bother her in the least.

*** **

Greg and Luna sat exhaustedly on the couch. They had just finished moving his things into her house. "I am glad that's done!" Greg said. "Now, how about I take my best girl to dinner?"

"Would you mind terribly if we just ordered in? I am too tired to even move from this couch." Luna yawned while Greg laughed.

"No, love, I don't mind. What would you like? Pizza?"

"Yes, pizza sounds really good right now."

After Greg took care of the ordering, he went back to snuggle with his ladylove.

"Greg?" Luna asked.

"Hmm?"

"Do you think we are rushing into this marriage?" Luna looked up at him worriedly.

"Not at all. Do *you* think we are?" Greg was getting a sinking feeling in his chest.

"No, actually I don't, but I know other people will likely say that we are. I am just ready to begin my life with you. Are you upset I want to wait until after we are married to make love?"

Greg let out a relieved sigh. "No, I'm not. Don't get me wrong. I want you more than I have ever wanted anyone, but it's only a couple of days. I can wait for you, love."

"There's really no need for you to sleep in the guest bedroom. I want to wake up with your arms around me!"

Greg chuckled. "Um, if you really want to wait until after the wedding, then there is a definite need for me to sleep in the guest bedroom. I only have so much willpower, you know."

Blushing, she stammered, "Right. Sorry, but it's important to me. Thank you for being so understanding."

"I love you, Luna. There is nothing I would not do for you or give to you if it's in my power to do so."

Kissing him softly, she whispered against his lips, "I love you, too. So much."

Just as he started to deepen the kiss, there was a knock on the door. "Looks like our pizza is here." When Luna started to get up, Greg stopped her. "No, I'll get it. You just sit here and relax."

After they ate, they both got ready for bed. It had been a long day, and they were both in need of some sleep. Kissing her, Greg told her goodnight. He went to bed thinking that he only had a couple more days to wait, and then she would be his in every way. He went to dreamland a very happy wizard.

Christy's Notes: Up next: Luna and Greg get married, and Severus stays the weekend with Hermione! Draco gets his mysterious YLC letter.

Southern's Notes: I wonder what Draco and Ginny will do now? I hate that Snape refuses to let Hermione know about his whereabouts. I'm just a suspicious person though. Hehe! Greg and Luna are definitely moving too fast, but I doubt they'll have problems. Love at first sight anyone?

Moving Forward

Chapter 11 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****
<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: The Harry Potter universe belongs to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks go to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Eleven

Moving Forward

Ginny sat in the stands watching the team practice. She couldn't seem to take her eyes off of Draco. He truly looked magnificent to her while flying.

She couldn't help reddening while thinking of the night they had spent together. It had been the most erotic experience of her life. One that she decided she wanted to have again. Soon.

He had surprised her the morning after by asking her if she'd wanted to spend the day with him seeing some of the sights before they had to return to England. She couldn't remember having a better day. How she had managed to slip away to buy him a gift was beyond her. She'd regretted having to come home, but he had made her

feel better by asking her to dinner. They would meet later that evening, and she would surprise him with the gift then.

Ginny sighed, knowing that her family would not approve of Draco but not really caring. She briefly wondered if Mrs. Malfoy would approve of her and then immediately doubted it. *A mere Weasley would never be good enough for her precious Draco* She remembered the first ball when Draco had escorted both his mother and Pansy Parkinson. *She is probably the one Mrs. Malfoy sees her only son with. Not someone like me.*

Realizing her thoughts were making her melancholy, she returned her eyes to the Quidditch pitch. After about thirty minutes, George called an end to practice. Thankful she could return home and start preparing for her date, she hurriedly got up and started down the stands.

"I could use a good backwash," Draco purred as seductively as he could into her ear while he wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Oh, no, you don't, mister! I have to go make myself beautiful for tonight!" Ginny tried in vain to get out of her lover's tight grip.

"Well, you are already beautiful, so isn't that a moot point? I have missed you," he said quietly.

"It's only been one day, Draco." Turning her head to look into his stormy eyes, she conceded by saying, "I have missed you, too."

"Why don't we skip the restaurant and find someplace to order room service and eat in bed?" he asked in between kisses on the back of her neck and ear.

His hot breath on the back of her neck made her tremble. She really couldn't think when he was doing that. "I think I could be persuaded," she relented. "However, I still need to ready myself."

Draco sighed, mock dramatically. "If you must. I will get us a room at the Three Broomsticks as soon as I shower. I will be waiting, so don't dally."

"Excuse me, but I have never *dallied* in my life, thanks!"

Laughing, he told her, "I will leave a note for you at the bar with our room number." Leaning down, he kissed her gently, surprising her. His kisses up until then had been mostly passionate and slightly rough. Ginny found that she liked the tender kisses just as much.

"See you soon, Ginevra," he said as he walked towards the locker rooms. "And remember, don't dally!"

Rolling her eyes, but still smiling, Ginny Apparated to the Burrow to make herself as beautiful as she could. She couldn't wait to make love with...no, shag...Draco again. The only problem was that, to her, it was making love. She was afraid to think of what exactly it meant to him.

*** **

Hermione had just sat down to write the accepted and rejected parchments when there was a knock at her door. "Enter!" she called.

Mr. Wimple came in and greeted her warmly. Hermione was surprised to see him, as he usually only came on Mondays and Fridays. First, he'd stopped by the day before to inform her of Mrs. Nott's arrest and now again today. She had no idea what the reason could be for today's visit, but she doubted she would like it.

"Hermione, I have arranged a business luncheon at the Leaky Cauldron for you today at noon with a Nichola Dimov. He is a Durmstrang graduate...a few years ahead of you I believe. You need a researcher to help you. You're getting too far behind trying to do all this work on your own. Since you will be the one that works with the new researcher, I have decided to allow you to do the hiring."

"But, sir! I don't have time to go all the way to Diagon Alley today! Look at all these requests," she said as she waved her arm over her desk.

"That is exactly my point. You have got to have some help." When she started to object again, he merely shook his head. "I will not take no for an answer, Hermione. You will also have another interview today at four o'clock with a Daphne Greengrass. Hogwarts graduate. She looks to be about your age."

Hermione sighed. She vaguely remembered Daphne from Hogwarts. They had graduated together. Daphne had been in Slytherin. "Fine, Mr. Wimple. Now, if that is all, I have got to get these parchments written and sent to you for approval."

"Very good, dear. I will check back with you in the morning, and then you can tell me if one of those two will suffice or if I need to find somebody else. Will that do?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you. Have a nice day."

"I do believe I have been dismissed," he said jovially. "You have a nice day as well."

After he walked out of her office, Hermione laid her head on her desk and began to gently bang it on the hard surface. *Why me? I have too much to do! I want to clear my desk before I leave tomorrow! Is it not his job to do the stupid interviews?*

Resigned to the fact she had no choice in the matter, Hermione began writing letters.

*** **

Severus was very frustrated. After he had gotten back to the castle the night before, he had been too worked up from wanting to sink himself into Hermione to sleep, so he had gone to work on the Wolfsbane alterations in his private lab.

After going over his notes and making a few calculations, he discovered something unusual, but he instinctively knew it was the missing piece. He actually needed *silver* cauldron. He was going to have to make a trip to Diagon Alley during lunch. He had a free period directly after lunch, so he could take his time to find the right one.

He wanted to work this out as much as he could tonight because as of the next evening he would be staying at Hermione's for two nights in a row. *will finally have her! I know she wants me just as much as I want her...I will just have to make sure she realizes it as well. Separate bedrooms indeed!*

Chuckling to himself, he stopped in front of the doors that would take him into his first class of the day: second year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Mentally preparing himself for the dunderheads, the dreaded Potions master opened the door with a bang and smirked inwardly as each student jumped at the sound.

"I trust that each of you has read your chapter and that you are ready to begin your Swelling Solution?" he asked as he flicked his wand and a list of ingredients and instructions appeared on the blackboard.

As the students looked nervously at their Potions professor, he barked, "Well? What are you waiting for? Begin!"

Suddenly, there was a scraping of seats and the sound of students heading for the supply closet. Severus sat down at his desk and began to think of all the ways he could seduce his little paramour. *Let the games begin!*

*** **

Hermione had known within fifteen minutes of the luncheon that she would not be hiring Mr. Dimov. He was only looking for a job to hold him until the new Quidditch season started, and then he would be training under Viktor Krum. Nichola had thought that because of her acquaintance with Viktor, Hermione would immediately hire him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dimov--"

"Nichola, please," he told her as he smiled his most charming smile.

Hesitantly, she said, "Nichola. I must apologize, but I was looking for someone more long term."

Taking her hand, using all the charisma he could muster, he said, "Surely we could work something out? Hire me now, and find a standby for when I am gone. I could... make it worth your while."

Thoroughly disgusted, Hermione started to jerk her hand from his when she heard a very familiar voice behind her in a tone that made the hairs on the back of her neck rise.

"Well, well. Quite a cozy little lunch we're having." Looking towards Nichola, he drawled, "I don't believe I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance? I am Severus Snape."

Nichola visibly paled. He'd heard of the Hogwarts Potions professor and his demeanor. "Nichola Dimov at your service, sir. And my lovely companion is Miss Hermione--"

Infuriated, Severus glared at him and said, "I know *your companion* very well. There is no need for introductions." Turning to an upset Hermione, he said, "Could you please give me your definition of exclusive?" He folded his arms across his chest in a defensive manner.

"Severus, I promise that this is not what it looks like!" Suddenly realizing that her hand was still in Nicholas' grasp, she jerked it back, knocking her drink over in her haste.

Raising an eyebrow in a disbelieving arch, he said, "I would love to hear the explanation for this cozy little rendezvous," he waved his arm over the table, "but I haven't the time. Perhaps *if* I see you again, time will not be an issue. Good day." He did have the time, but he had to leave before he would do something that he'd regret.

As he turned to walk out, Hermione jumped up from the table to catch him. "Severus! Stop!"

Turning around to face her, he said between clenched teeth, "I really haven't the time, *my dear*, nor do I care to hear your false excuses right now." He turned to leave once again.

Grabbing his arm just as he walked out the door, she said, "Regardless of how angry you are, you *will* hear me out, even if I have to follow you back to Hogwarts."

Pointedly looking at the hand that was grabbing his arm until she released it, he relented. "Fine, Hermione. Explain so that I may leave."

"Well, you see, Mr. Wimple set up this *business* luncheon. He seems to think I need help in the research area because my request forms are really piling up. He told me that because I am the one who will be working with the assistant, I could do the hiring of the people he selected."

"I see. Well, congratulations on your new assistant." He turned to leave once more.

"Oh, you insufferable man! I did not hire him! I had just finished telling him that he would not be suitable for the job, and he was trying to... charm his way into the position when you happened upon us! I was getting ready to put him in his place, thank you very much. AND! Might I add that had *you* not been so insistent on us not telling each other of our whereabouts, we could have avoided this entire scene. I would have owed you earlier to let you know."

When all he did was stare at her, she said in a quivering voice, "Do you have no faith in me at all then? Do you actually think that I would have lunch with some random man the day before I was to be with you? For the weekend no less?" When he made no attempt to answer her, Hermione threw up her hands in aggravation and turned to leave, wiping the tear that had fallen off her cheek.

This time, Severus grabbed her arm to stop her. Taking a page out of his book, she looked down at his hand and back up into his eyes. He reluctantly released her, quietly saying, "I apologize. When I walked in, the first thing I saw was you sitting there holding some man's hand." Sighing, he turned from her. "Hermione, I am not used to this kind of relationship. I will have to learn as I go, no doubt making mistakes along the way. I will admit that not wanting us to let each other know where we would be and who we would be with was perhaps not a good idea."

You think? "I agree. Do you think that if we are to be out...especially with someone of the opposite sex...we let the other know?"

"Yes, I think that we should." He ran an impatient hand through his hair. He could not believe he had been so jealous! He'd not been that jealous since Lily Evans and James Potter started dating. Hermione seemed to bring out feelings in him that he wasn't aware he could still feel.

Taking in his annoyed expression, Hermione laid her hand on his arm again, this time to try and calm him. "Severus, it's okay. Really." Suddenly smiling, she said, "Well, it looks as if we have just had our first official fight as a..." She had started to say *couple*, but she was unsure if that is what he considered them to be.

"Yes, so it would seem," he murmured, aware that she'd felt unsure labeling them as a couple. "I say that we will have to have a proper make up session at your flat tomorrow night."

"Oh, yes," she agreed. "Right and proper." She turned to face him and put her arms around his neck. Standing on her toes, she whispered into his ear, "But let this hold you until you get there." Rising as far as she could, she placed her lips on his...gently at first, slowly letting her passion build until she felt as if she could devour him right there on the street.

Gently pushing her back, hardly believing he'd actually kissed her in such a manner in public, he told her, "Keep that up and I will take you to a room upstairs now, and I would not be able to do you justice with the amount of time I have left." Barely grazing her cheek, he said, "Until tomorrow."

Watching him walk away, Hermione sighed, and having completely forgotten about her lunch companion, she went back to her office to do as much as she could before she had to meet with Daphne Greengrass. Luckily, that meeting would be held in her office.

*** **

Ginny had just put the finishing touches on her makeup when she noticed an official owl pecking at her bedroom window *Odd, that. I wonder why he didn't just go to the kitchen?*

She opened her window, and the owl flew to her dresser and held his leg out. She looked around for an owl treat; she usually kept some on hand for Pig, but she told the disgruntled owl he'd have to go to the kitchen, as she was out. He hooted once and sat where he was. *Oh! He must be waiting for me to reply.*

As she glanced down at the letter, she noticed **Yenta Livery Company** on the outside. "Holy shite! I'd almost forgotten about this. Damn, damn, damn!" Opening the letter with shaking fingers, she read:

Miss Weasley,

We are very happy to inform you that we have found your match! Your compatibility percentage was an all time high at ninety-seven percent!

We suggest you make haste and set up an appointment as soon as possible. You have until the end of February to respond; after that deadline has passed, your

questionnaire will be null and void. You will have to repay to resubmit.

We suggest you do not miss this unique opportunity! Don't delay! Please owl us at your earliest convenience to set up your meeting time and place with your match.

Thank you.

The YLC

"Well, I have to set up a meeting directly. I will just wait to speak with Draco about this after I see what happens," she said aloud to herself, nervously twisting the parchment as she thought.

After a few moments, she went to her desk to get a quill, parchment, and some ink. She quickly wrote a reply, saying she was anxious to meet her match as soon as possible, and then sent the owl on his way. Ginny decided to put it out of her mind for now and to concentrate on her evening with Draco. *I wonder what it would take to convince him to fill out the parchment?*

*** **

Draco was sitting on the bed with his back against the headboard in room 307 of the Three Broomsticks. As he awaited Ginny, he decided to read the *Daily Prophet*. His reading was disturbed by an owl tapping at the window. *What the bloody hell? How did that stupid owl know to come here for me? Unless Mum...*

Sighing, he got up to allow the owl to enter. He was taken aback when two owls flew into the room. He took the scroll off the first one and smirked when he saw **Yenta Livery Company** on the outside of the parchment. *Well, no wonder Mum sent the little bugger here.* Opening the letter, he read:

Mr. Malfoy,

We are very happy to inform you that we have found your match! It is very rare, but your compatibility percentage was an all time high at one hundred percent!

We suggest you make haste and set up an appointment as soon as possible. You have until the end of February to respond; after that deadline has passed, your questionnaire will be null and void. You will have to repay to resubmit.

We suggest you do not miss this unique opportunity! Don't delay! Please owl us at your earliest convenience to set up your meeting time and place with your match.

Thank you.

The YLC

"One hundred percent? I don't believe that." Throwing the parchment onto the bed, he went to the other owl to take the second parchment. Thinking that it had been from his mother, he was surprised to see **Yenta Livery Company** on the outside of that one as well. *I thought they only sent the highest score first, and if that didn't work, they went from there. Odd.* Opening it, he read:

Mr. Malfoy,

We are very happy to inform you that we have found your match! Your compatibility percentage was an all time high at ninety-seven percent!

We suggest you make haste and set up an appointment as soon as possible. You have until the end of February to respond; after that deadline has passed, your questionnaire will be null and void. You will have to repay to resubmit.

We suggest you do not miss this unique opportunity! Don't delay! Please owl us at your earliest convenience to set up your meeting time and place with your match.

Thank you.

The YLC

"Well, it appears that you two are awaiting my reply, eh? Okay, hold on there. It would be best to get these meetings out of the way so that I can start trying to convince Ginevra to fill out one of their forms."

After filling out the forms and sending the owls on their way, he sat back down on the bed to finish reading the paper when it hit him. "Oh, Merlin! I actually want Ginevra to fill out a form! I want her to be a match for me! No, no, I don't. I want to shag her...nothing else!"

His thoughts were cut short, as there was a knock on his door. He jumped off the bed and hurriedly went to open the door before he caught himself. *won't do to appear too eager.*

All thoughts of aloofness went out of his head when he opened the door. There stood Ginny, all smiles and flushing as if she had hurried. Putting her arms around his neck, she whispered into his ear, "Hey, there, gorgeous. I have been thinking of those lips all day."

When she proceeded to devour his mouth, the only thought in his head was, *Home.*

Ironically, Ginny forgot all about the gift she had for Draco in the pocket of her robe.

*** **

Hermione was in a very good mood when she got home Friday evening. Daphne turned out to be exactly the kind of person Hermione thought she needed. After a few minutes of speaking with her, Hermione hired her to begin that following Monday.

Sighing, she went to put the casserole in the oven. She'd known that tonight was going to be *the night*, so she'd put together a quick casserole before she went to work so that she would only have to bake it when she returned home. She'd wanted to spend her time more productively--readying herself.

She remembered their argument the day before. At first, she'd wondered if she had forgiven him too quickly, but she also knew that had she walked into a pub and seen him holding hands with another woman; she would have been just as angry. After they had decided to be exclusive, it was only natural that he would have been upset. She was actually glad they had come to the agreement they had, so in the end, things had worked out in her favor.

Going into the bedroom to gather her things for her bath, Hermione noticed the letter from the YLC. Sighing, she held it in her hands and read it once more. *have waited long enough. I am going to reply right now and set the meeting up. I have no right to keep that poor man awaiting my reply.* After she'd written a response, she called her owl to her to send it straight away. She wanted it to get there before they closed for the weekend.

After the owl had gone, she went into the bathroom to ready herself. She filled the bath with fragrant bubbles and sank into them appreciatively, taking great care to shave her legs and underarms and to groom herself. She wanted everything to be as perfect as it could be.

She recoiled as she recalled Ron's harsh words to her the time they'd danced together at the ball. Even though he'd been mad at the time, she knew that there was some truth in what he had said: *That was hitting way below the belt. Perhaps you shouldn't go there, as you were never any good in that area in the first place. Too prudish for starters, but I don't have the time or inclination to go on.*

She'd always known that she was nothing special in that area; she'd hardly ever had an orgasm while shagging *The few times I did have one, there was a lot of foreplay involved. Perhaps I am too much trouble.* But still, she wondered why he'd called her prudish. She wasn't above experimenting some, although she didn't do everything he'd suggested.

Many times when Ron had wanted sex, or Oliver for that matter, she didn't feel like being left frustrated by lack of orgasm, so she'd perfected her fellatio skills. *Perhaps I should start with that tonight.*

Noticing the time slipping away, she quickly got out of the tub and dried off before putting on her favorite robe. She wanted to knock his socks off, so she'd decided on wearing black, lacy knickers and a matching bra. After applying her makeup, she slipped into a comfortable pair of slacks and a soft jumper. She'd decided not to put her shoes on, as she'd wanted to be comfortable.

Just as the last hair was in place, she heard a knock on the door. Taking a deep breath, she went to open it. "Hi! Come on in."

Bending down to kiss her cheek, he told her, "You look lovely, my dear."

Blushing, she told him, "Thank you. Make yourself comfortable, and let me pour you a glass of wine." Noticing his overnight bag, she nervously said, "Here, let me take that for you."

Glad to find her nervous, he simply handed her the bag. Sniffing the air, he hesitantly asked, "Um, Hermione? What is that smell?"

"What smell?" She sniffed as well and exclaimed, "Oh, no! I forgot about my casserole!" Dropping his bag, she turned and ran into the kitchen to look in the oven. "It's ruined," she said, not even sure if he'd followed her or not.

Chuckling, he told her, "It's all right. We can just order in."

Sitting down in one of her kitchen chairs, she slightly pouted, "It's just not the same. I wanted to cook for you. I just forgot all about the casserole when I was getting ready." Looking into his eyes, she told him. "I'm sorry."

"Please don't fret over it, Hermione. Come and sit on the sofa with me and have some wine."

Hermione slowly got up and followed Severus out of the kitchen. *Some perfect evening this is turning out to be!*

When they got to the sofa, Severus poured them both a glass of wine and sat down. Hermione sat down beside him and took a long sip. Looking at her, he asked, "Are you very hungry?"

Thinking of the night ahead of them and the knots forming in the pit of her stomach, she quietly said, "No, not especially."

"Come here," he invited, holding his arms out to her.

She went willingly into his arms, and he embraced her. "Hermione, please don't think you need to do anything special for me. I wanted to be here this weekend to spend some time with you, and that is what I am doing. It's enough."

Smiling up at him, she told him, "I didn't feel that I needed to. I just wanted to. I wanted to make this evening special for the both of us, and I have to say that it's feeling pretty special to me right now." She leaned into him and softly kissed his eyes, nose, and then finally, his mouth.

Growling with need, he said huskily, "It's time. I want you."

"Yes," she agreed. Standing up, she took his hand and led him to her bedroom. Shyly turning back to face him, she was surprised when he pulled her to him and began kissing her with wild abandon.

She stiffened at first from his intensity, but she soon found herself answering his kisses with equal demand *Just feel... Don't think!* She wanted to lose herself in this man and was well on her way to doing so.

Pulling away from her, he pulled her jumper over her head as she fumbled with her trousers. Very quickly, she found herself standing in front of a fully dressed Severus in only her black, lacy under things. When he sucked in a breath, she said, "Now, this is not fair at all. I think you need to catch up."

He started to walk towards her, and she backed away, taking off her bra as she did. "Uh, uh, uh!" she teased, wagging her first finger from side to side. "Tit for tat, dear heart. You have entirely too many clothes on!"

Her only response from him was that damn sexy raised eyebrow. He slowly started unbuttoning his shirt, enjoying her reaction as he did so. After he threw his shirt to the floor, he unbuttoned his trousers, letting them fall around his ankles. It was then that he realized he still had his boots on. *Damn! So much for being sexy.*

Seeing his dilemma, she walked to him, enjoying the way he looked in his black silk boxers and went to her knees before him. Picking up his foot to remove his boot, she looked into his eyes and said, "Allow me."

Fighting the urge to come right there from the sexiest sight he'd seen in his life, Hermione Granger on her knees before him in nothing but those sexy little knickers, he said, "By all means."

She slowly started taking off his boot, rubbing his calf as she did. She heard the barest of moans and removed the other one. Noticing the tent in his boxers, she gently rubbed him, enjoying the silk feeling against the palm of her hand. "What shall I do about this?" *Maybe if I dazzle him with my mouth, he'll not be too disappointed with the actual deed.*

Before he could answer, she gently started pulling his boxers down his legs. Once he'd stepped out of them, she looked at his penis *Oh, my!* Not overly huge, but the biggest one she'd had the pleasure of seeing. Seeing that he wanted her so much was most definitely a pleasure.

She very slowly licked the underside of his penis, slightly nibbling as she went, and then circled her tongue over the tip. Severus rewarded her with a moan and gently fisted his fingers in her hair to pull her face closer.

She closed her mouth over him, taking him in as deep as she could, sucking and moving her tongue as she slowly eased her head back. She brought her hand up to stroke his dangly bits, and he yelled, "Oh, shite! Sweet Jesus, Hermione!"

Gently pulling her head back, he advised, "You have to stop lest you want this over before it truly begins." *Damn, I don't even want to know where she learned that!*

Grasping her hand and helping her to her feet, he led her to the bed. "Now, it seems that you are the overdressed one."

"Hmm, I do believe you are quite right. Let me rectify that now." She hooked her fingers under the elastic of her knickers and slowly lowered them. *Shite! I didn't get to finish! Please, God, don't let him find me lacking. Let it be good for him... for us.*

After she'd stepped out of her knickers, he laid her on the bed. Rubbing her cheek with his hand, he lowered his head and began kissing her. He nibbled and sucked her lips before working his way to her jaw. He smiled as she sighed and arched her back, offering her sweet nipples for him to consume. He played with her right nipple and gently pinched it as he licked and suckled the left. She cried out when he found an exceptionally sensitive spot on the underside of her breast.

He began working his way lower until he reached his destination. Looking her in the eyes, he said, "As you said, my dear, tit for tat," before he licked between her lower lips and then circled her clit with his tongue. She wasn't as gentle as he when she fisted her hands in his hair, but he didn't mind. The joy of pleasuring a woman this way was something he rarely allowed himself to do.

She began bucking her hips, trying to pull his face closer still. Sensing her need, he inserted one finger, and then another, while continuously licking and nipping. When he softly sucked her clit, she lost herself and began chanting, "Severus, Severus," over and over.

After she'd come down, he quickly positioned himself over her. Lowering his head, he feasted on her mouth as he sank himself completely into her welcoming, moist, heat. For a moment, he couldn't move. Many words came to mind as he looked at her: *tight, complete, happiness, feels so good, want you, need you...*

"Severus, please!" she begged as she began moving her hips.

Oh, God, she thinks I am teasing her. How can I possibly tell her that I don't want to rush this? I don't want this euphoric feeling to end! He slowly began thrusting in and out of her, loving the feeling of their joined bodies. Before long, he could no longer control his body's natural urge to claim what was his and began taking her with abandon.

He felt her walls trembling and knew she was close to completion again. Putting his hand between them, he massaged her clit between his first finger and thumb until he felt her insides clamp down on him, causing his release just after she did.

"Oh, Severus. I never knew it could be like this!" she said in between pants. "You are simply amazing!"

"I don't have the words to tell you what I am feeling. I have never... That is to say, I--" He stopped, realizing he was about to confess more to her than he wanted. *NO! It's too soon. Besides, one heart-stopping shag does not mean that it's... No! I won't even think it.* Except that he truly was feeling something. He just didn't know what exactly, how he felt about it, or what he was going to do about it.

Lying beside her, he pulled her back to his front and kissed the top of her head. As she nodded off, he thought about Greg and Miss Lovegood's binding and then the YLC match he was supposed to meet. *If she does not owl soon, I will have to contact them and demand a meeting!*

*** **

Hermione stood with Ginny at the bar watching Greg and Luna dance. The binding had been beautiful. Luna was a vision in white. Smiling at her best friend, she said, "You sure look like the kneazle that ate the rat! Anything you want to share with me?"

Ginny looked over and said, "I expect I look much the same as you. Am I correct in thinking I saw you arrive here with Professor Snape?"

"Yes, we came together." At Ginny's speculative look, she told her, "We decided to see each other... exclusively."

"Really? Professor Snape is actually going to see you and only you? Wow!"

"Well, there is no need to sound so surprised; I am a great catch you know!" Laughing at herself, Hermione asked, "What's going on with you and Draco? Don't think I haven't noticed the looks you two have been giving each other."

"Yes, there is something there; I just don't know what that something is yet. I mean, the sex is wonderful, but I wonder if that is all it is to him."

"I take it that it is more than sex to you then?" When Ginny hesitantly nodded that it was, Hermione told her, "Then, if I were you, I would talk to him about it and see."

"Oh, I plan to. It's just that this thing between us is all so new. I don't want to put the Thestral before the carriage. I get the feeling Draco is not a man to be rushed, ya know?"

Sighing, Hermione told her, "I do understand. I am dating Severus remember? I just don't want to see you hurt. I can see how much you care for him."

Before Ginny could reply, Luna and Greg walked up to them. "Ginny, Hermione, thanks so much for standing up with me!" Luna said.

"Oh, no problem," Hermione answered. "It was an honor! Greg, you take care of our Luna."

"No worries there. I plan to do just that."

"Aren't you two leaving soon?" Ginny asked. "Where are you going to honeymoon?"

Grinning, Luna told her, "I've talked Greg into taking me to America! I am finally going to get to see New York City! I have always wanted to."

"To be honest, I am looking forward to it myself," Greg admitted. "I just wish we had longer than a week, but that is all I could take off."

Suddenly, Greg felt a slap on his back. "Congratulations, Greg," Severus said as he placed an arm around Hermione's waist. Turning to Luna, he extended his greeting, "Mrs. Goyle."

Putting her hand over her mouth, Luna said, "That is the first time anyone has called me that! I am Mrs. Goyle!"

Laughing behind Ginny and startling everyone, Draco said, "I hope you are not just now figuring that out." He leaned down to kiss the back of Ginny's neck.

"Oh, hush, Draco," Ginny scolded playfully. "She is allowed to be giddy today of all days!"

Their shared laughter was cut short when an irate voice sounded behind the group. "What the bloody hell are you doing here *with* him?"

Christy's Notes: Well, things are moving along! Up next, Sunday lunch at the Burrow and a few meetings at the YLC. Oh, by the way, who is yelling, and whom are they yelling at?

Southern's Notes: Well, it's about time they start thinking about their letters and getting their letters. I see the paid YLC bloke "mucked" up, eh? Hehe!

The Perfect Match

Chapter 12 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****
<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: The Harry Potter universe belongs to JKR. I am making no money from this.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Twelve

The Perfect Match

The three couples turned around to see a very irate Ronald Weasley glaring at Ginny and Draco while purposely not looking at Hermione and Severus. He didn't want to argue with Samantha over Hermione again. They were just now getting back to normal.

Putting her hands on her hips, Ginny demanded, "Not that it's any of your business, but Draco is my date!"

Ron turned his glare solely to Draco, who smirked in reply. "Now, why would someone like you want to date someone like my sister, Ferret?"

Raising an eyebrow, Draco inquired, "Don't you think that she is good enough for me, Weaselbee?"

"On the contrary, I think she is too good. What's the matter? Was your pug-faced shadow not available?"

"RON!" Hermione had had enough. "This is neither the time nor the place for this. What's wrong with you?"

"ME? What's wrong with ME? What's wrong with YOU? Fawning all over that greasy git like some sort of scarlet woman!"

"That'll do, boy," Severus practically growled. "As I see it, it is no longer your concern who Hermione accompanies, and while I am certain you mean well, Miss Weasley is an adult and able to make choices on her own."

Knowing when to pick his battles, Ron simply said, "Fine. I will talk to the both of you at the Burrow tomorrow." Then he turned and stalked off.

"Well," Luna said, "I am glad that I will be in New York and not at the Burrow tomorrow!"

This caused everyone to laugh as she'd hoped it would, and the conversation started again.

*** **

Hermione sat at the dinner table at the Burrow slightly pouting. She'd wanted Severus to come to lunch with her, but he'd flat out refused. "Besides," he had told her, "I think with the breakthrough I've had with my calculations, I may be ready to start brewing the Lycanthropy cure this week. I want to stay here and work on it whilst you are gone. Before you go, however, I want to give you something to look forward to upon returning so that maybe your stay will be shortened."

After that, he'd led her to the bedroom and did indeed give her something to look forward to when she would come back. Just remembering the things he had done to her and caused her to feel made her quiver. *I am really going to miss Severus when he returns to Hogwarts tonight. Two days is not enough time to spend with him! Speaking of which, why am I sitting here at the Burrow when I could be spending more time with Severus? I need to go!*

Coming out of her reverie, Hermione heard Mrs. Weasley saying, "...and had Arthur and I known that you would choose Professor Snape, we never would have talked Gilbert into insisting you bring a date to those balls."

Shaking her head, not sure she'd heard correctly, she asked, "Excuse me? What did you just say?"

Every other conversation at the table stopped, all eyes turning to Hermione and Molly. Molly, realizing her mistake, tried to quickly cover her tracks. "Umm... That is to say... I simply meant that..."

"You mean to tell me that you, not the higher ups at the Ministry, forced me into bringing a date? How dare you!" Hermione was furious.

"Well, honestly dear, you needed a shove! You and Ginny both have been moping around for far too long and..."

"Now, hold on just a minute! Just because I haven't been discussing my social life with you doesn't mean that I don't have one!" Hermione couldn't believe the nerve of this witch.

Molly smirked. "Well, obviously you haven't seen anyone seriously or else you would have brought him by here."

Before Hermione could reply, Ginny spoke up. "Oh, and for the record, I have not been moping! Like Hermione, I've simply kept my dates to myself. However, I will be happy to bring Draco to lunch next week, as he is the man I happen to be dating at the moment."

Before anyone could comment, Hermione quickly added, "I tried my best to get Severus to come with me today, but he wouldn't budge. Now, if you don't mind, I think I will return to him. He is waiting for me at my flat... where he has been this entire weekend. Goodbye."

Harry started to choke on his drink, and Piper slapped him on the back. When Harry started to speak, he got a warning glare from his wife and decided not to say anything. *Besides, Ron will not keep quiet about this. I cannot believe Ginny is actually dating Malfoy! And, what is Hermione doing with the greasy git?*

As she was walking out, Hermione heard the uproar. No doubt they were yelling at Ginny for her choice in Draco. Hermione wasn't worried; she knew Ginny could handle herself. With thoughts of Severus, she quickly Disapparated home.

*** **

Monday morning found Hermione daydreaming instead of working as she should have been doing. Daphne was due to arrive soon, but she couldn't get Severus out of her mind. *I haven't felt like this in a very long time*, she thought as she sighed happily.

She remembered that after she had returned home Sunday, she and Severus had spent the rest of the evening in bed before he had to return to Hogwarts.

She thought of how he had simply hugged her before he left and how that hug had made her feel giddy for some reason she couldn't fathom. "I am going to miss you, Severus," she had told him.

"I know. I will miss you as well. I have Wednesday night off. Would you like to go out to dinner?"

"No, but I would love for you to come back here and order take out."

After they'd finalized their plans, he'd left, and she'd gone to have a leisurely soak in the tub.

Her musings were cut short when an official owl flew into her window. On the outside of the parchment, she read:

Yenta Livery Company

"Oh! This must be the time for my meeting!" She quickly opened her letter. *So, he wants to meet this evening? Good, the sooner the better.* Quickly grabbing a quill and writing her reply, she sent the owl on his way. Her only thought now was, *Is it too soon in our relationship to try to get Severus to fill out a form?* Laughing at herself, she said, "Of course it is, you silly witch!"

"Talking to yourself, Miss Granger? No wonder you need an assistant!"

Blushing, Hermione said, "Daphne! Please come in. I already have a list of ingredients I need researched. I have you a small office just across from mine. Go ahead and get settled, and I will bring your list to you."

Smiling, Daphne told her, "If you don't mind, I can just take the list with me. I want to jump right in."

"Ah, a girl after my own heart!" Handing her the list, Hermione said, "If you need anything at all, don't hesitate to ask me. I am very happy to have you here, Daphne."

"I am happy to be here. I wanted to thank you for this opportunity, Miss Granger. I won't disappoint you."

"Please call me Hermione. I have no doubt of your abilities. Do you know where our research area is located?"

"Yes, thank you. I will bring this list back as soon as I am finished."

"Okay, that's fine."

As Daphne walked out, Hermione tried to get her thoughts back on her work, but once again, all thoughts led to Severus.

*** **

Severus Snape sat in the Great Hall scowling into his breakfast. He missed Hermione, and that bothered him. He was not used to spending the entire weekend with one woman, but he decided that he would like to make it a habit with Hermione. That also bothered him.

It wasn't *Hermione* that bothered him; it was his feelings for her that did. He sighed, resigned to the fact that he was not interested in any other women. When he first agreed to be exclusive, he'd done it mainly because he didn't want any other men around her. Now, he began to realize that he didn't want to be around any other women either.

Suddenly, an official owl swooped to him with the morning mail. When he saw **Yenta Livery Company** on the parchment, he thought, *Good. This must be a response to the meeting time I requested.* Rather than opening his letter in the Great Hall, he left for his office.

He was pleased to see that the time was agreeable to the woman. He wanted to get this meeting over with *Hermione really needs to fill out a form. Not that I am ready for marriage just yet, far from it, but before my feelings get any more invested in her, I need to make sure we are compatible.*

Grinning, he started to think of one aspect where they were definitely compatible. When he started to feel a stirring in his loins, he quickly stopped that line of thinking. Noticing the time, he left his office to head to his first class of the day, thoughts of Hermione pushed to the back of his mind, but not completely gone.

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Ginny and Draco were both at practice when they received their owls. Draco received two, Ginny one.

George had just released the Snitch, and before Draco could kick off the ground, the Yenta owl flew directly to him. *Shite! I hope Ginevra doesn't see this!* Draco quickly glanced up at Ginny. He narrowed his eyes when he noticed she had gotten an owl of her own. Shrugging his shoulders, he thought, *Hermione must want to have lunch with her today.*

He had requested both meetings for tonight, an hour apart. He was happy to see that both witches had agreed.

Ginny was quickly opening her letter confirming her meeting for this evening. *Good, it's all set. Hopefully after this evening, I won't have to meet with any other men. Too bad it's not Draco I'm meeting tonight!* Ginny laughed. "Like Draco would fill out a form!"

See looked up to watch him fly, a sight she would never get tired of seeing. Due to her meeting that night, she would not be able to see Draco, and she missed him already. She couldn't remember the last time she had spent so much time with one man, but the youngest Weasley was enjoying herself immensely. She didn't want the feeling to end.

Ginny wondered how long it would take Draco to tire of her; although it didn't seem like it would be any time soon *One can only hope*, she thought as she sighed.

As Draco was flying, he noticed Ginny watching him with a dreamy expression. He wondered what she was thinking of, but then he smirked. He could well imagine. Hell, he could do more than imagine later on if he didn't have those two stupid meetings that evening.

It was as if he was addicted to her. He just couldn't get enough...didn't want to get enough. She had mentioned to him before practice started about going to eat Sunday lunch with her at the Burrow, and he didn't even think to refuse her. That in itself surprised him. If he was willing to go eat with a bunch of Weasels, then there was definitely something there.

Not that he minded. In fact, he quite liked the feeling. His only worry was if the feeling was reciprocated *Of course she feels the same. She wants me to have lunch with her family!* At that moment, the Snitch flew in front of Draco, and he started to chase it. Putting his thoughts of Ginny away for the moment, he sped toward his goal of

catching the little golden ball.

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Hermione arrived for her meeting twenty minutes early. She wanted to be in the room and waiting when the man she was supposed to meet entered. She had practiced her speech several times, wanting to be firm but not mean. As she started to pace, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," she said as she thought, *Here goes nothing!*

Severus knew he was early, but he wanted to get this meeting over with. He wished he had never filled out that bloody parchment. Damn it all to the devil and back! Why did he let Narcissa talk him into these things?

He had finished brewing the potion for the Lycanthropy cure on Sunday night; now, all he had to do was let it sit for five days. He'd decided that after it was properly tested he was still going to let Lupin try it first, as he did not want anything untoward to happen to Narcissa. All he had to do now was get this meeting out of the way so that he could concentrate on Hermione and his budding feelings for his little-know-it-all, who was not so insufferable any longer.

As he came to the door, room twelve, Severus took a deep breath and knocked. When he heard the soft, "Come in," he steeled himself and opened the door. When he walked into the room, the Potions master was so shocked that he couldn't even speak.

Hermione turned to the door as it opened. Gobsnacked was the only word to describe how she felt at that moment. "Severus? What are you doing here? Hang on! Did you follow me?"

"No, I most certainly did not follow you. I could ask the same of you, however. Why are you here?"

"It looks like we both have some explaining to do." Hermione was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

"So it would seem."

"Well, I am here because I filled out a form..."

"Why is it that you did not feel it necessary to inform me of this, Hermione? What are you hiding, witch?"

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione was flabbergasted. "Are you or are you not also here? I don't recall you mentioning this to me either."

"I came here to dissuade *my match* from thinking there was going to be anything more. When did you fill out a form? Are you looking for a husband? Do you wish to marry soon? What are your intentions?"

"For heavens sake, Severus! Slow down! I filled out a form the night we ran into each other at the Leaky Caldron... at Fred and George's insistence. They threatened to fill them out themselves if Ginny, Luna and I had refused. No, I am not looking for a husband *per se*, but it is nice to know that my time with you is not going to be wasted, as we apparently match. What about you? When did you fill out a form? Obviously, you are not looking for a wife."

Extremely angry, not caring if he was being unreasonable, Severus snapped, "No, I am not looking for a wife, and I have to tell you that I do not like being lied to, Hermione."

"Hold on right there. I didn't lie to you any more than you did to me. Why are you so angry?"

Why am I so angry? I wanted her to fill out a form, and she has done so. But why did she not mention it? Of course, I didn't mention it to her either! Why did you not tell me of tonight?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because, as I just said, I am not looking for a wife, and I didn't want you to get your hopes up."

"My hopes up? You think I am trying to... I see. It's fine. Maybe we should just leave. *He will never marry me. Not that I want a husband right now, but eventually... The only thing he wants is for us to be exclusive, but how long will that last? I really need to get out of here to think.*

Severus sighed, sensing her disappointment. He decided that he owed her the same courtesy she had shown him in explanation. "I filled out the forms the same night you did apparently, as did Draco and Greg. Narcissa was our enforcer."

"Severus, it's okay." Hermione was hurt by his reaction. It seemed as if he was disappointed it was *her* waiting in the room and not someone else. "I am just glad I didn't have to turn someone away."

"You never said why you didn't tell me."

This time, Hermione sighed. "Because I didn't want to scare you away by thinking I was husband hunting. I'm not." They stood there in an awkward silence for a few moments. Hermione was the one to break it. "Our compatibility rating was rather high, I think." She didn't know what else to say.

"Yes, it was. I was quite shocked by it to tell you the truth."

"Severus, we can just continue as we were, getting to know one another and such. I am going to let them know that I am happy with my match." As he looked at her with a raised eyebrow, she continued, "So they won't continue searching for me!"

"Right, I see your point. I will do the same. I do want to continue getting to know you Hermione. I enjoy your company very much."

Hermione smiled at him in a way that made his stomach tremble. "I also enjoy your company, Severus, and to be honest, there is nobody else I'm interested in meeting right now, as you know."

"I am happy with seeing only you. I like our previous agreement. I wish to remain exclusive."

Hermione cocked her head to the side. "Well then, I am exclusively yours," she told him jokingly, wanting to lighten the mood.

"I believe I will enjoy that. I know I have so far." Looking into her expressive brown eyes, he admitted, "Truly, Hermione, there is no one else I wish to be with right now." Severus was not exactly sure when he'd let this woman get under his skin, but he wasn't as repulsed by the idea as he'd thought he would be.

Inside, Hermione danced a jig. Outside, she appeared calm. This was just one step closer to what she ultimately wanted with this man...in the long run. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, I am. I wish to take you out to dinner."

"Okay, let's stop by the desk and tell the receptionist we are happy with each other before we go."

"Lead the way."

As they were exiting the room, Hermione could have sworn she saw the red hair of Ginny Weasley round the corridor ahead of them.

*** **

Pansy knew that her meeting time with Draco was not until seven. She wanted to arrive an hour early to set the mood. She had decided to make this meeting a romantic one. She planned to leave this building an engaged witch.

When the door slowly opened, Pansy turned, slightly annoyed her scene had not yet been set, but putting on a seductive smile nonetheless. "Drac..."

"Oh, excuse me," Ginny started, "I thought this was room seven."

"It is room seven! Look, Weasley, I don't know what you think you are doing here, but you need to leave. I am expecting someone."

"Pansy! Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but my parchment said to go to room seven."

"Oh, for crying out loud! Just take your stupid parchment and..."

"Ladies! There seems to have been some sort of mistake here." Draco said, looking at Pansy with apprehension and Ginny with amusement.

"Draco!" Pansy exclaimed. "Thank Merlin you're finally here!" Turning to Ginny, Pansy said in a dismissive tone, "You may leave now. Go to the desk and find out where you are supposed to be." *I'll be damned if she is going to ruin this for me!*

What in the world is Draco doing here? And for some reason, Pansy acted as if she was waiting for Draco specifically. I thought you didn't find out who your match is until you met them here! Ginny turned to Pansy with her fists on her hips, face contorted in anger. "Look, Parkinson, I don't know who you think you are! Maybe you're the one in the wrong place! Why don't you go to the receptionist?" *I can think of a few other places I would like her to go to!*

"Calm down, you two." As amusing as all this was, Draco knew that they needed to get to the bottom of this *I am not surprised that Pansy has filled out a form, but Ginevra filled one out? Interesting.*

Just then, the receptionist knocked on the door once and entered the room. "What is going on in here? I could hear you ladies all the way at my desk!"

Pansy started talking at once. Pointing at Ginny, she told the receptionist, "This woman is in the wrong place and refuses to leave." Turning to Draco, she asked, "Isn't that right, darling?"

Looking at Pansy in disgust, Draco said, "I don't think Ginevra is in the wrong place, Pansy, but I do think that you are."

Recognizing that an all out brawl was about to begin, the receptionist told the three, "Let me see your parchments, please."

They each handed her the parchments, although Pansy did so reluctantly. Suddenly, Pansy remembered that Ginny Weasley was supposed to have been Draco's true match. *I should have taken care of her before now. I should never have trusted Livingston to handle this.*

"Oh, dear, we do have a problem." The receptionist was looking at the three occupants nervously.

"No," Pansy said, "we don't. Please tell Mr. Livingston I wish to speak with him immediately."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"*Make it possible!* I demand to speak with him!"

"You don't understand, Miss Parkinson. Mr. Livingston received a package last week, and we have not seen him since. He is gone. We do have the Aurors checking into his disappearance, but as for now, he is not here."

Oh, no! This cannot be happening! That ruddy bastard took my money and ran. The stupid git didn't even fix Ginny Weasley's file. No worries, I see that will have to take care of that little harlot myself! What am I going to do? "Well, one of us is not supposed to be here, and I say it's her!" Pansy screamed as she pointed to Ginny.

"How do you know? Maybe you're the one who is not supposed to be here!"

"Enough! There is a simple solution. I will simply go to my desk and pull up each of your files." The receptionist turned to leave the room with Pansy fast on her heels.

As they walked out, Ginny turned to Draco. "So."

"So."

"Whom are you hoping for?"

"Between the two of you? Why, you of course." Draco smirked at the expression on Ginny's face.

"I think this was obviously a mistake. I'm going to go." Ginny couldn't quite mask the hurt in her voice. As she moved past Draco, he grabbed her arm.

"Don't go. At least wait until we find out who the true match is."

"I have it right here, Mr. Malfoy," the receptionist told him as she re-entered the room. "It says in the files that Ginevra Weasley and Draco Malfoy are at ninety-seven percent. Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy was only a twenty-nine percent match."

"Thank you," Draco said dismissively. As the door shut, he turned to Ginny and said, "Ninety-seven percent. I wonder how accurate it truly is."

"I don't really know, but from what I gather it's supposed to be very accurate."

"Well, the first parchment I received said that I am one hundred percent compatible with Pansy!"

"Well, as we've just found out, that was not correct. I think something is off there, too much of a coincidence and too high a percentage to just be a mix up. Besides, she acted as if she was expecting you." Ginny was positive Pansy was up to something.

Draco came very close to Ginny. "But what about us?" he asked. He didn't want to think about Pansy Parkinson right now. "Do you think ours is right?"

Breathing heavily, Ginny said, "It's almost too high to be believed, don't you think?"

"Yes," Draco agreed as he inched down to lightly brush his lips with hers. "Almost."

"What should we do?" Ginny whispered.

"Get married, of course," Draco whispered back.

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Surprise Wedding Of The Year!

Draco Malfoy, heir to the Malfoy fortune and son of deceased Death Eater, Lucius Malfoy, eloped Monday with Ginevra Weasley, daughter of Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts at the Ministry of Magic, after a meeting at the Yenta Livery Company.

Apparently, the couple...whose families are reputed enemies...has been secretly dating. When they fell in love, they decided to take a compatibility test. After seeing the results, which this reporter has learned was an all-time high at ninety-seven percent, they just couldn't wait for a wedding and decided to elope then and there...

Narcissa Malfoy threw the *Daily Prophet* down in a rage. She very seldom read the paper, but the picture of her son and the Weasley girl kissing on the front page caught her attention.

How dare he think he can elope with that girl and get away with it! Narcissa picked up the parchment needed to send a Howler, but then she thought better of it. "No, I have a better idea."

Walking to her fireplace, she grabbed a handful of powder. When her flames turned green, Narcissa stuck her head in and called out, "The Burrow! When the Burrow came into view, she yelled, "Molly? Are you home?"

Christy's Notes: I want to apologize for the long time in between updates. Real Life got in the way, and then my muse took a vacation. I promise the next update will not take as long.

Southern's Notes: I really enjoyed the Draco and Ginny portion of this. I can't wait to see what Pansy thinks, though, and I'm quite interested in what the mothers have to say to each other.

What Ails Us

Chapter 13 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****
<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR. I make no money from this.

A/N: Many thanks go to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Thirteen

What Ails Us

Severus stood in his lab, disbelief clearly on his usually unreadable face!*I've done it!*"Dear Lord, I have done it!"

Shaking with excitement, Severus started bottling the ultramarine liquid. If his calculations were correct, and he had no doubt that they were, he was bottling the cure for Lycanthropy. His first instinct was to contact Narcissa, and then he thought of Hermione. However, he needed to contact St. Mungo's as soon as possible.

When Remus Lupin began teaching at Hogwarts during Hermione's third year, Severus began brewing the Wolfsbane Potion for the bothersome werewolf. After a couple of months, Severus got the idea to contact St. Mungo's and offer to supply them with the potion as well since he was already brewing it. The extra Galleons came in handy at times.

As he had delivered the potion, he began to meet some of the afflicted that he had been helping over the past months. One wizard in particular, an Edward Fisher, who was one hundred seventeen years old, caught Severus' attention. He had lived with being a werewolf for nearly a century. When he'd discovered that Severus was aiming for a cure, he'd immediately volunteered to test the potion when ready, saying that if worse came to worse, he was ready to give his life. He was very, very tired.

After he finished bottling the cure, he threw some Floo powder into his flames and called, "St. Mungo's!" He wanted to find out how to get in touch with Edward, and St. Mungo's was the only place Severus could think of that would know where to find him.

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Narcissa sat at Molly's table sipping tea. This was only the second time she had been in the Weasley home, and Molly had never been in Malfoy Manor. At the end of the war, Narcissa had helped the Order when she'd realized that Lucius would willingly sacrifice their son for that madman.

She'd eagerly handed Severus pertinent information that the Dark Lord had only shared with a sparse few, Lucius being one of the few. This information had helped the Order prepare for the attack.

Only a couple of people were aware of Narcissa's assistance, which was the way she wanted it. Molly Weasley was one of the few, and they became, if not fast, somewhat reluctant, friends.

"Can you believe those two children of ours?" Molly asked, totally angered. "What were they thinking?"

"I have no idea! Draco especially knows better than this! A Malfoy marriage with no wedding? How ludicrous."

Molly slightly shook her head. "Narcissa, what is it exactly that you are upset about?"

"Why, them running off, of course. What in the world were they thinking?"

"Yes," Molly began slowly, "but what about them running off upsets you?"

Narcissa looked at her companion as if she had grown another head. "Molly, surely you understand that with Draco's position in society that there should have been a wedding of some sort? We are going to have to have a huge reception. There is nothing else we can do about the lack of a wedding ceremony now, so we will just have to be satisfied with the reception."

"A huge reception? What are you on about? Those two kids should never have married in the first place! Their backgrounds are entirely too different!"

Highly offended, Narcissa carefully sat her teacup down. "Apparently, the YLC disagrees with you, Molly. And from my understanding, those two have been dating." Narrowing her eyes, she asked, "Are you saying my Draco is not good enough for your Ginevra?"

"GINNY! She goes by Ginny! See, that right there only proves my point. She won't know how to blend in with your sort."

"My sort? What sort would that be, dear?"

"Now, don't go getting all uppity on me, Narcissa Malfoy! You know exactly what I am talking about." Leaning in closer, Molly whispered, "He was a *Death Eater*! Why, he tried to kill Dumbledore, for Merlin's sake! He used the Imperious Curse on Rosmerta! If it hadn't been for him, none of those Death Eaters would have gotten into Hogwarts to begin with! Ginny does not belong with someone like him. She is too sweet a girl. She belongs with someone like..."

"Harry Potter? Yes, I see how noble he was. He defeated the Dark Lord, I'll grant you that, and then he left the country and threw your daughter away like yesterday's rubbish. Why, he treated my old house-elf, Dobby, better than her!" As Molly started to shake her head, Narcissa held a perfectly manicured hand up. "I am not saying Draco is perfect." Molly snorted. "But, Molly, what would your Ron have done if some crazed person was threatening you? That is what was happening, you know. Draco thought the Dark Lord was going to kill me, his father, and him as well."

"Ron would have found another way! He, Harry, and Hermione..."

"Draco had only himself! Don't you see? He was only a boy with only himself to depend on as far as he knew. He had no noble father like your Arthur is to his children. No close friends that he knew *for sure* he could absolutely trust! You know that Lucius was going to kill Draco himself when he failed. *You know*, Molly."

Molly looked at Narcissa. "I am not disputing all that. I agree that the boy had some hard choices to make. However, I just don't see him with my Ginny. It won't work."

"It's done. They were married five days ago, they're off on some small holiday because of it, and there is nothing we can do to change that now." Narcissa was starting to get tired of Molly's 'holier-than-thou' attitude. "Sitting here brooding about it won't help matters. Molly, I truly want us to get along and to be a happy family. We will share a grandchild one day. Now, you can help me throw the reception to end all receptions, or you can continue to brood. The choice is yours."

Narcissa had to choke those words out. She truly wanted her son to be happy, and if Ginevra Weasley...no, Malfoy...was what it took to ensure that, then she would do or say whatever she had to. Besides, it's not as if she had to socialize with Molly and her family on a regular basis...

Molly didn't like this one bit. She didn't for one second believe that Draco and Ginny would be good for each other. She also wasn't fooled by Narcissa's nonchalant attitude, but she had to admit that the woman had a point. There really was nothing they could do about the marriage now. Folding her arms over her chest, Molly insisted, "I don't brood." Sighing with defeat, she told her new in-law, "I would be happy to help you plan."

The two witches put their heads together and began to plan.

*** **

It wasn't hard for Severus to find the modest home of Edward Fisher. Patting his pocket to make sure that the parchment was still there, he knocked on the door. Due to an earlier conversation he'd had with Hermione weeks prior, Severus had gone to his solicitor and had some legal documents drawn up stating that if anything happened to Edward due to this testing, the werewolf would not hold the Potions master responsible.

Edward was very surprised when he opened his door to see an unusually smiling Severus Snape on his porch. "Professor! It's good to see you. Please, come in." When Severus got settled and had a cup of tea in his hand, Edward asked, "So, what brings you by to see me?"

Unable to hold his happiness in any longer, Severus blurted out, "I think I've done it! I think I have completed the cure!"

Going pale, Edward simply said, "No." He hadn't let himself even think of that possibility. To finally be cured after all this time...

"Yes," Severus replied. "I wondered if you are still interested in testing it. The next full moon is coming up next week; we can do the test then."

"Yes, of course I am. I just can't believe that, after all this time, there could be a cure for me."

"Well," the Potions master started cautiously, "as I have said, it's not been tested. However, I am confident it will work."

"I am willing to find out, Severus. I have told you many times that I'm tired. If there is an end in sight, I mean to take it."

Clearing his throat, Severus pulled the parchment out of his pocket. "I need you to sign this waiver..."

Before the professor was finished, Edward stood to get a quill and some ink. Pulling the parchment to him, the werewolf signed it and handed it back to Severus. "I understand, Severus. It's fine. You just be back here next week during the full moon so that we can test this cure of yours."

"Don't you think St. Mungo's would serve us better? If something goes wrong, we will have more help there, more people who would know better how to deal with the situation."

"If you think it's best, then St. Mungo's is fine. I will see you then."

Severus could tell his friend was becoming tired, so he decided to take his leave. "See you next week."

As soon as Severus was outside, he Apparated to the Ministry of Magic. His class would be starting soon, but he had to share his good news with Hermione.

Hermione started when she heard a knock on her door as she was immersed in reading over her research on a new type of Doxicide that someone was trying to market. Assuming it was Mr. Whimple, she called out, "Come in."

As soon as Severus opened the door, he shook his head. The witch hadn't even looked up to see who was about to enter her office. After the threats and such that she had

received from Mrs. Nott, one would think she would be more careful, especially when her secretary had not arrived yet to screen her visitors.

"Is this a bad time?" Severus asked, delighted when she very nearly jumped out of her seat.

"Severus! What a pleasant and unexpected surprise! Come in." Hermione stood to walk around her desk to hug him. "Not that I am complaining, but what brings you by my office this morning?"

"I have some good news. Some very good news." Severus paused for a dramatic affect.

"Well? Don't keep me in suspense! What news?" Hermione folded her arms over her chest and tapped her foot impatiently.

"I think I have completed the Lycanthropy cure, Hermione!"

Gasping with surprise, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him hard. "Oh, Severus! How wonderful! I suppose we will have to wait until the next full moon to find out? What did Mrs. Malfoy say?"

Chuckling, he told her, "Slow down! Yes, we do have to wait until the next full moon. Mr. Fisher has agreed to test it for me." When she started to interrupt, he held up his hand. "Before you ask, let me assure you, he signed the waiver. I decided not to mention it to Narcissa until I know that it works for sure."

"I don't blame you. There is no need to get her hopes up if it turns out that it doesn't work. Although, I have every faith that *it will* work. I have faith in *you*, Severus. What would you say to an early celebration tonight? Just you and me for this initial one?" she asked as she nibbled his jaw.

Severus' chest tightened when she told him she had faith in him. He was feeling something for her that he couldn't quite name. Feeling himself slightly harden from her pleasing mouth, he pulled her closer to him and whispered, "Yes, I think a celebration is in order." When he remembered he had hall duty, he scowled and pulled away from her teasing mouth. "No, I can't tonight. Hall duty."

"That's right. I'd forgotten about that. It's your weekend to work, too, isn't it?" Hermione was trying really hard not to show her disappointment and frustration. It was hard to make time to be together with their work schedules.

"Yes," he answered irritably. "This is my weekend. And next week is the full moon. I will be at St. Mungo's with Mr. Fisher watching over the potions process during most of my free time." Severus was aggravated. This was the first time he had wanted to be with a woman as much as he could, but it seemed like something always came up to either shorten their time together or prevent them from being with each other completely.

Sensing his aggravation, Hermione tried to soothe. "Don't worry. We'll find time somehow. Perhaps Sunday evening we can steal a few hours."

"Yes, I am sure we can *steal a few hours*. Sounds great," he said sarcastically.

Frowning, Hermione looked at her lover. It almost sounded as if he was mad ~~at her~~. "Severus, I can't help our schedules or our living arrangements. You have obligations and so do I. I am trying my best to make myself available to you when you can arrange for us to be together. What more do you want from me?"

That was the question, wasn't it? What did he want...exactly? He wasn't sure. All he knew at the moment was that he wanted... more. More what? He couldn't say. Just... more.

Sighing, he told her, "I apologize, Hermione. I wanted to be with you, share my joy and excitement with you, and it seems like we need appointment books to arrange to be together. Sunday is fine. I have to go. My class is starting soon." He took her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly before walking out to Apparate back to Hogwarts.

*** **

Pansy Parkinson was sitting in the Auror department at the Ministry of Magic. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Tonks were both questioning her.

How could Draco press charges? I mean, marrying that spotty little weasel over me was bad enough, but to actually press charges? I wonder if the Dark Lord didn't cast one Crucio too many!

"MISS PARKINSON! Are you listening to me?" Tonks was becoming exasperated with the nonchalant attitude of this woman.

"Yes, I assure you that there is nothing at all wrong with my hearing. There is absolutely no need to bellow! I didn't know that paying for something you want is considered a crime. I would say it's merely... shopping."

"Shopping?" Kingsley asked in disbelief. "You paid to have an official document altered, Miss Parkinson. And in doing so, had you succeeded, you would have ruined the lives of two people, not to mention yourself."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. Witches and wizards have married without even using that blasted YLC! And honestly, can you see those two happily married?"

"It is not for us to see," Tonks told her matter of factly. "The point is that *those two* can see it, and both seem quite happy about it. But the main thing is that you have committed a crime, Miss Parkinson. Bribery. We have taken the matter before the Wizengamot, and they've agreed that you need to be punished with community service and probation. And a fine of one thousand Galleons, which is to be paid by the end of this month."

Pansy was seething. "I don't believe this! I will speak to the Minister about this!"

"Be our guest," Kingsley said, amused at her fury. "It won't help you get out of this, and you know it."

Rising out of her chair to leave, Pansy stopped at the door. Without looking back, she said, "We will just see about this!"

Hearing the laughter of the two Aurors as she left only added to her anger.

*** **

Draco and Ginny Apparated outside of Malfoy Manor full of apprehension. They decided to go see Narcissa first, as Ginny had more people in her family to deal with.

Putting his hands on her shoulders to reassure her, Draco told her, "You will be fine. Mum has been after me to get married, so I am sure she is pleased." He bent to kiss her forehead. "She will love you, Ginevra, as I do."

Frowning, Ginny said, "Your mother wanted you to marry someone like Pansy, Draco. Not someone like me. And the fact that we eloped without a word to anyone is not going to help our case. Although, it did seem like such a good idea at the time... What were we thinking?"

Laughing softly, he answered, "We were thinking that we wanted to avoid all the arguments and battles our engagement was sure to cause. I know we made the right choice, love. I would do it all again."

Barely brushing his lips with hers, she conceded, "Me, too. I will never regret marrying you. It's facing both our families that has me worried. I can't imagine what your mum will say, but there will be a lot of yelling when we go to the Burrow. I just want you to be prepared."

Squeezing her shoulders, he said, "I can handle yelling, my fiery temptress. Lest you forget, ~~am~~ Lucius Malfoy's son. Yelling was a way of life around here for a long time."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories. It's just... I want you to be aware that my family won't be happy and that they *will* voice their opinion."

"Ginny, I know this. I expect disapproval from your family. However, you should be aware of this. I won't apologize for marrying you...to anybody."

Raising an eyebrow, she said, "Well, you'd better not!"

"Okay, we have stalled long enough. What say you we go in and face my mum? She is expecting us, and I don't want to be late."

"Could you hide her wand first?"

"Ginny, she is not going to hex you!"

"I never thought she would, Draco. I thought she might hex you for marrying someone like me," Ginny said as her husband glared at her for even suggesting something like that.

"Enough, wife. Let's go in."

Bracing herself, Ginny walked into Draco's...and now her...home with some anxiety. She wasn't sure what her new mother-in-law would think of her, other than she didn't want her one and only son married to someone like her. Ginny sighed and tried to push those depressing thoughts from the front of her mind. She wanted to take in her surroundings, but her husband was walking too fast for her to enjoy the view.

"Draco, slow down!"

"Come on, Ginny! I don't want to keep her waiting."

So, he is more worried than he lets on. I don't know if that comforts me or scares me to death! Okay, okay! I'm coming."

When they entered the sitting room, they came to an abrupt halt. There sat Narcissa Malfoy having tea with the entire Weasley clan. Both newlyweds gaped in astonishment.

"Do close your mouths, dears. Gaping like a fish is highly unattractive," Narcissa drawled smugly. She was quite pleased with the plan she and Molly had come up with.

"Well, well, well," George started.

"What have we here?" Fred finished.

"If it isn't our little runaway bride!" Bill said, smiling like the wolf that he'd almost become.

Ginny chanced a look at both of her parents and cringed. *It's going to be a long afternoon*, she thought as she sighed.

Christy's Notes: A cure at last! It seems our favorite Potions master is becoming a little frustrated! Poor Ginny and Draco!

Southern's Notes: I can't wait to see how things are going, and I'm really enjoying that Snape realized he wants more and is feeling more. Lovely.

Adaptation Abounds

Chapter 14 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****
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Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR. I make no money from this.

A/N: Many thanks go to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Fourteen

Adaptation Abounds

It took a moment for the shock to wear off, but once it did, Draco remembered his manners. "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, welcome to my...our...home." Though he was nervous, he hid it well.

Arthur snorted. "We should have been invited into your home before this marriage occurred, Mr. Malfoy."

"Please, call me Draco, sir." After clearing his throat, he continued, "I apologize for marrying your daughter in secret, but I won't apologize for marrying her. I love her."

Ron jumped up. "Love her? LOVE her? How do you expect my family to believe that you honestly love her when all during school you..."

"Ron! Stop that!" Ginny exclaimed. "Is it so hard to believe that someone could actually love me? Besides, Draco was *your* enemy, not mine."

Turning towards his sister, Ron softened a bit. "No, Ginny, it's not hard to believe that someone could love you. You're an exceptional girl..."

"Woman."

Sighing, Ron conceded, "Woman. But if you think you will live 'happily ever after' with a bloody Malfoy, then you are sadly mistaken. *Malfoy*, Ginny."

"If I may speak?" Narcissa rose from her seat to stand beside her son and his wife. "At the risk of continuously repeating myself, might I point out that these two are already married? This is not a meeting to berate our newlyweds; we are here to discuss the party."

"Party?" Ginny looked at her mother, horrified. "What party? We don't really want a party, Mum."

"Oh, I see. So, the two of you would deprive us of witnessing your nuptials *and* having a wedding party for family and close friends? My **only** daughter, whom I have dreamed about seeing on her wedding day since the day she was born?"

Ginny and Draco both winced at that statement. Molly Weasley really knew how to lay on the guilt when she wanted to.

"Way to lay on the guilt, Mum!" Bill praised as if reading his sister's thoughts. Then, turning to the couple, he said, "It's true, you two. You should at least let them throw you a party."

Exhaling deeply, Draco caved. "All right. If throwing us a party will get everyone off of our backs and accepting this marriage, then by all means..."

"Glad to hear that, Draco." Turning to Narcissa, Molly said, "I think next week would be perfect. The gardens you have here are so beautiful, and with next week being the full moon and all, couples can walk through them for a moonlight stroll."

"Oh, yes, that would be so romantic!" Samantha said. Turning to her husband, she told him, "Ron, I don't believe we have ever had a moonlight stroll in a beautiful garden."

Nobody in the room noticed that Narcissa had gone deathly pale except Draco and Ginny. Her daughter-in-law quickly came to her rescue. "Oh, no, we couldn't possibly have the party next week! It's too soon. Perhaps the week after."

"What are you on about, Ginny? You know very well I can put a party together in that amount of time...less if I had to." Molly folded her arms across her chest, insulted.

"Of course *you* could, Molly," Narcissa calmly stated. "I'm afraid that it's *me* that couldn't possibly be ready in only a week's time."

Slightly mollified, Molly merely nodded. "Okay, fine. Two weeks then." Turning to her daughter, she snapped, "I will expect you and your mother-in-law to set up a time to meet with me. I'll need to know what foods you want prepared..."

"Whatever for? My caterer will handle all that nonsense," Narcissa said with a wave of her hand. "My florist will handle the flowers and so on. All we need to take care of is the guest lists and our attire."

Becoming angry all over again and feeling helpless and left out, Molly said through clenched teeth, "Well, if there is nothing for us to do except make a few Floo calls, then why in the world can't we have the party next week?"

Fred and George, who had been uncharacteristically quiet throughout the entire scene piped up after seeing their sister's distress. "Well, next week's practice will be exceptionally hard," Fred started.

"Too right," George continued. "We are playing Bulgaria after all."

Ron snorted. Turning to his brother-in-law, he said, "Practice all you want, you won't beat that team. Viktor Krum is the Seeker, you know."

Raising an eyebrow, Draco challenged, "Would you like to bet on that, Weasley?"

"Boys!" Authur said threateningly. "This is hardly the time or place for that."

"If it's my party, then why can't I decide when we have it?" Ginny wanted to know.

"Fine," her mother snapped. "Why don't you just let me know when it is, and I will just show up. Would that suit?"

"Mum," Charlie soothed. "It's only a party. Does it really matter when we have it?"

"Don't try to placate me, Charlie Weasley! I have had no say at all...none...over any decision my only daughter has made in this travesty of a marriage! Did she talk to me about Draco? No. Did she share her hopes, her dreams about the man she loved? No. Did I have even one inkling that she was even considering marriage? None! I feel right deprived, I do."

"Travesty? You think my marriage is a travesty? I can't believe you just said that! How dare you? You come into this home, berate us, offend his mother by putting down the name Malfoy, and now insult us personally about our choice? Now, I understand you are upset about not seeing the actual wedding, but I will not have you...or anyone for that matter...belittle what is between Draco and I. We love each other; can't you people see that?" Ginny threw up her hands in exasperation.

"You think I am merely upset? Ginny, love, I am devastated! This is one of the most important things in your life, and you have excluded those who love you."

With tears running down her cheeks, Ginny went to her mother and wrapped her arms around her. Molly didn't return the embrace. "I'm so sorry, Mum! I didn't mean to hurt you or anyone in our family. We didn't know ourselves we were actually going to get married until we got the YLC results back. When we met at the YLC office..."

"Hold on right there," Molly said as she help up a hand. "You mean to tell me this marriage was even more spur of the moment than we originally thought? Are you pregnant, Ginny?"

"No! I am not pregnant! I love Draco!"

"Molly, I think we should all just calm down," Narcissa started. "This is getting us nowhere. This should be a happy time for our children, but instead, it's becoming a living hell."

"Well, we agree there," Molly said. "I wish I would have never agreed to ambush the kids here to begin with. I should have talked to my daughter alone, like I had first planned to do. I have been hurt by all of this, and arguing about it is getting us nowhere. Ginny, I will talk to you later when we have all calmed down some." Turning to her husband, she asked, "Arthur, are you ready? Boys? Let's go." Molly felt she had to leave before she broke down.

Giving Ginny reassuring pats and hugs, her brothers left by Floo to head to the Burrow. The last thing Molly and Authur heard as they departed was Ginny quietly sobbing. After they left, Draco turned to his mother with a hard expression on his face.

"Well, whose brilliant idea was this?"

"You will watch your tone, young man. I am still your mother." Turning to the newest Mrs. Malfoy, Narcissa told her, "I would like to thank you for insisting we not have the party next week. I assume Draco has told you of my... affliction?" At Ginny's nod, she continued, "Good. That would have been hard to hide with you living here. I would

also like to apologize for today. I thought it would be easier for all concerned if we could get the first meeting out of the way. I had no idea your mother was still that upset. She seemed fine last time we spoke and agreed to coming here."

"It's okay. I never thought she would react so harshly. I mean, I knew she would be upset, but I had no idea she would be *shurt*. It kills me that I've caused her this pain."

"I'm sorry, love. If we'd only known, we could have been better prepared." Draco once again shot his mother a hard stare.

Sighing with defeat, Narcissa said, "I am going to retire to my room. Draco, I have had your rooms prepared for you and your wife. Goodnight."

As Narcissa walked out, Ginny looked up into her new husband's eyes. "Take me to bed, Draco. I need at least some good memories of my first night in my new home."

Smirking, Draco told his wife, "Gladly." Then he quickly picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. Smacking her playfully on her bum, he said, "Let's go make some memories, wife!"

*** **

Hermione was adding the finishing touches to her makeup, getting ready to go to Hogwarts to see Severus. She thought Sunday would never come! Severus had been extremely busy most of the week, and she had hardly been able to see him. She sighed with happiness. Things were slowly but surely falling into place for her and Severus.

She hadn't nagged, whinged, begged, cried or pleaded. She had demanded nothing of Severus and had gone along with each of his suggested meeting times...most of the time. When he'd left her flat or she had left his rooms after love making, she didn't try to make him feel guilty for not staying with her the whole night. She could tell sometimes by the way his arms tightened around her that he wanted her to stay, and if the buggler would just give in and ask her to, she would be more than happy to oblige him, but he never said a word. She simply didn't want to offer incase he denied her. She supposed it boiled down to a battle with pride.

Not that she was a doormat by any means. If she had something to say, she said it. If she had somewhere to be, she went, even if it caused Severus to have to wait on her or not see her at all for a time. If she didn't agree with something her lover said, she told him. Hermione just didn't fall into that clingy, I want to be with you all the time, don't leave me category, even though she wanted to spend the night in his arms and be with him more often.

Hermione wanted Severus to feel secure in this relationship and not pressured. He was already starting to complain of the lack of time he got to spend with her this past week, so she knew that he wanted more. It wouldn't be long until he thought of marriage...she was sure of it...especially when they started doing things with Greg, Luna, Ginny, and Draco.

She thought back to her conversation with Ginny earlier. Her best friend was so distraught at the thoughts of hurting her mother, but Hermione wondered how Ginny could not have known how this elopement would affect Molly. Ginny was her only girl out of seven children. It was almost a given that Molly had planned for Ginny's wedding day ever since she was a small girl.

Shaking her head, Hermione felt bad about not being able to have the party some night this week. Even though there was no getting around that, it seemed that either Narcissa or Ginny thwarted every other suggestion or plan that Molly made. Really, what would it have hurt to let her cook a few things? She'd bet anything that Molly Weasley could do just as well as any caterer. And why not let her Transfigure a few decorations or use some of her flowers?

Glancing at her clock, Hermione hurriedly grabbed the package on her dresser and went outside to Apparate to Hogwarts and her love...although he had no idea that he was her love, just yet.

*** **

Severus sat in front of his fireplace, watching the fire and brooding...although, if anyone had accused him of brooding, they would've gotten hexed. He was thinking about Hermione Granger.

He had never been in a serious relationship with a woman before and found he didn't care for the way it made him feel. He hardly ever went an hour without thinking of her. Whenever he had an idea or theory, he wanted to share it with her, and if he received any kind of news...good or bad...she was the first person he wanted to tell.

It was disconcerting to realize that he actually *wanted* her to stay the night in his bed and to hold her during the night. Why didn't the stubborn woman ever ask to? He had given her hints that he didn't want her to go, but she never seemed to *say* anything! He wasn't about to ask only to hear some flimsy excuse. He hadn't actually spent the entire night with her since that first weekend that they were together in her flat because of conflicting schedules and the fact that she never asked.

Thinking that it would be nice to read the *Daily Prophet* over breakfast and discuss the contents with her troubled him. But the final blow came when he realized that he would rather be with her on his days off this week than see to Mr. Fisher. Of course, he would never skive off his duties that way, but the mere fact that he wanted to troubled him. He had finally come to the realization that he had actual, deep-rooted feelings for Hermione.

At the same time, he had to wonder what she felt for him. He knew she wanted an exclusive relationship, but that hardly meant she had the same deep-rooted feelings he did. It was obvious that she cared for him. She showed him this in many little ways, but how much?

There was many times this past week that he wanted her just to Floo to him, though he never asked her *toWhy did she never just stop by?*A few of the other women he'd dated would have done just that. He never thought of the fact that Hermione knew how important this breakthrough was to him and was trying to be supportive and give him the time and space she'd thought he'd needed.

His scowl became deeper as he thought of her other reactions to him. She never tried to cling to him, which he was actually glad of, he was a man who needed space, but he wondered still why she didn't.

But this past week, he thought she had shown a bit too much nonchalance about their relationship, and that bothered him most of all...that she could show disinterest, while he wanted to cling, beg, and whinge about the lack of time they spent together. True, he had warned her that he would be busy, and she had done nothing really but give him the space he had claimed he'd wanted, but did she have to be so understanding about it? "Well, it stops now!" he grumbled aloud. If she could show indifference, then by God so could he! His mood became even darker.

The first thing Hermione noticed when she walked into his room was that Severus was in a very bad mood*Oh, no! I hope nothing is wrong with the cure!*

Walking over to him and placing a kiss on his cheek, she said, "Hello, Severus, all right?"

"Yes, I am fine. Why wouldn't I be?" he snapped.

Taken aback at his brisk reply, she told him, "No reason, you just seem upset." Wanting to change the subject and perhaps put him in a better mood, she continued, "I have a surprise for you." She then pointed to the package she had sat on the table as she walked over to him.

"What is it?" he asked moodily.

"It some of that gurdyroot you have been trying to get but can't seem to find anywhere! I had a client fill out a form to grow it some time back since it's so hard to find, and when he was approved, I asked if he could spare some." Hermione was beaming with pride.

"Thank you," was his only reply.

Confused by his behavior, Hermione moved to stand directly in front of her pouting lover. "Tell me what's wrong, baby. I want to help." He scowled at her for calling him 'baby,' but remained silent and choleric, crossing his arms over his chest and staring into the fire.

Toeing off her shoes, Hermione straddled him and put her arms around his neck. When he slightly stiffened, she started to get worried *What on earth is the matter with him? What could I have done to cause this reaction?*

She started rubbing his neck while lightly kissing his jaw and said softly, "My, you are very tense. Come and lie on the bed, and let me give you a massage before dinner. You have yet to experience the magic of my fingers!"

"Is that right? Magic fingers, eh? Well, tell me, *baby*, how many men have experienced them?" Severus knew that was uncalled for, but at the moment, he didn't care.

Abruptly, Hermione stood. "Okay, that came out of nowhere. I don't know what has put you in this mood, but I do know I don't want to be the recipient of your hurtful remarks."

"Going then, are you? Indeed, it seems to not bother you at all that we have hardly seen each other this past week or that we won't see much of each other this coming week. It's almost as if you don't care whether you see me or not."

"Now, that's just ridiculous! First of all, I didn't say I was leaving, I said I didn't care to be the recipient of your hurtful remarks...and I don't! Second, of course I care! I miss you terribly when I don't get to see you." Seeing his disbelieving look, she said, "I am going to hate this coming week, but I do understand how important this breakthrough is for you. I want to support you in every way that I can. It seems as if you are deliberately trying to pick a fight with me."

Starting to feel like a rotter, he said, "You do support me, Hermione." Sighing, he said, "I must admit that I am quite nervous about this upcoming week." He didn't feel like fighting with her anymore.

Softening a little at his admission, though realizing there was more to his bad mood than that, she said, "Come, lie down, Severus. Let me work out these kinks for you." *Perhaps if I loosen him up a bit, he'll tell me what's wrong.*

He stood wordlessly and followed her to his bedchambers. When he started to lie down, she stopped him. "Strip down to your boxers."

Raising an eyebrow, he started the task of unbuttoning his robes. When he was in only his boxers, he lay face down on the bed. When she started to straddle his back, he told her, "Your turn. Strip down... as much as you wish."

Chuckling, she decided to play along. She knew it would be more comfortable in only her bra and knickers in any case. After she'd undressed, she straddled him on his lower back and began to rub and knead his back and shoulders, pleased with his groans of appreciativeness. Sliding further down, she began to caress his legs and feet. When she finished, she told him to turn over.

Once he'd turned, she started with his feet and slowly moved up to his thighs. From the tent in his boxers, he was enjoying his massage immensely. To his disappointment, Hermione bypassed his erection...the thing he wanted massaged the most at the moment...and went for his chest and arms.

When she had moved up his body enough that he could do so, Severus grabbed her hips, molding his erection to her body. "I think you skipped a place ~~to~~ *baby*."

Hermione looked at him and raised an eyebrow. *He is never going to let me live that down.* "Oh, do you have a place that needs more attention? Someplace that... hurts... a little more than the others?"

Thrusting a bit, he said, "Oh, yeah, I have a place that hurts very badly, but you need to remove your knickers to ease this ache."

"Is that so? Well, my sole intention of bringing you in here was to... How did you put it? Oh, yes... ease your aches, so, by all means, lets get these knickers off." Raising off him and standing by the bed, she slowly eased her knickers down. "Would you like me to remove your boxers? As you like to say, tit for tat."

"I would, yes. I want to get a thorough massage." After she had removed his boxers, she straddled him once again, this time directly on his groin. Rocking just a bit, she bent down to gently kiss him, forgetting all about dinner. "I have really missed this, Severus."

"Indeed. I have as well." Tightening his hold on her, he pulled her down more firmly and deepened the kiss, allowing his tongue to invade her mouth. Lifting his hands from her waist, he found her bra-clad breasts, discovering that the bra made her even sexier. He raised his head and wrapped his lips around her nipple, enjoying the sensation of the lace on his tongue. She moaned when he tested her readiness with his finger.

Deciding that he couldn't wait any longer and would rather save the foreplay for later, he positioned her over him and thrust home *Home*. Being inside Hermione felt like coming home.

Looking into his eyes, Hermione locked her hands with his and started to move slowly. Sensing that something in the dynamics had changed for the better, she wanted this moment to last. "Severus," she whispered, and he expertly flipped her to her back without missing a stroke.

Becoming still, he leaned down and kissed her once again, enjoying the feeling of being inside her and feeling her tremble beneath him. When he started moving again, she moaned in pleasure.

All too soon, he started to feel the familiar tightening, so he lowered his finger to her small bundle of nerves and deftly rubbed the way he knew she loved. After he felt her stiffen and sigh, he let himself go, murmuring her name.

Slipping out of her, he pulled her close. "I have some time before I need to be at St. Mungo's. Stay here with me awhile. We can eat before I go."

"Nothing would please me more," she agreed. "I really wish I could spend the night in your arms more," she told him, kissing his nose, "and making love again in the morning light." She was immediately horrified she'd let that slip. *So much for not making him feel guilty.*

Pleased with that admission, he said, "I find myself wishing that as well."

Smiling up into his eyes with relief, she teased, "Well, we will just have to see what we can do about that then, won't we?"

"Indeed."

As Hermione drifted off, Severus pulled her closer. He made a decision at that moment. After the busy next week was over, he was going to talk to his lover about making a more permanent commitment, and then he would know where she stood.

Christy's Notes: Well! Ginny and Draco faced the wrath of their families and survived, although I think Ginny sees now how (and why) she hurt her mother. Severus seems to know what he wants, but can't figure out what Hermione wants. This fic has almost come to an end... Some of Greg and Luna in the next chapter!

Southern's Notes: I was wondering what happened to the Goyles and thought maybe they'd been abducted by fanfic aliens. Hopefully things will be resolved soon!

Hey guys! Southern_Witch_69 and I have started a new story, Coerced Salvation, and it's right here at ThePetulantPoetess!

Although it may not seem like it, it will end up being a HG/SS. Have a read and let us know what you think! Thanks!

Worth the Wait

Chapter 15 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

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Chapter Fifteen

Worth the Wait

The following week was hectic for everyone. Ginny had her hands full trying to juggle two very domineering witches...who both wanted their way in everything. After Molly had calmed down some, she put all of her attention into the reception.

Ginny felt ashamed to admit it, but she was almost glad that this week was the week of the full moon and that Narcissa couldn't participate too much in the planning. She did, however, leave very specific instructions written down...not only for Ginny and Draco...but the house-elves as well.

The final straw came when Molly came down from her ghoulish-infested attic and presented a box for Ginny to open. Her mother was almost shaking in excited anticipation. Wearily, Ginny untied the strings and opened the box. Molly mistook her gasp of horror for pleasure.

"Aren't they just lovely, dear?" Molly all but beamed.

"Um... Well..." Ginny was at a loss of words.

"They belonged to my great-grandmother and have been passed down through the generations. Don't you remember them from my wedding photos?"

Actually, Ginny *did* remember them. After another involuntary shudder, she turned to face Molly. "Mum? These are wedding robes. They would be too much for only a reception, don't you think?" Ginny asked hopefully.

"No, actually, I don't. It would give me great pleasure if you would continue the tradition and wear these. Knowing Narcissa, it will likely be an extravagant affair, so I am of the opinion that these would be just fine."

Ginny's heart sank as she looked over her mother's shoulder at her annoying twin bothers, barely holding in their mirth at their only sister's obvious discomfort. Looking at the hideously out of date and not too attractive robes, Ginny conceded. "Okay, Mum. I will wear them... to please you."

Watching the display angered Draco. He was tired of the amount of guilt that was being thrown towards him and his bride. Suddenly, inspiration struck. Casually walking over to his prankster brothers-in-law, he whispered so that only they could hear, "Either you two find a way to destroy those robes, or I will purposely lose the game against Bulgaria."

Identical shocked faces stared disbelievingly at Draco. "You have *got* to be joking!" George all but yelled.

"Ssh!" Draco admonished. "They'll hear you! No, not joking at all. I am tired of your mother making my wife feel guilty and ashamed. We are agreeing to this party for our families, but I draw the line at that... that... thing she generously calls robes."

Fred snickered. "What do you propose we do, mate?"

"I don't really care what you do, or how you do it, but you make sure those robes are not fit to be worn. Tonight."

"Tonight?" they gasped in unison. "Are you mad?" Fred demanded.

"Completely nutters," George agreed.

Smirking evilly, Draco said, "I may be, but either you do it, or I will become blind to small golden balls with wings."

Slapping Draco on the back, George grinned. "Not in the family a month and already blackmailing us."

Fred wiped a fake tear. "You make us proud, brother...very proud."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Don't worry about sending me proof. I am sure your mother will let us know just as soon as she does. Now, if you two don't mind, I think I will take my wife shopping to buy the robes of her choice and out to lunch."

Fred and George huddled together, wondering what experimental thing they were going to do. They almost felt bad about rendering the robes unwearable, but seeing as how these robes made the ones Ron wore to the Yule ball fashionable, they felt they would be doing their family a great service. But then again, they didn't want to hurt their mum by destroying her wedding robes...that just seemed too cruel. Suddenly, Fred got an idea.

"If she can't find them, then Ginny can't wear them!"

"Too right," George agreed. "Indeed. I think the best place would be the attic in our shop."

"Agreed. She will just think she misplaced them in all the fuss, and Ginny will get out of wearing them."

The twins bided their time, and when Molly went to the kitchen to prepare lunch for Arthur, they grabbed the robes and Disapparated.

*** **

Severus had never been so happy to see a weekend in his life. The potion was a complete success. Mr. Fisher had made a complete recovery, seemingly without any ill effects. After he had stopped by Hermione's to celebrate, he went straight to Narcissa's to tell her the good news. She immediately sat and wept with gratitude.

Despite the fact that this past week had been full with the testing of Mr. Fisher, he and Hermione had made time to spend one night together. It seemed it was becoming harder and harder to watch her leave after such encounters.

And, truth be told, it didn't bother him now as it had been. He was becoming used to the idea of her. He didn't want anyone else, and for once, it didn't disturb him. Actually, he was beginning to be pleased by the notion. To him, devoting oneself to one person physically, and yes, he could admit, emotionally, was becoming quite rewarding. Those thoughts made him smile.

He looked on his desk and, seeing the invitation, remembered the Malfoy party. Severus rolled his eyes. He hated these social things. Hermione, however, was looking forward to it. He smiled once again. They'd decided that he would stay the weekend in her flat again. Finally, they both were off once again for the whole weekend. *Thank God she hired Miss Greengrass!*

Deciding he wanted to clear his desk so that nothing would hinder his weekend, the Potions master sat down and got to work.

*** **

Greg and Luna came home from their honeymoon to a shock. Apparently, Ginny Weasley and Draco Malfoy had gotten married while they were away. "It's really *not* that much of a surprise, is it, Greg? I mean, they were already dating."

"True, but I never thought I would see the day when Draco Malfoy married a Weasley."

Putting her hands on her hips, Luna asked, "And just what is that supposed to mean? Ginny is more than good enough to marry Draco!"

"I never said she wasn't, Luna. I said I am surprised *Draco* thinks she is. Although, I do admit to wondering at times if he didn't care for her more than he let show."

"Ginny never confided in me, but I could tell she really cared for him." Sighing and putting her arms around her husband, Mrs. Goyle said, "I think it's wonderful! Now if we could find someone Hermione could fall in love with and marry!"

Chuckling, her husband told her, "You think because you are so happy, everyone should be. It's a nice thought, but somehow I can't see Hermione agreeing to us finding a husband for her. Could you?"

"No, not really. She is too stubborn and independent. She is seeing Professor Snape now anyway, and I have a feeling there. I just wonder about him, you know? He's not the sort of man to tie himself down with one woman."

"Well, he hasn't been, that's for sure," Greg agreed. "But I think the right lady could help him along. They seem to be a lot alike and have much in common, I think."

Starting to nuzzle his neck, Luna said, "Hmm. Yes, I agree." Then she stood on her toes and started nibbling his jaw.

When she found that special spot that drove him wild, his eyes rolled up into the back of his head. Suddenly, Luna found herself lifted in his massive arms and carried to their bedroom. When he'd laid her gently on the bed, he started undressing. Smiling, Luna started undressing as well.

"Hurry, Greg. I want you."

Feeling his blood boil, Greg fought for control. His wife was such a tiny thing compared to him. He didn't want to hurt her. Coming to the bed and resting gently on top of her, Greg started slowly teasing her mouth with his. Losing herself in the sensation, Luna wrapped her arms around his neck and lifted her hips, trying to ease the delicious ache he seemed to be able to put there with hardly any effort.

"Patience, love. We'll get there."

"No. I don't want slow and easy this time, Greg. I want hard and fast...take me! Take me without holding anything back."

"Luna..." Greg was unsure. He wanted to do just what she was begging him to, but what if he was too rough with her? He didn't want to take that chance.

Moaning and trembling with need, Luna assured him, "This past week has been the best of my life. Our lovemaking was beyond wonderful. But, Greg, I need you to possess me. Do you understand? Hold nothing back... Please."

When she slid her hands down to his bum and pushed as she thrust up, he couldn't help it. He slammed into her powerfully. She shrieked from the swiftness of it and then wallowed in the pleasure.

"Yes... Yes! Take me, Greg."

Thrusting even harder, Greg slipped his hands under her hips and lifted her higher so that he could sink further into her. His actions were rewarded with a long satisfied groan. Greg began thrusting in earnest. It had been a very long time since he had taken a woman this powerfully. Not missing a beat, Luna began to meet him, stroke for stroke.

He could feel that completion for him would come soon due to taking her so hard and fast, and he wanted to take her with him. Twisting his hips with each thrust, Greg moved one hand from under her hips and began to massage her clit furiously. *Come, come, come*, he chanted in his head, trying to mentally command her to let herself go.

Suddenly, Greg could hold back any longer, and he came with a long satisfied moan. He was thankful that his release triggered hers. Breathing heavily, he rested his forehead on hers. "That was absolutely brilliant, love. Thank you."

"No," she told him, purring like a cat. "Thankyou. The pleasure was all mine." Laughing, they both settled down for a nap.

*** **

Narcissa was walking on air. *He did it...that brilliant man! Not that I had any doubt, but I didn't think it would be done so soon!* Just the thought that this time next month she would be cured of this awful infliction made her spin happily. It had been five long years, and she'd felt that she had suffered enough.

So happy was she that she'd failed to notice Draco angrily sitting at the desk in the study when she walked in. Narcissa hadn't mentioned anything to Draco just yet. She

wanted to tell both him and Ginevra during dinner later that night. Walking to look out the window, she sighed happily.

"Well, if you don't look like the Kneazle that ate the rat. Why so happy? New profits coming in to increase your Gringotts account?" Draco was furious.

Turning around quickly, Narcissa exclaimed, "Draco! You startled me! What are you on about? What new profits?" He was sitting at the desk, going over the books and papers looking livid.

"Don't lie to me, mother!"

"That is enough, young man. You will not speak to me in that manner."

"I will speak to you in any manner I wish. I don't like being lied to, especially by those who claim to love me."

Looking confused, Narcissa said, "All right. Tell me what has you so upset, and I will do my best to set things right, if I have indeed wronged you in some way."

Holding up an official piece of parchment, Draco said, "Is this how I got my position on the team, Mother?"

Recognizing what he was holding, Narcissa went as pale as Moaning Myrtle. "No! I swear I had nothing to do with that!"

"Nothing to do with it? Damn it! You are Fred and George's silent partner! You arranged for this, didn't you? DIDN'T YOU?"

"Draco!" Ginny scolded as she came running into the study. "Stop that bellowing at your mum right now! What's the matter with you? I could hear you all the way down the hall."

"Guess who the silent partner of your brothers' little Quidditch team is?"

Looking back and forth between mother and son, Ginny put a hand over her mouth, and her eyes widened. "No. Narcissa?"

"Right in one," Draco drawled. "So, she is the reason I got the Seeker position."

"That is absolutely not true, Draco. I had nothing to do with that! Will you please just calm down and listen to me?"

Draco simply raised an eyebrow. Before he could speak, Ginny interrupted. "Yes, Narcissa. Go on."

"When I noticed the increase in Quidditch sales, I went to the Weasley twins. I had heard them talking once at an Order meeting saying...well, joking really...that they would love to own and manage a team. We talked, worked out the pros and cons, and I decided to invest. I don't think I need to tell you how profitable it has been. The only stipulation the boys had was that they chose the players, as they felt I would not be qualified for that, to which I agreed. Draco," Narcissa pleaded, "I had no idea they had even contacted you until you had gotten the invite to tryouts. You have to believe me, son."

Draco wasn't sure what to believe. "Okay, Mother. I will take your word for now. However, if I ask the devil duo and they tell me that hiring me was a stipulation..."

"It wasn't. I swear."

"Fine." When Draco started to leave the room, Ginny looked unsure as to what to do. She didn't know if he wanted her to follow him out or if he would rather be alone to think on things.

Narcissa took the problem out of Ginny's hands when she called to her son. "Draco, if you would wait one moment? I have some news." She figured she'd better not wait until dinner as she'd planned in case he didn't show.

"What is it?" Draco snapped, obviously preferring to leave.

"Severus' cure worked," Narcissa calmly said. "This time next month, I will be cured of Lycanthropy. It's over, Draco. I won't be a burden to you any longer!"

Draco and Ginny both rushed to her side. Draco took his mother in his arms and held her tightly as he buried his face into her hair. "You were never a burden to me...never! I love you, and I am so, so happy!"

With tears running down her face, Ginny held on, too. "Oh, Narcissa! This is the best news! Now, we have two reasons to celebrate!"

Smiling mischievously, Narcissa told her daughter-in-law, "Give me a grandbaby, and we can make it three."

Not saying anything, simply laughing, Ginny and Draco held on tighter and silently thanked Severus Snape from the bottom of their hearts.

*** **

Two weeks later found Severus and Hermione sitting at the dining table of Luna Goyle. The Malfoys were also in attendance. Luna was very excited, as this was her first time entertaining.

They were all laughing and talking about the wedding party they had attended the week before. "It was a lovely party! I had a wonderful time, Ginny!" Luna gushed.

"Yes, I did as well," Hermione agreed. "Your robes were gorgeous! That copper color really looked terrific on you. Oh, and Luna, you were practically glowing! Must be married life!" Hermione looked slightly wistful.

Severus noticed this, but chose not to comment. He had been noticing that look in her eyes since they'd arrived. She would look from Ginny to Luna and smile either wistfully or sadly. It made his chest ache.

"Well, you should have seen what Mum wanted me to wear. Her wedding robes, which are ghastly."

"The ones in her wedding photos?" Hermione asked.

"The very same," Ginny replied.

"Well, how did you get out of wearing them?" Greg wanted to know.

Draco smirked. "I took care of that for her. I threatened the twins that I wouldn't play against Bulgaria if they didn't make it so that Ginny wouldn't have to wear those robes."

Luna gasped. "Draco! You didn't!"

Severus smirked. "That, ladies and gentlemen, is Slytherin cunning at its finest."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Right, and taking care of the problem was Gryffindor courage."

Everyone laughed and began to talk about various things that happened during the party, how good the food was, and how lovely the decorations were. A good time had been had by all, even Severus, much to his surprise.

"I'm just glad it's over! Now maybe they will leave us be," Ginny told them.

"Oh, not a chance!" Draco predicted. "They are already talking about grandchildren."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "No, not yet. I want to wait a couple years, at least. Five would be ideal, I think."

Hermione laughed at her friends' predicament. "Right, I can really see that. I say you two will have a baby sooner just to keep Molly off of your backs! What say you, Luna?"

Everyone got quiet due to the extreme blush on Luna's face. "Well... I dunno... I think that people should have babies when they feel the time is right for them."

Severus looked from Luna to Greg. "Is there something you two wish to tell us, Greg?"

Greg looked at Luna for her reaction, and when she slightly nodded, he told them, "Luna is expecting. We made us a baby on our honeymoon!"

"Wow, you two sure don't allow grass to grow under your feet, eh? Are you sure you are ready for this, Luna?" Hermione asked gently.

This question angered Luna. "Regardless, I am expecting! We had not planned on it happening so soon, but we both agreed not to use any contraception."

"I'm sorry, Luna. I wasn't trying to imply anything." Hermione felt like she had taken all the joy out of her friends' announcement. That was the last thing she'd wanted to do.

"No worries, Hermione. I am very moody these days. It was a question I am sure most will think, if not ask."

Greg wanted to lighten the mood and for his friends that he thought of more than family to be as happy as he and Luna were. He said, "I wonder when the weird cravings will start?"

Everyone laughed. "Not for awhile, I expect," Ginny answered.

Hermione looked at her two best friends and noticed how happy and content they both were. And... settled *If only Severus... No, I am not going there tonight. I am going to keep my spirits up and have a good time.*

She had started to do just that when Luna spoke up. "So, Hermione, did you get any matches for a potential husband from the YLC?"

Hermione gasped in a breath and started to choke on her chicken. Severus patted her back with amusement. "Um, yes, I had a match."

After she said nothing else, Draco huffed and asked, "Well? Who was it?"

"It doesn't matter, Draco," Hermione told him testily. "Let's just drop it, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am! Sorry!" Draco mocked.

"Enough," Severus said to the group at large. He didn't want Hermione to be upset when he went with her to her flat after this dinner party.

"We apologize, Hermione. Luna is just a happily married woman, so she thinks all single people should wed."

"Nothing wrong with that." Ginny winked. "I love being married." She turned and kissed Draco soundly. "Even if it is to Malfoy here."

"Watch it, Ginevra; you're a Malfoy now, too!" Draco reminded his wife.

"So I am!" she readily agreed.

Severus watched Hermione watch the little scene with longing in her eyes.

*** **

Later that night Severus lay in the bed, watching Hermione getting into her nightgown. "Hermione?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you happy with the way things are?"

Looking slightly confused with his blunt question, she uncertainly replied, "Of course I'm happy, Severus. Why? Are you not?"

Severus looked at her intently. He knew that she wanted more, but refused to say it. He thought it was a pride thing at first, but now he wondered if she was afraid of rejection. He did have quite a reputation, and he did tell her he did not want anything more. Perhaps it was a mixture of both pride and fear.

"No, not really. And to be honest, I don't think you truly are either."

Hermione deliberately put the brush she'd been using to brush her hair down on her dresser. Turning to him, she said, "Don't tell me how I feel. If you want to know something specific, ask me, and I will be happy to answer. What are you getting at, Severus?"

"I believe I did just ask you specifically, and you lied to me."

"Oh," she said throwing her hands in the air, "now you're calling me a liar! What's this about?"

"It's about us and if you are happy with the way things are now! That is what *specifically* want to know!"

Chewing her bottom lip, she quietly asked, "Why do you ask that?"

Severus literally growled. "Because I want to know, Hermione!"

"I see," she said and turned her back to him while she picked the brush back up to continue to brush her hair. "Is this your way of looking for a way out of this relationship?"

Severus was dumbfounded. Had the woman not noticed any changes at all in him in regards to her? Did she actually believe that he wanted to end things? "Why on earth would you ask me that? Have I given you any indication that I wanted to end things?"

"No, not up until tonight, but if you don't want to end things, then why all the questions about if I am happy or not? Why say you aren't?"

"Because I truly want to know if you are happy with the status of our relationship."

Turning back to face him, she asked, "Do you want to start seeing other women again?"

"Hermione," he said in exasperation, "no, I don't want to see anyone else. Would you please stop answering my questions with questions? Just answer me."

"I am happy with you, Severus."

Severus smiled then. "Yes, but does our situation please you?"

Slightly still confused, she answered, "I don't want to see anyone else; nor do I want you to."

Okay, now we are making progress... "How deep do your feelings for me go?"

"Severus, what's going on? Really, why all these questions?" she demanded.

"Because I want to know these things, Hermione. Is it too much for a man to ask the woman he is involved with how she feels about him?"

"No, I suppose not. How do you feel about me?"

Now was the time, Severus decided, to spell things out for her...once and for all...knowing she wouldn't confess her feelings first. "What would you say if I told you that I think I am in love with you?"

Tears pooled in her eyes, but she didn't let them spill over. "Are you asking hypothetically or actually?"

"I want to know. I love you. What do you have to say to that?"

Smiling, she said, "Only that I love you, too."

Opening his arms, he commanded, "Come here. I would like to be holding the woman I love when I first tell her that I love her."

She put the brush down that she'd forgotten she was holding and went into his arms. "This is my favorite place, you know."

Smiling, he told her, "I have decided I want to change things some."

Raising her head from his chest to look into his eyes, she asked, "Change things how?"

"I was thinking of something more permanent."

Furrowing her brow, she said, "But, Severus, we're already exclusive... More permanent would mean..." She suddenly gasped and sat up to look directly into his eyes.

"Exactly, love. Exactly."

Christy's Notes: Well, this is it! Only an epilogue left! I am so, so sorry about the long wait between updates! I personally hate that myself when I am reading a fic I really like! I promise the epilogue will not take as long!

Southern's Notes: It's about damn time! I love it when things come together.

Epilogue

Chapter 16 of 16

Six single people are coerced into filling out a form that searches for one's perfect mate. What if the outcome isn't to their liking... at first? This is my take on LOTM's YLC Challenge over at WIKTT.

****Runner up for round six of the Endurance category on the Multifaceted FanFiction Awards****

<http://multifaceted.creative-musings.com/winners06.htm>

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR. I make no money from this.

A/N: Many thanks go to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69.

This is my response to LOTM's YLC challenge. For rules see the end of chapter one.

Chapter Sixteen

Epilogue

Hermione looked around the chapel excitedly. It was tastefully decorated with white teacup roses and lilies. Nothing too overdone, but enough to look elegant and charming.

She was still too shocked to believe this was really going to happen—that there was actually going to be a binding today. The chapel was slowly but surely filling.

Looking around at all the people, she spotted Ginny and Draco, still smiling lovingly at each other after five years of marriage. Every so often, Draco would lightly touch Ginny's slightly bulging belly. She was finally giving Molly and Narcissa the grandchild they had been longing for.

Luna and Greg were sitting with their two boys, happy and content. Both boys had Greg's bulk but Luna's brains—or her odd sense of reality that seemed to work for her and her family.

Suddenly, the music started, and everyone rose to watch the bride nervously walk herself down the aisle. Hermione looked up into her scowling husband's face. "Really, Severus, this is a happy day! And just think, your cure had a major part in making all this happen."

"Please," he said disdainfully, "don't remind me. Narcissa and the werewolf? What on earth is that woman thinking?"

Rubbing his arm consolingly, Hermione told her husband, "Right. And just four years ago, all of my friends were asking me what was thinking." She grinned at his dark look. "I am only teasing you, love. Remus will—is already—making her happy."

Severus watched Narcissa walk down the aisle. She did look radiant in her pale blue gown. Her eyes were fixed on Lupin, and she never looked at anything else.

Remus and Narcissa had bumped into each other at St. Mungo's six months before. They were both helping other werewolves who had come from other countries and were just learning of the cure available in England. They went to lunch together and started seeing one another after that.

At first, Draco had been very upset, but to Narcissa's surprise and with the help of his wife, he began to accept the relationship. And with Draco accepting it, Severus didn't have any choice except to follow suit. However, that didn't stop him from keeping his true thoughts to himself or confiding them to Hermione.

"I would imagine Lucius is rolling in his grave," Severus told his wife. "Serves him right, but I hate to see Narcissa suffer."

"Oh, she's hardly suffering," Hermione whispered to her husband. "Now, be quiet! The ceremony is starting."

Watching the binding made Hermione think of her mother, who had wed the previous year. It was hard on Hermione at first, but she soon realized that her mother had to live her life, and Muggles didn't have nearly the time to live theirs as wizards had.

At Narcissa's insistence, the reception was a lavish affair. Along with friends and family, a few heads from the Ministry of Magic attended as well. Thankfully, Hermione thought, she and Severus were seated with the Malfoys and the Goyles.

"How are you feeling, Ginny?" Hermione inquired. "Can you feel the baby much?"

"Oh, yes, more than ever now! Only three months to go. I can't believe I actually waited this long."

"That was stubbornness," Luna commented. "You just wanted to make both your mothers wait and have a baby in your own time frame."

"True enough," Ginny agreed. "But I think we timed it perfectly. Don't you, love?" Ginny asked as she turned to look adoringly at her husband.

"Yes, I do. I must confess, however, that I am quite anxious to meet my son!"

"Or daughter..." Hermione teased. She knew Draco really wanted a son.

"Doubtful," Draco told her. "Malfoys generally have sons first. But don't worry, my fiery temptress," he said, turning back towards his wife, "I would love a daughter as much as a son."

Smirking, she told him, "I have no doubt of that."

"How about you two?" Greg asked Severus. "Any plans for kids in the near future?"

Hermione blushed. She had a suspicion that she was with child, but until she was sure, she didn't want to say anything. They had been trying for nearly a year, but had chosen to keep it from everyone until they conceived.

Severus noticed the blush, but didn't say anything. "We shall see," was all that he would admit to.

When the music started and the bride and groom had their first dance, all three couples went to the dance floor. Luna was happy that childcare was provided. Otherwise, she and Greg would have had to leave right after the binding.

As soon as they were on the dance floor and in relative quiet, Severus asked Hermione, "Is there something you want to tell me?"

Hermione sighed. She had really wanted to be sure before she said anything. "Well, I am not sure or anything, but I may be pregnant—"

"Yes, I thought as much."

"How? I haven't said a word!"

"Hermione, my dear, we have been married for four years. I know when you've missed a cycle... or two." He smirked when she narrowed her eyes.

"Why haven't you asked me?"

"Because I knew you would tell me when you were certain. I have a feeling, however, as I can see the subtle changes in you."

Hermione smiled lovingly at her husband. "I feel it, too." She held him close and looked over to where Ginny and Draco were dancing and whispering softly to each other. Luna and Greg, dancing to their right, looked just as happy.

It's so hard to believe that eight years ago Ginny, Luna, and I thought that our lives were over. I did love Ronald, but that love was nothing compared to this... Nothing. When I thought that my life had ended, it actually was just beginning.

And who would have thought that this man would be the man to make it all happen? I never thought I would be attracted to, much less in love with, all that snarkiness, but I wouldn't trade Severus Snape for anything in this world. And to think, the girls and I have Fred and George to thank—which they remind us constantly.

She turned her head to look at Remus and Narcissa. She was practically glowing. Hermione noticed that even when not dancing, the Lupins couldn't keep their hands off of each other. It made her smile.

After they returned to their table, Minerva and Moody approached them. After everyone had said hello, Ginny teased her former Transfiguration professor. "Are you two next, then?"

Minerva looked scandalized. "Oh, no! I am not about getting married, now or ever. Alastor is a great companion, but we are too old for marriage nonsense."

"Too right," Alastor agreed. "I never have been married and don't care to be now."

Just then, Remus announced that he and his bride would be taking their leave, and everyone rose to wish them well.

Looking around the room once more at her family and friends, then finally at her husband, Hermione had never felt more content and blessed.

Life was good.

Christy's Note's: And so ends my YLC story! I hope you all enjoyed it! I appreciate every review and comment! See you next time!

Southern's Note's Hehe! Don't worry, folks! I'm already talking to her about what she'll do next!