

The Dreamer

by phoenix

Hermione and Ron get engaged, but her doubts begin to manifest in her dreams.
What are her dreams telling her?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

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Chapter 1

Hermione passionately kissed Ron goodnight. When they broke the kiss, he asked, "So, I'll see you tomorrow morning?"

Sadly she shook her head. "I'm afraid not. I have a very early meeting at the Ministry."

"The day after our engagement party? You have to be kidding me," he replied exasperatedly.

"I'm sorry, Ron. It was the only time I could get with the Minister."

"Kingsley couldn't get you a better slot in his schedule? I'll talk to Harry, and he'll straighten that out." Ron moved as though he was going to head up the stairs.

She put her hand on his chest to stop him. "Ron, it's late. We don't need to wake everyone up over this. And I don't want to involve Harry. Really, it's not a big deal. We'll get together for dinner, okay?"

"Sure," he replied, the anger leaving his voice. He nuzzled up to Hermione. "I just wish Mum wasn't so old fashioned; then it wouldn't be a big hassle because I could stay here with you and Harry."

Knowing his hormones, she replied, "It's probably for the best. Besides, I think that George really likes having you around."

He looked down at his feet. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Well, goodnight, Hermione."

"Goodnight, Ron," she said warmly.

Closing the door behind her, she looked at the ring on her finger. She could hardly believe she was engaged. It had all happened so quickly. But then again, she had known Ron for ages. Deep down Ron was a good man, and his family had warmly accepted her other than that incident involving the Triwizard Tournament.

Knowing she had to be up early, Hermione quickly prepared for bed in the hopes of getting a few hours of sleep. As excited as she was, she still fell asleep rather quickly, exhausted from the events of the day.

Hermione lay in her bed, half awake, waiting for the alarm to sound. She really didn't want to get up and would have preferred nothing more than sleeping in, but she had an appointment to keep.

"Don't go," said a seductive male voice as a hand trailed softly down her side, caressing her curves.

"I have to," she replied sadly.

He traced kisses from her ear down to her neck, soft, tender kisses. "Stay. For just a little while longer."

His touch and his words were perfect. Ron had definitely been studying that book on women. "I'd love to, but you know I can't, Ron."

"Even if I'm not Ron?" the voice replied.

Hermione rolled over to look at whoever was lying next to her, but he had risen from the bed and was fading into the shadows. All she could see was an indistinct shape.

Crying out and jerking awake, Hermione realized it had just been a dream. But she had never had such a vivid dream or one that she could recall with such clarity. The touch had felt so real. Reaching for her neck, she could almost swear that she could feel a slight dampness there. But it couldn't be. It had to be a figment of her imagination.

Before she could consider what had happened any further, the alarm went off, disturbing her train of thought. Knocking the clock off the table in her haste to quiet it, she shook her head, pushing the dream away and focusing on the day ahead of her. Her meeting with Kingsley was a very important one, one that she hoped would help the house-elves. Dobby, Kreacher, and the other house-elves had proven that they were worthy of something other than enslavement.

Hermione returned from the meeting, feeling immensely frustrated and slamming the door as she stomped into Grimmauld Place. She wasn't even bothered by Mrs. Black's screaming about a Mudblood living in her house. She sorely wanted someone to talk to, but both Harry and Ron were at the Auror Academy in class, and Ginny was at Hogwarts. While Kingsley had not outright rejected her ideas on liberating the house-elves, he had not glowingly approved it. She knew that he had a tightrope to walk as Minister, but he could have at least been more supportive and encouraging. Instead he had told her that many old, prominent and powerful families would not support the proposal as it was. He talked of phasing in house-elf liberation with the new generation of elves being born free, or actually a portion of them born free. And he did remind her that most of the house-elves were happy with their status in the wizarding world.

So, she set about solving that problem by working on a house-elf education plan. If they knew that what they thought they wanted was morally wrong, she might be able to encourage them to accept freedom and becoming paid servants. After all, those families who had house-elves could afford to pay them and Dobby had become educated on the value of being free, proving that it was possible.

She was still working on the curriculum when Ron and Harry returned and pulled her from her work to do something relaxing.

"Come on, Hermione, you can work on that tomorrow. It's time to put the work away and have some fun," Ron said.

She didn't really want to put it away, but she knew that she had to put time into a relationship to make it work. "I guess you're right," she reluctantly admitted.

He smiled broadly. "That's my girl. Come on, why don't you get changed and we can go out."

"Out? We were just out last night." She had always been a bit of a homebody, though she did try to make time to go out with Ron a couple of times a week because that was what he liked.

"That wasn't really out. That was a party with everyone at it. This'll just be us," he prodded.

"What about Harry?" She hated leaving him alone all the time, but it did tend to feel a little awkward when it was the three of them.

"Harry'll be fine. He has a wonderful evening of mooning over Ginny planned," Ron replied glibly.

"It's not mooning," Harry said defensively. "I'm planning on writing a letter to Ginny. And then there are some spells I want to review from today's lessons."

"Maybe you should review, too, Ron?" Hermione asked hopefully.

He pulled her out of her chair and wrapped his arms around her. "No, I'll be fine. I'd much rather spend the evening with you," he said with his usual boyish charm.

She found herself giggling as he tickled her. When he was like this, she knew that she would not be able to distract him. "All right. Let me get changed."

The first part of dinner was pleasant, but as they were wrapping up the main course, Ron had suddenly asked, "So I've been thinking about our wedding."

Hermione choked on her wine. "Our wedding?" she finally sputtered. "We've only just got engaged!"

"I know, but we've known each other forever. I don't think we need a long engagement."

"It's just that..." She was at a loss for words. "I thought that we could take some time to settle into our adult lives. You could finish Auror training, I..." Again she was at a loss. She had not really thought too much about what she would do after Hogwarts.

He reached across and put his hand on hers. "You what? You really don't know, do you?"

She sighed. "Ron, we lost a whole year of school. Yes, we learned a lot of practical magic, but there is more to school than that. You and Harry knew you wanted to be Aurors. I never got the chance to try to figure out what it was I wanted to do. I had looked forward to long discussions with McGonagall to try to determine which careers might best suit me. I don't have the same advantage that you had of having grown up in the wizarding world. I once thought that I would be a dentist like my parents, but that all changed when I stepped foot into Hogwarts."

"A career?"

She cut him off before he could say anything further. "Ron, I know the household you were raised in, but I am not like Molly. I won't be content staying home and raising children. I want more than that. You should know that. That's why I tried so hard in school."

"I know that, Hermione, it's just... Well I thought to start a family sooner rather than later, and then once the kids went off to school, well that's when you could really start your career."

She was trying not to make a scene so she leaned across the table and said in a hoarse whisper, "You are talking about at least twelve years, if not longer. I can't wait twelve years. Ron, I have ideas, goals. I was thinking of waiting eight or nine years before having kids. That would give me time to establish myself. I honestly wasn't thinking of getting married before next summer."

"Next summer?" he blurted out and she hushed him. "Hermione, that's a long time. I mean, if you would let me stay with you from time to time, I could see waiting that long, but this is love, Hermione, why are we waiting a whole year?"

She found that she really didn't have a good answer other than the fact that it was traditional to have a summer wedding. "Let me think on when would be a suitable time. I don't want to just rush into this and get married next week or anything. I think that people will expect us to be engaged for a few months at a minimum."

He smiled broadly. "Thanks, Hermione. Now, let's order some desert."

She couldn't help but laugh at how he went from a serious topic to thinking about food.

At the end of the evening, Hermione had to admit that she had a good time. It had been far less tedious than the large party the previous evening. This was one of those evenings when Ron had been entirely pleasant. These were the evenings that she cherished.

They said a long goodbye at a reasonable hour since they were both a bit tired from the long evening the night before. Ron had suggested that he could just slip into her room for a little while, but she knew that word would get back to Molly and that they wouldn't hear the end of it. For that reason she sent him away.

As she prepared for bed, she was humming merrily, feeling much better about their impending marriage. She still wasn't comfortable with having to pick a date, but she had least gotten him to seem to agree that this summer would be rushing things too much.

Hermione lay in bed, her mind drifting here and there. She could feel the bed behind her sink as though someone were lying next to her. "You shouldn't be here," she said playfully.

His hand brushed along her body. "Why not?" He continued to caress her, electrifying her skin. "Do you want me to leave?"

She didn't want him to stop. His touch felt so good. "Not really, but..." she said as she rolled onto her back.

He placed his finger over her lips and cut her off. "No buts then." He nibbled at her neck, eliciting a moan of desire. "Do you like that?"

"Oh, yes," she moaned. His touch was better than she had ever imagined. He knew exactly how to touch her.

His hand trailed under her night clothes and teased her. She wanted more, but she knew the time wasn't right. Her intellect warred with her passion. Finally she drew the strength to gently push him away. "We shouldn't," she protested.

"But you want to?" he asked in a voice heavy with desire.

"Yes," she replied, fighting the urge to pull him back to her. "But, Ron, I'm just not ready yet."

He seemed to retreat from the bed, and once again she heard him say, "I'm not Ron."

Hermione jumped awake. Her skin still tingled and she could swear she could feel where he had touched her. Feeling the mattress next to her, she could swear that the bed was still warm. Grabbing her wand from the bedside table, she said "*Lumos!*" Looking around the room, everything was exactly as she had left it.

She ran through a series of spells, but none of them showed the residue of magic. There was a knock at her door, and she jumped. "Who is it?" she called out cautiously.

"Hermione, it's me. Is everything okay? I detected some pretty serious spells," came Harry's concerned voice through the door.

"I'm fine. I just had a bad dream and wanted to make sure that's all it was." She got up from bed and opened the door so that he could see she was just fine.

He looked at her skeptically. "Are you sure?"

She tried to put on a reassuring smile. "I'm sure. Just go back to bed."

She closed the door, but she didn't return to her bed. It just felt far too real to have been a dream, but she didn't see how it could have been anything else. Now she started wondering about this 'not Ron'. He seemed to be tall and slender like Ron, but she couldn't really tell anything else. It was dark and he was always in shadow. His voice seemed familiar, but she couldn't quite place it.

At this point she wasn't sure she wanted to go back to bed. A part of her wanted to know more about this mystery stranger in her dreams, but the other part of her was concerned about the seeming reality of the dreams.

After about half an hour, she headed downstairs to the library. She wanted to make sure that Harry was asleep before she started searching through the books. It was a long shot that one of them might have the information she needed, but she had to do something and showing up at Hogwarts in the middle of the night wouldn't do her any good.

Harry pulled the book out of Hermione's limp hands. She stirred awake and he said, "Rough night?"

She stretched and then rubbed her eyes. "I couldn't go to sleep after the dream I had, so I came down to read a book and must have fallen asleep."

He sat on the chair next to the sofa. "Looks like more than one." He quickly skimmed the titles. Giving her a concerned look, he asked, "So do you want to talk to me about this dream? This was more than just reading, this was research."

Sitting up, she blushed because Harry knew her well enough to know what she had been doing. Guiltily picking up the pile of books, she replied, "Not really."

He placed a hand on hers as she tried to pick up another book. "You know I'm here for you if you need someone to talk to."

"I know, and thanks, Harry. It was just a very odd dream, but I'm sure it was nothing. You know me. I always worry about the slightest things." She tried to give him a reassuring smile.

He seemed to either believe her or realize that she wasn't going to talk about it.

Since she didn't have anything planned for the day, she decided that she would spend a few hours at the Hogwarts' library and see if she could find anything about unusually vivid dreams. She knew that as one of the heroes of the war, she was the target of some rather unsavory characters. Though infrequent, the letters of admiration were still trickling in, and she was still getting some unsettling ones. Even her rather publicly dating Ron had not stopped her admirers from trying to win her favor.

She feared that whatever was happening was the result of some Dark Magic one of her admirers was using. And the Restricted Section at Hogwarts was the best place to research that. She knew that Minerva would gladly allow her access to the library with very few questions asked.

For more than a month Hermione had researched the identity of her mystery man or about any magic that would give her the kinds of dreams she'd had, but had found nothing. Of course, it had become less important since she had stopped having the dreams about him. She found it odd that she would dream about him two nights in a row and then nothing even though she hadn't done anything different in her nighttime routine.

Since the dreams had not recurred, her research into a possible cause moved to the backburner as she continued working on her house-elf project. Summer had ended and the students were back in school at Hogwarts, so she decided that since she wasn't getting anywhere, that there was no reason for her to keep going back.

She reflected that it was nice to have a sense of normalcy in her life after having spent nearly a year on the run. She still wasn't sure what she wanted to do for a career, but she was spending time investigating various wizarding professions. Currently she was leaning towards being a Healer, but she knew that might change. There was just so much good to be done as a Healer and research would actually be encouraged. But being Hermione, she really wanted to be sure that was the profession for her before she interviewed.

She heard the door open and then Harry and Ron reliving the day's lessons when they came in the house. In a way she envied them in that they were focused on a career. Then she paid more attention to the words and the tone of their voices. Frowning, she could tell that everything was not well.

"I'm just saying that I don't think being an Auror is for me," Ron said boisterously.

"Well maybe it would if you put more of an effort into it. This isn't like school where you can copy someone's homework," replied Harry equally as loudly.

Hermione could tell that the two of them had stopped in the entrance, and she slipped to the door, curious as to what they were saying.

"So, even you think I would have been a failure at school without Hermione," Ron replied defensively.

Hermione closed her eyes. This was a discussion they'd had a couple of days ago when she was urging him to study rather than spend another night out.

"No, you wouldn't. You took the tests yourself and did all right. That proves that you aren't stupid, but this is different from school this is real life!"

"And you think I don't know that? I do know that. But I just look at what we are doing and it doesn't interest me."

"Being an Auror and helping people doesn't interest you?" Harry asked, aghast.

"Helping people does interest me, but I just don't think I'm cut out to be an Auror. There are too many details with the job, and I just don't think I'm suited for it."

"So you're just going to quit?" replied and exasperated Harry.

"Why not? Better to quit now rather than do a shoddy job later and get fired."

"So what are you going to do now?" Harry asked pointedly.

"I dunno. I thought maybe I'd try out for the Chudley Cannons they could use a new Keeper."

"Quidditch? You're going to quit a real job for Quidditch?" Harry asked, sounding incensed.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. She had thought they were done with that when they left Hogwarts. She didn't really have anything against the sport, but a career in sports was short-lived, and she had hoped that Ron would find something more permanent. Not to mention it would take him away from home a lot.

"Quidditch is a real job only you're too good for something like that," Ron shouted and was followed quickly by the slamming of the front door which set Mrs. Black off on a tirade.

Harry gave her a loud, "Shut up!" and then clomped up the stairs.

It wouldn't do any good for Hermione to pretend that she hadn't heard the heated exchange, so she waited for him at the library door. "Do you think he's really going to quit the Academy?" she asked quietly.

Harry ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah, I think so. He's not that interested in the work, and honestly he hasn't been doing that good at lessons. Maybe you can talk some sense into him. It's not too late for him to turn things around. Or at least get him to consider some other job. I know he loves Quidditch and he can be a good Keeper, but I don't think it's the job for him."

She was pretty sure that Harry was thinking the same thing she was that with a wife, and possibly children, he should have a more stable job. "I'll see what I can find out. Maybe since I'm not in classes with him, I can get some more information." She wasn't entirely hopeful since Ron had been very reluctant to discuss his Auror training with her.

Hermione slammed the door as she left the apartments above Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. Ron was impossible. He had refused to discuss the possibility of continuing his Auror training. Of course part of that may have been because he had accused her of spying on him despite the fact, she reminded him, that he and Harry had discussed the subject in shouts at the base of the stairs. It would have been impossible for her not to hear the two of them.

And when she tried to discuss career alternatives, he only threw in her face the fact that at least he was making a career decision while she still didn't have plans for her future. That accusation had hurt more than the fact that he wouldn't even consider something other than Quidditch. She knew that she had to make a decision, but she was working on special projects to help the less fortunate in the wizarding world while she was researching careers. He seemed to think that her indecision meant that she unconsciously wanted to be a housewife.

When she returned to Grimmauld Place, Harry started to come up the stairs from the kitchen, took one look at her expression, and let her proceed up the stairs without a conversation. She was thankful that he knew when to leave her alone. Ginny was very lucky to have him.

She threw herself onto her bed without bothering to change for bed, or eating dinner since she wasn't hungry anyway. She tossed and turned for quite a while, trying to push Ron from her mind. This was just a phase. Once he had calmed down, she was sure that they could discuss this. Hopefully it would be before he ruined his chance at being an Auror. Thank goodness this had happened on a Friday so she would have a couple of days to get him to come to his senses.

Finally she slipped off to sleep.

A weight pushed down the bed next her. "Don't be angry."

Her breath caught. Her mystery person was back. She vowed not to call him Ron this time because that seemed to make him leave. "I think I deserve to be angry."

"Is it worth it?" he asked gently.

She thought she could almost recognize the voice. It was one from her past, but she couldn't quite place it. If only he would speak more instead of only in short sentences, she might finally place his voice. "It feels good," she replied defensively.

His hand traced along her body. "As good as this?"

She laughed softly. "No. This is much better." She savored the his feel of his touch and hoped for something more than last time even though she wasn't sure who this mystery lover was. She was acting very much unlike herself, but she didn't care. He made her feel alive, like a woman.

"Good." He leaned forward to kiss her.

Before she could place her hands on him, he had her arms pinned. She felt a moment of panic, but he was passionate and gentle at the same time. His taste was exotic and wonderful, nothing she could place. Of course, she hadn't ever kissed anyone other than Ron, not even Viktor.

When he finally broke the kiss, she was entranced, though not by magic, but by his sexuality. He released her hands and started caressing her body. She resisted the urge to touch him, afraid it would make him leave. Instead she balled the sheets in her hands and writhed at his touch. "Oh, yes," she moaned.

Gently he spread her legs apart, and she anticipated his touch. She was surprised when he gently licked her rather than using his fingers, though it was a very pleasant

surprise. He continued to tease her with his tongue, eliciting more moans of pleasure.

After what seemed like an eternity, he slowly pulled away. "No, please, don't stop," she pleaded.

"You want more?" he asked playfully.

"Yes, yes, please." She wanted him to take her. He had left her on the verge of orgasm.

"Then you will have to find me," he replied seductively.

"But where... who are you?"

"Search your heart and you will know," he said before vanishing into the shadows.

Hermione jumped out of bed, certain that this could not have been a dream, but the house was well protected and only a select few had access to it. Her room was empty, and as she had expected there was no sign that anyone other than her had been there. It just didn't make sense.

Search your heart and you will know. His words echoed in her mind. She paced the room as she tried to figure out what that meant. She loved Ron, but he had established that he wasn't Ron. For a brief moment she wondered if it was Harry, but she dismissed that quickly. He was completely smitten with Ginny, and if nothing had happened between them during all those months on the run, nothing would happen now.

No, it was someone else, someone she knew and apparently someone she was truly in love with. But that didn't make sense since she was in love with Ron, wasn't she?

As she thought about his appearances, they had all three occurred on nights when she was reconsidering her future with Ron.

But that still didn't answer the question of who her mystery lover was. The voice was familiar, and she started going through the names of all the boys, no young men, she could think of that she found even remotely attractive. It was a very short list, and none of the voices matched the rich baritone of her mystery lover.

If that voice didn't belong to anyone she went to school with, who could it belong to? The only teacher she had ever had a crush on had been Lockhart. Aside from the fact that he still had no memory of who he was and was hospitalized, she was no longer attracted to him now that she knew he was a charlatan.

A part of her wished that Ginny were around, but then she realized that telling your fiancé's sister you were reconsidering the wedding might not be the brightest thing to do. The only person she had to talk to was Harry. Come morning she would bring this up with him, though not all the details.

8. Dream Lover

a. When the lights go down, the dream lover comes for a visit. What the heck is really going on: Subconscious?

Magic? Nothing?

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 2

Hermione and Ron get engaged, but her doubts begin to manifest in her dreams. What are her dreams telling her?

Chapter 2

The next morning, Hermione was waiting in the kitchen for Harry. She hoped that he wouldn't sleep in too long. Thankfully, she only had to wait about half an hour for him to join her.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You look like you didn't get much sleep last night?"

"I didn't and no, I'm not okay. Can I trust you not to tell Ron any of what I'm about to tell you?" she asked in a near whisper.

Harry looked over his shoulder as though expecting Ron to arrive. "Sure. What is it?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She had been planning this conversation for hours. "I've just started to wonder lately whether Ron and I are right for each other."

Harry raised his eyebrows, but said nothing, letting her continue.

"Everything seemed okay after he came back and in the immediate aftermath of the war, but as time has passed, I've been reminded of so many things about him that annoy me. And the whole quitting the Auror program hasn't had anything to do with this. Well, it has, but it wasn't what started it. I've been having some doubts since we got engaged." She stopped for a moment and took a sip of her tea.

"What sort of doubts?" Harry prodded gently.

"Well, I realize there are a lot of things we never discussed probably because what should have been our final year at Hogwarts was so different. For example, Ron knew I took academics seriously, and it shouldn't have been a surprise to him that I want to have a career, but it really seems like it was. He thought that I would settle at home and be a good little housewife." She tried to keep her calm as her anger threatened to boil to the surface.

Harry reached across the table and put his hand on hers. "That's what he's known. His mum devoted her life to her children. I don't think it's that unusual that he would think his wife was going to do the same."

She sighed again. "I know that. And perhaps I should have paid more attention to that. Harry, you know that's not me. I mean, I'm sure I won't be a horrible mother or

anything, but there are things I would like to do before that day comes. What do you expect Ginny to do after you two get married?"

He reached across the table and poured himself some tea. "We haven't really talked about it yet, but I was going to leave it up to her."

"See, you are leaving it up to her. Ron seemed to have already decided." She stopped, trying to decide how to work her dreams into the conversation.

Picking up that she had more to say, he gently prodded, "Is there something other than Ron?"

She looked up the stairs, just to make sure the noise she heard was a normal house noise even though she really didn't expect Ron to come by after the row they had had last night. "I've been dreaming of someone else," she said simply.

"Who?" Harry asked carefully.

She leaned back in her chair. "That's just it, I don't know who! I can almost recognize the voice, but I've gone through everyone I can think of having met and I just can't place it. However, I do know I've heard that voice. It's a rich baritone and it's so familiar," she said the frustration clear in her voice.

"I take it you've had this dream more than once and that's why you were looking at all those books earlier."

She nodded. "It is. It was a very real dream. It seemed like he was in the room with me because I swear I could feel him. I could sort of make out a shape, he's tall and slender, but that's all that I've been able to see. I can't make out any details. And I tried to get him to tell me who he was, but he told me to look in my heart. Harry, I'm at an utter loss, but I feel that until I solve this mystery that I can't be fair to Ron. And I really need to solve it for my own well-being. Everything about the dreams tell me that this is the person I'm meant to be with, not Ron."

Harry took a long draught from his tea before speaking. "That's pretty intense. It could be Dark Magic."

"That's what I thought at first, and after the second dream I spent a great deal of time at Hogwarts looking for any reference to dream visitation, and I couldn't find anything. I even gave Madam Pince a quick description of what had happened, and she couldn't recall having read anything about it. She knows those books better than anyone, so it really made me wonder if it was magic."

"But then what could it be? It's not like anyone can just barge into the house," Harry replied.

"I know that; that's what makes this all so puzzling," she said not hiding her frustration.

"So what are you going to do?" Harry asked after a prolonged pause.

She sighed. "I don't know. I really feel that I need to figure this out. I'm thinking of taking a sabbatical and heading somewhere I can concentrate on figuring this out alone."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? What if this mystery person wants you alone to do you harm?" Harry asked, clearly concerned.

Reaching across the table, she placed her hand on his. "After all the time we spent on the run, I think that I can ward someplace so that I can't be found, don't you?"

Harry flushed in embarrassment and ruffled his hair. "Yeah. I guess you're right. You will be careful won't you?" He still sounded as though he didn't entirely approve of her plan.

"I will. I'll write a letter to Ron and ask you to give it to him when he's calmed down a little."

"Are you going to break the engagement?" Harry asked pointedly.

"I don't know. I want to see what I can discover first."

"Hermione," Harry said carefully, "from everything you've said, it doesn't sound like you will be happy with Ron. Don't you think it would be fair to him to just let him go?"

"Harry, I'm not going to do it by letter. I think I owe it to him to let him know in person. I don't know when I'll be back, but I really need to sort this out." She stood up to leave.

Harry rose and gave her a reassuring hug. "You'll always have a place here. You're the sister I never had."

She brushed a tear from her cheek. "Thanks, Harry. That means a lot to me. I'll send you an owl while I'm gone." Pulling away from his embrace, she headed upstairs to pack. She wasn't entirely sure where she was going to go, but she wanted someplace quiet and alone.

It had taken Hermione two days, but she had finally found a remote cottage in Northern Scotland to rent. It was near enough to a village that she could get the supplies she needed, but far enough away that she shouldn't be bothered. She hoped that this would be the perfect place to search her heart.

Since it was early in the day, she decided to make a list of all the men that she knew. Counting all her classmates from her days at Hogwarts the list was quite extensive. For a moment she thought that maybe her mystery lover was Viktor, but she realized her dream lover's English was unaccented and the last she had seen Viktor, his English was still heavily accented. That led her to immediately cross him off the list, as she did for Ron and Harry. She then crossed off everyone who was deceased. Her next category was those who were married. She refused to get involved with a married man. And she presumed that her mystery lover was not still at Hogwarts. Finally she crossed off those who were too short, too fat or otherwise was not remotely close to fitting the general physical size of her mystery lover.

What was left was an incredibly short list. There were only a handful of names, and most of those names were people she didn't know very well more passing acquaintances than friends.

Deciding the list was useless she crumpled it up and threw it in the fireplace. She would use it to start the fire later in the evening when the temperature cooled off. While she could use magic to start a fire, there was something comforting about doing it the Muggle way using kindling and matches.

With nothing else to do until she cooked dinner, she decided to take a walk through the countryside and let her mind wander.

As her mind wandered to the men she knew, she realized that last night her mystery man had not come to her. She wasn't sure what to make of that. Was it because she was in an unfamiliar location or did it have something to do with the fact that she had pretty much decided that she wasn't going to settle for Ron?

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that the sun set much later than she was used to this far north, meaning it was later than she supposed from the height of sun. Upon returning to the cottage, she made a simple meal of spaghetti and poured herself a glass of wine from the bottle of Chianti. It wasn't fancy, but it was satisfying.

After that she lit the fire and curled up in the chair to read until she was tired. When she had trouble keeping her eyes open, she crawled into bed.

Drifting off to sleep she waited for her visitor.

Hermione felt sunlight on her cheek and realized it was morning. Again her mystery visitor had not come. She frowned in disappointment.

After dressing and eating breakfast, she dove into the books she had brought with her. Most of them were very old and written in a language other than modern English, but she didn't mind. It gave her something to do with her day. In the evening, she decided to go for a walk and enjoy the scenery before going to bed.

She repeated this pattern for more than a week. The books yielded no answers, and her visitor did not return in her dreams. She started to wonder how much longer she should remain. Remembering her promise to send Harry an owl, she Apparated to the nearest wizarding enclave and let him know that she was fine and would probably be away for another week. She hoped that he was well and hoped that Ron had come to a rational decision. She didn't specifically tell him to reply to her letter, nor did she tell him not to.

Returning to her cottage, she thought about Ron. She knew that he had always been in the shadow of his brothers and their achievements. A part of her had always thought that he underachieved to try to reduce comparison to his brothers. Of course, Fred and George had not really excelled at school and had in fact left before taking their NEWTs. The amount of trouble those two got into had actually made Ron look better.

It was that potential that she had seen that had drawn her to him. She thought that with the right encouragement he could live up to his potential, but it seemed that she wasn't able to give him that encouragement.

Hermione was getting ready for bed when she heard the familiar tap of an owl at her window. Opening the window she retrieved the letter from the owl. It looked at her expectantly. She searched the kitchen and didn't find anything. "I'm sorry, I don't have anything for you." It hadn't occurred to her to pick up owl treats. Indignantly the owl turned its back on her and flew into the night.

She sighed and opened the letter. Inside she found Ron's messy scrawl. She sighed again before reading.

Dear Hermione,

Harry told me you had gone away for a little while. I know that it's all my fault. I know that I can be a selfish git. I think my decision to quit Auror training is a good example of that. After talking it over with Harry, I've decided not to quit yet.

I still don't know if being an Auror is for me, but I realize I need to have a better plan than trying to get on a Quidditch team.

I hope that we can talk about this when you get back. And I'm sorry for snapping at you because you haven't picked a job yet. I now realize how hard a decision that is to make.

Love,

Ron

Hermione stared in shock at the letter. Ron actually showed some maturity. After several rereads, she still wasn't sure what to make of it. Yes, Ron was showing maturity, but she wondered how long it would last. It was times like this that he really made her life difficult. If he could be like this all the time, everything would be okay, but she wasn't sure that it would last. His other flashes of maturity hadn't lasted either.

After not reaching a decision, she decided to go to bed and sleep on it.

Hermione slept fitfully as decisions weighed on her mind. She kept waking up and checking the clock. Time seemed to be moving far too slowly, and it seemed like morning would never come. Looking at the clock this time, she saw that it was almost five o'clock, but she felt that was too early to get up. After punching her pillow back into shape, she tried to go back to sleep.

The familiar weight crawled into bed with her and started caressing her body. "Have you searched your heart?"

She wanted to snap, 'where have you been?' but thought better about it. "I have, but I haven't yet found the answer you told me to look for."

"A pity," he replied sadly, his fingers continuously moving along her body.

The name belonging to the voice was on the tip of her tongue, but it still eluded her. "But I believe that my future is about to change... for the better." When he didn't respond with anything other than his touch, she continued. "I tried to find you, but I failed."

"I am here," he replied simply.

"But are you really here?" She tried to make any part of him out in the shadows, but she couldn't, it was as though a darker shadow was cast over him.

He trailed kisses down her shoulder. "Do you want me to be here?" he asked seductively.

"Yes!" she replied enthusiastically.

"Then I am here," he replied simply in between kisses.

"But you leave when I open my eyes," she protested, trying to keep her wits about her as he used his touch to arouse her.

"You can find me. Search your heart. I am closer than you think." With those words, he once again vanished into the shadows.

Hermione sat up abruptly in bed. He had finally come to her, but his answers had been no more illuminating than before. But she knew one thing: she had to find him before she returned to her life in London. She had to have the answers before she decided what to do with Ron.

The first light of day was breaking in the east, and she decided to get dressed, eat and go for a walk to try to clear her mind.

Hermione walked for hours, further and further away from the cottage, taking whichever lane suited her fancy. When she was through walking she could just Apparate back to the cottage.

Just as she was getting ready to return to her cottage, she saw something through the trees, at least she thought she saw something. She could see it out of the corner of her eye, wavering in the shadows, but when she looked straight at it, it wasn't there. This alone compelled her to examine it more closely because it had all the signs of being enchanted.

Cautiously, with her wand drawn, she approached the area where she was reasonably sure that whatever was being hidden was. She thought it looked vaguely like a building, but when you could only see something with your peripheral vision it was hard to tell. She expected to find some sort of ruins that were under an enchantment that was finally fading.

Suddenly a cottage appeared an arm's length in front of her, and she stopped abruptly. It was clearly occupied because there was smoke coming from the chimney, and she could smell someone cooking breakfast. She wasn't sure what to do at this point. Whoever lived here clearly wanted to be left alone, but at the same time the resident had to know that she was here.

Her sense of curiosity got the better of her, and she knocked on the door. After all, no one knew that she was here so this could hardly be a trap. She had randomly chosen her destination and could have just as easily ended up in Wales as Scotland.

"Come in," replied a muffled voice.

This concerned her a little. She would have rather had whoever was living here open the door. Entering a strange house could be fraught with peril. Still holding her wand at the ready, she opened the door and peered into the darkness. The main room seemed empty and it was dark. The curtains were drawn and the trees blocked out a great deal of the sunlight. She could see light and hear movement coming from the kitchen.

After waiting a few moments for anything, she decided to go and see who was in the kitchen. Cautiously she moved across the main room and peered into the kitchen, wand at the ready and prepared to cast a non-verbal shield spell.

When she saw who was standing at the stove, her wand clattered to the floor. "But... You can't be... I saw you..." And it all came crashing to reality. The dream visits flashed through her mind. His height and build were right. His voice was right. But how could it be? How could he be her mystery man when he was supposed to be dead?

"I assure you that I am not." With a flick of his wand, he summoned hers and handed it back to her. "I am very much alive, though my survival was in question for some time." He took one step closer to her so that he was very much in her personal space and smiled warmly at her. "I see that you searched your heart."

Question after question raced through her mind. "But how...?" She found it was difficult to put it all into words.

"I know that you have many questions, but later. What does your heart tell you?"

Hermione had long respected Snape's mind and recognized that despite his gruff manner, he was one of the best professors she had ever had at Hogwarts. Her last couple of years at Hogwarts, she had come to have a crush on him. The way he worked was so elegant, there was no wasted motion. She realized that there was so much more to him than the Slytherin favoring, Gryffindor hating face he showed to the students, and she had wanted to learn more about him. When Harry had told her that Snape had killed Dumbledore, she couldn't believe it not because Dumbledore was dead, but that it had been Severus who had done it.

"How long have you known?" she finally asked.

He laughed softly, but not in a cruel way. "Longer than you would think, but while you were my student, there was nothing to be done about it. A witch of your potential is very rare." He tenderly brushed her cheek.

"Just as a wizard of your potential is rare," she said softly as she looked up into his dark eyes, drowning in the depths.

"Indeed. I have waited a long time for someone like you." He moved slightly closer to her so that he's body was almost pressed against hers. Leaning down, he gave her a soft kiss that turned more passionate when she did not resist.

With that kiss, she knew that she had finally searched her heart. "My heart tells me this is where I should be," she replied breathlessly when they broke the kiss.

"As I knew it would."

"Legilimency?" she asked curiously.

He admitted playfully, "A little. Now, why don't I answer some of your questions?"

Hermione and Severus spent the rest of the day talking, answering each other's questions, getting to know one another. The more time they spent together, the more she knew that she belonged with him. Every dream, every hidden desire she had had over the years was validated. She had always known there was more to Severus than what they saw in class, and he was proving it today.

She would have to return to London to break it off with Ron, but then what?

"What do we do now? Everyone thinks that you are dead, but you aren't. How do we make a future together if you don't exist?"

Clearly he had thought this through. "You can go to the Minister and explain that I have been recuperating in seclusion and am only now well enough to make myself public, but that I would prefer it to be done quietly. After that, we can go into business together."

"What sort of business?" she asked curiously, not entirely comfortable with the idea that he had seemingly planned out their future.

"Come now, Hermione," he said playfully. "You know me."

He couldn't possibly mean something dealing with the Dark Arts, but then that left... "Surely you can't mean Potions?" she asked incredulously.

"Why not?"

"I thought you didn't like Potions? Isn't that why you wanted to teach Defense?"

He chuckled. "I wanted to teach Defense because I knew it would be vital, that no one else understood the Dark Arts as I did and the imperative of knowing how to defend yourself. I have a passion for Potions, as you no doubt noticed from the Potions textbook Potter had that final year you were at Hogwarts. What I detested was teaching dunderheads. I would have liked nothing more than to have spent my adult life researching Potions, something I could spend precious little time on while teaching, but I owed a debt to Albus one that I could not ignore. Now I am free of that debt," he said sadly.

She considered his proposal. "I think that might be a good idea. I've been wrestling with what to do and was thinking of becoming a Healer because of all the research I could do, but I could easily do that learning Potions from you."

"Then we are agreed?" he asked cautiously.

She grinned at him. "I think so, but one thing... I know the dreams, and what I said, and well..." She blushed at the memory of how unlike herself she had behaved in the dreams. "I think we should wait and get to know each other a little better."

He didn't look disappointed. "Of course. I merely wanted to get your attention."

"You did that, though an owl would have worked just as well," she retorted.

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Would it really?"

After a moment she laughed. "Probably not. I would have thought it was a joke someone was playing on me." They both gazed at each other for a few moments, neither of them knowing what to say. Finally, she said, "Thank you."

"For what?" he asked curiously.

"For making me see the truth, for being alive, for rescuing me from a life married to Ron."

"When I heard that was going to happen, I knew that I had to act before it was too late." Picking up her hand, he gently kissed the back of it.

"Well, thank you." She looked out the window and realized it was nearly dark. "Goodness! Where did the day go? I really should be returning to my cottage and get ready to

return to London."

He looked as though he didn't want her to leave, but he didn't say anything to stop her. "I will await your return."

"I'll be back soon," she said and gave him a deep kiss that she reluctantly ended before departing.

There was a spring in her step as she entered her cottage and prepared for bed. She had come on this trip to find her mystery lover, to find herself, and she had done both. For the first time in her life, Hermione was at peace with herself.

Prompts:

8. Dream Lover

a. When the lights go down, the dream lover comes for a visit. What the heck is really going on: Subconscious?

Magic? Nothing?

6. The Other Man

a. Hermione is engaged / married to Ron but is in love with Severus Snape.