

A Victorious Draw

by nastygrl

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

This story was written for the HermioneBigBang on Live Journal. It is complete and will be updated on a regular basis. There are two gorgeous pieces of art to go along with this story and a soundtrack, as well, and I shall endeavor to post them with full credit given to the artists. A special thank you to Wildcatcdc and Sc010f for all their hard work.

Prologue

Hermione would have better luck getting shagged by Professor Snape than getting him to agree to her bloody interview Ron thought as the pair continued to argue. It was then he had his epiphany. **Hermione. Professor Snape. Shagging.** The thought would not leave; it began materializing in his mind. No, not just shagging him, he thought, the longer he pondered. She *belonged* with Professor Snape, Ron realized in amazement. Seeing them together now, he wondered how he never saw it. They fit, in ways that he and Hermione never would. To admit that hurt, but not as much as it should have. He knew he owed it to these two people to show them they belong together.

Ron had stopped by Hermione's office at the Ministry to take her to a late lunch. She didn't have the most glamorous position, in Ron's opinion, but she was satisfied; it gave her time to do what she was passionate about, writing an account of The Dark Wars (1970-1981 and 1991-1998) as told by the people who lived and fought and in some cases, died, during the wars. She had already interviewed his entire family, the teachers at Hogwarts, the surviving Order members and a few ghosts. Even Professor Dumbledore's portrait granted Hermione's request for information. Her last meeting had been with Harry, and she had come away cross and agitated. He would not tell her the details of Professor's Snape's memories and had told her if she wanted to know so badly, she was to ask the man, himself.

Ron crossed his arms and leaned against the wall in the corridor, observing Hermione and Professor Snape as they stood near the lifts at the far end of the hall. From her expression, Ron reckoned she was trying her best to convince the man to sit down with her to discuss his role in the wars. But just because the man survived and was now making a decent life for himself didn't mean he was ready to face his past. He was refusing, from the look of consternation crossing Hermione's face.

Seeing them together, Ron was struck again by the rightness of his conclusions. Hermione was neither awestruck nor afraid of the man, and for the professor's part, the cruel sneer he usually wore was missing from his face. They balanced and complemented each other not just in looks; straight hair and curly hair, tall and short, but also in personalities and temperaments; pessimistic and eternally optimistic, light and dark. Where someone else would simply point out opposites, Ron saw scary similarities. They possessed brilliant minds and keen intellects, and both were weighed down by their memories.

The last observation cemented Ron's idea. These two were trying to move on with their lives, but they needed each other to do it. Ron knew Professor Snape had made peace with himself and the roles he had to play, but moving beyond that still seemed out of his reach. When he lectured, Professor Snape still spoke in the present tense, as if the war was ongoing. The man needed to focus on his future.

For Hermione's part, Ron knew it was much the same, but worse. Hermione was ready to let go of the past and move on, but wasn't quite sure how to go about it. How to

make a life for oneself in the Wizarding world was not something that could be learned from book reading or attending lectures. Neither could it be gleaned from interviewing other Muggle-borns or half-blood wizards, Ron thought slyly.

Ron loved Hermione, first as a friend, then as a lover, but seeing these two together, the cords that bound his heart with Hermione's loosened. He could let her go if it meant giving her what she truly needed in her life, to make the nightmares go away, to bring back her enthusiasm and the sparkle in her eyes. Ron was tired of talking about the war, of rehashing every little detail and re-opening every wound. He lost Fred, and the thought made his stomach clench. It would hurt to lose Hermione, but he knew it was the right decision, for the three of them.

But how to do it? Being forthright would not get him very far. Hermione would be hurt, and Professor Snape would be caustic. Both would be unyielding. But Ron wasn't a Wizarding Chess Grand Master for nothing.

He lifted himself from the wall, turned and walked away, unnoticed by the witch and wizard, towards the emergency stairwell. Hermione and the professor's voices rose in unison with each other, and Ron smiled. They were not going to get together on their own, he knew, so it was time to plan his game strategy.

Ron entered the joke shop a few minutes later and spotted George near the sales counter. Seven years on and George was still lost without his twin, but from his misery came his greatest inventions. Working together, Ron and George had beefed up the newly formed WSD, the Weasley Stealth Division, a professional line of counter-espionage devices, designed specifically for the protection from and detection of Dark Magic. They were the exclusive suppliers for the Aurors and Unspeakables in Great Britain, and international agencies were beginning to notice the company, as well.

It was at an MLE convention where the Weasley Stealth Division line was being introduced where Ron became reacquainted with his former professor. The conventions introduced and provided the newest Wizarding technology to law enforcement agencies, and that Ron had attended the weeklong event to showcase the company. Professor Snape, being in high demand on the lecture circuit, was speaking on the final night. Harry had told him their former teacher also lectured at workshops concentrating in counter-espionage and intelligence across Europe for both Muggle and Wizarding agencies.

Severus Snape's fame as a spy had come to light at the end of the war. He had been given an Order of Merlin, First Class for his work. He gratefully accepted the award then promptly disappeared for four years. While there were many rumors surrounding his disappearance and his activities during that time, Harry had told him that Professor Snape was recuperating. Survivor's Guilt, Harry had quoted. Ron couldn't imagine anyone feeling guilty for living; even George, who had wanted to join his brother in death, didn't feel guilty for being alive. No, it was the separation from his brother that was slowly killing him.

Late that night, after he tucked George in with a kiss on the forehead and a draught of Dreamless Sleep, Ron walked over to the table holding his chessboard and sat down. The chess set didn't see much action these days, for it was an old family heirloom. The twins had been his early teachers, and after their first match, neither brother could win against Ron, not even when they'd play together against him. Ron dreamt of chess matches.

Now, as he sat at his old set, running his hand lovingly across the faded black and white squares, murmuring hello to his bishops and knights, bowing his head slightly to the White Queen and King, he began envisioning another type of board altogether. Ron's eyes shuttered, and he remembered the chess game he, Hermione and Harry had played their first year. Hermione had taken the Queen-side Rook position, Harry the Queen-side Bishop position, and he, Ron, had taken the King-side Knight position.

He would once again take the Knight position. Traditionally, the Knight was in the forefront of the game, controlling the center of the board, able to jump positions and pieces to get where he was needed.

Hermione would once again assume the Rook position. Able to cross wide swathes of the board, she was limited in that she could only move in one direction at a time. *Some things never change*, Ron mused. The Rook or Castle. *Home*. She was home...just not *his* home; she was Professor Snape's now, although neither of them knew it. Ron paused; he supposed he best get used to addressing Professor Snape as Severus. He shuddered lightly at the thought, then moved on.

Severus. He was a challenge, certainly. The obvious position would be that of the Black King. But Severus was agile and quick: not one to stand back and let circumstances come to him, he would make bold moves. Not a Knight, Professor Snape, Severus, would see to his own fights in his own time. A Bishop then; in olden times, it was the Archer. Black King-side Bishop. That Dumbledore and Voldemort had both used him in the Good Bishop and Bad Bishop positions and yet, that he survived at the end of the day, was astounding. Both kings had sacrificed him for their own victory; yet Severus had seen to his own safety and made moves independent of both Masters.

Ron studied his board for another hour or so, until he worked out the opening moves and possible counter-moves, where the middlegame maneuvers would take place and likely outcomes for the endgame. The best possible outcome would be for a draw, with neither party able to win or lose on their own.

Ron admitted to himself he was a romantic. He also admitted to himself he couldn't be in a relationship with a woman who had been so involved in the war. He needed to move on, as well. He would always have Hermione, of course. But perhaps it was time to place himself in this game, as well. Looking at his Black Pawns, he saw the face of a schoolmate. Pansy Parkinson.

He would need help on all fronts. George. George and Fred had always been Bishops, one light and the other dark. Together they crossed the entire board, attacking and retreating, maneuvering and positioning. Now Ron would ask George to play Knight. For Hermione, and gods willing, himself, as well.

Harry, he would certainly need his help, as well. A Bishop, once again. A good match for Severus, for they both played light Bishops, equal in strength and movements. Allies and fighters.

Ron sat back, finally relaxing the muscles in his back and shoulders that he hadn't realized were tense. His pieces in place, he began practice moves, making small technical adjustments. The endgame was as he wished. A victorious draw.

Now, to put the game in motion.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

Big thank yous to Wildcatcdc and Sc010f!

Hermione was having a bad morning. Her work robes hadn't come back from the cleaners, Crookshanks had used her closet as a litter box and, to top it off, she was out of

coffee.

Not that magic couldn't fix things, of course; but living in a Muggle neighborhood, while quiet and peaceful, had its disadvantages: she had to limit her magic during peak energy times due to interference. She'd received a nasty surprise last month when she attempted to repair a broken plate: the shiny, silver scar on her thumb was a reminder to limit her more complex magic to evenings and weekends.

Heaving a sigh, she donned a pair of dove gray wool trousers and a green cashmere turtleneck. Her hair, no longer a bird's nest of tangles and knots and riotous curls, was cut pixie short, framing her face in soft fringes, her bangs nearly covering her eyes.

Ronald had stayed late last night. Lately he'd been distant, and she'd no idea of how to approach him. Or if she should. The thought sent a sharp stab in her chest. *One more dilemma to work out*, she thought as she locked her house located south of London. Walking down the path, she climbed into her 2000 Benz SLK and slowly backed out of the drive. Reaching the entrance to the estate, a Ministry-approved Apparition point, she checked her mirrors then pushed the Dissapparition button on the gearshift. With a sharp tug, she and the car were gone.

Moments later, she was parked in her assigned parking slot in the Ministry car park. The Apparition Car prototypes (AC, for short) were expensive, but for those commuting, it was faster and cheaper than building an Apparition room in one's home. Complete with Muggle repelling devices and the installation of the complex spells and charms needed to contain the magic so as to not throw the Muggles' electric grid into a state of flux, the AC was the sound choice.

And it was better than disillusioning oneself every morning and flying to work, she remembered with a shudder. The flock of geese that had been heading straight towards her because they couldn't see her and then having to perform evasive maneuvers so as to not get knocked off her broom, all the while praying to whomever would listen that she wasn't killed from fright, or worse, having Ron or Harry find out, was not something that she wished to repeat. Better to drive.

By lunchtime, Hermione realized her morning had been as easy as sin.

Ronald stood her up for lunch, and she had confronted Professor Snape. Again. She couldn't understand his reluctance to sit down and talk with her. She wasn't asking for a blood oath or an Unbreakable Vow, for goodness sake. All she wanted was the information Harry so nastily refused to share with her. She would be the first to admit that perhaps a bit more tact was needed with the man. After all, their history was not an easy one.

Her book was important to her; surely he could understand. Her need to share the experiences of the war with the public, as told by those who lived and fought and died, was an important endeavor. She didn't understand her restless need to complete this project. It was not as if others hadn't written about the events of the war, ad nauseam. Hers wouldn't even be the most comprehensive, for it was to be mainly told as a collection of stories, instead of told in a timeline. She wouldn't dwell on her elusive reasons for writing the book. Suffice it to say, she was eager to finish her work so that she could regain some normalcy in her life.

Normalcy, yeah right, she silently scoffed. Her life hadn't been normal since she was three years old and made the turnips her mum had been preparing to boil for supper dance across the kitchen counter.

By the end of the day, Hermione was ready to crawl into bed and weep. She was tired. Tired of working, tired of struggling with the endless amount of paperwork her job entailed, tired of trying so hard to do so little.

The day that followed was the same as the last. Ronald promised to stop by with take away, and Hermione was grateful. She felt it was time to have a heart-to-heart chat, although she quite hadn't wrapped her mind around what she was going to say. Her life felt very much off-kilter, and she was desperate to find an even keel.

Ronald rang the bell a little after six that evening, and she smelled curry as she neared the door. She opened the door to find him shuffling brown bags full of food. A small smile flitted across his face before he leaned in to offer a gentle kiss on her cheek. They made short work of their dinner. Conversation was saved for afterwards; Hermione learned long ago not to engage Ronald in conversation while his mouth was full of food.

Later, they snuggled on the couch. For once, Hermione didn't feel the need to talk right away; she was content to just be held.

For his part, Ron was gathering his courage. He knew they needed to have a heart-to-heart, and he knew what he had to say to Hermione was going to hurt her. Probably not terribly, but he already felt the sting of it, himself. He was convinced this was the proper opening move however... the Knight paving the way, clearing obstacles in preparation what is to follow.

"You're not falling asleep, are you, love?" he asked gently, rubbing Hermione's arm as she snuggled into his side.

Hermione sighed. "No, just content, for the moment."

Ron leaned down to kiss her hair. "Feels good, doesn't it? A belly full of curry and wine."

"Hmmm..." she agreed peacefully.

"Speaking of curry and wine," Ron began, mentally girding himself for what was to come. "I dropped by your office yesterday to take you to lunch, but you weren't there. I saw you and Professor Snape by the elevators at the end of the hall. Arguing, from the looks of it."

Hermione sat up and straightened her shirt, her eyes glinting at the mention of the man's name. It must have been on the tip of her tongue to begin lashing out, Ron noted, but she refrained. He reasoned she knew this conversation would not be about the argument or the missed lunch. She reached for her glass of wine.

"You want to talk, don't you?" Hermione asked softly. Ron nodded. Her eyes roamed his face, looking for some sort of clue as to where this would be heading.

This was Ronald, Hermione thought, *one of two people I love most in the world. And he wants to talk, which is unlike him.*

Ron knew Hermione felt uneasy, her thoughts were written all over her face. He took a breath. "Darling, why is this book so important to you?"

It wasn't what she was expecting, and he watched her struggle with the urge to jump to her feet as if prepared to defend herself and her work. Instead, she took a deep breath and remained on the couch.

To answer his question, Hermione could only shrug her shoulders.

Ron reached out and took hold of her hand. "Can I give you my opinion?" he asked gently.

When Hermione nodded, he drew a quick breath and began. "I think you are looking for something in your own life, Hermione, but you don't quite know what it is. You use your boring job and that book as distractions. Yeah, I know they are important to you," he said quickly in an attempt to stave off her harsh retort, "but you are making both your life while ignoring the important stuff."

"You mean you, don't you? You think I'm not giving you enough attention, then?" Hermione asked, her eyes welling with unshed tears.

"No. No, love. That is not what I am talking about. You are brilliant, Hermione. Too smart to stay at that dead-end job at the Ministry. The answers you need might be tied up with your book, but not in the way you think." Ron quickly brushed at an errant tear from her cheek as it fell. He cupped her cheek and said quietly and gently, "You need to move on with your life, Hermione. You need to move past school and the war and the job and make a place for yourself in this world."

"Your life has been a whirlwind since you were eleven years old. When you were young, magic was new and exciting, and you completely immersed yourself; you soaked

up knowledge of this life like a sponge. And then there was the war, and you fought brilliantly! You researched and memorized, and you shared your knowledge so we could defeat Voldemort. And we did, Hermione! We defeated him.

"After the war was over, there was rebuilding and renovations, and once again, you immersed yourself in doing what you do best, for the betterment of us all." Ron paused, gauging her reactions to all that he has said so far and wondering yet again how he was going to get through this and tell her the rest.

"But Hermione, you didn't learn how to live in our magical world." Hermione sat straight at his words and attempted to draw back her hand. It was clear she did not understand. Ron didn't let go of her hand; instead, he tugged her to him and held her. She was stiff in his arms, but he didn't release her. With her where she was, he wouldn't see her face when he finished what he needed to say.

"Harry and Professor Snape have learned how to live, Hermione. But you haven't. Harry had no knowledge of this world, but when he was introduced to his heritage, he knew it was where he belonged. He survived the war; he has put it behind him and has moved on.

"The same with Professor Snape. He never expected to survive the war. But he did. And he has made a life for himself, too. He learned to live in a post-Voldemort world, one he thought he would never get to enjoy.

"I've done the same thing, Hermione. I've moved on as much as I can, but I can't do it with you, not when you're not by my side. I think you need to find a place for yourself, and I don't think it's with me."

Hermione didn't respond. Ron felt his shirt dampen. He held on tightly. The worst was over, and he released a small sigh. Tucking his finger under Hermione's chin, he lifted her face to his.

"I love you. You are my best friend and my first love, and I want you to be happy. But right now, you're not. Right now, you just exist. It shouldn't be enough for you, but you just accept it. You say your life has a purpose, to write this book. But what happens when you're finished, huh?

"You are angry because Harry and Snape won't give you the answers to your questions. Don't you wonder why?"

Hermione began struggling in his arms, and he released her. She sat up, her eyes fierce with anger. She ran a hand through her hair, a habit from long ago, now useless with most of it gone. She was upset and hurt and a bit indignant, as well, he noted.

"I know why they won't answer my questions, Ronald." Hermione began. "They feel like they would be exposing a part of themselves that they don't feel comfortable sharing. But what they have to say is important, Ronald. To fully understand how we won the war, we need to know what happened between them. Was it secret information regarding Voldemort? Was it a spell or charm? What knowledge did Severus have? What did he tell Harry?"

Hermione was working herself into a right state, Ron thought, and he halted her in mid-sentence.

"Maybe that's none of your business, Hermione," Ron said rather sharply, but took a calming breath before continuing. "Maybe it's not important, except to them. They found a way to get on with their life. Maybe you are asking the wrong questions. Maybe you should be asking them how they managed, despite everything that happened to them, to make a life for themselves."

Ron leaned over to kiss Hermione swiftly on the lips, "Maybe if you asked Severus the right questions, he'll give you your answers." With another kiss, Ron softly said his good-byes and, grabbing his coat from the back of the chair, left quietly.

Hermione sat distracted on the sofa after Ron left, her face unable to mask the whirl of questions for which she had precious few answers. Ron's words left an impression. *Ask him the right questions; he might give you the answers you need.*

Chapter 2

Chapter 3 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

A/N: Big, big thanks to my betas, Wildcatcdc and Sc010f. This story was written for the HermioneBigBang on LJ

"Harry, have a moment?" Ron asked, making his way to the podium where Harry was gathering his presentation materials. Ron noticed Professor Snape doing the same a few feet away.

The morning's lecture on counter-intelligence had been thrilling, as well as familiar. Ron had heard it several times now; Harry and Professor Snape gave the same presentation to each new set of recruits to the Auror Department. Ron took great pride in knowing the inventions that came from WSD were making a difference in the way Aurors and Unspeakables were able to perform their jobs.

"Wotcher, Ron," Harry said, distracted. "I didn't know you were here. Bit old hat, isn't it?"

"Yeah, a bit." Ron grinned. "But I still get a kick out of it." Ron looked down for a moment, gathering up a bit of courage. He felt Harry's eyes on him.

"How is Pansy doing?" Ron asked. He could tell from Harry's expression that he'd taken his friend by surprise. While the woman had been in Slytherin and had been Draco's friend throughout school, neither took much notice of her since the end of the war. When she had signed up for Auror cadet training, they had been shocked, but pleasantly so. From the corner of his eye, Ron saw Professor Snape pause in his work. Ron smiled briefly.

"Is she making it through her classes all right?" Ron continued.

"So far, so good," Harry answered him, his voice full of caution. Ron understood Harry's tone, it wasn't like him to inquire after cadets enrolled in the training. In fact, Ron made it a point not to get chummy with the cadets after 'the fiasco' a couple of years ago. Being a war hero combined with being the COO of the company supplying them with body shields made Ron an excellent 'catch' and a couple of the female cadets wanted to personally 'thank him' for his invaluable help. Ever since, Ron had steered clear of Auror cadets.

And now, he was asking after one in particular. Harry was curious, as was Severus, although the taciturn man wouldn't show it.

"What is going on, Ron?" Harry asked, the question burning his brain.

Ron shrugged. "Just curious, I suppose. I've been thinking of asking her to the annual shindig." The 'shindig' was the Victory Gala held every year in May, to celebrate Voldemort's defeat.

"WHAT?" Harry shouted.

Severus eyed the two men critically. He was sure Mr. Weasley was speaking to him as much as he was to his friend. He was unsure of why, however. He gave up the pretense of packing away his material and stood leaning against the table, his arms crossed. While Mr. Weasley did not spare a glance to his former professor, Severus knew the man was aware of his interest. He was interested in what was said next.

"And what the hell does Hermione have to say about it, huh?" Harry asked belligerently.

Ron understood Harry's indignation, for Hermione was his sister in all ways but blood. Ron held up a hand. He would not be baited into an argument with his best friend. He needed Harry's help.

"Harry, do you really think I would just step out on Hermione? No, don't answer that," Ron said firmly, knowing his friend was going to deny the accusation. "Harry, I love Hermione. There is nothing on this earth I wouldn't do for her. But I need to do what is best for me too, mate. I'm over this war! I'm moving on with my life, and I'm trying like hell to help Hermione do the same, but she can't. She needs help, Harry, and I'm not the one who can help her."

From the look on his face, Harry was confused and angry, as well he should be, as would Ron, if their positions were reversed.

"You know it's been a while since 'Mione and I could be called a couple, Harry. As much as we love each other, if we were supposed to be married, we'd have done it by now, don't you think?"

"So, you have any ideas who can help Hermione?" Harry asked, concern etched in the question.

Ron jerked his head in Professor Snape's direction. Harry's eyes grew round as he looked between him and their former teacher. While was Ron no longer was intimidated by the man, having crossed his path often enough at seminars and conventions, he still had a healthy respect for the powerful wizard.

"May I speak plainly, sir?" Ron asked, waited while Severus studied him for several long moments. Finally, he nodded slowly.

"Sir, both you and Harry have talked with Hermione. She is obsessed with this book she is writing. She has dogged you both for months. I realize you refuse to answer certain questions; this conversation is not about that. Well, it is, but not directly. Since Hermione was eleven, she immersed herself in our world; she has studied and memorized, theorized and researched, you know how she is. But for all her learning, she has not learned how to make a life in this world of ours.

"She attended school with us, fought with us during the war, and helped put our world back together, moving from one project to the next. She accepted a menial job at the Ministry, menial for her intelligence, leastways. And now she has her book. But is she living? No, she has no friends, save us. Her house came furnished by the Ministry, and she has put no effort into making it a home. She doesn't attend Quidditch games or lectures. She doesn't go to the theater. She shops for necessity, not for want. She is merely existing, going through the paces, but not interacting." Ron spoke quietly, his sadness permeating his words.

"And why does Ms. Granger's life concern me, Mr. Weasley?" Severus asked, a hint of menace in his voice.

"With all due respect, Professor Snape, the questions she desperately needs answers to are the ones you can provide. With your help, she can learn how to make a life for herself now that school and the war is over. Last night I told her that if she asks you the right questions, you would have her answers."

Professor Snape shook his head. "I cannot give her the answers for her book, Mr. Weasley. I will not talk about that time. I've put it behind me, and there it shall stay."

"I quite agree, Professor. Those aren't the answers to which I was referring; but of course, Hermione is still a bit stubborn. But would you help her, if she came to you? Like she has helped all of us, time and time again?" Ron couldn't quite keep the pleading from his voice.

Harry spoke up. "Ron, what exactly is it that you want Severus to do?" Ron saw the slow look that his friend and former teacher shared.

"Would you ask her to attend the Victory Gala with you, sir? Tell her you've been thinking of her questions, and you would be willing to talk with her?" Ron shuffled his feet back and forth. He was no longer looking at either man. He truly felt awful for Hermione and what he was setting in motion, but he reminded himself that this must be done.

"I've told you, Mr. Weasley..." Severus began, but stopped when Ron looked up at him. There was pain on the man's face, pain that he, himself, recognized. He understood that Weasley was letting go of something he held precious, and Severus was not indifferent to his pain, though he was loath to admit it. If Mr. Weasley was being truthful, and Severus was not quite sure of the man's intentions, as yet, then perhaps he and Hermione had something in common, something they could perhaps talk about.

Harry jumped into the conversation. "Severus, would you help Hermione? She hasn't found her place in our world. I think you, of all people, understand that."

Severus observed Ron looking at Harry, grateful that Harry understood. Ron and Harry and Hermione, they were the Holy Trinity, of sorts. Equal, but separate, and when together, they became a force unlike any other in the history of the Wizarding world. Ron gave his best friend an encouraging smile, and together, they turned their attention to the one man who could save their sister. Severus Snape.

Chapter 3

Chapter 4 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

Severus Snape, slightly put out at the position he had been thrust into by the two younger men, stood in the dingy green corridor in the bowels of the Ministry building and peered into the open door of Hermione Granger's office. That a woman of her intelligence, not to mention her service in the war effort, had been shuffled off to work in this god-forsaken office was beyond all comprehension. She was paid handsomely for her work, but surely it wasn't enough to satisfy her. He thought again on the conversation he'd had two days earlier with Harry and Ron, by whose given names they insisted he address them.

Hermione showed no signs of awareness of his presence, and that alone was troublesome. Did she think herself safe in her office deep within the Ministry? He discounted this notion; she was only too aware of what had taken place within these walls in the past to let down her guard.

Hearing his knock, Severus saw Hermione look up and smile. Her smile dimmed, however, as she saw him gracing her doorway. She stood and walked slowly towards the doorway. With a flutter of her fingers, she dropped the words and greeted him.

"Good morning, Professor Snape," Hermione said.

Severus nodded curtly. He had not felt any wards in place as he neared Ms. Granger's door but felt the unmistakable tingle as she had dropped them, allowing him entrance into her equally dingy office. Whatever she used, they were not Ministry-approved, of that he was certain. He appreciated her thoroughness.

"Ms. Granger, as I've enlightened you on numerous occasions, I am no longer your teacher. Please desist your use of that title. 'Mister' will suffice or my given name, if it does not cause you undue stress."

Hermione looked taken aback for a moment, as if addressing him by his given name was an unexpected treat.

"All right, Severus it is, then." Hermione smiled hesitantly. "Won't you come in? The furnishings leave something to be desired, unfortunately," Hermione explained, pointing to the small, metal chair alongside her desk.

Severus' eyes did not linger upon the cast-off furniture. "No," he said abruptly. "I shan't be here long." His mouth pursed slightly, as if something unpleasant had been passed under his nose. "Ms. Granger..." he began, but Hermione interrupted.

"Prof... Severus, please, my name is Hermione. I owe you an apology. I had no right to press you the other day by the elevators. But would you please reconsider? I would be honored to include any information you'd like to discuss in the book. Of course, I'd like to ask follow-up questions, if that is acceptable. For clarification," Hermione said purposefully. "We can begin whenever is convenient for you."

Severus eyed the witch critically. Clearly, she had taken Ronald's suggestion seriously. *But of course, she would want follow-up questions.* He smirked. She thought to gain the upper hand by lulling him into a false sense of security by letting him expound upon those topics that he felt comfortable discussing. Little did she know. He relaxed.

He had decided to help Ms. Granger. Notwithstanding Harry and Ronald's pitiful attempt to gain his sympathy, she had sent her Patronus to summon help when he had been lying in the Shrieking Shack the night of the final battle. He doubted she was as lost as the two men had portrayed. That she was clinging to her past instead of moving forward was not all that surprising; it was what defined her in their world thus far. *Well, he'd had enough experience with that, hadn't he?*

How fortuitous that she apologized and made her offer; he had just been given carte blanche... best set the machine in motion.

"Ms. Granger, Hermione," he began, "I've come to invite you to accompany me to the Victory Gala."

Hermione looked as if she were nonplussed. "But... but you never... I've never seen you with..." she paused, realizing how she sounded. She took a deep breath and said, "I go with Ron."

Severus eyed her for several long moments. He held her gaze without commenting, forcing her to continue.

"Why?" Hermione asked suddenly. She's been so taken aback when he'd asked; she hadn't given a thought as to why. Was that the purpose of this visit?

Severus lifted his eyebrow then exhaled softly. "I had thought the night of the Gala an appropriate time. It would simply be easier to arrive together. We would fulfill our obligations to the Ministry by attending, and then we could depart. I could share with you some of my experiences, thereby not wasting the entire evening. Does that sound satisfactory?"

Hermione stood motionless. If she attended the Gala with him, she would have her interview, but something didn't quite fit...

"You view attending the Victory Gala as an obligation, then? Something to escape once fulfilled?" she asked.

Severus said nothing, merely nodded.

Hermione felt the same. She attended every year with Harry, Ron and his family, but she never cared to celebrate. There had been too much death and destruction. She had seen it firsthand, and she couldn't bring herself to carry on as if everything that preceded the final battle was a bit of nasty business best left forgotten.

Hermione wondered how Ron would react to her attending the ball with Severus. Would he be angry? Relieved? She admitted to herself that perhaps he would be relieved if they didn't attend together. She and Ron were on the cusp of something important, she could feel it. Lately she'd been noticing small things, and she could read the writing on the wall as well as the next girl.

Their relationship was coming to an end, and it wasn't with a nasty blowout and high passion but rather a whimper and a wave. She fervently wished she felt a burning desire to rip his throat out or eviscerate him. She felt she was doing a disservice to Ronald and their relationship by letting it go so easily. She acknowledged that was what she was doing. Was she ready to let go? What came next? Suddenly, she felt lightheaded as her heart squeezed painfully hard. She grasped the closest sturdy thing, Severus' arm.

She was letting Ron go. Oh, how it hurt. But if she was brutally honest, it was the fear of what came next that was causing her heart to contract pitifully. She would have Ronald forever, of that she was certain. He was a part of her, but... *But.*

Hadn't he said it, himself? He was ready to move on but he couldn't, because of her. She stood staring at Severus, her panic-filled eyes roaming Severus' face, looking for something, anything, to help ease the overwhelming feelings.

Severus moved swiftly. First she was clutching his arm, then, in the next moment, she was engulfed in his sturdy robes, held tightly to his firm chest as the dizziness threatened to overtake her.

"Slow, steady breaths, witch," Severus said, his voice low and gruff. Hermione responded automatically, trying to quell the panic from rising and cutting off her air. She drew in a shuddering breath and found the next one a bit easier to manage. And the next. And the next. One moment she was in her former professor's arms, and the next he thrust her from him. She felt cold and alone. She wanted to bury herself once more in his robes but sanity returned, and she straightened and ran her hands through her hair before smoothing the wrinkles from her jumper.

"Thank you, sir," Hermione whispered, her voice hoarse. She cleared it delicately.

Severus could say nothing for the space of a few heartbeats. He had no words. He had grabbed her and yanked her into his arms because of the panic in her eyes; she had need of a safe haven. But once she was nestled snugly against him, he hadn't wanted to let her go. She had felt like home, as if he had opened the door and walked into his past, present and future. In the space those brief minutes, he found what he had been searching for: her.

Severus nodded abruptly, turned on his heel and left, wordlessly. He needed to think. He needed space and time.

As Hermione watched him go, she sank slowly to the floor, dumbfounded. In his arms, she had been safe and secure. She had been home. Home, in the way her house could never be, the way the Burrow felt to everyone else but her. The way she desperately wished Ron's arms would feel, but didn't. In Severus Snape's arms, she had been where she belonged.

Oh, God, her terrified brain chanted, out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Chapter 4

Chapter 5 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

As always, much thanks to Wildcatcdc and Sc010f. You ladies rock!

Hermione spent the rest of the day in shock. Too much was happening, too quickly. *How has this happened?* she wondered.

In her sitting room, reclining on her couch with Crooks in her lap and a cuppa in her hand, Hermione let her mind wander. Her mind traveled back to her school days; not the easiest of times, certainly, when she felt she had to be better than those with magical backgrounds. All her life she'd felt she'd had to swim upstream, to prove herself to everyone around her. To purebloods like the Malfoys and Parkinsons, and the Weasleys, too, if she were honest with herself, that she had to prove she was just as magical, just as powerful, as they. She supposed she was leading the way for other Muggle-borns as well, to show them that they were just as good as everyone else. That it didn't matter what your background was, you either were or you were not magical.

Her first year at school had been difficult to navigate, but not for reasons most imagine. Contrary to what most of the students believed, the Headmaster and her Head of House had been made aware of her higher-than-average intelligence. She had asked for, and had been granted permission to, perform magic before attending her first year at Hogwarts. Due to her high marks and upper-level math and science classes before attending Hogwarts, Headmaster Dumbledore not only delivered her letter at the beginning of summer, but other magical books as well, including her beloved Hogwarts, A History.

Accepting that she was, in fact, a witch had been difficult, but with the Headmaster's guidance, she performed some simple spells during his visit. It was then that she looked into the rather surprised face of Professor Dumbledore and asked if she might practice at home before the term began. His missive three days later told her of her special dispensation to perform the magic found in her first-year texts and any found in the additional books the Headmaster had given her. She was to only practice her craft at home, indoors, where she and her magic could be monitored. Mum and Dad had groused, of course, and the phrases "Big Brother" and "surveillance" were mumbled under their breaths for week.

As Hermione made her way to the kitchen to place her dirty cup in the sink, her thoughts continued to dwell on school. The magic had always been easy, much in the same way that her upper-level courses had been easy. Calculus and Arithmancy, Chemistry and Potions, Physics and Transfiguration; the transition from Muggle courses to magical ones was smooth, leaving Hermione with entirely too much time to dwell on the fact that making friends in the magical world was just as difficult as making ones in the Muggle world.

How much easier Hogwarts might have been if she's been allowed to articulate classes as she had in her Muggle school Hermione thought as she washed the few dishes in her sink before rinsing and setting them in the drain to dry. The older students would have thought her odd, but would have ignored her and continued on with their work.

And so it went. By the start of each new school term, Hermione was well-versed in what her courses would cover and could perform all of the spell work involved, perhaps not perfectly but at least well enough to pass finals with an 'E.' It worked out well that she was as clever as she was, or she, Harry and Ron would have been killed well before leaving. Looking back now, a shudder ran along her spine at the thought of what could have happened, had she not stayed in her class and become friends with Harry and Ron.

Thinking of Ron brought an ache to her chest.

Knowing she would have a hard time sleeping, she reached for her emergency bottle of Ogden's Firewhisky and a glass. Pouring a mouthful, she swallowed the whisky and clutched the sink ledge as her throat and stomach burned. When she was finally able to draw a breath, she blinked back the tears in her eyes and made her way to her bedroom.

She dreamed of the men in her life: Harry, with his incredibly green eyes and sweet smile; Ron, whose freckles make his looks as boyish as his charm, and now Severus, with his brooding frown and eyes as black and shiny as obsidian. Severus, in whose arms she felt safe and secure.

She dreamed she and Harry were having tea in the library of Twelve Grimmauld Place. Surrounded by dust and moldy books, they sat on the carpeted floor in front of the cold fireplace.

"Harry," Hermione asked, "do you like living here?" She looked around at the dilapidated room and was saddened by the waste and neglect.

"I love it here, Hermione," Harry answered enthusiastically, "it's my home. People I loved once lived here. I've friends over for tea, and I feel safe and secure here. It's where I belong."

Hermione looked around again. "I don't know if I could feel comfortable here, Harry. There are so many sad memories, so much destruction. It's a lot to put back together, isn't it? Don't you just want to find someplace new? Someplace that doesn't require so much work?"

Harry looked puzzled. "I've my entire life to make this place into what I want it to be. Its foundations are good and solid. I can fix what needs to be fixed, and if I don't know how, well, I've lots of friends, don't I?" He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

Hermione looked around for her copy of Hogwarts, A History. "Things keep getting lost or misplaced when I come for a visit; it's very distracting, isn't it?"

"Everything I want is here. Even if I can't find it right now, I know it's here. If I look hard enough, I find it."

Harry fixed her another cup of tea and as he set it down, he knocked over her book, sending up dust. It tickled her nose and she sneezed, sending even more dust motes into the thick air. With a gentle wave of his wand, Harry rearranged the floating bits of dust into musical notes, and she began to sing the tune. He laughed, free and easy, and she leaned forward and kissed him, lightly and gently, brushing her lips across his before withdrawing. It was a kiss of love and friendship. They looked at each other and laughed at their silliness.

Hermione slipped into consciousness. She could still feel the softness of Harry's lips, their warmth and texture, and her heart beat slow and even in her chest. With a soft sigh, she drifted back asleep and once more dipped into dreamland.

She was wearing a white summer dress and a crown of flowers in her hair while standing in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. She felt the soft breeze coming in through the opened windows. She caught his scent in the breeze. She could smell him, that unique, indescribable scent that belonged to only Ron. It had been this she had noticed about him, that first day on the train to school. The carriage he and Harry had been riding in smelled of stale sandwiches and chocolate and licorice and something vaguely resembling woods. She'd thought it had been either the frog or the jelly babies they'd been eating, but she later learned it was him, just him.

Ronald walked up behind her and gently took her hand. "It's time to leave, Hermione. Time to start our life together." She peered down at their joined hands and saw their simple gold rings, symbolizing their love and commitment to share their lives with each other.

She was afraid, suddenly. Not of him, not of their love, but of what lay beyond the walls of the school. "Do we have to leave right now? Couldn't we stay for dinner, at least?"

Ron shook his head, sadly. "No, sorry. That would be great, though, wouldn't it? I bet the elves would make anything we asked of them! But nah. They've worked long and hard enough, don't you think? They deserve a break, just like the rest of us."

Hermione took another look around the empty Hall. It saddened her to think that everyone was gone, that they wouldn't be coming back.

"I don't know if I'm ready to leave yet, Ronald," Hermione whispered as she leaned her head against his shoulder.

Ron put his arm around her and led her to their place at the Gryffindor table. He sat down and pulled her down onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her waist and holding her close.

"Sure you are, 'Mione. You've been ready to leave longer than most of us. This school can't teach you more than you already know."

"But there are still classes that I haven't taken, books I haven't read in the library," Hermione explained impatiently.

"But there is so much more knowledge waiting for you out there." Ron nodded to the open windows across the Hall. "And we'll be together. You'll still get to tell me what to do," he cajoled and gave her a little squeeze.

Hermione looked down at the gold band on her finger. Looking up, her voice quivered when she admitted, "I don't think I'm ready for this, either," twisting the ring.

He kissed her shoulder. "That just means we'll always love each other and support each other. Can you imagine us not doing that? Beyond that" Ron shrugged, "that ring can mean whatever you want it to mean. Harry wears his next to his heart. He loved you first, you know." Ron whispered that last admission.

Abruptly, Ron stood, picking her up along the way and depositing her next to him. "Let's go, love. Where ever we end up, we'll always be together, no matter what."

The dream drifted off, and Hermione rolled in her bed. A contented sigh escaped her slightly parted lips. Snuggling further into her feather pillow, she raced into dreamland once more.

She stood in the doorway, looking into the large ballroom, gazing in wonder at the opulence. The parquet floors were polished to a high gloss, reflecting the glittering gowns and robes, jewels the guests wore as they twirled across the room. She looked down at her dress. While the other women in attendance wore satin and tulle, she was in silk, a rich, cinnamon-colored sheath that clung and skimmed over her body, revealing the contours of her body with its swells and dips. She smiled and nodded to the guests that passed by, content to stand where she was and observe. She felt a presence behind her, large and solid. Then, warm breath on her exposed neck and a low whisper in her ear, "Have you been waiting for me, Ms. Granger?"

Hermione felt a shiver race up her spine. That voice, the one that had always reminded her of melted dark chocolate, thick and rich and deep. It blanketed her, surrounded her in luxury, and she felt herself immersed in the aura of this man, this one man she'd been waiting for.

She turned her check and lifted her chin, allowing her to gaze into the obsidian eyes of Severus Snape.

"Severus," she whispered, slightly breathless.

His hand found its place on her hip and pulled her up against him, against the hard plane of his body, including his semi-aroused member.

A sweet purr emanated from her throat, and she heard his deep chuckle.

"We've only just arrived, kitten. We are not permitted to take our leave just yet." His hand left its perch on her hip and he took his place at her side. He offered her his arm, and together they entered the Grand Ballroom. The guests on the floor parted as Severus led her to the middle of the room. He lifted his chin towards the band, and the slow, lilting sounds of a waltz filled the air.

They moved effortlessly around the room, lost in each other's arms, sinking further into each other's eyes. His arms tightened, and her fingers answered by clenching his muscled shoulder. Their movements were precise, so attuned were they to each other. They were a pleasure to watch, and the crowd took to the edges of the dance floor, better able to see the couple dancing, oblivious to everyone else.

Hermione felt as if she were flying, high and unencumbered by the restraints that had held her tethered for so long. In his arms she felt safe and secure, yet free. She never wanted this feeling, this lightness to end. But the final chords of the music drifted away, and she was pulled into the present, noticing once again the guests pressing in on her, demanding her attention, begging to be noticed. She looked for Severus, but he was gone, no longer by her side, and her panic set in once more. The weight on her chest was enormous, and she struggled to breathe, to catch her breath. Her knees grew weak, and she knew she had to escape, to get away. And then, he was by her side once more.

"You left me," Hermione gritted harshly. "I had to deal with this," jutting her chin to indicate the swarming masses closing in, "by myself."

"No, love," Severus whispered in her ear, "I've always been here, close by, should you need me. Your vision was clouded, however, and you lost sight of me for a moment."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as she rolled over in her bed. He had always been close, she realized. She had just lost sight of him.

Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

As always, big, big thank yous to Wildcatcdc and Sc010f!!

Hermione woke slowly. She rolled onto her back, stretching and arching before slumping back into the bed. She pulled the duvet a bit higher until she was buried to her chin. She smiled, something she hadn't done in many a morning. She wasn't quite sure why she felt so rested and relaxed. She'd dreamt more than usual the night before, and while she didn't remember her dreams with any sense of clarity, she knew they were good dreams, bringing her a measure of calm and comfort.

She stayed in bed a few moments more, hoping that some remnant of a dream would come back. And then she remembered his voice, whispering in her ear.

Oh gods, she thought, *that voice*. She admitted that Severus Snape's voice was the gods' gift to make up for his nasty disposition. She remembered more than one occasion where her knickers had actually become damp while listening to his lectures in his Advanced Potions classes, which were more theory than practical application. In those classes, when one was expected to sit and pay attention, she'd found herself distracted, not only by that smooth deep voice, but also by his physicality, the fluid motions of his body as he moved across the front of the room and his hands, *oh god, his hands*, she thought again, as they pointed to an equation written on the blackboards or some imaginary cauldron. That they were in constant motion in these classes shouldn't have surprised her. They were never still when the students were brewing, either. Severus was used to keeping his body, hands and mouth in perpetual motion.

Is he like that with a woman, as well? Hermione stilled. Had she really just thought that? Severus Snape with a woman? With a *lover*? Her panties dampened at the thought. Hermione smiled sleepily. *It is a glorious a morning*, she thought. *It's Saturday, I've nowhere to be and no one expecting me*. She closed her eyes.

Once again, she was in her Potions classroom, but she was no longer a student, and she wasn't attending a lecture. He was in the front of the room, stowing away his lecture materials and handouts, it appeared. She walked up the aisle, waiting for him to lift his head. He went through the motions of tidying his desk, giving no indication that he was aware of her, but she knew better. He'd spent too many years as a spy not to be aware of anyone in his space. When he'd finished his busy work, he straightened, rounded the corner and leaned his hip against the hard wood, folding his arms across his chest. He was clad in his lecturing attire, a lightweight, close-fitting black half-robe, similar to a waistcoat, which he had unbuttoned as he worked. A green button-down shirt was tucked into his wool trousers that sat low on his waist. A black, leather belt and silver buckle drew attention to how low-slung his hips were, a fact she noted with appreciation.

All he needed was a black Stetson and hip holster, and he'd be a gunslinger, Hermione thought wildly, remembering her father's collection of Clint Eastwood movies.

Severus' eyes traveled up her body as she stood in the aisle in front of her. In her bed, Hermione glided her hands over her pajamas. It was her habit to sleep in pajamas since her school days of sleeping in a drafty dorm room. She let her hands travel from her neck to her breasts, running her fingertips lightly over the sensitive flesh. Her skin tingled from the feather-light contact, and her pink nipples began to pebble, even before she gently ran her fingernails across them. She imagined her nipples hardening under the stare of her former Professor.

The barely-there bra under her cashmere sweater did nothing to conceal her body's reaction, on display for him. He said nothing, but his eyebrow arched. With approval, she hoped. As she made her way to stand in front of him, he stood straight and dropped his arms to his sides.

"Ms. Granger," Severus crooned, "I'm pleased that you could meet with me this afternoon." With that, he turned and began walking away from her, stopping halfway across the room to look back where she stood. He stretched out his hand, as if he meant her to take it, and she quickly crossed to his side. Instead of taking her hand in his, he settled it at the base of her spine, splayed so that he could feel the indent at her hips and the protrusion of her lower spine.

Hermione slipped her hands under her pajama top. Her nipples tightened further, and her fingers found them, plucking and pinching lightly, delighted with the corresponding bursts of pleasure in her quim. She grasped her pajama bottoms and slid them down her legs, letting them gather around her ankles. With her knees bent, she let her legs spread on the bed. How cool her cotton sheets felt on her overheated flesh. How deliciously her bottom slid across the smooth material as her fingers began running lightly up and down the soft pale flesh of her inner thighs, edging closer and closer to the wet heat of her pussy.

Severus guided her into his sitting room, where he removed his half-robe to hang it on a thin coat stand in the corner. "May I offer you a drink, Ms. Granger?" he asked, and Hermione fidgeted with the bottom of her sweater, running the material under her fingernail in a nervous gesture she acquired since leaving school.

"Yes, thank you," Hermione replied softly, "whatever you are having will be fine."

With a small nod, Severus turned and poured two glasses of red wine. With glasses in hand, he nodded to the broad sofa, indicating she should sit, then handed her the wine. He settled in next to her, his arm over the back, close to enough for him to play with the ends of her hair.

"It was suggested that I have a glass of red wine at the end of my day," Severus began conversationally while his finger gently stroked her neck, "for relaxation and for the health of my heart. It had been damaged over the years from various curses, you see." He paused to take a sip of the lush red liquid, and Hermione did the same, savoring the bite of the tannins, as a shiver ran down her spine at Severus' gentle touch.

"Your heart, is it weak?" Hermione asked tentatively.

Severus smiled devilishly and took the glass from her hand. Setting them on the side table, he took her by the shoulders and pulled her to him.

"Not in the least," he murmured before capturing her mouth in a branding kiss.

Hermione envisioned Severus kissing her, stealing her breath as his mouth traveled down her cheek to her neck where he laved the skin before sucking gently, making her moan in excitement.

He reached up to cup her breast and squeezed gently, learning the shape, letting it fill his hand. When he ran his thumb across her nipple, she drew a quick breath and wetness pooled between her thighs. She pressed her breast into his hand and was rewarded when he palmed the other breast, as well. She placed her hands on his thighs for leverage and squeezed.

Instantly, a hand went to the back of her neck and hauled her closer, dragging her into his lap. She was lying across his legs, and he bent low to kiss her breast through her sweater. His hot breath scorched through the soft material a second before he whispered the spell to remove it. He leered at the inconsequential scrap of lace that barely covered her nipples. Sliding his finger under the material, he pulled it down and covered her flesh with his mouth. She arched her back, eager for the contact. Splayed as she was before him, with his arm crooked under her neck for support, his hand left her breast and traveled down to her belly, lightly tracing his fingers down her ribcage, tickling her and making her gasp once again.

His hand dipped lower, into that concave space between her pelvic bones, running his fingertips back and forth, lower and lower, slipping beneath her slacks. She thrust her hips, hoping her aim was true and his hand would cover her, finally.

Hermione's fingers found her pussy. She traced her labia gently with her fingers before sliding her fingers through the folds and skimming her clit, drawing a moan, much like the Severus in her fantasy.

Severus' hand finally, *finally*, touched her where she most wanted, and he wasn't delicate or searching. His hand covered her hot, wet pussy, his palm pressing into her clit, rubbing and sliding along the wet, slippery flesh. Severus sought out her opening, inserting first one then two fingers, rocking back and forth along her wet cunt until Hermione was moving and thrusting with him in sync, point and counterpoint, her need building and building. Hermione found her breast and began tweaking and pulling at her nipples, twisting and pinching until in time with the thrusting fingers.

Hermione, in the throes of her fantasy, was doing much the same thing, her fingers on one hand were buried deep within her while the other was at her breast, kneading and pulling, catching her nipples between her fingers, flicking and tweaking them.

As Severus began thrusting his fingers deeper and deeper, so did Hermione until she came, shuddering and gasping Severus' name. Her hand slowed, her clit so sensitive that the slightest caress by her thumb caused her to jerk and twitch.

Eventually, her heartbeat slowed, and Hermione became fully awake, fully aware of what had transpired, both during the night in her dreams and of the last fifteen minutes.

She'd orgasmed for Severus Snape. He'd made her come long and hard, longer and harder than Viktor or Ron had ever caused her to.

*Oh my gods, she thought. Out of the frying pan, **indeed!***

Chapter 6

Chapter 7 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

A/N: As always, a huge hug and thank you to Wildcatcdc and Sc010f for their fantastic work!

Hermione indulged in a bit of self-mortification and threw her blankets over her head. She'd masturbated had *gotten off* to a fantasy regarding Professor Snape. *Severus!* She would never be able to address him as "Professor" again. She wasn't quite sure she could even look him in the face without blushing.

What was she going to do? How could she face him? She'd had a small crush on him during her last year of school and when they'd learned he was a spy for the Order; and later, when his past had come to light, what sacrifices he'd made, both personally and professionally, she was humbled and inspired by his single-mindedness and cleverness.

Contrary to what the countless newspapers had speculated, she hadn't been the one to save his life. The Healers and Curse-breakers had healed and brought Severus Snape back to life and back to health. All she had done was sent her Patronus with the message "Follow me to the body of Severus Snape." He had been dead, or as close to death as possible, only to be brought back by the most powerful witches and wizards in the world. Specialists from all over the world had Apparated to St. Mungo's to care for and watch over and observe the progress of Severus. She had not saved his life, and he did not owe her a life debt, of that she'd made certain, even before he had regained consciousness. He would be beholden to no one, certainly not to her, if she had any say in the matter.

To that end, she consulted with Professor Dumbledore's portrait, the most expedient source of information for her specific need. The portrait had told her that, in order for there to be a life debt, several factors must be taken into account, including the intent of the parties participating in the event. Since her Patronus had not been sent to gain aid or to save Professor Snape's life but rather to merely inform a third party of his whereabouts, her actions alone would not have invoked a life bond, regardless of whether her actions resulted in his life being saved or not.

Another requirement for the invocation of a life bond was the person, in this instance Professor Snape, must accept, either consciously or subconsciously, the reasoning for the action that invoked the bond was life saving. This had proven to be a blessing and a curse; Hermione had made certain Severus was told the truth, a message had been sent, but he was given no information as to why. As a result, Severus Snape, recipient of the Order of Merlin, First Class, believed it had been with callousness and disregard for his person but with a begrudging respect for his role in the war that prompted the use of the Patronus for retrieval of his body. He never would know Hermione's respect and regard for him, therefore he could allow his anger and resentment to override any softer emotion. *That is how it should be, how it **must** be,* Hermione often thought. *It's what he deserves.*

Hermione never allowed herself to dwell on the sight of him lying in his own blood, the swollen, black puncture holes a grizzly reminder of his service to both causes. She'd believed him to be dead, knew he was dead, and she had felt helpless and heartbroken for the millionth time that awful day. She had been numb by the time she'd sent her Patronus, unable to feel more in that moment, and it was that lack of feeling, that inability to acknowledge any tender feelings that disavowed any life bond from forming.

And now, seven years later, Hermione was thinking perhaps it wouldn't be so bad, having Severus beholden to her, and wondering if perhaps he could repay the debt with sex.

With a disgusted shake of her head, Hermione finally roused herself from her bed and stepped into the bathroom to take a shower. Stepping under the hot water, she closed her eyes and once again saw herself in his classroom, in his study, over his lap and in his arms. And now she imagined herself under his body, moving in rhythm with him. His body long and lean, his hands whipping her into a frenzy and his mouth covering hers. And later, holding her in his arms like he had not so long ago in her office, when those initial, overwhelming waves of terror threatened to overcome her.

Showered and dressed, Hermione went about her Saturday routine; laundry charms, cleaning spells and dictating a shopping list to call in for delivery. She was no less conflicted about the men in her life, but dwelling on the problem without having time to sit and work on a solution was pointless. That evening, when she had time for thorough, thoughtful introspection, she would sit with a glass of elf wine and puzzle it all out. *In the meantime,* she thought, *best fold the laundry.*

Severus was having no easier time. After leaving Hermione's office, his need for escape was great, so he returned to the one place that had always given him solace when the world closed in, the one place where he could get lost. He'd gone home, home being a nice, unassuming flat, and changed into comfortable, well-worn jeans, a cotton shirt and jacket, and headed to Hyde Park.

He walked for hours, first along Rotten Row then the Serpentine and finally the Foot Path, trying to clear his head and analyze his reaction to Ms. Grange *Hermione, now,* he corrected himself. What had started out as a simple favor and a vague feeling of obligation for his former students and fellow Order members has taken a turn, and Severus was not quite sure what he was going to do about it, if he should even do anything.

He'd been wandering most of his life, it seemed. Constantly looking for a home, a place he belonged. He'd found a home, of sorts, in the long-ago playground of his youth. His little shelter he'd made, had hid in, while he spied on the world around him, content to watch and listen and learn that there was more to the world than what he'd suffered at home. Parents and children playing together, nannies taking care of their charges, older brothers and sisters looking after their younger siblings. And it made him realize what he was missing in his life and what he wanted in his life.

He'd found a place for himself with Lily and with Hogwarts, until the day came when Potter disrupted his meagerly laid plans. Even before Lily had walked away from him, he'd been slowly losing her. She'd been slipping further and further away from him, becoming more and more immersed in the house rivalries, excluding him from things

when they'd once been partners and friends.

His Slytherin housemates had made him feel accepted and worthwhile. The unity in the House of Slytherin was unparalleled, and it was there, for a time, where he felt he belonged. Joining Voldemort and the Death Eaters had reinforced those feelings of acceptance and brotherhood, and it wasn't until the murders began that he felt he was beginning to drown under the weight of bad decisions. The final straw had been the death of Lily, and it was then Severus realized, with a biting and stinging reality, that the choices he'd made had had far-reaching consequences.

He'd spent the next twenty years living with the consequences, drowning in them until he found the resolve and strength to walk past his mistakes. He'd done it, and it had been harder than playing the double agent in the Second Wizarding War. He'd had to learn where he belonged in the post-Voldemort world, a world he never thought he'd see. He'd done it by figuring out what it was he wanted and what he didn't, and then going after it.

Did he want Hermione? Was he ready to grasp the final piece of the puzzle, the one which had been missing?

He didn't know. He thought, perhaps, he'd like to find out.

Chapter 7

Chapter 8 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

Severus made no effort to contact Hermione. He went about his business, researching material for his next series of lectures, updated his database with the most current information regarding crime statistics and such, and generally kept his mind so busy on work that he'd have little time to dwell on her.

She and *her*. Two pronouns he had taken to using with great regularity; her name was like a drug, leading him down paths best left unexplored. He wanted her. But he had denied himself far more, for far longer. He needed order and routine, things that he'd created for himself since the war, for they calmed and soothed him.

A week before the ball, he found himself once again in the Ministry of Magic, heading down the corridor towards Hermione's office. The Minister himself had requested that Severus speak with Hermione regarding certain classified information regarding the Ministry's book on the war. Apparently, it was no longer her book, but the Ministry's book. *Perhaps that was for the best*, he thought.

As he drew closer to her door, he heard Potter's, Harry's, voice, apparently attempting to calm Hermione down, from the sounds of it.

"Hermione, please! Just calm down. No! Put that down! You know you don't want to throw it!" **Crash!** "Now look what you did." Pause. "Oh, clever, you've charmed it to repair itself." Pause. "Hermione, please!"

Severus took another step but paused again when he heard Hermione's voice. At least, he heard what he thought was her voice. He'd never heard that tone; it was a mixture of malice and hurt and revenge, and he wondered what could have caused such a reaction. He thought perhaps it was due to the Minister's missive regarding the book.

"How could he, Harry? Did he give any thought to how I would feel about this? No, I can guarantee you he did not! Once again, he was doing what he felt was best. Why bother explaining his actions; who are we to question his motives?"

Severus hurried down the corridor, arriving at her door just in time to see her crouch in front of her fireplace. If she were going to lambaste the Minister of Magic, he would most certainly want to witness the whole debacle. He might even use the whole sorry mess to his advantage. Severus did what he did best, disillusioned himself, then watched and waited. He was astounded by what came next.

"Ronald Weasley! Where are you, you deceitful bastard?" Behind her, Harry was trying to calm her down. She whipped her head around to pin him with a deadly stare and, pointing a finger at him, hissed, "Not one word, Harry. Do you hear me? Not one word. He may be your best friend, but this is between the two of us."

Harry had taken a step back and raised his hands in a sign of acquiescence. Hermione whipped back to the Floo and stuck her head into the green flames.

"Ronald, you best get your sorry arse through here! It won't be pretty if I have to come through!"

Mumbling and cursing could be heard through the Floo, and even from this distance, it sounded as if there were an argument taking place on the other side of the connection.

Severus neared her door and waited for the wards to recognize him and lower. They did in a matter of moments, and he stepped through the doorway. Neither Hermione nor Harry acknowledged his presence. Hermione would perhaps be surprised at him getting past her wards. *Potter, however, would not*, Severus thought.

Hermione stood quickly and backed up as she saw the Floo activating. Instead of Ron walking through, however, it was George Weasley with an anxious and apologetic look on his face. He quickly raised his hand, stalling Hermione's imminent tirade.

George bent quickly and gave her a kiss on the cheek, then turned to Harry and shook his hand. Severus was surprised to see the man standing with the Hermione and Harry. While he still carried the undeniable semblance of a Weasley, the trademark red hair and freckles, the man in the room was more of a ghost of his former self. He had lost weight, and the vitality that had been his and his brother's trademark was missing. Severus shook his head sadly. Another casualty of the war. Back when the twins had attended Hogwarts, Dumbledore sensed rare magic surrounding the pair. The Weasley twins were special, even by wizarding standards. He, Severus, long used to Dumbledore's intuitive nature, brewed the ancient potion Dumbledore had requested, and the results were astounding, even to him and Severus. Fred and George shared a bit of each other's souls. He wondered if the results of those long-ago tests had ever been made public, even to the family. Dumbledore rejected the idea of telling the boys' family for fear of the information falling into the wrong hands, and what would result during the war. Afterwards, Poppy might not have shared the results. Special care must be given in these circumstances.

Severus narrowed his eyes. A trip to the Burrow might be in order.

Severus shook off his ruminations. He was not here to dwell on the Weasleys' problems. *Well, perhaps he was*, he thought with a smirk a moment later as Hermione began to interrogate the redhead.

George had begun explaining why he had come instead of Ronald. His tone was apologetic, saying his brother had received an owl from the Procurement Office of

France's Auror Department that must be dealt with immediately. He and Ron had been arguing as to who should take care of the situation, and George insisted that Ron go, as he was, in fact, the liaison for the division.

Hermione pursed her lips. It was clear to Severus she wasn't pleased with George's explanation, yet she couldn't disregard Ron's obligations, either. He couldn't wait to hear what happened next.

Hermione, for her part, was livid, and in her mind, she raged. How dare Ronald invite someone to the Victory Gala without first telling her? They might no longer be a couple and confide in each other or make decisions together, but surely he could have been decent enough to let her know personally. Did he think she would stop him? Did he think she would be so jealous that she would have some kind of fit? She admitted that she was jealous, jealous Ron could so easily walk away from their relationship without so much as a backward glance, where she had collapsed into the arms of her former Potions professor.

She paused midway through her prepared rant. She stood there, her mouth open, her finger pointed at George's chest, but no words came forth. She was not jealous that Ron had invited someone else. She was relieved, in light of their recent conversation. She was not happy that Pansy saw it fit to seek her out and request her permission to attend the gala with Ronald. What she was unhappy about was being taken by surprise.

But Ron had tried to contact me, she reminded herself guiltily. He had Floo-ed twice during the week, but she'd been tired and distracted and hadn't wanted to face whatever it was he'd been trying to say. She thought about the owl he'd sent. *The letter*. She'd get to that in a moment. But first...

"George, when did Ron decide to ask Pansy to the Gala?"

George looked confused for a moment, then replied, "He asked her three days ago, 'Mione." But Hermione shook her head.

"That's not what I asked, George." She looked at him, taking in sad brown eyes and gaunt features. *When had he become so thin?* she wondered. "I don't suppose it matters. You both," she turned to glance at Harry, "need to know I'm going to the Gala with Severus. Snape. Severus Snape."

She looked back and forth between the two men, wondering why they weren't reacting as she'd expected they might. She hadn't actually planned on telling either of them today, but it was as good a time as any, and it soothed that little part of her that was jealous of Ron for finding someone else, despite being happy for him.

"That's good, Hermione," Harry said quietly. "I'm glad you won't be alone, and Severus hates the Gala almost as much as you. You and he will have a grand time eviscerating all those who cross your path."

Hermione looked at him in quiet surprise. "Am I really that bad, Harry?"

"Well," Harry, looking distinctly uncomfortable, rubbed the back of his neck. "We know you hate the Gala and how hard it is for you to look on this as a celebration. We realize that it is also a reminder of all those we lost, as well as a celebration that we won, that we still have our world to live in. We understand, but it makes our friends a little nervous to come over and say hello when you are so obviously unhappy."

Hermione felt her cheeks grow hot with embarrassment. Her friends stayed away from her? Why hadn't they said anything to her, ask her to... Her thoughts ground to a halt. They had, but always on the night of the Gala, when her emotions were wild and hard to reign in. This year would be different, she thought to herself with a smile. Very different.

Hermione smiled and turned to apologize for her outburst. She was amused to see the men looking relieved. She still did not quite understand their easy acceptance of attending the Gala with Severus, but she supposed it was a testament to not only their belief in her judgment but also in his character that left the remarks left unspoken.

Hermione heard Harry and George breathe a sigh of relieve as they left her office.

Hermione sat down at her desk, found the letter Ronald had sent a couple of days ago, and began to read. She sat and read of Ron's decision to ask Pansy Parkinson to the Gala. When she finished, she set it down, her spirits lifting. She should have known, should have trusted him. Ronald would not hurt her, would not turn her away, and would not walk away from their many years of friendship. One more misstep on her part, it would seem.

Pansy was just as much a victim and refugee from the war as so many others. After the last of her family died, Pansy had finally come out of hiding to claim her inheritance and resume her life in Britain. Ron's father had helped her escape to Brussels, and Ron himself had gone to fetch her home. Even Harry had not known where Pansy had gone or the Weasleys' part in her flight. It explained why Ron had asked her to attend, why Pansy had come to her, asking for permission.

Hermione leaned back in her chair with a smile. She was free. Free of the Weasleys on the ghastliest night of the year. Free from the obligation to smile and nod and act as if all were bunnies and flowers. She could be as miserable as she wanted, for she would be attending with Severus.

For a change, the worst night of the year just might turn out to not so horrible. All because of Severus Snape, Potions master, war hero and maybe, savior. Severus. She leaned her head back and smiled.

Severus still stood in the doorway, unable to move, transfixed by her smile. Quickly coming to his senses, he retreated down the hall and reversed the Disillusionment Spell. Straightening his clothes and giving himself a mental shake, he once again approached her doorway and knocked.

She looked up at the sound and softly smiled and lowered the wards before crossing the room to meet him. "Hello," she said quietly.

At that moment, Ron stuck his head through the Floo, intent on speaking with Hermione now that the small crisis had been averted with his newest client in France. Seeing Hermione and Severus together, he quickly retreated as far as he could into the fireplace while still being able to overhear.

"I've stopped by to finalize our arrangements for Saturday evening. I'd have sent an owl, but I'd an appointment in the building. You have sufficiently recovered from earlier this week?" Severus asked quietly.

Hermione gazed at him for a moment. She thought she knew this man in front of her, the one who had taught her all those years while in Hogwarts, the one she'd stood shoulder to shoulder with in the Order, the one she'd fought beside in the war. But looking upon him now, her eyes were opened. There was so much to this man she didn't know, hadn't realized was there. She wanted to know more, and not for the damn book. He was new to her, new in a way she'd never experienced, like finding a hidden gem in the jewelry box, always there, but never really seen. Suddenly, she was unsure. She knew her own mind, her own heart, but what of his?

Severus watched emotions flitting across Hermione's face and wondered what the witch was thinking. Did she regret the moment of weakness she'd shared? Was she uncomfortable that he'd offered a measure of comfort? He knew his own mind, knew what he wanted. But what of her?

Hermione smiled. "I've sufficiently recovered, thank you." She appeared as if she was waiting for him to say something, but after a moment of silence, she continued. "About Saturday, should we perhaps..." He didn't give her time to finish her suggestion, but interrupted.

"I think perhaps it would be best if I escorted you to the Gala, seeing as how Mr. Weasley is not accompanying you this year. If you would kindly provide your address..."

"Oh! Of course," she answered happily and moved towards her desk to grab her quill and a bit of parchment.

"Hermione," Severus began quickly, taking her hand. She lifted her eyes, looking startled to hear her name on his lips and his hand covering hers. "I assure you, I've an excellent memory. If you would but tell me..."

Hermione laughed nervously. "I'm sorry," she said with a shrug of her shoulders and proceeded to recite her home address.

He stepped towards her, unconsciously pulling her towards him. They stood silently, holding hands, content to share the moment just gazing at each other. Severus finally remembered where he was, cleared his throat and took a step back, slowly releasing her hand.

"You may expect me at half-six, then. On Saturday," he said lowly. Hermione licked her bottom lip, and Severus could not take his eyes off her mouth. He had a sudden urge to find out if they tasted as they looked, like ripe strawberries.

Hermione was mesmerized by what she saw on Severus' face. He was staring at her mouth and suddenly, it was too much. She needed to know, she had to find out now, damn the consequences.

Like a choreographed dance, they moved as one, taking a single step each, their lips met in a soft hello. Too hesitant to whisper across the soft skin, they brushed lightly. They broke apart, and their eyes flew to the other, frightened, yet eager to discover the other's reaction. There was surprise and embarrassment. And acceptance.

"Half-six it is then, Severus." Hermione said softly, wanting desperately to lift her fingertips to her lips, to experience those lips once more.

Severus gave her a small smile, then turned and left.

Ron backed out of the Floo moments before George walked into the office.

"Were you speaking with Hermione just now?" George asked tiredly as he flung himself into a nearby leather chair.

"No, actually, I was going to go through, but Professor Snape was there, and I didn't want to interrupt," Ron said casually as he straightened his clothes and climbed to his feet.

"Are they still screaming at each other?" George asked with a small grin, and it was impossible for Ron not to return it with one of his own.

"Nah. They're making a couple more moves," Ron answered.

The brothers mulled over the possible scenarios for a span of several heartbeats.

"Wicked," was their shared observation.

Chapter 8

Chapter 9 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

Hermione was a nervous wreck. She'd spent every non-working minute either thinking of the kiss, thinking of questions to ask Severus, the Gala, or wondering if he was going to kiss her again. She'd spent an inordinate amount of time on the last thought. Did she want him to?

How very ironic that the one day of the year that she despised, that she had such a hard time coping with every year had become the day she had been looking forward to all week. When she saw Severus again, would once more be able to spend time in his company, have a reason to talk with him, to share with him. Yes, presumably it was to talk about his war effort, but she realized that she didn't need to know the grisly details to be able to tell his story. In fact, the more she had thought about it, the more she realized the information she wanted most would fit well in her book, but that wasn't the reason for wanting to know. No, now she wanted to know for herself.

Severus was a nervous wreck, although one would not be able to tell simply by looking at him. He neither broke a sweat nor had any telltale signs of discomfort. He'd kissed Hermione. She had kissed him. And it was more than he'd shared with any soul on earth. More than Lily, and he'd poured his young heart out to her. No, for the first time in his adult life, he wanted to share himself with someone.

Taking a walk in Hyde Park was not as appealing as the thought of taking Hermione to the Gala, of being able to spend time with her, sharing himself with her. And it might be under the pretext of her book, but he knew it would be for more important reasons.

He was ready. He'd been ready for three years now. After the war and his recovery, he'd been on a quest to purge his soul so that he might one day make a life for himself. He no longer wanted to be alone. And as nervous as it made him, she was the one. Would he have to convince her of it? He doubted it. He'd been as aware of her reaction to the kiss as his own. Still, nervousness was his partner for the evening.

He Apparated a short distance from her home and walked the few yards to her front door. As he was about to knock, the door was flung open and there she stood.

She is a vision, he thought, awestruck. A deceptively simple claret-colored gown, but when she took a breath, the dress shimmered in the soft glow of her sitting room. Minuscule strips held it up. It was modest in the front, but when she turned to fetch her wrap, Severus inhaled sharply. The back dipped alarmingly behind her, exposing the expanse of her back. She simply could not be wearing undergarments he thought as he tried to swallow the alarmingly large lump in his throat.

He was afraid to compliment her, afraid he would sound like those foolish teenagers at the school, but by the way she blushed as she held the wrap outstretched so that he could lay it across her shoulders, he was moderately certain she understood the meaning in his eyes. His cock tightened painfully and he was thankful for the layers of material that separated him and his sudden, embarrassing erection from her amazingly soft-looking skin.

Walking out into the evening air, Hermione shivered suddenly, and Severus pulled her closer to him. She smiled, and he realized one of the many benefits of her evening attire.

They Apparated effortlessly, and the magic was easily absorbed into the electrical grid. He did not question her decision to live in a Muggle neighborhood. He quite understood her need to feel connected to that part of her world. Her two best friends, however, had different thoughts on the matter. Well, he would find out soon enough.

They arrived at the huge double wooden doors. Two elves garbed in official Ministry hand towels nodded austerely as a third removed Hermione's wrap. Her magical residue on the wrap made it impossible for someone else to make off with it. *A simple and efficient form of coat check*, Hermione thought, amused for the moment. An uneasiness settled across her shoulders, however, as they slowly approached the doors leading into the ballroom where the Gala was taking place. Severus slowed, and Hermione looked up at him questioningly.

"A moment, if you please," he said in a low voice. He led her into a small alcove off to the side of the doors. Casting charms so they were neither seen nor heard, and turning to her, he said softly, "I thought perhaps you'd need a moment to compose yourself. I know this is not a pleasant night for you."

"Neither is it for you, yet here you are. I believe we can do this together," Hermione replied.

Severus gave her a small smile and nodded towards the doors. "Ready, then?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, not yet." Severus looked at her expectantly, as if waiting for her to compose herself. Instead she stood close, and raising herself to her tiptoes, she laid her cheek next to his and breathed in his scent. Her body pressed softly against his, and it took a supreme effort on his part not to haul her into his arms.

"Thank you, Severus," she whispered. "This night is already a success because of you. Instead of approaching tonight with dread, I looked forward to sharing it with you because you understand." She stood straight again. Before she moved away, Severus raised his hand and laid it on her cheek. He ran his thumb over her cheekbone, and she lifted her eyes to his.

"I feel the same, Hermione." And then he did what he'd been contemplating since she'd opened the door to him. He gathered her in his arms and kissed her. It was not the hesitant kiss of her office. It was lush and full and with the exquisite knowledge that this night was theirs to do with what they wished. He gathered her his chest and under his palm her satin skin heated his blood as he stroked her back. She shivered once more and pressed herself closer. Her arms wrapped themselves around his waist, her hands played against the rich, heavy silk of his robes.

When he withdrew, her lips were slightly red and swollen. Drawing deep breaths, he held out his arm, and together they entered the ballroom.

They hadn't meant to make an entrance. Usually Hermione arrived early, and there were few people around to make a fuss. Given the fact that Ron, along with Pansy and his family, not to mention Harry and Ginny, were already in attendance, all eyes turned to see the late arrivals. Severus stood as proud and austere as usual. The noticeable change was the stunning woman on his arm, and the crowd parted and drew a collective gasp when they realized the woman was none other than Hermione Granger, the war hero who had always worn black, to honor the war dead. That tonight she was dressed in a deep claret colored gown that revealed her softly rounded breasts and lithe frame, made the guests wonder if perhaps she'd been slipped some potion or was under some spell.

They'd spotted Harry and Ginny standing apart from the Weasleys, and Hermione felt comfortable enough to approach them. Severus escorted her to the couple, and while Harry was struck dumb, Ginny smiled and complimented the couple for not only looking like the height of fashion, but also causing quite the stir.

"Our evening just became much more interesting, Hermione." Ginny grinned. She turned to her husband and watched him swallow hard. Twice. She elbowed him in the ribs. Appearing startled, Harry turned to his wife, smiling, then turned back to Hermione and drew her in for a warm, welcoming hug.

"You look gorgeous, Hermione," Harry said as he pulled away. He turned to Severus, and the men shook hands. Severus glanced over towards the Weasleys and saw Ron walking towards them, while Pansy stood with Arthur and Fleur, chatting amiably. He saw Harry lift his chin in a salute to his best friend as he drew closer. Hermione saw the gesture as well and turned, her smile warm and genuine for her other best friend.

Ron lifted her off the floor, twirling her happily and planting a kiss on her cheek. "You look gorgeous, 'Mione," he said cheerfully. He turned to Severus, who greeted him with a scowl, as if displeased with such an outward display of affection. But Hermione didn't seem to mind the man's attention, and he was pleased. A jealous woman would not act happy to see her ex-lover at a function with his new paramour. It boded well for the rest of the evening, in Severus' opinion.

The first chords of a waltz were struck, and Severus reached out and took Hermione's hand, silently drawing her away from her friends and into his arms. As in her dream, Hermione felt as if she were floating above the dance floor. They were a true fit, and they moved as if they were one. The crowd parted as they watched them dance past. Neither Hermione nor Severus paid any attention to their surroundings. They were lost in each other's eyes, the golden brown and obsidian black. When the music ended, Hermione was breathless. Severus escorted her off the floor with the intent of finding some refreshments, but soon, friends and well-wishes wishers alike pressed in on her, congratulating her on her fine entrance and thanking her for her war effort and telling her how pleased they were she had managed finally to move past her grief.

Hermione felt weak, caught up in a wave of people, becoming lost in a sea of people, set adrift with no anchor or support. She looked around frantically, hoping to find a friendly face when she felt a strong arm around her waist. Panicking, she struggled to free herself of the restraint when she heard, "Shh, I have you," close to her ear. She slumped against the strong body. Severus. She looked up at him, into those black eyes, which comforted her and made her feel safe. His eyes flared briefly, and her breath caught in her throat. Desire flared in her belly. She wanted this man.

The crowd stood still, witnessing the silent exchange between the two. "Would you like to leave?" he asked hotly in her ear.

"Yes!" The word came rushing past her lips. He held out his hand and Summoned her cloak. The soft cashmere wrap floated through the air, high above the invited guests and floated gently onto Hermione's shoulders.

Severus gathered her into his arms. "Yours or mine?" he growled.

She was momentarily speechless. "Yours," she answered in a rush. He nodded once, turned, and they were gone.

Moments later they were standing in his sitting room which was softly lit with the candles that were haphazardly scattered around the simply designed room.

Severus removed Hermione's wrap and indicated the sofa. "I'll make some tea," he offered while Hermione sank down onto the black sofa.

"Oh, I thought we'd..." She stopped at the arrested look on his face. A hot flush crept up her neck and face, and she ducked her chin to hide her reaction.

Severus knelt on the floor before her and grasped her chin gently, lifting it until her eyes met his.

"We will," he said, amusement in his voice. "But more importantly, we need to talk, don't you agree?"

"Oh." Hermione laughed softly. "Yes, we do."

Severus leaned in and pressed a small kiss to her lips. "I'll return in a moment."

While Severus prepared tea, Hermione took the time to explore his flat. There were several paintings on the wall and sculptures and wooden carvings scattered around the room.

Before she had time to finish her tour of the room, Severus returned. She returned to the sofa and together they slowly sipped their tea.

"What happened at the Gala?" Severus asked gently. He watched Hermione intently, determined to find the cause of her distress.

"I had a dream a week or so ago, maybe a little more. I'd gone to the Gala, alone. You came up behind, and together we entered the ballroom. We danced a waltz, and when we were done, I was alone on the floor. Everyone was pressing in on me, demanding things of me. I was frightened. There was no one around, nowhere I could turn to for help. And then, you appeared." Hermione shrugged her shoulders. I suppose tonight was a little too much like my dream, and I panicked."

Severus stretched his arm along the back of the couch and caught the tips of her hair in his fingers. She leaned into his hand.

She told him of her other dreams, as well. He sat, listening, and when she came to the end, he asked several questions. "They are very telling, are they not?" Severus asked her.

"Do you know, this entire time, I've been concentrating on how I felt and the events of what had been going on, that I neglected the words. I realize that I've been torn between two worlds: afraid to embrace the Wizarding world for fear of what I would be leaving behind. Fear of letting go of the Muggle world, for fear of not being accepted

fully for just being me. Hermione Granger, a Muggle-born witch.

"Oh, Severus, how has it come to this?" Hermione heard the slight desperation in her voice.

Severus chuckled. "You aren't the first, Hermione. I've seen it quite a bit, Muggle-borns not prepared to enter into our world. I've often thought that, in addition to Muggle studies..."

"There should be Wizard Studies! Yes! That sounds perfect, doesn't it? We had hardly any help when I was told, and Mum and Daddy needed..."

Severus stopped her mouth with a kiss. "Do you think we could take up this matter up in the morning? Preferably late morning?" Severus gently kissed Hermione's neck, and all the air left her lungs in a giant whoosh.

"I've wanted to bury myself in you since the first time I held you in my arms," Severus admitted, trailing open-mouth kisses down her neck to her shoulder.

Abruptly he stood and pulled Hermione to her feet before sweeping her into his arms.

Gorgeous artwork created by Pennswoods for this chapter may be found here:

<http://hermione.magical-worlds.us/viewstory.php?sid=48&textsize=0&chapter=13>

Chapter 9

Chapter 10 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

A/N: Many, many thanks to Wildcatcdc and Sc010f for their patience, guidance and support.

Neither remembered entering his bedroom. He stood her next to the high sleigh bed that stood prominently against the far wall of the room. To either side were windows draped in nothing more than green silk. The furniture was dark and tasteful, and the counterpane was startlingly white, while the floor was covered in a thick, dark green pile.

They stood for a moment, looking at each other, taking in their flushed cheeks, bright eyes and moistened lips. He reached up slowly and cupped her face, slowly lowering his mouth to meet hers once more. The kiss was achingly slow, but powerful.

"Hermione," he murmured, tracing his lips over her mouth, to her chin then down her delicate neck to the base of her throat, sucking gently on the tender flesh before laving it with his tongue.

Reluctantly, his mouth left her skin and he lifted his head. "Before we proceed, there is something you must know, something I want to tell you," he whispered. His hands were caressing her shoulders, as if he couldn't bear to break contact with her skin. He traced her fingertips down her arms.

"You are the piece that has been missing in my life. When I held you in my arms, that day in your office, I'd felt like I'd come..."

"Home?" Hermione interrupted. She was now cupping his face in her hands, smiling softly into his deep obsidian eyes.

Severus nodded, scanning her face, looking for an indication of her feelings. He felt himself slipping into her warm, golden-brown eyes, and there he felt her acceptance, her care and concern for him, her loyalty and esteem. And love. He felt her love, felt in it wrap around him, warming him, filling up the empty cracks and crevices in his heart and soul and mind. He shuddered under the intensity; he knew she felt the same.

He smiled softly before leaning and taking possession of her mouth again. "Yes, home."

There were no slow movements, now. With one purpose, they began removing each other's clothing. In between gasps and soft sighs and low moans, piece-by-piece, they fell away. Buttons were opened, zippers undone, laces untied. A soft murmur of thanks was uttered by Severus as he freed Hermione's breasts from her scrap of a bra. Cupping the soft globes, he ran his thumbs over her nipples, encouraging them to harden. He lowered his head and gently kissed the soft flesh, raising a moan from Hermione's throat.

As his hand explored her breasts, learning their shape and weight, the sensitive areas that had her catching her breath, her hands closed over his, and the sight of her fingers intertwining with his, the contrast of small and large, set fire in Severus.

He pulled her to him, their thighs brushing, his hard length pressing hard into her belly. Hermione gasped and raised herself on her toes, seeking more direct contact, her pussy now wet with desire.

They wasted no time falling into the bed. Hermione scooted back onto the pillows as Severus climbed onto her. On his hands and knees above her, he bent down to kiss her mouth; their tongues danced and tangled, learning their shapes and textures and tastes. Hermione wanted to wrap her arms and legs around him, pull him down and into her, but before her desire-laden body could respond, he shifted, bending low so that his mouth began a slow decent down the long plane of skin. He was intent on learning every inch of her, every spot that drew forth pleasure, every patch that made her giggle and moan.

He kissed and traced her nipples with his tongue before gently sucking on them, gradually pulling more and more flesh into his mouth, and Hermione arched off the bed as the ragged course of sensations ran down her spine, flooding her pussy with hot, delicious wetness.

He dipped his tongue into her navel, and she couldn't stifle her giggle. He chuckled at her reaction, and his warm breath on her skin raised bumps on the sensitive flesh. He moved lower still, tracing her pelvic bones with his long nose as he kissed and licked the delicate skin. When he finally moved to her mound, Hermione whimpered. She let her legs fall back, unself-consciously opening herself to him, inviting him to explore.

Severus' sharp intake of breath permeated the room. He waited no longer; eagerly, he feasted on her womanhood. There was nowhere his mouth did not explore; he nudged her clit with his nose as he smelled her unique scent. He gave wet, open mouth kisses to her soft flesh, following the seam to her opening. There, his tongue delved inside.

As his mouth feasted upon her, Hermione's hands were busy trying to find purchase, to hold some part of him, but his shoulders pinned her legs wide, and her hands only found his head. She thrust into his mouth, moving in time with his tongue as he flattened it and ran it along her slit, from her perineum to her clit.

"Severus, Severus," Hermione moaned softly and brought herself up on her elbows. He paused briefly and looked up at her from between her legs. A shiver ran down her back at the sight of Severus Snape's black eyes peering up at her from between her legs. Like a cat, he lunged forward, pouncing atop her and kissed her. She could taste herself on his tongue, and it spurred her desire to new heights.

"Turn around, Severus," urged Hermione as she broke the kiss. She reached down their bodies to grasp his cock in her small hands, and she felt him lurch. His eyes registered his surprise, then a smile took hold of his face, and with another soul-searing kiss, he complied. They took a moment to arrange themselves on his large bed, with strategically placed pillows to ensure maximum comfort and access.

Severus wasted no time in returning to Hermione's pussy. Where before the room had been silent but for the soft moans and heavy breathing, words of pleasure and encouragement filled the room.

"You've the sweetest tasting pussy, Hermione," Severus praised between kisses. "Your skin is soft and hot."

Hermione took a moment to admire the magnificent cock in front of her. She ran her hand down his inner thigh then up, lightly tracing over his heavy balls to his cock, proud and erect, droplets of pre-come glistening on his glans. She leaned forward and daintily licked, and Severus lurched, heaving a breath of air, causing Hermione to smile wantonly, as if pleased by his reaction to her initial touch.

From there, she wasted little time. Taking his hard length in her hot, little hands, she guided him into her mouth, where she set upon him, using her tongue and her lips and her imagination. She used every part of herself that would reach him; her breast was pressed into his pelvic area, her arm wrapped underneath his leg to clutch at his inner thigh. Her hand held his cock, occasionally sliding along his length as she eagerly and steadily brought him into the warm cavern of her mouth. She kissed his hot flesh and licked the small planes and crevices, talking and cooing.

"You taste so good on my tongue. You feel perfect in my mouth, but I want you inside me, I need to feel you moving in and out of me." On and on she whispered and praised, all the while Severus working her to a fever pitch. When he slid his long finger deep into her body, she rose to meet it eagerly. Inserting another, her breath caught in her throat. And when the tip of another found its way into the small, tight hole of her anus, she screamed in delight, convulsing in a deliciously long orgasm that stole the words from her mouth, leaving her mumbling long, unintelligible ramblings.

Severus moved from Hermione's side, even as she reached for him. Returning to the bottom of the bed, he looked at her splayed out. Her legs spread wide, her pussy wet and swollen, and a blush that spread from her glorious breasts up her neck to her face. Her eyes were half-closed, but intense and she peered down at him.

"Come here," she demanded softly, and once again, he sprang, covering his body with his. He entered her, smoothly and steadily, seating himself fully as his lips settled on hers. Hermione instinctively brought her legs up and wrapped them around his waist, tilting her hips so that the tip of his cock touched her cervix. She gasped at how completely he filled her, stretched her, and how her body eagerly accepted him.

They whispered their hopes and dreams to each other, made promises to each other as they moved together, and with each promise made, each hope for their future offered, their hearts opened to what was being revealed before them.

With their foreheads touching and their hot sweet breath on each other's lips, they moved fast and furious to their completion. As they stared into each other's eyes, they saw their future intertwined and knew they'd come home.

Later, panting for breath, Severus pulled Hermione into his arms and pulled the soft cotton sheet around them. The room smelled of sex and candles and Hermione's own scent. Almost as if he was afraid to ask, he squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then opened them to look down at her. "Well then..." he began.

In his arms, Hermione squeezed her arms around his middle and giggled. "We've some specifics to work out, of course," she agreed, knowing without a doubt of what he'd been about to say.

"Where?" Severus asked lazily, his fingers tracing rune symbols on her arm and shoulder.

"Here, without a doubt," she answered immediately. "I'll not be sorry to give up the house. Besides," she continued and she wiggled contentedly, "I've become permanently attached to this bed. I doubt I'll be able to leave it for a week, let alone before Monday."

It was then that she sat up like a shot, startling Severus so that he released her immediately.

"Sod work." She said it forcefully, full of conviction and mettle. Just as quickly, she twisted and fell onto his chest. His arms came around her immediately, holding her fast. She looped her arms around his neck and kissed him energetically.

"I no longer work at the Ministry," Hermione announced between kisses. "I'm no longer working on that gods-damned book. In fact, the Minister can shove that book right up his..."

"The Minister had his own reasons for the book, Hermione," Severus interrupted with a few kisses of his own. "And now is not the time to show your displeasure at an assignment placed in your hands. In fact..." he paused as he saw the smile that transformed Hermione's face.

"You're right, of course, Severus. I'll need to convince him that Wizard Studies courses for all levels at Hogwarts is an absolute necessity, won't I? And what better way to show him how important it is needed than through this book?"

"Quite so," Severus murmured approvingly, then rolled onto her back and lowered his mouth to her neck, effectively cutting off further conversation until later. Much later.

Epilogue

Chapter 11 of 11

After the war, Hermione needs help, and Ron cleverly enlists Severus' help.

Ron stood near the bar and watched as Severus and Hermione danced their first dance as husband and wife. To the general public and almost all in attendance, theirs had been a whirlwind romance, but for those who knew them, it had been six years as professor-student, followed by seven years as colleagues and war heroes in the making.

Six months after seeing Hermione and Severus arguing in the hallway in the bowels of the Ministry, and five months after Hermione confronted the Minister of Magic, had made her proposal for a new course of studies at Hogwarts. The Minister, loathe to meddle in Hogwarts affairs, recommended that Hermione make her pitch to the Board of Governors at a special session that he would call.

Life for his best friend had taken a turn for the better by then, Ron noted. Harry had stepped up to help both Hermione and Severus, as Ron had known he would. He didn't feel bad in letting Harry in on the big picture. Harry couldn't keep anything off his face, and if there were two people on this Earth that could squeeze information from Harry, it was the couple currently indulging in a kiss on the dance floor.

Ron looked across the room and saw George standing in the middle of a group of Ministry officials that had been invited to attend the wedding of the century, and his eyes misted once again, as they always did at the sight of George these past few months. Severus had approached him four months ago, inquiring after George. Ron had been sitting in the bar of a hotel, downing a well-earned pint, when Severus quietly asked if he could join him. Ron nodded and had been surprised when Severus ordered a pint, as well. Sipping slowly and waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop, Ron was startled when Severus instead asked after his brother. Ron, heart-sick over the steady decline in George's health, answered Severus truthfully, that George was slowly dying.

Instead of rebuking Ron, as so often happened, Severus instead began explaining the tests that had been run on Fred and George back and school, and the results of said tests. Before Ron could faint from the weight of the news, Severus had gone on to explain what the results had meant at the time the tests were taken and the precautions that had been undertaken.

Severus had assumed since Fred's death, his family would have taken the necessary steps to prevent George from deteriorating further due to the soul wrenching. When he'd learned that nothing had been done and George was in the late-stages of detachment, he'd taken the necessary steps to secure the ingredients needed for the reversal of George's condition. Severus hadn't made promises since George had been suffering for so long, but Severus was the pre-eminent Potion masters in all of Britain, and to the Weasleys' everlasting gratitude, George had been making steady improvements.

And it all came about because George had gone through the Floo to protect Ron from Hermione's wrath.

How well everyone played this game, Ron thought, a trifle smug. He couldn't have been more pleased with the results, for everyone involved.

Harry had played his part as Bishop to the hilt, crisscrossing the board, facing off greater and lesser foes than himself, yet managing to retreat for another battle. Foes including Hermione, Severus and Ginny, Ron remembered with a small laugh.

George, as Knight, rushing in to save the damsel, much has he, himself had done all those years ago at school.

Severus, himself played Bishop as the role he'd been born unto, and it was where he excelled. Together, he and Hermione had seen Hermione's true place in their world, helping new Muggle-borns become familiar with all things Wizard. For theirs was a greater challenge than those of mere wizards learning Muggle studies.

Hermione was currently writing and overseeing the production of the first three levels of books. Being a Muggle-born witch of exceptional ability, she earned the respect and cooperation of the school's Board of Governors, including that of Draco Malfoy, the most recently installed board member. After hearing her presentation, the members agreed that it would be to everyone's best interest for Muggle-borns to learn the most basic of concepts in the Wizarding world, and by doing so, have the opportunity to teach their peers as well of the Muggle world, by comparing and contrasting what they have learned and applying it to real time situations, both in the Muggle world and Wizarding world.

It was a short time later that Severus and Hermione came up to Ron as he was talking with Pansy, his date for the wedding. Severus drew Pansy into a quiet conversation regarding her time on the Continent so that Hermione could speak with Ron.

She and Ron walked arm in arm to the small alcove near a window in the ballroom where the wedding reception was being held. She'd turned to him and threw her arms around him, squeezing hard. Taken by surprise, he could do no more than wrap his arms around her and hug her back. As she drew back, a radiant smile graced her features.

"I just wanted to say thank you," Hermione said, and for a brief moment, Ron felt as if she knew what he had done, but then realized the foolishness of that thought.

"For what?" Ron asked, amused.

"For pointing out that something was missing in my life. Of course, no one could have predicted that Severus and I would have ever ended up together..." and as Hermione went on thanking him for helping her to see what it was that she needed, and explaining that Severus was looking for someone, and all the rest, Ron thought how incredibly lucky they all were.

The outcome of his game was exactly as he had predicted; Severus and Hermione gaining what they needed, neither losing themselves in the process.

A victorious draw.