

The Thing With Wings

by bluewillow

Severus and Hermione bump into each other in NYC after the war and an unlikely friendship slowly develops.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 12

Severus and Hermione bump into each other in NYC after the war and an unlikely friendship slowly develops.

Author Notes: these characters and this particular world belong to JKR - this is just for fun. Many thanks go to my brilliant betas: thequeenofspades and servantofall36. Special thanks to Jemiah for her support and encouragement.

Chapter One

Hermione sat on the Low Library steps at Columbia University, hugging her knees. The sky was post-card blue on this absurdly beautiful, brisk September day. She was surrounded by groups of other students – some were sitting nearby, joking back and forth, whilst others ran to classes, drinking coffee out of paper cups, or lounged on the grass and chatted each other up. *It's almost like the war never happened* she reflected. *Well, at least, for them it hadn't. Not here, not these people. Everyone here has somewhere to go, somewhere to be.*

Somehow, she felt even more alone now than she had her first term at Hogwarts. She hadn't thought that would be possible. *Maybe there's some club I can join for first years, or international students . . . Maybe the Department of Magical Co-operation has a list of places where wizards meet in this area. But, even so . . .* She looked wistfully after a group of students she recognised from her dormitory as they laughed and talked excitedly . . . and walked right by her without a glance. *How do people make friends, anyway?*

Her mind took a rueful turn; even if she could find someone Magical her age, she had just left the whole British Isles full of them and hadn't been terribly impressed. The ones who had been through the war with her and *understood* . . . but that chapter was closed. *Ah well, better get a move on or I'll be late.* She walked along in a distracted manner until she reached the building for her next lecture. She had just reached the door, when a gust of wind blew her lecture timetable from the top book in her stack. It drifted lazily to the ground.

My schedule! She quickly stooped down to salvage the errant paper and was just closing her fingers around it when someone bumped rather forcefully into her, nearly causing her to lose her balance.

She heard an aggrieved voice. "I beg your pardon!" The voice was posh, English, and dripping with the exaggerated politeness used to highlight a gaucherie.

Something familiar in the tone made her head snap up, and it wasn't just hearing a fellow Brit. Her eyes widened in shock.

Bloody hell! It's Professor Snape!

"Professor!" she exclaimed, scrambling to her feet. *Maybe this is where he's been holed-up*, she thought, as she appraised him with cautious curiosity.

She'd heard that he was travelling on in Europe, maybe teaching at Durmstrang. She had suspected that Headmistress McGonagall knew for certain, but hadn't wanted to appear too interested in her former Potions master, so she hadn't asked.

"Miss Granger." He nodded the acknowledgement as a polite dismissal and took a step as if to proceed on his way.

Hermione impulsively grabbed his jacket sleeve.

Leather! Gods, he's wearing black leather, zipped to the chin . . .

"May I ask why you find it necessary to impede my progress?" he asked in a dangerously quiet voice, frowning down at her.

"I have a lecture now," she said faintly, clutching at straws to maintain a conversation.

That's it, Granger. Act the silly schoolgirl around him. Very impressive, very mature.

"As do I. Now that we've established that you have a firm grasp on the obvious, do you have anything of value to say?" He had noticed that they were holding up the flow of students like a tangle of sticks in the middle of a stream. He motioned curtly for her to move through the doorway and to the side of the hall.

"Would you like to . . . I mean, um . . . Can we meet up after classes?" she asked, unsure as to why it was so important to her to keep him talking, to not let him just walk away.

"To what purpose, Miss Granger?" he said in his best repressive manner. He looked suspicious; she could tell he was wondering why she wanted to talk to him, of all people.

She looked down. "I don't know anyone else here. When I heard your voice . . ." She trailed off, unsure of how to explain.

Snape was silent, his expression impassive for what seemed like an eternity, his black eyes regarding her coolly.

Hermione held her breath as she waited.

"Very well," he said finally. "Where do you propose we meet for this after-class rendezvous?" She blushed at his choice of words and couldn't meet his eyes. He seemed to enjoy her discomfiture. "Is there a problem?" he asked archly. "This was your idea, was it not?"

On hearing his sarcastic tone, Hermione daringly met his glare. "There's a café nearby, the Hungarian Pastry Shop; do you know of it?" He didn't, so she gave him directions, and they agreed to meet in a couple of hours.

--ooOOOOooo--

As Hermione walked away without a glance and blended seamlessly into the crowd, it struck Severus that she fitted naturally with this Muggle university population. She was able to adapt to this world, and she had also made a life for herself with friends and ambitions in the Wizarding world. By contrast, Severus didn't feel at home anywhere – he had been raised to feel contempt towards his useless Muggle father, and he was a man apart in the Wizarding world.

The only place that had ever been a haven to him was Hogwarts, but even that had been the locus of pain, fear, disappointment and loss. The students had infuriated him – the phrase "Youth is wasted on the Young" had been vividly brought home to him by each new class of happy-go-lucky wastrels.

Pathetic.

They had never had to understand that life wasn't fair, wasn't easy. That things didn't always go your way no matter how much you might want it to or how hard you worked . . . no matter what you were willing to give or give up in order to have it be so. Still, the Slytherins understood these truths: they understood that in an unfair world, you could gain an edge through influence, stealth, and manipulation. They knew that these were tools to help you succeed. They understood that you can't always get everything you want, but you can get more of it through the proper application of power than by other means. Severus had always believed these things to be true, even though it meant viewing everyone else in the world as a potential enemy, happy only to see you fail.

He proceeded through the next class, unable to fully focus. His mind was busy trying to figure out what Granger wanted from him – why she wanted to speak with him at all, and musing on how best to present himself so as to discourage her continued attentions.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 12

Severus and Hermione bump into each other in NYC after the war and an unlikely friendship slowly develops.

Chapter Two

The café was a snug little haunt where a decidedly intellectual set gathered to eat pastry, argue philosophy and play chess. It was warm enough to fog up the glass, and tears of condensation streaked down the window beside the booth where Snape was sitting when Hermione arrived. He had already ordered when she slid into her seat and placed an order for a latte. The waitress brought tea for Snape and Hermione's latte and cherry strudel.

Ugh, that's utterly revolting anaemic dishwater at best . . He was careful to keep an impassive countenance, but pushed the cup away from him after one sip – a controlled and precise distance as if to establish the fact that he felt the universe had failed him by presenting him with this entirely inadequate beverage.

Hermione watched, bemused. It was obvious to her that he wouldn't drink the tea, even though he had said nothing.

"Yes, they don't do tea well here. Or anywhere else I've found, actually. It tends to be bags and lukewarm water." She tried to sound neutral and not superior, as if ordering tea in America was a mistake anyone other than an antiquated Wizard from a different continent could make, and often did.

"What's that you're drinking? Hot milk?" he sneered, gesturing dismissively at her cup.

"It's called a 'latte'. It's made with espresso, a kind of very strong Italian coffee, and hot milk."

Please tell me he isn't totally ignorant of modern culture . . . then again, he doesn't get out into the Muggle world much, I imagine. I can't see the Leaky Cauldron having an espresso machine. She snickered into her drink at the idea of what Arthur Weasley would make of one*Probably blow himself up, the daft man.* She shook her head slightly to end that train of thought and was startled by Snape looking uncharacteristically uncomfortable as he spoke again.

"Can I order the Italian coffee by itself?"

Why didn't the server give me a blasted menu? How am I supposed to know these things? He felt very tetchy at having been shown up so early in the conversation and was determined to make her rue her presumption in asking him here.

"Oh yes, I think you'd like it - it's very strong and bitter," she said as she hid her grin in her latte. He placed an order for an espresso.

When it arrived he sniffed it advisedly and then again with appreciation. He took an experimental sip and let the aroma fill his nose, enjoying the taste on his palate*Rich and lemony, like a very dark, bitter-sweet chocolate. I'll have to see if they serve this elsewhere . . .*

While he was testing his new beverage, Hermione noted with approval the changes that Snape had made to his appearance. His hair was short - and now that it was clean, it was actually wavy. It made him look much younger and revealed his dark eyes. His skin, with a little sun, was actually olive, not sallow and pasty. His teeth would never be as gleaming white as Gilderoy Lockhart's, but they were even and reasonably clean. His teeth were unobjectionable. In fact, he no longer looked like a Muggle comic advert for the inadequacy of British dental policies.

Snape removed his rather severe leather jacket, carefully folded it and laid it down on the seat next to him. Hermione was reminded of The Master from the Tom Baker-era of the Doctor Who television series, in his immaculate black velvet coat, fastidiously brushing infinitesimal grains of dirt from his sleeves . . . She noticed that his jumper wasn't black, but the darkest shade of charcoal grey - it was a fine knit, probably cashmere. It came up to his chin, emphasizing the clean lines of his jaw and his rather attractive ears. Cashmere, corduroy and smooth leather - she wanted to feel the textures between her fingers. She felt astounded at the sensuality betrayed by Snape's sartorial choices.

An observer watching the meeting might think it was a job interview that wasn't going particularly well or a student assigned to entertain a distant relative visiting from out of town. Both of them were rather stiff, and the conversation did not lack for long and uncomfortable silences.

Hermione clasped her hands together on the table, "So, Professor Snape . . ."

"As I am not a professor here and, thankfully, no longer*your* professor, you may call me Mister Snape."

That's not bloody likely . . . She tried not to snort out loud. "All-right. What brings you here?"

"I might ask the same of you. I admit I was surprised to see you here - I thought you'd be well on your way through your first Weasley whelp by now."

"Yes, well, that didn't turn out the way I was expecting and I don't really want to talk about it."

Don't think about it. Be a blank piece of paper. Don't cry; don't give him the satisfaction. Damn Ron.

"I'm studying Maths here - Muggle mathematics is the closest thing I could find to Arithmancy, and none of my other courses translated well."

"Did they not have classes on 'How to be even more of an insupportable Know-It-All'?" Ah yes, I suppose that would obviously be an independent extra-credit project . . ."

Hermione bit back an angry retort, took a deep, calming breath and summoned the page of St. Augustine in her mind's eye . . . "Just as the flattery of a friend can pervert, so the insult of an enemy can sometimes correct."

"And are you corrigible, Miss Granger?" His demeanour spoke to his belief that she was otherwise.*The whole idea is risible. This recitation proves nothing other than her habit of memorization.*

"I have taken your criticisms to heart," she said calmly. "Not raising my hand all the time, keeping my head down. You may not believe it, but I have been trying."

"On the contrary, Miss Granger, I find it easy to believe that you have been . . . trying." He bared his teeth a parody of a smile.

And . . . point to Slytherin. Does he truly only smile when he's gloating? Suddenly she realized that, for the first time since uprooting from England, she felt at home. Snape being pointlessly snide and cutting had been a constant in her life for many years. *He doesn't mean it personally; it's just a habit or a reflex - like a porcupine shedding his quills or a squid squirting out a cloud of obfuscating ink.*

"Your irksome academic enthusiasm aside, why here in America? Surely your N.E.W.T.s were sufficient to allow you your choice of professions?"

"Well, I didn't want to join the Ministry - I thought they'd probably offer me a 'show' position due to my role in the war, and I didn't want that. I don't know what I want to do yet, so it seemed premature to apprentice myself to anyone. What about you? Are you taking a degree, sir?"

"No," he replied, shortly. *Me? Get a degree from a Muggle university?* "As I am sufficiently credentialed in my chosen field, a Muggle degree would be of no benefit to me. However, the fall of the Dark Lord removed the danger of my pursuing an interest in Muggle sciences. There are some, I believe, that may have bearing on Potions research and development. I am attending classes as an observer only; auditing I believe it is called."

"So, Chemistry, Biology, that kind of thing?"

"Yes, and Botany of course."

"You want to do Potions research, not go back to teach at Hogwarts?"

"I would think the parents might be wary of a known killer teaching their precious issue."

"Sir, you were exonerated of murder. Everyone knows why you did what you did."

"Yes, my personal experiences have been shared with the readers of the Daily Prophet, to become lining for their owl cages. I don't think much of the public's ability to accept or understand the mitigating circumstances, even if McGonagall put her stamp on them . . ." He was quite bitter at how reviled he was, even though Dumbledore had left Pensieve memories for McGonagall, and his very portrait had confirmed Snape's continued role as a spy. The Ministry knew all of it, at the end, but the public liked a villain and Snape was just too good at being hateful for them to change their thinking.

"I can see that. Yes."

He knew that she *could* see it - she understood his circumstances and wasn't judging or making an overt show to display her position on it, one way or another. She simply let it be. It was very refreshing and he could feel himself relaxing a little bit into his seat.

"Your family, what do they think of you being at such great remove?"

"Well, it's just my mother and father, you know. I'm a 'lonely only'. They're quite pleased that I'm at University it's expected in the Muggle world. Especially for someone as much of a blue-stocking as I am. They're disappointed that it's so far away, but relieved that it's at least a school they've heard of before, unlike Hogwarts."

"Why not Oxford or Cambridge? I know that the Ministry of Magic would have been able to arrange for suitable transcripts, if you wished to study there."

"Columbia was originally King's College, you know. It had a royal mandate." She smirked at him.

"Wretched colonists. I believe I asked you a question, Miss Granger, before you decided I required a history lesson."

"I wanted to get away. I'm not ready to get married and start a family; the last year, fighting the war, it derailed my studies and even with the additional study time we were given for the N.E.W.T.s, I feel as though I'm not ready to stop learning things."

Snape tried not to snort out loud. *Only she would think of the war as something that thwarted her education* Hermione glanced at him inquiringly, but he nodded for her to continue.

"Mostly, I wanted distance from everyone who knew me or had expectations for me." There was a long pause as both of them considered the circumstances that had brought them to this place in time. "Is something wrong, Profess I mean, sir?"

"I cannot fault your reasoning, Miss Granger. I too have enjoyed my anonymity here. Until now, of course."

They parted without making further plans.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 12

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Author Note: the characters belong to JKR, these specific words are mine – but no profit comes to me. Thanks to my delightful betas: thequeenofspades and servantofall36!

Chapter Three

The passage of several weeks found Snape browsing at a bookstore near Astor Place called Shakespeare and Co. He turned around abruptly when someone bumped into him (wishing [and not for the first time] for something more intimidating to swish than a Burberry) .

I should have known . . . Nobody but a witch or wizard would be likely to get close enough to touch him. His personal wards were set to repel Muggles with a small electric shock, like a strong static discharge.

"Miss Granger, we meet again," he said, rather repressively so as to combat the excitement that rose in his chest at the sight of her. He told himself that the feeling was merely annoyance at having his plans for the afternoon upset. She started giggling and tried to muffle it in her hand. "Something amuses you, perhaps?" he said, frowning at her.

"You just sound so much like a villain from James Bond. Minus the monocle." She dissolved into laughter again. He raised his eyebrow in query, so she clarified for him, "It's a Muggle movie reference."

He was determined to discover her purpose and send her on her way. To that end, he decided to ignore her amusement at his expense. "What brings you to this store today?"

"Well, they sell books you know . . . I can't afford them, but I like to visit them. I like the smell of books; new books with the acrid smell of fresh paper, old books with leather and dust."

"I have heard the expression 'It's a free country'. I assume that means I can't prevent you from popping up around me like a toad stool, Miss Granger."

"Call me Hermione."

"I'd rather not."

"Well, I'm not going to call you 'Mr. Snape', and saying 'Sir' all the time is rather David Copperfield, don't you think? Look, why don't you call me 'Granger'," she suggested. "You can even use that same sneery tone of voice that you use to say 'Potter' if it makes you feel any better. And I'll call you 'Snape'."

"I fear that you will call me what you will, regardless of my preference . . ." He sighed and felt not unpleasantly resigned.

"Are you looking for a particular book? Could I help you find something?" She was irrepressibly eager and happy looking, like a dog inviting its master to join in the dig for the bone it has just buried.

He felt a nearly overwhelming urge to crush that enthusiasm and nip her solicitousness in the bud.

"Whereby comes the idea that I require your assistance, when I have already declined a similar offer from the store help?" A tilt of his head indicated the errant hipster at the register who studiously avoided his glare with a skill particular to those who are bullied, when they sense they are the subject of scrutiny.

Gads, she's so dreadfully cheerful – one of those optimists who orders the world to her convenience and chivvies along any dissenters. I bet she's crossed ten things off her "to do" list by mid-morning tea. Do I look particularly helpless this afternoon?

She ignored his petulant outburst and declined to acknowledge his successful bullying of the store staff. "Are you looking for a book for your research, or a book for leisure reading? Something in fiction or non-fiction?" Hermione found that once she dismissed his surface level of nastiness, she actually enjoyed his company and was excited at the prospect of helping him find some books he would enjoy.

He sighed again, by now quite convinced that it would be the easier option to acquiesce to her relentless desire to save him from his morning pleasures of tyranny and suffering. As she stalked through the store like a hunter in search of strangely rectangular prey, he trailed behind her – amused and somewhat unsettled to find himself content to let her expend all this energy on his behalf. It was not unbearable, he admitted to himself. Her company was not as annoying as he had anticipated; her conversation not half as insipid as that of many of his colleagues.

She ended up settling him with an Iain Banks book, and a solid doorstop of a book called Middlemarch. They both cautiously agreed that, since Manhattan appeared to be chock-full of interesting bookstores and both of them bibliophilically inclined, perhaps it would be in both of their interests to investigate them.

They made a plan to meet the following weekend at a bookstore called The Strand.

Chapter Four

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Chapter Four

November happened to be unusually mild and, taking advantage of an espresso break between classes, Hermione suggested a different kind of field trip to Snape.

"I'd like to invite you on a picnic this Saturday, someplace out-of-the-way."

"Neither of us has a mode of transport, unless you intend for us to Apparate. I wouldn't advise it, as it may draw undue attention from the NYC Department of Magical Regulation." *Out of the way? This city isn't unusual enough for her?*

"We'll take the subway," she responded confidently.

"Oh, of course." He nodded sagely. *The below-ground metal death-trap. Does she really think I enjoy spending time like a goblin, in enforced company with malodorous strangers?*

They met that Saturday afternoon, outside the Cathedral Parkway station at the blue C line.

"Snape," she essayed tentatively.

"Granger," he responded in a neutral tone. He found he could call her this, as if she were a colleague or . . . a friend. She simply grinned up at him like the cat that had got the cream, happy that he accepted her sobriquet without demur.

Hermione had a MetroCard, and as she swiped Snape into the station, she wondered how he got around town. *Does he walk everywhere? Take taxis? I can't see him on a bus.* Snape sat bolt upright in his seat, his proper British trench-coat tucked around him like a shield. Hermione wore jeans and trainers, a jumper and a nondescript jacket.

They transferred to the A line. The train climbed out of the ground as they left the city and entered the outer boroughs. The gleaming office buildings gave way to small houses; a few showed personal effort expended in gardens or bright trim, but most looked rather dingy and weathered. As they got further out, he was astonished to see marsh grasses, sea birds and ramshackle fishing shacks.

The train reached the end of the line Rockaway Park. As they exited the station, he saw the signs pointing towards the beach.

"New York City has many charming features. I was not aware that a beach was one of them . . ."

"Well, surprise!" Her enthusiastic tone masked her anxiety at springing an unwelcome shock to his system. She stole a quick glance at his face and found the familiar inscrutable mask to be firmly in place. Reassured that he wasn't about to hex her, at least not immediately, she continued. "Let's walk a bit, shall we?"

He sighed and they took off their respective shoes and socks and rolled up their pants. The sand was cool and soft underfoot, the sky a dark slate. The water was clear glass-green with minty foam crests. All they could hear was the drone of the waves and the occasional lonely gull.

Hermione felt keenly aware of the empty space around them, the silence, the absence of insulating strangers. She thought Snape would appreciate the direct approach, so she plunged right into the musings that few others could appreciate or understand. "After it was all over, was it enough for you? Receiving the award, the recognition?"

"I am satisfied that I finally had the opportunity to bring down the bastard that ruined my life, yes. I know that without my assistance in letting the Order know where to find him and removing the anti-Apparation wards, Potter never would have got close enough, cloak or no cloak. How on earth, though, did you think of using Imperio on a snake?" *Stroke of genius, that. Just about the only creature that could have gotten close enough to the Dark Lord to do any damage . . .*

"Well, after Harry's fiasco at the Ministry, we knew that he wasn't very good with the Unforgivables. Crucio was right out, and he doubted that he had it in him to be, you know, *evil* enough to cast the Killing curse. Oh, Severus, I am sorry, I didn't mean . . . I don't think you're evil. . ."

She called me 'Severus'. She thinks of me as 'Severus'. He didn't know what to make of this unconscious admission but he felt like flinging some sand around with his wand. He didn't, of course, as that would be unseemly.

"Dumbledore said, 'Only you know what damage it will do to your soul to help an old man die a less painful death.' It did damage me to kill the man who had been as a father to me for most of my life, of course. How could it not? But it didn't rend my soul . . . Anyway, returning to Potter and his pure heart . . ."

"Yes, well, he didn't think he'd be able to kill anyone in cold blood, not even someone who really deserved it, like Voldemort. But I remembered that the Imperius curse could be cast on an animal from when Barty Crouch Jr. was posing as Moody and with Harry being a Parselmouth, it made perfect sense."

"And the Horcruxes? How did you know that Voldemort wouldn't be able to return again? His body had been destroyed before, you know . . ."

"Yes, but this time we *knew* about the nasty things three had already been destroyed: the diary, the ring and the locket. We knew that there were a couple more, but I figured that once Voldemort had been disposed of in such a gruesome manner, his followers wouldn't be that difficult for the Order and the Aurors to mop up."

Snape noted that when Hermione spoke of their plans in general, she said "we," but couldn't hide the fact that she was usually the one who did the thinking work. He suppressed a smile, allowing only a small glint of humour to reach his eyes, and brought his attention back to her rather wordy explanation.

"And as we knew that Voldemort had given Lucius Malfoy one of his Horcruxes in the past, it made sense that he would have distributed 'tokens of his esteem' to other highly placed Death Eaters, even if they didn't know the full significance of the gifts. It seemed likely that Veritaserum could get us the answers. That's how we found that the Lestranges had the Hufflepuff cup, and Dolohov the Ravenclaw diadem. We knew that a fang from the basilisk destroyed the diary, and we knew that the sword of Gryffindor was imbued with basilisk venom . . . I'm sure that's what Dumbledore meant by leaving the sword to Harry in his will."

"What of Nagini herself?"

"After the Animal Healers had ascertained that Voldemort had been sufficiently, um . . . *digested*, we used the sword to decapitate the animal, and it was then incinerated. There's a fragment of Voldemort remaining in Harry to this day, but without the animating essence of Voldemort himself, and the rest of the Horcruxes destroyed, the soul fragment isn't strong enough to possess him. Harry's innate ability to love and be loved prohibits its growth . . . Harry figures he'll have it in him until he dies, and then Voldemort will be truly destroyed."

This was a strangely pleasing thought to Snape Potter and Voldemort both being dead although he assumed it would happen after his own demise, being some twenty years older than the boy. Twenty years older than Hermione too, of course. The reminder made him pensive, and they walked along without speaking for some time.

"This looks like a decent spot. Let's stop here and eat our lunch." Hermione took a miniature basket out of her pocket and tapped it discreetly with her wand, enlarging the hamper. She removed a blanket and spread it on the ground. "Can you find some rocks to weigh down the corners?" Snape raised his eyebrows and, giving her an admonishing look, removed the several books he had stashed about his person and used those instead.

She placed a Thermos of hot tea and two mugs, some crisp ginger biscuits, and a paper sack with a couple of "everything" bagels with cream cheese and lox (because it was New York, after all) on the blanket. They sat in companionable quiet, munching and reading. Hermione belatedly remembered the beach chairs she had shrunk and stashed in her other pocket, so they sat in comfort. He feathered lazily through the latest issue of "The Practical Potioneer", while Hermione settled into a mystery she had checked out from the library.

"Real literature, that," he sneered as he snuck a peek at the title. "The Man in the Brown Suit"?

"Snape, did you know that during the First World War, Agatha Christie worked in a hospital dispensary compounding medicine, like you used to do for Hogwarts? Working with poisons too, of course." She smiled sweetly up at him, enjoying his discomfiture as he sought for something dismissive to say, but failed to do so within a reasonable amount of time.

Their camaraderie was part of an unspoken agreement to not discuss what it all meant. Neither of them belonged, and yet they felt comfortable with each other. There was so much that they didn't have to explain. He rarely laughed, and yet she understood when he was being sardonically humorous. They shared a view of circumstance that was often ironic, well aware of the frequent absurdities of life.

He watched her profile as she read the breeze lifting her hair, patterning it like the sand sculpted by the waves, the clouds laid out like lazy beaches in the sky. He wished he could put walls around this moment and call it home.

On the way back they were squashed together on the subway, just other faces in the crowd of people heading into the city. He had caught the sun on his face, and her hair was windswept and bushy, but with tendrils of curls from the sweat on her neck. A year ago a month ago, even he would have been outraged at being in such proximity to other people, being pressed up against her in broad daylight. But now, they just smiled ruefully at each other and tried to pretend that it was just one of the exigencies of Muggle transport. He couldn't believe that all that separated them were a few layers of clothing and the eyes of the general public.

Author Note: thanks again to excellent beta work from queenofspades and servantofall36. I'll admit to being particularly pleased with my solution for what to do with Voldemort and the Horcruxes.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 12

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Chapter Five

Hermione had tried making friends with her classmates but found that she had little in common with them. Even when she was tempted to socialise or given opportunities to "let her hair down", she held back because she was afraid that if she relaxed too much, she might let slip something about the Wizarding world. Or she would miss some reference that she *should* understand, despite the difference in culture between Britain and America. Like cable television or email. She had become pretty good at hanging back, listening to what others were saying and finding out what she should know, but it meant that others saw her as shy and insecure. Nobody seemed interested enough to poke a little deeper.

So it was with very little regret that she surrendered her weekends to exploring the city with Snape. He often muttered imprecations against her monopolising his time, but she knew that it was not in his nature to do anything without intention or forethought. Thus, if he showed up when she suggested a bookstore or museum or other outing, it was because he *wanted* to be there.

The day after Thanksgiving found the two of them at an oddly triangular brick building in Queens. Peering at the sign on the door as they walked into the lobby, Snape quizzed her, "So, what is this Noguchi? Please tell me this isn't going to be like the last museum, where there was naught but squares of primary colours . . ."

"Isamu Noguchi was a Japanese-American sculptor and artist." She picked up one of the brochures at the visitor desk and passed it to him.

"These . . . objects . . . then, are considered to be sculpture?"

"Yes, quite famous ones. Sculpture doesn't have to be representational, you know."

"Did you think we would have a shared interest in looking at rocks and chunks of wood?"

"I read about it in *The New Yorker* and it sounded peaceful. Quiet. Unfrequented."

"Hmm. There is that." They walked slowly through the museum, each pretending to be absorbed in the rough stone blocks pierced by peculiar holes, whilst watching the other out of the corner of their eye.

"How is the auditing going?"

"Well, I confess myself surprised that the Muggle world isn't rife with disease and unhappiness. The state of their potions and cures is miserably inadequate . . . It's all chemicals and machines – nobody wants to touch the *materia medica* or get their hands dirty. Nobody does any work themselves – they just type something out and it's all plastic and test tubes . . . I asked some questions about how the properties of the substance they were using to prepare their experiments affected the ingredients, and not one of them had even considered it! Nobody was familiar with the famous alchemical wizards of al-Andalus; one professor even referred me to the history department . . . I know that our burn salves and remedies work more efficiently than their bottles of pale pills, but if I stay here another six months, I won't know one end of my wand from the other . . ."

Hermione was astonished by this diatribe. It was more an angry grumble to himself than anything directed at her. As one of the few women involved in abstract mathematics, she too had felt alien in her courses. There was always a degree of translation involved in taking arithmetic concepts and working them through the Greek notations and diagrammatic proofs required by this system of learning. It was challenging work, but there was no one with whom she could share any of the struggle or accomplishment. At Hogwarts, even though she was alone in her academic ambitions, at least it was a matter of degree and not of type. She had expected that Snape would swan around in his classes at Columbia – she assumed that his rather negative charisma and his undoubtedly forceful presence would necessarily translate to respect among the teachers and distance from the students. She didn't know what to make of a Snape who was unsure of his place in the world.

His grousing subsided and he was brought back to his current situation. "So, with you here at university, whatever happened to your partners in crime?"

"Harry scraped the N.E.W.T.s to become an Auror – he's doing the training program now. I get the occasional letter from him saying how he's bruised or exhausted, but he sounds pretty happy overall."

"So in addition to rocks, I'm supposed to take an interest in Potter's happiness?"

"Well, you *did* ask. He's engaged to Ginny, but they're waiting to get married until after she graduates and he completes his training."

"And Mr. Weasley? There was some . . . understanding between the two of you?" He carefully studied the text on the wall explaining the provenance of a particularly uninspired piece of driftwood art.

"Misunderstanding would be closer to the mark. He and I are no longer a couple."

"I always considered him to be far below your intellectual level, so I'm not surprised he wasn't able to keep up with you."

"That wasn't the issue." *Did he just compliment my intelligence?*

"Oh?" He raised one eyebrow in schadenfreudic glee. *What on earth did the wretched lad do? Hermione is clearly the best thing to have ever happened to him, so whatever he did to have ruined it must have been spectacularly obtuse.*

"We fought all the time, of course. But the final straw was him getting some daft bint up the duff. Ron had taken to going to the pub with the lads after a match, since I wasn't interested. I'm sure he met her there. A bloody Quidditch groupie."

"Oh. That must have been rather difficult for you." He could barely restrain the urge to rub his hands together, like a parody of a miser being presented with a sack of gold.

"Naturally. His mum and dad put a great deal of pressure on him to do right by the girl, so now they're married, and it's her job to ensure the Weasley name doesn't die out . . . Good on her, I say."

Hermione had a rather savage look on her face; he could tell that she was immensely rankled by how events had turned out, but he was oddly, unexpectedly, rather pleased. He told himself that they were friends and his happiness was just because she was rid of a bit of bad news, but a quiet voice in the back of his mind muttered that she was available for wooing, should the need occur.

"You seem more aggravated than sad, Hermione."

Damn. Granger. Granger. Granger. I wonder if she'll notice . . .

"True – it was humiliating, but I have to admit that it was a relief. We didn't suit each other; we'd been tangled up in each other's lives for such a long time – but we couldn't find a way to end it."

Wait, did he just call me 'Hermione'?

She gave herself a mental shake and concluded, "Maybe we'll be friends again years from now, I can't say. For now I'm free to read whichever books I like and use words like 'differentiate' and 'hitherto' without being told I'm off my head . . . Well, around you, at least." She smiled cheekily up at him and his heart lurched.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 12

Severus and Hermione bump into each other in NYC after the war and an unlikely friendship slowly develops.

Chapter Six

At their usual café one afternoon, Hermione found an envelope at her place and Severus sitting across from her, studiously ignoring said envelope. She sat down and looked at him inquiringly. He didn't trust his voice, so he just nodded towards it in a dismissive manner, as if to suggest that someone had just dropped it by, like a telegram. She opened it to find two tickets to Carnegie Hall to hear Beethoven's Ninth symphony that Friday evening. She glanced at Severus – he appeared rather diffident and

nervous.

"I thought, as a way to celebrate the end of the semester, and as a Christmas present, well, you always suggest these cultural excursions, so I thought you might enjoy something cultural in the musical vein . . ." *Gads, I'm babbling! Pull yourself together, Severus! What's the worst that could happen? Either she'll appreciate it and you'll have a good time, or she'll see you for the lecherous old fraud you really are . . .*

He fought the urge to grab the envelope out of her hand and run from the café. *Why did I buy those wretched tickets, anyway?* He was only aware of a vague sense that it was "The Right Thing to Do" at this point in their relationship and that she would appreciate it. *Wait a tic, we're in a relationship?* His subconscious crossed its arms and nodded at him as though he were a particularly dense First Year. Only now did he become aware of how utterly inadequate that seemed as an internal justification. Severus wondered if it were possible for one's subconscious to have an agenda of its own, entirely unknown to its host.

"Oh, Severus thank you! That's so thoughtful of you, I do like to take advantage of New York's cultural features. I'd love to go I adore Beethoven, and I've never heard this piece live, and I'm sure it's very impressive." *Okay, calm down, you're gabbling at the poor man. But it's a date! At night! Alone with him, how adult . . . Oh gods, what am I going to wear?*

--ooOOOOoo--

Hermione spent some time on Friday afternoon carefully transfiguring a black slip she had into Audrey Hepburn's iconic dress from "Breakfast at Tiffany's". She used copious amounts of Sleekeazy's on her hair and put it up in a complicated do. She used a handful of minor charms, mostly to get her long gloves to stay up and the hair confection to remain firmly in place, but nothing, she concluded with a touch of womanly guile, that a wizard couldn't defend himself against.

Severus stood outside her door, contemplating his options. *If I make a run for it, I'm the world's biggest prat. She'll hate me forever, and rightfully so. However, if I go through with this, she may think this is the prelude to a liaison and that I have romantic intentions towards her.* Here he paused, musing on the possibility that he did have romantic intentions, as otherwise he wouldn't be so bloody nervous. He had transfigured his frock coat no fewer than three times before ending up with something that looked almost exactly like a posher version of his teaching attire. He knew he wasn't handsome, but he figured he could pull off distinguished, if she wasn't looking very closely and the lighting was favourably dim.

Without being aware of it, he had somehow crossed the Rubicon from friendship into . . . something else. Uncharted Territory. He squared his shoulders and reminded himself that, if the worst happened, it was only one night out of his life and he could always Obliviate her. He tapped on the door with the handle of his wand.

Hermione stepped out and did a little pirouette; the clips in her hair sparkled from the light in the hall. Her feminine wiles were completely satisfied with his gobsmacked expression and inability to comment.

Who is this sophisticated creature and what has she done with my Hermione? Snape found her dress beguiling, confoundingly so. It was plain black and very simple. It fit her close to the body, and yet it wasn't vulgar or even remotely revealing. In fact, all he could see of her skin was the top of her arms and her legs from below her knee. This made him intensely aware of the creaminess of her skin, the silken mystery of her legs, the ethereal delicacy of her ankles and the arches of her feet. He had never considered feet to be appealing before, but the very fineness of her bones made him want to take her in his arms and crush her against himself in a wave of voluptuous panic.

He took her hand and bowed silently over it. He wasn't sure how to convey his delight to be seen with her, how very beautiful she looked to him.

Hermione thought he looked very smart the silk jacket with its high mandarin collar, and a suggestion of a grey shirt at the neck. In fact, it looked like his usual formal Wizarding wear, only appropriate for the venue. *How different he is from those silly boys . . . He probably owns cuff-links, and knows what to do with all of the eating implements at a formal meal.* She pictured his attenuated, pale fingers doing unspeakably elegant things with an oyster knife. *He's an actual man he has done brave and manly things.* She found his competence appealing and felt that his oft demonstrated patience and determination spoke to his character. She had no doubt that he would ring true, if tapped firmly enough.

She had transfigured her plain black travelling robes into something more festive deep Bordeaux velvet, with a couple of warming charms. It looked a tad operatic for a Muggle event, but when else would she get the chance to wear it, if not out to hear Beethoven?

"Shall we depart?" He smiled down at her rather roguishly and offered his arm. She grinned up at him and wrapped her fingers gingerly around the crook of his elbow. At the curb, Snape surprised her by pulling out a silver whistle. He blew it sharply and a taxi pulled up immediately. He was inordinately pleased with himself he been given it as a goodwill gesture from a friendly professor who insisted that it worked "like magic". At first, this had worried Snape, and he investigated it for possible charms or hidden spells, concerned that magical artefacts were leaking out into the Muggle community. Eventually, upon finding nothing untoward, he had concluded that the man had meant it as a figure of speech.

At the music hall, they sat and chatted nervously while flipping through the generally useless programme guide. As the music began, Hermione settled back in her seat and closed her eyes to enjoy the overall gestalt of sound. Severus settled for watching her and doing some intense pondering. Most of his trains of thought led in circles, and he was aware that he wasn't being logical and that something was eluding him. The pieces didn't fit together into any picture with which he was familiar, no matter how much he tried to force them. *Look at how she's dressed. She dressed up forme. She agreed to come out with me at night for a formal event, and she dressed in something that, even I can recognise, is very posh.*

He stopped for a moment and, left unchecked, his thoughts headed off in an entirely different direction *I wonder if she's wearing actual stockings under that . . . with suspenders. . .* He closed his eyes and took several deep, cleansing breaths before he was able to return to his earlier train of thought *She's dressed like that, wearing (possibly) suspender-stockings (where there are suspenders, there are often . . . fancy knickers)* [more deep, cleansing breaths] *on a date with me. She must fancy me. But she knows me, by now. I've been a wretched git to her for years, hence she couldn't possibly be attracted to me . . . But she looks delicious; like a succulent siren, a modern young goddess. She's a strong witch who knows her mind, and she certainly has it in her to hex someone who would disrespect her. What does she want from me?* Stark terror filled him as he realised, ultimately, that he had no idea what she meant by any of it, and short of using Legilimency, he had no way of finding out other than asking her. Years of experience had left him with nothing but guile, subterfuge, intimidation and concealment and yet he felt a sinking certainty that none of that would work on Hermione.

Listening intently to the performance, towards the end of the 'Ode to Joy', Hermione was sitting on the edge of her seat, clutching the arm-rests of the chair. Her body was straining upwards, her eyes shut, and tears streamed down her face. She felt lifted out of her body, as though her soul was soaring in glory. With the change in key in the choir in the final phrase, she felt her consciousness slam back into her body with an intensity that made her gasp, intensely aware of her pounding blood and fingers and toes curled up in anticipation of the climax. The tightening sinews of her body wrenched her head to the sky like some visionary saint.

Severus watched her, caught up in the drama playing out on her face so unguarded, so abandoned to sensation. As he doubted that he'd ever see her like this again, he engraved the image in his heart like an erotic cameo. *I imagine this is what she looks like in bed when she's having a spectacularly good time* He suddenly had a moment of fierce clarity. Whatever *she* was playing at, he knew without any internal equivocation that he wanted to be the one to give her that to see her face take on the look of otherworldly feral joy.

Under the cover of applause, he passed her his graphite-coloured silk handkerchief, which she gratefully used to mop the tears off her face. "I trust you enjoyed the performance? You seemed quite . . . affected."

She felt shaky, as though she had not quite returned to earth yet. Her emotions were still too volatile, too close to the surface for the easy banter they had shared over the

last couple of months. *If I say anything to him, anything at all he'll know. For all I know, he simply enjoys my company on a platonic level and he wanted to share a cultural experience with me. Is he mocking me, or does he actually care if I had a good time? Gods, why does this all have to be so difficult?* She felt astoundingly exposed and vulnerable. All she could muster in response was a muttered, "Thank you" to her hands, which were clasped tightly in her lap.

A confused Snape took her home and bowed, again, over her hand. Hermione was subdued and deep in her own thoughts. She seemed a world away to Severus, her eyes not catching the puzzled look on his face as she said goodnight to him at the door.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 12

Severus and Hermione bump into each other in NYC after the war and an unlikely friendship slowly develops.

Chapter Seven

Although Hermione had always been fascinated by the dry beauty of the more abstract forms of mathematics, she couldn't help but feel that without the humanising element the psychological impetus behind people's actions that Arithmancy took into account Muggle maths was little more than algorithmic noodling. It made her feel like nothing more than a glorified pocket calculator, an adding machine with too much hair.

Without realising it, she had turned her time at university into an internal debate on the Muggle versus Wizarding worlds, and where she fitted into the puzzle. Maybe she hadn't given it enough of a go, but she felt unable to relax or be herself in this Muggle environment. Her selfhood was inextricable from being a witch. So, she was giving up on the Muggling experiment. She was going home at the end of the current semester, and she wasn't coming back in the Spring.

She sent a message to Snape to meet her at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and wondered how he would react to her news *Anger, dismay, relief? He plays his cards so close to his chest; I really have no idea what he feels if he feels anything for me at all. I wonder if he'll realise that he's part of the reason I want to stay in the Wizarding world? Will I see him again, back in England? Will it be like this, as comfortable as old slippers?*

Snape had been to the Metropolitan Museum before, but never to this area. He wanted to stop and look at the medical papyri in one of the alcoves, but did not tarry. He swept through the weekend crowds with long, purposeful strides. He entered the Egyptian wing and headed towards the Temple of Dendur. They hadn't met since the concert and his stomach was twisted in knots. The pigeon that had brought her note had pecked his finger when he had no snack on offer, and he unconsciously sucked on the cut as he walked along.

He stopped when he reached the entrance to the hall and saw her sitting on a bench near the temple. The diffused sunlight lit up her hair in a golden aureole like an Art Nouveau goddess, and the long peasant skirt she was wearing spread over the seat behind her and pooled out on the cool grey stone. She was reading, of course. Severus regarded her complete absorption with admiring approval and found himself wishing that he could have her peace and contemplative tranquillity around him always. He imagined sitting in a cosy room full of books, with a fire in the grate and a chair for each of them.

She felt his glance and looked up, meeting his eye across the deceptively large room. The scale of it swallowed the sound of his footsteps, and it took him much longer to reach her than he would have imagined. Her eyes remained fixed on him, and he felt terribly self-conscious by the time he reached her bench up on the dais.

"I like the papyrus in the moat; it's a nice touch don't you think?" She smiled as she gestured for him to join her on the bench.

"Whereas I like the stone crocodiles," he replied, trying to regain some of his poise. He felt unsettled by finding her so beautiful and was unsure as to how he should proceed. Every moment and gesture felt charged with meaning. He felt as though he was back in front of the Dark Lord, trying desperately to figure out what to say and the hidden undercurrents of what was said by others whilst trying to appear nonchalant and unmastered by fear.

Without any preamble, she plunged into her news. "I'm leaving at the end of the semester. I'm going back home." She kept her eyes on the stone floor in front of her. She didn't see Severus take a quick glance at her face, or his nervous fidgeting. She heard only the familiar tones of his cool dismissal.

"I fail to see how this concerns me in any way." *Severus Snape, you are a bloody fool. An imbecile thrice over. Tell her you don't want her to leave. Tell her you want to go with her.*

"Oh, it doesn't, of course. I just thought I should let you know so that you can make other plans for your weekends." The hurt showed in her reply, manifesting itself in her unnaturally crisp diction. *I see. I was a fool to think that we could be anything other than acquaintances. My company was tolerable, but unnecessary. Fine. Can it really be that we'll go on our way and that will be the end of it?*

Bastard. Bastard. I. Won't. Cry.

"Naturally, it will be a relief to have the time to complete my investigations. These jaunts of yours, while amusing at times, have been rather inexpedient." *Tell her that you want her! Why won't she even look at me? Doesn't she know that this is all I can say? . . . No of course she doesn't. Why would she care? She thinks you barely tolerate her and now you're succeeding in driving her away . . .*

Hermione stood up abruptly and started walking around the platform. She didn't have a direction in mind, just needed to be moving as if by getting away from him, she could distance herself from his cold words. *Why is he being such a prat? What happened to the gentleman at the concert? Why is he being so damned cruel!? Is he afraid that I want something more than friendship, so is doing this to make it clear that he assuredly does not?*

Snape stood up from the bench, but didn't follow her. *If she's walking away, then it's because she's sensible and you've given her no other option. If she returns, you've got another chance to fix things. What on earth do I say? Every time I open my mouth, I say the exact opposite of what I feel, and I dig deeper into the hole I've made for myself.* He watched her examining the temple, stepping inside to see the graffiti carved by Napoleon's troops. She was making a convincing show of being interested solely in the exhibit, reading the curatorial placards. But despite this display, Severus noticed that her hands were clasped so tightly behind her back that the knuckles were white.

A surge of empathy rose within him, followed by a pang of self-loathing for having brought her this fresh misery. Refusing to permit himself a moment to think, he walked swiftly over to her and tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to face him, her chin held up. She was determined not to show him that his unkindness had affected her. But he noticed the glassiness of her eyes, and the pinkness at the tip of her nose that bespoke the imminence of tears.

"Granger . . . Hermione. Forgive me, I'm being an arse." The words left his mouth before he knew he had spoken, and he felt strangely outside his own body, as if he was watching from afar. She swayed as if she were a kite dropped by the wind, and he instinctively reached out, putting his hands on her upper arms to steady her. He was afraid she was going to faint, so he led her over to a bench and gave her a gentle push down to sit.

"An 'arse' is one word for it," she managed, rather shakily. "Why? Such meanness! I thought we were . . . at least friends."

"I don't know how to do this." He spoke very softly, as if by swallowing the sound of the words, he could eat the insecurity they revealed.

"Do what?" She looked up at him, her face open, sincere, and interested.

"I don't know how to be . . . friends. I have colleagues, people I tolerate, enemies and people whom I used to know but later spied on and betrayed . . . I don't know how to be other than what I am, which is not a friendly person."

"And had you come to 'tolerate' me?"

"Barely, astonishingly enough," he grinned ruefully at her, to let her know that he was being, for him, rather playful and risqué. *Say it, you fool! Else she'll walk away and that will be the end of it and she'll never know!* "Actually. . . Hermione . . . I have felt more than tolerance for your presence. I have contemplated our outings with . . . anticipation."

She sat there, absorbing his words and feeling a sense of peacefulness wash over her. *He likes me. He probably doesn't realise it yet, but he wouldn't try this hard, or care about my feelings, if he didn't. I wonder what he thinks his feelings towards me are? It's like he's been trapped in a box that was too small and now he's trying to stand up straight and his cramped muscles are giving out involuntary spasms. Except in him, it erupts in vitriol.*

"Well . . . good. I have too. Just don't *don't* do that to me again. Don't lash out at me just because you're feeling unsure."

"I can't promise that. I don't do it on purpose, you know." He felt exasperated. *Circe's knickers! She thinks I'm feeling 'unsure'? I feel bloody unmanned and a hundred miles out at sea!* "Let's get a breath of fresh air."

"Where would you like to go?"

He gestured towards Cleopatra's Needle in the park, just outside the glass wall of the museum. They collected their coats from the lobby and headed outside. A few minutes of walking brought them to the benches near the base of the obelisk. The air was crisp and chill, bringing a tingle of cold to their ears and noses. Their feet made echo-y sharp sounds as they walked on the path.

They stood at the base and read the inscription about the circuitous journey of the stone from Egypt to New York City. Hermione hugged her arms around herself to keep out the cold and to stop her hands from trembling. Snape made to tap her on the back, but instead, his hand rested lightly on the very cup of her shoulder, and getting her attention, he pointed upwards with his other hand.

"Oh! It's started to snow!" she exclaimed with delight. She stood for a moment, enraptured by the dizzying vortex, staring up at the sky. She looked back at him with her eyes dazzled and bright, and he noticed that she had snowflakes frosting her eyelashes. One hand still on her shoulder, he slowly reached up to brush them away. She closed her eyes and felt the infinitely gentle sweep of his hand. Before he could let his hand drop, she clasped it to her face, pillowing her cheek.

They stood there for a moment, the snow swirling around them, unaware of cold toes or the passage of time. Hermione thought of a lyric from a song. *"I'll stop the world and melt with you . . ."*

Nothing more was said about Snape's earlier harsh words, Hermione plan for leaving, Severus' feelings or anything of import. They parted ways, and as she walked to the subway, Hermione thought about how the New Year would find her back in England. Another verse from the song popped into her head; *"The future is open wide."*

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 12

Severus and Hermione bump into each other in NYC after the war and an unlikely friendship slowly develops.

Author Note: These characters were created and belong to J K Rowling no profit accrues to me. Thank you for your patience! This chapter has been a long time coming, and I hope you find it worth the wait. Many thanks to my beta, queenofspades and NEW pinch-hitter beta, ArtemisofEphesus.

Chapter Eight

"Eileen Sophia Snape! What on *earth* were you thinking?!" Hermione put her hands on her hips in exasperation. Her eldest was certainly a right handful. "Lina, sweetheart, you mustn't torment Justin like that!" She scooped up her nursling and used a cleaning spell to remove the jam from his wispy curls. He, of course, was not at all disturbed by his sister's predilection for finding out how much toast he could balance on his head, and gazed down at his sibling adoringly.

"Is there any of that toast left? Your father will want a slice before he heads off . . ." At that moment, Severus swung past the breakfast table and snatched two slices of bare toast in a smooth sweep as he headed toward the Floo. He stopped in front of her for a moment, smiling faintly as she went through her morning routine.

"Keys? Lunch? Ring? Wand? Will to live?" He nodded and patted or indicated each item as she reeled them off. It was a bit obsessive, but he had to admit that the checklist had got him off to work at the Ministry with everything he needed more often than not.

"Anything I should know about? You'll be home at the usual time?" He nodded, his mouth full of toast. She shifted Justin to her other hip and stood up on her tip-toes to give him a kiss. Justin gurgled with delight as the kiss brought his father close enough for him to grab a handful of hair to yank. Lina tackled him around the knees and rubbed her jammy face on his robes. Hermione laughed and cast *Tergeo* to remove the traces of jam from Severus' hair and clothing. He kept his face impassive and tried his hardest to look put-upon, but his eyes crinkled up at the corners and she knew he really loved these affectionate demonstrations. It came naturally to his children, loved and cherished as they were their upbringing so different from his own experience.

"You're a good father, Severus," she whispered into his ear and gave him a playful nip on his earlobe. He started back in surprise.

"Madam Snape! Behave yourself!" he pretended to admonish her. He went so far as to shake a finger in her face, but his tone held no threat whatsoever. Hermione attempted a penitent mien, but managed to pat him on the bum as he walked to the Floo. He whirled around in surprise, but she was innocently moving Justin's arm to help him wave goodbye.

He threw his handful of Floo powder into the fireplace and spoke clearly and calmly, "Ministry of Magic Department of Potions Research." The green flames whirled him away, and the brightness made Hermione blink.

She blinked again and was surprised to find herself lying in bed. Alone. The sun was slanting through the leaf-green curtains and onto her pillow. She slowly came back to reality she was at her parents' house, back in England. She wasn't married to Snape; she didn't have children. Nonetheless, the dream had felt so *real*, so comfortable and right.

It had been months since she had moved back from New York. She hadn't written to Snape or heard anything from him she didn't even know for certain if he was back in England. It wasn't the first time she had dreamt of him, but this one hadn't felt like a dream. It felt real and true and meaningful, as though the life she woke up into was the impostor. She wanted that easy camaraderie with the tall, darkly sardonic man. She longed for him to feel so comfortable around her. In the dream, she had felt like an adult an intelligent, alluring grown-up. She realised that was how she felt around Snape in general. He made her feel like the best, most interesting, and worthwhile version of herself she could imagine.

With the echoes of the dream scenting her morning tea, she decided that she couldn't waste any more time sitting around, waiting for life to happen to her. There had been quite enough of that recently. She had been moping about since she had returned from America; her mother called it "being a silly goose". The wise woman was sure that there was a boy somewhere in the picture, but sapiently kept her nose out of her daughter's business. As undoubtedly intelligent as Hermione was, there were invariably the truths of life that could only be learnt through personal experience. Hermione had been subjected to her fair share of grief and loss, frustration and misadventure. Perhaps it was time for some of the sweeter things that life had on offer . . .

Hermione stopped for a moment to muse on *why* exactly she wanted to find a man whom most people considered an uptight kill-joy at best, and an evil bastard at worst. She missed him. The dream reminded her of how much she had come to find his propinquity comforting. But it went deeper than that; Snape was excitingly *unknowable* to Hermione. She was familiar with his presence, but the workings of his mind were impenetrable. She could never be certain as to what he would say or what he was thinking. His worldview was breathtakingly grim, in Hermione's view, and yet his assessment of people's motivations, as demonstrated by their actions, was almost always spot-on. He was truly brilliant; his intellectual curiosity prompted him to think in ways that other people didn't, to explore places they wouldn't. Hermione found his acumen impressive. She wasn't interested in Potions research herself, but she had a great deal of respect for his explorations. He was also rather funny, in a rueful, absurdist way. He was a master of deadpan humour and was always ensnaring her in the most outrageous suppositions, then almost-smiling when she finally caught the joke. She noted that he had a habit of ducking his head back when he had a ghost of a smile on his face, as if he still had curtains of hair to hide behind. She longed to see a real smile and knew that this meant, somehow, finding him . . .

Hermione knew that if Snape was back in England, he wasn't at Hogwarts. She wondered what he could be doing and where he could be. He had mentioned Potions research, so presumably a friendly word at the Ministry would confirm whether or not he worked there. She didn't feel up to approaching Arthur Weasley. She tapped her paper with her pen and wrote "Ministry possible" at the top.

She thought about what he liked to do and where he could most often be found *He's probably at home, reading a nice book with a hot cup of tea. I know I would be, if I didn't have anything more pressing to do. Tea, some hot dripping toast, a comfy chair, a side table on which to set the tea, a lamp for optimal reading enjoyment, a lapful of cat for warmth . . .* Her mind drifted off into a well-visited fantasy land of 'How The World Should Be Arranged (according to Hermione Granger)'. It would not have surprised her to learn that it was very similar to Snape's view, with the substitution of a hot toddy for tea and a blanket in lieu of Crookshanks.

Bookshops seemed a distinct possibility. She added "Bookshops probable. (Research further)" to her paper. She didn't much fancy the direct approach of simply owling him, although it would certainly be quicker and more certain. She wanted to give him the opportunity to back out of contact gracefully, give herself the chance to save face if he didn't want to continue their odd association.

So, in her usual organised method, Hermione mapped out a plan of attack, alternatively titled, "Running Severus Snape to Ground, Without Him Realising It." She made a map of all of the kinds of bookshops in London that were akin to the ones she and Snape had frequented in New York. Her love for books made this part relatively easy. She made a schedule for Saturday and Sunday mornings, with a plan for spending half an hour or so at each of four locations each day. Having spent so much time in proximity to him gave her a sense of his magical signature it left a particular resonance in the air. It was like the trail of a heavy perfume but translated as a ringing in the ears or a tingling on her skin. She was soon able to figure out which shops he had ever visited and focused her attentions there.

--ooOOOOoo--

Snape had long since moved back into his home at Spinner's End, but didn't feel entirely *settled*. He wasn't sure why. The house was the same miserable pit it had been when he was growing up. Granted, it was cleaner now; he hadn't seen the point of making improvements to it since he had always lived at Hogwarts for most of the year. However, now that he was cut loose from the castle, he was looking at his sole inheritance with new eyes.

Contrary to popular belief, he did perform spells from time to time. Even aside from duelling. He just preferred the physical response he got from working directly with the ingredients of potions, the actions of stirring and decanting. Touch and smell could tell you if something was overripe or too dry. He supposed that you could run a diagnostic test through a charm or something to that effect, but it seemed rather removed for his tastes. What was the point of doing work if it wasn't, well, *work*? That which sustains you should require effort. In this sense, he was different from the average Slytherin, who had no compunction against someone else doing the dirty work, especially if it was an elf.

Recognising that *some* spell-work would be required, he rolled up his sleeves in preparation as he entered the small living room. Several perfunctory waves later and the old walls were the neutral colour of parchment. He had initially tried white, but found it too stark. So, he had pulled out a book at random from the nearest shelf and duplicated the colour. There wasn't too much wall-space to recolour, as the bookshelves filled nearly the whole room. They were the only thing he had added since his parents' demise, and they were solidly built and spelled against dust accumulation and mildew.

He was currently doing his reading either in bed or at the kitchen table, so he made a note to purchase a comfortable armchair at his earliest convenience. Perhaps two. They came in matched sets, did they not? It would be more comfortable that way, if he ever had a visitor . . .

The windows were now sparkling clean, but still draughty, as the old house was resistant to his charms to repair the cracks and leaks. New windows would solve the problem, but he was chary of spending money before he had more amassed in his vault. Instead, he Transfigured the old cotton curtains into thick velvet ones in a rich chocolaty brown. The floor, once cleaned (several times), revealed wood planks in remarkably good condition. There was nothing much to do there except add a rug or two for comfort.

The kitchen he gutted entirely with no remorse. With the cupboards and units cleared away, there was room for a decent table under the window. An open shelf was all he needed for his silver and dry-goods. A small magical fridge kept his cheese from going off before its time. The window ledge would be perfect for growing salad herbs. A larger area for herbs in the back garden would have to be planned and implemented with the appropriate wards in place to prevent any interference with the more toxic exotics he liked to cultivate.

All the expenditure of magical energy had tired him, and he resolved to tackle the upstairs another day. He settled down to read at the kitchen table with his copy of Middlemarch, a cheese and pickle sandwich, and a strongly fortifying cup of tea.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 12

Severus and Hermione bump into each other in NYC after the war and an unlikely friendship slowly develops.

Author Note: many people have taken turns helping to whip this chapter into shape: queenofspades, gottawrite, corianderpie and the Empress of Betas - Southern Witch 69. I am in debt to them all.

Chapter Nine

Hermione had been doing a lot of thinking during her walks around London. Her venture in New York had decided her in favour of making a life for herself in the Wizarding world a life that hopefully included one Severus Snape. But billing and cooing could only take up so much of the day, and she was the type of person who needed something useful to do. Her experience with maths had led her to the conclusion that, whatever she decided to do with her life, it wouldn't be something abstract and removed.

Part of the reason she had felt so cut adrift after the war was that it had provided focus to her life. So she wanted something that was 'hands on' with meaning and purpose. She had felt deep contentment in her dream, being at home with her children. However, she didn't feel the same urge that Ginny did: to rush into childbearing right out of school. Regardless of how much the idea of the 'practising' was enticing there was also the issue of whether or not Severus wanted children and when. Even that conjecture was putting the cart before the currently un-located horse. No, she wanted to have something more in her life some work that brought her a sense of contributing to the well-being of humanity in general.

She knew that she liked learning new things, so perhaps something that would allow her to keep adding to her current skills. Maybe teaching? She admitted to herself that any subject she had taken at Hogwarts would be very easy for her to teach, but was there some subject in particular she was drawn to? Something she would enjoy, or maybe, something she felt was lacking from her education . . . Perhaps she could fill some previously unknown need . . .

She wondered if any of her friends were finding it as hard as she was to figure out what to do next. After all, school hadn't helped much. Students took the classes they were good at, and then *poof!* they were done and out the door. What if one didn't want to be an Auror or work for the Ministry? How did someone work out what she could be good at, what she would enjoy? Stirrings of thoughts began in her brain building to a quiet simmer. She would need to look into it, of course, but maybe what Hogwarts needed was a personal advisory and assessment system to help students figure out their career paths! And what about adults who were out in the world and wanted to change what they were doing or mothers returning to work after their children were grown? Was anyone addressing these needs, or did people have to flail about on their own? She had an inkling that arithmantic tropes could be adapted to specific career trajectories.

Hermione felt flushed with excitement. It was the perfect problem on which to exercise her fondness for research, her organisational skills, and her determination to Do Good in the World. This would bear more reflection, perhaps a note to Headmistress McGonagall.

--ooOOOOOoo--

Now that his living space was no longer a concern, even of a very niggling variety, Severus started applying himself to the problem of his livelihood. Although Minerva had made it clear that the Potions master position or even Defence Against the Dark Arts was his for the asking, he hadn't dissembled when he told Hermione he wouldn't consider returning to Hogwarts. He had always kept his hand in, brewing the odd experimental thing here or there during holidays. He had made something of a name for himself with articles in some of the best Potions journals and was itching to discover what kind of budget the Ministry would be willing to put behind him to get a jump on the American researchers. There would be no more faffing about half-arsed. Especially if he could paint a convincing picture of their technological advances . . .

He had his own contacts at the Ministry; mostly mid-level bureaucrats who'd had to approve the curriculum and expenses for his classes at Hogwarts, but he thought a word in Kingsley's ear wouldn't go amiss. The idea of his own lab, a couple of assistants, the freedom to explore several interesting avenues in cross-purposing of potions (off-label use, the Muggles called it) appealed to him immensely. It was almost as appealing as the notion of being his own boss. Advancing on his own merits! Accountable to no man! Aside from the Ministry, of course. But surely that couldn't be as intolerable as the pick of sociopathic manipulative madmen he had, until recently, laboured under. Then again, the Ministry was responsible for the Board of Governors, and they were a right cheerless lot. Still individual members of a committee could be got around in a way that a delusional egomaniac could not. The future was looking bright!

Having established his bona fides to his satisfaction, he spared a thought for Hermione. He decided that this session of cogitation required something stronger than tea. He Transfigured his spare kitchen chair into a stern armchair in front of the grate in the living room. He settled into the creaky leather and swirled the liquor around in the glass, inhaling the hot sweet aroma of a respectably venerable tawny port. *Dratted girl . . . woman? I wonder how she's faring now that she's back home. I imagine she's still living with her parents. She needs to break out on her own, find her feet.*

What of Hermione, herself? What was it about her that was prompting all of this spring cleaning of the soul? Severus' vocabulary was inadequate for a mode of interaction warmer than collegial. He was aware of the theories behind luring a mate into one's den. He even had some degree of practice with the physical side of attraction. After all, everyone was young at one point his experience, coming of age in Slytherin house, was that there was always bound to be someone more desperate and unhappy than oneself. Later on, female interaction could be hired by the hour, as the need . . . arose. He discarded those avenues of thought like a snake shedding a skin, outgrown and left behind.

Severus was determined to do something substantially different with his sleek and shiny new self. Hermione merited nothing less. He was determined to secure her affections for the future, and he wanted to do it in the right way. But she was such a strong flavour to add to the mix! He worried that she would overpower the subtler notes, the darker base of his own potion. She was all kinds of things that were brash and green vetiver and lime, the bruised stem of lavender fresh from the field. There was also something basic and earthy about her the summery smell of rain on warm dirt. There was something he couldn't identify it must be particular to her, but greater proximity would be required to smell it properly. Maybe it was her hair, or perhaps her skin . . .

He had an idea that precision and method was required in wooing, much like making a tricky and exacting potion. He wanted to do it correctly. He had a place where he wouldn't feel ashamed to invite Hermione for tea or to examine a particularly abstruse text. He had a solid foundation for a respectable and remunerative livelihood. So he wasn't the most attractive or well-regarded bachelor on the market. He had never imagined being *on* the market. The idea of having to change himself in some fundamental way to appeal to a woman was abhorrent to him. Luckily, the witch in question had a pretty clear idea of his basic personality and qualities, and altering anything at this point would be a sign of weakness. He also had the vague idea that Hermione had come to tolerate him as he was, and that modification could be confusing. As strange as it was to contemplate, she seemed to accept him and enjoy his company.

He wanted to owl her he missed her impertinence and felt he was getting rusty, not having her challenging nature against which to sharpen himself. *It's her time to make*

her way in the world, and I don't want to impose myself upon her. She needs to determine whether we spent time together because there was no one more appropriate available or if there's something stronger than convenience that brought us together. Now that she's back with her friends, she'll almost certainly find someone rather less . . . used up. But if she seeks me out, then I'll know that she is amenable to proceeding further . . .

He took a large swig and held it in his mouth – swished it in his teeth, hissed through the alcohol and swallowed it. He raised his glass towards the fireplace in a silent toast to his decision to make a sea change in his life. He had never thought he'd sign up with another master – perhaps a mistress would make a favourable change?

Chapter Nine and a Half

Chapter 10 of 12

Severus and Hermione bump into each other in NYC after the war and an unlikely friendship slowly develops.

Author Note: I wish I could say that the Wizarding World belonged to me and that I lived in a castle rolling around on a pile of money, but that isn't the case. Many thanks to the betas who have worked on this piece: queenofspades, corianderpie and Southern Witch 69.

Chapter Nine and a Half

With all of the work that she had put into finding him, Hermione really shouldn't have been surprised that she actually *did* find him, but the finding itself was rather anticlimactic and left her at a loss. She stepped into Thames and Hudson on a blustery March afternoon – or, rather, was blown into the shop. She took a moment to catch her breath and straighten out her hair before taking a look around. Her sixth sense made the hairs stand up on the back of her neck, and she turned. She saw Snape leaning over a stack on a display table, completely intent on the book he was holding. She didn't run over to him, but walked as quickly as was possible. She stood there for a moment, not knowing what to say, unsure if he could sense her in the same way that she had felt his presence.

He casually glanced up and said, "Ah, there you are, Granger. Fascinating book they have here on alchemy. Lovely illustrations." He held it up for her to see, as though they hadn't been apart for months – as though this was just another weekend bibliophilic jaunt. Love may be a many-splendoured thing, and hope may be the thing with feathers, but at that moment Severus felt as though the winged creature itself was lodged in his chest. *Try not to give the game away by coughing up a feather now . . . She looks deliciously half-crazed with her hair getting away from her like that . . .*

"Hallo, Severus." She tried to keep her voice steady, the tone unexcited. Most importantly, she tried not to faint or pant. *I'm a fool. An absolute bloody fool. This was a complete mistake – he doesn't care a fig that I've found him.*

He shot her an inquisitive look at the use of his first name. They were both trying to figure out how to gauge their new level of interaction. Casual or familiar? Casually familiar? Formal? Studied indifference? "You look well." *I wonder what he's been up to these last couple of months. It's as if we never said good-bye, as if he never almost kissed me.*

"Let me purchase this book and we can go and get some tea, if you like." *Please say yes.*

"You never asked me why I left New York." *Don't think you're getting away with it that easily, Mr. Snape! Although tea would be a good start . . .*

"I have a theory, but this is not the appropriate venue for that conversation." *Why can't she simply be happy to see me? I'm pleased as punch she's finally here. But it sounds like she means an interrogation . . .* They walked together to the register, and Hermione was surprised to see him pay with a credit card.

"I have an appointment at the British Museum at two o'clock, but we've got time for tea before then." They headed out of the shop and started the short walk to the museum. The wind buffeted them with stops and starts, throwing them off balance – at times pushing them close together, at times leaving them staggering and fighting to stay upright.

"What are you doing at the museum?"

"Have you heard of the Secretum? It was the Secret Library at the British Museum – an annexe full of materials deemed too obscene for common viewing. The Muggle artefacts have been integrated into the museum's public collection, but the Wizarding Secretum still contains some fascinating ancient tomes."

"Are you going for something in particular or just for fun?" *Libraries – of course! I should have had libraries on my list . . . there aren't that many other people who would think of spending their weekends in a library as entertainment.*

"They have a special exhibit of documents on loan from the Vatican library. I'm scheduled to have a look at some of the Borgia materials."

"Oh, right! The Borgias were known for poisoning their enemies. So, they were wizards?"

"Yes, Lucrezia Borgia was a particularly powerful witch – known particularly for her acumen in potions. The Vatican has her diary, 'Il Diario della Strega Lucrezia Borgia'." Snape looked uncomfortable for a moment. "I don't know that it has any actual application for potions research, but I'm not planning on telling that to the Ministry."

Hermione gurgled a bit. She was right; this was just a lark. Looking at the personal notes of one of the most notoriously nasty pieces of work in Renaissance Europe was a pleasant weekend jaunt for Snape.

They walked in companionable silence to the museum and headed upstairs to the tea room. Once they were settled at a spindly tea table, mugs in hand, Hermione took up the conversational reins again.

"Your theory, Mister Snape?" she queried. Her arch look was a transparent attempt at disguising her eagerness to hear what he had to say.

"You are probably aware that I'm half-blood." He looked to her for confirmation, and she nodded solemnly, so he continued. "The choice was easier for me because my Muggle father was such a wretched excuse for a human that there wasn't much incentive for me to consider life as a Muggle. However, I believe that, for those of us who have ties to the Muggle community, 'mulling it over' it is a common phenomenon upon coming of age."

Hermione nodded. "I wondered what my life would have been like if I had been, you know, normal. If I were just a clever girl, going to university, having boyfriends . . . Not finding out I was a witch and living through a war and seeing my friends killed." She took a fortifying gulp of tea. "But then I realised that, even if I were just a Muggle, I still

probably wouldn't have been considered 'normal'. I'm too interested in books and not interested enough in boys." She looked deep into her tea cup, as if suddenly taking up the art of tasseomancy. *Oh gods, that didn't come out right! I don't want him to think that I don't fancy blokes . . .*! I mean, boys my age are so grotty and into sport, and well, I've found they haven't much to say."

"You may be unduly prejudiced by your experience with Potter and Weasley a singularly uninspired pair of..."

"Yes, dunderheads. You needn't remind me of your low opinion of them. They're my friends but they are SUCH boys. I'm tired of boys. *Does he understand what I'm trying to say? I don't want him to think I'm off to join a convent!*

Snape sniffed dismissively and took his own sip of tea. "At any rate that is my theory of why you left New York. Your assay at Muggle life had reached its logical conclusion and you returned home."

"I came home to my parents, and I thought I'd make a go of it in their world. I thought the problem was maybe America versus Britain. But it wasn't. I worked as the receptionist at their practise. I went on dates with every one of their friends' eligible sons. I was bored stiff. I needed a project. So I decided to try to find you."

"You've turned me into an independent study project?" He wasn't sure if he should be offended or flattered.

"You're an interesting subject." She flushed as she smiled hesitantly at him over the rim of her mug. "I do hope you don't mind that I've found you."

"You could have just owled me."

"I wanted to give you the opportunity to 'not be found', if you wished."

"We're friends, Hermione." He made the concession as gracefully as he could.

"No, we're not."

"We're not friends?" *What on earth is she playing at? Doesn't she WANT us to be friends? Does she think I sit around and sip tea with my sworn enemies?*

"Well, we are. But I've missed your company. I've been thinking of you. We could be . . . friends with . . . benefits . . ." She looked down at her hands on the table ~~there~~ *cards on the table. There's no way he can misunderstand me now.*

"Benefits?" Snape looked completely befuddled. "What kind of benefits?"

"Honestly, Severus! It's a colloquial expression." *Why is he humiliating me by making me spell it out like this? Clearly, he isn't interested and is just playing with me prior to the pounce.*

"Do tell," he drawled in a supercilious manner to mask his confusion and buy time.

"It means people who are friends who aren't in a romantic relationship yet share, um, intimacies."

"Oh." *She's having me on. This is some kind of elaborate jest. She knows I desire her and want to be serious about this, and she's mocking me!* You must have mistaken me for one of your more wanton peers," he said rather coldly.

"Perhaps I'm just hopeful." *Stupidly, blindly hopeful. I wish the earth would swallow me up right now. Could this possibly be going any more pear-shaped?*

"I'm going to venture onto a particularly shaky limb here, as I don't quite understand your meaning. Are you trying to tell me that you wish to be . . . physically intimate with me, but that you despise my company enough to not want to be in a relationship with me?" *Deep breaths, old man. Steady on. She can't possibly WANT you you must be misunderstanding it it's some modern understanding of 'hopeful' with which you're unfamiliar.*

"No. Well, yes. Partially. No this is coming out all wrong." She felt like she was on the downward swoop of a roller coaster *I feel like I'm going to be sick. That would really impress him great chatting-up technique, being sick on the bloke.*

"I thought we were friends," he said in a hurt and frustrated voice. *I thought I understood the English language reasonably well, but nothing she is saying is making any sense at all. She might as well be speaking Mermish.*

"We are." She nodded patiently. *He's going to have to work his way through this himself.*

"And yet you don't have enough respect for me to sustain an observance of the niceties of courtship; you want to jump to the lewd. *Can't she tell I've had all of this under consideration? Doesn't she want the nicest possible Snape she could have?*

"My assumption is that *you* wouldn't want to be entangled in a relationship with *me*."

"I find this whole conversation offensive in the extreme."

"Fine let's just pretend to Oblivate the last couple of minutes and go on our way." Hermione's mouth was set into a firm line. Both of them looked anywhere but at each other. She took a couple of sips of lukewarm tea and set the empty cup down with a touch more than necessary force. She started rootling around in her bag and making moves with her jacket as if to leave.

"I wouldn't be averse to continuing our exploration of bookstores," Snape said in a low voice, not making eye contact.

"Not slamming the door entirely in my face, then?" She felt a bit rueful, but wondered if a friendship could be salvaged out of this disaster.

"Hermione, how do you expect a man to react to being told that he's naught but a piece of meat upon which a nubile creature wishes to slake her lusts?"

"Jubilant? Huzzah! A heavenly chorus singing hosannas?"

Despite himself, he laughed. They both laughed at the absurdity of it all until tears were streaming down Hermione's face and his face was red, and they had to stop and gasp for breath.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 11 of 12

Severus and Hermione bump into each other in NYC after the war and an unlikely friendship slowly develops.

Author Note: Thank you to all of the people who have helped this story come to fruition the betas (queenofspades, corianderpie, Southern Witch 69) and the readers. It's been an enormous pleasure to write, and I'm grateful to JK Rowling for allowing us to share.

Chapter Ten

She had sent him an owl. *This is a bad sign. Or is it? I have no idea anymore. That dratted woman . . .* He slowly unfolded the parchment and smoothed out the creases.

Dear Severus,

I hope this missive finds you well. I know it's been several weeks since our last encounter, and I didn't want to let it grow into months again. I wish I knew what you were thinking, what I could say to address your apprehensions; I realise that at our last meeting we were talking at cross purposes. It was as though we were participating in different conversations.

This is all so important to me, and I'm terrified of saying something wrong and driving you away and losing, well, you. Our convergence in New York (however incidental and inadvertent) and getting to know you, has been the best thing that's happened to me since I received my letter from Hogwarts . . . I've been trying to speak my heart as clearly as possible, yet being misunderstood. Perhaps you're being wilfully obtuse, but maybe you just don't have an "ear" for endearments.

I'll put this as plainly as I can. I like you. We get on well together. I enjoy your company. When you're gone, I look forward to seeing you again. I enjoy hearing what you're thinking about and discovering the way your mind works. Your existence has become peculiarly necessary to my happiness. Lest you think this is merely an intellectual inclination, I should clarify that I fancy you. That is to say, I feel strangely shy and physically excited by your proximity. My mind wanders along lustful paths.

I remember that you said that you don't know how to be friends; well, I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to be overly subtle or say anything other than what I feel and what I want. I could give you a list of well-considered reasons why this alliance would be mutually beneficial, and I'm quite sure I could find a decent reference book on relationships, but it wouldn't have much relevance to this unique and unlikely thing that exists between us.

I'm assuming you will have many reservations about entering into a relationship with me, so I'd like to make perfectly clear that I don't give a shrivelfig for your age or for the facts that you used to be my teacher and a Death Eater all of that is surface. Underneath it, I believe that you and I have a congruence of souls. I feel both at peace and intriguingly ruffled when I'm near you.

I believe that you found my earlier attempts to convey this information too forward or too brash. Maybe you're not used to being approached, but I'm hoping my intent is not wholly unwelcome. To reiterate I am interested in pursuing a relationship with you that involves both physical, emotional and intellectual components. I'm putting my heart on the line by writing these words so starkly because I sense a corresponding echo in you.

I could be mistaken. I hope that I am not and that you are interested in exploring this species of mutuality. I will be at Harry's birthday party at the end of July I believe it's being viewed as an impromptu anniversary celebration of the end of the war. I hope to see you there.

Yours,

Hermione

Bloody hell.

He carefully placed the letter down on the table and smoothed it again with his hand. A post-script hastily inked itself in. "P.S. You are not a git."

He decided to disregard the rest of the letter (for the moment) as too alien, in favour of the post-script. *Nowhere* was something he could understand! *I wonder what she's playing at of course I'm a git!* Once a greasy git, now a much cleaner one, but a git nonetheless. The world had always treated him as a git, and he had treated it right back. With interest. *But she sounded so sure.* He knew he was a git . . . wasn't he? Gods. What if *he* wasn't? Well then, what was he? *How on earth does one go about finding out what kind of person one really is?* He dropped that line of thinking like a red-hot crucible.

Back to the letter then.

"I am interested in pursuing a relationship with you." She liked him. She fancied him. *Well, that's all right then. I fancy her.* He was simultaneously flattered at being sought and terrified of what was expected of him next. Well, not *that* part, but the wooing. He had already decided to court her, but now the tables were turned, and he wasn't sure how he was supposed to proceed. He read through the letter again. She was a remarkably intelligent witch, and it appeared she had put some of that considerable intellect into sorting this whole relationship business out. It would behoove him to investigate the conclusions she had reached. *Maybe this could work. And maybe it could go disastrously wrong. Would it be worth the risk, to see how things turn out?*

He wanted to believe it, to believe she meant it that she wasn't delusional or mistaken or bound to change her mind in a month or a year. But the world didn't work like that. Could it? Wasn't life unfair and cruel and arbitrary? Yes, obviously it still was: just look at the headlines of any Muggle newspaper still plenty of muttering have-nots and undeserving haves. Was it possible for him to be happy, even in a miserably imperfect world?

He started to weigh up his ideas and impressions and sort them according to time-honoured principles of gain and loss, but then stopped abruptly. He sat back in his chair and *thought* of Hermione. Himself eddying in the wake left by her hair as she sailed around the bookstore, seeking out books for his enjoyment. Her serene face absorbed in reading at the beach, nibbling on a ginger biscuit holding it carefully away from the book so that no crumbs fell into the crease. Her pale neck thrown back in uninhibited ecstasy at the concert. The way her cheek fit into and warmed the palm of his hand in front of Cleopatra's Needle. Laughing with her until his lungs hurt at the museum tea-shop. *Anything would be worth it to have more of those moments. I don't want to be lying on my deathbed and have nothing to flash before my eyes.*

He closed his eyes in speculative contemplation of the range of activities afforded to the successful paramour. He had never done this before (the "advancing one's suit" part), so he wanted to do it properly.

This means going to Potter's blasted fancy dress party . . .

--ooOO0OOoo--

Snape was one of the first to arrive at the party he wanted to find a safe spot from which to observe the proceedings.*It's bad enough to have to celebrate the continued existence of The Prat Who Lived, but to have a costume party to celebrate the fall of the Dark Lord! It's obscenely unfit. Although that could be the very point thumbing one's nose at evil.* He rustled his robes more tightly around himself and adjusted the helmet so that he could see more clearly through the eye-slits.

I see Arthur and Molly have come as Zeus and Hera he doesn't seem the 'catting around' type, but Molly could certainly give Hera a run for her money in the shrewish-interference department. Following the theme, ah, yes, there are the Heavenly Twins. Good Lord. I can't imagine their tunics need to be that short! I wonder who landed the slinky blonde oh it's Fleur Delacour, now Weasley, and Bill. He's got a trident and she's in green scales, so they must be Poseidon and Amphitrite. Hmm. There's Sybill . . . I wasn't aware that the Pythia reached her transports via cooking sherry.

He watched with some trepidation as the elder Weasleys approached his hidey-hole.

"Ahhh, Severus so glad you could make it!" Arthur Weasley made so bold as to grab his upper arm in a gesture of greeting. Snape slid the helmet visor up off his face and prepared for the worst.

"Arthur, Molly." He nodded politely.

"I hear you ran into our Hermione in the States . . .?" Molly enquired in a carefully casual tone that fooled none of the three.

"Since she sustained no lasting injury, I declined to bring it to the attention of the authorities."*Get to the point you meddlesome woman! Why are you being nice to me? What did Hermione tell you? Has she been talking about me?*

Arthur chuckled and chuffed Snape again on the shoulder, then quickly removed his hand as Snape looked down at the hand in question and then back up at Arthur with a raised eyebrow.

"No, no! No harm, certainly. She looks well, don't you think?"

"As I have not yet seen her this evening, I can neither confirm nor deny your statement and do not wish to be drawn into conjecture."

Molly poked Arthur in the ribs and gave him a meaningful look, as if to say, "Shove over; I'll handle this, you big booby!"

"Hermione told us that she particularly hoped *you* would be here tonight. As improbable as it seems to some of us, she is looking forward to seeing you. She may not be my daughter, but I've not known her these many years to suddenly think her a fool. If she cares for you, then you must have given her good reason to do so. But she's not very worldly, if you know what I mean. She's young. I don't want to see her get hurt."

"Are you implying either that Miss Granger cannot fend for herself or that I'm the Big Bad Wolf? Both, perhaps?" His voice dropped into a low and cold register. Anyone who knew him could tell he was an eyelash away from a hex on the grey side of the spectrum.

Molly had the grace to blush, but she continued anyway. "Her parents aren't here to make enquiries on her behalf, and we wouldn't be good friends to her if we didn't try to establish your intentions towards her . . ."

"My intentions!" He nearly squeaked with alarm. He took a deep breath to calm down and attempted to speak in a settled and masterful way. "My intentions are a matter between myself and Hermione."

"So it's 'Hermione', then?" asked Arthur gently.

Snape closed his eyes briefly, then looked down at a point somewhat to the left of Arthur's shoe.*Someone will find out, sooner or later. I can't deny it, especially since I came here to see her in the first place.* He nodded.

"All right then, Severus. Molly, let's go and see what the twins have used to spike the punch this time . . ." Arthur put his arm around Molly's shoulders and steered her away. She looked for a moment like she might argue, but he gave her a little squeeze and she snuggled up to him as they walked off.

Snape shifted the visor back down as he watched them walk away and replayed the conversation in his head.*What has she been saying? To whom has she been talking about me?* He was deeply uncomfortable to find himself entered into the equations of other people. His life was his own, and he was accountable to no man.*Well, there's the exact rub. If we engage in any kind of a relationship, I'll have to take her friends into consideration. She's woman enough to hex off my bollocks if I don't . . .* His musings were rueful in tone because it seemed evident that there was no way to have Hermione without running the gamut of many Weasleys and the occasional Potter. However disruptive she proved to his life, he had decided that wanting Hermione in it was a given, if she would have him.

"Hallo, Severus." He gave a start, as she had sidled up to him without his noticing. His spying skills must be slipping, or maybe he wasn't alerted to her presence as something foreign.

"How did you know it was me?" He was slightly aggrieved. After all, the costume had a helmet that hid his face.

"Well, who else would dare to impersonate the Lord of Death? The black robes, the menacing helmet . . . playing Hades must be like wearing a comfortable slipper." She smirked at him. He tipped the helmet back and glared down at her. She grinned back up at him and gestured at the crowd. "Are you enjoying yourself so far?"

"Potter is such a Gryffindor, always so literal and unimaginative I wouldn't have thought him subtle enough to do justice to Hermes, though it's true that he has a Cloak of Invisibility . . ."

"It was either that or one of the heroes Heracles, Perseus, or Jason, and he hasn't the physique. Oh, and be cautious of Luna . . ."

"I don't see Miss Lovegood at present. Her costume is . . .?"

"Medusa the snakes won't bite *her*, of course, but they took a healthy nip out of George a minute ago. Now, he did get rather close . . ."

"I don't think that I will be in danger, then. I was surprised to see Miss Weasley as Athena. I thought surely *you* would be the natural embodiment of Wisdom."

"Oh, perhaps, but I'm not nearly warlike enough. Besides, she was able to borrow Hedwig from Harry, and that really adds a nice touch. So . . . have you figured out who I'm supposed to be? Everyone seems to think I'm some kind of Greek seamstress." She frowned with disappointment that, once again, her allusions flew over the heads of the group.

"Let's see plain grey hooded robes, holding a heavy pair of shears that transforms into a spindle and then a tape measure (impressive Transfiguration there) . . . You're the

Moirae; they spin the thread of life, measure it, and then, ultimately, cut it. Lady Fate, before whom even the gods must bow." He finished his speech with his own low and courtly bow.

She flushed at his attentions and beamed with delight at his knowledge of classical mythology.

"Very creative, but all wrong. Please allow me . . ." She held her hands up and open in a gesture of surrender and closed her eyes. He transfigured her grey robes into a white linen chiton with floating layers, took her shears and transfigured them into a wreath of colourful spring flowers for her hair. She opened her eyes and looked down cautiously. She blushed when she noticed the slight sheerness of the weave, but settled a bit as she noted that there was sufficient fabric for modesty's sake. She looked up at him with cautiously expectant eyes as he settled the crown of flowers on her brow.

"Your letter . . ." he began.

"Yes?" she interrupted him hopefully. After all, he had shown up surely a good sign.

"Thank you for writing it." He sketched a little bow in the air in her general direction. *Thank you for giving me a chance, for being who you are. For existing.*

"That's all?" Her heart fell through her body like an over-ripe fruit hitting the ground on a windy day *But he came! He's here what does he mean by it? Don't go leaping to conclusions, Granger. Take a breath.*

"Why, exactly, are you thanking me?" She tried to ask in a playfully light tone. She needed to know if she should gather up the sticky mass of her heart and shove it back in place or if she should take it in both hands and run out the door.

"I'm not yet sure." He attempted the same inconsequential tone, but had to work hard to suppress a nervous tremolo in his voice. "Can I tempt you with a bite from the Tree of Knowledge? Ah, no apples here. Some grapes perhaps?"

"Some writers aver that the original fruit from the Garden of Eden was a pomegranate."

Severus Summoned a pomegranate from the fruit spilling out of a cornucopia on the nearby table.

"You know that I'm no longer confined to the dungeons . . . so, no underground lair for this Hades," he said in a conversational tone. She nodded, eyes wary but hopeful.

"But stay with me, Hermione. Be my Persephone." He held out the pomegranate with a playfulness that masked his gut-wrenching certainty that this was the cusp of his life and that the whole world was about to come crashing around his ears in the next moment.

She took the pomegranate from him, carefully peeled back its rubbery rind and plucked out a handful of the bittersweet jewel-red seeds. She counted out twelve under her breath and ate them as she counted.

"Six for the dark and six more for the light months . . ."

His breath caught in his throat and what began as playful badinage took on truthful weight. "But, but Persephone only stayed for half the year. She could only be compelled to stay for that long . . ."

"Yes, but I'm not Persephone." She looked up at him defiantly, challenge in her eyes.

He took her face in his hands and kissed her juice-stained lips.

Epilogue

Chapter 12 of 12

Epilogue to The Thing With Wings

Epilogue

Hermione hated her thighs. To be quite honest, most women feel they are a bit on the squidgy side, no? But Severus secretly adored her supple softness: the way his fingers sank into the flesh when he grasped her hips. He reckoned one would be hard pressed to find a single straight line on her entire body – he himself had spent a particularly languid afternoon examining her with close attention and found nothing but curves. He called her his 'little nectarine', for she was sweet, ripe, juicy – and more sophisticated than your average peach.

They had once spent hours, fingers entwined, wrapped up in the drama of skin on skin – the warmth. Feeling the blood running, the pulse under the thin skin of the wrist, tracing the bones of the top of the hand, the soft pouches of skin underneath the fingers. Seeing the blue tracery of veins under skin as clear as skimmed milk. The place under the fingernail where the skin transitions to the hard, shell-like nail with a slight catch. Slow sensuous stroking of fingers on skin made tactile and rough with sweat. The struggle for dominance when the fingers interlace and the web of one junction presses tight against another, the light scraping of fingernails – the clink of their rings.

The rings were a custom design in platinum – a parade of letters spelling out a phrase with special meaning for them, enciphered with a Muggle computer trick called 'rot13' and charmed to shuffle their order at random intervals so that no one else would ever know their secret.

She kissed his ear and whispered, "I love you."

He repeated, "I lobe you?" They laughed.

He gently lifted the mass of hair off the delicate, vulnerable, hidden spot at the base of the skull. He nuzzled the back of her neck. "I nape you."

She huffed an excited shiver. "You certainly do 'Snape me!'"

"Oh, is that what the children are calling it these days?"

They both laughed.

She kissed his eyelids. "I vitreous humour you."

He kissed her forehead. "I prefrontal cortex you."

She kissed the tip of his nose. "I aquiline you."

He pressed the side of his face to her chest, listening to her heart beating. "I ventricle you."

She tugged his head up for a kiss – a long languorous, voluptuous kiss. She impishly whispered in his ear, "I tongue you," and she blushed.

He pulled back to be able to look her in the eyes, and then he blushed too.

She splayed her hand across his chest, stroking the soft skin covering his breastbone. "I clavicle you" – she dipped her fingers into the intercostal notch and followed up with a soft, breathy kiss.

Then she darted down in a surprise attack and nibbled on a nipple. "I nip you!"

"Aha, Madam Snape! Two can play at that game!"

---***0000000***---

"I had a dream about you, about us . . ."

"And was your behaviour suitably reprehensible?"

"I patted you on the bum, but that's the extent of it. We had two children, though, so reprehensible actions can be inferred."

"Two! Boys?"

"A boy and a girl."

"I've heard that the fashion nowadays is to name children modern Muggle names – a touch of the exotic."

"No, no – they had proper Wizarding names. Justinian – named after a Roman emperor, just like you" – a quick glance at him, but he smirked and shook his head in a negation.

"Family name, I'm afraid."

"Well, it was *my* dream, and in my dream you're named after an emperor and so is our son, only we called him Justin, for short. And the girl was Eileen, for—"

"My mother." A pause. "Thank you, your unconscious is remarkably solicitous."

"I try."

"I had heard that you were trying . . ." She whapped him on the arm and favoured him with a mock scowl. He held her face in his hands and placed small, precise kisses on her scowl lines before brushing his lips across hers.

He sat back and looked intently at her face.

"What's the matter? Do I have a spot? Am I displaying the signs of Parani Fever?"

"No, no . . . nothing is amiss. Everything is as it should be. I'm just astounded that even your faults, your flaws, your *glowers* fill me with a tender regard for you. I must be going soft in the head."

"Clearly. Is there anything that can be done to halt the decline? I'd hate to see the great Severus Snape drooling and muttering, fit only to kiss the hem of his wife's robes."

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She sat on one of the comfortable chairs, reading – her profile backlit and knife-sharpened by the fire in the grate. Watching the contours of her face wax and wane in the inconstant light, Severus was reminded of another time he had watched her.

"I have a question for you, my dear . . ."

Hermione placed the bookmark in the crease, closed the book and looked up at him. Her face was open and reflected an engaged interest.

"When we went to the concert, in New York, were you wearing stockings with a suspender belt?"

She gave a slight start and a sputtered laugh. "What? Just now, you were wondering if I was wearing girly-girl stockings?"

"I am not in my dotage, Hermione. My memory is as clear as ever. Something put me in mind of it, and I was wondering if you would be so kind as to Answer. The Question."

"Yes."

""Yes', you'll answer the question, or 'yes', you were wearing stockings?"

"Both," she said with a smirk.

"The further question remains as to whether you took the traditional route of also wearing, shall we say, *special occasion* knickers?" Severus tried very, very hard to seem as though this question followed logically from his first query and not that it was the end goal he had had in mind.

"No."

"No, you won't answer the question, or 'no', you weren't wearing fancy knickers? Hermione, this is getting quite tedious."

"Is it? I thought I was having quite a success, teasing you." She got up from her chair and walked over to him. At a slight gesture, he sat upright and presented her with a level lap on which to perch. She sat sideways on his knees and twined her arm around his shoulder, under his hair and tucked it into the soft part of his neck. She leaned close to his head and whispered into his ear. For a full breath, he was perfectly still. Hermione was seen to blush. From that point proceeded physical declarations of love and affection that were entirely pleasing to both parties.

The End